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Widowhood as Curse: An Analysis of 'The Moth-Eaten Howdah of Tusker'

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ABSTRACT: The world is divided into different nations, societies and cultures but the subjugation of women in patriarchal set up is somewhat similar across boundaries. Many writers and social activists in last two centuries have made concerted efforts to eradicate this type of inequality. One among them is Indira Goswami. Her works deals with plethora of issues that North East region of India is facing. This paper is based on the study of her novel The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker and delves deep into culture and society where women are infringed beyond resilience due to the curse of widowhood. It also shows how class and caste differences even aggravate the sufferings of an individual.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Feminism, Culture, Widowhood, Caste.

INTRODUCTION: The novel The Moth-Eaten Howdah of Tusker (2004) authored by Indira Goswami vociferously verbalizes the concerns of the North-East India. North-East region of India encircles seven states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and its womb is interjected with multiple communities with distinct language, culture and historical context. This conglomeration of diverse ethnicities and cultures in one way makes the region a storehouse of legends, myths, folklores but it also augments acrimony between two different ethnicities and cultures. It is evident that every society has a high culture and low culture, depends on the majority and the credence one is given

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

over the other. As a result minority cultures feel ostracized and it further generates identity crisis. This issue of identity crisis has become grave along with innumerable riddles in the North-East region of India. As every society has its representative writers and artists, who are on arduous job to make things crystal clear before the society. Their works are never parochial and it is their authenticity which enables them to procure the objectives behind a work of art. It is this power of writing which persuaded the suppressed people to leap into the American Revolution, French Revolution and freedom struggle in India against the despotic British colonial rule. The stature won by women in the past few decades with the help of women writers is just commendable. Their writings are a kind of outburst against all those norms of society which keep them under veils to mould them into passive creatures. The inner fire was first set ablaze by Mary Wollstonecraft, a British writer, who aptly substantiates the life of woman, as she avers; "Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." There can be numerous socio-political, economic and cultural issues that vary from place to place but women across the whole world are ineluctable of the subordination by patriarchal social structure and their representation as weak, docile, innocent, seductive and irrational. A very well known poet of the Victorian age describes the life of a woman in his poem "The Princess" as "Man for the field and woman for the hearth, / Man for the sword and for the needle she, / Man to command and woman to obey / All else is confusion" (427-31). The white women somehow enjoys some precedence, but the pathetic condition of Black and Brown women has been very well accentuated by MolaraOgundiPe-leslie in her essay African Woman, Culture and Another Development averred that; African woman is one:

> … who is overburdened and oppressed because of six mountains on her back, oppression from outside in the form of colonialism and neo colonialism, the traditional patriarchal feudal structures of African Society, her backwardness due to lack of employment and education, man, who oppresses her, her color and race. She herself is her worst enemy because she is shackled by her negative self-image (107).

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

We can take this quote to discern the condition of women in India overburdened by all the above stated structures and aggrieved even more by the prevalent caste and class stratification. Jawahar Lal Nehru in his speech 'Tryst with Destiny' on 14 August 1947, avouch to free India not only from British rule but also from the shackles of caste and class based inequalities. However, even after the sixty nine years of independence, men folk hold the lives of women in their fists. So, what can compensate the pangs of those, who are deprived on the basis of caste, class, gender and region. It is the North-East region of India, impoverished by all these forms of inequality and left with nothing to sustain a halcyon life. Although, few tribes of North-East India exercises matrilineal structure such as Khasi-Jaintias and Garos, among them the youngest daughter bequeath the ancestral property and sustain female lineage but this is again a kind of inequality on the part of other daughters. Moreover, the economic spheres are reserved to male counterparts but still women of these societies enjoys some freedom over others, who are still gasping for breath under obstinate patriarchal modus operandi. Writers like Indira Goswami are very sensitive to social cause, thus left no issue of this region untouched by her pen. Her most of the novels are written in Asomiya, have autobiographical tinge and also an expression of her dilemmas as she ponders over the creeping hungry tribal marred by social, cultural and religious ethics. Her novel "The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker" dealt with all those issues and norms that have engulfed the beauty and youth of Assam in the context of a small village Amranga in South Kamrup. However, Goswami's this novel as well as "The Blue Necked Braja" etched the Physical, emotional, financial deprivation of young widows in a village Kamrup and in a sacred city Vrindavan, respectively. Goswami's life was also much strained by her father's death, early age widowhood and subsequent depression, but instead of wriggling under fate she triumphed over all blows and vaulted towards success with the potence of her quill. In both the novels Goswami marveled at the fact that how the patriarchal force moulds ethics into dictums which fall out of the domain of rationality and amity, wreck violence in the lives of widows and engulfed their all aspirations. Vrindavan is considers as one of the holiest place in India, where widows are thought to spend the rest of their lives in religious

