

WOMAN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S

Dr. Sadaf Shah

Sr. Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Jammu

The Blue-necked God

*In 1970s, Ecofeminism emerged as a social and political movement with the increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. Ecofeminists believe that there is a close relationship between the domination of nature and exploitation of woman. French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne who first coined the term "Ecofeminism" in her book *Feminism or Death* (1974) urges the women to lead ecological revolution to save the planet Earth and form new relationships between humanity and nature as well as man and woman. The development of ecofeminism is greatly affected by both ecological movements and feminism. Indira Goswami is a well known writer from one of the north east states of India namely Assam. In her fictional writings, she has shown strong ecofeminist concerns. In the novel *The Blue-necked God*, Goswami depicts the exploitation and poverty of widows, who have been left behind in the holy city of lord Krishna, Vrindavan by their families after the death of their husbands. Both widows and nature are exploited by men. Man is shown as cruel and greedy who can go to any extent in exploiting woman and degrading environment for his own progress. It is the woman only who shares a close bond with nature and contributes to its protection and preservation.*

Key words: *Ecofeminism, Widows, Women, Nature, Men, Exploitation, Oppression, Preservation, Protection, Degradation, Solace.*

Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that is used to describe a [feminist](#) approach to understand [ecology](#). According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society" (7). French writer [Françoise d'Eaubonne](#) in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) holds the view that patriarchy is responsible for the exploitation of women and the destruction of nature. She strongly stresses that all women must recognize and work to end the domination of natural world if they want to work towards their own freedom from the shackles of patriarchy. She urges the women and environmentalists to come together to end patriarchal system that promote hierarchies, control and unequal socio-economic relations. Ecofeminist activism grew during the 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti nuclear, environmental and lesbian feminist movements.

Ecofeminism believes that there exists interconnectedness between exploitation of nature and oppression of woman. Ecofeminists link ecology with feminism. They view that the domination of woman emerges from the same ideologies that bring about the domination of the environment. Men who own and control land are seen responsible for the exploitation of women and the destruction of the natural environment. Just as men in power exploit land for their own benefit in the same way, they exploit women for their own profit and pleasure. So, the ecofeminists focus on the ways woman and nature are treated by the patriarchal society. This philosophy also examines the ways in which the societal norms put unjust dominance over woman and nature. Ecofeminism proposes an alternative worldview where earth is regarded as sacred and acknowledges the dependency of the whole humanity on the natural world. Thus, ecofeminism regards all life as valuable. Mary Mellor in 'Introduction' to *Feminism and Ecology* writes:

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

Indira Goswami, also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Mamoni Baideo is an Assamese writer. Her literary career started at the age of thirteen only, Goswami published the first collection of her short stories titled as *Chinaki Morom* with the help of an editor Kirti Nath Hazarika who always encouraged her to write. Her literary cannon is very large. She has over twenty five novels to her credit. Her only poetry collection *Pain and Flesh* was published in 2009. She is best known for her efforts to bring about social change through her writings as well as through her role

as a mediator between the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Government of India. She has won several awards including Sahitya Academy and Jnanpith award, the highest literary prize for writing about the plight of the poor, oppressed, marginalized and downtrodden sections of the society.

Being an Assamese writer, Goswami's literary works are not restricted to the boundaries of Assam only but they extend beyond it and give a realistic picture of the life outside the boundaries of Assam. For instance, her novels like *The Blue-necked God* (1973) and *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) are set in Vrindavan and Delhi respectively. Besides this, in her fictional writings, Goswami has shown great ecofeminist concerns by bringing out close connections between women and nature. In her novels *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005) and a short story collection *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001), Goswami has shown great concerns for women and nature. The novel *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) is set in Delhi and depicts the anti-Sikh riots that broke out in Delhi in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi. The novel shows ecofeminist concerns where men were raping women and setting fire to different things, thus polluting and degrading environment. *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001) is a collection of eight short stories. In these short stories, Goswami realistically presents the landscape and people of her region i.e. Assam. There is a rich description of flora and fauna. In many of her short stories, woman and nature are shown as synonyms. Woman is not portrayed as part of nature but nature itself. Woman is described in relation to nature and vice versa. The Brahmaputra river in Assam and Kamakhya temple occupy an important place in these short stories. In her another novel *The Man From Chinnamasta*, relation between nature and woman is explored. Goswami vividly depicts the landscape, myths, legends and people of Assam. Her description of myth of Goddess Kamakhya strongly brings out the ecofeminist concerns in the novel. U.R. Ananthamurthy, a famous Kannada writer in his article titled "A Deeply Human Writer" published in the book *Indira Goswami: The Passion and the Pain* (2012) edited by Uddipana Goswami writes about Goswami as:

