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INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER*: A LITERARY
DOCUMENT OF CONTEMPORARY TRANSITIONAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Indira Goswami wins Jnanpitha award for her well acknowledged novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. It is a nostalgic memory of sattras in Amraanga in South Kamrup. Almost all the characters have been picked from this sattras, but there have been close brushes of imagination with reality. The writer has set the story in rural Assam at a time when the feudal system ruled the roost. Indranath, the only son of the Gossain and the Adhikar-to-be of the village emerges as the kind of local chieftain that our country needed badly at the time – when it was slowly and steadily transforming into a sovereign democratic republic. Moving with the times, he tries to ring in the changes by carrying the people with him. The latter, steeped in orthodoxy and feudal values do not realise his liberal concept.

Giribala, Gossainee, aunt Durga are other widows who face dialectic between their body and spirit because of rigid social conventions and psychological conflicts.

Key words: Feudalism, Liberalism, Dialectic, Conventions, Customs

A brief profile of author

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, better known by her popular name Indira Goswami, is one of the most celebrated feminist women writers of India. Born in 1942, she turned out several creative and scholarly works in Assamese and English languages. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, is regarded as a classic in Assamese literature and excerpted in Masterpieces of Indian Literature (*SahityaAcademy*). It is a novel about the plight of Brahmin widows in the *Sattras* of Assam. *The Blue Necked Braja* is perhaps the first novel that traces the plight of Hindu widows popularly called *Radheswamis* in Vrindavan. *Pages Stained with Blood* is a first person account of the Sikh-riots of 1984 in Delhi. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, is a controversial but enlightening novel which criticises the practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient

Kamakhya Temple, in Guwahati, Assam. *Pain and Flesh* is a rare collection of published poetry in English from Indira Goswami.

Her treatise *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra* is her magnificent research work. The national award winning filmmaker Jahnu Baruah made a film on her life *Words from the Mist* based on her Autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*.

There is a very little research work done on the translated works of Goswami. Baharul Islam Saikia's M. Phil dissertation contains a translation of the well-known novel *Ahiron* with a discussion on the phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactical and cultural problems faced by the translator in translating the Assamese novel into English. Among the translated novels and short stories of Indira Goswami, "*Devplthar Tej*" is translated as "*Shadow of Kamakhya*" by Apratim Barua. "*Yatra*" is

translated as "The Journey" by the writer herself. "The Empty Chest" is the translated version of "Udarti Bakac" by Dr. Pradipta Borgohain. The writer translated "Sarhskar", a powerful story, a cinematic version of which is also available. "Shadow of Kamakhya" contains some of her English translated short stories in the form of an anthology. Apart from the short stories many of her novels are translated too. "Pages Stained with Blood" is translated by Pradip Acharyya from the origin "Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Prsta". "An Unfinished Autobiography" is the translation of her "Adha Lekha Dastabej" by Prafulla Katakya. "Cenabar Srota" is translated by Nibha Rani Gogoi as "The Curent of Chenab". "The Blue Necked Braja" translated by Gayatri Bhattacharyya is a Zubaan publication of the novel "Nilkanthi Braja". "The Man From Chinnamasta" is the English translation of "Chinnamastar Manuhtu" by Prasanta Goswami published by Katha.- "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" and "Saga of South Kamrup" are the translations of "Datal Hatir Uye Khova Haoda" by the writer herself. "Adajya" (a film) is based on her novel "Datal Hatir Uye Khova Haoda". A television serial of the same 16 book was telecasted on Delhi Doordarshan under the title "Dakshin Kamrup Ki Gatha". Guwahati Doordarshan made a telefilm on her story "Udarh Bakac". Delhi Doordarshan made a serial on her "Bhikshar Patra Bhani". "Words from the Mist" is a film made on her by Jahnu Barua. Besides these, her works are translated into many other languages like Marathi, Hindi, Nepali, Telegu, Kannada and Bengali. The Marathi version of "Adhalekha Dastabej" has been prescribed as a text book in Marathi. While in the most recent translation of Goswami Aruni Kashyap has rendered "Thengphakhri Tahcildarar Tamar Taroval" into English as "The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar".

