

Breaking the Bars: Women's Quest for Freedom in Indira Goswami's "The Blue- Necked God"

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Dr. Indira Goswami, through her prolific writing, emerged as a fearless voice in the portrayal of human life and societal issues. She established herself as a prominent figure in the realm of literary world at an early age. Her literary repertoire consisted of over 25 novels and numerous short stories. She made significant contributions in Ramayana research. Dr. Goswami's narratives were grounded in her first-hand experiences and keen observations of society. Her novel, "The Blue Necked God," published in 1976, stands as a testament to explore intricate themes and present them with lucidity and sensitivity. The literary works of Dr. Indira Goswami contain a recurring motif that is widely spread. This motif focuses on the portrayal of marginalized and oppressed members of society. In her narratives, Dr. Goswami skillfully depicts the challenges faced by various social classes. These challenges include widows coping with their circumstances, sharecroppers and destitute peasants in dire predicaments, abandoned lovers enduring hardships, disillusioned youth, and victims during times of communal upheaval. Dr. Goswami's ability to explore the depths of human experience with unwavering honesty is highly praised in the field of literature. Her work has left a lasting impact on the Indian literary tradition.

Keywords: Widowhood, freedom, marginality, society.

Introduction:

Dr. Indira Goswami, known by the name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, has established herself as a prominent figure in Assamese literature. Her remarkable creative achievements and profound impact have earned her a distinguished position among the esteemed literary figures at the national level. In recognition of her outstanding contributions, she has been honored with several prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, the Jnanpith Award in 2000, and the Principal Prince Claus Laureate in 2008. Many of her noteworthy works have been skillfully translated from her native Assamese into English. In 1982, she was bestowed with the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel "Mamare Dhara Tarowal," which has been translated into English as "The Rusted Sword." Her novels, such as "Chenabar Srot" (As the Chenab Flows), "Ahiron" (also included in her book "The Selected Works of Indira Goswami"), and "Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda" (translated into English as "A Saga of South Kamrup"), have received immense praise from both the general public and critics alike. The enduring popularity of many of her Assamese novels is evident from their multiple reprints. Goswami's recent work, "Adha Lekha Dastavej," strikes a chord with Assamese readers through its candid

portrayal of formative life experiences. The translations in English and Hindi further enhance its accessibility and underscore Goswami's far-reaching influence in the literary world.

Vrindabhan, the city associated with Lord Krishna, provided a fruitful environment for Indira Goswami's scholarly pursuits, particularly her study of the Ramayana. After relocating to Delhi and assuming a position at the University of Delhi, she experienced a period of great productivity, producing numerous notable works, including short stories and two acclaimed classics -Pages Stained with Blood and The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker, during this period.

The Blue-Necked God, a novel by Indira Goswami, published in 1976, sheds light on the exploitation and impoverishment of widows in Vrindavan. The widows are abandoned in the city and subjected to a life of prayer, cruelty, and indifference. The novel combines fact and fiction, using autobiography to depict the emotional and psychological turmoil of the protagonist, Saudamini. It addresses the challenges faced by young widows, including physical, emotional, and financial deprivations. Goswami's narrative draws from her own research and experiences in Vrindavan, revealing aspects of the city's traditional norms and practices.

"The novel 'The Blue-Necked God' (Neelkanthi Braj) vividly portrays the profound grief, anguish and helpless condition experienced by widows in Vrindavan. Number of widows hailing from East Pakistan and West Bengal encountered ostracization within their own families due to their widowhood. Published in 1976, the book was a ground-breaking work on this topic. Dr. Goswami's extensive research led her to extend her stay in Vrindavan after concluding her research on the Ramayana. The novel serves as a testament to the wretched existence of over 5000 widows, who spent their lives singing, begging, and hoping even for the most meager offerings. In her autobiography 'Adha Lekha Dastabaz (An Unfinished Autobiography),' Dr. Goswami dedicates a chapter to the plight of Vrindavan's widows."

Echoes of Desolation: Widows in the Shadows of Vrindavan

The portrayal of Vrindavan in Neelkanthi Braja depicts a town that encapsulates the duality of a rich Hindu tradition amidst the presence of poverty and corruption. It delves into the history, temples, festivals, and the diverse population of pilgrims and beggars. The narrative revolves around three women facing adversity: Mrinalini, devoted to her ailing parents; Sashiprabha, a widow longing for a connection with a young Swami; and others seeking solace and proper burials through prayer. Sashi finds refuge with Alamgadhi, grateful for his protection, yet yearning for a deeper connection.

Sashi's daily routine is disrupted as their holy place which is owned by Thakur Sahib, is sold, resulting in Alamgadhi losing his position. Left to fend for herself, Sashi finds herself in a vulnerable situation, too advanced in age for conventional employment and yet too young for begging. Seeking sanctuary in a marginalized community, she encounters the possibility of being expelled due to her susceptibility to Vrindavan's predators. Alamgadhi's demise further worsens her predicament, as she fruitlessly searches for a protector. Banished by the Radheshyamis, she flees through treacherous alleyways, eventually finding temporary refuge with Mrinalini, who, despite facing her own challenges, offers comfort and shelter.

