
Embodied Narratives: Feminine Agency and the Politics of the Body in Indian English Literature

Dr. Bhujendra Singh Rathod L R

MA., M.Phil., PhD.

Assistant Professor and Head,

Department of English,

Government First Grade College,

Hesaraghatta, Bengaluru-560088

Mob: 8884571615, 7483109871

E-Mail: bhujendra25@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research examines the intricate conflict between women's lived experiences and the cultural frameworks that influence and govern those experiences. In contrast to males, women encounter intensified challenges related to their bodies, prompting essential ontological inquiries on the sources of their pain. The body functions as a biological indicator of sex and serves as a medium for cultural expression, whereby societal standards shape identity. A fundamental question emerges: how does the body's materiality facilitate the confusion of biological sex with socially created gender classifications? Moreover, how can women assert their bodily autonomy amid societal narratives that aim to define and regulate their physicality? This study analyses Indian English literature from the mid-19th century forward, focusing on the representation of the female body in connection with the sociocultural issues it reflects. It emphasizes the ways in which women's bodies are both constrained by and fight patriarchal and societal norms. Although depictions of the female body have changed over history, a continuous discord remains between women's actual bodily experiences and the societal paradigms that seek to understand and regulate them. This research highlights the intricate perceptions, experiences, and limitations of gendered bodies within certain cultural settings. This paper examines the ongoing negotiation between women's lived experiences and the cultural forces influencing the perception of their bodies, as revealed through Indian English novels, highlighting the evolving yet unresolved nature of this dynamic across time and literary representation.

Keywords: Conflict, Bodies, Gender, Autonomy, Patriarchy, Representation, Culture.

Margo and Joe's findings highlight a persistent existential concern for women that transcends generations: the female body. This aspect of femininity presents a unique biological dilemma, often making the body a source of agony from which women cannot extricate themselves. Although all genders experience life via their physical presence, women have additional challenges arising from societal perceptions of their bodies. The intrinsic disparity in male and female interactions with the world has made the female body a central subject of critical analysis across many discourses.

Since the post-Cartesian era, inequalities between male and female existence have often been analyzed within frameworks that endorse binary gender relations. These dualisms often subordinate women within the gender hierarchy. Elizabeth Grosz's claim that women are seen as "more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" under binary frameworks is the foundation of most discourse around the female body. The body is a crucial element in the discussion of women's ontology and subjectivity. Many feminist thinkers contend that authentic female subjectivity cannot be attained without transcending the limitations of bodily existence. Cartesian dualism, which links men to the thought and women to the body, perpetuates the notion of women's inherent intellectual inferiority. This amalgamation cultivates a discourse that objectifies women, reducing their identity to mere physicality, while men are, conversely, associated with cerebral abstraction.

As a result, several women endeavor to detach from their bodies, seeking liberation by rejecting physicality. Some feminist philosophers advocate for this disassociation to reclaim intellectual sovereignty. However, this essay will contend that these methods may unintentionally worsen the same issues they aim to resolve. Women should embrace the visibility of their bodily forms as essential to their subjectivity rather than rejecting their bodies. This thesis will examine prominent Indian English novels to demonstrate the need to reassess the politics around the female body. Additionally, it will analyze how alterations in psychosomatic experiences have provided women with new chances to confront the inconsistencies present in traditional feminist perspectives.

A critical exploration of Indian English literature, starting with Rajmohan's Wife (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, reveals the risks women often encounter due to their physical presence. Women's perceptions of their bodies have undergone significant transformations in recent decades. The proliferation of several discourses and counter-discourses around the female body has complicated the subject. What was once seen as a passive medium for cultural inscriptions has evolved into a center of resistance, as women actively repudiate these imposed meanings and devise strategies of rejection from the inside.

