

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

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Abstract: Ecofeminism is an academic and socialist movement which believes that the exploitation of environment and women is done by men. Ecofeminists see patriarchy and capitalism as a common reason for the oppression of women, ecological destruction, and exploitation of nature. According to Greta Gaard, “ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1). In her novel *The Blue-necked God*, Indira Goswami shows her worries over the victimization of women and nature in the holy city of Brindaban. One can see the close relationship between the domination of nature and suffering of radheshyamias (widows in Brindaban who sing songs of Lord Krishna in the temple).

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecofeminist, Patriarchy, Environment, Widows.

Introduction: Ecofeminism is an academic and socialist movement which believes that the exploitation of environment and women is done by men. Ecofeminists see patriarchy and capitalism as a common reason for oppression of women, ecological destruction, and exploitation of nature. The most affected person due to the destruction of nature is a woman. The Earth is viewed as sacred because the fate of entire humanity depends on it. But in his greed, the man has become blind to the gifts of nature and destroys it. Deforestation, pollution, dumping of waste into rivers etc. are results of men greed. Men see women and environment as “other” category and think of himself as superior to them.

French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974. It is the interweaving of links between the exploitation of women on the basis of caste, class, gender, race and destruction of the nature. According to Sherry Ortner, an anthropologist, universally women are seen having more connection with nature than men. Their day to day lives revolve around it especially in rural areas. The one reason for seeing women and nature as one is their reproductive and nurturing ability. The bonding of women with nature is the theme of ecofeminism.

Lots of women in developing countries live very close to nature. A huge amount of their work is dependent on it, especially in tribal and rural areas. But the environmental destruction impacts them severely. Tribal people depend on forests for their livelihood and medicines. Deforestation affects this marginalised section of the society. Ecofeminists look at the domination of human over non-human world and women and how does it impact them. They believe that patriarchy is the root of all social injustice (gender, caste, class, racism) and exploitation of nature. According to Greta Gaard, “ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1). The ideology in the above lines is one section of the society believing in having power over the other, that is, hierarchical and patriarchal thinking. The binary of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in which ‘self’ always come at the top and

‘other’ at the bottom. Their needs become priority at the expense of marginalized. Men always see women as ‘other’ and feel that it is their right to subjugate them. With relation to them women are always considered as inferior, irrational, and emotional which perpetuates their exploitation. In the same way, nature is secondary to them and they destroy it for their personal gains.

As mentioned in Patric D. Murphy’s “Introduction” to *Literature and Ecofeminism*:

Ecofeminism developed as a movement led by women and with participation of men around the world taking actions to address gender-based issues and to conserve and preserve human and non-human habitats. These actions exposed the links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of natural environment. (1)

Winner of the highest literary award in India, the Jnanpith Award (2000), Indira Goswami is a popular name in Indian literature. She was a poet, a writer and a teacher. Born in a well off sattra (religious institution) in Assam, she has expanded the horizons of Assamese literature. She had won Sahitya Academy Award (1984) for her novel *A Saga of South Kamrup*. She had deep concern for those people who lived in the margins of the society. She was the sensitive person who had the ability to understand the sorrows of fellow human beings. She wrote about the injustice, exploitation, and oppression of marginalized people in her works.

Goswami was a humanist through and through and tried to bring social change through her works. She had put forward the connection between nature and woman in her writings. In the novel *Pages Stained with Blood* one can see her ecofeminist side. The setting of the novel is 1984 anti-sikh riots in Delhi. She shows men harming environment by setting trees, houses, and vehicles on fire and sexual exploitation of women, burning people. In *A Saga of South Kamrup* she shows the pathetic conditions of women in Hindu orthodox family in a sattra in Assam. She also depicts the inhuman treatment of elephants in the novel. Goswami even writes against the killing of animals in the name of religion in her work *The Man from Chinnamasta*.

Originally published in Assamese in 1976, *The Blue-necked God*, is translated into English by Gayatri Bhattacharya in 2012. In this novel Goswami shows her worry over the victimization of women and nature in the holy city of Brindaban. One can see the close relationship between the domination of nature and suffering of radheshyamias (widows in Brindaban who sing songs of Lord Krishna in the temple). The way she compares the widows of Brindaban with nature, one can see that they have become equivalent to one another. Through Saudamini, a young widow, Goswami shows the plights of radheshyamias. Saudamini has come with her parents to live in Brindaban after the death of her husband. Soon after his death, she has fallen in love with the Christian young man which is not acceptable by her orthodox Hindu parents. They bring her in the holy city so that she could help the poor and needy people and repent for the sin she has committed. Sashiprova too is a young widow living with a priest Alamgarhi. Along with these characters Goswami shows the pitiable, horrifying truth of lives of radheshyamias who have been abandoned by their families and oppressed by the pandas (priests).

India has a complex hierarchical structure. The status of a person depends upon his caste, class and gender. Within the same caste or gender there is hierarchy too. Being a woman in a patriarchal society is difficult but being a widow is sin. The widow woman is blamed for the death of her husband and she is not allowed to attend any functions of the family. She becomes an outcaste in her own family. It is strange that when a person requires the support of the family,

she is abandoned by them. As she becomes a burden on them, they send her to the religious places like Brindaban and Varanasi.

