

**AM I HEARD? REDEFINING THE VOICE OF A SUBALTERN: A
POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF ‘THE OTHER’ IN INDIRA GOSWAMI’S
THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER**

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DOI: 10.5958/2249-7137.2022.00172.0

ABSTRACT

A subaltern’s voice is always subsumed because they lack the discursive power. The paper aims to outline how Dr. Indira Goswami projects the fictitious characters in her novel with a bold voice that revolts with diverse behavioural patterns like intricate actions, revolutionary manifestations, rebellion, violence and blatant expressions. Silence takes the form of powerful resistance. Taking in cue the theory of post colonialism, the study branches to the theory of the ‘other’ and further to the concept of voice. The study delves upon the concept of ‘voice’ as a tool for resistance manifesting in myriad forms. It analyses the development of a subaltern woman transforming into a ‘new’ woman who is strong, bold and articulate. Notwithstanding the total submissiveness of Durga and Saru Gossainnee, the silent rebel, Giribala, the ‘voice’ of the novel poses a recalcitrant attitude to the rules, conventions, and taboos prevalent in the sattra. She is a new ‘voice’, the voice of dissent for the subaltern who is never heard. The study traces the evidence of ‘voice’ in Giribala with an objective to be ‘heard’.

KEYWORDS: *Subaltern, Voice, Post colonialism, Other, Resistance, Rebellion, Identities, Silence, Non Representor, Political And Aesthetic Representation*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story.” (Peter 41) [1] Expression is the only route through which bottled up contemplations dissipate. Thus the prime focus of this article lies in the premises of self-acclamation resulting in resistance and takes the research further to understanding the concept of Voice which is one of the contrivances of resistance. A subaltern is a person who is lower in rank and position. In the colonial context, it is someone who is marginalized and oppressed by the dominant culture and his voice is never heard.

The subaltern’s voice was always subsumed because they lacked the discursive power. Vinayak Chaturvedi in his article *A Critical Theory of Subalternity: Rethinking Class in Indian Historiography* discussed the opinions of the subaltern Studies group stating that the subalterns have failed to voice out their say. They were forced to resist the conditions of elite domination and economic deprivation in their everyday lives. Subaltern Studies as a historiographical project failed to “retrieve colonized women’s subject position”. (Chaturvedi 16) [2] Gayatri Spivak later developed the idea of the ‘new subaltern’ in a wider context. In her analysis, she reconsiders the

issues of the subaltern groups by dealing with the glitches of gender and particularly Indian women during Whiteman's rule. [3]

It was impossible to voice on behalf of the oppressed group's "resistance because of their representations by other dominant forces". (Morton 59) Spivak contends that, "... the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow". (Morton 59) [4]

The novel *The moth Eaten howdah of The Tusker* revolves around the desires and aspirations of the three widows of the Gossain family viz. Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala. These three widows posit the predicament of the 'othered' as they are never heard. The study traces the evidence of 'voice' in Giribala with an objective to be 'heard'. Goswami endeavors to give an identity to all the widows of Assam in particular and the entire widow population in general through Giribala's position and plight. She dexterously touches on some important aspects of widowhood and the role of religious conviction and patriarchy in immolating their identity.

Durga is the eldest of the three. Her absolute surrender to the traditional norms and regulations characterizes her as an archetype of orthodoxy. Durga is a "subaltern who can never speak". Whether it was a shadow that fell on her body or her legs touching the ground when it was not supposed to be touched or "some rice has accidentally fallen by the *jajmani* Brahmins" or "a *firingi's* shadow on a Goswami widow! She fled immediately to the well and prepared for a second bath!" (TMHT 442) Her emaciated body craves with a single desire to perform the last rites of her deceased husband.

