



From margin to centre: Analysing New Woman in Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

Name of the Candidate – Rashi

Designation – Phd Scholar, MIL & LS dept., Delhi University.

E-mail – rashi7494@gmail.com

Abstract

Women are pigeonholed as the secondary sex in our society. Second sex and Angel in the house has been allotted to women by none other than our phallogocentric society to define their gender roles. They are expected to be homemakers and continue to be compliant and subservient. But in the nineteenth century, women challenge the traditional role of angel in the house and transgress the roles and norms set up by the patriarchal society resulting in entering into a new role. And such women are called New Women. One such woman named Giribala is presented in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. This novel is a literary piece centres on the widows and their sufferings and also focusses on several women characters who resist patriarchy as well as cross the patriarchal constraints. Indira Goswami has very well presented the issues such as caste system as well as the position of women as victims in a patriarchal society. The paper attempts to study the female character, Giribala who emerges as a new woman. Being a widow at a very early age, Giribala fights all odds and events till her death for her individuality. Her resistance till her death becomes a guiding force for thousands of Indian women who are still suffering behind the curtains of patriarchy.

Keywords: *New Woman, Patriarchy, widowhood, Individuality, Resistance*

Introduction

New Woman is a term devised by the Irish writer Sarah Grand in her article 'The New Aspects of the Woman Question' (1894). Soon after, the American writer named Henry James promulgated the term to represent the transmuted women in Europe and the United States that challenged the conformist gender roles and hailed themselves as educated, independent and feminist. Their exertion is to defy the 'angel in the house', a hegemonic aspect to suppress the woman. The new-women toils to adulate themselves and proclaim their sovereignty and individuality. They are the new generation women who defy their precursor role of amenability and docility and institute themselves as confident and liberated. These new-women marks their advent in both drama and fiction of the late nineteenth century. In drama they appear

predominantly in the writings of Henrik Ibsen, Henry Arthur Jones and George Bernard Shaw. In fiction, contrariwise, the works of Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophie Cory, and Ella Hepworth Dixon presents such deep-seated characters. And, amongst the Indian writers who explain the Indians regarding the new-woman comprises the names of Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Indira Goswami, who produce quite a lot of unforgettable and unbending female characters in their novel. Roy's Ammu, Deshpande's Saru, Markandaya's Saroja, Sahgal's Saroj and Goswami's Giribala and Saudamini are the renowned rebels and radical women characters. About Indira Goswami, distinguished Indian writer Amitav Ghosh states that "Indira Goswami is one of the well-known literary figures in India and a woman of astonishing valour and opinion. She has also been a vital voice in supporting women's causes, and has done much to highlight the predicament of widows.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is considered to be one of the great writer, researcher, editor, poet as well as professor and is popular among her readers because of the subject matters that she deals with in her works. Concern for women always plays a principal role in Goswami's writings and she raise questions about status of women in society, marriage and widowhood. The *Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a literary piece that centres on the plight of widows in Assamese conventional family. The novel tries to display how patriarchal norms are recognized as laws and one who tries to go against it are considered tumbled.

Analysis of Women in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*:

The Moth eaten Howdah of the Tusker is a powerful depiction of the anguish and torment confronted by a woman in her development into an adult role and social adjustment in a society where the woman is given little room for self-development, consciousness, individuality and freedom as a being. As critic Sudhir Kakar pens down that "The prevailing psycho social realities of a woman's life can be summarised into three phases. First, she is a daughter to her parents; second, she is a wife to her husband and daughter in law to husband's parents and third, she is a mother to her sons and daughters" (Kakar 1996: 57). And sadly, in all the three phases women are oppressed and demoralized more than men. Though women do all the household chores, bring up children single handily, yet they are always considered a debt to the family. They are always considered inferior and are ill-treated by husband and inlaws.

In India, though, women are still suffering from the forced act of man upon woman. Sexism is time and again articulated in the form of men's supremacy which leads to women's suppression, discrimination, manipulation and subjugation. With respect to patriarchal views, men's chauvinist beliefs project women as inconsequential who find worth only by relating to men. Indira Goswami in this novel has also discussed about how women have become victim of men's chauvinist ideology and their physical strength. But in the recent time, the shift from the *pativrata* image of an ideal housewife to that of the sexually liberated woman marks the arrival of a new class of Indian woman who are coming out of their conventional shells and are

all set to accept the sexual and psychosomatic veracities of human life. It is certainly a sign of major transformation arising in the Indian sexual landscape.

The novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is set in South Kamrup district and the background of the novel is British colonial rule. The story circles around a Vaishnavite household which heads a Satra. The head, known as Gosain of the Satra is considered an avatar of God to the other people of the community. The story of the novel is about three widows of the Gosain family: Durga, Soru Gosain and Giribala. Widows are found to be tortured socially, frugally, and also at a very personal level and simultaneously they are psychologically oppressed as well. They are not allowed to read and write. They are considered inauspicious and are kept at an arm's length in any occasion of the family. Widow Remarriage is like a sin in that society. One who grieves can understand the height of pain that one has to go through. It contains difference from the first position in society, modification in food habits that one has to accept as stated by the society, and they have to live under more restrictions and constraints. The title of the novel is very symbolic. It has reference to the impression of strength and power but simultaneously the howdah is eaten by the moth.

Indira Goswami has presented the vile condition of the women sustaining the patriarchal Brahmin society as a milieu. Child-marriage was normal among the people. A girl had to get married before she attained puberty or else her family would be out of favour. Therefore, their fathers were anxious for getting their daughters married. The girls were meant to dwell themselves in domestic concerns and were cut off of from getting education. Apart from all these, the husbands did inexpressible tortures upon their wives. "These Gossain's sticks, sometimes, rained blows on the back of the ill-fated women and were sometimes beaten up to death or they themselves committed suicide, waning to bear their husband's tortures. There was an unused well near Matia Pahar that was considered spooky. They pulled out many skeletons of women (Goswami 2004: 213). Wife of Bamdeo Maujadar suffered the same fortune as her husband had an affair with a nurse. The society remained finger on its lips in case of an adulterous man, and on the other hand, it raised the same finger to curse the woman who did the same act even after her husband's death. A Gossain could have an affair with a low caste woman but a Gossainee was never permissible to think about it even in her trance. If they did so they had to go through certain cleansing sacraments.

All these things are portrayed very clearly and wonderfully in the novel. Indira Goswami has snapped a 1948 picture in the form of the novel, which she has specified in the very beginning. By the end she provides us another very brief image of 1981 where she has seized a reformed picture of the society where the inter-caste marriages were acceptable to certain level. In the transformed society one could see the Gossainees going to Guwahati to fight for their cause or were seen to be the indicted of shams; girls have started going

to school like boys, some had even become chief officers. Yet, the thing that had not improved is the abuse of women.

Analysis of the woman character Giribala

Indira Goswami has represented the outstanding character of Giribala, one of Gossain widows who resisted the outmoded and traditional customs set by the patriarchal Gossain society. When she returns from her in-laws' house to her paternal home after the attainment of widowhood, the environs women came to see her and were chatting and conferring about her adversities. Giribala could not bear it and she came out of the puja room battering the door open like a tigress in fury. Her hair got unfastened and flew riotously. Her *gatala*¹ had come off and her clothes were in frenzy and she yelled, "I am alive! I will live on and have an improved and healthier life than all of you" She was not happy with her married life. Her husband had many affairs. She recalled his words, "Since we are already married, you'll have to endure some of my habits. I love women. I like their company (Goswami 2004: 140). This aches her very much. She had no warmth for him and thus a sign of blues was not there in her eyes for her deceased husband. Every time she thinks of him, she thought of his affair with the low caste woman of Maniari Chowk. She wasn't a conservative Gossain widow but a wrongdoer who did not want to exist, just for the sake of being alive, did not have any love for her dead husband who touched and had fun with that disreputable woman who sold opium, and did not want to follow the pathway of Durga. Giribala was contrary to Durga; where Durga was a traditionalist, Giribala was a non-conformist. She was a new woman who desired her freedom and wanted to lead a peaceful and untroubled life, dissimilar from the life led by Durga and Saru Gossainee. She could not overlook her desires and crossed the boundary set for the widows. "On an occasion when she smelt the aroma of lovely mutton curry, she could not control herself and she failed to recall everything, religion and customs, knowledge or restriction and she started gulping it down in excessive speed" (Goswami 2004: 144). For a Gossain widow it was an atrocious act. Even to smell the aroma of prohibited food was a pronounced sin. But she was sick and tired of the boiled rice and pulses with the boiled vegetables with a pinch of salt, which she had to be eaten every day. Her integrity was not allowing her at the beginning but soon after when she remembered her husband's disloyalty, her morality stopped interfering. On watching it, Durga fainted and Gossainee grasping hold of Giribala's tresses, kicked her, beaten her and clawed at her. Giribala had to go through cleansing rights as Indira Goswami has said, "this drama of cleansing and ceremonial reparation went on for quite a long time" (Goswami 2004: 147). Giribala was invigorated by Indranath, her elder brother, to continue her education. She was glad when she was chosen by her brother to help Mark as she would not be bounded within the four walls like Durga. Giribala had a soft corner for Mark Sahib. His self-sacrificing dedication to the deprived, poor and ostracized, moved her heart and believed that it was just Mark who would be able to set her free. It was only Mark who could offer her everything including her biological necessities. But he would not touch her as he knew his boundary. In

