



# Love And Longing In Feminism In Indian Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Indian feminist literature intricately intertwines the motifs of love and longing with a vehement critique of patriarchal paradigms. Far from mere romantic indulgence, these narratives encapsulate the emotional estrangement, existential voids, and repressed desires experienced by women confined within domestic orthodoxies. Eminent writers such as Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai dissect the claustrophobia of conjugal life, where women grapple with imposed silence and psychological exile. The sanctified archetypes of womanhood, epitomized by mythic figures like Sita, are subverted to illuminate the insidious expectations of submissiveness. Kamala Das's candid exploration of feminine libido and metaphysical yearning ruptures literary taboos, foregrounding corporeal and emotional autonomy. Literary voices from Toru Dutt to Pandita Ramabai lament the entrenched misogyny of their eras while asserting proto-feminist resistance. Post-independence literature, from Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of agrarian despair to Desai's urban alienation, magnifies the multifaceted suffering of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* audaciously exposes the trauma of marital violation cloaked in cultural silence. Anita Nair delineates love as an ambivalent force with tumultuous. Shobha De's *Second Thoughts* confronts the entanglement of emotional deprivation and suppressed eroticism. The longing in these texts extends beyond eroticism to encompass spiritual anchorage, intellectual emancipation, and socio-cultural liberation. Contemporary feminist literature further dismantles heteronormative constructs by embracing queer identities and alternative desires. These narratives are not merely cathartic expressions but insurgent articulations against hegemonic structures. Through a constellation

of diverse voices, Indian feminist literature reclaims the fragmented self and redefines the contours of female subjectivity.

## Introduction

### Love And Longing In Feminism In Indian Literature

Feminist literature in India has extensively explored the themes of love and longing, often challenging traditional narratives and societal expectations placed upon women. These themes are not merely romantic; they delve into a broader spectrum of desires, emotional needs, and the quest for autonomy and self-fulfillment. Unfulfilled Desires within Marriage: Many feminist writers depict marriages as spaces where women's emotional and physical longings are often ignored or suppressed. Authors like Shashi Deshpande (*That Long Silence*) and Anita Desai (*Cry, the Peacock*) explore the loneliness and alienation experienced by women within conventional marital structures, where their roles are often confined to wife and mother.

Critique of "Ideal" Womanhood: The traditional Indian narratives often idealize women as selfless, devoted wives (like Sita or Draupadi). Feminist literature subverts these ideals, showcasing women who yearn for more than just domesticity and who question the very premise of love as submission. Rejection of Arranged Marriages and Societal Pressure: Some works highlight the longing for choice and agency in matters of love and partnership, resisting the societal pressure to conform to arranged marriages that may not cater to their emotional needs. Breaking Taboos: Indian feminist literature has been instrumental in openly discussing female sexuality and desire, which were historically taboo subjects. Kamala Das is a prominent figure in this regard, whose poetry boldly explores women's physical and emotional longings, often expressing frustration with the superficiality of physical love and a deep yearning for a more profound connection.

Beyond the Carnal: While acknowledging physical desire, many authors also emphasize a longing for genuine intimacy, understanding, and emotional fulfillment that goes beyond mere physical gratification.

Love as a Path to Self-Discovery: For many women characters in feminist literature, the quest for love is intertwined with a journey of self-discovery and the assertion of their own identity. They long for relationships that respect their individuality and allow them to grow. Freedom from Constraints: Love and longing are often portrayed as desires for freedom from societal constraints, familial expectations, and patriarchal control. This can manifest as a longing for education, a career, or simply a space where they can be their authentic selves. Loneliness and Alienation: The absence of genuine love or the inability to fulfill their longings often leads to profound loneliness and alienation, as seen in the works of various authors.

**Beyond Romantic Love:** While romantic love is a significant theme, feminist literature also explores other forms of love, such as the love for family, friends, or even a spiritual longing. **Queer Love and Desires:** More contemporary Indian feminist literature is increasingly exploring queer love and desires, challenging heteronormative narratives and giving voice to marginalized experiences.

**Longing for a "Home" and Belonging:** The concept of "home" often extends beyond a physical space to a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional security, which many women characters actively long for. **Kamala Das:** Her poetry is renowned for its frank and intense exploration of female desire, love, and disillusionment.

**Shashi Deshpande:** Her novels often delve into the inner lives of women, their psychological struggles, and their search for identity within traditional family structures. **Anita Desai:** Known for her psychological depth, her works often portray women grappling with isolation, emotional complexities, and unfulfilled desires. **Amrita Pritam:** Her works, particularly those related to the Partition, often highlight the trauma and longing experienced by women. **Lalithambika Antharjanam:** Her writing explores the complex roles of women at the intersection of family and society.

**Mahasweta Devi:** While often focusing on the struggles of marginalized women, her work implicitly addresses their longing for justice and dignity.

In essence, love and longing in Indian feminist literature are complex and multifaceted. They serve as a powerful lens through which authors critique patriarchal norms, give voice to suppressed desires, and explore women's arduous but persistent quest for autonomy, self-expression, and meaningful connections in a society that often seeks to define and confine them.

**Anita Nair:** Love is portrayed as a multifaceted and often complex force, encompassing both its empowering and destructive potential. Her works explore love's capacity to shape identity, challenge social norms, and drive personal growth particularly for her female characters. Love in Nair's narratives is not always straightforward often involving struggles, compromises, and self discovery within the context of relationships.

