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## A FEMINO-CENTRIC READING OF INDIRA GOSWAMIS' THE BLUE- NECKED GOD

Miss. Arunima Mohan

M.A. English Language & Literature, NET  
Kollam, Kerala, India

**Abstract:** A femino-centric reading of this book aims at analyzing the tortured female characters, the utter exploitation and extreme starvation they underwent, and finally their ultimate quest for identity, including that of the authors, thereby the attainment of ultimate self-realization

**Index Terms-** Indian literature, feminism, women writers, gender theory, Indira Goswami, The Blue Necked God

### THE BLUE- NECKED GOD

The Blue-necked God has lonely and beautiful Soudamini as the main character, who is always in search of meaning, identity, and validity. It could also be about the fractured nature of life in the holy city of God, where greed alternates with godliness, beauty with beastality, enlightenment with decadence, and plenty with poverty. Widowed Soudamini, along with her parents, arrives at Vrindavan to settle there permanently for the rest of her life and is exposed to the plight of Vrindavan's widows, also known as radheshyamis. Vivid images of the city create long-lasting impressions on her senses; the exquisite sculpture of artist Chandrabhanu Rakesh; the changing moods of the Yamuna; the flower-bedecked processions of deities; the disintegration of gender demarcations; and so on.

But, beneath all these, Saudamini is constantly affected by paranoia, doubts, and existential questions for which there are no ready answers. The other prominent female characters are Sashiprova and Mrinalini. We could identify the protagonist, Soudamini, with the author herself and discover the autobiographical elements, which reveal the physical and mental torture she faced as a young widow and her ultimate quest for identity. The other female characters who are passing through the torture and identity quest are Sashiprova, Mrinalini, and the widows of Vrindavan.

"Neelkantha Braja" was originally written in Assamese and was published in 1976. This work's translation to English was done by Gayathri Bhattacharya, with an introduction by Aruni Kashyap and an afterword by Namita Gokhale. The English translation was titled "The Blue-necked God", and was published by Zubaan, New Delhi, in 2013, and the novel was divided into eighteen chapters. The original title 'Neelkantha Braja' is translated into English as 'The Blue-necked God', which refers to Lord Shiva, who drank poison to save the world from destruction and was interrupted by his wife Parvathy Devi, who clutched the Lord's throat so that the poison may not spread over his entire body, which resulted in his neck turning blue in colour. On the other hand, the Lord of Vrindavan, Lord Krishna himself, is blue in color all over his body. The blue colour emerging from the poison suits aptly as the title in the present scenario, equating with the darker, uglier side of Vrindavan now, rather than the holy, religious, spiritual, heavenly blue of the Lord Krishna himself, that had existed in the holy Vrindavan in the past.

In ancient India, women used to enjoy equal status with men in all spheres of life. During the early Vedic period, they enjoyed a high position, which is proved by the works of ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana. According to Rig-Veda, women were given freedom to select their husbands through 'swayamvara' and could marry at a mature age. Even some kingdoms in ancient India had traditions like 'nagaravadu'. The status of women began to decline with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Empire, and the influence of Christianity, which began to frame boundaries for women's freedom and rights. The emergence of a male-dominated society in India could be traced from that period onwards.

In Indian culture, Manu, the lawgiver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, gave only a secondary position to women in relation to men. According to 'Manu Smriti', a woman is expected to depend upon a man from her cradle to grave and should never live as an independent being. The rule is detailed as follows: a female has to live under the protection of her father in her childhood; under the protection of her husband in her youth; under the protection of sons in her old age; in the case where her husband is dead, under the protection of her husband's nearest kinsmen; if she doesn't have sons or paternal kinsmen to protect her. The ultimate goal of this law is that a woman should not be allowed to live her life according to her own desires, because if she is, she will be spoiled and bring shame to the family. While analyzing the Indian women's position in society over the past years, we found that it further deteriorated during the mediaeval period. It was at this time that sati, child marriage, and the ban on widow remarriage became more dominant.

