

**WIDOWHOOD: A SOCIAL HARASSMENT REFLECTED IN INDIRA  
GOSWAMI'S DATAL HATIR UYE KHUA HOWDA**

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**Abstract**

Widowhood has become a grave issue in Indian society. It represents a crisis in a woman's life. It is a shattering experience and only one who suffers, realises exactly the inner turmoil that she is going through her life. Indira goswami, a versatile genius, the most eminent writer from North-East India, winner of the Jnanpith and the Sahitya Academy award, explores this social malady in her novel *Datal Hatir uye Khua Howda*(1988) which is translated in English in 2004 as *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. It projects three widow characters who are victimised in the orthodox Assamese Brahmin society. They represent not only the widowed but also the women in general who are suffered by the tyrannize patriarchal norms and practices.

**Key Words:** Widowhood, Oppressive, Patriarchal norms , rituals and customs, injustice etc.

Widow, a very old word which can be traced beyond the Vedic language to Indo-European origin .It means a woman whose husband is dead and who has not married again.Widowhood represents a crisis in a woman's life who is socially boycotted and victimized in indian society. It is a crime against woman which is a harsh fact of life.

In India, widows are found to be harassed and tortured socially, economically and personally .It represents a crisis in women's life. They are socially boycotted and victimised psychologically .It is a shattering experience and only one who suffers, realises exactly the inner turmoil that she is going through her life. She leads to loss of her position in family and kin groups, reduces her participation in religious activities, changes her food consumption pattern, and life style etc. So lack of emotional, financial and social support, they always feel insecure.

Human rights are intrinsic to all human beings irrespective of nationality, place, sex, colour, language, caste, class, religion or any other aspects. But, unfortunately, the violation of women's rights has become a social epidemic. The issue of Widowhood has become a matter of grave concern from time immemorial to the present age. Girls, from a very early stage, are taught that they are inferior to the boys and should live under some restriction and limitations. All most all the countries of the world, irrespective of their advanced or backward socio-economic conditions have not been free from this malpractice. Every year thousands of women

are tortured and killed in different circumstances and millions of women throughout the country live in a condition of abject deprivation. The Govt. of India has taken many steps to improve women position in India. Many amendments are provided to secure the position and status of women like the Domestic Violence Act, the Indecent Representation of Women Act, Sexual Harassment of women at the Work place (Prevention) Act etc. But no fruitful result is seen throughout the country. Today, the ground reality is that women are suffering from severe discrimination as manifested in India's Sex Ratio—940/1000 (2011 Census). Gender inequality really becomes the vital issue of violation of women's rights in India today. We live in a time when crime against women—as claimed over 2.25 lakh in 2011, according to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB)—creates an alarming in the present scenario of India.

Most important factor in women's subordination is seen because of patriarchal society, where men are superior and women are thought as inferior. All the traditional literature, social rules and regulations of Worldwide from ancient times to now, generally have been framed from male perspective. This leads to the neglect of women's rights and problems. Freedom is attributed to boys but severe restrictions are attributed to girls, curb all opportunities for growth and fear instilled to them not to "cross boundaries".

Indira Goswami, a versatile genius, winner of the Jyanpith award and the Sahitya Academy award, is one of the most eminent writers from North East India, explores the social maladies which grasped the whole Indian society. Born in an orthodox family, as a woman, she has experienced the restriction and constrictions of the Assamese conservative society. Her widowhood, only two years of her marriage and her subsequent sufferings, intensifies her sensitivity towards the victims who are socially and individually oppressed by the male-dominated society. As a feminist, she raises questions on several issues of discriminations faced by the women in India like childhood of a girl, marriage life and widowhood. In her autobiography, *Adhalekha Dastavej* (1998) she recalls how she accepted a life in Vrindavan and spent two years amidst the widows in Vrindavan. She stayed there as a compassionate member as well as a researcher who witnessed the pain of these helpless women and it reflects at many contexts of her works. Her experiences as a widow belonging to the Assamese orthodox family is reflected in her works like *Nilakanthi Braja* (1976) and *Datal Hatir Uye Khua Howda* (1988)

The present paper is based on Indira Goswami's *Datal Hatir uye Khua Howda* which is translated in English in 2004. The novel is based on different social issues of mid-twentieth century and is set in post-Independent period of south Kamrup, Assam. It projects three widow characters who are victimised in the orthodox Brahmin society. They represent not only the widowed but also the women in general who are suffered by the tyrannize patriarchal norms and practices. Married women are totally under the control of their husbands who may be negligent, irresponsible or promiscuous. The three major characters –Durga, Saru Gossaine and Giribala have played vital roles in this novel who are unfortunately become widowed and have to suffer a lot in their remaining life. They have no independent identity and no living spaces. They are deprived by callous feudal patriarchs. The author presents their struggle, sufferings, repressed desire and longings. As widows, they have to observe all the restrictions on food, clothes and social intercourse which makes their lives a virtual imprisonment. Invariably they face torture and harassment from their in laws who want to get rid of them and take possession of their property. The representation of the pathetic condition of these widowed in her autobiography, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, she narrates the tragic story of her aunt who has become widow in

her early age .This experience of her aunty's life is reflected in this novel through the portrayal of the widow characters who may be compared with just like an item or commodity.

