

Cross-Cultural Chronicles: A Comparative Study of Widowhood in Selected Assamese and Tamil Novels

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ABSTRACT:

It is not easy to archive the profound historical exploitation endured by widows, a tenacious issue of societal concern. Within the context of this discourse, the scrutinized novels serve to illuminate the distressing plight experienced by widows, employing a poignant metaphor that draws parallels between their predicament and a fragile leaf forcibly severed from the societal tree. These women, who were once vibrant and integral members of their communities, now find themselves mysteriously uprooted, abandoned to languish on the ground, burdened by the oppressive weight of entrenched tradition. A striking embodiment of this thematic exploration emerges in "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker," an eminent work in Assamese literature by Jnanpith awardee, Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Goswami adeptly reflects upon the harsh realities confronted by widows ensnared within the confines of patriarchal traditions. Notably, this narrative draws extensively from the author's own personal experiences as a widow, imbuing it with a profound resonance and authenticity. Furthermore, the challenges faced by Goswami and her characters, situated within the context of upper-class Hindu Brahmin society, offer a compelling point of comparison with the lives of the Dalit widows in "The Grip of Change," a semi-autobiographical novel authored by Palanimuthu Sivakami, a prominent Indian writer and the inaugural Dalit woman novelist in Tamil literature. This discourse will further employ "trauma theory", specifically Judith Herman's Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) theory, to provide a valuable framework for comprehending the psychological and emotional impact of widowhood and societal discrimination on widows.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood, Women, Trauma Theory, Caste, Society.

Introduction

Lived a tragic life of widowhood herself, Mamoni Raisom Goswami emerges as a poignant voice in the realm of literature, shedding light on the plight of widows in the orthodox Hindu Brahmin society. To cope with her anguish, Indira Goswami turns to writing and isolation, encapsulating Herman's idea of utilizing coping mechanisms during the aftermath of trauma. Her literary works, which vividly portray the suffering endured by widows, become a form of catharsis and a channel to express the anguish she shares with these marginalized women. Her literary contributions to Assamese literature, marked by resilience and creativity in the face of adversity, stand as a testament to her indomitable spirit. Unfazed by sorrow, obstacles, or adversity, she forged her creative path with unwavering determination. In those challenging times, she bestowed upon the world a pearl of creative wisdom. Goswami's literary corpus not only mirrors her humanity but also serves as a poignant reflection of the agonizing existence endured by widows within Hindu society. She remained steadfast in her exploration of this theme, highlighting the anguish and societal silence surrounding it in her works. Her novel, "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker," translated from "Datal Hatir Uye Khuwa Howrah" dissects how women, particularly young widows like Durga, Xoru Goxani, and Girbala, grapple with marginalization in a society mired in decay, corruption, frustration, and poverty. This stark contrast is set against the backdrop of the eroding spirituality of Brahmin Sattradhikaras. The Brahmin caste



system in Assam carries a deep-rooted history, and the treatment of widows has evolved over time. Traditionally, Assamese society imposed strict seclusion, head shaving, and plain white attire upon widows, barring them from participating in social and cultural events, education, and employment opportunities. These women were expected to mourn rigorously and abstain from worldly pleasures indefinitely. In later centuries, there were incremental improvements in the status of widows, allowing for remarriage under certain circumstances, albeit with caste restrictions and the need for consent from the deceased husband's family. The colonial era brought forth legal changes, such as the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, although it faced resistance from conservative Brahmin quarters. Following independence, legislative reforms like the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 aimed to uplift women's status, yet widows in Brahmin society continue to endure social stigma and discrimination, particularly in rural areas where age-old customs and beliefs persist.

