

AN EXPLORATION OF THE MARGINALIZED VOICES IN THE NOVELS OF INDIRA GOSWAMI

Dr Deepak Upadhyay

Reader, Dept. of English

Agra College, Agra

ABSTRACT

Indira Goswami is one of the most celebrated writers of Indian English literature. Her novels unsparingly portray the Indian culture and traditions especially that of the marginalized sections. She has realistically presented the callous and inhuman treatment meted out to the widows in our society. By giving insight into the intimate recesses of the lives of the indigent and helpless widows in our society, Indira Goswami has exposed how we are insensitive and inconsiderate towards them. She herself was a widow and, therefore, her experiences together with the coloring of her imagination bring out artistically the suffering and the pain that a widow goes through in her life. This research paper attempts to bring out how Goswami in her novels exposes the ill treatment, the physical and psychological trauma that widows are subjected to. It will also take in its purview how her deep concerns for the poor and helpless widows and their unheard voices within their families and outside make her stand apart.

Key Words: *Victimization, Oppression, Patriarchy, discrimination, Metamorphosis.*

Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is a celebrated name in Assamese literature. She has produced some heart-touching novels like *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (Datal Hatir Uwe Khuwa Howdah), *Pages Stained with Blood*, *The Rusted Sword*, *The Blue-Necked Braja* (Nilkanthi Broja) and a truly unforgettable autobiographical work *An Unfinished Autobiography* (Adha Lekha Dastabej). Her autobiography was serialized in a journal published from Guwahati. On the occasion of 36th Jnanpith Award the Vice President of India, Sh. Krishan Kant conferred the award to Indira Goswami, appreciated her writings and said while politics and social inequalities can be divisive, it is literature and creative arts which have a capacity to cross boundaries with facility and ease. He further pointed out that Indira Goswami has surely earned her due place in the literary world by virtue of her excellent oeuvre.

Much of the world's literature has been dominated by a canon that disused women's writing. Women's literature has evolved to show common experiences, a sense of sisterhood that questions the recurring face of patriarchy. Unlike any other woman, marginalized woman in order to survive and empower has to generate their own definition and in due course of time has tried to gain their

identity through their writing. In this contemporary world where there is a demand for equal status for women, there continues to be a deep-rooted pattern of discrimination against women both within the family and by the society in general. It is so deeply rooted in the system that it is rarely questioned and we can observe that the victimization takes place at various levels. Indira Goswami is able to present realistically the feelings of these victims of various levels of oppression, and this is an artistic challenge that she is able to overcome convincingly. Indira Goswami, recognized as one of the leading voices among Indian writers, is known for her portrayal of India's culture, especially of the marginalized society. She depicts, through her novels and stories, the sexism, harsh treatment towards workers, and devastating condition of widows in India.

Interestingly, Indira Goswami through her novels deals with the victimization of the women who are marginalized in the society. She adopts a technique of fiction writing which originally blends with her autobiographical metamorphosis and helped by memory the truth of her life, a certain awareness of consequential loneliness and anxiety. She gives insight into the intimate recesses of the inner lives of widows without hiding the harsh realities that widows had to or still have to suffer. She presents to us the real sufferings and unwillingness of the victims whose female nature is brutally squashed and manipulated through the religious lords.

Indira Goswami's novels *An Unfinished Autobiography* and *the Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* are fine examples of live experiences of widows. She is herself a widow; her writings reflect what she believed, what she saw and what she perceived. She has written her novels from the direct experiences of her life. She has only molded these experiences with her imagination. Her life maps crucial transitions. Born in 1942 to Uma Kant Goswami, she had the good fortune to receive a quality education in Shillong. She enjoyed a happy though short married life with Madhaven Raisom Ayengar. The eighteen-month marriage was quite memorable for Indira Goswami, but when Madhaven died in an accident, Indira was mentally and physically destabilized. In her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*, she has beautifully recalled how she created a secluded life by shutting herself in a small room in Goalpana and even contemplated suicide.

Blue Necked Braja is an amazing narrative combining fact and fiction and autobiography and fiction as well. Indira Goswami introduces the novel as she tried to show how the mental and physical state of a young widow takes a different shape and how this change affects her life after her widowhood. The novel *Nilkanthi Braja* very powerfully projects the lives of young widows abandoned in Vrindavan by their families. Indira is probably the first Indian novelist to take up this theme and reveal the cruelty, violence and pathos that surround the lives of these helpless women. Her Vrindavan experience helps to shape the novel, which probably is, along with *Daantal Hatir Une Khoa Howdah*, her finest achievement as a novelist.

