



INDIRA GOSWAMI'S AN UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN FEMINISM

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Abstract

Lately, the Indian education system attempted to change the course of the subaltern existence of women and imbued in them a new sense of resilience. With that flow, in the nineteenth century came the first wave of women's autobiography in India. The upshot of women's autobiography as a non-fictional genre of writing is to dismantle the biased representation of women written by men in their autobiographies until then and to create a new indiscriminate one. Thus, in the twentieth-century women restricted themselves from unauthentic representation, and their truth, as well as facts, made the genre of 'autobiography' most widespread in India. In general, autobiography surrounds writers' life but becomes the grievance of the entire community. Sometimes, the unfiltered approach of men/women's autobiography crossed geographical boundaries. So that readers could empathize with writers' pain and pangs where the individual experiences could become the collective testimony of the entire community. On the basis of the above layout, the research paper will delineate the origin and development of 'autobiography' as a genre of writing in the context *An Unfinished Autobiography*. The core objective will be to highlight the essence of the autobiography of Indira Goswami and to situate feminist ideas behind it.

Keywords: Autobiography, Woman, Widow, Feminism, Goswami

M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham define 'autobiography' in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as "a biography written by the subject about himself or herself [...] The first fully developed autobiography is also the most influential: the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, written in the fourth century" (27). Smith and Watson in their collaborative work *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* write: "In Greek, *autos* signifies 'self', *bios* 'life', and *graphe* 'writing'. Taken together in this order, the words denote "self-life writing", a belief definition of "autobiography" (1). In Britain, the advancement of the writing of

autobiography is situated in the eighteenth century. "The term autobiography was first coined in the preface to a collection of poems by the eighteenth-century English working-class writer Ann Yearsley, although most critics still cite Robert Southey's anglicizing of the three Greek words in 1809 as the first use of the term in English" (Smith and Watson 2). Similar to autobiography, there are other genres of writing. These comprise biography, bildungsroman, bio mythography, life writing, life narrative, memoir, etcetera. "Autobiography, by contrast, is a term for a particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and

has become canonical in the West” (Smith and Watson 3).

Based on general perceptions, autobiographies are considered most authentic and relevant in association with time and space. To decipher the crude realities of any society be it Western or Indian from the fringes to the top and the quality of lifestyles, autobiographies written by any sort of gender are the best possible ways. Women’s autobiographies offer a reliable picture of society from women’s perspectives. It also showcases the lived experience of half of the predominant population. Generally, readers’ interest in reading any sort of autobiography lies in the inspirational journey of its autobiographers and their determination to assail through life. Autobiographies also provide philosophical lessons to deal with the trials and tribulations in life. Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar in their seminal text *Women in Indian Society* write: “The spate of studies on autobiographical writings by women known and unknown and narratives by women negotiating space for assertion which may be vocal or quite often silent are efforts to understand women’s expressions of selfhood, in public or in private” (Desai and Thakkar 14).

We have an extended history of the emergence of women’s autobiographies in India. It can be traced back to the first Indian woman’s autobiography: Rashsundari Devi’s *My Life*. It represents the life of a homemaker in a Bengali family who marries early and receives home education later on. Devi realizes the significance of her recorded self and penned down her autobiography. In *No, Not the Nation: Lower Caste Malayalam Novels of The Nineteenth Century*, Dilip M. Menon remarks:

[...] the advent of autobiography: a genre that presumes notions not only of an individual self but also ideas of interiority and the placing of the individual in a historical and moral continuum...Tanika Sarkar in her account of the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman Rashsundari Debi in 1868, shows how she came to structure her narrative on the pattern of the Chaitanya

Bhagavat...Second, and even more problematic, women represent that fraction of a culture that remains untouched by modernity; a gendered denial of coeval-ness is being practiced here. To move away from this sentimental, conservative strain is to apprehend the possibility that modes of imagination are not directly related to changes in either political or economic conditions (54).

