



Gender, Language, and Power in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing

Lima Antony

Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College for Women (Autonomous), Aluva, India.

Article information

Received: 8th January 2026

Received in revised form: 9th February 2026

Accepted: 11th March 2026

Available online: 7th April 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJLL/3049.3242.0033>

Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of gender, language, and power in twenty-first-century Indian women's writing, analyzing how contemporary women writers deploy linguistic and narrative strategies to challenge patriarchal structures, assert female subjectivity, and reimagine gender relations in the Indian context. Through close readings of works by Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy, Geetanjali Shree, and Janice Pariat, the study investigates how women writers use stylistic innovation, multilingual practice, narrative form, and the representation of women's speech as tools of feminist resistance. The paper argues that language is both a site of patriarchal oppression and a resource for feminist transformation in Indian literature.

Keywords:- Gender, Language, Power, Indian Women's Writing, Feminist Linguistics, Narrative Resistance

Introduction

The relationship between gender and language has been a central concern of feminist scholarship since the pioneering work of Lakoff, Spender, and Cameron. Lakoff's identification of a "women's language" characterized by hedging, tag questions, and polite forms, Spender's argument that language is "man - made" and serves patriarchal interests, and Cameron's critique of gender essentialism in language studies have collectively established a rich theoretical tradition for analyzing the linguistic dimensions of gender inequality (Cameron 15). In the Indian context, where patriarchal structures are intersected and complicated by caste, class, religion, and regional identity, the relationship between gender and language assumes particular complexity.

Indian women's writing in the twenty-first century has been characterized by a remarkable diversity of linguistic and formal experimentation. Women writers from multiple language traditions have used stylistic innovation, genre disruption, and multilingual practice to challenge not only the content of patriarchal discourse but also its formal and linguistic conventions. This paper examines four works that represent different dimensions of this feminist linguistic practice: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Meena

Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, and Janice Pariat's *The Nine-Chambered Heart*.

Roy's Ministry: Transgender Voice and Linguistic Rebellion

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* opens with the story of Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman) born as Aftab in Old Delhi. Roy's decision to begin her long-awaited second novel with a transgender protagonist is a bold act of feminist literary politics, challenging not only heteronormative social structures but also the binary gender categories embedded in the grammar and vocabulary of both Hindi and English. The novel's representation of Anjum's experience of gender foregrounds the inadequacy of available linguistic categories: in a language system that offers only masculine and feminine grammatical gender, the hijra, who is neither and both, exposes the violence of linguistic binary classification.

Roy's prose style in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is characteristically inventive, employing long, flowing sentences that accumulate detail and perspective in a manner that resists the linear, hierarchical organization of patriarchal narrative. Her treatment of Delhi as a layered, palimpsestic space, in which Mughal history, colonial architecture, contemporary capitalism, and subaltern communities coexist and interpenetrate, finds its linguistic counterpart in a prose that mixes Urdu, Hindi, and English registers, formal and colloquial voices, and lyrical and journalistic modes (Roy 18). This linguistic heterogeneity is itself a feminist practice: it refuses the authority of any single voice, perspective, or language, and insists instead on the polyphonic, multilingual, and multi-gendered reality of Indian social life.

Kandasamy's Autofiction: Language as Weapon and Wound

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* is a searing autofictional account of domestic violence within an arranged marriage between the narrator, a young Tamil writer, and her husband, a Marxist academic. The novel's central preoccupation is with the relationship between language, power, and gendered violence: the husband's abuse takes specifically linguistic forms, including the control of the narrator's writing, the imposition of silence, the monitoring of her electronic communications, and the destruction of her manuscripts.

Kandasamy's narrative strategy is to reclaim the linguistic agency that the husband seeks to destroy. The novel's style is deliberately excessive, employing rhetorical accumulation, repetition, and stylistic variation to demonstrate the narrator's irrepressible linguistic creativity. Chapters shift between realist narration, epistolary fragments, lists, stream-of-consciousness passages, and metafictional commentary, as if the narrator is testing and exhausting every available literary form in her struggle to articulate the experience of domestic violence (Kandasamy 112). This formal restlessness is itself a feminist assertion: it insists that the woman writer's voice cannot be contained by any single form, least of all the conventional realist narrative that might domesticate her story into a familiar tale of victimhood.

