

The Metamorphosed Self: A Feminist Reading of Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*

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What distinguishes the story of people with an established public achievement and personality is a consistent relationship, a sort of harmony, between outward experience and inward growth of unfolding, between incidents and the spiritual digesting of them, so that each circumstance, each incident, instead of being an anomalous fact, becomes a part of a process and a revelation of something within the personality. (Pascal 10)

Having this purpose, this article throws light on the gradual development of the personality of the well-known writer Indira Goswami through some striking revelations of her life. It is an account of her journey from “feminine” to “feminist self” and then her final evolution into “female self” (Showalter 35-36). It traces her transformation from “self-effacing” woman into an assertive autonomous human being. This paper brings into light the metamorphosed self of the author, who got purged in the hellish fire of the misfortunes of her life. The term “metamorphosis” has been borrowed from Franz Kafka’s novella *Metamorphosis* in which the hero, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into an insect. The literal meaning of the term “metamorphosis” is “transformation”. *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines the term “metamorphosis” as it is a process in which somebody or something changes completely into something different (963). The transition of a person from one form to another takes place in various stages and it is a gradual process over a period of time. It is a kind of “bildungsroman”, a German term, signifying “novel of formation” or “novel of education” (Abrams 200).

One of the most reputed and distinguished Assamese woman writer Mamoni Raisom Goswami, popularly known as Indira Goswami wrote her life story *Adha Lekha Dastabez* (1988) along with her other short stories and novels. It was originally written in Assamese but later translated into English as *An Unfinished Autobiography* in 2002 by P. Kotoky. She was born on 14 November, 1942 in Guwahati. Indira spent most of her childhood at Amranga village in South Kamrup. She did her early schooling at Pinemount School in Assam. Later she was transferred to Tarinicharan Girls’ High School in Guwahati in 1954. She completed her B.A. from Cotton College in 1960 and M.A. in 1963. She did her research work in the comparative study of Madhab Kandali’s Assamese Ramayan and Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas in 1973. Her marriage with Madhavan Raisom Ayenger, an engineer was very short-lived.

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. 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. In the very first part of the autobiography, we find the seed of this transformation, when she says, “The realization slowly dawned upon me that the justification of our life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavour to live for others” (25). The well renowned Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam, in her foreword to *An Unfinished Autobiography* (2002), points towards this transformation too, when she says, “The astrologer had a reason to worry.... According to his predictions, misfortunes would come upon her thick and fast to bedevil her life.... He had not visualized the metamorphosis the girl would undergo after her baptism of fire engendered by her misfortunes” (vii-viii). Indira’s pangs and sorrows of widowhood led her to her transformation and her creative genius embarked her on her life’s journey. She could relate her pain with the sufferings of people at large and in comparison to them, she found her pain far lesser. In the foreword to the Autobiography, Amrita Pritam says, “Indira’s life story well nigh be termed as, ‘Life is No Bargain’. It is in fact a testament of Indira’s life leading to its metamorphosis” (X).

Indira Goswami was a creative writer who could not bear the brutality and intolerable oppression of human being. Excessive pain and sorrow left a deep impact on her psyche which led her stand in support of the oppressed and the unprivileged. Her own experiences go into making of her literary oeuvre. She has written originally in Assamese and many of her works have been translated into English which include *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda (The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar)* (2005), *Tej Aru Dhueire Dhusarita (Pages Stained with blood)* (2001), and *Chinnamastar Manuthu (The Man from Chinnamasta)* (2005). During her stay in Vrindaban, she wrote her well-known novel *Nilkanthi Braja (The Shadow of the Dark God and the Sun)* (1976) on the plight of the Hindu widows in Vrindavan, who devoted their entire life in the worship of Lord Krishna. This was her first novel, in which she highlighted the utter poverty and exploitation of these women. She has been the winner of Sahitya Academy Award (1982), India’s highest literary award, the Jnanpith Award (2000) and Principal Prince Claus Laureate (2008). She refused the Padmashree award (2002), saying it was too late to receive a Padmashree after receiving Jnanpith award. She won the highest civilian award of the state Asom Ratna in 2011.

Often, she 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” (Goswami, Uddipana 121). 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”, says Prasenjit Goswami (Khaund 82). By writing her life story, Goswami has critiqued the idea that an autobiography can only be written by a male writer.