However, despite legal and societal advancements, widows in India and Assam still grapple with numerous challenges. In this regard, Goswami and P. Sivakami emerge as rare novelists who have presented a vivid and unvarnished account of widows' neglect and exploitation. In the intricate tapestry of Tamil Nadu's social and cultural fabric, the convergence of caste and gender discrimination exerts a significant influence, disproportionately affecting Dalit women. P. Sivakami, a celebrated Dalit author, sheds light on the distressing experiences of Dalit widows in her compelling novel, "The Grip of Change." This compelling narrative reveals the grim challenges that these women confront while navigating a society steeped in long-standing customs and biases. Dalit women in Tamil Nadu bear the weight of the combined burden of caste and gender discrimination. Among these challenges, widowhood stands out as an especially precarious status, subjecting them to a spectrum of social and cultural prejudices deeply ingrained in the state's traditional practices. Sivakami's "The Grip of Change," a self-translation of the semi-autobiographical Tamil novel "Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum," delves into the harrowing experiences of Thangam, a Dalit woman who faces triple marginalization – economic oppression, gender subordination, and caste discrimination. The novel underscores how the upper caste views the incident as a gender struggle while the lower caste perceives it through a caste-centric lens. Thangam's widowhood becomes a central theme in the narrative, shining a harsh light on the ordeal of Dalit women subjected to brutal treatment at the hands of upper-caste landlords and their own community. Yet, Thangam, a Dalit woman from the third world, continues to grapple with challenges across various dimensions, including physical, emotional, psychological, and religious violence. Generations of women have endured subjugation by patriarchal hands, and the battle for their empowerment remains ongoing.

Methodology

This research employs a comparative literary analysis approach to delve into the experiences of widows as depicted in selected Assamese and Tamil novels, with a specific focus on "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" by Mamoni Raisom Goswami and "The Grip of Change" by P. Sivakami. The qualitative research methodology is employed for a thorough textual examination and critical analysis of these two chosen texts to interpret their meanings. The primary aim of this study is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the traumatic experiences, coping mechanisms, and resilience demonstrated by widows within these distinct cultural and regional contexts. In the descriptive aspect of this research, there is a meticulous exploration of the novels, delving into the narrative, characters, and societal context in which the stories unfold. This method is designed to provide a comprehensive and intricate account of the widowhood experiences portrayed in the novels. Simultaneously, an analytical method is implemented, making use of trauma theory, particularly drawing from Judith Herman's Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) theory. This analytical framework serves to deepen our comprehension of the psychological and emotional impact of widowhood and societal discrimination on the female protagonists. It entails a detailed analysis of the characters' coping mechanisms, resilience, and resistance, shedding light on the shared and complex experiences of marginalized widows in India, regardless of their varying geographical locations and cultural backgrounds.





Research Analysis

The selected novels in this discourse shed light on the shared experiences of widows from different regions and cultural backgrounds who face similar challenges rooted in societal norms, discrimination, and trauma. Through their powerful narratives, they contribute to a broader understanding of the plight of marginalized widows in India and the resilience they display in the face of adversity. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's writing vividly illuminates the poignant facets of widows' experiences, skillfully shedding light on these challenging truths with exceptional lucidity and empathy. In her 1990 work titled "An Unfinished Autobiography," Mamoni Goswami who was born Indira Goswami provides an honest and poignant narrative of her formative years and the circumstances that fueled her artistic drive. Her upbringing, though privileged, was marred by difficulties, marked by a profound sensitivity to life's darker facets, and defined by a perpetual battle against her own melancholic disposition. To combat her inner turmoil, she turned to the pursuits of literature, writing, and keen observation of people in her surroundings. During her youth, a devastating tragedy struck when her husband tragically perished in a jeep accident while working on an aqueduct project in Kashmir. This event shattered her world, and she vividly portrays her emotional paralysis during this time. Tortured by persistent thoughts of suicide, she sought solace in isolation and in writing. In her literary works, Goswami uniquely presents a vivid portrayal of the mistreatment and abuse endured by widows, a depiction unparalleled by any other novelist. She articulates the plight of widows, delving into their shaved heads, adorned foreheads marked with turmeric and sandalwood paste, their physically impaired limbs afflicted by leprosy, and their emaciated forms, clearly visible through tattered saris. Her memories from her early Assamese childhood eventually found their creative outlet in her 1986 novel, "Datal Hatir Uwe Khuwa Howdah" translated as "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker", a compelling testament to her indomitable spirit prevailing over suffering. It is plausible that writing about the anguish experienced by these women enabled Indira Goswami to come to terms with her own sorrow and frustration, ultimately helping her inner self.

