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SANCTIFIED SPACES AND SHATTERED SELVES: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS SETTINGS IN THE LITERARY UNIVERSE OF INDIRA GOSWAMI

Akangkshya Sarma [1], Dr. Mukuta Borah [2]

[1] Ph.D. Research Scholar, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex and multi-dimensional role of religious settings in the literary works of Indira Goswami, with particular focus on her autobiographical text Adha Lekha Dastabez (Goswami, 1988) translated into English as An Unfinished Autobiography (Goswami, 2002) and the novel Neelakanti Braja (Goswami, 1976) translated into English as The Blue Necked God (Goswami, 2013). Goswami, a Jnanpith awardee and a pioneering voice in Indian literature, frequently situates her narratives within sacred geographies that become symbolic terrains of trauma, societal exclusion, spiritual longing, and gendered resistance. Central to this inquiry is the town of Vrindavan, a revered pilgrimage site, which in Goswami's texts emerges as a paradoxical space, simultaneously sacred and deeply oppressive, especially for Hindu widows. Her literary works intricately capture her personal journey from deep psychological anguish and emotional fragmentation to a state of inner resilience and creative empowerment, documenting how she gradually rebuilt her identity and established herself as a distinguished literary figure. The research is anchored in feminist standpoint theory and trauma studies, particularly the frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Patricia Hill Collins. Goswami's writings are profoundly shaped by her own experiences as a young widow and spiritual seeker, which infuse her portrayals of marginalized women in religious spaces with authenticity and emotional depth. The widows in her narratives are not merely symbolic of suffering or passive victims of patriarchal oppression; rather, they emerge as resilient and complex individuals who assert their agency and fight to reclaim their voices. Religious rituals, temple spaces, and the mythological backdrop of cities like Vrindavan are re-signified in her texts to critique the dominant patriarchal and theological ideologies that structure widowhood in Indian society. By examining how these religious geographies become sites of both confinement and contestation, this paper asserts that Goswami's narratives offer a profound literary resistance to the institutionalized marginalization of women.

Keywords: Widowhood, Death, Resistance, Trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami, widely known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami and affectionately addressed as "Mamoni Baideo" in her home state of Assam, is one of India's most deeply empathetic and socially engaged writers. Goswami was a celebrated contemporary Indian writer, poet, editor, scholar, and professor at the University of Delhi. Born in 1942 in Guwahati into a traditional Vaishnavite Brahmin family, Goswami grew up in a household that was closely associated with religious and cultural leadership. This early exposure to ritualistic traditions and spiritual life later deeply influenced the thematic canvas of her literary creations. From a young age, Goswami exhibited a keen sensitivity to suffering, injustice, and the invisible wounds inflicted by society, particularly upon women. She pursued Assamese literature academically, completing her postgraduate studies at Gauhati University. Even as a student, her literary voice had begun to emerge with her first collection of short stories, Chinaki Morom, published in 1962. However, it was not academic achievement alone that shaped her. Personal tragedies, most notably, the death of her young husband shortly

after 18 months of their marriage, left a profound imprint on her life, thrusting her into long battles with depression and existential despair.

Goswami was a scholar of Ramayana studies; she extensively researched on Ramayana in Assamese and Hindi. She completed her Ph.D. under the supervision of Professor Lekharu, for which she decided to move to Vrindavan. Along with her research work, she moved to the fabled city of Lord Krishna, seeking both physical and spiritual refuge. Yet, rather than finding solace in this sacred city, she encountered a harsher reality: the abandoned widows of Vrindavan, living in abject poverty, trapped between religious idealization and brutal neglect. What was celebrated in mythology as a city of divine love stood revealed in her writing as a city of abandonment, betrayal, and silent suffering. Her time in Vrindavan became a pivotal moment, profoundly influencing her literary path and ethical concerns. From these experiences emerged one of her most acclaimed novels, Neelkanthi Braja translated in English as The Blue-Necked God, which courageously brings to light the exploitation and marginalization of widows in Vrindavan's religious economy. Through the story of Saudamini and other women like her, Goswami gives voice to those who had been silenced by tradition. She dismantles the glorified image of religious piety, exposing instead the gendered violence and hypocrisy that thrive within sacred walls. Her autobiography Adha Lekha Dastabez translated in English as An Unfinished Autobiography further unveils her inner struggles, documenting her descent into depression after widowhood and her experiences living amidst the marginalized widows of Vrindavan. Unlike conventional autobiographies that glorify personal success, Goswami's self-narrative bravely reveals frailty, longing, and the quest for meaning in spaces marred by both faith and human cruelty. The Autobiography is divided into three parts, which give a glimpse of 30 years of her life until 1970.