Autobiography as a genre has caught the attention of the readers since 1960s. *An Unfinished Autobiography* stands out as an important work for the one interested in the life history of the author. However, it is not a raw collection of facts. The autobiographies are written not only to describe the life and death of the author but are written with an urge to reveal his/her inner most thoughts. It is a revelation and a “re-creation of the self” (Sodhi 13). At this point, the

genre of autobiography becomes important for women writers, who write an autobiography with the purpose of disclosing and sharing their secrets which they keep hiding throughout their lives. In comparison to men, women write with the purpose of confession and acknowledgement, not only of their virtues but their vices too. This confession takes place in a “sakhi bhava” (Tiwari 209). In the same way, Goswami’s autobiography, too, is a very frank and an unbiased account of her life. Through her life narrative she discovers and recognizes her true “self”. It is a journey into the dark inner recesses of the soul. She does not overlook or conceal the weak moments of her life but confesses them with the courage of a warrior. It is an account of her aspirations and inspirations, triumphs and failures, heights and pitfalls, dreams and superstitions, beliefs and disbeliefs, affections and anguish. Indira’s autobiography covers her life span from early 1956 to 1970 and it describes her life up to her joining of Delhi University as a Lecturer in Assamese Language.

Her autobiography is divided into three parts and the reading of them comes out to be a very interesting endeavour. First part is entitled as “Life is No Bargain” which covers her life since her childhood days spent in Shillong up to the unfortunate death of her husband. Second part is entitled as “Down Memory Lane” which describes how she took to profession of teaching in Goalpara Sainik School to overcome the memories of her beloved husband. The third part of the autobiography entitled as “The City of God” is the longest and the most crucial one, which gives us a glimpse not only of Indira’s life spent in the unpleasant and unhygienic conditions of the city of Vrindavan but also the filth and squalor, poverty and superstition at its peak which in reality contradicts the image she had formed about this “city of God” before her arrival there. In fact, Vrindavan is the most suitable place to depict the “spiritual nature of her agony”. CE Sujatha and R Ramachandra say, “Vrindavan in Indira’s autobiography tellingly enacts the drama of the unaging spirit’s sojourn in the wasting body” (Goswami, Uddipana 87).

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 contend herself with the role of her 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 for 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.

Pre-marital love and sexual relationship was considered taboo for the girls of the Vaishnavite Brahmin society. The “code of conduct” and the “dharma” prescribed by society for the women always put fetters into their feet. Indira, very openly reveals that how the young boys admired her beauty and charm and loved her. At various places, she hints at her own desires of the body but the “feminine sensibility” within her restricts her from crossing the limits. 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” (14). Women are taught to be ashamed of their body and preserve their chastity since their childhood. This dictum is so deeply rooted in their psyche that

come what may they never try to go against the norms openly. To talk about their “female sexuality” was considered a sin.

Her failed attempt of suicide in 1961 caused a great clamour amongst the people. After that incident, marriage became a necessity for her rather than a choice. On account of the unlucky stars that governed her fate, her mother was suggested by an astrologer as, “Better to cut her into two and set her afloat in the river than give her in marriage” (16). What that poor soul Indira was supposed to do in that matter or what was the fault on her part? To close the matter of her marriage, she married an Ahom (originally from the Shan tribe of Upper Burma region) in haste without informing anyone. The marriage devoid of love and emotions could not be consummated by her. She was torn by the conflict that arose in her mind. Finally the marriage got annulled and Indira thinks as if she was “transformed into an automaton” (23).

Her marriage with Madhavan Raisom Ayenger in October, 1965 transformed her life beyond her expectations. After her father’s death, she came under the love and protection of her husband. The psyche of an Indian woman, whose entire world revolves around her husband, gets reflected in her words when she says, “It is only in a man’s power to lead another 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” (25).

Indira makes an honest confession of all the events of her life. Confidently, she talks of her excitement in the company of Major Sindhu, a young man from the nearby camp where Madhu worked. She confesses:

... , Major Sindhu abruptly held me by the hand and pulled me towards a small hillock nearby.... The touch of the youthful Major gave me a thrill of excitement.

