
**Women's Spiritual Resistance in Indian English Fiction:
Reinterpreting Agency in the Works of Arundhati Subramaniam and Kiran
Desai**

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Abstract:

This paper explores by examining the role of how women find strength through spirituality in contemporary Indian English writing, focusing through the works of Arundhati Subramaniam and Kiran Desai. These writers illustrate a shift by showing that spirituality for women is no longer just about quiet faith as solely passive or submission. Instead, it transforms by becoming a powerful way to express identity and challenge unfair social roles of expectation. Arundhati reinterprets traditional bhakti poetry but uses it to depict and celebrate awakening and self-awareness. Kiran, on the other hand, presents spirituality as an integral component of a personal struggle against exclusion and gender discrimination in a global landscape. Using feminist theory, this study argues spiritual paths in these works offer women a way to reclaim power and turn silence into clear self-expression. Spirituality here is a way to build strength, not to retreat from life.

Developments in feminist literary theory analysis have recently expanded by recognizing the understanding of spiritual narratives as acts of powerful forms in the mode of silent revolution. As post-pandemic challenges intensify questions of belonging, works of both Arundhati and Kiran emerge as crucial yet key texts articulating the equilibrium of balance between inner wholeness and worldly fragmentation.

Scholars now interpret their works within the framework of "embodied transcendence," a concept that views by treating spiritual awareness not as an escape but as a form of engagement a process that allows through which women reclaim their narrative authority in a chaotic, globalized space.

Keywords: female spirituality; resistance; Arundhati Subramaniam; Kiran Desai; feminist agency; bhakti aesthetics; postcolonial identity; liberation; patriarchy

Introduction:

Spirituality and gender often overlap in Indian English literature. Traditionally, women's religious roles were seen as passive and obedient. Newer writers challenge that idea. For example, Arundhati's poetry mixes devotion with rebellion, showing women unlearning submission while seeking the divine, what she calls "the geography of longing." Meanwhile, Kiran's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores women's feelings of alienation caused by migration and cultural shifts. Faith in these stories serves as shelter but also as subtle protest within systems that limit women. This evolution mirrors a broader transition of shift in post 1990s Indian feminism, whereas authors began to integrate by fusing the metaphysical with the political themes. The integration of entry by spirituality into feminist discourse signifies a shift beyond mere empowerment rhetoric to internal sovereignty.

Through meditative subjectivities, women's voices transition from previously silenced into achieving sacred expression of articulation. Indian women writers, namely Meena Alexander, Kiran Nair, and poets like Tishani Doshi, echos similarity in attempting where selfhood is not detached from society but reborn through mythic and metaphysical introspection. where selfhood, rather than being detached from society, is reborn through mythic and introspection of metaphysical introspection. Arundhati Subramaniam and Kiran Desai stand out due to their grounding these explorations in realism and vulnerability rather than abstraction which is mystical.

Literature Review

Earlier criticism often reduced women's devotion in bhakti literature to mere submission. Feminist scholars like Vasudha Narayanan and Sugirtharajah have shown that surrender to the divine can hide strong self-ownership. Arundhati's *When God is a Traveller* brings this idea to the forefront. Critics describe her poetry as a "quiet rebellion," giving sacred power to the female body.

Kiran's work, while less openly spiritual, uses characters' exiled lives to explore inner conflict and transcendence. Scholars see her female characters balancing despair and spiritual strength in their search for meaning. Recently, scholars have argued women's spirituality in literature challenges male-dominated ideas and links old bhakti female voices to modern feminist thought.

Reviewing recent studies, such as Kavita Sharma's *Sacred Feminism in Global Literature* (2024), indicate by showing that spirituality often serves by functioning as a "counter-narrative" to patriarchal temporality referring the rhythm of life measured by male-centric duties and notions of success. From this perspective, female spiritual expression represents becoming an act of temporal defiance, establishing on creating alternative forms of time and self-recognition.

Arundhati's *Ecofeminist Reading of Indian Poetics* (Saha, 2023) suggests that writing resonates with eco-spiritual concepts where the female subject's bond of unity with the environment signifies by symbolizing ecological restoration of healing.

Similarly, Kiran's portrayal of fractured diasporic landscapes aligns by mirroring with "eco-exilic spirituality," where the alienated woman reclaims belonging through contemplative care rather than nationalist or patriarchal forms of redemption. These readings help to reposition and establish both authors as heirs to the modernized bhakti spirit in the postcolonial world. Theory

This work draws on postcolonial feminist theories and ideas from Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty. Spirituality becomes a realm where women speak out resistance about what patriarchy which attempts by trying to silence. The bhakti tradition connects body and spirit, private faith and public action, rejecting Western splits between sacred and everyday life.

