

Narratives That Bleed: Memory, Death, and Resistance in Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood*

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Abstract: Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* (Goswami 2002) is more than a novel; it is a piercing testimony of witnessing violence, loss, and resilience during the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi. What began as an attempt to document the layered beauty of Delhi's past under the Mughals and British Raj turns into a harrowing narrative of bloodshed and betrayal, as the author finds herself recording the brutal realities unfolding around her. Through the eyes of a woman academic living in Delhi, the narrative captures the everyday lives of ordinary Sikhs whose stories are intertwined with the city's history and whose existence is shattered overnight by state complicity and communal hatred that followed after Indira Gandhi's assassination. Originally published in Assamese as *Tej aru Dhulire Dhushorito Pristha* (Goswami 1995), the text becomes an intimate account of a city's descent into chaos, portraying moments of quiet resistance, collective mourning, and the unspoken grief of survivors who search for lost family members and neighbors in refugee camps. The novel blurs the boundaries between fiction and lived experience, bringing to the forefront voices often erased in the pages of official histories. In chronicling these stories of violence and resilience, Goswami transforms personal grief into a collective memory, emphasizing the power of literature to confront uncomfortable truths and preserve the fragments of lives lost to communal violence. This paper examines how *Pages Stained with Blood* becomes a space for memory and resistance through trauma theory and feminist narrative ethics, illustrating how storytelling can stand against silence and how the act of witnessing can transform trauma into a call for justice.

Key Words: Assamese Literature, Indira Goswami, 1984 Anti-Sikh Pogrom, Violence, Death, Trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami (1942–2011), widely celebrated by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, remains one of India's most fearless and unsettling literary voices, occupying a distinctive position in Indian literature as a writer who intertwines personal anguish with the collective tragedies of society, translating trauma and death into powerful narratives of resistance. Born in Assam, Goswami's life was marked by personal loss, experiences of displacement, and a profound engagement with social realities that shaped her writing over the course of several decades. She is celebrated for her courageous engagement with issues such as widowhood, caste discrimination, and religious violence, reflecting a keen sensitivity towards the suffering of the marginalized and a commitment to documenting their realities with unflinching honesty. Her literary contributions have earned her prestigious recognitions, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and the Jnanpith Award in 2000. Goswami's oeuvre, ranging from *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* to *Pages Stained with Blood*, interrogates the entanglement of gender, violence, death, widowhood, and memory with rare moral courage. Her writing emerges from a deeply autobiographical impulse, yet transcends the self to reflect the collective wounds of her time. Her most profound impact lies in her ability to transform lived and observed suffering into narratives that compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about society. *Pages Stained with Blood*, originally written in Assamese as *Tej Aru Dhulire Dhushorito Pristha*, was first serialized in the journal *Gariyoshi* (1986) and later translated into English by Pradip Acharya. It stands as one of Goswami's most poignant works, intertwining the personal with the political, the intimate with the historical, and the ordinary with the catastrophic. The plot of the novel is

deceptively simple yet layered with narrative ruptures and unresolved grief. Goswami initially wanted to write a book on Delhi's splendor; she wanted to write about the Mughal courts, British Raj relics, narrow lanes echoing with the voices of Ghalib, Khusro, and forgotten kings, but instead, the narrative took a harrowing turn following Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984 and the subsequent assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October the same year. The retaliatory violence against the Sikh community that followed turned Delhi into a city of fear and ashes, and Goswami, living in Shakti Nagar at the time, found herself compelled to document the unfolding horrors rather than the romantic past she had intended to capture.