Discussion:

In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, the writer, as is her wont, has set the story in rural Assam at a time when the feudal system ruled the roost. The country was slowly but steadily readying itself to transition into a sovereign democratic republic by emphatically conveying to the British, our colonial masters of the time, that they should

quit India sooner than later. This writer keeps the reader glued to the book through its strong story content. However, unlike the other three novels (which the researcher investigated earlier on), this novel has not been supplemented and complemented by effective translation into the English language from the Assamese language. Fortunately, the debatable quality of translation has not marred the quality of the novel significantly.

Indranath, the only son of the Gossain and the Adhikar-to-be of the village emerges as the kind of local chieftain that our country needed badly at the time – when it was slowly and steadily transitioning into a sovereign democratic republic. Moving with the times, he tries to ring in the changes by carrying the people with him. The latter, steeped in orthodoxy and feudal values often do not see eye with Indranath on various issues but seldom picked up the courage to disagree with him overtly. With more and more of the villagers including housewives becoming opium addicts, the Kolkatta-educated Indranath is left wondering whether there is a way out of this dreaded vice for his disciples. The whole village is consumed by opium addiction, leading to erosion of moral fibre and intellectual courage with each passing day. The humane side of this young Gossain is tellingly brought out by the writer when Jamaluddin is mutilated by the rogue elephant. Ignoring the Brahmin's caution ("SaaruGossain, keep yourself seven hands away from that body! Otherwise you'll have to go through *chandrayanprayschita!*") and the threat posed by the rogue elephant which was still at large, he leads the team that carries the mutilated body of Jamaluddin into the latter's village.

As usual, the worst sufferers in Indranath's village are women. Surprisingly even some of the enlightened women like his own mother, the Gossainee and his own aunt Durga, seem to acquiesce in a milieu that objectifies women. For example the Gossainee praises the widow SaruGossainee for single-handedly chasing her share of the produce from the farm being tilled by her late husband's disciples. The praise is also an attempt to insinuate that Indranath does not pay adequate attention to the farm owned by his father, the Gossain and does not take the Communist menace

seriously. Not to be outdone, Indranath asks the Gossainee and aunt Durga why they should not liberate the farm from the disciples and undertake farming on their own. After all, they are familiar with the farm and all the disciples that till the farm. The replies of the two women are typically identical and surprise the Gossain: "Good gracious! We are ladies of the Gossain family! Go out there and expose ourselves? SaruGossainee gets things done through her disciples. She has never set foot on the land herself. That is why she is respected so much by everybody! She did not even go to Gauhati to fight the land litigation case. Everything was done by her disciples. She knows how to keep the dignity and honour of the family intact!" (pp. 9-10).

The feminist in the writer no doubt brings out the fact that women have been objectified. At the same time, the writer seems to convey the impression that to a certain extent the women have themselves to blame for their unfortunate plight. Going by ground reality one may be inclined to agree with the writer. We have seen countries headed by women in our neighbourhood. Our own country was headed by a woman for a considerable period of time. But none can state confidently that they championed the cause of women all the way.

As if to rub salt into the wound, superstitions render the condition of women worse. For example, Durga's mother-in-law believes firmly that Durga caused the death of her son. She even goes to the extent of suspecting that Durga's father, the Gossain of Amranga manipulated his daughter's horoscope to marry Durga off to her son! The writer does manage to bring out the injustice perpetrated on women through a bunch of superstitions. One wonders why it is never suspected that a prospective bridegroom's horoscope has been tampered with to facilitate his marriage with a girl he is obsessed with, for whatever reason. Yet another disgusting superstition comes to the fore when the widow Giribala, the only sister of Indranath, almost empties the pot of mutton curry and is caught red-handed in the act. For the first time, a Gossain's daughter, in the manor of a *sattrā* commits the so-called heinous act.

As the writer aptly suggests through one of the characters, one is at a loss to understand why

bubbly and voluble girls should be deemed as promiscuous. When the bubbly girl Eliman tries to jog Indranath's memory and even jokes with him, the latter is surprised! When she goes a step further and introduces herself to a perplexed Indranath, the hunch-backed old woman calls her a "shameless girl" and cautions her that she will scare away potential grooms! Thus the writer brings to the fore the cruel allegations levelled against an innocent, artless and naive girl who has not even come of age!

