

# Gender and Power Dynamics in Contemporary South Asian Women's Writing

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## 1. Abstract

Contemporary South Asian women's writing serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the intricate interplay of gender and power within patriarchal, postcolonial, and diasporic contexts. This article explores how women authors from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and their diasporas challenge traditional power structures, including patriarchy, colonialism, caste systems, and globalization, through their narratives. Drawing on feminist theories such as intersectionality, subaltern studies, and postcolonial feminism, the study analyzes key works by authors like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, and others to reveal how female characters negotiate agency, resistance, and identity amid oppressive dynamics.

The literature review synthesizes scholarly discussions on gender representation in South Asian fiction, highlighting themes of silence, resistance, and transformation. The methodology employs qualitative literary analysis informed by feminist and postcolonial frameworks to dissect narrative strategies and thematic elements. Case studies focus on specific novels, such as Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, illustrating real-world parallels in gender power imbalances.

Findings underscore the diversity of South Asian feminisms, emphasizing how women's writing disrupts hegemonic discourses and fosters empowerment. The article suggests that these narratives not only reflect societal inequalities but also envision pathways for gender equity. Tables and figures are integrated to visualize key authors, themes, and historical timelines, enhancing the analytical depth. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discourses on global feminism by centering South Asian perspectives, advocating for inclusive literary criticism that acknowledges cultural specificities.

## 2. Keywords

Gender dynamics, power structures, South Asian literature, women's writing, feminism, postcolonialism, diaspora, patriarchy, intersectionality, resistance.

## 3. Introduction

South Asia, encompassing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, has a rich literary tradition that has evolved significantly in the contemporary era. Women's writing in this region, particularly since the late 20th century, has emerged as a vital force in challenging entrenched power dynamics rooted in

gender, caste, class, religion, and colonial legacies. Contemporary South Asian women's literature often grapples with the complexities of identity formation in a globalized world, where traditional patriarchal norms intersect with modern influences such as migration, urbanization, and economic liberalization.

The term "contemporary" here refers to works produced from the 1990s onward, a period marked by increased globalization, the rise of diaspora communities, and heightened feminist activism in South Asia. Authors such as Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Monica Ali, and Tahmima Anam have gained international acclaim for their portrayals of women's experiences. These narratives frequently explore how power is wielded through societal institutions like family, marriage, religion, and the state, often marginalizing women and rendering them subaltern.

Gender and power dynamics in this context are multifaceted. Patriarchy, as a dominant structure, enforces unequal power relations, where women are expected to conform to roles of subservience, domesticity, and silence. However, postcolonial and feminist lenses reveal how colonialism exacerbated these inequalities, intertwining gender oppression with racial and cultural hierarchies. In diasporic settings, additional layers of identity negotiation arise, as women navigate between "home" cultures and host societies, often facing racism, cultural alienation, and hybrid identities.

This article posits that contemporary South Asian women's writing not only critiques these power imbalances but also imagines alternative futures where women assert agency and resistance. For instance, Roy's exploration of forbidden love in *The God of Small Things* highlights the intersections of gender, caste, and power, while Lahiri's diasporic tales in *The Namesake* examine generational conflicts and cultural adaptation. Shamsie's works, such as *Burnt Shadows*, weave global histories with

personal stories of women's resilience amid war and displacement.

The significance of this topic lies in its contribution to global feminist discourses. South Asian feminisms, as noted in scholarly works, differ from Western models by emphasizing collectivism, spirituality, and anti-colonial resistance. They address unique issues like honor killings, dowry violence, and religious fundamentalism, while also engaging with universal themes of empowerment. By analyzing these dynamics, this article aims to bridge gaps in literary criticism, which has often overlooked the nuanced contributions of South Asian women writers.

To structure the discussion, the article includes visual aids. Figure 1, a timeline of key milestones in South Asian women's writing, illustrates the evolution from early feminist voices like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to contemporary figures.

- 1905: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* – Early feminist utopia.
- 1947: Partition literature emerges, influencing gender narratives.
- 1997: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* wins Booker Prize.
- 2003: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores diaspora.
- 2009: Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* addresses global conflicts.
- 2017: Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* tackles contemporary issues.

This timeline underscores the progression toward more explicit engagements with power and gender.

#### 4. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine how contemporary South Asian women writers portray gender and power dynamics, highlighting themes

of oppression, resistance, and empowerment.

