

FROM SILENCE TO RESISTANCE: FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of feminist awareness in Indian English literature, moving from the constrained, domesticated female subjectivities of early twentieth-century fiction to the openly defiant, intersectionally informed voices of the contemporary period. Starting with the colonial-era fashioning of Indian womanhood as an emblem of national virtue, the study examines how writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal turned narrative attention inward, laying bare the psychological toll of silence within patriarchal domestic arrangements. It then considers the breach initiated by Kamala Das's confessional poetry and prose, and the sustained interrogation of marital and familial muteness in Shashi Deshpande's fiction. The paper further contends that any thorough account of feminist thought in Indian English writing must extend beyond upper-caste, metropolitan, heterosexual paradigms to encompass Dalit women's testimonial narratives and diasporic negotiations of gender, drawing on the theoretical work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Uma Chakravarti. Reading Arundhati Roy, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy in dialogue with these critical interventions, the paper demonstrates that Indian English literature's passage 'from silence to resistance' is neither linear nor concluded, but defined by continuing negotiations among voice, complicity, and structural constraint.

Keywords

Indian English literature; feminist consciousness; silence; resistance; postcolonial feminism; intersectionality; caste and gender

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 22.08.2026

Approved: 16.09.2026

Dr. Balvinder Kaur

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INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE*

Article No. 32

*RJPSS April - Sept. 2026,
Vol. LI No. 2,
Pg. 273-284*

Similarity Check - 05%

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2026.v51i02.032](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2026.v51i02.032)

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of RJPSS.*

Introduction

Indian English literature occupies a peculiar and generative position within postcolonial studies: it is a body of writing composed in the language of the former coloniser, addressed simultaneously to domestic and international readerships, and shaped by the competing pressures of nationalism, class aspiration, and, in recent decades, transnational circulation. Within this field, the literary representation of women has undergone a deep transformation over the past century—from figures of domestic virtue and national allegory to subjects of psychological depth, sexual autonomy, and overt political defiance. This paper argues that the history of feminist consciousness in Indian English literature can be productively understood as a movement ‘from silence to resistance,’ in which successive cohorts of women writers have progressively dismantled the discursive and formal structures that once confined female experience to the margins of narrative attention.

The claim demands immediate qualification. ‘Silence’ as used here does not signify an absence of women from Indian English fiction—women have always been present, often centrally—but rather a structured suppression of female interiority, desire, and dissent, in favour of representations that serve nationalist, familial, or aesthetic purposes other than the woman’s own. Colonial and early postcolonial Indian English fiction routinely cast female characters as vessels of cultural continuity, domestic sacrifice, or national allegory, in ways that precluded sustained engagement with their inner lives. ‘Resistance,’ conversely, does not denote a single unified feminist politics or a triumphant endpoint. It names instead the gradual accumulation of narrative strategies—confessional voice, interior monologue, testimonial witness, transgressive plotting, formal disruption—through which women characters and women writers have asserted authority over their own representation.

This trajectory is neither smooth nor finished. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other postcolonial feminist critics have warned, any account of ‘Third World women’s’ literary emergence risks constructing a developmental narrative in which non-Western women advance, under Western feminist guidance, from tradition to modernity (Mohanty 61–62). The present paper resists that framing by insisting that Indian feminist consciousness possesses multiple, unevenly developing genealogies—shaped as much by caste, class, region, and religion as by gender alone—and that writers working outside the urban, upper-caste, English-educated milieu have articulated resistance through forms and idioms that a narrowly literary-historical account of Indian English fiction can easily overlook. Accordingly, the paper proceeds chronologically but not teleologically through six moments: the idealised woman of early fiction; the turn to psychological interiority in the mid-

century novel; Kamala Das's confessional breach; Shashi Deshpande's sustained analysis of domestic silence; the intersectional critique advanced by Dalit and subaltern feminist writing; and the transgressive, diasporic, and testimonial modes of the contemporary period.

Theorizing Silence and Voice: A Framework

The foundational vocabulary of feminist literary criticism—voice, silence, the pursuit of narrative and creative self-determination—coalesced largely within Anglo-American contexts and needed substantial adaptation before it could adequately address the Indian situation. Elaine Showalter's mapping of a distinct female literary tradition among British women novelists offered Indian critics a model for identifying continuities across women writers, but its premise of a relatively cohesive national literary field could not be transplanted without distortion onto a linguistically plural, caste-stratified, colonially inflected literary culture (Showalter 4–12). Indian feminist critics therefore had to construct a framework capable of accommodating at least three overlapping axes of silencing: the silencing of women within the family and community; the marginalisation of 'Third World women' within international feminist discourse; and the relegation of English-language women's writing within a national literary hierarchy that frequently privileged writing in Indian languages as more authentically 'Indian.'

