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## Religiously “othered”: A Subaltern Study of Indira Goswami’s *Pages Stained with Blood*

**Daisy Gohain**

Ph.D Research Scholar

Fatima college

Madurai Tamil Nadu

### **Abstract:**

The article attempts to analyze Dr. Indira Goswami's novel 'Pages Stained with Blood', which brings the horrendous sight of religious marginality to notice. The Sikhs residing in Delhi were victimized, burnt alive, looted, stabbed, beheaded and raped. Anyone wearing a turban or holding a kirpan were mercilessly killed be it men, women or children. It also touches on the other forms of marginality like unemployment, prostitution, economic poverty etc. The narrator assumes the role of the protagonist running through the blood stained streets, sheltering the attacked victims and attending their first aid. Her own apartment is filled with blood as she gives refuge to the victims. The novel alarms the reader of the consequences of disunity giving a recalcitrant call for unity, love and wellbeing for our neighbors and friends. It also forges the readers to think on the sensitive issues of our social institutions ethically rather than falling as a victim in their grip.

**Keywords:** subaltern, religiously ‘othered’, marginalization, prostitution, unemployment.

This article aims to delineate the seclusion, alienation and helplessness an “othered” community feels and undergoes in a great democracy like India where brotherly love and harmony is replaced with retribution, blood and brutal rape. India witnessed the greatest massacre that history beholds in the year 1984. Indira Goswami stunningly gives her first hand experience narrating the horrendous scenes she eye witnessed in the highways and ghettos of Delhi.

The novel *Pages stained with Blood* is a poignant chronicle of the lethal mixing of religion and politics in modern India. The novel reveals how the imperial mechanism continues to operate at the hands of the ruling elite, how ‘fragile’ the concept of nation is, and how the seeds of communal hatred sown by colonialism continue to flourish in the neo-colonial set up, challenging the secular, democratic ideals of the nation-state.

The abrupt functioning of the Indian Military operation named ‘Operation Blue Star’ devastated the entire history of India, leaving it the worst massacre ever, the first Indian genocide in 1984. This was followed by the assassination of the then prime minister Smt. Indira Gandhi leading eventually to the breakout of the riot which became very intense almost ravaging the whole city of Delhi on flames.

Jahangirpuri was a ruin that day and it was like a place ravaged by a big war. All the houses were burnt. Broken window panes, glasses and clothes and tyres and burning motorcycles lay scattered around the place. We couldn't see a single soul, we walked in further and saw a broken looted Gurudwara, on top of which a madman was sitting and speaking gibberish. The only house that stood without a single scratch was the house of the MLA..... I had never seen so many widows together”

The historical facts claim it a year of great violence in the state of Punjab, the homeland of the Sikh community. In June 1984, Indira Gandhi sent the Indian Army to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, which is the holiest shrine in Sikhism. There it conducted Operation Blue Star in order to flush out the militants. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale led the operation team. Bhindranwale was killed in the operation. The militants had taken to arms mostly to demand the implementation of policies that would protect the religious, linguistic and economic rights of Punjab and Sikhs.

The attack on the holiest Sikh shrine was widely criticized by both Sikhs and other parties in India. Many Sikhs believed the attack amounted to desecration, even if they supported the removal of militants from the shrine. Many other Indians meanwhile felt that Operation Blue Star was a disproportionate response to a fringe group numbering around 200 militants. Certainly, from a tactical perspective, the operation to remove militants from the Golden Temple could have been handled better. In addition to the death of the militants, thousands of civilians were killed. Indira Gandhi's own cynical calculations played a major role in fostering militancy in Punjab. In her highly selfish attempt to weaken a local political party opposed to her, i.e.; Shiromani Akali Dal, (SAD) she initially encouraged Bhindranwale's popularity with the populace of Punjab.

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is a Sikhism centric political party formed by the election commission of India. It controls sikh religious bodies. The basic philosophy of Akali Dal is to give political Voice to sikh issues and it believes that religion and politics go hand in hand.