Indira Goswami, for me, is not just a writer from Assam but truly an Indian writer, one who is important for every language in India. She is also one of the greatest women writers ever produced because in her writings there is nothing like an excessive ideological approach as we find in some women writers. She is open to experiences and deeply human – I will not say feminine or masculine, but deeply human – and she has lived a life of varied experiences. (24)

Goswami in the novel *The Blue-necked God* (1976) has shown great concern for both woman and nature who are victims at the hands of men. It was first published under its Assamese title *Nilakantha Braja*. It has been translated into English by Gayatri Bhattacharyya, the former lecturer in English at the University of Guwahati. Saudamini, the main protagonist arrives in Vrindavan with her father Dr. Roychoudhury and mother, Anupama. Her parents have brought her to Vrindavan because she has fallen in love with a Christian boy soon after the death of her husband. According to her orthodox parents, Saudamini has violated the strict code of a Hindu widow which is not approved by the orthodox and religious society. She has been brought to Vrindavan in the hope that she will find peace and solace in the holy environment of Vrindavan and accept the reality of her life without questioning. Roychoudhary starts a hospital for destitute patients which was once built by his great grandfather. He holds the view that the suffering of the people will arouse her sympathy and she will sacrifice all her life to the service of the needy. As Saudamini starts moving around the city of Vrindavan, she begins to experience the pathetic conditions of the poor and helpless widows. They do not have enough food to satisfy their hunger and are starving. Even one of them pleads before Saudamini to give her some charity, "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" (22). In the temples they are forced to chant Radha and Krishna even when they are unwell or staving under the watchful eyes of supervisors, "They had to sing the Lord's praises as loud as they could even if they were on the verge of choking" (23). The places where widows spend their lives are unhygienic and filthy. Her heart bleeds when she looks at the pathetic condition of widows.

The nature in *The Blue-necked God* becomes indicative of the pitiful existence of widows in the city of Vrindavan. Their condition is pitiful and they are not able to get two meals a day. Due to this, they are reduced to mere bones or skeletons. Goswami has given the realistic portrayal of the staving widows on Annakut festival, which is celebrated on the first lunar day of the bright fortnight (Shukla Paksha), which is the fourth day of Diwali. It is the day of offering gratitude for Lord Krishna's beneficence. During this festival, the widows come out of their dwellings and gather in large number around the temple in the hope that they would get stomach full of food to eat. Even those widows who are on the verge of dying come out of their residing places with the support of young widows to have glimpse of the

attractive festival. They share the collective belief that by having the glimpse of this festival once, they will be free of cravings of hunger throughout the year. But the reality is totally opposite of what they hope. The reality is that they are not given enough food on the Annakut festival by the cruel temple priests. When they ask for more food, the priest rebukes them and says, “Go, go away, all you old woman! It is no good sitting here like this. Go to Radha-Damodar, otherwise the food will be finished there too” (58). The irony is that the men are offering mountains and mountains of food to God but they are not ready to give enough food to the starving widows. The very first description of nature in the novel becomes suggestive of the deplorable condition of widows in the city of Vrindavan, the city of Lord Krishna. Trees are shown as devoid of greenery which symbolizes unhealthy life. Trees have dried up and become thin like bones, “Saudamini turned to look and saw forests of dust-laden trees and thick prickly-bushes. The branches and twigs of some of these had dried up and looked like thin, dry, fish bones. The purple blossoms on these plants looked like artificial flowers someone had stuck on the dried up branches” (3).