The rapid cultural changes due to improved educational access, legal reforms, and more public involvement have profoundly influenced women's lives. These modifications have significantly impacted women's self-image and, particularly, their understanding of the male gaze. Psychoanalytical study in India has advanced the development of "feminist body politics," a language that analyses individual women's experiences and their positions within broader power systems. These regimes maintain control over female bodies while also instituting new mechanisms

of sexual politics. Feminist critiques of these institutions have inherent challenges since they operate within the broader power dynamics of language, education, and societal standards. These power relations continue influencing the discourse and understanding of women's bodies.

Ketu H. Katrak, in her seminal work *Politics of the Female Body* (2006), emphasizes the complexity of these interrelated power structures, stating, "Such theorizing of the body politics is located within the larger body politic which, after all, sustains systems of power" (Katrak, 2006, p. 16). Thus, feminist examinations of the body are intrinsically linked to external factors that sustain these power dynamics. Moreover, feminism has an internal challenge as it endeavors to alter the image of the female body. Katrak defines this as the "female responsibility," whereby women assimilate cultural norms such as beauty, familial devotion, and the nurturing role. This internalization often limits women to a constrained understanding of their identity, dictated by the patriarchal frameworks they want to resist.

The internalization of these beliefs often stems from a desire to surpass the body, seen as the source of their oppression. Cartesian dualism associates males with intellectual capability and relegates females to the physical realm, imposing a binary dichotomy that suggests a deficiency in intellect—an absence Freud describes as the "absence of the penis." Instead of cultivating an independent ontology, numerous women seek to emancipate themselves from the mental and physical constraints imposed by patriarchy. This tendency to detach from their physical forms is rooted in body-mind dualism, leading some women to want invisibility or to "negate" their corporeal identities.

Somatophobia, an aversion to or fear of the body, is a logical fallacy that perpetuates patriarchal structures and obstructs feminist efforts for emancipation. By rejecting their bodies, women inadvertently endorse the political structures they want to dismantle. Thus, the female body becomes a symbol of cultural norms and expectations rather than a center of autonomy and value.

The depiction of the female body as a cultural icon has been a recurring theme in feminist literature. In their publication "Breaking Out of Invisibility: Rewriting the History of Women in Ancient India," Uma Chakrabarty and Kum Kum Roy examine the historical abstraction of female bodies and sexuality into certain virtues, including chastity. They argue that the depiction of Sita underscores the enforcement of chastity and the assumption that an exemplary marriage is contingent upon female devotion, aspects that were forced onto a basically simple tale. Throughout history, crucial components have been integrated into the narrative, significantly shaping the development of feminine identity" (Chakrabarty and Roy, 1992, p. 334). This process of abstraction has historically limited women's agency, reducing their bodies to mere representations of virtue and subservience.

Similarly, Shashi Deshpande explores similar abstractions in her essays and novels. In her compilation, *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays* (2003), Deshpande analyses the sexualization of women's bodies in Indian mythology, which undermines female unity and perpetuates patriarchal structures. Deshpande's critique underscores the need to reclaim the female body as a site of agency rather than just a cultural symbol.

In conclusion, feminist discourse on the body is fraught with complexity that requires careful navigation. This research argues that the strategies suggested by some feminist thinkers, which promote the dismissal of the body as a means to intellectual liberation, often perpetuate the same issues they aim to resolve. Women must reclaim their physicality, seeing it as integral to their subjectivity rather than dissociating from their bodies. By challenging the body-mind dualism, feminist theorists may develop novel frameworks that transcend patriarchal constraints and foster genuine female autonomy. An examination of Indian English literature and cultural artifacts indicates that reclaiming the female body is symbolic and crucial for achieving genuine freedom and equality.

The depiction of female characters in literature often reflects broader societal views on gender, sexuality, and power, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* thoroughly analyzes female sexuality via its two main female characters, Kanak and Matangini. Kanak is first shown as "a formidable champion of a world-conquering sex" (Chattopadhyay, 2009, p. 1), a description that demands more scrutiny. Kanak's fastidious morning routine, including her preparations before water collection and the subsequent portrayal of her appearance, epitomizes mid-19th-century Indian perceptions of women. This combination of complex detail and societal criticism presents Kanak's sexuality as both potent and dangerous, placing her within longstanding traditions that represent female sexuality as an object of fear and control.

