

An Unconventional Narrative On Widowhood: Reading of Indira Goswami's *Aadha Lekha Dastavez* Or An Unfinished Autobiography

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Abstract

Indira Goswami or Mamoni Raisom Goswami or Mamoni *Baideo* (1942-2011) as she is better known to the Assamese reading public, is a prominent figure in the domain of Assamese literature. Her works have been translated into English and have received wide appreciation and she was conferred many awards including the Jnanpith and Sahitya Academy. Indira Goswami primarily writes about the subjugated and marginalized sections of society observed from close quarters. Indira Goswami who became a widow at a very young age, within two and a half years of her marriage, presents stories of the marginalized through the experiential voice of a widow herself. Thrown into a life of depression with suicidal tendencies after the tragic death of her husband, Indira Goswami found a renewed impetus towards life through her creative work. The issue of widowhood and the complexities of it is a recurrent theme in Indira Goswami's works. The essay deals with Goswami's self-initiation into the rituals attached with widowhood and tries to enquire into her choices. It also deals with the issue of memories and melancholia and mourning that are intertwined in Goswami's personal narrative presented in the form of an autobiography.

Key Words: Widowhood, Unconventional narrative, Memory, Melancholia, Mourning

Introduction

This essay begins with charting out a biography of Indira Goswami based on her half-written autobiography which also reads like a novel. This is to introduce the author and her life which is crucial in understanding her body of work. Thereafter, this essay examines the nature of subjective widowhood which the author shares vis-à-vis other subjective testimonies available. I have mostly relied on *Shadow Lives: Writings On Widowhood* edited

by Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill for other subjective testimonies or ‘personal narratives’ to be more precise, as the text provides an archive on widowhood in the form of prescriptions, injunctions, laws, personal narratives as well as fictional accounts. I have left out the fictional renderings of the text for the obvious reason that the primary text under discussion is an autobiography. And finally, the essay tries to locate self-imposed widowhood of Goswami which appears to be different from ‘enforced widowhood’ deeply embedded in both ‘oppressive traditions’ and ‘oppressive structure’ of material, social, ideological, patriarchal locations, in Goswami’s pathological condition of melancholia at the loss of her husband and her father very early in life more than anything else. Her self-initiated debate trying to come in terms with the abrupt ending of her happy conjugal life by pushing herself to the margins of life finally comes to a positive closure. She denounces her self-imposed garb of widowhood and thereby those age-old ‘oppressive traditions’. In this act of hers, Goswami defeats the popular rhetoric associated with widowhood which still prevails in the Hindu psyche. Although a resolve is seen in Goswami’s self-imposed celibacy, the state of melancholia or depression that perpetually assails her mind and body prevails till the very end of the autobiography.

Biography of Indira Goswami as accounted in the autobiography

Indira Goswami consciously accommodates in her autobiography from her memory, incidents and events starting from the year 1956 till 1970. It begins with her ruminating about her school days in Pine Mount School in Shillong at a time when her father Umakanta Goswami was the State Director of Education. Delving deep into her past memories, she recounts that “her forefathers were ‘*adhikaris*’¹ of a Sattrā² on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, possessing thousands of acres of land” (12). Goswami’s tryst with a “vague” sense of anguish and sorrow features in the very first paragraph of the autobiography both in the Assamese original and in the English translation. A consequent obsession with the idea of self-destruction or suicidal tendencies grips her mind at a tender age of ten. She writes, “It was at best ten or so at that time, and yet was obsessed with the thought of taking my own life. It all arose from my fear that the agony of my father’s death when it comes- for come it

