

Reconstructing Women's History from An Unfinished Autobiography

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Abstract: Ramayana scholar and Jnanpith laureate Dr. Indira Goswami is an esteemed Assamese woman writer, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami. She wrote her autobiography, *Adha Lekha Dastabez* in 1988 in Assamese and later translation to English was done by P. Kotoky as *An Unfinished Autobiography* (2002). The present paper is an abridged attempt to understand the female plight and to disclose comprehensive women's history from Dr. Goswami's autobiography. At the same time the study also intends to peep into the cultural, linguistics and religious background of Assam as outlined in the memoir. An unfinished autobiography is unique in the sense of its clarity and coherent character. It is not a work of delusion or narcissism. Indira Goswami imparted her moments of debilitation, dilemma of her widowhood and the bizarre surroundings that had to face as women. It is true that she did not write the autobiography to describe life and death, but indeed with the enthusiasm to reveal her inner most thoughts. The significance of this text lies on the strategies to transform the social structures, which can help in the emancipation of women. Indira Goswami has placed the problems of women in conventional way and draws the picture of offence and discontentment among them. The invisibility of women from the written history is not the sign of non-existence of women, but it indicates the negligence of the historians. The dedication, directorship, determination, toughness and love of womenfolk who built one successful society were as significant as that of the male, and history cannot be completed without the non corporation of the half population. Women autobiographies can justify in this as they reflect the traumas, taunts of society, patriarchal barriers, the decisions, and wounded psyche of women. In general a woman forms her existence in relation to others. *An unfinished autobiography* represents the agony of women in 19th century Assam. This autobiography started with her schooling days of Shillong (1956) and ended with her joining as Lecturer in Modern Indian Language of Delhi University. This study covers not only Assam but also some specific areas where Goswami once visited or stayed for timing.

Key words: Women's history, Autobiography, Widowhood, Assam, Patriarchy

Introduction:

Assamese literature is having experience of autobiography, a literary genre of western origin, right from the beginning of 19th century. The coinage of the term 'autobiography' is quite modern. Formerly the autobiographical form passed under various names: life narratives, written by the author himself, memoirs, journal, diary, biography by self, history by self etc. Life – writing is the best medium to unlock human heart as the autobiography is a record of a person's life. Nowadays considering autobiography as a historical source is the

drift in historical research and researcher has to face the impediment of the core essence of self centeredness. Roy Pascal says, “*The autobiography is on the contrary historical in its method and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world*”.¹ Autobiographical research or life story research is a specific form of research where author is the sole informant. According to the auto biographer’s mode and mood autobiographical form reveals four different aspects. These aspects can be classified into subjectivity, self-revelation, introspection and self secrecy. Hitherto autobiography of women represents more about private, social, public, and moral life of the writer. She emerges not as an individual but as a person with collective identity who invariably conscious of the society’s prescription for herself. Finding the history of women in the autobiographies is the deed of digging deeper. But many times the authenticity of autobiography is challenged. Jawaharlal Nehru on Discovery of India says, “*There is no such thing to be called as true objectiveness. If the subjective elements are unavoidable and inevitable, it should be conditioned as far as possible by scientific method*”.² The self-preferentiality of autobiography is evident in the language, narrative and the structure of the work. “*The person who writes memory is not a historian, although he is providing raw materials for the use of other historian*”.³ To avoid such situations, writer maintains a balance in giving account of other events and his own self. Thus, auto biographer has to perform a twin role of a historian as well as a litterateur. And the role of historian is the toughest.

Women’s history is an existing chapter of history which is reformed. Technically, the role of women in history, the growth of women’s rights and methodologies used to extract women’s role, summed up as women’s history. Indira Goswami, who is also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami was an Assamese editor, poet, teacher, scholar, professor, writer and peace adorer. Her works were published in vernacular language and translated into English. She did her research work in the ‘*comparative study of Madhab Kandali’s Assamese Ramayana and Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas*’ in 1973. She received the *Sahitya Academy Award* (1982), *Jnanpith Award* (2000) and *Principal Prince Claus Award* (2008). She won the highest civilian award of Assam, *Asom Ratna* in 2011. An unfinished autobiography covers her story from her primary schooling at Shillong to the appointment as a lecturer at Delhi University. She was in Vrindavan for many years, when pursuing PhD. This autobiography displays a women with tremendous obstruction comes out as a magnificent and prosperous lady.

