



From Domesticity to Distress: A Feminist-Psychological Analysis of Housewife Identity in Indian English Fiction

Dr. Indu Kumari,

Assistant Professor, CCS College, Rajpur, Rohtas
indus290812@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, a feminist-psychological investigation of the housewife identity is created, debated, and dismantled within a subset of Indian English fiction is presented. Through the novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, and R. K. Narayan, the paper explores how the character of the housewife-historically romanticized in the discourse of Indian patriarchy- turns into a place of psychological discomfort, loss of identity, and muted protest in literature. Based on the qualitative textual analysis framework that is informed by feminist literary theory and psychological identity theory, the paper explores how the notion of domesticity as a social construct gives way to distress as its experiential result among fictional women protagonists. As the analysis shows, Indian English novelists use the housewife character as not only a passive victim of the patriarchal system but as a multifaceted subject, the psychological interior of which reveals the fault lines of the gender ideology. The paper also contends that the literary expression of housewife distress serves as a counter-narrative to the nationalistic exaltation of the household as an institution, and thus it is part of a larger feminist critique of the institution of the Indian family. The results highlight the ongoing significance of both feminist and psychological overlapping in the interpretation of the subjectivity of women in postcolonial literary backgrounds.

Keywords: *Housewife Identity; Indian English Fiction; Feminist Literary Criticism; Psychological Distress; Patriarchal Domesticity*

1. Introduction

The Indian housewife has long occupied a paradoxical position within the cultural imaginary of the subcontinent. On the one hand, she is venerated as the *grihalakshmi* (goddess of the household), the moral anchor of the family, and the custodian of cultural continuity. On the other hand, she is rendered invisible in the public sphere, denied autonomous subjectivity, and confined to a domestic role that subsumes her individuality within the collective identity of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. This paradox has been a persistent thematic concern in Indian English fiction, where novelists have

interrogated the gap between the idealised image of the housewife and the psychological reality of her lived experience.¹

The literary preoccupation with the housewife figure in Indian English fiction is neither incidental nor merely representational; it is, fundamentally, a feminist intervention into the dominant discourses of gender, family, and nation. From R. K. Narayan's Savitri in *The Dark Room* (1938) to Shashi Deshpande's Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1989), and Manju Kapur's Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Indian novelists writing in English have consistently returned to the domestic sphere as a primary locus of gendered conflict and psychological tension. These literary representations reveal the housewife not as a stable, contented identity but as one fraught with contradiction, repression, and the latent potential for rebellion.²

Betty Friedan's identification of "the problem that has no name" in mid-twentieth-century American suburbia finds a striking parallel in the Indian literary context, where women writers have given voice to the unspoken anguish of educated, middle-class housewives trapped between tradition and modernity.³ However, the Indian articulation of housewife distress is inflected by distinctly postcolonial concerns: the legacy of colonial domesticity, the nationalist appropriation of women's roles during the independence movement, the persistence of joint family structures, and the caste-class matrices that shape gendered experience differently across social locations.⁴

1.1 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows: first, to critically examine the construction of housewife identity in select Indian English novels through the intersecting lenses of feminist literary theory and psychological identity theory; second, to analyse how the transition from domesticity to psychological distress is narratively represented in the chosen texts; third, to evaluate the extent to which fictional representations of housewife distress function as counter-narratives to patriarchal domesticity; and fourth, to assess the relevance of intersectional feminist frameworks in reading women's subjectivity in postcolonial Indian fiction.

1.2 Research Questions

¹Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 330.

²Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 15–32

⁴Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (i) How do select Indian English novelists construct the identity of the housewife, and what ideological assumptions underpin this construction? (ii) What are the psychological dimensions of housewife distress as represented in the chosen literary texts? (iii) In what ways do the fictional housewife protagonists negotiate, resist, or succumb to the patriarchal norms of domesticity? (iv) How do intersecting categories of class, caste, and education mediate the experience of housewife identity in these narratives?

2. Review of Literature

The intersection of feminist theory, psychological inquiry, and literary analysis has generated a substantial body of scholarship on women's identity in Indian English fiction. This section reviews five recent studies that are directly relevant to the present investigation.

