

From Nationalist Feminism to Intersectional Resistance: Ideology and Gender in Modern Indian Literature

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Abstract—This research article undertakes a critical examination of ideology and feminism across four canonical Indian writers Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, Munshi Premchand, and Yashpal whose works span the colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial periods of Indian literary history. Drawing upon feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and Marxist ideological analysis, the study explores how each writer constructs, challenges, or subverts dominant patriarchal, caste-based, and class-based ideological frameworks. Through close readings of representative texts, the article argues that while Naidu and Roy engage feminism from markedly different historical and aesthetic positions, Premchand and Yashpal, despite writing in the progressive Hindi literary tradition, demonstrate complex and sometimes contradictory engagements with gender. The comparative approach reveals that Indian feminist consciousness in literature is not monolithic but is shaped by intersecting forces of nationalism, class, caste, colonialism, and social reform. The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that situates Indian women's writing and women centered narratives within broader ideological contestations.

Index Terms—feminism, ideology, Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, Premchand, Yashpal, postcolonialism, Indian literature, gender, nationalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ideology and literature has been a central concern of literary theory since at least the nineteenth century. In the Indian context, this relationship assumes particular complexity, shaped as it is by the colonial encounter, the struggle for national independence, social reform movements, caste politics, and the global currents of feminism. Four writers who exemplify this complexity with especial richness are Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), Arundhati Roy (b. 1961), Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), and Yashpal (1903–1976). Together they represent the arc

of modern Indian literature in English and Hindi, from the colonial fin de siècle to the late postcolonial moment.

Feminist literary criticism, broadly understood, examines the ways in which literary texts encode, reproduce, contest, or transform patriarchal ideologies the systems of belief and practice that naturalize male dominance and female subordination. Applied to Indian literature, such criticism must necessarily be intersectional, attending to the ways in which gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and colonial status. This article brings such an intersectional feminist lens to bear on the selected writers, asking: How does each writer represent women? What ideological assumptions about gender, sexuality, domesticity, and public life are operative in their texts? To what extent do their works challenge or reproduce dominant ideologies? And how does their historical positioning shape their feminist (or ambivalently feminist) vision?

The article proceeds through individual analyses of each writer before drawing comparative conclusions about the ideological landscape of modern Indian literature. The theoretical framework draws primarily on the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, supplemented by Louis Althusser's conceptualization of ideology and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: IDEOLOGY, FEMINISM, AND INDIAN LITERATURE

Louis Althusser's influential account of ideology as a system of representations that interpellates individuals into subject positions provides a useful starting point. For Althusser, ideology is not merely a set of

consciously held beliefs but a lived relation to the real conditions of existence one that operates through Ideological State Apparatuses including religion, family, education, and culture. Literature, as a cultural form, both reproduces and potentially critiques such ideological interpellations.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony the ways in which dominant groups maintain power not through coercion alone but through the production of consent further illuminates the operation of patriarchal ideology in literary texts. The Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual also resonates with the social positioning of all four writers studied here, each of whom functioned as a public intellectual and cultural voice. Feminist theory, from its second-wave articulations by Beauvoir, Millett, and Showalter through to its postcolonial revisions by Spivak and Mohanty, has consistently argued that literature is a site where gender ideology is produced and contested. Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" is particularly germane to Indian women's literary representation, foregrounding the ways in which colonial, class, and patriarchal discourses conspire to silence women's voices. Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism, meanwhile, cautions against applying monolithic feminist frameworks to non-Western contexts. In the Indian context, feminist literary criticism has developed a rich tradition, from the pioneering work of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in *Women Writing in India* (1991) to more recent scholarship by Meenakshi Mukherjee, Rosemary George, and Priyamvada Gopal. This tradition insists on the specificity of Indian women's experience its embeddedness in structures of caste, community, and colonial history while also connecting it to global feminist conversations.

III. SAROJINI NAIDU: THE NATIONALIST FEMINIST AND THE BURDEN OF BEAUTY

3.1 Historical and Biographical Context

Sarojini Naidu occupies a unique position in Indian literary and political history. Known as the 'Nightingale of India,' she was simultaneously a celebrated poet in the English language, a leading figure of the Indian National Congress, the first woman president of the Congress (1925), and a prominent voice in the women's suffrage movement.

