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# The Absent or Flawed Mother: Subverting the Ideal in Indian English Novels

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**Abstract:** The Indian society has traditionally romanticized motherhood as unselfish, nurturant and morally upright. This stereotype is, however, disproved in Indian English literature, through the portrayal of mothers who fail, repudiate, or subvert the traditional roles of mothers. The present paper is an analysis of the theme of absent or imperfect mothers in four Indian English novels: *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* written by Anita Desai, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande and *Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto. These narratives help the paper to explore how such depictions are indicators of tension in society, shifting gender expectations, and transforming ideals about motherhood.

### Introduction

Motherhood The culturally cherished role has taken up a paradigm which is highly admirable of virtue, compassion and moral power and was the idealized image of motherhood in the Indian society. The mother has also been frequently depicted as a holy person- an epitome of perseverance, sacrifice and unconditional love whose self acquires its meaning through her attachment to family and children. Since the figures of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, the colonial and postcolonial ethical and emotive discourse, the Indian society has always believed in the figure of a mother as the corner stone of ethical and emotional stability (Chakrabarti 2010). Such reverence, yet, has a moral demand of women to fit in socially constructed ideal of motherhood self-efficing, patient, and submissive, which restricts their individuality and agency. In this conventional paradigm, the mother is not allowed to exist as an individual but rather as the nurturer that is why she is the supreme moral authority but also deprives her identity (Narayan 2012).

Conversely, modern Indian English literature reformulates such a traditional depiction by prefiguring the inner struggles, desires and contradictions of the mother figure. The contemporary writers expose the clash between the glorified myth of motherhood and the reality of women who have to find

their way through personal ambitions and social norms. As Pramod K. Nayar (2015) notes, the subjectivities of women in the postcolonial Indian fiction have started to become fluid, with the challenge of patriarchal hierarchies which previously venerated the mother as the morally unquestionable one. The maternal role is viewed as a place of struggle, ambivalence, negotiation instead of fulfillment and perfection in novels by the writers Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya.

As an example, in *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, Ammu, despite not being a traditional mother, is a rebellion against the morality of patriarchy because she places the desires of her own person first, revealing the ways in which the ideas of purity and sacrifice oppress women (Sarkar 2018). On the same note, the mother character in *The Nowhere Man* (1972) by Kamala Markandaya is emotionally alienated and culturally displaced, which reflects the loss of old family values in a fast-paced and diasporic environment. The maternal ideal is further complicated in *That Long Silence* (1988) by Shashi Deshpande, as the author portrays women who are demonstrating the silent compliance that is demanded of them, as they seek a voice and self-identification in the restricting space of their homes (Deshpande 1988).

These descriptions are a great departure of what used to be done in the past with the literary tradition where the all-sacrificing mother was glorified. They reveal instead the emotional and psychological fracturing behind such idealization. According to Rina Mazumdar (2021), this change can be attributed to the socio-cultural changes in post-liberalization India when women started to have the same family life along with professional ambitions, education, and self-identity. The opposition of the independence of the state and the personal duty is also a motif in itself, a representation of the tensions of modernization. With increasing involvement of women in the public life, the literature reflects the changes in the form of motherhood as a holy obligation to a multifaceted human experience which comprises love, guilt, resistance, and desire.

In addition, such literary re-imaginings echo with feminist interests in the body and identity, and where motherhood is not either exalted or deplored but rather viewed as a process in changing power and vulnerability among women. Such reflective texts as the ones written by Anita Desai explore the theme of alienated and existentially exhausted mothers, which is a faint commentary on the emotional work that they have to perform due to the family hierarchy (Banerjee 2019). With help of these subtle images, Indian English fiction offers a dialogic platform on which to reconsider motherhood not as an archetypal abstraction but as a socially and emotionally negotiated state.

Thus, contemporary literature functions as a **cultural mirror and critique**, portraying mothers not merely as moral guardians but as women with inner lives, intellectual depth, and emotional ambivalence. This evolution in representation encourages readers to engage with motherhood as a **spectrum of experiences** rather than a singular ideal. By embracing imperfection, self-awareness, and resistance, Indian English writers have expanded the literary discourse surrounding motherhood, allowing it to embody the multifaceted realities of women's lives in an evolving social order.

