

The Plight of Voiceless and Subjugated Widows in Indira Goswami's The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker

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Abstract

Her mind has become a graveyard. Day after day it is a tortuous task for her to find something tangible to hold on to, to hold on to sanity.

(Goswami, 2004, p 11)

After the untimely demise of her husband merely eighteen months into their marriage, Indira Goswami experienced a period of profound psychological distress, for which she depended on medication to attain a semblance of stability. This personal suffering found creative articulation in her seminal novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Better known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, she emerged from Guwahati, Assam, as one of the most distinctive voices in modern Indian literature, noted for her deep humanitarian consciousness and her engagement with issues of social justice. Originally composed in Assamese in 1986 under the title *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*, the novel makes extensive use of the Kamrupi dialect, thereby embedding the narrative within the linguistic and cultural landscape of the Kamrup region. Goswami later rendered the text into English in 2004, broadening its reach beyond regional boundaries. The novel offers a poignant exploration of widowhood and female subjugation within the framework of a patriarchal Assamese society. It exposes the persistent injustices endured by women in familial and social institutions, highlighting the manner in which half of humanity has long been subjected to systemic discrimination and marginalisation. Set in Palashbari, Kamrup, the story centres on Indranath, his widowed aunt, and his widowed sister—women who, in the name of preserving familial honour, are condemned to live secluded lives within the domestic sphere. Indranath himself remarks upon the blind perpetuation of these oppressive customs through generations. On a more personal level, the narrative reflects Goswami's own confrontation with bereavement and her subsequent quest for meaning as a solitary individual. The act of writing thus becomes, for her, a means of catharsis and self-realisation, transforming private anguish into a profound social commentary on the condition of women in traditional Indian society.

Keywords: Widowhood, Psychological effect, Indian Society, Gender bias, Sati-pratha.

Introduction

Her mind has become a graveyard. Day after day it is a tortuous task for her to find something tangible to hold on to, to hold on to her sanity.

(Goswami, 2004.11)

Widowed just after eighteen months of her marriage, Indira Goswami had to cling on to heavy doses of sleeping pills for tranquility. The pain strikes a chord in her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. The book was written originally in Assamese in the year 1986 as *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*, heavily iterating the Kamrupi dialect, Kamrupi district being the background of the story. Later, the novelist herself translated it into English in 2004. The novel portrays the plight of widow women in the contemporary Indian society. Despite the supposed social efforts at rehabilitation, widowed women often find themselves

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abandoned both emotionally and financially, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and indignity.

Social Injustice and the Condition of Widowed Women

The systemic injustice faced by women—within families, communities, and society at large—has often remained unacknowledged. For generations, women have endured diverse forms of discrimination under patriarchal norms. For ages, the half population has been succumbing to various modes of discrimination—patriarchy, polygamy, physical assault, free labor, illiteracy and such. The mistreatment of widowed women is only one of them, which Indira Goswami has experienced and brooded upon in her work. Within traditional social frameworks, widows are frequently regarded as burdens—ostracized even by their own families. Her family and relatives are the first ones to outcast her. A number of illogical and inhumane conditions regarding clothes, food, socialization restrict them from leading a normal life. A widow woman is limited to this sole identity only.

Prior to the social reforms championed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the practice of sati—in which widows were compelled to self-immolate on their husband's funeral pyres—was widely prevalent in India. When the prohibition act was passed in the year 1829, as a result of painstaking efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck, there were efforts made for rehabilitation of such women who were estranged by their families. The need for this emerges from further gender bias regarding widowhood, a misfortune that might fall upon both the genders but only one of them is forced to suffer. Society readily reintegrates widowed men, often arranging their remarriage without hesitation. Widowed women, however, face lifelong stigmatization and social erasure. Babul Hossain in his article “Widowhood and its Associated Vulnerabilities in India: A gendered Perspective” comes up with some statistics to prove the point,

