

**Reading Minds: Cognitive Literary Approaches to Consciousness in
Contemporary Indian Fiction**

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Abstract:

Cognitive literary studies examine how fiction represents thought, memory, emotion, and perception. Scholars such as Lisa Zunshine, David Herman, and Alan Palmer have shown how readers infer beliefs and intentions while following a narrative. Much of this work, however, draws on British, American, and European fiction. Contemporary Indian writing offers a different field of study because it often connects individual consciousness with caste, gender, family, language, religion, migration, and historical violence.

This paper studies consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. It focuses on fragmented chronology, unreliable narration, shifting focalization, memory, and representations of interior life. These novels ask readers to interpret the minds of characters, but they also show how social power affects whose thoughts are believed and whose experiences are dismissed. Cognitive narratology becomes more useful in the Indian context when it is combined with postcolonial, feminist, caste, affect, and memory studies. The paper therefore argues for a situated cognitive poetics that treats consciousness as social, embodied, historically shaped, and culturally mediated.

Keywords: cognitive narratology, theory of mind, Indian fiction, consciousness, memory

Introduction

The cognitive turn in literary studies has renewed interest in how fiction represents consciousness. Cognitive critics study the ways narratives organise attention, memory, emotion, intention, and perception. They also ask what readers do when they encounter fictional minds.

Reading a novel involves more than following events. Readers constantly infer what characters know, believe, fear, misunderstand, or conceal. A character may say one thing while thinking another. A narrator may provide incomplete information. A later scene may

change the meaning of an earlier one. Readers build provisional explanations and revise them as the narrative develops.

Lisa Zunshine connects this process with theory of mind, the human ability to attribute thoughts and intentions to other people. Fiction places unusual demands on this ability because it often presents several levels of consciousness at once. A reader may need to understand what one character thinks another character believes about a third person. Such structures appear frequently in novels built around secrecy, misunderstanding, irony, or unreliable narration.

David Herman approaches narrative as a cognitive instrument. Stories help readers organise time, causation, action, and perspective. Alan Palmer develops this idea further by arguing that fictional minds are not represented only through interior monologue. Readers also infer mental states from speech, gesture, behaviour, silence, bodily response, and social interaction.

These theories provide useful tools for reading Indian fiction. Yet they also create a problem. Much of cognitive narratology was developed through Western literary traditions and often assumes an individualised model of consciousness. The mind is treated as an inner space that belongs to an autonomous subject.

Contemporary Indian novels often resist this model. Their characters think through family histories, religious identities, caste hierarchies, political memories, gender roles, and multilingual environments. Consciousness is rarely private in any simple sense. It is shaped by other people and by institutions that decide who may speak, whose testimony matters, and whose motives are treated with suspicion. This paper argues that contemporary Indian fiction does not merely offer access to fictional minds. It examines the social conditions under which minds become readable. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* represents traumatic consciousness through fractured chronology and child focalization. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* presents memory as something shared, inherited, reconstructed, and disputed. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* turns narration into a struggle over selfhood and credibility.

These novels require readers to infer mental states, but they also warn against interpretive certainty. A mind can be misunderstood, manipulated, or deliberately misrepresented. The ability to read another person does not automatically produce sympathy or justice.

Cognitive narratology and the problem of other minds

Cognitive narratology begins with a simple observation: readers do not receive complete information about fictional characters. They work from evidence.

A character's silence may suggest fear, resistance, shame, anger, or uncertainty. A gesture may be sincere or strategic. A narrator may misunderstand an event. Readers therefore construct explanations from partial signs.

Zunshine's account of theory of mind helps explain this process. Fiction relies on the reader's ability to distinguish between different levels of knowledge. The reader may know something the protagonist does not know. One character may misread another. A narrator may believe that a character acts from one motive, while the reader suspects another. This gap between minds is central to narrative. It produces suspense, irony, sympathy, and distrust. It also allows fiction to represent consciousness without fully explaining it. Herman's work shifts attention from individual mental states to the larger process of story comprehension. Readers create a mental model of the narrative world. They arrange events in time, connect actions with causes, and identify changes in perspective. In a non-linear novel, this work becomes especially visible because the reader must reconstruct the sequence of events.

Free indirect discourse is one of the main techniques used to represent consciousness. It combines third-person narration with the language or emotional tone of a character. The sentence remains grammatically controlled by the narrator, but its judgments may belong to the character. This makes it difficult to separate narration from thought. Such techniques complicate the idea that a reader simply enters another person's mind. Access is always mediated by language, form, and perspective. Fictional consciousness is constructed rather than directly observed.

