

International Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal

Golden Research  
Thoughts

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2231-5063

Golden Research Thoughts Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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## SALVATION FOR AGONY: INDIRA GOSWAMI'S AN UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY



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### Short Profile

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#### ABSTRACT:

During 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. The world body of literature in English would have been much power today but for the contribution of women writers, the new series studies in women writers in English is a grateful acknowledge of that contribution and public recognition of their voice. Since time immemorial, woman has always faced the problems of oppression, exploitation, injustice, inequality, patriarchal domination, marginalization, sexual and emotional harassment, suppression and colonization. Woman has always been the object of male subjectivity. Her social role and position in society is also assigned by patriarchy.

#### KEYWORDS

*Indira Goswami's, Unfinished Autobiography, patriarchal domination, marginalization.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 was indeed a seminal work investigating not only the position and role of women in society but also scrutinizing how male writers have viewed and portrayed woman in their writings which was followed by a spurt of writings on feminism making frantic efforts to re-think and re-examine the entire gender issue.

Goswami is known as a sensitive creative writer who is unable to bear the brutality and intolerable oppression of human beings. Excessive pain and sorrow left a deep impact on her psyche which led her stand in support of the oppressed and the underprivileged.

Indira recalls how she shut herself in a small room in Goalpara and contemplated suicide, and how her only sustenance was the memory of a carefree childhood and the letters of her father. In other words, the privileged past seemed over and widowhood began to cast a dark shadow on Indira's self-image even more than on her external circumstances. In some confusion she accepted a suggestion to choose a life in Vrindavan, the most traditional destination of bereft Hindu widows. It is not that she had no other possibilities. She recounts in her memoirs that two paths were before her: she could have proceeded to London, "that land of ancient Western tradition and culture" or she could have moved to Vrindavan, "the centre of ancient Hindu tradition and culture."

From early age Indira suffered from mental dejection. Several times she attempted to jump into the Crinoline waterfall, which is located near her house in Shillong. She mentions it in her autobiography. She got serious mental shock after her father's death. Again she was mentally broken when her husband Madhavan Raisom Ayengar died in a car accident in Kashmir after eighteen months of their marriage. After that she returned to Assam and started teaching at Goalpara Sainik School. At that time she started writing again to avoid loneliness of her life. During this period she wrote two novels. These are *Ahiron* and *Chenabor Srota*. She shares her own experiences with her husband in Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir in these two books.

The fall of the two strong pillars of her life i.e. the death of her father and her husband left her shattered and she almost reached to the brink of madness when she started taking sleeping pills to kill herself. The untimely death of her father forced her to attempt suicide in 1961, but her fate brought her back to life. Her attempt of suicide led the hell fire lose upon herself. Another tragic event, which came as a shock to her, was the death of her loving and caring husband Madhu. She could not enjoy the blissful and happy conjugal life with her husband for a longer period.

Her biggest shock came after her husband's death and the beginning of her widowhood. Her mother wanted her to read scriptural literature and lead the ascetic life of a widow. But, she saw how the rigidity of customs had taken a toll on her aunt and how she was considered "polluted" after her widowhood. As she refused to observe the traditions, she became more isolated and lonely. Thus, in her own life she stood in the periphery because of her gender, in spite of her birth to an upper class Brahmin family. Such was the undercutting of the set identity, in which she was isolated in spite of belonging to a superior hierarchy.

Indira Goswami faced the life full of struggle and hardships courageously. Her fate challenged her to survive in the most pathetic conditions of her life. She plunged into the sea of suffering as a true fighter, struggled bravely with the strong waves of the fate, and reached to the shore with a more experienced outlook towards life. The misfortunes of her life led her to be a more mature person and made her to look at life from a wider perspective.

Often, Indira Goswami is termed as a feminist for speaking on behalf of those women, who have remained on the periphery and have suffered under the patriarchal control. Preeti Gill says, "... to me she was very much a feminist writer stating her views strongly and effectively in story after story and engaging with the social injustices and the inequalities she encountered" (212). There are very few Indian women

autobiographers who have given such a beautiful and intimate account of their life in their regional language. She has described her life in such an absorbing style that once you open the pages you become impatient to go through the whole book as early as possible.