Indira Goswami's novel "The Moth-eaten Howdah of a Tusker" draws inspiration from her own childhood recollections and extensive research, offering a glimpse into life within a feudal Vaishnavite sattrā in Assam's South Kamrup district during the post-Independence era (1948-81). The narrative delves into the struggles faced by women who find themselves ensnared by the oppressive grip of orthodoxy, granting them limited agency over their destinies. Young girls are compelled to wed into high-caste families before reaching puberty, lest their own families risk social ostracization. Once married, these women become wholly subservient to their husbands, regardless of whether these spouses prove neglectful, irresponsible, or promiscuous. As widows, their existence is marked by a series of constraining regulations governing their diet, attire, and social interactions, effectively rendering their lives akin to imprisonment. Invariably, they encounter torment and mistreatment at the hands of in-laws eager to be rid of them and seize their assets. Goswami's portrayal of the traumatic experiences faced by her characters, such as Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala, aligns with Judith Herman's theory of understanding trauma as events that shatter an individual's sense of safety and well-being. The loss of husbands, social ostracization, and oppressive norms are recurring themes that cause deep emotional wounds and psychological distress.

At the heart of this narrative stands Indranath, a character emblematic of youthful idealism in the face of a rigid, traditional social order. Hailing from the influential Gossain family that wields significant influence over the Amaranga sattrā, Indranath is portrayed as well-educated and forward-thinking, yet he finds himself unable to openly defy the societal norms that bind him. His central mission revolves around rescuing his widowed aunt, Durga, from the clutches of her oppressive in-laws. However, despite his best intentions, he is ultimately compelled to return her to the same household when her health deteriorates with age. Furthermore, Indranath's determination to spare his sister, Giribala, from a fate similar to Durga's leads him down a path that inadvertently results in Giribala's public humiliation and downfall. Within the pages of this novel, the readers encounter three widows, each serving as a poignant representation of the collective trauma experienced by marginalized groups within society. Durga, the elder sister of the adhikar, finds herself mired in sorrow and rejection at the hands of her husband's family, who perceive her as an inauspicious presence. Seeking refuge in her





brother's household, she occupies a lowly position as a distant relative, marked by an inner void as she dutifully adheres to the stringent customs imposed upon widows. Durga's enduring hope of receiving her rightful share of her in-laws' prosperity or an invitation back to their residence in Chikarhati remains unfulfilled, leading her to yearn for liberation from her stagnant life within the sattrā. Her aspiration takes the form of a pilgrimage to Puri and Prayag, where she hopes to immerse her husband's ashes in the sacred waters. "Gods above are my witness! I am a widow of Chikarhati's Gossain who will now die from the sorrow of not offering her husband's funeral bones to the holy river. Let my curse fall upon those who have done this harm to me!" (Goswami, 2005)

This stark contrast between her destitution and her fervent desire to be recognized as a woman of substance and virtue casts her predicament in a deeply pitiable light. Denied the funds necessary for her pilgrimage, Durga takes desperate measures, which ultimately imprison her within the sattrā for the rest of her life. Her emotional paralysis following her husband's death serves as a compelling illustration of the psychological consequences of trauma. Goswami masterfully captures the inner emptiness and despair that envelop Durga, reflecting the profound impact of trauma on an individual's emotional world and self-identity, aligning with Herman's insights into the disruption caused by trauma.

Saru Gossainee, a youthful and attractive widow, presents a striking contrast to Durga's plight. She is the wife of Indranath's late uncle, exiled from the sattrā due to his dissolute behavior. Saru hails from the prosperous Pathaldia family, boasting a Gossainee lineage spanning three sattrās, extensive land holdings, and a widespread following across a vast region. Saru embodies dignity and self-reliance as she resists malicious gossip and chooses an independent life, even traveling to Puri with the *pandas*. Previously, she enjoyed financial stability through her lands and disciples, but the advent of communist movements in the rural areas left her in financial distress. Despite dwindling resources and a crumbling house, Saru remains steadfast, relying on the support of Mahidhar Bapu, a trusted Brahmin from Haramdo who assumes the roles of her agent and estate manager. In a compelling twist, Saru's deepening bond with Mahidhar gradually evolves into a source of personal conflict. She prepares his meals and eagerly anticipates his return, yet her love blinds her to his deceit. Unbeknownst to Saru, Mahidhar has been embezzling her income, engaging in clandestine land sales, and even stealing Durga's gold trinkets from her bedroom, tarnishing Saru's reputation within the community. When Mahidhar's treachery is exposed, and his lifeless body is delivered to Saru Gossainee's residence following a confrontation with the police, her world shatters, and her dreams and aspirations lie in ruins. "She forgot all about the sweet fragrance of lime and the peaceful moonlit night! The silvery moon, caught in the heap of silken cloth, cracked into several pieces. They were like sharp pieces of glass which lacerated her bosom." (Goswami, 2005)

