

Feminist Reappraisals Of Motherhood In Indian English Literature

Priyanka Naik Dessai*

*Research Scholar, University of Technology, Jaipur, Email Id: priyankadessai17@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

In the expansive terrain of Indian English literature, feminist reappraisals of motherhood challenge the traditional paradigms that have long defined women's roles within both the family and society. This literary movement seeks to explore and redefine the concept of motherhood beyond its conventional boundaries of self-sacrifice and nurturing, presenting it instead as a complex and multifaceted experience that intersects with themes of autonomy, identity, and agency. By critically examining how motherhood is portrayed, feminist writers not only question the existing narratives but also contribute to the formation of new perspectives that reflect the realities and aspirations of women in contemporary Indian society.[1]

These literary efforts are particularly significant as they provide a counterpoint to the often romanticized or idealized portrayals of mothers in traditional Indian literature. Writers such as Nilanjana Bhowmick in "*Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden*" and Salma in "*Women, Dreaming*" use their narratives to delve into the pressures, conflicts, and joys that come with motherhood, portraying it as a pivotal element in the broader discourse on gender and power dynamics. Through their works, these authors illuminate the struggles and resistances of their characters, showcasing how these women navigate and negotiate their roles in shifting cultural and social landscapes. [2]This burgeoning genre not only enriches the literary canon but also resonates deeply with ongoing feminist dialogues about women's rights, equality, and liberation in India. Born into such a diverse country, Indian women face a two-faced life—one that the law guards, the other that the culture destroys. Nilanjana Bhowmick's "*Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden*" set me on a journey where I tried to comprehend the two-faced life that Indian women are forced to lead by virtue of the law, a life where the law is protective but the culture destructive. With pressing achievements in the domain of rights of women, pressure from the traditional expectations interwoven with modern-day capitalism still goes on to craft the experience for a great majority.[3] Bhowmick pushes back on what is at times a widely held assumption that the presence of legal provisions automatically leads to social and actual equality. It is, therefore, very important that we understand the struggle in this context of Indian women creating identities and roles in some way that this transformation bridges the gulf between the law and lived realities of the people, while at a time when the world is rewriting the rules of women.[4]

"*Lies Our Mothers Told Us*" by Nilanjana Bhowmick is a portrayal that brings out the silent struggles, constant negotiations, and pervasive conflicts that seem to characterize the life of so many Indian women. The feature is a scathing view of challenges that are often trivialized, moving the discourse much further towards realizing and working through the actual burdens the women bear. We do not get an elaborated detail of her work on "*Women, Dreaming*," but women's struggles and challenges must be brought out in a patriarchal frame, as it is a complementary work of the same issues.[5]

Motherhood, in Bhowmick's book, is used as a powerful narrative tool to uncover the depths of important feminist issues: gender roles, autonomy, and consequently, identity within the Indian socio-cultural space. Bhowmick and possibly Salma, through her literary work, have a mastery of the deep and creative analysis of women's lives. Both inspire the fact that legal reform structures alone should not be enough; it is the societal structures that reinforce gender disparity. This introspective journey that this book takes its readers on is hopefully a call to reconsider motherhood in Indian literature and society in the hope that the discussion is led on to reach some tangible changes in the perception and value attached to women's roles and identities in today's India.[6] This points towards the challenges that continue to be prevalent, but it speaks to the power of literature to act as a driver in social change due to a realignment and recasting of the plot around motherhood and the role of women in India.

Feminist Framework

Feminist Literary Theory and Motherhood: Feminist literary theory critically examines the influence of gender on literature, aiming to deconstruct patriarchal norms and elevate the narratives of women. When applied to motherhood, this approach challenges the traditional representations and roles assigned to women, advocating for a broader, more complex view of motherhood that encompasses both societal influences and individual choices.[7]

Traditional Portrayal of Motherhood in Indian English Literature: Traditionally, Indian English literature has depicted motherhood within the confines of self-sacrifice, nurturing capabilities, and dedication to familial obligations. However, this portrayal has been progressively challenged by contemporary Indian women writers who strive to present a more realistic and nuanced depiction of motherhood. These authors explore the joys, struggles, and paradoxes of motherhood, thus providing a more rounded and authentic portrayal of women's experiences.[8]

Exploration in Modern Works: Notable works like *"Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden"* and *"Women, Dreaming"* utilize the theme of motherhood to delve into broader feminist issues such as gender roles, autonomy, and identity. These narratives examine the intersection of motherhood with societal expectations, the agency and choices available to women, and the impact of motherhood on a woman's identity[9]. Through these themes, the authors encourage a critical reflection on the complex realities of women's lives in India.

