

**WOMEN IN GENDERED ENCLOSURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY  
OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *DATAL HATIR UNE KHOWA HOWDAH*  
(*THE MOTH-EATEN HOWDAH OF A TUSKER*) AND EASTERINE  
IRALU'S *A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY***

**Kabita DEKA & Debajyoti BISWAS<sup>1</sup>**

***Abstract***

*The paper discusses Mamani Raisam Goswami's The Moth Eaten Howda of the Tusker (2004) and Easterine Kire Iralu's A Terrible Matriarchy (2011) with reference to the plight of women in North East India. Although the socio-cultural context of the novels varies from each other, the paper argues that the characters depicted in the fictions are connected through the sense of deprivation and oppression that women have to undergo in a patriarchal society. Iralu's A Terrible Matriarchy and Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howda of a Tusker underscore that neither religion nor modernity can offer a solution to the existing structures of domination and discrimination unless the women resist and break these structures from within.*

**Keywords:** Assamese Society, Matriarchy, Angami Naga, Mamani Raisam Goswami, Easterine Kire Iralu.

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Structural discriminations exist in multiple forms in every society. In India too, along with class, caste and racial prejudice, discrimination against women is well-knitted into the very social fabric of the Indian society. For a long time, the voices of women were not allowed to be heard in India's North East because of the region's backwardness. However, from the twentieth century there have been gradual impactful transformations. Educated women have used the might of the pen to fight off the social restrictions levied on their tribe from time to time.

Indira Goswami and Easterine Iralu are two eminent women writers from the North East region of India who have tried to bring social change through their fictional writings. Storyteller, novelist, poet, winner of Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi award, Indira Goswami, who wrote under the pen name of Mamani Raisam Goswami, is an Assamese iconoclast who wrote almost all her works in the Assamese language. While Easterine Kire Iralu, a Naga writer who takes self-exile in Norway, writes in English. Though both of them write in two different languages, in their novels we come across such women characters who can really make an impression on our mind. These female characters are victims of social oppression, injustice and inequalities. The aim of this paper is to draw a comparison between these two writers' representation of women characters in their novels— *Datal Hatir Une*

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<sup>1</sup> Kabita Deka, Assam Civil Service (ACS), Assistant Commissioner, Government of Assam, [kabitadeka80@gmail.com](mailto:kabitadeka80@gmail.com); Debajyoti, Biswas, Associate Professor, Bodoland University, [deb61594@gmail.com](mailto:deb61594@gmail.com).

*Howa Howdah* by Mamani Raisam Goswami and *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Iralu. In this paper I deal with *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*—the translated version of the Assamese novel *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*. We selected these two novels in order to study the similarities between them. Both portray some female characters who struggle against unfair norms, illogical perception, and rigid morals of the society in which they live. Set in the mid twentieth century, both novels depict the lives of women in traditional societies. Mamani Raisam Goswami depicts the picture of the orthodox Assamese Brahmin society at the dawn of independence when there was socioeconomic decadence of the existing feudal system due to the increasing popularity of communism. The plot revolves round the lives of three Brahmin widows in the family of the Satradhikar of Amranga Satra of South Kamrup district of Assam. They are — Durga, Giribala and Saru Gossaini. This novel vividly brings out the repression of women in the orthodox Assamese Brahmin society. It also shows what type of miserable lives they had to lead and the superstition, prejudice and the abuse of power and oppression they had to confront. On the other hand, in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Iralu depicts the picture of the traditional Angami Naga society. Though it can be considered as the story of the young protagonist Dielieno, the plot revolves round the lives of three women —belonging to three different generations—the protagonist Lieno (short for Dielieno), her mother Nino and her grandmother Vibano. In both these novels, the writers attempt to portray the lives of these characters, their hopes, dreams, aspirations and their attitudes towards their lives and society. In both these novels, the lives of these characters are shown to seek path within societal restrictions for the expression of their individuality. However, these characters subsequently become entangled within societal restrictions. In characterization, Goswami's outlook is always modern (Gogoi 2001). She delves deep into the characters to express their individuality. Though she is an expert at portraying both male and female characters, her female characters are more powerful and unforgettable than their male counterparts. The main reason behind this is that most of her female characters are painfully oppressed women who have suffered in their loneliness. In her women characters we can see the prevalent problem, lack, complaint that a woman faces in her real life. Some of her female characters are extraordinary, because they are cruelly oppressed by time and society. Still, they are not weak. They can stand against society, its people and circumstances and whenever necessary they can revolt against them. The consequence of these revolts may not be successful all the time, but they are not defeated miserably either. In order to challenge them, some of the characters even sacrifice their own lives. These characters display psychological and mental strength in their handling of the social issues. Very much like the feminists, these characters question the persistent nature of patriarchal dominance and masculinist hegemony. Indian feminists like Kamla Bhasin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have argued that women education can play a vital role in breaking gender stereotypes and empowering women. Women's engagement with writing about themselves can liberate them because through writing they also reclaim their identity (Mohanty 2011).

