

# **Towards a Spirituality of Loss**

## **Self-revelatory Discourses in the Lives of Indian Catholic Women<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to look into the existential situation of loss, which confronts Indian catholic women. It specifically explores the ways in which women cope with loss. Through vivid examples of three catholic women from different social strata it argues that loss when faced with courage can be transformed into moments of self-revelation and spiritual vivacity. However, we should be cautious about the tendency to romanticize suffering and loss. Romanticizing suffering leads to victimization of the one in pain. This results in an alienation from the self and the path to subjecthood and agency is thwarted.

**Keywords:** Death, sense of loss, sense of life, sense of life, self-revelatory discourse

Nimmie was a mother of two adorable kids, Charmaine, a four-year-old daughter and Christine an eleven-year-old daughter studying in the sixth standard. Nimmie lived in Goa, South India, a state with a sizeable population of Catholics. In the morning of August 9, 2002, she took Charmaine to the doctor as she was suffering from common cold and cough. She returned home with Charmaine at around 12 or so. She then left for Carmel College, where she worked as a Botany Lecturer, to attend to some odd jobs. She was expected back home in 30 minutes. Carmel College is an institution for higher education run by the Sisters of the Apostolic Carmel. The college is just a five-minute drive from her home. She was on her two-wheeler and as she was returning home from college a bus knocked her down, the front wheel went over the region below the stomach and the

back wheel of the bus dragged her a little, so eyewitnesses say. One wonders why the driver of the bus was not aware of it until the people around started yelling at him. It was on hearing the cries of alarm from bystanders that he stopped the bus. The accident took place just three minutes away from her home. Her stomach and other organs between the stomach and pelvic region were crushed, including her back and pelvic bone. She was alive and speaking for four and a half hours after the fatal mishap. Though a team of efficient surgeons attended to her they could not stop the blood flow. I was told that she literally bled to death. She died at 6.40 pm.

Nimmie is none other than my much-loved sister.<sup>2</sup> Her death has caused immense pain and a deep feeling of loss for all of us, especially her beloved husband Derick, her daughters, our parents, her sisters, her sisters-in-law, her brothers-in-law, colleagues, neighbors and friends. However, even in the face of such a tragedy my mother's words of deep assurance strengthens us. After the funeral my mother said, "Some people's deaths leave a void in our hearts, a void that can never be wiped away. But Nimmie, now living in a close and deep union with the resurrected Christ, will transform that void into a flame that will glow bright and thus make her shining presence always with us." There is a very significant manner in which we experience very strongly God's constant presence and Nimmie's illuminating light shining in us and in our home every moment. It is the profound experiential awareness of this presence, in the face of an otherwise rude shock, following the untimely and sudden death of my dear sister, that evoked in me a spectrum of questions. What is that special spark of courage and trust that my mother possesses which gives her the strength to face this tragedy of a daughter's sudden loss with hope and gentle surrender? Where does she find the grace and assurance, which helps her spread such tranquility and peace to all her children, her friends, Nimmie's colleagues? How has her catholic faith helped her live this moment of loss?

My experience and encounter with death in a very vital way and in a way that touched the deepest recesses of my being, with flesh and blood reality, the timeliness of its occurrence, at a time when I am scheduled to write this paper, the manner in which my

mother, sisters and entire family coped with it and still struggle to find meaning and assurance, reminded me of many other Catholic women who have been forced to face the trauma of the death of loved ones and the existential reality of loss. Therefore, I have changed my initial plan for the paper and am specifically theologizing from the context of this experiential reality of death and loss in order to invest this paper with life, flesh and blood vitality. In addition to this issue of experiential vivacity, I am interested in probing into the ways in which catholic women in India cope with loss and death, the ever-present mysteries of life. Besides, I am also interested in probing into the ways in which such a study can explore ways of building up a critical solidarity and sisterhood among women.