Indira's growing up and her turning into a young beautiful woman becomes the major focus of the first part of the autobiography entitled as "Life is no Bargain". Indira reveals her experiences of turning into an adult. Her physical changes made her conscious of her own "body" as well as her difference from the male members of the society. She becomes aware of others' gaze and their gestures. This is the first stage leading to her metamorphosis where she had to confront herself with destiny. She confesses that she "... was obsessed with the thought of taking her own life", even at this young age of her life (4). Her fascination with the image of Jesus and his crucifixion is symbolic of her obsession with death and the forthcoming calamity in her life. She had been such a sensitive soul that even the thought of losing her near and dear ones was unbearable to her. She shared a very close and strong relationship with her father. He had been her companion during her childhood days. But the sudden death of her father made her cry her heart out. She could not dream of her existence without paternal care, affection and protection.

Amrita Pritam writes, "... She would become so agitated that she would feel like drowning herself in the lake...previously suicide had become a part of her mental makeup and had degenerated into an obsession...in 1961,...But as ordained by fate, her feet led her back to life." (viii)

Indira Goswami had to face so many difficulties in her life. About her baptism of fire, Amrita Pritam writes:

And then a time came when she had to face something much worse than the travails of the baptism of fire. It was the hell fire of society. People talked in whispers behind her back, "She must have conceived... Imagine an unmarried girl becoming a mother... That's why she took such a desperate step... that's why she wanted to commit suicide!" (viii-ix)

Indira Goswami writes about her problems she faced in her life and what people thought about her suicide:

Physically, I became a little worn out and lost some of my glamour after that attempt at suicide. Besides, facing the world outside became a problem for me. I hardly dared go out for fear of the spate of uncharitable remarks passed on me by passers-by. Some of the remarks were quite vulgar and too cruel to be forgotten. I still seem to bleed when I remember them, for they prick me like spikes even on this distant day. "She must have been with child...had an affair with somebody... otherwise why should she attempt suicide?" (14)

However, she confesses having a number of boyfriends but denies having crossed the limit with any of them. She writes, "True, of lovers and admirers and well-wishers I had no end, but I had not been to bed with any of them." (14)

She writes about the discrimination based on the caste among the students in those days. She writes,

"The particulars of the school and its surroundings are vague in my mind now. So are those of the teachers. The pupils carried their own seats, mats of different sizes, which they spread on the floor and squatted upon. My brother and I were escorted to this school by two servants, who carried our mats too. The two acted like our bodyguards, for they shouted at the knot of naked or semi-naked school children to keep away from us – the son and the daughter of the Gosain. We were a separate, exalted class, not to be touched by those who were our inferiors!" (69)

Most of her childhood was spent in Guwahati and Shilong, but she says that the days which she spent at their Sattrā, left a lasting impression on her mind that she wrote a voluminous novel on the background of the Sattrā in which she received prestigious 'Basanti Devi Memorial Award' for the novel by Assam Sahitya Sabha. She also had an experience of riding on the elephant. She recollects:

At times, my brother and I rode our elephant to go round the villages of the neighbourhood. I still

seem to sense the foul odour emanating from the deep wound caused by the iron goad on Rajendra's shoulder. I also remember the foul smell of the wounds of wild elephants as they were being tortured to tameness. To me, a mere child then, it was a symbol of utter brutality. (73)

In one of the episodes, she tells about the widowed condition she saw in her childhood days. She writes, "The sad tales of many of the young girls of my age whom I knew, haunt my mind. They belonged to the Sattra. Who were they? Yashoda, Jayanti, Deh, Satari – merely names to me now..." (77)

Indira Goswami is an outstanding writer who reveals the lived experience of ordinary people. Her powerful graphic descriptions and haunting images bring to light the centrality of the body in human affairs and the codifications of political, religious and cultural systems through the body: the bodily processes of life, the impact of gender and age, and the physicality of poverty, norms and conflicts. Indira Goswami herself is the witness of caste discrimination and caste system in her childhood days. She writes in her autobiography, "In my childhood days, I was not allowed to play with low caste children. I rarely obeyed that rule. Very often, I was dragged to the well and buckets of water were poured over my head for purification." (13)

