

A Study of Ecofeminism: Indira Goswami's *The Blue-necked God*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism, both an academic discourse and a socio-political movement, asserts that the exploitation of nature and women stems largely from patriarchal structures. Ecofeminist thinkers identify patriarchy and capitalism as central forces responsible for environmental degradation and the subjugation of women. As Greta Gaard observes, ecofeminism is grounded in the idea that the same ideological framework that legitimises oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and species also justifies the exploitation of nature. In *The Blue-necked God*, Indira Goswami highlights her concern regarding the suffering of both women and the natural environment in the sacred city of Vrindavan. The novel reveals a deep interconnection between ecological destruction and the marginalisation of radheshyamis—widows who survive by singing devotional songs in temples.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Environment, Widows, Exploitation

Introduction

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the interconnected oppression of women and the environment, attributing both to patriarchal dominance. It critiques the structures of patriarchy and capitalism for fostering ecological destruction and gender-based inequality. Women, particularly in marginalised contexts, are often the most severely affected by environmental degradation. The Earth is traditionally regarded as sacred, sustaining all forms of life. However, human greed has led to its systematic exploitation through deforestation, pollution, and ecological imbalance. Within patriarchal ideology, both women and nature are categorised as the “other,” subordinate to male authority and control.

The term *ecofeminism* was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, emphasising the relationship between gender-based oppression and environmental destruction. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner suggests that women are universally perceived as closer to nature due to their nurturing and reproductive roles, particularly in rural and indigenous communities. This perceived affinity forms a central theme in ecofeminist discourse. An ecofeminist analysis of *Blue-necked God* by Indra Goswami reveals the intertwined subjugation of women and

nature within a socio-religious framework. The novel foregrounds the suffering of marginalised female figures whose bodies and identities are regulated by patriarchal customs, much like the exploitation of the natural environment. Goswami symbolically aligns feminine endurance with ecological degradation, suggesting that both are subjected to cycles of control, ritualisation, and violence. The sacred landscape—particularly temple spaces and riverine settings—becomes a contested site where purity and pollution are imposed upon both women and nature, reinforcing hierarchical binaries that ecofeminism seeks to dismantle.

Furthermore, the narrative critiques ritual practices and orthodox beliefs that justify both gender oppression and environmental harm. The figure of the “blue-necked god,” evocative of Shiva, operates as a layered metaphor for absorption of poison—mirroring how women internalise suffering within rigid social orders. Goswami exposes how religious and cultural discourses normalise sacrifice, whether of female autonomy or ecological balance, thereby sustaining systems of domination. Through this lens, the novel calls for a reimagining of ethical relationships that transcend exploitative hierarchies, advocating a more integrated vision of coexistence between humans, gendered bodies, and the natural world.

In developing nations, women’s daily lives are closely tied to natural resources. Environmental degradation disproportionately impacts them, especially in tribal and rural areas where livelihoods depend on forests and ecosystems. Ecofeminism thus critiques the hierarchical worldview that privileges human dominance over nature and male authority over women.

Indira Goswami, a distinguished figure in Indian literature and recipient of the Jnanpith Award (2000), was a prolific writer, poet, and academic. Born in a Vaishnavite religious institution (sattrā) in Assam, she made significant contributions to Assamese literature. Her works consistently reflect her sensitivity toward marginalised communities and her commitment to social justice. “Yes, you are a Christian. But see the warmth of your body against my heart is the same ... as that of ... my beloved husband ... the same ... the old touch.” (175)

Goswami’s writings address themes of exploitation, injustice, and human suffering. As a humanist, she sought to inspire social transformation through literature. Her ecofeminist concerns are evident in works such as *Pages Stained with Blood*, which depicts violence during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, and *The Man from Chinnamasta*, which critiques ritual animal sacrifice.

Originally published in Assamese in 1976 and translated into English in 2012, *The Blue-necked God* reflects Goswami's deep concern for the plight of widows and environmental degradation in Vrindavan. The novel draws a parallel between the exploitation of nature and the suffering of *radheshyamis*. Through characters like Saudamini and Sashiprova, Goswami portrays the harsh realities faced by widows—social abandonment, poverty, and exploitation. Saudamini, a young widow, is ostracised by her orthodox family and forced into a life of repentance in Vrindavan. Similarly, Sashiprova is subjected to sexual exploitation under the guise of protection by a priest. "I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work ... I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl ... an independent person ... You are all hypocrites. You are like butchers." (71)

Indian society's hierarchical structure, shaped by caste, class, and gender, places widows in an especially vulnerable position. They are often blamed for their husbands' deaths and excluded from familial and social life, eventually being abandoned in religious cities. Goswami uses environmental imagery to reflect the condition of widows. The description of dry, lifeless trees mirrors the malnourished and neglected state of the *radheshyamis*. Just as forests are depleted through human negligence, widows suffer from societal indifference and exploitation.

The novel also depicts extreme forms of oppression: widows are forced into starvation, prostitution, and humiliation. Men exploit their vulnerability, treating them as commodities. Goswami's comparison of widows to animals being inspected by butchers underscores their dehumanisation. Historical invasions of Vrindavan by rulers like Mahmud of Ghazni and Aurangzeb symbolise the recurring theme of power-driven destruction—both of land and people. Expanding ecofeminist concerns, Goswami also highlights the suffering of animals. Inspired by thinkers like Carol Adams, she portrays animals as victims of the same oppressive structures. Overburdened bullocks, skinned snakes, and exploited wildlife reflect human cruelty driven by greed. Environmental degradation is further illustrated through pollution of the Yamuna River, unseasonal rains, and deforestation. These ecological disturbances parallel the suffering of widows, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all forms of exploitation.

Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes. (48)

The novel critiques the hypocrisy within religious institutions. Priests exploit widows sexually and economically while claiming moral authority. Even in death, widows are denied dignity, as their bodies are often discarded into the river instead of being properly cremated.

The symbolic assertion that Krishna is the only *purush* (male principle) and all else is *prakriti* (nature/feminine) reflects the hierarchical worldview that subordinates women, animals, and nature. Despite pervasive suffering, Goswami portrays nature as a source of healing and refuge. Saudamini and Sashiprova find moments of peace in natural surroundings, suggesting that nature retains its restorative power even amidst destruction.

Conclusion

Indira Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* is a profound ecofeminist text that exposes the intertwined oppression of women, animals, and the environment. The novel critiques patriarchal dominance and highlights the silent suffering of marginalised beings. Through her narrative, Goswami calls attention to the urgent need for social and ecological justice. Thus, ecofeminism becomes a critical tool in the novel to expose the nuances of patriarchal dominance and legitimise both gender oppression and ecological imbalance. The novel also exposes and, at the same time, proposes the ethical need to restore harmony between human beings and the natural world in the universe.

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