The novelists underscore the necessity of this kind of feminism because they believe that such an approach is reasonable and necessary for the emancipation of women in an illiterate society, where there are lot of superstitions and prejudices. In this context, some of the female characters depicted by Goswami can be considered as ideal and pioneering voices in Assamese literature. There is no second author in Assamese literature, who can so vividly portray the lives and sorrows of the widows as Mamani Raisam Goswami could. Like in her other novel—*Nilakanthi Braja* (Goswami 1989), she depicts the miserable picture of lives of widows, particularly Brahmin widows. These widows were regarded as inauspicious and impure. It was believed that whatever they touched would become impure. They had to lead hopeless and frustrated lives. In Indian society, among the caste Hindus the widows are not allowed to take active part in festivals or household ceremonies because they are considered inauspicious (Bhattacharyya & Singh 2018). The marginalisation of women in Indian society is further reinforced by the fact that, women are insignificant without the presence of their husbands (Chakravarti 1993). Since women are always under the care of their fathers or brothers or husbands, once they lose the husband, they also lose the right to live active social life. Whereas, there are myths celebrating the power of female deities like Durga or Kali and women like Behula and Savitri who brought their dead husbands back to life, there are no stories accommodating the role of a widow. In fact, the practice of sati system in India informs us about the protective discrimination that prevailed among the Hindus (Stein 1978). Even after the abolition of the Sati System during the

colonial era, other forms of discrimination against the widows continued unabated. After the death of their husbands, throughout the remainder of their lives, they are expected to observe countless restrictions and rituals. For example, during Ambubachi, a Hindu festival when the Mother Earth is believed to have her menstrual period, a widow has to observe very strict and unhealthy rituals: “She (Durga) will not be allowed to eat cooked food. Her daily share for three days will be raw vegetables and fruits” (Goswami 2011: 6). A widow cannot have non-vegetarian food, not even certain spices like onion or garlic. She is not allowed to enter into the kitchen where food for the rest of the family is prepared: “She took a step towards the kitchen. Durga, from the middle of the assembled women, cried out, “Don’t go there! The stove for cooking fish is kept there”” (Goswami 2011: 15). The illiterate superstitious women of neighbourhood even thought that by touching Giribala, others may also lose their husbands: ““Don’t touch her! You women with sindoor! She is widow now”” (Goswami 2011: 5).

Thus, there were many codes of conduct, violation of which was considered as the most serious sinful act of transgression and the guilty had to undergo some purification rituals ascertained by the patriarchal society. This patriarchal society forgets that these widows are also normal human beings of flesh and blood. Like other women of their age, a widow also has her own wish, both physical and emotional desire and needs. Since the death of her husband, she has to sacrifice all of these. She has to wear plain white cloth. She is prohibited from using any perfume, flower, even soap or oil or any ornament and even to look at a mirror (Goswami 2011, Vol II). In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Dr. Goswami depicts such colourless lives of Durga, Giribala and Saru Gossaini. Again, in this novel we can see that in the Brahmin society, if a widow does not have a son who can protect their personal property, she becomes worthless. She feels as if she belongs nowhere. After her marriage she loses her place in her paternal home and after her husband’s death, the in-laws also consider her as burden. Dr. Goswami shows how Durga and Giribala had to leave their in-laws’ house after the death of their husbands. The same scenario of widowhood can be seen in the traditional Angami Naga society also, as depicted by Easterine Iralu. Much like the restrictions talked about in Goswami’s novels, in a traditional Angami society, it is only the sons who inherit the paternal property. In the village, widows without sons lose their husband’s entire property to other male relatives. Because of this rule, the grandmother’s family has to live a life of hardship. She “saw her own mother suffer hardship and poverty and exclusion from many aspects of social life because she had no brothers” (Iralu 2007: 273). Life becomes difficult for a widow if she has no siblings or parents to take care of her. In the absence of the husband, the woman is often left to the mercy of her relatives.

The novel catalogues the hypocrisy of the individuals who maintain a double standard in critiquing the ‘other’ and is replete with instances of subjugation of women. For instance, Nisano has to face severe criticism from the society for her staying at her in-laws’ place after her husband’s death. According to their custom, after one year of mourning period, the widow has to return to her paternal home. In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, both the novelists, Dr. Goswami and Iralu, depict a patriarchal society, where women are disciplined with several rules, regulations and restrictions. In almost every society of India, women are considered as weaker beings, they are considered as sub-ordinate to men. The traditional Assamese and Angami Naga societies are no exception. Women could not have their free will and desire. They have to work and lead their lives according to the norms of the patriarchal society. But the same society allows men a certain level of impunity. Dr. Goswami shows that males are not judged excessively harshly for their extramarital physical relations while their wives are still alive. A woman does not have any social or financial security. A husband can at any times drive her out from his house and marry another one (Goswami 2011: 162). But if a woman feels some kind of emotional attachment towards a male after her husband’s death, it is considered as a ‘sin’. For that she has to undergo ‘prayachhitta’, a penance which in extreme cases may be death. Prayachhitta is the rite of penance which the women have to undergo for her sins (Olivelle 2006: 195-198). Without any hesitation and feelings of guilt, Giribala’s husband confessed that he did not enjoy sleeping with her because she was his legally wedded wife; he enjoyed it more with his keep. And Giribala was expected to worship his “kharam” (wooden footwear) after his death for the rest of her life, though she did not have any feelings of love or respect

