

THE EVOLVING NARRATIVE OF WOMEN FROM PAGE TO SCREEN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the evolution of women's representation in Indian literature and cinema, highlighting a key contradiction: literature has consistently offered more complex, nuanced female characters. From the 1970s, Indian women's literature, influenced by second-wave feminism, moved from depicting psychological confinement and domestic discontent to exploring themes of sexuality and desire through authors like Anita Desai and Kamala Das. In the contemporary period, writers such as Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri have expanded the narrative to include intersectional identities shaped by globalization and social hierarchies like caste and class. In stark contrast, mainstream Indian cinema, driven by commercial pressures and a male-dominated power structure, historically relied on rigid archetypes like the "idealized heroine" and the "vamp". However, a modern renaissance is underway, fuelled by a new generation of female filmmakers and the disruptive influence of streaming platforms. Malayalam cinema, with its distinct economic model, serves as a case study for progressive storytelling that more closely aligns with the complexity found in literature. This paper concludes that while a historical gap exists, cinema is increasingly moving toward authentic and multifaceted female narratives, a shift driven by both creative voices and changing audience expectations.

Keywords: *Indian literature, Indian cinema, Feminism, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Globalization, Archetypes, Malayalam cinema, and Streaming platforms.*

INTRODUCTION: A NEW CANON FOR AN EVOLVING NATION

Cinema and the representation of women in Indian literature from the second-wave feminist to the post-feminist movement captures a complex and multi-dimensional evolution. The paper posits that Indian literature has long overtaken mainstream Indian cinema in its careful representation of women by moving from the narrative of "confined self" to that of "intersectional protagonist". Though conventional cinema, and notably Bollywood, often stereotyped women to a narrow range of characters on commercial considerations and the stranglehold of male control, parallel and regional cinema, in particular the Malayalam New Wave, serves as a necessary cinematic corollary to the evolving literary trajectory. Parallel and regional cinema in general, most notably the Malayalam New Wave, has offered a cinematic parallel to this literary movement. The comparison suggests an underlying disjuncture between the two media, a rift in which literature is at its best when it comes to psychological depth and socio-political critique, while cinema works against those values, forced by market considerations towards banalisations of challenging issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the evolution of female narratives in Indian literature and cinema, with a focus on the contrast between the complexity of female characters in literary works and mainstream films. The study included a thorough examination of a

few literary works by well-known Indian women authors, such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sarah Joseph, K. R. Meera, etc., who have made substantial contributions to the study of subjects including desire, sexuality, and domestic discontent. These pieces had a prominent impact that indicates a change from portraying psychological captivity to examining nuanced female realities. In order to comprehend how women are portrayed and how commercial pressures affect cinematic storylines, the study looked at popular Indian films, publications, and film reviews.

A case study of the Malayalam film industry, which offers a unique economic paradigm that has made progressive storytelling and more complex female tales possible, was also a part of the technique. An understanding of the new trends in Indian cinema can be gained from the study of films made by a new generation of female directors and the effect that streaming services have on viewer expectations. This study investigates the historical discrepancy between literary and cinematic portrayals of women in India and the forces behind the trend toward more genuine and complex female tales in modern cinema by examining literary works, films, and critical reviews. The research draws on feminist literary theory and film criticism to contextualize the findings and identify areas for future study.

Historical Context: Defining the Second Wave of Indian Feminism

The Indian feminist movement was not a single wave, unlike its counterpart in the West. Its roots extended deep into 19th-century social reform movements and nationalist attempts to wrest independence from colonial rule. But except for the 1970s—which was a key period throughout the world, because women staged a robust struggle for their rights—post-independence registered a relative let-down in feminist activism.

