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WOMEN, MARGINALITY AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S THE MOTH- EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER AND ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Keywords	Abstract
Marginality, patriarchy, caste, widowhood, Assamese literature, feminist reading, postcolonial fiction	The article analyzes the representation of women's marginality and social resistance in two landmark Indian novels by Indira Goswami and Arundhati Roy in radically different regional, cultural and historical contexts. Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker deals with the issues of widowhood, orthodoxy and female suffering in the Assamese Vaishnavite and feudal structures. Roy's The God of Small Things deals with patriarchy, caste violence and the policing of female desire in Kerala. Both texts show marginality is not only a personal exclusion, but a social process which is produced by family, religion, caste and gendered discipline. Together, the novels show that although the resistance of women may seem to be silent, fragmented or not direct, it is nevertheless of political significance in that it subverts established hierarchies. These novels, the study contends, depict women as victims of systemic domination but also as agents of refusal, resisting social power through memory, speech, bodily presence and emotional endurance.



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I. Introduction

Women are often represented as the most vulnerable subject in the intersecting structures of patriarchy, caste, class, religion and custom in Indian English and regional Indian fiction. Both Indira Goswami and Arundhati Roy have a major place here, as both the writers do not treat women's pain as private tragedy, rather they turn it into a critique of social order. Goswami's novel takes place in Assamese society and addresses widows, Brahmin households and the stultifying power of ritual orthodoxy, while Roy's novel is a performance of a postcolonial Kerala constructed through caste exclusion, domestic authoritarianism and forbidden love. The literary importance of these texts is also reflected in the stature of Goswami as one of the most celebrated Assamese writers and a Jnanpith Award recipient, and Roy's international recognition through the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* (Kumari & Kumari, 2022).

Reading comparatively is useful because both novels interrogate the marginalization of women through systems that appear natural or sacred. Goswami highlights the social invisibility of widows and the ways religion becomes a tool of control, whereas Roy depicts women's lives as dictated by "Love Laws," family honor, and caste boundaries. Together, the novels show us that resistance is not always heroic or public; it can be memory, silence, transgression, endurance, emotional survival. The study, therefore, reads the two novels as feminist-social texts that expose the gendered architecture of Indian society (Kumari,Princy and Mishra,Binod 2026).

II. Literature review

The recent criticism of Goswami's novel has been mainly on widowhood, orthodoxy and oppression in Assamese society. One recent study reads the text through ecofeminism, and argues that the text reveals the parallel domination of women and nature within patriarchal and religious structures. Another article reconsiders the novel as a critique of cultural decay and the crisis of modernity, highlighting the collapse of feudal and religious authority. Scholarship also often emphasizes the plight of widows and the novel's focus on female silencing and social invisibility.(Princy Kumari & Binod Mishra, 2026)

Roy's novel has been the subject of extensive feminist and caste-based criticism. Studies say it's often called a work about patriarchy, gender identity, and women's resistance in postcolonial Kerala. Other articles discuss caste discrimination and show the compounding effect of gender and caste stigma on Ammu's suffering. Many critics argue that the novel exposes hierarchical social structures through family discipline, social punishment and regulation of sexuality. Trauma, memory and the novel's fragmented form are also important critical themes, particularly in readings that stress the embedding of suffering in social systems rather than in isolated individual experience (S Shetty, Ujwala 2026)

Although both novels have been separately studied in terms of patriarchy and oppression, the scholarship in the field is usually text-specific. Goswami is often read through widowhood, religious orthodoxy or Assamese social reform; whereas Roy is usually analyzed through caste, trauma and



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patriarchy. There is less work in the literature which directly compares female marginality and resistance in these two novels. This gap merits a comparative focus that reads both as regional feminist critiques of Indian social power (Sarma & Borah, 2025)

III. Research Gaps

Such criticism offers rich interpretations of each novel, but often isolates them within separate themes or regions. Goswami's novel is often read in relation to Assamese widowhood and social decay, whereas Roy's novel is mostly read in terms of caste, trauma, or patriarchy in Kerala. What is lacking is a sustained comparative framework that places both texts as parallel explorations of women's marginality and resistance in different Indian social formations. There is also scant discussion of how both novels translate private suffering into social critique through narrative form, silence and embodied defiance (Mandal, Mohosin 2023).

This study addresses that gap by comparing the two writers' representations of women not as oppressed figures per se, but as subjects whose lives reveal the violence of social norms. It also suggests that the marginality depicted in both the novels is intersectional, constructed by gender as well as religion, caste, family authority and regulation of sexuality. The paper thus makes a contribution to comparative Indian feminist literary studies by linking these texts.

IV. Objectives:

This study has four objectives.

- To study the construction of marginality of women in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The God of Small Things*.
- To examine the types of social resistance available to women in both the novels.
- To compare the role of patriarchy, caste, religion and family rules in shaping the lives of women.
- To demonstrate the narrative form, silence and memory to improve the political significance of female suffering.