Indira also throws light on the practice of 'sati' among the Hindus: There was also orthodoxy 'sati' system. She writes,

It is said that one of my great-grandmothers was taken away by the Burmese soldiers in 1819, when they invaded Assam for the second time, and my father's eldest sister was married in the family of "adhikaris" of Rajapukhuri, whose husband was the grandson of Bishnupriya Devi, who had immolated herself on the burning pyre of her husband and had become a sati. A concubine of the great king, Bhaskar Verma of Kamrup immolated herself after the death of the king. After that, the only recorded sati incident is that of Bishnupriya. (13)

Writing in her Assamese mother-tongue, Goswami highlights the diverse cultural context of the remote region. She depicts contemporary political and social dimensions, avoiding romanticism and anthropological tendencies. Her intimate knowledge of community realities is closely woven into the narratives that tackle controversial subjects such as the plight of widows (*The Blue-Necked Braja*) and the experience of Sikhs in the anti-Sikh riots (*Pages Stained with Blood*), and examines the impact of the caste system, prostitution and ethnic strife on the human body and psyche. Her *An Unfinished Autobiography* is remarkable for its utter frankness. An important voice for the marginalized, she also writes about Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir and Vrindaban, bringing local issues to the core.

Her journey to Kashmir with her husband brings disaster for her and her ill fate snatches everything from her when her darling husband dies in an accident. Her entire world collapses in a dizzy. Without a man's support and love, a woman considers herself lost. Moreover, she considers her existence meaningless in the world. Being a widow is a curse in the society and that also at such a tender age, it was an unpardonable crime. Her life changes completely. After her husband's death, she took to the habit of taking sedatives to maintain her calm and peace.

The second part of the autobiography, entitled "Down Memory Lane", provides a flashback on Indira Goswami's miserable life after the death of her husband Madhu and the memories of her forefathers in Assam. Her biggest shock comes after her husband's death and the beginning of her widowhood. Goswami's mother wanted her to read scriptural literature and lead the ascetic life of a widow. But, she has seen how the rigidity of customs had taken a toll on her aunt and how she was considered "polluted" after her widowhood. As she refused to observe the traditions, Goswami became more isolated and lonely. Thus, in her own case Goswami is pushed to the periphery because of her gender, in spite of her birth in an upper class Brahmin family. Such undercutting of set identity, in which Goswami is isolated in spite of belonging to a superior hierarchy, can also be traced in her writings.

Being a widow, and that too a young widow, Indira's life was not so easy. At this point she went back to writing. She claims, she wrote just to live; otherwise it wouldn't have been possible for her to go on living. Her experiences in Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir, where her husband worked as an engineer were used in her novels *Ahiron* and *Chenabor Srota*, respectively. After working in Goalpara Sainik School, she was persuaded by her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu to come to *Vrindavan* and indulge in research work for peace of mind. Her experiences as a widow as well as a researcher find expression in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja*, which is about the plight of the Radheswamis of Vrindavan who lived hand to mouth and carried money sacrificing their daily food so that they receive a decent, ritualized cremation after their death. But most of them were denied even of this and the bodies never received cremation according to Hindu rites and the money used to be snatched. Indira exposes this aspect of *Vrindavan*, the city of Lord Krishna, ruthlessly in her novel. It was the first novel to be written on this subject.

Indira Goswami suffered from depression since her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, she mentions her inclination to jump into the Crinoline Falls located near their house in Shillong. Repeated suicide attempts marred her youth. After the sudden death of her husband, Madhavan, in a car accident in the Kashmir region of India, after only eighteen months of marriage, she got addicted to heavy doses of sleeping tablets. Once brought back to Assam, she joined the Sainik School, Goalpara as a teacher. At this point she went back to writing. She claims that she wrote just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living. Her experience in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh, was used in her novels *Ahiron* and *The Chehnbab's Current* respectively.

