

Portrayal of Female Characters and their Socio-Psychological Conditions in Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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ABSTRACT

The prime concern of the present paper is to discuss socio-psychological conditions of a woman in the male dominated society as portrayed by Indira Goswami in her most famous and read novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. In the mentioned novel, Goswami depicts the bitter reality of a pathetic condition of a woman especially that of a widow in the male dominated society in India. Being a part and parcel of an Indian male dominated society, she expresses her observations and experiences in her novels through the characters. In the present novel, women and especially that of widows of Gossain - Brahmin society are portrayed by the novelist.

1. Introduction

Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* depicts the pathetic condition of a woman in the male dominated society. Being an Indian woman, Goswami had experienced a lot and she expresses her observations and experiences in her works through the various female characters. She dives deep into the mind and heart of her female characters and presents their feelings, sufferings, physical and psychological pains. She throws lights on the orthodox ill-rituals of the so called high class society i.e. Brahmin. From the beginning to the end of the novel, readers can get the full picture of the pathetic socio-psychological conditions of the women in the male dominated society.

2. Socio-Psychological Conditions of the Female Characters

There is much importance of women characters in literature because without female characters theme of any literary species cannot reach at its culmination. Especially in India, the role of woman has explored. She has to perform various roles during her life such as a daughter, sister, beloved, wife, mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law etc. India is a male dominated country where the woman has been considering the subordinate to the male in the family and society. The same idea is reflected in the literature too by many male and female writers. Indira Goswami has presented female characters effectively in their novels.

Most of the female characters of Indira Goswami are widows and helpless fellows of the patriarchal society. In the present novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* Goswami has focused the demotion of women in the Brahmin society in general and the marginalization of the widows in particular. In the Gossain - Brahmin society widows were treated as sinners. They were considered as inauspicious so they were not supposed to enter in any auspicious occasions or festivals of the society, they were kept away from such occasions and festivals. They were ordered to remain within the four walls of the house and were not permitted to watch the outside of the house. They were not permitted to cross the threshold of the

house and whole day and remaining years, they were supposed to live in the house. In the novel, Durga represents such character that tolerates everything in silence. In fact, she willingly, meekly and passively accepts all that has been imposed upon her by her in-laws. She can never think of going to court even to fight for her rights:

Could she go to Gauhatito demand her share of property? Impossible! Impossible! (Goswami: 2004, 14).

Saru Gossainee, another traditionalist, consoles miserable Durga when her gold ornaments were stolen as:

it's our fate that we are born as women. We should learn to lead our lives with patience and tolerance (Goswami: 2004, 99).

The widow Gossainee leads a very miserable life. They are devastated by deprivation and diseases. Sometimes they are tortured pitilessly by their in-laws. Goswami writes in the novel to narrate the pitiable condition of Giribala at her in-laws house that:

In case of Giribala her mother-in-laws torture had crossed the limit...this is the reason why her unborn child was destroyed in her womb...why, she was not even allowed to go to latrine during amoti!... and she could get down from her cot only after wearing betelnut bark sandals on her feet (Goswami: 2004, 30).

They are not even allowed to read and to learn. In that society widow re-marriage was considered as a sin. Even no one can dare to think about the re-marriage of a widow in those days in that society. For the background of the novel Goswami has chosen the wretched condition of the women sustaining the patriarchal Brahmin society. Child-marriage was customary among the people. A girl had to get married before she attained puberty or her family would be detested. Thus,

their fathers were desperate for getting their daughters married. The girls were meant to occupy themselves in domestic concerns and were kept away from the nectar of education. Goswami asserts:

Here girls from Gaussian households still don't go out in public, let alone to school (Goswami: 2004, 66).

They believed that:

What's the use of intelligence in a girl? It will bring nothing but blemish on the family's name. Women's education is of no use (Goswami: 2004, 286).

Apart from all these, the husbands also tortured their wives. These Gaussians' sticks, sometimes, rained blows on the back of the unfortunate women and were sometimes beaten up to death or they themselves committed suicide, failing to tolerate their husbands' tortures:

There was an unused well near Matia Pahar that was considered haunted...they hauled out many skeletons of women (Goswami: 2004, 213).