Through the portrayal of Durga's character, this study tries to assert the failure of rituals and taboos in relieving the agony of the widows. Durga was never sluggish to perform all the rituals. Whenever the reputation of the *sattra* was at risk, Durga would take ardent steps to restore the transgressed rule. Unlike her name that resonates power, strength, and authority, Durga can be categorized as a dutiful and patient widow, zealous to protect herself from pollution. As Spivak remarks in the preface to *In Other Worlds*, that as the "theoretical models are 'too deeply marked' by 'colonialist influence'", (Morton 20) [4] similarly the subaltern status of women has its root 'too deeply' embarked in colonialism, which is patriarchy – the mouthpiece of colonialism.

Unlike Durga, the second important character is Saru Gossainee. She is a perfect concoction of tradition and modernity. An ardent follower of all the rules that the *sattra* demands of an Adhikari and a Gossain widow, she performs all the rituals with tenacity and devotion. Despite having masculine traits and strong will power she severely fails in improving the standard of widows especially her own widowed daughter, Giribala.

2. Voice of Dissent

Giribala, the third and the most significant of the other two widows is the mouthpiece of this novel. She poses a vibrant and articulate character oblivious of rules, conventions, and taboos of this *sattra*. Giribala's precepts and beliefs stand completely detached from the thoughts and actions of her counterparts, Durga and Saru Gossainee. It falls as a shock of her life when she hears everyone shouting: "Don't touch her! Don't touch her! You women with *sindoor*. She's a widow now!" Durga warns "Don't go there! The stove for cooking fish is kept there!" (TMHT

408) The house where she had spent her entire childhood becomes an inescapable entrapment, suffocating her entity and crippling her identity. Giribala cries: “Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you!” (TMHT 520)

Durga’s relentless effort to scrupulously follow all the customs stand in stark contrast to Giribala’s sloppiness and laxity in following the same rules. The ceremonious principles that appear to be very divine for Durga seem to be very insignificant and hollow to Giribala. Durga’s several attempts to bring Giribala to the fold go in vain. The constant nagging of the neighboring women: “How will she cross the mountain of days ahead? ... (TMHT 408) You have brought her back ... What will be her fate? She’ll be like another Durga ...” (TMHT 408) sounds ridiculous to her. Agitated by their constant nagging Giri shouts, “Let these women go. I want to be alone”. (TMHT 408)

The study observes one instance in the novel where Giribala throws out her pent-up feelings of disgust contemptuously. Giribala comes “out of the *puja* room bursting the door open ‘like a tigress in rage’” (TMHT 414) and she screams: “You came here to see me, didn’t you? Have you seen me now? I am still alive. I will live on and have a better life than all of you ...” (TMHT 414) Giribala is contrary to Durga; on one hand, where Durga stands as a conformist, Giribala poses to be a nonconformist. She emerges as a “new” woman seeking after liberation, desperate to lead life according to her own terms, unlike Durga and Saru Gossainee. Her decree, “I cannot just exist ... like Aunt Durga and Saru Gossainee” (TMHT 562) confirm her strong stance towards widowhood in the Assamese Sattra. Aunt Durga’s continuous sneer and taunt on Giribala: “... that I am neglecting my late husband’s wooden sandals; that I don’t offer flowers and *tulsileaves* like a pious widow!” (TMHT 563) infuriates her to the core. Giri couldn’t be like Durga, “... the feudal social system in the patriarchal society couldn’t bind Giribala. She was irresistibly attracted towards life” confessing, “Sahab! I cannot stay alive like Durga or Saru Gossani”. (Qtd in Gogoi 36) [5]

The study traces the evidence of ‘voice’ in Giribala with an objective to be ‘heard’. Goswami endeavors to give an identity to all the widows of Assam in particular and the entire widow population in general through Giribala’s position and plight. She dexterously touches on some important aspects of widowhood and the role of religious conviction and patriarchy in immolating their identity. Dr. Goswami takes Giribala’s character to an extreme degree when the question of her rights and freedom arise. In the words of HridayanandaGogoi, in his compiled book *In search of Modernity*, he comments: “She is protesting against the customs of society. Behind this rebellious mind is her dissatisfied hunger. The hunger is both physical and mental”. (Gogoi 109) [5]