Indira emphasizes here on her yearnings of the flesh and hunger for the sexual union that she expected from her husband day and night. She confined herself to a single room and renounced the world, which could not bring solace to her scorching heart. The dark isolated room symbolized the emptiness and vacuum in her life, which nobody could occupy without her will. Indira writes, "Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal life affects the poor wife? Most of the time, as I realized, a sense of endless, ruthless pain suppressed all the yearnings of the flesh". (54)

Her loneliness and the separation from her beloved helped her find her way out of this agony and start anew. Recollection of the past and the feeling of nostalgia play an important role in the life of a "lonely woman". The circumstances of her life take her back to the childhood days spent with her father and grandfather. Indira reads the letters and diary of her father and recalls all those happy memories, which even if she wants cannot bring back to her life. She started associating herself with the dead and lived in her own world. Her sense of "association" and "relation" to someone living was lost with the death of her husband. The presence of a male counterpart in the life of a woman is as important as water to the plant. This sense of "loss" compelled her to look back to her father's protection. Throughout the second part of the autobiography, Indira Goswami goes through a kind of interior monologue. Her revelation of the outer world and her interaction with the people outside is of less importance at this point.

Being a widow means the loss of the charm and beauty of life for an Indian woman. The sense of being beautiful breathes its last with the last rites of one's husband. Does her love for bindi and kumkum, kajal and lipstick blow away suddenly with the death of her husband or is it only a double life a woman has to lead after being a widow? Indira throws light on the various attempts made to "de-feminize" and "de-sexualize" (Sogani: 7) widows at that time. Their heads were shaven. They were supposed to be clad in white saris. They devoted themselves fully to the worship of the God and lived an austere life. They were considered inauspicious and were cut off from all the social and religious gatherings. Indira remembers the treatment of her widow aunt during her childhood that how the Brahmin widows told their daughters, "Touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin". (56)

In search of inner peace and solace, Indira visits various saints and "sadhus". Her visit to Deboria

Baba was one of them. But her visits to Deboria Baba, Mauni Baba and various others were all futile. The acute pain and constant thoughts of Madhu accompany her everywhere she goes. Instead of any remedy for her pains, she only finds the religious hypocrisy of these saints who exploit young helpless widows and poor people in the name of religion. She flaunts the irony of the situation that on the one hand there are people who die due to poverty and starvation and on another we find the saints and the "sadhus" who remain busy with expanding their business.

Indira was so nervous and desperate after the death of her father due to cancer that the mental turbulence finally drove her to attempt suicide. Indira writes, "And yet, I could bear the sight of my father languishing as a victim of cancer – the same person without whom, I was sure, I could not live!" (4) She adds further:

Father passed away –and my mind, which since childhood smarted under the constant fear that I would not be able to bear his loss, bore it calmly... many more near and dear ones also passed away – many of them my blood-relations, whom I had known closely...under the grip of that old sense of despondence and pain... my mind seemed busy counting the number of graves in the graveyard. What other wretched soul did ever feel like bearing the cross at the first flush of youth like I did? Oh! The suffering of my soul! Oh! The pain! ... As for me, the two old persecutors of my soul – agony and despair – continued to inflict their lashes as violently as before. (12)

But still, marriage through the settled mode remains a distant dream. She writes, "Marriage, for me, still remained an elusive prospect. In desperation, mother started looking for a match even in such families of which I could not at all approve. I nearly lost all restraint." (20) The failed attempt pushed her further into melancholy, till she met Madhavan. "Many years have rolled by since but the colour of Madhu's bones has not undergone any change. Only I have changed several of the caskets in which I have preserved them," ponders Indira Goswami. Her only salvation was writing. She poured her gloom on paper, picking the sorrows of others and enmeshing them with her own to produce short stories at first. Wrote Amrita Pritam, "...But it was certainly a fateful moment when Nature herself made her take her first step towards metamorphosis, she picked up her pen to do creative writing. She turned out a spate of stories, all of which had the distinction of being published."

