

I Am a World of Narratives: Feminine Perspectives in Modern Indian English Literature

*¹Dr Seema Arora ²Dr Madhu Kamra ³Dr Gurpreet Singh Saund ⁴Dr Anil Manjhi

¹Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, Shri Shankaracharya Institute of Professional Management and Technology, Raipur, 492015

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Durga Mahavidyalaya, Raipur, 4920215

³Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Shri Shankaracharya Institute of Professional Management and Technology, Raipur, 492015

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Science, National Institute of Technology Raipur, 492015

Abstract

This paper examines the feminist perspectives in contemporary Indian English literature through the works of Arundhati Roy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* are critical lenses for exploring gender dynamics, societal norms, and the challenges faced by women within patriarchal structures. Roy's narrative delves into the harsh realities of gender inequality and the systemic oppression faced by women in Kerala, showcasing the severe repercussions of transgressing societal boundaries. Similarly, Divakaruni reimagines the epic figure of Panchaali, highlighting her quest for identity and resistance against patriarchal dominance. Through detailed analysis of character experiences and societal critiques, the paper underscores how both authors use their narratives to challenge traditional gender roles, critique historical injustices, and advocate for a redefined understanding of women's agency and empowerment. This study reveals the significant contributions of Indian women writers in reshaping literary traditions and addressing gender-based injustices, offering insights into the ongoing relevance of feminist discourse in modern literature.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Gender Equality, Oppression, Contemporary Literature, Transgression

Corresponding author: s.arora@ssipmt.com

Introduction

Indian English literature has consistently aimed to capture and analyze the experiences and observations of the world today. While many male authors have touched upon gender issues in their works, the contributions of female authors stand out significantly. By the mid-nineteenth century, Indian women had begun writing in English, carving out a distinct place in the literary landscape. These pioneering women have left an indelible mark on the country's literary canon and are recognized as monumental figures in the history of English literature. Their writings often strive to free female readers from men's historical dominance over their gender. Gender-related themes, whether traditional or feminist, resonate universally. Female authors, often marginalized, challenge the predominantly male literary tradition, using their voices to critique and redefine societal norms. As women began writing poems, stories, and novels in English, their works not only became more prevalent but also sparked significant debate. Women's

contributions to society are indispensable; no nation can truly progress without the active and equal participation of women. Despite variations across time and culture, women have historically been denied full equality with men. Their role as life-givers has often confined them to domestic spheres, perpetuating a struggle for recognition within conservative societies.

The value of women in society is undeniable, as reflected in the adage that likens a man's life without a woman to a flower without fragrance, a ship without a rudder, or a body without energy. Traditionally, a good woman has been equated with a loyal wife, embodying the virtues of purity and devotion, much like the mythological figures Sita and Savitri. The extensive body of Indian English literature thoroughly addresses feminist themes. Feminism encompasses cultural, economic, and political movements that seek to ensure women's legal rights and full equality. Indian women writers have made concerted efforts to evaluate the social conditions of their time, albeit on a modest scale. Numerous Indian authors have penned works that expose the discrimination and inequality women endure in Indian society. These English-language narratives offer an accurate portrayal of women's lives in India, emphasizing the traditional expectation that women should depend on their fathers in childhood, their husbands in youth, and their children in old age. The notion that a woman should not strive for independence if she lacks male relatives underscores the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that continue to influence societal norms.

Literature Review

The entry of women into Indian English literature can be traced back to the colonial period when early female authors began to articulate their experiences and perspectives in English—a language that was once the preserve of the British elite. Writers like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu were among the first to break through patriarchal barriers, using English to express themes of love, loss, and identity complexities (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). The question of identity has been central to the works of modern Indian female authors. Writers such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande have explored the inner lives of women, delving into conflicts between tradition and modernity, self and society, and the public and private spheres (Devika, 2006; Desai, 1982). These narratives often focus on the struggles of women to assert their individuality in a society that frequently imposes restrictive roles upon them. For example, Kamala Das's poetry and autobiographical writings candidly explore female sexuality and the quest for selfhood, challenging societal norms and expectations (Das, 2009). Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* are prime examples of how cultural contexts shape the experiences and identities of their female protagonists (Lahiri, 2013; Roy, 1997). These works critically examine how cultural expectations confine women, often leading to a sense of alienation and loss. Lahiri and Roy use their narratives to question and critique cultural practices that continue to marginalize women (Dodiya, 2006). A significant strand of modern Indian English literature involves feminist reinterpretations of myths and traditional narratives. Authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane have reimagined the lives of mythological women, presenting them as complex, multidimensional characters with agency and autonomy (Divakaruni, 2008; Kane, 2013). These reinterpretations challenge the traditional depictions of women in Indian mythology, offering alternative narratives that empower rather than subjugate (Jain, 2019).