2.1 Patel and Sahu (2024)

In their comprehensive study published in *The Academic*, Patel and Sahu (2024) examined the portrayal of women in Indian English literature through the lens of feminist literary criticism. Their analysis demonstrated that Indian English literature has historically presented women in a variety of roles-housewives, mothers, temptresses, and mythological figures-all connected to the concepts of *Dharma*, *Kama*, *Artha*, and *Moksha*. The study argued that feminist criticism must be essentially interdisciplinary when applied to Indian contexts, given the intersection of gender with caste, class, and religion. The authors found that contemporary works show a significant shift from passive, traditional portrayals of women to depictions of empowered, independent agents who challenge societal constraints.⁵ This study provides a valuable macro-level framework within which the present paper's focused analysis of the housewife figure can be situated.

2.2 Sanap (2024)

Sanap (2024) examined the feminine psyche in contemporary Indian English novels, focusing on works by Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Shashi Tharoor, and Anita Desai. The study explored themes of identity, autonomy, resistance, and sexuality, arguing that these novelists use fiction as a platform to challenge societal norms and give voice to women's inner conflicts. Sanap's analysis highlighted how the feminine psyche in Indian English fiction is shaped by the tension between tradition and modernity, and how women characters navigate the complexities of patriarchal expectations while seeking

⁵Patel, H. and Sahu, K. (2024). Portrayal of Women in Indian English Literature. *The Academic*, 19(3), 1–12.

selfhood.⁶ The study's emphasis on psychological interiority is directly relevant to the present paper's examination of housewife distress as a psychologically grounded literary phenomenon.

2.3 Barman (2026)

Barman (2026) conducted a comparative analysis of gender representation in Indian and Western feminist fiction, using a purposive sample of twenty texts analysed through qualitative content analysis. The study found that Indian feminist fiction is more focused on themes of patriarchy, domestic oppression, intersectionality, and collective opposition, while Western feminist fiction places greater emphasis on individual empowerment and sexual autonomy. Significantly, Barman observed that male characters in Indian fiction are more frequently depicted as patriarchal authority figures compared to their Western counterparts, where they appear as more supportive and multifaceted.⁷ This comparative perspective helps contextualise the present study's focus on domestic oppression as a distinctively Indian literary preoccupation.

2.4 Verma (2024)

Verma (2024) explored the psychological impact of emotional abuse in Indian literary narratives, with particular attention to the novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur. The study demonstrated that these writers depict female protagonists who experience loneliness, emotional neglect, and psychological conflict within marital and familial relationships, and that continuous emotional suppression leads to anxiety, depression, and loss of self-identity. Verma adopted a qualitative approach grounded in feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis.⁸ This study's focus on emotional abuse as a form of gendered violence within domestic spaces directly informs the present paper's analysis of psychological distress in housewife characters.

2.5 Lata (2024)

Lata (2024) investigated feminist consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's literary landscapes, focusing on three novels: *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The study found that all three novels share common themes-women's quest for identity and autonomy within patriarchal societies, rebellion against oppressive structures, and the exploration of silence,

⁶Sanap, S. K. (2024). The Portrayal of Feminine Psyche and Issues in Contemporary Indian English Novels. *International Journal*, 4(6), 35–39.

⁷Barman, J. (2026). A Comparative Analysis of Gender Representation in Indian and Western Feminist Fiction. *IJARMT*, 3(1), 1–15.

⁸Verma, R. K. (2024). Psychological Impact of Emotional Abuse in Indian Literary Narratives. *IJARMT*, 2(1), 1–10.