But, it is worth mentioning that, in spite of all these bad conditions, some women excelled in the fields of politics, education, religion, and literature. Razia Sultana, Jhansi Rani, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Mrs. Naidu, Anne Beasant, etc. were the major figures among them. In order to restore women's status and to question the forms of oppression, the Bhakti cult emerged, with Mirabai, a female saint poet, being one of the important Bhakti movement figures. Many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidhya Sagar, Jyotirao Phule, and so on tremendously fought for the upliftment of women. While the abolition of "sati" was done by the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidhya Sagar's crusade for the improvement of the condition of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act. A famous female reformer was Pandita Ramabai.

The constitution of India guarantees all Indian women equality and provides for special provisions to be made by the state in favor of women and children. Though all these rules and guarantees exist on paper, the proper execution of these is few in number. The increasing number of rapes, child marriages, eve teasing, gazing, public harassment, sexual exploitation, and the practice of neglecting and abandoning widows still exist in one corner or another.

Phallogocentric society plays a crucial role in determining the gender roles of women, terming them as the 'second sex' and the 'angel in the house', by the general notion that women are "home makers" and men are the "bread earners". By this notion, they are expected to always be docile and submissive. By the nineteenth century, the patriarchal society's traditional norms and gender roles had been transgressed, and women began to emerge into the new world with new roles; thus, the new woman who challenges the traditional norms is referred to as the "new woman" in literature.

"New Woman" is a term devised by the Irish writer Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspects of the Woman Question" (1894). Later, the British-American writer Henry James propagated the term to portray the metamorphosed women in Europe and the United States who defied the conventional gender roles and acclaimed themselves as educated, autonomous, and feminist. Their ultimate goal was to challenge the concept of the 'angel in the house,' a hegemonic expression used to subjugate women. The term "New Woman" always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives, be it personal, social, or economic. According to this viewpoint, the new women work hard to demarginalize themselves and assert their autonomy and individuality.

They are the new generation of women who have got the willpower to challenge their progenitor role of compliance and docility and establish them as self-assured and independent. The emergence of these new women, in both fiction and drama, is visible in the late nineteenth century. In drama, they appeared in the works of Henrik Ibsen, Henry Arthur Jones, etc., and in fiction, in the works of Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, etc. Among the Indian writers, the most notable are Arundhati Roy, Sashi Deshpande, and Indira Goswami. Here in "The Blue-necked God," we could find a "new woman" in the protagonist, Soudamini, whose DNA is identical with that of the author.

A continuation of the practice of sati is clearly evident still, though it was abolished. The only change was that the "physical immolation" was replaced by the "mental immolation." The novel brought in the realization that generation after generation, women were internalizing their marginalization and were passively accepting their condition as their fate.

But, among these conformist and orthodox characters, Soudamini stands out, challenging patriarchal society's norms of marginalizing and exploiting women and even defying religious barriers. Soudamini's love relationship with a Christian youth reveals her sexual autonomy. We could identify Soudamini as the representative of the budding new woman with a different outlook and contemplation, who thought and worked differently. At the same time, she was deconstructing conventional gender roles. It is clear that although Soudamini committed suicide by the end of the novel, the suicidal act does not seem to represent defeat; rather it symbolizes her freedom from the curse of widowhood, freedom from unspeakable suffering, and freedom from mental immolation.

