

FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT OF THE PROTAGONIST TOWARDS EMANCIPATION IN THE MOTH – EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to focus on the female character, Giribala of The Moth – eaten Howdah of the Tusker of Indira Goswami. She fights throughout her life for her 'self individuality'. In the Indian culture the orthodox manmade society forces her to live in confinement, in the four walls of the house. Even her in laws leave her when she becomes widow and eliminates her from all the rights of the family. But Giribala is strong and determined and fights against all odds and evens till her death. So, her fight for the right till death becomes a guiding force for thousands of Indian women.

Key Words: Self Individuality, Struggle, Fight, Manmade Society

The Moth – eaten Howdah of the Tusker is a powerful portrayal of the agony and anguish faced by a woman in her development into adult role and social adjustment in a society where the woman is given little space and place for self – development, awareness and independence as a being. As SudhirKakar points out:

The dominant psycho – social realities of a woman's life can be condensed into three stages. First, she is a daughter to her parents; second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter – in – law to his parents) and third, she is a mother to her sons (and daughters) (Kakar : 1996, 57).

In all the three stages, women are oppressed and exploited more than men. Women bear and bring up children, does the entire household work, yet they are considered a debit to the family. They are ill – treated and tortured by their husbands and in – laws for various reasons. As Ambedkar points out:

A woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows the husband the right to beat his wife (Ambedkar : 1987, 431).

Indian culture considers marriage to be the supreme boon of a woman because it offers her salvation through her service to her husband. For her chastity is superior and preferable to life. This reduces her to a non – living commodity that her father offers as a gift (Kandan) to a man in marriage. She is deprived of love, enjoyment and education which are indispensable to the growth of her personality.

The Hindu concept of marriage is restrictive that demands commitment from a woman after marriage to her husband, family, society and culture. She has to be faithful, playing subordinate roles, child – bearing agency, paying respect to the elder relatives in the family and remaining truthful to the husband to preserve the honour in society. Her extra – marital relationship is condemned and she is excommunicated and ostracized.

Indira Goswami, one of the leading woman writers of the Indian English literature, strikes upon these traditional bondages in her endeavour to free woman from the authority of society. In Indian society, women are confined to inner world and are given freedom to walk and talk within space of freedom as the patriarchy allows them to do. It is really surprising that a man may have any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. Our society has been so conditioned as to categorize women as immoral course of behaviour.

Indira Goswami has minutely portrayed this dissatisfied picture of marriage and marital unhappiness on the part of women in the Indian culture which increases the pathetic condition of women. Though they compromise a lot with their husbands and other family members, the male counterparts cannot even bother to understand them which create dissatisfaction and unhappiness in women. By discussing this issue, Indira Goswami wants to give women proper and respected place in the family. She believes that women should have their own space and place in the family and society. She attempts to give women proper space in the patriarchal culture.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, in a patriarchal society “marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (1981 : 445). But woman is essentially a subservient partner in marriage. Marriage for a woman is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self – realization. Usually in the institution of marriage, a woman is reduced as an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification. It turns out to be an institution of oppression for her in various forms rather than of her protection for which it was primarily instituted. In the words of J.S. Mill : “No slave is a slave to the same length, and in so full in a

sense of words, as a wife is" (1974 : 25). A man is represented as a taker of woman and a woman is always a giver in marriage. She becomes man's half and acquires his name, his religion, his family and his class. She is truly reduced to the status of a nurse - maid of the children. In a way, for the sake of husband and family, she loses her identity, and even her individuality as a human being.

In India, however, woman is still suffering from the enforced act of man upon woman. Sexism is most often expressed in the form of male domination which leads to women's subjugation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression. According to patriarchal views, male supremacist ideology projects women as valueless who obtain value only by relating to men. Indira Goswami in this novel has also described how women have become victim of men's supremacist ideology and their physical strength.

But in the modern time, the shift from the 'pativrata' image of an ideal housewife to that of the sexually emancipated woman marks the emergence of a new class of Indian woman who are coming out of their conservative shells and are ready to accept the sexual / psychological realities of human life. It is really a sign of radical change occurring in the Indian sexual landscape.