Even from a demographic perspective, there is significant gender disparity in the widowed population in India...the proportion of the widowed in the total population across different age categories indicates that women comprise a higher share of the widowed than men. As per the last consensus in 2011, 29% and 48% of the women aged 45 and 60 years and above being widowed in 2011. This highlights the feminisation of widowhood in Indian demography (IIPS&UNFPA India 2023) (Hossain, 2024)

Leave alone the injustice conducted by the so-called progressive society, the psychological and financial crises are further hurdles in the path to normalcy for the spouses of the deceased:

The greatest problem in widowhood is still emotional. Even if it had been a bad marriage, the survivor feels the loss. The role of spouse is lost, social life changes from couple-oriented to association with other single people; and the widowed no longer have the day-in, day-out companionship of the other spouses that had become a intrinsic part of their lives. (Trivedi, Sareen, Dhayni. 2009)

The Writer in Formation: Early Life and Experiences

Goswami, started writing and publishing when still in high school. Goswami's early creative life was marked by personal turmoil. Her first story collection, Chinaki Morom (1962), emerged during her school years. Having faced depression and loss early on, writing became her means of survival and self-reconstruction. Goswami, in her autobiography recalls of attempting suicide in the premises of her hometown Shillong. Her misfortune doesn't spare her even after marriage as her husband died soon after their marriage in a road accident.

Brought back to her home, despaired and hopeless, Goswami joined Sainik School, Goalpara as a teacher and went back to her childhood life, that is, writing, to find some respite.

Seeking solace and scholarly purpose, Goswami later moved to Vrindavan—the sacred town of Lord Krishna—where she lived among the widowed women and conducted ethnographic research on their conditions. Here, being a reasonable human being, she was dejected by the plight of the ladies who were left alone in misery by their own kins. The plight of younger widows proved especially tragic; many were subjected to abuse and exploitation within institutions that claimed to offer them refuge and spiritual rehabilitation.

Goswami records her experiences of Vrindavan in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja* in 1976. Their dilemma of following the traditional ‘widows practices’ and yearning for liberation stretches life- long. Belonging to the Ekasarana Dharma, which focuses on complete devotion to Lord Krishna, Goswami was deeply moved by the predicament of the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan. Saudamini, the central character in this book, echoes her own reflections and experiences there as a widow with a wit. In the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, she investigates the impact of rigid societal norms and traditions on widows in a Vaishnavite monastery. The personal suffering of these women is a direct result of societal structures and religious practices. Goswami humanizes abstract political and social issues as she focuses on the personal lives of her characters. This engages the readers and they understand the impact of systemic problems.

Goswami’s fiction consistently interrogates the social and religious systems that perpetuate marginalization. By portraying her characters’ psychological depth and emotional resilience, she invites readers to question the structures that sustain oppression and to imagine possibilities for empathy, resistance, and social change. The portrayal of strong, resilient characters strive to overcome their circumstances serving as a source of inspiration and empowerment for marginalized section of society. Her works demonstrates the possibility of resistance and change by encouraging others to advocate for their rights. By recognizing the traditions, customs, and languages of marginalized society, Goswami played a role in preserving their cultural heritage. This validate their cultural identity and contribute to the broader recognition of India’s diverse cultural landscape. She has been widely studied and discussed in academic and literary circles, contributing to ongoing debates and discussions about marginalization, gender, and social justice. Her literature provides rich source of material for scholars and activists working on these issues. Through her contributions, she not only reflected the realities of marginalized communities but also played a part in challenging and transforming the socio-cultural dynamics leading to marginalizaton.

Growth and Literary Range

Her prolific oeuvre includes novels such as *The Chenab’s Current* (1972), *The Blue-Necked Braja* (1976), and *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), among others, spanning themes of widowhood, spirituality, and social reform. Goswami later joined Delhi University as a Professor in the Department of Modern Indian Languages, a period that proved highly productive for her writing. During these years she produced significant works, including short stories such as Hriddoy, Nangoth Sohor, and Borofor Rani, as well as major novels like *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988). She was an avid reader as well as writer, having novels, short stories, poems and autobiography to claim as her own. Her novels span a wide range of themes and periods, from early works such

as *The Chenab's Current* (1972) and *The Blue-Necked Braja* (1976) to later masterpieces like *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) and *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005). Together, these texts reflect her deep concern with spirituality, gender, and social transformation in Assamese life.

