

# Women as ‘Other’ in Indira Goswami’s *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* and Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*

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**Abstract:** With the rise of various socio-political turmoil, women predicament also evolves down the ages. Throughout the history, women are marginalized and oppressed by the patriarchal ideology. They are often regarded as an inferior being in which they are deprived of their rights. They have been socially, politically and economically neglected. The reasons behind these are the rigid conventions of tradition, custom, culture, religious beliefs and practices. However, in the twentieth century with the deep impact of education, technology and modernization, women are able to recognize the difference that has been the construction of male chauvinism. Women’s issues are represented through their writings and they at present oppose the male dominated literature which ignores women’s potentialities. Keeping in this mind, in the contemporary period, women writers critically respond to the binary opposition of ‘self’ and ‘other’, and represents women issues through distinct themes and techniques. Indira Goswami’s, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2004) highlights the discrimination of widows and unmarried women in the ‘sattrā’, a vaishnavite monastery in Assam. Women are victimized with the strict patriarchal, religion and social norms. Set in the post-independence period, it also presents the transition of socio-political set up during the period. Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1982) portrays the traumatized experiences of del Valle-Trueba women against the patriarchal tyranny of men. In the novel, Allende bring out the resistance of women in reconstructing their history and identity during the boom period of 1960s and 1970s. The focus of the paper is the comparative analysis of the two writers.

**Key Words:** Discrimination, Marginalization, Patriarchal, Self and Other.

## Introduction

Throughout history and across cultures women have been treated inferior. Due to male chauvinism, women received no recognition as rational individuals from male counterparts. They are marginalized economically, politically and socially. The reasons behind these are biological difference, tradition, custom and patriarchal ideology in the society. Identity classification is based on sexual difference, a binary opposition. Women are the ‘other’ and male counterparts are the ‘self’. This distinction leads female to be

treated as an object by the male counterpart. Though women are capable as men, they are subjugated in every sphere. So, women are victimized in the outdated traditional beliefs and practices. But, over the decades with the development of technology, education and politics, women have been able to be recognized. Thus, women writers change the conventions of male dominated literature in which it examines with contemporary issues in terms of different themes and techniques. In connection with the presentation of women as 'other' in the society, it will discuss with Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* (2004) and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982).

In both the novels, one finds the discrimination of women in the male dominated society. Goswami and Allende bring out the socio-political condition that women are treated as inferior by the patriarchal values. While representing the silence of women, the two authors significantly give a voice of the oppressed and marginalized women in the society. Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* examines the plight of widows in the 'sattrā', a vaishnavite monastic institution of Assam. The fall of new feudal politico-economic set up and the communist agitation form a turmoil in the orthodox society. Along with the issue of caste struggle, Goswami protests orthodox religious institutions that violate equal rights and status of women. Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* chronicles the experience of male dominated del Valle-Trueba women. It blends both fact and fantasy in revealing the tyranny of men against women. The patriarchal dictatorship subverts women's history and identity in the novel. Both the novelists represent similar and dissimilar issues of women from different cultural perspective and geographical locations. Goswami represents the othering of women from Northeast India and Allende represents this particular issue from Latin America.

### Objectives

The aim of this study is to bring out the factors related to the marginalization of women from different sections of the society. Attempt will also be made to trace the consequences of such wrong configuration.

### Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary datas. It includes books and other critical references that are used in discussing the proposed study in detail. The study will be based on the theory of *Feminism*. For citing the sources, it will follow *MLA* style.

### Hypothesis

Women novelists challenge the conventional representation of women through their literary interpretation and are able to have thereby equal position along with the male counterparts. The voice of protest shows how patriarchal ideologies treating women as the 'other'. To overcome this problem, characters in the novels confront the male violence with resistance and complicity. However, not every woman character is successful in overcoming the trials of gender discrimination.

## Discussion

Goswami examined the problems of unmarried and widow women in the orthodox community. In the sattra, widow women 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 feudal patriarchs who literally own the land as well as the souls of their numerous disciples are also the pillar of moral laws. The widows and unmarried women 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. Goswami describes their vulture-like habits in razor sharp prose. The evil custom is that every Brahmin girl should be married before she reaches puberty. Married women are also not able to escape the dark fate that religion has assigned to them. They are continually cheated on by their husbands and abused by their laws. The fear of social censure and the absence of financial freedom force these women to accept their own victimization. Widows are not allowed to leave their homes and are supposed to make themselves invisible, because their touch may bring misfortune on others. The harsh rituals make them threatened. One of the customary laws of the widowhood is the continuous fasting, which includes abstaining from cooked food and have to stay only with raw foods like vegetables. As per by the customs, widows sleep on a bed of bamboos and wear the areca nut tree's bark. Moreover, if their body is touched even by the shadow of low-caste men, they have to undergo more purification rituals.