These Vrindavan widows are mainly from Bengal, and their condition is so wretched that they often face physical abuse from the pandas that function at the pilgrim town as mafias. The widows

are called "Radheshyami" as they earn their share of food from temples by chanting "Radhe-shyam" all day long in Lord Krishna's honour. In spite of their pitiable economic condition, these widows often choose to starve. Whatever meager money they are able to collect through their mendicant wanderings is deposited with the pandas to ensure that they are cremated after their death. Experience has taught them that unless such insurance is taken out, their corpses could well become the food of jackals and dogs. Thus, the insurance they purchase is illusory and since the pandas, more often than not, simply pocket the money and dispose their bodies in the Yamuna. Indira describes this sequence of actions in man's cruelty to his own species with typical mastery.

Saudamini, the protagonist, despite having caring and supportive parents, is always trying to probe the realness of widowhood. This novel focuses on social attitudes and the inner consciousness of a woman who has been brought up to believe that widowhood is somehow her 'fault' or her 'destiny', and that she should undertake 'penance'. Throughout the novel we find Indira Goswami's message through Saudamini who accepts, analyses and finally rejects the construction of the widow stereotype. The message has diversified further by addition to two more acquaintances of Saudamini: Shashi and Mrinalini. Shashi is one of the 'Keeps' of the priest, derided for accepting this option in preference to "suffering" the fate of widowhood. Shashi suffers more severely through the loveless attachment to an impotent priest and secretly harbours lesbian desire, Saudamini's other companion is Mrinalini, daughter of a temple owner who has fallen upon poor days due to mismanagement of his fortune. Here, again is a topical theme - that of a woman's economic dependence on the father and her subjection to his ill-founded financial decisions. The temple is sold off - the scion (there is no female equivalent to the word!) of an ancient family is brought to penury through no fault of hers.

The setting of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is Satra in the South Kamrup District of Assam. The plot revolves round the lives of three Brahmin widows in the family of the Satradhikar. Datal Hatir Uwe Khuwa Howdah vividly brings out the superstitions, the abuse of power and oppression that widows had to confront. The theme is the socioeconomic decadence of the feudal institution lingering on till the modern times on the threshold of the independence of India, and the repression of widows in the orthodox Brahmin society. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* has mentioned about the beliefs, customs, rituals, food habits, dress, and house-pattern of Assamese people. The widows, basically from the Assamese Brahmin community, were regarded as inauspicious and had to suffer great disadvantages. They had to lead a hopeless and frustrated life and had to observe many restrictions all through the rest of their lonely lives. A widow was served a bland vegetarian diet. She couldn't take onions, garlic, fish, meat, etc. "She (Durga) will not be allowed to eat cooked food. Her daily share for three days will be raw vegetables and fruits."¹

It is mentioned that Assamese Brahmin widows cannot wear ornaments or flowers, perfumed oil or soap and cannot use mirror. She has to wear white dresses and cannot put vermilion on her forehead. In the novel Mark says, "Do you know how beautiful you (Giribala) are? Have you ever

seen your face in the mirror?"² In Assamese Brahmin society, the widows were regarded as impure. It was believed that whatever the widows touched, it would become impure and nobody would use or touch those things again. The widows were not allowed to go to the kitchen where food was prepared for the family, "She took a step towards the kitchen. Durga, from the middle of the assembled women, cried out, "Don't go there! The stove for cooking fish is kept there."³ The Assamese society believed that due to the presence of evil stars, many unusual things happen in life. The Assamese women were brought up with the belief that husbands were an incarnation of God. They always prayed their husbands. Even a widow offered prayers to her dead husband: "...You must offer flowers, Tulsi, and water daily to your dead husband's wooden sandals (paduka). You know husband is the God for a woman."⁴

People believed that a married woman should not touch a widow. If a married woman did so, then she too would also get widowed early. The novel mentions: "Don't touch her! You women with sindoor! She is a widow now"⁵. An Assamese Brahmin widow should not touch the shadow of another person. If she does so, the others have to take a bath to purify them: "...All of a sudden, there was an abrupt cry from Durga, she had found to her horror that Mark Sahab's shadow had fallen on her body! A foreigner's shadow on a Goswami widow. She fled immediately to the well and prepared for the second bath."⁶

