



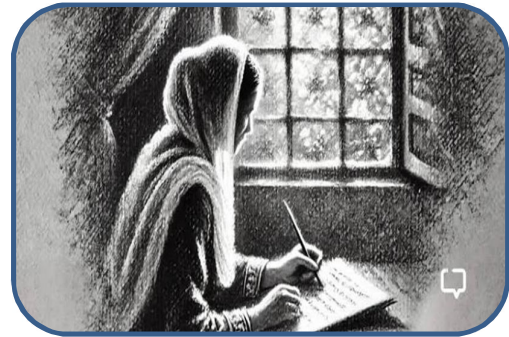
**NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN INDIAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH FROM
THE LENS OF FEMINISM**

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at how women writers working in Indian English fiction use narrative form itself as a feminist tool, not just a vehicle for feminist subject matter. Reading across Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bama, Nayantara Sahgal, Meena Kandasamy, Manju Kapur, and Githa Hariharan, it traces a shared set of formal habits — stream-of-consciousness narration, the reworking of myth from a woman's vantage point, broken or looping chronology, meaningful silence, shifting narrators, code-switched and dialect-inflected prose, fragmented and metafictional structure, and the use of domestic space as a kind of narrative grammar. Rather than treating these as isolated stylistic tics, the chapter argues that they belong to a recognisable feminist poetics: each device unsettles the conventions of realist, linear, single-voiced storytelling in ways that echo how patriarchal structures have historically restricted what women are permitted to say and how they are permitted to say it. Bringing in theoretical touchstones such as Hélène Cixous, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Toril Moi, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the discussion suggests that in this body of writing, form is not decoration laid over a feminist message — it is where a good deal of that meaning actually gets made.



KEYWORDS: *women writers working , woman's vantage point, broken or looping chronology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary discourse has long insisted that form and content cannot be separated, that how a story is told matters as much as what it tells. In Indian writings in English, the narrative techniques favoured by women writers often mirror the layered, sometimes contradictory experience of being a woman within a postcolonial and still deeply patriarchal society. Fragmented timelines, mythic rewritings, interior monologue, silence, and code-switching are not decorative choices; they are strategies through which narrative itself becomes an act of resistance and re-vision. Feminist writers, in other words, do not simply narrate women's lives — they interrogate and reshape the very grammar of storytelling. This chapter examines how feminist concerns shape narrative form in Indian English literature, drawing on the work of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bama, Nayantara Sahgal, and Meena Kandasamy, and situates their formal choices within a wider tradition of feminist narrative theory.

2. STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND FEMINIST SUBJECTIVITY

Among the most distinctive feminist narrative strategies is stream-of-consciousness, a technique that opens a window onto a character's inner thoughts, anxieties, and half-articulated desires — the very material that patriarchal decorum trains women to suppress. In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande uses this technique to trace Jaya's slow, painful reckoning with the terms of her marriage:

"I had learnt it at last, no questions, no retorts, only silence" (Deshpande 30).

The fragmented, non-linear quality of Jaya's narration mirrors her inner dissonance, so that the disordered surface of the text becomes an index of the gendered constraints placed on her speech. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued that feminist narrative frequently works to dismantle what she calls monolithic representations of women as powerless (Mohanty 73), and Deshpande's interior technique offers exactly this kind of counter-representation: Jaya is not merely a victim rendered from outside but a consciousness rendered from within, contradictory, self-aware, and evolving. What makes the novel formally radical is that Jaya's silence on the page is never simply an absence of narration; it is itself narrated, turned into the very substance of the story rather than its withheld remainder.

3. MYTHIC RETELLING AS SUBVERSIVE NARRATIVE

A second, equally powerful strategy is mythic retelling, in which authors return to inherited mythological narratives and reimagine them from a woman's point of view, exposing the silences built into the original telling. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* re-narrates the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi, a figure traditionally cast as a passive object of male honour and dynastic rivalry rather than as a subject in her own right.

"They said I was born with a purpose. That I had been born to change the course of history. But I didn't ask for that burden" (Divakaruni 3).

Through first-person narration, Draupadi becomes the author of her own account, and the intimacy of that voice resists the grandeur and masculine focus of epic convention. Hélène Cixous's well-known call for women to write themselves into the text, into the world, and into history through their own movement (Cixous 875) finds a direct formal answer in Divakaruni's novel: the epic is not rejected but re-inhabited, its authority borrowed and redirected toward a woman's interiority. In this sense, mythic retelling functions less as revision for its own sake than as a claim to narrative authority long denied to the female figures at the centre of these stories.

4. NONLINEAR TIME AND MEMORY

Feminist writers frequently turn to non-linear narrative to capture the cyclical, recursive way memory actually works, particularly where that memory carries trauma. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* unfolds in a fragmented chronology that echoes the disjointed emotional lives of its female characters, above all Ammu.

"Ammu had begun to realize that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes" (Roy 167).

The novel's disruption of linear time does more than register trauma; it challenges the teleological, cause-and-effect narrative structures that have traditionally excluded women's experience from historical account. As Roy's narrator drifts between childhood and adulthood, between past and present, the text refuses the closure and finality that conventional realist narrative tends to impose — an embodiment, in formal terms, of feminist critique directed at patriarchal versions of history. The reader is denied the comfort of a single, orderly timeline, and is instead asked to hold multiple moments in mind at once, much as memory itself does.

