

**VIRTUES AND WEAKNESS IN THE CHARACTER OF INDRANATH IN
*THE MOTH –EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER BY INDIRA GOSWAMI***

Vanitha .T

Ph.D Research Scholar
L.R.G.Govt.Arts College For Women
Tirupur,Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. R. Krishnaveni

Assistant Professor and Head
Government Arts And Science College,
Palladam, Tamil Nadu,India

Abstract

Indira Goswami's novels depict the finest human tendencies of the oppressed and suppressed people, she came across in her life. The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is one of the best novels of the author. The novel displays a powerful picture of change and transition of degeneration and decay with subtle expressions by the author. The main theme of the novel is fabricated with tragedy of widowhood, the plight of Brahmin widows in Sattrra, of South Kamrup district, Assam. The novel also depicts the socio-economic decadence of the feudal institute lingering on till the threshold of the independence of India. This article deals with a young and kind hearted youth, Indranath. It also effectively portrays how a man of rare qualities was ignored by his own people and became a victim for their greediness. Goswami rarely brings out the goodness of such male characters in her novel. The author received Sahitya Saba Award for this novel. Its original Assamese was translated by the author herself in English

Keywords - Indira Goswami- Assame Literature-second half of nineteenth century-young protagonist- Gossain of Sattrra-opium addiction- Elimon- Bhawati the Smuggler -sympathy- Giribala-Mark and his mission-Durga aunty- back to Chikarhati- Saru Gossainee- a brave widow-Mahidhar- Jagannath and Jamaludhin-Davedutt's advice- visit to Marabhita land-tragic end -failure in character.

The greatness of a man is not how much wealth he acquires,
but in his integrity and his ability to affect those around him positively
-Bob Marley

Indira Goswami is one of the celebrated names in Assamese literature. As a child of renaissance Goswami portrayed the finest human tendencies in her novels. Her themes were built on oppressed and depressed people of the society. Her minute expressions of the plights of young widows in Vrindavan brought her a national wide recognition. Goswami also served as a peace maker between the ULFA of Assam and the Indian Government. Goswami's novel, *The Moteaten Howdah of The Tusker* is considered one of the best of Goswami's novels and was included in the list of classics by Sahitya Academi. The novel is a genuine record of finest human tendencies and traditions.

The background of the novel is the second half of the nineteenth century at the dawn of Independent India. The novel deals with the tragic tale of high class Brahmin widows, belong to the Gossains of Sattrra in South Kamrup in Assam. While narrating the traumas of the widows Goswami also picturized a young protagonist with unique moral values. Perhaps the author would have re-presented the original character of her father who influenced her life even after his death. Indranath was the son of the senior Gossain of Sattrra. He was a young man of rare qualities and struggled for the upliftment of his people. Indranath's prior concern was about the opium addiction of his natives. Being the fervent admirer of his natives, Indranath's mind was troubled by the wretched condition of the opium addicts. Goswami describes,

In the dead of night, emaciated figures, almost skin and bones, appeared suddenly from nowhere and fell at the feet of card players, begging for money... opium addicts once respectable farmers and villagers but now pitiful wretches. They would beg in shrill and tenacious cries, and would not let go the feet of the card players until some coins were thrown to them. (TMEHTT, p 2)

Opium addiction was one of the worst consequences of colonial impact. The past glory of Assam was gone forever after the opium addiction. Indranath's heart was filled with strange feeling of sadness. The rehabilitation camps he arranged for the opium addicts became futile. Some times Indranath whipped the victims severely but it did not bring much change. Indranath felt "Those hypocrites, opium addicted Bhramins! Fools!. They were reluctant to go to the treatment camp at Haramdo, out of false prestige!" (TMEHTT, P 57) Dibakar Bhagwati a Brahmin who supplied leeches to the Negro soldiers later joined with a man from Cooch Behar and supplied opium clandestinely. Jokram Bhagwati (Bhagawati the leech) and another Bhramin from Cooch Behar smuggled opium successfully. Though Indranath helped for the Bhramins arrest, he had a desire to marry Bhagawati's daughter, Elimon out of sympathy. Later he tried for Bhawati's release also. Indranath's innate humanity and his passionate sympathy are highlighted here.

Indranath's present worry was about his beloved sister Giribala whose husband died recently. Giribala was in her teens and hardly spent a few months with her husband. It was said that Giribala's marriage was arranged in haste, for the girl had attained her puberty well ahead her marriage. Usually such girls were avoided in marriage proposals. Giribala's husband did not go for any work and roamed with Jatra party. Giribala's mother -in-law also ill-treated her. Finally her unborn child died in the womb. The tradition bound society started to spread scandals about Giribala. She was sent back to her mother's home. Indranath had seen the intense suffering and object misery of some of these tragic women, made widows at too young an age by callous fate who took root and died imprisoned within four walls.

