



Patriarchy, Power, And Body Politics In Contemporary Indian Fiction

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Abstract- This paper critically explores the intersections of patriarchy, power, and body politics in contemporary Indian English fiction. Patriarchy is such a Society in which more importance is given to man than woman. In Indian society, except some parts, has been patriarchal from olden times. In Indian society which is primarily patriarchal in which men's population is around 52% and women are around 48%. Man holds all powers so he wants to control a woman but in present times of equality a woman has recognized her potential as an individual. Contemporary Indian fiction frequently explores the interplay of patriarchy, power, and body politics, showcasing how patriarchal structures influence women's lives and their relationship with their bodies. Authors examine how patriarchal norms, particularly within family structures, caste systems, and societal expectations, shape women's identities, restrict their agency, and perpetuate their subjugation. These narratives also highlight the struggles of women to reclaim their bodies and challenge the imposed control through various forms of resistance. In a male-dominated society a man wants complete control on his wife but she doesn't want to be controlled. Drawing on texts by authors such as Meena Kandasamy, Arundhati Roy, Perumal Murugan, and Anita Nair, this study reveals how the Indian novel becomes a powerful medium for negotiating issues of gender, sexuality, caste, and corporeality. It argues that contemporary Indian fiction not only critiques hegemonic structures but also reimagines the body as a site of resistance and empowerment.

Keywords- Patriarchy, Body Politics, Indian Fiction, Gender, Power, Resistance, Caste, Feminism.

I. Introduction

Indian English fiction has been an essential medium for critiquing patriarchal systems in Indian culture. Authors like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sehgal's writings prominently featured feminist themes. These writers depicted women's battles with social expectations, family dynamics, and traditional roles. Themes like individuality, sexual autonomy, girl child, education, and gender discrimination are all explored in depth by contemporary Indian English fiction writers like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, and Jhumpa Lahiri. The landscape of contemporary Indian fiction, the body particularly the female body emerges as a powerful symbol, a site where larger ideological conflicts are inscribed. Issues of control, representation, sexuality, and violence converge on the body, exposing the ways



in which power operates within a deeply patriarchal and caste-bound society. Contemporary Indian writers have increasingly turned to the body not just as a narrative subject, but as a terrain of struggle between tradition and modernity, suppression and freedom, silence and voice. This paper explores how patriarchy and power regulate bodies, and how these same bodies are used to resist such control in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Objectives:

- To examine how social norms, familial expectations, and cultural traditions marginalize women in patriarchal system.
- To analyse the ways in which female characters either defy or comply with patriarchal expectations and traditional gender roles.
- To investigate how the patriarchal ideology acts as a regulatory form of power in the selected story.
- To examine the ways women are objectified, and women's bodies are commodified for the perpetuation of patriarchy.
- To investigate the ways women's bodies are inscribed with traditional and cultural signifiers, which are then exploited and are oppressive.

II. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Body Politics and Patriarchy

Body politics involves the control and representation of bodies within social, political, and cultural frameworks. Michel Foucault's notion of "biopower" explains how modern institutions regulate bodies to maintain order. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity demonstrates how gender is not inherent but produced through repeated bodily acts governed by societal expectations.

In the Indian context, patriarchy is further complicated by caste, religion, and postcoloniality. The female and Dalit bodies are doubly marginalized subject to systemic violence and surveillance. Therefore, analysing literature through the lens of body politics unveils how authors critique these hegemonies and rewrite the possibilities of embodied existence.

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (2017) autobiographical novel is a searing portrayal of domestic abuse and marital rape. The protagonist's body is systematically brutalized, not only through physical violence but through ideological control. Her husband dictates what she eats, wears, reads, and writes, turning her body into a battleground for ideological domination. Yet, Kandasamy does not dwell solely on victimhood. The protagonist ultimately reclaims her body and voice, asserting that writing becomes an act of bodily liberation. By narrating her trauma, she exposes the intimate link between bodily control and patriarchal power structures.

III. The Female Body as a Site of Patriarchal Control

In Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, the protagonist's body becomes the battlefield for patriarchal violence. The abusive husband exerts control through sexual violence, gaslighting, and isolation. Her pain is both physical and emotional, but the novel refuses to portray her as merely a victim.



Kandasamy uses the act of writing as resistance. The narrator's decision to tell her story despite threats and shame is a reclaiming of her body and autonomy.

Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* portrays Ammu, a woman whose body is policed by both family and society. Her illicit relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, is seen as a defiance of not only sexual norms but also caste boundaries. Ammu's body is thus doubly transgressive, leading to her social ostracization. The novel challenges how patriarchal and casteist ideologies conflate bodily autonomy with moral judgment.

IV. The Dalit Woman's Body and Structural Violence

Dalit women face what sociologist Gopal Guru calls "the triple burden" of caste, class, and gender. Their bodies are sites of not only symbolic violence but also real physical harm. Bama's *Karukku* a seminal autobiographical text portrays the experiences of a Dalit Christian woman navigating institutions that are oppressive despite their proclaimed spiritual neutrality. The narrative exposes how religious and educational institutions perpetuate caste discrimination and control bodily expression.