The novelist intricately weaves the indignation of women from humanistic angle in which she expresses the repressed desire and freedom of women. Marriage as an economic exploitative arrangement binds the unmarried and widow women to domesticity. In such situation, widows are identified with their bodies and recognized as vulnerable. However, Goswami has given a voice of the silent sufferer with pity and horrors. As a widow, older Gossainee has led a trouble life. After the death of her husband, she is victimized as an object by the religious norms and feudal patriarch ideologies. As a widow, older Gossainee's widowhood has brought more grief and worries in the form of indifferent ones in the society. She is more burdened with the task of conforming to the prescribed religious ethics. Eliman, a twelve year old girl suffered, whom her father proposed to sell to an opium addict person. Eliman refused and again when she refused second time to another groom, she is punished. Saru Gossainee, another widow is also a victim of the narrow minded 'satra'. She is the young and beautiful widow of Indranath's uncle. Coming from a prosperous family of Pathaldi, she is a Gossainee of three 'satras' with lands and disciples scattered over a large area. During the time of her husband, they used to get enough revenue from the lands, but sudden demise of her husband and the communist agitation brought the bad days. From this time Saru Gossainee is betrayed by the low-caste villagers. Because of widowhood, Saru Gossainee is overlooked by the society. For the fear of social censure, she even hesitated to go to court. At this situation, Mahidar, a young widower, comes forward to help her. Saru Gossainee falls in love with Mahidar and believes that he understand her feelings. Belonging to a community that shuns widows, she feels very fortunate on being chosen as the object of a man's love. Saru Gossainee not even realizes that she is being cheated on and exploited by Mahidar.

Kindness makes her trust over Mahidar. Saru Gossainee's dreams shatter forever. In spite of all these incidents, she is unable to fight for the justice against the rigid social conventions. So, she accepts and express her grief "Durga, it's our fate that we are born as women. We should learn to live with patience and tolerance. As it is, our lives have been shattered by the death of our husbands" (Goswami, 46). It is a conventional construction of the value of women. Simon de Beauvoir in the book *The Second Sex* stated that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (5).

Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the *adhikar* is an unhappy woman harassed and rejected by her husband's family as an inauspicious woman. She is treated as a poor relation in her brother's house. Widows like her are not given any status and space where they have to undergo the misfortunes. Durga hopes that the growing prosperity of her in-laws will make them share properties with her or call her back to their establishment in Chikarhati. But when these expectations are not fulfilled, she plans to go on a pilgrimage to Puri and Prayag and immersing the ashes of her dead husband in the holy waters. In her excitement to go to Puri is unfulfilled when she discovers that the trinkets have been stolen. Finally she is condemned to remain a prisoner in the "sattrā" forever. Durga's health begins to deteriorate rapidly and she desires to die to escape from her misery. She requests her nephew Indranath to send her to Chikarhati to die at her husband's place so that she can enjoy the dignity of a high-caste Brahmin widow. Giribala's fate is similar to Durga. The tragic consequences as a widow is miserable when she exclaimed to Mark, "My father the *adhikar* said: Your future and Durga's future are now linked together. Durga has found her path, and you must follow her! You must observe all the rituals. You must offer flowers, *tulsi* and water daily to your dead husband's wooden sandals" (Goswami, 172). On reaching her puberty, she is married to the worthless son of the 'adhikar' of Bangara who neglects and humiliates her. After the death of her husband, she is tortured by her mother-in-law and sent back to her parents. However, to cast off her melancholy, her brother, Indranath engaged her to the American philanthropist named Mark. The touch of Mark to Giribala marks breaks of the conventions of the 'sattrā'. At one time, she consumes a bowl of meat curry. After this incident, she is locked in the airless room. When her in-laws come to reclaim her, she refuses to go because she realizes that her life would become more miserable. Instead, she runs away to Mark's hut. Giribala desires to release from the turmoil by escaping with Mark. She revealed Mark to go along with him. But, Mark hesitates to take this decision for his scholarly work and as a missionary. Accusing of clandestine affair, they want to purify the girls through rituals by using water and fire. Giribala as a hopeless woman refuses to perform any ritual and immolates herself in the fire. Giribala's desires to free from the orthodox community remain as fruitless.

Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* gives an account of Latin American women in the time of patriarchal authority. The novelist narrates the male violence from the perspective of subjective/objective position. The patriarchal ideologies subvert women's history and identity. In the novel, the male counterparts discriminate women as the 'other'. The otherness politics operate from the monolithic ideas of 'self'. This is a cultural conditioning that makes women inferior beings. Women as an 'object' can be understood from Esteban's aggressive and patriarchal attitude towards women. Esteban's female members in house are the victims of male dictatorship. Their oppression depicts how the representation of female history is different from the past truth. Along with Esteban's female generation, the peasant women are victimized as sexual



object. The incidence of Rosa's death reveals an aspects of Esteban's character. His extreme violence, uncontrollable anger and possessiveness prejudiced Rosa. These possessive and aggressive behavior are indicative of Esteban's general attitude toward women, which is later demonstrated in his relationship with Clara, Rosa the Beautiful's younger sister. Esteban's wanted Clara to depend on him. He wished to control her mind and body. Women's struggle for freedom is violated to be an immanence, and this situation, they are more like animals in which it excludes them from their liberty and knowledge. Esteban's transcendental being exploits del Valle-Trueba women as an immanent that is passive like animal and nature. The difference arises within the sexual identification between the Trueba women and Esteban.

The peasant women are a sexual object for Esteban. He used power as patron, no one can escape from him because he views them as property. His cruelty spread throughout the region and peasants hide their daughters where they cannot confront him. He thinks that he owns not only the land but the people as well, and as he is both patriarch and tyrant, the peasants are powerless to stand up against him. He thinks this sexual violence as normal behavior for a man of wealth and stature. The sexual violence continues in his relations with Transito Soto, a prostitute. Though he treats her as the 'other', Transito played a crucial role in her life. Esteban tried to hide this incidence because he wants all the incidents deal with women to be subverted. As a political figure, Esteban is conscious of what he should and should not include in his memoir, Esteban should certainly would not have written about the prostitute with whom he consorted throughout the novel, nor the bastard children whom he fathered at Tres Marias. The case of Transito Soto forced to incorporate her in his story because she rescues Alba from imprisonment and torture; otherwise it would have been unknown.

Apart from the discrimination of women, the narrative of the novel also examines the resistance to the male narratives. The switch from first person narration to third person narration is not accidental, but it symbolizes how it overcomes the male dictatorship. Alba's mixing of subjective/objective position in the narrative is to reflect the misrepresentation of women's ancestors and identity. By narrating in first person and the third person, Alba acknowledges the past and present history of del Valle-Trueba women. And it gives Alba to recognize the difference in Esteban's narrative. Alba is not only a victim of male violence, but she is exploited by the political struggle. In the prison, Alba and other women are raped and harassed mentally and physically. The women in the prison are mute spectator in which they are restricted to reveal and know the truth of their own identity. In spite of all these circumstances, women support Alba's rewriting of women history. While writing, Alba reclaims the traumatic experience of the past and to overcome this terror, she consulted Clara's notebooks, Nivea's photographs, Blanca's letters and her own experience. Alba asserts that "Clara wrote them so they would help me now to reclaim the past and overcome the terrors of my own. The book is an ordinary school copybook with twenty pages, written in a child's delicate calligraphy. It begins like this: Barabas came to us by sea" (Allende, 433). Alba destabilized the grandfather, Esteban's account. To exclude the male dictatorship's history, she narrates in a circular manner in which it undermines the traditional linear narrative.

## Conclusion

Both the novelists Indira Goswami and Isabe Allende write from different cultural contexts that bring out the trials and tribulations of women across the globe. The two novelists examine the discrimination of women in different sphere of their society. Writing from Northeast India, Indira Goswami in her novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* highlights the cruelties of religion and the feudal patriarch against women in Assam. From the humanistic point of view, Goswami critically responds to the miserable situation of women in Sattria in which they are deprived not only as women, but also as human. Isabel Allende who writes from Latin America presents the tyranny of patriarch and male dictatorship in *The House of the Spirits*. Though the characters of two novelists belong to distinct culture, tradition and country, it justifies the oppression of women as an inferior being. In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Giribala's desires to free from the restraints of the rigid conventions become hopeless. As a widow, she has to sacrifice her life in the fire. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende deals with the marginalization of women. Alba's resistances against the male violence recovers the lost past and history. The women characters are more active in the resisting the politics of customary laws of women in Allende in comparison to Goswami. On the otherhand, Goswami's women characters act passively due to the fear of conventional norms. For this reason Giribala, Saru Gossainee, older Gossainee and Durga are exploited economically, socially and politically. Allende's Alba, Blanca and Clara represent the active involvement in resisting the difference. But, the weaker women in both the novel present the sympathetic and passive figure. Thus, both the novelists explore the image of women from the humanitarian ideals in the male dominated society and bring out the similar problems of women.

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