



# Woman as Subalterns : Rereading Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chhinnamasta* And *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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**Abstract** : It is argued that the life of Indian women as subalterns is very challenging, which is a serious issue raised in the fictional works of Indira Goswami. The writer in her literary works shows deep concern for underprivileged women, which gets reflected in different contexts of her works. She raises questions about several facets of women's subalternity in society. Foremost among them are attitudes towards girls' children, marriage and widowhood. In her novels, we also notice two types of characters - both voiced and voiceless; one accepts society's norms, while, the other raises her voice and stands against the oppressors or the dominant ones. The present study is an attempt to analyse the subaltern women, both voiced and unvoiced, especially the widows.

**Key-words** : Women, subaltern, Indira Goswami, fiction

## Indira Goswami as a writer

Indira Goswami was a pre-eminent female writer of the contemporary North East. Goswami has written thirteen novels and numerous short stories to her credit. She has achieved great success and recognition in the field of Assamese literature, many of which are translated into English. She published her first work in the form of the short story *Chinaki* (1962), when she was a student. Some of the widely read novels by Indira Goswami are – *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* (*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, 1988), *Nilkanthi Braja* (*The Blue-necked God*, 1976), *Mamore Dhora Tarawal aru Dukhon Uponyas* (*The Rusted Sword and Two Other Novels*, 1980), *Tej aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha* (*Pages Stained with Blood*, 2001), *Arihon*, *Chinnamatsar Manuhto* (*The Man from Chhinnamasta*, 2005), *Chinavar Srota* (*The Chenab's Current*, 1972). Some of her famous novels were made into movies also. Through her works, she has always tried to focus on women's issues, especially of the widows and other voiceless subaltern women.

## Subaltern Studies and Women:

Starting from late 1970s, Subaltern Studies was one of the outcomes of increasing criticism against globalization. In Third World nations, this started with Post-colonial literary critiques. Accepting that Post-colonial criticism derived from Postmodernism, Subaltern Studies has its origins in Marxism and Post-structuralism. The Subalternists started with restudying the Indian history through a post-colonial lens which forced them to focus on Indian historiography and the ways in which colonialism has been operating, especially in India. The subaltern studies encompass the interplay of dominance and subordination in colonial systems.

In South Asia, especially in India, women are also a lower social group displaced to the margins of the patriarchal societal system. But, it seems Gender's Question, or more specifically Women's Question has not been a central issue in Subaltern Studies. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) in his essay "A small history of Subaltern Studies" does not deny this negligence, but still he mentions women, only once, at the end of the essay when he is trying to acknowledge this issue with naming the authors who addressed it. Himani Bannerji on the other hand, in her article "Pygmalion Nation: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the 'Resolution of the Women's Question'" (2001) clearly states women's "subalternity is rendered invisible or unimportant" in Subaltern Studies (Bannerji, 2001, p. 69) and she tries to prove it through an uncompromising critique of one of the principal texts in the field. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" writes she thinks the Subalternists "overlook how important the concept-metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse" (Spivak, 1988, p. 215). Spivak criticized them via a precise "Reading Practice" of their principal works, in the beginning of their flourishing time, in 1986 when they published the sixth volume of their essay collection. This attempt aims to understand how they see "Women's Question" being addressed in primary works of the Subalternists and further to examine if their viewpoints are reconcilable. In Indian patriarchal society, "the female child, soon after birth, is groomed to develop characteristics that are considered, such as selflessness, patience, endurance, masochism, caring, loving, aesthetic, passive, diffident and religious" ( Reddy. *Problems of Widowhood in India*, p 9). Her image of widow in Indian society is that of a helpless and unfortunate woman with or without children. She is expected to suffer because of sins committed in her past birth. Due to such misconception, a widow does not enjoy any status in the community. "The widow finds herself at a disadvantage in all walks of life" (Kitchlu. *Widows in India*, p 22).

