

Deconstructing Masculinity: Exploring Male Discrimination in Postmodern Indian English Literature

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ABSTRACT:

The discourse on gender discrimination has traditionally focused on the oppression and marginalization of women within patriarchal societies. However, contemporary literary studies increasingly recognize that rigid gender structures also subject men to discrimination, emotional suppression, and restrictive social expectations. This study examines the representation of male discrimination in postmodern Indian English literature through a qualitative textual analysis of selected works by Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Drawing upon postcolonial theory and gender studies, particularly the concepts of subalternity, power, and the "Other" advanced by Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha, the paper explores how masculinity is constructed, negotiated, and challenged within patriarchal social structures. The analysis demonstrates that male characters experience various forms of marginalization through cultural expectations, emotional repression, and institutional power despite occupying socially privileged positions. Characters such as Simon, Subbu, and Eugene reveal that patriarchal ideology imposes restrictive standards of masculinity that frequently deny men emotional agency and personal autonomy. Rather than portraying men as victims in opposition to women, the selected texts expose patriarchy as a system that constrains individuals irrespective of gender. The study argues that postmodern Indian English literature broadens the understanding of gender discrimination by presenting masculinity as a socially constructed identity shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological forces. Consequently, these literary representations encourage a more inclusive discourse on gender equality that acknowledges the experiences of both women and men.

Keywords: Masculinity, Male Discrimination, Postmodern Indian English Literature, Gender Studies, Subalternity

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1. Introduction

Discrimination has remained a persistent feature of human civilization, manifesting across gender, race, caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. Although the concept is frequently associated with women's oppression, discrimination also affects men through social expectations that prescribe rigid models of masculinity. Patriarchal societies not only privilege men in specific social and political contexts but also impose behavioural norms that restrict emotional expression, personal freedom, and individual identity. Consequently, masculinity itself becomes a site of negotiation, conflict, and marginalization.

Postmodern literature questions fixed identities and grand narratives by foregrounding marginalized voices and exposing the instability of social categories. Within this framework, Indian English literature has increasingly explored the complexities of gender relations beyond the conventional binary of male privilege and female oppression. Contemporary writers demonstrate that patriarchal structures often harm both women and men, although in different ways. Male characters frequently experience psychological isolation, emotional repression, and identity crises while attempting to conform to socially constructed ideals of masculinity.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, later expanded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argues that marginalized groups are often denied representation within dominant discourses. Michel Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge further explains how institutions regulate behaviour through disciplinary mechanisms, while Edward Said's concept of the "Other" and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural difference illuminate the processes through which identities are constructed and marginalized. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide an effective framework for examining male discrimination as a product of

intersecting social, cultural, and ideological forces.

While numerous studies have examined female marginalization in Indian English literature, relatively little attention has been devoted to the ways in which male characters become victims of patriarchal expectations. This gap is particularly evident in studies of Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose fictional works present nuanced portrayals of masculinity that challenge traditional assumptions regarding male privilege. Their narratives demonstrate that patriarchy often confines men within rigid gender roles, limiting emotional expression and personal autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing unequal power structures.

The present study therefore investigates the representation of male discrimination in selected novels by Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It argues that postmodern literary narratives expose masculinity as a socially constructed identity shaped by power relations rather than biological determinism. Through a critical reading of these texts, the study seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on gender equality by emphasizing that discrimination should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon affecting individuals across gender boundaries.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual and thematic analysis. Since the objective is to examine literary representations rather than empirical data, qualitative textual analysis provides the most appropriate framework for interpreting the selected novels.

Research Design

The research employs an interpretative and descriptive approach grounded in literary criticism. It analyses narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, symbolism, and thematic development to understand how male discrimination is represented within postmodern Indian English literature.

Primary Sources

The primary texts selected for analysis include:

The Scent of Pepper (1996) by Kavery Nambisan

Mango Coloured Fish (1998) by Kavery Nambisan

The Story That Must Not Be Told (2010) by Kavery Nambisan

Purple Hibiscus (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

These novels were selected because they portray male characters negotiating social expectations, family relationships, and patriarchal structures in ways that challenge conventional assumptions regarding gender privilege.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining postcolonial theory and gender studies. Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of representation, Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse, Edward Said's concept of Othering, and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural identity provide the conceptual basis for interpreting male marginalization. These perspectives facilitate an examination of how masculinity is socially constructed through institutional power, cultural expectations, and historical discourse.

Data Collection and Analysis

Relevant passages depicting male discrimination, emotional repression, identity conflict, and power relations were identified through close reading of the selected texts. The data were then organized into thematic categories, including patriarchal expectations, emotional suppression, family authority, gendered identity, and resistance to social norms. Comparative textual analysis was subsequently employed to identify recurring patterns across the selected novels.

Ethical Considerations

As this research is based exclusively on published literary works and secondary scholarly sources, it does not involve human participants or confidential data. All quotations and interpretations are presented with appropriate academic acknowledgment and in accordance with accepted standards of literary research.