Objectives:

This study is a partial findings of womens condition based on Indira Goswami’s autobiography. Attempt has been made here to analyze women’s participation and their exclusions in society. In this study main focus is on women’s history, which to be extracted from her autobiography. Double marginalisation of women as widow is also seen. Initially Indira Goswami was in her birthplace Assam, but her consequential life explored many places within india, special mention to the city of hindu god, Vrindaban.

Methodology:

Life story or life study is quite new in historical research. Vivid approaches make each study unique in style. Here the author is sole informant and is in the witness box and researcher is on the other side. It can be relate with *Narrative research methological approach*

where the study rely on interviewing someone in a sychronized way. The *life history method* also applied throughout the study in a holistic way. *The life history method* is an emerging trend of qulitative research. This method intensifies the individual's experiences and also provide information about their social life. In this study *biographical research methodology* is also used. This study emphasises on person's completed or ongoing life. There may be some demarits in this study beacuse the researcher solely lean on authors facts or propaganda. But apart of hue and cry for the authencity of biographical research, biographical studies open up the new opportunity to unlock human heart with their innermost feelings by suspending all types of prejudices. Womens history is a newly added concept of historical research and methodology. This study is based on women's perspective, along with the social marginalisation.

Women's history and An Unfinished Autobiography:

"Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worth less"

-Myra Pollack Sadker(Professor, Author, Researcher and women activist)⁴

Studying History is not an unprogressive nature of thinking, but the sole responsibility is to reveal the mystry of past events. Without knowing past, someone cannot feel the present and future. People often catagorise history as a pile of events , deeds or misdeeds of rulers, severe and fiercessull battles or treaties, dates and years. In a true sense, history is the story of evolution, story overtaking man's own life and the source of people's struggle towards freedom and human relationship. Widened scope of history is the latest features of history learing and writing.

*"The contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition."*⁵

With the changing time, this subject is embracing all spheres of society and all the dynamics of women's history are opened up with time. Woman plays versatile roles in her life span. Nowadays women's history is not all about uncovering women in the past, but also about gender and relation between the sexes. In Indian context, gender plays a very significant role in social life. The aspect of both the genders are defined clearly and naturally and they are taught different social conduct, behaviour and way of living a normal life. In patriarchal scenerio, women are defined in a strict roles and rules. Women as a force in domestic and social affairs are not visible. Women's sufferings and experiences couldnot brought by them who used to narrate history of evolution. From the very outset of documented history, Assam is playing a balanced role in the gender consequences. Women became equal or perhaps even better in passive resistance in paticipating freedom movement of india. The stunning figures like Puspallata Das, Hemanta Kumari, Girija Devi and Chandraprova Saikiani maintains the legacy of Mulagabhoru, Sati Sadhoni and enormous war-heroins. Indira Goswami is one of those torch bearers of society, who broke silence, fetter and stereotypes of widowhood by exhibiting the supressed.

Prof. Meena Sodhi argued on the advantages of women's autobiography in reconstructing history ,*"How many of these women autobiographies have been able to*

establish their identity through their writing? Have any of the women autobiographers can answer the crucial question put forth by cock shut? There are not many but undoubtedly, some women autobiographies have revealed their true self successfully through their life stories.”⁶ *An Unfinished Autobiography* is divided into three parts. First part, ‘Life is No Bargain’ contains her school days in Shillong, her youth and her married life with her husband, *Madhaven Raisom Ayengar*. The second part ‘*Down Memory Lane*’ deals with her teaching profession in Goalpara Army School to defeat her loneliness. The last part of the book entitled as ‘The City of God’ is important one that gives her life account spent in the unpleasant and unhygienic conditions of the city of Vrindavan. Indira Goswami is one of the finest realistic fiction writers that one can rarely draw line between fiction and fact. From her bold and powerful writings we can say that she is ahead of her time. In the words of Prof. Hiren Gohain, “*Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years*”.⁷ She can relate herself with every downcast, downtrodden, fragile though rebellious women of society. Her life story is not only piled up on the pages of her unfinished autobiography, her distinguished masterpieces also portray her living experiences.

Caste stigma:

*“This sub division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub divisions is that they have lost the open door character of the class system and have become self enclosed units called castes.”*⁸

The hierarchical order of the caste system confined every person to be included in one definite group, where they can be supreme or inferior according to their caste. Women from lower caste face a double marginalisation or we can say double jeopardy, as the victims of one’s caste and one’s gender. Indira Goswami was from the highest stratum of Assamese society. Bishnupriya Devi was a predecessor in her family, who herself become a ‘sati’. Her grandfather witnessed the wealth and prestige of being ‘*Adhikara*’, however deteriorated in later. Her autobiography is the living account of women’s aspect on caste discrimination of the proposed time frame. In the higher strata of society classism and the taboos for women were on its peak.

