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The Problems Of Hindu Widows As Represented In Indira Goswami's Text

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Abstract

Widows in India thus experiences many psychological problems as well as social problems in the society. Widowhood exposes the opening between cultural and social realities, and between principles and practices. It brings in its fold a number of problems for the widow and she has to live a life of isolation and dependency. Widowhood has been a strongly gendered experience, and elderly widows in particular, have traditionally been seen as one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Jnanpith award winner Indira Goswami (1942 – 2011) was a prolific writer in Modern Assamese Literature. Goswami, an adaptable intellect, projects widow characters that are mistreated in the orthodox Assamese Brahmin society. This paper highlights the impact of widowhood as represented in Goswami's *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker, 1998)*, *Nilkanthi Braja (The Blue-necked God, 1972)*, *Adha Likha Daztabez, (An Unfinished Autobiography, 1988)* and *The Offspring (Sanskar)*

Keywords: Widowhood, Indira Goswami, Widow, Oppression, Tradition, Regional

Introduction

Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent contemporary Assamese writer, editor, poet, professor and scholar of Assamese literature whose work have been translated into English from her native language. Goswami has been the recipient of a number of awards including the Sahitya Academi award for *Mamore Dhara Torowal*, Bharat Nirman Award, Katha national award for literature, Kamal Kumari foundation national award, D. Litt. from Rabindranath Bharati University, West Bengal Mahiyoshi Joymoti award by Ahom court of assam, D. Litt. degree from Rajib Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, The International Tulsi award from Florida International University for her book, *Ramayana From Ganga to Brahmaputra* and *Asom Ratna*, the highest civilian award in the state of Assam, India. She has achieved a great success and recognition in the field of Assamese literature. She published her first work in the form of short stories *Chinaki* (1962), when she was a student. She completed her schooling at Pine Mount School in Shillong, Meghalaya and graduated from Cotton College, Guwahati. She had contributed a lot in the field of Assamese literature and some of her novels were made into movies. According to the distinguished critic, Prof Hiren Gohai, “Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years. She has sprung upon her readers a whole new world of experience- feelings, perceptions, thoughts, characters, types and situations – that amaze and enthrall...A singular intensity of feeling and a searching honesty, courage, and a masterful confidence of expression mark her writing”. Some of her widely read novels are – *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker, 1988)*, *Nilkanthi Braja (The Blue-necked God, 1972)*, *Mamore Dhara Tarowal aru Dukhon Uponyas (The Rusted Sword and Two Other Novels, 1980)*, *Tej aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha (Pages Stained with Blood, 2001)*, *Arihon*, *Chinnamatsar Manuhto (The Man from Chinnamasta, 2005)*, *Chinavar Srota (The Chenab's Current, 1972)*. *Chinavar Srota* (1972) is her first novel, a work that is marked by a sympathetic rendering of life and situation of a group of men engaged in building a bridge over the river Chenab. The work is further marked by vivid realism, penetrating insight and deep poetic sensibility. On the whole, it is an impressive work full of promise. This promise was more than amply fulfilled in her next novel, *Nilkanthi Braja (The Blue-necked God, 1972)* with which she came into limelight in Modern Assamese literature.

Indira Goswami was an outstanding writer who reveals the lived experience of ordinary people. Her powerful graphic descriptions and images bring to light the centrality of the body in human affairs and the codification of political, religious and cultural systems through the body: the bodily processes of life, the impact of gender and age, and the physically of poverty, norms and conflicts. Goswami's stories have a common setting in the southern part of the district of Kamrup in Assam. Her tales have multiple themes in a wavering timeframe spreading through a half a century. Goswami highlighted the diverse cultural context of her remote region. She depicts contemporary political and social dimensions. Her intimate knowledge of community realities is closely woven into strong narratives that tackle controversial subjects such as the plight of widows and the experience of Sikhs in the anti-Sikh riots as well as the impact of caste system, prostitution and ethnic strife on the human body and psyche. Her *An Unfinished Autobiography* (1988) is remarkable for its utter frankness. An important voice for the marginalised, she also writes about Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir and Vrindavan, bringing local issues to the fore.

