

AN ECO FEMINIST READING OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S AN UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY**Marshina Ahmeda**

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ABSTRACT

Eco feminism is a branch of feminism which sees the relationship between women and earth. As a social , political and philosophical movement Eco feminism connects the oppression of women to the exploitation of nature and considers it interconnected. It is believed that the term was coined by the French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Femisimse ou la Mort* (1974).Eco feminists tries to questions the patriarchy which stands as common culprit to women and nature. Indira Goswami, a stalwart of Indian Literature exposes the issues of women in relation to nature in her outstanding work *An Unfinished Autobiography*. She shows how the Radheswamis are marginalized, devalued and deprived with a parallel description of the exploitation of nature by masculine regimes. In the holy city of Lord Krishna , Vrindaban, the women are poverty stricken, they are hungry and have no place to live. They suffer from diseases but have no money to go to doctors. They are abused, underestimated and exploited by the society. The degradation of river, land and environment has also become common. Man has been shown as real agent who can exploit women and nature for his own profit.

KEY WORDS : Eco-feminism ,nature, women ,men, exploitation**INTRODUCTION:**

Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism emerged as an ideology and movement seeks to understand and resist the interconnected dominations of nature and women. Ecofeminists believe that there is a close connection of exploitation of nature and domination of women. It sees environmental threats like climate change , melting glaciers, deforestation ,gender inequality, social injustice, physical and mental assault of women all tied to masculine dominance e.g. patriarchal society. The term 'Ecofeminism' is said to have been first coined in 1974 by radical French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne and soon it became a very strong movement that seeks for interconnections of women's oppression and ecological crisis.

Identifying the same cause for environment degradation and exploitation of women, she called upon the feminists to fight for a post patriarchal society which will be free from social inequalities and over exercising of masculine power. Ecofeminists claim that women and nature are interconnected. Promod K Nayar in Contemporary Literary and Cultural theory writes: 'Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. It ignores women's work, knowledge and 'situatedness'' (249) Some of the most influential ideas about ecofeminism come from various wings like Spiritual/Cultural feminism that emphasises on the natural connection between women and nature as exclusive and unique and supports the concept of 'Mother Earth' and 'femininity of nature'. They argue for a restoration of traditional way of protecting nature and respect of women in contemporary society. In Indian society earlier the trees were worshipped as goddess. The nature has occupied a very important role in the process of civilization. From the Harappan civilization to the 21st century nature has been an integral part of the country. Vandana Shiva who is an Indian scholar and environmental activist, has authored more than 20 books, describes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* that "Forests have always been central to Indian civilization. They have been worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary source of life and fertility, and the forest as a community has been viewed as a model for societal and civilizational evolution. The diversity, harmony and self-sustaining nature of the forest formed the organizational principles guiding Indian civilization; the aranya samskriti (roughly translatable as 'the culture of the forest' or 'forest culture') was not a condition of primitiveness, but one of conscious choice." (Shiva, 53). Starhawk is also known for her work in spiritualism and ecofeminism. She advocates for social justice in issues surrounding nature and spirit. Thus the over exploitation of nature due to capitalist needs concern. In the patriarchal society, the capitalists are seen doing anthropocene activities which are harmful for the earth. They are indifferent to nature as they are to women. Women and nature are both treated as entity which can be easily used for the interest of men.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are given below:

1. Discuss eco feminist concern in Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*
2. Analyse the dynamics of women-nature relationship in Indira Goswami's autobiography.

METHODOLOGY:

The method approached for this paper is mostly analytical. Moreover a descriptive approach has also been adopted. The main text is taken as the primary source of this research paper while various secondary sources like different articles, research paper and extensive use of internet are taken as secondary sources.

WOMEN AND NATURE DYNAMICS IN AN UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

Indira Goswami popularly known as Mamoni Roisom Goswami is considered to be one of the most renowned contemporary female writers of Assam, India. Recipient of a number of awards including Sahitya Academy Award, the Jnanapith, the Padma Shri, the Assam Ratna, she has published over twenty five novels to her credit. She is best known for her efforts to bring about social changes through her writings as well as through her role as a mediator between the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Government of India. Some of her best novels are *The Chenab's Current* (1972), *The Blue Necked God* (1976), *The Rusted Sword and Two Other Novels* (1980), *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (1988), *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005) etc. Being an Assamese writer Goswami is not limited to her contents of writing to a limited circle of Assamese literature. Rather she has drawn her themes from various parts of the country. In most of her novels, Goswami has shown her concern to nature, women and thus gives immense space for ecocritical or eco-feministic reading. For instance her novel '*The Blue Necked God*' (1976) shows the poverty of women who are left behind by their families. It is based on the exploitation of Radheswamis of Vrindaban and their excessive poverty. It shows the writer's concern for women and nature. She has given the realistic portrayal of the staving widows. In her novels *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005) and a short story collection *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001), she has shown great concerns for women and nature. The novel *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) is set in Delhi and depicts the anti-Sikh riots that broke out in Delhi in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi. The novel shows ecofeminist concerns where men were raping women and setting fire to different things, thus polluting and degrading environment. *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001) is a collection of eight short stories. In these short stories, Goswami realistically presents the landscape and people of her region i.e. Assam. There is a rich description of flora and fauna. In many of her short stories, woman and nature are shown as synonyms. Woman is not portrayed as part of nature but nature itself. Woman is described in relation to nature and vice versa. The Brahmaputra river in Assam and Kamakhya temple occupy an important place in these short stories. In her another novel *The Man From Chinnamasta*, relation between nature and woman is explored. Goswami vividly depicts the landscape, myths, legends and people of Assam. Her description of myth of Goddess Kamakhya strongly brings out the ecofeminist concerns in the novel. An unfinished autobiography is one of the finest autobiographies written by an Indian female writer. The linguistic sophistication and a convincing narrative style makes it more powerful literary creation. The book unveils many of the author's shade of life: her excessive pain, depression, struggle to form an identity and fight for living. She mentions how right from her childhood she was struggling with depression. The sorrow of losing her father was unbearable to her and this is why she developed the tendency for suicide in the Crimoline Waterfall near her house in Shillong. While she was undergoing though pain, the well known

