

Embodied Resistance and the Politics of the Female Body

Peenaz Ahmed¹, Mohammad Kamran Ahsan²

¹PhD Scholar, SOLA. GD Goenka University Gurugram, Haryana

Email: peenaz7sep@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, SOLA GD Goenka University, Gurugram, Haryana

Email: kamran.ahsan@gdgu.org

ABSTRACT

The paper examines “The Game of Bhairavi” (1988) to expose societal constructs surrounding purity, desire, and women’s autonomy. The article also explores the social and psychological effects of marginalization caused by conditions like vitiligo, often mistaken for leprosy. It examines Padmapriya’s transformation as she reclaims her stigmatized body as a site of power and resistance. It analyzes how she uses her body as a tool of seduction and psychological control to challenge patriarchal norms. Moreover, the paper reveals the tension between agency and the societal tendency to reduce women’s worth to their physical appearance.

Keywords:: Stigmatization, Embodied Trauma, Resistance, Agency.

INTRODUCTION:

Indira Goswami’s short story “The Game of Bhairavi” examines the effects of trauma produced by stigma and patriarchal structures. It also draws attention to female agency through the character of Padmapriya. The narrative critiques social ignorance, as Padmapriya is wrongly perceived to have leprosy, a condition burdened with intense stigma, when she actually has vitiligo, a non-contagious skin disorder. The misconception becomes the basis for her abandonment by her husband at the temple on their wedding day. Her body is transformed into a contested site, marked with associations of impurity and disgrace which leads to her dehumanization and social exclusion. At the same time, Goswami reconfigures the female body as not merely an object of oppression but also as a means of defiance and resistance.

Padmapriya is traumatized and shamed for her bodily conditions. She is compelled to internalize her shame which is mostly shaped by the cultural attitudes and stigma associated with the mark on her body. Shame is classified as a self-conscious emotion (M. Lewis, 1992) because it primarily involves self-evaluation. It is often an overwhelming feeling, where a person feels small, inferior, and unimportant. They begin to view themselves as inadequate, incapable, and not worthy. Jayswal (2025) Padmapriya feels a sense of exposure and the possibility of being an object of ridicule as a result of her leucoderma. Because of her skin condition, she is abandoned by her to be husband on her wedding day. Bhagwati, her father is angered and threatens to go to the courts to seek justice for the abandonment of his daughter. “Padmapriya cringed inwardly and slipped out of the room to run away from their voices. She hurried back to her room and slammed the door shut. Everybody seemed to know! All the people living around the temple, and even people living far away. Everyone knew!”(Goswami 96). Her shame is heightened. Her urge to withdraw physically

mirrors her inner distress and her desire to escape the burden of social judgment. Her repeated remark that “everyone knew” reveals her heightened awareness of constant public scrutiny.

Padmapriya withdraws into isolation, staying in her room as a way to cope with the judgmental gaze of society. “A sharp rebuke jolted her out of her reverie. “What are you doing here all day long? Why do you bury yourself in this dark room? Come out. Come out immediately” (Goswami 97). The psychological impact of trauma leads to emotional and social isolation. Herman notes that “trauma isolates; the survivor is left feeling utterly alone, abandoned by humanity” (52). Her solitude protects her from the harsh judgment of society and lets her live away from its expectations. However, this withdrawal also shows her growing sadness, as she distances herself not only from others but also from her own sense of control. Her isolation is not just a personal choice but a response to how society judges her condition.

Padmapriya’s condition, though medical, comes to represent rejection and shame in her life. It makes her start looking for other flaws in her body. It shows how deeply social stigma has affected her, making her see herself only in terms of her physical appearance Effendi (2024). Goswami writes: “...Once again, she felt her hand moving to her back. To the small slender portion of her back. Was she really so slender? Yes, that was where the white sport was. Was she too slender?” (Goswami 97). Padmapriya is constantly aware of herself, as she is often reminded of her condition. Her hand unconsciously moves to the affected area on her back. It reflects both her insecurity and the pressure of society’s judgment. Trauma arising out of social stigma leads to the erosion of self-confidence. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman examines how individuals with socially stigmatized identities navigate the world, often facing exclusion, discrimination, and psychological distress. He defines stigma as an attribute

that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them from a “whole” and accepted person to someone who is devalued in the eyes of society. Moreover, it can also be understood that her fixation is not only on the white spot but also on her overall appearance, suggesting an internalization of external criticisms.