Then she goes on to marry the man of her life, Madhu, who is a construction engineer. She remarks:

Once again I appeared before a magistrate in the court at Mangaldoi, where a number of my well-wishers accompanied me. I signed on the dotted line. I have no idea even to this day as to the kind of agreement I signed to annual Section 11 of the Civil Marriage Act... I was so depressed that I did not even glance at the papers. The heap of papers lay before me like a bundle of dry bones. After coming back home at Guwahati, I plunged for days into a well of dark depression. Again those sinister thoughts of self-annihilation haunted my mind! In retrospect, now I feel as if I was transformed into an automaton at that destined hour of my life. I could hardly raise my head to read the documents. The agony and shame of the entire episode made me insensate, as it were. Out of the court, I stepped into another world. (23)

The third part of *An Unfinished Autobiography* is entitled as "The City of God" in which Indira relates her experiences at Vrindaban. She writes in her preface: "The third part of this work contains my days at Vrindaban with my teacher, Professor Lekharu, and my various experiences while staying in a ruined temple." The turning point came in Goswami's life which is mentioned in the third part of the autobiography. About it, Tiwari writes:

The third part, *The City of God* has her experiences at Brindaban. Before we go on, we must pause to remember what *Vrindaban* means to a common Hindu. *Brij Bhumi* has tons of meaning for us. *Vrindaban* is the place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood days-the gopi days, the makhan days, the charming, naughty childhood days with Yashoda. The child Krishna forms a very thick and deep layer of the subconscious of every Hindu. In fact the Indian child utopia in its marked difference from Western



concept of a child is much due to the story of Krishna and its intuitive acceptance by the Indian masses." (214)

Indira Goswami also reports incidents where painfully saved money of Radhesyamis is taken away just like that: "The old Radhesyamis who had lost their all, could only bewail their lot. They could produce no written evidence of their deposits with the Brahmin from Uttarkashi, for they had kept none. Nor did they have any knowledge of the man's whereabouts." (152) The young *Radhesyamis* are exploited. One of her acquaintances, Lalita Dasi tells Goswami, "You must have observed the ways of these *munshis* (the secretaries). They engage these young widows for doing their household chores. Sometimes they force them to sleep with them". (157)

After losing her husband, she undergoes an acute sense of loss, worthlessness, and depression. She seeks spiritual solace. On such occasion when she is trying for peace of mind (through gurus) she comes across a fiery-eyed and robust-bodied holy man coming directly from the Himalayas. Well, at the end of her encounter, the holy man tells her:

I shall one day sit in meditation in that hove. You shall have to sit beside me for some time. But you must not have a thread on.... However, red garlands made of bamboo strips and leopard skin you can put on. There are pieces of such skins in our *godown*. Many do their meditation in this manner. A number of young girls like you also have gone through it. (138-139)

Indira's husband Madhu was an encouraging companion. He had brought to her life charm, happiness and prosperity. An abrupt end of that state of togetherness caused a great blow to her. Tragedy plunged her into isolation. She confined herself to her solitary cell in a residential school at Goalpara and later in the crumbling basement in *Vrindavan*. She engaged herself in teaching, creative writing and introspection. She buried herself in her search for a distant and elusive spiritual beauty, connected with the divine. It was the thirst for the infinite, timeless that triumphs over the finite, even death.

The Third sub-part is about her days spent with Madhu at Chenab bridge project in Kashmir. Observing the life of the workers, Indira Goswami received the raw material for writing her novel. She writes, "Living with Madhu in the camp on the bank of the Chenab, I started to write a novel on the life of the workers." (35)

Indira Goswami suffered from perennial depression right from her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, she mentions that she always had the inclination to jump into the Crinoline waterfall located near her house in Shilong. It was the death of her beloved father, who she was extremely attached to, left her shattered. Persistent thoughts of suicide haunted her.

