

**Postcolonial Feminism and Resistance: Reclaiming Voice in
Contemporary South Asian Women's Fiction**

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Abstract

Postcolonial feminism offers a critical lens that merges the concerns of postcolonial theory with feminist critique, foregrounding the unique experiences of women in formerly colonised nations. This paper examines the narrative strategies employed by contemporary South Asian women writers—particularly Arundhati Roy, Kamila Shamsie, and Jhumpa Lahiri—to articulate resistance, agency, and identity in the face of patriarchal and neo-colonial structures. Drawing on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern voice, the study explores how these authors reclaim narrative spaces for women, address intersectional oppressions, and interrogate cultural hybridity. Through close readings of *The God of Small Things* (Roy), *Home Fire* (Shamsie), and *The Lowland* (Lahiri), this paper reveals how postcolonial feminist literature not only resists dominant narratives but also reimagines community and belonging in the globalised era.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, resistance, South Asian literature, Arundhati Roy, Kamila Shamsie, Jhumpa Lahiri, intersectionality, subaltern voice

Introduction

Postcolonial feminist criticism recognises that women in formerly colonised societies experience gender oppression in ways inseparably tied to histories of colonial domination, economic dependency, and cultural displacement. While Western feminist discourse has often been criticised for universalising women's experiences (Mohanty 333), postcolonial feminism insists on contextualising female agency within local cultural, historical, and political realities.

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South Asian women's fiction offers rich terrain for exploring such issues. The works of Arundhati Roy, Kamila Shamsie, and Jhumpa Lahiri span India, Pakistan, and the diaspora, confronting both internal patriarchies and global power dynamics. Their narratives embody what Gayatri Spivak terms the "strategic essentialism" of reclaiming marginalised voices while resisting the flattening tendencies of dominant discourse (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 284).

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" challenges the homogenisation of 'Third World women,' highlighting the dangers of erasing specificity. For Mohanty, feminist scholarship must resist colonialist tendencies that depict non-Western women only as victims, neglecting their agency and local forms of resistance.

Spivak's seminal question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—further interrogates whether marginalised women can articulate their identities without mediation by dominant cultural structures. In postcolonial contexts, the act of writing itself can be a form of resistance, reclaiming language and narrative from colonial authority.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity also informs this study, suggesting that postcolonial literature often operates in an 'in-between' cultural space where identities are negotiated and reconfigured.

Arundhati Roy: Resisting Patriarchal Memory in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a complex meditation on memory, caste, and forbidden love, but it is also a feminist critique of the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy and colonial history. The protagonist Ammu's rebellion against societal norms—her divorce, her inter-caste love affair—becomes a site of female agency and resistance. Yet her story also illustrates the crushing consequences of violating patriarchal boundaries.

Roy's narrative structure, moving fluidly between past and present, disrupts the linear temporality often associated with colonial historiography. As Elleke Boehmer notes, "Postcolonial women's writing often unsettles time to recover silenced histories" (Boehmer 212). Roy's linguistic innovation—her bending of English syntax—can be read as an act of decolonising the language itself.

Kamila Shamsie: Female Agency in the Shadow of the State in *Home Fire*

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, a retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone* set in the context of Britain's counterterrorism policies, foregrounds the struggles of Muslim

women negotiating loyalty, love, and law. Aneeka's determination to bury her brother defies both the state and patriarchal prescriptions, positioning her as a postcolonial feminist heroine whose agency challenges the authority of multiple oppressive systems.

Shamsie's narrative interrogates the securitisation of Muslim identities in post-9/11 Britain, illustrating what Leela Gandhi describes as "the entanglement of empire with the intimate realms of family and gender" (Gandhi 87). By placing a Muslim woman at the centre of a political tragedy, Shamsie disrupts the stereotype of the voiceless, oppressed Muslim female.

Jhumpa Lahiri: Diasporic Displacement and Female Subjectivity in *The Lowland*

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* addresses the gendered dimensions of migration, political upheaval, and familial duty. Gauri, whose life is shaped by the political martyrdom of her first husband, resists traditional widowhood and embraces intellectual freedom in the United States. Her choice to leave her daughter behind is a radical assertion of selfhood, challenging the idealisation of maternal sacrifice in South Asian culture.

As Ania Loomba points out, "Postcolonial feminism must address how migration can simultaneously liberate and alienate women" (Loomba 192). Lahiri's restrained prose and focus on interiority allow for a nuanced portrayal of the contradictions inherent in diasporic female identity.

Intersectionality and the Multiplicity of Oppressions

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is essential to understanding how these authors portray women's experiences. Gender, caste, religion, class, and diaspora status intersect to produce unique forms of marginalisation. Ammu's oppression cannot be separated from her caste; Aneeka's from her Muslim identity in a securitised state; Gauri's from her migration and intellectual ambitions.

These writers illustrate that resistance in postcolonial feminist contexts often requires navigating multiple axes of power, both local and global.

Language as Resistance

In all three works, language becomes a tool of subversion. Roy's playful subversion of English syntax resists linguistic imperialism. Shamsie's incorporation of British legal jargon alongside familial idioms destabilises narrative authority.

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Lahiri's minimalist English resists exoticisation, presenting diasporic life in understated, everyday terms. NgũgĩwaThiong'o argues in *Decolonising the Mind* that reclaiming narrative control over language is fundamental to cultural liberation. These authors, while writing in English, reshape it to reflect South Asian rhythms, idioms, and silences.

Conclusion

Postcolonial feminist literature, as embodied in the works of Roy, Shamsie, and Lahiri, offers a vital counter-discourse to both Western feminist universalism and patriarchal nationalism. By centring female voices and lived experiences, these narratives create spaces for reimagining identity, agency, and community in the globalised era. They remind us that the project of decolonisation must also be feminist, and that feminism in the postcolonial world must be attentive to the complex intersections of culture, history, and power.

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