Bankim's portrayal of Kanak as a "formidable" representation of sexuality is intentional; it corresponds with a broader framework of body politics. The association of feminine sexuality with malevolence holds substantial cultural importance, ranging from mythical depictions of female demons to the Romantic ideal of the "femme fatale." In John Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the Fairy's "long hair" and "wild eyes" enthrall the Knight, leaving him eternally ensnared. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "Body's Beauty," Lady Lilith enthralls men with her "enchanted hair" and alluring charm. Both figures suggest a malevolent femininity reminiscent of Bankim's Kanak. In his landmark book, *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz analyses the "femme fatale" archetype, defining it as one that "incarnate[s] in all ages and all lands, an archetype which united in itself all forms of seductions, all vices, and all delights" (Praz, 1933, p. 209). Thus, Kanak's depiction under this archetype exemplifies how patriarchal narratives correlate female sexuality with danger, thus reinforcing control mechanisms.

The politics of feminine beauty in *Rajmohan's Wife* aligns with the notion that patriarchal regimes shape and govern women's bodies. The notion of feminine beauty is constructed according to patriarchal criteria that need regulation. The development and regulation of female sexuality are interconnected processes within a cyclical power structure. From a Foucauldian perspective, this representation of female sexuality may be examined via the lens of the power-knowledge dynamic. Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy asserts that sexuality, like other aspects of human experience, is historically constructed, with patriarchal institutions gaining power via this knowledge. The perceived menace of Kanak's sexuality and its implied violation may be linked to the genealogical history of social regulation of women's bodies.

In contrast to Kanak, Matangini, described as "the perfect flower of beauty" (Chattopadhyay, 2009, p. 3), represents a display of controlled sexuality. Her "land-lotus" beauty and "careless knot" of hair suggest a more understated depiction of femininity. Matangini adheres to traditional conventions—concealing her face, enduring her husband's abuse, and suppressing her feelings for another man, Madhav. Her sexuality is marked by ambivalence. Despite risking her position as a housewife for love, she ultimately reverts to the sanctity of marriage. This ambivalence indicates a moral paradox rooted in societal expectations of female behavior. Matangini's sexual issue illustrates the tensions between desire and duty, revealing the internalized constraints of patriarchal authority.

R.K. Narayan's work also examines the idea of the "femme fatale," but his books delicately reinterpret female sexuality in innovative ways. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), Narayan illustrates a diverse spectrum of feminine sexuality that serves as a rebellion against physical subjugation. Rangi, the temple dancer, embodies a sensuality juxtaposed with Nataraj's bride's more traditional and submissive nature. The narrative explores the tensions between these contrasting representations of femininity. Nataraj's husband is a hardworking and modest housewife, but Rangi, as a temple dancer, occupies a socially ambiguous position. Her matrilineal heritage provides her with a level of autonomy often granted to women under patriarchal systems. Narayan asserts, "Padma had now retired, being advanced in age, corpulent, and formidable like the daunting sentinels of Ravana, while her daughter Rangi assumed her role at the temple" (Narayan, 2010, p. 115). Rangi's position within this matrilineal tradition subverts the patriarchal society's efforts to control female bodies.