Due to her husband's death, the members of her family and Madhu's brothers were full of sympathy for her. They were all well-established in life. They had asked her to go and settle down at Malleswaram in Karnataka. But she was not so inclined. Then, she sold off the small property she had. Her mental and physical condition was not so good. Her life was so miserable. Though she hoped some sign of Madhu's presence, she knew that that was all an illusion. She writes, My mind was utterly distraught with grief. In the happy days gone by, I used to carry sweet-scenting attar in my vanity case. Now that Madhu was no more, I had sleeping draughts instead. I did not know how it would be possible for me to drag my days to the end of life....But I knew that was all an illusion. Nothing lingers of a man after death. Tear your heart to shreds, yet your beloved returns not to inquire why. Terrible, indeed, is this tale of the overnight separation of two beings, truly united once, in the depths of their being. But there is no help. (53-54)

Then she herself solved her problem and decided firmly not to cry but to write to overcome her grief. She writes about it:

Later, I resolved to face life boldly, and never to weep. An overwhelming sense of grief and misery and an uncertain future combined to disconcert me. I did not have the courage then to look up, literally, to the sky above my head. So, I often kept myself confined indoors. The sense of void that possessed my soul then, no words can describe. I engaged myself in rounding off, as much as possible, the half-done novels,

which I had started while at the work-site in Kashmir. That was a kind of struggle, as it were, with my own self. A sense of overwhelming conflict, resulting in tears, and geysers of blood shooting up unseen in my heart, marked those moments of utter dejection. (54-55)

A Sikh lecturer was the first of many, who, after Madhu's demise offered her a new life. She writes, It would be wise to accept life as it is. I should accept this man and dedicate my life to the pursuit of literature. ...I was steeped in darkness. Despair would sneak into my soul and bog me down. "How would it be possible for me to live now that Madhu is no more? I put the question to myself. It evaded an answer. It was several months since that fateful day, but I did not have the courage yet to look up at the sky. (58) The sudden loss of her husband was such a shock that she decided to swallow the sleeping pills and end her life. What she did was that she collected the sleeping pills instead of collecting lipstick or sweet-smelling attar.

Throughout her life she struggles a lot and in between she is nostalgic. She writes, "So, I left Goalpara, my soul full of apprehensions about an unknown future. Many dear faces I left behind – of colleagues and pupils. They now all swarmed around me – lovely faces, ever ready to console and consider." (90)

Being a single woman and a struggling soul, many men tried to seduce her. She recalls:

They were all men — looking for a chance always to enjoy the company of a single woman. One of the men who had declared himself to be well-wisher of mine, left behind on my table some such vulgar pictures, which filled my mind with disgust against all males... then I was firmly convinced that the measure of animality in man was much more than in women. (83)

Indira Goswami also reports incidents where painfully saved money of Radheshyamis is taken away just like that. 'The old Radheshyamis, who had lost their all, could only bewail their lot. They could produce no written evidence of their deposits with the Brahmin from Uttarkashi, for they had kept none. Nor did they have any knowledge of the man's whereabouts.' (152) The young Radheshyamis, are exploited. One of her acquaintances, Lalita Dasi tells Goswami, "You must have observed the ways of these munshis (the secretaries). They engage these young widows for doing their household chores. Sometimes they force them to sleep with them. (157)

Indira Goswami told another example of Radheshyami. In front of the temple at Brahmakunda, where she lodged, there was another temple, where some devout Bengali disciple started a trust in its name. A fair-complexioned Bengali was the priest of that temple. With him, in the same narrow room, there lived a *Radheshyami*, who was quite old. She cooked his meals, as well as the boiled-rice offering for the deity. Indira Goswami writes,

Later, I heard that they were not formally married. Many people used to live like that. .... I had the impression that there was nothing improper for a woman like her to live with a man. I didn't consider such an arrangement to be sinful. It was rather commendable that one could be of help to the other. That was how I perceived this situation. (121)

In winter season, the severity of it increased and the temple domes were almost invisible due to fog. A cold breeze began to blow from the Yamuna. At that time the condition of *Radheshyamis* became worst. Indira writes, "The bony bodies of the *Radheshyamis* clad in rags, reeled under the cold." (122)

Specific amount of donations were given to other bhajan ashrams of Vrindaban. But Indira Goswami's mind was heavy with the thought of helpless *Radheshyamis* and their exploitation. She laments:

My mind was heavy with the thought of the poor and helpless *Radheshyamis*. Since the pilgrims offer substantial donations, why should it not be possible to start a hospital for the *Radheshyamis* and other poor people of Vrindaban? And voice a protest, and demand their dues? Was it in the power of those feeble women on the threshold of death, ever to shout in unison that their

The articulation of subliminal depths of a woman's psyche adds fascination to this autobiography.