Val Plumwood, an Australian philosopher and an ecofeminist in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) writes that western ‘rationalist tradition’ acknowledges ‘dualism’ which is responsible for the domination of both woman and nature. She gives examples of such dualities such as culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, rationality/animality (nature), reason/emotion (nature), civilized/primitive (nature), etc. The terms like culture, reason, rationality, civilized, etc are associated with masculinity and terms like animality, emotion, primitive, etc are associated with femininity. The terms associated with masculinity are treated as superior and those associated with femininity are treated as inferior. The inferior side becomes a means to the ends of superior side. Thus, inferior side is excluded. In her book, she further writes:

The inferiorisation of human qualities and aspects of life associated with necessity, nature and women — of nature-as-body, of nature-as passion or emotion, of nature as the pre-symbolic, of nature-as primitive, of nature-as-animal and of nature as the feminine — continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life. (21)

Both woman and nature are shown as inferior and helpless victims under the domination of patriarchy. The injustice done to both women and nature brings out the inhumane nature of man who is portrayed as a superior being. The condition of widows of Vrindavan is pathetic and they often become the object of physical abuse at the hands of *pandas* (Hindu priests) of Vrindavan. Like nature, the widows are mute sufferers at the hands of men. They are sexually exploited by men, “Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes” (8). So, the inferior side i.e both woman and nature are just the means to achieve the ends of the superior side i.e. man (reason). Whatever little money, the widows are able to retain through their wanderings and chantings of holy songs is deposited with greedy *pandas* in order to ensure that they would get decent and proper funeral rites after their death. These widows prefer to starve themselves so that they would be cremated with proper rites after their death. But the reality is different and shocking from what they expect. The fact is that the greedy and cruel *pandas* ensure them of proper funeral rites but instead they pocket their money after their death and throw their bodies in river Yamuna so that no money would be spent on their last rites. Goswami writes:

The *paanda* started throwing the dead woman’s things around, looking through them. He kicked the water pitcher and the cow-dung *chappatis* and the old women cringed with fear and retreated a few places. Not satisfied with this, the man started poking about the dead body. Who knew perhaps the old woman has hidden away gold or silver coins on her person. Perhaps tied them around her waist, or on her upper arm? (14).

In another incident, Saudamini, is seen accompanying her mother to a saint where she sees the lowering of water level of the Yamuna river. Only round mass of sand is visible in the middle of the river. The drying up of the water of Yamuna river shows the pitiful existence of widows. The nature shares the same fate as the widows of Vrindavan who do not have enough food to eat and have become weak and thin like river Yamuna. There are scenes of earth drying up and unseasonal rains which is suggestive of the wrong going on against the widows of Vrindavan at the hands of cruel, selfish and greedy men. Again, in the novel when Saudamini is roaming around Vrindavan, she meets a middle aged *radheshyami* (who earn her living by chanting *Radhe-Shyam* in honour of Lord Krishna). She enquires from her whether she has been able to erase the memories of her husband who died many years ago. This unnamed widow is completely shocked by Saudamini’s question as she did not expect such question from her and breaks down. At this moment the widow’s pathetic condition is described in terms of world of nature as if she is nature itself, “The

woman looked up like a startled deer, and then she collapsed on Saudamini's chest, just as the soft mud of a river bank erodes and falls into the river" (167).

In Vrindavan, each and every sight of widows is depressing for Saudamini. She finds solace only in the objects of nature. When she is with Charabehari, an artist friend of hers, she prefers to be with nature rather than visiting other place of Vrindavan, "Charabehari went inside the temple to get flowers and Prasad, and Saudamini sat down under a flowering tree near the temple. The spot was quiet and not so crowded, and the atmosphere was peaceful. She had hoped that she would be able to spend some time alone here" (53). There are numerous instances in the novel when Saudamini is shown as roaming amidst the nature which brings out the strong ecofeminist concerns in the novel. It is nature alone which provides her some peace of mind, "The clear, almost transparent rays of the young sun fell on the sands of Jamuna. She walked slowly towards the tents and umbrellas, and once again she found alone on the rough, cool sands of the river" (150-151). It is evident, that she shares a close bond with nature. In the novel, there is conflict going on in the mind of the Saudamini. She is not able to decide whether to go with her Christian lover, which is a sin in the eyes of an orthodox Hindu society or to lead a life desired by the society and her parents i.e. to live a simple life in Vrindavan like other widows. At times, in the novel the nature becomes representative of emotions, feelings and the conflict which is going inside her mind:

The other day, I saw a young couple. They were sleeping under a dimaru tree on the parikarma path. There was a peculiar smell in the waters of Jamuna river, I don't know what the smell was, but it was not at all pleasant, like the smell of newly butchered meat. Something happened to me, I do not know what. The unnatural smell from the river, that couple lying under that tree [. . .] I lay down on the sands of Jamuna, and started rolling about. At one time, my clothes slipped off. The feel of the sands on my naked body was something very strange, unusual. (106)

Initially, Saudamini decides to submit to the wishes of her parents. She starts helping her father in his dispensary without complaining. She accompanies her father wherever he goes to help the poor and sick people. After witnessing the wretched conditions of the Vrindavan widows, her mind gets disturbed. Gradually she begins to lose interest in the dispensary and social services. She starts accusing her father and calls him hypocrite and butcher. She protests and demands freedom, "I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work...I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl, and cannot pass all my years in serving society like you...I am an independent person, and fear no one and nothing! (71). Goswami compares Saudamini's agony to a bird who has been wounded, "Her body jerked restlessly like a wounded bird" (71). So, woman and nature are both synonymous and are victims. Her roaming amidst the nature to find answers to her questions shows that she is one among nature.

Vandana Shiva is an Indian [scholar](#) and [environmental activist](#) who authored over twenty books. For her feminism and ecology are inseparable and believes that there exists a close relationship between the oppression of women and degradation of nature. She also believes that women are more nurturing, peaceful, cooperative and closer to nature than men. As women are more nurturing so they are more equipped to manage the environment. In one of her books *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, she writes, "Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (37). Goswami writes about various myths, legends, landscape, people and history, related to the land of Vrindavan. Through the use of various myths, she has shown the close affinity of women with nature. Women are shown as the preserver of environment and animals thereby, playing an important role in maintaining ecological balance. In one of the myths, Goswami talks about Yashoda, the foster mother to Lord Krishna and Radha, the Hindu Goddess as sharing close bond with nature. Yashoda is making some gifts for cows and Radha is giving birth to nature by planting trees and flowers. These trees and flowers were transforming the whole environment of Vrindavan by healing the sorrows and griefs of the people. Like a selfless mother, nature nurtures the whole humanity without any selfish motive:

The deep and thick forests of Atalbehari Bon, Kewari Bon and Gopal Bon where legend says Yashoda made a gift of cows, and the famous Radhabagh, where Radha herself had planted trees and flowers together with her companions and that most beautiful of all forests, Nikunja Bon, where lovely white flowers seemed to stoop down and bend over to embrace the precious soil of Braj! These bushes blossom with sparkling flowers resembling the nupur, the tinkling foot ornaments worn by Radha. They say that if one listened with faith in one's heart, one could almost hear the enchanting tinkling of a pair of heavenly nupurs echo all over Braj... A single blossom of this flower, it was said, could transform acute sorrow and grief to a feeling of intense pleasure. (69)

The people are seen in the novel shouting slogans like “Jai, Radharani Jai!” and “Jai Yamunji Jai” which is quite ironical. On one hand, they are worshipping female goddesses and on other women are victimized in the name of religion. Goswami also talks about Radha Astami, the birth anniversary of Shri Radha Rani, the consort of lord Krishna. She is known to be an avatar of Goddess Lakshmi. On Radha Astami, devotees worship Goddess with utmost zeal and enthusiasm. The devotees gather in large numbers to celebrate this festival and obtain the blessings of Goddess. She also talks about Ekadasi when again there is large gathering of devotees to worship the goddess Radha. On the one hand, men are showing deep reverence for goddess and on the other hand women are victimized in the name of religion. It is evident from the kind of life Sashiprova, another widow is living. Goswami identifies Sashiprova with nature when she compares her to a beautiful flower, “She has changed into a lovely jasmine flower of Braj” (68). From an ecofeminist perspective, woman and nature are same so Sashiprova’s mistreatment at the hands of a religious priest, Alamghari is the exploitation of the nature itself. Sashiprova resides with Alamghari, a temple priest to protect herself from the sexual predators of Vrindavan and in the hope that she would receive a decent funeral rite after her death. Alamghari is a very greedy and cruel priest who takes full advantage of his freedom. Sashiprova is helping Alamghari in his temple duties during daytime and at night she shares bed with him. So, she is leading a dual life and becomes the victim under the guise of religious custom. Being poor and helpless, she is victim of Alamghari who exploits her sexually. In one of her conversation with Mrinalini, another woman character who lives in Vrindavan Saudamini says, ““One day, he asked me to disrobe completely in front of him and I did. He scrutinized my body thoroughly in the light of the lamp. Then he put out the lamp and went and slept in his own bed”” (59). As she is identified with nature, her violation is the violation of nature by man who is ready to go to any extent to satisfy his lust.