*“I was not allowed to play with low caste children. I rarely obeyed the rule. Very often, I was dragged to the well and buckets of waters were poured over my head for purification”.*⁹

She and her siblings were accompanied with servants who carried mats for them and warn other children not to touch them as they were offsprings of higher caste. The womenfolk of her ‘*satra*’ (religious institution) were covered by screens holding by four or more people and escorted with their servants and siren was blown by another to aware the habitants not to come nearby as the ‘*Gosains*’ were approaching. Her short story, ‘The Offspring’ is a mutinous offence against caste system. Her novels also displayed the gist of caste system and impact on women in that era. In every dimension of life women bounded to face custom based prejudices and every expectation put them into a subservient and illusory position. Inter caste marriage was an outlaw for Assamese society. Even she thought of being a nun to escape from the tug of war between her mother and society in search of her match.

“Other thoughts also assailed me. What would happen to my sisters after my affair became public?? What chance of marriage they then have? How would mother face the situation? Inter-caste marriage is still a taboo in our society.”¹⁰

She once registered marriage with an *Ahom* boy whom she didn't love. Her mother faced various problems to find a match. But following the divorce with the boy, her mother granted the proposal of Madhaben, whom she had rejected earlier. She was bit relieved by marrying her to a south Indian boy as Assamese society will forfeit Indira after annulment of her first marriage. Madhaben was the paradisiacal mate for her as she ousted from her destructive thoughts and persuaded her writings. Roaming from site to site she gathered the first hand experiences of the female workers or the family of the workers. In Kashmir her husband breathed his last in an accident. She was shattered and returned to home. She had to face the tyranny of widowhood which was explained later. She was not allowed to take food with others as the newly widowed Brahmin girls were untouchables. She was not above of those vile practices of society. But in her writings she reveals that she and her family were above those narratives. Even she protested those evil practices. Her father used to roam around in the areas of his disciples which were not at all common. She never overpowered caste than her emotions. She even smoked opium which was offered by their *mahut* (the man who takes care of elephant). As a *Brahmin* girl she was in the dominant position of caste hierarchy but as a human being she can feel the intricacy and odium of lower caste people.

Widowhood:

“Who brought about that change in me? Was it love? I had little idea before I came into Madhu's life, that love is such a tremendous power. It is only in a man's power to lead from darkness to light. It is man alone who can bestow a new life upon another. For this, in love and understanding, lies the key.”¹¹

This was the words of that girl who once attempted suicide and obsessed with melancholia. Her marriage with Madhaven Raisom Ayenger in October, 1965 transformed her life beyond her expectations. But her hymeneal life was not lasted for long. Altekar on widow says that, *“a widow was regarded as impure and ineligible for association with religious rites and functions as long as she had not removed her hair. Orthodox people would not take any water or food touched by her”¹²*

“Touch her not, no, you must not: only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin.”¹³

Widowhood is a curse for the society. She was advised and proposed by many to reboot her life. Later she joined Sainik school of Goalpara, Assam. Though people stopped to burn a widow on her husband's funeral pyre or burying the widow alive in husband's grave, they still well practised to smash her in every possible way. Surprisingly part of women join hands and reinforced the savagery. *“I started living more with the dead than with the living, in that desolate hostel room at Goalpara.”¹⁴* During the days of Goalpara, she was asked by relatives to hang some religious photos and recite religious hymns. Everybody cared her and lift up her emotions. But in the meantime she also received naked photographs from some of her colleagues. In that tenure her depression was in its alarming level. She would read her father's old documents and writings and lived most of the time on past events. She was

haunted by her suicidal thoughts again. Widows had to follow some social dictum during amboobachi (myth related to Kamakhya temple) and were forced to sit on a wooden plate for three days. During menstruation widows were allowed to take only one meal in a day. The customs were vicious and unhygienic. She witnessed all these cruelty suffered by her widow aunt in her *satra*. Being a widow Indira also faced similar situation of getting food separately. Social barriers always tied her feet as widow.