I have had encounters of varied depth with many catholic women from different spheres and economic and social backgrounds. From among them, it is the memory of Maria, aged 58, a poor catholic woman that resonates vividly in my mind. Maria lost her husband and became a widow at a very early age. With the death of her husband, Maria was reduced to penury as a result of the cruelty she experienced at the hands of her in-laws. She once told me that her brothers-in-law had taken every bit of land and each and every penny that was her due of the family property, and left her to fend for herself and her children. When her young husband died, thirty-year-old Maria had nowhere to go, no professional education to fall back on. Eventually she was employed on compassionate grounds in one of the convent schools as a peon receiving a rather meager salary of Rs.1000/- a month. She had three girls, the eldest was Stella, Reena was second and Cecily the youngest. Her only son Joseph, who added to her miseries as he took to gambling and drinking, literally squandered the little wealth that Maria had gathered through her strenuous efforts.

However, my memory of Maria is of a very confident woman who coupled efficiency and firmness with extreme gentleness and kindness. In addition to that, Maria was often called upon to settle feuds between neighbors and take important common decisions in the low caste colony in which she lived. Maria was to my mind a very praying person and a staunch believer in Jesus. The neighborhood in which she lived was a multireligious and multilinguistic lo-

cale. Yet every family was in admiration of Maria and spoke of her with reverence. In addition to educating her children, she also got them married in catholic families. Today even Joseph is well employed and Stella, Reena and Cecily too have built their own houses and are well to do, thanks to the single-handed effort of Maria. I have always secretly admired Maria's courage and persistence despite all odds. Some of the questions that very often came to my mind were related to the empowering beliefs and attitudes to life that I perceived in her. Where did this tremendous courage come from? How did she succeed in imparting immense valour and emancipating religious values to her daughters, in spite of the stringent attitudes to women within the Church and women in the Indian society? What made her spirituality different from the spirituality of her brothers-in-law? What made people flock to her and what was it those women gained in their get-togethers?

Maria is a member of a group of Catholic women which meets every week for faith sharing. In the process of this faith sharing, they contribute in a very significant way to the spiritual growth of all members of the group. These meetings were no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and strength. The activities that happened in these meetings were sharing, renewing connection, figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and related problems in their work. These analyses and analyzing were vital to adjusting to what must have been at times enormously trying circumstances. In addition these 'meetings' had a communitarian aspect as well to it.

I met Maria ten years ago at a faith-sharing meeting of Catholic women that had been organized by the diocese. Impressed by her vivacity and child like trust in the divine, which she constantly manifested in her encounters with others, I decided to get to know her better. A year ago I had an interview with Maria. I am recording below a small portion of the interview I had with her. I must say that I was amazed at Maria's immense knowledge of the collective lives of Catholic women in India and especially in the state of Kerala, South India, from where I come.

## A Section of the Interview with Maria

Maria was 55 years old when I interviewed her. A year later she retired from the school where she worked as a peon and is presently residing alone in the house she has built for herself and her son. This interview was conducted three years ago while she was still in service.

**Q.** How do you feel now that all your obligations are fulfilled? Do you feel a sense of satisfaction?

**Maria** – Dear Sr. Pushpa, I feel a great sense of accomplishment and know that I have been a true Catholic and a courageous mother. In addition I have taught my daughters the important values of Christ. The Bible most of all emphasized total surrender to Christ and selfless love for neighbor. I have taught my daughters to find confidence in the belief that God will grace us with His incessant blessings. I have also brought home to my daughters that the secret and true meaning of life lies embedded within each of us because God lives within each of us. Likewise He lives in all our sisters and brothers and also in the whole of creation. Therefore, I have taught my children that values like sharing and respect for other people, other religions and even nature is very important (Smiles. Pauses for a minute, then with a bright shine in her eyes, whispers, albeit, in a rather triumphant tone): “*I am very proud of my daughters.*”

**Q.** What was *the factor* in life that kept you going, despite the fact that you had to fight it out single-handedly?

**Maria** – Of course, you know that I have always been a faithful believer in the magnanimity of God. Even in times of difficulties he had been my strength. In addition, though my husband died and all my in-laws abandoned me I never felt alone. I always experienced the presence of God. When I was very desperate, I would go to the Church nearby and pray.

**Q.** Have you felt the Catholic religion helpful in your struggles? Has it been a source of liberation and freedom to you especially a stronghold in your rather tough journey?

