



The Conditions of Assamese Brahmin Women of 20th century with special reference to Mamoni Raisom Goswami's Selected novel *Moth- Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.

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ABSTRACT

Assam is not only known for Lachit Barphukan, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Gopinath Bordoloi etc., but also known for Kanaklata Baruah, Joymoti, Mulagabharu, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Puspalata das etc.. These are the leading female figures of Assam from different fields. Though in the land of Assam, many women figures were born and broke the traditional gender hierarchy and stereotypical thoughts; but from the ancient time, the condition of women in Assam was not so fruitful, like any other regions of India. They are kept behind the bars. The condition of Brahmin women was especially painful. They are not allowed to go outside, take education as well as to see others. This paper examines the socio-cultural and economical conditions of Brahmin women of Assam in the early 20th century with special reference to the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami, who was a leading and dominant literary figure of Assam. She portrays the condition of these Brahmin women in many of her novels. One such novel is *Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. This novel gives a subtle portrayal of the lives of Brahmin women in Assam specially foregrounding their struggles in a rigid patriarchal society, high social expectations and personal aspirations. We can say that this particular novel offers a strong critique of rigid socio- cultural norms that governs the lives of Brahmin women in Assam during the 20th century and this paper argues about the importance and autonomy of women in



shaping their own destinies.

Introduction:

Indira Goswami, who wrote under the pen name of Mamani Raisom Goswami(1942-2011) is a prolific and legendary Indian author, poet and activist. She wrote many masterpieces which enrich the treasure of Assamese literature. She created many novels and short stories exploring the themes of social justice especially for the marginalized women, love, some political issues etc.. Her notable works include *Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker*, *Pages Stained With Blood*, *The Man From Chinnamasta*, *The Rusted Sword*, *The Blue Nacked Braja* etc.. *An Unfinished Autobiography* consists of her Autobiographical account. She got Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *The Rusted Sword* (Originally published as *Mamore Dhara Tarowal* in Assamese language) in 1983, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988, Bharat Nirman Award in 1989, Jyanpith Award in 2000 (Became the first Assamese woman to receive this honor), Padmashri in 2001 and Assam Ratna Award in 2009. But she declined to receive the Padmashri Award. Her masterpiece *Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tuskar* became the turning point for her popularity.

This particular novel is a fine example of a classic modern Indian novel by Dr. Goswami. *Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* was originally published in Assamese language as *Dontal Hathir Une Khowa Howda* in 1986. Later this novel was translated into English in 2004 by the author himself. This novel deals with the story of Giribala, a young Brahmin woman set in 1940- 50s Assam and presents a vibrant reflection of progression and adaptation of society. The story traverses personal desires of the characters and societal strain in a traditional Assamese village. Through the characters, especially the character of Giribala the novel critiques the rigid patriarchal norms, explores the themes of identity and emphasizes the women's strive seeking autonomy in an oppressive society. It also shows the complexities of human relationships even though living in a simple village. The author acknowledges in the preface of the novel that she has written this novel by the inspiration of Aamranga Satra(monastery) of South Kamrup, Assam. Her family hails from this particular place and she has a reliable source of the circumstances in which the women of this particular region specially the Brahmin women are cowed down in the name of age old customs. The characters of the novel are also taken from real life situations. But the novelist put the colour of imagination into these characters. The old customs set for women in those places were such that many women died without even catching a single sight of the main entrance of their household. Child marriage was a traditional practice which spread like wildfire among the people of Assam and the people , who could not marry of their daughters even before puberty, also suffered



form social disparagement. Though the author, Mamani Raisom Goswami was also a widow herself, but broken down the propaganda on every side of Vrindavan in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja*, where she expressed the doomed world of widows who were ditched by their families and went to pass the rest of their lives in the divine places with a hope of acquiring salvation, a similar picture given by Indian poet Jayanta Mohapatra in his poem “Dawn at Puri”:

White- clad Widowed Women

Past the centres of their lives

Are waiting to enter the Great Temple.

Niren Thakuria, a critic of Assamese literature Stated about the novel that, “ *Dantal Hatir Une Khuwa Hauda* is a cruel expression of the inhuman oppression of Brahmin widows in a conservative society and the outdated attitude of that society towards love, marriage and widows.” The story of this novel highlights the character of Indranath, 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. He inspires Giribala, his sister who has lost her husband, to live life as a normal girl instead of being frustrated like the other widows of the “Gossain” family. Gossain are Hindu social group dealing with *Vedas* and they are known as the learned or priestly class. But the opium prone Gossain’s excessive drollery and exposed malpractices hinder what could have been the narrative’s most tender love story between Indranath and Elimon. Despite being bound by a chain of religious and social conduct, Indranath entrusts Mark, a Christian missionary with the task of assisting him with copies of books for rescuing history. Giribala becomes very happy when she is asked by her brother to help Mark. Mark's selfless love for the poor, the needy and the marginalized touches her soul and she starts believing that only Mark will be able to liberate her, and provide her with everything that she demands from life. One day she enters his room forcefully, in a stormy night and crosses all the barriers of the society and wants him to satisfy her physical needs. She is not as like as her widow aunt Durga, who already gave up all kinds of human desires, hopes and aspirations. This behaviour of Giribala, however, is considered as a crime in the eyes of the Brahmin society. A ceremony is arranged to cleanse Giribala’s body, but Giribala, “a new woman”, does not accept it and voluntarily leaves her body in the same hut which is used for her purification rights and then set on fire. One can term Giribala's euthanasia to protest against the injustice done to her by the patriarchal society.