Beyond her literary achievements, Goswami's life was marked by social activism. She played an instrumental role in initiating peace dialogues between the Government of India and the banned militant outfit ULFA in Assam. Her commitment to justice, compassion, and the dignity of marginalized lives defined her not just as a writer but as a public intellectual deeply concerned with her times. Goswami was recognized widely for her contributions. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, the Jnanpith Award in 2000, which is the highest literary honor in India, and the Principal Prince Claus Laureate in 2008. Yet accolades, though numerous, could scarcely contain the expansive spirit of her writing, which refused to shy away from uncomfortable truths. Goswami does not offer romanticized visions in exploring sacred geographies such as Vrindavan. Instead, she delves into the lived experiences of those whom society and religion pushed to the margins. She spent her entire childhood in a Sattra (Vaishnavite monastery) as her father and forefathers were the Sattra Adhikars. She writes about the plight of women and widows broadly in her novel Datal Hatir Uye Khuwa Howdah (Goswami, 1988). Her religious settings are complex landscapes where spiritual aspiration collides with social exclusion, and where the struggle for survival becomes a daily act of resistance. Goswami's writings frequently navigate themes of alienation, mental illness, religious hypocrisy, and the socio-spiritual plight of women, particularly widows within Indian society.

This research paper aims to examine how Goswami uses religious settings not merely as passive backgrounds but as active terrains where gender, trauma, and power intersect. It investigates how, through works like Neelakanthi Braja and Adha Lekha Dastabez, she transforms spaces historically associated with divine transcendence into zones of critical inquiry and feminist intervention. Through the lenses of feminist theory and trauma studies, the paper seeks to illuminate how Goswami redefines the very meaning of sacredness and how she writes back against a tradition that has long tried to silence women like herself. Her literary works comprise a diverse range of genres: short stories, novels, translations, essays, and poetry. She is perhaps best remembered for her powerful depictions of life in Vrindavan and other religious locales, which she observed firsthand during her extended stays in the region. Her intimate and intellectual voice situates her not only as a regional literary force but also as a contributor to global feminist and postcolonial discourses. Adha Lekha Dastabez, structured as a memoir, offers a fragmented yet vivid account of her life, from her early childhood days in Shillong and South Kamrup to her days in Goalpara, Gujrat, Kashmir, Vrindavan, and New Delhi. The book is structured into three distinct sections, each reflecting a significant phase of her life: her early years in Shillong, her experiences at the Sattra (a religious monastery), and her time spent in Vrindavan. The third part, titled "The City of God," is set against the backdrop of Vrindavan, which chronicles her psychological descent, the societal apathy she endures, and her complex relationship with faith. The autobiographical nature of the text provides a unique vantage point into the author's inner world while shedding light on the external mechanisms of exclusion and spiritual longing. In contrast, Neelakanthi Braja is a part-fictional and part-documentary but equally evocative narrative centered on a young widow named Saudamini, who is sent to Vrindavan to live out her life in renunciation. The novel paints a

