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Challenging Cultural Oppression and Representation of Widows in the Nationalist Narrative: A Study of Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*

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Abstract

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It is often argued that one of the greatest shortcomings of most notable middle-class Indian women writers in the post-independence era was that though they experienced patriarchal oppression and often felt stifled on account of gender in the overall conservative social ethos, they never made a common cause with the systemic injustice to Indian women. They do not try to locate women's subordination within a framework of material or social relations, always choosing instead to highlight their individual suffering and individualistic aspirations and achievements in their autobiographies.

Indira Goswami was one of the greatest writers in Assamese literature. Her autobiography. *Adha-Likha Dastavej (An Unfinished Autobiography)* depicts the first thirty years of an extremely sensitive creative writer who, unlike so many of her contemporary women writers did not feel stilfled by marriage or felt trapped between individualistic aspirations and social roles. Her major struggle was against the disquiet and intense suicidal longings she experienced after her husband's untimely death. My paper argues that *Adha-Likha Dastavej* is not simply a self-absorbed account of personal loss and misery, in her continuous focus on the misery and helplessness of the abandoned widows of Vrindavan in the third part of the narrative, she does connect it to the widely prevalent women's 'fate' in India. In doing so, she questions the socio-religious beliefs which perpetuate female oppression and asks how they get religious sanction and legitimacy when they are so obviously unjust to the hapless widows from the eyes of an observing widow herself. In doing this, she exposes the limitations of the dominant nationalistic discourse around the Hindu widow as well as critiques established religious practices that condemn the unfortunate women to inhuman living conditions. In this sense, her autobiography could be read as the text of the 'oppressed', articulating through her personal narrative, experiences which might be representative of a particular marginalized group and the act of writing could be seen as a way of testifying to the oppression and empowering the subject.

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Challenging Cultural Oppression and Representation of Widows in the Nationalist Narrative: A Study of Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*

Indira Goswami (1942-2011), popularly known as Mamoni Raisome Goswami was one of the most versatile and prolific writers in contemporary Assamese Literature. Her autobiography, *Adha- Likha Dastavej (An Unfinished Autobiography)*, first published in 1988 was translated into English in 1990. It is a young woman's autobiography and as the name also suggests, it's by no means a comprehensive account of her life even up to that point. It can be seen as a 'coming of age' narrative that depicts a period from her childhood to her securing a job as a lecturer in Delhi university. It is often argued that though Indira's outrage against the plight of *Radhesyamis* is very powerfully registered in the narrative, she does not articulate any explicit concern or the commitment for the women's cause. She does not explore her insecurities and anxieties as generated by the specific conditions of dependence and passivity that are ingrained in the psyche of Indian women. In a perceptive comment on Indira Goswami's work, Prof. D. K. Baruah writes that "Her's is an individual protest, often ending tragically because she does not want to make common cause with others and she is apparently not sure that she would like to change the social structure radically (Baruah, p.43).

However, I would like to argue that *An Unfinished Autobiography* does not merely tell a story of a famous writer's early childhood and how she coped with the demise of a beloved husband. It is a testimonial by a widow witnessing and chronicling an unusual detail of the suffering that many women are still subjected to in the event of the unfortunate death of their husband, she records their everyday struggles and resistance to it. It is not simply a self-absorbed account of personal loss and misery, in her continuous focus on the misery and helplessness of the abandoned widows of Vrindavan in the third part of the narrative, she does connect it to the widely prevalent women's 'fate' in India. She questions the socio-religious beliefs which perpetuate female oppression and asks how they get religious sanction and legitimacy when they are so obviously unjust to the hapless widows. In other words, I would like to argue that in the third and most important part of the autobiography, rather than seeing her own excellence as exceptional, the agony and strife of widowhood as individualistic, she does locate in in the prevalent discourse of gender and religion and pervasive marginalisation of widows in mainstream culture.

By deploying the genre of autobiography, with obvious connotations to her status of young Hindu widow, Indira Goswami courageously and consistently foregrounds the plight of Hindu widows conveniently abandoned in holy places in the name of religion to probe into the underlying foundations of the rituals and unquestioned social beliefs which perpetuate women's oppression. Historically speaking, the widow occupied a special space in the national discourse since the mid-19th century, but the sad reality is, even today, widows are a marginalised group in India because they occupy a very low social status. The severe economic, social and cultural deprivations of widows in an under researched area. In this context, Indira Goswami's relentless probing of the religious, cultural traditions, juxtaposing them against the stark social reality and the attempt to probe the material roots of women's subordination is extremely significant and has to be duly recognised. The time frame of the autobiography, roughly speaking, corresponds to first twenty-five years after India's

independence. Those were definitely transitional times for Indian women with rapid changes occurring in their role and place in the family and society yet the overall ethos remained conservative and conformist. Thus, in all her writings, there is an unmistakable sense of being part of the generation of women that broke new grounds for women in a traditionalist society.

