

# INDIRA GOSWAMI'S THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER: MANIFESTATION OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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**Abstract:** Indira Goswami is a renowned Assamese writer, editor, poet, professor and a scholar who writes many realistic novels and awarded as a Jnanpith award winner. She portrayed a life-like picture of the society and culture in front of us in all her novels. "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker" is based on Amranga Sattrā, situated in South Kamrup. She presents the real picture of the society of Amranga Sattrā and depicts a real picture of the rituals, customs and cultures that were followed by the inhabitants of that society. Although she gives us a true picture of that society, she also has mixed some of her imagination with reality as she has stated in the preface of the novel "Almost all the characters have been picked from this Sattrā, by there have been close brushes of imagination with reality." This paper has attempted an analysis of the socio-cultural picture portrayed by Indira Goswami in her novel "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker".

**KEYWORDS:** Society, Culture, Real picture, Rituals, Customs, Imagination

Indira Goswami who has adopted the pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami was a writer, poet editor and activist from Assam, India. Many of her prominent novels were written originally in Assamese and translated into English. She has many novels to her credit including "The Blue Necked Braja", "The Rusted Sword" and "Pages Stained with Blood", "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker" which was turned into a film which won many awards, "The Man from Chinnamasta" and more. She has written a few anthologies of short stories and poetry and her autobiography is titled "An Unfinished Autobiography". She is the recipient of several awards including Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for the Rusted Sword, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988, Bharat Nirman Award in 1989, Katha National Award for Literature in 1993, Jnanpith Award in 2001, Padma Shri which she refused to accept in 2002, Principal Laurate Prince Claus Award in 2008 and Asom Ratna in 2009.

The book called "The Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker" is originally written in Assamese as "Dantal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah" where we find the abundant use of Kamrupi Dialect and it was translated into English by the writer herself. The novel was included in the list of classics by Sahitya Akademi and was translated into many Indian languages. The film "Adajya", which was made on the basis of this book in the direction of Dr. Santwana Bordoloi, was very well received in film festivals in India and abroad, and won many national and international awards.

The novel "Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker" begins with the year, 1948, and clearly portrays the socio-cultural lives of the inhabitants of Amranga Sattrā of Post Independence

era. It reflects the tragic condition of the upper class widow, strict patriarchal order, terrible effect of opium, illiteracy, caste system, superstition, emergence of new laws and many other things happening in that era in that Sattra.

The novel reflects a transition from the feudal setup to democratic capitalism. Here emerges a broader overview of a decadent Indian feudal society. The novel happens to be a cultural text which reflects various socio-economic and cultural conditions of a society or a community. It also reflects a decadent Vaishnavite Sattra or monastery. The political and economic power concentrates in a superior or the formal head called the Adhikar or Gossain. In the novel the Gossain is invested with social authority and an extensive feudal landed property. Indranath, the Junior Gossain or the Senior one are almost like minor Gods to the tenets and the people to the community. They are held in the highest respect by all persons of all ranks and creeds. Various cultural manifestations in the form of rituals, customs, habits and beliefs have been dealt with by the author in a narrative graphic and also suggested various contemporary social institutions are described in details and the characters are drawn as she says from her felt experiences of her own Sattra in Amranga in South Kamrup. The suggestive power of Indira Goswami's narration makes almost all the characters in the novel alive and palpable.

The writer portrays the character of the male protagonist Indranath in the light of the scene in 1948. He is a powerful Brahmin feudal lord who also posits himself on the fringes of changing time that makes him potentially vulnerable to the difficulties of dialectical forces. His conflict reflected in a romantic human situation in which he wavers between his emotional affiliation towards Elimon and his determinate duty towards his tenates. The opium prone Bhagawati's excessive drollery and exposed malpractices hinder what could have been the narrative's most tender love story between Indranath and Elimon. For the conscientious Feudal lord the Saru Gossain, the blossoming tender Elimon is like the quivering "lantana bush" that awaits the foundational support of the robust landlord. The destiny of the young feudal Gossain seems to be intertwined with the listlessness of Elimon. "Disappointment and frustration were always evoked by all that he saw around him. In the midst of the dark gloom the face of the girl rose again and again before his eyes. He felt as if he was in a cremation ground ...But his eyes flew, again and again, to a rose plant nearby blossoming with flowers!..."(p 37) But as in the case of unfulfilled desire of the young widow Giribala for Mark Sahib or to some extent, the repressed love of Saru Gossani for the deviant, Muhidhar, here too, the collective, the decaying social fabric is reflected in every sign of decay and degeneration. Giribala's coming back, widowed from her husband's place; very succinctly pose the social prejudices in and around, the customs, rituals and the living manifested in the narrative. The ruthlessness of social prejudices, the intermittent excesses and the paucity of human impulses and the horrifying cruel clutches of political forces on the ignorant masses have become felt experiences for the author. The narratives of Kaltu Kalia, Gilmil Sahib's hunting of the boar and the mauzadar's story, their vociferous enmity, the story of Elimon, the taboo of the Brahmin girl reaching puberty before marriage, opium smugglers of Garo Hills and Cooch Bihar-all are landmark signs of a community life, its history and vibrancy.

The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is a mammoth epic of a historical period of transition. The pre and post independence scenes proffers historical evidences of change from a decaying feudal order to the newly emerging democratic concepts of equality and individual liberty. A challenge to the feudal land system is reflected in the slowly gathered

movement of the communists in Rangamati which is culminated with the confused brawl at Marabhitha arising out of the misconception that Indranath wants to till his landed estate while actually he seeks to bring about a radical change in ownership. Saru Gossain, Indranath was killed unceremoniously by the communist sympathizers. Indranath posed as an arrogant feudal lord riding his *howdah* and coercing upon the will of the peasants the 'moth eaten howdah' represents exactly the decayed, waning seat of power for the feudal lords in the wake of post colonial resurgence of democracy and also capital. Amranga Sattrra of the South Bank of Brahmaputra saw the traversing of historical incidents in distinctive cultural phases. This "South Saga of Kamrup" tells the degenerating and dilapidated social practices of the feudal lords of that area, the dark shroud of socio-religious customs and rites envelop the Brahmin widows to untold misery and suffering. All their desires, repressed aspirations reflect a totally segregated community, for whom normal living is a taboo. The author has imbibed all wafts of the narrative credibly and she has embarked upon a startling journey of memory, love and recollection of personal and collective history in the mode of linguistic representations of signs.

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