
Patriarchy & Construction of Female Identity in selected Indian Short Stories

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Abstract

This study examines the construction and negotiation of female identity within patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks. Through a comparative analysis of three short stories: *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Goodmother* by Mridula Koshy, and *The Domestic Maid* by Anita Desai the research discussed how women's identity is shaped by certain traditional norms. Grounded in feminist theory, social constructionism, and intersectionality, the research explores gender roles that are culturally produced and reinforced through institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and labor.

The analysis reveals that patriarchy operates as a multi-layered system of control. It functions both externally through social structures and internally through self-regulation and internalized norms. The study demonstrates that female identity is not inherent but socially constructed. And it is often defined through relational roles that limit autonomy and individuality of women. It highlights the intersection of gender and class that produces varied experiences of oppression women go through everyday. The study highlights particularly in the context of working-class women whose labor and service remains invisible and undervalued.

At the same time, the study identifies subtle forms of resistance and agency. It shows that women actively negotiate and reinterpret their identities within restrictive environments due to being taught so. By integrating theoretical frameworks with textual analysis, this research helps the readers to understand gender dynamics in literature broadly. And it also underscores the relevance of feminist perspectives in challenging patriarchal structures.

Keywords

- Patriarchy
- Female Identity
- Feminist Theory
- Social Construction
- Intersectionality
- Marriage and Motherhood
- Domestic Labor
- Gender and Class
- Resistance and Agency
- Indian Short Stories

Introduction

Patriarchy is a social system. The primary power and authority in social, political, economic, and cultural institutions are held by men in this system. It leads to visible structures such as political power, governance and property ownership. It is also an invisible aspect of daily life. Patriarchy governed the gender roles, behavioral expectations, and moral standards. Within patriarchal societies, gender hierarchy is considered a normal issue, and male dominance is also accepted as natural and legitimate. On the other hand, women are often positioned as secondary subjects. Their identities are shaped in relation to men such as daughters, wives, and mothers. They are never accepted as autonomous individuals.

Patriarchy runs through long-standing traditions, religious interpretations, customary practices, and familial structures, in the Indian Socio-cultural concepts. Collectively these norms regulate women's roles and responsibilities. Girls are socialized into specific expectations from the very beginning of their life. Specifically they are instructed in modesty, obedience, emotional restraint, and domestic competence etc. Marriage is frequently constructed as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. After marriage, motherhood is treated as the defining proof of her fulfillment and social acceptance. Female virtue is closely associated with chastity, sacrifice, and endurance. It reinforces the idea that women must prioritize family honour & the social status over personal desires & happiness.

These norms shape women's external behavior. These are the reasons for their internal sense of identity also. In patriarchal society, female identity is not formed through individual choice. Rather social surveillance, cultural prescriptions, and moral judgment deeply influence their identity. Women's worth is measured through their conformity. Society characterized their worth through their resilience and obedience over everything rather than through personal achievement or self-expression. This system invites criticism, isolation, or even social exclusion.

Dependency on Economics strongly intensifies these constraints. In many traditional settings, women have limited access to do something for their financial freedom. And they are supposed to depend on male authority. In middle-class urban families, women may have access to education, but never have the choice to prioritize their desires over family or society. Rather they must prioritize societal norms over personal choices. Working-class women often engage themselves in hard labour. Still they remain subject to patriarchal control. They are always bound to be restricted within both workplace and home environments. This is how patriarchy works across class divisions.

Simone de Beauvoir, a famous feminist philosopher, argues in his book *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This statement clearly shows the idea of femininity, which is socially constructed. Femininity is not rather biologically predetermined. Women's roles, characteristics, and values are shaped by society according to cultural norms. Women are frequently reduced to reproductive and caregiving roles, which become markers of social legitimacy. When a woman fails to fulfill these expectations due to any reason such as infertility, unmarried status, or resistance to domestic duties, she is often tagged as incomplete or abnormal.

Literature is a powerful medium for understanding these norms & social taboos. Indian short stories provide clear portrayals of women navigating patriarchal structures in everyday life. Through easy narratives and character focused storytelling style short fiction captures the forms of control, emotional repression, and silent resistance of women's lived experiences.

This study talks about female identity and how it is shaped through social norms. The three selected Indian short stories: *The Treatment of Bibi Halder* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Goodmother* by Mridula Koshy, and *The Domestic Maid* by Anita Desai. Portray women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It highlights patriarchal expectations and how these operate across class divisions. Analyzing these stories the study aims at how women identity is constructed, negotiated & considered throughout Indian patriarchy.

4. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How female identity is defined & governed in Indian patriarchy in the selected stories?
 2. According to social and cultural expectations, what measures a “normal woman” or “an ideal woman?”
 3. How are women's experiences of patriarchal norms shaped by class positions?
 4. In what ways are marriage, motherhood, and labour used as mechanisms of control?
 5. How and why do female characters negotiate personality and follow restrictive social norms?
 6. Do the stories offer possibilities for resistance or transformation, and if so, how?
- Through these questions, this study analyzes the texts and identifies recurring patterns and contrasts.

5. Methodology

Grounded in close reading and textual analysis this research has a qualitative methodology. Close reading enables careful examination of symbolism, characterization, dialogue, and thematic development. Rather than depending on random or quantitative information, the study focuses on interpretative analysis. This helps to uncover the underlying meanings and the depth of ideological structures within the texts.

The feminist theoretical framework guides the analysis on a larger scale. Feminist criticism examines how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges gender hierarchies. It uncovers the hidden assumptions about femininity and masculinity. It also interrogates the ways in which narratives construct female identity. The study

draws particular attention on feminist concepts of social construction, gender roles, and intersectionality.

The analysis focuses on the following elements:

- Representation of normal or ideal women under patriarchal frameworks.
- Measuring female worth through the status of marriages and motherhood.
- Differences in access to power and autonomy depending on class positions.
- Portrayal of domestic and emotional labour of women in society.
- Symbolic use of repression, illness, and marginalization of women in restricted social norms.

The three stories identify both shared patterns and distinct variations. The comparative approach enhances understanding Indian patriarchy. And how it operates across different contexts while maintaining structural similarities.

6.Literature Review and Theoretical Framework While feminist theory provides the analytical lens, the selected short stories -

1. The Treatment of Bibi Haldar by Jhumpa Lahiri
2. The Goodmother by Mridula Koshy, and
3. The Domestic Maid by Anita Desai

serves as practical sites. In these texts patriarchal norms and female identity are enacted, negotiated, and contested. This chapter establishes a strong foundation for the analytical chapters by combining theoretical insights with textual evidence.

A. Conceptualizing Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a system of social organization in which men hold dominant power in political, economic, and cultural institutions. However, feminist scholars argue that patriarchy is not only limited to institutional structures but also is deeply embedded in everyday practices and belief systems. It operates both externally & internally. Through laws and customs, and through social conditioning and self-regulation.

In the Indian socio-cultural context, patriarchy manifests through some common hierarchies such as marriage, and gendered division of labor. Women are often positioned within domestic spaces. Their roles are defined by caregiving and service for the family . These roles are widely normalized so that they appear natural rather than socially constructed.

This normalization is evident in *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*. The protagonist is treated as an anomaly due to her inability to conform to expected social roles. The community perceives her as 'a burden'. Bibi's life was an encounter with one fruitless antidote after another (Lahiri, P-01 pdf). It reflects how women who fail to align with patriarchal expectations are marginalized. Her condition is not understood medically but socially. In our society, it is very common to accept that for any type of disorder of women such as menstruation complexities or mental health issues in early adulthood, people find their solution only in marriage. Their only assumption is that getting married and having a child can eradicate all the problems of a woman.

Similarly, patriarchal authority is not always overtly oppressive. It operates through subtle forms of control. In *The Domestic Maid*, the protagonist's continuous labor is taken for granted. She works in at least four houses at a time, doing odd jobs like cleaning and washing. (Anita. P-02 pdf). Still, the protagonist faces the anger of the owners for being a little bit late for work and never getting any respect for her working hard. It illustrates how patriarchal systems rely on the invisibility of women's work. The absence of recognition becomes a form of control. It denies women a sense of identity beyond their functional roles.

B. Feminist Theory and Gender Construction

Feminist theory provides the primary framework for analyzing female identity. A central argument in feminist thought is that gender is not biologically determined rather it is socially produced. The idea that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (de Beauvoir, 1949) emphasizes that femininity is shaped through cultural norms and expectations.

From an early age of life, women are socialized into roles. These roles prioritize obedience, modesty, and emotional restraint. These expectations not only limit their autonomy but also reinforce male dominance. Feminist theorists argue that such roles are not inherent but imposed. These are simply to serve and maintain patriarchal structures. At a very early age girls are taught certain norms in her family such as women can not go outside most often, they should not raise their voice over elders even if they are correct. Females are taught that even if they become harassed

they should not confess it and should not ask for Justice. This type of action will reduce family honors and society will exclude them.

In *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, this social construction is clearly visible. Bibi's identity is defined not by her individuality but by her inability to fulfill societal expectations. It was there, after performing a series of blood tests, that the doctor in charge of Bibi's case, exasperated, concluded that a marriage would cure her (Lahiri, P-03 pdf). The suggestion that marriage could cure her condition (Lahiri, P-03 pdf) highlights how femininity is tied to marital status. The absence of marriage is interpreted as a failure of identity rather than a personal circumstance.

