

# Interpreting Society and Culture in Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.

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## Abstract:

Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, also known as Indira Goswami, was an esteemed writer, poet, and scholar hailing from Assam. A renowned Professor of Delhi University, editor, poet, and scholar, Goswami gained wide recognition for her valuable contributions to Assamese that have been translated into numerous Indian languages. She was bestowed with numerous awards and honours for her literary accomplishments, such as the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, Jnanpith Award in 2000 and the Padma Shri in 2002. Goswami's writings often humbly centered on social issues, women's rights, and the cultural heritage of Assam. In her novel "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker," Goswami skilfully portrays the society and culture of Amranga Sattrā in South Kamrup. She offers a realistic depiction of the customs, rituals, and way of life of the people in this society. While she draws extensively from the Sattrā to shape her characters, she modestly acknowledges the inclusion of elements from her imagination. This research paper aims at analysing the socio-cultural representation of the Assamese Society presented by Goswami in this thought provoking novel.

Keywords: Society, Culture, rites and rituals, women.

## Introduction

Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is considered to be a highly esteemed literary figure in Assamese literature. She is perhaps "the greatest woman writer in Assamese today". Renowned Assamese critic Prof. Hiren Gohain stated "Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years." She is the only Assamese woman writer to have received the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 2000, which serves as a testament to her significant contributions to Assamese literature. Goswami has an extensive body of work, consisting of 25 novels and numerous short stories in Assamese. Goswami penned several notable novels, including "Chenabar Hooth" (1972), "Neelakanthi Bridge" (1976), "Ahiran" (1980), and "Mamore Dhara Taruwal" (Sword) and "Two Novels/Dukhan Upanyakh" (1980). Her book 'Mamore Dhara Taruwal and Two Novels/Dukhan Upanyakh' earned her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982.

The literary landscape of Goswami's works is rooted in a rural background, offering deep insights into the lives of those who are marginalized and come from a socioeconomically moderate background in Assamese society. Her writings have been very well received and many of her works have been translated into many Indian languages.

Indira Goswami's novel, "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker," is written in the Kamrupi dialect and delves into various social issues of mid-twentieth-century Kamrup. Originally published as "Dontal Hatir Une Khowa

Howdah" in 1986, the book was later translated into English by the author in 2004. This work has been adopted into the Hindi serial "Kamrup Ki Kahaaniya" by Dulal Roy in 1996. This serial was produced under the direction of Ruma Ghosh for the national television channel. Additionally, Dr. Santana Bordoloi transformed the same novel into a film titled 'Adahya' in 1996. Notably, it was for this particular novel that Dr. Goswami received the Vishnu Rava Award from the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1988.

### Objectives of the study

1. To understand post-independence Assamese society through the portrayal of widows in the novel.
2. To analyse how Indira Goswami's experiences in a Sattra shape her narrative style and character development.
3. To explore the novel's representation of societal change and its impact on individuals and communities.

### Methodology of the study

This study employs a method of close textual analysis of primary sources to delve into various socio-cultural aspects of post-independence Assamese society also with focus on the predicament of widowed women. Various secondary sources i.e. related articles, books and essays and internet sources have been consulted to enrich the discourse of the paper.

### Analysis:

The novel "Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker," set in Palashbari in Kamrup during the year 1948, serves as a literary exploration of the societal dynamics of that time. It mainly focuses on Giribaala, a widow from an Assamese Brahmin family. She tells her story as she navigates two different worlds: one traditional and the other more open-minded. The narrative is a powerful depiction of the profound changes and transitions that took place, reflecting the tension between established traditions and the emergent liberal ideals.

The novel provides a detailed look into the social and cultural aspects of the people living in Amranga Sattra during the post-Independence period. It vividly portrays the superstitious beliefs, abuse of authority, and the mental and physical suffering that widows face. It powerfully exposes the harshness, brutality, and sorrow that surround these vulnerable women. The author's experience in Vrindavan reveals the distressing social reality these widows endure, particularly those from Bengal, who rely on temple offerings obtained through day-long chanting of 'Bhajans' for sustenance.

The novel doesn't solely revolve around the author's personal widowhood, but rather encompasses the lives of widows in general, regardless of her own experiences. A consistent theme in Indira Goswami's extensive and diverse body of work is her deep concern for women. This sentiment resonates both in her personal life and throughout her literary works in various ways. In Assamese society, a widow's involvement with another person is deemed sinful, necessitating a penance, as mentioned in "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker." It is believed that a Brahmin widow must undergo nineteen "dhanu prayaschita" for engaging in a sexual relationship with a person of a lower caste. "There are ways to purify her? Rituals for prayaschit!"<sup>7</sup> In the novel, Giribala forms a deep bond with Mark Sahab, a Christian youth, leading to her undergoing a purification ritual. She is taken to a small hut made of dry banana leaves and straw, traditionally meant for sacrificing a goat by burning it alive as part of the rituals for Devi Basanti.

