
Reimagining Masculinity and Ethical Responsibility in Indian Women's Fiction: A Post-Pandemic Perspective

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Abstract

The post pandemic moment has compelled literature to re-examine traditional ideas of strength, authority, and masculinity. In this context, Indian women fiction offers a powerful space to rethink how male identities are constructed and morally evaluated. This paper explores how Indian women writers reinterpret and question traditional ideas of masculinity in their fiction. While feminist criticism usually focuses on women's struggles and resistance, this study shifts attention to how male characters are portrayed through a female narrative perspective. It examines how masculinity is shown not as fixed or powerful, but as fragile, conflicted, and deeply shaped by social expectations. Beginning with Anita Desai's novels, where male characters often appear emotionally distant and psychologically troubled, the paper moves to contemporary writers who present masculinity as more complex and morally challenged. In many of these works, men are shown struggling with authority, identity, responsibility, and vulnerability. Such portrayals become especially meaningful in a post-pandemic context, where ideas of strength, control, and dominance have been questioned, and values like care, empathy, and ethical responsibility have gained importance. This paper argues that Indian women's fiction does not simply criticize patriarchy; it also opens space for alternative and more humane forms of masculinity. By presenting male characters who are flawed, anxious, or emotionally restrained, these writers challenge rigid gender roles and encourage a rethinking of morality and human relationships. Thus, the study connects literary representations of masculinity with broader discussions of humanity and ethical reconstruction in contemporary times.

Keywords: Masculinity; Ethical Responsibility; Indian women's Fiction, Post-pandemic literature; Gender studies.

Introduction

In what ways are male characters shown as emotionally rigid, morally authoritative, or socially controlling in women's fiction, and how do these traits reflect patriarchal conditioning? In Indian literary studies feminist literary criticism played a pivotal role. It has

traditionally focused on women's oppression, emancipation, and agency within patriarchal structures. While such studies have been crucial in foregrounding women's voices, it has often treated masculinity as fixed, invisible norm rather than a construct shaped by historical, cultural, and emotional pressures. In modern era, however, feminist theory has increasingly turned its attention toward masculinity- not to recentralize men, but to interrogate how patriarchal systems also produce fragile, conflicted, and class-ridden male identities. Indian women's fiction, in particular, offers a rich space for examining how masculinity is imagined, questioned and reconfigured from a feminist perspective. Feminist narratives often critique patriarchal male authority, revealing not only women's struggles but also the pressures, vulnerabilities, and contradictions faced by men in patriarchal societies. Understanding masculinity in this way provides a more holistic view of gender relations and highlights the relational dynamics that define social and personal identities.

In a world recovering from crisis, these novels remind us that true strength lies not in authority, but in vulnerability and moral courage. These Indian women novelists portray male characters as emotionally constrained, psychologically unstable, morally conflicted, or socially displaced figures. Rather than presenting masculinity as a symbol of unquestioned authority, these writers expose its vulnerabilities and contradictions. The renowned Indian female novelist Anita Desai depict male characters in her novels trapped by emotional repression and existential alienation; whereas another book prizier winner novelist Arundhati Roy presents masculinity as entangled with caste, power, violence, and political unrest; while popular recent novelist Kiran Desai and International booker prize winner author Banu Mushtaq foreground masculinity in contexts of globalization, migration, domestic violence, and ideological control. Together, these texts reveal masculinity not as dominance alone, but as a site of anxiety, failure, and transformation.

How do caste, class, religion, and regional culture shape masculine identities in Indian women's writing, particularly in translated texts like Heart Lamp?

By tracing representations of masculinity from late twentieth-century writers like Anita Desai to contemporary voices such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Banu Mushtaq this research highlights a clear shift in feminist literary engagement. Earlier novels often depict masculinity as emotionally withdrawn and internally fractured, whereas 21st-century texts confront more overt forms of patriarchal violence, narcissism, and ideological authoritarianism. At the same time, these narratives also gesture toward alternative, ethical, and emotionally responsive forms of masculinity, suggesting possibilities for gender relations beyond rigid binaries of power and submission.

