

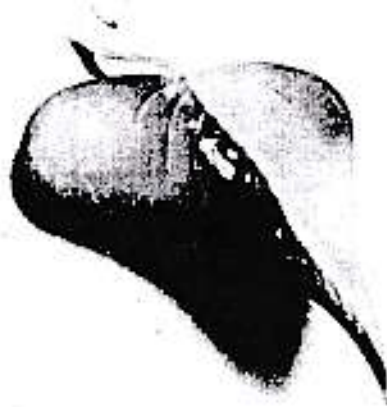


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Editor
Dr. Bapu G. Gholap



- 13) A study of B.Ed. students' Attitude towards using Cyber Resources
Neetu Spring—Smita Srivastava, Lucknow. || 64
- 14) IDORU AS POSTMODERN CYBERPUNK NOVEL BY WILLIAM GIBSON
Dr. U. A. PATIL, Shirol, Dist:-Kolhapur || 68
- 15) Cry of women: A study on women characters in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's
Rajendra Prasad Roy—Sefali Roy, Assam || 70
- 16) Gandhi and His Philosophy of Education
Dr. Monika R. Seth—Dr. V. H. Asudani, Nagpur || 75
- 17) मध्यपूर्वीन खानदेशात बंदुकीची दारू घर्नाचण्णाचा व्यवसाय
डॉ. भामरे नानाजी दगा, अक्कलकुवा, जि. नंदुरवार || 78
- 18) कुटुंबकवी: संत नामदेव
प्रा. प्रवीण घारपुरे, ता. नरखेड, जि. नागपूर || 81
- 19) लोकसंगीतातील भाषा, परंपरा आणि संस्कृती
डॉ.प्रा. वृषाली र. देशमुख, दर्यापूर || 90
- 20) मराठी व हिंदी संत साहित्याचा तुलनात्मक अभ्यास मराठी व हिंदी संत साहित्याची तुलना
डॉ.योगिता देवगिरीकर, बदनापुर, जि.जालना. || 92
- 21) चांगदेव पासण्टी—संत ज्ञानेश्वर
डॉ.विजय विष्णुपंत केसरकर, कळंब—वालचंदनगर || 96
- 22) एकोणिसाव्या शतकातील खानदेशात मातीपासून उद्योग व्यवसाय
डॉ. भामरे नानाजी दगा, अक्कलकुवा, जि. नंदुरवार || 98
- 23) एकात्मिक बाल विकास योजना : वर्तमानातील यश, अभयश भंडार्यातील रणनिती.
प्रकाश कोथळे, मुदखेड || 103
- 24) सामाजिक बंधुत्वता आणि ग्रामीण दलित स्वीच्यः
गणेश लक्ष्मण माने, आर्वी रोड वर्धा || 106

Cry of women: A study on women characters in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar".

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Abstract:

Women has been the prime focus of many writers down the centuries. Women studies has always been played a critical role in redefining the notion of society and helps in transcending former narrow formulations regarding the status of women. The practitioners of women's studies are found instrumental in playing a crucial role in making class and gender central to the analysis of women's oppression. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the renowned *Modern Assamese writer*. She is a great poet, scholar, editor, critic and professor. She has many novels, poems and short stories to her literary cap. The Jyanpeeth and Sahitya Academy award winning Assamese litterateur showed her deep concern about the status of women in society in many contexts of her literary works. Her writings unveil the facts deeply rooted in social system of which women are made victims. As a feminist she raises questions on several issues of discrimination faced by

women in society like childhood of a girl, marriage life of women and pathetic widowhood of women in society. In her *Nilakanthi Braja* (1976), *Adha Lekha Dostavej* (2005), *The Moth Eaten of the Tuskar* (1988) she depicts the plight of Assamese women. The present paper deals with *The Moth Eaten Howdah Of The Tusker*, one of the most celebrated novels of Indira Goswami translated from original Assamese *Datal Hatir Unekhwa Hawdah* by the author herself in 2004. The novel is based on variety of social issues of mid-20th century and set in Post-independent period of South Kamrup. The novel has projected three major widow characters of Gossain family namely Giribala, Saru Gossaine and Durga. They are victims of the so called orthodox Brahmin society. They suffer a lot due to the long established orthodox social beliefs and practices laid down for widows in Assamese culture.

Key words: Women, society, suffering, widow.

Introduction:

Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. The writers come out from the bastion of prejudice now acknowledge the status of women in male-dominated society. Over the centuries women novelists have consistently been trying to portray female characters from different perspectives. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the pioneer in this field of delineating the marginalized section of the Assamese society. As a feminist she has always focus on the issues of women. She portrayed the challenges women confronts at home as well as in their social interactions. She thus in a way tried to create an identity for her protagonist. Interactions.