Bama's language, her vivid description of walking barefoot to school or being forced into physical labor, demonstrates how caste hierarchies are etched into bodily experience. Yet *Karukku* is also a text of resilience the narrator's spiritual and bodily awakening becomes a journey of resistance and dignity.

V. Fertility, Sexuality, and the Reproductive Body

In Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, translated from Tamil, the female body is viewed through the lens of fertility. Ponna, the protagonist, is stigmatized for her inability to conceive. The society and even her husband internalize the patriarchal norm that equates a woman's worth with her reproductive capacity. The novel explores how the childless woman's body is scrutinized, judged, and eventually subjected to ritual exploitation.

However, Ponna's story is not merely one of submission. Her refusal, in the climax, to comply with societal norms, is a quiet but radical assertion of bodily integrity. Murugan critiques the commodification of the female body in the name of tradition, religion, and marriage.

VI. Age, Desire, and Female Embodiment

Indian English fiction explores the complexities of age, desire, and female embodiment, often reflecting societal expectations and challenging traditional norms. Female characters in these narratives grapple with issues of self-discovery, societal pressures, and the construction of identity within patriarchal structures. Literature often depicts women navigating their desires, negotiating power dynamics, and striving for agency within their specific contexts.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* question the desexualization of older women and confront stereotypes that deny them desire or agency. In *Ladies Coupé*, the protagonist Akhila listens to women's stories of bodily awakening and learns to assert her own needs. In *Tomb of Sand*, the elderly protagonist seeks a life beyond maternal or widow roles. Her journey to Pakistan, and her



experience with love and independence, is symbolic of reclaiming her body from cultural decay and invisibility.

These texts dismantle the belief that female bodies are either reproductive or nurturing. They imagine new bodily possibilities beyond age, role, or utility.

Markandaya, gives a vivid description of the social customs and traditions and shows how these are responsible for the sufferings of women. In her other novels such as *A Silence of Desire*, she addresses the issues of social class of India and the controversies surrounding the social hierarchy. In *Two Virgins*, Lalitha the more adventures and extrovert of the two sisters, is resentful of her backward family and the constricting village ethos. Thus her women, by and large, are conservative and traditional in outlook. But most of her women manage to be independent in thinking while performing their traditional roles.

Markandey has chosen first- person-narration in most of her novels. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmani, who is both an observer and participant, recollects her tale in a reminiscent mood and looks at herself as a young girl of 12. In the words of S. John Peter Joseph, “The novel portrays travails of Rukmani who faces crises in life with exceptional courage and extraordinary confidence. As a typical Indian woman she is a loving wife to Nathan, an admirable mother to her children and a helping woman to her neighbours. With an uncommon spiritual and mental strength she absorbs all miseries and misfortunes that come her way. As an embodiment of invincible optimism and hope she resolutely fights against the social and the economic forces which crush her and her family malignantly”.

VII. Queer Bodies and Non-Normative Sexualities

Contemporary Indian fiction is beginning to explore the realities of queer bodies, which face legal, social, and familial forms of control. Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* features Anjum, a Hijra (transgender woman), whose body defies binary classification. Her identity is criminalized by the state, shunned by her family, and marginalized even among the marginalized.

Yet, Anjum’s story is not tragic. Roy gives her dignity and complexity, portraying her body not as a spectacle but as a site of revolutionary living. The novel critiques how the state and society erase or fetishize queer identities, and it offers radical empathy as an antidote.

VIII. State Power and the Surveillance of Bodies

Power in Indian fiction is not always personal it is often systemic. State institutions, courts, police, and media monitor and discipline bodies. In Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as well as in Kandasamy’s *The Gypsy Goddess*, the body becomes a political symbol. Farmers, women, and activists are killed, jailed, or discredited through narratives of national security or social order.

These works ask how the state appropriates the right to life, choice, and expression especially for bodies that are female, queer, Dalit, or dissenting. Literature here becomes a counter-discourse, asserting that nobody should be invisible or expendable.



IX. Language, Pain, and Narrative Embodiment

When pain exceeds language, the body speaks. Contemporary authors use fragmented narratives, silences, and non-linear time to convey bodily trauma. In *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy's protagonist breaks conventional storytelling; her wounds are not told chronologically but emotionally. This narrative choice mirrors the bodily chaos she experiences.

Language becomes a medium of resistance as much as pain. Silence, screams, or even metaphors become substitutes for the unspeakable. Thus, literature not only narrates the body it becomes the body.

X. Conclusion: Reclaiming the Body, Rewriting Power

Contemporary Indian fiction reveals how patriarchy and power structure not only social relationships but the very perception and treatment of the body. However, it also demonstrates that literature is a site of reclamation. Through narrative embodiment, women, and marginalized individuals retake control over their representations, asserting that their bodies are not battlegrounds but territories of selfhood.

By exposing and challenging structures of control be they familial, societal, or state-based these works initiate a re-imagining of bodily politics. They demand that literature, like life, center the body not as an object to be subdued but as a subject to be liberated.

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