Chapter 9

Woman as ‘Scapegoat’: Religious Ethics as the ‘Force of Law’
in Indira Goswami’s *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent contemporary Assamese writers. She has been honored with the “Sahitya Akademi Award” in 1983 for the novel *The Rusted Sword*, the “Assam Sahitya Sabha Award” in 1988, the “Bharat Nirman Award” in 1989, “Sauhardya Award” from Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India in 1992, “Katha National Award for Literature” in 1993, “Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award” in 1996, and in the year 2000 she won the country’s highest literary prize the Jnanpith Award. Her literary repertoire includes novels, short stories, poems as well as autobiographical writings. Goswami’s literature is, in fact, her attempt to engender social change. It is her means to address the socio-political violence directed against by the oppressed and marginalized sections of society. She sheds light on the essence of cruelty in human nature that takes shape into various forms of violence every day. In Goswami’s view, this violence is “worse than death, it is worse than dying in a riot, or in a bomb blast” ("Stained with Blood"). Her novel *The Blue Necked Braja* focusses on the plight of Hindu widows commonly known as Radheswamis in Vrindavan. Another novel entitled *Pages Stained with Blood* presents a first person account of the Sikh-riots at Delhi in 1984. *The Man from Chinnamasta* is
viewed by the critics as her most controversial and subversive novel for it is a direct protest against the practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient Kamakhya Temple, in Guwahati, Assam.

Goswami also explores the manner in which the politics of social construction affects the Indian woman. Writer and literary critic Malashri Lal says, “the common thread in Indira Goswami’s immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women …despite the complex interstices, I see no contradictions – only a holistic expression of India’s many challenges to women’s empowerment and a gifted writer moulding them into creative forms.” In her writings, Goswami probes the underlying foundation of the rituals and the unquestioned beliefs which perpetuate female oppression. Her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* focusses on the plight of widows belonging to the Assamese orthodox community. Goswami has translated it from her Assamese novel *Une Khowa Howda*. Renowned Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam lauds Goswami’s fictional work by saying that she is one of those “rare souls who have been able to get an insight into the great power which is working behind this universe. In turn the endeavor to grapple with that finds reflection in this book and lends strength to it….This power that this metamorphosis has bestowed upon her has now became a matter of pride for every Assamese woman.” A renowned Hindi writer, playwright, and actor, Bhisham Sahni says that his reading of Goswami’s novel was “an unforgettable experience. Whenever [his] mind wanders back to this somber, penumbral and horrid atmosphere, [he] feels overpowered by awe.” Another critic Sisir Kumar Das says that the novel describes “the disintegration of power, of unbelievable suffering of men and women, and also of tremendous
courage and the tremendous pain that love brings” (“In the View of Critics”). Published in 2004, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is centered on the socio-economic self-indulgence that defined the feudalistic institutions which existed close to the advent of Indian independence from the British rule. Goswami focusses on the patriarchal transformation of ethics into laws that fall out of the realm of reason and humanity. Moreover, the coupling of religion and ethics often culminates in violence. Ethic-based religion, in fact, needs to be viewed as a socio-judicial construct that dictates, controls, and metes out violence against women. Goswami’s reveals the way in which religious ethics acquire the “force of law” and wreak violence in the lives of widows.

Ethics is a field of inquiry that examines the foundations of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ actions in pursuit of human goals. It denotes the overarching rationale that supports the moral ideals that may form a person’s philosophy of life. Ethics is, in fact, believed to be a carefully examined structure that includes both practice and theory. It is based on humanistic assumptions justified primarily, and sometimes only, by appeals to reason. The concept of ethics has gradually evolved over the last few centuries. Prominent philosophers, ranging from antiquity to the twentieth century, namely Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Georges Sorel and Jean Paul Sartre consider spirituality, knowledge, virtuousness, wisdom, anti-narcissistic attitude, freedom and the power to make choice and contribution to social well being etc. to be the prerequisites of a ‘good’ life. Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, takes a detour from the prominent moral schemes of his time, namely those provided by Christianity
and Utilitarianism. In his characteristically provocative style, Nietzsche calls himself an immoralist seeking to destroy morality and wanting to reconstruct a new, more natural source of values in the vital impulses of life itself. Michel Foucault, too, seeks to decouple ethics from the moral order and tries to reconnect it to the formation of a political subjectivity in which truth is a certain practice of freedom.

