

The Living Dead: Portrayal of Widows in Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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Abstract

The present article makes an attempt to analyse the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* by Indira Goswami that narrates the story of widows in a Satra. What is unique about this novel is that it portrays the plight of being women, of being Brahmin widows in particular, and hence convinces the audience that the identity of women in the so called religious institution- Satra is a matter of living dead. By narrating the story of widows and their death-like conditions, the novel questions the human understanding of plight, problem, trauma and discrimination. Questioning of female objectification, marginalisation and socio-religious positioning is the focus of this paper. The importance of the novel under analysis lies in the question as how artistically it unfolds the life of the marginal characters like widows. While bringing out the different facets of the life of the women the novel has been successful as an authentic socio-cultural document of a period.

Key Words: Patriarchy, widows, marginality, traditions, religion

Introduction

The *Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is regarded as one of the classic contemporary Indian novels first published in the year 1981 in a print literary magazine called *Prakash* published by the Publication Board of Assam. The novel created huge ruckus and disturbance for its unattractive representation of the dilemma of women in a society in a Satra - which is a socio-religious institution of high order, a monotheistic religion founded and propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century "Satra (Ekasarana Dharma)". These institutions were mainly founded as centres of democratic and free learning in order to propagate Bhakti movement which flourished India during that period.

However before Independence, these Satras had deteriorated into feudal

institutions with the Satradhikars holding huge terrains of land and its populations. These institutions followed cold-hearted customs and practices in the name of traditions.

The plight of women and especially widows is the main theme of the novel. Goswami belongs to Amranga Satra in Kamrup. Her family holds the Satra, so she provides an insider's views of life providing an authentic picture of how a Satra works and the lives of the people living in it. These are the glorified institutions yet these are the places which abuse people specially women. If a woman happens to be a widow, her plights are even horrible. They live a horrible life by following ruthless customs which devoid them of any touch of humanity. The so called liberal place becomes a prison for

them where they are shunned behind the walls for life. *'The stringiest control of female sexuality among non-labouring castes, with permanent enforced widowhood at the apex of the cultural codes becomes the index for establishing the highest rank in the caste system'* (Chakravarti 156). Their freedom is restricted as they are not supposed to see the main entrance of the households. Goswami has herself undergone the plights of widowhood, and very well knew about the harsh rituals of the widows. The novel raises questions on how widow's desire and her individualism is condemned and subjected to patriarchal surveillance, reducing her to the status of, what Susie Tharu calls *'an appendage in a household organised around its active householder subjects'* (Goswami 237).

Widowhood as social death

Widowhood is a state of social death, particularly among the higher castes. Widows are still blamed for their husband's death, and are anticipated to have a *spiritual* life with many constraints which disturbs them both physically and emotionally. In the name of religion women have to go through many violent extremities. They become 'impure' (*asuddha*), a quality that seemed to be tied to widows forever. She is considered ill-fated and so abstained from participating in auspicious rituals such as marriage. Widowhood is perceived as one of the most stigmatised aspects of women's desertion, so much so that the gendered modes of power structure are intensified through social conditioning, rendering such women all the more vulnerable.

In the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami depicts the life of a village on the banks of the river Jogolia. The time and setting is just before

Independence 1947, which is a very important year and many changes were taking place, with the ruin and deteriorations of the power of the Satras in Assam. The life in the village is very drowsy with most of the people being addicted to opium. The novel opens with Indranath, the next-to-be heir of the Satra, shown wasting his life in playing cards and consuming opium. He is a man of passion, ideals and liberal thinking yet helpless due to traditions and customs of the society. A kind of decadence pervades in the novel from the beginning itself. It continues to deepen as the story progresses. After the initial gloomy picture of the village, Goswami concentrates on the lives of the widows belonging to the Orthodox upper community and exposes the religious hypocrisy of the society and that of the Satra. Of the three widows, Durga is the oldest and weakest. She is very weak to question the traditions, and rituals of widowhood. She follows them happily as part of her life without complaints. Durga was not only sent out of her husband's house but also disinherited from his property. Being childless matters become worse for her as it leaves a very little scope of negotiating her share in the deceased husband's lands and property. Her only dream is to carry her husband's ashes to Puri and to immerse them in the holy waters of the sea in Puri. In doing so she believes that she will get salvation and her husband's soul will rest in peace. Her health is deteriorating day by day and due to constant weight loss she has almost become a carcass, but still follows all the widowhood rituals sincerely. Her condition evokes pity and anger too as she reminds of the mercilessness of practices being followed in the Satra in the name of tradition. Same Durga later in the novel wants to fight for her rights even if she

'will have to go to the court at Gauhati' (p. 86). This is the advent of great change a courageous resolution that symbolises the beginning of the shifting socio-cultural and political dynamics of colonial India in early twentieth century.

