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The Voice of Subaltern: Indira Goswami's *Giribala*

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Abstract:

Since time immemorial, women are classified as the 'weak section' of the society but not the 'other half.' But in the passages of time and with the rise of feminist norms, they come under a 'same' roof demanding their own rights and even they go beyond this and want equal status and identity like the male counterpart. Ironically, even they become the subject of the subaltern studies. Their voice is unheard and untouched, keeping them aside in this man made patriarchal stereotype. They are not recognized as the subsidiary contributor of the society; instead they are walled in the house itself. In this paper an attempt is made to study the sufferings of Giribala in Indira Goswami's novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Secondly, this paper will show how she develops herself against the man coded web of the time, means though forcefully categorized as the subaltern; she raises her voice.

Gramsci used the term 'subaltern' meaning 'of inferior rank' to refer those groups in the society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. The term 'subaltern' has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the works of subaltern studies group of historians led by Ranajit Guha giving it a status of a specific genre of literary criticism. Gayatri Spivak in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak*" says that the idea of the oppressed is often written by the elite; consequently, their voice remains unsaid. In critical theory and post-colonialism, subaltern refers to the populations that are socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland.

Patriarchy has often been the force to subdue the other half of society since generations. The social norms and mores of Patriarchy have been instituted keeping in mind the hegemony resulting in the unequal polarity of society with one force suppressing the other. Of late however the emergence of feminist thoughts and practices have radically challenged those dogmas and called for reformation demanding an equal emotional and social space for womenfolk within the society. The rise of New Women's Movement has radicalized the cause of women calling for empowerment of the underclass section of society namely women. There is a general agreement among scholars that the current forms of feminism grew out of the 'Women's Movement' and 'Conscious raising groups' of the 1960s supported by various trade union movements, but the origin of some of the fundamental ideas associated with feminism date back to a much earlier period. This movement is a renewal of the old tradition of thought and action which had diagnosed the problems of women's inequality in society. The twentieth century has witnessed a growing awareness among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-respect, self-definition, existence and destiny. Women's endeavor to establish their own identity leads a revolution all over the globe. Anjali Hans in her article 'Feminism as a Literary Movement in India' says 'Feminism is defined cultural, economic and political movements that are focused towards establishing legal protection and complete equality for women. In Indian writing, feminism has been used a modest attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as women are concerned. There are several novels in English literature of India that actually portrays the actual status of the women in Indian societies. However, the modern aged women have realized that they are equally competent like men and they are not helpless unlike the past when men were considered as the sole bread earners, in today's age, women too have become direct money earners of any household.' In fact, Indian feminism is also a struggle for equality of women, an effort to make women become like men. The agnostic definition of it sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist aggression. Indian women writers placed the problems of Indian women in general and they have proved their place in the international literature as well. The role of new women is to demarginalize themselves and express their autonomy and individuality.

Giribala is the protagonist of Indira Goswami's celebrated novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. This present paper is an attempt to show how the novelist tries to depict the character of Giribala; first as a subaltern of the patriarchal stereotype and later her transformation from subaltern to the new woman.

Internationally acclaimed Jnanpith Award winner novelist Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a record of ancient Assam's sattras with palpable threat to their traditional authority. The novelist holds a powerful picture of change and transition, of degeneration and decay which find suitable expression in the central metaphor. Interwoven with the main story is

