



INDIRA GOSWAMI'S THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF A TUSKER AND THE BLUE NECKED BRAJA: VIRTUE, SELF AND WIDOWHOOD

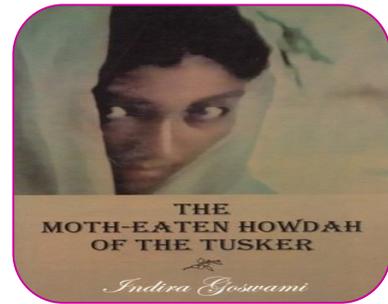
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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to reflect on the ruthless exposure of inhuman austerities and cruelties perpetuated on Brahmin widows in orthodox society of pre independence .As a widow Indira Goswami herself stayed in Sattra-a vaishnavite monastery in south Kamrup and had seen the pathetic conditions of widows. She is blessed with a great art of writing and through these two novels_ THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF A TUSKER AND THE BLUE NECKED BRAJA she has focused on the live experiences of widows. The plight of widows in Hindu society and the oppression of female were the central themes in these novels .She has portrayed the violent customs and pathetic conditions of widows and their exploitation in the society in the name of God ,religion, sin etc.



KEY WORDS : virtue, self, widowhood.

INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami, a prolific writer, editor, poet, scholar ,social activist was born sensitive. Mamoni Raisom Goswami was born in Guwahati in 1942 . She started writing fiction at the early age of fourteen and her first stories were published in the children's sections of Assamese newspapers. Her maiden collection of short stories Cinaki Morom was published in 1962 and since then she has published fourteen novels, several short stories, a collection of poems (Pain and Flesh), an autobiography (Adhalekha Dastabej), a research work in English (Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra) and other miscellaneous writings. "Writing was never my career. It was a passion... I write to enjoy my life. Without writing, I would have been a dead person", says Mamoni. In her autobiographical work she has related how at every moment of intense pain in her life when she was suffering from a sense of almost pathological depression, the act of writing gave her the sublimation and enabled her to recover her Self again and again. She was very emotional to either cruelty toward animals or the abrupt expire of her family members including her father and immediately she used to become panic.

Her first marriage was against the wishes of her family and it broke up soon because of vigorous antagonism from her orthodox family. She got married to Madhavan Raisom Iyengar, a young, energetic and adventurous engineer who was employed in the construction of bridges and river-dams. In an interview with Sudheshna B.Baruah, she stated that most of her novels express the pain that she felt, experienced and saw around her. When she got married Madhavan and enjoyed eighteen months conjugal life, there were no boundaries to her ecstasy. But his unexpected death in an accident, in such earlier phase of her life made her to undergo trauma and depression .After loosing her husband who can ascertain the exact mind of woman so suddenly hit by misfortune as I was? , "who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal life

affects the poor wife? These were her own sentences expressing personal grief and the mind of widow in that hard time. She felt it very difficult to recollect the broken pieces of her life. She lost interest in her life and was continuously thinking about that tragedy which had taken away her loving husband from her life. She began pursuing his shadow, but ultimately realized that he will never come back. Instead of perfume, lipstick her hand bag was filled with sleeping pills at that time. Those were the days and conditions enforced her to think about suicide. She herself in an Interview said that “Depression is my second name there have been times when depressive thoughts lead me to suicidal tendencies”.

But she reinvented herself through hard work. She taught at the Goal Para Sainik School for a while and then joined her research supervisor at Vrindavan to immerse herself in the study of the Ramayana. She received her PhD on the topic “A Comparative study of Tulsi Das’s Ramcharit Manas and Madhav Kandali’s Assamese Ramayana”, where as her experience of staying alone in a temple in Vrindavan gave her an opportunity to observe the lives of the widows there. Her Nilakanthi Braj is one of the earliest and most insightful studies on the lives of the widows of Vrindavan.

Time is only the best medicine. Gradually she recovered from that worst psychological conditions and took a determination to face the challenges of real life. She started writing to overcome her depression. Nothing is impossible when there is a strong will. As a scholar Indira Goswami under the guidance of Mr. Upendra Chandra Lekharu, stayed at Vrindavan “the city of God”. There she described her sojourn at Vrindavan with pitiable Radheshyamis. At Vrindavan, she saw so many reverential priests and saints who seek only the flesh of helpless, young widows. These widows came to Vrindavan, in search of spiritual solace, but exploited in the hands of sattras and adhikaris. She also noticed that those helpless widows have no right to speak, no right to ask and no right to seek any sort of pleasure. “The pitiable Radheshyamis in rags, lustful sanyasis and priests, rapacious pilgrim guides, lepers, beggars’, sadhus, half naked men and women lying on the roadside waiting for death, corruption, exploitation and heartlessness of people.