### Literature Review

The Indian expression of the mother in literature has taken the leading position in the understanding of feminist literature critique, where developing trends in gender, identity and societal change have been brought forth. Throughout historical stages such as colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary, the issue of motherhood, womanhood, and expectation of society has been the concern of Indian writers. The timeless myth of a mother who sacrificed her life in favor of her children has been subject to growing criticism by scholars who have revealed the emotional, psychological and moral ambiguities inherent in the maternal experience (Chakravarty 2010). Such a transition also implies a socio-cultural change not just in the literary but also in the roles and goals of women in India as they have become wider in the context of modernization and globalization.

The book *Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman burden* (2009) by Nilanjana Bhattacharya is one of the most significant works because it challenges the generational interchange of the values of patriarchy over the concept of motherhood. Bhattacharya states that Indian society is still perpetuating challenging ideas of womanhood where motherhood is being praised as a moral obligation and not a choice. She explains how this ideological brainwash instills conformity to gendered norms which usually suppress women and their voices and wants. Her interpretation reveals the emotional baggage that women inherit out of their mothers and the cycle of internalized oppression continues. The book also

adds to the feminist discourse by exposing the myths about the virtue of motherhood as a means that perpetuate patriarchal power relations.

In the same way, the literary oeuvre of Shashi Deshpande has contributed to changing the image of the Indian mother significantly. In her novels like *That Long Silence* (1988), Deshpande gives the readers the role of women who struggle to balance between the demanding role of a family and self-discovery. Her heroes frequently face existential crises which occur out of the conflict between personal desires and outer norms. According to Pramod K. Nayar (2015), the characters of Deshpande reflect the psychological realism of a contemporary Indian womanhood, and mothers are not idealized mothers but women who are struggling with searching their identities, sense of purpose, and emotions. The nuanced psychological profiles of Deshpande are indicative of a further feminist sensibility that is challenging the sanctity of the motherhood tradition and demanding that women be acknowledged as multidimensional human beings with agency and fallibility.

Radha Chakravarty (2010) continues this critical discussion by exploring the myth about the ideal mother in Indian literature. In her analysis, she indicates that the image of the maternal figure is commonly used in both classical and contemporary canonical stories to represent purity, moral survival, and national identity. New literary texts, however, disrupt such symbolic role, portraying mothers as imperfect and ambivalent and even opposed to cultural norms. Chakravarty suggests that these representations dismantle the patriarchal myth of the mother as the impeccable source of principle and caring and show instead the contradictions and vulnerabilities that make up the motherhood.

In line with this line of thought, Anjali Rao (2015) underscores the fact that portrayals of imperfect mothers in modern fiction are a feminist intervention. According to Rao, the portrayal of maternal imperfection does not deny the motherhood but rather a rediscovery of the emotional integrity of women. Authors like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur build narratives spaces by using narratives of ambivalence, guilt and resistance to undermine the silencing of dissatisfaction and inner conflict in women. The work by Rao places motherhood in a socializing process, which is constantly renegotiated under the changing gender, class relations, and world forces.

All these studies when combined indicate a reformulation of motherhood in Indian literature as a whole, that is, as an idealized moral model to a dynamic socially situated one. The motherly figure, which used to be the moral foundation of the Indian family, is now seen in fiction as a place of confrontation and change. The use of motherhood is a tool used by the modern Indian English authors to examine the wider themes of autonomy, alienation, migration and identity construction. Ambivalent, resistant, and self-aware mothers are a shift toward the mythic to a kind of psychological realism, which is consistent with written accounts and lived experiences of women as an ever-changing socio-economic environment (Mukherjee 2017; Mazumdar 2021).