¹ Religious head

² A Vaishnavite monastery in Assam

must, after all, I knew- would be too terrible for me to bear” (4). Further, she tries to fathom this trait cultivated in her childhood, “even as a child, I was stricken with grief to think of the terrible effect of separation from my near and dear ones. I did not know what exactly it was. It was a sort of strange unease of my inner mind which I tried to subdue but failed” (7). Agony and despair grew stronger with passing time and grew worse at the loss of her husband. The first record of her numerous attempts at suicide takes place in 1961 after her father passes away. She meets Madhavan Roysom Iyenger, an engineering graduate from Mysore in 1961. He came to work with the Hindustan Construction Company which had taken up the project of constructing the Saraighat Bridge over the Brahmaputra. Madhavan proposes marriage to Indira in April 1963 but her mother rejects the match. In order to escape the rigmarole associated with her mother’s desperate search for a high caste match, Goswami on impulse contracts a civil marriage to an Ahom. But she fails to accept the man as her husband for Indira falls in love with Madhavan and seeks divorce. After this incident, Indira’s mother gives consent to her marriage with Madhavan to escape social criticism. In October 1965, Indira Goswami ties the marital knot with Madhavan and sets out to start a life full of happiness and bliss. She writes, “For the first time in life, I felt released from those nightmarish thoughts that had preyed upon my mind and spirit for long years of my childhood and youth” (22). She further mentions” 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” (23) . Goswami accompanies her husband to Runn of Kutch, to Kashmir for the Chenab bridge project where she gathers material for her fictions. She mentions going to Madhu’s ancestral home in Malleswaram Bangalore for the first time in January 1967 where her affinal family showed much liking of her. In March 1967, they return to Kashmir and Madhavan is appointed as the manager of Suina project on his return. That very month, on a fateful day Madhavan meets with a car accident and dies. With this the first part of the narrative, “Life is no bargain” comes to an end.

The second part of the book titled “Down memory lane” starts with the year 1968. Indira Goswami has moved back to Assam and has taken up a teacher’s job at the Sainik School at Goalpara. Her childhood despair returns back without its sense of vagueness, for now, that

vagueness is replaced by the sudden death of Madhavan. She writes, “Every morning I woke up to find my mind sagging under an acute pain of depression, so much so, that the old obsession of the suicide, which haunted me from my early childhood but left me whole after I had met Madhu, once more started nagging me in the secret recesses of my life” (73). In this phase of her life, she contemplates self-annihilation every single day and takes solace in her past memories of her childhood, her father’s old diaries and letters and in the memories of people long dead and gone. She started “living more with the dead than the living” (60). Many well-wishers propose marriage to Indira but she rejects them all. This section of the autobiography mentions her taking the decision of going to Vrindavan-the abode of the widows in 1969 to pursue her doctoral studies in Ramayana literature under the guidance of Upendra Chandra Lekkharu and also mentions that in 1971, she joins as a lecturer in the Department of Modern Indian Languages of the Delhi University.

The third and the final part of the autobiography titled, “The City of God” deals with her own self-imposed state of widowhood, her renunciation of the worldly ways and her first-hand experience of the miserable condition of the widows in the land of Braj. She negotiates her desire in the wake of it and tries to conquer it every single time. Finally, she rejects her life of austerity, abandons traditional codes and gives up her decision to become a *sanyasini*. This section ends with Indira Goswami joining Delhi University on 2 November, 1970.

***Aadha Lekha Dastavez* : an unconventional narrative**

To answer the question as to what qualifies *Aadha Lekha Dastavez* an unconventional narrative on widowhood, one has to go back to previous and early accounts of widowhood as described by women. Uma Chakravarti writes about the need to, “ shift the attention of history from ‘knowledge’ about widowhood ‘produced’ by men to the ‘experience’ of widowhood as described by women” (247). Most of the male writings on widowhood especially in the context of reformist discourse centred on a ‘humanist rhetoric’ and confined to a repetitive description of the “ oppressive cultural practices that spelt the social death of the (upper-caste) widow” (ibid 247). Uma Chakravarti essentially talks about the subject of upper-caste widow and forms a critique of enforced widowhood by locating it within the structures of “ material and ideological arrangements of Brahminical patriarchy” (ibid 247).

She examines writings of women like Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910), Rakhmabai (1860- 1950), Anandibai Karve (1865-1950) who along with a critique of the cultural practices of Brahminical widowhood, also conceptualises and exposes patriarchy, double standards of morality and religion and legislative power. The point of convergence of such writings with that of Indira Goswami's personal narrative lies in Goswami belonging to an upper-caste Brahminical household. Both her natal and affinal families belonged to the upper-caste. One has the habit of presuming that most accounts of widowhood render similar or almost identical experiences as the structures within which such experiences are positioned are identical in nature. Although cultural, material and ideological practices of widowhood have regional variances, in essence they are almost the same everywhere. Now, going back to the question of how Indira Goswami's narrative is an unconventional one, I would draw a parallel with other well-known personal narratives by women which have become the focus of feminist scholars in recent years. Since the focus of this chapter is not one of comparison between early and latter writings, I would take up only one significant instance to address the question.