Indira Goswami realized that the pain of widowhood is not restricted to a particular person or place; it is everywhere. This pain was so deep and disturbed her a lot. These experiences laid a foundation when she was staying alone in the temple in Vrindavan which gave her an opportunity to observe the lives of the widows there. Her Nilakanthi Braj (The Blue Necked God) is one of the earliest and most insightful studies on the lives of the widows of Vrindavan. Regarding Goswami, eminent Indian writer Amitav Ghosh says: “Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction...She has also been an important voice in championing women’s causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows.”

In “The Blue Necked God”, Indira Goswami portrayed the psyche and horrendous, terrific, miserable lives of widows in Kashi. It depicts the pain of widowhood. It is very difficult to separate fiction from reality in her writings. While writing this novel she stayed in a widow’s house for a short span in Uttar Pradesh. She roamed all the streets of Vrindavan and exposed the obnoxious and unhygienic side of the holy city. She is the first writer who dared to highlight the exploitation, adversity of Radheshyamis who were ruthlessly neglected by their family members under the guise of religion and tradition. They used to sing Kirtans of Krishna for their earning. They felt that earned money should be spending for their death rights. They used to save this money with adhikaris of sattras with a hope that they would spend the saved money for their last rituals after their death. But the fact was totally different because unfortunately Indira Goswami saw many dead bodies of these widows floating on the banks of river without proper burning of body.

Nandita Basu in *The Frontline* (2001) writes “Indira writes in a manner which suggests that her direct experiences of social reality are woven closely into the narrative. This gives her works a touch of authenticity, even though it carries its hazards for a woman writing in an Indian language. Whenever an intimate experience is portrayed, there is a natural assumption on the part of the reader that it reflects the writer’s personal experience - an inference which neglects the creative process that transforms lived experiences into literature”

In majority of her writings, the reader come across women as sufferers of social tyranny because society never gave green signal for their desires, they were not even permitted to lead their life according to their wish. Unfortunately very few women in the society were well educated who could live on their own. Vaishnavite Brahmin society considered Pre-marital love and sexual relationship as taboo for the women. There were so many bindings in the name of “code of conduct” and the “dharma” mentioned by society for the women which was always a restraint for them. Indira Goswami was very sad for the treatment given to the widows. She was very instrumental in bringing awareness in the conventional society regarding so many sensitive issues.

There were many questions in her mind about the ill-treatment of widows .According to Hindu Dharma, a widow must loose the grace and beauty of life. For an Indian woman, the sense of being beautiful ,enjoying married life ends with the last rites of one’s husband. Every women in India has a great passion for wearing bindi and kumkum. She expresses her feeling very boldly that is her love for bindi and kumkum, Kajal and lipstick should be disappeared suddenly with the death of her husband or is it only a second life a woman has to lead after being a widow? Indira keeps her focus on the various attempts made to “de-feminize” and “de-sexualize” (Sogani) widows at that time. Their heads were shaven so that the widows don’t look graceful. They were supposed to be wear only white saris which indicate their colourless life. They devoted themselves fully in worshipping the Lord and lived an austere life. They were considered inauspicious and were not even invited for all the social and religious occasions. Indira remembers the treatment of her widow aunt during her childhood that how cruelly the Brahmin widows told their daughters, “Touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin” Her aunt was supposed to be “seated on a wooden plank during the days of the ambubachi”.

Since childhood Indira Goswami had seen her aunts as widows and she herself as widow at the age of 26 realized the pain of widowhood. Widows were considered sinners and bad omen. Hence they were not even invited for any auspicious occasions. It was also obligatory for widows to keep themselves far away from men. Mamoni Raisom is probably one of the rare Indian woman writers who was bold to expose a woman’s sexual needs as a natural right .She never bothered about society and restrictions and always used to wear bright coloured saris.