As “deconstruction that provides Spivak with a critical strategy to articulate this recognition” (Morton 33) [4] to impart voice to the Subalterns, likewise Giribala had to ‘dismantle’ and ‘deconstruct’ the customs following through ages for the betterment of the society. Spivak’s discourses and essays invariably adhere to the institutional and cultural concerns and practices that exclude the subaltern, especially subaltern women. As breaking rules of the academy and trespassing disciplinary boundaries have been central to the intellectual projects of Gayatri Spivak, one of the leading literary theorists and cultural critics, similarly

An instance from the novel is narrated where Giribala breaks the canon of widowhood through her defying act. No longer able to dominate her desires, she traverses the margin laid down for

the widows in consuming food forbidden to them. In the *shraddha* ceremony of the late Gossain plenty of sumptuous meals were prepared. Dr. Goswami gives a rich description of the mutton curry and deer flesh which waters every one's mouth. "... the very sight of the curry was overwhelmingly tempting! Everybody started gulping it with relish". (TMHT 511)

Irresistibly "Giribala darted into the palanquin room and picked up the pot of mutton cooked with black beans. She forgot everything ... religion and rituals, wisdom and restraint ... she started gulping it down in great haste ..." (TMHT 512) Giribala did not stop eating even for a moment and 'swallowed one morsel after another! (512). It was a 'heinous sin' committed by a Gossain's daughter for the first time in the *Sattra*. Giribala couldn't escape from the impending disaster for which she had to pay a huge price. "Grab her hand! Grab it! Drag her out of the room!" (TMHT 513)

3. Giribala speaks

Giribala had to undergo the atonement process which fell hard on her body with wounds and bruises: "... Giribala trembling! She'll collapse. Oh! She's falling down! Catch hold of her! ... somebody ..." and in the very words of Goswami — "this drama of purification and ritualistic atonement went on for quite a long time." (TMHT 516) Saru Gossainnee being a mother and a widow herself kicks and curses Giribala. The spiteful dehumanizing act of religious penance and purification procedure and its ruthless taboos leaves her with excruciating pain. Giribala being literally locked in a claustrophobic room without food and even first aid itself highlights her subalternity. Basic humanity fails outrageously in the hands of patriarchal norms and customs.

Spivak, in her essay, *Can the subaltern speak?* discuss the diplomacy played by politics in the lieu of representation which is pronounced in the theories of Giles Deleuze and Michael Foucault. Both 'Aesthetic' representation and 'Political' representation are juxtaposed to bring to light the effacement of the subaltern's voice from the historical archives and records. They systematically ignore the question of ideology. Spivak discusses that Michael Foucault and Giles Deleuze's interpretations wipe out their role as intellectuals in representing the disempowered groups, playing only a 'masquerade' in which the intellectual is only an 'absent non-representer' (Morton 57) [4] They fall on a transparent model of representation, in which 'oppressed subjects speak, act and know' their own conditions. (Morton 57) [4]

4. Politics of Representation

From the light of the above discussion, representations made by a society according to the 'objective' interpretations from the social elites and patriarchs, is not a genuine representation but only a 'masquerade' (Morton 57) [4]. Unless a subaltern speaks for herself, her authentic voice will never reach the audience. She doesn't need an 'absent non-representer' because he will only mimic the elitist's ideology and keep the affairs of women at the periphery. In this study, Giribala's authentic voice falls deaf to the hearers. There is no one to represent her. She has to struggle alone; fight her own battle with bravery.

In a society where women are hard pressed between erroneous interpretations and objectification, it is indeed a herculean task for widows like Durga and Saru Gossainnee to break its fetters. They simply act as 'representative voice' or 'masqueraders'. They try to satisfy what patriarchal taboos and laws demand from them. Their voice is curbed with restrictions and

societal norms. They go to any extent to safeguard these social taboos. They imitate the elitist's ideologies and try "to satisfy the West's preconceived, imaginary perceptions about the East". (Hasan 31) [6] Saru Gossainnee mercilessly hauls and wounds Giribala, pouncing on her with her sharp nails on her soft fragile body on seeing her eat the mutton curry forbidden for a Gossain widow. Even Durga taunts Giribala repeatedly for not taking bath even when a shadow falls on her body or seeing any slack on performing the rigorous rites and observing fasting.