Broadly speaking, the book depicts the first thirty years of life of an extremely sensitive, feminine and creative individual who has been enormously privileged in so many ways and yet had to battle her own demons like self-doubt and depression. In the preface to the book, she writes about being discouraged by several quarters, mostly from Assamese readers who were critical about a young girl writing her autobiography, however turbulent her life might have been. Indira Goswami belonged to a socio-culturally eminent family in Assam and she started creative writing at quite an early stage. She is definitely aware of the tradition of autobiographical writing and the narrative contains the historical self-consciousness of the genre as well. However, the narrative is not framed as an ever-developing success story of an individual genius. She brings into her writing, her insecurities, anxieties, failures. Self is presented as alienated from her socio-cultural milieu, indeed the people around her do not seem to understand or support her aspirations. The tension between desire for autonomy and independence and tentativeness of a restricted, orthodox, conservative upbringing is constant. Her lack of self-belief, as it were, propels her continuously towards depression and suicidal thoughts during the stay in Vrindavan. She seems to have handled this tension by drawing on "other" while negotiating her self-image. The Radhesyamis of Vrindavan constitute this 'other'. Autobiographical self in the third part is fashioned as a widow in quest of one's culture and traditions, to seek direction for her future and with the hope of finding succour in the spiritual solace offered by the holy land.

The autobiography consists of three parts. The first part 'Life is no Bargain' deals with her childhood and her days in Shillong - a world clearly dominated by her father, education, marriage and the most traumatic event of her life- the unfortunate death of her husband in an accident just after eighteen months of marriage. It seems right from the young age, she suffered from a sense of despondency and a deep-rooted fear and foreboding that "this life would leave you quite helpless and at the mercy of an indifferent world after exhorting all the precious bits from you" (p.14). The second part 'Down the Memory Lane', traces the disconcerting time immediately after the death of her husband when she was uncertain about future, fighting her own suicidal impulses, she sought comfort in the past, her father's diaries, to be precise. It was the period when she was "living more with the dead than with the living" (p.60). The third part, 'The City of God' depicts her days at Vrindavan, which incidentally forms the core part of the narrative.

As a young girl Indira grew up in her ancestral *sattra*, religious monasteries typical to Assam, and the life in *sattra*, with its astrologers, religious rituals, strict social and gender codes seems to have left a deep impact on her. Right from the narration of her childhood, one perceives a conflict between the traditional Hindu beliefs that form the core of her personality and the sceptical modernity and progressive outlook given to her by the liberal education. One notes that the liberal humanist ethos of modern education alienates her from the orthodox and discriminatory tenets of the social traditions and beliefs practiced in the name of religion.

Indira writes that when her father was alive and she was just in teens, he used to receive many marriage proposals for her but he always turned them down saying that the girl

was too young and she must finish her studies first. Father's death however, put an end to the steady flow of marriage proposals for her. The narration of Indira's adolescence and her mother's anxieties underline the significance and burden of marriage and domesticity in the lives of women in the 1970s. Even progressive, highly educated upper-caste Hindu families seem to have lived under the unforgiving rule that the daughters must be married off quickly. As the clock ticked away, families became more and more anxious, willing to compromise in order to fulfil this obligation. Apparently, at this point Indira wanted to get married just to alleviate her mother's anxieties about her future. After her love marriage to a young south Indian civil engineer, Madhavan Iyengar, for a brief while, Indira claims to have found fulfilment and happiness. Her constant search for emotional security and stability was over along with attendant brooding and depression. Unfortunately, her husband was killed in a road accident in Kashmir just within two years of marriage. She writes, "Who can ascertain the exact state of the mind of a woman 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 … a sense of endless, ruthless pain supressed all the yearnings of the flesh. I felt like being pushed into a deep dark abyss" (p.50).