During her allocation in Vrindavan, Goswami read the Tulsidas' Version of the Epic Ramayana, and keeping it parallel to the Assamese Ramayana by Madhava Kandali, she wrote the non-fiction Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra. Later, on the tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous temple Kamakhya in Assam, Goswami came up with *The Man from Chinnamasta*. Despite facing severe backlash and even personal threats, Goswami courageously questioned violent ritual practices, advocating instead for symbolic worship grounded in compassion rather than blood sacrifice. In her interview as recorded by Laxmiprasad in his book *Contextualizing women and her struggles: A Critical Study of Indira Goswami's Five Novellas about Women*, Goswami admits:

When the novel was serialized in a popular magazine, I was threatened with dire consequences. Shortly after this, a local newspaper, Sadin, carried an appeal about animal sacrifice, which resulted in quite an uproar- the editor was gheraoed and tantrik warned me. But when the appeal was published, the response was overwhelmingly in favour of banning animal sacrifice...Chinnamasta Manuhto went on to become a runway bestseller! (wikipedia)

Goswami's humanitarian vision extended far beyond literature; she consistently engaged with broader social issues, addressing themes of justice, reform, and empathy for the marginalized. She also tried to tough the issue of militancy in the North-East India since ages. The issue of Secession has been problematic there since the times of Indian independence. In *Jatra* (The Journey), Goswami turns her attention to the insurgency and violence that have long plagued Northeast India. Through this narrative, she exposes the psychological toll of conflict on individuals and communities, juxtaposing the region's natural beauty with its atmosphere of unrest and fear. The abundance of serene nature contrasted with the unrest and bloodshed, life and death is presented here in the simplest form.

The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker : Themes and Symbolism

Written in the Kamrupi dialect and set in Kamrup, the novel first appeared in Assamese in 1988 and was later rendered into English by Goswami herself in 2004. Set in Palashbari in Kamrup, it illustrates the story of Indranath, his widowed paternal aunt and sister. Their existence is confined within domestic boundaries, justified by the rigid notion of preserving the family's honor. Indranath even mentions the tradition being followed blindly since ages,

Grandmother died in this house without ever stepping outside into the batghar. Her ghost still haunts the four walls of this house. She wanted so much to visit jagannath Puri. But her desire remained frozen forever in her heart. She had to peep through the curtains to catch a glimpse of the annual sabha. You are nothing but ghosts pretending to be human beings... (Goswami, 2004, p 10)

Indranath's aunt Durga left her in-law's home and came back to her parents house. It was in practice those days that widows were outcaste from the homes of their husbands. Through the narrative it is revealed that her mother in law accused her of bringing death to her son by manipulating the horoscope before marriage. Despite her father in law's promise to bring her back, she knew that there is no return.

Giribala, the young widow, the younger sister of the protagonist Indranath, is back from her in-law's house. A bunch of 'concerned' women gather only to further judge her character when she is back home as a widow, as if she were some alien creature. Giribala is outrageous as she always had been, resisting her marriage earlier and when the family restricted her from getting educated,

You came here to see me, didn't you? You have seen me now. I am still alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you...

The words were cut off abruptly and hung in the air. She fell like a severed branch of a tree on the breast of her mother... (Goswami, 2004, p 34)

When Mark Sahib, a young man who came to the village for research, arrives at Indranath's house, Durga suddenly is horrified to find his shadow falling on her and rushes to have a second bath. But Giribala admires him and dreams of marrying him, her inclination towards him is natural but includes the prohibitions that won't allow a widowed woman to remarry. She is a 'visionary' girl willing to resist her marriage and also pursuing studies. But her wings are clipped.