Indranath introduced Mark, an English man who had planned to write the history about Sattrra by referring the holy scriptures. Indranath asked Giribala to read the manuscripts for Mark to accomplish his holy mission. Indranath knew very well that the pitiless idealism, the loveless marital life, old bondage and oppression will make his sister a living corpse. He had an intention of educating his sister further but it was forbidden for widows. As he found it impossible, he connected Giribala with the holy mission of Mark. Through his modern ideals Indranath felt he could revive at least a streak of happiness in Giribala's life. So he made such an arrangement. He did not bother about the relentless feudal patriarchal norms.

Indranath's mind was roused by pity and indignation at the distress of his paternal aunt Durga. Indranath was shocked when he saw the emaciated figure and sunken features of his dear aunt after her husband's death. The young chap also understood the merciless treatment imposed on Durga by her mother-in-law at Chikarhati. Indranath exclaimed sadly as, "Is it you, aunty? You look like a skeleton! What's wrong with you?...No, no! I must know what has happened. Come with me to Amaranga." (TMEHTT, P 12) Durga's torments made her to accept the suggestion of Indranath and she left for her parental home.

Durga's in-laws never minded about her departure and they were too happy to see her go back to her father's house. Durga's father –in –law promised to take her back after the *jatra* festival. But so many *jatra* festivals had gone and no one had turned up. She was deprived of her share of property also. Durga was never invited for any auspicious occasions in her family or elsewhere. Gradually Durga accepted all accusations and became a pessimist. Though Indranath points out his aunt's mistake of leaving her husband's house, he never hated her. They maintained a silent and mutual affection between them. Once Durga became adamant in favor of her pilgrimage towards Puri, she shifted her belongings to Saru Gossainee's house nearby. But still Indranath maintained the warmth of his affection.

When Durga tried her option at the second time she planned to sell her jewels. But her jewels were stolen. She suspected Mahidhar Babu, a widower Brahmin who supported Saru Gossainee. Though the culprit was found out, Durga's health was deteriorating. Indranath took pity on her in spite of her curse and tried to admit her in Guahati hospital but she did not listen. At last Durga left for Chikarhati only to die. Indranath followed her aunt's cart in his cycle. Durga's last wish melted Indranath. Durga said,

Go back Indranath, go back! My blessings will always be with you! You'll be able to reclaim that Marabhita land. I feel certain! It will not remain a festering sore any longer. You will bring the old prestige of the family. Remember! If I die you must come and perform my last rites. ...Go, go! (TMEHTT, P 258-259)

Indranath's grief knew bound. The cart faded away at the distant horizon. An arrow of pain shot through him. Mark Sahib took pity on Indranath and convinced him by saying, "Get up Indranath. Fate is inexorable. We can only fight against it. Those who cannot rise above the level of emotion ultimately get washed away in the ocean of sorrow!" (TMEHTT, P.259)

Saru Gossainee was the widow of Gossain Mahaprabhu's brother. She lost her husband in a fire accident during the annual festivals of *Sattrra*. Saru Gossainee managed her lands through the tactful handling of her disciples. Gradually Saru Gossainee's name was drawn to public light. But Indranath had great respect for her. He even induced his mother and his aunt to meet their disciples instead of passing negative comments over the helpless widow. Saru Gossainee was in her thirties and the most beautiful of the three widows. When Durga's ornaments were stolen, she showered poison like terrible curse over the Gossain family. Indranath

convinced Durga and pointed out her mistake of keeping her valuable belongings in unprotected manner. Indranath understood the helpless situation of Saru Gossainee and never blamed her.

Saru Gossainee got the help of a widower Brahmin named Mahidhar, who promised to look after her official works. The late Gossain, Rama Kanta Goswami was deprived of his share of land. He advised his wife Saru Gossainee in his death bed, not to run to his elder brother's house in case of help and make herself small in their eyes. He also advised his wife to keep her dignity. When Durga dragged out Saru Gossainee's name to public shame, the innocent widow felt so much. Her reminiscence about her husband, Rama Kanta Dev Goswami made her eyes wet. Her illusion about Mahidhar crumbled. Indranath who understood everything never uttered a word against the poor soul. Thus he saved the honour of his family and proved his decorum.

Indranath's family elephant Jagannath became rogue and got frenzied. The elephant destroyed the fields and was roaming aimlessly. In an unexpected moment Indranath faced it at a distance of ten yards. Indranath seemed to hear frantic shouts, "run! Go on! Fast! Run, run." (TMEHTT, P.113) But the elephant never harmed Indranath and disappeared in the sal forest. Perhaps the elephant would have remembered Indranath's happy childhood days spent along with him. Indranath realized the magnanimity of the elephant. At last the elephant killed Jamaluddin, the elephant trainer. Indranath decided to give a decent burial to Jamaluddin. A Brahmin cautioned Indranath as "Saru Gossain, keep yourself seven hands away from the body! Otherwise you'll have to go through *chandrayan prayaschita!*" (TMEHTT, P.204) Indranath exploded in anger and he himself came forward to lift Jamaluddin. It shows that Indranath was rational and elevated himself from traditional and religious sentiments.