Wife of Bamdeo Maujadar underwent the same fate as her husband had an affair with a nurse. In case of a polygamous man, society rarely pointed out finger at man but society would not remain back to point out the finger at the woman if the same case might have happened with a woman even after the death of her husband. A Gaussian could have an affair with a low caste woman but a Gossainee was never allowed to think about it even in her dream. If they did so they had to undergo certain purification rituals. All these things are depicted very lucidly and superbly in the novel. Goswami has clicked a 1948 picture in the form of the novel, which she has stated in the very beginning. By the end she gives us another very brief picture of 1981 where she has captured a changed picture of the society - the inter-caste marriages were acceptable to certain extent; the Gossainees went to Gauhati to fight for her cause or were seen to be the accused of forgeries; girls began to go to school like the boys, some had even become important officers. However, the thing that had not changed is the exploitation of women:

Nowadays Bihari traders or Kabuli merchants hailing from Kabul sometimes make a round of the sattra conspicuously. They lure some low-caste girls away with dreams of marriage or even marry them with due ceremony. But alas, these girls either come back ruined and disgraced, or they are sold in the flesh trade (Goswami: 2004, 345).

The exceptional character of Giribala is also the projection of Goswami in the present novel. She is a Gossain widow who defied the traditional norms set by the patriarchal Gossain society. When she came from her in-laws' house to her paternal home after the attainment of widowhood, the neighbourhood women came to see her and were talking and discussing about her misfortunes. Giribala could not tolerate it as Goswami depicts:

She came out of the puja room bursting the door open like a tigress in rage. Her hair had come undone and flew wildly. Her gata had come off and her clothes were in disarray...She screamed. "I am alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you..." She was not happy with her conjugal life. Her husband had lots many affairs. She remembered his words: Since we are already married...you'll have to tolerate some of my habits...I love women. I like their company (Goswami: 2004, 140).

Her husband's statement hurts her much. She has no affection for him and thus a sign of blues is not there in her eyes for her dead husband. Every time she remembers him, she thinks of his affair with the low caste woman from Maniari Chowk. She is not the projection of a conventional Gossain widow but a rebellious who does not want to exist just for to live. She does not have any devotion for her dead husband who touched and played with that notorious woman who sold opium, and does not want to follow the path of Durga. Her inner most being whispers to Mark Sahib, "Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you" (Goswami: 2004, 153).

Giribala is contradictory to Durga; where Durga is a conformist, Giribala is a non-conformist. She is a new 'figure' who wants her liberation and wants to lead a halcyon life, different from the life led by Durga and Saru Gossainee. She cannot dominate her desires and traverses the margin laid for the widows. On an occasion when she smelt the smell of delicious mutton curry she could not control over her passion and desire as Goswami depicts:

She could not resist herself, she forgot everything...religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint...started gulping it down in great haste...(Goswami: 2004, 144).

For a Gossain widow it was a wicked act; even to smell the aroma of forbidden food was a great sin. But she was sick and tired of the boiled rice and pulses with the boiled vegetables and a pinch of salt, which she had to have every day. Her conscience was not permitting her at the beginning but later on when she recalled her husband's betrayal her conscience stopped interfering. On witnessing it Durga fainted and Gossainee, catching hold of Giribala's braids, kicked her, punched her and clawed at her. Giribala has to undergo purification rights as Goswami has said:

this drama of purification and ritualistic atonement went on for quite a long time (Goswami: 2004, 147).

Indranath her elder brother encourages Giribala to carry on her education. She is happy when she is nominated by her brother to help Mark as she would not be engaged within the four walls like Durga. Giribala has a soft corner for Mark Sahib. His self-less devotion to the needy, poor and marginalized, touched her heart and believes that it is just Mark who would be able to liberate her. It is just Mark who can provide her everything including her biological needs. But he cannot touch her as he knows his margin. In utter frustration she begs the

mad elephant to kill her. By the end of the novel, she enters into his hovel, forcefully, in a stormy night. She utters:

I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die (Goswami: 2004, 295).

She crosses all the barriers and wants him to satisfy her physical needs. But Mark is not as brave as her. When she is caught red handed they drag her out and prepare to purify her as she has committed the sin of having illicit relations with a low-caste man. But Giribala, 'a new-woman' would not accept it and sacrifices her life in the same hut that is used for her purification rights and then set on fire.

3. Conclusion

Thus, Durga, Giribala and Saru Gossainee are the widows and Eliman, a young girl of twelve year all are the leading characters of *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988). They all have tried to raise their voice against the taboo of the orthodox society but ultimately they have either to surrender or accept death in the male dominated society. From beginning to the end of the novel, they have to suffer a lot to survive in the home and society. They all want to create their own identities, all want to become independent but all their efforts have proved vain. They all long for golden lives but they cannot achieve what they desire.

Works Cited

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