The theists study ethics as a branch of theology and consider religion to be the absolute bedrock of ethics. In their view, ethics stem from the truth that is received from divine sources. This idea was initially suggested by Immanuel Kant who insisted on the idea of God as the ground of ethics. The existence of God and the immortality of the human soul are, according to Kant, the prime postulates of practical reason that underlie all ethical and moral order (Harrison). The staunch critics of theistic ideology, however, consider Kant’s ideas to be baseless. In their view, the relationship between religion and ethics is ambivalent for it is a relationship between revelation and reason. Religion is somewhat based on spiritual insights into human life that are presented in the holy texts and considered to be “revelations” (Donahue). The views presented in these texts are not strictly rational and verifiable. To the extent that ethics are based on the tenets of reason, one has to concede that religion can be regarded as a solid foundation for ethics only when its own rational basis is strong. Moreover, the idea of God’s eternal goodness, benevolence and morality takes a hard beating in the face of all the calamities and disasters that often plague the world. Religion and ethics, nonetheless, continue to be coupled together, for to separate them would mean condemning people to live their lives without solace amidst disasters and insecurities.
Religious ethics are the ethics derived from a particular religion. For centuries, the belief has been nurtured in people’s minds that religion is the only sanctuary in which peace, truth, non-violence and a sense of fairness truly prevail. Religion promises salvation to human beings on the condition that the laws laid down by it are unquestioningly followed. As a result, religious edicts are often fanatically followed and seldom questioned for they are believed to be immensely beneficial for the community as well as the individual members of the community. The religious institutions conceal their violence and inspire the blind faith of large populations. Some philosophers and theorists have, however, traced violence to the very heart of religion. In Nietzsche’s view, the highest of human productions, such as religion, morality, philosophy etc. may be productive of suffering that plagues an individual. Nietzsche’s antagonism towards religion is evident in his statement that “God is dead” (Thus Spake Zarathustra 3). In his view, religions like Christianity promote slave morality, whereby the slave lives in fear and resentment of its master. The slave morality gives rise to values of compassion, distorts reality, and introduces individuals to the notion of the mortification of the flesh (On the Genealogy of Morality 22). Nietzsche states that religious practices are a form of self-directed violence that conceals a deep resentment against every form of human mastery.

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is based on the nostalgic memories of Goswami’s own “sattra” (a “Vaishnavite” monastery) in Amaranga situated in South Kamrup, Assam. Here the novelist has borrowed heavily from her observation of the practices and experiences of her community during post-independence years. The novel focusses on the lives
of people who are facing the onslaught of opium addiction. These people can
go to any length to satisfy their opium fixation. Apart from this, their other
obsession is their steadfast conformity in the matter of religious practices. This
community feels no qualms about swindling or even killing a person for a
pinch of opium, yet a minor error while performing a religious act can instill
immense fear of God’s wrath in their hearts. The religious rites are extremely
strict and any laxity in performing them entails an even more violent
punishment. A close reading of the novel exhibits the double standards of
ethics that prevail in this Brahmin community. It seems that the onerous task
of pleasing the gods falls mostly on the shoulders of women and the minorities
as they are the principal victims of the resulting violence. They are made to do
long penances even for a slight diversion from the path that their religion has
set out for them.

Goswami highlights the violence-ridden existence of women living in
a strict religious community. Women belonging to all age groups are targeted
and victimized. Unmarried teenage girls are held in contempt by the entire
community. Old as well as married women are always on the lookout for
unmarried girls who have hit puberty for in their eyes these girls are akin to
criminals who have horribly offended their gods. As soon as they have located
the offender, they brandish the girl and her entire family as an “outcaste.”
Eliman is a twelve-year old girl whose only escape from punishment is to
marry a Brahmin who is, in fact, an opium smuggler. When he is caught by the
police, the girl is punished again for refusing another groom who has been
twice married before.
In the “sattra,” menstruation is considered to be the “greatest sin” and no one touches a woman during her “monthly flow” because of the risk of contracting the impurity (Goswami 128). If someone happens to touch her then it is the woman who has been touched who has to fast rigorously as a mandatory purification ritual. Married women also are not able to escape the dark fate that religion has assigned to them. They are continually cheated on by their husbands and abused by their in-laws. God-fearing people acting as mouthpieces of their religion constantly preach women that “a husband’s house is like a heaven for a woman” and if a woman attempts to cross its boundaries she is like “a naked woman loitering in the streets” (29). The fear of social censure and the absence of financial freedom forces these women to give their silent assent to their own victimization. Yet they feel that they are more fortunate than all those women who have lost their husbands to death.