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's celebrated essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' identifies the starkest dimension of this problem: the subaltern woman, caught between colonial and patriarchal systems of meaning, is perpetually represented and interpreted by others yet denied the discursive conditions necessary for self-articulation within dominant historiography and literary culture (Spivak 287–293). Spivak's argument underscores that granting voice to marginalised women is never a transparent act of inclusion; the very machinery of representation, including realist fiction and sympathetic feminist criticism, can replicate the silencing it sets out to remedy. This caution bears directly on a study of Indian English fiction, since English-language writing by women is itself a relatively privileged formation, produced overwhelmingly—though not exclusively—by urban, educated, upper-caste women, and consumed internationally through interpretive frames that reward certain recognisable patterns of suffering and triumph.

At the same time, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's ambitious two-volume anthology of women's writing in India, spanning two millennia and multiple languages, established that the impulse toward feminist self-expression long predates the postcolonial English-language novel, and that silence is most accurately grasped not as a pre-existing condition from which women writers gradually emerge, but as

an effect actively manufactured and maintained by literary canons, publishing gatekeepers, and critical inattention (Tharu and Lalita vol. 1, 1–37). To read Indian English literature's feminist trajectory, then, requires attending simultaneously to what women writers articulate, what forms make articulation possible, and what structural conditions determine whose speech registers as significant.

The Idealised Woman: Silence in Early Indian English Fiction

The earliest decades of Indian English fiction, roughly from the 1930s through the 1950s, were shaped by a realist, often reformist aesthetic exemplified by Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. Women in this fiction generally appear in one of two registers: as personifications of domestic virtue, patience, and self-abnegation, whose suffering lends the narrative its moral weight without becoming its principal object of investigation; or as allegorical stand-ins for the nation itself, their bodies and choices encoding debates about tradition, modernity, and cultural survival that are ultimately adjudicated at the level of national rather than personal destiny. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates the pattern: its protagonist Rukmani weathers poverty, displacement, and bereavement with a fortitude the novel frames as exemplary, but her inner life is conveyed almost entirely through the register of endurance rather than desire, ambition, or anger.

This is not to suggest that early Indian English fiction was incapable of social critique. Reformist writing of the period frequently condemned specific practices—child marriage, widow mistreatment, dowry—that damaged women's lives, and in doing so participated in a longer tradition of social-reform discourse stretching back to the nineteenth century. Yet the critique tends to operate at the level of custom rather than subjectivity: the woman functions as a surface upon which injustice is inscribed, from which the reader is invited to feel appropriate moral indignation, but she is seldom allowed to serve as the source of her own analysis of that injustice, or to pursue desires that exceed the boundaries of her prescribed social role. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's early novels, written from a more ironic and socially observant vantage, offer keener satire of marriage markets and family politics among the English-educated middle class, yet even here the female protagonist's consciousness is frequently surveyed from outside rather than inhabited from within.

The cumulative effect of these narrative choices is a literature in which women are structurally central—their marriages, fertility, chastity, and capacity for sacrifice organise entire plots—yet narratively peripheral, in the precise sense that the novel's investment in interiority, the traditional novelistic instrument for rendering a character as a full subject, is reserved largely for male protagonists or withheld

from female characters altogether. It is against this structural silence that the mid-century turn toward female interiority, discussed in the following section, represents a significant formal and political departure.

Interiority and Its Discontents: Desai and Sahgal

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a marked reorientation in Indian English fiction toward the sustained interior rendering of female consciousness, most influentially in the work of Anita Desai. Desai's early novels, **Cry, the Peacock** and **Fire on the Mountain**, place the reader inside the fragmented, anxious, often disintegrating psychology of women who cannot reconcile the demands of marriage and family with an inner life that exceeds and strains against those demands. In **Cry, the Peacock**, the protagonist Maya's obsessive dread, rooted in childhood trauma and a fatalistic prophecy, is rendered through a nearly claustrophobic first-person narration that refuses the reader easy access to a stable evaluative perspective; the novel insists that the reader inhabit Maya's disordered interiority on its own terms. This marks a significant departure from the externalised suffering of earlier fiction: Maya's crisis is not merely inflicted upon her by circumstance but constituted by the incompatibility between her psychic reality and the domestic role she is required to occupy.

Desai's later novel **Fire on the Mountain** extends this concern with female interiority to old age and to relationships between women across generations, tracing the uneasy bond between an elderly woman seeking solitude and a traumatised adolescent girl entrusted to her care. The novel's preoccupation with female solitude—its costs and its necessity—prefigures a tension that recurs throughout the subsequent tradition: whether a woman's silence should be read as oppression to be challenged, or as a deliberately chosen shelter from a social world that affords women little else.

