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## **From Silence to Selfhood: Feminist Metamorphosis in Assamese Women's Fiction**

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### Abstract

For centuries women have been denied full justice—social, economic, political, and constitutional—and largely ignored as the “second sex.” The twentieth century witnessed the rise of a fresh consciousness about the marginalized position of women, resulting in the birth of the women’s liberation movement. Many women writers from North East India have vociferously explored women’s issues and highlighted women as individuals shaping their own destinies through assertiveness and self-confidence. The body of work by early Assamese women authors added significantly to the canon of Assamese literature and paved the way for later generations of women writers. The present paper examines selected works of four Assamese women writers—Indira Goswami, Jahnavi Barua, Arupa Kalita Patangia, and Mitra Phukan—to explore how these writers depict women’s struggles amid social, cultural, and political constraints in the region. It also reveals the process of feminist metamorphosis their female protagonists undergo, from victimhood to empowered individuals who challenge traditional gender hierarchies in Assamese society.

**Keywords:** Assamese women’s writing; feminist fiction; selfhood; emancipation.

### Introduction

Feminist consciousness consists of women’s awareness that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural but socially determined; the development of a sense of sisterhood; the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and the articulation of an alternative vision of the future. For a long time, Assamese literature depicted women through roles prescribed by a patriarchal point of view. However, the emergence of women writers in Assam marked a decisive shift in literary representation, enabling women to evolve from silence to selfhood and self-realization.

Contemporary writers such as Indira Goswami, Jahnavi Barua, Arupa Kalita Patangia, and Mitra Phukan have enriched the literature of the region through their contributions. In the surge of literature from North East India, many significant contemporary works are by women writers, reflecting the growing participation and development of women in the literary field. In the past, literature of the North East was largely observed from the outside or written through male perspectives. These women writers are therefore essential in re-articulating women's experiences through their literary works (Luikham, 2020). They interrogate the silencing of women and chart their movement towards selfhood. Their writings expose religious, domestic, emotional, and political structures that confine women and depict their transition from suffering subjects to agents of change.

## Discussion

Indira Goswami stands as a foundational figure in Assamese feminist literature. Her women are often trapped within rigid social codes that regulate female sexuality and autonomy. She offers insight into the inner worlds of women through characters such as Giribala in *Datal Hatir Uye Khuwa Hawulan* (1988) and Houdamini in *Nilakantha Braja* (1976), where she presents the poverty and sexual exploitation of widows in Vrindavan. Goswami exposes the grim realities of the social set-up and envisions a challenge to age-old traditions that imprison women within restrictive social constructs.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami projects the plight of Brahmin widows living in a *sattra*, a Vaishnavite monastery in Assam. Through the lives of Durga, Saru, and Giribala, she explores how women are denied basic human rights. Giribala reflects on her restricted existence and the clash between traditional norms and personal desires. Her revolutionary courage in raising her voice for a meaningful existence transforms her from a meek, stereotyped wife into a liberated woman. Her refusal to accept moral blame for her condition marks a significant shift from silence to selfhood. Goswami suggests that emancipation begins with the rejection of internalized oppression.

Similarly, *The Blue-Necked God (Nilakantha Braja)* exposes the poverty and sexual exploitation of widows in Vrindavan and critiques the erasure of women under the guise of ritual purity. Goswami's autobiographical work *An Unfinished Autobiography* interrogates social attitudes toward widowhood and reveals the author's inner consciousness. Goswami's fiction thus represents an early feminist metamorphosis—from mute suffering to voiced rebellion—paving the way for later women writers. As Chutia (2019) observes, Indira Goswami and Mitra Phukan offer compelling womanist and feminist representations through fictional accounts that reflect lived experiences.

Another prominent writer, Bangalore-based Assamese author Jahnavi Barua, addresses quieter but equally pervasive forms of female suffering, particularly emotional invisibility within domestic life. In works such as *Next Door*, *Rebirth*, and *Undertow*, Barua portrays strong-willed women navigating the aftermath of the Assam Movement. *Rebirth* presents Kaberi, who fights an internal battle to break free from submissive existence and male domination. In *Next Door*, Barua depicts a woman whose life appears stable but is marked by unspoken dissatisfaction: "words were never spoken, yet expectations filled every corner of the room" (Barua, 2008, p. 63). Emancipation in Barua's fiction does not involve abandoning domestic life but redefining one's relationship with the self. Her protagonists' metamorphosis is subtle, emerging through introspection and resistance to internalized norms.

Arupa Patangia Kalita, a leading feminist voice from Assam, centers her fiction on women's lives amid violence, poverty, and insurgency. Her works expand feminist inquiry by situating women within politically unstable and conflict-ridden contexts. Her female characters endure suffering shaped by both patriarchy and historical circumstances. Stories such as *The Girl with Long Hair* portray women whose identities are shaped by community, tradition, and struggle, while *Miraganabhi* depicts lives marked by violence, displacement, and uncertainty. In Kalita's fiction, silence is enforced through fear and marginalization. Emancipation is collective rather than individualistic, rooted in shared resilience

and ethical responsibility. As Swami (2020) notes, ethnic conflict and gendered violence significantly shape women's journeys toward selfhood in Kalita's works.

Mitra Phukan offers powerful portrayals of women situated within socio-political upheavals. She explores women's predicaments in both domestic and public spheres, often through educated, middle-class protagonists. In *The Collector's Wife*, Rukmini confronts infertility, stigma, marital discord, and the shadow of insurgency. As a modern, educated woman, she defies traditional norms and undergoes emotional turmoil before attaining self-realization. Her transformation from a silent sufferer to an independent thinker presents her as a "new woman." Bhuyan (2019) notes that Rukmini's journey illustrates a shift from traditional wifehood to self-sufficient rebellion.

In *A Monsoon of Music*, Phukan explores female bonding, ageism, and self-assertion within the cultural setting of Tamulbari, where tradition intersects with artistic aspiration. Through characters like Nomita, Phukan highlights women's social and economic independence within traditional settings, emphasizing their evolution from constrained roles to empowered identities.

## Conclusion

The feminist metamorphosis in Assamese women's fiction traces a trajectory from Indira Goswami's bold challenges to patriarchal orthodoxy, through Jahnavi Barua's introspective resistance, Arupa Patangia Kalita's marginalized voices shaped by conflict, to Mitra Phukan's nuanced quests for agency. Although these protagonists endure widowhood, infertility, emotional invisibility, and violence, they refuse to remain confined within victimhood. Instead, they reclaim agency and redefine identity. Collectively, the works of Indira Goswami, Jahnavi Barua, Arupa Patangia Kalita, and Mitra Phukan chart a powerful feminist movement from silence to selfhood in Assamese women's fiction.

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