Being a woman, Goswami has a minute and thorough knowledge of feminine sensibility and exploitation, hurts, anguishes and suppression which they face in a patriarchal society. The story of the novel revolves around three widows of the Gosain family viz. Durga, Saru Gossaine and Giribala. Durga is the eldest of the three. Her character is reflected under the shadow of darkness and death. She surrenders to the traditional norms and regulations mutely and uncomplainingly. She is the representative of many such women who do not know the language of rebellion. They know only to tolerate till their last breath. After her husband's death, she is treated brutally by her in-laws and also by her maternal society. She is not allowed to participate in different rituals and functions, even not permitted to take cooked foods, sleep in bamboo beds, not allowed to walk bare foot and many more. She firmly believes that one day her in- laws will come and take her to to her husband's home with dignity and respect though she is deprived of her properties. She even has no interest to fight legally for her property, as she thinks that going to court and standing with the thieves and criminals would make her impure. Abiding and performing the different rituals and customs made for widow by the society, she is infected with the severe tuberculosis .She becomes a voiceless character who has no courage to regain her own identity. She also represents the image of a traditional Assamese Brahmin widow who gradually turns to a neurotic and unconsciously perverse.

The other widow, Saru Gossaine a young woman has faced the same type of sufferings in her life time just like Durga. She has attraction for a man called Muhidhar, who is her helper. She has fantasizing dreams about him and has felt both spiritual and physical gratification towards him. As infected by the social norms, she often feels that her growing feelings towards Muhidhar is a sin. So she represses her sexual longing and desire. She blindly believes him. In return, the greedy Muhidhar cheats her financially and tries to sell her land on a forged letter of authority. After witnessing the treachery of this selfish man, her dreams of love and faith are shattered and ruined. It is very significant to note that under the grip of societal rule, she could not fight against injustice. Presenting this kind of sexual and gender repression against social norms, Goswami tries to show that the gender and sexual identity are designed by the patriarchal society.

Giribala is the youngest widow is totally different from Durga and Saru Gossaine. She raises her voice against the restrictions imposed by the society. She revolts against these restrictions and wants to be independent , as a result she faces lots of crisis. In sharp contrast to Durga who is eagerly waiting to go back to her in laws, Giribala gets scared at the news that her in-laws have sent people to take her back to her husband's house.She wants to remove all the memories of her dead husband who has an extra marital affair. She wants freedom from a life bounded with strict rules which is just like a prison. When Giribala returns to her father's home, after her husband's death, womenfolk living in the neighbourhood come to see her, but there is no sympathy in their words. They warn each other "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now"

Such warning shows how women themselves work to perpetuate the rules and regulations determined by male members of the society. Durga, with traditional mind set, wants new generation woman Giribala also to follow the societal rules and regulations that a widow should live with. Just like Durga, in our society, there are many illiterate women who want to follow the

strict rules of society without any grudge. Even though these painful laws hurt them, they accept these laws as universal truth and cannot even think of changing them.

At first, Giribala seems to accept the traditional principles of the Assamese society. But later she protests against the cruelty of this orthodox society. In her mother's house as well as in her in-laws she has experienced the problem of assimilation with the religious orthodoxy. In both the houses, she finds it difficult to live as a human being after abiding social customs that suppress her human instincts. For example, once there is a feast in her mother's house and Giribala is locked in an isolated room. As being a widow she cannot touch meat, but, being lured by the smell of the mutton curry Giribala cannot not resist herself and has started eating that. But she is caught in her act of transgression and is beaten up brutally. Such treatment meted out to her makes her wish to die. Once, when she is with Mark Shahib, the mad elephant appears in front of them. Scared Giribala hides in Mark Shahib's arm. At that moment, tired of her life she wishes to die in Mark Shahib, an outcaste's, arm.

Giribala is brought back to the Sattrra safely, but the in-laws of Giribala scandalises by her growing intimacy with Mark Sahib. They arrange for her return to her late husband's home, but Giribala does not like the idea. And so, at midnight, defying a terrible downpour, she reaches Mark Shaib's house, seeking his protection from the men who would take her to her in-laws. She requests him to take her away from the society which is oppressing her. Mark is pleased by her courage and vulnerability but he is unable to take any decision which would jeopardise his life as a scholar and a missionary. When Giribala is discovered with Mark, it causes uproar and a ritual expiation is prescribed for the sin of getting involved with an outcast. A straw hut is built in the open field. Amidst chanting of purificatory mantra, they set fire to the shed with the instruction to Giribala that she should come out of it when the fire will engulf it. But even after the fire engulfs the shed, Giribala does not come out. In this way, by immolating herself, she prefers death instead of a life of bondage and humiliation. Her suicide is her final act of defiance against a system which grants no freedom to a widow. Smell of burning human body spreads over the banks of Jogoliya. This smell is not only the smell of burning Giribala's flesh but the smell of burning women's dreams and aspirations.

To sum up the paper, it can be said that Goswami raises a strong protest against the orthodox and conservative tradition of the Hindu society. She has extended her sympathy to widows who are discriminated and exploited in our society. Though Giribala voices against the social customs, but in this process, she has lost her life. Her sacrifice symbolises a protest of the entire women community against the set norms of the conservative society. There are still such women who favour the societal rules of patriarchal society and try to pass on its rules and regulations to the generations to come. Indira Goswami is well aware of this narrow mindset of women and therefore has brought forth this issue in many of her novels. With some of her brilliant character portrayals she wants us to rethink about the age- old orthodox norms exercised under the banner of religion and such other elements. In this novel, she seems to ask how can a woman break the shackles of patriarchy and achieve her self-fulfilment in a world full of numerous restrictions imposed by religion, custom and fear of assault.

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