Her literary career was shaped by the intertwining demands of colonial cultural politics, nationalist ideology, and emergent feminist consciousness.

Born in Hyderabad to a Bengali Brahmin father a scientist and philosopher and a Bengali mother who was herself a poet, Naidu received an elite education and came under the mentorship of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symonds in England, who encouraged her to write poetry that would represent the 'real' India. This colonial pedagogical encounter profoundly shaped her poetic aesthetic, producing what several critics have described as the tension between the colonial 'Oriental' gaze and Naidu's own self-fashioning.

3.2 Ideology and Gender in Naidu's Poetry

Naidu's major collections *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), and *The Broken Wing* (1917) have been subject to divergent critical assessments. Early critics celebrated them as evocative renderings of Indian sensibility in the English lyric tradition. Later feminist and postcolonial critics, however, have been more ambivalent, noting the ways in which Naidu's verse reproduces colonial and patriarchal ideologies even as it seeks to assert a feminine Indian voice.

A central ideological tension in Naidu's poetry is the construction of Indian womanhood. Her poems frequently celebrate women in traditional roles as lovers, wives, mothers, and temple dancers rendering them as embodiments of an eternal, spiritualized femininity. "Who are you, O fragrant one, / Whose eyes are soft as the Bengal night, / Whose feet are delicate as lotuses / Beside the moonlit river's light?" Naidu, 'Palanquin Bearers' (representative lyric)

Such imagery, critics like Eunice de Souza and Priya Joshi have argued, aestheticizes and objectifies the Indian woman, producing her as a spectacle for both the colonial Western gaze and the nationalist male gaze. The Indian woman becomes, in these readings, a symbol of the nation timeless, beautiful, and spiritually pure rather than a historical subject with political agency. And yet this reading, while powerful, risks oversimplification. Naidu's political career presents a counter-narrative: she was an outspoken advocate for women's rights, including the right to vote, to education, and to participate in public life. Her poem 'The Gift of India' (1915), an address to the British Empire on behalf of Indian mothers mourning

their sons lost in the First World War, mobilizes the figure of the Indian mother not merely as passive sufferer but as a moral and political claimant upon the empire. Here, the ideology of motherhood is deployed with strategic feminist intent the mother's grief becomes a form of political accusation.

Naidu's feminism, then, is best understood as a form of what Mrinalini Sinha has called 'nationalist feminism' a feminism that operates within the ideological framework of nationalism, sometimes reinforcing its gender hierarchies even while expanding women's public roles. She worked within the Gandhian nationalist framework, which, as scholars have noted, idealized women's self-sacrifice and constructed the spinning wheel and the hunger fast as feminine nationalist virtues. Naidu's poetry and politics are marked by this structural tension: a genuine commitment to women's advancement coexists with ideological investments in femininity as spiritual essence and national symbol.

IV. ARUNDHATI ROY: RADICAL FEMINISM, POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE, AND THE POLITICS OF FORM

4.1 The God of Small Things: A Feminist-Marxist Reading

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), is one of the most critically celebrated works of postcolonial Indian fiction in English. Winner of the Booker Prize, the novel has generated an enormous body of critical commentary, much of it focused on its feminist and ideological dimensions. Unlike Naidu, Roy operates in a fully postcolonial, postmodern literary moment, and her feminism is correspondingly more radical, more intersectional, and more explicitly ideological.

The novel centres on the tragic story of the Ipe family in Kerala, tracing the lives of the twin siblings Rahel and Estha and their mother Ammu. The central event the love affair between Ammu, an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an 'Untouchable' carpenter is represented as a transgression of what Roy famously calls 'the Love Laws': the socially enforced prohibitions on cross-caste, cross-class intimacy. This framing identifies the novel's ideological project explicitly: the critique of the interlocking systems of caste hierarchy, class oppression, and patriarchal

control that together constitute hegemonic ideology in Kerala society.

