

## **Beyond Borders: The Journey of Themes of Indira Goswami's Writings from Vernacular to Transnational**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents international concerns expressed by Sahitya Academy winner, writer, poet and academician, Indira Goswami, in Assamese. Goswami has written extensively about concerns that relate to typical locales of her home state Assam, while lucidly correlating the themes to the lives of humanity around the world. The paper will explore the exposition of theories such as Womanism, Bilateral Peace talks, international recognitions and the retelling of classics like *Ramayana* while exploring the trajectory of Goswami's work. Indira Goswami has engaged multiple genres in her journey of this exploration, thereby establishing a role and responsibility of vernacular writings, in the literature of India. As for the role of translation of vernacular to English in India, this immense possibility has made writings of various calibres of vernacular writing accessible for reading, review and research. This paper will thereby present the significance of writings in the vernacular in the canon of Indian Writing.

### **KEYWORDS**

Vernacular; Womanism; Retelling; Translation; Transnational.

### **Introduction:**

The canon of Indian Writing in English is incomplete without the works of translation from regional languages into English. The translated works are now a significant component of academic and cultural study and research. With a myriad of vernacular expressions in India, the scope and possibilities of academic research in undermining the role of vernacular writings, translation and transliteration, are wide and potent. In line with this potency, is the exploration of the writings of Indira Goswami, which is the premise of this paper. In this paper, Goswami's works are examined to present

the impact of her writings on the culture, politics and literature of her state, country and domain. Thereby an argument in favor of the need for translation of literary texts of vernacular languages into English is organically established.

Indira Goswami's (1942-2011) name in the Indian writing literary domain shines bright, whenever a discussion of Indian writers takes place in an academic discourse. Popularly known as Mamoni *Baideo* (Elder sister), her pen-name was Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Indira Goswami was an Assamese writer, editor, poet, scholar, activist and professor. Born on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1942 in

Guwahati, India, to Umakant Goswami and Ambika Devi, her family was steeped in the Brahmanical order of the state or *sattrā* (a religious order) of the Ekasarana Dharma. Due to rigorous schooling in the English medium schools established by the British missionaries in Eastern India and the regions of Guwahati, Goswami had an early exposure to English Literature of the works of most of the noted writers, as well as an understanding of Western art, sculpture and tradition. Goswami graduated in Assamese Literature from Cotton College, Guwahati and went on to pursue a Master's degree at Guwahati University with the same specialization.

A celebrated writer of contemporary Indian literature, her works were mainly written in her native language, Assamese, though most of them are now studied and examined in the form of English translations. Another notable contribution of Goswami has been her constant efforts to contribute and structure social change, through her writings and her varied roles in social and political organizations.

One of the major roles that she played was that of the mediator between the armed, militant group ULFA-United Liberation Front of Asom and the Government of India. This mediation could lead to some peace-keeping initiatives and eventually led to the formation of the People's Consultative Group. This committee took up the responsibility of maintaining peace in Assam, with the support of the Central agencies.

Indira Goswami started writing at a very early age and by the time she was in class eight, with immense encouragement from the publisher, Kirti Nath Hazarika, her first short stories were published in a literary journal that he edited. When still a student, in 1962, at age twenty, she published her first collection of short stories, *Chinaki Morom*. The other celebrated works, translated into English

are *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Pages Stained with Blood*, and *The Man from Chinnamasta*. Her books have been adapted for stage and films. Her contribution to Assamese and thereby, Indian literature, has been widely acclaimed and recognized by the two major awards of the country, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and the Jnanpith Award, the highest literary award of India, in 2000. The celebrated award, Principal Prince Claus Laureate Award in 2008, granted Goswami the international recognition and status that was long awaited and well-deserved.

#### **Notable Works of Indira Goswami:**

Goswami became the head of the Assamese Department at Delhi University and she could use Delhi, the city, as the background of most of her renowned stories such as *Hridoy*, *Nangoth Sohor*, *Borofof Rani*. Just when Goswami was settling into a glorious phase of her life, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, shook Delhi. Witnessing another round of violence near her home in the Shakti Nagar area of Delhi, Goswami poured out her anguish about the bloodshed and communal violence in her book *Pages Stained with Blood*.