This point matters in the Indian context. Social categories affect the interpretation of behaviour. A Dalit man's actions may be read differently from those of an upper-caste man. A woman's anger may be described as instability, while male anger is treated as authority. A survivor's testimony may be doubted because it conflicts with family honour or social expectations. Cognitive criticism must therefore ask more than how readers infer mental states. It must also ask which interpretations appear credible, who controls them, and what kinds of power support them.

Fragmented consciousness in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* represents consciousness through broken chronology, shifting perspective, repetition, and unusual language. The novel moves between 1969 and the adult reunion of Estha and Rahel more than twenty years later. It reveals major events gradually rather than in chronological order.

The reader learns early that Sophie Mol has died and that the twins' childhood ended in catastrophe. The full relationship among Sophie Mol's death, Velutha's killing, Ammu's punishment, Estha's abuse, and the separation of the twins emerges slowly.

This structure forces the reader to reconstruct the past. Events return in fragments. A phrase appears before its meaning is clear. An image is repeated from a different perspective. A minor detail later becomes part of the central tragedy.

The disrupted chronology resembles traumatic memory. Trauma does not remain safely located in the past. It enters the present through sound, touch, smell, language, and repetition. Adult Estha and Rahel are still shaped by experiences they could not fully understand as children.

Roy's child focalization makes this process more complex. Estha and Rahel observe the adult world closely, but they do not understand all of its social codes. They recognise tension, cruelty, jealousy, and fear without always knowing what produces them. Readers must therefore interpret two levels at once. They follow the children's perceptions while also understanding the adult structures behind those perceptions. The children experience caste, sexuality, politics, family resentment, and social shame through gestures and fragments rather than abstract explanation.

Their language reflects this partial knowledge. Words are reversed, broken apart, capitalised, repeated, and reshaped. These patterns are not simply stylistic play. They show the children's attempt to process experiences for which they have no adequate language. The narrative also moves between different minds without always announcing the shift. It may take on the rhythm of a child's thought, Baby Kochamma's bitterness, Chacko's self-importance, Ammu's frustration, or Margaret Kochamma's grief. These transitions blur the boundary between narrator and character. This makes consciousness appear permeable. Characters think through words, memories, and judgments that come from other people. Family language enters the minds of the children. Social rules become internal commands.

The treatment of Velutha shows why this matters politically. Other characters do not interpret him as an individual first. They interpret him through caste. His relationship with Ammu is treated not simply as a private relationship but as a violation of a social order. Baby Kochamma's false account succeeds because the police are prepared to believe it. Velutha's supposed intentions are accepted without evidence because caste prejudice has already made certain explanations seem plausible.

The problem is not a lack of theory of mind. The characters do attribute intentions to Velutha. They simply do so through a violent and prejudiced framework. This suggests that mind-reading is not always ethical. People may interpret another person's motives in ways that protect hierarchy and justify punishment. Social power determines which mental-state attributions are accepted.

Ammu is treated in a similar way. Her desire is described as immoral and destructive, while Chacko's sexual behaviour receives greater tolerance. The family interprets male and female desire according to different standards.

Roy therefore connects interiority with social judgment. The novel does not present private consciousness as separate from caste and gender. It shows how these structures enter the mind and shape the interpretation of other people.

The reader's task is not simply to sympathise with Ammu, Estha, Rahel, or Velutha. The reader must also notice how sympathy itself is organised. Whose pain is visible? Whose account is trusted? Whose inner life is ignored?

Memory and shared consciousness in *The Shadow Lines*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* approaches consciousness through memory, storytelling, geography, and historical reconstruction. The unnamed narrator builds his understanding of the past from the stories of Tridib, Tha'mma, Ila, May Price, and other members of his family.

Much of what he knows was not directly experienced. He learns through conversations, photographs, maps, recollections, and later discoveries. His consciousness is built partly from the memories of others. This complicates the distinction between memory and imagination. Tridib teaches the narrator to imagine distant places carefully. Ila, who has travelled widely, claims a different authority based on direct experience. The novel does not simply choose one form of knowledge over the other.

Physical presence does not guarantee understanding. Imagination does not necessarily produce fantasy. A place can become psychologically real through stories before it is physically visited. From a cognitive perspective, the narrator constructs the story world through testimony. He must decide how much to trust each account. He must also understand that memory changes over time.

Each person remembers differently. Tha'mma, Tridib, Ila, and May interpret the same history through different emotional and political frameworks. Their recollections reveal as much about their present selves as about the past.

The narrator's mind is therefore social. It is formed through other minds. His understanding of Tridib, London, Dhaka, nationalism, Partition, and communal violence depends on stories that have been told, revised, withheld, and remembered. This is close to Alan Palmer's idea of the social mind. Characters do not think in isolation. Their consciousness develops through relationships, conversations, shared assumptions, and conflict.