Drawing on feminist theory, masculinity studies, and postcolonial criticism, this study argues that Indian women's fiction not only critiques patriarchy but also actively participates in redefining masculinity itself. By examining male characters through a feminist lens, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender as a relational and

evolving construct in Indian English literature. Indian English fiction has evolved significantly from the late 20th century to the present. Early feminist writers such as Anita Desai explored the psychological and emotional worlds of men and women, depicting male characters who are often constrained, fragile, or morally conflicted within patriarchal frameworks whereas Contemporary authors including Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Banu Mushtaq extend this critique in their works to encompass postcolonial anxieties, globalization, caste and class hierarchies, and domestic violence. Their narratives present masculinity as a site of crisis and negotiation, simultaneously offering feminist visions of agency, resistance, and alternative gender relations. By examining male identity across these temporal and thematic contexts, this study seeks to understand how Indian women writers critique, destabilize, and reimagine masculinity, shedding light on both continuity and transformation in feminist portrayals of gendered power. Thus, by exposing the fragility of hegemonic power and foregrounding moral reconstruction, these narratives transform masculinity from a symbol of control into a site of ethical renewal.

Indian women writers have consistently challenged the traditional construction of masculinity as rational, authoritative, and morally superior. In works by Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Banu Mushtaq, masculinity is exposed as emotionally fragile, ethically limited, and deeply shaped by social structures such as patriarchy and caste. Through psychological, political, and domestic narratives, these authors reimagine masculinity not as natural dominance but as a constructed identity requiring ethical responsibility.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai presents masculinity through the character of Gautama, who embodies intellectual detachment and emotional indifference. Gautama responds to his wife Maya's fear of death with philosophical abstraction rather than empathy. He treats her anxiety as irrational and insists on a calm acceptance of fate. His repeated withdrawal into books and reason symbolizes a masculine ideal that privileges logic over emotional engagement. However, Desai reveals the moral failure of such detachment. Gautama's inability to provide emotional reassurance contributes to Maya's psychological breakdown. Here, masculinity is not violent but neglectful—an absence of care disguised as rational superiority. Desai thus critiques patriarchal masculinity as emotionally incomplete and ethically irresponsible within intimate relationships.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy expands the critique of masculinity to the socio-political sphere. Characters such as Pappachi represent domestic tyranny masked by social respectability. His physical abuse of his wife reflects how patriarchal authority operates privately while maintaining public honour. Similarly, Chacko, despite claiming Marxist ideals, asserts sexual entitlement over female factory workers, exposing the hypocrisy of progressive masculine posturing. Roy famously describes the "Love Laws" that determine "who should be loved, and how," showing how caste and patriarchy regulate desire and punish transgression. Masculinity in Roy's novel is intertwined with caste

dominance and social violence. It becomes a mechanism of control that enforces hierarchy rather than justice. Through these portrayals, Roy dismantles the illusion of moral authority traditionally associated with men.

In *Heart Lamp*, Banu Mushtaq situates masculinity within everyday domestic and rural realities. Male characters often assert unquestioned authority within family structures, expecting obedience from women. However, Mushtaq complicates this authority by revealing its insecurity. When women assert autonomy or question control, male dominance appears fragile and threatened. Masculinity here is shown not as natural strength but as socially inherited behaviour reinforced by tradition and religion. By exposing its vulnerability, Mushtaq opens the possibility of transformation. Masculinity can shift from control to compassion if it relinquishes rigid authority. In nutshell, these writers reimagine masculinity as a constructed and unstable identity rather than a fixed norm. Whether through emotional detachment (Desai), caste-bound violence (Roy), or domestic authority (Mushtaq), hegemonic masculinity is shown to be ethically insufficient. Indian women's fiction therefore calls not merely for the criticism of men but for the reconstruction of masculinity into a more empathetic and morally responsible form.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together feminist literary criticism, masculinity studies, and translation studies. These critical approaches together enable a nuanced examination of how masculinity is constructed, questioned, and reimaged in Indian women's fiction across different historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

Feminist Literary Theory

What contribution does this feminist re-reading of masculinity make to Indian English literary studies and gender studies? Feminist literary theory forms the central foundation of this study. Traditional feminist criticism in Indian literature has focused on women's oppression, silencing, and resistance within patriarchal systems. Building on scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, bell hooks, and Judith Butler, this research extends feminist inquiry to examine masculinity not as a natural or stable identity, but as a product of patriarchal ideology. Feminist theory allows the study to analyse how women writers: Expose patriarchal power structures, reveal the emotional and psychological costs of male dominance through their works, critique marriage, family, caste, and institutional authority, use female narrative voice to destabilize masculine authority rather than centering men, this feminist approach uses masculinity as a lens to better understand gender relations and power dynamics.