The other classic that emerged during her Delhi stay was *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. In this, she wrote about the plight of Assamese Brahmin widows in the religious orders or *sattras* of Assam. The novel is now a part of the anthology *The Masterpieces of Indian Literature* and has been made into a film titled *Adajya*, which went on to win national and international film awards. The success of her writings remained unabated until the novel

*The Man from Chinnamasta* came up at the peak of Goswami's writing career. The controversial novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* is centred around the age-old tradition of animal sacrifice in the

famous temple of Mother Goddess Kamakhya, in Assam. In the novel, Goswami quoted scriptures to support her argument, "let the Mother Goddess be worshipped with flowers rather than animal blood". The traditionalists strongly objected to this and threatened Goswami with dire consequences. Of course, there was an understanding of the need to ban animal sacrifice as a part of worship; however, it resulted in an uproar in the dis-favour of Goswami. (Many publishers withdrew their contracts of advance payments for her writings but the book turned out to be a bestseller!)

Another piece of fiction, *Jatra*, reliably depicted the issues that militancy and secessionism created in North-Eastern India that remained unresolved even after the country turned independent. The journey, therefore, for Goswami has been from the personal to the political, like so many writer-activists. For confronting, challenging and providing reconciliations, Goswami remains a force to reckon with in the Indian political scene as well. Her range of writings- about subalterns, the politics of victimizing, the rights of the landless labourer, issues of marginalized women, victimization in the name of religion and custom, to the cultural and political construct, especially of Assamese society, became her subjects and themes of writings.

The most notable aspect that Goswami has to be celebrated for is the determination and courage with which she spoke of the status of Indian women, in twentieth-century India. The patriarchy existing in Assamese Brahmin families, like in many other states and their cultures as well, was well illustrated and recorded, for the first time in national literature, by Goswami, especially in two of her novels *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *The Blue-necked God*. Though her efforts to uphold the Assamese identity to put forth the richness of the age-old culture of

Assam, have ensured her a place in the annals of Assamese Literature, her truthful and unbiased depiction of hypocrisies of these same cultural traditions also functions as historical and social records. Her fiction and personal narratives offer a commentary derived out of deep concern for the exploitation of women, in the patriarchal set-ups of Hindu societies that operated in the name and fear of custom and religion. The dichotomy of this suppression and oppression was further enhanced with the justification of women being worshipped as "goddesses".

This un-clarified status of their identity, especially for the vulnerable women and widows, the pedestal of the goddess and the brutality at home remained the contradictions that were not recognized, even in twentieth-century India. Post-Independent India saw the banning of untouchability, as a social crime. But the segregation and torture of women during her menstruation, widowhood, barrenness, for not bearing a male child and branding her as unlucky and lucky mascots, still remain social evils. These evils are conveniently practised in most modern households, in the garb of the custom and tradition of the families and societies, without realizing the injustices that they impose on the victims, obviously, the women. These social habits are so strongly ingrained in the minds of the women too and passed on by the patriarchs to the women, that eventually, they are the victims and perpetrators of the same injustices. With her detailed explanations and descriptions of the reasons, rituals, beliefs and lack of reasoning behind the beliefs, Goswami let the concern for women run as the common oeuvre in most of her works and personality. It became imperative that a writer of her calibre was compelled to take up cudgels to challenge deep-rooted cultural habits of the Indian patriarchal systems. In her own brutally frank

manner, she highlights the exploitative plights and injustices meted out to Indian women, irrespective of their caste and community.

Writings in Indian languages about women by male writers, made similar depictions of the status of women, especially widows, in Indian literature. The stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Munshi Premchand expressed this theme in some of their novels, which was a popular literary genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The narratives of these writers could uphold the norms of the upper-caste societies and point to them as the *raison d'être* of suffering, manipulation and oppression of both men and women. Their writings were discourses for examining and defending social values, rather than viewing it from the lens of gender. For these writers, the suffering and loneliness of the widow was a comment on her assertion and personal journey. The oppressed widow did seek her dignity but did not dare to disturb any established, social or religious order.

In stark contrast, Goswami expressed an alternative, in favour of the women, but injected it into her narrative without any explicit controversial statements. The approach in her writing was definitely feminist, with female protagonists centred in her narration. The self-affirmation of her female characters, to their right to self-fulfilment, in a repressive male-dominated society has covered the main canvas of her major works. For the first time, from the land of Assam, a writer has presented the truthfulness of a woman's heart, which is so often broken, by convention, repression, religious and cultural stereotyping.

### **Critical Review of Writings of Indira Goswami**

The mastery with which Goswami has conveyed the cruelty of humans to

their own species in her writings is conveyed with immense pathos. The sense of suffering and pain of her sorrows permeate through each and every line in her writings. Even though writing, at one point in her life, had become her only way to survive, she did not allow cynicism to affect her readers. Instead, by conveying the details of her personal emotional battles, she allows the reader to identify with the pain and seek similar confidence to overcome the anguish. By doing so, she has offered a carefully drawn scale, for social change to be brought about in Indian society.