Indira began to concentrate on her work. But she was swallowed up by the aching gloom of her heart. She decided to go out to buy some sleeping draughts from the Sindhi doctor's store. She was assured that they would bring her relief. She writes:

Having lived in the city of God, many a stricken soul accepted the pearls of wisdom that could be gathered there. This is what the holy men had to say, "Why escape from this world? This world itself is the garden of heaven, and these trees and shrubs are the wishing-trees. Work without attachment, work without the desire for the fruit of your action. Know that whoever is averse to work, invites ruin upon himself." (158)

She knew everyone tried to overcome grief. But she never gave herself to despair. She reports:

Even the illiterate, ignorant, neglected dregs of humanity, the *Radheshyamis*, have picked up these pearls of wisdom. They have accepted life as it is. They have not jumped into the Yamuna. They've accepted life with all its pitfalls, all its struggles. I've seen their splashes of blood, but never seen them surrender to despair. (158-159)

The thought that she could possibly be mistaken for a profligate widow abandoned at Vrindaban was very painful to her.

It was during her stay in Vrindaban that she learnt the general truth and principle of life. She puts it thus:

...all things come to an end one day. Nothing abides. Not even one's closest companions keep one company for ever. They, too, take their turn, and disappear. Only a lonely, mysterious path lies before all of us. A person can be said to live, in the full sense of the term, only those few days when the people who are tied to his heart-strings, are still around him. (181)

In those miserable days, Indira's friend Manu had to sell her gold watch when her teacher said to her, "A person in distress is often forced to sell of his treasured possessions. But my mind doesn't allow me to buy them cheap." (184) So Manu's pride of possession of a gold watch was sold off in a trice. Indira comments: "In that city of God, there is no dearth of self-seekers to take advantage of people in a terrible plight. There are quite a few who are always ready to pounce on people in distress." (184)

Indira read somewhere that about 80 % of the prostitutes take to the degrading calling under actual economic compulsions. Only 20% join it by choice. It was obvious to her that in the case of the woman who came to her, the choice was voluntary. She says:

Earlier, on the banks of River Chenab in Kashmir, I had seen a prostitute...But this one, I met in the city of God itself. The former was perhaps compelled by her situation to take to this path, but the present one adopted this course of self-abasement of her own will. (200)

Indira is sensitive about the problems of the downtrodden people in the society. In her autobiography, she tells about the ill-fated untouchables who were in group of devotees. There were objections against entering the temple. But the Indian Constitution had declared in no uncertain terms that untouchability was abolished, and that to practice it in any form was a cognizable offence. She writes, To the best of my knowledge, another law was enacted in Uttar Pradesh in 1956, bestowing upon these people many more, privileges to offer prayers in the temples. Yet, they were too ignorant of their rights and privileges to assert themselves. They could not be easily persuaded to do so. They would rather resign themselves to their fate. I saw number of these people also increasing almost daily. They would be singing devotional hymns in the yards of the temples that come up overnight, but not at the old, established ones. The cunning pilgrim guides exploit them in all possible ways. They would advise the ignorant devotees to have the names of their parents or other near and dear ones engraved on marble plaques to be cemented on the temple floors. As a result, the floors presented a pattern grotesque beyond belief. (217-218)

Indira Goswami describes a series of actions of man's cruelty to his own species with exceptional mastery. Her autobiography conveys a sense of the pain, the restlessness and the suffering that she has undergone in various phases of her life. Writing was her way of overcoming these. With indefatigable

energy and incessant effort, she rose above the circumstances that mould her, but never lost her profound sense of identification with those who continued to suffer in the river of pain.

