



Exploring Female Subjectivity in Indira Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* through Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Anjali Kadian

Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Received: 15 Sep 2024; Received in revised form: 12 Oct 2024; Accepted: 19 Oct 2024; Available online: 23 Oct 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the psychological struggles of female characters in Indira Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* through the lens of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Central to the analysis is the concept of identity formation as shaped by societal constraints, particularly in a patriarchal order. Saudamini, Sashiprova, Mrinalini, and the maternal figures—Anupama and Mrinalini's mother—are examined through Lacan's key ideas: the mirror stage, symbolic order, lack, and the Real. The characters' identities are defined by external reflections of widowhood, spinsterhood, and motherhood, causing deep internal splits between their desires and societal expectations. By applying Lacanian theory, this paper reveals how societal structures exacerbate the mental anguish of these women, leaving them in states of profound alienation and despair.



Keywords— mirror stage, lack, desire, the real, widowhood, depression.

Indira Goswami in her work, *The Blue-necked God*, showed the plights of the widows who were abandoned by their families in the holy city of Vrindavan. In this work, she explored the countless and endless miseries of radheshyamis day-to-day life. She gave voices to these helpless widows who were forced to sing in the temples and still not being able to eat a meal per day. Originally published in Assamese in 1976 the novel was a path-breaking work as it was the first work that threw light on the miserable lives of the widows in the name of religion. The work becomes the social document of the lives of widows both young and old.

Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* delves into women's lives deeply affected by societal restrictions, particularly the constraints of widowhood and traditional gender roles. This paper examines the novel's female characters—Saudamini, Sashiprova, Mrinalini, Anupama, and Mrinalini's mother—through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, specifically his concepts of the mirror stage, lack, the symbolic order, and the Real.

Lacan's theories highlight how each character's identity and desires are shaped—and often suppressed—by

societal expectations. In his famous essay “The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious” Lacan defines his concepts of the mirror stage and the symbolic order. The mirror stage is where the individual forms an identity by recognizing themselves in the mirror — but this recognition is always incomplete, leading to a lifelong sense of alienation. The Symbolic Order consists of the ideologies of the society: cultures, laws, values, religious beliefs, and so on. The way we react to these ideologies is what makes us who we are. The symbolic order restricts people from acting on their desires or articulating their inner feelings.

Lacan's concept of the Real is an unmediated, raw experience of existence with no ideologies at all. According to him, the Real is “impossible” as it is beyond any rules, it is resistant to the Symbolic which makes it traumatic (*Seminar XI*). It is an individual's experience in realizing that the rules of the society they live are meaningless and are just the curtains that hide reality (Qazi 10).

By applying Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper seeks to illuminate the inner conflicts and psychological fragmentation experienced by these characters, revealing the often-destructive intersection of personal desires and

social expectations within the cultural landscape of *The Blue-necked God*.

Saudamini, a young widow, is the protagonist of the work. She had been brought to Vrindavan by her Hindu orthodox parents hoping that in the holy atmosphere of the city, she might forget the young Christian man with whom she had fallen in love after the death of her spouse. A widow having an affair is considered a scandal in society. Her father, Dr Roychaudhary, opened a dispensary and she helped him in nursing the destitute and sick people.

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage suggests that individuals form their identities through their reflections and the perceptions of others. For Saudamini, her identity as a widow is shaped not by her desires but by how society views her. She is forced into a role where she is desexualized, devoid of personal identity, has no autonomy over her life, and is seen only as a widow. Saudamini's suffering can be viewed as the result of her being trapped in the symbolic order of the patriarchal society, which dictates how widows should behave. Her attempts to break free from the symbolic order are consistently thwarted by societal forces, as seen when she seeks work outside the dispensary but is denied. This external view of her identity causes a split between who she truly is and how she is perceived by society. This split led her to deep feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction.

