



# The Living Ghost ‘Widows’: A Study of Indira Goswami’s *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*

Guriya Kumari<sup>1</sup>, Research Fellow, LNMU Darbhanga,

Dr. Tanima Kumari<sup>2</sup>, Assistant Professor, Department of English, C. M. College, LNMU Darbhanga

## Abstract

*Manusmriti* defines a good woman as “a woman who controls her mind, speech, and beauty and is never unfaithful to her husband, attains the world of her husband, and virtuous people call her a good woman.” Since ages women has attained a subordinate position to male within the society. She is restricted and is allowed to control her emotion and passion. In this world they have taken the place of the oppressed section of the society. And, when the women is a widow she is doubly oppressed; leading to her condition much worse. She takes the position of the subaltern section of the society. When she tries to break the chains or raise her voice against the oppression, she is silenced.

This paper attempts to throw a light on the plight of widows and their subsequent questioning; Am I heard? through the reading of Indira Goswami, a Jnanpith awardee’s most acclaimed novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. The paper also attempts to show how the subaltern one when tries to speak, she is not heard and the person sees death more pleasurable than the oppressed life.

**Keywords:** Atonement, Patriarchy, Sattrra, Subaltern, Tradition

## Introduction

Indira Goswami also known as Maimon Raison Goswami is an established writer from Assam. She mainly wrote in Assamese and her major works has been translated into English. Her *Neelkantha Braja* was translated into *The Blue Necked God*, *Dantir Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* as *The Sage of Kamrup* or *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, etc. She has been felicitated with several of the great literary rewards like Sahitya Akademi in 1983, Kamal Kumari Foundation National award in 1996, International Tulsi award in 1999, Jnanpith Award in 2001, Asom Ratna, etc. for her works. She boldly declared that “My two main subject are migrant labourers and widows.” Though born in a traditional Brahmin family; she suffered a lot in her life. For a time, even she suffered from suicidal tendencies. She sought in the novel a mode to question and express her anguish towards the society.

Her masterpiece *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* also known as *The Sage of Kamrup* is set in the typical Assamese institution, the Sattrra<sup>1</sup>, which is on the way of its decay. The novel tells the rise of communism as well as the plight of widows and the Brahmin girls dominated by the patriarchs and the shackles of tradition. There is no one to listen them or console them. Indira Goswami tries to show the taboos and raises the question of female sexuality and their desires.

## Women in the Assamese Brahmin Society

In a typical Assamese Brahmin family, the women are always felt to be subordinate to men. They have to follow the tradition set by the patriarchy and those written in the scriptural texts. The girls before reaching at the age of puberty are married off without any choice for if once the girl starts menstruating then she is told to be impure and her family is outcasted by the society. So in one word the girls are responsible for the

reputation of the family. The girls given hands in marriage at such a tender age to a grownup man can even face the fate of widowhood. Once she becomes widow, her life completely changes. She is felt to be inauspicious for the family. She has to follow several norms of widowhood like eating boiled food, worshipping her husbands' sandals, observing the ritual of Amoti<sup>2</sup>, etc. all her life.

### **The Widows in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker***

The plot of *The Moth eaten Howdah of a Tusker* revolves around the life of the three widows: Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala. Durga is the eldest of the three. She is widowed sister of Adhikar of the Sattrā, who after her husband's death is harassed and rejected by her husband's family as an inauspicious women. She seeks shelter in her brother's house, where she is treated as a poor relation. She is a devoted widow and follows all the restrictions and duties imposed on widows. She waits in vain for someone from Chikarhati to take her back to her husband's house. "...Her in-laws had never enquired even about her welfare, let aside taking her back. Days, months had passed, waiting, waiting by the fireside, hoping against hope, but only her skin became darker, her Mekhela more ash coloured" (The Moth-eaten Howdah of a Tusker, 394)

Durga turns old, waiting. Even in her brother's house, she is not happy. Her now only desire is to mix the ash of her dead husband in the holy Ganga but she has no money. The jewels that she left for safety in Saru Gossainee's house is stolen. Her in-laws even deprived her of her share of property. But as an orthodox widow and a women she'll never go to court. Atlast when her health falls, she leaves for Chikarhati on her own to take her last breath in her husband's house.

The second widow Saru Gossainee, is the young widow of Adhikar's brother. She is described as very beautiful; fair, long hair, etc. Coming from a prosperous family of Pathaldia, she is the Gossainee of three Sattras with lands and disciples scattered over a large area. When her husband was alive, she led a happy conjugal life. They used to get revenue from their lands and offerings from disciple. When her husband died taking oath from her that she'll never bow down in front of his brother, Adhikar of the Sattrā, she finds it difficult to manage the household. On the suggestion of Indranath, Mohidhar Babu came to work for her. Gradually she completely begins to rely on Mohidhar for her revenues and offerings. She begins to fall for him. Though she maintains to keep a distance from him, he gradually becomes a part of her life, her dreams. She keeps waiting for him, even drenching herself in the rain. Once, after a particularly stressful day, she walks upto Mohidhar's shed with a lamp in her hand and watches him sleeping "like Ram Chandra himself after a day's exhausting march through the forest during his exile." Though she controls herself from going near his bed, he continues to come in her dreams and take her along a flowery path. In the meantime Mohidhar, knowing her reliance and weakness, he forges her sign and tries to make illegal deals of selling her property and also steals Durga's ornaments. When Saru Gossainee is brought to the reality, she collapses and her dream of a future with Mohidhar is shattered forever.