In this state of mind, Indira decided to go to Vrindavan to do research under the guidance of her revered professor Prof. Lekharu. It is here that she first came face to face with *Radhesyamis* or the destitute widows of Vrindavan living in extremely oppressive conditions in trying to eke out a living for themselves by begging and singing bhajans (devotional songs) in the various bhajan ashrams established by charitable donors supposedly to ameliorate the plight of Hindu widows and help them lead ascetic, pious lives expected of them. This is for the first time she is forced to question the religious and national ideologies that are usually evoked to justify the subordination of women. The harsh reality of the abandoned widows of Vrindavan, the filthiness on the narrow streets, rampant greed and corruption of the entire set up is in complete contradiction to the peace of mind and solitude she was expecting to find in a holy place. Her stay in Vrindavan is thus becomes a cornerstone in her life which makes her decide "to face life boldly and never to weep" (p. 50).

Indira's narration of the dehumanization of *Radhesyamis* attains a special poignancy because it is presented through the experiential voice of a widow herself. Though there's a vast difference in terms of class and social status, she herself too has experienced subtle sense of discrimination, marginalisation and stigma attached to widowhood and this constant identification apparently enables her to move beyond a position of alienation within dominant culture, to embrace alternative self, willing to fight the marginalization and rebel against the depressing code of conduct for a widow expected by the conservative ethos of her upbringing. As she writes in the preface, "My father dominated the world of my childhood, though I do not know, whether he would have accepted the way of life which I chose later on" (p. xii).

Indira remembers to have seen in her childhood several young brahmin widows whose lives were steeped to the lips in misery for those "stupid practices of age-old customs and beliefs" (p.52). She writes that words of her aunt who had lost her husband in her late teens still ring in her ears. The brahmin women who had gone to console her on the day of her bereavement, had warned their own daughters to keep away from the widowed woman: "touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed, she carries in her the pollution of sin" (ibid). Indira writes that she had always felt uneasy with and alienated from

the orthodox ways of her family. The notions such as widows are inauspicious and therefore to be excluded from certain religious ceremonies and social occasions of the community were common then. She writes that her mother too would urge her often "to read about the lives of the pious women in puranic literature, who had sacrificed their lives on the burning pyre of their husbands" and that once on an auspicious occasion, a Guwahati family wanted to serve her separately along with the other widows she writes that she walked out in huff in protest (p.51). So, it was obvious that though she herself had little faith in the rigorism of traditional customs and practices, the miserable lives of young widows around her made her too painfully aware of her own social situation as well.

Indira writes that though her mind was deeply disturbed after her husband's death, someone, perhaps her inner conscience seemed to whisper constantly in her ears, "sitting idle like this with your soul benumbed. Pull yourself out of your gloom, march ahead, that way lies life" (p. 93). Her relatives were supportive, empathetic in the aftermath of the tragedy. Her mother in fact wanted her to go to London for further studies The deeply spiritual core of Indira's personality is unmistakable in her choice of Vrindavan, the centre of ancient Hindu tradition and culture over London. Indira also goes there as a researcher with the liberal humanist tools and a modern sensibility. Rather than spiritual/ religious ethos of the place, her mind was repeatedly drawn towards its contradictions.

Indira has painstaking recreated the atmosphere of the Braja region- held sacred by the devotees of Radha and Krishna- with all its contradictions: the glorious traditions of Hindu philosophy, art and devotion, a world filled with genuine ascetics, simple devotees, the chants of prayers and bhajans as well as the squalor, misery and corruption rampant in Vrindavan. She describes the turbulent history of the town, the abundance of Hindu relics desecrated by Muslim invaders, the maze of narrow roads and alleys, the profusion of small and large temples, the ghats and the cremation grounds on the banks of Yamuna and the numerous fairs and festivals that are organized all year around. The historical Krishna, "who wore himself out by his ceaseless participation in the Kurukshetra war" was known to nobody here. "As a friend, as a lover, as a father figure, he has won the heart of the *Radhesyamis* here" (p.*112*). While the devotees thronging Vrindavan surrender themselves to a mythical Krishna, she is occupied by questions regarding the historical Krishna (thereby marking the difference of her sensibilities).