The important widow character of *The Moth eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is Giribala who is young, beautiful and charming. She is the only woman character in the novel who protests strongly and openly against the old age social conventions. Though the patriarchal culture tries to oppress her badly, she revolts against the man made culture courageously and tries to establish her individuality and self - identity.

On reaching puberty, she is married off to Latu Goswami against her wishes because nobody in the house is bothered about her desires and dreams of the life partner. The male members of the family have decided to marry her according to their desires because a woman has no voice in the house. A woman has no right to speak against the patriarchal decision. Because of their decision, she has to marry a man who did not love her at all. Her husband was the worthless son of the *adhikar* of Bangara who always neglected and humiliated Giribala. She never found any type of fulfillment in the company of her life.

Giribala, the young passionate widow of Gosain family, was unfortunate because her husband, LatuGoswami, did not care a bit for his wife and told her on her first night after their marriage that he had relations with other woman and he would not change his habit. All the romance and happiness of new marriage was suddenly disappeared when Giribala heard that her husband had intimate relationship with an ordinary low caste woman who used to sell opium. As her husband speaks to Giribala:

You daughter of three *sattras*... as those poets say, you have a body like a young date palm! But since we are already married, you better know one thing. You will have to tolerate some of my habits. People say they are bad habits but you will have to accept them (Goswami : 2002, 509).

In the patriarchal culture, only a woman has to accept all the habits, bad or good, of her husband whereas her husband doesn't care for the happiness of his wife. Only woman has to care for the happiness of her husband. So Indira Goswami has satirically portrayed the character of Latu who exposes the typical mentality of the patriarchal culture. He further says:

I love women. I like their company when I roamed with the *jatra* party through all these places - Bardowa, Somaria, Dakhala, I had taken tea from the hands of low caste women. And that woman of ManiariChowk, not only she makes dove curry with papaya for me, but she also cooks for me and with deer flash ... He had gradually reached the lowest rung of debauchery possible for a dissolute son of a Gosain family ... (Goswami : 2002, 510).

These harsh memories have remained in Giribala's mind forever and so after the death of her husband, she did not immerse the ashes of her husband in Ganga or any other sacred river. In order to take revenge not only on her husband but on the whole patriarchal culture, she, at the "Shraddha" ceremony, breaks all the taboos by eating meat.

Total lack of love on her husband's part had made her a rebel against the whole patriarchal system. She did not have any loving memory in her mind. Giribala did not accept any physical restraints imposed on her by a rigid Hindu social structure. As she thought:

He gradually roamed with *jatra* parties and almost everyday that notorious woman, the opium seller of ManiariTiniali used to feed him dove curry, cooked with papaya. Once, feeling guilty, he did 'Prayaschit' ... His whole mental make up was like that of a free bird. He is dead now, yes, her is now no more, but his words act like poison in her [Giribala's] mind (Goswami : 2002, 509).

She hates her husband so much that she utters:

Do you know? That husband of mine touched and played with that notorious woman who sold opium. He even slept with that woman. Do you know what he said to me on her first night? Pushing aside my *gatala*, he said -

“There cannot be any enjoyment in bed with the woman one brings in marriage! Absolutely none!” Still I try to put flowers and tulsi leaves on his wooden sandals. But if it continuous like, I am afraid, I’ll turn into a ghost (Goswami : 2002, 562).

Even after the death of her husband Giribala was tortured a lot by her in – laws and sent back to her parents’ home after her miscarriage. Giribala is the only woman in the novel, who wants to live like a free bird, according to her own wish. She does not like the restrictions of the patriarchal culture. She wants self fulfillment and so after the death of her husband, when she returns to her parents’ home, she bursts out and opposes the gossip about her. By expressing this incident, the author has mentioned:

Giribala rushed out like a tigress in rage. Her hair had come undone and flew widely. Her eyes blazed at the group of women, she screamed : You came here to see me, didn’t you! You have seen me now. I am still alive! I will live! I will live on and have a better life than all of you ... (Goswami : 2002, 414).