Goswami presents in minute detail the pitiful existence of widowed women of her “sattra.” Widows are not allowed to leave their homes and are supposed to make themselves invisible, because their sight or their touch may bring misfortune on others. They are like “ghosts pretending to be human beings” (10). The harsh rituals they are forced to perform make them vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. Some customary rituals of widowhood are continuous fasting, following a strict eating regime which includes abstaining from cooked food and surviving only on raw food such as vegetables for days, sleeping on a bed of bamboos, wearing the areca nut tree’s bark as one’s shoes, bathing and undergoing more purification rituals if their body is touched even by the shadow of a low-caste man, and so on (11).
Widowed young girls are deprived of education for it is thought to be of no use to them as they have to stay enclosed in the four walls of the house.

In the novel, the older Gossainee, Saru Gossainee, Durga and Giribala are all widowed women in different circumstances but sharing the same fate. The older Gossainee has led a troubled life. Marriage to a rich philanderer has brought her grief and widowhood has brought her more worries, be those in the shape of an indifferent son or a widowed daughter. She is burdened with the task of conforming to the prescribed religious edicts and of making sure that others around her do the same. Durga, a relative of the older Gossainee, is thrown out of her marital home after her husband’s death. Her in-laws seize all her property and abandon her at her maternal house. However, Durga continues to harbour the hope that her husband’s family will come back one day and escort her back home with respect. She does not even fight a legal battle to obtain her share of the property because her clan believes that respectable women should never step into a court of law as the gaze of thieves and criminals would make them impure. Living a cloistered life and fasting continuously make her vulnerable to tuberculosis. But Durga refuses to go to hospital and get medical aid. Instead she goes back to her estranged in-laws house for she wants to die with some semblance of dignity.

Giribala’s fate is similar. She too is a widow sent back to her maternal house. Her brother Indranath, however, helps her cast off her melancholy by getting her to be engaged in the task of helping an American philanthropist named Mark with his scholarly work. Her in-laws come to reclaim her after some time but she refuses to go because she realizes that her life would become even more miserable. Instead, she runs away to Mark’s hut. The
village men catch them together and accuse them of carrying on a clandestine affair. They want to purify the girl through rituals by using water and fire. Giribala, however, refuses to perform any ritual and immolates herself in the fire. Saru Gossainee, another widow, is also a victim of the inflexible and narrow-minded “sattra.” She owns a few acres of lands and has low-caste villagers growing paddy on it. These villagers hold her in esteem for they consider her to be very religious and virtuous. But they cheat her in the payment of revenue. She hesitates to go to court to get her due for fear of social censure. Mahidar, a young widower, comes forward to help her and gradually becomes her right-hand man. Saru Gossainee falls in love with Mahidar and believes that he reciprocates her feelings. Belonging to a community that shuns widows, she feels very fortunate on being chosen as the object of a man’s love. In her yearning for love and human affection, Saru Gossainee does not even realize that she is being cheated on and exploited by Mahidar. His acts of kindness delude her into believing that “she is his world” (214). Her love for Mahidar blinds her to his tricks for he runs away after financially defrauding her. But the rigid social conventions do not allow Saru Gossainee to fight for justice.

There are several instances of women going through violent extremities in the name of religion such as women being forced to commit “Sati.” The practice of Sati involves widow’s self-immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre. Those who resist going through sati are forcibly intoxicated with opium and placed on the burning pyre (56-57). Furthermore, the rich Gossain’s sexual exploitation of low-caste Brahmin women is overlooked by the “sattra.” He beats a low-caste woman for daring to
complain to his wife about his philandering ways. However, the villagers say that the beating is probably the work of some ghost exacting revenge on her for accusing the morally upright Gossain of adultery (124-25). Similarly, the poor, lower caste individuals have to do penance for inadvertently committing heinous “crimes” such as standing close or accidentally touching a Brahmin. As a punishment for their crime, the lower castes are forced to give away most of their hard-earned money to the temple priest. All these violent practices are legitimized and endorsed by religion.