Vaishnavism was an offshoot of the Bhakti movement which flourished in many parts of India, particularly in Bengal and the Braj region of western Uttar Pradesh. "*Vaishnavism* promised liberation through devotion to a personal god Krishna whom devotees could worship as master, friend, child or lover. 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… *Vaishnavism* promised liberation to its followers through devotion. Numerous Hindu widows, (mostly from Bengal) found refuge in *Vaishnavism* and lived away from their families in the pilgrim towns of Kashi and Vrindavan and in the maths and *akharas* of *Vaishnava* gurus" (Sogani, pp.13-14). Many charitable people and institutions have given large donations to establish ashrams in these holy cities to enable these widows to live their lives dedicated to prayers and piety. The institutions however are grossly inadequate to address the concerns of vast number of widows that keeps arriving there even today. Poverty and unwillingness of the family members to look after them often results in their abandonment. "If the family does not find the widow's presence useful, the reluctance to maintain her can still lead to abandonment, preferably in a 'holy place' such as Vrindavan,

Mathura or Kashi, so that the act of abandonment can be masked under religious belief" (Chakravarty, 2001, p.11).

From the 19th century, the debates around the status of the Hindu widow formed major part of our nationalist discourse. The 19th century reforms were mainly directed towards upper caste Hindu women because men of their community were the first to come into contact with liberal ideology through English education. Under the impact of British rule and as a reaction to it they started movements for the reform and modernization of their own communities. The leaders of the new reform movement in the 19th century were influenced by the spirit of nationalism and individualism which has come to India under the influence of liberal thinkers, protestant missionaries and newly established press and educational institutions.

The social and religious movements initiated by the new middle-class Hindus sought to educate women, bring them out of seclusion, abolish child marriage, ameliorate condition of widows and so on. As a result, the Hindu widow, being the focus of reform movement, suddenly came into prominence in the 19th century literature and her condition, her role, her place in the family and the question of her remarriage became the themes of great many novels. However, as Uma Chakravarty puts it quite succinctly, it was "male guilt of the emerging 'bhadralok' across India -which first made visible the widow question. It was they and not the women or other categories of men who fixed the terms of the debate" (Chakravarty, 2001, p.5). Uma Chakravarty further argues that in the early discourse on the 'status' of the widow, most of the writing by men was marked by rhetoric rather than analysis and even the most passionate advocates of reform in the status of widows, even those who acknowledged the responsibility of men in perpetuating the oppression of the widow or in taking advantage of her vulnerability, did not explore the location of widowhood within a larger structure of social relations. In short, "no one recognised institutional role of male dominance, the structure of patriarchy, and the continuum of oppression in the case of women, where the oppressions mounted from girlhood to wifehood culminating in the oppressions of the widow" (Chakravarty, 2001,p.6). When men wrote on widowhood, they generally, "tended to outline the dangerous consequences of enforced widowhood, particularly, the effects of the supressed sexuality of widows upon society or cruelty involved in denying motherhood to them", the women however, "showed considerable concern for the material and existential conditions of widowhood" (Chakravarty, 1993, p.1).

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the widow occupied a special space in the national discourse. Her self-imposed chastity not only gave her a moral and spiritual status but her presence also ensured a reservoir of spirituality in each home. For the nationalists, the widow "became a symbol of subjugated nation, suffering under foreign yoke and enduring hardships in silence. Her ascetic figure from which all signs of sexuality have been supressed became the ideal of femininity for a whole generation of writers in the early 20th century" (Sogani, p.20). The material roots of women's subordination were never systematically explored. The focus of writing both by men and women, though with significant differences, remained limited to the upper caste widow's individualised misery. Consequently, the solutions suggested to end the miseries of widowhood too were individualised, paternalistic ones rather than an attack at the roots of the system which spawned the degrading practices. Under the influence of nationalist narrative, the Hindu middle-classes closed ranks to resist any further interventions on the women's issue after a period of moderate reform. However, in recent years, feminist scholars have evolved various strategies to locate the way patriarchy

operates to enslave, oppress and restrict women. It is feminist scholarship that has drawn attention to the relationship between material structures and ideological and cultural practices and to the specific dimensions of widowhood according to caste, community, religion and region. However, because the focus on the widow, even when it has been feminist in orientation, has been confined to studies rather than to suggested policies of action, most widows continue to be especially vulnerable category among women. In this context, the manner in which Indira continuously foregrounds of the widows of Vrindavan in her journey of self-formation and deploys her own status as a young widow to expose the hollowness and hypocrisy of both, the cultural traditions and nationalistic narrative concerning the widows, becomes significant.