author Homen Borgohain inspired her to write. Touched by his words she began to write the autobiography. The unfinished autobiography is not just about documenting the events of the author but also of transformations. Readers get a glimpse of the metamorphosis of a depressed young girl to an aspiring writer, a widow to a complete individual. Goswami is said to have a soft corner for the marginalized sections of the society and it is of no wonder that her own tragedies and experiences pushed her to feel compassionate with the same. Goswami has not only described the plight of the women in a patriarchal society, she has critiqued it. She was married in 1966 to Madhavan Ransom Ayengar and he died after 18 months of marriage in a car accident. After becoming widow she was considered as considered polluted and hence she became alienated. An Unfinished Autobiography is divided into three parts. First part is entitled as “Life is No Bargain” which covers Indira’s life since her childhood days spent in Shillong up to the unfortunate death of her husband. The 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” which is the longest and the most crucial one, contains her days in Vrindaban. She came to Vrindaban for doctoral research under Professor Lekharu and this place enriched her to become a writer. As she starts moving around the city she begins to experience the pitiful conditions of the poverty stricken radheswamis(widows). They do not have enough meal to satisfy their hunger and are starving. They are helpless.. The places where widows spend their lives are unhygienic and filthy.They do not get two times meal and the question of medical treatment even does not exist. They live with beggars and lepers, eating dirty crumbs thrown by devout pilgrims. Sometimes, their bodies are eaten by worms. These women are forced to live like this. They are deprived of basic human needs. Indira Goswami writes:

‘One day, while visiting Shahji’s temple situated at a corner of the market to have a look at the marble gopis in dancing posture, I came across another destitute Radhesyami, lying prostrate in a dark alley nearby. She was in rags and was clinging to some odd items picked up from garbage dumps. She looked more like a vulture with broken wings than a human being. (119)’

The nature in An unfinished autobiography becomes expressive of the pitiful existence of widows in the city of Vrindavan. Their painful condition can not be described. Due to hunger, they are reduced to mere bones or skeletons. Goswami has given the realistic portrayal of the starving widows on Annakut festival. It is the day of offering gratitude for Lord Krishna’s beneficence. During this festival, the widows come out of their dwellings and gather in large number around the temple in the hope that they would get stomach full of food to eat. Even those widows who are on the verge of dying come out of their residing places with the support of young widows to have glimpse of the attractive festival. Goswami describes that by looking at the starving widows it is felt they would jump in the heaps of the food to have some and everything will be finished in a moment. The author has told the brutality of the men by saying that some men jumped into the body of the old widows. The

irony is that the men are offering mountains and mountains of food to God but they are not ready to give enough food to the starving widows. Indira Goswami has portrayed the plight of the old widows and she says that the money they save for their last rites is also taken by some men:

“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)

In her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature (1993)* Val Plumwood, an Australian philosopher and an ecofeminist, writes that western ‘rationalist tradition’ acknowledges ‘dualism’ which is responsible for the domination of both woman and nature. She gives examples of such dualities such as culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, rationality/animality (nature), reason/emotion (nature), civilized/primitive (nature), etc. The terms like culture, reason, rationality, civilized, etc are associated with masculinity and terms like animality, emotion, primitive, etc are associated with femininity. The terms associated with masculinity are treated as superior and those associated with femininity are treated as inferior. Both woman and nature are shown as inferior and helpless victims under the domination of patriarchy. The injustice done to both women and nature brings out the inhumane nature of man who is portrayed as a superior being. The condition of widows of Vrindavan is very pathetic and they often become the object of physical abuse at the hands of pandas (Hindu priests) of Vrindavan. Like nature, the widows are mute sufferers at the hands of men. They are sexually exploited by men.

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) Whatever little money, the widows are able to retain through their wanderings and chantings of holy songs is deposited with greedy pandas in order to ensure that they would get decent and proper funeral rites after their death. These widows prefer to starve themselves so that they would be cremated with proper rites after their death. But the reality is different and shocking from what they expect. The fact is that the greedy and cruel pandas ensure them of proper funeral rites but instead they pocket their money after their death and throw their bodies in river Yamuna so that no money would be spent on their last rites. The nature shares the same fate as the widows of Vrindavan who do not have enough food to eat and have become weak and thin like river Yamuna. In Vrindavan, each and every sight of widows is depressing for Goswami . She finds solace only in the objects of nature. The tragedy of losing her husband mixes with many pains. Here Indira Goswami finds multiple things to be concentrated on unlike her gloomy days in Goalpara Sainik School. She refers in many palces of the autobiography how she was living with the nature. She used to roam around the the nature of Vrindaban ,by the side Of Jamuna which clearly shows a great eco feminist concern. It is evident, that she shares a close bond with nature. So, woman and nature are both synonymous and are victims.

CONCLUSION:

An Unfinished Autobiography is a very exceptional work of Indira Goswami as it is not limited to authors's reminiscence of past. The work has shown the writer's great concern for women and nature. Both nature and women are object at the hands of men. Indira Goswami experienced the plight of these women and wrote about it in her autobiography. Thus she questioned the patriarchal society which in the name of religion did all this wrong. The relationship of women and nature is multifaceted. It is women who protects and preserves nature.

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