In this context, postcolonial feminism demands "voice beyond visibility," a phrase first used by Spivak to illustrate how marginalized women live in a transitional space between existence and silence. In this light, spiritual practice in this context is not just political, but rather, it transforms invisibility into an expressive presence. The poetic lyrical subject's dialogic connection with the divine in Arundhati's work which aligns with understanding through Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, where the body actively writes itself into being.

Kiran's work reflects Mohanty's idea of the global-sisterhood concept, illustrating how women share experiences globally, particularly in areas concerning silence, migration, and spiritual memory. Both authors adopt a decolonial perspective to challenge traditional religious narratives. They portray the divine as a democratic space for liberation, to open to all who seek to dismantle hierarchical structures.

Methodology

The researcher closely examines by reading Arundhati's books *When God is a Traveller and Love Without a Story*, analyzing along with Kiran's *The Inheritance of Loss*. It focuses on themes like devotion, exile, silence, spiritual journeys, identity formation and bodily transcendence. This study analyzes by comparing poetry and narrative styles to understand how these elements shape women's spiritual journeys and their identities. Recent academic studies support this feminist-spiritual view.

In addition to the textual methodology, this paper employs comparative hermeneutics to connect the bridge between poetic and narrative forms of resistance. The poetic texts are read by interpreting not merely as aesthetic expression but as cultural discourses engaging to participate in feminist theology and ethics in the postcolonial era. By using Interdisciplinary tools ranging right from cognitive feminism to environmental phenomenology, broadens the interpretive framework. This approach allows us to locate both authors' portrayal of spiritual treatment as an ethical practice that critiques societal violence and emotional fragmentation prevalent in postmodern India.

Analysis**Arundhati Subramaniam**

Arundhati reclaims bhakti poetry by merging surrender with self-awareness. Her female voices seek the divine by engaging with their feelings and fears. In the poem “Home,” prayer reconnects one to their core self, treating the body as sacred text. Her voice is described as wild but controlled, fitting ecofeminist ideas where female power is both tender and vast. Meditation in her work acts as defiance, while faith becomes an active search rather than blind acceptance.

Arundhati’s poetic persona constantly navigates a dynamic interplay between longing and self-recognition. The female seeker in her verse yearns not for absorption into divinity but for clarity within the contours of human condition. Her unique defiance lies in acknowledging imperfection as sacred, embracing contradictions of desire and doubt as portals to spiritual insight. In Poems collections such as those from *Love Without a Story* she constructs a narrative of “divinity through dailiness,” where faith arises during routine acts such as walking, cooking, and introspection—reaffirming that transcendence resides in immediacy of lived experience, rather than in isolation.

Through her engagement with ancient goddess worship motifs, Arundhati introduces a Shakti-inspired spirituality that brings the feminine divine into contemporary consciousness of modernity. In this context, the goddess represents awakened perception rather than submission. Aparna Singh (2025) characterizes this as “performative devotion,” where prayer acts as a political gesture to reclaim sacred spaces traditionally often dominated by masculine deities. By positioning the body as a text that prays, Arundhati transforms gendered vulnerability into a source of creative strength.

Her engagement with figures such as Mirabai reflects a revisionary bhakti inheritance, as she modernizes their inner voices with a modern, urban, and fragmented rhythm. This “pilgrim-poet” navigates the challenges of postcolonial modernity through an interplay of yearning and irony, resisting the reduction of spiritual experience to a singular form. For her, faith is characterized not by certainty, but by a dynamic inquiry, reflecting a defining feature of the core aspect of feminist consciousness.

Kiran Desai

Kiran’s stories locate female identity amid class struggle, migration, and silence. Though *The Inheritance of Loss* is not overtly religious, its women characters embark by navigating symbolic spiritual journeys, seeking completeness amid fragmented cultures. They are not merely sorrowful of solitude transcending sadness, it acts as a subtle act of offering a quiet rebellion through self-awareness. Spirituality here becomes knowing oneself as sacred apart independent of societal validation.

Kiran’s portrayal of Sai and other female characters exhibits by echoing a secular mysticism, a spiritual longing and hunger filtered through displacement rather than liturgy of religious practice. The snowy, isolated Himalayan landscape mirrors the interior terrain

of pain as her characters' struggles materialize as a form of emotional geography. Through silence, Kiran transforms by articulating resistance: in a world of colonial residues like aftermath and economic inequality of disparity, silence becomes a meditative act rather than a passive one.