5. SILENCE, GAPS, AND SUBTEXT

Silence, rather than mere absence, becomes in feminist narrative a deliberate and potent device. In Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, the protagonist Bim withholds comment on several defining episodes in her family's past. These gaps and ellipses are not failures of narration; they are a strategy for evoking memories and emotions too painful, or too dangerous, to be spoken aloud.

"She did not say anything. She only smiled—and turned back into the house" (Desai 217).

This refusal to articulate should be read as conscious withholding rather than narrative lack, a way of subverting the reader's expectation and opening space for interpretation. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes silence of this kind as a tactic of refusal and reticence, itself a form of resistance (DuPlessis 40), and Desai's fiction bears this out: what Bim does not say organizes the novel as powerfully as what she does. The withheld sentence becomes, paradoxically, one of the most legible signs in the text.

6. POLYPHONIC VOICES AND PERSPECTIVE SHIFTING

Feminist narratives often employ multiple perspectives in order to represent the sheer diversity of women's experience, resisting any single, totalizing account. In Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, the narrative moves between the voices of Sonali and Rose — an Indian bureaucrat and a British-born woman married into an Indian family — and their alternating viewpoints bring class, race, and cultural difference into the foreground of female experience under patriarchy.

This polyphonic structure works against the monologic, often male-centred narratives associated with colonial and nationalist literature. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, in which multiple voices coexist without being subordinated to a single authoritative perspective, is clearly at work here, and it functions as an essential feminist strategy: multiplicity is not simply represented as theme but enacted as narrative structure, so that no one woman's account is allowed to stand in for all women's experience.

7. LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTATION AND CODE-SWITCHING

Postcolonial feminist writers frequently turn to code-switching and hybrid linguistic forms to represent subaltern female voices that standard literary English tends to flatten or exclude. Bama's *Karukku*, a Dalit feminist autobiography, moves between Tamil and English and departs from standard syntax in order to assert a specifically Dalit and feminist linguistic identity:

"Why is it that we are always the ones to be humiliated? Why is it that others have everything, and we have nothing?" (Bama 43).

Bama's refusal of polished literary English is itself a radical feminist gesture. It dismantles the elitism embedded in 'correct' literary language while asserting the legitimacy of Dalit women's speech on its own terms. In her hands, language stops being a neutral medium and becomes an inclusive, political, and narrative tool — proof that the choice of register, and not only the choice of subject matter, carries ideological weight.

8. FRAGMENTATION AND EXPERIMENTAL FORM

In Meena Kandasamy's *'When I Hit You'*, the story of marital rape and emotional abuse is rendered through metafictional devices, poetic interruption, and episodic structure. Second-person address and shifting tenses repeatedly break the continuity a reader might expect from conventional narrative:

"You are a woman trapped in a book that is burning" (Kandasamy 9).

This experimental form mirrors the protagonist's fractured psychological state and asks the reader to engage with trauma not as spectacle but as lived, embodied reality. Toril Moi's observation that such disruptions in narrative form are not ornamental but essential to feminist writing (Moi 120) applies directly here: Kandasamy's fragmentation is not a stylistic flourish laid over a conventional story but the very means by which the novel makes the reader inhabit, however briefly, the disorientation of survival.

9. DOMESTIC SPACE AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONFINEMENT

A further narrative strategy that recurs across Indian women's writing in English is the use of domestic space itself as a structuring device — the house, the threshold, the inner courtyard becoming as central to meaning as any character's speech. In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the narrative repeatedly returns to rooms, doorways, and the physical layout of the family home, using spatial description to chart the protagonist's shifting position between duty and desire. Similarly, in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the household functions less as a fixed backdrop than as an active narrative presence, its rituals and enclosures shaping what the female protagonists are permitted to say and where they are permitted to go.

This spatial narration extends the insight, associated with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential account of the 'madwoman in the attic,' that architecture in women's writing is rarely incidental: enclosed and forbidden spaces often figure the constraints placed on female expression, while movement across thresholds can signal a character's tentative claim to agency. By treating domestic geography as narrative structure rather than mere setting, these writers extend the feminist techniques already discussed — interiority, silence, fragmentation — into the physical architecture the characters inhabit, so that where a woman is allowed to stand becomes inseparable from what she is allowed to say.

10. CONCLUSION

Narrative technique in Indian feminist writing in English is inseparable from the ideological work of challenging patriarchal norms. Stream-of-consciousness, mythic revision, non-linear temporality, strategic silence, polyphony, code-switching, experimental fragmentation, and the spatial architecture of the domestic interior together constitute a feminist poetics of resistance particular to this body of literature. These techniques are not simply applied to women's stories from the outside; they emerge from the specific pressures of narrating female experience within a postcolonial and patriarchal society, and in doing so they reshape the very act of storytelling. Taken together, the writers examined in this chapter demonstrate that form is never incidental to feminist meaning — it is one of the primary sites where that meaning is made.

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