Anandibai Karve (1865-1950), the first student at Sharada Sadan the school set up by Pandita Ramabai, and who remarries the social reformer Maharishi Dhondo Keshav Karve in 1893 creating a furore in Maharashtra especially in Poona, talks of her drudgery at her in-laws house and the "wicked" custom of tonsure implemented on her in the extract which appears in *Shadow Lives: writings on widowhood* . The underlying motive behind the custom of the tonsure of widows, " was to make the outward appearance of the widow in harmony with the ideal of renunciation (samnyasa)". (Altekar 159) Altekar further 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"(161-62). Anandibai was made to shave her head on this very pretext of religious dogmatism perpetuated by the priest in the form of sermons that every drop of water which drops from the widow's hair gave the dead husband the life of a worm and he remained in Hell. Anandibai captures her experience in her own words,

But it was when I lost my hair and had to wear a red sari that I realised for the first time what it was to be a widow....The ordeal had to be repeated every month, and even now I feel for the unfortunate young woman that I was...From that time, I was supposed to live the life of an

ascetic, observing several fasts a month, keeping various vows, restricting what I could eat and showing special piety in the worship of God. (148)

This particular extract dwells on one of the most loathsome ‘conventions’ of widowhood i.e. of tonsure. This ‘convention’ is nowhere mentioned in Indira Goswami’s narrative not even in her observations of the conditions of the widows of Vrindavan. There is of course a plausible reason to it which is that by the time Indira Goswami had become a widow, this obnoxious custom which began to disappear in the first quarter of the 20th century had almost gone out of practice. Notwithstanding this conceivable reason, one could say that a degrading custom which had consumed the society not too many centuries ago, a custom which had dominated the public debates of the nineteenth century India remains a silent issue in Goswami’s account. In that absence of such a ‘convention’, and the recurrent themes which dominate widow narratives almost binding the women in a strange form of sisterhood, one can call Goswami’s narrative an unconventional one. Goswami’s narrative qualifies as an unusual one only when it is posited vis-à-vis early writings of the nineteenth century and the traditional cultural practices in relation to widowhood such as tonsure, resistance to widow remarriage, property rights of widows documented in these writings. Also the theme of ‘enforced widowhood’ which over-dominated the writings of the nineteenth century resurfaces in Goswami’s autobiography albeit in a different way and this differential element further qualifies her autobiography as an ‘unconventional’ one. I shall discuss it in detail a little later.

In the wake of social reform in the nineteenth century, passing of the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act in 1856 owing to the efforts of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), the Sanskrit scholar and later changes in the legal system regarding property rights, “the material and ideological structures (which) have shaped both law and custom governing the lives of widows” (Chakravarti, 2001) also underwent changes. With the traditional practices going out of trend and gradually with it the definition, the feelings of what it is to be a ‘widow’ also changed. Partition widows, widows of the 1984 riots, war widows, and widows taking part in social and political movements, widows of Vrindavan, Mathura and Kasi have different and unique experiences to share. Most of these narratives are marked by a common marker of irreparable loss of their husbands, their lives plagued by memories of their past. In the new century, these widows have had to come to terms with new problems of livelihood, of

identity. In the extract titled “Widows of the 1984 Riots” in *Shadow Lives: Writings On Widowhood*, attention is drawn to the usage of the English term “widow” by the riot widows to refer to themselves instead of any other Hindi terms. The Indian State has conferred this term to these women and the term has in a way “become a marker of their identity”. The extended families of these women disapprove of the term as these women are “no longer identified as the “wives of” the dead sons, but as women in their own right albeit as widows” (236). Such account reiterates the point that the question of widowhood has undergone significant changes and has assumed newer meanings. Indira Goswami’s personal narrative can be placed along the lines of such recent narratives which depart from early narratives depicting ‘conventional’ oppressive practices. Therefore, there is the need to understand and place the nature of the self-chosen and therefore ‘unconventional’ widowhood described by Indira Goswami within newer structures.