ambience. Its carbuncles are brought to surface by Indira Goswami, as the young widows have to accompany the priests in temples during day and in bed during night. They disguise such adulterous affiliations under the banner of 'JugalUpasana' (divine-worship in pair). Goswami with her novel unravels the crookedness of the place as well as incessant exploitation of women in all provinces. However, the protagonist Saudamini is obdurate against her tormenters in Braja but there are many others like Sashiprova, who had to live with a eunuch Alamgari because she was young and there would be men after her. She would have to grow old "when her body would be emaciated and dried up, like a mangy street dog" to roam about freely in Braja. Widows at first vitiated by ominous stars then quelled by these so called sanctify premises. Goswami's novel "The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker" gives the glimpses of her "Sattra" in Amaranga situated in South Kamrup, Assam. The depiction of opium addicted youth turning absconders to gratify their opium fixation but hypocrisy in performing religious rites is awful as well as inspires mirth. A very grim picture of it is depicted in lines as;

> Indranath peered under the dark shadow of the tree and saw a man crouching there with hunched shoulders, like an old eagle, an outcaste from the village suffering from the hideous disease of leprosy. This man always accosted him when he passed by at this hour. His screeching voice never failed to irritate Indranath. As usual, the leper reminded him-"Can you provide a thatched shelter for this poor suffering soul? Flies and mosquitoes tear my skin will be eaten away bit by bit and vanish till one day you will find me a ghostly shadow!"(7).

She is the true interpreter of the social maladies and racial psyche of this region. Like any other society, here as well, the yoke of maintaining ethical codes and pleasing the god is carried by women and the minorities and they are the principal victims of the resulting violence. This novel can also be taken as a dig at the social, moral and ethical codes set by Brahmin community, as how they maneuvered the things on the name of penance and sacrosanctity to puff up their

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

pockets. This curse of feudal system and religious hypocrisy and falsehood is not confined only to this religion but contaminates whole India. Time and again many writers have given rendition to it to efface it out of the territories of our nation. MunshiPremchand's novel Godan censures this Brahmin society, as when Brahmin Datadin ask Gobar about the ways to earn money to which Gobar retorts as;

> You lack nothing Maharaj, you know how to touch others for money; knock at their doors and the rest is easy. Whether it is birth or death, marriage or funeral you get your bit you have hands, you double in money lending, you charge brokerage, you impose fines. Isn't all this money enough, what will you do with more, or have you hit on the secret of taking it with you to the next world. (137)

It can be discerned from the evidences at many places in Goswami's works written to unravel the threads of social and religious practices which are perpetuating on the premises, that, this is what Hindu scriptures inculcates. PurshottamBhagwati, the family priest of the Gossains is the epitome of such knavery. He can contort the scriptures at any angle to facilitate his jajmans and the favors escalate with the weight of cash or gifts. He himself conceded it before Indranath, when he salvaged a local Majumdar against the allegations of extra marital affair as well as murderer of his wife. Bhagwati avers to Indranath, "Listen Indranath! Yagyavalkya has laid down most terrible act of atonement for this crime! ... If all these terrible rules are strictly observed, then there won't be such evil deeds in this world. But now days everything has to be made simple! I, myself, with these two hands, have compromised on these ancient rules" (The Moth-Eaten 61). Another Brahmin JokramBhagwati too can make the things topsy-turvy to thrive in opium smuggling. Such crooked characters are evident enough to show that no one is consecrate or profane by birth but their actions make them so. The ancient scriptures were written in Sanskrit and only a well educated person can have access to them. So, these well educated upper class Brahmins manipulate the Sanskrit shalokas to beguile the lower class, uneducated poor to dominate them. In the novel The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker the rich Gossain's are very ostentatious about