**Maria** – I love my religion and am proud to call myself a Catholic. However, I am inclined to think that there is a big gap between

the way we live spirituality and experience God in our day-to-day living, and the manner in which the official Church functions. Those in leadership in the Church do not often understand our everyday experiences of loss, powerlessness and struggle. While the concerns of the official Church are with matters of Scriptural authority, canon law and so on, our concerns are those related to living authentic lives, bringing up our children in the best way possible, coping with drunkard husbands and even wayward sons. There have been moments when it was just the inner faith and trust my mother had imparted to me that gave me the strength to carry on. My mother too was a very courageous and a 'God-experienced' lady. She never feared men. Therefore for her, religion was not something that was dictated by laws and codes. She would not refrain from speaking her mind very frankly. It is that Christianity, my mother's Christianity, that brought me freedom. Furthermore I started gaining immense strength from the way my mother had taught me to live my religion. Besides it also increased my love for Christianity and the Bible.

(The interview did not end here, in fact I have reproduced only a very small section of the three-hour formal interview I had with Maria. Besides, I have had innumerable friendly conversations with Maria because she was a member of the diocesan Women's Group governing body.)

## **PART TWO: AN ANALYSIS**

In part two, I will use the category of loss as an epistemological tool to interpret the lives of Indian catholic women and their journey to selfhood and freedom

### **From Sense of loss To Sense of life, To Sense of Love**

In Maria's life one notices a triple sense of loss. First and foremost she experiences the sudden death of her husband. With the death of her husband, she experiences estrangement and alienation from the in-laws who ought to have supported her. She also experienced estrangement from the members of her own natal family. In a

socio political situation where a woman's identity is normally linked with that of her husband, father or son, incidences of death and loss are invested with a specific shade of materiality. This is what I term as the feminization of loss. With her identity always associated with a man, she has no individual existence other than in relation to these men in her life. In addition to this, women do not have economic independence. Lack of education also aggravated the unfortunate predicament Maria was in. Like most women in India, the life of Maria was tied to the fortune of her husband whose work and position was shaping her world. When she lost her husband, she also lost, along with her husband, her social status and economic security.

The second sense of loss which becomes glaringly evident, is the material loss and alienation she experienced as a result of her husband's death. She was reduced to penury. In addition her son Joseph who was a spendthrift and squanderer, aggravated her predicament by taking to gambling.

The third sense of loss which she had to confront, was the degenerate ways of her prodigal son. In a society like ours, where not to have a son is interpreted as a bad sign and the woman who does not bear a son is an unpropitious woman in God's sight, to have a prodigal son intensifies the magnitude of the problem in many ways, in addition to the personal tension and anxiety the mother experiences as an individual and above all as a mother.

I will argue that these three losses pertain to the institution of motherhood as established by Indian patriarchy. In the Indian understanding, a woman who loses her husband and becomes a widow is considered a bad omen. Traditionally, widows wore only white and were supposed to live unadorned and unobtrusive lives.

Closely related to the problem of widowhood in India, is the issue of control of women's sexuality. Similarly feminist historians of Indian nationalism have demonstrated that the management of sexuality was the key to the thorny problem of widow remarriage. The most problematic category of women throughout the nineteenth century India was widows. The two important issues which were implicit in the whole debate on widow remarriage in nineteenth cen-

ture India, was firstly the recognition of women as sexual beings and secondly the relationship of female sexuality with the prevailing family and property structures.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly one who is not blessed with material riches is supposed to be cursed by God. In Indian philosophy wealth is considered a sign of auspiciousness and the woman specifically is considered to be *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth.

Thirdly a woman whose son, and that too an only son, goes astray, is looked down upon by society as not having the capacity to nurture and nourish the precious gift God has bestowed on her, because sons are considered more precious than gold. If a woman gives birth to a son, her path to heaven is ensured.

## **From Loss to Life**

In this section I will argue that the greatness and specificity of Maria's spirituality/Women's spirituality, lie in the fact that this sense of loss was transformed into a sense of the dynamic, vivacious and vigorous nature of life and God. Thus their sense of life was a sense of fullness, a sense of oneness and a sense of mystery. The sense of God that these women lived with, permeated every nook and cranny of their very enterprise of living. To have a sense of God, to have a sense of religion, to have a sense of life, meant to live dynamically by tapping all the resources God had blessed them with. This was emphasized and re-emphasized by the belief that whatever experience of 'apparent loss' one was doomed to encounter on life's precarious paths, it was within one's capacity to transform this experience of loss into an experience of spiritual, emotional, mystical and practical gain. This was simply made possible because 'God the magnanimous one makes his abode' within each of us.