Indira had preserved the urn of her husband's ashes wrapped in one of his shirts and refused to immerse the *asthi* of her husband in the river, "I felt that his bones were integrated with mine… no, I won't abide by the Hindu rite of depositing the *asthi* in the holy waters. Wasn't it my only physical link with Madhu? (p.122). Obviously worried by this morbid state of affairs and to help her find some solace, her teachers took her to see various Gurus and saints but meeting holy saints and seeking their guidance could not bring any change to her heart. Her encounters with various sadhus and ascetics made her painfully realise the fact that the traditional hierarchical and gendered value system is often indifferent to human pain and suffering. In one such attempt to seek solace from a spiritual seer, one of the revered saints, Lila baba remarked that, for a widow, life is totally devoid of any meaning and purpose, she felt sorely provoked, "your words will only deepen the sores of a woman's mind. It is your business to lend succour to the worn-out spirit of a widow… your duty to impart healing to all suffering souls, instead your words only aggravate their sufferings" (p. 135).

A lot is often written about a young widow's vulnerability to sexual exploitation yet Indira had somehow never expected that she would receive such proposition on the pretext of offering to cure her agonising pain and sense of loss. She writes that once she visited a supposedly austere and pious seer. The glowing pair of the holy man's eyes caught her attention, he seemed quite impressive stocky build wearing only a lion cloth. After most of the devotees left, she told him the story of her woes with brim-full eyes. She felt transfixed by his eyes and aura, "he was, as it were, peering into the very depth of my being. To him, I thought, was revealed the whole course of my life and being, my past and present" (p.126). The sanyasi in a peculiar voice, pointing to a hovel, asked her to sit naked with him to do some kind of meditation to cure her malady. She writes that she was embarrassed beyond words and blamed herself for going alone to visit this sanyasi.

On the very first day in Vrindavan, Indira was stuck in a traffic jam in the narrow roads when she was trying to reach her teacher's house in a tonga, and the prayers from *bhajanashram* reached her ears. The first thing she noted through a glimpse from the open doors was "the dirty linen that draped their skeleton figures. "They were not particularly attentive to their chanting; their gaze was often diverted to the rows of green grocers outside the temple wells" (p.99). A number of *Radheshyamies* earned their living by singing for hours for paltry sums, lived nearby her quarter in the temple . She writes, "they passed their days in small dark rooms, that should better be called cages…some of them were drawn to that place by their religious impulses but most of them sought shelter there to find an escape from the woes of their private and domestic life" (p.108). One day she visited Shahji's temple to have a look at the marble *gopis* there in dancing posture and came across another destitute *Radhesyami*, " lying prostrate in a dark alley nearby. She was in rags and was clinging to

some odd items picked from garbage dumps. She looked more like a vulture with broken wings than a human being" (ibid) The contrasts can't be more stark and hard-hitting. The widows don't get any medical facilities, many work as housemaids, young widows are exploited by hoodlums as well as priests and pandas and forced into prostitution. The *Radhesyamies* are dehumanized by extreme poverty, malnutrition, incurable diseases, subhuman living conditions and every kind of indignity. Many of them are depicted as merely waiting for death, with their meagre savings tied in their waistbands for a decent *aurdhvadehic* (cremation) by other widows. Nobody wanted to provide shelter to the *Radhesyamis* unless they had money for their last rites.

There are grotesque images of old *Radhesyamis*,"one had no hair on the scalp, she was all skin and bones. Her shrivelled breasts were hanging like the central rib of a dried up plantain leaf" (p.137). She describes older *Radhesyamies* being chased and molested by drunken louts, fighting over few coins snatched from the waistband of a corpse, gorging themselves on rotten food given to them in charity on festive days, and later falling ill as consequence, groaning and moaning on deathbed with no one to attend, waiting for death amidst the stench of vomit and faeces and swarms of flies. She is quite overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of these unfortunate women. As she was writing a novel based on the city, for the sake of authenticity, she decided to spend a lot of time in the bazars and ghats of Vrindavan. Her friend Manu advised her against sitting on the steps facing the market because gangs of loiters frequented these places in search of easy fun, those hooligans her might mistakenly assume her to be one of the *Radhesyamis* of Harabari. She writes, "the thought that I could be mistaken for a profligate widow abandoned at Vrindavan was painful to me" (p. 158).

Indira had confessed about her suicidal tendencies quite a few times in the narrative., and even as she was progressing quite well in her research work in Vrindavan, she had started collecting sleeping pills again, contemplating to end it all. The brutal reality of the life of the widows in Vrindavan seems to be just the trigger that shook her out of her sense of drifting away. She understood the necessity to resist the overpowering narrative of victimhood. She felt that even these illiterate, destitute women choose to live, fight their circumstances rather than choosing to drown themselves, then what moral right someone like her had to contemplate suicide wallowing in self-misery. "Even the illiterate, ignorant dregs of humanity, the *radhesyamies* ... have accepted life as it is. They have not jumped into Yamuna. They have accepted life with all its pitfalls… never seen them to surrender to despair" (p.144).