### **Women as Subversive Subaltern Voice in *The Man from Chhinnamasta***

The shrine of Kamakhya situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra is a place for religious observances. However, the natural beauty of the place stands in sharp contrast to the poverty and ignorance of the people. However, the sacrifice of animals here speak of the cruelty and savagery of religious observances, and the pathetic plight of women in a society which owes its allegiance to a female deity. In *The Man from Chhinnamasta* (2006), Goswami presents Dorothy Brown, the betrayed wife of a professor, and Vidhibala, daughter of a fanatic worshipper of goddess as somewhat identical to the animal sacrificed before deities. The only difference is that animals do not know the language of protest, whereas Dorothy and Vidhibala are the subversive women who have revolted, at least through their actions. When Vidhibala's father, Sinhadatta, following the norms of society wants, to marry her off to a middle aged-high caste man before the onset of her puberty, she denies obeying him. But her father never listened to her and came to Kamakhya to offer a buffalo calf to the deity to celebrate the occasion. At night, frustrated Vidhibala requests Ratnadhar, who is in love with her, to release the animal and save its life. Ratnadhar does so and at this angry Sinhadatta swears that he will sacrifice two buffaloes instead of one. Vidhibala unable to protest against her father openly, quietly leaves the house and joins a group of prostitutes, who were sailing back to their home in Shekhadari. However, she keeps herself aloof from them, refuses to eat anything and dies within a month. In this way, through her death, she protested against her father as well a

patriarchal societal system. She was so subversive that she did not join prostitution for money, but did so only to revolt against her father's crude and forceful decision. Then there is Dorothy Brown, whose husband has started living with another woman in her absence. Hurt by her husband's such behaviour she, broke her relationship with him and started living all by herself in a small abandoned house near the Kamakhya shrine, to get some mental peace.

But in that patriarchal society, some of the priests living there wanted to gain sexual favour from her. When they failed in their attempts, they started spreading rumour about her character. On the other hand, her husband, with his patriarchal mindset, also could not take the fact that Dorothy could so easily leave him. That year, at the time of Devadhvani, in Kamakhya along with the animals, a human life was also sacrificed and it was Dorothy Brown's. Though the identity of the murderer of this strong lady was not established, it was certain that the bullet aimed at her was meant to destroy her revolutionary self. In this way, even though both Vidhibala and Dorothy lost their lives due to the wishes of their father and husband, representatives of a patriarchal male-dominated society.

### **Women in *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker)***

The novel "*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*" (2005) was developed with the theme of the farmers' rebel against landlords, and the feudal system as well. The novelist dealt with the sorrowful saga of women residing in the South Kamrup District of Assam and their voices of protest against the system. Indranath, the representative of the feudal system, loses his life in the revolt of farmers. Again, his sister Indranath's sister Giribala too, sacrifices her life in the fight for the rights of women. The story of the novel revolves around three widows of the Gosain family viz. Durga, Soru Gosainee and Giribala. Durga is the eldest of the three. Her portrayal is under the shadow of darkness and death. She surrenders to the traditional norms and regulations wordlessly without any protest. Durga stands as the representative of many such voiceless subaltern women who do not know the language of rebellion. They know how to tolerate, but do not know how to raise their voice. The other widow, Soru has an attraction for a man called Mohidhar, a Brahmin, who helps her to collect rent. She has fantasizing dreams about him. In return, greedy Mohidhar cheats on her and tries to sell her land on a forged letter of authority. After witnessing the treachery of this selfish man, her dreams of love and faith are shattered and ruined. Giribala is the youngest, and she just cannot accept the restrictions imposed by society. She revolts against these social restrictions and, as a result, faces lots of crisis. In sharp opposition to Durga and her attitude to go back to her in-laws' house, Giribala gets scared at the news that her in-laws have sent people to take her back to her husband's house. Giribala is not in favour of keeping her life again in dark with the bitter remembrance of her dead husband who was engaged in extra-marital relationship when he was alive. What Giribala wants is freedom from a disrespected and underprivileged life, from a life of captivity of societal customs and beliefs. When Giribala returns to her father's home, after her husband's death, womenfolk living in the neighbourhood come to see her, but there is no sympathy in their words. The pathetic situation of a widow who is made to live a life of subaltern by the social customs and attitudes is finely reflected here. The womenfolk of the village warn each other "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now". Such a warning shows how women

themselves work to perpetuate the rules and regulations determined by male members of society. Durga, with her traditional mind set, wants new generation woman Giribala also to follow the societal rules and regulations that a widow should live with. Just like Durga, in our society, there are many illiterate women who want to follow the strictest rules of society without any grudge. Even though these painful laws hurt them, they accept these laws as universal truth and cannot even think of changing them. At first, Giribala seems to accept the Satriya society's traditional principles. But later, she protests against the cruelty of this orthodox society. She has started saying, "Moi Durga naiba Soru Goshanir dore basi thakibo nuaru ore jeeban, khanyakhi sahib moi mori bhoot hoi jam"