Widowhood as represented in *Aadha Lekha Dastavez*

Widowhood as is recounted in the autobiography reveals subjective experience of widowhood of the author herself and that of sad plight of the Hindu widows of Vrindavan as seen and observed through the author’s eyes. I would mostly focus on the moving account of the author’s coming to terms with her widowhood as told in the second and third section of the text. As mentioned in the chronologically fashioned biographical account in the beginning of the chapter, Indira Goswami takes up a teaching job at the Sainik School in Goalpara. The privileged but troubled childhood of Goswami marked by her suicidal tendencies came back to her. She began filling her vanity bag with ‘sleeping draughts’ contemplating suicide unable to cope up with the second traumatic experience of her life, the first traumatic experience being the death of her dear father. Goswami resided in a lonely little room in the residential room, an isolated ‘space’ which she carved out for herself for the purpose of brooding over her loss. She writes, “...as soon as I entered my room, I was steeped in darkness. Despair would sneak into my soul and bog me down” (54). Such an act of confinement of the self in a lonely dark cell later recurs in Vrindavan as well. She stayed for two years in an unventilated, snake infested hovel in the basement of an old temple. Many years later in Guwahati, one of the woman that she had met in Vrindavan, exclaims in surprise, “I could never imagine that you belong to such a well-to-do family. While in Vrindavan, the clothes

you used to put on were also very ordinary. Even the table and the chair you used were so shaky” (181).

This conscious decision on the part of an upper class privileged girl can be seen as synonymous to renunciation of the luxuries of life- a form of self-enforced renunciation given the status of her being a widow. Prescriptive texts like the Dharmasutras (c.500-200 BC), the Dharmasastras (200BC-200AD), Kautilya Arthashastra (c.300 BC), Manusmriti, Vriddha Harita (c.600-900AD), have laid down codes to regulate the lives of upper caste widows. These texts which laid down injunctions, laws and prescriptions regarding levirate marriages, laws of inheritance etc. emphasized on enforced celibacy. Some of the prescribed codes ask of widows to take up fasts, give up taking two meals a day, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments, avoid things like honey, meat, salt, liquor and instead live on flowers, roots and fruits, sleep on the ground etc. Some of these codes like cooking meals only once a day, sleeping on the floor of her tiny and hovel are followed by Goswami. That such practice was enforced on her either by her natal or affinal family can be ruled out. Indira came from an upper-caste but liberal family for she recounts the second marriage of ‘her father after the death of his first wife even in the face of opposition from the Brahmin community which probably did not favour remarriage in that time’ (58) which is after 1937. But one cannot say for certain whether such practices were a part of her self-chosen celibacy or were they due to economic reasons given the constraints of space of the hovel. Goswami credits such choices of being reclusive to the abrupt ending of her martial life. She writes,

Who can ascertain the exact state of the mind of a woman as suddenly hit by misfortunes 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. That perhaps explains my preference- subconscious it seems now- for the single room in the school hostel then, or for a dark hovel later at Vrindavan. (50)

One should take note that Goswami uses the English word “sexual” in the Assamese original. (68) This suggests ‘repression’ of her sexual desires in the wake of “endless and ruthless pain” into the ‘unconscious’ zone of the mind. Goswami subjecting herself to celibacy or to some nascent form of celibacy in order to channelize her sexual urges through the ‘proper’ or ‘legitimate’ path of austerity corresponds to the codes of enforced celibacy which propagates the idea that by being the ‘virtuous and the chaste’ wife after the death of the husband, the

wife too can join him in heaven. This channelization of sexuality has echoes of controlling of the sexuality of upper-caste widows or their ‘reproductive labour’ which is so rampant in Brahmanical patriarchy.

The state of widowhood in India amongst Brahmanical patriarchy or upper castes is mainly a state of social and sexual death of the widow. Uma Chakravarti says in her article, “Gender, Cast and Labour Ideological and Material Structure of widowhood”,

The widow’s social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family. (2248)

Since the widow is bereft of her ‘personhood’, she is relegated to the state of a living element only. Therefore, the debate surrounded around how to incorporate this “socially dead but physically alive” ‘element’ in the society. One way of incorporating them,

could have been to constitute a separate community of widows, a non-sexual community such as that of the female ascetics. Another would be to retain her in society but place her on its margins and then institutionalise her marginality. The widow’s institutionalised marginality, a liminal state between being physically and socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as her personhood (ibid 2248) .