Goswami turns Padmapriya’s inner pain into something physical. Throughout the story, Padmapriya becomes fixated on the white spot on her back. She scratches it repeatedly, even tearing her blouses and hurting herself until it bleeds. The spot becomes a constant source of anxiety, as she struggles to accept it. Unable to deal with her frustration and self-hatred, she ends up harming herself. Trauma theory emphasizes that the body can store pain which a person cannot express in words. The author again highlights Padmapriya’s repetitive behavior, showing how her hand unconsciously returns to the spot on her back, while her nails continue the futile attempt to erase the mark. It demonstrates what Freud (1914) refers to as the “repetition compulsion” which has been explained as a psychological phenomenon where a person re-enacts aspects of their trauma, not out of conscious choice, but as an attempt to process it. He states: “the patient remembers nothing of what is forgotten repressed, but that he expresses it in action. He reproduces it not in his memory but in his behavior; he repeats it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it” (160). Her scratching at the mark becomes a symbolic act of erasure, an attempt to rid herself of what she perceives as the physical source of her suffering. The white spot is a visible symbol of the stigma and isolation she faces. Her habitual scratching externalizes the psychological toll of societal judgment. Cathy Caruth notes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, trauma is not merely a historical event but an ongoing intrusion of the past into the present (4). Padma’s repetitive behaviors and self-isolation represent the persistence of her trauma in her daily life.

Padmapriya experiences a deep sense of vulnerability when others look at her. Their gaze makes her feel being stripped and closely examined, with every part of her body searched for the white spot. It shows the dehumanizing way people are reduced to. It also points to society’s fixation on physical perfection and its tendency to stigmatize any perceived flaw. Padmapriya feels violated not only physically but emotionally, as it is not just the mark itself but the constant judgment and curiosity of others that strip her of dignity. Her vulnerability is further intensified by her internalization of this shame, as she begins to see herself through the same critical lens. Padmapriya’s father also feels wronged as he cries, “They stood there. In that very courtyard. They spat on my face... They... They charged me. They accused me of trying to cheat them. They threatened me.... At my very doorstep they threatened me. That my daughter is diseased.... that I cheated them.” (Goswami 99). It highlights the dishonour Bhagwati feels as a father, not only because of his daughter’s rejection by society but because of how that rejection has come to define him as well. His attempts to grab Padmapriya and show her back to the world reflects his belief that proving the absence of disease will absolve both Padmapriya and himself in the eyes of society.

Paradoxically, in his effort to defend his daughter, Bhagwati unintentionally perpetuates her objectification. His willingness to expose her physically to satisfy public scrutiny mirrors the very dehumanization he seeks to counteract. Her father, meant to be a figure of protection, becomes an agent of her humiliation.

Women’s existence is defined by their perceived desirability and their role as objects of gratification. The short story offers a sharp critique on the pervasive nature of gendered exploitation that lays bare the vulnerabilities women face in a society which treats them as objects of desire and possession. Padmapriya’s friend Lavanya subtly suggests her to seduce Bhuvaneshwar through her body:

I mean, has he seen your... hands and legs... your heaving bosom....your....Men are like wolves. Once they taste flesh, they turn into man-eaters. Anyone who has spent even one night with you.... Haven’t you heard how the man-eaters swallow even the blood soaked clothes of their victims. Human flesh is intoxicating. And the craze for human flesh is even more powerful in humans than it is among animals. (Goswami102)

It reveals the way how patriarchal societies commodify, objectify and dehumanize women, thus, reducing them to mere physical entities. This strips women of their individuality and humanity. It shows that “in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (Bartky 72). Lavanya reflects a societal construct in which men’s desires are predatory mirroring the violent instincts of wild animals. Lavanya’s response to Padmapriya’s accusation of being shameless – “I’ve learnt a lot, you know. I’ve learnt how the mind of a man works” (Goswami 102) reflects her understanding of patriarchal structures and the transactional nature of relationships within a male-dominated society. Lavanya’s response highlights the conflict between societal morality and personal survival. Padmapriya’s accusation of shamelessness reflects a conventional moral judgment that views women who step outside traditional roles as transgressive. To survive in a society where men hold disproportionate power, Lavanya has learned to adapt, even if it means conforming to or manipulating the very systems that tend to oppress women.

Padmapriya’s confrontation with Bhuvaneshwar disrupts the assumed passivity of the female body within patriarchal frameworks. Her undressing does not simply signify surrender. It rather exposes how deeply a woman’s sense of worth has been tethered to her physicality and desirability. Her “voluntary act” is shaped by a long history of conditioning in which the body becomes a medium through which women negotiate recognition, intimacy, and legitimacy within male-dominated relationships. However, this act cannot be reduced to mere submission. By choosing to use her body in her own ways, Padmapriya redirects the very logic that once confined her. Najar (2025) The body that had earlier functioned as a site of shame and scrutiny is reconfigured into an

instrument through which she asserts presence and control. The duality of constraint and agency reveals the complexity of her position, where resistance emerges from within the same structures that enable subjugation. It resonates with Judith Butler's argument in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), where the body is understood not as a neutral entity but as one already inscribed by social and cultural meanings. Padmapriya's act thus becomes legible as a disruption of normative expectations: she does not simply perform femininity as prescribed but reworks it to articulate a form of self-definition. She destabilizes the image of the compliant, enduring woman and instead portrays a subject who negotiates power on her own terms, even within limiting conditions.

