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Revolutionary woman: A Study of the character of Giribala in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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ABSTRACT

Women are always categorized as the 'other' having a secondary position and thenotion of 'normal' is very complex as one has to fulfill the expectations as well as the rules set by the society. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is not only popular because of her writings but also for she transgress the boundaries to address the plights and problems of woman. Women studies flourished with feminism which fights against gender inequalities and it concentrates on studying the different experiences that women goes through. The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is a literary piece that focuses on the plight of widows in Assamese orthodox family at the same time it also depicts some women characters who tries to cross the patriarchal boundaries. Goswami has very finely depicted issues like caste system and position of woman in a patriarchal society in the novel. Status of women as victimized is very clear in the novel. The title of the novel is very symbolic. It has reference to the idea of 'strongness' but at the same time the howdah is eaten by moth. The title seems to signify that women are dominated and they are suppressed because of the regulations formed by the male counterparts. The paper attempts to study the women characters, especially the character of Giribala who emerge as a 'new' woman. The novel narrates the story of Giribala who becomes a widow at a very early age. Through the character of Giribala, Goswami is in search of independent women who tries to transgress the norms set for women by the patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

MamoniRaisom Goswami is considered to be one of the great poet, scholar, editor, writer and professor and is popular among her readers because of the issues that she deals with in her writings. Concern for women always plays a dominant role in Goswami's works and she raise questions about position of women in society, marriage and widowhood. *The MothEaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a literary piece that focuses on the plight of widows inAssamese orthodox family. The novel tries to show how patriarchal norms are accepted as laws and one who tries to go against it are considered downfall.

Gender inequality is one of the reason for language variation. Language is sexist in nature and the definition of the term 'woman' is also a result of it. The term 'woman' is a social construction and a result of the patriarchal system. Moreover, woman are always represented by the male dominated society. Synonyms for the word 'woman' shows how woman are always relegated to the back and are considered weak who are supposed to stay only within the four walls of the house. In a patriarchal setup woman are the homemakers and men are the bread earners. The notion of 'normal' is very complex as one has to fulfil every expectations of the society and woman are expected to be very submissive and inferior. But towards the end of the 19th Century women entered into a new world by transgressing the values and norms set by the patriarchal society. The woman who transgress the patriarchal rules and who has control on their life are the "new woman". These woman never allow others to control their lives in terms of their identity, social and economic status. They always raise their voice to assert their identity and always demarginalise their presence. Woman are often been relegated, subjugated and oppressed and in this context feminism started as a movement to erase the social and gender inequality. Women studies flourished with feminism which concentrates on studying various experiences that woman goes through. Woman as seen often are subjugated and dominated by the male counterparts. In this context feminism as a movement stands to erase the gender based inequalities in our societies and to study the power structure.

Goswami in her works not only tried to state the problems of the society but through her works she always tried to bring a change. The novel *"The Moth Eaten Howdah of theTusker"* is set in South Kamrup district and the setting of the novel is British colonial rule.The story revolves around a Vaishnavite household which heads a Satra. The head, known as Goisain of the Satra is considered an incarnation of God to the other people of the community. The story of the novel is about three widows of the Gosain family: Durga, Soru Gosaine and Giribala. Widows are found to be tortured socially, economically, and also at a very personal level and at the same time they becomes victimized psychologically. One who suffers can realize the height of trauma that one has to go through. It involves difference from the former position in society, difference in food habits that one has to accept according to the society, and they has to live under more limitations and restrictions. The title of the novel is very symbolic. It has reference to the idea of strongness and power but at the same time the howdah is eaten by moth.