domesticity, and the quest for freedom. Lata's analysis revealed that Deshpande's female protagonists challenge societal expectations, question traditional gender roles, and assert their agency and individual ambitions, demonstrating an evolution in Deshpande's feminist perspective across her oeuvre.⁹ This work is centrally relevant to the present study, which extends Lata's analysis by incorporating a psychological dimension to the reading of Deshpande's housewife characters.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis methodology, situated within an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon feminist literary theory and psychological identity theory. The methodological approach is primarily hermeneutic and interpretive, aimed at analysing the construction, contestation, and deconstruction of housewife identity in select Indian English novels.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this study rests on three pillars. First, Simone de Beauvoir's foundational insight that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" provides the conceptual basis for understanding the housewife identity as a socially constructed rather than biologically determined role.¹⁰ Second, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity informs the analysis of how housewife identity is constituted through the repeated performance of domestic roles and the disciplinary norms that enforce such performances.¹¹ Third, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation, particularly his concept of identity crisis as a normative developmental challenge that can become pathological under conditions of social constraint, provides the psychological dimension of the analysis.¹²

Additionally, the study engages with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist framework to address the question of subaltern speech and representational politics in the context of Indian women's narratives.¹³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's concept of the "madwoman in the attic"-the figure of the confined woman whose creative and psychological energies are repressed by patriarchal

⁹Lata, S. (2024). Reimagining Gender: Exploring Feminist Consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's Literary Landscapes. IJRASET, 12(4), 1–18.

¹¹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

¹²Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 91–141.

domesticity-is employed as an interpretive lens for reading instances of psychological breakdown and silent resistance in the chosen texts.¹⁴

3.2 Selection of Primary Texts

The primary texts selected for analysis are: (i) R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938),¹⁵ which offers one of the earliest portrayals of housewife subjugation in Indian English fiction; (ii) Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963),¹⁶ which foregrounds the psychological interiority of a housewife descending into existential crisis; (iii) Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1989),¹⁷ which is widely regarded as a definitive literary exploration of the educated Indian housewife's identity crisis; and (iv) Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998),¹⁸ which situates the housewife's dilemma within the broader historical context of Indian nationalism and partition.

3.3 Method of Analysis

The method of analysis involves close reading and thematic coding of the selected texts, with particular attention to: (a) the narrative construction of domesticity as ideology and lived experience; (b) the psychological dimensions of housewife distress, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, identity dissolution, and existential crisis; (c) modes of resistance, negotiation, and agency employed by housewife protagonists; and (d) the intersecting roles of class, education, and cultural context in shaping the experience of domesticity. The analysis is structured around a thematic progression from the construction of domestic identity to the emergence of psychological distress and, finally, to the possibilities of resistance and self-recovery.

4. Results

The textual analysis of the four selected novels reveals several interconnected findings regarding the construction and deconstruction of housewife identity in Indian English fiction.

4.1 The Construction of Domestic Identity as Ideology

¹⁴Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 73.

¹⁵R. K. Narayan, *The Dark Room* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1938). Narayan's portrayal of Savitri remains a foundational text in the study of Indian housewife characters.

¹⁶Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1963). The novel is widely regarded as one of the earliest Indian English texts to foreground female psychological interiority.

¹⁷Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989). All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁸Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998). Kapur's debut novel won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia).

Across all four novels, the housewife identity is presented not as a natural or self-evident condition but as an ideologically constructed subject position that is actively produced and maintained through the institutions of family, marriage, and cultural pedagogy. In Narayan's *The Dark Room*, Savitri's entire selfhood is defined by her relation to her husband Ramani; she possesses no independent identity, no economic autonomy, and no voice within the domestic hierarchy. The dark room itself functions as a spatial metaphor for the psychological confinement of the housewife-a space of retreat that is simultaneously a space of erasure.¹⁹

In Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's domesticity is constructed through a different register-that of aestheticised confinement. Maya is not the downtrodden housewife of realist fiction but an emotionally hypersensitive woman whose domestic existence is experienced as a form of existential suffocation. Her identity as a housewife is inseparable from her psychological fragility, suggesting that domesticity itself is a condition productive of neurosis.²⁰

Deshpande's Jaya in *That Long Silence* represents the most fully elaborated critique of domestic ideology. Jaya is an educated woman and a talented writer who has progressively surrendered her creative identity to the demands of wifehood and motherhood. Her silence-the "long silence" of the title-is not merely a personal failing but a structural consequence of the patriarchal contract that demands women's self-effacement as the price of domestic respectability.²¹