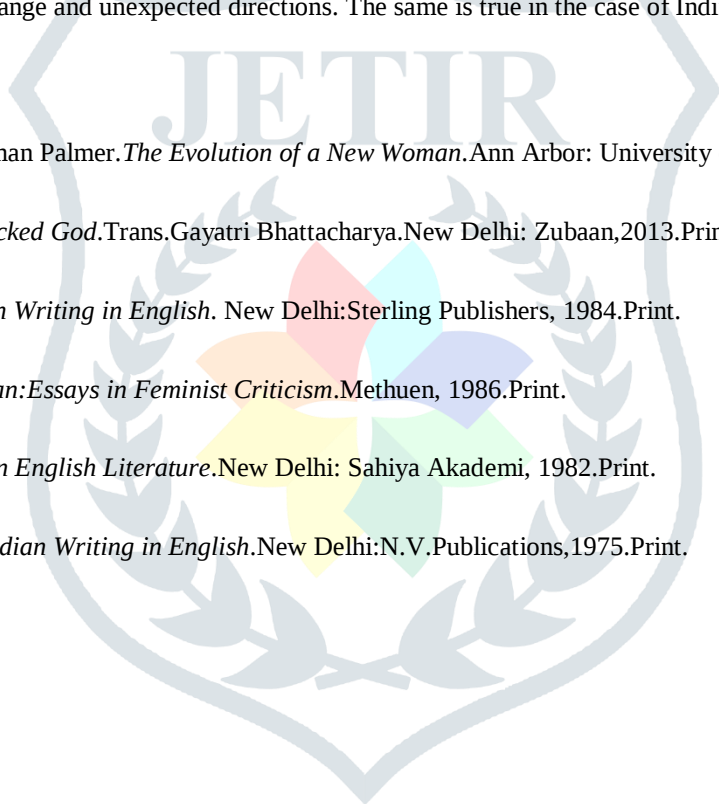
Indira Goswami's characters Soudamini, Mrinalini, Sashiprova, and the Vrindavan widows have brought forth the utter pain and agony endured by the women of Vrindavan. This was an area that was not much attempted in the past by any other writers, which was conveniently left 'unseen'. Being a widow and having undergone and experienced almost all the tortures and sorrows, the author has been able to depict the facts in this work more realistically than in a fantasy manner. Thus, it could clearly be noted that this subject was an explosive one to be touched, which stirred up great controversies and unending discussions for many years, whose repercussions could be felt even today. The significance of this work is made clear by the massive acceptance it received when it was translated and published in 2013; it reached more people and attracted more attention. Thus, the author successfully crossed linguistic boundaries, bringing this globally relevant subject matter to the centre of attention and discussion.

The unique aspect of Indira Goswami's narrative style was that metaphors and similes were not only used to describe a scene but also to create the mood of the atmosphere by creating contrasts. The best instance occurs when we find Soudamini possessing a field of desolation in her heart, and that alone doesn't take the story forward, nor does it show how intense the emptiness of her heart is, unlike there is a contrast. The contrast is provided by lush descriptions of the religious activities, the laughter, and cheers of people when oiled, muscled wrestlers try to climb a great pole, all of which serve to show Soudamini's disconnect even worse. The amazing narrative, which combined fact and fiction, autobiography and reflection in a fascinating mix, could be seen in this novel. The vivid, haunting, and disturbing characters of the novel stay with the reader even after the last page because of their unique characterization. The dried branches of the thick, prickly bushes look like 'fish bones', which is a fine example of infusing writing with vividness and life. Finally, it is remarkable that the descriptive triumph is brilliant in this work.

A femino-centric reading of this work brings into light a reading of the lives of the main female characters, Soudamini, Mrinalini, and Sashiprova, the physical and mental agony they faced in their lives in the form of poverty and exploitation, and their quest for identity. The author's own quest for identity is found through Soudamini, the protagonist. Hence, the author's life too is dealt with. In the background, a vast reading on the lives of the widows of Vrindavan and a reading on their present issues have also been attempted.

Even in this century, no other work contests the position of this novel in Assamese literature because, like classic books, the pages of this tragic novel still live and reinvent themselves in the minds of new readers from each generation. It is true that writers live, travel, and continue living in inexplicable ways through their books, translations, metaphors, and refracted images. Their journeys do not end easily, but continue, always in strange and unexpected directions. The same is true in the case of Indira Goswami too.

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