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**Gendered Exploitation in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary Indian women's writing serves as a vital critical lens exposing the pervasive reality of gendered exploitation within Indian society. This literature meticulously charts how systemic patriarchy, deeply intertwined with intersecting structures of caste hierarchy, class disparity, religious sanctions, and political disenfranchisement, creates unique vulnerabilities and mechanisms for the devaluation, control, commodification, and violation of women. Moving beyond portrayals of victimhood, it explores multifaceted manifestations: the domestic sphere as a site of unpaid labor, reproductive control, widow stigmatization, and property denial; the amplified oppression of Dalit women facing the "triple burden"; the failures of legal and political systems to provide justice; and the paradoxes of globalization bringing both opportunities and new forms of commodification and precarity. Ultimately, this body of work transcends documentation. It constitutes a powerful act of literary resistance, shattering silences, constructing counter-narratives of agency and solidarity, and functioning as both indispensable social critique and catalyst for feminist discourse and the struggle for gender equity, demanding recognition of women's inherent dignity and rights.

**Keywords:** Gendered Exploitation, Intersectionality, Literary Resistance.

**Introduction**

Contemporary Indian women's writing, spanning roughly from the late 20th century to the present and encompassing works in English and numerous Indian languages (often via translation), represents a vital literary landscape bearing witness to the complex realities of women navigating a society structured by patriarchal norms, intersecting inequalities, and rapid socio-economic change. A central theme within this corpus is gendered exploitation: the systemic ways in which women's bodies, labor, autonomy, and aspirations are devalued, controlled, commodified, and violated based on gender. Such exploitation is significantly intensified by the interlocking axes of caste, class, religion, region, sexuality, and urban or rural location. Moving beyond portrayals of victimhood, contemporary women writers employ diverse literary strategies to critique, explore, and resist these structures.

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**Gendered Exploitation in India**

Defining Gendered Exploitation in India requires an understanding of its roots in patriarchal power structures that permeate familial, social, economic, religious, and political spheres. It manifests as the systematic extraction of value—economic, social, sexual, reproductive, and emotional—from women and girls, justified by tradition, religion, or hierarchy, while denying them autonomy and equal rights. Crucially, this exploitation operates intersectionally: "Gendered exploitation is not merely about individual acts of discrimination but about systemic structures that enable the appropriation of women's resources and agency" (Chakravarti 15). As Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon note, patriarchal oppression varies according to "the specific relations of the political economy and the cultural and religious practices of a region" (3). For Dalit women, this manifests as a "triple burden of caste, class, and gender oppression, where sexual violence is often a tool of caste domination" (Rege 38).

Traditional Norms & Religious Sanctions provide ideological justifications for exploitation. Prescriptive roles like the dutiful daughter, self-sacrificing wife (*pativrata*), and nurturing mother confine women to the domestic sphere, valorizing service while erasing individual aspirations (Deshpande). Notions of female "purity" (*izzat*) and family honor render women's bodies symbolic territory, restricting mobility, dress, and sexuality. Veena Das observes, "The female body becomes the territory on which the honour of the male is inscribed" (55). Religious personal laws institutionalize inequality in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Flavia Agnes argues that despite reforms, "Hindu law continues to uphold the patriarchal family structure" (72), while similar critiques target interpretations of Muslim Personal Law (Engineer). Practices like dowry (a catalyst for domestic violence in texts like Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*), widow stigmatization, and menstrual taboos perpetuate economic exploitation and social control.

**Caste Hierarchy**

Caste Hierarchy fundamentally structures gendered exploitation. Dalit women face compounded oppression: the "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender. Their exploitation is exacerbated by perceived "impurity," as Bama Faustina's autobiography *Karukku* starkly illustrates. Sexual violence against Dalit women functions as a "tool of caste humiliation, subjugation, and assertion of power" (Rege, "Caste and Gender" 787). Economically, Dalit women are overrepresented in degraded labor: landless agricultural work under threat of sexual harassment by landlords, manual scavenging (caste-linked), and precarious domestic work (Kamble). Systemic denial of dignity, access to public resources (water, temples), and justice mechanisms reinforces vulnerability, documented powerfully in Dalit feminist testimonies like Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*.

Political & Legal Failures sustain exploitation despite constitutional guarantees. Laws prohibiting dowry, domestic violence, workplace harassment, and caste atrocities suffer from lax implementation, police apathy, and inadequate infrastructure. Patriarchal biases within the judiciary and police foster victim-blaming, trivialization of complaints, low conviction rates, and re-traumatization. Nivedita Menon critiques the gap between law and

reality: "The law... operates within a social and political context saturated with patriarchal values" (12). The complexity, cost, and stigma of legal processes render justice inaccessible for poor, rural, and marginalized women, ensuring perpetrator impunity (Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch). Women's rights issues are often cynically instrumentalized for political gain without genuine commitment to structural change.