At her parents’ home, Giribala starts to help Mark Saheb, an American Missionary, in his research of the history of the region and also the biography of other missionaries in Assam. Giribala helps him in his research with great enthusiasm and zeal. During this research, they have been attracted towards each other. Whenever Giribala is in trouble, Mark Saheb always sympathies her, but Giribala does not need any sympathy, she needs love. Again the patriarchal culture comes as an obstacle in her life. She is a widow and so she has to suppress her physical attraction towards Mark. She cannot love Mark. She has to suppress her sexual desires. Patriarchal culture does not allow a widow to love any man. But Giribala, against the rules and taboos created by the man made culture, loves Mark bravely.

During the *Shraddh* feast, the situation of Giribala becomes pathetic. Patriarchy treats her harshly. During that feast, Giribala is attracted by delicious dishes, because she has to live only on vegetarian diet of a widow. She is overcome by the temptation and at last gulps some delicious meat curry. She forgets everything ... religion and rituals, wisdom and restraint. But unfortunately, she is discovered and disgraced. She is locked up in a small, airless room as a punishment for her transgression. It is a great unfortunate thing for a woman that after the death of her husband, she has no right to eat according to her wishes. A widow has to eat only that food which is decided by the patriarchal culture. If a woman breaks the taboo created by men, she is severely punished for it. She has to perform the drama of purification. After the drama of purification and ritualistic atonement of Giribala, her situation is quite pathetic. As the author narrates:

She was still trembling and shivering. Her dress was wet with perspiration and the water sprinkled on her for purification. She changed immediately. Her arms, legs, neck and face, were covered with bluish bruises and lines of nail scratches inflicted by her mother ... tiny beads of dark red blood had oozed out on her skin ... she looked around the room ... All the doors and windows are tightly shut ... From the wooden ceiling above her head, came soft sounds of weevils boring into the wood These sounds of inexorable destruction struck further terror in her heart ... (Goswami : 2002, 516).

Social taboos and rigidities lead Giribala to death. Her cruel death is caused by religious conservations also. Throughout her life, she fights against the patriarchal culture and meets a tragic end. An important characteristic of her personality is that though she meets a tragic end, she fights courageously against the whole patriarchal set up, and lives the life the way what she wants. So, from the gynocentric point of view, the character of Giribala is an excellent example of a woman who tries to find out her own place and space in the patriarchal set up.

Giribala feels that it is impossible for her to live without Mark and one night, there is a knock on the door of Mark Saheb’s home. Giribala enters his room requesting him to take away from all the miseries and troubles of life. The society, in which she is living, is oppressing her because of her widowhood and now she is tired of this monotonous life. She wants to run away from the male dominated culture which is nothing but only the world of suppression and miseries. She opposes the man made culture and tries to find her place in the patriarchal society.

But unfortunately, Giribala is discovered by the society from Mark’s house. The patriarchal culture demands the purification of Giribala. She has to pass through severe penance. She is in deep shock but still remains calm, detached and motionless. For her penance, the villagers, with the instructions of the priest, erect a shed made up of plantain leaves and timber, and then make Giribala enter it. During the chanting of purification Mantras, she has to come out of that shed but Giribala does not come out of the burning shed. The whole shed, with Giribala, is burnt into ashes. This is the pathetic and terrible end of Giribala in the man made culture. As the author portrays:

The tremendous hue and cry of the people rent the sky asunder ... With a huge crash and cracking sound, the roof caved in and engulfed the motionless girl, Giribala. She disappeared into the raging flames! Sky. There was only the stench of burning flesh. Only the stench of burning flesh ... Human flesh! ... (Goswami : 2002, 653).

Through the character of Giribala, Mamoni Raisom Goswami represents the situation of all the women in the male dominated culture. Throughout the novel, Giribala goes on suffering. She never finds relief or happiness during her whole life. Yet, she bravely fights against the patriarchal set up and meets the tragic end. In this way, the character of Giribala is a perfect example if we look at her from the gynocentric point of view. She is always in search of identity, self respect and self – fulfillment. She chooses death instead of life which was full of humiliation. Giribala could not accept the restraints that society had imposed on her – as a young widow. She fights with cool head against the patriarchal set up and pays the price for it. Her death is defiance against a system created by male dominated culture which granted no freedom to a widow. About *The Moth – eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Dr. Rajul Sogani expresses his views:

As an artist, she [Indira Goswami] brings into sharp focus the pity and horror of their [widows'] situation and above all, the intense desire in each one of these caged birds to come out of its prison if not to fly, at least to breathe the fresh air of life and sing its own song. How long will society force them to languish in isolation or perhaps court violent and pre – mature death? The question is still to be answered (Sogani : 2002, 65).