In the above-mentioned references, we have a clear picture of the origin of women’s autobiographies in India. Since the nineteenth century onwards, there are a plethora of women’s autobiographies in India. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their focus shifted gradually. Now, women are more inclined to write about personal, political, and social incidents related to their lives. Some of the prominent Indian women’s autobiographies from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century included autobiographies of Anandi Bai Karve’s *Majhe Puraan* (1944), Hamsa Wadekar’s *Sangtye Aika* (1970), Kanan Devi’s *Sabare Ami Nami* (1974), Kamala Das’s *My Story* (1976), Amrita Pritam’s *The Revenue Stamp* (1977), Indira Goswami’s *An Unfinished Autobiography* (1990), Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), Baby Halder’s *A Life Less Ordinary* (2002), C. K. Janu’s *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu* (2004), Nalini Jameela’s *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (2005), Durga Khote’s *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography* (2006), Prabha Khaitan’s *A Life Apart* (2013), Malika Amar Sheikh’s *I Want To Destroy Myself* (2016), Ajeet Cour’s *Weaving Water* (2018) and many others. Meanwhile, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the voices of women’s writers were controlled and their actual representation was restricted. In the twenty-first century, women writers not just took advantage of the freedom of the press but also freedom of expression after two centuries of hassles.

II

An Unfinished Autobiography by Indira Goswami was published in 1990. There are three sections in *An Unfinished Autobiography*. These are “Life is No Bargain”, “Down Memory Lane”, and “The

City of God". In her autobiography, Goswami covered the timespan of the 1940s to 1970s. She traced her childhood, phase of adulthood, married life, widowhood, career, and middle age. She gave priority to the phase of childhood which shaped her personality influenced deeply by the persona of her father and the phase of widowhood that took her creative career to the height. As a teacher and writer, Goswami succeeded not just in her personal life but also in her social life. She became a national figure in the field of Human Rights and a Peacemaker. Even after she died, her life remained inspirational for many Indians.

Indira Goswami (1942-2011) was one of the prolific authors of Assamese Literature in particular and Indian Literature in general. Some of her prominent works of fiction are *Shadow of Dark God* (1987), *Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (1988), *A Saga of South Kamrup* (1993), *Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001), *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), and *A Man from Chinnamsasta* (2005). Her father Umakanta Goswami was the Professor and her mother Ambika Devi was the Homemaker. Devi was the second wife of Umakanta Goswami. Indira Goswami was influenced by her father's personality. As a personality, she was sensitive, cheerful, and broody. She was a reputed creative writer and renowned academician. She belonged to an upper caste privileged, conservative Brahmin family. Since her childhood days, she has had an intimate connection with the Brahmaputra River. She got married to a man from Karnataka. It was love turned into an arranged marriage. But in the beginning, her mother opposed the marriage to a man from a different state. Since her childhood days, Indira Goswami was a victim of intermittent depression. She was a sensitive child. She was scared to lose her father in the near future. Unfortunately, sometimes she suffered from suicidal tendencies because of tragic life incidents that transpired in her life.

Indira Goswami was deeply attached to her father and his death from Cancer left her inconsolable. With him, she lost her self-esteem. Not only this, but she also lost her husband in a road accident during the phase of her newly married life. In her adulthood, she became a widow. She neither remarried nor practiced any hardcore stricture

associated with the stigma of widowhood. She even celebrated the company and friendship of men in her life. In some instances, she received marriage proposals from some of her close ones. But her self-respect and choice did not allow her to accept any man as a second husband. In such stances, she demonstrated her Indian feminist self. Indian Feminism locates women-centric themes. Some of them are the struggle for survival, the quest for identity, feminine desire, patriarchal oppression, recognition of dual consciousness, actual lived experience, sense of loneliness and alienation, fear of the loss of identity and selfhood, emotional crises, and others in the context of Indian Laws, Movements, Organizations. Sometimes Goswami had infatuations with certain men in her life. But she did not disclose much about them. She restrained her womanly whims and wishes. It might be possible that in her autobiography named *An Unfinished Autobiography* under the veil of widows of Vrindavan, she actually disclosed her angst and anxieties. During the different phases of her life, she stayed in Guwahati, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Kashmir. That is why her work centered around people from different places and professions. She wrote about militants, laborers, workers, widows, and other sections of society. But Goswami did not follow any literary movement to give shape, structure, and weightage to her work. She remained popular in the twentieth century either because of her achievements in academics as well as the literary world or because of her down-to-earth personality. Goswami worked effortlessly to elevate her depressive condition in connection with the overall achievement of women in India. Her unique voice as an upper-caste widow Indian woman writer resonated with different strata of women in India as well as abroad. In Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography* women's voice as a subaltern existence are given priority and it has been recognized by all sorts of gender in Indian society.