A Vaishnavite monastery, known as a Sattrā, plays a crucial role in the functioning of Assamese society and is an essential part of its cultural identity. The novel does a commendable job of showing how a Vaishnavite monastery, known as a Sattrā, provides valuable insight into the functioning of the society. It sheds light on the significant role played by a powerful leader, referred to as the Adhikar or Gossain, who possesses considerable influence over matters of politics and finance. Within the storyline, this leader is regarded with great importance, possessing vast land and authority. The Junior and Senior Gossains, named Indranath, hold positions of immense significance, almost akin to that of deities, and are revered by everyone in the community, irrespective of their social status or personal beliefs. The author skillfully describes a superfluity of cultural practices, including rituals, customs, and beliefs, as well as the functioning of social institutions within the community.

The characters in the novel are deeply rooted in the author's personal experiences in a Sattrā in Amranga, which lends them a sense of authenticity. Indira Goswami's storytelling technique truly brings the characters in the novel to life. In the given context, Goswami presents the character of Indranath, who is a powerful Brahmin landlord, in a humble manner. The story takes place in 1948, a time when societal norms and values were undergoing significant changes. Indranath is depicted as someone who is torn between adhering to traditional beliefs and adapting to the evolving world around him. This internal conflict makes him susceptible to external influences and forces. Indranath struggles with his feelings for Elimon, a person with whom he shares a romantic connection, and his responsibilities towards his tenants. However, their love story faces obstacles due to Bhagawati's addiction to opium and her involvement in wrongful activities. The writer draws a comparison between Elimon and a delicate "lantana bush," symbolizing her vulnerability and need for support from the strong landlord, Saru Gossain. The destiny of both the young landlord, Indranath, and Elimon appears to be intertwined. They are both affected by a sense of aimlessness or lack of direction in their lives. "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)

The narrative vividly portrays the harshness of social prejudices, occasional excesses, the suppression of human emotions, and the oppressive grip of political forces on the uninformed masses. Much like the unfulfilled desires

of young widow Giribala for Mark Sahib and the suppressed affection of Saru Gossani for the unconventional Muhidhar, this narrative also vividly reflects the collective decay and degeneration within the social fabric. Giribala's return as a widow from her husband's home succinctly exposes the prevalent social biases, customs, rituals, and the general way of life. The stories of Kaltu Kalia, Gilmil Sahib's boar hunting, the mauzadar's accounts, their vocal animosities, Elimon's story, the Brahmin girl's taboo of reaching puberty before marriage, and the activities of opium smugglers in the Garo Hills and Cooch Bihar all serve as significant indicators of community life, its history, and its vitality.

Goswami has presented the Assamese society in the backdrop of 1948 in her masterpiece "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar." The Amranga Sattrra of the South Bank of Brahmaputra saw the traversing of historical incidents in distinctive cultural phases. This "South Saga of Kamrup" tells not only the historical records of transitional period but amply depicts 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. The novel portrays the decline of the traditional feudal system and the emergence of democratic values like equality and freedom. This transformation is exemplified by the communist movement in Rangamati, which leads to a tragic misunderstanding and the untimely demise of Indranath at the hands of sympathetic communists, including Saru Gossain.

In "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker," the condition of widows is depicted as one of profound suffering and isolation. They are bound by oppressive socio-religious customs and rites, which shroud them in darkness. Their desires and aspirations are repressed, rendering them marginalized in their community, where normal living is considered a taboo. The novel portrays a bleak and segregated existence for these widows primarily from the Assamese Brahmin community highlighting the need for societal change and a departure from these fixed practices.

### **Conclusion:**

"The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker" by Indira Goswami is a powerful literary work that offers a profound exploration of the social and cultural dynamics in Assamese society during the post-independence era. It shows the contrast between traditional and progressive worlds, revealing significant societal changes and conflicts between old customs and new ideas. Goswami sheds light on life in the Amranga Sattrra, depicting superstitions, abuses of authority, and the challenges faced by widows in post-independence Assamese society. Drawing from her experiences in Vrindavan, she highlights the difficult reality for widows, especially those from Bengal who rely on temple offerings. The novel consistently addresses women's issues, including societal stigmas surrounding widow relationships. It also provides insights into a Vaishnavite monastery and its influential leader, showcasing cultural practices within the community. The characters in the story, influenced by Goswami's own experiences, reveal struggles with tradition and changing norms. Ultimately, the novel portrays a society in transition, moving from a feudal system to embracing democratic values, emphasizing the importance of liberating Brahmin widows from restrictive customs."

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