poignant tale of the tragedy of widowhood – the plight of the Brahmin widows encased in the satta and their responses to a fate worse than death. This novel is considered as one of the finest novels in Assamese Literature of feminist discourse. “*To her favourite theme of exploitation and repression is added the theme of the decay of feudal institutions which continue to linger. The institution here is the vaishnavite monastic institute of Assam that holds a religious and economic sway over the masses. The protagonist of the novel is a widow who lost her husband at a young age.*” (Goswami, 51) The woman loses her baby because of the religious practices and penance she had to undertake as a Brahmin widow. Her life is suffocating and she finds solace in an unexpected temporary presence of a Western missionary who has come to the sattras for research. When the widow, impatient with endless penance and abstinence, enters the house of the missionary- the conservative villagers say she has transgressed. They humiliate the missionary and force the widow to undergo a serious ritual. The widow in her passive way has already made a protest against the religious practices forced on her. She had eaten meat- curry at a religious feast during her isolation in an outhouse. The meat which was served in the feast was taboo for a widow. Her second major offence leads to severe chastisement. She must enter a shed which is set afire amid the chanting of mantras for her purification. The widow is instructed to come out of the shed as fire engulfs it. But she does not, thus protest mutely against a repressive society. At that time, child marriage was customary among the people. The nectar of education was restricted: *What's the use of intelligence in a girl? It will bring nothing but blemish on the family's name. Women's education is of no use. (Ch 14, P- 286)* The male could have an affair with a low caste woman but females were never allowed even to think about it in her dreams. The description of the novelist is so distinct about the exploitation of women: *Nowadays, Bihari traders or Kabuli merchants hailing from Kabul sometimes make a round of the sattras conspicuously. They lure some low- caste girls away with dreams of marriage or even marry them with due ceremony. But alas, these girls either come back ruined and disgraced, or they are sold in the flesh trade. (Ch- 15, P- 345)* Women whether rich or poor, are considered as subalterns and their voice is also not recognized.

Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is one of the most significant novels that have strong feminist discourse. The issue that has been described in it is the exploitation of woman folk but the protagonist, Giribala, the widow shows the strength of subalterns of a male coded society. Giribala not only destroys the patriarchal dictations of male counterpart but also establishes herself as a new woman of a new dawn. After her husband's death, when she comes to her paternal home, the neighborhood women come to see her and discuss about her misfortunes; but she does not tolerate these: *I am alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you* as she was not happy with her conjugal life. Her husband had several affairs with other women: *I love women. I like their company.* It clearly shows that he does not have the minimum respect to his wife. Whenever she reminds him, only the thought of his illicit affairs comes to her mind. Giribala is neither a conventional woman nor the 'Ibsenian Doll.' She is a rebellious woman with the features of 'new woman' who can fight against the male made norms of the society and who wants her own liberty to lead life.

Indira Goswami's Giribala is a strong character symbol of the new woman with modern intelligence. She even does not try to dominate her desires and traversed the margin laid for the widows. Mark Sahib's selfless devotion to the subalterns makes Giribala fall in love with him. For her it is Mark who can provide her true liberty and can also fulfill her physical needs. She is Shaw's Candida as she can say to Mark; *I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die.* When Giribala was caught red handed, the society wants to purify her but being the new woman, she refuses it and offers her life in that same hut that is used for her purification rituals.

Since time immemorial, the Gossains are the most orthodox people in Assam. They are the sole inheritors of the sattras. They are at that time, the indirect rulers. Other classes of people believe and depend on them in different matters. There are two reasons for this blind belief. Firstly, excluding the Gossains, other people were not educated during that time; and secondly, common people were misleading in some places by these mediators of God. The condition of the female folks was more dangerous than this. Females were forced to keep themselves within the four walls of the house. They were compelled to tolerate every wrong done to them. The novelist has created the typical Assamese society where till recent times women were regarded as the subalterns. The conditions of the widows were terrible as they were taught the lessons of fate. But, interestingly Giribala is liberal who seeks freedom of her own. She revolts against the age old patriarchal dogmas of the time. She defies the religious hindrances and tries to re- marry Mark. Deconstructing the male made code of conduct of the society, Giribala raises her voice beyond the horizon paradoxically symbolizing the power of women that they are no longer the margins or the subalterns or the subdued class of the world. Women wants respect and true love. They are not male's plaything. They can tolerate hardships for their loved one but disrespect cannot be tolerated by them because they are also human being, they have the equal power to perform. Liberty of women in their married life, their own value and status all are a system of feminist process. New women revolt against the so – called male domination and for their own status and identity. The novelist describes as traversing the varied textures of human conflict and covering the tension between the society and the individual including explorations of femininity and the gaps that exist between people in a relationship. Giribala is a different woman and independent purified by a self – imposed penance and at the same time free from the patriarchal symptoms. So, she guides herself with her own life – force and establishes her own place and identity and this is the 'force' of every new-woman.

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