Another character that stands out in the novel is Giribala. She not only faces Bhoomichampa's barbs confidently and nonchalantly but also throws a challenge back at those who scoff at her widowhood! She admonishes the rubbernecks by declaring, "...I am still alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you..." The feminist in the writer comes to the fore here and Giribala, as the latter part of the book reveals, manages to hold her own, come what may!

Smooth operators and confidence tricksters like Mahidhar, SaruGossainee's assistant, as the writer rightly implies, are wolves in sheep's clothing and find it easier to fleece destitute women like SaruGossainee. When the latter finds out that the trustworthy Mahidhar not only collected *baina* without her knowledge from the prospective buyers of her land but also stole Durga's ornaments, one realises how vulnerable could a destitute widow could get in a man's world. Perhaps the writer suggests that once condemned to be a destitute, a woman remains a destitute; no salvation comes her way! Mahidhar spelt doom for another widow too, namely Durga. She could not immerse the ashes and bones of her dead husband in the holy river no thanks to Mahidhar knocking off her jewellery.

The writer has poignantly brought out the emotions that come to the fore when Durga takes leave of the Gossainee and Giribala, before leaving for Chikarhati, her late husband's village, for good. It is a pity that she does not take leave of SaruGossainee.

Indranath judges Mark Sahib objectively and it is a pity therefore that even he succumbs to superstition when he eventually implies that Mark Sahib should forget Giribala. "We want her to die, when the time comes, with dignity" sums up his rare

capitulation to superstition! This must have come as a great shock to the affable and cool Mark Sahib as it must have to Indira Goswami's readers. How could a well-informed and civilised man like Indranath could hold such an irrational view? Perhaps the compulsions imposed by the status his family held in his village were more important to him than his own sister's happiness! The latter conducts himself with honour and dignity even when Purshottam Bhagawati provokes him by making an indirect reference to his friendship with Giribala. Mark realises the futility of attempting to secure the release of Giribala from the drudgery of widowhood and the latter seems to have understood his predicament. Eventually, the *mlecha* is unfairly accused of ruining Giribala's life by the greedy priest and his cohorts. The priest's plan backfires when Giribala chooses to embrace death in the so-called impure hut that is set on fire rather than yield to the dictates of a sycophantic priest. The greedy priest had under-estimated Giribala's determination and mental strength. Although this was a welcome trait in Giribala, what leaves Indira Goswami's readers perplexed is the girl's capitulation. Of what use is determination or for that matter, mental strength when the individual possessing these traits succumbs meekly? Is Indira Goswami trying to drive home the point that eventually the weaker sex succumbs or will succumb or has to succumb?

The writer admits that "nobody has a full stomach" when Indranath is killed by communist follower. Ironically, Indranath had assumed the opposite, when he died. Here the writer brings out the fact that even in a local conflict as in war, both the parties lose eventually. Neither side wins. Both lose!

Conclusion

Indranath, the central Brahmin character emerges as a liberal human being who can overcome caste rigidity and ready to distribute his fields to the tillers. But his greater goal of equality is not understood by the poor farmers. In a way, he is in his purpose and gets killed at the end of the story. But the same broad minded person gets succumbed to the social obligation when it comes to his widow sister, Giribala's possible marriage with Mark Sahib.

He judges him objectively and it is a pity that he succumbs to superstition. His saying "We want her to die, when the time comes, with dignity"(260) sums up his capitulation to superstition.

The widows in the novel are accustomed to the ways of society in thinking they are taught to think and analyse in terms of social conventions and customs. The conflict between liberty and convention is probed at a deeper level successfully by the author. Indranath asks the Gossainee and aunt Durga to liberate the farm from the disciples and undertake farming on their own. The reply of the two women are typically identical and surprise the Gossainee:

"Good gracious! We are ladies of the Gossainee family! Go out there and expose ourselves? Saru Gossainee gets things done through her disciples. She has never set foot on the land herself. That is why she is respected so much by everybody!..."(9-10)

The suicide of Giribala has greater implications which include a rebellious spirit as well as individual dialectic.

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