
Widowhood, Patriarchy and Resistance: Reading Gendered Violence in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's Fiction

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Abstract:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, the celebrated Assamese writer and Jnanpith awardee, employed literature as a critical medium to interrogate the pervasive realities of gendered violence and to envision women's struggle for equality. Her fiction, most notably *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *The Blue-Necked God*, move beyond mere documentation of suffering; they expose how patriarchal norms, religious dogma and social structures perpetuate both overt and subtle forms of oppression. By portraying a range of female experiences, from marginalized widows to resilient rural women, Goswami reveals the systemic denial of women's agency while simultaneously foregrounding acts of resistance. This article examines how her fiction writings position gendered violence as both a structuring force of social life and the central problem to be confronted in the pursuit of equality. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality, Foucauldian notions of power and postcolonial feminist critique, it argues that Goswami's narratives map patriarchal injury onto caste, religion, customary law and the state, while mobilizing voice, memory and testimony as tools of resistance.

Keywords: Gendered violence, widowhood, patriarchy, Northeast India, feminist narrative, resistance.

Introduction:

Gendered violence has long been one of the most pervasive realities shaping women's lives in India. It manifests not only in the form of physical aggression but also through a network of symbolic, institutional and ritual practices that normalize the subjugation of women. Literature, as both a mirror and critique of social life, has played a vital role in exposing these structures and in articulating women's struggles for dignity, voice and equality. Within the Indian literary landscape, Mamoni Raisom Goswami (Indira Goswami, 1942–2011) occupies a unique and indispensable place. A Jnanpith awardee and one of the most prominent voices from Assam, Goswami consistently used her fiction and

non-fiction to interrogate the layered violence inflicted on women by patriarchy, caste and religious orthodoxy.

Goswami's works are deeply rooted in the Assamese milieu but extend beyond regional boundaries to address pan-Indian and even universal questions of gender justice. Her novels *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, originally published in Assamese (*Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah*) in 1986 and translated into English in 2004 by the author herself and *The Blue-Necked God*, originally published in Assamese (*Nilakantha Braja*) in 1976 and translated by Gayatri Bhattachary into English in 2013, stand as landmark texts in this regard. The former examines how Assamese Brahminical society dehumanizes widows in the name of purity and tradition, while the latter shifts the lens to Vrindavan, a sacred town that becomes a graveyard of living women, where widows from across India are abandoned to a life of ritual servitude and invisibility. Together, these works highlight how widowhood is in practice a site of systematic deprivation, exclusion and gendered violence.

What distinguishes Goswami's writing is not only her documentation of suffering but her insistence on portraying women's interiority, resilience and subtle modes of resistance. Her widows, though silenced and marginalized, are not passive victims. Through inner monologues, fractured memories and acts of quiet defiance, they reclaim fragments of agency, challenging the oppressive systems that deny them humanity. By foregrounding these voices, Goswami disrupts the culture of silence that has historically accompanied women's oppression in Indian society.

This article examines Goswami's literary engagement with gendered violence as both a structuring force of social life and a problem that demands contestation in the quest for equality. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks- particularly intersectionality, Foucauldian notions of power and postcolonial feminist critique- the study explores how Goswami's narratives reveal the entanglement of patriarchy, caste, religion and the state in producing women's marginality. At the same time, it highlights how her characters negotiate spaces of resistance, thus offering a complex vision of female subjectivity.

By situating Goswami's works within the broader discourse of South Asian feminist literature, this paper argues that her contribution lies not only in exposing the mechanisms of oppression but also in insisting on the ethical and political necessity of acknowledging women's agency. In doing so, Goswami's fiction emerges as both testimony and intervention: testimony to the silenced lives of women subjected to systemic violence and intervention in the cultural imagination that must be transformed for genuine equality to emerge.

Objectives of the Study:

The present research sets out with the following objectives:

1. **To examine representations of gendered violence** in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's works, with a focus on *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *The Blue-Necked God*.