Usually, Indian women writers are reticent to put on record their experiences as a body. Indira Goswami shows courage in admitting that in those years of self-exploration and soul-searching in Vrindavan, she once went to Delhi and spent night with a male friend. There is no guilt or remorse in the recall, because for her, it was actually a time for self-assessment as to what exactly she wanted from life. Creative writing has undoubtedly given Indira a sense of purpose and identity along with a confidence about self-worth and positive energy. Literature is what gave her "peace of mind" (p.18). But she needed a secure job to finally unshackle herself from material structures and ideological and cultural practices that deny dignity and self-respect to a widow. The autobiography thus ends as she is standing on the threshold of a promising future, empowering herself to live a dignified life on her terms. The dehumanized existence of abandoned widows works as a decisive catalyst in driving this change.

Considering Indira's young age and her terrible loneliness, her family and even her ascetic teacher were open to the idea of her finding a suitable partner and getting married again. She does admit that there were some moments when she felt attracted to young men and was tempted like throwing all considerations to wind but prized her self-control and dignity more than fleeting temptations. Though many of her suitors were keen on giving her a 'fresh start in life' and her family and well-wishers fervently hoping that she did accept some proposal, "matrimonial alliance was now an inconceivable path to her autonomy" and thus, her life narrative ended with her migration from "Vrindavan to Delhi University, from a patriarchally bound body to an autonomous subject" (Goswami,Nilakshi. p.253).

As a part of the highly literate, aware and opinionated intelligentsia, Indira Goswami was quite self-conscious about her self-perceived role in shaping the destiny of an emerging nation where narrow divisions of caste, class, religion would cease to matter yet a deep-rooted spirituality and religiosity in the mental makeup is unmistakable in her creative work. However, it is quite evident that the writer, in her capacity as an aspiring individual, yearns for the freedom of women from the abuses of traditional, patriarchal gender ideologies and sees herself as associated with a general desire for modernization and reinterpretation of tradition. And try as she might, she was unable to overlook the dirt, filthiness of the streets, overflowing sewages emitting foul smell, rows of half-naked lepers in the temple premises. The wretched widows squatting on the roads with their miserly belongings under the scorching sun, the blare of the loudspeakers, the preying guides and the ways in which the inhuman system exploits the hapless widows filled her with revulsion. In devoting a large section of the third part of her autobiography to the exploitation and the miserable living conditions of the abandoned widows in Vrindavan, Indira Goswami questions the discourse of nationalism, which has seemingly fashioned the nationalist narrative around the status of a widow, and later on expended so much energy for amelioration of the widow, valorising her inner-strength and piety has effectively done nothing to change their fate. She also subjects traditional religion to deep scrutiny for its indifference and insensitivity to the suffering because apparently, the abandonment of widows in the holy places masked as religious belief is legitimised in the name of cultural traditions.

To sum up, Indira Goswami's autobiography does manage to move beyond her personal tragedy, her very real struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts by finally putting her individual grief, loss and suffering in the context of overall suffering and marginality imposed on the hapless widows in the name of culture and traditions. Her autobiography thus offers a strident critique of victimization of women in patriarchal society and simultaneously, her decision to make common cause with the abandoned widows of Vrindavan in spirit, can be seen as a gesture enunciating the empowerment of the female. In her protests, in her indignation against the dehumanization of the widows of Vrindavan, the rejection of prevailing social system and condemnation of the indifference and insensitivity of so-called religious people to the suffering of the hapless women becomes evident. The dehumanised existence of the *Radhesyamis* jolted her out of her middle-class comfort zone to look within herself and confront the demons from which she had been running away. It turned her obsessive death wish into a love and zeal to live for others. As a creative writer, it made her even more determined to give voice to the silenced and marginalised by asking probing questions and questioning the status quo. Though on the surface of it, she does seem too self-obsessed to look beyond her individual circumstances, careful reading reveals that a sceptical/ rational re-examination of the traditional hierarchical and gendered value system

that is often indifferent to human pain and suffering is a crucial component of the autobiography. The critical re-examination of the traditional value system and the imperative of giving voice to those marginalised, powerless victims of the dominant patriarchal discourse the is a crucial component of her self-formation and thus forms core of the narrative.

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