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker describes that the Assamese Brahmin widows were not allowed to take non-vegetarian food and if someone did so, it was regarded as a sin and they had to undergo some purification rituals determined by the society. It is believed that if a widow or a Brahmachari partook intentionally of fish and meat, they would have to go through an eight dhanu prayaschita (purification rite for expiation in which eight quarters of a rupee and other gifts are paid to the officiating priests). If they ate masoor dal, betel nut, white pumpkin, they would have to practise three dhanu prayaschita (purification rite for expiation in which three quarters of a rupee and other gifts are paid to the officiating priests). Giribala, who is a widow, takes non-vegetarian food (mutton) at a social function and for this she undergoes prayaschita. "There are ways to purify her? Rituals for prayaschit!"⁷ She was pulled towards the well. The purohit dipped dubori grass in water and sprinkled it on Giribala at intervals, uttering a Sanskrit mantra at the same time with his peculiar faulty Sanskrit accent and full of grammatical errors"⁸ Giribala darts into the palanquin room and picks up the pot of mutton cooked with black beans. She forgets everything, religious and rituals, wisdom and restraint, and starts gulping it down in great haste.

In her novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Indira Goswami breaks through her protagonist Giribala the restrictive rules that widows had to follow. For the first time, a Gaussian's daughter, in the manor house, has committed this act which for the society is heinous. This novel vividly brings out the superstitions, the abuse of power and the oppressions, both mental and physical, that widows have to confront. She powerfully exposes the cruelty, violence and pathos that surround

the lives of these helpless women. Her Vrindavan experience unfurls the social reality in a pathetic and deplorable manner. She focuses on the widows mainly hailing from Bengal, and their condition is so wretched that they earn their share of food from temples by chanting 'Bhajans' all day.

If an Assamese widow maintains a relation with another person, it is regarded as a sin by the society, and for this they have to undergo some prayaschita, as mentioned in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. It is believed that a Brahmin widow has to undergo nineteen dhanu prayaschita for the sin of having sexual relationship with a low caste man. In the novel, Giribala develops a deep attachment for Mark Sahab, who is a Christian youth, and for this, she undergoes some purification ceremony. She is brought to a small hut, made of dry banana leaves and straw, which is meant for sacrificing a goat by burning it alive in a fire, according to the rituals done for Devi Basanti. It is not a personal widowhood that comprises the substance of her novel, but one can easily see that she undertakes in her purview the lives of widows in general irrespective of her own experiences. The common thread in Indira Goswami's immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work, this is echoed multifariously.

While diving into the depth of the text of the autobiographical piece, one needs to know what prompted her to undertake this genre of writing. In her preface of *Adha Lekha Dastabej*, she clearly states that Homer Borgohair, a well-known Assamese writer, understood her agony, sorrows and even partial death and his letter inspired her to start writing her autobiography, but she could not complete it - the reason for this is not voiced by her. Her writings about herself provided an opportunity to break her silence. As a young widow belonging to a high-born Brahmin family from Assam, she had the power to assuage the thirst of her soul, pandemonium of survival, suppression and brutal treatment of women especially identity crises and subdued rumblings of the socially and physically oppressed to the assertive voice of the rebel.

Indira Goswami started writing early, but her intense and persistent involvement with the craft began when her husband 'Madhu' died in an accident in 1967, only eighteen months after her marriage. The pen became her sword to cut a path through the enveloping gloom. She attempted to unfold the essential truths of life in her work, thus, reflecting her knack to observe very minutely all her surroundings. For her, writing became a voyage of self-discovery, a discovery of surroundings, human dignity, cultural identity and the ability to reach out and touch others:

“There was a day when I woke upon it as an escape from all the ills of life, as a drop of nectar that would soothe all my woes.”⁹

Her autobiography allows us a peep into a segment of her life up to 1970. It shows not only the organic growth of a writer, but the strain under which a writer lives, a soul-searing experience of the death of one who shared her life and her dreams, who was more of a lover than a husband:

“Several...painful memories crowded my mind at the same time...when this memory of Madhu could be a source of inspiration...an unbearable torment.”¹⁰

As rightly said by Margaret Atwood that literature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind, so is *An Unfinished Autobiography* of Indira Goswami. It is indeed captivating, and touches a wide range of emotions, thoughts and thus gives us an authentic facet of her experiences, her fears, her suicidal tendencies, which used to re-surface as and when she was left alone, her quest for identity as a writer, as a widow and at last her spiritual survival. The story of her life is told in three divisions. The reading of these parts really makes many interesting revelations. They focus on how her life and her metamorphosed self are extremely close to her literary creations. She is recognized as one of the leading voices among Indian writers and known for her portrayal of India's culture, especially of the marginalized society. She depicts vividly, through her novels and stories, the sexism, the harsh treatment towards workers, and devastating condition of widows in India.