Giribala, Indranath's younger sister, is another unfortunate young bride who has lost her husband and returned to live in her mother's house. Child marriage was very common and girls before attaining puberty were married off. Those who could not marry their daughters were punished and publicly despised. In order to avoid humiliation people married their daughters at an early age. Same faith shadowed Giribala she too was married off early only to return as a widow to the family. She is young and stubborn in nature. She tried to get away with the traditions by questioning and refusing to follow widowhood rituals. She started to help Mark, the British Christian missionary, with transcription of ancient manuscripts at the initiation of her brother Indranath. When Giribala came back home for the first time after her husband's death, women folk from neighbourhood came to see her to express their sorrows, but she refused to meet them. They warn each other "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now". One of the women advises Giribala's mother to send her to her husband's home soon as it is "like heaven for a woman. If she runs away from her husband's house, she is like a naked woman loitering on the streets" (Goswami 23). The gossip of the women shows how they themselves work to propagate the rules and regulations of inhuman patriarchal ideologies determined by male members of the society. As Foucault writes *power is not something that somebody exercises, it is something that*

exists between human beings. According to him there are relations of power; power exists in the relations between human beings in the form of struggle (Foucault 167). Hence, where there is power, there is resistance. She became furious when they started to talk about her husband's affairs with a low -caste women. She bursts out with anger and lashes out at them furiously, 'You all came to see me right? Haven't you seen me now? Get lost now, get lost!' (8).

Durga was waiting to go back to her in laws house, while Giribala was scared at the news that her in-laws have sent people to take her back to her husband's house. They both were been sent back to their natal home after the death of their respective husbands. The religious ideas and cultural practices of Brahminical patriarchy, which had once merged Giribala and Durga as wives to their in-laws places, no consider them as 'domestic enemies' (Chakravarti 157) in the occurrence of widowhood. Widows were blamed for their husband's death, Durga recalls, how her mother-in-law always accuses her of bringing the shadow of death to the house which killed her son. She was never invited for any auspicious occasions in her family or elsewhere. She was considered inauspicious' (p. 9). Thus, widows are subjected to elaborate rituals which mark their expulsion from not only legitimate sexual activity but also normal community life, thereby announcing their social death. As Chakravarti further suggests:

Widowhood was perceived as a disrupter of social order and a potential violation of the moral order. There were two modes of representing the social death of widows: one was intrusive, in which the widow was conceived of as someone who did not

belong because she was an outsider (as in the affinal home); and the extrusive mode, the widow who had left her natal home following marriage became an outsider because she no longer belonged. (Chakravarti 157).

A widow's desire has to be censured as the social death is inextricably linked to sexual death within the logic of upper caste relations. Thus, the widow ceases to be a person, a social entity and has no right to express herself.

Giribala refused to live her life in a dark room remembering her dead husband who was engaged in extra-marital relationship when he was alive. She seeks freedom from a life bounded with strict rules and inhuman practices. Her aunt Durga, with a traditional mind-set, has completely surrendered herself to the dominant system and wants Giribala also to follow the societal rules and regulations that a widow should live with. There are many women like Durga, in society who are illiterate and want to follow the strictest rules of society without any resentment. However these painful rules upset them, they accept these rules as universal fact and cannot even think of altering them. The novelist highlights her Durga's internal state which is one of profound apprehension. "*Her mind has become a graveyard ... All those customary rituals of widowhood which she did a few years back without much effort, are now a source of fear for her*"(9). Durga abandoned by her husband's family and neglected in her brother's household, is the traditional image of a Brahmin widow and as Prof. D.K. Baruah says, "*neurotic and unconsciously perverse*" (19). Because of her crushed sexuality, she is a miserable image of pity.