The third widow in the narrative is Giribala, Indranath's sister, a character who challenges societal norms with an indomitable spirit. Forced into marriage against her will during her early adolescence to the unsuitable son of the *adhikar* of Bangara, Giribala faces neglect and humiliation from her husband while he indulges in his theatrical pursuits and a relationship with a lower-caste mistress. After her husband's death, Giribala becomes a target of torment by her mother-in-law and is ultimately sent back to her parents after suffering a miscarriage. Frustrated by the pretentious condolences offered by women gathering in her mother's courtyard, Giribala isolates herself in a room, rejecting the fate that befell her aunt Durga within the sattrā. It is here that Indranath introduces her to Mark, an American missionary engaged in historical research in the region, compiling biographies of other missionaries in Assam. This encounter marks the beginning of a transformative journey for Giribala, who, in stark contrast to Durga and Saru, possesses an unwavering determination to challenge the prevailing social conventions. "I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die! Scores of images of Gossain widows passed before Mark's eyes ... Widows who have stretched out their existence within four walls, who have never seen the road outside. Widows racked with deprivation and unknown diseases, brought on by harsh and cruel rituals. Widows who had died without fulfilling their craving to learn the rudiments of reading and writing, without drinking in the nectar of written words, out of fear of social censure" (Goswami, 2005)



Giribala's defiance of societal norms and her refusal to conform to the expectations of a young widow make her a standout character in the narrative. In a society where girls were often married off before reaching puberty, she faced the loss of her husband at a tender age, becoming the youngest widow among them all. Her resolute decision not to return to her in-laws' home following her husband's death symbolizes her revolutionary spirit and her rejection of traditional confinement.

The novel underscores the challenges faced by widows in Brahmin society, particularly the strict dietary restrictions and societal expectations placed upon them. Giribala's story, in particular, sheds light on the emotional and social consequences of being a young widow, ultimately culminating in her tragic end. Throughout the narrative, the author delved into the complexities of trauma, societal norms, and the struggle for individuality within an unbending social framework, painting a vivid and thought-provoking portrait of the characters and their trials in the face of tradition and societal expectations.

In P. Sivakami's novel "The Grip of Change," the harsh treatment of Dalit widows in Tamil Nadu is vividly portrayed through the life of Thangam, a Dalit woman who undergoes severe triple marginalization – economic oppression, gender subordination, and caste discrimination.

"That it is natural for me as a Dalit and a woman - factors decided by birth to write about those factors. And thereby I firmly place myself within a circle, influencing the politics surrounding those factors." (Sivakami, 2013). Thangam's widowhood exposes her to economic hardship and social subjugation. The death of her husband forces her to work on the farm of the upper-caste landlord, Paramjothi Udayar, merely to make ends meet. Her status as a widow rendered her vulnerable, subjecting her to exploitation by the landlord and harassment by her in-laws. Thangam does not possess royal lineage, nor is she the offspring of a government official, and she is currently without a spouse. He came to realize her vulnerable status as a destitute widow, left without assistance from anyone. Consequently, he developed a pattern of fulfilling his desires whenever the opportunity arose. The sexual violence she endured on that initial day left her emotionally scarred for the remainder of her life. Thangam's harrowing narrative is unprecedented in its severity. This experience can be understood through Judith Herman's trauma theory, which emphasizes the concept of "disempowerment." Thangam's loss of control over her life and her economic dependence reflects a traumatic state of disempowerment brought about by the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. Moreover, Thangam's struggle for her husband's share of the land becomes deeply entwined with her body and fertility. Thangam's status as a widow also makes her vulnerable to gender-based oppression. Being a widow, she is perceived as an extra or someone potentially open to sexual advances that lead to her being exploited and subjected to harassment. Her inability to bear children leads to further discrimination as she is denied the right to inherit her husband's land. Her brothers-in-law propagated false rumors that she has become Udayar's concubine, leading to merciless beatings and further degradation. This situation exposes her to sexual exploitation by her own brothers-in-law, highlighting the traumas associated with "entrapment" as outlined in Herman's theory. Kathamuthu, a respected Dalit leader, initially offers Thangam hope for justice. However, he ultimately betrays her, causing a profound shock. Her quest for justice took a troubling twist when Kathamuthu, breaking her trust, requested sexual favors as a condition for his support. This betrayal vividly exemplifies the power imbalances that sustain the victimization of Dalit women. Thangam's eventual empowerment within Kathamuthu's household, even though it stemmed from her oppressed and subjugated state, underscored her strength and capacity to assert authority in extremely challenging situations. Thangam's plight, as witnessed through the eyes of Gowri, Kathamuthu's daughter, underscores the psychological toll of witnessing the harsh treatment of Dalit widows. Gowri, a young observer, openly condemns the inhuman treatment her father inflicts upon Thangam, vocalizing her critique and anger. This can be seen as a form of "traumatic witnessing," a concept elucidated by Cathy Caruth, where individuals who witness trauma are themselves impacted by the events they observe. Gowri's character is autobiographical to P. Sivakami herself. She being the protagonist of the novel, serves as the spokesperson for Sivakami, using her voice to represent the voiceless Dalit women who endure inhuman treatment in silence.