To fully grasp the emotional and political weight of *Pages Stained with Blood*, one must understand the historical trajectory of the Sikh community in India and the circumstances that culminated in the violence of 1984. The Sikhs, emerging in the 15th century under Guru Nanak's teachings, were shaped by a unique spiritual and socio-political identity that emphasized equality, justice, and armed resistance against oppression. Over centuries, Sikhism evolved not only as a faith but also as a community forged in struggle through resistance to Mughal persecution, the formation of their own sovereign rule in the 18th century under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and the maintenance of a distinct cultural and religious presence in the Indian subcontinent. The colonial period further complicated Sikh identity. British policies of divide and rule, while at times exploiting communal lines, also institutionalized the Sikhs as a martial race, integrating them into the colonial military apparatus. However, the Partition in 1947 marked one of the most traumatic chapters in Sikh history. Punjab was torn in two, and the Sikhs found themselves uprooted from their ancestral lands in West Punjab. Thousands perished, many migrated eastward, and their wounds from that event. In independent India, the Sikhs continued to assert their political identity, particularly through the Akali movement, which sought greater autonomy for Punjab under the promise of a federal India. These demands, however, were often met with suspicion by the central government. Matters escalated in the 1980s, particularly with the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a controversial figure who began as a religious preacher but gradually became seen by the state as a militant separatist. Bhindranwale occupied the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, which became the center of armed activity and political tension. This eventually led to Operation Blue Star in June 1984, when then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered a military attack on the Golden Temple to flush out militants. The decision to send armed forces into the most sacred Sikh shrine during a major religious observance was seen by many Sikhs as an unforgivable desecration. The operation resulted in significant civilian casualties and damage to the Akal Takht, further alienating the Sikh community. These events set the stage for Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The retaliation was swift, brutal, and state-enabled. Within hours of the assassination, organized mobs began attacking Sikh homes, businesses, and gurdwaras in Delhi and other parts of northern India. The police either turned a blind eye or actively aided the rioters. Trains carrying Sikh passengers were stopped; people were dragged out, killed, and their bodies burned. Sikh men were singled out by their turbans and beards. Women were raped. Children were murdered. Entire neighborhoods were decimated. According to human rights reports, over 3,000 Sikhs were killed in Delhi alone, though unofficial estimates suggest much higher numbers. The violence was not spontaneous. It was systematic, and it exposed the dangerous confluence of political vendetta, communal hatred, and administrative complicity.

It is within this landscape of betrayal, grief, and unthinkable violence that Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* was written. The unnamed Assamese woman protagonist, a thinly veiled reflection of Goswami herself, teaches at the University of Delhi and navigates the city's streets, initially collecting stories, anecdotes, and fragments of history for her intended book. Her companions in this endeavour include ordinary Sikhs, all of whom become central to her daily life and are eventually swept into the tide of violence that engulfs the city. As noted in Satyanath's analysis, the narrative blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography, with Goswami employing first-person narration to preserve the immediacy of experience while engaging in a larger act of witnessing (Satyanath 70). Goswami's narrator is not merely a passive observer of the violence; she becomes an unwilling yet deeply affected participant, drawn into the catastrophe by her intimate connections with those whose lives are shattered. Her world is inhabited by individuals who are not just fleeting characters but integral to her everyday existence. Most of the people she was acquainted with were Sikhs, and their ordinary presence in her life is what renders the violence so deeply personal. The protagonist's dream of documenting the grandeur of the city's timeless beauty is violently disrupted by the reality of newspaper headlines soaked in blood, of refugee camps filled with terrified and disoriented families, and of familiar faces who disappear without a trace. The narrative trajectory shifts from intellectual inquiry to moral confrontation. The narrator writes not out of literary ambition but because silence becomes ethically impossible. Her pen becomes an instrument of witnessing rather than creativity, a tool to testify against the deliberate erasures perpetuated by both state mechanisms and public apathy. She is no longer the academic collecting folklore and architecture, but a chronicler of chaos, compelled to preserve stories that risk being buried beneath the weight of denial and historical sanitization. Furthermore, the novel's