For Maria and her companions, her women friends, this was also made possible by their interactions and meetings during which they had discussions of issues related to life, philosophical discussion on Truth, God and the like. Truth, and the attaining of it, was seen as a discursive process and no one could boast total monopoly over it. At this juncture it is important to say that most of the women who formed part of the circle of Maria's companions were widows.



In addition, some of these women who formed part of the women's circle were not all Catholics or even Christians. They belonged to different religions. Thus Maria and these women's sense of life and God was permeated with the mysticism of a unique 'oneness' they experienced with all peoples beyond the barriers of caste, creed, color and status.

This 'oneness' they experienced with one another was also extended to a special feeling of 'connectedness' they felt with nature and other people, especially the needy and the suffering. Many of these women despite the fact that they themselves were victims of poor pay packages, donated generously within their means, to orphanages and others in need. A particular incident remains so fresh and vivid in my mind. Maria had a Hindu colleague named Geeta. Her daughter was to be married. The marriage was due in three months time and Geeta was desperately in need of money. Sometime in the same year Maria's daughter was to be married. That was the first marriage to take place in her house and Maria was preparing for a rather grand celebration. In view of the ceremony she had saved a large sum of money because according to the custom in her locality the marriage expenses were to be met by the bride's parents. When Maria saw Geeta in distress she quickly ran to the bank, withdrew the fixed deposits and gave them to Geeta, without any written evidence. When Maria's daughter confronted her with the possibility of Geeta not returning them because of lack of any written evidence her response was so touching that I have never forgotten it all my life "What I see in Geeta is the mystery of God who incarnated as man. That mystery is so incomprehensible that I will not doubt for even a moment the veracity of that existential truth. When I saw Geeta desperately in need, I only saw the mystery of God reflecting through her." I was dumbfounded though my skeptical mind, I am ashamed to say as a nun, wondered "Is that a practical and realistic way to live?" For the mystic, life does not exist in realisms and practicalities. She sees beyond what the common human eye sees. To allay my rather unfounded fears Maria rang me up one day to inform me that within two months of her daughter's marriage Geeta had returned the sum. Stella is happily married and has two lively kids.

## From Life to Love

The three specific features of the love that I experienced in the spirituality of Maria and her women friends is love as non-institutional/contextual, love as communitarian and love as joy spreading and not fear generating. For Maria and her companions Christianity/religion was not at all a matter of creating institutions. It was a matter of creating loving bonds between mother and children, between people, between friends and neighbors, between brothers and sisters. It was a matter of realizing what the needs of the individual were and how best could she/he be challenged to bring out the best in her for the sake of her own person and the community. If this demanded a challenge of structures, Maria did not refrain even from organizing *Satyagrahas* after the style of Gandhi who was her inspiration. Once at a protest march that she had organized against illicit brewing of liquor within the locality, she pronounced as a way of encouraging a young Muslim wife named Razia Begum "Who will we fear other than Allah? Who has the right to stop us? Those men, our husbands who come fully drunk to beat and strangle good women to death? Let Jesus show mercy to our children." After a week of incessant demonstration Razia Begum's husband one day rang the doorbell of Maria's house. To her surprise he fell on his knees begged her pardon and resolved never to drink any more. Never, since I was told by the people of the locality, has anyone seen Mohammed, Razia's husband drunk on the streets. Now Razia is a social worker and she herself has conducted innumerable demonstrations against illicit liquor brewing in many parts of Kerala.

In the preceding section I have probed into how the experience of loss affected meaning-making and the sense of religion and life in the lives of Indian Catholic women and the way they imparted it to their children. This sense of loss did not make them powerless. Instead this sense of loss that they experienced was transformed into power. The sense of loss was partly a consequence of what society had inflicted on them for the fact of being women. Through their lively every-day encounters, these women tapped the emancipatory potential in the existential state of loss, which is part and parcel, and an inevitable factor, of life. I will argue that the losses experienced by these women were transformed into freedom

in political, religious and academic achievements either in the life of these protagonists or in the life of their daughters and grand-daughters.

In the next part of the paper we will look into the manner in which the Book of Ruth deals with the existential fact of loss.

