



Breaking The Chains: A Radical Feminist Reading Of Indira Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howdah Of A Tusker

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Abstract: Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is a powerful critique of the patriarchal and religious structures that systematically oppress women, particularly widows, in Vaishnavite society. This article applies a **radical feminist lens** to examine how the novel exposes **institutionalized gender oppression, the policing of female sexuality, and systemic violence against women**. Drawing on the works of **Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Mary Daly, and Kate Millett**, this study explores the themes of **patriarchy, religious oppression, bodily control, and female resistance** in Goswami's novel.

Through detailed analysis, the article highlights how the widows in the novel stripped of autonomy and desire experience **physical, emotional, and psychological subjugation** under a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. Yet, within this suffering, acts of **rebellion and defiance emerge**, challenging the notion that women are merely passive victims. The study differentiates between **silent rebellion and open defiance**, questioning whether these acts can truly dismantle oppressive structures or whether they reinforce the **cyclical nature of female subjugation**.

By positioning Goswami's work within **radical feminist discourse**, this article argues that *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is not just a historical reflection but a text that remains **deeply relevant to contemporary feminist struggles**. The novel's unsettling portrayal of widowhood forces readers to confront **the intersection of gender, religion, and institutionalized misogyny**, making it an essential text for understanding **the ongoing fight for women's liberation**.

Index Terms - Radical feminism, patriarchal oppression, widowhood, gendered violence, religious patriarchy, feminist resistance, Women's Subjugation in Religious Institutions, Patriarchy in Literature, Silent Rebellion vs. Open Defiance, Gender and Power, Intersection of Religion and Feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami as a Feminist Writer

Indira Goswami, also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is one of the most influential voices in modern Assamese literature. Her works focus on themes of gender oppression, widowhood, religious orthodoxy, and caste-based discrimination, making her an essential figure in feminist literary discourse. Unlike mainstream feminist narratives that often emphasize reform within existing structures, Goswami's writings expose the deep-seated violence and institutionalized subjugation of women, aligning with radical

feminist critiques of patriarchy. Goswami's personal experiences significantly shaped her literary voice. As a widow herself, she intimately understood the oppressive customs imposed on women in traditional Indian society. Her works particularly *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* reflect her own struggles and serve as a **powerful indictment of the patriarchal institutions that deny women agency**. Through her portrayal of marginalized women, she highlights the **systematic erasure of female voices**, a key concern of radical feminism.

Radical feminism is a branch of feminist theory that identifies patriarchy as the **root cause of women's oppression** and argues that gender inequality is not just a social construct but an embedded structural reality. Unlike liberal feminism, which seeks equality through legal reforms, radical feminism demands a **complete dismantling of patriarchal institutions**, including religion, marriage, and family structures, which uphold male dominance. Goswami's novels, particularly *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, reflect many radical feminist concerns. The novel exposes how the **Sattr**a (Assamese Vaishnavite monastic institution) becomes a mechanism for controlling women's lives, particularly widows. Radical feminism critiques religious orthodoxy for reinforcing gender hierarchies and sexual repression. The novel highlights how widows are expected to suppress their desires and live under extreme moral and social restrictions. Radical feminists, such as **Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon**, have long argued that **female sexuality is policed by male-dominated institutions** to maintain power dynamics. The widows in the novel experience **psychological, emotional, and even physical violence**, reinforcing the radical feminist argument that **patriarchy uses violence as a tool of domination**. By critiquing these oppressive systems, Goswami's work aligns with **radical feminist thought**, making it a crucial text for analysing gender and power dynamics in Indian society.

Among Goswami's many works, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* stands out as an **unflinching critique of widowhood and institutionalized patriarchy**. The novel is set in Assam and follows the lives of Brahmin widows confined to the rigid rules of a Sattr. Through their suffering, silent resistance, and gradual breakdown of societal norms, the novel reveals how **patriarchy operates not just through men but through institutions, traditions, and even other women** who uphold these oppressive structures. The novel portrays how **widows are denied personal agency** under the guise of religious purity. Radical feminism argues that **religion is a tool of patriarchy**, keeping women subservient. Women in the novel are **denied any expression of desire**, reinforcing **male control over female bodies**. This theme resonates with radical feminist critiques of **sexual repression and gender-based power**. **It Depicts Violence as an Enforcer of Patriarchy.**

The novel portrays **emotional and psychological violence** inflicted on women, demonstrating how patriarchy uses violence to maintain control. Radical feminists argue that **gender-based violence is systemic, not just individual acts of cruelty**. **It Challenges Reformist Feminist Perspectives.** The novel does not offer a simple "solution" to oppression, reflecting radical feminism's belief that **minor reforms cannot dismantle patriarchy**. Instead, it suggests that true liberation requires **fundamental structural change**. In light of these themes, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* provides a **powerful case study for radical feminist discourse**, offering deep insight into **how patriarchy operates through religious orthodoxy, societal norms, and institutionalized violence**. Goswami's novel goes beyond traditional feminist narratives by **challenging the very foundations of gender oppression**, making it an essential text for radical feminist analysis.