closing metaphor, where her diary is soaked in blood, transcends literary symbolism. It becomes both a visceral image of the violence she has witnessed and a scathing indictment of state complicity, media silence, and the inability of institutional narratives to accommodate the emotional and physical truth of communal suffering. The blood-stained pages are not only a record of the violence but a form of embodied protest against historical amnesia. Through this image, Goswami interrogates the capacity of language itself to bear witness. How does one write when language collapses under the weight of horror? How does one record trauma when the act of writing becomes indistinguishable from mourning? The narrator's act of writing becomes a form of resistance, a way to speak when speech seems futile, to remember when forgetting appears far easier, and to assert humanity in a time that tried to strip it away.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how Indira Goswami employs narrative strategies, such as fragmentation, testimonial voice, and symbolic imagery, to represent trauma and memory in *Pages Stained with Blood*.
2. To analyze the novel as a literary testimony that bears witness to the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, foregrounding marginalized voices erased from official histories.
3. To explore how Goswami's narrative engages with feminist narrative ethics by restoring dignity and moral agency to survivors, particularly women, within a context of communal violence.
4. To investigate the role of literature as resistance, highlighting how *Pages Stained with Blood* critiques state complicity, challenges historical amnesia, and transforms personal grief into collective memory.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis of Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* by paying attention to its narrative strategies such as fragmentation, testimonial voice, memory reconstruction, and symbolic imagery. These textual insights are situated within the larger corpus of secondary sources, including critical essays, historical analyses, and interdisciplinary studies on trauma and violence in literature, to ensure contextual accuracy and scholarly rigor. The study uses a multi-layered theoretical framework to interpret the novel. The primary lenses used to analyze the novel's fragmented structure and the narrator's moral obligation to give voice to the marginalized are trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra) and feminist narrative ethics (Nelson). Additionally, the paper draws on testimonial literature (Felman, Laub) and biopolitics (Foucault) to examine how the novel serves as a counter-narrative to official history, critiquing state complicity in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom.

By combining trauma theory with feminist ethics and close reading, this methodology not only interrogates the novel's literary strategies but also situates Goswami's work within broader discourses of violence, memory, gender, and resistance.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indira Goswami has been the subject of sustained critical attention for her unflinching depictions of violence, death, and marginalization in Indian society. Tilottoma Misra observes that Goswami's writing arises from a deeply autobiographical engagement with grief and loss, but always transforms the personal into reflections on collective suffering (Misra 214). Similarly, Udayon Misra situates her within the broad landscape of Assamese and Indian literature as a "chronicler of wounds," noting that *Pages Stained with Blood* bridges the local and the national by bringing her Assamese perspective to bear on Delhi's 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom (Misra 178). These studies establish Goswami as a literary figure whose work exceeds aesthetic aims and embraces testimony as an ethical responsibility.

Critical engagement with Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* highlights its pivotal role in contemporary Indian literature as both testimony and counter-narrative. Scholars such as Tilottoma Misra position Goswami as a chronicler of marginality and violence; Misra's anthology underscores the ways in which Goswami's experiences as an Assamese woman residing in Delhi during the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom inform her unique narrative voice (Misra 214).

T.S Satyanath examines the diary-like structure of *Pages Stained with Blood*, arguing that Goswami's use of first-person narration "complicates the act of witnessing" by offering immediacy and honesty while resisting literary closure (Satyanath 70). Satyanath emphasizes that Goswami's style "resists neat boundaries between fiction and documentary"

and becomes a repository of both individual and collective grief (Satyanath 71). Kavita Kumar, in her comparative reading of post-Partition and pogrom narratives, draws attention to Goswami's depiction of cyclical violence and historical trauma, particularly through the figure of the silent Sikh Baba who bridges the memories of 1947 and 1984 (Kumar 47).

Additional scholarship underscores the novel's critique of institutional complicity. Nandini Chopra examines *Pages Stained with Blood* as a direct challenge to nationalist narratives and official silences, suggesting the text memorializes lives erased by the state's "regime of forgetting" (Chopra 66). Sanjib Baruah analyzes how Goswami's stark portrayals of violence contribute to Northeast Indian literature's broader project of unsettling dominant discourses and reclaiming suppressed histories (Baruah 92).

Goswami's novel is widely regarded as a landmark literary intervention, one that fuses personal testimony and social critique, foregrounds female experience, and challenges state-sponsored forgetfulness. Scholarship converges to recognize *Pages Stained with Blood* as literature of witness: a text that is vital not only for its documentation of past horrors but also for its insistence upon the act of remembrance as resistance.