## **Joan Chittister and the Book of Ruth**

The Catholic feminist theologian Joan Chittister offers us a feminist interpretation of the book of Ruth in her spiritually energizing book entitled *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life* (Chittister 2000). She defines twelve significant moments in the life of a woman. These she terms respectively as loss, change, transformation, aging, independence, respect, recognition, insight, empowerment, self-definition, invisibility & fulfillment. This paper then will take the form of a conversation between the book of Ruth and the lives of these Indian Catholic women. The interpretative category that forms the specific lens for this enriching conversation will specifically be the experiential category of loss carved and shaped in the specificity of Indian women's lives. The paper therefore will make a comparative study of defining moments in the lives of these Indian women and that of Naomi and Ruth. It will depict the manner in which Indian catholic women through their daily spiritual efforts effectively channel the creative energies in experiential and recurring situations like loss and change, in order to unleash their emancipatory potential. The book of Ruth begins in tragedy – a situation of loss. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are three young women left with three dead husbands and with no means of support. However, these women do not succumb to feelings of self pity and helplessness. They decide to take the hard and unbeaten track in order to make something fruitful and valuable of their lives. An analysis of the journey made by Naomi and Ruth presents us with five significant and emancipatory aspects of the existential reality of loss.

Loss is, as Chittister says, a 'crossover moment in time', for it leads us to ourselves, in and through God's time. Nevertheless time here is not measured from the perspective of *chronos*, but from that of *kairos* (Panikkar 1993a, 1993b) Chronological time is measured in terms of productivity, and what one does, and in terms of what

one produces. In such a culture and worldview, age is seen a problem to reckon with. However, time seen from a kairological perspective challenges the evolutionary, linear model of chronological time. It is cathartic and brings true self-revelation. Kairological time is measured in terms of quality, of being. In a moment of loss often one realizes the depth of her inner self. Time stands still.

Moments of great loss throw a woman back on her own assets. A truly feminist strategy indeed, because when authentically and critically encountered, loss brings in women a deep and critical awareness of our agency and subjecthood as women of God. During a moment of loss such as this, what counts is the existential reality of “what a woman is inside herself” (Chittister 2000: 9).

‘The profound encounter with ‘what a woman is inside herself’ brings her face to face with the ultimate logic that God in her life is her only real resource (Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are women coping with loss) (Chittister 2000: 9).

Loss becomes a moment of deep spiritual revelation. Moments of loss are moments of power that authentic self-revelation brings, since we are faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was? For a woman, often the loss of a husband strikes at the very foundation of her life. What confronted us with this loss was a feeling of being reduced to nothing.

Loss brings in a feeling of helplessness, of being an outsider, of being powerless. This is the ambiguity of the existential reality of loss – it makes one feel powerful and at the same time powerless. This feeling of powerlessness and loss is a common/universal feeling of women. However, in the book of Ruth, God takes a stand on the side of the woman who is alone in the world. God pronounces her whole and capable of her own direction.

Loss once reckoned with is a gift. “I can be and must be something new. I discover more of God in emptiness, than I have ever known in what I once took to be fullness.” Loss is empowering, because in loss we are faced with ourselves, with the reality of our inner selves. Loss thus, in Chittister’s understanding, brings knowledge of ourselves and of the world. She defines knowledge first and foremost as being ‘conscious of the way her world goes together.’

This is further explicated in terms of the knowledge of one's/a woman's role as the other image of God; knowledge as claiming her part of the will of God; the knowledge of how life works, of her powerlessness in the system and yet the knowledge of her great strength of self; and the knowledge of her dignity as a daughter of God. For Chittister knowledge paves the path to the unfolding of consciousness. Correspondingly, in the Indian understanding knowledge is seen as a *Brahmajignasa* (realization of *Brahman* the highest reality) where in the process the seeker (*mumuksu*) is being transformed. Knowledge as a result is seen as bringing in authentic freedom and empowering consciousness. Therefore the bridge between these two moments of loss and empowerment is the unfolding of consciousness.