Patriarchy and Religious Oppression

One of the most striking aspects of **Indira Goswami's** *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is its powerful critique of how **patriarchy and religious orthodoxy work together to subjugate women**, particularly widows in Assam's Vaishnavite society. The novel exposes how religious institutions, like the **Sattr**a, reinforce gender hierarchies, denying women their autonomy and reducing them to symbols of purity and sacrifice. Radical feminism, which sees **patriarchy as an institutionalized system of oppression**, provides a strong theoretical framework to analyse these themes. In the novel, Brahmin widows are **subjected to extreme restrictions** in the name of religious purity. In **Vaishnavite society**, widows are expected to **renounce their sexuality** by shaving their heads and wearing white garments. They are expected to **abstain from eating certain foods**, particularly those associated with pleasure (e.g., meat, fish, and rich foods). They are also expected to **Withdraw from social life**, living in isolation or in institutions like the **Sattr**a, where they are **denied any personal or financial independence**. These restrictions are **not just cultural traditions**

but mechanisms of patriarchal control, ensuring that women remain dependent on male-dominated institutions for survival. The novel illustrates how widowhood transforms women into **invisible figures**, stripped of their individuality and forced into a life of austerity, regardless of their desires or needs.

The **Sattr**, a religious monastery in Assam's Vaishnavite tradition, plays a crucial role in enforcing **gendered oppression** in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. Originally designed as centers of devotion, Sattras became **spaces where Brahmin widows were confined under the guise of religious protection**. **The Sattr Enforces Patriarchy**. Widows in the Sattr are **not allowed to own property or make independent financial decisions**. They must rely on male figures, reinforcing **male economic control** over women. They are **segregated from mainstream society**, preventing them from forming alliances or seeking alternative lives. The widows are expected to **remain celibate for life**, a rule imposed to maintain the **"purity" of the Brahmin lineage**. The novel shows how religious doctrines are used to convince women that their suffering is **divinely ordained** a **classic tool of patriarchal oppression**. The **Sattr serves as a microcosm of a patriarchal society**, where religious leaders (who are always male) dictate every aspect of women's lives. Goswami uses this setting to highlight the **systemic nature of gendered oppression**, aligning with radical feminist critiques of religious institutions.

Radical feminism argues that **patriarchy is not just a collection of individual sexist acts but a system embedded within institutions** including religion, law, and social customs. The treatment of widows in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* aligns with key radical feminist theories. **Andrea Dworkin**, a radical feminist scholar, argued that **organized religion has historically been a means of controlling women's bodies and sexuality**. In her book *Right-Wing Women*, she critiques how religious traditions **deny women autonomy**, forcing them into submissive roles. Religion **frames female sexuality as sinful**, enforcing strict moral codes that favour male dominance. Goswami's depiction of the **widows' forced celibacy, economic dependence, and social isolation** reflects **Dworkin's argument that religious institutions perpetuate male control over women's lives**. **Mary Daly**, another radical feminist thinker, wrote extensively about how **patriarchal religions erase female identity**. In *Beyond God the Father*, she argues that **religious institutions define women in relation to men**, either as daughters, wives, or widows, never as independent beings. **Sacred texts and traditions are used to justify women's suffering**, convincing them that their oppression is "natural" or "divinely ordained." This is evident in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, where widows are **indoctrinated into believing that their suffering is righteous** and that their "dharma" (duty) is to accept their fate without resistance. The **religious leaders in the Sattr act as gatekeepers of this oppression**, using doctrine to ensure women's submission.

