



Patriarchy and Cultural Entrapment in the Fiction of Indira Goswami

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Abstract

Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami), one of India's most powerful feminist voices, portrays women caught between patriarchal authority and cultural rigidity. They are deeply entrenched in social expectations. Her fiction exposes the psychological suffering of widows, the structural oppression sustained through religious orthodoxies, and the cyclical nature of gendered violence that is normalized across generations. Through works such as *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *The Blue-Necked Braja*, *Pages Stained With Blood*, and *The Shadow of Kamakhya*, Goswami constructs a literary universe where women struggle against systems that simultaneously revere and suppress them. Her writings illuminate the duality of Indian culture—its spiritual richness coexisting with its capacity for silencing and regulating women's bodies and desires.

Against this backdrop, patriarchy emerges not merely as an external force but also as an internalized ideology. Cultural entrapment becomes a mechanism through which women accept suffering as destiny, viewing obedience as virtue and silence as protection. Using feminist literary criticism, thematic interpretation, and socio-cultural contextualization, this research paper examines how Goswami's characters negotiate trauma, resist oppressive norms, and articulate fragmented forms of agency. The paper argues that Goswami does not simply document suffering; she challenges readers to confront the ethical contradictions of ritual purity, widowhood, caste hierarchy, and religious sanctity. Ultimately, her narratives create a powerful discourse that interrogates tradition while advocating for psychological and social liberation.

1. Introduction

Patriarchy in India is both a social system and a cultural philosophy that permeates the everyday lives of women. It is reinforced through religious texts, ritual practices, family hierarchies, and community norms that dictate who women can be, what they may desire, and how they must behave. In many traditional societies—including the Brahmanical Assamese context that seeks expression in much of Indira Goswami’s writings—patriarchy becomes indistinguishable from culture itself. Its presence is subtle, pervasive, and often justified through the language of purity, sanctity, and duty.

Indira Goswami’s fiction offers an unflinching examination of these structures. Her protagonists—widows living under severe ritual restrictions, women trapped in temple precincts, victims of communal violence, and those marginalized by caste or economic precarity—serve as narrative conduits through which the author critiques the paradoxes of cultural pride and gender subjugation. The oppressive conditions depicted in her works are not anomalies but reflections of the systemic constraints imposed on women in various regions of India.

What distinguishes Goswami’s writing is her ability to merge personal experience with ethnographic observation. Having lived as a widow herself and having researched ritualistic practices in temple towns like Vrindavan and Kamakhya, her insights are grounded in both emotional authenticity and social realism. Her fiction thus becomes a hybrid of autobiography, cultural studies, and feminist dissent.

To contextualize the socio-cultural background, the following table summarizes the recurring patriarchal structures present in Assamese society during Goswami’s period:

Table 1. Key Patriarchal Structures Reflected in Goswami’s Fiction

Patriarchal Structure	Description
Widowhood Norms	Restrictions on dress, diet, mobility; ritual purity expectations
Religious Taboos	Temple restrictions, ritual roles denied to women
Economic Dependence	Limited access to property, income, or employment
Marriage as Control	Early marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage
Cultural Policing	Honor codes, gendered expectations, surveillance

This table sets the thematic foundation for understanding the cultural constraints depicted in her novels.

2. Literary Survey

The existing body of scholarship on Indira Goswami reflects her position as a transformative figure in Indian feminist literature. Academic discourse consistently acknowledges that her writings serve as both social documentation and cultural critique, revealing the contradictions inherent in religious and patriarchal institutions. Scholars such as Barua (2014) and Dutta (2017) contend that Goswami's fiction combines autobiographical elements with ethnographic sensitivity, allowing her to portray the embodied suffering of women with emotional depth and structural clarity.

A central theme across Goswami's literature is her engagement with widowhood; a condition historically associated with ritual deprivation, social ostracization, and symbolic death. Feminist scholars—particularly those studying upper-caste Hindu societies—have argued that widowhood functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control where women lose not only their marital identities but also their economic and social agency. Works such as *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* have been widely discussed for their unflinching representation of Brahmin widows in Assam and the violent expectations placed upon them in the name of purity, devotion, and cultural continuity.

Several researchers (Chakraborty, 2019; Sharma, 2020) note that Goswami's contribution lies in her ability to portray widowhood not as an isolated event in a woman's life but as part of a larger ritual order where religion, community reputation, and caste-based gender norms intersect. These studies highlight her unique narrative approach, which blends personal trauma with broader cultural observation, offering readers insight into the psychological landscapes of women trapped within oppressive systems.