“*Dantal Hatir Une Khuwa Hauda* is a novel of Social realism” -

(Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma, a renowned writer and Rtd. Professor, dept. of English, Gauhati University).

We can easily relate this statement with this particular novel. This novel is a real treasure of the pitiful conditions of the Brahmin women of Assam. It is a live witness how the Brahmin women were oppressed and dominated by the patriarchal society, in which class and caste distinction find utmost priority. Through the character of Giribala, we can easily see the effects of assimilated oppression and social pressure on the Brahmin women in Assam. She was a product of the patriarchal norms and reinforces the traditional norms that restrict herself and the lives of those who are surrounded her. Her attitudes and own actions reflect the burden of the opinions and the traditions of the society, also illustrating how the pressure can lead ones to highlight social approval over one’s personal desires. The choices for the Brahmin women were always limited and the character of Giribala was an evidence of the situation how predetermined and expectations are met with objections. Her relationship with the other characters like Soru Gossani, Durga, and also Indranath emphasize the impression of social expectations on female’s identities and their relationships, which reveal the complexities of male dominated influences that shape their lives. The character of Giribala raises some important questions on autonomy, individuality and the human cost of being submissive to social expectations. But Mamani Raisom Goswami, the author portrays Giribala as a powerful reminder of the necessity to challenge and demolish male dominated patriarchal norms, and for more impartial societal rules where women can practice sovereignty.

Goswami uses the word *Howdah* in the title of the novel and it's quite symbolic. It is a symbol of exploitation of the poor by the upper class. It also means decay or how behind the glitters of the upper class society lies the weapon to control the poor and the distressed. The *dontal hati (tusker)* and the *maut* (an elephant driver) plays an important role in traditional Assamese society and the novelist shows a very close connection with them in the novel. The brahmin widows, who live in the *Satras* are surrounded by the patriarchal rules and regulations. *Satras* are one kind of religious institutions founded by Srimanta Shankardev and Madhavdev to spread the tradition of Neo- Vaishnavism in the 15th century. There was a time when widows had to suffer from the traditional oppression in the society. Actually not only in *Satras* but in the common Assamese society also mensuration is considered to be one of the greatest sins. For that no one can touch a woman during her menstruation days, because people think that it may bring impurity to their lives. The novelist states “ widows are not allowed to leave their home and are supposed



to make themselves invisible, because their sight or their touch may bring misfortune on others. They are like ghosts pretending to be human beings.” The brahmin widows are considered as sinners and kept away from any auspicious occasions in their families. They are also forbidden to eat non vegetarian foods and even some foods like onion, garlic and lentil as it may lead to an increase in their sexual hormones. They are supposed to use a separate kitchen where only vegetarian foods can be cooked. Those brahmin women who become widows at a very early age can't choose a partner once again and also think of starting a new life with others. Where a man marries more than one and can marry anyone after the death of his wife, in that society the novelist wants to show how women are dominated by the male. Almost all the women characters in the novel spend their whole life for some one's sake as well as within the four walls of their house. We can take Durga, one of the women characters, as an example who tolerates everything silently that has been forced upon her by her in- laws. In the case of Giribala, her mother-in-law tortures her so badly that her unborn baby gets destroyed in her womb. She is not even allowed to go to the toilet during *amoti*(the seven menstruation days of earth). Mainly the novelist shows how the brahmin widows are alienated from the society and how the idea of untouchability is imposed upon them. Giribala gets nothing except bitterness and humiliation in her married life. Although Durga and Saru Gossani have a happier married life than Giribala, the widowhood that comes to their life as a curse in such a way that they can see nothing but desolation, scarcity and harshness.

In a lecture, Dr. U.R. AnathaMurthy, a prominent Kannada writer and critic Praises Mamani Raisom Goswami as “ A rare talent in Indian literature.” Goswami puts light on the nuances of Assamese Brahmin women's lives, and guides male dominated traditional norms and social expectations. But at the end of the novel, the novelist gives a ray of positivism about these rigid norms. The film “ Adajyo”, directed by Dr. Santanu Bordoloi is based on this novel and has been screened at various film festivals across the country and abroad. This novel addresses the deep - seated inequalities faced by the brahmin women, making it a vital contribution to Indian literature and feminist debate.

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