One of the most tragic aspects of Goswami's novel is how **women themselves become enforcers of patriarchal oppression**. Many widows accept their suffering as a **divine mandate**, preventing them from questioning their condition. Radical feminists argue that **patriarchy survives because it conditions women to uphold its values**. This is seen in the novel through **older widows policing younger ones**, reinforcing strict rules of purity. **Religious indoctrination**, where women are taught that submission is virtuous. **Shame and social exclusion**, used as tools to punish those who defy norms. This internalized oppression aligns with **Simone de Beauvoir's** idea of the **"Second Sex"**, where women are taught to see themselves as "the Other" in a male-dominated world. Indira Goswami's novel provides a powerful critique of **how patriarchy and religion work together to control women**, especially widows. By exposing the **role of the Sattr as a monastic prison**, Goswami aligns with radical feminist arguments that **religious institutions are not just places of faith but tools for maintaining male supremacy**. The novel challenges the **illusion that women's oppression is natural or justified**, making it a significant text for radical feminist analysis. Through its depiction of **systemic violence, economic disempowerment, and sexual control**, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* serves as an **uncompromising indictment of institutionalized patriarchy**, echoing the arguments of radical feminists like **Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly**.

The Female Body as a Site of Control

One of the most striking radical feminist themes in **Indira Goswami's** *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is the way **the female body is controlled, denied autonomy, and treated as a symbol of purity and sacrifice**. In the patriarchal Vaishnavite society depicted in the novel, widows are expected to **erase all expressions of desire, sexuality, and personal agency**, reinforcing male dominance. This aligns with **radical feminist critiques** by theorists like **Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Kate Millett**, who argue

that **patriarchy maintains its power by controlling female sexuality and punishing women who defy its rules.**

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Brahmin widows are subjected to extreme restrictions that **erase their sexuality and enforce bodily control.** They must shave their heads, symbolizing their desexualisation and loss of identity. They are forced to wear white garments, stripping them of any personal expression. They are denied rich food, especially aphrodisiacs like fish and meat, which are linked to pleasure. They are expected to remain celibate, even if they are still young and have desires. This reflects radical feminism's argument that patriarchy uses sexual control as a tool of subjugation. According to Andrea Dworkin, women's bodies are either commodified (as in marriage or prostitution) or erased (as in widowhood) but they are never truly free.

One of the most symbolic moments in the novel is when **Durga, a young widow, resists having her head shaved.** The act of shaving a widow's head is meant to signify her removal from the sexual world, marking her as someone who can no longer be desired or desired by others. In a moment of silent rebellion, Durga hesitates before letting the barber touch her hair. The older widows scold her:

"Why are you hesitating? Do you still dream of worldly pleasures?"

Durga clenches her fists but ultimately submits, as the **razor scrapes away the last vestiges of her autonomy.** This moment echoes Catharine MacKinnon's argument that **female sexuality under patriarchy is never free either it is policed, punished, or controlled by male-dominated institutions.**

Despite these restrictions, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* subtly portrays **women's forbidden desires and quiet acts of defiance,** showing that even in extreme oppression, female agency persists. In one of the scenes Durga, despite being forced into celibacy, **feels desire for a man she once loved.** In a powerful moment of internal conflict, she **touches her own face in the darkness,** imagining how it would feel if someone caressed her again.

She whispers:

"Is it a sin to feel warmth? To want to be touched?"

But she quickly suppresses these thoughts, terrified that even her desires will be punished. This moment echoes Kate Millett's theory that **women's sexuality under patriarchy is regulated through fear and shame,** ensuring that even their thoughts remain controlled. In another striking moment, an elderly widow secretly eats a piece of fish is a forbidden act for widows. As she savors the taste, she feels both pleasure and guilt, realizing that even **food is something as basic as nourishment is policed to control women's desires.**

Her whisper to herself:

"Let me taste life, just once more"

is a **small but radical act of rebellion.** This aligns with radical feminist critiques that women's **pleasure, autonomy, and choices are systematically denied,** making even a simple act of eating **an assertion of selfhood.**

Radical feminists argue that **patriarchy constructs female sexuality as either controlled or punished.** In the novel, this is evident in different ways. The widows in the novel are expected to live **asexual, ascetic lives,** reinforcing the radical feminist argument that **women are valued only when they conform to male-imposed standards of purity.** Mary Daly argues that religious institutions create a "Madonna/Whore" dichotomy, where women must either be **sexless (saints/widows) or sinful (desiring women).** The novel shows that men and even other women fear a widow's sexuality. If a widow expresses desire, she is **seen as a threat to social order.** This aligns with Andrea Dworkin's argument that **patriarchy suppresses female desire because it disrupts male control.** When a widow is suspected of having a relationship, she is **ostracized, humiliated, and labelled immoral.** Radical feminists argue that **female sexuality is policed through violence, social exclusion, and religious doctrine,** ensuring women remain subordinate.

SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUBJUGATION

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah* of a Tusker, **violence against widows is not just physical but deeply psychological and systemic**. Indira Goswami vividly portrays how **religious institutions, family structures, and social customs** enforce male dominance through **physical punishment, emotional cruelty, and psychological manipulation**. This aligns with **radical feminist critiques** from Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Mary Daly, who argue that **violence against women is not random but an institutionalized tool of patriarchy**. According to MacKinnon, “Violence against women is not an accident, but a means of control.” Widows in the novel endure various forms of systemic violence. The widows face **harsh physical punishments** if they defy social expectations. **They are beaten, starved, and physically restrained** to ensure they conform.

When a widow is **caught speaking to a man**, she is dragged into the widow’s quarters and beaten by the older women.

**An elderly widow slaps her, saying:
“You have stained your soul! You will burn for this.”**

**Other grabs her by the arm, shaking her violently:
“How dare you disgrace us? A widow must not look at a man!”**

She collapses, **tears streaming down her face, but she does not scream** because **she knows there is no one to hear her cries**. This brutal enforcement of **chastity through physical abuse** echoes MacKinnon’s argument that **women’s bodies are policed through direct violence** when they do not comply with **patriarchal rules**.

Even more devastating than physical violence is **the emotional and psychological subjugation**. The widows are constantly **reminded that they are worthless**, leading to internalized oppression. Durga, the young widow, expresses a moment of **despair and self-hatred**:

**Durga (whispers to herself):
“What have I done to deserve this? I am alive, but they treat me as if I am dead.”**

**Older widow (coldly replies):
“Because you are dead. A widow is nothing but a shadow.”**

This **erasure of self-worth** aligns with **radical feminist critiques** from Andrea Dworkin, who argues that **women are trained to hate themselves under patriarchy**. The **constant psychological degradation** ensures that **women remain compliant**.

The **Sattrā (monastic institution)** functions as an **oppressive force**, reinforcing the idea that a **woman’s suffering is sacred**. During a sermon, the Sattrā’s guru preaches to the widows:

Guru: “A true woman accepts her fate. A widow’s purity brings her closer to the divine.”

A widow (mutters to herself): “Then why does God remain silent when we suffer?”

This scene reflects **Mary Daly’s argument** that **religion is often used to justify women’s suffering**, framing it as “holy” while ensuring they remain powerless. MacKinnon argues that **violence is the foundation of male dominance**. The beatings, starvation, and forced isolation of widows in the novel reflect **how patriarchal societies use violence to suppress female autonomy**. Dworkin argues that **violence against women is not just about individual acts, but an entire system that teaches women to fear and obey men**. In the novel, widows **do not even resist their mistreatment**, showing how deeply ingrained this fear has become. Daly critiques religious structures for enforcing **“spiritual violence”** by convincing women that **their suffering is noble**. The Sattrā in the novel functions exactly this way, **turning female pain into a divine duty**. The **violence in the novel is not random. it is systemic**. Widows are **physically punished, emotionally broken, and spiritually controlled** to ensure that they remain **submissive to a male-dominated**

order. Indira Goswami exposes this **cycle of oppression**, making the novel a **radical feminist indictment of patriarchal control through violence**.

RESISTANCE AND FEMINIST DEFIANCE

Despite the **crushing weight of patriarchal oppression** in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Indira Goswami offers moments of **resistance and defiance**, showing that women, even in the harshest conditions, **find ways to challenge their oppression**. Radical feminists argue that **women's resistance takes multiple forms**. They are **Silent rebellion** (covert defiance through small acts of agency) and **Open defiance** (direct, confrontational challenges to patriarchal power). Goswami presents **both types of resistance** in her female characters. Though most widows in the novel appear **submissive**, some engage in **small, rebellious acts that challenge the system subtly**. **One night, Durga, the young widow, secretly keeps a small mirror under her pillow** a simple act, but one that signifies her **refusal to erase her identity**.

As she stares into the mirror, she whispers:

“They have taken my name, my hair, my desires. But they will not take my face.”

This seemingly minor act reflects **Judith Butler's concept of gender performance**, which argues that **women can resist oppression by reclaiming their identities, even in constrained spaces** (Gender Trouble). Some women in the novel **refuse to stay silent and openly rebel against oppression**, even at great personal cost. **Giribala, a widow, falls in love with a man and refuses to suppress her desires**. **When confronted by the elder widows, she does not apologize**.

She shouts:

“I am not a ghost! I am not dead! I am a woman with blood in my veins!”

She is **beaten, exiled, and condemned but she does not surrender**. This echoes **Andrea Dworkin's radical feminist argument** (Right-Wing Women) that **women who challenge patriarchal norms are always punished but their defiance is necessary for revolutionary change**.