Rangi's identity acts as a kind of resistance against cultural discourses that aim to constrain and diminish women's sexuality. Although she inhabits the same environment as Nataraj, Sastri, and others, her position as a temple dancer sets her apart, making her sexuality both alluring and, for Nataraj, threatening. Her physique is persistently described using animalistic terminology: a "notorious character," a "perfect female animal," and a "animated hyena" (Narayan, 2010). Nataraj's apprehension of succumbing to her appeal shows his internal battle in maintaining power over female sexuality, which he perceives as a danger to his monogamous commitment. In contrast, his wife embodies the traditional ideals of 20th-century Indian femininity: submissive, devoted, and confined to domestic roles. As a "femme fatale," Rangi significantly contrasts with Kanak in *Rajmohan's Wife*. While both women challenge patriarchal norms around female sexuality, their narratives differ in perception and treatment. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, Kanak's sexuality is regulated via sarcasm, but in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, it manifests as social shame. The representations of defiant female sexuality in both works highlight the persistent need for patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires.

These literary works represent a significant shift in understanding female bodies and sexualities. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, women's bodies are shown as inert beings, mostly unaware of their potential. Male characters like Rajmohan, Madhab, and Mathur strive to assert control over these bodies. In contrast, Rangi in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is aware of her body's distinct status, yet this autonomy is granted rather than claimed. Unlike Draupadi in *Mahasweta Devi's*

"Draupadi," Rangi exhibits a lack of self-control over her desire. Mahasweta's work, published more than ten years after *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, illustrates a thematic evolution in portraying women's agency about their bodies.

The expansion of Indian English literature, particularly in the post-1980s, reveals a profound exploration of female physical experiences, with authors such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande offering nuanced perspectives. The writers go from social narratives to an in-depth examination of the psychological dimensions of their female characters. This change has enabled the development of contemplation, emotion, memory, and mental illness themes. By prioritizing the psychological, these writers embrace a more introspective narrative approach, requiring innovative literary techniques to portray women's internal experiences accurately.

The "stream of consciousness" approach, popularized by European authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, permeates Indian English literature. Authors like Deshpande, Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee use this approach to depict their female heroines' worries, struggles, and evolving identities. This literary method meticulously analyzes the characters' internal struggles with their bodies, thus enhancing their narratives' psychological complexity.

Kamala Das's *My Story* (1973) is particularly noteworthy for its candid portrayal of female sexuality and the physical body. Considered one of the most controversial autobiographical narratives in Indian literature, Das's memoir confronts societal taboos about the female body, including issues such as marital rape, extramarital relationships, and the restrictions imposed on women's bodies by cultural norms. Das uses turmeric to improve her skin tone. He addresses the physical and mental wounds from her relationships, asserting control of her body and challenging the imposed silence around female corporeality. Her poetry—especially works like "An Introduction," "The Freaks," and "In Love"—explores these themes, offering frank insights into a woman's physical awakening and her attempt to reconcile sexual desire with societal expectations. In the introduction, Das thoughtfully examines the consequences of sexual abuse, expressing the psychological toll on her body: "He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten." For Das, the female body represents a complex site of interplay between internal emotions and external cultural factors.

Ismat Chughtai, a contemporary of Das, examines female sexuality from a distinct cultural perspective. In her little narrative, *The Quilt*, Chughtai challenges cultural norms by depicting a same-sex relationship inside a conventional Muslim household. While lesbian relationships are hardly shown in Indian English literature, Chughtai explores Begum Jaan's unfulfilled sexual desires and her intimate connection with her attendant Rabbu. This story confronts conventional taboos by revealing repressed sexual desires often stifled in patriarchal environments.

In contrast, Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of feminine sexuality tends to be more restrained. In works like *The Window*, she subtly examines homosexuality inside a controlled narrative framework, prioritizing emotional connections over blatant physicality. In *The Intrusion*, Deshpande examines the phenomenon of marital rape, with a newlywed husband claiming his

"right" over his wife's body, rendering her emotionally vulnerable and helpless. Deshpande's portrayal of violence starkly contrasts Chughtai's *The Quilt*, where the physiological needs of the female protagonist are overlooked rather than brutally imposed. Deshpande contests the patriarchal assertion over women's bodies, whereas Chughtai reveals the hidden impulses behind traditional conventions.