In her interview to the Times of India, after receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award, she said, "Writing is in my blood, in my veins. If I stop writing I will die of suffocation. Without my pen I will die...With my writings I am free as a bird, to fly anywhere, to be anyone, to understand anything". Goswami includes in her writings her hope for justice and equality that reflect her deep connections with the society. Her writings show her deep empathy for the marginalised section of the society. Humanistic theories on harsh realism used by her are given stress to examine the enhanced sensory and tactile representation of reality and the female body, which are part of her conceptualizations and legacy. Sometimes in her pages we find an intersection of ideas, forms and styles taking place at different levels creating processes and dialogues with inter-linkages between form and content, genre and theme, visual and aural, local and regional, traditional and contemporary. In order to eliminate this loathsome process she had ventured to transgress several superstitions. In this way she hopes to animate the human and fundamental desires. She had chosen the path of detachment for the appraisal of these human desires. So, she feels that though inhuman and brutal hardness and devastate natural desires of man such as serenity, happiness, beauty, love etc., yet it cannot altogether destroy all these. And renovation of these fundamental desires is not only a duty, but is significant for the society as a whole.

The novel *The Blue-necked God* set in Vrindavan offers a graphic picture of the plightful condition of the Hindu widows in Vrindavan. The plot revolves around the exploitation and miserable lives of Brahmin widows who spend their remaining years in the holy city of Vrindavan. The novel is an exploration of the terrible misery and helpless widows in Vrindavan who suffered everyday and in almost all aspects of life. Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel is a young widow and hence her family has brought her to Vrindaban as they suspected that she had starting having an affair with a Christian young man soon after she became a widow. Goswami's famous novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* set at the dawn of independence in India, in small sattras in South Kamrup in Assam. The novel was made into a film named Adajya and won many national and international film festival awards. The author holds up a powerful picture of change and transition, of degeneration and decay, which finds suitable expression in the central metaphor. Interwoven with the main story is a poignant tale of the tragedy of widowhood—the plight of Brahmin widows encased in the sattras and their responses to a fate worse than death. The novel revolves around the lives of three female characters—Durga, Saru Gossaine and Giribala, who were forced to eat, live and interact as per the deeply patriarchal norms of the sattras. Goswami's own childhood experiences and her time in Vrindavan, spend researching the lives of widows, form the backdrop of this classic, as she writes of the emotional, physical and social deprivation of women victimised by the feudal Vaishnavite sattras system. Religion, especially the practices of the orthodox Hinduism into which she was born, has remained a major concern in her writing. It has fuelled her uncompromising, direct engagement with violence, custom and prejudice. She never afraid to take a stand on principle, whether as a woman writing about the sex trade or as a vegetarian condemning animal sacrifice, she has made her art into a potent instrument of social change. Her shorter fictions is equally admired and widely anthologised. She has published poetry in English, though she disclaims the title of poet, preferring to be known as a novelists and critic. She has researched the epic *Ramayana*, comparing the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas with an 11th century Assamese *Ramayana*. Through her creative writing in her native language and her translations, she had brought her native Assamese language to the forefront of India's literary scene.

Indira Goswami's most famous short story 'The Offspring' which is a story of a young and beautiful widow, Damyanti, who was forced to take up prostitution. She is a helpless widow, who is by circumstances driven to sleep with another man. She is contracted to bear the child of Pitambar, a rich low-caste man, who has no child and keenly longs for one. Though she agrees to conceive for Pitambar – the childless father, she, a Brahmin widow, refuses to face the ultimate situation. The story ends with a surprise reversal with Damyanti aborting the child. The story reaches its climax when, on getting the news, Pitambar makes a bid in the night to dig up the fetus from the earth.

Emotionally, widows suffer the most and she has to make many compromises with her life and the sense of isolation haunts mostly the childless widow. Although, widows with children are able to pass their days in the company of children, yet a large number of widows feel anxious about their future. Being financially inadequate they are at a disadvantage to shape the careers of the children. Her image is that of a helpless and unfortunate woman with or without children, who is expected to suffer because of the sins committed in her past birth. Due to such misconception, a widow does not enjoy any status in the society. A widow experiences considerable change in her social relationships. Not only does a widow experience change in the attitudes of people around her but she also undergoes change which affects her own behaviour towards others. The stereotyped patriarchy brings a social death for a widow. Widowed women in traditional societies often face a strong drop in status and limited life choices. Widowed women's life could be highly disrupted if she does not have economic support because she is not likely to have skills with which to obtain well paying job. Myths are dangerous when they result in over simplified stereotypes that influence personal perception, social interaction and social policy. Widowhood is considered a punishment for the crime committed by her in her previous life and she is locked down upon as sinner. Widowhood in India among the upper castes is a state of social death. Widows are considered inauspicious beings. The problem of widowed women raises many queries, because though she is socially dead, she remains an element in society.