A key precipitant for this phase was the government-commissioned study *Towards Equality* (1974). This report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India was a startling revelation. It simply revealed the vast gap between the constitutional commitment to gender equality and the brutal, mundane reality of existence for most women in India. The report proved a potent catalyst, giving birth to a new round of political activism and scholarship. The focus of the movement also moved from welfare-based contentions, such as to those in objection of annual dowry-related cases and custodial rape, towards a more serious challenge against violence reflected through female feticide. This change in the questions that life posed, was rapidly and jarringly reflected in the various themes - personal, societal or spiritual - and characters that Indian Literature began to show forth. This new feminist consciousness provided a strong foundation in literature that portrayed the process of self-discovery of an independent woman's mind: it moved from traditional domesticity to active challenging of the system imposed on them.

The paper aims to focus on the pan-Indian women narrative from Indian literature and cinema depicting a comparative approach that highlights how women progress as a matter of theme and character from each period in time up to the contemporary. From the comparison of the textual story and its film rendering, a more sensitive insight to each medium's unique functions and challenges in representing women is gained.

The Confined Self: Narratives of Psychological and Domestic Confinement

A clear and notable break from the traditional representation of women may be seen in the creative output of the 1970s and 1980s. In order to examine the psychological and emotional trauma that binds them to a patriarchal system, it has gone beyond a passive heroine. The idealized concept of the "angel in the house," which is frequently romanticized in the media, was contested by the literature. Instead, it explored women's lives in great detail, reflecting their inner and exterior spaces and delving into their disordered core.

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande were some of the authors to take up the cause. Desai's novels, like *Cry, the Peacock* and *Clear Light of Day* explored the inner lives and smaller corners of the homes of women who continued to live in loveless marriages trapped by stifling domestic space, on a psychological level. The latter, which concentrates on its heroine Maya's descent into madness, is a searing examination of the terror of a woman's lonely lot under an oppressive patriarchy. Likewise, Deshpande's writing as seen in *That Long Silence*, delved into the silent, everyday wars as well as purposeful suppression of identity to fit into the traditional mould of womanhood. Deshpande's characters are frequently negotiating the question of silence.

One of the leading voices in the political sphere during this time was Nayantara Sahgal. Meanwhile, her protagonists (and even secondary characters) reflect the experience of married women whose identity as individuals is crushed by their social condition. *The Day in Shadow* (1971), is the story of Simrit, a well-educated and divorced woman, and her life amidst an acrimonious divorce settlement and ostracism in a male-dominated society.

Simrit's struggle is not just her own; it is a deeply political act that runs counter to the convention and culture in which it has become customary for a woman never to have an identity of her own outside of being someone's wife. Sahgal's women are unyielding in their modernity, pursuing nothing less than equality as a right and not a choice, while they, moreover, are often contrasted with men who cling to patriarchal attitudes even when educated or having lofty social status.

The literature of this period was, in a sense, a collective psychoanalysis of the society. By directly depicting the female psyche and giving a face to its suffering, writers were diagnosing the deep-seated illness of patriarchy from within. This offered a vital, often painful rebuttal to the romanticised, glamorous domesticity that was idealised in mainstream Bollywood depictions of home during this same period (the big family dramas of the 1970s, for example, where self-sacrifice on the part of mothers/wives remained to be celebrated).

The transformation of society due to urbanization and economic development created a new "problem" for women; it was a struggle between traditional values and the possibility of independence. What had long been the great inner conflict, still unexamined as mainstream culture dared not scrutinise it, now found a strong and authentic voice in words that were free from commercial pressures that had driven mass media to evade so difficult and introspective themes.

Breaking the Silence: The Body, Desire, and Revolutionary Voice

This was a game-changer for its honest and unabashed disclosure of female sexuality and desire, formerly taboo in Indian society, life, and literature. This new wave of literature intentionally turned

away from the stark contrast between the saree-clad, cultured 'Sanskari' woman and the morally corrupt vamp that we had seen then.

Kamala Das' 1976 autobiography *My Story* and poetry served the ground for this transition. She employed her fiercely feminine sensibility to express the emotional and physical "hurts it has taken in an insensitive man-made world". Das was one of the first Indian women writers who dared to explore marital discord and female desire, declaring with astonishing boldness that the world was "far bigger than their 6-foot-tall husbands". Her writing served as a touchstone for a generation of women writers who were trying to wrest the female body and experience back from patriarchal control.

