

**“Understanding Depression, Loneliness, and Inner Resistance in Women-Centred Narratives based on Fictions Written by Indian Women Novelists between 1980 and 1990”**

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**Abstract:**

This study examines the representation of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance in women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990. Focusing on selected works by authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal, the paper explores how female characters negotiate emotional and psychological struggles within patriarchal social structures. Depression and loneliness are portrayed not merely as individual conditions but as outcomes of societal expectations, gender roles, and restricted agency. At the same time, these narratives reveal subtle forms of inner resistance, where women assert identity through silence, reflection, and self-awareness. By employing feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives, the study highlights how these writers give voice to the suppressed inner lives of women, thereby contributing significantly to Indian English literature and feminist discourse.

**Keywords:** Depression, Loneliness, Inner Resistance, Women-Centred Narratives, Indian Women Novelists, Feminist Literature, Psychological Conflict, Patriarchy, Identity, Indian English Fiction.

**Introduction**

The emergence of women’s voices in Indian English literature marks one of the most significant literary developments of the late twentieth century. Particularly during the decade of 1980 to 1990, Indian women novelists began to foreground the psychological, emotional, and existential dimensions of women’s lives with a new intensity and authenticity. This period reflects a shift from external, socially driven narratives to inward-looking explorations of subjectivity, identity, and resistance. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal crafted narratives that center on women’s inner worlds, exposing the quiet yet profound struggles shaped by patriarchy, tradition, and modernity.

Unlike earlier literary portrayals that often confined women to symbolic or supportive roles, the fiction of this period presents women as thinking, feeling individuals negotiating complex emotional landscapes. Themes of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance emerge not as isolated psychological conditions but as deeply embedded responses to systemic gender inequalities. These narratives reveal how personal suffering is frequently rooted in broader socio-cultural structures that limit women's autonomy and expression. As Elaine Showalter observes, women's writing often "embodies a double-voiced discourse," simultaneously reflecting and resisting dominant patriarchal ideologies (Showalter 1985)<sup>1</sup>.

The socio-historical context of India during the 1980s plays a crucial role in shaping these literary representations. This was a time of gradual social transition, marked by increasing urbanization, the spread of education, and the growing visibility of feminist movements. However, despite these changes, traditional gender roles continued to exert a powerful influence on women's lives. The tension between evolving aspirations and entrenched expectations created a fertile ground for psychological conflict. Women were expected to fulfill roles as dutiful wives, mothers, and daughters while simultaneously navigating emerging possibilities of independence and selfhood. This contradiction often resulted in emotional fragmentation, which is vividly captured in the fiction of the time.

Depression, as depicted in these narratives, is rarely articulated in clinical terms. Instead, it manifests through silence, withdrawal, and a sense of existential fatigue. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988)<sup>2</sup>, the protagonist Jaya's emotional state reflects years of suppressed identity and unexpressed desires. Her silence becomes both a symptom of psychological distress and a socially conditioned response to patriarchal expectations. Similarly, Anita Desai's works, particularly *Clear Light of Day* (1980)<sup>3</sup>, delve deeply into the interiority of female characters, portraying their loneliness as an enduring condition shaped by memory, familial relationships, and unfulfilled aspirations. Desai's narrative style, often described as introspective and lyrical, allows readers to engage intimately with the mental and emotional states of her characters (King 2001)<sup>4</sup>.

Loneliness in these texts is not merely the absence of companionship but a more profound sense of disconnection and alienation. It often exists within the very structures that are supposed to provide support, such as family and marriage. This paradox highlights the limitations of traditional institutions in addressing women's emotional needs. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, women are often defined in relation to others, particularly men, which restricts their ability to develop an autonomous sense of self (Beauvoir 1949)<sup>5</sup>. This relational identity contributes significantly to the feelings of isolation experienced by female characters in Indian women's fiction.

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At the same time, these narratives are not solely accounts of suffering. They also articulate forms of inner resistance that challenge dominant norms, albeit in subtle and often understated ways. Resistance in these texts does not always take the form of overt rebellion; rather, it is embedded in moments of introspection, self-realization, and quiet defiance. Jaya's eventual recognition of her own silence and her desire to break it can be seen as an act of reclaiming agency. Similarly, the characters in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985)<sup>6</sup> navigate political and personal constraints, revealing how resistance operates both at the individual and societal levels.