.... Major Sindhu’s valour and manliness, and his fond adoration for me, ruffled my mind for a short while. But it was only a bubble. My mind got its calm again, and retreated to its safe haven in Madhu’s heart, for it was he who had possessed my entire mind and being. For me, his heart was the most secure abode, like a mother’s to a child. (42-43)

She calls it only an excitement of the moment and terms it only a “bubble” to cover up her actual emotions for Major Sindhu, as a post-marital affair is unacceptable in a social milieu of a country like India. Though, while writing her autobiography, she reveals those secrets of her life, which due to the restraint of the society remain suppressed in one corner of the heart, yet she reminds herself, at the point of taking liberty that she is married and it is her husband who is her God and her world and it is a sin to think or talk about another man in glorifying words. True are the words of Shubha Tiwari, when in her article “Musings on The Life of The Indian Woman, And Indira Goswami’s *An Unfinished Autobiography*”, she says:

Can Indian Women finally throw off the Sati Savitri shroud? Can they talk freely about their failings and fallings? That these women are not ideal Sati Savitries is a fact. Yet the model is very much there. The model dictates that a woman should never think of any man other than her husband. Marriage is a spiritual and religious bond. A woman’s life is meaningful only in serving her husband in every sense of the word. She should pray to get the same husband in coming seven lives. (210-211)

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 fizzy. 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 remain calm and peaceful.

The second part of the autobiography “Down Memory Lane” covers her life as a teacher in Goalpara Sainik School, where she took to the profession of teaching to kill her time as well as to overcome the grief and misery her fate had brought for her. A widow was supposed to follow a strict pattern of life, living like an animal and to pay the price for her widowhood. At the time, when a woman requires the emotional and mental support of her family and the people around her, society makes her stranger than reality. Indira emphasizes here on her yearnings of the flesh and hunger for the sexual union of a conjugal life and expected 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).

This was the period of widowhood, with which Indira progressed on the path of metamorphosis. Her loneliness and the separation from her beloved do not come as a hurdle in her way but help her to 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 can not 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 is involved in 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. The stream of consciousness technique employed by her leads her to focus more on her “self” and which also becomes the platform to give her courage to face life boldly and fearlessly. Virginia Woolf, too, considers past an important element in writing an autobiography. She dwells on the theme of “self-analysis” and “self-judgment” through a series of recollections of the past (Anderson 101).

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 in worshipping 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). Her aunt was supposed to be “seated on a wooden plank during the days of the *ambubachi*” (menstruation period) (56).

The calamity of her fate, her dejection and disappointment didn’t allow her to be at rest anywhere. She was caught in the conflict between her “feminine self” and her “female self”. The ray of hope was extinguished and she had to strive to seek for her own existence. Her decision to pursue her research under the supervision of her teacher Prof. Lekharu took her to the city of Vrindaban amidst the “Radheshyamis”. Her understanding that the suffering of the individual

self is symbolic of the sufferings of the people at large takes place during her stay in Vraj. Stanford's views on the "collective identity" of the women are significant in Goswami's case as she says, "Women's sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation" (Smith and Watson 75). Here, Indira turns into a "feminist" when she recognizes her "collective identity" as a woman and as a widow. Her voice is sarcastic, satirical and ridiculing when she speaks on behalf of the community of the widow sisters not only those who resided in Vrindaban awaiting the end of their life but widows of the nation at large too.

The picture of the "City of God", Vraj, contradicts Indira's own image of the "city of God". Shubha Tiwari defines Vraj as, "Brij Bhumi has tons of meaning for us. Vrindavan 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" (214). However, further she says that "Indira Goswami's Vrindavan comes nothing less than a deadly shock" (215) to her. She meets the tricksters, religious hypocrites, the priests exploiting the devotees in the name of the religion, and the worst sufferers "Radheshyamis", the Hindu widows, who devoted their entire life of widowhood only in the worship of Lord Krishna, the "God" who could see neither their plight of helplessness nor could hear their pitiable cries. She describes about the place called "Harabari", where the destitute widows lived. These wretched widows earned their living by singing bhajans. Some came to this place out of their religious impulse but most of them sought shelter "to find an escape from the woes of their private and domestic life" (118).