*“Who can ascertain the exact state of mind of a woman and suddenly hit by misfortune as I was? Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal life affects the poor wife? Most of the time, as I realised, a sense of endless, ruthless pain suppressed all the yearnings of the flesh. I felt like being pushed into a deep, dark abyss.”*¹⁵ Societies always put women as the motif of cultural identity. But literally, put chain into their feet and imposed the social ordinances called taboos. Malicious practices often push women into darkness. Pre-marital love and sexual relationships are forbidden fruit for girls and they psyched up to those social benchmarks. Indira Goswami had enormous admirers for her alluring and smart appearance, but her feminine self restricts her to be opened up with them. She justifies this by saying, *“True, of lovers and admirers and well-wishers I had no end, but I had not been to bed with any of them”*.¹⁶ Her sensitive mind could feel the ambience when she was sprouting physically. For the social circumstances or for the foremost maturity in girls she became more conscious for her body. Women are taught to be ashamed of their body aftermath puberty and are always taught about preserving their chastity. This dictum is deeply rooted in their psyche that whatever tough the situation is they never oppose openly.

During her teaching job in Sainik School, she was called up by Prof. Upendra Chandra Lekharu to research on Ramayana under his guidance. He helped her to rise from the mud of obsessive depressed thoughts. Vrindavan, the place of salvation for widows of India, was the workplace of Goswami. When she headed towards Vrindavan she was opposed by her mother and asked her to go London as she was afraid of her future. Everybody was astonished seeing the miserable life she passed through in Vrindaban by a girl from aristocrat rich family. Sleeping tablets sheltered in her carrying bags in Goalpara and as well as in Vrindaban.

“The heart-rending accounts of helpless widows, declared consequent upon men’s brutal assaults upon them, and finally abandoned to their fate at Vraj , were known to people all over the country”.¹⁷

She was aghast by the torment of widows called as ‘Radheshyami’ in that ‘widow city’ of India. This city offers some dilapidated, smudged rooms for them. Either the widows came to Vrindaban with their own will or were sent away. In Vrindaban, the elderly widows were bound to beg and young widows were forced in to prostitution for living. Vrindaban is witnessing the plight and trauma of Hindu widows from very outset. They are thrown away or they came with their own will. Indira Goswami closely observed them and can feel the deprived as she was herself a widow. They were busy with kirtan, bhajans etc. and all of them were much deprived. Radheshyamis were seemed to be in search of ultimate salvation but in reality they were abandoned by family. They lived in total misery and unhygienic condition. For *Oudhodehik* (money for their last cremation rituals), they gathered money by hook or crook and often they were cheated. In the pages of her autobiography their pain and agony is

scripted. Above all these grief and soreness their eternal love for Krishna makes them alive. She witnessed various incidents which reveal their personal desire and physical need. Where many of them choose the paths of prostitution, simultaneously many of them molested in that city of God. Indira Goswami is one of those who overcame her fear, guilt and loneliness with her boldness and confidence. After shattering from such a heartbreaking incident, her teacher and his wife led her life from ruined to radiant one. They roamed around Vrindaban city for saints and fortune tellers, who can make her life better. They bestowed their ultimate trust and goodwill for her even in worst situations also. Her teacher and wife used to wrap her with the warmth of love and utmost care where everybody was poking her with their bitterness. In her words, *"sometimes, torch in hand, he would be searching the crevices for the mysterious snake. On occasions like that, I felt that he was more than a mother to me."*¹⁸ She was fortunate to have a mentor like him. But the actual picture of widowhood of that era is portrayed in her realistic novels. The realistic novels, *'The moth eaten howdah of the tuskers'* and *'The blue necked god'* are having some passive yet rebellious women characters. Either they have to bow down to the social conduct for being alive or by acting insurgency; they have to lose their life. She symbolises herself as a person desired to be bitten by the snake or so that it could end her life and she would be reborn as a "new woman". Simply she wanted salvation from the precarious life in that city of god. This is the mental dilemma of widows or every separated soul.

Women psyche:

*"The young man, my lover, was standing by my side. That was the moment when I could surrender my whole being to him, a natural human desire which was suppressed by fate and circumstances since Madhu's death but I could once more indulge myself in it. There stood the charming young man, enamoured of me, looking intently at my attractive figure. At the slightest indication from me, he would instantly take me in his arms, and shower my whole body with hot kisses. It was a tense moment. Time stood still."*¹⁹