The key takeaway of the novel is the experience of Durga, a widow trapped within a deeply patriarchal society, where widowhood is equivalent to social death. This novel addresses the religious orthodoxy of Brahminical Hinduism and how its interpretation of widowhood is a tool for suppressing women's autonomy. Durga's physical confinement and emotional suffering symbolize the broader social mechanisms that seek to regulate women's bodies and suppress their individuality. The Brahminical traditions expect women to lead a life of austerity, devoid of pleasure or personal agency. Durga's existence is a kind of imprisonment both socially and emotionally. Goswami offers a subtle critique of this power dynamic. Durga who is shown powerless externally, her inner life- her thoughts, desires, and reflections presents an alternative form of resistance. Despite her apparent helplessness, Durga's yearning for dignity becomes a quiet act of rebellion. Goswami thus reveals how women, even in silence, nurture a spiritual and moral resilience that undermines patriarchal authority from within. Durga is subjected to severe restrictions, both socially and emotionally. Through this novel widowhood is depicted as "social death," where women are denied the basic right to live fully, they are suppressed by religious and societal expectations. The inner conflict that goes within Durga as she questions her subjugation, "Widowhood at thirty! There was still so much of life left in her. For whom should she now live? For those few cows? For the old mother-in-law? Or for the memory of her husband, who never cared for her" (25)? This highlights the deep dissatisfaction Durga feels. The bitterness in her reflection is perceptible, and it presents her awakening to the injustice of her situation. She does not act radically but her internal awareness of the unfairness imposed symbolizes an important form of empowerment. The gender bias creeps in here so selfishly. A widowed man is always up to remarriage. But the case is not the same with a woman facing the same predicament.

Indranath is a strategically foresighted man who suggests the women of the house to accompany Saru Gossainee, a widowed but powerful woman who, after the demise of her husband, managed her lands and other properties with skill and was a sore to the eyes of the regressive society. She, manages her fields and properties which was being infiltrated by the Communists gradually:

For some time now, this unknown fear had been haunting her and devouring her soul bit by bit. Who knows! What days are coming! If they refused to give her her share of paddy, what would she do?...If they restored to violence and broke Mahidar, what would she...? It was possible that a day might come when she, the Gossainee, the ruler of three sattras Gossain families, who once owned immensely vast lands would have to face hunger, starvation and death!.. (Goswami 79)

with the fear of losing them in the hands of powerful and privileged men. Her inner turmoil represents the prejudices that were prevalent on the widows.

Through this novel religious orthodoxy is represented, how religion is weaponized to control women and maintain the status quo. Widowhood is made holy under the guise of religious piety, but in reality, it enforces patriarchal domination. As a widow, Durga is constantly judged and shamed by the sattras community. She is deprived of basic freedoms, her desires deemed sinful simply because of her marital status. Goswami writes, "She longed for the softness of a red sari, the taste of fish, the laughter of festivals she could only observe from afar. Were these cravings sinful, or were they the cries of a soul imprisoned by rules written by men." Religious authority dictates widowhood, the critique is voiced through Durga's reflections. Here, Goswami is empowering her protagonist by allowing her to question the fundamental basis of her oppression. Durga's internal questioning subverts the patriarchal religious codes that are used to control women. Her rebellion is internal and the questioning of these practices signifies a step towards self-empowerment.

The narrative extends beyond gender to include the dynamics of caste and class. Set against the backdrop of a collapsing Assamese Brahminical elite, the novel portrays a world whose rigid hierarchies and customs are losing relevance in a rapidly changing society. The sternness of the caste system, and the exploitation of lower caste individuals and economically weaker sections, is depicted alongside the oppression of women. The society and the era shown in this novel is that of fading away feudal system and the takeover by democracy in 1948. Post India's independence, the democratic government was about to replace, or rather, eradicate Feudalism or the zamindari system. The feudalists cannot be rid off their pomp and pride, although in looming loss of power and possession. The title of the novel serves as a powerful metaphor for social decay. The once-majestic howdah, now moth-eaten, mirrors the disintegration of outdated customs and the moral corrosion of a society clinging to oppressive traditions, one of them being the predicament of widow women. They are not allowed to voice their pain, their disapproval over the conduct of the society, their desires and such. The society has turned them into but a body that eats and sleeps, not allowed to have a life in the true sense of the term.