Consciousness is defined here in terms of the four fold Indian approach. In a recent thesis submitted to the University of Madras, Dr. George Thadathil has argued that modern humanity, be it in the West or the East, is beset by a four fold alienation which corresponds to the four-fold layers in the Indian understanding of consciousness. The four-fold alienation is alienation from the socio-political, the psycho-spiritual, the aesthetico-religious and the philosophico-mystical. Tapping the emancipatory potential in the sphere of the psycho-spiritual and the aesthetico-religious, through an application of the Indian Advaitic view of reality, Dr. Thadathil depicts the contours of a wholesome spirituality that will counter the alienation of the modern self. Situating the context of his research within a particular low caste community called the Ezhava community in Kerala, South India, he extends the liberative thrust of the spiritual and the aesthetic even into the socio-political. The underlying democratic vision of life forms the edifice on which he develops his four fold division of consciousness which depicts, the 'lokaḥ'/world of men and women collectively and individually. The democratic four-fold vision of reality with its potential for unity and communion building, is depicted as follows.

The pranava (primordial utterance) "AUM" is in the Upanishadic understanding the ultimate Mahavakya (vital utterance) – the sum and substance of the Upanishads and the Vedas. The 'AUM' in Mandukya language is Catuspad – fourfold. It represents Brahman,

the reality as jagrat (wakeful) swapna (dream) susupti (sleep) and turiya (silence). It is symbolized in the very sound production 'A', 'U', 'M' and 'silence.' The wakeful consciousness is directed to the world of objects (external world), the dreamy half awake consciousness to the world of the subject, the deep sleep (susupti) state to the hidden world of the preconscious – subconscious, and the 'silence' of the unconscious as the perfect vision of Being as Being or Non-Being.

It is by relying on the above fourfold scheme of reality – consciousness that the very outlining of a feminist vision is being attempted. Applying this scheme to the complex reality of women, I derive the four segments: the socio-political (the objective wakeful world), the psycho-spiritual (the subjective dream world), the aesthetico-religious (the Divine trans-conscious, trans-human 'sleep' world) and the philosophico-mystical (the infinite 'non definable, and unspeakable beyond' that prevents reality from being totalized – 'silence').

A situation of loss, be it individual or collective, when faced with courage and involvement takes us to our inner selves and brings self revelation and revelation of the true nature of the divine.

## **Loss and Self Revelatory Discourse**

The stories of Indian Catholic women that I have illustrated confront us with a picture of 'committed people' entering into a 'biased' search for their authentic 'selves' and sharing their inner domain through the story/text of their lives. In an article entitled "The Cloistered Closet" the author, Reverend Dorothy A. Austin, gives emphasis to the freedom people experience when they 'open' themselves to the reality of their authentic selves, 'embrace' it, acknowledge it with interest and compassion and without reactivity. With an autobiographical slant in her writing thus underscoring the experiential nature of the text, Austin points out that the path to freedom opens when 'one is released from her conditioning.' This takes us to a new stage of freedom – a moment of clear seeing, without a struggle.' The end product of such a personal and collective journey is 'happiness unabated' and 'clear seeing, without a struggle.' These moments of clear seeing and productive silence

bring into our lives a wholesome measure of peace and patience. For as Austin says and as the lives of these Catholic women reveal, “Given a healthy sum of self-respect and self acceptance, we have a substantial reserve to spend on others, even those who hate us.”

However in a discussion like this on Indian Catholic women, we are forced to pose the question: Is pursuing ‘unabated happiness’ a self-revelatory discourse for Indian Catholic women? Can Indian Catholic mothers who are responsible for the smooth running of their families spend time on self-revelatory discourses or personal spiritual journeys? Or is this an issue to be left to personal and individual choice? I tend to think that a clue to these questions can be found in the concept of ‘ongoing struggle’ Austin uses, and also in the idea of a spiritual practice that she elaborates. For Austin, as I see it, ‘Self-Revelatory’ discourse is not a static but a dynamic concept. As such, it is for the individual in relation to her social and political context to decide. It is important to realize the contextual and historical nature of self-revelation and not reduce it merely to a psychological/spiritual category. I have also encountered many Catholic mothers and housewives’ in India who despite their daily chores, which for most of them is a round the clock task, in addition to the battering from their husbands and the demands of the joint family bond, draw inner sustenance through such spiritual practice. My friend Nancy is for me a very telling example.