Giribala's intimacy with Mark Sahib brooded many rumors. When Mark himself conveyed Giribala's behavior, Indranath convinced Mark and advised him to shy away such sentiments. But Giribala was brought to public shame in an unusual circumstance and burnt herself in the atonement fire. It is an unexpected failure to his virtue. If Indranath had curtailed Giribala's lustful behavior at least after Mark's information, he could have saved her life. Indranath's appearance also witnessed his grief and failure. Devdutt, an old friend of Indranath warned him about the Land Ceiling Act of Indian Government. If Indranath had taken proper remedies, he would have saved his land and himself. When Devdutt passed some vulgar comments about Elimon, the Brahmin girl whom Indranath planned to marry, he pushed aside all suggestions of Devdutt.

Indranath planned to visit Marabhitha land to settle the dispute and ensure their possession, according to his father's instruction. But actually he was disinterested. Bolo, a sincere disciple and friend suggested him to visit the troublesome land sitting in the howdah of the elephant to express his authority, instead of taking his bicycle. Indranath said he had no desire for lands. A tuskless elephant was taken for the journey. Indranath's heart was filled with nebulous pain. Indranath climbed on a tree and announced that he would like to give the peasants *kecha patta* of the land. But in an unexpected moment Indranath was killed by the peasants as they were misguided by a greedy communist leader who was also the illegitimate son of the old Gossain.

. Indranath made a fatal mistake by collecting only a few disciples with him unlike his elders who would be followed by good number of disciples. The huge ceremonious procession would have diluted the diabolic plan of the vicious communist leader. Though Indranath had excellent plans for the upliftment of his people he could not execute it due to threadbare customary hierarchy and reach the heart of the peasants. Indranath's character though seems to be touching; it became a failure in practical life.

REFERENCE SOURCES

1. Goswami Indira, *The Moth-eaten Howdah of The Tusker*, New Delhi, Rupa & Co, 2004.
2. Gowami, Indira, Gowami, Indira, tn. Gayatri Bhattacharya, *The Blue-necked God*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013
3. Gowami, Indira, tn. Prashant Goswami *The Man From Chinnamasta*, New Delhi: Katha, 2012
4. Gowami, Indira, tn. P. Kotoky, *An unfinished Autobiography*, New Delhi: A Sterling Paperback, 2002.
5. Goswami, Indira. *Pages Stained With Blood* translated by Pradip Acharya. New Delhi: Katha Publishers 2002
6. Das, Veena. "Indian Women. Work, Power And Status." New Delhi; Prestige Publishers 1976.
7. Satyanath. T.S. "Reading through the Pages Stained with Blood" *Indian Literature* (July, Aug 2012): 68-69 .
8. Burjror Satarawala, Kaikous. "Her fictional world "The search for the sea. Delhi; B.R Publishing Corporation. 2002
9. Gogi, Hari dayananda. "Dr. Indira Goswami In Search Of Modernity." Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation 2002.
10. Bala, Suman. "Indira Goswami's The Saga Of Kamrup; A Study. Indian Women Novelist; Set III; VOL 6. R .K. Dhawan (Ed) New Delhi; Prestige Books, 1995.
11. Baruah, Manjeet. *Indira Goswami, A Compilation on her Life, Works Achievements*. Delhi; B.R Publishing Corporation. 2007.
12. Kotoky, Prafulla. "Selected Works Of Indira Goswami, New World Literature Series; 12" Delhi B.R Publishing Corporation. 1998.
13. Subbamma, Malladi, "Women, Tradition and Culture" New Delhi; Sterling Publisher Private Ltd., 1st May 1985.
14. Edward, Philip "Pilgrimage And Literary Tradition."; Cambridge University Press 3rd December.. 2009
15. Grewal, J.S, "Love and Gender In the Rig-Veda and Medieval Punjabi Literature"
16. Goswami, Indira. "An unfinished Autobiography", Translated by P. Kotoky. New Delhi: Sterling Publisher (P) Ltd., 2002.

SOURCES FROM INTERNET

1. <http://www.amazoncastle.com/feminism>
2. www.politicalsciencenotes.com/articals/feminism in politics-definition- development-types Didion, Joan "without Regret or Hope". New York Review of Books, web. 12 June 2009 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7366>
3. web 04. June 2008. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/travel-literature>>