Indian women writers have also used their narratives to address pressing social and political issues, particularly those affecting women. Mahasweta Devi's works, for instance, focus on the plight of marginalized women, including tribal women and those oppressed by feudal systems (Devi, 1997). Her stories bring to light the intersectional nature of oppression, where gender,

caste, and class combine to create unique challenges for women. Similarly, Manju Kapur's novels explore themes of domestic violence, reproductive rights, and the struggles of women in the face of rigid societal norms (Kapur, 1998). Another important theme in modern Indian English literature is the role of women in nation-building. The works of authors like Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya highlight the contributions of women to India's political and social landscapes (Sahgal, 1985; Markandaya, 1954). These narratives often depict women as active participants in the struggle for independence and the subsequent efforts to shape the nation's future, challenging the notion that women should only play supporting roles in society (Sunder Rajan, 1993).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on textual analysis to explore the representation of feminine perspectives in modern Indian English literature. The research is primarily descriptive and interpretative, aiming to understand how gender dynamics and feminist ideologies are articulated through literary works by Indian women authors. The study examines various literary texts, critical essays, and scholarly articles to gather a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The selection is purposive, focusing on works that explicitly deal with themes of gender, identity, and feminism. The exploration of feminine perspectives in modern Indian English literature uncovers a multifaceted engagement with gender, identity, and resistance against patriarchal norms. Indian women writers have utilized literature as a powerful medium to articulate their experiences, challenge societal expectations, and offer alternative narratives that foreground women's voices. This section analyses key themes and insights derived from selected texts, illustrating how these writers contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and feminism.

Rewriting Gender Narratives

Indian women writers have significantly contributed to the reimagining of gender narratives, often challenging and subverting traditional roles assigned to women. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi, a pivotal female character who is traditionally portrayed within the confines of patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni's Draupadi, however, is depicted as a strong, independent woman who questions her fate and seeks to assert her agency in a male-dominated world. This reinterpretation not only challenges the conventional portrayal of women in mythology but also empowers the character by giving her a voice to narrate her own story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delves deeply into women-centred themes, consistently portraying her female characters as bold figures challenging societal constraints. Her novels frequently address the struggles of women seeking to redefine their identities against the backdrop of traditional norms. In her reimagining of Panchaali, known as Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni presents her as a modern woman battling against the patriarchal structures that have historically oppressed women.

Panchaali's struggle for identity begins from her birth. Emerging from the holy fire with her twin brother, she is introduced to the world with a sense of unwelcome. The names given to her and her brother reflect this patriarchal dominance: while her brother is named Dhristadyumna, meaning "Destroyer of Enemies," Panchaali is named Draupadi, "Daughter of Drupad" (5). Panchaali's desire for a name reflecting her own heroism—"one who was supposed to change history"—is an early indication of her resistance to her father's authoritative expectations (5). She reclaims her identity by calling herself Panchaali, Queen of

Panchal, thus challenging her father's ego and the constraints imposed upon her. From a young age, Panchaali's quest for identity is thwarted by her father's dominance. His treatment of her is marked by isolation: "I could not forgive him for that initial rejection" (6). He confines her within the palace, which she describes as a "gold bar cage," reflecting her discontent with her restrictive environment (6). This depiction underscores the patriarchal control that pervades her life. To escape her father's oppression, Panchaali dreams of a different existence, one where she is free and powerful.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchaali challenges traditional values that restrict women within a patriarchal society. Ancient epics, according to Divakaruni, highlight men's grand achievements while sidelining women's contributions. Panchaali's attempt to learn war techniques is rejected by her father, who believes a Kshatriya woman's role is limited to supporting the male warriors in her life (26). Panchaali's refusal to accept this limitation signifies her determination to alter the historical narrative for women. The novel criticizes how tradition and culture have historically imprisoned women. Through Panchaali's story, Divakaruni questions the persistence of such oppressive systems. Panchaali is depicted as a resilient figure who confronts and challenges these ingrained norms. By re-narrating the epic tale, Divakaruni makes it accessible for readers to connect past cultural practices with contemporary issues.