Some women obviously suffer internally due to unavoidable physical needs but many do not appreciate that and consider self pleasure as a sin. It is true that in their husband's funeral they cannot burn hormonal instincts. Goswami's relationship with the brother of one of her friend *Munni* also reveals the deepest thoughts of every widow. She sat besides that guy during her visit to Mathura and she wrote later *"I felt at certain moment as if a poem was almost welling up in my heart but the next moment it collapsed like a building long out of repair. All the time I was sitting by this young man, my heart was busy, as it were, clearing the debris of the crumbled structure."*²⁰ Amidst her grief and turmoil she was facing typical and troublesome incidents, which conveys the irony of society towards widowhood. *"I had no doubt left in my mind that it was an irresistible attraction for me that had led Hit Kumar inside the temple. I felt nervous and ran out by the back door, to my teacher for protection."*²¹ *Hit kumar Gupta* was one of those admirers of her who wants to give her a 'New Life' after hearing her awful condition. Later he became one of her trusted friends and helped her. Another fellow from *Sainik School, Goalpara* wanted to lead her to a better future and he even came to Vrindaban for her. Many of them indeed wanted to make her life a better

one. But the calamities of her life make her a matured person. Indira Goswami's life is a sort of paradox. In one side she excelled in her literary field and honoured and on another sinking in the thoughts of depression and melancholia.

*"On the contrary, it was a time for some self-assessment. Self-assessment, in relation to a man who offered himself at your door? Didn't my teacher encourage me to be ready for such a situation? Then why this scene of Self-reproach?"*²²

She was probably the first Assamese writer who wrote her life story without masking. She wanted to live her life on her choice. She was in relationship with an engineer named *Kaikos Burjor Satarawala*. She spent a night with him in Delhi during her stay at Vrindaban. After that decision, remorseful thoughts repeatedly poked her and again the annoying thought of self-destruction started. Crushed and wounded mind of every widow can be identified with her. Combat, submissive and docile character of typical women always covers up her desires.

Initially at Vrindaban she was not certain about her topic on Ramayana. Even she was obnoxious to *Tulisadas's* portrait of women character especially about wives. *"I was of the firm conviction that the poet's own experience of life was too limited for him to write passionately about women and love."*²³ In *Tulsidas's* *Ramcharitmanas* he delineated women characters in an evil way. Goswami stated that in his real life, he was abandoned by his wife. In one word, he couldn't feel the divinity and fidelity in love. In patriarchal writings Goswami's perception is quite true to some extent.

She does not legitimize her rebellious attitude with feminism. She write about the marginalised and deprived under 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"*.²⁴ For the interview of *Sreemoyee* with Hemanta Barman states that, *"she is not a diehard feminist (jabardast feminist), her writings can be easily interpreted as a variety of scripture feminism (women's writing)"*.²⁵

Conclusion:

Representation of autobiographical memory can be modulated and experimented. Many circumstances restrained author to be the perfect imitation, in their culture, gender and overall society. Often author purposely quash the occurrence to refrain from enormous pain and peril. Furthermore memory of a person can also be negated on basis of their obscurity with time. Here this autobiography nullifies the presumptions about the loopholes in autobiographies. Her impartial and intrinsic voice can be heard through her autobiographical accounts or her fictions. Traditional Indian society is challenged by her progressive thoughts and action. Her autobiography is the boldest and honest attempt to reconstruct her life. Her proclamation on caste, yearnings of widows, discloser of her affair, combat with depression and liberated views make this autobiography unique. Comparing to the other concurrent literary figures of Assam, Indira Goswami justifies in demonstrating the concealed howl of women in society. She vindicated the grief and remorse of widow. Padmashree *Nalinibala Devi's* autobiography '*Eri Oha Dinbur*' is a submissive yet expository life story. She was

also a widow and the pangs of separation haunted her throughout her life. Likewise, '*Jiwon Jiwon Bor Anupam*' by Nirmalprobha Bordoloi and '*Bishax aru Xongxoyor Majedi*', by Nirupama Borgohain are good sources of executing women's history. In many talks and interviews Indira Goswami gave the hint that, she was not the creator of her characters of novels, but she was living on those consequences. Indira Goswami rejoices her life on leading multiple ethos of female life. "*I have 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.*"²⁶ She recognizes her "collective identity" as a woman and as a widow. Her third chapter of autobiography displays the sorrow of every widow in Vrindaban and beyond. As a student of history if we consider her autobiography as a source, it is very difficult for us that she is mature enough than the contemporary female society of Assam. Though the situation that she had to face are common but her inner strength and loyalty to her soul make her a strong character in the female history of Assam. Nowadays autobiographies are coming up with utmost transparency and authenticity. But in 19th century the circumstances were not the same. She wrote her life story in Assamese and make sure about the candidness by including the weak moments of her life. It is an account of her aspirations and inspirations, triumphs and failures, heights and pitfalls, dreams and reality, beliefs and disbeliefs, affections and torture. Disclosing the true speculations in autobiography is challenging. Accordingly an Unfinished Autobiography has become a living account of women's misery after separation from their loved one.

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