Both writers engage in a broader discourse on female agency, bodily autonomy, and the psychological ramifications of societal control over women's bodies. Employing diverse narrative techniques, they together highlight the multiplicity of female experiences, offering a nuanced spectrum of perspectives on the female body in Indian literature. Their works go beyond conventional representations of women, exploring the complexities of female desire, autonomy, and identity within an ever-evolving sociocultural framework.

Anita Desai's books portray the female body from a unique viewpoint, contrasting with the overt or alternative sexual representations seen in the works of Kamala Das or Ismat Chughtai. Desai analyzes complex physiological feelings, exploring issues faced by women that are sometimes overlooked owing to their non-sexual categorization. The subtle, often asexual aspects of her female characters' lives are intrinsically connected to their corporeal experiences, which, although not immediately apparent, shape their identities.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the protagonist Maya's sensitivity and her appreciation for the elegance of the peacock's dance are interwoven with her medical and psychological struggles. Although seeming purely artistic or intellectual, these feelings are rooted in her suppressed wants. Maya's reliance on her overbearing father illustrates patriarchal control over women's independence. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault contends that disciplinary power produces "docile bodies," suggesting that the upbringing of women in ways that foster dependency is a subtle kind of control. Maya's father's overprotectiveness makes her physically dependent, unable to express her autonomy, and emotionally vulnerable. Her inability to balance her physical and psychological needs drives her to retreat into a fantasy state, where her unfulfilled sexual desires manifest via an enhanced emphasis on the natural world, particularly the courting displays of peacocks. This dance, symbolizing life and death, represents Maya's physical and existential challenges.

Maya's partner, Gautama, embodies detachment, a core tenet of the *Bhagavad Gita*, hence exacerbating her sense of isolation. His emotional and physical isolation exacerbates Maya's need for connection and intensifies her growing unhappiness. Her thorough observations of the peacocks may represent her suppressed sexual energy, which, in the absence of fulfillment, evolves into a broader philosophical contemplation on life and death. Desai's narrative suggests that Maya's sexual anguish impacts her creative sensibility and propels her into deep philosophical reflection.

Shashi Deshpande's body of work often explores the objectification of the female form, particularly through the lens of beauty. In her concise novella "The Story," Deshpande examines the formulation and continuation of societal ideals of feminine beauty via myths and historical

tales. Deshpande asserts that women have internalized these standards, leading to their objectification and the continuous need for visual attention. This internalization aligns with the male gaze and promotes the normality of the sexualization of women's bodies, making them complicit in their objectification. Deshpande analyzes this subject from a historical-mythical perspective, exploring the impact of Indian mythology, particularly the figure of Laxmi, on the idealization of feminine beauty.

In *The Stone Women*, Deshpande's Afterword reveals that her tale was influenced by the myth of Laxmi, highlighting how myths inscribe femininity onto women's bodies and perpetuate idealized notions of beauty. These concepts are historically produced, shaped by masculine imagination, and maintained via language and cultural customs. Subsequently, women conform to these standards, shaping their identities in alignment with these entrenched concepts of beauty. Any deviation from this idealized form is seen as a defect, perpetuating the cycle of objectification.

Deshpande's story further obfuscates the intergenerational transfer of these beliefs. The narrative spans three generations of women: the narrator, her daughter, and her granddaughter. The daughter's absence in the tale is crucial since it disrupts the traditional process of cultural transmission from mother to daughter. Rather than the mother, the grandmother recounts the story to the granddaughter, highlighting a rupture in the continuity of internalized values. This disruption, however, only partially disrupts the cycle. The narrator reflects on the mother's silence as a crucial aspect of the narrative: "Perhaps even your mother's silence is part of this story" (Deshpande, 2004, p. 168).

This silence denotes a repudiation of idealization, but this repudiation occurs inside the same cultural framework, reinforcing the same process it seeks to escape. The tale illustrates that attempts to counter idealization ultimately perpetuate it since they occur within the same sociocultural context. The claim made is that even when women resist or attempt to de-idealize the feminine physique, their actions sustain the persistent process of objectification.