Patriarchal views consider women as property of their fathers and husbands. This attitude is reflected in King Drupad's treatment of Panchaali during her swayamvar (marriage contest). Panchaali perceives the swayamvar as a political manoeuvre rather than a personal choice: "Why even call it swayamvar, then?" I cried, "Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry" (56). This sentiment highlights how her marriage is exploited for political gain, underscoring the patriarchal exploitation inherent in the practice. Panchaali's life diverges significantly from other women's experiences. Her love for Karna, who is excluded from the swayamvar, and her subsequent forced marriage to the Pandava brothers reflect the patriarchal disregard for her autonomy. She is treated as an object in the game of dice, which leads to her public humiliation. Her husbands' failure to defend her and her vow for revenge against the Kauravas further exemplify her struggle. Despite her lack of agency in the traditional sense, Panchaali's determination to seek justice showcases her strength and resilience. Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchaali not only highlights the challenges faced by women but also their enduring spirit in confronting and overcoming patriarchal constraints. Through this retelling, readers gain insight into the historical and cultural dynamics shaping women's roles, both in ancient times and in the modern era.

Challenging Patriarchal Structures

Indian women writers have often critiqued patriarchal structures and the systemic marginalization of women. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) serves as a prominent example of this critique, particularly through its portrayal of gender, caste, and social norms in Kerala. The novel vividly illustrates the repercussions faced by female characters, such as Ammu, who transgress societal boundaries, thereby revealing the stringent control imposed by patriarchal systems. Roy's narrative underscores the severe consequences for women who defy these norms, often encountering violence and ostracism, thus reflecting the entrenched gender inequalities within Indian society (Roy, 1997).

N. P. Singh, in “Women in The God of Small Things,” observes that the older generation of women tends to resist entrenched patriarchal norms, which is reflected in their limited freedoms under male dominance (Singh, 65). In the Ayemenam household, women’s autonomy is severely restricted by male authority. For instance, Mammachi’s relationship with her husband, Pappachi, is characterized by male dominance, as Pappachi believes in asserting authority over his wife. He views marriage as a means for men to exert control over women, treating Mammachi more like a servant than a partner. His jealousy over Mammachi’s success as a businesswoman leads him to abuse her physically, displaying a disregard for her well-being (Roy, 1997). Mammachi’s suffering is indicative of the broader pattern of abuse faced by many women in various societies. Her silence in the face of Pappachi’s abuse reflects the broader silence imposed on women who endure torture without speaking out. Despite her talent as a violinist, Mammachi’s achievements are undermined by Pappachi’s jealousy, culminating in his preventing her from furthering her musical education. When her son Chacko attempts to intervene, Pappachi’s response is to sever all communication with Mammachi, further isolating her (Singh, 65).

Nirmala C. Prakash’s “Man-Woman Relationship in The God of Small Things” highlights Pappachi’s view of marriage as one of control and oppression. Prakash points out that Pappachi’s perception of marriage reflects a broader patriarchal attitude where a wife is viewed as a subordinate who can be mistreated without consequence (Prakash, 180). Roy depicts Mammachi’s eventual submission to these societal expectations, portraying her acceptance of the submissive female role model imposed upon her (Roy, 56). Baby Kochamma, Pappachi’s sister, represents another victim of patriarchal oppression. Her unfulfilled love for Father Mulligan and subsequent conversion to Roman Catholicism illustrate her struggle to conform to societal expectations of marriage and love. Despite her personal disillusionment, Baby Kochamma adheres to traditional views and perpetuates societal norms by conspiring against Velutha, an untouchable, which results in his brutal death. Her actions reflect the internalized oppression and resentment stemming from her own experiences of betrayal and societal rejection (Roy, 1997).

