

Revolt And Resilience: The Role Of Women In Mamoni Raisom Goswami's Moth Eaten Howdah Of The Tuskar

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Introduction

Indira Goswami, widely recognized by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami and affectionately known as Mamoni Baideo, stands as one of the most illustrious figures in modern Assamese literature. As Prof. Hiren Gohain remarked, "Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years," highlighting the profound impact she has made on the literary landscape of Assam. Her contributions as a writer, poet, professor, scholar, and editor have earned her numerous accolades, including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 for her novel *Mamare Dhara Tarowal* (The Rusted Sword). She is the only female writer from Assam to have received the Jnanpith Award in 2000 for her significant contributions to Assamese literature. In addition to these honors, she was awarded the international Tulsi Award from Florida International University for her book *Ramayana From Ganga to Brahmaputra* and was recognized with the Asom Ratna, Assam's highest civilian award, for her immense contributions to the state.

Born on November 14, 1942, in an orthodox family in the South Kamrup District of western Assam, Goswami pursued her education at Cotton College (now Cotton State University) and later earned a master's degree from Gauhati University. In 1973, she was awarded a Ph.D. for her thesis, *Comparative Study of Goswami Tulsidas' Ramcharit Manas and Madhava Kandali's Assamese Ramayana*. Her literary works have been widely acclaimed, with many translated into various Indian languages. Notably, her novel *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker) has been translated into Urdu in Pakistan, further extending her influence beyond linguistic and national boundaries.

Goswami's impact on Assamese literature is profound, with a body of work comprising 25 novels and over a hundred short stories. Her literary oeuvre is predominantly set against a rural backdrop and is characterized by its exploration of critical themes, including social prejudices, women's issues, societal hypocrisy, and the plight of marginalized communities. Goswami's narratives often draw from personal experiences and real-life situations, reflecting the struggles of individuals from poor and middle-class backgrounds. Among her most renowned works are *Chenabar Srot* (As the Chenab Flows), *Nilakanthi Braja* (The Shadow of a Dark God),

Ahiron (also translated into English and included in her book, *The Selected Works of Indira Goswami*), and *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* (A Saga of South Kamrup). Her autobiography, *Adha Lekha Dastavej* (An Unfinished Autobiography), is particularly notable for its honest, brave, and open expression of her early life experiences.

As a prominent feminist writer, Goswami addresses themes of patriarchy and socioeconomic oppression, particularly as they affect marginalized communities. Despite her own relatively privileged background, she critically examines the systemic and harsh oppression of women, especially widows, who are often deprived of their social status and place within their families and communities after their husbands' deaths. Her works reveal the exploitation these women endure under rigid social customs, often remaining silent about their suffering. Through her novels, Goswami sheds light on these issues, giving voice to those affected by such systemic injustices. In her celebrated novel *Ahiron*, she boldly asserts a feminist stance, declaring that "A woman is completely free to love and bear children according to her own choice. Isn't this the view of Isadora Duncan too?" (Tilottoma Misra, *Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold*, Uddipana Goswami, ed., p. 65).

Goswami's novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* vividly portrays her deep concern for the status of women in society. Set in India from the early 19th century through the period leading up to independence, the novel exposes the harsh treatment of women, particularly Hindu widows, by feudal rulers residing in monasteries. The story centers on three female protagonists—Durga, Saru Gossaine, and Giribala—each of whom is constrained by the strict patriarchal norms of the sattrā. These norms dictate not only how they live and eat but also how they communicate and interact with the world around them.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the feminist themes in Indira Goswami's novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*.
2. To explore how widowhood is portrayed in the novel and its implications on female agency.
3. To examine the role of women in perpetuating patriarchal norms within the context of Assamese society.
4. To understand the significance of Giribala's rebellion and its impact on the critique of patriarchal structures.

Methodology of the study:

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on a close reading of Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. The analysis is framed within feminist literary theory, particularly examining how the novel addresses issues of patriarchy, gender roles, and the social position of widows. The study also considers secondary sources, including critical essays and scholarly articles, to contextualize the themes within broader Assamese literature and society.

Portrait of Widowhood: Durga, Saru Gosainee, and Giribala

The narrative of “The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker” revolves around three widows from the Gosain family—Durga, Saru Gosainee, and Giribala. Each of these characters offers a different perspective on widowhood and the societal expectations imposed on them. Durga and Giribala present contrasting responses. Durga exemplifies conformity, accepting and adhering to the restrictive rules imposed by her community. In contrast, Giribala embodies resistance, actively challenging the oppressive norms that govern the lives of widows. Her bold defiance underscores a critical examination of these oppressive structures and contributes to a broader discussion on gender and agency within patriarchal systems.

Durga, the eldest widow, embodies the traditional, passive acceptance of the norms that dictate a widow’s life. She lives under the shadow of darkness and death, surrendering to the strict societal expectations without protest. Durga's character represents countless women in similar circumstances who, lacking the language or means of rebellion, endure their suffering in silence. Her portrayal is a powerful reflection of the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society in which she lives, where compliance is expected, and any form of dissent is stifled.