Widowhood Rituals

Giribala finds it very difficult to follow the widowhood rituals in her in-laws place, so she comes back to her mother's house. At her mother's place she was forced by her mother and aunt Durga to adhere to the customs and rituals. She feels oppressed and protest by eating meat in a feast held in her house. Being lured by the smell Giribala could not resist and started eating. This act of her marks her dissent from the cultural and material practices which reduce widows to the realm of ascetic excesses. Unfortunately she was exposed in her act of wrongdoing. In order to teach her a lesson and to punish her she was beaten up cruelly by her own mother who is a most willing upholder of patriarchal rules. Such treatment meted out to her made her wish to die. Giribala's room is dark and coffin-like and her inner thoughts reflect her sense of claustrophobia. "*What can I do? Suicide? Ah, that Christian! Why doesn't he say anything?*" (127). Her sexual longing for Mark Sahib is reflected in her caressing the soft satin cloth of the ceremonial umbrella as if it were the smooth skin of Mark Sahib. "*She rubbed the silk on her cheeks, her neck, her breasts... all over her body in a soft, languid movement of her hand... as if she desired to pull all the silk onto her, wrap herself in its softness...*" (129)

The novel is set in the transition period, independence and the rise of modern nation state. The novel records the deterioration in power, privileges of upper caste and authority of gossains in the wake of the changing political situation and had significant consequences on moral developments, which were responsible for '*reconstituting and strengthening patriarchies*' (Sangari and Vaid 23). Unfortunately widows are not at all

considered as important and in the patriarchal dynamics of modern nation state they are banished and placed at the margins of gender, social relations on the one hand and (re) production processes.

Once both Giribala and Mark Sahib went out looking for old manuscripts, on the way the elephant appeared in front of them. Scared Giribala hides in Mark Sahib's arm. At that moment, tired of her life she wishes to die in Mark Sahib, an outcaste's, arm and whispers to herself, Giribala was brought back to the Satra safely. Her in-laws were scandalised by her growing intimacy with Mark Sahib they became conscious of their respect and prestige in community. The family who after their son's death abandoned her now prepared for her return to her late husband's home, but Giribala did not like the idea. At midnight, defying a dreadful rainstorm, she reached Mark Shaib's house, looking for his guard from the men who would take her to her in-laws. She cries out that she will "*not go back to that graveyard.*" (250) She speaks frankly of her fondness for Mark Sahib and her hatred for all the prayers that a widow has to offer to her dead husband's wooden sandals. She confesses that she has no sense of sin. She admits, "*I cannot just exist, just for the sake of remaining alive, like Aunt Durga and Saru Gossainee*" (168).

However, Mark though overwhelmed with sympathy and tenderness for her, could not go towards her and stood there "*as if metamorphosed into an iron contraption*" (252). She requested him to take her away with him. Mark was encouraged by her bravery but he was unable to take any decision which would threaten his life as a scholar and a missionary. When Giribala was found with Mark, it triggered

disturbance and a ritual penitence is arranged for her as she has committed the sin of getting involved with an outcast. A straw hut was built in the open field. Amidst chanting of mantras, they set fire to the shed while they instruction to Giribala that she should come out of it when the fire consumed it. When the fire immersed the hut, Giribala did not come out of it. She committed herself to death; she preferred death instead of a life of suppression and disgrace. This incident marks Giribala's rebellion against the authoritarian texts which distinguish '*devotion and loyalty to one's husband as the key point of a widow's life*' (Chakravarti 154). Her act of suicide by choosing to stay inside the burning hut comes across as a powerful critique of the symbolic structure which deprives a widow sexually, socially and financially in the guise of tradition. This is a "voluntary" sacrifice as Mani calls a "fundamental ambivalence" toward suttee. An act of deliberate *sati* as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out while citing the anti-sati crusaders' view. Even though she is exercising choice but ultimately, she is portrayed as a victim. In *Real and Imagined Women*, Rajan describes *how the colonial discourse has seized upon an real narrative situation of a single white man saving a brown woman from a mob of brown men* (Rajan 42). But in Goswami's novel, the white man Mark Sahib proves to be absolutely helpless as he failed to save Giribala from being the victim of the traditions.