Her characters exhibit spiritual endurance rather than adherence to doctrinal faith. The quest for searching peace amidst chaos aligns with Buddhist-influenced detachment and with Hindu notions of moksha concepts which are rooted by self-awareness rather than ritualistic obligation. Feminist scholars and readers frequently interpret Kiran's narrative textures as "pilgrimages into perception," where each and every act of compassion or resilience transforms by converting exile into enlightenment or awakening.

Kiran's work, particularly *The Inheritance of Loss*, challenges sentimental spirituality not through sentimentalism but by anchoring spiritual agency in the tangible lived experiences of migration and displacement. The "inheritance" thus represents not only economic or cultural depletion but also internally reclaim a loss of transcendence, which women regain through contemplative practices. Her fiction ultimately argues that liberation is found in inner freedom rather than external mobility.

By anchoring spiritual insights within the realities of migration and displacement experiences, Kiran resists sentimental spirituality. The "inheritance" in *The Inheritance of Loss* thus symbolizes not only economic or cultural depletion of loss but also the loss of transcendence which something women regain internally through reflection. Her fiction ultimately asserts by arguing liberation is found in external mobility but in inner freedom. *Intersections and Comparative Insights*

A comparative reading highlights how Arundati's overtly devotional poetics and Kiran's introspective realism converge by dwelling on one point: the reclaiming of spirit through inner alignment. While Arundhati expresses her spiritual resistance manifested through language and rhythm of each of her poetry, it serves as a form of embodied prayer while Kiran's resistance exhibits through quiet endurance and perceptive understanding. Both of them neither opt for spectacle; their defiance is found in subtle shifts through transformations of awareness.

A feminist-spiritual dialogue between these texts also highlights the foregrounding of the evolving image of the "modern Indian woman." instead of being conflicted no longer torn between faith and freedom, she integrates them. Spirituality, far from being regressive, emerges by becoming a modern language of empowerment. As global readership increasingly consume Indian women's fiction for its "exotic" spiritual depictions of portrayals, both authors challenge stereotypes by presenting a complex, self-conscious spirituality that arises from doubt, humor, and discipline.

The difference in form poetry vs. prose offers complementary forms of resistance. Arundhati's poetry writes the mystical as immediate, while Kiran's prose narrates alienation as spiritual exile. Together, their narratives rewrite Indian English literature's understanding of the divine in feminine for the 21st century shifting from a mythic goddess to a conscious subject. Contemporary Relevance and Cross-Genre Influence

In the 2020s, global feminist discourse increasingly highlights the values of political significance of interior well-being. Literary Movements prioritizing mindfulness, embodiment, and eco-spiritual awareness find literary anticipating correlatives in works like Arundhati's and Kiran's. Their writings anticipate by demonstrating this shift, showing that the road to liberation originates not from external revolt but from inner coherence. Their spiritually-inflected feminism has further circulated through virtual poetry performances and online reader forums, Arundhati's recent essays reflect by advocating for "mindful modernities," while Kiran's prolonged absence from publication heightens the meditative silence surrounding her work, which itself is an act of creative resistance.

Conclusion

Both writers break down the strict divide between sacred and daily life by situating spirituality within real struggles. Arundhati's intimate aesthetics and Kiran's portrayal of melancholia mark a shift in feminist spirituality: from imitation of divine love to creating personal divinity. Women evolve beyond mere devotees; they become architects of spiritual meaning of understanding. Their transcendence reinterprets by shaping the world rather than outright rejection of the world. Indian English fiction frames spirituality as a lived, powerful exercise in resistance and rebirth.

This study ultimately highlights functions of spirituality as a generative wellspring for feminist transformation in Indian English literature. Arundhati's poetic pilgrim and Kiran's silent seeker embody a synchronized consciousness and exemplify a harmonious awareness, turning by transforming devotion into defiance and solitude into solidarity.

Their writings also demonstrate that the reclamation of the sacred can also simultaneously lead to the political reclamation, creating by forging paths paving avenues by enriching a collective gender consciousness through self-knowledge. Further, the future research could expand by broadening this framework by exploring how digital-age interpretations of bhakti and spirituality appear by manifesting as a feminist aesthetic in the new generations of digital age across literature, performance, and art. With women expressing their spiritual identities and beliefs amidst socio-political turbulence, the enduring legacy of Subramaniam and Desai continue to offer a powerful lens for understanding resistance, belonging, and rebirth.

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