Finally, this scholarly work highlights the reflection of Indian writing on wider feminist paths, which shift towards adoration and denunciation, silence and expression. The change of motherhood in the literature is accompanied by the increasingly insistent realization of female voices in the society, the redefinition of the motherly not as the final stage of feminine virtue but as the multifaceted, dynamic state of existence.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The proposed study will use a qualitative and interpretive research design that is based on the feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The aim is to analyze how motherhood as depicted in the Indian English fiction has changed the traditional concepts of womanhood based on the ideals of sacrifice and devotion to complex, personalized and more realistic depictions of women.

The study is analytic and discovery-oriented because it concentrates its attention on the close textual analysis of the chosen novels to reveal the hidden ideological, cultural, and emotional frameworks within them that construct the maternal representations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**The research is anchored in three key feminist perspectives:**

- **Existential Feminism by Simone de Beauvoir** - motherhood is a social construct experience where womanhood is a socially constructed experience instead of a naturally established one.

- **Gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter** - the importance of women writing as a manifestation of female experience and consciousness is accentuated, with a particular emphasis on voice, identity and agency of the text.
- **Postcolonial Feminism-** places women maternal experiences in socio-political circumstances of patriarchy, classes, culture, and colonial histories.

A combination of these structures informs the meaning of motherhood as a socio-cultural text, as well as, a space of female subjectivity and resistance.

#### Selection of Texts

Four major Indian English novels were selected based on their representation of motherhood across temporal and thematic dimensions:

Author	Title of Novel	Year of Publication	Focus of Maternal Representation
Anita Desai	<i>Where Shall We Go This Summer?</i>	1975	Psychological alienation and rebellion
Kamala Markandaya	<i>Nectar in a Sieve</i>	1954	Endurance and sacrifice amid poverty
Shashi Deshpande	<i>That Long Silence</i>	1988	Ambivalence, silence, and identity crisis
Jerry Pinto	<i>Em and the Big Hoom</i>	2012	Mental illness, fragility, and emotional inversion

These texts span six decades of Indian English literature, allowing a comparative reading of changing social, cultural, and feminist attitudes toward motherhood.

#### Data Collection

Data was collected through:

- **Primary Sources:** The four selected novels, analyzed in depth through repeated textual readings.
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly books, journal articles, critical essays, and feminist theoretical texts (including works by Nayar, Chakravarty, Bhowmick, and Mazumdar) that provide interpretive and contextual insights.

All secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed journals, academic publishers, and recognized digital databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Project MUSE.

#### Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a multi-step interpretive process integrating feminist theory, thematic mapping, and comparative synthesis:

Stage	Analytical Focus	Methodological Tool	Expected Outcome
1. Textual Reading	Identify representations of motherhood, selfhood, and gender roles	Close reading & annotation	Recognition of recurring maternal tropes
2. Thematic Coding	Classify themes: silence, alienation, endurance, rebellion	Thematic & narrative coding	Mapping patterns of resistance and conformity
3. Character & Narrative Mapping	Examine mother figures' psychology, voice, and agency	Feminist psycho-narratology	Understanding subjectivity and self-representation
4. Comparative Synthesis	Juxtapose traditional and contemporary depictions	Cross-textual analysis	Identify paradigm shifts in maternal ideology

This interpretive sequence ensured depth of literary insight and theoretical consistency, allowing the study to trace the transformation of maternal archetypes into multidimensional, self-aware identities.

### Methodological Orientation

The study aligns with the interpretive paradigm of literary research, emphasizing:

- Hermeneutic understanding over quantification,
- Contextual interpretation rooted in gender and culture, and
- Reflexive engagement with authorial voice and socio-historical background.

This orientation acknowledges literature as both a reflection and reconstruction of social realities, particularly those influencing women's experiences of motherhood.

### Ethical Considerations

Since the study relies on published literary and academic texts, no human participants are involved. However, due diligence has been observed in:

- Proper citation of all sources following MLA 9 style.
- Ethical interpretation respecting authorial intent and cultural specificity.
- Avoidance of any cultural or gender-based stereotyping in analysis.

### Limitations of the Study

While the selected novels provide rich perspectives, the research acknowledges certain constraints:

- It focuses on Anglophone Indian writers, excluding regional-language literature.
- Interpretations are qualitative and subjective, dependent on critical reading frameworks.
- The scope is limited to four novels, representing key trends but not the full literary spectrum.