Indira Goswami's autobiography and her fiction offer a carefully drawn continuum of social change in Indian society. There are many more aspects to Indira Goswami's "womanism". As a young woman she found tragedy and pain whereas she was born to happiness and privilege. Performing an act of self-withdrawal, she came out stronger with the realization of a map of social problems relating to women. The restlessness springs from an urge to speak out her commitment to the causes of equity and justice. In Delhi, too, Indira Goswami was engaged with civil concerns, when the anti Sikh riots brought the city to shame in 1984. Her personal and professional life was caught in turmoil. Her novel *The Pages Stained with Blood* captures the brutality and the distrust in the cityscape where the fugitives from justice and the perpetrators of crime are difficult to distinguish. So to understand the complex nature of mercenary agents of crime, Indira even visited the infamous GB Road and spoke to the sex workers. The common thread in her immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work this is echoed multifariously.

In *An Unfinished Autobiography*, Goswami writes: "I loved writing about the lowly and the lost. My sympathy went to those who were denied justice and were victims of oppression". (20) Although Goswami was born in a Brahmin family, as a woman, she experienced the restrictions and constrictions of her conservative society. Her widowhood after only two years of marriage, and her subsequent sufferings, intensify her sensitivity towards the victims of social and individual oppression. Due to her personal sufferings, she understood the plight of those living in the periphery and her sympathy for such victims is seen through the life of the people in and around her life.

Her attitude towards life gets changed. The sky, which is symbolic of one's "consciousness", "thinking", "wisdom" and "spiritual vision", (Guerin: 185) is a recurring metaphor in her autobiography. After the death of her husband Madhu, she has not been able to look up at the sky and confront it, which meant she could not confront her own self. Often she says that "At a time when I was so steeped in despondence that I could not look up at the sky" (79). While working at Goalpara Sainik School, she often faced this situation and questioned "Has anyone else ever faced a situation like mine so that he cannot look up at the sky overhead?" (80) Even after a long gap of years, she could not do so, which shows her lack of vigour and her ignorance. However, her journey to Vraj brings her face to face with her own consciousness and makes her understand the bitter truth of life that it is not a bed of roses. One has to live as much happily as one can even during the worst circumstances of the life. Her "wisdom" and "spiritual vision" is reflected in her perception of the outer world at this stage and she could look up at the sky too, when she says:

For a long time after Madhu's death, I had not the nerve to look up at the sky above my head... But on that day, the sky above my head, on the bank of the Yamuna at Chriharanghat, had a rare splendor. A soft, reddish glow, much like that of the radiant lips of a youthful girl, pervaded the sky.... At the touch of the glory radiated by the sky at the moment, all the ugliness and cruelty of the city of God seemed to evaporate instantly. I fell into a deep comtemplation on the grandeur of the sky and the transience of life and love. (211)

Thus, Indira Goswami's autobiography, very beautifully, brings out those aspects of her life which might have been burnt on the pyre with her corpse. However, the purpose of putting life into words is best served when somebody grows up through it and uplifts himself/herself above the common human being. Indira Goswami, too, decided to lead life on her own terms and conditions instead of adhering to the social conventions, traditions and values.

In pursuit of her research project, she had to stay for two years in a dark, airless room teeming with snakes, totally bereft of any facilities. It was an uncommon step for an upper caste girl to live in a squalid dwelling. During her research, she witnessed the most sordid condition of the abandoned women

and widows who crowded the state. Her keen observation of the miserable plight helped her to reconcile herself with her own grief. She found the essence of life in the realization of the life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavor to live for others.

An identification of her personal sorrow with the agony of mankind resulted in harmony of warring forces within her heart. A changed persona emerged and Indira was convinced of the healing power of compassion. She thinks that the humanity alone was the prime consideration and nothing else in one's life. From a mere litterateur and scholar, she was transformed into a social crusader. That is one way of transcending the limits of one's personal fate and personal circumstances.

Indira Goswami's task of writing her life story helped her in creating a distinguished place for herself amongst the other Assamese women writers. Also, she could look at herself and confront her inner self from which she had kept running away most of her life. Her obsession with death turns into her love and zeal to live for others. It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and from darkness to enlightenment and while enlightening the others, the cultural ambassador of Assam, breathed her last on 29th November, 2011, at the age of 70, leaving her story unfinished forever!

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