Just as man is exploiting or ravishing the chastity of woman for his own pleasure in the same way man has been shown as digging the earth for personal gain. They are digging the earth so that they can let snake into people’s houses and after that they would go to these houses and extract money from them to remove snakes from their houses. So both woman and nature are helpless and are victims of man who exploit them to gain more and more profit. It is clear from the conversation of Saudamini and Mrinalini:

In the meantime a few people who had come to perform the tarpan had collected nearby and an old man was digging at the roots of an old Arjun tree.

“What is he digging for?” she asked.

“Snakes,” replied Sashi.

Sashi laughed, and repeated, “Yes, snakes. Then he will go around letting the snakes into people’s homes. Later, when the snakes are found, he himself will go as a snake charmer, find the reptiles and take money as reward his good deed!” (62)

In one of her visits around Vrindavan, Saudamini notices a man near the temple who is selling different things made out by killing different animals so that he can earn more money, “In a stall near the Singha Dwar (the Lion Door), Saudamini noticed a man selling medicines. He occupied a large space where he displayed strange things like tiger oil, crocodile skin, the bones and bile of various fish, and so on” (11-12). It shows that man is exploiting both women and nature for his own betterment. Using both woman and nature for his own personal profits and to satisfy and fulfill his own selfish motives and wishes. This is also indicative of violation of natural order as both woman and nature are the same.

According to Samakhya or Sankhya philosophy, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy founded by sage Kapila, there is Purusha and Prakriti. These are the two basic opposite and eternal principles that are chiefly responsible for human existence. Purusha is the soul, the self, pure consciousness, and the only source of consciousness. The word literally means “man.” Prakriti is that which is created. It is nature in all her aspects. Prakriti literally means “creatix,” the female creative energy. Purusha is universal, uncreated, inactive and unchanging whereas Prakriti is active, changing and earthly that creates. Prakriti also gets affected by the Purusha. According to this philosophy, the universe is created out of Prakriti. Vanadana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* writes:

All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti). Nature both animate and inanimate is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world (37).

In the novel, Goswami identifies women as not the part of nature but nature itself. She believes that that there is only one man (purush) in the city of Vrindavan i.e. Lord Krishna and the rest is nature (prakriti). Thus, she makes no distinction between woman and nature as she writes, "The one and only purush in Braj was the flute player Lord Sri Krishna. All else was prakriti" (109). On one hand, religion provides woman a respectable place in society and on the other hand same religion exploits woman. As woman is synonyms with nature, so mistreatment of woman is the violation of nature.

CONCLUSION

Through the novel *The Blue-necked God*, Goswami has shown serious concerns for woman and nature. Both woman and nature are victims at the hands of man who is exploiting both for his personal gains. The novel has voiced Goswami's protest against the exploitation of both, nature and woman. Through Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel, Goswami subverts the patriarchal domination of woman and refuses to be the victim. Throughout her stay in Vrindavan, Saudamini feels comfortable only amidst nature which brings out strong alliance between woman and nature. All the female characters like Saudamini, Sashiprova and the widows of Vrindavan are exploited by men in the name of religion and the same religion itself places women at the pedestal which is evident from the worshipping of Goddesses' in Hindu religion. Just as women procreates and nurtures similarly nature also procreates and nurtures. It can be inferred that it is woman only who can maintain ecological balance as she shares strong bonds with nature.

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