Another significant strand in Goswami's works relates to her representation of temple economies, spiritual labour, and gendered religiosity. Scholars studying *The Blue-Necked Braja* and *The Shadow of Kamakhya* have explored how temple towns such as Vrindavan and Kamakhya operate as sites where women are at once sanctified and exploited. Here, women—especially widows and the economically vulnerable—are often bound to religious institutions through forms of invisible servitude, ritual obligations, and sacred prohibitions. Academic analyses (Sen, 2018; Wagh, 2021) argue that Goswami exposes these spaces as deeply political, challenging the idealization of religious settings as universally benevolent or spiritually liberatory.

Comparative feminist studies position Goswami alongside the writers like Mahasweta Devi, Bama, and Kamala Das. While these writers also critique patriarchy, scholars observe that Goswami distinguishes herself through her insistence on cultural entrapment—a term that encompasses both the external

constraints imposed by tradition and the internal acceptance of suffering as virtue. Unlike other feminist writers who frequently foreground rebellion and overt resistance, Goswami represents resistance as fragile, fragmented, and often constrained by cultural loyalty. Critics suggest that this approach makes her work particularly valuable in understanding South Asian women's negotiations with identity within deeply conservative contexts.

Moreover, studies drawing from intersectional feminist theory emphasize that Goswami's fiction navigates the complex interlinkages between gender, caste, class, widowhood, religious practice, and economic precarity. Caste-based patriarchy, in particular, receives attention in recent literary scholarship, which argues that Brahminical norms are central to the construction of female purity and pollution. Goswami's narratives thus become crucial sites for analyzing how cultural institutions regulate women's bodies, choices, and social mobility.

Recent research also examines the narrative techniques Goswami employs to depict trauma, desire, and rebellion. Scholars (Khan, 2022; Bhattacharjee, 2023) note her use of psychological realism, shifting focalization, and symbolic landscapes—particularly forests, temples, animals, and decaying architecture—to reinforce the oppressive weight of tradition. Her portrayal of animals (such as the tusker in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah*) has been interpreted as metaphoric of the slow decay of feudal-patriarchal societies.

3. The Fiction of Indira Goswami: Key Concerns

Collectively, her literature reflects a strong consensus: Goswami's fiction represents a powerful critique of patriarchal structures embedded within cultural and religious frameworks. Yet it also fills a gap in feminist literary studies by showing how cultural entrapment persists even in the absence of overt physical violence, operating instead through ritualized deprivation, internalized obedience, and generational conditioning. Her writings offer a rich field of inquiry for feminist scholars, sociologists, and cultural theorists seeking to understand how patriarchy sustains itself through seemingly sacred traditions.

Indira Goswami's portrayal of patriarchy is neither abstract nor theoretical; it is rooted in lived realities, embodied pain, and the socio-religious environment in which Assamese women negotiate their lives. Her narratives expose how patriarchal norms are internalized, ritualized, and legitimized through cultural and religious authority. Goswami does not merely depict patriarchal oppression—she reveals how it shapes identity, relationships, and psychological landscapes.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, the oppressive Brahmanical system restricts the life of widows through rigid codes of purity and pollution. The women of the Sattrā live under surveillance, deprived of physical comfort, emotional freedom, and the right to seek companionship. Through the protagonist Giribala, Goswami explores the silent torment of women who are “alive yet socially dead,” bound by rules they cannot question. Patriarchy appears as a generational inheritance in which even older widows enforce the very customs that once oppressed them.

In *Pages Stained With Blood*, Goswami shifts the lens from familial patriarchy to the political form—examining how violence against marginalized communities becomes a gendered experience. Women in the novel suffer both as victims of riot-induced trauma and as targets of sexualized aggression. The political chaos following the 1984 anti-Sikh riots is intertwined with intimate patriarchal violence, revealing that women’s bodies become symbolic sites upon which masculine power is asserted and negotiated.

Similarly, in *The Blue-Necked Braja*, the culture of temple towns, religious devotion, and widowhood intersects with exploitation. Widows who migrate to Vrindavan for refuge often face sexual predation, economic dependence, and spiritual manipulation. Goswami’s narrative disrupts the romanticized image of sacred spaces, showing how cultural sanctity can mask systemic violations.

Across her works, patriarchy appears in multiple forms—ritualistic, sexual, economic, political, and psychological. To illustrate these layers, the following table categorizes the major patriarchal patterns identified in Goswami’s fiction:

Table 2: Forms of Patriarchal Oppression in Goswami’s Fiction

Type of Patriarchal Control	Manifestation in Texts	Representative Works	Impact on Female Characters
Ritualistic/Brahmanical Control	Widowhood restrictions, purity rules, isolation	<i>The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker</i>	Loss of mobility, emotional deprivation, internalized guilt
Sexual Exploitation	Predatory behavior toward widows and	<i>The Blue-Necked Braja</i> , <i>Pages Stained With Blood</i>	Trauma, socio-economic

	marginalized women		vulnerability, loss of dignity
Economic Patriarchy	Dependence on male relatives, denial of property rights	<i>The Shadow of Kamakhya, The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker</i>	Disempowerment, forced compliance, generational poverty
Religious/Institutional Patriarchy	Temple hierarchies, spiritual manipulation, dominance of male priests	<i>The Blue-Necked Braja</i>	Exploitation masked as devotion, moral policing
Political Patriarchy	Gendered violence during riots, state failure to protect women	<i>Pages Stained With Blood</i>	Physical and psychological trauma, silencing
Social Surveillance	Community gossip, policing of female desire, condemnation of autonomy	Across Goswami's works	Fear, self-censorship, suppression of individuality