Saru Gosainee, the second widow, represents a more complex relationship with societal norms. Unlike Durga, Saru harbors feelings for Mohidhar, a Brahmin who assists her in collecting rent. She fantasizes about him, envisioning a romantic connection that transcends her widowhood. However, Mohidhar, driven by greed, betrays her trust by attempting to sell her land using a forged letter of authority. This betrayal shatters Saru's dreams of love and trust, leaving her disillusioned and heartbroken. Her character illustrates the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society, where even the semblance of personal agency is often undermined by deceit and exploitation.

Giribala, the youngest widow, stands in stark contrast to Durga and Saru. She refuses to accept the restrictions imposed by society and courageously rebels against the oppressive norms governing the lives of widows. Unlike Durga, who longs to return to her in-laws, Giribala is terrified at the thought of going back to her husband’s house, where her life would be marked by darkness and the memory of a husband who had been unfaithful. Giribala's desire for freedom from the suffocating life of a widow is a powerful statement against the rigid patriarchal structures that seek to control every aspect of a woman's existence.

Women as Perpetuators of Patriarchy

Upon returning to her father's home after her husband's death, Giribala is met with disdain and warnings from the women in the neighbourhood. They caution one another, saying, "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now." This reaction highlights how women themselves often perpetuate the patriarchal norms that oppress them, enforcing rules that further entrench their subjugation. Durga, with her traditional mindset, expects Giribala to conform to these societal rules, just as she has. This dynamic underscores the deep-rooted nature of these oppressive customs, which are upheld not only by men but also by women who have internalized them.

Giribala's Rebellion and Tragic End

Initially, Giribala appears to conform to the traditional principles of Sattriya society, but she soon begins to resist the cruelty of this orthodox system. She expresses her anguish, saying, "Moi Durga naiba Saru Gohenir dore basi thakibo noru ore jeeban, khaynakhi sahib moi mori bhoot hoi jam," which translates to "I cannot live like Durga or Saru Gossaine, merely surviving. If I continue this life, I will die and become a ghost." Her words reflect a deep desire to break free from the life of bondage and oppression that she is expected to endure.

Giribala's life is marked by a series of humiliations and struggles against the oppressive customs that govern her existence. For instance, when there is a feast in her mother's house, Giribala, being a widow, is locked in an isolated room because she is not allowed to touch meat. However, someone secretly places some mutton curry in her room, and Giribala, unable to resist the temptation, begins to eat it. When she is caught, she is brutally beaten, a punishment that leaves her wishing for death. This incident exemplifies the cruel and dehumanizing treatment that widows endure, reinforcing the idea that their lives are considered less valuable and that they must adhere to strict, often inhumane, societal rules.

Giribala's growing intimacy with Mark Sahib, an outcaste, further scandalizes her in-laws and the orthodox society around her. When her in-laws arrange for her return to her late husband's home, Giribala defies them by seeking refuge with Mark Sahib, asking him to take her away from the oppressive society that seeks to control her every move. Mark Sahib, though moved by her courage and vulnerability, is unable to make a decision that would endanger his own position as a scholar and missionary. Giribala's act of seeking protection from an outcast is a bold rejection of the societal norms that have oppressed her, but it ultimately leads to her tragic end.

When Giribala is discovered with Mark Sahib, the community prescribes a ritual expiation for the sin of associating with an outcast. A straw hut is built in an open field, and Giribala is instructed to come out only when the fire engulfing the shed reaches her. However, even as the flames consume the hut, Giribala does not emerge, choosing instead to immolate herself. Her suicide is a final act of defiance against a system that offers her no freedom or dignity. The smell of her burning body spreads over the banks of Jogoliya, symbolizing not only the destruction of Giribala's physical form but also the obliteration of the dreams and aspirations of countless women like her.

Giribala's tragic end serves as a powerful critique of the patriarchal society that devalues the lives of women, particularly widows, and enforces strict, often inhumane, codes of conduct upon them. Through Giribala's story, Goswami highlights the brutal reality of women's lives in a society that demands their subjugation and punishes any attempt at resistance. The novel, therefore, stands as a poignant exploration of the ways in which women navigate, resist, and ultimately succumb to the oppressive structures that govern their lives.

Conclusion:

In Indira Goswami's work, the character of Giribala represents the collective protest of women against the oppressive norms of society. A revolutionary figure, Giribala is desperate to escape the suffering imposed by widowhood, ultimately finding suicide to be her only means of resistance. Her tragic death serves as a powerful act of defiance against the rigid, conservative structures that govern women's lives.

However, Goswami also highlights the role of women who, despite being victims of the same patriarchal system, act as enforcers of its rules and regulations. These women perpetuate the cycle of oppression by passing on these norms to future generations. Goswami was acutely aware of this internalized patriarchy and addressed it in many of her novels. Through her nuanced character portrayals, she challenges readers to reflect on the entrenched orthodox norms upheld in the name of religion and tradition.

In her exploration of these themes, Goswami raises critical questions about how a woman can break free from the constraints of patriarchy and seek self-fulfillment in a world bound by restrictive religious and cultural customs. Her work invites a deeper consideration of the possibilities and limitations of female agency within such a repressive social framework.

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