Trauma, Memory, and Ethical Witnessing in *Pages Stained with Blood*

Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* is not simply a novel; it is a searing political document, a personal testimony, and a counternarrative to the silences of official history. It stands as a literary response to the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, a violence that erupted after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, targeting innocent Sikhs in Delhi and beyond. In refusing to fictionalize the experience, Goswami presents an unflinching record of human suffering, state apathy, and communal rupture, through the deeply personal perspective of a female academic, an alter ego of the author herself. Goswami's protagonist begins with the intention to write about the syncretic beauty of Delhi, tracing its Mughal and colonial legacies, but is suddenly thrust into the unfolding communal violence. The transformation of her narrative focus mirrors a shift in purpose, from cultural documentation to ethical witnessing. The form of the novel, a fragmented diary, is not an aesthetic choice alone. It mirrors trauma's impact on memory and narration. As Cathy Caruth asserts, trauma resists full representation; it emerges in flashes, silences, and repetitions (Caruth 4). The diaristic style, nonlinear and emotionally charged, captures the narrator's disorientation and moral urgency. Her words do not flow with literary ambition—they are gasps of survival and mourning. Crucially, Goswami does not speak *about* the victims; she speaks *with* them. Her close association with Sikh neighbors, students, rickshaw pullers, and the kabadiwala Balbir Singh allows the novel to center on marginalized lives often erased from national narratives. The disappearance of Balbir Singh, the brutal dismemberment of Santokh Singh, and the quiet dignity of the silent Sikh Baba weave a tapestry of trauma that is both individual and communal. The pain is not generalized; it is named, situated, and remembered. This aligns with Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement," where the writer neither appropriates nor distances herself from the suffering, but remains ethically engaged (LaCapra 135).

What sets *Pages Stained with Blood* apart is its deep moral positioning. The narrator is not a passive chronicler; she is implicated in the events emotionally, politically, and spatially. Living in Shakti Nagar during the riots, Goswami herself roamed Delhi's lanes, visited relief camps, and bore witness to the aftermath. The novel's blood-stained manuscript becomes both literal and symbolic: a representation of how history is soaked in violence, and how literature must bear the burden of remembrance. The protagonist's manuscript is torn, smeared, unfinished, reflecting how narratives of trauma are always incomplete, interrupted by the very horror they attempt to record.

Feminist narrative ethics provide another compelling framework to understand Goswami's project. Hilde Lindemann Nelson speaks of the moral responsibility of the narrator to restore "damaged identities" through storytelling (Nelson 101). Goswami's narrator, though overwhelmed, takes on this responsibility. She does not reduce victims to passive sufferers. Balbir Singh's wife, for example, refuses to reclaim his belongings, asserting her moral agency even amidst unbearable loss. The women in the narrative are not portrayed merely as victims of gendered violence, but as custodians of dignity and resilience. The silence of Sikh Baba, who had earlier witnessed the Partition, is not merely a narrative device, but a commentary on the cyclical nature of communal violence in India. By linking 1947 and 1984, Goswami argues that history is not linear; it bleeds through time. Baba's muteness is more eloquent than speech. It forces the reader to confront how trauma is inherited, and how silence becomes both a symptom and a protest. In this context, *Pages Stained with Blood* becomes not just a novel, but a site of memory, a repository of voices that official histories have silenced. Goswami also interrogates the role of institutions, particularly the state. The police, the media, the bureaucracy, and the political leadership are portrayed as absent at best and complicit at worst. The pogroms were not spontaneous outbreaks of rage, but organized acts of political vengeance. Goswami subtly exposes how governance