2. **To explore the lived realities of widowhood** as dramatized in Goswami's narratives.
3. **To analyze the negotiation of agency** by Goswami's female characters, tracing their movement from victimhood to subtle or overt resistance against oppressive structures.
4. **To situate Goswami's contribution within feminist literary discourse**, both in the Assamese context and within the broader framework of Indian literature.

Methodologies:

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology that combines close textual reading with critical theoretical frameworks. The primary approach involves detailed analysis of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *The Blue-Necked God*, paying particular attention to narrative strategies and characterization in order to uncover Goswami's representation of gendered violence and women's resistance. These texts are also read within their contextual-historical framework, situating Goswami's narratives against the socio-cultural background of Assamese society as well as the broader Indian realities of widowhood, patriarchy and caste-based oppression.

The Lived Experience of Widowhood:

In Mamoni Raisom Goswami's fictional world, widowhood emerges not as a private misfortune but as a social condition marked by ritualized humiliation, economic insecurity and emotional isolation. Goswami insists on portraying widowhood as a lived experience rather than an abstract cultural construct, showing how it permeates the body, psyche and community relations of women. By foregrounding the daily struggles of widows, her works illuminate the continuum of violence that women endure long after the death of their husbands.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, widowhood is inscribed into the very fabric of Assamese Brahminical society. The story revolves around three widows, Durga, Saru Gosainee and Giribala, each representing a different response to their oppressive circumstances. Durga embodies the traditional, submissive widow who adheres to the strict rituals and norms of her community, accepting her fate with silent resignation. She represents the vast majority of women who lack the courage or means to challenge the status quo. Saru Gosainee, in contrast, seeks to escape her loneliness and finds hope in a new relationship, only to be betrayed and exploited. Her character highlights the vulnerability of women who dare to seek personal happiness outside of societal constraints. Giribala, the youngest, is the most rebellious. She actively challenges the repressive norms, refusing to conform to the life of a widow. Her yearning for freedom explodes in moments of defiance. She cries out: "Am I not alive? Am I not flesh and blood? Must I die each day because my husband has gone?" (Goswami, p.76) Giribala's act of seeking protection from Mark Sahib, an outcast, is a bold rejection of the societal norms that have oppressed her, but it ultimately leads to her tragic end. Her ultimate act of defiance, a symbolic sacrifice in the form of suicide, is a potent statement against the 'graveyard' that widowhood had become for women. Giribala's character demonstrates Goswami's belief in the necessity of rebellion and resistance.

The novel exposes that all the widows are subjected to rigid codes of conduct that regulate every aspect of their lives: the mandatory putting on of white saris, the denial of jewellery or colour, the prohibition of remarriage and the policing of sexuality. Goswami captures their inner worlds with painful intimacy- loneliness, suppressed desires and a sense of social invisibility become recurring motifs. The metaphor of the “moth-eaten howdah” powerfully symbolizes the decay of a social system that sustains itself by consuming women’s vitality while offering no avenues for renewal. Here, widowhood is not only about loss but about the systematic stripping of identity and agency, rendering women socially dead even while biologically alive.

The Blue-Necked God expands the lens from the confines of Assamese orthodoxy to the broader Indian context of Vrindavan, often referred to as the “city of widows.” Goswami documents how women from across the subcontinent, abandoned by families and communities, are forced to migrate to Vrindavan, where their existence is reduced to chanting bhajans in ashrams in exchange for paltry sustenance. Widowhood here becomes an institutionalized form of exploitation, where religious devotion is commodified and women’s labour sustains the very temples that profit from their suffering. Goswami’s descriptive realism lays bare the indignities of crowded ashrams, meagre food rations and the psychological toll of collective anonymity. Yet, amidst despair, she highlights solidarity among widows, small acts of compassion, shared stories and collective endurance, that transform widowhood from a condition of silence to a space of communal resistance.