The assassination of Indira Gandhi led to the widespread attacks against Sikhs in India, especially in Delhi. These random attacks targeted innocent members of a widely respected minority that was considered fully part of the main stream and whose members especially renowned for their bravery during India's war against Pakistan. There is significant evidence that the riots were aided and abetted by members of Indian Government and the congress party. The Delhi police were said to have looked on passively as rioters murdered and raped Sikhs. Rioters somehow acquired voting records that enabled them to identify and mark the houses of Sikhs with large X signs. Rajiv Gandhi's son, who became the next Prime Minister, was reported to have said nonchalantly that “when a big tree falls, the earth shakes”. The CBI, an investigative police agency, concluded that the riots were part of a well-executed conspiracy.

The novel runs swiftly against the backdrop of the Anti-Sikh riot, narrating the incidents authentically. Later in an interview she says:

“Yes, I wrote exactly what I saw; there is almost no difference between fact and fiction in that book.....”

The diplomatic game played by the heads of the government for a personal gain had left a deep indelible wound to thousands of innocents, laying shattered in the Delhi streets. The

minority Sikhs in Delhi were the victims of communal atrocities. Just under the spark of wrong motivation the devout Sikhs, specifically those carrying a kirpan or wearing a saffron turban were targeted. The operation was carried by Indian Army troops with tanks, artillery, helicopters and chemical weapons.

The novel runs swiftly with the incidents that constitute the major aspect of 'marginalization'. Under the veil of religious groups targeted for communal riots, the novel also candidly portrays the nation robbed of its economic utilization as the entire economy and finance goes to the hands of the pot bellied ministers running the government. The penury of the nation is highlighted where the young energetic youths aspiring for a job through the narrators threshold helplessly.

"These boys, all of them matriculates, tried thrice to get into the army and failed. They say one of them is not tall enough, the other doesn't have the correct chest measurements. The JCO wants money and we don't have any" (45)

Issues like economic poverty, unemployment, prostitution, the miserable life of the downtrodden transgenders are dealt with brevity. The author witnesses all these deprivations and poverty with her own eyes. She musters up enough courage and rushes to the ghettos and slum streets of Chandini Chowk, GB Road, Kabadi Bazaar, Shakti Nagar, Jahangirpuri, Mirza Ghalib etc., making her way through the narrow steps to the square shaped room appearing like furrows and pigeon holes where the young sex workers wait in queue for their customers, sporting nylon ribbon, bright lipsticks and perfume mixed with the stench from the gutters. The unhygienic atmosphere with the pungent smell from the gutters, tobacco, cigarettes mixed with cheap perfume creates a claustrophobic atmosphere. The paper aims to highlight through the mind of Dr. Goswami the importance of 'voice', the power of articulation and expression be it audible voice or through the action of resistance. The novel also calls for an ethical thinking of social institutions rather than following these beliefs blindly. A sound ethical analysis of the pros and cons of any social institution without hurting the religious and communal sentiments can solve most of the uninviting impending disasters. A spirit of unity and goodwill can foster a healthy nation and make it a 'democracy' in its true sense.

Ms. Goswami takes enough risk to write this novel as it holds the truth, the reality of life. Her concern for the downtrodden, deprived and outcast forms the oeuvre of all her works. She is a humanitarian who lives for the cause of others struggling to give them a 'voice' to be heard by the nation, a 'voice' that liberates women from the sufferings and victimizations at the hands of autocracy be it caste, religion, economy, government or patriarchy. Her literary repertoire includes novels, short stories, poems as well as autobiographical writings. Goswami's literature is, in fact, her attempt to engender social change. It is her means to address the socio-political violence directed against by the oppressed and marginalized sections of society. She sheds light on the essence of cruelty in human nature that takes shape into various forms of violence every day. In Goswami's view, this violence is "worse than death, it is worse than dying in a riot, or in a bomb blast" ("Stained with Blood").

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