

# Human Values, Gender Justice, and Narrative Agency: A Feminist Reading of Contemporary Indian English Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between human values, gender justice, and narrative agency in contemporary Indian English fiction through a feminist critical framework. While human values such as dignity, equality, autonomy, and justice are frequently upheld as universal ideals, their application within patriarchal societies remains uneven and challenged. Contemporary Indian women writers have foregrounded these contradictions by representing female protagonists who challenge oppressive social structures and reclaim their narrative voices. Through a close reading of select novels by authors such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, and Anuja Chauhan, this study argues that contemporary Indian English fiction functions as a site of ethical interrogation and transformation. These narratives expose gender-based discrimination surrounded within family, caste, class, and institutional systems, while simultaneously asserting women's agency as a fundamental human value. By integrating feminist literary theory and humanist ethics, the paper determines how narrative agency becomes a tool for gender justice. The act of storytelling itself emerges as confrontation, enabling marginalized female voices to contest silence and invisibility. Ultimately, the study suggests that contemporary Indian English fiction not only reflects human values but actively reconstructs them, expanding the discourse of justice to include gendered experiences.

**Keywords:** Human Values, Gender Justice, Feminism, Narrative Agency, Indian English Fiction

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## Introduction

Human values such as dignity, equality, kindness, freedom, and justice form the ethical foundation of democratic societies. However, these values often remain hopeful when examined within the lived realities of women in male-controlled cultures. In India, gender-based discrimination has historically shaped social structures, influencing access to education, property, autonomy, and public voice. Literature, as a powerful cultural medium, has responded to these inequalities by interrogating the gap between proclaimed human values and actual social practices. Contemporary Indian English fiction, particularly by women writers, engages deeply with the question of gender justice. These writers do not merely depict women as victims of patriarchy; instead, they foreground women's agency and subjectivity. Through complex female protagonists, they challenge oppressive norms and redefine ethical frameworks. This paper argues that contemporary Indian English fiction serves as a transformative space where human values are critically examined and reconstructed through feminist narrative strategies. By analyzing select works of Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, and Anuja Chauhan, this study explores how narrative agency becomes central to the discourse of gender justice. The paper situates these texts within feminist theory and humanist ethics, demonstrating how literature contributes to broader social debates about equality and dignity.

## Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Humanism, and Narrative Agency

Feminist literary criticism seeks to examine how literature reflects and spreads gender inequalities while also offering possibilities for resistance. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" highlights the social construction of gender roles. Male-controlled systems regulate women's bodies, voices, and aspirations, often denying them narrative authority. Humanism, on the other hand, highlights universal dignity and equality. Yet traditional humanist discourse has frequently centered male experiences as normative. Feminist scholars have therefore expanded humanism by insisting that women's lived experiences must inform ethical frameworks. Narrative agency refers to the capacity of characters to articulate their own stories and shape their destinies. In patriarchal societies, women's stories have often been silenced or mediated through male perspectives. Contemporary Indian English fiction challenges this silence by granting women narrative control. Through first-person narration, interior monologues, and multi-perspective storytelling, these texts foreground female subjectivity as a crucial human value.

### **Gender Justice and the Politics of Silence**

One of the central concerns of contemporary Indian English fiction is the politics of silence. Women's experiences of domestic violence, marital oppression, and emotional marginalization are often suppressed within familial and social structures. Literature disrupts this silence. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, female characters confront rigid social hierarchies shaped by caste and patriarchy. Ammu's defiance of social norms challenges both gender and caste boundaries. Her transgressive love becomes an assertion of autonomy, though society punishes her severely. Roy exposes how institutional structures deny women justice while simultaneously moralizing their desires. Similarly, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* presents Akhila, a middle-aged unmarried woman seeking independence. Through conversations with other women during a train journey, the novel reveals diverse experiences of female confinement and resistance. Each narrative voice represents a challenge to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. The act of storytelling within the novel becomes an act of reclaiming dignity. These texts demonstrate that silence is not merely absence of speech but a tool of oppression. Breaking silence becomes the first step toward gender justice.