The concept of "inner resistance" is particularly significant in understanding women-centred narratives of this period. It reflects a shift from external forms of protest to internal processes of questioning and self-awareness. This aligns with the broader feminist project of redefining power and agency. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes, feminist analysis must consider the specific cultural and historical contexts in which women's experiences are situated, rather than imposing universal frameworks (Mohanty 1988)<sup>7</sup>. In the Indian context, resistance often takes nuanced forms that are deeply intertwined with cultural values and social expectations.

Narratively, these themes are reinforced through innovative literary techniques. Indian women novelists of the 1980s frequently employ stream of consciousness, fragmented structures, and symbolic imagery to represent the complexity of inner life. Silence, for instance, functions as a powerful motif, signifying both oppression and potential transformation. Memory and time are also used non-linearly, reflecting the fragmented nature of identity and experience. Such techniques enable a more nuanced portrayal of psychological states, moving beyond simplistic or reductive representations.

Furthermore, these narratives contribute to a broader redefinition of Indian English literature. By centering women's experiences, they challenge the male-dominated literary canon and expand the scope of thematic and stylistic exploration. As Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, Indian English fiction has evolved through continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity, and women writers have played a crucial role in this process (Mukherjee 2000)<sup>8</sup>. Their work not only enriches literary discourse but also provides valuable insights into the lived realities of women in contemporary India.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine how depression, loneliness, and inner resistance are constructed and represented in women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990. By analyzing selected texts through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, the research aims to uncover the complex interplay between

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individual psychology and socio-cultural structures. It also seeks to highlight the ways in which these narratives articulate both suffering and resilience, offering a more holistic understanding of women's experiences.

In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist literary criticism and Indian English studies. It underscores the importance of examining literature not merely as a reflection of reality but as a site of meaning-making and resistance. The works of Deshpande, Desai, and Sahgal, among others, demonstrate that the inner lives of women are rich, complex, and deserving of serious scholarly attention. Their narratives invite readers to listen to voices that have long been marginalized and to recognize the subtle yet powerful ways in which women negotiate their place in the world.

Ultimately, the exploration of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance in these texts reveals a deeper truth: that the personal is inherently political. The emotional struggles of female characters are not isolated experiences but are shaped by and reflective of larger social dynamics. By bringing these issues to the forefront, Indian women novelists of the 1980s not only challenge existing norms but also pave the way for future generations of writers to continue this important work.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of depression in women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990.
2. To analyze the portrayal of loneliness and emotional isolation experienced by female characters within socio-cultural and familial contexts.
3. To explore the concept of inner resistance and the subtle forms of agency expressed by women in response to patriarchal constraints.
4. To investigate the relationship between psychological experiences (depression and loneliness) and external factors such as gender roles, social expectations, and cultural norms.
5. To evaluate the narrative techniques and literary strategies employed by Indian women novelists to depict the inner lives and struggles of women.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology grounded in close textual analysis, with the aim of examining the representation of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance in women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990. Given the exploratory and analytical nature of the research topic, a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective

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experiences, emotional states, and narrative complexities that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods.

The primary method employed in this study is textual analysis, which involves a careful and systematic reading of selected literary texts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and symbolic elements. The analysis focuses on how psychological conditions such as depression and loneliness are represented through character development, narrative voice, and literary techniques. It also examines how these internal states are connected to broader socio-cultural contexts, particularly patriarchal structures and gender norms that shape women's lived experiences.

The study is based on a purposive selection of three significant novels written during the specified period: *That Long Silence* (1988) by Shashi Deshpande, *Clear Light of Day* (1980) by Anita Desai, and *Rich Like Us* (1985) by Nayantara Sahgal. These texts have been chosen because they offer rich insights into the inner lives of women and reflect diverse yet interconnected perspectives on gender, identity, and resistance. Each of these authors is recognized for her contribution to Indian English literature and for her nuanced portrayal of female subjectivity.

To provide a structured analytical framework, the study integrates feminist literary theory and psychoanalytic criticism. Feminist theory is employed to understand how gender roles, power relations, and patriarchal ideologies influence the representation of women's experiences in literature. It helps to situate the narratives within a broader socio-political context and to highlight how women characters negotiate constraints imposed by society. Scholars such as Elaine Showalter (1985) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949) provide critical insights into the ways in which women's identities are constructed and contested within literary texts.

Alongside this, psychoanalytic theory is used to explore the internal psychological dimensions of the characters. Concepts such as repression, identity conflict, and emotional isolation are particularly relevant in analyzing the portrayal of depression and loneliness. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how unconscious processes and suppressed desires shape the behavior and emotional states of the protagonists. The combination of feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives thus enables a comprehensive analysis that addresses both external and internal dimensions of women's experiences.