being superior and beats the lower caste Brahmins if they accidentally touch them. The Gossain's took bath to sanctify themselves and the lower-castes have to pay off their hard-earned money to the temple priest as an act of penance, or in short they were on the throes of the worst crisis of their lives. However, no religious rites or penances were contrived to those Gossain's who sexually exploited the lower caste Brahmin women. This caste and class based inequality has defiled the very core of their being, as when Durga and Gossainee had some bickering regarding Durga's possession then the lower castes women from the neighborhood get hoarded in the courtyard. It flared up Gossainee and she leads them out with full aversion, as she gets a "whiff of bad odour, like that of a rotten jack fruit from the bodies of women and as they passed by she covered her nose immediately with her gatala"(99). Whereas, these low caste people show great reverence towards Gossians. Goswami aptly enumerates Indranath's occasional visits to the dilapidated huts of shuris, as "Yes, they really thought that the Gossains had descended from heaven. They dared not touch a Gossain, even a mere boy like him. And when they were on the threshold of death, they had a keen desire to touch a Gossain's feet" (339). Societal norms are only fabricated to throw reins on women in the most stringent manner as no age group of women eschewed from this onslaught. The sharpened knife of puberty is thrust into the pulsating hearts of unmarried teenage girls, who have to abide the scornful looks of the whole community and the old as well as young married women keep vigil over them to ferret out if any unmarried girl hit puberty before marriage. If they find any, then the girl carries the stigma of a porcupine and she, along with her family is trot out as an outcaste. Eliman, a twelve year old girl was caught in such circumstances and can evade this embarrassment and ostracization by marrying a Brahmin opium smuggler. When he is circumscribed by the police, the girl is plunged into more grave circumstances with the exigency to opt a twice married man. Each and every woman seems to be ensconced in the intricacies of ill social perpetuations. What can substantiate superstition, illiteracy and backwardness of people in this "Sattra" as well as in other parts of the region, who venerate a fissure in the shape of a yoni in the temple of Kamakhya and celebrate three days every year as the period of goddess's menstruation by the name

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

of Ambubachi festival. In case of women inhabitants of this sattra, menstruation is a kind of vice which can defile anyone who touches a woman during monthly flow. People are so superstitious, and benighted that if someone touches her accidentally then the so called victim has to fast meticulously for the ablution. This society is not amiable even for the married women as their husbands debauch them and tethered them inside the house like impeccable dogs. They never rebelled against their exploitation because they are constantly preached that "A husband's house is like a heaven for a woman" and if woman tries to traverse its periphery she is like "a naked woman loitering in the streets" (29). They are bridled by the fear of social aversion and financial dependence. However, such social afflictions are even more severe in the case of widows, for their heart bleeds with every passing second. They are not admitted to step forward out of their houses and are supposed to make themselves invisible, because their sight or their touch can hail calamities. Moreover, the rituals performed by widows sapped blood out of their bodies. Durga, devastated at first by the death of her loving and caring husband then by the death of humanity in the perpetuation of these rituals, the lines from the novel states,

> Her mind has become graveyard. Day after day it is a torturous task for her to find something tangible to hold on to, to hold on to her sanity. All those customary rituals of widowhood that she performed till a few years back without much effort are now a source of fear for her. Amoti is soon approaching. A wave of annoyance mixed with fear passes through her body. She will have to remain on a bed of bamboos for three days. Her feet should not touch the ground. For answering calls of nature, she must cover the soles of her feet with bark from areca nut tree. She will not be allowed to eat cooked food. Her daily fare for three days will be raw vegetable and fruits. . . . (11)