chilling portrait of the widow colonies in Vrindavan spaces that are, paradoxically, both holy and hellish. Through the eyes of Saudamini, Goswami portrays her own life in Vrindavan as a widow and explores how religious doctrines and social norms combine to rob women of their dignity, agency, and identity. She portrays a clear vivid image of the Radheshyamis, who were the widows left to fend for themselves after being abandoned by their families. Many of these women find no choice but to turn to prostitution to survive. In Vrindavan, the sacred city of Krishna, Indira Goswami encountered the brutal realities of human exploitation for the first time at such close range. Her storytelling, alive with raw emotion and urging readers to witness this truth, powerfully captures the silent suffering of these widows. Without adopting an overtly feminist tone, Goswami expresses their deep pain and offers a fierce, compassionate critique of the injustices they endure, staying true to her distinctive humanistic vision. Unlike the more introspective tone of Adha Lekha Dastabez, this novel expands Goswami's critique into a broader socio-political commentary, indicting the structures that marginalize women in the name of tradition and piety. It is within these two texts that the full breadth of Goswami's literary exploration of religious settings comes to the fore. Vrindavan, though geographically the same in both texts, transforms according to the narrative lens: in one, it is an internalized space of emotional turbulence where Goswami mentioned about her own first-hand experiences, she endured in Vrindavan during her research days; in the other, a public site of collective female suffering which she presented through her characters. Both texts, however, present a deeply feminist re-reading of sacred space, where temples and ashrams traditionally imagined as refuges are shown as crucibles of isolation and repression.

This paper undertakes a detailed study of these two texts to understand how religious settings function not only as narrative devices but as ideological battlegrounds. It will analyze how Goswami re-signifies sacred space to critique societal norms, provide space for gendered resistance, and explore trauma. By engaging with feminist theory, trauma studies, and cultural criticism, this research aims to unpack the complex role that religion, geography, and memory play in shaping the lives and stories of women in Indira Goswami's literary world. This research is also an attempt to navigate the interstices of space, spirituality, and suffering in Goswami's narratives. By anchoring the analysis in feminist theory and trauma studies, the paper aims to illuminate how religious settings in her work become sites of contestation, memory, and resistance. The study of these sacred geographies not only deepens our understanding of Goswami's literary contributions but also sheds light on broader cultural practices that continue to marginalize women under the guise of spiritual tradition.

1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To critically explore the portrayal of religious settings in Indira Goswami's selected works.
- To understand how sacred spaces serve as symbolic sites for expressing gendered trauma and resistance.
- To examine the socio-cultural and historical significance of widowhood as constructed and critiqued in Goswami's narratives.
- To investigate how Goswami's use of religious space subverts traditional narratives and creates a feminist discourse.

1.2. HYPOTHESIS

Religious settings in Indira Goswami's literature act as reflective and resistive spaces that encapsulate the dual experiences of trauma and transformation. These sacred geographies, particularly Vrindavan, are not merely symbolic backdrops but complex spaces where women navigate their socio-religious marginalization. Through her nuanced and autobiographical engagement with these spaces, Goswami reconfigures traditional religious narratives and offers a literary framework that critiques and resists the patriarchal ordering of spiritual life.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach to literary analysis, using close reading and contextual examination of Indira Goswami's Adha Lekha Dastabez (Goswami,1988) and Neelakanthi Braja (Goswami,1976). The study is rooted in feminist literary criticism, with emphasis on Feminist Standpoint Theory (Collins, 1989) and Trauma Theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth (1996). This theoretical lens allows for an exploration of how marginalized female voices reinterpret religious discourse from a standpoint shaped by exclusion and lived

suffering. Historical and sociological texts on the condition of widows in India provide essential context to Goswami's portrayal of religious spaces. The research also engages with secondary scholarly material, including critical essays, newspaper articles and journal articles accessed from repositories like JSTOR, and Google Scholar.