The widows were also not permitted even to eat the food according to their wish. Even enjoying the aroma by smelling was almost as good as eating it. And for a Gussain widow it is a great sin even to smell the aroma of forbidden fruit. In “The Mouth Eaten Howdah of Tusker”, When the rebellious character Giribala was highly tempted to aroma of iguana curry on an occasion at their residence. She was unable to resist herself from eating iguana curry “.....That delicious odour....again that tempting aroma....and she ate it with great relish ..She forgot everything religion, and ritual, wisdom or restraint. She started gulping it to great haste because after her widowhood, she had taken only habisiya rice....her tongue has become dull and dry....She was fed up with the diet. When it was come to notice by the elder Gossainee, “Chiko, Chiko, what are you doing? Such greed for flesh is very inauspicious for a girl” she was compelled for a purification ritual. This incident is also an example for restrictions on widows even for food they eat.

In Writings of Indira Goswami, the women are portrayed as a tragic creation suffering from a deep sense of guilt and regret for their inability to restraint in their sexual drive. They are pursued inexorably to their destiny by the Furies of their own mental creation. The two Brahmin widows Soudamini (in *Nilakanthi Braj*) and Giribala (in *Dantal Hatir Uinye Khowa Howda*) commit suicide at the end because they are unable to face the consequences of social violation.

Professor Sishir kumar Das, Delhi University(in view of critics) “I feel that with the publication of the book Dantal Hatir Uwe Khuwa Howda(The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker) a great writer has emerged amidst us. Mamoni tells a wonderful story, a story of disintegration of power, of unbelievable suffering of men and women, and also of tremendous courage and the tremendous pain that love brings. The characters so Assamese and yet so universally alive and kicking real and exciting, to say the least, kept me haunting for many days. It’s an unforgettable work.”

Saptahik Hindustan: March 29-April 4, 1992. “...it is extraordinarily captivating, as well disquieting both fascinating and repelling in its naïve openness and uninhibited nature... The singularly most honest and transparently sincere character that Indira Goswami possesses—a novel—it touches and sounds one’s heart. It can be said that such autobiographies are rarely written in Indian languages. It is really a wonderful and unique work. The translation is so good that it appears as if it’s not a translated work, but an original one. Publication is also equally praiseworthy. The work will go a long way in the world of literature.”

In 1971 Indira Goswami joined the Delhi University in the Department of Modern Indian Languages as a Lecturer and retired as a Professor from the same department. She was very dynamic and used to involve in various academic and cultural activities. But her passion for writing was like a spiritual castle gave her a retreat from her sorrows. Indira Goswami achieved maximum rewards that a writer can deserve for like the Sahitya Academy Award, the Katha National Award, International Tulsi Award, Jnanpith Award, the Principal Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands, and the Kamal Kumari National Award, among others. She also received the highest literary award The Jnanpith award for her life time contribution.

The common thread in Indira Goswami’s immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. . . Despite the complex interstices, I see no contradictions—only a holistic expression of India’s many challenges to women’s empowerment and a gifted writer molding them into creative forms,” writes Malashri Lal.

Sodhi (1999: 13) rightly says that the autobiographies are written not only to describe the life and death of the author but are written with an urge to reveal his/her inner most thoughts. Through her writings she revealed and a re-created her own self. It is very important for women writers, as they have faced uncountable problems from society since a long time such as gender discrimination, oppression and sexual exploitation.

Indira Goswami not only simply projected her own experiences to others but also she found an outlet for giving an honest expression to her personal grief and loneliness of widowhood with the help of her writings. It is really a predicament for any one to write about one’s own self. But she opened about herself with appealing truthfulness, hiding nothing and unmasking everything with deliberate truth. She always said, “I acted as I thought” After considering her own experiences and observations on other widows, she analyzed the social and mental adversities of widowhood. She says in the introduction of the book: “I have tried to show how the mental and physical state of a young widow takes a different shape and how this change affects her entire life after her widowhood.”

CONCLUSION

Indira Goswami as a narrator discovered and identified her true “self” through her writings from the dark inner recesses of the soul. She was a bold writer never ignored or mask the weak or helpless moments of her life but exposed them with the courage. Mamoni Raisom Goswami was quite obnoxious with her personal life, but by focusing marginalized woman again and again, re-inventing herself each time in her every new characters, as a teacher, as a social activist, as a serious scholar of the epics and till the last day of her life she did not stop to make use of her pen in any of her incarnation.

Through this paper we can understand how Indira Goswami facing innumerable obstacles in her life overcame and by the virtue of her writing, she depicted the society the horrendous and miserable conditions of widows through her own “self” of being a widow. She also gave her voice and message to the society that the angle of looking towards the treating widows should be changed.

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