Durga is a character who very finely accepts the rules of the patriarchal society who do not know how to rebel. After the death of her husband, she is treated brutally by her in laws and her maternal society. She was not allowed to participate in any

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religious activities and ceremonies, not even allowed to eat cooked food. She firmly believes that one day her in laws will come and take her to her husband's home with dignity. She is deprived of her property and even she do not have any interest to fight legally for her property. She do not have a voice of her own and has no courage to regain herself identity. Saru Gosainee faced the same type of problems like that of Durga. She has love for a man named Mohidhar but she feels that it is a sin as she is a widow and thus she suppresses her sexual longing and desires. She believes him but in return the greedy Mohidhar cheated her by trying to sell her land and this is how her love and faith for him got ruined and shattered. In this context, we can say that Goswami is also trying to show how sexual identity is also designed by the patriarchal society. The novel depicts the story of Giribala who become a widow and has to lead a very painful life because of the societal expectations. Giribala is the youngest who do not accept the norms of the patriarchal society and protest the restrictions that society imposes on a widow. While Giribala returns to her father's home after the death of her husband, no women feels sympathy for her, instead they talked with each other not to touch her as she is a widow now. The idea of doubly marginalized comes here how the woman are dominated by their male counterparts and at the same time they are not treated equally by the womenfolk.

Giribala is different from Durga and Saru Gosainee and she utters "Moi Durga naiba Saru Gosainee dore basi thakibo nuaru ore jeeban, Khaynakhi Sahib moi mori bhoot hoi jam".

Caste discrimination stands as one of the dominant element in the novel. Goswami depicts it very finely as a cause of pain especially for the people belonging to lower class. On the other hand woman as victimised is also knitted with a true facet. Girls who are not married but attain puberty are considered outcast. The married woman are cheated and abused by their husband and in-laws. According to the Brahmins, woman should stay inside the four walls of the house and those who tries to cross the boundaries are considered outcast. Dependence of women on their male counterparts make them more victimized in the society. Yet, the married woman feels they are more lucky than the widows and the girls who attain puberty before getting married. The plight of the widows are portrayed by Goswami very clearly as the society believes that their presence can also bring misery to the society.

There is a clear difference between people belonging to the higher class and the lower class in society. The feudal system gives the Gosain family authority over the whole community who considers themselves to be superior and maintains a gap with the other households. In the novel people belonging to the working class are not allowed to enter inside the Gosain's house because they are considered untouchable. Even if the people from lower strata of society touches a person of higher class accidentally, s/he as a form of punishment has to give all the hard earned money. Along with the people from lower class, the foreigners are also considered untouchable. We can site an instance from the novel when Mark Sahib came to Assam for his research work on the tradition of Satra. He was given a wooden chair to sit and when Giribala and Durga came out to meet this man, Durga finds his shadow fall on her. She is a very passive woman who follows the patriarchal rules and considering that the shadow of this man make her body polluted she took bath again. Except Giribala and Indranath, all the other members of the family are proponents of strict caste hierarchy.

Giribala is such a strong character in the novel who prefers her own freedom. She donot accepts the norms of the society and stands against the restrictions that society imposes on a widow. On reaching puberty, she is married off to Latu Goswami againt her wishes because no one bothers about her wishes and desires. In a patriarchal setup, a woman can decide or speak nothing because a woman donot have a voice of her own and even if she speak there is no one to listen. On the first night of their marriage he told Giribala that he has a relationship with a woman who belong to lower class and he will not change this habit of maintaining relationship with other woman. Giribala had to suffer a lot and even after the death of her husband, she had to go through tortures by her in-laws. Lack of love made her more rebellious and in order to take revenge on the patriarchal norms, she break all taboos by eating meat at the "Shraddha" of her husband.

She was sent back to her father's home after her miscarriage. At her father's home she started to help Mark Sahib, an American missionary who came to Assam for research work. At that time they were attracted towards each other and again the society stands as an obstacle in front of her. One night she entered Mark Sahib's house and requests him to take her away from all the societal restrictions on a widow. But unfortunately she was discovered from Mark's house by the society and they demands purification of Giribala. With the suggestion and instruction of the village priest, the villagers erect a shed made of leaves and timber and made Giribala stay inside the shed. During the mantras, Giribala has to come out of the shed according to the villagers but she did not come out of the burning shed. Giribala inside the burning shed burnt into ashes. She fought against the patriarchal system and meets the tragic end.

2. Conclusion

The character of Giribala was in search of respect, space, and identity and she choose death instead of life by transgressing the patriarchal norms. Her death is defiance against a system created by man. Her death is a cause of religious conservations and Giribala is a character who finds out her own place and space in a male dominated society. By immolating her own body going against the expectations of the villagers once again Giribala transcended the patriarchal norms.

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