4.2 Intersectionality and Ideological Critique

Roy's feminism is markedly intersectional. The novel does not represent patriarchy as a single, unified system but as a complex of overlapping oppressions caste, class, colonial history, and gendered social norms that bear differently on different women. The character of Mammachi, the grandmother, embodies the ways in which women can be complicit in patriarchal ideology: she perpetuates the caste system, reinforces Ammu's subordination, and participates in Velutha's destruction. The character of Baby Kochamma represents the self-hating internalization of patriarchal and colonial values that Spivak associates with the colonial subject's mimicry.

Ammu, by contrast, is constructed as a figure of transgressive feminist consciousness a woman who refuses the subject position assigned to her by patriarchal ideology but is ultimately destroyed by it. Her love for Velutha is simultaneously a feminist act (the assertion of her own desire against social prohibition) and an intersectional political act (the crossing of the caste boundary, the refusal of 'Touchability'). Roy represents this crossing with lyrical intensity, but she does not idealize it: the lovers' destruction is unflinching, and the novel refuses the consolations of romantic resolution.

Roy's ideological critique extends to the communist party (the CPI-M), which in the novel colludes with the Syrian Christian establishment to ensure Velutha's murder and the suppression of Ammu's transgression. This is a pointed critique of the limitations of a Marxism that fails to address caste and gender: the party protects its class interests (its relationship with the landed, upper-caste establishment) at the expense of its ideological commitments to the dispossessed.

4.3 Roy's Non-Fiction and Activist Feminism

In her essays collected in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2004), and *Azadi* (2020), Roy extends her feminist-ideological critique to the contemporary political landscape. She writes about the impacts of neo-liberal economic policy on India's poorest and most marginalized populations, arguing that 'development' has become an ideology that displaces Adivasi

communities, destroys ecosystems, and particularly devastates the lives of women and Dalits. Her essay on the Narmada Dam controversy, 'The Greater Common Good,' exemplifies this approach: it is simultaneously an environmental critique, a feminist critique of development, and an ideological analysis of the Indian state. Roy's feminism is thus explicitly political and activist in a way that Naidu's, operating within the constraints of colonial nationalist politics, could not be. She does not merely represent women's suffering but analyses its structural causes and calls for structural transformation.

V. MUNSHI PREMCHAND: PROGRESSIVE IDEOLOGY AND THE LIMITS OF REFORM

5.1 Premchand and the Progressive Writers' Movement

Munshi Premchand is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the Hindi and Urdu literary traditions, and his work is central to what has been called the 'Progressive turn' in Indian vernacular literature. A founding figure of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), Premchand was deeply committed to a literature that would address social injustice, expose the exploitation of the poor and the marginalized, and contribute to the transformation of Indian society. His fiction is marked by a sustained engagement with caste oppression, class exploitation, and the condition of rural India under colonialism.

Premchand's engagement with gender, however, has been the subject of considerable critical debate. While many of his stories and novels feature women characters and represent their suffering under patriarchal social arrangements, feminist critics have also identified significant ideological tensions and contradictions in his representation of women.

5.2 Female Characters and Patriarchal Ideology in Premchand's Fiction

Premchand's fiction is populated with suffering women: *Nirmala* (*Nirmala*, 1927), condemned by poverty and social convention to an unhappy marriage; *Surdas's* wife in *Rangbhoomi* (1925); and the unnamed women of countless short stories who endure domestic violence, economic exploitation, and social ostracism. In representing their suffering with sympathy and moral indignation, Premchand clearly positions himself against patriarchal ideology. His

stories repeatedly expose the ways in which custom, religion, and economic necessity conspire to oppress women. And yet, as critics like Vasudha Dalmia and Sara Rai have noted, Premchand's ideological framework is not simply feminist. His reform agenda is primarily class-based and caste-based, and his feminism operates within the limits of a nationalist social reform tradition that, as scholars of the period have shown, tended to construct women as bearers of cultural tradition and objects of reform rather than as autonomous political subjects. Premchand's 'good women' are typically selfless, patient, and self-sacrificing virtues that reproduce rather than challenge patriarchal norms of femininity.