In “Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things: A Study in Feminine Sensibility and Aspects of Style,” Pratibha Vermain describes the women in the novel as being constrained by a patriarchal society where men dominate and oppress women (Vermain, 180). Ammu, the novel’s central female character, faces discrimination despite her education. Her father’s refusal to support her higher education and the preferential treatment given to her brother Chacko highlight the gender biases within her family. Ammu’s lack of opportunities and her eventual forced return to her parents’ home underscores the societal limitations imposed on women (Roy, 38). Ammu’s subsequent marriage to a man who mistreats her further exemplifies her struggle against a male-dominated society. Despite knowing the societal risks, she defies traditional norms by engaging in a relationship with Velutha, an untouchable. This defiance leads to severe consequences, including her ostracism and eventual death. Roy portrays Ammu’s rebellion against social norms and the harsh punishment she faces as a consequence, including her final indignities and exclusion from a proper burial (Roy, 1997).

Feminine Identity and Self-Realization

The journey toward self-realization and the quest for identity are recurring themes in the works of Indian women writers. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013) delves into the inner lives of its female characters, particularly Gauri, who struggles with her roles as a wife and mother after a series of personal tragedies. Gauri’s decision to leave her family to pursue her

intellectual aspirations reflects her rejection of traditional expectations and her pursuit of self-identity beyond the confines of her gender. Lahiri's exploration of Gauri's complex psyche highlights the challenges faced by women who seek to redefine themselves outside of societal norms (Lahiri, 2013). *The Lowland* spans nearly fifty years, unfolding across Tollygunge and Rhode Island. Tollygunge, once significant during the British East India Company era, became a notable locale when the widows and children of Tipu Sultan were imprisoned there following his defeat in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. After their release, they were allocated plots in Tollygunge, which, over time, evolved into a predominantly Muslim neighborhood as the English shifted focus back to central Calcutta Rhode Island, a small U.S. state, is characterized by its geographical features: "mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, with land predominantly to the south and west".

The novel juxtaposes these two locales, reflecting the dual facets of its author's identity—her Bengali heritage and her Rhode Island upbringing. The narrative traverses from the middle-class neighbourhoods of Calcutta to the academic environment of Rhode Island, centring around two pivotal events: one in Kolkata in 1971 and the other in Rhode Island twelve years later. Readers do not need to be in a specific location or time to resonate with the novel's emotional depth or to empathize with its characters' heartache and struggles. However, familiarity with Calcutta, renamed Kolkata to shed colonial remnants, or having experienced the feeling of displacement and grappling with profound events can enrich their reading experience. Understanding the sense of living between worlds, disconnected yet tied to one's place of origin, adds a layer of connection to the narrative.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri vividly depicts the once modest, now faded grandeur of Tollygunge. This city has witnessed numerous political shifts, communal violence, and the repercussions of colonial mismanagement. Lahiri's portrayal immortalizes Tollygunge, presenting it as a living entity marked by historical turbulence. Through this depiction, Lahiri critiques how modernity often overshadows historical legacies, emphasizing the interconnectedness of past upheavals with present realities. Lahiri's narrative masterfully revives the essence of Calcutta, portraying it as a complex, enchanting, and flawed city. Readers are guided through its affluent neighborhoods and impoverished slums, discovering stories of struggle and triumph that define the city's spirit. The novel also reflects on the impact of globalization, contrasting the forgotten struggles of earlier generations with the contemporary rush towards progress. Lahiri's exploration of identity and place resonates across different experiences, whether set in Rhode Island or Tollygunge, and regardless of historical movements such as the SDS or Naxalite agitation. The novel prompts readers to revisit their roots, reflecting on their personal histories and the values that bind them. Through *The Lowland*, Lahiri provides a poignant reminder of one's origins and the enduring connections to a place and culture that shape personal identity.