In *The Godmother*, the protagonist's authority is framed within acceptable feminine roles. Her power is expressed through maternal imagery. The story suggests that even when women occupy positions of influence, their identity remains tied to traditional gender roles. She compromises by remaining silent in the face of their questions and instructions. (Koshy, P-01 pdf). This reflects the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms, where female empowerment is conditional and regulated.

C. Social Construction of Female Identity

The concept of social construction is crucial to understanding the construction of female identity. Identity is not fixed. But it is shaped through social interactions, cultural narratives, and institutional practices.

In patriarchal societies, women are often defined in relation to men. They are always introduced as daughters, wives, and mothers. This relational identity restricts their autonomy. It also reinforces their subordinate position in the family and society. Cultural narratives further reinforce these roles by idealizing women who conform to expectations of sacrifice and devotion.

In *The Domestic Maid*, the protagonist, Geeta's identity is entirely defined by her labor. She is not given a personal history or individuality. Rather Geeta is portrayed through her functions within the household. Geeta found work as a domestic maid in the high rise residential complex (Desai, p 03 pdf). Geeta works hand to hand with her husband to support the family but still doesn't have her own identity. She is known only for her labour.

Her continuous work like cleaning, cooking, and serving is described as routine and unremarkable. Beyond doing these works they can have a personal life, our society can not accept that. A card that certifies their social status, an identity that of a Domestic Maid (Desai, p 01 pdf). Without the card laborious women can not have their normal identity. This lack of recognition reflects how working-class women are reduced to their roles, with little acknowledgment of their individuality. In our society, women, those who can access education & career choice may have their own identity sometimes. Or, they can prioritize their individuality over everything. But women who work as domestic maids or servants can never have their own identity. They can never do anything according to their desires. Our society divided women communities prioritizing educated women & non educated women. Those who are educated can rule over the non educated women. They treat other women as the valueless existence of the society.

Anita Desai in her *The Domestic Maid* portrayed a scene, Why don't you answer, why are you late? Too much money and food has gone to your stomach, that's why you People take advantage of good people like us, Asha continues to berate the maid (Desai, p 03 pdf). This statement shows that poor people can not be good people. Poor people can not be honest and they can only take advantage of good people. Here good people means rich people or educated people. Working women, whether educated or uneducated, no matter working as a maid or a corporate worker should have the same dignity in the society. But we are failing to ensure their identity. Geeta's statement, These rich people have no compassion for poor women like us (Desai, p 04 pdf) says that clearly. Educated or rich women can have all the facilities in the family like home, food, health etc. But poor women can not have any respect. Geeta said Don't they ever realize that life is a daily struggle for us? (Desai, P-04 pdf). This statement portrays the universal position of women in our society.

Similarly, In the Treatment of Bibi Halder, Bibi's identity is constructed through societal perception. Though she is suffering from an unknown and complex disease, no one takes care of her. People just suggest doing things she can not do alone without their help. She suffers all her life but no one comes to help her properly. As an orphan she is neglected in the family she is living with. Her illness

becomes a defining characteristic, overshadowing her humanity. Jhumpa Lahiri said, Relations will calm her blood (Lahiri, P-04 pdf). This statement shows Bibi's only treatment to overcome her disease.

In our society, it is still a common phenomenon that people find every solution in getting girls married off. Many women at their early age suffer from many physical and mental diseases. But society finds their ultimate treatment Marriage. Many women can not confess their physical complexities due to the fear of being judged or banned by society. Also many of us can not share their mental trauma or illness due to social stigma and anxiety. Society always blames women and finds solutions in marriage.

They say it's the only hope (Lahiri, P-04 pdf). The community's attempt to normalize her through marriage demonstrates how identity is imposed rather than chosen. Like Bibi, in our society many women can not have their individuality over male domination. Most of the time women can not choose their partner or fulfill their desire regarding marriage. It is always decided by the male & the society. In our country, the poor families never think about girls' education or career. They arrange work in the households of others for a poor income by their daughters. Later, they get their marriage off for money, to get rid of them or just to eradicate them from the family. No matter what, girls suffer because society thinks marriage can be the only solution. As a result, every year many women die from health issues, premature pregnancy issues, torture by husband or families and other issues. Most of the girls give birth to unhealthy & immature infants which later brings another curse in their life.

7.Marriage and Motherhood as Mechanisms Control Marriage and motherhood are central two institutions through which patriarchy regulates female worth. Marriage is often seen as a marker of social legitimacy. And motherhood is considered the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood.

In The Treatment of Bibi Haldar, the belief that marriage can cure Bibi reflects how women identified with traditional roles. In that society, for any problem like the disease of Bibi, the only solution is marriage. The societal expectation that women must be anchored within a marital framework

highlights how women are marginalized. The absence of marriage is considered as incompleteness. It reinforces the idea that female identity is dependent on authority. Motherhood plays an important role in defining female worth. In *The Goodmother* by Mridula Koshy, Motherhood is highlighted as a layered and complex situation in life. The protagonist tried to escape from her husband & children but ultimately became more attached with them. Her femininity makes her power socially acceptable. Her motherhood becomes a trap of emotional bonding.