Though *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai is studied in contemporary English-language academic work as a pioneering queer feminist text, there is an important but often obscure extent to which it can be complex. Many translations and critical treatments in their own way systematically muted the caste ecology of the text by risking skipping the caste slurs and context that are integral to the original Urdu version. By intentionally leaving caste out, a huge factor in virtually all social interactions, the narrative becomes one of a "caste-less queer curricular choice". This analytical elision reflects a larger trend in some postcolonial studies of favouring a "sanitized" story (for example, one more exclusively marked by sexuality) over a "messier" and messily entangled, intersectional story (such as caste-based power dynamics). If this process is done selectively and repetitively, using Western theoretical categories for non-Western texts without taking the full socio-cultural context into account, it risks making 'complicated' stories seem simpler than they are.

In regional language writing, for Malayalam in particular, writers like Sarah Joseph (*Aalahayude Penmakal*) and K. R Meera (*Aarachar or Hangwoman*) were subversive with a female voice and political critique. Joseph's fiction frequently weaves mythology and history to probe female victimisation and silent revolt. Meera's protagonists, like the executioner's daughter Chetna Grddha Mullick in *Aarachar*, manifest an aggressive, almost evil-tinted feminism, taking on society, law, and the patriarchal paradigm.

This exploration of female desire found resonance in mainstream cinema of the late 80's and 90's. The explicit representation of female desire and intimacy between women for the first time on screen (in films such as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), caused immense socio-political uproar. Provoking violent protests on its release for dealing with lesbianism, *Fire* was a newfound landmark in world cinema that brought the discussion of female sexuality from behind the metaphorical subtext of literature.

New Horizons: Globalization, Migration, and the Diasporic Identity

The economic liberalization in the early 1990s was followed by the introduction of new themes in Indian literature. With India being increasingly integrated with the global economy, writers began to contemplate how globalization, migration, and growing consumerism are altering women's lives. This era gave rise to a literary new archetype: the "diasporic woman." Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully chronicled the lives of women living two existences, straddling their Indian identity with their adopted Western landscapes. Her characters frequently exist in a "state of

loneliness," with a feeling of "home" that's nothing more than a construct in their own mind built from memory. Her fiction, from *Interpreter of Maladies* to *The Namesake*, explores the heartache of cultural dislocation and the often-painful path toward self-definition.

This diasporic narrative had in the meantime been complicated by writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni whose *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) deploys the trope of magic realism and that lovable being, Tilo, an immigrant grocer, to investigate the complexities of immigrant life, longing and cultural memory. The Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (2006), deepened the story by juxtaposing Biju's experiences in New York with those of his grandfather and orphaned granddaughter, Sai, in an upheaval Himalayan town. The novel thus knits the isolation of the immigrant back to the failure of the post-colonial nation-state and its class war.

This theme of globalization also appeared in movies like Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006, based on Lahiri's novel) and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). Where *The Namesake* provided a literary-minded, interiorized filmic depiction of the "mental construct" of home, *Bend It Like Beckham* employed rom-com to reflect on the push-pull between traditional Indian-Sikh family values and modern professional female ambition (football) in the diaspora, finding commercial success by packaging the cultural clash for audience across the globe.

Beyond Gender: An Intersectional Framework

In the 1990s there has been a crucial development in feminist literary thinking: an analytical shift from the sole-focus on gender and to acknowledge its interconnections with other markers of social difference such as caste, class, religion, and regional identity. This literature articulated the lives of those women who were earlier relegated to the margins, and forever altered our literary landscape. This was the age in which Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, despite being another English word that refers to a theory coined in 1989 found its most potent practice in Indian literature.

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is another source of inspiration for this movement. What really drives is the deliberate coupling between 'subjugation of women' and 'oppressions of class and caste,' with Devi's female characters depicted as "rebellious spirits" who resist exploitation at the systemic level. Her fierce, earthy stories from the lives of tribal and oppressed women were a fitting rebuff to the upper-caste, urban orientation of previous feminist writing.