One of Lacan's most famous concepts is lack, which refers to the inherent gap or emptiness that all humans feel due to the unattainability of their desires. According to Lacan, humans are driven by desire, but this desire is never fully satisfied because it is always for something that is ultimately out of reach. Saudamini's fixation on the Christian youth can be understood through this Lacanian lens. In Lacan's theory "object petit a" refers to the object of desire which is always unattainable yet drives all the desires of the individual (*Écrites*). The Christian youth represents her "object petit a". She confessed to Charanbehari that the Christian youth motivates and inspires her and that she "has not actually fallen in love with him" (Goswami 79). Saudamini yearns for him not simply because she loves him, but because he embodies all that she cannot have: freedom, love, and the chance to escape her suffocating widowhood. The fact that the Christian youth never physically appears in the novel makes him the perfect Lacanian symbol of lack — he exists as a phantom or projection of what Saudamini desires but cannot attain. The more Saudamini yearns for this unattainable ideal, the more she becomes trapped in her own desire. This cycle of desire and lack deepens her depression, as the object of her desire remains forever out of reach, pushing her toward a state of hopelessness and despair.

Saudamini's suicide can be seen as a tragic encounter with the Real. In the end, the symbolic order and her own sense of lack prove too overwhelming, and her death represents her break from the symbolic world. Her suicide is the ultimate act of confronting the unbearable reality of her situation — a reality that cannot be contained within the social norms that define her life.

Sashiprova is another important character in the novel. She was a young widow, lonely and vulnerable. Unlike Saudamini whose parents were wealthy, Sashi was an orphan. Her father died in the partition; she lost her mother to famine. She had no support system at all. She lived with Alamgarhi, a priest of Bihari kunj, in the name of Jugal Upaasna (a couple taking care of deities in the temple). Sashi falls in love with someone but she cannot act upon it as she is a widow and it could create a scandal. She talked about her suffering to Saudamini one day. This conversation is very important to understand the misery, agony, suffering, and agitation of both the widows. Sashi asked Saudamini, "how do you propose to live out the rest of your days" (62). When Saudamini was not able to answer her, she asked again. She told her about the young Swamiji whom she started to love and the pain it brought to her. "I have been plagued by an unwonted pain and mental suffering sometime now" (63). Here she was talking about her love for young Swamiji.

Sashiprova's identity is shaped and constrained by the symbolic order that governs her status as a widow. Widowhood, in the symbolic order of her society, is a state of non-being. Women like Sashi are stripped of their agency and reduced to a position where their desires and individuality are denied. Sashiprova's love for the young Swamiji disrupts this symbolic order. Her feelings are not just repressed; they are also rendered unspeakable within the societal framework. Her love represents a break in the symbolic structure, as it challenges the roles imposed on her.

Lacan's concept of lack is central to Sashi's character. Sashiprova is plagued by an overwhelming sense of emptiness. Her desire for the young Swamiji is not just a longing for love, but a search for something that can fill the void in her life left by widowhood. However, Lacanian theory suggests that desire is never fully satisfied because it is always directed toward something unattainable. For Sashi, the young Swamiji, is something she can never have, which makes the desire itself all the more painful.

Sashi's trauma, particularly the exploitation she faces as a widow, belongs to the realm of the Real. This trauma is so intense and painful that it cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic order of social norms. It haunts her, manifesting in her sense of dislocation and her inability

to find a stable place in society. After the selling of Bihari kunj, Sashi became homeless and she had to find someplace to live as her arrangement with Alamgarhi came to an end. Her situation got worse after the death of Alamgarhi when the radheshyamis of her neighboring rooms asked her to leave due to the fear of these young wolf-like people as they were going to harass them too. The scene where she is forced to wander the streets after Alamgarhi's death is an encounter with the Real — a moment where the harsh reality of her situation breaks through the symbolic protections of society, leaving her exposed to raw suffering.

Mrinalini is another female character in the novel. She was a 40-year-old spinster taking care of her mentally ill mother and half-blind father. She belonged to a wealthy family but her father, Thakur Sahib, wasted all his wealth in drinking. They had become poor and had to sell everything to survive including Bihari Mohan kunj. The symbolic order dictates that as an unmarried daughter, she is responsible for her aging parents. Her identity as a “spinster” and a “caretaker” is not self-chosen but rather imposed by societal expectations; it is her mirror image. Mrinalini's repression of her desires can be seen as her compliance with this symbolic order.

Mrinalini could have gotten married and had children but she did not as she had to take responsibility for her old parents. “Mrinalini's mind was filled with an unknown fear and for some time past she had been overwhelmed by the feeling of helplessness” (Goswami 41). Unable to handle the stress she had a meltdown when her mother got missing. She tore off her clothes in a frenzy and started shouting at her father. Her breakdown represents a moment where the cracks in the symbolic structure become visible. When Mrinalini rips off her clothes and yells at her father, it represents a moment where the Real breaks through the symbolic order. Her frustration, anger, and helplessness, which have been repressed for so long, finally surface in a raw, unmediated way. This outburst is an expression of the trauma that has been festering beneath the surface, which she has been unable to articulate or manage.