Indira Goswami's fiction does indeed present patriarchal oppression as a multifaceted force that operates on various levels of society—religious, social, economic, and historical. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complexity of patriarchal systems, which cannot be reduced to a single oppressive force but rather are interwoven into multiple aspects of women's lives. The emphasis on religious obligation, community expectations, and economic dependence highlights how these structures shape women's existence in ways that are often invisible, operating not through overt acts of violence but through more insidious means such as ritualistic practices, social norms, and economic subjugation.

What makes Goswami's critique particularly compelling is her focus on the *psychological realism* of these experiences. Her depiction of women's suffering does not just concern external oppression, but rather the internalization of these structures, which turn suffering into an accepted, almost inevitable,

part of their lives. This emotional depth captures the struggle not only against external forces but against the internalized beliefs that women adopt in their efforts to comply with patriarchal norms.

One of the unique aspects of Goswami's writing is the portrayal of resistance as *fragmented* and often *subtle*. Rather than having her protagonists engage in overt, dramatic acts of defiance, Goswami highlights how resistance can manifest in quiet, often personal ways. This approach aligns with the feminist idea that resistance is not always revolutionary or visible; instead, it can be embodied in personal acts that are resistant to the larger societal forces. For example, the act of remembering a forbidden love or offering refuge to another woman can be seen as subverting societal norms. These acts, though not grand in scale, serve to challenge the rigid social order, reflecting a deeper, more complex form of agency.

In this sense, Goswami's work is particularly powerful in revealing how oppression works not only through physical domination but through the continuous reinforcement of social, religious, and economic structures that shape women's lives. Her protagonists' refusal to fully accept these norms—through quiet resistance or by daring to question tradition—becomes a form of rebellion in itself, though it is rarely expressed in direct confrontation. This form of resistance becomes a symbol of *survival*, suggesting that even in environments steeped in oppression, women find ways to carve out moments of freedom, no matter how small or subtle.

4. Cultural Entrapment in Goswami’s Narrative World

Cultural entrapment refers to a condition in which women internalize societal norms to the extent that they become complicit in their own oppression. Goswami’s narratives reveal:

- **Caste and ritual-based confinement**
- **Gendered moral policing**
- **Exclusion from sacred spaces**
- **Emotional and psychological imprisonment**

In *The Blue-Necked Braja*, widows are trapped not just economically but spiritually. In *The Shadow of Kamakhya*, religious structures create closed systems where women’s agency is eroded.

Table 3. Dimensions of Cultural Entrapment in Goswami’s Fiction

Dimension	Explanation	Example from Text
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Ritual Entrapment	Women bound by purification rituals	Widows denied temple entry (<i>Howdah</i>)
Spatial Entrapment	Restricted movement within community	Braja widows confined to ashrams
Psychological Entrapment	Internalization of inferiority	Characters blaming themselves for misfortune
Economic Entrapment	Financial dependence reinforcing submission	Lack of income opportunities
Sexual Entrapment	Exploitation under the guise of devotion	Temple workers using widows' vulnerability

This table helps identify the layers of cultural confinement that Goswami exposes.

5. Resistance and Agency

While entrapment dominates her narratives, Goswami gives space for resistance:

- Giriba questions Brahminical authority.
- Braja seeks spiritual meaning outside imposed rituals.
- Women in *Pages Stained With Blood* reclaim memory as resistance.
- Characters challenge silence by narrating trauma.

Goswami does not portray women as passive victims; instead, she highlights a spectrum of subtle and overt resistance that undermines patriarchal rigidity.

6. Discussion

Goswami's fiction dismantles the ideological foundations of patriarchy by:

1. **Revealing the cruelty behind sacred traditions**
2. **Exposing how religion and culture work together to control women**
3. **Highlighting emotional and bodily suffering as consequences of cultural entrapment**
4. **Presenting women's struggles against centuries-old norms**

The tables inserted throughout the paper demonstrate how oppressive structures operate across narrative, cultural, and psychological domains.

7. Conclusion

Indira Goswami's fiction is a profound critique of patriarchal and cultural entrapment in Assamese society. Her narratives illuminate the struggles of widows, marginalized women, and victims of violence, while simultaneously advocating for human dignity. Through realistic portrayal and emotional depth, Goswami exposes the contradictions of sacred traditions and reclaims narrative space for women's suffering, resistance, and transformation.

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