Giribala, experienced the problem of social and religious orthodoxy in her mother's house as well as in her in-laws. She found it difficult to live as a human being experiencing unjust social customs that suppress a woman's human instincts. For example, when there was once a feast in her mother's house and Giribala was locked in an isolated house for being a widow the situation was very pathetic and inhuman. It was done so, as meat was untouchable for a widow. "For a Hindu women, widowhood is considered a punishment for the crime committed by her in her previous life. Hence, she is locked down as a sinner. Widowhood in India among the upper castes is a state of social death. Widows are considered inauspicious beings" (Reddy. *Problems of Widowhood*, 2004, p 10).

However, someone stole some mutton curry from the kitchen and concealed it in her isolated room. Being lured by the smell, Giribala could not resist herself and soon started eating it. But she was discovered in her act of transgression, and she was beaten up cruelly. Such evil treatment meted out to her made her wish to die. Once, when she was with Mark Shahib, the mad elephant appeared in front of them. Scared Giribala hides in Mark Shahib's arm. At that moment, tired of her life, she wishes to die in Mark Shahib, an outcaste's, arm and whispers to herself, 'Mar! mar! ei mleshor bahupakhot thakutei toi muk mar'

Giribala was brought back to the Sattravi safely, but the in-laws of Giribala were scandalised by her growing intimacy with Mark Sahib. They arranged for her return to her late husband's home, but Giribala did not like the idea. And so, at midnight, defying a terrible downpour, she reached Mark Shaib's house, seeking his protection from the men who would take her to her in-laws. She requested him to take her away from the society which is oppressing her. Mark was moved by her courage and vulnerability, but he was unable to take any decision which would jeopardise his life as a scholar and a missionary. When Giribala was discovered with Mark, it caused uproar and a ritual expiation was prescribed for the sin of getting involved with an outcast. A straw hut is built in the open field. Amidst chanting of purificatory mantra, they set fire to the shed with the instruction to Giribala that she should come out of it when the fire engulfed it. But even after the fire engulfed the shed, Giribala did not come out. This was certainly a silent protest by a subaltern widow. Her protest rather led to her wish for death. Therefore, by immolating herself, she preferred death instead of a life of bondage and humiliation. Sadly, her act of suicide is her final act of defiance against an unjust system which grants no freedom to a widow. Soon the smell of burning human body spread over the banks of Jogoliya. This smell was not only the smell of burning a widow's flesh but the smell of burning subaltern women's dreams and aspirations alive.

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### Comparison and analysis :

In both the novels mentioned above, a strong protest against the orthodox and conservative tradition of the Hindu society that stands in the way of man's desire to live as human a being finds a very strong and artistic expression. Vidhibala and Dorothy have raised their voice against their father and husband and protested through their actions, though in the process, they lost their lives. Then there is Giribala who falls in love with a Christian lover. In her act of falling in love with a Christian, we can find elements of a woman's freedom and a strong step towards revolting against conservative society and family.

In "*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*", Durga is voiceless who accepts society's norms, whereas, Giribala raises her voice and stands against them. The subaltern women's voice could be heard in speeches of Giribala who, courageously protests, against the strict norms which society imposes on widows. A depressed woman's protest is a protest of the entire women's community. Revolutionary female character Giribala desperately wanted to end the sufferings of a life of widowhood. Suicide was the only option left in front. She committed suicide in order to protest against the set norms of the conservative society. But there are still such women who act like agents of patriarchal society and try to pass on its rules and regulations to the generations to come. Mamoni Raisom was well aware of this narrow mindedness of women and therefore has brought forth this issue in many of her novels. With some of her brilliant character portrayals, she wants us to think about the age-old orthodox norms exercised under the banner of religion and such other elements. In both these novels, she seems to ask how can a woman break the shackles of patriarchy and achieve her self-fulfilment in a world full of numerous restrictions imposed by religion and custom.

### Conclusion:

The women in Indira Goswami's novels, especially the widows - both voiced and unvoiced are the focus of concern. The problem of widowed women raises many questions. As Spivak says, they do not have any agency or platform to raise their voice. They are socially dead; only remains as a living element in society. The widows, thus, institutionalize a marginal state between being physically alive and being socially dead. For them, deprivation, negligence and dominance are the common traits of social culture which compell them to live a pathetic, inhuman and marginal life.

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