2. To analyze the application of feminist theories, including intersectionality and postcolonial feminism, to South Asian literary contexts.
3. To review existing literature on gender in South Asian fiction, identifying gaps and contributions.
4. To conduct case studies of selected novels to illustrate real-world implications of these dynamics.
5. To propose recommendations for future research, emphasizing the role of women's writing in social change.

These objectives guide a comprehensive exploration, ensuring the article's relevance to both academic and activist spheres.

## 5. Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on gender and power in South Asian women's literature is extensive, drawing from feminist, postcolonial, and cultural studies. Early works like Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) laid the foundation by linking women's struggles to anti-colonial movements, emphasizing how gender roles were shaped by imperial power. This intersectional approach has been expanded in contemporary analyses.

A key theme is the subaltern woman's voice, inspired by Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Studies apply this to South Asian fiction, arguing that women writers reclaim agency for marginalized characters. For example, in *Gender, Place, and Identity of South Asian Women* (2022), the focus is on how literature reflects diasporic identities and gender negotiations.

Diasporic literature receives significant attention. Ruvani Ranasingha's *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction* (2016) compares authors like Lahiri and Shamsie, exploring narration and globalization's impact on gender. It highlights how migration disrupts traditional power structures but introduces new oppressions like cultural hybridity and racism.

Feminist aesthetics in South Asian art and literature are discussed in *Gendered Gazes* (2025), which examines how women subvert patriarchal norms through narrative innovation. Similarly, *The Struggle of South Asian Women* (2024) uses subaltern theory to analyze postcolonial fiction, revealing double marginalization due to gender and colonialism.

Power dynamics in relationships are explored in dissertations like *South Asian Women's Sexual Relationship Power* (2015), linking sexism and cultural conflicts to agency. Violence and resistance feature in *On Violence and Resistance* (year unspecified), intersecting with sexuality and identity.

Communication and identity in patriarchal societies are gaps noted in *South Asian Women's Communication Styles* (2025). Climate change's gendered impacts are emerging, as in *Breaking the Mold* (2025).

Key authors' works are cataloged in lists like "South Asian Fiction by Women" on Goodreads, featuring Roy, Lahiri, and others. Anthologies like *Women Writers of the South Asian Diaspora* (2020) provide interpretive frameworks.

Gaps include under-representation of non-English works and queer perspectives, though recent studies like *Unveiling Lived Realities* (2024) address academic women's narratives. Overall, the literature affirms women's writing as a site of resistance, but calls for more intersectional analyses.

Table 1 below summarizes key scholars and their contributions.

**Table 1: Key Scholars and Contributions to Gender in South Asian Literature**

| Scholar/Author     | Key Work  | Main Focus                              |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Gayatri Spivak     | "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)                         | Subaltern agency and silence            |
| Kumari Jayawardena | Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (1986)        | Gender in anti-colonial struggles       |
| Ruvani Ranasinha   | Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction (2016) | Diaspora, narration, globalization      |
| Chitra Sankaran    | Women, Subalterns, and Ecologies (2022)                   | Ecofeminism in South and Southeast Asia |
| Maryam Mirza       | Resistance and its Discontents (2023)                     | Resistance in women's fiction           |

This review establishes a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

## 6. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach centered on literary analysis, informed by feminist and postcolonial theories. The primary method involves close textual reading of selected novels to identify representations of gender and power. Feminist theory, particularly intersectionality (as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw), is applied to examine how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and diaspora. Postcolonial frameworks from scholars like Spivak and Homi Bhabha highlight hybridity and subalternity.

Data sources include primary texts (novels) and secondary sources (scholarly articles, books) gathered through web searches. Selection criteria for case studies: works by prominent women authors focusing on gender themes, published post-1990.

Analysis involves thematic coding: identifying motifs like silence, resistance, agency, and power negotiation. Narrative techniques, such as non-linear storytelling or multiple perspectives, are scrutinized for how they subvert patriarchal norms.

Limitations: Focus on English-language works may exclude vernacular literature; subjective interpretation inherent in literary analysis. However, citations from diverse sources ensure rigor.

This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how literature mirrors and critiques societal power dynamics.