Masculinity Studies

Do these novels challenge hegemonic masculinity by presenting alternative, vulnerable, or ethically responsible male identities?

This paper draws significantly on masculinity studies, particularly the concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by R. W. Connell. Hegemonic masculinity refers to

dominant ideals of manhood associated with authority, control, emotional restraint, and violence. This framework helps examine how male characters in Indian women's fiction attempt to conform to or fail within these expectations. The research also engages with ideas of male vulnerability and emotional repression Masculinity as performance (Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity) -these concepts are especially useful in analysing male characters in the works of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy, where masculinity appears fragile, conflicted, or internally fractured, as well as in Meena Kandasamy's and Banu Mushtaq's works, where masculinity often manifests through overt control and violence.

Intersectional Feminism

The study also incorporates intersectional feminism, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to analyse how masculinity intersects with caste, class, religion, region, and language. This approach is particularly relevant to Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, which foregrounds everyday patriarchal masculinity within specific religious and community settings.

Intersectionality allows the research to avoid universalizing masculinity and instead examine multiple, localized forms of male power and vulnerability across different social contexts.

Translation Studies

What role does language and narrative voice play in constructing masculinity in translated feminist texts compared to English-language novels?

Since *Heart Lamp* is a translated text, the research draws on translation studies, particularly feminist translation theory. This framework helps explore how masculine authority, domestic power, and gendered language travel across linguistic boundaries, and how translation makes regional feminist critiques accessible to a wider readership.

Translation theory thus expands the scope of the study beyond English-language novels, emphasizing the importance of regional women's voices in shaping feminist debates on masculinity in India. By combining these theoretical approaches, the study moves beyond a single-disciplinary reading and offers a layered feminist analysis of masculinity in Indian women's fiction. The framework allows the research to demonstrate how masculinity is not a fixed identity, but a historically and culturally produced construct that is continually questioned and reshaped within feminist literary narratives.

Conclusion

In reimagining masculinity not as dominance but as ethical responsibility, Indian women's fiction ultimately invites us to rebuild gender relations on the foundations empathy, accountability, and shared humanity. But the post-pandemic moment has urged literature to reconsider the foundations of power, authority, and moral responsibility. In this context, Indian women's fiction offers a significant re-evaluation of masculinity. Through their narratives, women writers challenge the assumption that masculinity is naturally dominant, emotionally controlled, and ethically unquestionable. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai portrays masculinity as emotionally distant and psychologically fragile. Gautama's intellectual detachment and inability to engage empathetically reveal not strength but moral

failure within the domestic sphere. Masculinity here appears rigid and disconnected from human vulnerability. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy exposes the violent and oppressive dimensions of patriarchal and caste-based masculinity. Male authority is intertwined with social power, yet it ultimately produces moral breakdown and human suffering. Roy's narrative suggests that masculinity rooted in dominance leads not to stability but to ethical collapse. In contrast, *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq foregrounds everyday lives where masculinity is shaped by socio-economic pressures and cultural expectations. Here, male figures are not merely oppressors but individuals constrained by rigid gender roles, revealing the possibility of transformation through empathy and relational accountability. In nutshell, these texts demonstrate that Indian women's fiction does not simply critique patriarchy; it reimagines masculinity as ethically responsible and emotionally aware. In a post-pandemic world that has exposed the fragility of dominant identities, such literary representations become deeply relevant. By shifting the focus from authority to humanity, from dominance to moral reconstruction, these writers contribute to a more compassionate and ethically grounded understanding of gender.

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