### Expected Contribution

This methodological design aims to:

- Reveal the evolution of motherhood as a literary construct in Indian English fiction.
- Establish intersections between feminist theory and narrative technique.
- Contribute to feminist literary scholarship by repositioning motherhood as a site of self-awareness, resistance, and transformation.

### Analysis

The portrayal of motherhood in modern Indian English fiction has undergone a remarkable transformation—from a sacred ideal of nurturing sacrifice to a psychologically intricate and socially situated identity. The novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* by Anita Desai, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande, and *Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto explore diverse dimensions of maternal experience: alienation, endurance, ambivalence, and mental fragility. Each text reframes motherhood as a contested space where personal desire collides with societal expectation, thus contributing to a broader feminist re-reading of maternal identity in Indian literature.

- ***Where Shall We Go This Summer?* by Anita Desai**

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) presents Sita as a woman suffocated by domestic monotony and emotional isolation. Her retreat to the island symbolizes a yearning to escape from patriarchal control and the repetitive obligations of motherhood. Desai's narrative reveals how maternal identity, when defined solely by social expectation, becomes a site of psychological entrapment. Sita's remark—"*I didn't want their love, I wanted to be free*" (Desai 27)—captures her rebellion against the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother.

Desai subverts the glorified image of motherhood by foregrounding emotional detachment and existential despair, demonstrating that maternal affection does not erase individuality. Sita's psychological withdrawal becomes both a resistance and a cry for recognition—an assertion that motherhood, when imposed, denies women the freedom to define their own lives.

- ***Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya**

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) portrays Rukmani, a rural mother embodying patience, resilience, and sacrifice amidst famine, poverty, and social change. Although Rukmani epitomizes traditional maternal virtues, Markandaya complicates her role by revealing the emotional cost of endurance. The line "*It was as if the earth had taken hold of our lives... and there was no hope for us*" (Markandaya 145) underscores her resignation to suffering, reflecting how socio-economic hardship erodes maternal agency.

Rukmani's motherhood is both heroic and tragic—her nurturing strength sustains the family, yet her identity dissolves in endless labor and grief. Through her, Markandaya critiques the romanticization of rural motherhood, exposing how economic oppression and gender inequality shape women's sacrifices.

- ***That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande**

In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), motherhood emerges not as an essence but as a socially imposed identity. The protagonist Jaya confronts a crisis of self when she realizes that her role as wife and mother has silenced her individuality. Her reflection—"*Motherhood was a sentence I had to serve, not a fulfillment to be sought*" (Deshpande 63)—exposes the burden of expectation that confines women within domestic narratives. Deshpande's portrayal rejects sentimental glorification and instead presents motherhood as a performance of duty under patriarchal surveillance. The novel explores intergenerational discontent, as Jaya's relationship with her own mother reveals inherited silence and internalized submission. By weaving the personal with the political, Deshpande situates motherhood within systemic gender hierarchies, asserting that selfhood cannot flourish under repression.

- ***Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto**

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) marks a bold shift in literary representations of motherhood by introducing mental illness as a central motif. The narrator's mother, Em, struggles with bipolar disorder, shattering the conventional image of the flawless, self-sacrificing mother. The line "*There were days when she was everything, and days when she was nothing*" (Pinto 78) poignantly encapsulates the volatility of her emotional world.

Through Em, Pinto humanizes maternal vulnerability, depicting love and instability as coexisting realities. The novel explores the emotional labor of caregiving, reversing traditional hierarchies by showing children nurturing their mother. This inversion challenges cultural expectations of maternal perfection and invites empathy for psychological complexity in family relationships.