The life of widows has come to a halt and all their expectations turned out to be bubbles in the air. Durga was abandoned by her in-laws and usurped her share in property. Durga wanted to take her last breath at her husband's house but every now and then her hopes slumped to the ground. It is again the customs and beliefs of this

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

'Sattra' which hinders her from proclaiming share in property, because to ascend the steps of court Kachari by the woman of her clan would besmirch her purity and dignity. As a result she passed her days, months, just waiting by the fireside getting emaciated and her skin became darker and her mekhala more ash-coloured. Her heart was full of agonies like a pitcher brimming with water and her mind strays to incongruous musings. At last she decides to go by herself to her in-laws house to die with some semblance of dignity.

Giribala's life as a widow is even more heinous as her husband died when she was just fifeteen like Durga. Although, Giribala is a non-conformist and wanted to gallop towards future but forced to live within four walls. However, her brother Indranath gave her some respite by allowing her to help an American philanthropist, Mark. She mumbled to Mark Sahib-"Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you" (153). Rituals ask her to worship a morally depraved husband's wooden sandals. The atrocities of rituals can be well etched in the case of Giribala, at first when she was fed up with having rice and boiled pulses, started gulping meat on the day of the shradha ceremony of the old Gossain. Overlooked by some village woman, Giribala's mother was informed about it, and she rushed as if the hell broke loose and the world turned upside-down, as "When the Gossainee heard about it, she left the kitchen and rushed to the spot. In a fit of rage, she caught hold of Giribala's braids and started kicking her. She was like a tigress in rage. She pulled her hair, punched her and clawed at her as if she would tear off her flesh" (145). But Giribala's character is different from typical widows of her sattra, she comprehends very well that each and every individual has right to do struggle as well as to survive. Instead of scrabbling like a passive creature for whole life, she wielded her might to confess her fascination towards Mark. In the eyes of the villagers, Giribala has done a very horrendous act and need to go through purification ceremony. She was fully taut with such religious dramas and her unutterable grief finally break her down into shards and weary of everything inhumane around her she singed herself in the drama of purification and ritualistic atonement. As she said to mark "I will not go back to that grave yard: I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die!" (295).

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

SaruGossaine, another widow is left to fend for herself with few acres of land. Instead of being assisted by the so called ritualistic religious people, she is defrauded by her right hand Mahidar, with whom she shares close affinity as well as by the villagers who grow paddy on her land. Like Durga, she abstains from a legal fight for justice for it will defame their caste and clan.

Since time immemorial women are taken as sexual objects and the social and religious norms are puppets in the hands of patriarchy, maneuvered to curb women's desires and aspirations in order to serve the whole society without uttering a word against her extremities. The mark of widowhood froze the women characters with grief but those awful societal norms don't leave them even with the strength to mourn. What can be the harshest blow on humanity than the perpetuation of 'Sati Pratha' on the name of religion. In this 'Sattra' widows were not allowed to re-marry and confined within the four-walls, where as polygamy and male adultery were completely unchecked. Such dogmatic or orthodox rituals can never be benign to a community and will pull people deep into the mire of poverty, degradation and barbarity. Humanity should be valued above all other things to tread on the path of prosperity. Both nature and women are need to be preserved to sustain life or to put the foundation stone towards new ideal world, manured with goodness and love. However, theories such as 'Ecofeminism' are making the issues of exploitation of women and nature conspicuous by taking them as synonymous. In the history of civilization, all the man-made devastations have been endured by nature and women. These sufferings finds vent in a Manipuri writer RatanThaiyam's play My Earth, My Love as;

War, You have made us prostitutes,

War, You have made us prisoners,

War, You have made us bonded slaves.

……

Women and children are fed to war

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Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

……..

> The epic of the earth and voluminous chapters of thousands of pages would not be sufficient to describe the woes and sufferings of women alone. (qtd. in Mishra 6)

If the dignity and sanctity of nature and women is not reverenced, the future of civilization will be very bleak, as the very process of creation is in jeopardy. It is the most urgent call of the time because once their immunity is traversed with pestering then they seek nemesis in most catastrophic ways. It is not that all customs, traditions and rituals are antagonistic to the society because they are important to maintain moral equilibrium in the society but they should not be perpetuated at the cost of inflicting any living being. They should not be imposed as 'laws' but need to be checked and altered time to time to serve humanity.