Religion thus can be construed as a patriarchy-infested, disciplinary institution that operates on the underside of law. It reinforces and multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law (*Discipline and Punish* 222-23). A study of the harsh rituals and social practices outlined for the widows reveals the violence that lies at the heart of religion. Here ethics help in the formation of the artificial link between religion and morality. All the religious practices are centered on the implementation of the moral course of action. Moreover, patriarchy manifest through religion signifies a state of lawlessness, or a state of exception. The violence meted out to widows is viewed as necessary to the maintainence of cultural order. A widow is basically treated as a “scapegoat” within the orthodox Assamese sattra. Girard defines “scapegoating” as the situation where the entire community carefully chooses and sacrifices a victim who already has a peripheral existence in society. This “surrogate” victim serves as an antidote to cleanse the violence precipitated by the “sacred” on the entire community. The sacrifice of the surrogate victim carries out the function of controlling and displacing the violence within the community and preventing
the eruption of conflicts (*Violence and the Sacred* 12-14). The widows of Kamrup are forced to “sacrifice” their identity, their future, and their entire existence as per the religious norms. The community views this “sacrifice” as being a requisite to their own happiness and prosperity. Moreover, even a small mistake by the widows is met with outrage by the community.

Ethnic-based religion is, in fact, treated as law in the society. Patriarchy is indeed a regime where acts that do not have the value of law acquire the force of law. Jacques Derrida defines the term “force of law” as the indestructible character of the law that the sovereign himself can neither repeal nor revise (*Acts of Religion* 241-2). Technically the term refers not to the law itself, but to the decrees that the executive power is designated to give. In Giorgio Agamben’s view, the force of law possesses a mystical element or is a “fiction” that disconnects norm from reality and invites “anomy” to be a part of law itself (292). Patriarchy manifests itself through religion. It provides religion with the power to wreak violence on individuals. Ethics play and important role in the legitimization of violent religious practices. It assigns a semblance of rationality to religion. Ethical insights on morality play a significant role in the perpetuation of violent religious practices. Ethnic-based religion operates by uniting “freedom and duty in personality” and sanctioning it as an alliance between “the soul and the Spirit” (168). Starvation, mutilation, murder, sacrifice, etc. are sanctioned by religion as the ways to achieve transcendence. Any attempt to resist this violence is met with outrage and entails much harsher punishment. Religious ethics thus can be viewed as the force of law which no entity or foundation can “contradict” or “invalidate” (241).
The only way to escape this violence wrought by religion is, probably, to decouple ethics from religion which, in fact, seems as of now to be an impossible task. The theists stick to the view that God is the necessary foundation of all morality. Hence the violence perpetrated on people in the name of religion is sanctioned as ethical. Ethics, however, should not require the aid of any unquestionable traditional beliefs and religious dogmas but should depend on independent choices. The option of an independent choice is, however, not provided by religions for they demand an individual to be subservient to their dogma at all costs. Religions are thus invested with immense power which they wield ruthlessly against helpless and marginalized individuals, especially women.

Analysis of the novel thus reveals the manner in which religion legitimizes the perpetration of violence against women. Women are frequently “scapegoated” in the guise of an age-old explanation of the protection of the community from the wrath of gods. In his exposition of the “scapegoat” theory, Girard points out that the victim is always an outsider or one living a peripheral existence in society. The marginalization of woman springs from the fact that she has always been regarded as the other in the patriarchal symbolic order. The French feminists stress that the “feminine” needs to be abjected by patriarchy through its subjection to symbolic violence. The so-called “symbolic” violence, however, becomes quite real and literal when light is shed on the extremely brutal religious practices. Nietzsche states that “bad conscience” is the inevitable outcome of man’s enclosure “within the walls of society and peace” (On the Genealogy of Morality xvii). Moreover, “bad conscience” springs from the steadily burgeoning sense of “indebtedness” to
the divinities which is vigorously encouraged by religious scriptures and preachers (189). This deepens the sense of guilt in persons. They unsuccessfully try to repress their instincts of cruelty, hostility and destruction, thereby succumbing to bad conscience. The “bad conscience,” however, is substituted by “good conscience” when unfair and violent treatment is meted out to women in the name of religious ethics. In the acts referencing “good conscience,” violence is seen as sanctifying itself. The religious violence committed against women is justified by claiming that it is good for her soul and also for the people of her community. A critical examination of the novel lays bare the manner in which a community’s unethical demands on women are sanctioned by its religion in the name of virtue, whether in the form of punishment or of supposed redemption. Unmarried teenage girls are boycotted in society, for the start of puberty is taken to indicate that sin has entered their bodies and their virtue can be saved only through marriage. Many widows are forced to perform Sati as their future holds no hope; it is impossible for them to get re-married, for the entire community sanctifies a woman’s virginity as the precondition of a sacred marital union. Moreover, widows are shunned and imprisoned in their homes, for society views them as threatening figures capable of wreaking violence and destroying the peace within the cultural order. Such selfish, inhumane and brutal conduct of a community is, however, vindicated through its universal acceptance as an act of “good conscience.”