V. Methodology

The approach of this paper is qualitative and comparative literary. It draws on feminist critique, intersectional analysis and close textual analysis of chosen patterns of narration, characters and social contexts. The study treats Goswami's and Roy's novels as culturally specific texts while also reading them as works that expose common structures of domination. Special attention is given to widowhood, caste, sexual regulation, domestic power, and symbolic forms of speech and silence.

The analysis is based on secondary scholarly sources and published critical discussions of both novels. Rather than attempting a historical sociology of Assam or Kerala, the paper focuses on literary representation and social meaning. This method allows a focused comparison of how the two novels construct marginality and resistance through plot, character, and narrative texture. (Raj K, Surela Raj & Paul, Janet 2026)



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VI. Analysis and Discussion

In Goswami's novel, the marginal position of women is closely associated with the social figure of the widow. Widowhood is not simply a personal loss, it is a disciplinary category through which society regulates mobility, desire, voice and dignity. The novel's Brahmin and sattra world turns women into carriers of ritual purity and shame, making their bodies sites of surveillance. Recently critics have written that Goswami exposes these structures of orthodoxy and reveals the emotional toll of living within them(Princy Kumari & Binod Mishra, 2026).

The resistance of the novel is to refuse such suffering as normal. The world inhabited by female characters is one in which social custom is strong, but their pain itself is an exposure. Their very existence exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that celebrates tradition and creates misery. Goswami's story adds value to the lives of the socially minimized women and this literary attention acts as resistance. The novel makes their suffering legible as a critique of patriarchal and religious authority, even when women do not have direct power(Princy Kumari & Binod Mishra, 2026).

Roy's novel features a different but related kind of marginality. Ammu, Rahel and other women are bound by family, morality, caste boundaries and gendered respectability. Ammu's forbidden love and social exclusion are especially associated with caste, class and social punishment, and the criticism always indicates that the novel connects patriarchy with them. Roy's "Love Laws" are the social system that determines who can be loved and how, so that desire itself is a political question that is regulated. In this world women are not only judged as daughters or mothers but as bodies whose choices jeopardize the social order(Ujwala S Shetty, 2026)

Resistance in Roy's novel is unmistakable, often quiet, indirect, and damaged by trauma. Ammu's sin, Rahel's survival, and the novel's fractured temporality all resist the smooth narrative of social compliance. The text demonstrates that women's lives are constructed by institutions that claim moral authority but reproduce violence. As several critics have pointed out, the novel is also a study of memory and trauma, where personal pain bears the brunt of public systems such as patriarchy, caste prejudice and family honor. Resistance then is not triumph but persistence against erasure (Devi, 2022).

When we compare the two novels, we find many similarities. Both authors reveal the social construction of women's silence. Goswami's silences are based on widowhood and orthodoxy; Roy's silences are imposed by shame, caste discipline, and emotional repression. The domestic space in both novels is also shown as political space. The home, the family, the religious community are not safe havens but instruments of control. This leaves the female subject doubly vulnerable: marginalized in the larger society, but also in the intimate sphere meant to protect her(Princy Kumari & Binod Mishra, 2026).

But the novels are different in scale and focus. Goswami is more explicitly regional and religious in focus, concerned with Assamese traditions and the suffering created by ritualistic social hierarchy. Roy's novel is more overtly intersectional in its treatment of caste, sexuality and familial power. Goswami's resistance is often about laying bare the cruelty of social custom; Roy's resistance is about the violated body, the forbidden relationship, and the afterlife of trauma. These differences



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matter because they remind us that marginality in India is not one but constituted by local histories and social formations (Mandal, Mohosin 2023)

VII. Results

The study shows that both novels depict women's marginality as structurally produced and not naturally given. In Goswami, widowhood and religious orthodoxy operate as a double bind limiting the social presence of women; in Roy, patriarchy and caste are conflated to police female desire and to punish transgression. Both novels also present resistance as broken but meaningful. Women resist with words and memory, with refusal and emotional stamina, when open rebellion is impossible (Sarma & Borah, 2025).

A second finding is that both texts expose the violence of dominant moral systems and therefore destabilize them. The novels do not merely depict oppression, but also show how it is justified in the name of tradition, family honor, and sacred or social codes. A third finding is that narrative form matters. Goswami's realistic critique of society and Roy's fractured and memory-driven structure, both help dramatize the inner cost of oppression. Thus, these novels taken together show that women's marginality cannot be divorced from the larger political order of caste, religion and patriarchy.

VIII. Conclusion.

A comparative reading of *The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The God of Small Things* shows that women's marginality in Indian fiction is not just a question of exclusion but a social process of discipline through institutions, customs and affect. Goswami and Roy offer two powerful literary anatomies of oppression, but both also insist that there are forms of resistance in women's lives that cannot be completely erased. Their novels turn private suffering into public critique, making silence, memory and pain politically readable.

The study concludes that these texts are significant not only for feminist literary scholarship but also for understanding how literature registers the workings of social power in India. Their continued relevance is their capacity to demonstrate that resistance often starts where dignity is denied. Both novels, in this sense, are still urgent testimonies to women's resilience under unequal systems.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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