Nancy lived through such traumatic experiences in the first few years of her married life, that even to date, recounting those tales brings tears to the eyes of any listener as it did to mine. Her mother-in-law would shriek and yell and call her names that would almost reduce Nancy to ‘feeling like a whore’, in her words, and most often for some reason or situation the mother-in-law herself would fabricate. To my constant queries on how she lived through those years safeguarding her sanity and confidence, Nancy inevitably, with a special shine in her eyes replies “ ‘God!’ – every time I left my mother’s house to go to my in-laws,’ my mother would assure me that Mother Mary was sitting beside me.” It is ten years since Nancy got married and five years since I met her. Despite this agony, Nancy, besides fulfilling all her duties to her husband and in-laws as is expected of an Indian wife, decided to pursue a Doctoral

degree in Economics. Nancy has already submitted her doctoral thesis for approval and evaluation to the University of Bombay. The last time I met Nancy she looked so happy and cheerful. In response to my wide-eyed bewilderment, she whispered in my ears, “my years of spiritual practice have borne fruit. God has transformed my husband and mother-in-law. They look upon me now as an auspicious wife and a propitious daughter-in-law.” I shied away in disbelief only too aware of my lack of faith in her capacities and in the silent strength and enduring faith of millions of such women in my country. The faith and spiritual practice of such people speaks volumes in a language louder and more dignified than words of the significance of ‘dying a million deaths’ in order to struggle towards that ‘one deeply-realized moment of clear seeing’, of demanding that others, who have refused them the luxury of a ‘self-revelation’, clearly ‘see’ their auspiciousness.

Now Nancy, in addition to working as a journalist, also renders voluntary service to an organization that caters to offering counselling services and retreats to battered women. As Austin notes in her article, Nancy too thinks that the first impediment to overcome in our journey towards self – revelation is ‘fear.’ I too have benefited considerably from Nancy in this regard.

My intention in illustrating the example of Nancy, is to exemplify through these demonstrations that the category of ‘self-revelatory discourse’ has immense potential and offers wide possibilities when seen as a dynamic concept. Besides, the feminist category of struggle enhances the implicit nature of self-revelation as a prophetic committed and disciplined sojourn. Austin in her article says, “happiness is not dependent upon the accumulation of pleasant experiences.” Here she underscores the importance of the ‘seemingly insignificant, moment-to-moment experiences of our lives.’ These moments could be moments of loss in its varied forms or moments of deep revelation and fulfillment. By stressing the ‘moment to moment’ nature of living, Austin draws our attention to the manner in which the ‘ordinary’ becomes the ‘extraordinary’ through the very act of ‘narrative telling’, “to be a self is to have a story to tell.” This ‘telling’ for Austin is not something that can be accomplished only through ‘words’ but also through the language of ‘Silence’, through the very act of committed living itself.



These women, be it Maria, Nancy, or the scriptural women Naomi and Ruth, thus pose to us through the story of their lives varieties of paradoxes that are seemingly contradictory but arguably emancipatory. To me, entering into such a process of personal liberation has wide implications even for Indian Catholic women whose primary and often only source of individuality is derived from their existence as 'self-denying' mothers. The nature of this spiritual journeying is for each one, in relation to her context and community, to decide.

## Notes

1. This paper was presented in a gathering of Asian Catholic women under the auspices of Ekklesia of Women (EWA) that took place in November 2002 in Thailand.
2. I have given a brief account of the accident, which killed my sister precisely because such accidents are not a rare phenomenon; it is rather the in thing. Surprisingly even in a place like Goa where statistics show that accidents are on the increase there are no proper emergency centers where trauma cases can be handled. Statistics collected from the Traffic Department reveal that over 1,650 accidents were reported last year with 209 fatalities. An alarming 69 per cent of these accidents were caused due to negligent driving. A majority of the accidents also involve drunken driving, figures reveal a high incidence (68 per cent) of mishaps between 11 am to 8 pm – normal working hours in the tourist state. Such laxity points to a theological issue – the question of value of life. Considering this social factor, could one say that the death of my sister was God's will? For eg. One nun who lives in my community and who is 90 told me that she couldn't think of it as God's will. I am faced with a dilemma.
3. Uma Chakravarth, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi : Orientalism, Nationalism and a script for the past" in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (New Delhi : Kali for women, 1989) 27-87.

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