Because of Indira Goswami's inquisitive nature, she gained expertise in Comparative Studies. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the comparative study of "Tulsi Das's Ramacharitra Manas and Assamese Ramayana of Madhav Kandali". In order to write her thesis, she stayed in Vrindavan and

worked under the supervision of her lifetime Guru named Professor Lekharu. Her teacher cum guide helped her to deal with the grief of her husband's death to some extent.

"At that time, he appeared to me to be my protective spirit, zealously watching over his charge. I felt I gained a unique power under his sheltering care.... He showed the concern of a mother whenever I felt ill at ease. If I complained of giddiness, he would come down to my hovel and rub balm on my forehead for my relief" (Goswami 187). In the last section of *An Unfinished Autobiography*, Goswami mentioned her joining as a permanent faculty in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, at the University of Delhi. She did not cover her experience as a Professor and also the journey of her life after the 1970s. We do not have information on Goswami's life between the 1970s and 2010s in her autobiography.

Indira Goswami in *An Unfinished Autobiography* conversed tragic life incidents and her relentless resolution to deal with them. Goswami has suffered from depression since her childhood. The recurring suicide attempts marred her youth. Later on, the sudden demise of her husband placed her in intermittent depression. As a result, she seemed extremely wary about disclosing events from her personal life. Perpetually, she appeared to be in defensive mode. However, the worth of her autobiography lies in her description of corruption in the name of religion at Vrindavan. She critiqued so-called religious practitioners who in the name of Krishna plunder innocent *Radheshyamis*. In order to survive, some of the *Radheshyamis* stay with the priest of the temples as kept women. Some of them indulge in prostitution. According to Goswami's lived experience, the circumstance of widows (*Radheshyamis*) in Vrindavan is a nationwide disgrace. That's where Goswami's personal suffering takes backstage and the collective suffering of widows comes frontline. Indira Goswami depicts the plight of widows (*Radheshyamis*) in *An Unfinished Autobiography*:

I saw there two other *Radheshyamis*. They had their holes near an earthen mound

where basil plants were raised. All of them appeared grotesque. One had no hair on the scalp. She was all skin and bones. Her shrivelled breasts were hanging like central rib of a dried up plantain leaf. She had a piece of loin cloth tied round her waist, without which she would have become altogether bare. I was surprised to see a kind of pouch hanging from her waist (Goswami 137).

In an Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra, Goswami revealed that she had dreams of dead people including her father and husband. Even, though she tried to take her life by drowning in the river. Based on that, we have similarities between Goswami and other women writers such as Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). They also had suicidal tendencies and they too suffered from chronic depression. Like Goswami, these women writers used images of the river in their works as well as disclosed their intimate connections with rivers. Unfortunately, Virginia Woolf attempted suicide and took her life by drowning. Sylvia Plath killed herself. Howsoever, Goswami like Woolf and Plath did not romanticize her affectation towards the impression of the river in her life as well as writings. Goswami took a liberal stand in her writings as well as her approaches toward life. She admired nature, advocated against animal sacrifices in the Kamakhya temple, and followed the principle of Humanism.

III

Goswami's autobiography has more of a public description than her personal life. She includes historical events and figures based on her father and grandfather's diaries. That slows the pace of reading of readers. Sometimes, the readers lose their interest in the second and third parts of the autobiography. Even after that, *An Unfinished Autobiography* appeals to readers because of its poetic language filled with similes, metaphors, images, and symbols. Future scholarship related to *An Unfinished Autobiography* is possible on the basis of Queer theory, Subaltern theory, Ecocriticism, and Feminism. The autobiography ends on a positive note with a reference to Goswami's Guide Upendra Chandra Lekharu.

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