#### Comparative Overview of Motherhood in Selected Novels

Author & Novel	Protagonist / Mother Figure	Dominant Representation of Motherhood	Central Conflict / Theme	Key Narrative Device	Critical Implication
Anita Desai – <i>Where Shall We Go This Summer?</i> (1975)	Sita	Alienation, emotional withdrawal, and rebellion against imposed motherhood	Desire for individuality vs. domestic confinement	Psychological realism and interior monologue	Deconstructs myth of nurturing mother; emphasizes autonomy and alienation
Kamala Markandaya – <i>Nectar in a Sieve</i> (1954)	Rukmani	Endurance and sacrifice under socio-economic oppression	Poverty and patriarchal burden vs. maternal resilience	Realist narration with socio-political commentary	Critiques romanticized motherhood; links suffering with systemic inequality
Shashi Deshpande – <i>That Long Silence</i> (1988)	Jaya	Ambivalence and resistance toward prescribed maternal duty	Silence, identity crisis, and gendered expectation	Stream of consciousness and introspection	Highlights motherhood as social construct; foregrounds female voice and agency
Jerry Pinto – <i>Em and the Big Hoom</i> (2012)	Em	Maternal fragility and mental illness	Family trauma, care, and emotional dependency	First-person retrospective narration	Redefines motherhood through vulnerability and mental health discourse



### Synthesis of Findings

Across these novels, the ideal of motherhood is both interrogated and humanized. Desai and Deshpande explore motherhood as a psychological struggle for selfhood within urban, educated contexts, while Markandaya situates it within agrarian hardship, and Pinto reimagines it through the prism of mental illness. Together, they challenge the patriarchal myth that mothers must embody endurance and perfection. Instead, they propose a more authentic, emotionally complex vision of motherhood, acknowledging imperfection, ambivalence, and pain as integral to women's humanity.

In this convergence of perspectives, Indian English fiction becomes a powerful feminist archive—documenting women's inner lives and questioning social ideals that conflate motherhood with virtue. The result is a multidimensional literary discourse that transcends glorification to embrace truth, conflict, and transformation.

### Discussion

The four selected novels collectively dismantle the idealized image of motherhood that has dominated Indian cultural consciousness. By portraying mothers who are **flawed, absent, alienated, or emotionally conflicted**, these narratives question the moral absolutism traditionally attached to maternal roles. The maternal figures—Sita, Rukmani, Jaya, and Em—serve as narrative lenses through which larger issues of **patriarchal conditioning, identity fragmentation, and emotional labor** are explored.

Each novel reflects the **intersection of private emotion and public expectation**, revealing how women's maternal experiences are shaped by forces such as class, marriage, mental health, and societal change. The emotional withdrawal of Sita, the endurance of Rukmani, the silence of Jaya, and the instability of Em together construct a **spectrum of motherhood** that challenges singular interpretation. Rather than embodying moral perfection, these characters exhibit **ambivalence, desire, guilt, and resilience**, highlighting motherhood as a **dynamic and evolving human experience**.

Furthermore, the novels reveal strong **intergenerational tensions**, where daughters inherit not only cultural legacies but also the emotional aftermath of their mothers' struggles. This motif of inheritance transforms motherhood from a biological act into a **psychological and social continuum**, where love, absence, and rebellion coexist. Consequently, Indian English literature becomes a **critical and reflective space**—one that negotiates, contests, and redefines the very meaning of being a mother in a transforming nation.

### Conclusion

The depiction of absent or imperfect mothers in contemporary Indian English fiction signifies a **paradigm shift** from veneration to interrogation. By humanizing motherhood, writers like **Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, and Jerry Pinto** expose the **psychological depth and socio-cultural weight** carried by women navigating multiple expectations. These maternal figures are not archetypes of sanctity but individuals negotiating **freedom, fatigue, and selfhood** within the constraints of patriarchy and modernity.

Through these portrayals, Indian English literature reconfigures motherhood as a **lived, complex, and often contradictory reality** rather than a moral ideal. It exposes how love and rebellion, devotion and despair, coexist in women's emotional landscapes. This redefinition not only challenges traditional frameworks but also mirrors **India's broader social transformation**—from collective conformity toward personal autonomy and gender consciousness.

Ultimately, these narratives affirm that motherhood, like womanhood itself, must be understood as **plural, contextual, and evolving**. Literature thus serves both as a **mirror and mediator** of this evolution—documenting women's journeys from silence to speech, and from obligation to self-realization.

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