In the essay *Can the Subaltern speak?* Spivak discusses the "proxy or an elected representative, who speaks on behalf ..." (Morton 35) [4] and sadly the representatives fail in portraying the transparent position of women. Likewise, Durga is a 'proxy or an elected representative' among the widowed subalterns who fail downright to voice out the grief and anxiety of the widows. Her rhetorical gesture parodies the colonized mind of the 'Third World' thoroughly indoctrinated with 'elitist's discourse'. They "often portray non-western subjects as petrified, mute objects ... who are denuded of culture, language and history". (Morton 32) [4] Durga masquerades as a metaphor for tradition and orthodoxy. She represents the colonized widows under patriarchal domain, acting only as agents, as an 'absent non representer' (Morton 57) [4] to fulfill the taboos and wash their hands off from the crisis. Patriarchal taboos imitate their white masters and their hegemonic reign. Durga is the mouthpiece of the colonized elites, "a small group of educated, middle-class men holding political and economic power" (Morton 6-7) [4] who imitates and obey each and every instruction with godly obedience.

The taboos prescribed for the widows and the assiduous obedience that patriarchal dictators expect from them is the same game of the 'oppressor' and the 'oppressed'. The only difference between them is that the oppressor takes the manifestation in the dogmas and rituals and the oppressed are the impotent widows who cannot do anything. As Spivak was aided to deconstruct or 'dismantle' the fixed tradition that was followed assiduously for years together in her search for the voice, similarly Goswami embarked upon "dismantling the philosophical tradition from *inside* rather than *outside*" (Qtd. in Morton 28) [4].

The other important aspect in the plight of a widow which the paper attempts to throw light on is her right over her emotions, her sexuality. As the widows are young and Indira Goswami herself was widowed at a young age, she empathetically posits the legitimacy on this issue. In fact, the study takes a deconstructive approach to save all the widows of India. A very young widow in her early twenties just cannot lead her life without emotions and feelings. The study aims to legitimize sudden emotional urges, stating them to be completely normal and natural in all the novels. A vibrant young widow hardly in their late nineteen or early twenties cannot be expected to behave like an eighty-year old granny. Natural course of impulse if thwarted will only result in dissipation. In this novel, the common thread that links these three characters is their magnetism towards the male sex. Whether it is the attraction towards the opposite sex or the "ripple of excitement that passes through her body whenever he comes near her", (TMHT 453), Goswami legitimizes this attraction.

5. 'Voice' through defiance

In Fact the paper attempts to impart 'voice' through their defiance and stubborn stand of falling in love even as a widow in a rigid sattrā. The thin veil which divides purity and sin becomes absolutely imperceptible, completely removed by the author's power of expression. Saru Gossainnee secretly admires Mahidhar: "Mahidhar is a handsome man with a thick mop of hair

and a straight nose. He had bright shining eyes. The glow is from within like a luminous red partition illuminated by an oil lamp within.” (TMHT 453)

Instances are spread evenly on many occasions to emphasize and accentuate this argument. Finally, Goswami comes out triumphantly solidifying this act as natural, innate and genuine. Relying on the support of Mahidhar Babu, who has become her trusted agent and estate manager, Saru Gossainee deepens her affinity with him. Though she strictly maintains a proper distance from him and he is deferential towards her, he gradually becomes a part of her dreams and fantasies. “She cooks his meals for him and waits anxiously for his return in the evenings, even going out in the pouring rain to await his arrival”. (Satarawala 62) [7]

The study records one occasion in which the very thought of Mahidhar’s arrival arouses her desire to cook something sumptuous for his tiring day. “A hot meal will make him cheerful and happy!” (TMHT 586) The very thought surges her with tremendous energy. “Let him always remain as her shadow”. She consumes herself in her desire “Ah! Let Mahidhar come! There cannot be anything more joyful for her!” (TMHT 587)

Dr. Indira Goswami projects the constant tug of war that takes place to a young widow in her prime. She is torn between the choice of passion and rigid traditions of the *sattrā* she heads. (Satarawala 62) [7] Self-reproach and shame batter her mind tossing between desire and stringent rules inhibiting her actions.