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* historicises the housewife's predicament by locating it within the context of Indian nationalism and the partition of 1947. Virmati's struggle to pursue education and personal autonomy is constantly thwarted by familial expectations of domesticity, revealing that the construction of housewife identity in India is deeply entangled with nationalist discourses of cultural authenticity and female duty.²²

4.2 Psychological Dimensions of Housewife Distress

The analysis reveals that psychological distress in housewife characters manifests through a spectrum of symptoms that can be broadly categorised as: (i) identity dissolution-the progressive erosion of

selfhood under the pressures of domestic conformity; (ii) depressive withdrawal-the retreat into silence, passivity, and emotional numbness; (iii) existential crisis-the confrontation with the meaninglessness of a life defined solely by domestic roles; and (iv) psychosomatic manifestation-the expression of psychological conflict through physical symptoms, sensory hypersensitivity, and hallucinatory experience.

Savitri's response to her husband's infidelity in *The Dark Room* follows a pattern of depressive withdrawal: she retreats into the dark room, refuses food, and eventually attempts to leave the house, only to return when she realises that the social structure offers no viable alternative to domestic subjugation. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* experiences a far more extreme form of distress that culminates in psychotic breakdown and violence, her psychological disintegration functioning as a literary indictment of the domesticity that produced it. Jaya's distress in *That Long Silence* is perhaps the most psychologically nuanced: it takes the form of a gradual awakening to the extent of her own self-betrayal, a recognition that her silence has been not merely imposed but internalised.²³

4.3 Modes of Resistance and Agency

The analysis further reveals that housewife protagonists in Indian English fiction are not uniformly passive victims; they exhibit diverse modes of resistance, ranging from the covert to the overt. Savitri's temporary departure from the marital home, though ultimately unsuccessful, represents an early literary articulation of the housewife's refusal. Maya's violence, though pathologised within the narrative, can be read as the extreme consequence of a domestic system that offers no legitimate channel for female anger. Jaya's eventual decision to write-to break the long silence-represents the most affirmative mode of resistance: the reclamation of creative selfhood as a feminist act. Virmati's insistence on education, despite the overwhelming pressure to conform to domestic expectations, illustrates how the pursuit of intellectual autonomy functions as a form of gendered resistance within the specific historical context of pre-independence India.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend the existing body of scholarship on women's identity in Indian English fiction. The analysis demonstrates that the housewife figure in Indian English novels serves as a critical site for the interrogation of patriarchal ideology, and that the literary representation of housewife distress carries significant feminist-psychological implications.

²³Khanna, N. and Khatri, N. (2021). Impact of Marriage Over an Indian Housewife's Mental Health: Case Series. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(2), 258–263.

The construction of housewife identity as ideology, as revealed across the four texts, aligns with Butler's theory of gender performativity: the housewife is not a pre-given subject but a role that is produced through repeated performances of domesticity-cooking, child-rearing, deference to the husband, maintenance of familial harmony-that are regulated by social norms and cultural expectations.²⁴ The analysis reveals, however, that Indian English fiction complicates Butler's framework by foregrounding the material and institutional constraints that make the refusal of domestic performance far more costly for women in patriarchal societies than Butler's theory might suggest. Savitri's return to the marital home, for instance, is not a failure of feminist consciousness but a realistic acknowledgement of the absence of social and economic structures that could support an alternative existence.

The psychological dimensions of housewife distress, as identified in the results, resonate strongly with Erikson's framework of identity crisis. The housewife protagonists in the selected novels experience what Erikson termed "identity diffusion"-a state in which the individual is unable to integrate the various dimensions of selfhood into a coherent whole.²⁵ In the case of the Indian housewife, this diffusion is produced by the fundamental incompatibility between the culturally prescribed identity of the self-sacrificing domestic woman and the emergent desires for autonomy, creativity, and self-expression that education and exposure to modernity have awakened. The distress experienced by Jaya, Maya, Savitri, and Virmati is thus not merely personal or pathological but structural: it is a predictable consequence of a social system that demands the repression of female subjectivity.