Saudamini, a youthful widow, experienced the unfortunate loss of her husband shortly after their matrimonial union. She proceeds to develop an affectionate bond with a Christian gentleman, thereby defying the established norms surrounding Hindu widowhood. In order to seek solace, her parents accompany her to Vrindavan, a place of utmost sanctity. Dr. Roychaudhary, her paternal figure, undertakes the establishment of a medical facility with the intention of instilling within Saudamini a sense of empathy. Anupama, her maternal influence, acquaints her with sacred locales and venerable figures, all in the pursuit of inner tranquility. Despite concerted endeavors to conform to societal expectations, Saudamini grapples with a sense of rebellion, isolation, and despondency. She deliberately abstains from embarking on pilgrimages and consequently loses interest in the aforementioned hospital. Her sojourn in Vrindavan entails aimlessly wandering in search of answers, yet regrettably, she finds herself bereft of enlightenment. Unique apprehensions plague her consciousness, leading her to confide in her confidant Chandrabhanu regarding her prevailing state of depression and desires. A profound discussion with an elderly individual named Radhashymi unveils their shared tribulations related to desires. These profound encounters ultimately mold Saudamini's emotional trajectory.

As Saudamini grapples with her feelings of despair and remorse, she encounters others who have found solace in their suffering through faith or artistic expression. For instance, there is a young widow who, because of her untouchable status, is forbidden from entering the Lord's temple. However, she finds a sense of devotion and liberation as she dances freely on the riverbank. Similarly, an artist named Chandrabhanu finds comfort in creating beautiful sculptures, even though he struggles to find buyers for his work. When Saudamini's restlessness becomes unbearable, her elderly father enters her room one night and empathetically reveals that he understands her predicament. He informs her that he has written to her Christian lover, urging him to come and rescue her before he and his wife depart from this world. In a dreamlike sequence that ensues, Saudamini eagerly awaits her mysterious lover with her father's silent approval. Months later, on a cold and dark night, she ventures towards the riverbank, where she hears the enchanting melody of the shehnai emanating from the temple. As she walks, her feet become entangled in the red scarf of a fortunate married woman who had passed away before her husband. Finally, her lover, a shadowy figure, takes her into his boat, and they passionately make love while a storm rages outside. Now, the question arises: is this lover a real person, a figment of Saudamini's imagination, or perhaps even Death himself, for whom she has eagerly awaited as a woman united with her lover rather than a widow? Despite the conventional conclusion of the novel, it does not detract from the candid portrayal of how society's restrictions thwart a widow's sexuality and how cruel circumstances can blight the lives of the young.

Despite the portrayal of the youthful love reverently shared between Radha and Krishna, Vrindavan presents itself as a worn-out and decaying town that provides solace to those in the later stages of their lives. Mrinalini, Sashiprabha, and Saudamini find themselves in the shadow of their mortality, while their caregivers, who are elderly and weak, stand on the edge of their existence. Each of them struggles with the troubling possibility of becoming one of the many forsaken widows of Vrindavan, known as Radheshyamis... "I am sure that she must have left something with one of you. After all, she was a radheshyami, in the Bhajan Ashram". (p.56) These women have been abandoned by their families in the name of religion and now lead a precarious existence in

shabby and dilapidated shanties. They beg for alms near the temples or sing devotional hymns at bhajan ashrams for a meagre amount of money. "Give us some donation to keep us alive. You people live to eat, but we need to eat something in order to live. Give us something to keep us alive" (21). However, the funds designated for their well-being, whether provided by generous donors or temple trusts, are often misappropriated by corrupt officials. The younger women are coerced into a life of prostitution or forced into prayerful unions with priests and pandits. Some of them come from educated and respectable backgrounds but have been reduced to destitution due to extreme poverty, incurable diseases, and subhuman living conditions. They endure various forms of humiliation. Many await death with their meagre savings tucked in their waistbands, yearning for a dignified farewell. However, their lifeless bodies are frequently stolen by the pandits or even their companions in search of any small possessions, only to be heartlessly discarded into the Yamuna River.

Conclusion

The novel "Neelkanthi Braja" portrays the predicament of widows in Vrindavan. The lives of these widows are marked by abandonment and vulnerability. Characters like Saudamini, Mrinalini, and Sashiprabha illustrate the harsh realities faced by these women. The novel combines factual and fictional elements based on the author's research in Vrindavan. It exposes the norms that cause the suffering of these marginalized women. Vrindavan itself reflects both sanctity and corruption. The novel contrasts the love of Radha and Krishna with the widows' harsh lives. It explores their struggles with mortality and the fear of being abandoned like the Radheshyamis. The narrative also highlights the misappropriation of funds meant for their well-being. "Neelkanthi Braja" is a social commentary on the challenges faced by widows in Vrindavan. It calls for societal transformation and compassion towards these marginalized women. It effectively captures their reality.

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