The novel's engagement with the politics of caste and language adds a further dimension to its feminist critique. As a Dalit woman, the narrator's oppression is intersectional, shaped by the convergence of gender, caste, and the patriarchal authority structures of both Brahminical and Marxist ideologies. Kandasamy's linguistic strategy of writing in English while incorporating Tamil Dalit perspectives challenges the double marginalization of Dalit women within both patriarchal Indian society and the upper-caste-dominated Indian English literary establishment.

Shree's Tomb of Sand: Breaking the Gendered Page

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, originally published in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, became the first Hindi-language novel to win the International Booker Prize in 2022. The novel tells the story of Ma, an octogenarian widow who, after a period of depression, unexpectedly decides to travel to Pakistan to confront the memories of Partition that have shaped her life. Shree's novel is remarkable for its formal experimentation: the narrative is non-linear, digressive, and self-referential, incorporating metafictional commentary, surreal imagery, and a constantly shifting perspective that resists the teleological structure of conventional realist narrative.

The novel's feminist politics are inseparable from its linguistic innovations. Ma's journey across the India-Pakistan border is simultaneously a journey across gender boundaries: in Pakistan, she encounters and befriends a hijra community, and her understanding of gender is transformed. Shree's prose mirrors this transformation through a style that is fluid, boundary-crossing, and resistant to categorical fixity. Sentences flow across paragraph breaks, characters merge and separate, and the narrative voice shifts from third person to first person to a collective "we" that dissolves the boundaries of individual subjectivity (Shree 201).

Rockwell's translation preserves the inventiveness of Shree's Hindi prose while introducing its own translingual dimension: the English text retains Hindi words, phrases, and cultural references that mark it as a translation and refuse the illusion of linguistic transparency. This translingual quality is thematically appropriate for a novel whose central concern is the crossing of borders, whether national, gendered, or linguistic.

Pariat's Nine-Chambered Heart: Desire and the Unnamed Woman

Janice Pariat's *The Nine-Chambered Heart* takes a structurally innovative approach to the representation of female subjectivity. The novel is composed of nine chapters, each narrated by a different person who has loved the unnamed central character, a woman whose own voice is never directly heard. The reader constructs a portrait of the protagonist through the accumulated perspectives of her lovers, each of whom brings a different cultural, linguistic, and emotional framework to their account of the relationship.

Pariat's decision to represent the central female character exclusively through others' perspectives might appear to reinforce the patriarchal objectification of women, but the novel's effect is precisely the opposite. By multiplying perspectives and refusing to fix the protagonist in a single narrative, Pariat suggests that female subjectivity is irreducible to any single account, framework, or language. The protagonist's silence is not an absence but a form of resistance: she refuses to be contained by any lover's narrative, and her identity remains fundamentally her own, inaccessible to the possessive gaze of those who desire her (Pariat 155).

The novel's cosmopolitan setting, spanning Shillong, Delhi, London, and Cambridge, and its linguistic texture, incorporating Khasi, Hindi, and English, reflect Pariat's own multilingual, multicultural background as a writer from Northeast India. The representation of desire across cultural and linguistic boundaries becomes a vehicle for exploring the broader relationship between language, identity, and the limits of understanding in a multilingual, postcolonial context.

Conclusion

The works examined in this paper demonstrate that language is both a primary site of patriarchal oppression and a powerful resource for feminist resistance in contemporary Indian literature. Roy's polyphonic multilingualism, Kandasamy's formally restless autofiction, Shree's boundary-crossing narrative, and Pariat's perspectival multiplicity represent different

but complementary strategies for challenging the linguistic and formal conventions through which patriarchal authority is maintained and reproduced in literary culture.

These works suggest that feminist literary practice in the Indian context is inseparable from multilingual practice, formal experimentation, and the disruption of narrative conventions that naturalize patriarchal gender relations. Future research might productively explore the feminist linguistic strategies of Indian women writers in regional languages, the intersection of gender, language, and digital culture in contemporary Indian writing, and the translational politics of bringing Indian women's multilingual literary innovations to global audiences.

Works Cited

- Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.
- Kandasamy, Meena. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Atlantic Books, 2017.
- Pariat, Janice. *The Nine-Chambered Heart*. Fourth Estate, 2017.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.
- Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Tilted Axis Press, 2021.