

# ‘Subaltern issues’ in Mamoni Raisam Goswami’s *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar.*

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## ***Abstract***

*Indira Goswami is one of the most important figures in contemporary Indian literature. She has devoted her writings for the cause of the marginalized women. She was honored with the “Sahitya Akademi Award” in 1983 for the novel *The Rusted Sword*, the “Assam Sahitya Sabha Award” in 1988, and in the year 2000 she was awarded with the country’s highest literary prize the *Jnanpith Award*. Her novel originally published as *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* in 1986 was translated by the author herself in 2004 as the *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar*.*

**Keywords:** *Indian literature, marginalized women, patriarchal society*

## **I. Introduction:**

The novel mainly brings out the pathetic plight of widows belonging to the Assamese orthodox community. Goswami has concentrated on how Patriarchal norms of the Assamese orthodox community have entrapped women. The novel shows how the ethics of the patriarchal society is guarded by *Satra*: feudal institution of Assam. Many patriarchal laws have been explored and questioned by the novelist through her portrayal of the women characters.

## **II. Theoretical Overview:**

In the literary discourse of post colonialism, the term ‘subaltern’ has occupied a prominent space. The term ‘subaltern’ owes its origin to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s writings. He was imprisoned for a long time by Mussolin’s police until his death at age 45. In prison, he wrote notebooks on politics, history and philosophy. In those writings he declared that the term ‘subaltern’ was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. In postcolonial studies, the terms such ‘the subaltern other; ‘the marginalized other; ‘the cultural other’ are often used interchangeably to mean the subjugated, oppressed, marginalized section of society who are victim of social institution such as Patriarchy, casteism, colonialism, racism, stereotyped gender

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identity etc . With the formation of the Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective, in early 1980s, the term 'subaltern' gained worldwide attention. The group led by group Ranajit Guha, comprises a number of other south Asian historians, social critics and scholars, chiefly- Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Sumit Sarkar. Ranajit Guha in the preface of the first volume of the *Subaltern Studies* defines the term 'Subaltern':

“...The word 'subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise English Dictionary, that is, of 'inferior rank'. It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way (Preface)”

Thus, the term subaltern mainly means the poor, landless peasants, religious minority, women, lower caste etc in the context of Indian society. The term gained much world wide popularity and attention after the publication of Gayotri Chakravarty Spivak's widely known essay, '*Can the subaltern speak?*' where she asserts that subalterns can not be heard in the dominant discourse.

### **III. Objectives:**

1. To study nature and various forms of women's oppression in the novel.
2. To relate women as subaltern subjects.
3. To explore various causes of women's oppression.

### **IV. Methodology:**

The method of close text reading of primary texts is adopted to explore different aspects women's oppression in this paper. The theory of 'subaltern studies' is used to authenticate and justify the arguments of the paper. Various secondary sources i.e. related articles, books and essays and internet sources have been consulted to enrich the arguments of the paper.

### **V. Analyses:**

#### **5.01: Nature and forms of women's oppression:**

In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar*, the pathetic plights of the women of the time was represented through five major women characters, namely- Giriwala, Durga, Saru Gossai, Bar Gossaini and Elimon. Giriwala is the younger sister of Indranath, who returned to her mother's home after the death of her husband; Durga is the widowed paternal aunt (younger sister of Indranath's Late father) who also returned to her parents house like Giriwala; Saru Gossaini is the widowed wife of his late paternal uncle; Bar Gossaini is the mother of Giriwala and Eliman is the 12 year old daughter of Jukram Bhagawati, an Opium addicted Brahmin of the village. The pathetic

tales of these five major women characters give the reader a realistic picture of the suffocating condition women of the time.

The women in that society were forced to follow various oppressive laws made by the Patriarchal society. First of all, the child marriage was very much prevalent during the time. Girls were supposed to marry as soon as or before she hits the puberty. In the novel, Giritwala was married off to a womanizer of another village before she hits puberty. Her mother was forced to marry her off to avoid censorship and social exclusion from the villagers based on customary laws. Similarly, Elimon's father also forcefully tried to marry off her daughter to his friend, an opium smuggler from Koch Bihar. The person was twice the age of Elimon yet her father promised the opium smuggler to offer his daughter's hand to him as soon as she hits her puberty. The twelve year old Elimon is no way willing to marry a person of his father's age but her consent is not important to her father.