The rituals or prescribed codes for the widows more often than not symbolise either their state of being socially dead or of being sexually dead. The practice of tonsure enforced upon widows shows that the lives of the widows are regulated by the ‘authority’ of men and is a burning example to that effect. “A widow’s life is a long series of privations, and the shaving of her head is a symbolic rite to desex her” (Mukherjee 89). Therefore,

Widowhood is a highly symbolised domain in the experience of upper caste Hindu society. While there are many elements of the widow's existence that are symbolised, there is an overwhelming concentration on the profound danger represented by the sexuality of the widow The continued existence of the widow after the death of her husband was to convert what was most valuable to the husband in his lifetime into an awesome threat to his community The theme that dominates the ceremonies and rituals of widowhood is the sexual death of the widow. And since the upper caste woman in brahmanical patriarchy is primarily a vehicle for reproduction, the sexual death of a woman is simultaneously a social death. (Chakravarty 2249)

In the light of the above theoretical propositions, one can argue that Goswami in her ‘self-chosen’ state of widowhood chooses to be “sexually dead” by channelizing her sexuality

through legitimate means of forms of asceticism. She constantly talks about male gaze of ‘roadside Romeos’ trying to probe her sexuality in the streets of Vrindavan. She mentions that there was no dearth of ‘lovers’ who offered her marriage proposals in Goalpara, Vrindavan and Delhi. She also talks about how she feared being labelled as a debauched widow- “but the thought that I could possibly be mistaken for a profligate widow abandoned at Vrindavan was very painful to me” (158). She always expressed a sense of self-reproach at the slightest hint of her desires coming to the surface. A constant tug-of-war took place between her desires and her initial inhibitions associated with how she would come across in the assessment made by other people. There is an instance described where one of her former students from Sainik School comes to visit her in Vrindavan and she was hesitant to even offer him a seat lest her Guru and his wife would take notice of a young man in her hovel. She mentions one regrettable instance of spending one night with Kaikos Burjor, an engineer friend of her husband in a hotel in Delhi for some official work related to Madhavan. She was so much mortified by the act that it “numbed” her soul. She writes, “I began to despise myself so much so that for having spent that night in the New Delhi hotel I did not even want to touch the clothes I had then put on, and laid them aside” (178). She tried to console herself that she hasn’t disgraced herself by arguing that all of it amounted to self-assessment. She writes, “ On the contrary, it was a time for self-assessment. Self-assessment in relation to a man who offered himself at your door?” (178). She tries to secure her position as the woman who doesn’t give into the assumed innate promiscuous nature of woman and constantly checks herself from giving into temptations. This corresponds to the anomaly associated with the sexuality of the widows and hence the need for, “ legitimate channelization of their sexual energy in a stringently organised system of reproduction without which the social system would collapse” (Chakravarti 2249). In case of Goswami, her desires are manipulated in a ‘organised system’ of ‘repression’ through self-denial and self-restraint. Goswami’s conformity to the dictates of brahmanical patriarchy reiterates the point of ‘self-chosen’ celibacy which marks her autobiographical narrative as an unusual one.

Goswami in the course of her stay at Vrindavan comes in contact with yogis and *sannyasins*. She closely observed the rigorous ascetic rites they performed on their bodies and “the strict austerity of their disposition led (her) to believe that they would hardly react even if a lump of flesh was torn off from their bodies” (162). Again, she wanted to go to the Himalayas in

the company of a *sannyasin* instead of going to Delhi for the new job. Indira's belief that a *sannyasin* is unconcious and numb to the pain and suffering of the body due to following of codes of bodily mortifications propelled her to consider the decision of exploring the life of a *yogi* renouncing the material world. This is precisely what the *shastras* and brahmanical ideology propagates to exercise their control over the body and mind of the widow.