This exploration reveals that contemporary Indian English literature serves as a dynamic platform for discussing and reimagining motherhood through a feminist lens, contributing significantly to the discourse on gender and identity in literature.[10]

Analysis of "Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden"

"Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden" by Nilanjana Bhattacharya offers a penetrating exploration into the lives of Indian mothers, highlighting the tension between cultural dictates and personal autonomy. The book critically examines the traditional roles expected of Indian mothers, who are seen as keepers of cultural and moral legacies. These roles, while culturally significant, often restrict their personal freedom and identity. Bhattacharya uses vivid personal narratives to question these entrenched norms, or the 'lies' that have historically dictated the behavior and roles of women, revealing how these pressures undermine women's independence and contribute to their social marginalization.[11] Set against the backdrop of contemporary shifts in society, the novel underscores the growing assertiveness of Indian women who are rejecting these traditional confines in favor of pursuing their own aspirations. Through its narrative, the book not only challenges the conventional roles attributed to Indian mothers but also underscores their potential for resistance and transformation, making a powerful case for reevaluating the narratives that shape women's lives in India.[12]

Analysis of "Women, Dreaming"

"Women, Dreaming" by Salma presents a vivid portrayal of the lives of women in a Tamil Nadu village, highlighting their aspirations and setbacks. The narrative focuses on their personal ambitions, the yearning for independence, and dreams of a life beyond traditional expectations, particularly in the realm of motherhood. Salma explores the internal landscapes of these women, revealing their secret hopes, fears, and the emotional burdens imposed by societal and familial expectations.[13] The novel also touches on the quiet yet potent forms of resistance these women deploy against oppressive norms, illustrating their resilience and subtle defiance. Salma's story not only paints a picture of their struggles but also celebrates their spirit and determination to challenge the boundaries set by their community. This book serves as a poignant reminder of the complex, rich inner worlds of women and their courageous confrontations with societal limitations.[14].

Comparative Analysis

In a comparative analysis of *"Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden"* by Nilanjana Bhattacharya and *"Women, Dreaming"* by Salma, both novels dissect the challenging traditional roles imposed on women, yet they do so through distinct cultural lenses and narrative techniques. Bhattacharya's narrative is overtly feminist, engaging directly with societal norms and the burdens these impose on Indian women. Her critique is forthright, using explicit discussions to challenge and dissect the 'lies' told to women about their roles and behaviors. On the other hand, Salma's approach is more subtle and introspective. *"Women, Dreaming"* captures the daily lives and inner thoughts of women, weaving feminist themes through personal stories and emotional landscapes, thus offering a reflective examination of their challenges.

This table show comparative aspects of both works:

Aspect	<i>Lies Our Mothers Told Us</i>	<i>Women, Dreaming</i>
Narrative Style	Direct and explicit	Subtle and introspective
Feminist Approach	Overt critique of societal norms	Feminism woven through personal narratives
Cultural Focus	Pan-Indian perspective	Specific to Tamil Nadu village life

Method of Challenge	Through discussions of 'lies' and norms	Through depiction of everyday experiences and thoughts
Character Development	Driven by societal critique	Driven by personal growth and emotional depth

This table Show how both authors address the theme of challenging traditional roles, but through significantly different methods and narrative scopes, providing rich texts for understanding the complexities of women's roles in India.

Implications

The comparative analysis of Nilanjana Bhowmick's *"Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden"* and Salma's *"Women, Dreaming"* reveals significant insights into the dynamics of feminism and motherhood within Indian English literature, highlighting how traditional roles are both embraced and challenged. This reflection ignites a broader conversation about gender roles and societal expectations in India, presenting several important implications.

Firstly, these novels serve as vital resources for policymakers and social activists who aim to reshape the experiences of women in India. By elucidating the contrast between legal protections and cultural practices, the narratives call for a critical reassessment of how women's roles are understood and appreciated within the societal framework. Furthermore, integrating these texts into educational syllabi could profoundly impact students' understanding of gender complexities in India. Exposure to such feminist literature could cultivate a greater appreciation for its role in challenging entrenched societal norms and inspire a new generation to critically evaluate and transform traditional gender narratives.

Lastly, both books foster a crucial discourse on the necessity of cultural adaptations that promote and respect women's autonomy. They advocate for a reevaluation of the conventional narratives surrounding motherhood and women's societal roles, which is essential for advancing societal development. Overall, the study underscores the capacity of literary works to not only reflect but also influence societal attitudes and policies concerning gender equality and women's rights in India.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of motherhood in Nilanjana Bhowmick's *"Lies Our Mothers Told Us"* and Salma's *"Women, Dreaming"* through a feminist lens offers a poignant critique of the traditional and contemporary challenges faced by Indian women. These works not only reflect the struggles and aspirations of women in navigating their socio-cultural environments but also highlight their resilience and agency in confronting these challenges. The authors effectively use narrative techniques to invite readers into the complex worlds of their characters, promoting a deeper understanding and empathy towards the plight of Indian women. Through their distinct narrative styles and approaches, Bhowmick and Salma provide a rich tapestry of themes that resonate with the ongoing struggles for gender equality. Their contributions to Indian English literature are invaluable, as they provide both a mirror and a map: a mirror reflecting the current state of gender dynamics, and a map suggesting pathways towards more equitable and fulfilling experiences for women. The ongoing dialogue sparked by these works is not only crucial for academic and literary circles but also for broader societal implications, signaling a shift towards more nuanced and inclusive understandings of gender in India.

Ultimately, these literary works empower readers and society at large to reconsider and reshape the narrative around motherhood and women's roles, urging a move towards tangible changes in perceptions and the valuation of women's identities in contemporary India. This study affirms the power of literature as a transformative tool in the ongoing discourse on gender and social change.

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