The comparative dimension of this analysis reveals an important chronological progression in the literary treatment of housewife distress. From Narayan's relatively straightforward depiction of patriarchal oppression in the 1930s, through Desai's modernist exploration of psychological interiority in the 1960s, to Deshpande's feminist deconstruction of domestic silence in the 1980s and Kapur's historicised feminist narrative in the 1990s, Indian English fiction has progressively deepened and complicated its engagement with the housewife figure. This progression mirrors the broader development of feminist consciousness in Indian society and reflects the influence of both Western and indigenous feminist movements on Indian literary production.²⁶

²⁶Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 11–36.

The study's findings also have implications for the ongoing debate about the applicability of Western feminist theory to non-Western literary contexts. While frameworks derived from Beauvoir, Friedan, and Butler provide valuable analytical tools, the Indian literary texts under examination demand attention to culturally specific dimensions of gendered experience-including the role of the joint family, the ideology of *pativrata* (devotion to the husband), and the intersecting hierarchies of caste and class-that are not adequately captured by Western theoretical models alone.²⁷ The postcolonial feminist frameworks of Spivak and Mohanty are therefore essential supplements to any analysis of housewife identity in Indian fiction.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the housewife identity in Indian English fiction is a complex, contested, and psychologically charged literary construct that serves as a critical lens for examining the intersections of gender, domesticity, and psychological well-being within patriarchal societies. Through the analysis of four seminal novels spanning six decades of Indian English literary production, the paper has traced the trajectory from domesticity as an ideologically prescribed norm to distress as its lived psychological consequence, and from silence as a mode of survival to voice as a mode of resistance.

The findings reveal that Indian English novelists have consistently deployed the housewife figure not as a flat, stereotypical character but as a psychologically complex subject whose inner life exposes the contradictions and costs of patriarchal domesticity. The literary representation of housewife distress-encompassing identity dissolution, depressive withdrawal, existential crisis, and psychosomatic manifestation-constitutes a powerful counter-narrative to the nationalist and cultural discourses that glorify women's domestic role. At the same time, the diverse modes of resistance exhibited by housewife protagonists-from Savitri's silent protest to Jaya's recovery of voice through writing-demonstrate that Indian English fiction does not merely document female suffering but also imagines possibilities for agency and self-recovery within and against patriarchal constraints.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating the analytical value of integrating feminist literary theory with psychological identity theory in the reading of Indian English fiction. This interdisciplinary approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how literary texts represent the construction and deconstruction of gendered identity, and how the psychological dimensions of domestic experience are inscribed in narrative form. Future research may extend this analysis to include

²⁷Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988): 61-88.

a wider range of texts, including those by Dalit women writers and queer writers, whose representations of domesticity and identity may further complicate the frameworks employed in this study. Additionally, a comparative analysis of housewife representation in Indian-language literatures and Indian English fiction could illuminate the role of language and readership in shaping feminist literary discourse across the Indian subcontinent.

References

1. Barman, J. (2026). A comparative analysis of gender representation in Indian and Western feminist fiction. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends*, 3(1), 1–15.
2. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
3. de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
4. Desai, A. (1963). *Cry, the peacock*. Orient Paperbacks.
5. Deshpande, S. (1989). *That long silence*. Penguin Books India.
6. Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton.
7. Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
8. Gilbert, S., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
9. Kapur, M. (1998). *Difficult daughters*. Faber and Faber.
10. Khanna, N., & Khatri, N. (2021). Impact of marriage over an Indian housewife's mental health: Case series. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(2), 258–263.
<https://doi.org/10.25215/0902.031>
11. Lata, S. (2024). Reimagining gender: Exploring feminist consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's literary landscapes. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology*, 12(4), 1–18.
12. Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30, 61–88.
13. Narayan, R. K. (1938). *The dark room*. Indian Thought Publications.

14. Patel, H., & Sahu, K. (2024). Portrayal of women in Indian English literature. *The Academic*, 19(3), 1–12.
15. Sanap, S. K. (2024). The portrayal of feminine psyche and issues in contemporary Indian English novels. *International Journal*, 4(6), 35–39.
16. Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
17. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
18. Verma, R. K. (2024). Psychological impact of emotional abuse in Indian literary narratives. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends*, 2(1), 1–10.