The work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and, thus, re-writing the history of India.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the

most renowned writers of Modern Assamese literature. She is the recipient of several awards including Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988, Bharat Nirman Award in 1989, Katha National Award for Literature in 1993, Jnanpith Award in 2001, Padma Shri which she refused to accept in 2002, Principal Laureate Prince Claus Award in 2008 and Asom Ratna in 2009. She is known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami or Mamoni Baideo to the readers of Assam. Although she has written in both Assamese and English many of her prominent novels were written originally in Assamese and later translated into English. She has many novels to her credit including *The Blue-Necked Braja*, *The Rusted Sword*, *Pages stained with blood*, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*, *The Man from Chinnomasta*, *The Bronze Sword of Theng phakhri Tehsildar* and many more. She has written a few anthologies of short stories and poetry and her autobiography is titled *An Unfinished Autobiography*.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is realistic to her approach in many literary context of her novels. She makes an exploration of the social maladies which grasped the Assamese society and culture in the name of orthodox beliefs and customs. She was born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family and herself experienced the restrictions and constrictions of the conservative society which later on she splendidly transformed into literary text. Her widowhood, only two years of her marriage, her close watch of sufferings of women in different strata of society has intensified her sensibility towards the victims who are socially and individually oppressed by the male dominated society. As a feminist, she raises several questions on issues of discrimination often met by the women in Assamese society like childhood of a girl, marriage life and widowhood. She declared boldly, "My two main subjects are migrant labourers and widows." She noted her bitter experiences as a widow in her

autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography (Adhalekha Dastaveja)* published in 1998. She narrated her experiences of a widow belonging to Assamese orthodox family in her novel, *Neela Kanthi Braja (1976)* and *Datal Hatir Uye Khua Howda (1988)*. She had adopted the Ramayana Studies and started a new voyage of her life by involving herself fully into teaching and writing besides focusing on the marginalized sections of the society.

Objectives:

This paper intends to study the social standpoint of the women especially the widows in a patriarchal culture who are denied any rights and freedom. As the novel is set in the Amranga Sattrā during the time of 1948, we also try to analyse the articulated voice of the women for their resistance, challenging the stereotypes and subverting patriarchy in a conservative society in the Post Independent period.

Methodology:

In order to discuss the selected topic of the paper, we have adopted descriptive method of research. The text of this novel is the main source of primary data. For secondary data we have made use of different reference books, journals, newspapers etc. Some information are collected from internet also.

Analysis:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's celebrated novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is originally written in Assamese as *Une Khawa Howdah* where we find the abundant use of Kamrupi dialect, and it was translated into English by the writer herself in 2004. "There are many possible ways of seeing the narrative of South Kamrup - as the story of widows, as a saga of the ryot-landowner conflict, as a spectacle of the relationship between man and woman with all the attendant complications of caste and social hierarchies. Indira powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of Brahmins, their greed and their lop-sided values, and the many

ambivalences of their attitudes towards the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak." (Basu, Nandita) This novel has been anthologized in the Masterpieces of Indian Literature by Sahitya Akademy and translated into many languages. The award-winning Assamese film Adajya was made on the basis of this novel under the direction of Dr Santwana Bordoloi. Noted actress Nandita Das acted in the role pmggof Giribala was instrumental in singing the local issues to the core.

The novel is based on different social issues of mid-twentieth century and is set in post-Independent period of south Kamrup, Assam. Goswami has focused the relegation of women in the Brahmin society in general and the marginalization of the widows in particular. As she has painted, in the Gosain/Brahmin society, widows were treated as sinners as the author herself had personal experiences of suffering in that aspect. She has delineated the tragic saga of the widows who are confined to lead an austere life style in all domains like dress, food and in general behaviour. Their very presence seemed to be inauspicious and were not even to be touched by the married women with husbands alive

The novel has projected three widow characters of the Gosain family viz. Durga, Saru Gosainee and Giribala. Through the projection of these characters the author present not only the widowed but also the women in general who are made suffered by these rules and norms of patriarchal society. Durga, Saru Gosainee and Giribala who are destined to be widow have played their own crucial roles in this novel to unveil the segregated and biased society at the context. They are bound to suffer alot in the rest of their life. Their dreams of a rosy life is miles away from their existence. A widow is supposed to follow a strict pattern of life, living like an animal and to pay the price for her widowhood. The author makes a real presentation of their struggle in daily life, their sufferings to the end,

their repressed longings and desire in this novel. An inhuman and callous feudal and patriarchal system driven by avarice and religious orthodoxy deprives these widows of their share in property, their right to a decent livelihood, in fact, it does not allow them even the minutest atom of self-respect. Mortified by stringent ascetic practices and penance imposed upon them, these widows live by worshipping the clogs of their dead husbands and the only thing that they look forward to the death.

Indira Goswami has nuanced the widow deprivation of body, passion, emotion, and woven it into a perceptive text much ahead of the rest. She probes the causes, rituals, the unquestioned "beliefs" which perpetuate oppression. She says that she tried from the direct experiences of her life and modules the experiences with her imagination. The novel is a tragedy of widowhood of the Gosain family. Durga, Saru Gosainee and Giribala are the widows of the Gosain family. Durga is the eldest of the three. Her character is reflected under the shadow of darkness and death. She surrenders to the traditional norms and regulations mutely and uncomplainingly. She is the representative of many such women who do not know the language of rebellion. They know only to tolerate till their last breath. After her husband's death, she is treated brutally by her in-laws and also by her maternal society. She is not allowed to participate in different rituals and functions, even not permitted to take cooked foods, sleep in bamboo beds, not allowed to walk bare foot and many more. She firmly believes that one day her in-laws will come and take her to her husband's home with dignity and respect though she is deprived of her properties. She even has no interest to fight legally for her property, as she thinks that going to court and standing with the thieves and criminals would make her impure. Abiding and performing the different rituals and customs made for widow

by the society, she is infected with the severe tuberculosis. She becomes a voiceless character who has no courage to regain her own identity. She also represents the image of a traditional Assamese Brahmin widow who gradually turns to a neurotic and unconsciously perverse.