Indira Goswami throughout her literary career, remains the spokesperson of the oppressed and marginalized – the helpless victims of violence and exploitation and deprivation. The pangs of widowhood and the particularly the emotional trauma and deprivation these women are subjected to, is a recurrent motif in

Goswami's writings as clearly manifested in her two novels, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Blue-necked God*. *The Moth- Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami's own "sattra" in Amranga situated in South Kamrup, Assam. The main theme of the novels is the plight of widows. Indira Goswami's life, especially after the publication of her frank autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*, has been an open book; ever since its publication it has been used to draw strong parallels with the novels she has written. A reading of her novels demands familiarity with her autobiography, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. In many of her interviews she has said that she does not like 'imagine' plots. She often wrote about incidents that had taken place in her own life. Goswami who became a widow at a very young age, presents stories of the marginalised through the experiential voice of widow herself. Thrown into a life of depression after the tragic death of her husband, the issues of widowhood is a recurrent theme in Goswami's works. In her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*, she depicts her experience as a widow and her depression associated with widowhood. "Indira Goswami's autobiography came across as a deviant account of 'self-chosen' celibacy associated with widowhood where the author goes and resides in a place which is the traditional refuge for widows. Her depression which stems not out of some cultural practices of widowhood but of the loss of her loved one is juxtaposed with the lives of the widows of Vrindavan who are pushed to live a life of drudgery, mendicancy even prostitution not out of their own choice but out of her compulsion" (Hazarika, p 56). Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* is sensitive and true portrayal of the plight of widows. The plot revolves around the exploitation and miserable lives of Brahmin widows who spend their remaining years in the holy city Vrindavan in the hope of 'mukti' and salvation. The novel is an exploration of terrible misery and that the countless widows in Vrindavan suffered every day and in almost all aspects of life. Most of these widows were from East Pakistan and West Bengal. They were of all ages, from young to old. But the common thread that bound them was their cause for living in town was similar being rejected or becoming unwanted in their own families for being widows. Indira Goswami in her autobiography, *An Unfinished Autobiography* she recalls how she accepted a life in Vrindavan and spend two years amidst the widows in Vrindavan. She stayed there as a compassionate member as well as researcher who witnessed the pain of these helpless women . Her experience as widow belonging to the Assamese orthodox family is reflected in her works like *The Blue-necked God* and *The Moth Eaten-Howdah of the Tusker*.

In the novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami depicts an Assamese village on the banks of River Jogolia. The novel follows the life of three widows and Goswami examined the problems of widows in the orthodox community. Goswami presents the pitiful existence of widowhood women of her “sattra.” In the sattra, widows are treated as inferior one against men. “They are subjugated and victimized due to the religious laws and ethics. In the novel the position of women is determined by religion, custom, culture, beliefs and practices in the Vaishnavite sattra in South Kamrup of Assam. The marginalization of women is not only from the religion, but also from the patriarchal ideologies. The widows have no rights to possess property, they are deprived of their freedom and decent livelihood. They are all ground to dust by the grinding wheel of the system. Widows are not allowed to leave their homes because their sight or their touch may bring misfortune on others. They are like “ghosts pretending to be human beings” (Goswami. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, p 10). The harsh rituals they are forced to perform make them vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. “Some customary rituals of widowhood are continuous fasting, following a strict eating regime which includes abstaining from cooked food and surviving only on raw food such as vegetables for days, sleeping on a bed of bamboos, wearing the areca nut tree’s bark as one’s shoes, bathing and undergoing more purification rituals of their body is touched even by the shadow of low-caste man, and so on” (Goswami. *The Moth- Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, p 11).

Conclusion

Indira Goswami despite her own relative privilege, felt deeply the impact of patriarchy and socio-economic oppression on privileged communities and wrote extensively about them. Goswami’s own experiences as a widow find expression in many of her works. She presents the pitiful existence of widowed women in Satra, who are not allowed to leave their homes and supposed to keep themselves hidden as it is believed that their sight or touch may bring troubles or misfortunes to others. In most of her works she has a female protagonist, and she portrays her sufferings, feelings, desires very boldly in vivid descriptions. She has a masterly command over the language she writes in and that makes the description of the situations of her work very life-like.

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