## 7. Case Studies and Examples

This section presents detailed case studies of three seminal novels, illustrating gender and power dynamics. Each analysis draws on feminist lenses to unpack character arcs, themes, and societal critiques. These case studies reveal how gender roles are constructed and contested within narrative structures, highlighting the intersection of personal identity and societal expectations. Each novel employs distinct feminist theories to critique patriarchal power and expose systemic inequalities. Through close textual analysis, the studies demonstrate the transformative potential of literature in challenging dominant gender norms.

### Case Study 1: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel set in Kerala, India, explores forbidden love amid caste and gender hierarchies. The narrative centers on twins Estha and Rahel, and their mother Ammu's affair with Velutha, an untouchable.

Power dynamics are evident in patriarchal control over women's bodies. Ammu, divorced and defiant, challenges norms but faces severe repercussions, including violence and ostracism. Roy portrays patriarchy as intertwined with caste: Velutha's lower status amplifies the power imbalance, leading to his brutal death.

Feminist analysis reveals resistance through narrative fragmentation, mirroring disrupted lives. Ammu's agency, though limited, inspires subaltern voices. As Spivak notes, subaltern women like Ammu are silenced, yet Roy gives them interiority.

Real-world parallels: The novel reflects ongoing caste-based violence against women in India, such as honor killings.

Table 2 summarizes themes.

**Table 2: Themes of Gender and Power in *The God of Small Things***

| Theme                     | Description                     | Example                      |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Patriarchy                | Male dominance in family        | Pappachi's abuse of Mammachi |
| Caste-Gender Intersection | Oppression of lower-caste women | Ammu-Velutha affair          |
| Resistance                | Defiance through love           | Ammu's rebellion             |
| Silence                   | Subaltern voicelessness         | Estha's mutism post-trauma   |

**Case Study 2: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003)**

Lahiri's novel follows the Ganguli family, Bengali immigrants in America, focusing on Ashima and her son Gogol's identity struggles.

Gender power is depicted through Ashima's adaptation: from arranged marriage to cultural isolation. She embodies diasporic women's dual burdens – maintaining traditions while navigating Western individualism. Power imbalances manifest in marital dynamics; Ashoke holds economic power, but Ashima gains agency through motherhood and eventual independence.

Intersectionality highlights gender with ethnicity: Ashima faces racism, compounding patriarchal expectations. Lahiri uses subtle narration to show quiet resistance, like Ashima's return to India.

Scholarly views align with Ranasinha's analysis of diasporic narration. The novel critiques how globalization erodes women's cultural power. Ashima's evolving identity reflects the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing new societal norms. Her gradual assertion of independence challenges traditional gender roles within the diasporic community. Lahiri's nuanced portrayal underscores the complexities of female empowerment amid intersecting social pressures.

Examples: Ashima's pregnancy metaphor for foreignness underscores liminal identity.

**Case Study 3: Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009)**

Shamsie's epic spans Japan, India, Pakistan, and America, following Hiroko Tanaka's life amid wars.

Gender power is explored through Hiroko's resilience: surviving Hiroshima, she navigates patriarchal societies in multiple cultures. Power dynamics include colonial legacies and militarism, where women bear conflict's brunt.

Feminist reading shows Hiroko's agency in defying norms, like inter-cultural marriage. Shamsie subverts male-dominated histories by centering women's narratives. Her journey reveals the

intersections of personal and political struggles, highlighting how historical traumas shape individual identities. Shamsie's narrative challenges traditional historiography by weaving intimate experiences with broader socio-political contexts. This approach emphasizes the resilience of women who navigate and resist the forces of oppression across borders.

Comparisons with Roy and Lahiri reveal common themes of displacement and resistance. Real examples: Echoes Afghan women's struggles under Taliban.

- Center: Gender
- Intersecting circles: War, Migration, Culture, Patriarchy

Additional examples from other authors, like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Their Language of Love*, reinforce these patterns. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* depicts Bangladeshi immigrant women's empowerment.

These cases demonstrate literature's role in exposing and challenging power imbalances.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary South Asian women's writing profoundly illuminates gender and power dynamics, offering critiques and visions of equity. Through authors like Roy, Lahiri, and Shamsie, we see how patriarchy intersects with other oppressions, yet resistance flourishes.

The study achieves its objectives by reviewing literature, applying methodologies, and analyzing cases. Implications: Enhances feminist scholarship, informs policy on gender violence.

Future research should include more vernacular and queer voices. Ultimately, these narratives empower, fostering global solidarity.

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