Tridib's death is the clearest example. The narrator does not receive one stable account of what happened. He reconstructs the event from partial testimonies. May

remembers it through guilt. Tha'mma understands it through the collapse of her ideas about nation and belonging. The narrator approaches it through grief, admiration, and belated knowledge.

The event remains uncertain in some respects, but the uncertainty does not make it meaningless. The novel treats memory as incomplete yet necessary. This is important in relation to political violence. The narrator cannot recover the past in a perfectly objective form. Yet refusing to remember would also be an ethical failure. He must work with fragments.

The novel also questions national borders. The lines separating countries appear clear on maps, but they do not contain memory, fear, family history, or violence. Calcutta and Dhaka are imagined as separate national spaces, yet communal conflict links them. Tha'mma's consciousness is shaped by Partition and displacement. Her desire for clear national belonging cannot be understood as a private belief detached from history. It develops from the loss of home and from uncertainty about where identity begins and ends. Cognitive narratology can help explain how the novel distributes knowledge among characters. Yet historical context remains necessary. Without it, Tha'mma's ideas may appear simply contradictory or irrational. With it, they become part of a larger struggle over memory, nation, and belonging.

The Shadow Lines therefore asks the reader to understand consciousness historically. Personal memory and public history are not separate. They overlap and reshape one another.

Narrative control in *When I Hit You*

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* presents consciousness through domestic abuse, political language, authorship, and retrospective narration. The narrator recounts her marriage to a controlling and violent husband.

Her husband attempts to regulate her movements, friendships, writing, digital communication, and speech. He also tries to control how she understands her own experience.

This makes narration central to the conflict. The struggle is not only over what happened. It is also over who has the authority to interpret what happened.

The husband explains surveillance as concern. He presents control as discipline and violence as a response to supposed disobedience. His political language gives him another way to justify domination.

The narrator's account challenges these explanations. She shows how ideological conviction can coexist with private cruelty. Public radicalism does not prevent patriarchal behaviour.

The novel asks readers to evaluate competing descriptions of the same actions. The husband treats himself as rational and principled. The narrator reveals the fear and coercion hidden by that language. This has consequences for the idea of unreliable narration. Women who describe abuse are often portrayed as unstable, emotional, or vindictive. Their reliability becomes part of the conflict. Kandasamy uses this problem deliberately. The narrator is aware that her story may be doubted. She reflects on the difference between experiencing violence and later writing about it. The self who suffers is not exactly the same as the self who narrates. Retrospection creates distance. The narrator selects, arranges, and interprets events. That does not make the account false. It shows how narration helps her recover control. Writing becomes a form of mental resistance. Even when her husband restricts her physical freedom, she continues to observe, remember, compose, and imagine. She preserves an inner life that he cannot fully possess.

The novel does not give the reader unrestricted access to that inner life. The narrator decides what to reveal and how to reveal it. This control matters because the husband repeatedly claims the right to define her thoughts.

An ethical reading should not replace his control with the reader's control. The goal is not to feel that the narrator has become completely transparent. It is to recognise her authority over her own account.

The novel also shows that sophisticated mind-reading can be abusive. The husband watches the narrator closely. He anticipates her behaviour and uses that knowledge to limit her choices.

Understanding another person's thoughts is not always compassionate. It can also support manipulation, intimidation, and surveillance.

Theory of mind and the ethics of interpretation

The three novels make strong demands on the reader's theory of mind.

In *The God of Small Things*, readers interpret what children understand about adult behaviour. They also see adults impose false motives on Velutha and Ammu.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator reconstructs what one person remembers another person believing about an event that occurred years earlier.

In *When I Hit You*, the narrator studies how her husband interprets her actions while she performs obedience and protects her private thoughts.

These layered structures show why fiction is useful to cognitive criticism. They require readers to track several perspectives and levels of knowledge.

Yet the novels also expose the limits of mind-reading. A person may interpret another mind incorrectly. A socially powerful character may impose a false interpretation and have it accepted as truth.

Baby Kochamma understands the prejudices of the police and uses them against Velutha. Kandasamy's abusive husband studies his wife's reactions and uses that knowledge to control her.

The ability to infer mental states can support empathy, but it can also support domination.

This is why empathy alone is not enough. A reader may sympathise with a character while ignoring the social structure that produces the character's suffering.