The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy is another classic example of this treatment. The heroine, Ammu (played by Roy), was "doubly marginalised", first being a woman and then belonging to the oppressed caste. Her illicit liaison with Velutha, a Paravan (Untouchable), is not just a personal betrayal but an "act of defiance against rigid caste and class boundaries". Roy interlaces themes of gender oppression, communist politics and caste hierarchy to show how the "Love Laws" dictated whom one could love and how, it was deeply rooted in patriarchy.

Bama Faustina was one of the earliest and most important Dalit writers in India, who penned her autobiography *Karukku* — which literally means Palmyra leaf but comes to denote a suppressed people by extension — that can be seen as a literary landmark. Published in 1992, it was the first time a Dalit woman had narrated in her own voice the "joys and sorrows" and "resistance and rebellious character" of her community. In depicting the omnipresent violence of caste-based

discrimination through the life-story of a Christian Dalit nun, Bama foregrounded a Dalit-feminist standpoint. Not only did it become an inspiration for women's writing, but it also provided a theoretical framework or boundaries. Her work is testimony to the fact that mainstream feminism routinely suppresses caste as a vital facet of oppression. In the landscape of contemporary Indian women's poetry, Meena Kandasamy has emerged as a major writer investigating, in particular, caste, gender, and institutionalised oppression. Works like *Ms. Militancy* (2010) carry an aggressive, militaristic tenor that directly confronts the Brahminical patriarchy by subverting myths with a Dalit feminist perspective.

This contemporary literary push-back, far from an accident, is a move born purely as a necessity to repel the idea, just one of many, that Indian women's stories and experiences are all alike. Through their foregrounding of the struggles of Dalit and adivasi women, these writers showed that demands for liberation must be broad-based and all-encompassing to take into account multiple, intersecting systems as oppression.

Rejection of the upper-class orientation that had dominated the women's movement in the 1970s was also a reaction to a more grassroots, politically involved women's movement popularized in the late 20th Century. This movement insisted on the representation of the women's real world, whose realities and final complexity reorientation. This challenge was taken up by writers like Devi and Bama, resulting in a "plurality of feminist expressions," thereby transforming the fabric of the literary canon itself to better reflect diverse women's experiences across India.

The Screen and the Page: A Comparative Analysis

For decades, there was this basic gulf between how women were depicted in literature and popular cinema in India. Due to the profit-inclined commercial cinema, female characters were usually portrayed as either extreme type: the passive, self-sacrificing "good woman" (heroine/mother who merely serves to be saved by man) and the aggressive and ruthless "femme fatale" (vamp). Women have often been "sidelined in secondary or ornamental roles" for the storyline of a male protagonist. The structural bias is then compounded by a male-dominated power structure in the industry, wherein "writers' rooms and production offices are overwhelmingly male spaces," leading to female characters with "little depth or agency".

Commercial pressures also accelerated the commodification of the roles appropriate to women. The continued prevalence of item songs, more or less irrelevant dance numbers that woo male viewers by presenting women as "visual spectacles" rather than full-fledged characters—has been one such issue that critics have long complained about. This inclination in cinema to objectify and reduce is perhaps best demonstrated when translating complex literary creations from page to screen. The movie adaptations of Saratchandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* frequently put the predictable needs of the audience before fidelity to text, in an effort to "empower" female characters according to a "postmodernist breakthrough" rather than the particularities of the text. Likewise, while the 1969 film version of *Parineeta* drew praise for how closely and subtly it remained true to the source material, its 2005 adaptation was successful at the box office but singled out for "physicality harped upon" that would be crucial in pursuing our twenty-first-century audience.

The fundamental difference between the two channels is that one is for a purpose. The very fact

that literature is an explorative entity, however, and can shed light on the inner thoughts or emotions of its characters, means it is suitable for addressing certain feminist issues in lyrical subtlety. Cinema, on the other hand, is big business, and it always seems to cheapen things up, dumbing down its femininity for mass consumption by reducing females into commodity groups that every single conservative viewer can be comfortable with.