Indira Goswami's moving to Vrindavan in 1969, at the advice of her teacher is not a matter of co-incidence. That her old teacher had happened to give her a call to pursue her doctoral studies on Ramayana literature may be seen as a co-incidence but her going there is not. For she had other choices too- of going to London for further studies as advised by her mother. Her decision of going to Vrindavan, the most traditional destination for Hindu widows and also celebrated for the immortal divine love story of Radha and Krishna can be read as more than a co-incidence. C E Sujatha and R Ramachandra observe that,

Her relationship with Madhavan was deeper than a formal, marital one: it shows deep shades of the Gopika-Krishna relationship. She regarded him as her soul-mate.³

The Radha-Krishna relationship as imagined and propagated in the Vaishnava tradition epitomizes easily unattainable divine love and the figure of Radha is symbolic of the philosophy of *Viraha* or "pangs of separation" which is an important element in Vaishnava literature. Rajul Sogani writes,

The concept of Radha was developed as the archetypal beloved of God, who, as a married woman, disregarded social restrictions in order to seek union with Him. The Radha-Krishna pair of divine lovers took hold of the popular imagination (Vaudeville 1-12), and inspired literature, painting and performing arts all over the country. (13)

Goswami was evidently inflicted with *Viraha* her tragic separation from her husband must have identified herself with the Radha figure seeking union with her husband for she constantly looked for signs of his presence in the form of a whisper or showing her signs in a difficult situation. One has to go back to the Bhakti tradition which flourished in medieval India in order to understand this parallel drawn. Sisir Kumar Das in his essay, "*The Mad Lover*" talks about the metaphor of the 'mad lover' a term which is not considered to be a

³ C E Sujatha and R Ramachandra "Princess amidst ruins". Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain 86.

pejorative one in Hindu religious context.⁴ The Bhakti movement saw many a women poet-saints expressing their unrestrained love for God through the medium of love poetry and the dominating theme of these love-poems was the longing for the beloved almost in a dizzying frenzy. Sisir kumar Das writes,

...This longing for the beloved as expressed in the vachana of Mahadevi became the central theme in Vaishnava poetryand reached its dizzy height in the character of Radha... (26-27)

Perhaps coming from a Vishnavaita background, Goswami well-versed with such a tradition identified herself with Radha longing to seek union with her 'soul-mate'. Contemplating on her decision to go to Vrindavan instead of London, Goswami asks herself, " But was it He (Krishna) who occupied my heart? If not, then why the decision to go to Vrindavan? I had no clear answer to that question of my own heart" (79). Later in Vrindavan, listening to the songs sung by *Radhesyamis* capturing the deep grief of Radha's separation from Krishna, Goswami tries to resolve her vote between the historical Krishna-'the Krishna of Kurukshetra' and the mythical Krishna. She admits that she strongly wanted to believe in the 'plebeian image' of Him- the one who was Radha's consort. Her belief in the existence of the popular image of Krishna re-affirms her identification with Radha. In this identification however a kind of subversion takes place for according to the legend, Radha was a married woman who like most other poet-saints of the Bhakti movement, left their mortal husband to seek union with the divine Krishna which is an act of defiance in itself. In the case of Indira, a double defiance takes place for an upper-caste widow, who according to brahmanical patriarchy is no more than a living element seeks 'union' or seeks to be Krishna's bride defying the traditional rituals associated with the renunciation of the widow's 'wifeness' which is diametrically opposite to that of the rituals associated with marriage. Goswami posits two opposite ideas or strands of widowhood in her autobiography- one of succumbing to the conventions on widowhood and the other of challenging the same. Two examples would drive this point home once again. On an auspicious occasion, in Guwahati, when the family wanted to serve her food separately with the other widows, Indira walked out in strong protest. Her mother read out stories of pious women, satis in puranic literature but she, "have

⁴ Das, Sisir Kumar. "The Mad Lover". *Cultural Diversity Linguistic Plurality and Literary Traditions in India*. Delhi, 2005, 25.

had but little faith in the rigorism of traditional customs and practices” (51). The same Indira conforms to such rigorisms in a bid to assess herself. There is a constant tussle between the two in the text and doesn't get resolved till the very end of the narrative and one must also bear in mind the fact that it is a half-written autobiography which abruptly pauses in the year 1970. The resolve of her mental dilemma somewhat takes place in one of her fictions *Neelkanthi Vraja* based on her experiences at Vraj.