Moreover, Padmapriya's revelation that the child in her womb does not belong to Bhuvaneshwar, despite luring him back through her body and forcing him to publicly claim paternity of the child is another example of how she weaponizes her body as an instrument of vengeance. She deliberately subverts traditional gender roles and the patriarchal control of women's bodies. By manipulating the very structures that sought to control and marginalize her, Padmapriya asserts her agency. By claiming Sambhudev as the father, Padmapriya shatters Bhuvaneshwar's sense of ownership over her body and their unborn child. This transforms her body from a site of vulnerability into one of rebellion. His inability to process the truth highlights how deeply his sense of self and honor is tied to his control over Padmapriya's body. She disrupts the status-quo, leaving him powerless and humiliated in the same way her rejection and isolation left her. The tables are turned and the reversal of roles exposes the fragility of patriarchal constructs that is based upon the silence and subjugation of women.

Padmapriya's encounter with Bhuvaneshwar shows how desire becomes a means of power rather than submission. Her act of seduction is neither impulsive nor purely emotional. It guides Bhuvaneshwar into a psychological and moral space where he becomes vulnerable. As he watches her, he slips into a trance-like state, imagining "the several forms of the Devi... materialising before his eyes" (Goswami 127). Padmapriya is no longer seen as an ordinary woman but as something charged with symbolic and almost divine force. Earlier marked by rejection and scrutiny, her body now becomes a source of authority. She mobilizes her sensuality not as an expression of submission, but as a strategy of control. She reverses the terms of power that once positioned her as inferior, turning herself into the one who plans and manipulates the encounter.

The comparison with figures like Kali and Bhairavi expands the meaning of her actions. Padmapriya's revenge exceeds the personal and takes on the quality of a larger reckoning. Like Bhairavi, who disrupts illusion and compels truth to surface, she leads Bhuvaneshwar toward a confrontation with his own guilt and moral failure. His ego, once secure within patriarchal privilege, is gradually undone. Through this process, Padmapriya moves beyond victimhood, asserting agency and reclaiming dignity while embodying a force that is both destructive and transformative.

Therefore, Goswami's portrayal of Padmapriya exposes the deep-seated inequities embedded within patriarchal society while simultaneously foregrounding a powerful narrative of resilience. What begins as a condition of marginalization shifts as Padmapriya reclaims authority over her own existence. She refuses to remain confined within definitions imposed by the society. Her body, once subjected to scrutiny and control, is reimagined as a site through which she negotiates power, desire, and self-expression. She disrupts the very structures that seek to regulate her identity. Her transformation not only redefines her relationship with her own body but also repositions it as an instrument of autonomy and resistance, enabling her to assert control over the narrative that once constrained her.

REFERENCES

1. Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Routledge, 1990.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2011.
3. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
4. Effendi, R. (2024). Politics as A Path to Happiness (Reflections on Al-Fārābī's Islamic Social and Political Philosophy), *ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies*, 1(1), 54–62. <https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v1.i1.2024.7>
5. Freud, Sigmund. "Recollection, Repetition and Working through". In *Therapy and Technique*. Collier books, 1963, pp. 157 – 166.
6. Gilbert, Paul. "Body shame: A biopsychosocial conceptualisation and overview with treatment implication". In Paul Gilbert & Jeremy N. V. Miles (Eds.). *Body Shame: Conceptualisation, Research and Treatment*, Routledge, 2002, pp. 3-54.
7. Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, 1963.
8. Goswami, Indira. "The Game of Bhairavi", in Mamoni Raisom Goswami & Her Fictional World- The Search for the Sea, compiled by Kaikous Burjor Satarawala, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2002, pp. 94-128.
9. Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
10. Jayswal, B. K. (2025). The History of the Ram temple and 21st-Century Politics: A Socio-Political Analysis of the Temple Movement, *ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies*, 2(2), 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v2.i2.2025.45>
11. Lewis, Michael. *Shame: The exposed self*. New York: Free Press, 1992.
12. Najar, M.A. (2025). From Closet to Stream: The Politics of Queer Representation in Post-Section 377 Indian Web Series, *ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social*

Studies, 2(2), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhshreejan.v2.i2.2025.20>

13. Vikan A., Hassel, A. M., Rugset, A., Johansen, H. E., & Moen, T. (2010). “A test of shame in

outpatients with emotional disorder”. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 64, 2010, pp. 196-202.

..