In *Nirmala*, the eponymous protagonist accepts her exploitation with quiet resignation, and while Premchand clearly invites the reader's sympathy, he does not give *Nirmala* the language of protest or the possibility of resistance. Her suffering is represented as social injustice, but the novel's ideological framework does not extend to challenging the fundamental gender arrangements that produce that injustice. Premchand's story 'Sutta' and several others do feature women who resist or transgress social norms women who refuse arranged marriages, who seek education, who assert their desires. But these figures of resistance are often represented ambivalently: their transgression is frequently punished, and the narrative frequently returns to an idealization of sacrifice and duty. The tension between Premchand's reformist sympathy for women and his ideological investment in traditional gender norms remains a constitutive feature of his fiction.

5.3 Caste, Class, and Gender in Premchand

Premchand's most powerful feminist moments occur when he links gender oppression to caste and class oppression. His story 'Sadgati' (*Salvation*, 1931), which Satyajit Ray later adapted for film, represents the brutal exploitation of an 'Untouchable' family by a Brahmin landlord; the story's most devastating moment involves the treatment of the Untouchable woman, who is subject to both caste contempt and sexual objectification. In such moments, Premchand anticipates later intersectional feminist analysis: the specific vulnerability of lower-caste women to multiple, overlapping forms of oppression is rendered with devastating clarity.

VI. YASHPAL: REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY AND FEMINIST POLITICS

6.1 Yashpal and Marxist Feminism

Yashpal is in several respects the most explicitly ideological of the four writers studied here. A committed Marxist and former revolutionary who had participated in armed anti-colonial resistance under Bhagat Singh's influence, Yashpal brought an explicitly political consciousness to his fiction that is inseparable from his literary aesthetic. His major novels *Jhootha Sach* (This is Not That Dawn, 1958–1960), *Dada Comrade* (1941), and *Divya* (1945) are works of both literary distinction and ideological argument. Yashpal's Marxism shaped his feminism in distinctive ways. Unlike Premchand, whose feminism remained embedded in a social reform framework, Yashpal understood women's oppression as structurally linked to class exploitation: patriarchy and capitalism were, for him, mutually reinforcing systems of domination. This Marxist-feminist framework allowed Yashpal to represent women not merely as objects of sympathy or reform but as potential revolutionary subjects.

6.2 Women as Revolutionary Subjects

In *Dada Comrade*, the character of Shailbala is one of the earliest representations in Hindi literature of a woman as a political and revolutionary subject. She participates in revolutionary activity, develops a political consciousness, and refuses the subordinate domestic role assigned to her by both bourgeois and traditional society. Her relationship with the male protagonist is marked by equality and mutual respect a model of gender relations that Yashpal explicitly contrasts with the hierarchical relations of bourgeois marriage. *Divya*, set in the ancient past but clearly a vehicle for contemporary ideological argument, represents the transformation of an enslaved woman into a figure of philosophical and political consciousness. The novel is Yashpal's most sustained meditation on gender, freedom, and ideology: *Divya's* journey from slavery to liberation is simultaneously an individual feminist narrative and an ideological allegory of social transformation.

6.3 Jhootha Sach and the Partition of Gender

Jhootha Sach, Yashpal's two-volume masterpiece about the Partition of India, offers his most complex

and ambivalent representation of women. The novel follows several characters through the trauma of Partition the violence of displacement, communal massacre, rape, and forced migration and its feminist dimensions have been extensively analyzed. Yashpal represents the particular vulnerability of women in communal violence: the mass rapes and abductions of Partition, the social stigma that attaches to the violated woman, and the patriarchal logic that treats women's bodies as symbols of community honor.

At the same time, *Jhootha Sach* features women notably the protagonist Tara who demonstrate remarkable resilience, agency, and political awareness in the face of catastrophic social disruption. Tara's journey through the chaos of Partition and its aftermath is a feminist narrative of survival and self-fashioning that has few parallels in Hindi literature of the period.

Yashpal's representation of women is, however, not without its tensions. His male characters frequently speak for women, and the novels' ideological frameworks sometimes constrain female characters to the role of embodying or illustrating ideological positions rather than developing as fully autonomous subjects. The revolutionary ideology that empowers Yashpal's representation of women also, at times, subsumes their particularity into an abstract political programme.