Goswami was born into privilege and status but her life drifted into pain and suffering. Silence and withdrawal became a part of her penance-like life. In these phases, her perceptions and observations sharpened. Life mirrored the harsh realities- cruelty in the name of religion, dishonesty, inequality, injustice, communalism, conservatism and victimization, especially of women. The tumult of her personal life sanctioned her ability to look at politics too. The book *Pages Stained with Blood* commented harshly on religious intolerance and communal riots, based on her first-hand experience of the anti-Sikh riots that ravaged parts of Delhi, post-assassination of Indira Gandhi, who was then, Prime Minister of India.

As an accredited feminist writer, the concerns of her social and cultural milieu were the themes of her writings. The themes were varied and their approaches were real, as Goswami spent years of research on these issues while she recorded it in writing. For instance, the issues of the un-organized labour force discussed in *The Chenab's Current*, the punishing ways of orthodoxy for the young widows in *The Blue-necked God*, or the similar plight of Brahmin widows in *sattras* of Assam in *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, the gory custom of animal sacrifice in *The Man from*

*Chinnamasta*, her sole collection of poetry titled *Pain and Flesh* reflect realism in its starkest, brutal form.

Goswami has expressed her intolerance to this brutality of the world, in the best way that she is equipped to do, in simple, straightforward narration. Her plot, language and characterization are simple, though the profundity of her thoughts underlines the writings. The focus of her work has remained undeterred. The oppressed and underprivileged are the people for whom she writes. With much of her writing in Assamese, English translation of her works brought her onto the stage of world literature. With sixteen novels, and over a hundred short stories, Goswami seems to have written with the sole purpose of bringing about social change. For this scholarship and commitment to the world that she inhabits, Goswami was bestowed with the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1983.

If social change is a concern, then activism in resolving the issues to bring about positive change was an essential component of most women writers. With the privilege of being a professor of Assamese Literature at Delhi University, Goswami shouldered the responsibility of her commitment towards the welfare of her home state, Assam. When it was riddled with the bullets of insurgency and violence, Goswami mediated with the insurgent group ULFA- United Liberation Force of Asom and the Government, as a member of the People's Consultative Group. By prioritizing the welfare of the state and the cause of peace, Goswami has put subaltern points of view on the national scene. Her public stature and journey of self-introspection wished for harmony, not only of self and state but for entire humanity. For this achievement, Goswami treated each of her personal and public experiences as a part of the process, rather than simply an anomalous fact, towards humanism. To imagine that

peace was the final destination of a mind that once languished in pain and disturbance is not unexpected. Aspirations for peace and the welfare of all of humanity should be the aim of an authentic writer, in the truest sense. True to this sensibility, Goswami emerges as a humanist.

As for the other aspects of Goswami's writings, she has utilized most characteristics that the canon of feminism could offer her. Later in her life and career as a writer and activist, she required a wider vista to fit her gamut of work. As her approach expanded from feminism to being womanist, on the path to propagate and practice humanism, the critics and academicians had to adopt a wider lens to examine her writings. As the conclusion of her works conveys, her concern for all humans dominates any categorisation that any lens could examine.

### **What if Goswami's works were not translated into English?**

If Goswami's writings had not been translated to English, readers, academicians, researchers of India and the world would have been denied the ability to understand the power and commitment of a writer of a vernacular language. Moreover, the womanist aspect of Goswami's writings including all human beings, living beings, religious aspects (in her retelling of *Ramayana*), peace-keeping and communalism has expanded the vista of the reader in co-relating aspects of Nature and Living and their contemporariness. By exploring and presenting her own personal journeys and exhibiting the universality of her issues, Goswami has permitted the readers and researchers to join in the journey of human experience, from various corners of the world. The universality that Literature offers is an unmistakable feature of Goswami's writings that has presented aspects of human lives and living in all its glory and suffering. If not

translated into English, the readers of the world would be deprived of the genius of a writer, who was so steeped in her cultural and linguistic heritage, even when she had a universal vision of welfare, peace and justice for all living beings on this planet. Goswami reached beyond borders to expand the power of the vernacular expressions to address transnational issues of peace and the welfare of all human and living beings.

Thereby, the vision and mission of translating Indira Goswami's works have also stretched beyond regional and national literature. They have addressed the pressing need of all literatures to eventually be concerned with the welfare of all beings on the planet. This means all policies pertaining to governance would now have to transcend beyond borders and view the world as one whole, wherein the rights to live and rights to freedom are universally applicable to all.

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