The novel holds an immediate appeal for us because we read it as Giribala's story, the story of the journey of a confined woman towards self individuality. Probably because we are middle – class women, we identify the central problematic to be the exploration of women's sexuality within the confinements of domesticity. *Moth – eaten Howdah of the Tusker* depicts the pitiable condition of Giribala who can be said to be representing most of the young girls of today who just after their marriage, fall victim to the ill – treatment and atrocities of their husbands. As Jandhyala points out:

With woman's sexuality so closely bound with marriage and her role as wife and mother, there was no possibility of considering her sexual needs and desires (Jandhyala : 1989, III).

This novel questions and exposes the gender – biased values and morals of patriarchy which have oppressed women for ages.

The age old orthodox tradition does not give women space for individuality as the creator of rules are men. So in the patriarchal culture women's desires are neglected and male ideology is throbbed on them. They don't care a little about the feelings and emotions of women. They treat them only as an object to satisfy their needs which is the reason of women's pathos.

Indira Goswami portrays the inner world of the Indian woman through the character of Giribala in the realistic manner. A woman and her desires, efforts and failures in the traditional Indian society is the main theme of this novel. One of the best examples of it is the famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, who based his theory of sexuality on the possession of the phallus / pennies. A man is a man because he possesses the phallus. So, a woman is simply not a man. Therefore, a woman is a lack, a negative entity. This lack of female self can also be reflected in art and literature where women frequently appear as objects of men's desires. Women are always associated with the passive body and men with the active mind and this idea is in the centre of this novel.

From childhood, women are always taught the concept of male superiority and are conditioned to co - operate in their own subordination. Unlike women in many western countries, Indian women are denied equal opportunities for working with men in many spheres of life. Women's powerlessness stems from this unequal gender relations. With Sita and Savitri as predominant models of reference, Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives, though husbands are not required to be so. In most cases, they generally do not have the freedom to decide when they should marry, whom they should marry, how many children they should have or how the children should be brought up. When a woman is married off, in most cases, in her new home, she is often made to act the part of an unpaid domestic servant with a marginally superior status. Even ShashiDeshpande remarks:

Is to be a feminist to want to be like a man? I don't think so. On the contrary, to me it has meant an acceptance of my womanhood as a positive thing not as a lack. An understanding that I am different, not inferior. And how can feminism be anti – men when it is really working for a better, a more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women, instead of the uneasy relationship between tyrant and oppressed? (Deshpande : 2003 , 83 – 84).

From the above statement, a reader can understand that Indira Goswami's writing comes out of her own intense and long suppressed feelings about what is to be a woman in our society. Her writing comes out of her consciousness of the conflict between her idea of herself as a human being and the idea that society has of her

as a woman. Indira Goswami moves further and catches on the subtle psychological complexities of the individual mind.

In fact, this novel focuses on man – woman relationship: the failure of a man to treat his wife as person and provide space for the fulfillment of her personality. Here, Indira Goswami not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and patriarchal culture but also stealthily deflates the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural falters that have enslaved women for ages. The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society.

In short, *Moth – eaten Howdah of the Tusker* questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by women. Her husband openly and unashamedly commits adultery but nobody objects to it, It shows that man is allowed to flirt with as many numbers of women as he pleases. Female virginity is thus nothing but to keep a woman as a slave under man’s control.

Thus, in a patriarchal culture, woman’s emotions are of no value. Only man’s desires are in the centre. Through the character of Giribala, Indira Goswami has commented on how “Indian women are forced by bigoted society to repress their sexuality” (Deshpande : 2003, 8). As she begins to suppress her real feelings, she begins to experience a corresponding loss of self – esteem. Gradually, she allows herself to enter into a passive, almost traditional relationship with her husband.

Through the example of Giriabala, Indira Goswami has re – incarnated the Indian woman and has also re – enforced the female dilemma. Her concern for women is reflected in her novel. Her regard for social problems, especially of the middle class women is evident. In short, her novel is an epitome of women’s culture which narrates the grave experiences of women and their social pressure to live into the four walls of the house, which is completely true for most women even today.

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