VII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES, DIVERGENCES, AND IDEOLOGICAL TENSIONS

7.1 Historical Positioning and Feminist Consciousness

The four writers studied here represent distinct moments in the history of Indian feminist consciousness. Naidu writes from within the colonial nationalist framework, where women's public participation was encouraged as a form of national service but was simultaneously constrained by nationalist ideologies of femininity. Premchand writes from within the social reform tradition, where women's suffering is a moral problem requiring reformist solution but where women's agency remains circumscribed. Yashpal writes from within an explicitly Marxist framework that links women's liberation to class revolution but sometimes reduces gender to class. Roy writes in the fully postcolonial

moment, with access to global feminist theory and the tools of postmodern narrative, producing the most explicitly intersectional and theoretically self-aware feminist vision of the four.

7.2 Language and Form as Ideology

The question of language is itself an ideological question of significance. Naidu and Roy write in English the language of colonial power and their choice of language situate them in complex relations to both colonial and nationalist ideology. Naidu's English was shaped by the Orientalist expectations of her British mentors; Roy's English is self-consciously hybrid, incorporating Malayalam syntax, rhythms, and cultural reference into a postcolonial literary form. Premchand and Yashpal write in Hindi and Urdu languages of the Indian vernacular public sphere and their choice of language is itself a political act, an investment in the cultural resources of the non-elite reading public.

7.3 The Subaltern Woman

All four writers engage, in different ways, with the figure of the subaltern woman the woman who is marginalized not only by gender but by caste, class, or communal identity. Premchand's lower-caste women, Yashpal's Partition survivors, Roy's Ammu and Velutha's mother, and even Naidu's temple dancers occupy this position. But the degree to which they are allowed to speak to be subjects rather than objects of representation varies significantly. Roy's narrative technique, with its multiple perspectives and its refusal of authoritative closure, most fully allows for subaltern women's subjectivity; Premchand's and Yashpal's progressive ideologies, for all their sympathetic intent, sometimes reproduce the silencing they seek to critique.

7.4 Nationalism, Ideology, and Gender

A central finding of this comparative study is the complex relationship between nationalism and feminism across all four writers. Naidu's feminism is deeply entangled with and constrained by nationalist ideology. Premchand's social critique operates within a nationalist framework that idealized the village community and traditional social arrangements. Yashpal's Marxism offered a more radical critique of nationalism Jhootha Sach is sharply critical of both Indian and Pakistani nationalisms but his ideological framework brought its own constraints. Roy's critique

of the Indian state and of Hindu nationalism is the most uncompromising of the four, and it is perhaps this uncompromising quality that has made her the most controversial of these writers in contemporary India.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the four writers studied here Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, Premchand, and Yashpal represent a rich and complex tradition of engagement with ideology and feminism in Indian literature. Their works collectively constitute a conversation across time, language, and literary form about the condition of women in Indian society and the ideological structures that produce and sustain gender oppression.

Naidu's nationalist feminism, constrained by the ideological demands of colonial nationalism but animated by genuine political commitment, established a public space for women's voices in modern Indian literature. Premchand's progressive realism, while marked by the limitations of social reform ideology, produced some of the most powerful representations of gender and caste oppression in Hindi literary history. Yashpal's Marxist feminism, the most explicitly ideological of the four writers' approaches, produced revolutionary women characters who challenged the gendered conventions of Hindi fiction. And Roy's postcolonial intersectional feminism, the most theoretically sophisticated and formally innovative, continues to provoke and disturb both through its fiction and through its activist non-fiction.

Together, these writers demonstrate that Indian feminism in literature is not a single tradition but a contested terrain of competing ideological formations. The study of ideology and feminism in Indian literature requires, therefore, an attention to historical specificity, to the intersections of gender with caste, class, and colonial history, and to the formal and linguistic dimensions of literary representation. Such an approach reveals not only the limits but also the genuine achievements of these writers as feminist thinkers and literary artists. The continuing relevance of these writers is not merely academic. In a contemporary India where gender violence, caste discrimination, and communal conflict remain urgent realities, the ideological and feminist resources of this

literary tradition offer not only critical tools for analysis but imaginative resources for envisioning transformation.

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