Conclusion

Literature and narrative, as demonstrated by the work of Mamoni Raisom Goswami and P. Sivakami, have a pivotal role in increasing awareness and championing transformation, nurturing compassion and comprehension within the broader society. This paper provided evidence of the widow's traumatic experiences. Even though the novels selected for this discourse are written by writers of different geographical location, and belonging to different culture and caste, it portrays the same issues the widows have to face in their everyday life. As a result, widows majorly struggle with various factors such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Both the writers, Goswami and Sivakami wrote about young widows suffering out of trauma after their loveable husband's demise in "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" and "The Grip of Change". Sivakami encourages women, following Ambedkar's counsel, to break free from the shackles of both caste and gender inequality through the avenues of education, employment, ideological awareness, and active involvement in collective and structured socially conscious movements. Authentically through the character of Thangam, the novel living up to its title, 'The Grip of Change,' the book chronicles the transformative shifts occurring within the Dalit community's awareness, offering a potential remedy for societal ills. Both novels vividly depict the harsh realities of societal oppression that widows from marginalized backgrounds must endure. In "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker," Goswami portrays how Brahmin widows are subjected to stringent regulations governing their dietary choices, attire, and social interactions, perpetuating a stifling environment. The paper analyzed the three widows in Goswami's novel, highlighting their unique experiences and coping mechanisms. Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala each represent different facets of widowhood and societal discrimination. Durga's longing for agency, Saru's vulnerability to manipulation, and Giribala's resistance to conformity are examined through the lens of trauma theory. Conversely, in "The Grip of Change," Dalit widows like Thangam suffer from economic exploitation and endure gender-based violence, primarily due to their vulnerable status within the caste hierarchy. Applying Judith Herman's trauma theory, it becomes evident that both narratives showcase a profound sense of disempowerment experienced by these widows, as they grapple with the loss of their husbands, compounded by the discrimination and subjugation they face. Moreover, both novels feature instances of betrayal, where Saru Gossainee in "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" is deceived and exploited by Mahidhar Bapu, while Thangam in "The Grip of Change" experiences betrayal by Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader who takes advantage of her vulnerable position. These betrayals underscore the pervasive power imbalances that sustain the victimization of marginalized widows, further emphasizing the profound psychological distress they endure as a result of societal norms and discrimination. This regrettable circumstance deprives the widows of fundamental human rights, underscoring the harsh and unwarranted treatment meted out by society. This study shed light on the plight of widows, drawing a poignant analogy to a fragile leaf severed from the social tree. Once vibrant and integral, these women are inexplicably uprooted, left to wither away on the ground, and subjected to the crushing weight of tradition. The paper also discussed how societal conventions deprive widows of proper sustenance and autonomy. It explored the restrictions imposed on widows' diets, symbolizing their suppression and repression of desire. Giribala's act of consuming meat, despite societal taboos, serves as an act of defiance and an expression of her inner turmoil. This research paper employed Judith Herman's C-PTSD theory to provide a comprehensive analysis of the psychological and emotional impact of widowhood and societal discrimination on the female protagonists in the selected works. Through the lens of trauma theory, the paper explored the coping mechanisms, resilience, and resistance exhibited by widows, shedding light on their complex experiences. Both Goswami and Sivakami's narratives serve as a poignant testament to the enduring impact of trauma and the human spirit's quest for healing and liberation in the face of societal oppression.

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