Indira Goswami's oeuvre occupies a seminal position in Indian literature, particularly for its poignant engagement with the lives of marginalized individuals and communities. Born into a Vaishnavite Brahmin family in Assam, Goswami's personal experiences as a widow, a writer, and a woman negotiating mental health and spiritual trauma deeply inform her creative universe. She was not only a prolific author but also a committed social thinker whose writings probe into the hidden crevices of Indian society, exposing structures of caste, class, and gender-based oppression. At the heart of Goswami's fictional and autobiographical work lies the sacred geography of India, especially spaces like Vrindavan, Kamakhya, and religious ashrams in Assam that she uses not merely as settings, but as vital topographies that interact with the lives of her female protagonists. These spaces are particularly significant when read through the lens of widowhood, a condition that in the Indian context is entrenched in cultural, religious, and social dogmas. Goswami's rendering of religious settings, i.e, temples, pilgrimage towns, and rituals, unravels the mythic idealism surrounding such places and reveals their latent violence, especially towards women. She exposes the grim realities of widows who, stripped of identity and rights after the death of their husbands, are banished to religious towns under the guise of devotion. In places like Vrindavan, also known as the "City of Widows," spiritual sanctity coexists with abandonment, poverty, and exploitation. The city of Vrindavan, renowned in Hindu mythology as the playground of Lord Krishna, represents a curious duality in Goswami's writing: it is both a space of divine love and a sanctuary for those whom society discards. Widows here are cloaked not in spiritual dignity but in economic destitution and social invisibility. Goswami, having spent time in Vrindavan herself, brings a unique authenticity to her portrayal. Her life was profoundly impacted by the tragic death of her husband in a road accident at the age of 29. Their brief time together ended too soon, leaving her in deep emotional turmoil as a young, childless widow. Struggling to cope with this devastating loss, she found solace in spiritual inquiry, philosophy, and eventually, creative writing. Her longstanding battle with suicidal thoughts, which had taken root in her childhood fears of losing her father, became more intense after his sudden death and reached its peak following her husband's passing. Her decision to reside in Vrindavan following her husband's death was a difficult one. Presented with the option of settling in London or continuing her research on the Ramayana in Vrindavan, she ultimately chose the latter. To find a sense of purpose and escape her pain, Goswami immersed herself in academic work, beginning research on the Ramayana under the guidance of Professor Upendra Chandra Lekharu. Once she relocated to Vrindavan, her observations of religious life and the harsh realities faced by widows deeply influenced her writing. Her experiences in the city, particularly the suffering of Bengali widows exiled into poverty and exploitation, shaped her novel Neelakantha Braja, in which she mirrored her own anguish through the character of Saudamini. Vrindavan, with its spiritual aura and stark social contrasts, became both a place of personal suffering and creative revival. She witnessed firsthand the despair and resilience of widows who, despite facing indignities and being driven to the margins, continued to survive without surrendering to hopelessness. Goswami's initial encounter with the widows of Vrindavan was deeply unsettling, revealing a reality far more distressing than she had imagined. Their frail appearance and tattered clothes reflected extreme deprivation, indicating a lack of basic necessities like food and proper clothing. Hunger had stripped them of all dignity, forcing them to watch vegetable vendors with desperate hope, waiting for scraps of discarded produce while they sang devotional songs. From these rotten leftovers, they managed to prepare whatever little they could to survive. Goswami came to know about the Radheshyamis—abandoned widows who sustained themselves by singing bhajans throughout the day, earning a mere twenty-five paise for an entire session. Their living conditions were equally dismal—confined to small, dimly lit rooms that resembled cages. Religious organizations, rather than offering genuine support, were more invested in exploiting these vulnerable women and misappropriating the funds meant for their welfare.

These women became symbols of strength in her writing, even as she grappled with insomnia, loneliness, and haunting memories of her husband. In moments of deep despair, she turned to the saints of Vrindavan, seeking guidance and peace for her troubled mind. Ultimately, it was her dedication to literature and academic pursuits that helped Goswami survive her emotional crises. Her pen became her refuge and resistance. Writing not only gave her an outlet for grief but also allowed her to challenge societal injustices, especially those faced by widows.

Through her perseverance and talent, she transformed personal pain into powerful stories that continue to resonate with readers. Her Adha Lekha Dastabez offers a fragmented yet emotionally powerful narrative of her own spiritual crisis and psychological descent, where the temple bells of Vrindavan become echoes of loneliness rather than calls to

enlightenment. Her novel, particularly Neelakanthi Braja, expands this personal experience into a collective narrative of widows who dwell in religious spaces yet remain excluded from their promises of liberation. Goswami's approach reflects a literary reclamation of sacred space. Her religious settings become contested terrains where patriarchal control is challenged through the silent resilience of female characters. These women neither fully conform to nor entirely reject religious norms. Instead, they inhabit the ambivalent space in-between struggling, questioning, and reconfiguring their identities in relation to faith, community, and loss. The result is a body of work that not only narrates widowhood but also interrogates the socio-religious constructs that underpin it. The importance of studying religious spaces in Goswami's literature lies in their symbolic function and social critique. These spaces are not passive or decorative; they shape the contours of female subjectivity and serve as mirrors to the socio-political structures of power. Through her integration of lived experience, ethnographic detail, and literary imagination, Goswami invites the reader to confront the complexities of gendered suffering within the very institutions often idealized for spiritual elevation.