Through the delineation of legitimating sexual attraction of a widow, the current study brings out women’s self-acclamation to their rights rather than observing lifelong widowhood. Doubly marginalized as the weaker sex of the society and a cursed widow, women become an easy prey to perform the rituals. In the conversation of Giribala, there was no atonement process or *prayachitta* observed by Giribala’s husband for his lecherous life.

This paper traces Giribala’s attraction towards Mark Sahib, the hermit-like scholar who came to do research on the history of the Assamese *sattrā*. Her pull towards Mark again points out the legitimacy given to emotions and feelings for a very young widow by Dr. Goswami. She began to feel the touch of Mark. Their quick exchange of words made them good friends and Mark remarked, “So, from tomorrow, I’ll be your student ... I am sure you’ll help me.” (TMHT 450)

Giribala’s heightened admiration towards Mark Sahib and the feelings nurtured surreptitiously swathe to the core of her heart. Her fervent zeal in helping Mark with all the information and manuscripts needed to carry out his compilation enthralls both of them. Her longing for Mark’s company becomes stronger and unavoidable. Mark remarks: “Giribala, I am very happy to see you moving about like this, instead of stagnating in that damp wooden room.” (TMHT 554) His selfless devotion to the needy, poor and marginalized, his philanthropic generosity, and the reform camps to rehabilitate and educate the opium afflicted people touched her heart.

Though Giribala’s “simple conviction stirred a chord in his heart” Mark knew how to take stock of the situation and convinced her passionate mind saying, “I am still a foreigner, an outsider ... Do you understand Giri? ...” (TMHT 559) Goswami highlights sexual attraction not as something contemptuous and abominable, but as a sweet emotion which should be legitimized and accepted. In the words of Hridayananda Gogoi, “This hunger is of the modern man – of characters who wish to tread the boundary determined by society”. (Gogoi 109) Giribala finds it

intolerable to perform all the rituals just for an undeserving adulterous husband pilfering on her outrageously.

Giribala was not a conventional Gossain confined to the yardsticks of a 'good widow' but a transgressor of taboos. She did not have any devotion towards her deceased husband who "touched and played with that notorious woman who sold opium". (TMHT 520) She wanted a free life to soar high like a free bird in the vast expanse of the boundless sky. Her innermost being whispered to Mark Sahib: "Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! (TMHT 520)

6. I speak but 'first you Listen'

The novel reaches its climax when Giribala takes the gravest step in her life and comes to meet Mark Sahib in the midst of a boisterous storm and torrential rain. Mark's admonitions, "Giribala, you are breaking the traditional code of Gossain families. Go back! Right now! Go Back!" (TMHT 646) falls deaf on her ears. Here lies the authentic 'voice' of Giribala that violates all confinements. Soon the door burst open and the priest roared, seizing the trembling couple: "Pull out that girl from his den! Pull her out! ... Bind him; Bind him tight with a rope! Don't let him escape! Be quick! Drag her out! look at her *gatala*, her *mekhala*. She's ruined! Utterly ruined! ... " (TMHT 649) She was caught red handed in a circumstance mistaken to be physical intimacy. They dragged her out and prepared to purify her as she had committed the sin of having illicit relations with a low-caste man, a *mlecha*.

Spivak's unique theory is formulated on the basis of the Indian tradition and its socio-cultural background. In her theory, Spivak exposes that the subaltern can speak but she is hardly given any audience. Morton records Spivak's view in an interview, "'the subaltern cannot speak" means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard". (Morton 66) [4] The listeners do not give a patient hearing to their say. The message is invariably hindered by the element of 'noise' leading to communication failure. They can speak but "their speech acts are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation". (Morton 66) [4] Communication becomes real only with the conscious, voluntary effort on both sides.