The other widow, Saru Gossaine a young woman has faced the same type of sufferings in her life time just like Durga. She has attraction for a man called Muhidhar, who is her helper. She has fantasizing dreams about him and has felt both spiritual and physical gratification towards him. As infected by the social norms, she often feels that her growing feelings towards Muhidhar is a sin. So she represses her sexual longing and desire. She blindly believes him. In return, the greedy Muhidhar cheats her financially and tries to sell her land on a forged letter of authority. After witnessing the treachery of this selfish man, her dreams of love and faith are shattered and ruined. It is very significant to note that under the grip of societal rule, she could not fight against injustice. Presenting this kind of sexual and gender repression against social norms, Goswami tries to show that the gender and sexual identity are designed by the patriarchal society.

Giribala is the youngest widow is totally different from Durga and Saru Gossaine. She raises her voice against the restrictions imposed by the society. She revolts against these restrictions and wants to be independent, as a result she faces lots of crisis. In sharp contrast to Durga who is eagerly waiting to go back to her in laws, Giribala gets scared at the news that her in-laws have sent people to take her back to her husband's house. She wants to remove all the memories of her dead husband who has an extra marital affair. She wants freedom from a life bounded with strict rules which is just like a prison. When Giribala returns to her father's home, after her husband's death, womenfolk living in the neighbourhood come to

see her, but there is no sympathy in their words. They warn each other "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now"

Such warning shows how women themselves work to perpetuate the rules and regulations determined by male members of the society. Durga, with traditional mind set, wants new generation woman Giribala also to follow the societal rules and regulations that a widow should live with. Just like Durga, in our society, there are many illiterate women who want to follow the strict rules of society without any grudge. Even though these painful laws hurt them, they accept these laws as universal truth and cannot even think of changing them.

At first, Giribala seems to accept the traditional principles of the Assamese society. But later she protests against the cruelty of this orthodox society. In her mother's house as well as in her in-laws she has experienced the problem of assimilation with the religious orthodoxy. In both the houses, she finds it difficult to live as a human being after abiding social customs that suppress her human instincts. For example, once there is a feast in her mother's house and Giribala is locked in an isolated room. As being a widow she cannot touch meat, but, being lured by the smell of the mutton curry Giribala cannot resist herself and has started eating that. But she is caught in her act of transgression and is beaten up brutally. Such treatment meted out to her makes her wish to die. Once, when she is with Mark Shahib, the mad elephant appears in front of them. Scared Giribala hides in Mark Shahib's arm. At that moment, tired of her life she wishes to die in Mark Shahib, an outcast's, arm.

Giribala is brought back to the Sattra safely, but the in laws of Giribala scandalize by her growing intimacy with Mark Shahib. They arrange for her return to her late husband's home, but Giribala does not like the idea. And so, at midnight, defying a terrible downpour, she reaches Mark Shahib's home, seeking his

protection from the men who would take her to her in-laws. She requests him to take her away from the society which is oppressing her. Mark is pleased by her courage and vulnerability but he is unable to take any decision which would jeopardise his life as a scholar and a missionary. When Giribala is discovered with Mark, it causes uproar and a ritual expiation is prescribed for the sin of getting involved with an outcast. A straw hut is built in the open field. Amidst chanting of purificatory mantra, they set fire to the shed with the instruction to Giribala that she should come out of it when the fire will engulf it. But even after the fire engulfs the shed, Giribala does not come out. In this way, by immolating herself, she prefers death instead of a life of bondage and humiliation. Her suicide is her final act of defiance against a system which grants no freedom to a widow. Smell of burning human body spreads over the banks of Jogoliya. This smell is not only the smell of burning Giribala's flesh but the smell of burning women's dreams and aspirations.

Conclusion:

As a woman writer, writing about the experiences of women, Indira Goswami has carved for herself a unique place in literature. She has brilliantly portrayed the women characters in the backdrop of a segregated and callous society in the Post Independent period. As a women novelist Indira Goswami has questioned the values, customs, and traditions of the Assamese Orthodox Brahmin society in particular and Indian society in general. She is a social critic. She raises her strong voice against the orthodox and conservative tradition of Hindu society. Indira Goswami has created such a society in her novel where women were marginalized to great extent, especially the widows. She has also thrown light on the fact that generation after generation the women were internalizing their marginalization and passively accepting their conditions as their fate. By creating the characters like Durga,

Giribala and Saru Gossainee, Goswami & rethink about the age-old orthodox exercised under the banner of religion and other elements.

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