Nayantara Sahgal's fiction engages the same period from a more explicitly political orientation, locating women's domestic and marital struggles within the broader apparatus of post-Independence Indian political life. Sahgal's novels typically feature women drawn from the political and administrative elite, whose personal decisions—extramarital relationships, departures from unhappy marriages, forays into public life—are presented as acts carrying real social and political consequences, not merely private matters. This coupling of the domestic and the political, elaborated by later writers, contends that the confinement of women within marriage is not incidental to the nation's political architecture but continuous with it: the same hierarchies of authority and deference that structure the postcolonial state also structure the middle-class household.

Considered together, Desai's psychological inwardness and Sahgal's political framing mark a decisive shift from the earlier mode of externally observed female suffering. Women in this fiction are no longer solely objects of the reader's sympathy; they are subjects whose perceptions, however partial or distorted, govern the narrative's meaning. Yet this interiority, in both writers, remains largely confined to a narrow social stratum: the urban, English-educated, professional or bureaucratic middle and upper-middle class. The silences being fractured here are the silences of a particular class of women, and the resistance modelled is correspondingly bounded—a resistance of consciousness and, at most, of individual choice, rather than of collective or structural transformation.

Kamala Das and the Poetics of Rupture

If Desai's fiction turns female suffering inward, Kamala Das's poetry and autobiographical prose, produced from the 1960s onward, accomplish something closer to an open breach. Das's poetry is widely recognised for bringing an extraordinary frankness about female desire, bodily experience, and marital discontent into Indian English writing, dispensing with the decorous restraint that had previously governed these subjects. Her work stages a recurring collision between the socially sanctioned roles available to women—wife, mother, respectable community member—and a persistent, often painful insistence on individual desire and selfhood that those roles cannot contain. Importantly, this insistence is not depicted as a settled attainment but as an ongoing, unresolved struggle, frequently shadowed by self-doubt, irony, and a keen awareness of the personal price it demands.

Das's prose autobiography, *My Story*, extends this frankness into an explicit chronicle of a woman's sexual and emotional experience, including an arranged marriage entered at a very young age and a subsequent search for emotional and physical fulfilment outside its confines. The publication of such material provoked considerable public discomfort at the time, precisely because it violated the norms of reticence that had governed the literary representation of women's inner and sexual lives in India. That discomfort is itself evidence of the cultural labour the text performed: by making a woman's desire, dissatisfaction, and vulnerability a matter of public literary discourse, Das's writing effectively shifted female subjectivity from the periphery of the nationalist-realist novel to the centre of a newly emergent confessional mode.

It bears noting, however, that Das's breach, like Desai's interiority, does not resolve neatly into political resistance in a collective sense. Her writing is frequently ambivalent about the worth of the freedom it claims, and her speaking subject often appears isolated rather than allied with a wider feminist community or movement.

This ambivalence ought not be read as a deficiency of feminist consciousness but as a faithful record of what solitary rebellion against deeply entrenched social norms actually felt like for a woman writing in the 1960s and 1970s—a condition the next generation of writers, working through the more sustained architecture of the novel, would seek to analyse rather than merely give voice to.

Shashi Deshpande: The Grammar of Domestic Silence

Shashi Deshpande's fiction, emerging from the late 1970s onward, undertakes precisely this analytic labour, and her novel **That Long Silence** has become a central reference point in scholarly discussions of feminist consciousness in Indian English writing. The novel's protagonist, Jaya, is a writer whose own creative voice has been progressively stifled by the demands of marriage and motherhood, and who is compelled, when her husband's professional misconduct destabilises the family, to confront the degree to which she has silenced herself in the interest of domestic equilibrium. Deshpande's accomplishment, distinct from both Desai's psychological emphasis and Das's confessional mode, resides in her meticulous attention to the mechanisms—linguistic, social, economic—through which silence is generated and perpetuated in ordinary middle-class marriages, rather than in dramatic incident, extremity, or transgression.