In the writings of Desai and Deshpande, the female body functions as a site of conflict, shaped by cultural conventions and personal ambitions. Desai provides an in-depth psychological analysis of the feminine body, while Deshpande critiques its commercialization and the historical factors that shape women's identities. Their combined works provide a complex understanding of the feminine experience, demonstrating the intertwining of women's bodies with broader cultural, social, and philosophical discussions.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women* explores the female body via a symbolic and introspective lens, closely connected to the narrative's cultural and historical context. The tale depicts a newlywed couple's visit to the Chenna-Keshava Temple in Belur, Karnataka, where the temple's sculptures of "lush-bodied, high-breasted, dancing women" (Deshpande, 2003, p. 71) provoke very different reactions from the husband and wife. The husband appreciates the aesthetic

appeal of the figures, but the female protagonist experiences discomfort and reflection, highlighting a significant discrepancy between societal beauty norms and the internalized feminine experience.

The protagonist's reaction to the sculptures transcends simple discomfort; it signifies a resistance to the historical objectification of the female form in art and society. The sculptures, albeit seen as ecstatic embodiments of beauty, evoke in her a suffocating sense of imprisonment. The figures represent aesthetic ideals and demonstrate the commercialization and display of women's bodies for male viewing and admiration. This contrast between her husband's external adulation and her interior turmoil underscores a critical tension: the discord between societal reverence for the female form and the everyday experiences of women who see themselves as limited by these representations.

In this reflective moment, the protagonist considers the influence of these artistic ideals, recognizing that such representations of women, albeit past, continue to shape contemporary ideas of female bodies. Deshpande used this scenario to contest the entrenched nature of these views and their continuation throughout generations, hence perpetuating a limited and often oppressive notion of femininity. The protagonist's inner conflict underscores the broader issue of cultural pressures on women to adhere to beauty standards, often jeopardizing their mental and emotional well-being.

Deshpande demonstrates proficiency in *The Stone Women* by contrasting historical and personal storylines, linking ancient representations of women in temple sculptures to the protagonist's struggles with identity and self-image. This reflection allows readers to see the enduring impact of these ancient beliefs, suggesting that the objectification of women is not only a historical occurrence but a dynamic force shaping contemporary female consciousness. The protagonist's discomfort symbolizes the unexpressed pain resulting from the internalization of beauty standards, which, although being glorified in cultural symbols, often causes women to feel diminished and restricted by their physical existence.

The protagonist's understanding of how these concepts are conveyed between generations further enhances the narrative complexity. Her reflection in the temple illustrates a deep understanding of how women, even in modern culture, are shaped by historical notions of femininity. This notion corresponds with Deshpande's large body of work, which often explores the impact of mythology, tradition, and cultural norms on forming women's identities. The protagonist's unease is a personal rebellion against the historical forces that continue to impose restrictive conventions on her body and identity.

Moreover, the protagonist's feeling of suffocation highlights the disempowerment arising from these ingrained ideals. Her discomfort indicates a growing awareness of these expectations' limitations on her ability to express her identity and live independently fully. Deshpande's critique is both subtle and substantial: the stone-carved figures, despite their seeming stability, symbolize the inflexible roles imposed on women, confining them to certain standards of beauty, behavior, and existence.

In conclusion, *The Stone Women* offers a nuanced critique of the idealization and objectification of the female form in both historical and contemporary contexts. Deshpande adeptly integrates personal introspection and cultural critique, using the protagonist's experience at the temple as a framework to examine broader societal issues about gender, identity, and bodily politics. Deshpande underscores the protagonist's subtle struggle to demonstrate how women have traditionally been shaped by and often restricted by, notions that consistently determine their worth and social positions. The tale emphasizes the need to challenge existing conventions and enable women to independently redefine their identities.

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