The religious institutions conceal their violence and inspire the blind faith of large populations. However, the repugnant aspects of religion are contoured by some philosophers every now and then. In Nietzsche's view, the highest of human productions, such as religion, morality, philosophy etc. may be productive of suffering that plagues an individual. Nietzsche's antagonism towards religion is evident in his statement that "God is dead" (Thus Spake Zarathustra 3). In his view, religions like Christianity promote slave morality, whereby the slave lives in fear and resentment of its master. The slave morality gives rise to values of compassion, distorts reality, and introduces individuals to the notion of the mortification of the flesh (On the Genealogy of morality 22). Nietzsche states that religious practices are a form of self directed violence that conceals a deep resentment against every form of human mastery. It is evident when Giribala choked by the crooked religious practices, submitted herself to the fire and "Nothing remained to be done…In the air and in the sky, there was only the stench of burning flesh. Only the stench of burning flesh… Human flesh!..." (302).

In this novel the character of Indranath is depicted as an examiner of the social evils prevalent around him. He is very sympathetic towards the horrid and

ISSN: 2235-767X
Volume 07 Issue 05
May2019

secluded life that widows were forced to live. Indranath transcends the constraints of religion and culture for the sake of humanity when he saved the life of a child belonging to low caste by thrusting his finger into his mouth to pull out a fish stucked in throat. He even decides to give up his land to those villagers working on his fields for so long but unfortunately he was killed in those fields by the communists raging against Gossain's. Indranath is very sensitive soul who comprehends very well the predicament of widows and their urge to live. He is only one in the whole village who won't mind Giribala's attraction and love towards Mark. His death left a question to be asked from the whole hypocritical society as well as those insurgents who claim to procure equality in the society. Goswami is very much aware that violence will bring only misery as reflected in the question asked by Bolo to a communist leader "you seized the land after shedding a river of blood. Could you distribute the land properly among the poor peasants? Are they contended and well fed now?" (346). The character of Mark as Christian missionary is also very relevant in the story, as the British reign over India had shown the tyranny in its extreme form. Christian missionaries wanted to dominate the minds of the colonized people by eradicating Hindu religions and beliefs with Christian gods. They succeded in their vile designs to a certain extent but knelt before the flare of freedom struggle. However, these missionaries brought with them nectar as well as gall to our society. Their teachings infused with rationality helped Indians to shatter the shackles of false social as well as religious perpetuations. With the help of Indian social reformers, these missionaries obliterated sati pratha, child marriage and other stigmas on Indian social constitution and promoted widow remarriage and education for all. North-East region of India was swayed by these missionaries and a very large population endorsed Christianity. This conversion proved congenial for women, because now North-East is the only region in India, where there is no dowry culture. Moreover, the standard of living of the tribal folk was raised with the strong factor of modernization. In their old traditional faiths, their lives were full of fear and innumerable superstitions. The function of the rites and taboos observance was to temporarily liberate people from the harmful activities of malevolent spirits. Christianity liberated the people from a world view in which they were socially and

psychologically enslaved by the fear of spirits. So Christianity along with the efforts of some literary philosophers, restored the sense of dignity as well as identity among tribal folk.

CONCLUSION: Goswami with her writings has become the voice of those who are groaning under horrible conditions and find the antidote of this social infirmity with the help of education. Although, our nation procured independence in 1947 but women are still gasping for breath and their hearts are pounding in fear of lurking danger in the form of any patriarchal or social norm. The fire of women to restitute the sense of dignity hasn't quelled yet and will send quivers in the world every now and then with their shrieks. Goswami's works successfully demonstrate valiant woman power by which oppressive shackles of freedom can be broken, domestic and social tyranny can be resisted and a woman's mental sanity, peace and honour can be preserved.

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Volume 07 Issue 05
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