### **Reclaiming Autonomy: Women as Ethical Subjects**

Contemporary Indian English fiction increasingly portrays women as ethical subjects rather than passive objects. Autonomy emerges as a central human value in these narratives. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, female characters navigate globalized spaces marked by displacement and uncertainty. Though the novel primarily addresses postcolonial identity, it also foregrounds women's struggles within patriarchal households. Sai's gradual awareness of social injustice reflects the intersection of gender and class consciousness. Anuja Chauhan's novels, though often categorized as popular fiction, subtly critique gender stereotypes. Her female protagonists are witty, self-aware, and professionally competent. They negotiate love, career, and family expectations without surrendering their individuality. Through humour and realism, Chauhan challenges the notion that feminism must be solemn to be serious. Her characters embody confidence and resilience, reinforcing autonomy as a fundamental human value. By presenting women who make choices sometimes flawed but self-determined these authors assert that ethical subjecthood belongs equally to women.

### **Intersectionality: Gender, Caste, and Class**

Gender justice cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of oppression. Contemporary Indian English fiction recognizes the interconnectedness of gender, caste, and class. In *The God of Small Things*, caste hierarchy intensifies gender oppression. Ammu's relationship with Velutha violates both male-controlled and caste norms. The punishment she faces underscores how women's bodies become sites where social anxieties converge. Similarly, many contemporary narratives depict domestic workers, rural women, and economically marginalized characters whose struggles differ from those of urban middle-class women. This intersectional awareness broadens the discourse of human values. Justice must account for multiple vulnerabilities. By representing diverse female experiences, these novels challenge universalized notions of womanhood and emphasize contextual ethics.

### **Narrative Form as Feminist Resistance**

The structure of contemporary Indian English fiction itself often embodies feminist resistance. Non-linear storytelling, fragmented narratives, and multiple perspectives disrupt patriarchal authority. Arundhati Roy's nonlinear narrative technique resists singular truth. By allowing marginalized voices space within the narrative, she destabilizes dominant power structures. Similarly, Anita Nair's episodic storytelling in *Ladies Coupé* decentralizes authority, presenting collective female experience rather than a singular heroic narrative. Narrative experimentation becomes political. It rejects hierarchical storytelling models that mirror patriarchal systems. Through formal innovation, these writers align aesthetics with ethics.

### **Marriage, Domesticity, and Redefinition of Family**

Marriage has traditionally been presented as the ultimate goal for women in Indian society. Contemporary fiction interrogates this assumption. In *Ladies Coupé*, several characters recount marriages marked by control and emotional neglect. The novel questions whether marriage inherently guarantee fulfilment. Akhila's decision to pursue independence without societal approval redefines fulfilment beyond marital statesman Chauhan's protagonists often balance romantic aspirations with professional ambition. Marriage is depicted as partnership rather than destiny. This redefinition aligns with gender justice, as it recognizes equality within relationships. By questioning domestic norms, these novels expand the ethical understanding of family and partnership.

### **Language, Humour, and Subversion**

Language plays a crucial role in feminist narrative agency. Contemporary Indian English fiction frequently employs irony and humour to subvert patriarchal discourse. Anuja Chauhan's witty dialogues dismantle stereotypes through satire. Humour becomes a tool of empowerment rather than trivialization. It allows female characters to critique societal expectations without overt didacticism. Similarly, Roy's lyrical prose juxtaposed with brutal social realities intensifies critique. Language becomes both aesthetic and political. Through linguistic innovation, these writers assert control over representation, reinforcing narrative agency as a human value.

### **Toward an Ethics of Care and Solidarity**

Another significant human value reflected in these novels is solidarity among women. Sisterhood counters isolation. In *Ladies Coupé*, shared stories create a temporary community of empathy. Women validate each other's struggles, challenging internalized patriarchy. Solidarity emerges as transformative. Contemporary fiction suggests that gender justice requires collective effort. Individual empowerment must connect with social change. Literature thus fosters ethical awareness beyond the text.

### **Conclusion**

Contemporary Indian English fiction plays a crucial role in redefining human values through a feminist lens. By foregrounding women's narrative agency, these texts challenge patriarchal silences and advocate gender justice. Human values such as dignity, equality, autonomy, and solidarity are not abstract ideals but lived demands articulated through storytelling. Through the works of Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, and Anuja Chauhan, this paper has demonstrated how literature becomes a site of ethical transformation. Narrative agency emerges as central to feminist resistance, enabling women to claim subjecthood and redefine social norms.

Ultimately, contemporary Indian English fiction expands the discourse of human values by insisting that justice must include gendered experiences. In doing so, it strengthens democratic ethics and reimagines society as inclusive and equitable.

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