By depicting the various types of oppression- gender, caste and class, Goswami reinforces a hierarchical social order that keeps the powerless in their place. Here in this novel the lower class people are not just economically disadvantaged but are also socially marginalized and are denied any real autonomy or voice in a society that views them as inferior. However, there are several moments of resistance that can be seen in the novel. For instance, the younger characters in the novel, particularly women start to question the traditional roles assigned to them. It depicts that there is a potential for change and can be a possible break from traditional roles. Goswami through her narrative exclaims that empowerment will come, not from a single source but from a broader questioning of all forms of oppression, be it related to gender, caste, or class.

The novel also addresses the struggles of marginalized caste groups who are also economically disadvantaged. There is a character Chakradhar, a low caste man, who represents the social marginalization. Through this character intersection of caste and class oppression is highlighted that suggests that empowerment for the lower caste is tied to their resistance against the hierarchical social order. He reflects on his status in the society. She writes, "Born into a family of landless laborers, Chakradhar knew no other life but servitude. Yet within him burned a desire for dignity, for the respect that he knew his work deserved. Would the world ever see him as a man, and not as a caste" (64)? This suggests the dehumanization of lower-caste individuals. His desire for dignity, though unrealized indicate the potential for empowerment by acknowledging his own worth. The novel specifies that empowerment is not just about external actions but about recognizing one's own value, even in a society that denies it.

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Other issues touched in the novel are the mal-effect of opium addiction, caste system, poverty and illiteracy grounded deep in the society. The wretched condition of the slum areas, Indranath notices the change of the scenario with an ache in his heart. He had spent his childhood days playing around the area where there were paddy fields. They were now replaced with opium fields and foul odor of mud and rotten pumpkins. All the poor lot of the area was being addicted to opium and living in lethargy. One of the damage that the Britishers did to India's flourishing farms was this shift from paddy to opium that led to wreckage of farmers in particular and society in general.

Summary and Conclusion

As Trivedi, Sareen, and Dhayni (2009) observe:

There has been considerable controversy as to whether widowhood is a more difficult experience psychologically for men or for women. Widowhood is generally a greater problem financially for women than men, and economic difficulties can lead to lower psychological well-being. (Trivedi, Sareen, Dhayni, 2009)

This underscores the persistent gendered dimensions of widowhood in Indian society.

Obviously, reports say that the share of population of widowed women is more than men. The reasons are in multitude. One of these is the mind-set of the society that sees re-marriage of widow woman in bad light. Even if a person agrees to it, accepting the children of the deceased husband is hardly goes down well with them. So, women better try to avoid remarriage. This is the scenario even in the post-modern era. Indira Goswami has portrayed the 1948 Indian society which was even more prejudiced. The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is deeply autobiographical, reflecting Goswami's own confrontation with loss and solitude. Writing became her means to redefine purpose and meaning after tragedy. Her second journey as a

single soul, finding a meaning and goal in life led her to pen down everything that she experienced, things that she wanted to convey, whatever she got dejected of, what she desired to change but couldn't, what hurdles were there, mentally, physically, financially, socially and such. Kamrup and the widowed ladies, Saru Gossainee, Durga, Giribala- a world that Dutta (2019) notes that the novel exposes the deterioration of Brahminical customs that confine widows to lives of silent suffering, turning them into symbols of a decaying moral order.

...tells the degenerating and dilapidated social practices of the Brahmin widows to untold misery and suffering. All their desires, repressed aspirations reflect a totally segregated community, for whom normal living is a taboo. The author has imbibed all wafts of the narrative credibly and she has embarked upon a startling journey of memory, love and recollection of personal and collective history in the mode of linguistic representations of signs.

In sum, Goswami's novel not only reflects her personal trauma but also critiques the entrenched patriarchal and feudal norms of Assamese society in the late 1940s. By portraying characters such as Durga, Giribala, and Saru Gossainee, she brings to light the systemic injustices faced by widows and the faint yet persistent glimmers of resistance within them. Her narrative transforms personal pain into a broader commentary on gender, class, and spiritual hypocrisy, making the novel a cornerstone of feminist Indian literature.

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