Mourning in memories

Like widowhood, memory in *Aadha Lekha Dastavez* is presented as having two qualities to it- one painful and lethal and the other therapeutic. Gripped with the memories of her husband, Indira tried to find momentary escape from the “undefinable load of grief” in the memories of other dead people and of her childhood spent with her father. She says, “There was a time when I was more in the company of the dead than of the living. The affliction of the loss of my beloved was still vexing my soul” (81). An obliteration of the memories of Madhu is what she constantly tried to seek everywhere. She pinned her hopes on the magical aura associated with holy man and visited all the *babas* or *sannyasis* who came to visit Vraj in the hope of finding a way out of the painful memories. She is constantly bogged down by one question, “Shall I really find a way out after all? Would my constant remembering of Madhu, which caused anguish in my heart, ultimately become a mere memory for which my heart would not bleed?” (121). This is what she had in mind to ask one Deboria Sannyasi She went to one Mauni Baba, “to know from him how to free my mind from tormenting thoughts and feelings. I only wanted to know if I could ever get any respite from those fondly painful memories of Madhu that gripped my heart and soul” (124).

All these holy men failed to offer her any solution. But what these holy men failed to give her; her father's diaries did. She started residing “more with the dead than the living” and all those dead and long gone offered her comfort and solace. Her father's diaries were like a portal to the past- of past histories of her father, of her grandfather, of colonial Assam, of her own childhood. She roamed freely and revelled in these memories and as long as she was inside that portal, it provided a shield to the present memories of loss and suffering. She tries to relive and feel all the love and care once bestowed on her by her parents and in those

memories of parental cares tries to drown her miseries. She did not seek solace in religion or religious books as advised by many but read only her father's diary as an alternative to those.

Death-wish

As outlined in the biography at the beginning, Indira's suicidal tendencies which had plagued her childhood days became acute with the death of Madhavan. She began filling her purse with sleeping pills every single day and struggled between keeping alive and being dead. This phenomenon resonates of brahmanical patriarchy's consideration of the widow as socially dead. In the section titled, "A snake in the Living room", Goswami narrates an incident about a snake that entered into the hovel in her absence. The fear of the snake gave her many sleepless nights but soon she overcame the fear of death associated with the snake. That is because of the "death-wish" lurking in the deep recesses of her mind. She says, "It was because of the death-wish deeply- entrenched in my heart that I slowly grew immune to fears and anxieties of all kinds. I had to wage a long war, as it were, to overcome this obsession" (155).

This obsession of Goswami calls to mind the Freudian formulation of the death drive in his theory of psychoanalytic studies. Pamela Thurschwell writes in *Routledge Critical Thinkers*,

Contrary to what its name implies, the death-drive is not connected with aggressive impulses towards others. It is self-destructive, rather than other-destructive, and seems to have no economic explanation in Freud's own terms. There is no payback of pleasure involved in the death-drive (Thurschwell: 2000, 88).

Death drive or *Thanatos* as it is usually known is posited against *Eros* or the pleasure principle which according to Freud dominates the human mind. In his seminal text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an association is formed between death and pleasure. For,

Death is the ultimate release of tension; it promises the ultimate experience of stasis and complete calm. Re-enacting unpleasurable experiences comes to seem like a rehearsal for our own deaths (ibid 88).

The idea of repetition of an act, of dreams (unpleasurable) came to be associated with a psychic end in itself and hence the urge to re-visit or replay of something takes place. Goswami's self-destructive urges then can be associated to the replaying of the memories of her husband in her mind. Those once fond memories had undergone mutation and become painful and in the act of re-visiting them or in associating those memories to places and people as Goswami repeatedly rehearses her urge to die. Every single act of repetition or replay of those

memories corresponds to the rehearsal of Goswami's own death-wish. This dilemma to die and to live is not resolved in the text as I have already stated a little earlier. Only a mechanism of repetition occurs till the end of the narrative.

In the autobiography, Goswami experiences and relates to death in two different ways. In reality, she only experiences her self-destructive urge and not her own death because no one can 'experience' one's own death. The other experience is about the deaths of her loved ones- that of her father and her husband. Although Goswami overcomes the death of her father; she fails to do so in the case of the latter. The former is a case of mourning and the latter a case of melancholia.