While Goswami's female characters **fight back**, radical feminists question whether **small acts of defiance can ever dismantle an entire system of oppression**. **Kate Millett in her Sexual Politics she stresses on the need for collective revolt**. Millett argues that **individual resistance is not enough** women need **collective, political action** to overthrow patriarchy. In the novel, the widows resist in isolation, making their struggles **powerful but ultimately futile**. Dworkin warns that **patriarchy will always retaliate violently against women who resist**. **Giribala's exile proves that even when a woman fights back, the system is designed to crush her rebellion**.

Goswami does not offer a **utopian feminist revolution**, but she also does not depict **complete defeat**. Instead, she **exposes the slow, painful struggle of women who resist oppression in a deeply entrenched patriarchal system**. The widows remain trapped, with only **small acts of resistance** keeping them from complete erasure. Each generation of widows **inherits the same suffering**, but their defiance shows that **patriarchy is never absolute it is always being challenged**. Goswami's novel suggests that **even in the darkest oppression, women resist**. While their victories may seem small, they **lay the groundwork for future rebellions** echoing **Judith Butler's idea that patriarchy is constantly being destabilized by women's acts of defiance**.

CONCLUSION

Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is not just a novel about widowhood it is a **radical feminist critique of systemic patriarchy**, exposing the ways in which **religion, tradition, and family structures conspire to control and oppress women**. Through her deeply evocative storytelling, Goswami brings to life the **physical, emotional, and psychological suffering of widows**, while also highlighting their **acts of defiance both silent and overt**. **The Novel is a Radical Feminist Text**. Throughout the novel, we see how **widows' bodies are treated as property, their desires denied, and their lives reduced to endless suffering**. Goswami exposes **how violence whether physical, emotional, or spiritual is used to maintain patriarchal power**, reinforcing radical feminist arguments from thinkers like

Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Mary Daly. Widows are **stripped of their sexuality and autonomy**. Women are **physically punished, emotionally broken, and spiritually manipulated** to remain submissive. Despite immense oppression, some women **fight back whether through small acts of rebellion or open defiance**. Goswami does not present a **simple story of suffering** she reveals the **hidden power of women**, showing how even in the worst conditions, **women resist in their own ways**.

Indira Goswami is one of the few Indian writers who has **fearlessly explored female oppression within religious institutions**. Unlike mainstream feminist narratives that focus on **urban, elite struggles**, Goswami turns her lens on **marginalized women widows in rigid Vaishnavite society whose suffering is often ignored**. **Goswami's Works Stand Out in Indian Feminist Literature**. Many Indian feminist texts critique family structures, but few openly confront **religion's role in women's oppression** the way Goswami does. **She gives voice to the silenced**. The widows in her novel are rarely the focus of mainstream feminist discourse, making her work **a powerful intervention in feminist literature**. **She portrays rebellion, not just suffering**. Her women are not passive victims; they **push back against oppression in ways both big and small**. By doing this, Goswami aligns herself with **radical feminist discourse**, making *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* a crucial text for understanding **gender, power, and resistance in Indian society**.

The Novel is Relevant to Contemporary Feminist Struggles. Even today, the themes of Goswami's novel remain **deeply relevant**. Across India and the world, women continue to face **institutionalized oppression**, particularly within **religious and patriarchal family structures**. Just as widows in the novel are denied control over their own bodies, **women today still struggle for reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and bodily agency**. From **honour killings to domestic abuse**, the systemic violence Goswami portrays continues in modern forms. Women across cultures still face **religious restrictions** that control their choices whether in **dress codes, marital laws, or restrictions on female clergy roles**. Goswami's novel serves as a **reminder that feminist struggles are ongoing** and that even in the darkest oppression, **women continue to resist**.

Goswami does not offer an easy resolution in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* because **true feminist liberation is not about individual escape but systemic transformation**. The novel's open-ended suffering leaves us with an **urgent question: What must we do to break these cycles of oppression?** **This is not just a historical story it is a present reality**. The fight against **religious patriarchy, gender-based violence, and bodily oppression** is still ongoing. **Resistance, however small, is powerful**. Every act of defiance whether a **widow keeping a mirror under her pillow or a woman today speaking up against injustice chips away at patriarchal control**. **Systemic change requires collective action**. Radical feminism teaches us that **individual rebellion is not enough** we must **challenge and dismantle** the institutions that uphold gender oppression. Goswami's novel, through its **unflinching portrayal of female suffering and resistance**, demands that we not only **recognize the oppression of the past but fight against its modern forms**.

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