Conclusion

The exploration of feminist perspectives in modern Indian English literature, as exemplified by the works of Arundhati Roy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, unveils a rich artistry of gender dynamics and societal critique. Both authors, through their vivid and nuanced narratives, illuminate the complexities of female experiences within patriarchal and traditional frameworks, challenging established norms and advocating for a reimagined understanding of women's roles. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents a critical examination of caste, gender, and social norms in Kerala, showcasing how patriarchal structures inflict severe consequences on women who transgress societal boundaries. Through characters like Ammu and Baby Kochamma, Roy underscores the harsh realities of gender inequality and the systemic

oppression faced by women. Ammu's struggles, from her father's neglect to her abusive marriage and eventual ostracism, reveal the deep-seated misogyny embedded in both familial and societal structures. Roy's narrative not only highlights these injustices but also critiques the ways in which societal norms perpetuate the marginalization of women.

Similarly, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a feminist reimagining of the epic figure of Panchaali, exploring her quest for identity and resistance against patriarchal dominance. By focusing on Panchaali's experiences, Divakaruni critiques the traditional values that confine women and the systemic barriers that hinder their self-expression and autonomy. Panchaali's rejection by her father, her constrained existence within the palace, and her ultimate defiance of patriarchal norms underscore the novel's thematic concern with women's struggle for self-definition and agency. Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchaali challenges the historical narrative of female subjugation and emphasizes the need for a re-examination of gender roles and societal expectations. Both Roy and Divakaruni utilize their narratives to reflect on broader themes of female empowerment and societal change. Roy's depiction of gender-based violence and societal control in *The God of Small Things* serves as a critique of the patriarchal systems that perpetuate such inequalities. The novel's portrayal of the repercussions faced by women who defy societal norms reveals the pervasive nature of gender discrimination and its impact on individual lives. On the other hand, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a revisionist perspective on historical narratives, using Panchaali's story to question and challenge the traditional roles assigned to women. By giving voice to Panchaali's inner struggles and resistance, Divakaruni underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the historical and cultural forces that shape women's experiences.

The comparative analysis of these works highlights the significant contributions of Indian women writers in reshaping literary narratives and addressing gender-based injustices. Both Roy and Divakaruni engage with historical and cultural contexts to critique the limitations imposed on women and to advocate for a more equitable understanding of gender roles. Their novels not only offer a window into the lived experiences of women in different contexts but also encourage readers to reflect on the ongoing relevance of these issues in contemporary society. In conclusion, the feminist perspectives presented in the works of Arundhati Roy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni provide a powerful critique of patriarchal structures and offer a reimagined vision of women's roles in society. Through their compelling narratives and nuanced portrayals, these authors challenge traditional norms and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender. Their contributions to modern Indian English literature underscore the importance of continuing to question and address gender-based injustices, both within literary traditions and in broader societal contexts.

Work Cited:

- Das, K. (2009). *My Story*. Harper Collins Publishers.
- Desai, A. (1982). *Clear Light of Day*. Vintage.
- Devi, M. (1997). *Imaginary Maps*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Routledge.
- Devika, J. (2006). *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Kerala*. Orient Longman.
- Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). *The Palace of Illusions*. Doubleday.
- Dodiya, J. (2006). *Perspectives on Jhumpa Lahiri*. Sarup & Sons.
- Jain, J. (2019). *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. SAGE Publications.

- Kane, K. (2013). *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Rupa Publications.
- Kapur, M. (1998). *Difficult Daughters*. Faber and Faber.
- Lahiri, J. (2013). *The Lowland*. Knopf.
- Markandaya, K. (1954). *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin Classics.
- Roy, A. (1997). *The God of Small Things*. Random House.
- Sahgal, N. (1985). *Rich Like Us*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Sunder Rajan, R. (1993). *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (1991). *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. The Feminist Press.
- Singh, N.P. "Women in The God of Small Things." Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary, edited by R.K. Dhawan. Sangam books, 1999, pp.65-70.
- Prakash, Nirmala C. "Man-Woman Relationship in *The God of Small Things*." Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary, edited by R.K. Dhawan. Sangam books, 1999, pp.77-83.
- Verma, Pratibha. "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Study in Feminine Sensibility and Aspects of Style." Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary, edited by R.K. Dhawan. Sangam books, 1999, pp. 180-187.