A reader might treat Ammu's relationship as tragic romance without confronting caste. A reader might pity the narrator of *When I Hit You* but still ask why she did not leave sooner. Such responses reproduce the judgments the novels criticise. Reading across differences of caste, gender, religion, and class requires more than emotional identification. It requires attention to the reader's own assumptions. Cognitive literary criticism should therefore include a metacognitive element. Readers must examine how they form judgments about fictional minds. What evidence do they use? Which motives seem natural to them? Which forms of speech do they trust?

Affect, memory, and embodied cognition

The selected novels also show that consciousness is not limited to explicit thought. Mental life includes bodily sensation, mood, habit, fear, memory, and atmosphere. In *The God of Small Things*, trauma returns through sensory fragments. Estha's silence communicates what he cannot explain. His mental state appears through withdrawal, repetition, and bodily behaviour. In *The Shadow Lines*, places become emotionally real through stories. London and Dhaka exist in the narrator's imagination before he fully experiences them. Geography becomes connected with desire, fear, nostalgia, and loss.

In *When I Hit You*, abuse produces hypervigilance. The narrator monitors tone, movement, timing, and danger. She learns to anticipate violence through bodily and emotional cues. These forms of consciousness cannot be reduced to statements such as "she believed" or "he knew." Affect often comes before clear interpretation. The body responds before the mind can explain. This is where cognitive literary studies connect with trauma and affect theory. Repetition, broken chronology, silence, and sensory intensity may represent experiences that have not been organised into stable narrative form. Memory is also unreliable without being useless. It changes when it is recalled. It can be incomplete, emotionally distorted, or influenced by later knowledge. Yet it remains central to identity and testimony. The novels do not offer memory as a perfect record. They present it as a difficult form of knowledge that must still be taken seriously.

Toward a situated cognitive poetics

A situated cognitive poetics of Indian fiction should not claim that there is one Indian model of consciousness. Indian literature contains too many linguistic, regional, religious, caste, and philosophical traditions for such a claim. The purpose is instead to study how specific texts represent minds within particular cultural and historical settings.

Language is one important area. Indian English fiction often carries the syntax, rhythm, idiom, and vocabulary of other Indian languages. Characters may move between linguistic worlds.

A change in language may signal intimacy, authority, memory, education, or exclusion. Multilingualism affects how thought is represented. The character's mind may operate across languages that do not organise experience in the same way. Oral storytelling also matters. Knowledge may circulate through family stories, gossip, songs, rumours, myths, and repeated phrases. These forms of transmission challenge the idea that consciousness belongs to one isolated narrator. In *The Shadow Lines*, memory is built through stories told across generations. In *The God of Small Things*, family language enters the minds of the children and shapes how they understand themselves.

South Asian philosophical traditions may also offer useful concepts for thinking about consciousness. Vedantic, Buddhist, Jain, and other traditions contain different accounts of selfhood, perception, desire, attachment, and memory. These traditions should not be used mechanically. A critic should not assume that every Indian character represents an ancient philosophical idea. Still, they may provide alternatives to Western models of the unified and autonomous individual. Power must remain central. Some characters are denied credibility because of caste, gender, class, religion, sexuality, or social position. Their pain may be dismissed, their motives criminalised, or their testimony ignored.

A situated cognitive criticism should therefore study both consciousness and credibility. It should ask who is allowed to possess a complex inner life. This approach can also be useful in the classroom. Students can track what each character knows at different points in a novel. They can identify shifts in focalization, reconstruct disrupted chronology, and compare different accounts of the same event. They should also ask why some interpretations appear more convincing than others. What social assumptions influence the reader? What remains unknowable? How does the narrative manage uncertainty? These questions connect formal analysis with ethics and politics. They prevent cognitive narratology from becoming a method that treats literary characters as psychological case studies.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian fiction expands the field of cognitive narratology because it presents consciousness as social, historical, and politically contested.

In *The God of Small Things*, fragmented time and child focalization represent trauma while showing how caste and gender shape the interpretation of motives. In *The Shadow Lines*, memory is shared across people, places, and generations. In *When I Hit You*, narration becomes a way to recover authority from an abusive husband who tries to control both experience and interpretation.

These novels ask readers to infer thoughts and emotions, but they do not make other minds fully accessible. They preserve uncertainty. They also show that people can be understood incorrectly and that false interpretations may be supported by institutions. Cognitive narratology is most useful here when it works with postcolonial, feminist, caste, memory, and affect studies. A universal account of mind-reading cannot explain why some characters are believed and others are not.

A situated cognitive poetics would treat consciousness as relational rather than isolated. It would study thought alongside language, embodiment, memory, social hierarchy, and historical experience. Indian fiction should not be treated as a new set of examples for an unchanged Western theory. These novels require the theory itself to change. They show that reading another mind is never simply a cognitive exercise. It is also an ethical and political act.

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