towards him, who cheated on her. In these novels we can see that Lieno and Giribala both revolted against the patriarchal society. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Lieno rebelled against her grandmother who wanted to train her to be a “good wife material” as per the expectations of their society. She ultimately won because of her intelligence, hard work, mental strength, sense of social justice and above all, the support from her loving parents. All of these factors assured her personal victory. But Giribala was not as lucky as Lieno. She rebelled against her family members and her neighbour who tried to bind her within some boundaries. She did not wear the plain white cloth of the widow according to the tradition of Hindu religion. Among the caste Hindus, the widow has to wear a white Saree (the traditional dress worn by Hindu women) which is indicative of her life of austerity – a colourless and joyless life. However, she did not want to accept the widowhood just like her aunts, Durga and Sarugosani. She was not at all ready to lead an inhuman life of a widow. The hunger of her mind and body made her extremely impatient. She could not resist her temptation and committed the sin of eating meat stealthily. She wanted to seek consolation in the company of the Christian fellow Mark. Because of all these she had to undergo ‘Agnipariksha Agnipariksha literally means acid-test and it metaphorically means the ordeal one has to undergo to prove one’s purity. The phrase has been taken from the Hindu Epic Ramayana, where Lord Rama’s wife Sita has to prove her chastity by walking through the fire. Sita has become the double victim, first being abducted by Ravana and later been put to test by her husband in order to prove her chastity. Whereas the portrayal of Sita in Ramayana was made from a patriarchal perspective, in real life, the emotional and physical need of women are no different from men. Through the character of Giribala, the novelist challenges the stereotype representation of women through mythic narrative. In the novel we see that Giribala did not accept her defeat. She immolated herself in order to challenge the society and its norms. To attain puberty is a natural biological process. Simone de Beauvoir discusses this process, in her *Second Sex*, from a Euro-centric perspective. She says that for western women it is just a physical incident, and nothing more than that. But for a Brahmin girl, Ilimon, the daughter of a poor priest as shown in the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, who attained puberty before her marriage, it was a very precarious event. The patriarchal society taught adolescent Ilimon to be afraid of her natural physical development. Her family would have to be a sinner if she attained puberty before her marriage. The value of the patriarchal society has turned the biological process into an unbearable sin or bad luck which should be hidden from society. Apart from the major female characters, there are other female characters, too. Some of whom have a positive attitude, while some others a negative one. In both novels, characters who are neighbourhood women indulge in gossip. Then there are positive characters like Bano, the grandmother’s niece and unmarried spinster and Lieno’s older-sister figure in grandmother’s patriarchal society. From the depiction of all these characters, the pitiable position a woman occupies in a traditional Angami society becomes visible. Thus, from the above discussion we can see how both novels can be discussed from a feminist perspective. Through the novel - Easterine Iralu - a resourceful advocate of Naga women, reveals what position women occupy in a traditional Naga society in general and in a Angami society in particular. This novel reflects the journey of a society whose women, like young and progressive Lieno and her mother, have helped make the transition from an age of a terrible matriarchy to one brightened with new hope. Dr. Goswami, too, through her novel vividly brings out the superstitions, the abuse of power and the deadweight of oppression that the Brahmin widows had to confront in traditional Assamese society.

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### ***The authors***

**Kabita Deka** is a civil servant with Assam Government presently designated as Assistant Commissioner. **Debajyoti Biswas** is an Associate Professor of English at Bodoland University, Kokrajhar. Debajyoti Biswas is currently working as an Associate Professor of English at Bodoland University. He has completed his MA in English from Jawaharlal Nehru University and earned his doctorate from Gauhati University. He has completed 2 research projects funded by University Grants Commission (UGC) and organised several seminars in his professional career. He is the editor of “transcript: An e-journal of cultural and literary studies.” His areas of interest are Nationalism and identity, Environment and Literature and Anglophone fiction from Northeast India. His research articles have been published in national and international journals like *Policing: Journal of Policy and Practice* (Oxford University Press), *English: Journal of English Association* (Oxford university Press), *Social Science and Humanities Communications* (Springer), *RUDN journal of studies in literature and journalism* (RUDN University, Russia), *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* (Corvinus University, Hungary), and *Postcolonial Studies* (Routledge). He has edited two books: *Nationalism in India: Texts and Contexts* (Routledge) and *Ethnonationalism in India* (Atlantic Publishers). His forthcoming book from Routledge is *Global Perspectives on nationalism: Political and Cultural Discourses*, slated to be released in 2022.