Every autobiography is the fragment of self and self-representations. It is both a documentary where scenes are strung together by a personal logic and it is also a fiction where their coherence is not of the rational orders but empowered by the writer's testimony. As a monument to self, her autobiography leaves behind a commemorative finished or unfinished to oneself, and it is this memorial that performs the work of permanence. Indira Goswami seems to validate this concept and through *An Unfinished Autobiography*, there emerges a chiseled and a finely her wrought self. Her autobiography is indeed a frank self-transformation through self-representation. She begins the first part entitled “Life is no Bargain” with the narration of the time, a time she felt she was happy but a sort of vague fear and anguish¹¹ somehow always shadowed her even at that tender age. “The desperation and suicidal tendencies of the Shillong days seemed to have secured a foothold in my heart.”¹² She further describes her childhood, her school days at Pine Mount School which becomes a tour de force of her writing. “Among my school Wales, there were a few European girls. The happy memory of some of them still abides with me - Listie Warner, Ebon Neil, Florence Saints to name a few.”¹³ She does not dig out any celebrated heritage of blood to stress the glory of her roots. She depicts herself as an ordinary child, born to parents having money and fame yet simple and down-to-earth. “My father, the late Umakanta Goswami was known for his brilliance of mind and nobleness of character.”¹⁴

Indira Goswami's candid narration of growing into an attractive young woman who has survived a suicide attempt, who has a number of admirers hovering around her like bees, who marries someone in a fit of impulsive whim but fights to get it annulled, is then again wooed and married to an engineer from South and has a short blissful period of conjugal life with him, are indeed like a motion picture. The vital sequences are so gracefully woven together that they permeate emotional responses. Her initial years are tangled with romance and yearning and melancholy as she is widowed in the prime of her youth.

"Many years have rolled by since, but the colour of Madhu's cremated bones has not undergone any change"¹⁵

Her life appears in her worth in the most natural form. Her memories never corrupt or embellish but simply states with a clarity born of an understanding of the situation and the people who are associated with it.

In the chapter "Down Memory Lane" her words cover a wide range of human experiences as she narrates almost all the memorable moments of her life from the childhood with her beloved father, his diaries, anecdotes about her grandfather, memories of her husband that keep her company during her stint as a teacher at Sanik School, Goalpara and her unexpected search for new prospects for future. The temporal settings of this part move to and fro and increasingly, we find that they 'overlap'. The blurring of times in the story is achieved in shifts, in parts in emotional nostalgia. She dives deep into human psyche and unfolds human mind in relation to nature and social scenario. What, in addition, strikes us of this autobiography is that Indira Goswami is, many a times, shadowed by nostalgia and acute depression but still she is not averse to life, rather, she participates avidly in all its unfolding genre.

The author with graphic description in the third part 'City of God' describes her two years stay at Vrindavan, losing herself in research on the Ramayana, her comparison with the life of Tulsidas, lustful sanyasis and priests, rapacious pilgrim guides, lepers, beggars, sadhus, half-naked men and women lying on the roadside waiting for death, corruption and exploitation in name of religion. The autobiography in the end reflects her inner conflicts—her passions and body desires alive and seething within, learning a load of personal grief and a tumult of voices within; her endeavors to resolve her predicament by wishing for miracles to happen and complying with destiny and therefore caught in a never-ending struggle. This autobiographical work acquires distinction by virtue of author's artistry in presenting pellucid picture of the anguish, the apprehension, the insecurity, the sense of alienation and the sense of displacement. Yet she had the ability to stand face to face with life and reality, a person who passed through the crucibles of life without even submitting herself to another will. That in a way lends future credence to her unfinished account of life. She is one of those rare souls who have been able to give an insight into the great power which is working behind this universe. In turn, the endeavor to grapple with that power finds reflection in this book and lends strength to it.

In the last few centuries women writers have considerably widened and deepened the areas of human experience with their sharp, feminine perception of life, successfully transmuted into verbal artifact. Virginia Wolf, Tony Morrison, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Indira Goswami, Jhumpa Lahiri, to name a few, have placed themselves as feminist writers to simulate a feministic thinking in the heart of readers and to raise women's conditions towards betterment.

Thus, the violence that humanity inflicts on itself, whether as group or individual, the pain and the

misery they create, the protection and love which they are either unwilling or unable to provide but which they desperately crave - these are some of the themes that run through Indira Goswami's oeuvre. Her graphic depiction of violence and her use of startlingly fresh images are aspects that make her works unique not only in Assamese but in all of Indian literature. Her autobiography conveys a sense of pain, the restlessness, and the suffering that she has undergone in various phases of her life. And, therefore, writing helps her overcoming all the pains and pangs which she has been subjected in her life. With indefatigable energy and incessant effort, she rose above the circumstances that moulded her, but never lost her profound sense of identification with those who continued to suffer in the river of pain.

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