¹ A piece of cloth draped over the shoulders by Assamese women from South Kamrup

total frustration she pleaded the mad elephant to kill her. By the end of the novel, she passes into his fleapit, vehemently, in a thundery night. She said “I will not go back to that graveyard! I don’t want to be buried alive. I’d relatively die” (Goswami 2004: 295). She crossed all the obstacles and desired him to gratify her physical needs. But Mark was not as courageous as her. When she was held red handed, they hauled her out and organized the occasion to cleanse her as she had committed the sin of having illegitimate relationship with a low-caste man. But Giribala, being a new-woman would not agree to it and forwent her life in the same hut that was used for her cleansing rights and then set upon fire.

Conclusion

Although sati was obliterated, but in a sense it was still existed. Physical immolation was substituted with mental immolation. Indira Goswami has formed such a society in her novel where women were ostracized to a great extent, particularly the widows. But by constructing the characters like Sashiprova, Anupama, Gossainee (Giribala’s mother) and Durga, she has also focussed on the point that generation after generation the women were internalizing their relegation and inertly accepting their circumstances as their destiny. But in the midst of these conventional and traditional characters, Indira Goswami went on to construct one woman character named Giribala who attempted to growl for her independence, and preferred to surrender living than to live within four walls and under restrictions. She defied the rules and norms set by the patriarchal society to ostracise and abuse women. She challenged the religious barricades as well. Giribala offers herself to Mark in a stagy climax. Therefore, it shows that she claims her sexual sovereignty. She is the promising new woman, who is new in her stance and thoughts, who believed and functioned in a different way critiquing the conformist gender roles and demanding her freedom. Even though she had committed suicide by the end of the novel, the suicidal deed does not seem to signify her loss, rather it represents her freedom, freedom from the blasphemy of widowhood, from horrifying misery, and from psychological immolation.

In a nutshell, *Moth eaten Howdah of the Tusker* questions the patriarchal ethical code which demands the truthfulness of a woman to her husband but not the truthfulness of a man to his wife. This is believed not only by men but by women as well. Her husband willingly and unapologetically commits infidelity but not even one person objects to it. It displays that man is permitted to have an affair with as many numbers of women as he wants. Female virginity is thus nothing but to possess a woman as a slave under man’s authority. Therefore, in a patriarchal culture, woman’s sentiments are of no worth. Only man’s yearnings are in the centre. Through the character of Giribala, Indira Goswami has remarked on how “Indian women are forced by opinionated society to suppress their sexuality” (Deshpande 2003: 8). As Giribala begins to subdue her real feelings, she begins to experience a parallel loss of self-confidence. Slowly, she lets herself to move into a submissive, nearly traditional bond with her husband. Through the example of Giribala,

Indira Goswami has re-embodied the Indian women and has also strengthened the female predicament. Her worry for women is mirrored in her novel. Her concern for social problems, particularly of the middle class women is apparent. To be brief, her novel is an archetype of women's culture which re-counts the serious experiences of women and their social burden to breathe into the four walls of the house, which is totally accurate and true for most of the women even in the present day.

Lastly, one needs to understand that Patriarchy is not to be judged by the presence or absence of a few good men who respect their wives or the few bad men who treat them scruffily. It is to be seen in whole as demonstrated within the politics of power structure. It is the power structure that the women writers take appreciation of when they write texts showing choices open to women. Resistance in itself is a discourse of the process of evolution in the journey of the new woman. Indian writings in English, such as the literatures in the regional languages deal with a rich and varied variety of themes, which mirror the changes that have been going on in the society. The changing equations within the array of relationships in a domestic set up need to be elucidated and represented more widely. There is an apparent tension inherent in the depiction of male-female narrative as the new found female awareness is not easily acceptable to a society which is conditioned by patriarchy. It is thus vital to understand that the new woman of the twentieth century Indian-English writing is not just a creation of mind. Her real and noticeable presence must be recognized as society prepares itself to usher in an era of modernization.

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