Jaya's silence, as the novel makes evident, is not simply forced upon her from outside; it is also self-constructed, maintained through a sequence of small accommodations, deferrals, and acts of self-censorship that Jaya herself performs in the name of being a 'good' wife and mother. This recognition—that patriarchal silencing functions as much through internalised self-suppression as through external prohibition—has been pivotal to subsequent feminist readings of Indian domestic fiction, and it enables Deshpande's novel to avoid reducing women to passive victims. Jaya's eventual movement toward a more honest confrontation with her own complicity, rather than a dramatic external liberation, models a form of feminist resistance grounded in self-knowledge and incremental reckoning rather than rupture. Deshpande's earlier novel **The Dark Holds No Terrors** similarly traces a woman's gradual recognition of the ways in which her mother's preference for a son, and her husband's need to reassert dominance when his professional standing is threatened, have shaped her sense of self; here too, resistance takes the form of understanding rather than escape. Jasbir Jain's critical study of Deshpande's work argues that this commitment to situating feminist consciousness within the gendered realities of ordinary domestic life, rather than in spectacular acts of rebellion, constitutes Deshpande's distinctive contribution to Indian feminist fiction: it declines both the earlier tradition's idealisation of female endurance and a celebratory feminist

narrative of straightforward liberation, attending instead to the slow, often imperceptible labour of learning to perceive one's own situation with clarity (Jain 45–67).

Beyond the Urban Middle Class: Caste, Testimony, and Intersectional Feminism

The writers considered thus far—Markandaya, Desai, Sahgal, Das, Deshpande—share, despite real differences among them, a common social position: they are upper-caste, English-educated women writing predominantly about the lives of women similarly situated. This shared position has been the target of sustained critique within Indian feminist scholarship itself. Uma Chakravarti's analysis of the historical entanglement of caste and gender in India demonstrates that upper-caste women's oppression and lower-caste women's oppression cannot be grasped through a single, undifferentiated category of 'Indian womanhood,' since the very norms of female seclusion, chastity, and domesticity that upper-caste feminist fiction interrogates were historically unavailable to, and differently experienced by, Dalit and lower-caste women, whose labour outside the home and greater relative mobility were sometimes interpreted by upper-caste society as evidence of moral deficiency rather than comparative autonomy (Chakravarti 48–75).

This critique has direct consequences for how one reads the 'silence to resistance' arc in Indian English literature, because it indicates that the silence being fractured by Desai, Das, and Deshpande is a caste- and class-specific silence—the silence of the secluded upper-caste wife—and that a more comprehensive account of feminist consciousness in India demands attention to writing that arises from fundamentally different structural locations. Bama's autobiographical narrative **Karukku**, originally composed in Tamil and subsequently translated into English, furnishes precisely this alternative testimony: an account of growing up as a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu, confronting discrimination from caste Hindu society and, the narrative suggests, from within her own religious community and even within currents of the Dalit movement itself, which she found insufficiently responsive to the particular experiences of Dalit women. **Karukku**'s resistance operates through a mode—testimonial, rooted in embodied communal experience and unapologetic in its anger—markedly different from the psychological inwardness of Desai or the domestic realism of Deshpande, and its English translation has been instrumental in widening the field of 'Indian women's writing' accessible to an English-reading audience.

Urmila Pawar's memoir, translated as **The Weave of My Life**, accomplishes a parallel task, documenting a Dalit woman's life across decades of participation in the Ambedkarite movement and detailing the specific burdens—of housework,

caregiving, managing family survival alongside political activism—that fell disproportionately on Dalit women even within a movement explicitly committed to challenging caste hierarchy. Read alongside Deshpande’s fiction, Pawar’s memoir sharpens the question of what, precisely, silence and resistance signify: for Pawar’s narrator, resistance to caste oppression and resistance to gender oppression within her own community are not separable undertakings but are pursued simultaneously, sometimes in open tension with each other. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s theoretical work on gender and postcolonialism in India, together with Mohanty’s broader challenge to universalising feminist categories, supply the conceptual vocabulary for reading these testimonial narratives as making a claim not simply for inclusion within an established feminist literary canon but for a fundamental reconceptualisation of what feminist consciousness in Indian English writing has entailed.

Arundhati Roy and the Politics of Transgressive Desire

Arundhati Roy’s **The God of Small Things**, published in 1997 and awarded the Man Booker Prize, occupies a distinctive position in this history, since it weaves together the psychological inwardness pioneered by Desai, the formal experimentation associated with postcolonial modernist fiction, and an explicit thematic preoccupation with caste that links it to the intersectional critique discussed above. The novel’s central transgression—a sexual relationship between Ammu, a divorced upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter—is met with devastating punishment by both family and state, and the novel leaves no ambiguity in identifying this punishment as the operation of intersecting structures of caste and gender oppression rather than a private moral failing. Ammu’s death, and the lasting damage visited upon her children, serve in the novel as an indictment of a social order that cannot countenance a woman’s desire when it transgresses the boundary of caste, however readily that same order might, within specified limits, accommodate desire that remains within caste and class lines.