Lacan's theory of desire and lack is central to understanding Mrinalini's psychological state. Her life is marked by an unfulfilled desire for personal happiness, emotional connection, and a future beyond caring for her parents. This lack drives her actions, even though she cannot fully articulate it. Mrinalini's desire for control over her life, especially in the face of her parents' deteriorating health and her uncertain future, is an unattainable goal. No matter how much she sacrifices, the lack remains, which leads to her feelings of helplessness and fear.

Hardships of her life made Mrinalini's mother mad. The loss of both of her sons and her husband's drinking habits took a hard toll on her mental health and she required urgent psychiatry help. One time she became so hysterical that she started throwing things at her husband who was the cause of all of their miseries. Anupama, Saudamini's mother, she too was worried about her only child's future. She tried her level best to take care of her daughter but failed. She took her to various sanyasis in the hope that they might be able to help her. Anupama tried to be buried in the sacredness of the city in order to overcome the tension she had about her daughter.

Anupama and Mrinalini's mother represent maternal figures trapped by the symbolic order of motherhood. Their identities are defined by their responsibilities as mothers, yet they are repeatedly thwarted by their inability to protect or support their children. Anupama's attempts to secure Saudamini's future ultimately fail, leaving her burdened with unfulfilled desires and helplessness. Mrinalini's mother, who suffers from her husband's alcoholism and the deaths of her sons, eventually succumbs to hysteria, unable to cope with the trauma and loss that plague her life.

Both women are trapped within a Lacanian lack: they desire stability, happiness, and safety for their children, yet these goals remain perpetually out of reach. For Mrinalini's mother, this unresolved lack manifests as hysteria and violence, symbolizing her psychological collapse in the face of trauma. Anupama's decline into depression reflects the inability to symbolically process her concerns about Saudamini's future, driving her toward psychological exhaustion and helplessness.

Indira Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* offers a profound exploration of the psychological struggles faced by widows and other marginalized women in a rigidly patriarchal society. By analyzing the characters through Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper reveals how societal expectations and restrictions shape, and often fracture, the identities and desires of these women. Each character—Saudamini, Sashiprova, Mrinalini, Anupama, and Mrinalini's mother—grapples with feelings of alienation, unfulfilled desire, and helplessness, all rooted in the symbolic order that dictates their roles and represses their autonomy.

Lacan's concepts of the mirror stage, lack, and the Real underscore the characters' tragic encounters with an unattainable sense of self. Saudamini's yearning for love and freedom, Sashiprova's search for identity and connection, and Mrinalini's unfulfilled desires as a caretaker all illustrate Lacan's notion of “lack.” The constant tension between their desires and societal

constraints drives each woman toward a state of psychological distress, exemplified in Saudamini's ultimate encounter with the Real through suicide and Mrinalini's breakdown under the weight of her repressed emotions. The maternal figures, Anupama and Mrinalini's mother, further illustrate how the symbolic order's expectations of motherhood create unbearable pressure, leading to psychological collapse when they cannot fulfill these roles.

In highlighting these internal conflicts, Goswami's novel not only portrays the oppressive forces governing women's lives but also serves as a social document that amplifies the silenced voices of widows in Vrindavan. Through Lacanian analysis, this study underscores the complex intersection of personal desires, societal expectations, and psychological fragmentation in *The Blue-necked God*, offering a deeper understanding of the novel's characters and their tragic fates within the patriarchal framework.

REFERENCES

- [1] Goswami, Indira. *The Blue-Necked God*. Translated by Gayatri Bhattacharya, Zubaan, 2014.
- [2] Lacan, Jacques. "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconsciousness." *Modern Criticism and Theory*, edited by David Lodge Wood Nigel. Routledge, 1988, pp. 79–106.
- [3] ---. *Ecrites*. Translated by Bruce Fink, W.W. Norton, 2007.
- [4] Qazi, Khursheed Ahmad. "Lacanian Concepts – Their Relevance to Literary Analysis and Interpretation: A Post Structural Reading." *The Criterion*, vol. 2, no. 4, Dec. 2011, pp. 1–12.
- [5] Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2006.