Indian women have been facing challenges in the form of inequalities, mental and physical violence acts and many more from different phases of time in India. The portrayal of feminism in Indian literature is considered to be one of the most debated topics. From the 19th century to the 21st century, Indian writers have expressed their concerns and views through their work. India is a land of multiple languages and different pieces of writing have been published in several languages. The aim of this article is to assess the representation of women and feminism in Indian literature.

## **Depiction of feminism in Indian literature in the pre-independence era**

The portrayal of feminism in Indian literature goes back to ancient Indian history. 'Ramayana' is considered to be one of the greatest epics of Indian literature written by Valmiki in the 5th century BCE. In this epic, the characters women have depicted the real condition of Indian women in the ancient period. As stated by Gamberi, the character of Sita who is the wife of the protagonist has justified the power and strength of her husband Rama. She has also been portrayed as vulnerable without her husband.

Furthermore, Gamberi has stated that the epic has made Rama an exemplary protagonist at the cost of the rejection of his wife. According to Dwivedi, Toru Dutta, a nineteenth-century Indian poet, expressed her pain and grief through her poem 'Sita' and questioned the dominance of Indian patriarchal society. On the other hand, another 19th-century Indian author, Pandita Ramabai depicted the helpless condition of Indian Hindu high caste women during the colonial period in her book 'The High-Caste Hindu Women' (Bhog and Bharadwaj).

## **Depiction of women in the post-independence literature**

Post-independence Indian literature has portrayed the condition of Indian women in new dimensions. As stated by Sharnappa, the real suffering of a peasant woman in rural India can be witnessed in 'Nectar in a Sieve', a novel by Kamala Markandaya. This novel has a story of a woman and her husband in an Indian village who were exploited by moneylenders. The lead female character of the novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' is Rukmani who is the wife of a peasant husband apart from doing home chores she also helps her husband in farming. However, the land was sold and the couple had to suffer a financial burden. The village shopkeepers started refusing to sell rations on credit to Rukmani as she did not have money. This novel has depicted a picture of rural Indian women who did not receive education, financial security and societal support.

On the other hand, the novel 'Voices in the City' by Anita Desai has stressed on freedom and facing realities in the lives of Indian women (Khan). The novel 'Voices in the City' has represented two lead women characters in different realities. Monisha, an important female character in the novel commits suicide due to her unhappy marriage life. Monisha discovered that her husband and his relatives have no respect for her and they wanted a child from her. Monisha was bound with old orthodox traditions like a bird in a cage.

On the hand, Amla the younger sister of Monisha came to Kolkata from Mumbai to live a new life. However, her enthusiasm disappeared when she came across an astonishing truth about one of her friends, Dharma. He had a daughter of her age and treated his daughter with no respect.

## Depiction of women in the 21st-century

Indian society has been going through several changes in the establishing an identity for women. As stated by Sharma, *The Binding Vine*, a novel by Shashi Deshpande has highlighted marital rape. In this novel, the protagonist is a female character Urmi. She witnessed and felt the pain of her mother-in-law Mira. Urmi found a diary of Mira and discovers that Mira suffered marital rape and failed to raise her voice against it. Moreover, Urmi was also dealing with her grief and pain of losing her child to illness. *The Binding Vine* has portrayed the contemporary issue of marital rape which is considered to be taboo in many family discussions.

Another contemporary author, Shobha De has highlighted the emotional and sexual needs of an Indian middle-class woman through her story 'Second Thoughts'. The story revolves around a young middle-class married woman who falls in love with a man other than her husband. However, Maya cherishes old traditions and cannot continue with the extramarital relationship for long. In this story, the author has exhibited the importance of emotion and sexuality and their interdependence in maintaining healthy relationships.

## Conclusion

In the realm of fiction, Indian writing in English has heralded a new era in which women writers have come out boldly to raise the question of the prominent age old patriarchal domination, traditional customs, gender inequality in Indian society. The works of great writers like Kamal Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arunthathi Roy, Meena Alexander, Anita Nair and other women writers have left a deep impression in the minds of readers of Indian writing in English. Anita Nair, a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English is one of the greatest Indian woman writers. Her novels mainly deal with the experiences of the women protagonists who face traumatic situations in the family life.

The women of the household are required to prepare the meal for the men, who eat most of the food. Only after the males are finished eating, can the females eat. Typically the leftover food is meager, considering the families are poor and have little to begin with. Even though the constitution guarantees free primary schooling to every one up to 14 years of age, very few females attend school. There are several reasons why families choose not to educate their daughters. One reason is that parents get nothing in return for educating their daughters.

In a household have the responsibility of the housework. In addition, even if a woman is educated, especially in the poorer regions, there is no hope for job. Most jobs women perform are agricultural or domestic which do not require a formal education. Another reason girls are not educated because families are required to supply a chaste daughter to the family of her future husband.

India has mandatory reporting of any sexual offence against a child, child abuse, in its various forms can be found every where in India, in cities and rural homes, in the rich home and the poor, and in the streets and schools. Wiping out child abuse in India requires a complex strategy that will require multi-stakeholder support. This abuse can be of several organization (WHO) like physical, emotional, mental, psychological or in the form of neglect or exploitation. Parents must educate children about sexual advances or threats and protect them from abuse through the concept of unacceptable “bad touch.” This communication must be constant, friendly, and frank and teach children how their sexuality works so they don’t unknowingly harass others.

In India, male dominance is everywhere. It is found superiority of men in every phase of our lives. When women are born, they have their fathers to look after as, their brothers then share the responsibilities of the father when they enter their teenage years, then they have their own life partners who decide everything in their married lives, lastly their sons enter the bandwagon in our old age days. To a very large extent, lives of women in our country are decided and controlled by the men in their lives.

Today India offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. The society has to treat men and women equally.

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