The process of analysis involves several stages. First, the selected texts are read closely to identify key themes related to depression, loneliness, and resistance. Particular

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attention is given to narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, and the use of silence, which play a crucial role in conveying psychological depth. Second, these themes are interpreted in relation to the socio-cultural context of the 1980s, including the status of women in Indian society and the emerging feminist discourse of the time. Third, the findings are synthesized to draw connections between individual experiences and larger structural factors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation through which literary texts are interpreted and analyzed. In the present study, the representation of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance in women-centred narratives is examined through two complementary critical approaches: Feminist Literary Theory and the Psychoanalytic Perspective. Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced understanding of both the external socio-cultural structures and the internal psychological processes that shape women's experiences in literature.

### **Feminist Literary Theory**

Feminist literary theory serves as a crucial lens for analyzing how literature reflects, reinforces, and at times challenges gender inequalities embedded within society. Emerging as a significant critical movement in the late twentieth century, feminist criticism seeks to interrogate the ways in which women are represented in literary texts and to uncover the ideological structures that sustain patriarchal dominance. As Elaine Showalter argues, feminist criticism not only examines "images of women in literature" but also aims to recover women's voices and experiences that have historically been marginalized or silenced (Showalter 1985).

In the context of Indian English literature, feminist theory becomes particularly relevant due to the complex interplay of tradition, culture, and modernity. Women writers of the 1980s, such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal, depict female protagonists who are often confined within rigid social roles—wives, mothers, and daughters—defined by patriarchal expectations. These roles limit women's autonomy and contribute to their psychological struggles, including depression and loneliness. Feminist criticism helps to situate these individual experiences within broader systems of power and inequality, emphasizing that personal suffering is often a reflection of structural constraints.

One of the central concerns of feminist theory is the concept of patriarchy, understood as a system of social organization in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of leadership, authority, and control over resources. In literary narratives, patriarchy manifests through the marginalization of women's voices, the normalization of their subordination, and the expectation of silence and self-sacrifice. For instance, in *That*

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*Long Silence*, Jaya's inability to express herself openly is not merely a personal limitation but a consequence of internalized patriarchal norms that discourage female assertiveness. Her silence symbolizes both oppression and a conditioned response to societal expectations. Feminist theory also explores the idea of female subjectivity, which refers to women's capacity to define their own identities and experiences. Traditional literary representations often depict women as "the Other," a concept articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, where she argues that woman is defined in relation to man rather than as an autonomous being (Beauvoir 1949). Indian women novelists challenge this notion by presenting complex, introspective characters who grapple with questions of identity, selfhood, and agency.

### **Psychoanalytic Perspective**

While feminist theory focuses on external structures of power and inequality, the psychoanalytic perspective offers insight into the internal psychological processes that shape human behavior and emotional experience. Rooted in the theories of Sigmund Freud and later developed by scholars such as Jacques Lacan and object-relations theorists, psychoanalytic criticism examines how unconscious desires, repression, and identity conflicts influence literary characters and narratives.

In the context of this study, the psychoanalytic lens is particularly useful for interpreting themes of depression and loneliness. These emotional states are often portrayed in women-centred narratives not as overt or dramatic conditions but as subtle, pervasive experiences embedded in everyday life. Psychoanalytic theory helps to uncover the underlying causes of these conditions, such as repression, unresolved conflicts, and emotional isolation.

Repression, a key concept in psychoanalysis, refers to the process by which individuals suppress thoughts, desires, or emotions that are deemed unacceptable or threatening. In many Indian women's narratives, female characters repress their desires and frustrations in order to conform to societal expectations. This suppression often leads to a sense of inner emptiness or depression. For example, Jaya's emotional withdrawal in *That Long Silence* can be understood as a result of prolonged repression of her individuality and creative expression.

Another important concept is identity conflict, which arises when individuals struggle to reconcile competing aspects of their self. Women in the selected texts often experience tension between their personal aspirations and their prescribed social roles. This conflict contributes to feelings of alienation and loneliness, as they are unable to fully integrate their desires with their lived realities. Psychoanalytic criticism allows us to explore

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how these conflicts are internalized and how they manifest in the characters' thoughts and behaviors.

Loneliness, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is not merely physical isolation but a deeper sense of disconnection from oneself and others. It may stem from a lack of meaningful emotional relationships or from an inability to communicate one's inner experiences. In Anita Desai's works, for instance, characters often inhabit rich inner worlds but struggle to connect with those around them. This disconnect highlights the gap between inner consciousness and external reality.