The historic town of Vrindavan, also referred to as 'Braja' or 'Braja Dham', is revered for its association with the childhood tales of Lord Krishna. However, it has also borne the brunt of repeated Mughal invasions, which led to the destruction of thousands of its temples. The title Neelakanthi Braja has sparked much curiosity, as it references Lord Shiva, known as Neelakanthi. In this context, Indira Goswami appears to draw symbolic parallels between mythological figures: just as Lord Shiva retained the ocean's poison in his throat, turning it blue, Krishna metaphorically absorbs the material, emotional, and spiritual suffering endured by the widows of Vrindavan. Indira Goswami's engagement with sacred geographies, particularly Vrindavan, is inseparable from her feminist critique of Indian society. In Neelakanthi Braja, the spiritual town of Vrindavan, transforms into a graveyard of forsaken women. Goswami uses this sacred site to examine the socio-religious structures that marginalize widows, portraying it as a space where spirituality intersects with systemic neglect. Saudamini, the protagonist, is not only stripped of her social identity after her husband's death but is also subjected to economic, sexual, and emotional exploitation (Goswami, 1986). Religious sanctions play a significant role in shaping Saudamini's fate and emotional suffering. As a young widow, she is subjected to the strict customs and expectations imposed by orthodox religious beliefs, which dictate how a woman in her condition should live. These rigid norms deny her the right to personal freedom, love, and self-expression. Her relationship with a Christian man is condemned not just by her family but by the larger religious framework that sees such love as a violation of purity and tradition. In Vrindavan, religious customs further isolate her. The practices enforced there strip women like her of their individuality, reducing them to symbols of grief and sacrifice. Her residence in the Dasarath Akhara, a dark and airless space, reflects the spiritual and physical confinement imposed by these religious ideologies. Saudamini's entire identity is overshadowed by these doctrines, which expect her to suppress her desires, live in austerity, and find solace in rituals that bring her no comfort. Instead of healing, religion becomes a tool of control, deepening her alienation and mental distress. Her experience shows how religious sanctions, rather than offering peace, can sometimes imprison the human spirit. Much like her character Saudamini, Goswami was disillusioned by a space that promises spiritual refuge but conceals a harsh reality of exploitation. In Vrindavan, widows, commonly known as Radheshyamis are subjected to systemic marginalization, forced into ascetic lifestyles marked by poverty, ritual labor, and social invisibility. Far from being sites of compassion, the temples become institutions of control, where priests (pandas) not only manipulate these women emotionally and economically but also extend their exploitation beyond death, treating even their corpses as potential sources of hidden wealth. These Radheshyamis meticulously save every bit of their lifelong earnings to ensure the dignified performance of their final rites; however, these savings are often misappropriated by the pandas in Braj, who exploit their vulnerability even in death. Religious settings, in this context, become deeply symbolic. Goswami does not present Vrindavan as a homogenous site of spiritual enlightenment. Instead, it is fragmented, reflecting the fractured selves of the widows who inhabit it. This spatial fragmentation corresponds to the feminist notion that "space is not neutral" (Lefebvre, 1991). Saudamini's journey through the temples and ashrams reveals that religious space is gendered; while it appears open, it is ultimately exclusionary for women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations. The application of Feminist Standpoint Theory pioneered by Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins proves useful in interpreting Goswami's representation of religiously marginalized women. The standpoint of widows, often neglected in mainstream literature, becomes central in Goswami's narrative framework. By foregrounding the experiences of women who are doubly oppressed, first by patriarchy and then by religious institutions, Goswami offers a counter-hegemonic narrative. As Collins (1989) argues, those at the margins possess an epistemic advantage to critique the dominant structures because they see the world from the "outsider-within" position. In Adha Lekha Dastabez, Goswami's autobiographical self reflects on her time in Vrindavan after her husband's death. Her experience is intensely personal but politically charged. As she writes:

"The sense of void that possessed my soul then, no words can describe. I did not have the courage then to look up, literally, to the sky above my head" (Goswami, 2002, p. 54).