The bulk part of the novel mainly focuses on delineating the pathetic plight of the high caste Hindu widow of the time. The novel mainly focuses on the condition of the four widows of Indranath's family. The women were completely deprived of any kind of freedom. A widow has to follow strict disciplinary lifestyle forced unto them by various patriarchal laws. Being economically dependent and without any agency or representatives they silently follow everything prescribed by the patriarchal society. Durga and Saru Gossaini strictly follow all the norms of widowhood forced unto them. Some customary laws for widows are continuous fasting, following a strict eating regime that includes abstaining from non vegetarian, oily and spicy food, sleeping on a bed of bamboos, bathing and undergoing purification rituals if their body is touched even by the shadow of a low-caste man, and so on \. Following all these rigorous disciplinary laws, Durga becomes lean and thin like a ghost. But, despite her miserable life, she thinks about the afterlife happiness of her late husband. She keeps her valuable jewelry not for her future help but to provide expense to immerse her husband's *Asthi* (remaining bones of a death body) to Holy Ganga.

Durga, refuses to fight a legal battle to reclaim her husband's property as her relatives believe that respectable women should never step into a court of law as the gaze of thieves and criminals would make them impure. Following all the norms of widowhood, such as fasting routines makes her victim of tuberculosis. But Durga refuses to go to hospital to get medical aid. As, elderly women of the house repeatedly tell her that a woman should never leave her husband's house even after his death. If a widow dies in her husband's house only then she goes heaven. Because of these superstitious believes, she goes back to her in-laws house to die with some of dignity.

Moreover, all the women characters lead a very repressed life in the novel. None of them is allowed to follow their instincts, dreams and desires. Widowed at a very young age, Saru Gossaini falls in love with Mahidar Bapu, who has been living with her as a helper in a nearby by hut after death of her husband. The author describes the emotional turmoil of Saru Gossaini resulted from the clash between her passionate love for Mahidar Bapu and her moral conscience, informed by patriarchal society she lives in. But her repressed feeling for Mohidar Bapu finds outlet one night. As there was thunder and storm outside, she started worrying for Mohidar Bapu, for the latter had not returned home yet. In spite of heavy rain and thunder, she went out of her house alone in the night in search of Mohidar Bapu. Saru Gossaini's feelings for Mohidar Bapu grows day by day and she becomes restless. But, her strong consciousness of the ethical code of the society resist her unconscious urge to love Mohidar passionately.

Here, the author talks about the clash between individual freedom and the patriarchal laws of the time. She asks herself-has anyone of the *Satradhikar's* family faced such kind of conflicting emotions after becoming a widow?

Giriwala's tragic death is also the result of the strict customary laws prescribed to a widow. After becoming widow, she falls in love with Christian Mark Saheb. To give some relief from the boredom of her widowhood, the sensitive Indranath allowed her to roam around with Mark Saheb as a helper, who tried to write the family history of the *Satridhikar's* family of *Amranga Sattra*. But unfortunately, because of the strict patriarchal laws of the time, her growing restlessness and romantic interest for Mark Saheb culminates in her death. People around the *Sattra* and their village started making a fuss about their relationship as she roams around with him alone. To escape from social censorship, Indranath and his relatives decide to send Giriwala back to her late husband's house to die with dignity. But the rebellious Giriwala doesn't want to go back to her in laws house. Out of frustration, she enters the solitary hut of the Mark Saheb. She surrenders herself in front of Mark Saheb and asks him to accept her. Although there was no physical intimacy between Giriwala and Mark Saheb villagers interpreted the incident as scandalous. She was accused of committing adultery. The villagers and neighbor immediately arranged for Giriwala's purgatory rites. On the process of performing the purgatory rites, she immolates herself along with Mark sahib in the hut as way of rebellion against the patriarchal norms of the society. Thus, Mamoni Raisom Goswami reiterates unforgiving patriarchal laws where women are subjected to inhuman torture, violence and oppression.