Oppression of women can be seen as violation of natural law. In this sense the nature and women become synonyms. When the writer describes the destruction of forests in and around Brindaban one can see the exploitation of radheshyamis too. "The branches and twigs of some of these [trees] had dried up and looked like thin, dry, fish bones"(Goswami *Blue-necked* 2). Due to malnutrition the radheshyamis has become thin and skinny. They are weak as they do not get single meal in a day. "These women were compelled to sing even if they were starving" (23). They live in "small and dark dilapidated rooms that looked more like pigeon holes than human habitations" (20). The dry tree branches signify the unhealthy life of widows in Brindaban. Dry trees also show the negligence of forests by humans.

Old widows spend their lives as living dead bodies; the young ones have to sell their bodies to avoid death due to starvation. The men exploit them physically and mentally. They take advantage of their situation. The young men took advantage of these unfortunate hungry widows "whose immediate problem was hunger because they had not eaten anything for days" (7). Goswami compares the young men with butchers and widows to the animals. "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" (7). The Braja has become so corrupt that there are young men roaming around who "are ready to pounce upon innocent and unwary victims" (95). The forest around Brindaban which earlier were lush green now are just dried up bushes and thorns. Goswami shows power hungry men and destruction of Braja by telling about various attacks on the city by rulers in the history. Emperors like Mahmud of Ghazni and Aurangzeb attacked the city as it was rich. They did so to show the world their dominance over other powerless rulers. "The signs of the appalling bloodshed and terror that Aurangzeb unleashed there four hundred years ago still seem to haunt the place." The nature indicates the pathetic existence of radheshyamis.

Some priests take advantage of poor conditions of young widows and ask them to live with them. They demand sexual favours from them in exchange of providing "protection" to these helpless widows from other men. Sashiprova had to live with priest Alamgarhi as his mistress in Biharimohan Kunj Temple. She told about her humiliation to Mrinalini. "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" (59). There are lots of widows like her who have to go through violation like this in their day to day lives. When Alamgarhi died, there were lots of young men pounding on her door who wanted to give her their "protection". In a patriarchal society a woman is seen as a property of man. Before marriage she has to depend on her father, then her husband and after he dies, either she has to depend on her son or her husband's family. Both nature and women bear the exploitation and oppression of men in silence. Unseasonal rain, drying of river Jamuna, decrease in the size of forest are all the examples of destruction of nature by men. "The water was starting to dry up and there was around mass of sand in the middle of the river"(26). In the dry river one can see the dead animals and fishes along with other gruesome things. Unseasonal rain marked the climate change. "Indeed the rain has suddenly burst upon us, completely out of season" (30). Carol Adams gives the new dimension to ecofeminism by including oppression of animals along with the women. Animals are as much part of Earth as human beings are. But men consider animals as 'other' and use them for their own favour. Goswami feels the pain of animals and show their pathetic treatment by humans. She shows how the bullock carts are burdened with the

weight that it becomes difficult for bullocks to pull the carts. The owners of bullocks become blind towards the pain of animals in their greed. Burdened with weight of people and their baggage “necks of poor bullocks almost touched the ground under sheer weight”(10). Outside the gate of a temple Saudamini sees a man selling medicine and various other things like crocodile skin, oil made from animals. One time she sees a snake charmer digging the roots of a tree searching for snakes. Another day she sees the man peeling the skin off of a snake as it is of rare colour and he might make some extra money. Goswami shows the injustice done to animals and women by men as they think they are superior and can do anything they want. Snake charmers skinning of snake can be seen as paandas violating the poor radheshyamis.

The greedy paandas would not let the dead radheshyamis die in peace. They check their dead bodies for some hidden money or gold. Instead of giving proper cremation to the dead body “they will take the body and dump it in Jamuna” (14). Radheshyamis save the money for their funeral rites and in order to save the money they starve themselves, even after so much trouble they do not get the proper cremation. The other radheshyamis watch this in silence like the river Jamuna. The dumping of the dead bodies by the paandas into river causes water pollution. Nature too becomes the victim of man.

“The one and only purush in Braja was the flute playing Lord Sri Krishna. All else was prakriti” (109). It means man (purush) is the only supreme power in the world, everything else (prakriti) is inferior to him. It includes women, animals, plants and other living beings. The novelist shows the close link between women and nature. In the old times it is believed that Radha, consort of Lord Krishna, used to plant flowers in Radha Bagh. Planting of trees is conservation of nature. Nature heals itself when there are no humans. In the absence of pilgrims “the enormous tortoise had fearlessly created under the shade of the bushes” (76). Saudamini too finds some peace and solace in the arms of nature only. “Saudamini sat down under a flowering tree near the temple. The spot was quiet and not so crowded, and the atmosphere was peaceful” (52). Sashiprova would like to play and swim in the river when she feels lonely to cheer herself up. The author compares Sashiprova with jasmine flower.

During the Jhulan festival, Braja is crowded with lots of pilgrims and people. “The tonga passengers looked around, and noticed the remains of fireworks and crackers all over the place. There were heaps of packets made from tomal leaf that were used for packing food” (10). These people left their garbage behind. The fire crackers cause air pollution and destroy the environment.

Goswami is an ecofeminist through and through. In this novel she shows the domination of nature and oppression of radheshyamis by those in power. In her work one can see the close connection between women and nature. During her stay in Brindaban, Saudamini has been comfortable and peaceful only in the arms of nature. Nature and women are the silent victims of the oppression of men. The writer depicts the unholy happenings in the holy city through her work. She also includes the inhuman treatment of animals by humans. For their personal interest, men destroy and damage the environment. Her concern for human and non-human world can be seen clearly.

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