Feminist theorists have long argued that widowhood in South Asia is not merely a cultural category but a disciplinary regime that governs women’s bodies and subjectivities. Goswami’s novels vividly illustrate this, aligning with Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower, where institutions regulate life through minute control of bodily practices. For widows, the control is doubly violent: it deprives them of sexual autonomy and economic independence, while simultaneously glorifying their suffering as “pious.” The lived experience of widowhood, as Goswami renders it, is thus a paradox, stigmatized as impure yet sanctified as holy, silenced in public yet hyper-visible as ritual objects.

By shifting widowhood from a cultural stereotype to an experiential reality, Goswami destabilizes the discourse that naturalizes women’s subjugation. Her widows are not passive symbols but thinking, feeling subjects who confront violence in their everyday lives. Their narratives expose the contradictions of a society that denies them humanity while sanctifying their suffering, thereby demanding a radical rethinking of women’s place in tradition and religion. In doing so, Goswami transforms the lived experience of widowhood into a potent site of feminist critique and the quest for equality.

Patriarchy, Caste and the Dehumanization of Women:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s fiction consistently exposes how patriarchy and caste intersect to produce a social order that systematically dehumanizes women. In her works, patriarchy is not simply a matter of male domination but a deeply entrenched system that

legitimizes violence and control through religious sanction, caste hierarchies and cultural taboos. Caste, in turn, acts as the silent enforcer of these patriarchal codes, reinforcing boundaries of purity and pollution that render women's bodies the primary sites of regulation.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Goswami turns a critical eye to Assamese Brahminical society, where caste purity becomes an instrument of patriarchal violence. The widows in the novel are condemned to a life of ritual deprivation in the name of safeguarding caste honour. Their bodies are stripped of adornment and their desires denied legitimacy, not merely because they are women but because they are widows within an upper-caste framework that defines them as both dangerous and expendable. The very community that claims to uphold moral purity thrives on the psychological and social mutilation of these women, revealing how caste sustains patriarchy by dehumanizing its most vulnerable. Goswami's depiction of Giribala's suffocating existence dramatizes this nexus: she is reduced to a "living corpse," her individuality effaced in the name of religious propriety.

The Blue-Necked God expands this critique to the pan-Indian context of Vrindavan, where widows of various caste and class backgrounds are herded into ashrams. Here, caste acts both as a determinant of suffering and as a dissolving category: women are uprooted from their native contexts, but their marginalization is nonetheless justified through the logic of ritual pollution. The religious economy of Vrindavan thrives on this dehumanization, with widows treated as instruments of temple labour, chanting bhajans for survival while their humanity is eclipsed by their caste-marked identities. One widow voices in anguish: "We were not married, we became widows. Our lives have withered in Braja. Our voices sing only kirtan, but our hearts echo only with cries". Goswami shows that even in a space where women from different castes converge, the social logic of exclusion persists and widows remain commodities in a system that exploits both their gender and their caste-based vulnerability.

Through these narratives, Goswami aligns with the insights of intersectional feminism, which argues that systems of oppression cannot be analyzed in isolation. The violence inflicted on Goswami's widows is not simply patriarchal in nature; it is patriarchal violence fortified by caste boundaries and religious orthodoxy. The combined force of these structures reduces women to "non-beings," valued only in relation to the purity or pollution they signify. In this way, Goswami echoes Dalit feminist critiques of Brahminical patriarchy, highlighting how caste-based hierarchies amplify gendered suffering.

The dehumanization of women under this nexus is not only physical but existential. Denied dignity, voice and recognition, Goswami's widows embody the condition of social death- a state in which life continues biologically, but personhood is stripped away by custom and belief. By documenting these lives with empathetic detail, Goswami challenges readers to confront the brutality hidden beneath the veneer of tradition. Her fiction insists that any meaningful quest for equality must dismantle not only patriarchy in its overt forms but also the casteist logics that make such violence appear natural and inevitable.