"In his article *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud analyses the ways in which people react to the death of a loved one, or the loss of a cherished idea: 'mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (Freud 1917: 251-2)" (Pamela Thurschwell 2000: 89-90).

Freud in his essay lays down some distinctive symptoms of melancholia which include,

"a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (Freud, 1917).

Mourning is almost as same as melancholia but in mourning, the mourner is depressed about the "object-love" for a particular period of time only after which, the mourner comes back to normal state again:

The fact is however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (ibid 245).

In mourning, the mourner accepts the loss of the loved person and after a period of time relegates the "object-love" into forgetfulness. But that doesn't happen in the case of melancholia. For,

The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning- an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. ...this picture of a delusion of inferiority is

completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and –what is psychologically very remarkable –by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life (ibid 246).

By using the conceptualisation of the pathological condition of melancholia, one can say that Indira Goswami was going through this condition at the loss of her beloved husband. The normal mourner who had lost her father very early in life gradually grows in a melancholic person at the face of another crucial death. At point there is the need to reiterate the fact that the “vague” sense of desolation plaguing her life since her childhood had ceased after her marriage with Madhavan. When this source of her new found happiness ceased to exist, understandably the old feeling of desolation came back to her.

The symptoms or distinguishing features of melancholia as outlined by Freud corresponds to the behaviour exhibited by Goswami in the autobiography. Her “loss of interest in the outside world” persuades her to embrace self-chosen celibacy. This losing of interest in the immediate reality is what also persuades her to consider taking up *sannyas* for life. Although many lovers and well-wishers had proposed her for re-marriage, she refused to consider any of those for her emotions and memories associated with her husband remain attached to him even after the corporeal loss of him. Losing him made her ‘lose the capacity to love others’. Goswami’s death-wish or her self-destructinon urges can be attributed to this pathological condition of melancholia because, “ In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (ibid).

The ego or the self-preservation unit becomes devoid of the urges to live; it is surmounted by the death-drive and pushes one towards self-annihilation. This explains Indira Goswami’s constant thoughts of suicide. But one should also keep in mind that, although the tension between the ego and death-wish is not sorted out in the narrative, Goswami does seek to find a way out of her memories in the company of her father’s diary and by visiting those holy men who came down from the Himalayas which has already been discussed before.

Conclusion

In *Aadha Lekha Dastavez* or *An Unfinished Autobiography*, the author has depicted her acute melancholia or depression as it is better known today associated with widowhood. As was the norm with most stories or personal narratives of widowhood to narrate one’s gruesome

experiences of widowhood deep-entrenched in equally gruesome and inhuman cultural practices especially at a time when public consciousness and public discourse was over-dominated with the rhetoric of child widows and widows of the upper-caste; Indira Goswami's autobiography comes across as a deviant account of 'self-chosen' celibacy associated with widowhood where the author goes and resides in a place which is the most traditional refuge for widows. Her depression which stems not out of some cultural practices of widowhood but out of the loss of her loved one is juxtaposed with the lives of the widows of Vrindavan who are pushed to live a life of drudgery, mendicancy or even prostitution not out of their own choice but out of sheer compulsion. Towards the end of the autobiography, Goswami's desire to join the *sannyasins* retreating to the Himalayas is chided by her guru and he encourages her instead to join her new job in Delhi. Goswami finally withdraws her impulse to wander with *sannyasins* and leaves the City of God for the Capital. The book ends with reminiscing about the death of her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu and his values on humanity which he had taught her. The autobiography ends with these lines,

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... (199)

The author's earlier belief that "religion and humanity fostered each other" is shattered when she comes across those widows and those people who come to the city of God in search of something- may be livelihood or maybe to breathe their last in the sacred place. But the nude picture of religion maligned by the religious heads and their practices of corruption and of exploitation of these hapless people who come there makes her revise her belief as she leaves the so-called city of God. One can say that in this new found religious scepticism, the author somewhere becomes sceptical about her 'self-chosen' celibacy too and hence renounces it in order to embrace the religion of humanity as inspired by her father-like, revered teacher. However, one cannot say that whether this renunciation of her idea of leading a life of ascetic has any impact on her state of melancholia. That question is left unanswered in the autobiography.

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