Roy’s formal choices—a non-linear architecture that circles repeatedly around the same traumatic events, disclosing them incrementally rather than sequentially, and a densely metaphorical prose idiom—mark a further departure from the realist conventions of earlier Indian English fiction, suggesting that the portrayal of female desire and its social punishment demanded new narrative methods, not merely new thematic content. The novel’s international success also constitutes a significant moment in the global circulation of Indian English women’s writing, complicating any straightforward account of resistance as a purely domestic literary-political achievement: **The God of Small Things** is read, marketed, and

taught internationally in ways that inevitably condition how resistance in Indian women's writing is received and interpreted by non-Indian audiences, a dynamic that returns the discussion to Spivak's and Mohanty's warnings about the politics of representation.

Contemporary Resistances: Diaspora, Trauma, and the New Confessional

The most recent phase of this trajectory is distinguished by an increasing willingness among Indian English women writers to engage subjects—marital rape, domestic violence, caste-based sexual violence, the particular difficulties of diasporic and transnational womanhood—with a directness that recalls Das's earlier breach but situates it within more sustained formal and political analysis. Meena Kandasamy's autobiographically inflected novel **When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife** narrates the experience of a young woman writer confined in an abusive marriage, organising the narrative explicitly around the protagonist's growing recognition of how language itself—the stories she is permitted or forbidden to tell about her own life—becomes a site of both oppression and eventual resistance. Kandasamy's novel renders the connection between narrative voice and feminist defiance, latent throughout the tradition examined in this paper, into an overt thematic concern: the protagonist's decision to write her own story is presented as inseparable from her decision to leave her marriage.

Diasporic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri extend the tradition's concerns into transnational settings, exploring how Indian and Indian-American women negotiate inherited expectations of domesticity and self-sacrifice alongside the different, though not necessarily lighter, pressures of migration, racialisation, and generational conflict in the diaspora. Lahiri's fiction, including **The Lowland**, frequently depicts women who leave or resist marriages and family expectations but discover that geographic and cultural relocation does not simply dissolve the older structures of gendered obligation, complicating any facile narrative in which migration to the West functions as a straightforward vehicle of feminist emancipation.

More broadly, the period since roughly 2010, shaped in India as elsewhere by intensified public attention to sexual violence and by transnational feminist movements including #MeToo, has generated a wave of Indian English women's writing—fiction, memoir, and hybrid autofiction—that treats sexual violence, harassment, and institutional complicity as central rather than incidental subjects, and that increasingly draws direct connections between individual women's experiences and systemic critique of institutions including the family, the university, the publishing industry, and the state. This contemporary body of work suggests that the resistance named in this paper's title is not a stable acquisition secured by

earlier generations of writers but an ongoing, actively contested practice, continually adapting its forms to newly identified forms of harm and newly available modes of collective articulation.

Conclusion: An Unfinished Trajectory

Tracing feminist consciousness in Indian English literature from the idealised, narratively peripheral women of early twentieth-century fiction to the openly resistant, intersectionally aware voices of the contemporary period reveals a trajectory that is genuine but neither smooth nor concluded. Each of the moments examined here—Markandaya's stoic endurance, Desai's psychological interiority, Das's confessional breach, Deshpande's analysis of self-constructed silence, the testimonial resistance of Dalit women's narratives, Roy's transgressive formal experimentation, and the contemporary confessional and diasporic modes exemplified by Kandasamy and Lahiri—represents a distinct strategy for claiming narrative and political authority over female experience, forged in response to the particular constraints and possibilities of its historical moment. None of these strategies simply supersedes the ones before it; rather, they coexist and continue to be practised, often in productive tension with one another, within a literary field that remains stratified by caste, class, language, and access to international publishing markets.

This paper has argued, drawing on Spivak, Mohanty, and Chakravarti, that any account of this trajectory that fails to attend to these stratifications risks reproducing precisely the kind of silencing it purports to critique, by treating the experience of urban, upper-caste, English-educated women as representative of 'Indian women' as such. The incorporation of Dalit testimonial narrative within the frame of Indian English literature—enabled by translation but also by the sustained critical work of scholars who insisted on its relevance to feminist literary history—is therefore not a marginal addition to this history but a necessary correction of its scope.

If the movement 'from silence to resistance' names anything durable, it is perhaps best understood not as a completed developmental arc but as a continually renewed formal and political project: each generation of Indian English women writers has had to invent, or reinvent, the narrative resources adequate to naming forms of constraint that the previous generation's silence, resistance, or relative privilege had left unarticulated. The task, this paper suggests, remains unfinished, and its continuation will depend on the literature's ongoing willingness to interrogate its own exclusions as rigorously as it interrogates the patriarchal structures external to it.

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