Modernity & Globalization present a paradox, creating opportunities while exacerbating exploitation. Women's bodies face intensified commodification through global media and consumerism, narrow beauty standards, advertising, entertainment, and commercial surrogacy (Padmanabhan). New employment opportunities in globalized industries (garments, electronics, call centers) often trap women in precarious, low-wage jobs with poor conditions and harassment risks. Rising consumer aspirations ironically reinforce traditional roles; women face a heightened "double burden" of careers and uncompensated caregiving (Nair). Economic migration exposes women to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. Women navigating education and careers endure a double bind: criticized for abandoning "tradition" while expected to perform "modernity" (Hasan). Neoliberal policies eroding public services disproportionately impact women, increasing care burdens and insecurity (Roy).

Contemporary Indian women's writing thus maps the contours of gendered exploitation from intimate domestic violence to structural caste-class brutality, economic servitude to bodily violation. These texts shatter silences, challenge normalized oppression, and demand accountability, while constructing counter-narratives of agency, resistance, and solidarity.

### **The Domestic Sphere as a Site of Oppression**

The idealised concept of the home as a sanctuary often obscures its potential as a primary site of oppression, particularly for women and gender minorities. Within the domestic sphere, structures of power rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, and social norms manifest in multifaceted modes of control and exploitation. This essay examines key dimensions of this oppression: marital exploitation, motherhood and reproductive control, widowhood and stigmatization, land and property rights, and violence against the body.

The institution of marriage frequently entrenches gender inequalities through the unequal distribution of domestic labor. Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work (childcare, eldercare), housework, and emotional labor, activities essential for societal functioning yet consistently devalued and exploited. Marxist feminists argue this unpaid labor subsidizes capitalism by reproducing the workforce at minimal cost to the system (Federici). This "second shift" (Hochschild and Machung) limits women's economic independence, career advancement, leisure time, and personal autonomy, trapping them in roles defined by service to husbands and families. The expectation of this labor as a "natural" female duty normalizes its exploitation.

Oppression extends critically into the realm of motherhood and reproductive control. Motherhood, often idealized, becomes a site of oppression when women's reproductive choices are controlled. This control ranges from restricted access to contraception and

abortion (Ehrenreich and English) to coercive pronatalist policies and social pressures. Lack of reproductive autonomy forces women into motherhood, impacting their health, education, economic prospects, and life trajectories. Furthermore, the ideology of intensive motherhood demands constant, self-sacrificing devotion, creating unrealistic standards that lead to guilt, exhaustion, and the erasure of maternal subjectivity beyond the caregiver role (Hays). State and societal interventions often regulate marginalized women's reproduction more harshly, particularly women of color and those in poverty (Roberts).

The death of a spouse can trigger severe oppression for widows, particularly in patriarchal societies. Widows often face harmful cultural practices and stigmatization: labeled as inauspicious, blamed for their husband's death, subjected to degrading rituals, or ostracized from social and religious life (Chen). Economically, inheritance laws and customs frequently dispossess widows of marital property and land, leaving them destitute and dependent on often reluctant relatives. This "social death" adds to the trauma of bereavement, stripping widows of status, security, and agency.

Access to and control over land and property is fundamental to economic security and social power, yet women globally face significant barriers. Discriminatory laws, patrilineal inheritance customs, and male-dominated family structures often prevent women from claiming their rightful share upon marriage, divorce, or widowhood (Agarwal). This lack of tangible assets reinforces women's economic dependence on male relatives, limits their ability to leave abusive relationships, undermines their bargaining power within the household, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

Violence within the domestic sphere acts as the ultimate enforcer of this oppression, used to exert control, punish transgressions of gender norms, and enforce submission. Intimate partner violence (IPV), including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, is a global epidemic disproportionately affecting women (World Health Organization). Marital rape, often inadequately criminalized or normalized, represents a profound violation of bodily autonomy. This violence is not random but a tool to maintain patriarchal power structures within the supposedly private space of the home, where victims may be isolated and societal intervention is often minimal or ineffective.

The domestic sphere, far from being a neutral haven, is a critical terrain where systemic inequalities are reproduced and enforced. Marital exploitation extracts unpaid labor, reproductive control denies bodily autonomy, widowhood imposes social and economic penalties, discriminatory property rights enforce dependence, and violence acts as a terrifying enforcer of patriarchal order. Recognizing the home as a potential site of oppression is crucial for dismantling the structures that perpetuate gender-based inequality. True liberation requires challenging the devaluation of domestic labor, ensuring reproductive justice, securing equitable property rights, eliminating harmful widowhood practices, and eradicating domestic violence through legal, economic, and profound cultural change.

## **Conclusion**

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Contemporary Indian women's writing functions as a crucial literary mirror, reflecting the persistent and intricate realities of gendered exploitation woven into the fabric of Indian society. Moving beyond simple documentation, these narratives delve into the systemic roots of oppression, exposing how patriarchy intertwines with caste hierarchies, economic deprivation, religious dogma, and political disenfranchisement to create unique and amplified vulnerabilities for women across diverse social locations. Ultimately, contemporary Indian women's writing on gendered exploitation serves a dual purpose: it is an indispensable social critique, forcing a reckoning with deep-seated inequalities, and a dynamic catalyst for change. By amplifying marginalized voices and fostering critical consciousness, it not only bears witness to injustice but actively contributes to feminist discourse and the ongoing struggle for gender equity, demanding recognition of women's inherent dignity and rights within the nation's complex social landscape.

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