7. CONCLUSION

Gayatri Spivak, author of the most debated essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) [8] defines subaltern in an interview with Leon de Kock (1992) as "everything that has limited or no access to cultural imperialism - a space of difference". Spivak notes that to be a subaltern is to be removed from all lines of social mobility. Spivak further states that "subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action", Spivak gives the example of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, a young Bengali girl who committed suicide as a political response to not wanting to kill someone she was ordered to kill. In the case of the young suicide victim, the attempt at 'communicating' her message - she waited for the onset of menstruation before she committed suicide in order to stress on the fact that she did not commit suicide because of an "illicit love affair and a source of private shame" (Morton 66) [4] - failed miserably and could not be understood correctly by the 'listeners'. Her effort to 'speak' did not fulfill itself in a speech act.

Giribala too tries hard to communicate but is hindered by various socio-cultural forces. An emerging "new-woman", she could no longer endure the dreary life of widowhood and sacrifices

her life in the same hut that was used for her purification rights and then set on fire. She tries 'to the death' to speak but the communication fails due to the indifference and insensitivity of the patriarchal society. For Giribala, to die was not an escape but a 'gain' because she considered death as a better choice than dying every day under the name of religion, penance and meaningless painstaking rituals. Her 'voice' is perpetrated through her action which makes her message more audible than voice itself. Being a ruler of her own heart she tells the society about the uselessness of living a meaningless life which only aggravates their already existing suffering. She heroically accepts death rather than living in this cruel *sattra*. For her, a single death is far more easy and painless than dying every day.

The characteristic trait that differentiates Giribala from the rest of the widows is her love for freedom and reluctance in accepting her mistake. Her blatant confession stirs the readers as she says to Mark, "But, Sahib, what a strange thing! I don't feel guilty of any sin. Even after taking goat's meat that day! It didn't shake me even a little bit ..." (TMHT 562). Through her disposition, Dr. Goswami portrays the willingness of every widow for freedom, a state of existence in which every widow swathes her bundle of feelings and struggles to transform them into reality. She never repents nor does she feel guilty for her transgressed act or admits her mistakes.

As change is the only permanent thing in the world, the subalterns should continue to make their position clear to the authorities. It is only when the authorities heed to the appeals of the subalterns that the new dawn of life may be enjoyed by the subalterns in all its fullness. As Black feminism asserted their "self-determination as essential ... with the aid of their American and African tradition – Blues, Jazz, Voodoo, mumbo jumbo, symbols, rituals, myths" (Peter 66) [9] likewise Indian Feminism too should endeavor to establish her very radical identity through redefining the socio-cultural set up in its most pristine and ancestral form through 'deciphering' and 'deconstructing' the colonial/patriarchal taboos imposed on women.

This paper aims to deconstruct Spivak's cynical statement concerning the status of Indian women stating it as 'Yes, 'a subaltern can speak', if not audibly then through her gesticulations, actions and even silence, which can always be louder than words. Just as Mahesweta Devi's 'Dopdi' (*Druaupadi*), "has the courage to battle with her demons", (Peter 91) [9] she speaks, no longer remaining a subaltern, similarly Dr. Goswami's Giribala [10], gives a clarion call, she speaks out her thwarted feelings freely thereby proving her assertion: 'Yes, 'We' Speak, You Listen'.

Endnotes

Adhikar: Owner of the land

firingi: foreigner

Jajmani: Name of the highest category of Brahmins in Assam

gatala, mekhala: Petticoat or in-skirt worn by Assamese woman in Assam

Mlecha: low caste foreigner

prayachitta: Act during the conduct of penance or repentance

Sattra: Name of the caste the person belongs to

Shraddha: The 45th day of memorial ritual done by the Hindus

Sindoor: Red vermilion put by a Hindu married woman

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