The third widow is Giribala, the youngest of the three and the daughter of the Adhikar of the Sattrā. She is not a devoted widow like Durga, nor curbing her desires like Saru Gossainee but she is the most revolting one. Before reaching at the age of puberty, she is married off to the worthless son of the Adhikar of Bangra. He neglects and humiliates her. He is involved with a theatre woman. When he dies, Giribala is pregnant, but the strict restrictions on widows leads her to the miscarriage. She returns to her parent's house, but here she feels like an alien in her own house. When she wanted to go near the pond, Durga caught hold of her hand and told "Now things have changed. You are a widow." (The Moth-eaten Tusker Howdah of the Tusker, 408), She is introduced by her brother Indranath to the American missionary, Mark Sahib, a melecha<sup>2</sup> who is researching in the region and writing on the Sattrā. Earlier, Durga used to help him, reading out the old manuscripts for him in Assamese. Now Giribala is supposed to assist him.

In the course, Giribala draws a physical attraction towards Mark Sahib, whose shadow even if happens to fall on Giribala, she is supposed to bath. But Giribala wants to break the barriers. On the other hand, Mark Sahib though an observer neither responds nor reacts. The scandalous relationship takes the form of gossip in the village. Giribala's in-laws when come to know it they send men to take her back. Giribala doesn't wants to go and seeks shelter in Mark's shed. Nothing happens between them, but the discovery of the two, makes a scandal. People think that Giribala is polluted by a 'melecha'<sup>3</sup>. She is ordered for atonement. Where Giribala seeks death more pleasurable than the life of a 'living ghost'.

## The Plight of Widows

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, in her most notable work *Can the Subaltern Speak* reasons that by the denial of the right of self-immolation, the system has robbed Indian Women of the alternatives of determining between the vicious but immediate death and the slow but excruciating death as she clarifies: “By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed object such a death can be understood by the female subject as an exceptional signifier of her own desire exceeding the general rule for a widow’s conduct. (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, 96)

For a women, whether her husband is alive or dead, she is supposed to treat him as a deity. She must remain faithful, even *Manusmriti* quotes “Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god.” [Chapter 5 (154)]

Giribala’s husband when he was alive neither cared for her, nor loved her. He had an illicit relationship with other woman. But when he dies she is supposed to observe all the rules of widows and worship her husband’s sandals, control her taste by putting herself on a sattvik<sup>3</sup> diet, etc. And all of these customs and the rules are sought by the women in the family whether it is getting performed well or not and are instructed. Giribala’s mother beats her brutally when she couldn’t control her mind and gulps the meat kept in the storeroom. She is then led for the atonement. She sometime feels Durga as a living ghost and the space in which they live as a grave. She confides in Mark that she hates her life. She can’t exist like this:

Oh, Sahib, can you understand me? I cannot just exist, just for the sake of remaining alive like Aunt Durga and Saru Gaossainee. 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 husband’s sandals. (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker, 562)

While Durga had a happy conjugal life of sixteen years with her husband, he was dear to him. She had respect for him. On the other hand Giribala’s husband just for the sake of society married the Gossain’s daughter. So, Giribala never felt any such kinds of emotion towards her dead husband. But still she tries to fulfill her duty. “Still I try to put flowers and tulsi leaves on his wooden sandals. But if it continues like this, I am afraid I’ll turn into a ghost.” (The Moth Eaten Tusker of a Howdah, 562)

It is believed that without a male guardian or a custodian of her body and mind, a widow is denied an identity in the framework of traditionalist patriarchy. A widow is a ‘nobody’ without her husband and is ‘lacking’ in many ways. She is without the reproductive ability as scriptures deny the remarriage of women. So, after the death of her husband she is pushed towards the fringes of the peripheral zones.

Indira Goswami, herself being widow at a young age gives voice to her characters. Her women characters are opposing the traditional code of Brahmanical patriarchy and refuse to subscribe to the typical idea of widowhood. Saudamini, the protagonist of *Blue Necked God* revolts the conduct of widowhood and later commits suicide by drowning herself in the river Yamuna. Similarly, Giribala in the *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* commits suicide by burning herself in the raging fire rather than living as a ghost in a living grave. Elaine Showalter aptly opined that: “Suicide becomes a grotesquely fantasized female weapon, a way of cheating out of dominance. Martyrdom and self-immolation are viewed as aggressive, as a way of inflicting punishment on the guilty survivors.” (Showalter 250)

## Conclusion

Writing has always been an area where Indira Goswami expresses her disenchantment towards the society. Her handling of the topic of widowhood in several of her works, reflects the male dominated space, upholding notions of male supremacy. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* she shows the exploitation of women within the Brahminical patriarchy. She criticizes the society where a widow like Giribala has to choose the path of self-immolation as a tool of resistance. Widow like Saru Gossainee, has to curb her feelings and desires. Widow like Durga, has to bear everything, without any demands. The poor condition of widows is still prevalent today. Indira Goswami depicting the fate of these widows tries to tear apart the hypocritical facade of Brahminical patriarchy.

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## Notes

- Amoti- Four days in July when the earth is supposed to be unclean and the digging of the earth is forbidden. A ritual observed mostly by the Assamese widows.
- Melecha- Any foreigner, particularly the white skinned Englishman and European.
- Sattra- Monastic institutions of the neo Vaishnavite tradition that serve as socio-religious and cultural centres in Assam.