### **Depression in Women-Centred Narratives**

Depression in women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990 is portrayed not as a purely medical or individual condition, but as a deeply embedded psychological response to socio-cultural constraints. These narratives move beyond conventional depictions of sadness or despair and instead present depression as a layered and often silent experience shaped by gender roles, emotional suppression, and the burden of societal expectations. The female protagonists in these works frequently inhabit spaces where their identities are constrained, their voices muted, and their desires subordinated, leading to a gradual erosion of selfhood.

One of the defining features of depression in these narratives is its subtle and internalized nature. Unlike overt expressions of suffering, depression is often conveyed through silence, withdrawal, monotony, and a sense of emotional numbness. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), the protagonist Jaya exemplifies this condition. Her life, structured around domestic responsibilities and marital expectations, leaves little room for personal expression or creative fulfillment. Over time, this suppression results in a deep sense of dissatisfaction and inner emptiness. Jaya's silence is not merely a lack of speech but a manifestation of her psychological state—an indication of years of internalized repression and resignation.

Similarly, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), depression is depicted through the character of Bim, whose emotional isolation and unresolved past contribute to her sense of stagnation. Desai's narrative emphasizes the interiority of her characters, allowing readers to witness the slow accumulation of emotional fatigue. Bim's life is marked by unfulfilled aspirations and a lingering sense of responsibility, which traps her in a cycle of introspection and discontent. Here, depression is closely linked to memory and the inability to move beyond past experiences.

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A key aspect of these portrayals is the connection between depression and patriarchal structures. Women are often expected to conform to idealized roles of selflessness, patience, and sacrifice. These expectations discourage the expression of personal desires and emotions, leading to a form of psychological repression. As a result, depression emerges not as an individual weakness but as a consequence of systemic inequality. The inability to articulate dissatisfaction or challenge existing norms further intensifies this condition, creating a sense of helplessness and internal conflict.

Moreover, these narratives highlight how domestic spaces, traditionally considered safe and nurturing, can become sites of emotional confinement. The home, rather than offering comfort, often reinforces isolation and monotony. The repetitive nature of domestic life, combined with a lack of meaningful communication, contributes significantly to the protagonists' psychological distress. This paradox underscores the limitations of conventional social structures in addressing women's emotional needs.

### **Loneliness and Emotional Isolation**

Loneliness and emotional isolation form a central strand in women-centred narratives by Indian women novelists of the 1980–1990 period. These texts portray loneliness not simply as physical solitude but as a deeper, more complex condition—a sense of being unheard, misunderstood, and emotionally disconnected even within close relationships. The protagonists often inhabit familial and social spaces that appear full on the surface, yet are marked by an absence of genuine communication and emotional reciprocity.

A striking feature of these narratives is the paradox of relational loneliness. Women are rarely alone in a literal sense; they are wives, daughters, or caregivers embedded within family structures. However, these relationships often fail to provide emotional fulfillment. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Jaya's marriage exemplifies this condition. Despite sharing a household with her husband, she experiences a profound lack of dialogue and understanding. Her thoughts remain unspoken, and her identity gradually dissolves into prescribed roles, leading to a quiet yet persistent sense of isolation.

Similarly, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, loneliness is intricately tied to memory and time. Bim's emotional isolation is not only a result of her present circumstances but also of unresolved familial tensions and unfulfilled expectations. Her life becomes inward-looking, shaped by reflection rather than connection. Desai's emphasis on interiority highlights how loneliness can exist even in familiar environments, suggesting that emotional isolation is often psychological rather than spatial.

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These narratives also reveal how patriarchal norms contribute to emotional isolation. Women are frequently socialized to prioritize harmony, silence, and self-sacrifice, which limits their ability to express dissatisfaction or seek emotional support. This suppression creates a gap between inner experience and outward behavior. As a result, the protagonists often retreat into their own thoughts, developing rich inner worlds that contrast sharply with their external lives.

Another important dimension is the failure of communication. Language, which should bridge emotional distances, often becomes inadequate or absent. Conversations remain superficial, and deeper concerns are left unarticulated. This inability to communicate reinforces the characters' sense of invisibility and alienation. Silence, therefore, becomes both a symptom of loneliness and a coping mechanism.

### **Narrative Techniques**

Indian women novelists of the 1980–1990 period employ a range of distinctive narrative techniques to represent the complex inner lives of their female characters. These techniques are not merely stylistic choices; they are deeply connected to the themes of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance. By moving away from conventional linear storytelling, these writers create narrative forms that mirror the fragmented, introspective, and often conflicted nature of women's experiences within patriarchal structures.