The new post 2010 decade though, witnessed a small, if commercial, turnaround in Hindi cinema. Movies such as *Kahaani* (2012) and Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) tried to take back control over female sexual identities and portray women in multifaceted, non-conformist lights. *Kahaani* subverted the genre of thriller to make a pregnant woman chase the truth relentlessly, and turned her into an active protagonist, while *Lipstick Under My Burkha* directly engaged with how women across ages share their desire and suffer; it defied the sexual conservatism of the audience.

A Shared Path: The Role of Parallel and New Wave Cinema

The mainstream cinema showcased a different tradition since the 1970s, reflecting a parallel to the literary oeuvre. Directors like Shyam Benegal (*Ankur*, *Bhumika*) and Gulzar (*Mausam*, *Ijaazat*), with their art cinema, threw a flood of light on the social conditions of women trapped within the shackles of patriarchy. A crucial instance could be Benegal's *Bhumika*, which illustrated a woman's search for selfhood and freedom.

This tradition has a profound existence in regional industries, particularly the Malayalam New Wave cinema movement and the more recent wave in Tamil cinema. The Malayalam New Wave has some immaculate narrations depicting the essence of Malayalee life and landscape, defying the very bondage and conventional narrative style. *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Uyare* (2019), and *How Old Are You?* (2014) point fingers at domestic patriarchy, female ambition, and breaking free from stifling expectations, which is usually eulogized in the mainstream cinema. *The Great Indian Kitchen*, is a cinematic experience of evolving from the confined self to exploring the woman desiring to break the fence erected around her, representing the powerful act of rebellion explicit in the works of Desai and Deshpande.

The Kollywood industry has not taken a step back in portraying the essential life of women, particularly through an intersectional lens. Directors like Vetrimaaran have exposed caste and class through a critical lens that not only focuses on identity as a woman, but also its coalescence with the socio-political backdrop that forms her identity. The rise of potent, woman-centric films like Mari Selvaraj's *Karnan* (2021), a framework rooted in a Dalit- feminist perspective, showcases how regional cinema can successfully translate the intersectional narrative of authors like Bama and Mahasweta Devi onto the screen.

This revolution brought by the new wave cinema does not just reflect in the themes or breaking stereotypes. Nevertheless, the creation of compelling cinema on low budgets is a signature of their meticulous grip in various technical aspects of the cinema as well. This unique economic model serves a surreal experience in weaving life, bridging the gulf between real and reel. Unlike Bollywood's blockbuster budgets, Malayalam cinema operates with lower costs and a smaller, more discerning audience. This gallantry reflected by regional industries has brought copious

experimental storytelling with unconventional themes. The final and most crucial connection between progressive cinema and literature is the rise of women creators. As rightly pointed by Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak, a subaltern can raise voice for their own rights and justice, female directors and writers like Anjali Menon (*Bangalore Days*), Gauri Shinde (*English Vinglish*), and Reema Kagti (*Talaash*) have been a reflection of women's voice speaking for herself, exploring her inner self and living her life instead of mere survival. Creating such "female-driven stories" has slowly bridged the gap between the page and the screen.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE INDIAN FEMALE NARRATIVE

The evolution of the Indian woman's narrative—from the 'confined self' of the 1970s literature to exploring the 'intersectional, globalized protagonist' of contemporary works is a journey that had its backbone in artistic progress as well as a farewell to the commercial and consumeristic attitude that couldn't measure cinema beyond monetary benefits that funded the patriarchal structure. Literature has consistently been the torchbearer of this transformation that paved the way for opportunities for radical self-examination, devoid of market needs. Yet the emergence of a powerful, globalized, and intersectional literary canon—featuring voices like Meena Kandasamy—and Nayantara Sahgal's continued political engagement have fundamentally shifted the conversation. Travelling through the new road, regional cinema, particularly the New Wave movements, has proven that nuanced, female-centric storytelling can be commercially and critically successful. This liberation is an indication of coming out of the box to explore a world full of adventure and opportunities to identify their true selves. The bold, complex, and intersectional voices of the page become the norm, not the exception, on the screen.

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