These representations highlight how marriage and motherhood function as tools of control. They define women's roles and limit their opportunities for self-expression. Women who deviate from these roles often face social stigma and exclusion.

8.Female Labour and Economic Dependency

Economic dependency is one of the key factors in maintaining patriarchal control. Women's limited access to financial resources restricts their freedom and it also reinforces their subordinate position.

Domestic labor is a significant aspect of this dynamic. Homemakers are the most important parts of a family. From maintaining every single work of a home to upbringing children everything is properly arranged by them. But at the end of the day they remain cased, without any appreciation, gratitude and respect. Women are the powerhouse of a family. It is essential for the functioning of households. But is often unpaid and undervalued. This invisibility contributes to the marginalization of women.

In *The Domestic Maid*, the protagonist's labor is central to the narrative. Her daily routine is described in detail. She maintains her own family & children and then works in 3-4 houses for supporting her family. Yet it is presented as ordinary and unremarkable.

You know, no matter what we do for these women, they will always be ungrateful. They will always cheat us. (Desai, P-04 pdf)

This reflects how domestic work is normalized and devalued. Despite her contributions, she remains socially invisible and disrespected. In our society, it is a very common scenario to disrespect the working women & judge them for their

work. For example, those who work in garment factories or in household works, the owner always thinks of them as thieves, cheaters and narrow minded. Their work becomes a minor topic to discuss but their worth. Working-class women often face a double burden, balancing paid and unpaid labor. However, their economic participation does not necessarily lead to empowerment. Instead, it can reinforce existing inequalities. Though they work & earn their own, they can not have the authority to speak for themselves & confess their desires.

9.Silence, Resistance, and Agency

Silence is often interpreted as a sign of oppression in patriarchal contexts. Women are discouraged from expressing their thoughts and emotions. Silence leads them to internalized repression. However, silence can also function as a form of resistance. Women are encouraged to remain silent to show their worth, resilience and family honour. No matter what or how they feel, women can not confess their opinions like a man can. In situations where open defiance is not possible, women may adopt subtle strategies to navigate constraints. These may include emotional withdrawal, passive resistance, or small acts of defiance.

In *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* by Jhumpa Lahiri Bibi's silence reflects both her marginalization and her resistance. While she was excluded from social interaction, her eventual transformation challenges societal expectations. She was dependent on her cousin and was suffering from fatal diseases. She had no freedom to ask for proper treatment. She kept silent and went through all the physical and mental complexities. This shows women resilience over their sufferings. In *The Domestic Maid*, the protagonist's silence underscores her invisibility. Now don't be late tomorrow or I will chuck you out. There are hundred women out there waiting to work at my place (Desai, P-04 pdf). This statement shows working women face daily disrespect and insults and still remain silent to continue their earnings. It also highlights the structural constraints that limit her ability to speak. In another line, Geeta just looks at her with blank expression, nods her head and walks out wiping her hands on her saree pallav (Desai, P-04 pdf), her endurance can be interpreted as a form of resilience within oppressive conditions.

10.Conclusion

This research has carefully explored the fundamentals of patriarchy and how it influences and shapes the identity of women in selected Indian short stories,

including *The Godmother* by Mridula Koshy, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *The Domestic Maid* by Anita Desai. The study helps us to understand women's identities which are not formed independently, but are shaped by social expectations, cultural traditions, and male-dominated power structures.

A detailed analysis of these texts, this research shows that female identity is often constructed within restrictive environments. It examines how women are expected to follow predefined roles. At the same time, the study also highlights how women try to negotiate their positions within these limitations and resist the pressures imposed upon them. By examining these different aspects, the dissertation presents a comprehensive view of patriarchal systems and how it continues to shape, control, and influence women's sense of self in both visible and subtle ways.

However, this research is limited as it focuses on a select number of texts and a specific theoretical approach. For understanding female identity and its representations, there needs to be a broader study incorporating additional authors, diverse genres, or interdisciplinary perspectives. Comparative studies across different cultures or traditions should be explored for future research. Researchers should examine representations of women in contemporary literature broadly.

In conclusion, this research establishes that patriarchy plays a central role in constructing female identity. It often restricts women's autonomy and shapes their existence within predefined roles. At the same time, it highlights that women actively negotiate these constraints, creating spaces, ignoring confession and avoiding conflicts. For agency and self-definition they make themselves isolated & conform to society norms. With the critical engagement of the three selected texts, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender, identity, and power. It underscores the importance of literature as a means of questioning and reimagining social realities.

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