#### **5.02: Women as subaltern subjects.**

In the above discussion, we have seen the nature and forms of discrimination against women during that time. But, it is imperative ask why the women characters of the novel can be called subaltern subjects. As Spivak says in her interview with Leon De Kock that not all oppressed are subaltern. "Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern' ... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are." (45) Spivak's point is that although some people are oppressed, they are able to see "the mechanics of discrimination" utilized by the hegemonic forces to deny them equal treatment. In that case, merely by being aware of the instruments of oppression that is applied against, these groups have the possibility of speaking up and making their voices heard by their oppressors. But, subalterns like the women characters in the novel are not even aware of the reason of their oppression. Even if they are aware of the discriminatory mechanisms they are not in a position to oppose or subvert it. For example, Although, Giriwala was aware of the various discriminatory laws of the society but she couldn't stop or resist those. But, she doesn't have the capacity to make her voice heard in the male dominated society. She doesn't have a voice in that male dominated society so that she could choose to eat anything she wanted after becoming widow or marry Mark Saheb instead of going through the hardships of her widowhood. Although, she immolates herself as a rebellion against the existing oppressive system of the society, yet no one heard her rebellious voice. Her rebellion dies with herself as her self-destruction doesn't end the sufferings of women of the time. Not only Giriwala, all the female characters of the novel can be considered as subaltern as they are systematically oppressed in the male dominated hegemonic society.

### 5.03. The causes of the systematic oppression of women:

At first glance, patriarchal laws, blind adherence to the traditional rituals and practices, illiteracy, lack of the economic freedom seem to be the main factors for the marginalization of women. But, a close study of the novel reveals that they are rather medium or mechanisms than actual causes of their marginalization. The oppressive states of women are rooted in the greater economic and selfish interests of the privileged classes.

Instead of practicing egalitarian ideologies which was supposed to be the guiding principles of the *Sattra*, it became a place for wealth and unquestionable superiority of its ruling classes. Thereby, to maintain the hierarchical balance, it became essential to create various ideologies. In the essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), Althusser mainly tries to explain how conditions and relations of production are maintained in a society. Like other Marxists, a ruling class in a particular society tries to renew the existing relation of production to maintain their dominant position. He puts equal importance on the non-material aspects of the society while explaining the continuous marginalization of the certain section the society. These no material aspect is termed as Ideological state Apparatus by Althusser. Thus, various patriarchal laws forced upon the women of the time can be considered as the Ideological State Apparatus. The dominant section of the *Sattra* tried to implement and keep alive these patriarchal laws so that it would benefit them in maintaining their hierarchical position. On such a situation, women became the scapegoat for keeping alive selfish interests of the ruling classes. The women were given the task to preserve the reputation of their respective class. In the family of the *Satriadhikar*, Bar Gossaini, Giriwala, Saru Gossaini, and Durga were all forced to live ascetic life because of the interest of keeping alive feudal social set up of *Sattra*. The psychological turmoil of Bar Gossaini, Giriwala's mother during the time of snake biting scene is very interesting. Instead of thinking about the life of her daughter, she was thinking more about the how she would purify her daughter as her daughter was touched by a Christian. They exemplify such strict purity, so that their disciples and the common villagers would also respect these laws. Without these superstitious laws, the hierarchical structure of the *Sattra* would break down and people would start doubting its innumerable laws.

Therefore, the existence of the various superstitious customary laws owes its relation to the economic interest of the priestly class of the time. Because of the existence of various customary laws, the priests get money, lands and various valuable items as sacrificial offerings. The author repeatedly emphasizes the relation between existence of the priestly class and existence of various superstitious customary laws. For instances, in one incident when Giriwala got the smell of the Mutton Curry which had been hidden at the back of her house by a greedy priest, she desperately wanted to taste it. As she had been continuously on fasting after the death of her husband, she couldn't resist herself from eating it. But in the mean time, her mother and Durga caught her eating the forbidden meal. Her mother immediately rushed towards her and started beating her. The Brahmins of the village demanded for immediate penances. The Brahmins started making hue and cry and demanded immediate purgatory rite as they would get a few rupee through it. For, if a widow eats meat or fish she would have to purify herself by offering *Aath Dhenu* (1 Dhenu is equal to quarter of rupee) to a Brahmin. If an untouchable touches a *Brahmin* then he has to offer *Baro Dhenu* to a Brahmin. In the first funeral rites of the *Burha Gossai*, the Brahmins of the village were given 14

*Bigha* of land as a part of the ritual. Thus, the existence of various customary laws which victimizes women in most cases, have strong connection with the economic interest of certain class.

## **VI. Conclusions:**

From the above brief discussion, it can be said that the author graphically discusses various socio-economic factors of the marginalization of the women in the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar*. All the women characters of the novel can be considered as subaltern as they can't oppose the systemic oppression forced unto them. All them silently endure their sufferings and pain as they are not in a position to oppose the discriminatory system of the society. It can be argued that the various superstitious patriarchal and customary laws owes its relation to the economic interest of certain classes of the time.

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