From Victimhood to Agency:

One of the most compelling features of Mamoni Raisom Goswami's writing is her refusal to leave her female characters confined within the role of passive victims. While her novels unflinchingly portray the oppressive structures of patriarchy, caste and religious orthodoxy, they also stage moments where women reclaim fragments of agency, however fragile, within the suffocating contexts of their lives. These acts of self-assertion, ranging from small gestures of defiance to outright challenges to social norms, mark the transition from victimhood to agency that underpins Goswami's feminist vision.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, Giribala emerges as the central figure through whom Goswami dramatizes this shift. Initially, Giribala appears trapped within the oppressive codes of widowhood, condemned to a life of deprivation under the watchful eye of a patriarchal community determined to silence her. Yet, through her interior monologues, readers encounter a consciousness that refuses to fully submit. She questions the logic of customs that demand her erasure, wrestles with the suffocating weight of purity laws and reclaims her inner world as a space of freedom. Though she may not dismantle the external order, Giribala's refusal to internalize its legitimacy constitutes a powerful act of resistance. By granting her this inner voice, Goswami destabilizes the image of the widow as a silent victim and reframes her as a figure of moral courage and quiet rebellion.

The Blue-Necked God offers a parallel narrative in a broader, pan-Indian setting. The widows of Vrindavan are depicted as powerless, subjected to a religious economy that thrives on their labor and invisibility. However, Goswami does not end their story in abjection. Some of these women, even amidst dire conditions, assert the will to survive, share solidarity with one another and subtly subvert the structures that exploit them. For example, their collective singing of bhajans, though imposed, also becomes a space of communal bonding and mutual consolation, turning an act of ritualized exploitation into a quiet form of resilience. By humanizing their survival strategies, Goswami suggests that even within systemic oppression, women can fashion forms of agency that affirm life against dehumanization.

These transformations echo the feminist idea that agency need not always manifest in overt rebellion but can emerge in the form of resilience, memory, voice and solidarity. Goswami's women are not romanticized as triumphant revolutionaries; rather, they embody what Saba Mahmood calls the "paradox of agency"- the ability to navigate structures of power in ways that preserve dignity, selfhood and hope. In Giribala's refusal to be spiritually annihilated and in the Vrindavan widows' insistence on survival through collective bonds, Goswami shows how even the most silenced and marginalized women retain the capacity to speak, resist and assert humanity.

By foregrounding these shifts from victimhood to agency, Goswami not only challenges the stereotype of women as passive sufferers but also articulates a feminist ethics of survival. Her narratives insist that equality cannot be imagined only as a legal or structural reform but must also be understood as the recognition and amplification of women's inner voices, their capacity for endurance and their power to create meaning in the face of violence.

Conclusion:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's oeuvre stands as one of the most powerful testimonies in Indian literature to the lived realities of gendered violence and the enduring struggle for equality. Through her uncompromising depictions of widows, marginalized women and the silent victims of social orthodoxy, she unmasks the ways in which patriarchy, caste and religious dogma conspire to deny women dignity and autonomy. In novels like *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *The Blue-Necked God*, Goswami portrays not only the stark violence of widowhood but also the structural and symbolic mechanisms that sustain women's subjugation. Yet, her vision is never one of despair alone. By giving voice to women's inner conflicts, their subtle acts of defiance and their capacity for resilience, Goswami reframes her characters not merely as victims but as agents negotiating the terms of their survival and identity.

Her work ultimately demonstrates that the quest for equality is inseparable from a confrontation with the deep-rooted cultural practices that normalize women's oppression. Goswami's narratives challenge the culture of silence that surrounds gendered violence and insist on the necessity of recognizing women's voices, however muted, as central to social transformation. In this way, she not only contributes to Assamese and Indian feminist literature but also to global feminist thought, showing how literature can function as both witness and catalyst for change.

By weaving empathy with critique, Goswami leaves behind a legacy that continues to provoke, disturb and inspire. Her works demand that readers move beyond passive recognition of women's suffering to an active engagement with the structures that perpetuate it. In doing so, they keep alive the possibility of imagining a society where women's dignity is not contingent on patriarchal sanction, but an unquestioned foundation of human equality.

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