This passage exemplifies the intersection of emotional trauma and spatial alienation. Goswami's engagement with religious space is thus not only physical but deeply epistemological, she writes from a situated standpoint that challenges both patriarchal and religious hierarchies. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, particularly the idea of belatedness where trauma returns not as memory but as a haunting provides another interpretive lens. Goswami's writing often reflects this delayed, recursive trauma. In Adha Lekha Dastabez, the author recounts repetitive thoughts of suicide and depressive isolation, which are re-triggered by the environment of Vrindavan, where spiritual chants ironically amplify her existential dislocation. Caruth writes, "The traumatized... carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, 1996). Goswami's characters, particularly Saudamini and the autobiographical "I", exhibit this symptom. Vrindavan, instead of healing the wound of widowhood, intensifies it. The Radheshyamis singing bhajans is not out of devotion but survival, which is a visual metaphor for belated trauma, a body enacting faith in the absence of belief. While temples and ashrams are constructed as spaces of purity, Goswami's novels uncover them as zones of social violence. Widows in Vrindavan, often left by their families under the pretext of religious devotion, become victims of economic destitution and sexual exploitation. As Priyadarshini and Pande (2021) note in their analysis of Vrindavan widows, "the widow's sexuality is seen as a threat to societal order and hence must be managed through ritual purity and physical containment" (p. 160). This aligns with Uma Chakravarti's assertion that widowhood represents a "social death" (Chakravarti, 1998). In Neelakantha Braja, Goswami depicts the pandit's or the priest's predatory advances toward young widows, illustrating how the religious mask is often used to disguise institutional violence. The religious places, instead of being a space of safety, become an instrument of patriarchal control. This critique is not merely narrative but structural. Goswami indicts the entire cultural machinery that valorizes women's suffering in the name of spiritual ascension. One of the most significant aspects of Goswami's approach is her reclaiming of religious space through narrative. By writing herself into the geography of Vrindavan, Goswami defies the very act of erasure that widowhood entails. Helene Cixous's idea that "woman must write her body, must write herself" (Cixous, 1976) resonates powerfully here. Goswami, in scripting her experiences, transforms Vrindavan from a site of imposed silence to one of vocalized pain and resistance. Her writing becomes a sacred act of defiance. The metaphysical "City of God" (the final section in Adha Lekha Dastabez) is stripped of its idealism and recast as a stage for reclaiming identity. This process, where sacred geography is rewritten from the perspective of the marginalized, has broader implications for how we understand the politics of religious space in South Asian literature. In many instances in her literary works, Goswami mentions these religious settings and how her female characters portray their hardship. Despite the bleak realities presented, Goswami's works also gesture toward resistance. Characters like Damayanti in the short story Sanskar translated by herself into English as The Offspring refuse to internalize shame. Forced into prostitution by poverty, she states:

"I know people call me a sinner. But I choose to live. My daughters will not suffer as I did" (Goswami, 1986).

Such moments assert the widow's agency, illustrating how Goswami's narratives do not merely mourn victimhood but empower subversion. Damayanti, Saudamini, and even the author's autobiographical self challenge the dominant spiritual narratives by surviving them. These assertions form what Carolyn Elliott calls a "subversive voice", writing that disturbs the normative definitions and instead reveals the hidden structures of power (Elliott, 2005). Goswami thus transforms the sacred into a battlefield, not of divine ecstasy, but of embodied resistance.