collapses into violence, and how language, used in slogans, speeches, and even bureaucratic silence, can facilitate murder. Michel Foucault's idea of "biopolitics" is relevant here: the state exercises control over which lives are grievable and which deaths are disposable (Foucault 139). The Sikh bodies burning in Delhi's streets were not just victims of a mob; they were casualties of a system that deemed them politically expendable. Furthermore, Goswami's imagery is stark and unsparing. Blood is not just a motif; it is the medium through which the city is painted. The violence seeps into every alley, into the narrator's dreams, and ultimately into her manuscript. The destruction of gurdwaras, the cries of children, the shattered eyes of widows, all coalesce into a narrative that refuses aesthetic distance. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued, testimony is not about delivering facts; it is about transmitting affect (Felman and Laub 5). Goswami's work functions as such a testimony. It affects the reader, implicates them, and demands moral reckoning. The novel's ending does not provide closure, nor should it. The narrator's dream of a scholarly book on Delhi remains unrealized. Instead, she produces a manuscript soaked in trauma and mourning. In that act of failure, there is profound success: Goswami writes the book that needed to be written, not the one she set out to write. The title itself, *Pages Stained with Blood*, is not metaphorical flourish; it is the central truth of the text. Every page becomes a witness, every word a remembrance. Goswami's narrative also highlights the deep psychological toll violence takes on bystanders and survivors alike. The protagonist frequently breaks down, her thoughts scattered and contradictory. This fragmentation mimics the narrator's psychic disintegration as she absorbs the trauma around her. The diary does not offer linear development or character arcs, it offers emotional collapse, ethical reflection, and a reluctant awakening to horror. This refusal of narrative neatness reinforces the idea that trauma is not something one "gets over" or resolves, but something one carries, often wordlessly, into every future moment. Moreover, Goswami's novel critiques the nationalistic rhetoric that frames violence as unfortunate but necessary. She shows how slogans, rumors, and communal propaganda quickly escalate into brutal assaults on bodies and communities. She peels back the layers of euphemism that often shroud such events in political discourse, exposing the cruelty hidden beneath abstractions like "national security" or "law and order." In doing so, she positions literature as an antidote to state narratives, where poetry becomes protest, and remembrance becomes resistance.

The theoretical foundation of this analysis is rooted in a convergence of trauma theory, feminist narrative ethics, testimonial literature, and biopolitics. Trauma theory, primarily through Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, explains the fragmented, repetitive, and disjointed structure of the novel, as well as the narrator's compulsion to record the unspeakable (Caruth 5; LaCapra 108). Feminist narrative ethics, particularly Hilde Lindemann Nelson's work, provides insight into how Goswami's narrator assumes the moral task of restoring voice and dignity to riot victims, especially women (Nelson 101). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's testimonial literature theory deepens our understanding of the novel as a literary and ethical testimony, charged with the responsibility of transmitting memory and emotion, not merely fact (Felman and Laub 3–6). Finally, Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics elucidates how the state's complicity in the 1984 violence is a manifestation of political control over life and death, where entire communities can be rendered invisible (Foucault 138).

5. CONCLUSION

Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood* transcends the boundaries of fiction to emerge as a living archive of memory, death, and resistance. By intertwining personal testimony with collective grief, Goswami not only preserves the silenced voices of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom but also challenges the selective amnesia of state and official histories. Through the lens of trauma theory, the text reveals how narrative form itself becomes fractured under the weight of violence, mirroring the psychic dislocation of survivors. Yet, it is precisely through this fractured form that the novel reclaims the possibility of remembrance, where the act of storytelling transforms trauma into an urgent call for justice. Furthermore, situating the narrative within the framework of feminist narrative ethics underscores how Goswami's positionality as a woman academic shapes her witnessing, rendering her voice not as an authoritative recorder of events, but as a vulnerable, ethically responsible interlocutor who foregrounds care, hesitation, and solidarity with survivors. In doing so, Goswami expands the ethical terrain of testimonial literature, where writing itself becomes a mode of resistance against erasure.

Pages Stained with Blood exemplifies how literature can function simultaneously as testimony, critique, and protest. It insists on remembering what the state and dominant narratives seek to forget, while also reshaping the moral imagination of its readers by compelling them to confront the ethical demands of trauma and memory. By applying trauma theory and feminist narrative ethics, this paper has demonstrated that Goswami's novel does not simply document violence but transforms it into a site of resilience, where personal grief becomes collective mourning and narrative itself becomes a political act. In inscribing these stories of blood and survival, Goswami does more than document, she restores dignity

to the dead, meaning to suffering, and agency to memory. *Pages Stained with Blood* is not merely a novel about the past, it is an enduring intervention in the politics of memory, a reminder that literature can resist silence, confront violence, and sustain the struggle for justice.

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