In search of inner peace and solace, Indira visits various saints and "sadhus". Her visit to Deboria Baba was one of them. But her visit 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 could only find the religious hypocrisy of these saints who exploited young helpless widows and poor people in the name of religion. Her search leads her to a holy man descended from the Himalayas who told her:

I shall one day sit in meditation in that hovel. You shall have to sit beside me for some time. But you must not have a thread on... However, red garlands 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)

She flaunts the irony of the situation that on one hand there are people who die due to poverty and starvation and on another the saints and "sadhus" remain busy with expanding their businesses.

Autobiographies are written by the writers with the purpose of exposing their restricted passions and desires. Indira, too, talks of her passions and desires of the flesh but somewhere the "sati" "savitri" sorts of instincts meddle in her ways. Indira reveals her relationship first with Mr. Singh, one of her colleagues in Goalpara Sainik School, who proposed her for starting a new life with him, and later Munni Gautam's brother whom she meets in Vrindavan. However, she discloses that her "feminine sensibility" didn't let her surrender herself to the wishes of these young men. The reference to "snakes" and her fear for them in the last part of the autobiography is symbolic. The recurring symbol of snake echoes D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake" and the narrator's conflict between his "voice of education" and "voice of spontaneous self" (Chaudhuri 13) is symbolic of Indira Goswami's own conflict between her "feminine self" and her "female self". Snake is "an embodiment of all those dark mysterious forces of nature which man ignobly fears and neglects" (Chaudhuri 13). It is a sort of "female desire" which lurks larger within the

heart of hearts of Indira Goswami but her fear for the estrangement from the society makes her afraid of accepting it. She even desired to be bitten by the snake so that it could end her life full of fear and apprehension and she would be reborn as a “new woman”. In a way, she wanted to eat that forbidden fruit for which she would be expelled from the society. However, it took years for her to be relieved of her fear for the snakes, which symbolizes her acceptance of a new kind of life and her recognition of “female self”. Her love affair with Kaikos Burjor Satarawala, the engineer-in-chief of the Hindustan Construction Co. Ltd, was the reflection of this courage. She could think of herself not in terms of society but in terms of her individual and autonomous self. In her quest for her true and real “self” Prof. Lekharu becomes her mentor and a guiding spirit, who encouraged her to start her life anew. Though she curses herself for crossing the boundary and the limits prescribed for a widow, yet she tries to justify her action by saying, “... , 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 sense of self-reproach?” (196). She felt disgraced and mortified by her act of transgression but she accepts it with great courage.

The theme of “rebirth” and “resurrection” is also associated with her references to the city of God Vrindavan. She associates herself with Vrindavan, the city of God, as she says, “Vrindavan is a city that rose up like Phoenix, again and again, after it had been razed to the ground with every attack by Muslim invaders” (162). She gets motivation and the inspiration from it that how in spite of filth, squalor and the complete destruction of it by the Muslim invaders it stands with its own splendor and magnificence, and gives shelter to so many poor and destitute. Indira confesses that after a very long time, she had been able to accept the life full of misery and magnificence, gloom and glory, adversity and prosperity. At this point of her life, she is able to derive spiritual strength and vigour from the memories of Madhu. He is no more a reason of her misfortunes but her inspiration and moral support. 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 Chirharanghat, had a rare splendour. 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 contemplation on the grandeur of the sky and the transience of life and love. (211)

Indira rises from the ashes and regains her spirit and love for life. She is reborn and rejuvenated. She considered her “Guru” and mentor Professor Lekharu a great help in coming out of her miseries of life. It’s a father-daughter relationship which she shares with him and she

confesses that after Madhu's death, he had been her mentor, guru, her father and a strong pillar of moral support. She says:

My teacher inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar, but an individual endowed with all human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity. For my teacher, humanity alone was the prime consideration, and nothing else. (220)

Thus, Indira Goswami's autobiography, very beautifully, brings out those aspects of her life which might have been buried in 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, decides to lead life on her own terms and conditions instead of looking for the social conventions, traditions and values. As much as the person suffers, the more experienced he becomes in life. Goswami's task of writing her life story helps her in creating a distinguished place for herself amongst the other Assamese women writers as well as she could look within herself and confront her inner self from which she kept running 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.

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