According to Hindu laws a widow has two options in front of her – be a sati who mounts the pyre, rejects widowhood and proves herself to be the best follower of "stridharma"; or become an ascetic within the home, remaining celibate, steadfastly

devoted to her husband till she dies' (Chakravarti 164). But Giribala's affection towards the Christian missionary and her willingness to support him in his quest of knowledge is problematic as she neither fits into any of the model prescribed. This can be the seed of a third model in the making, which is merely based on individual wish and aspiration. Similarly, Soru Gosainee, who is the widow of Indranath's uncle, is a young woman, in love with her life. She lives separately with a caretaker – Mahidhar. He takes care of her monetary transactions and her lands and possessions. Unlike Durga she is strong and lives independently, yet later on she becomes fully dependent on Mahidhar and develops some feelings for him. The fact that she transfers her emotions to another man sensitises us to her intense desire to defy the traditional injunctions imposed on a widow. It symbolises her refusal to lose her individuality within the socially defined mores on widowhood. She is often troubled by uneasiness, thinking about his wellbeing. Goswami exposes her guilty morality "*Watching this sleeping man, lying there almost half naked, behind the broken down mud wall? Should such thoughts flicker through the mind of a thirty year old widow?*" (158). Mahidhar cheated her and took away all her cash, gold and forged documents of her lands. She was deeply affected by this heinous act of his. She was doomed to misery for the rest of her life. She is aware of the restriction that an upper caste woman like her should maintain. But she fails to control her deep sexual longing for Mahidhar.

Economic exploitation

The novel raises many important questions related to the concept of widows' rights and claim. Durga and Saru Gossainee both

suffer on account of material deprivations. Their right to maintenance is threatened due to widowhood which marginalised them within the larger familial and communal context. Under the Dayabhaga system of inheritance, Saru loses her right to property. After her husband's death, she cannot seek maintenance as her father-in-law had disinherited his son (her husband) Rama Kanta from owning lands under the joint property. Nobody care for her and has no source of maintenance except the little rent she manages to obtain from the property left by her husband at the time of his death. The resultant earnings are clearly not enough. "*I am the daughter-in-law of the old Gossain, the same Gossain who was so powerful and had vast lands and ten elephants! Has anybody cared to come and find out about the wretched condition of this daughter-in-law at present?*" (Goswami 237) Even though being called the Adhikar of the three Satras Saru Gossainee is very lonely.

Indira Goswami never tried to show any kind of hope in the narrative. The novel portrays the darker side of life, of not only the widows, but life in general in the village. Nobody tries to fight the evils of the society, even though characters like Saru, Giribala, and Indranath are capable of doing so. Their desires to fight against the evil custom and practices remained inside their minds only. Even though Giribala who is shown as rebel tried yet failed and dies at the end. With the death of Indranath at the hands of rebellious peasants, the last hope of change was gone. The struggle of these women to break free from patriarchal hold may not always be successful, as is the case with Giribala, but they are shown to be involved in a process of questioning and resisting the socio-religious factors that attempt to

manipulate and control their lives. The institution of marriage and widowhood in these societies has been designed in a way that gives men complete and unquestionable control over the bodies and particularly the sexuality of women. A woman fails to attain the legitimacy of an independent self or an individual being like that of a man in the dominant socio-religious doctrines of India. She is always the other, the derivative, the marginal, the subliminal, and defined in terms of a lack which exists in the natural order of things to procreate and immortalise the name of men. A woman in control of her own body, without any male supervision, is a source of panic and anxiety in the society.

Conclusion

The Moth-eaten Howdah of a Tusker, is not merely a literary genius in its own right, but also happens to be an authentic socio-cultural document of a period spanning over a hundred years. In the

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name of rigorous practices and tradition widows are mortified and punishments were imposed upon them. Goswami presents the pitiful existence of widowed women of the Satra, who were not allowed to leave their homes and are supposed to keep themselves hidden as it is believed that their sight or touch may bring troubles or misfortunes to others. The picture of the three widows of the Gossain family – Giribala, Durga and Saru Gossainee, is the most pathetic one. The cold-hearted and insensitive feudal and patriarchal system driven by greediness and religious orthodoxy deprives these widows of their share in property. The novel has portrayed vividly the institutionalized and cruel oppression of widows in the Satras but author does not offer any reformist solutions to their problems nor does she show any animosity towards their oppressors or those who sympathise with them but cannot resist against the system.