One of the most significant techniques used is the stream of consciousness, which allows direct access to a character's thoughts, feelings, and internal conflicts. This method enables writers to portray psychological depth with remarkable subtlety. In works such as Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, the narrative frequently shifts inward, focusing on the mental and emotional states of characters rather than external events. Through this technique, readers experience the continuous flow of consciousness, where memories, emotions, and reflections intermingle. It becomes an effective way to depict inner turmoil, especially the quiet and often unspoken dimensions of depression and loneliness.

Another important device is symbolism, particularly through motifs such as silence, space, and memory. Silence, for instance, recurs as a powerful symbol in many women-centred narratives. It represents both oppression and the internalization of societal expectations, but it can also suggest resistance and introspection. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, silence becomes a central metaphor for the protagonist's suppressed identity and emotional state. Similarly, physical spaces—such as the home—are often symbolic of confinement and restriction, reflecting the limited agency available to women. Memory, too, functions symbolically, connecting past experiences with present emotions and revealing how unresolved conflicts continue to shape identity.

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The use of non-linear narrative structures further enhances the representation of fragmented identities. Instead of following a straightforward chronological sequence, these narratives often move back and forth in time, blending past and present. This technique reflects the way human consciousness operates, where memories and experiences are not neatly ordered but exist simultaneously. It also underscores the instability and fragmentation of the protagonists' sense of self, as they struggle to reconcile their personal desires with social expectations.

Together, these narrative strategies create a layered and immersive reading experience. They allow authors to move beyond surface-level storytelling and to engage deeply with the psychological and emotional dimensions of their characters. By doing so, Indian women novelists not only innovate in terms of form but also provide a more authentic and nuanced portrayal of women's inner lives, making narrative technique an essential element in understanding these texts.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of women-centred narratives by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990 reveals a profound interconnectedness between depression, loneliness, and inner resistance. These themes do not exist in isolation; rather, they emerge as interdependent responses to the socio-cultural realities shaped by patriarchal norms and expectations. The female protagonists portrayed in these works experience psychological distress not merely as personal suffering but as a consequence of constrained agency, emotional suppression, and limited avenues for self-expression.

Depression in these narratives is closely tied to loneliness, particularly the kind that exists within relationships. The inability to communicate openly, combined with the expectation to conform to traditional roles, creates a sense of internal fragmentation. This emotional isolation intensifies depressive states, as characters are left to navigate their struggles in silence. At the same time, loneliness becomes a space where introspection occurs, allowing characters to confront their suppressed desires and question their circumstances.

It is within this space of introspection that inner resistance begins to take shape. Unlike overt rebellion, resistance in these narratives is subtle and internal, often expressed through moments of self-awareness, reflection, or the desire for change. These small yet significant shifts indicate a movement toward reclaiming identity and agency. The characters may not always achieve complete transformation, but their recognition of their own condition marks an important step toward empowerment.

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Furthermore, the narrative techniques employed by these writers—such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, and non-linear structures—reinforce the thematic concerns of fragmentation and inner conflict. These techniques allow readers to engage more deeply with the psychological dimensions of the characters, making the experience of depression and loneliness more immediate and relatable.

Overall, the discussion highlights that these narratives function not only as representations of women's emotional struggles but also as critiques of the social structures that produce them. They underscore the idea that personal experiences are deeply political, revealing the need for greater recognition of women's voices and inner lives.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, women-centred narratives written by Indian women novelists between 1980 and 1990 offer a profound and nuanced exploration of depression, loneliness, and inner resistance, revealing the intricate relationship between individual psychology and socio-cultural structures. Through the works of writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal, it becomes evident that the emotional struggles of female characters are not isolated or purely personal experiences, but are deeply rooted in patriarchal expectations, restrictive gender roles, and the pressures of conformity. Depression is portrayed as a silent and internalized condition emerging from prolonged suppression of identity and desire, while loneliness is depicted as an emotional disconnection that persists even within familial and marital relationships. However, these narratives do not remain confined to themes of suffering; they also illuminate subtle yet significant forms of inner resistance, where self-awareness, reflection, and the questioning of norms become acts of quiet defiance. The innovative narrative techniques employed by these novelists—such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, and non-linear storytelling—further enhance the representation of fragmented identities and psychological depth, allowing readers to engage closely with the inner lives of the characters. Ultimately, these literary works challenge traditional representations of women, foreground their voices, and contribute meaningfully to feminist discourse in Indian English literature. They affirm that the personal is inherently political and underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing women's emotional and intellectual experiences as central to both literature and society.

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