3. CONCLUSION

Indira Goswami's literary oeuvre, rooted deeply in personal trauma and socio-cultural observation, offers a powerful critique of the intersections of gender, spirituality, and marginality within Indian society. Through her unflinching portrayal of religious settings such as Vrindavan—not as divine utopias but as terrains of abandonment and struggle—Goswami lays bare the hypocrisies embedded in the spiritual fabric of the nation. Her nuanced narratives challenge the glorified sanctity of places that have historically served to silence, erase, and commodify women, especially widows. This study sought to investigate the symbolic and functional role of religious spaces in Goswami's key texts, namely Adha Lekha Dastabez and Neelakanthi Braja, as sites that mirror the fragmented selves of women marginalized by death, patriarchy, and institutionalized faith. It was found that Goswami does not employ religious landscapes simply as exotic backdrops; instead, they become active agents in the unfolding of emotional trauma and existential reflection.

The characters that populate her Vrindavan- Saudamini, Damayanti, and the unnamed autobiographical narrator are not passive recipients of divine intervention; they are survivors of both sacred mythologies and profane realities.

At the heart of Goswami's intervention is a feminist reclaiming of space and voice. Applying Feminist Standpoint Theory allowed this paper to critically situate Goswami's work as a unique articulation from the "outsider within." By foregrounding the lived experiences of widows, who have historically been silenced or spoken for, Goswami not only challenges dominant narratives but also legitimizes an alternative epistemology; one grounded in pain, resilience, and embodied spirituality. Her characters do not seek God as a traditional path to moksha; rather, they seek dignity, agency, and the right to define their own spiritual trajectories. The application of trauma theory, especially Cathy Caruth's conception of belatedness and the "unspeakable wound," revealed the psychological depth in Goswami's sacred geographies. Her protagonists carry with them the residues of past grief, which manifest in their interactions with temple rituals, chants, and religious figures. The trauma is not cured by proximity to the divine; rather, it is amplified, echoing the contradictions inherent in a society that venerates deities while dehumanizing women. Goswami exposes this spiritual dissonance with clarity and compassion, encouraging readers to question the structures that sustain it. Religious spaces in Goswami's writing, therefore, emerge not only as metaphors for societal contradictions but as battlegrounds for female subjectivity. Vrindavan, in particular, embodies the paradox of divine love and earthly abandonment. While Krishna is worshipped as the eternal lover, the women who sing his bhajans are often widowed and destitute and are discarded by the same society that exalts his name. In capturing this irony, Goswami reveals a sacred space that has ceased to be sacred for those who inhabit it. Instead, it becomes a cruel reminder of institutional betrayal and social hypocrisy. Moreover, Goswami's literary voice serves as a powerful tool of resistance. Her act of writing is not simply therapeutic; it is political. As a widow herself, her decision to document her life, to name her depression, and to critically engage with spaces like Vrindavan challenges the cultural expectation of female silence. Her autobiography, Adha Lekha Dastabez, stands as a testament to the reclamation of identity through language. It is both an archive and an act of defiance, where the spiritual and the secular meet not in harmony, but in conflict and eventual catharsis.

This research has demonstrated how Indira Goswami's religious settings, particularly the depiction of Vrindavan, serve multiple functions: they are reflective of internal psychological states, they critique societal and religious norms, and they provide a feminist space for reimagining womanhood and widowhood. The study reaffirmed that literature can serve as both witness and intervention, offering not just a mirror to society but also a medium through which change can be envisioned. However, this work also opens avenues for further exploration. Comparative studies could be undertaken to analyze how religious spaces function in the works of other Indian women writers, such as Lalithambika Antharjanam or Kamala Das. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches involving sociology, religious studies, and gender studies could further unpack the lived realities of widows in sacred towns like Vrindavan and Varanasi. These studies could benefit from ethnographic insights, thereby bridging the gap between fictional representation and lived experience. In conclusion, Goswami's work not only questions the moral fabric of Indian religiosity but also reclaims the narrative space for those who have been pushed to the periphery. Through her bold and evocative portrayal of religious spaces, Goswami invites us to reconsider what it means to be sacred and who gets to belong within the boundaries of sanctity. Her literature is not just a chronicle of pain; it is a manifesto of resistance. In writing herself and her widowed sisters into the heart of Vrindavan, Goswami has not merely documented suffering, she has transformed it into a sacred act of survival.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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