3. Results

The qualitative textual analysis of the selected novels reveals that postmodern Indian English literature challenges the conventional perception of men as the exclusive beneficiaries of patriarchal society. Instead, the narratives demonstrate that patriarchal structures impose rigid expectations on men, restricting their emotional expression, personal autonomy, and social identity. The findings are organized into four major themes that collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of male discrimination.

3.1 Patriarchal Masculinity as a Source of Male Marginalization

The analysis indicates that masculinity in the selected texts is represented as a socially constructed identity rather than an inherent biological characteristic. Male characters are expected to embody authority, courage, emotional restraint, and economic responsibility irrespective of their personal aspirations or emotional needs. Such expectations often deprive them of individual freedom and compel them to conform to socially sanctioned ideals of masculinity.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene occupies a position of social and religious authority but simultaneously becomes a victim of the rigid patriarchal ideology he perpetuates. His inability to express vulnerability or emotional affection reflects the psychological consequences of internalizing authoritarian masculine ideals. Similarly, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu's journey from a rural servant to an educated individual illustrates how social class and gender intersect to shape masculine identity. Although Ugwu gradually acquires confidence and agency, his experiences reveal the vulnerability of men positioned within unequal power structures.

3.2 Emotional Suppression and Identity Crisis

A recurring finding across the selected novels is the suppression of male emotions. The texts demonstrate that male characters frequently conceal fear, affection, grief, and insecurity because these emotions are perceived as incompatible with socially accepted masculinity.

Kavery Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not Be Told* provides one of the clearest representations of this phenomenon through the character of Simon Jesukumar. Although Simon appears to possess social privilege as an educated middle-class man, his domestic life is characterized by emotional dependency and psychological insecurity. His marriage to Harini reveals an unequal emotional relationship in which Simon consistently suppresses his opinions to avoid conflict. His reflections on the "wasted years" of his marriage demonstrate that emotional suffering is not limited by gender but emerges from unequal interpersonal power relations.

Similarly, *The Scent of Pepper* portrays Subbu as a physically fragile and emotionally vulnerable character whose self-worth is shaped by society's expectations of masculine strength. His physical disability, romantic frustrations, and desire for social acceptance generate feelings of inadequacy that influence his personal decisions. Rather than exercising independent agency, Subbu repeatedly seeks validation from family members and society, illustrating how patriarchal ideals may marginalize men who fail to conform to dominant masculine standards.

3.3 Power Relations within Family and Society

The analysis further demonstrates that family functions as one of the primary institutions through which gender expectations are reinforced. Male characters are frequently positioned within hierarchical family structures where authority is negotiated rather than automatically possessed.

In *Mango Coloured Fish*, Shari's father gradually abandons many aspects of his cultural identity in response to his wife's preferences. His transformation illustrates that authority within

marriage is not exclusively determined by gender but is continuously shaped through interpersonal relationships and cultural adaptation. Likewise, Simon's marriage in *The Story That Must Not Be Told* challenges conventional patriarchal assumptions by depicting a household in which domestic authority frequently resides with Harini. Although Simon retains social privilege outside the home, he experiences emotional subordination within the family.

These portrayals suggest that power operates dynamically rather than absolutely. The novels reject simplistic assumptions that either men or women invariably dominate interpersonal relationships, instead presenting power as contextual, negotiated, and constantly shifting.

3.4 Reconstructing Masculinity through Postmodern Narratives

The selected texts ultimately question traditional definitions of masculinity by presenting male characters whose identities remain fluid and continually negotiated. Rather than portraying men solely as authority figures, the novels emphasize their emotional complexity, psychological vulnerability, and capacity for transformation.

Adichie and Nambisan both reject binary representations of gender by demonstrating that patriarchal systems generate suffering for both women and men. Their narratives encourage readers to reconsider masculinity beyond stereotypes of dominance and emotional invulnerability. Male discrimination is therefore represented not as opposition to female empowerment but as another consequence of rigid gender ideologies that restrict individual identity and human relationships.

Summary of Findings

The analysis identifies four major findings:

Patriarchal expectations construct restrictive models of masculinity that limit male autonomy.

Emotional suppression emerges as one of the most significant forms of male discrimination.

Family and social institutions reinforce gender roles that produce unequal power relations affecting both men and women.

Postmodern Indian English literature challenges traditional gender binaries by presenting masculinity as a socially constructed and evolving identity.

These findings indicate that the selected literary texts contribute to a broader understanding of gender by revealing that discrimination is multidimensional and operates through complex intersections of power, culture, and identity rather than through gender alone.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that postmodern Indian English literature challenges the conventional assumption that patriarchy exclusively privileges men while subordinating women. Instead, the selected novels reveal that patriarchal ideology simultaneously constructs and confines masculinity, compelling men to conform to rigid social expectations that frequently undermine their emotional well-being, personal autonomy, and individual identity. The experiences of male characters in the works of Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie suggest that gender discrimination should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon operating through complex networks of power rather than through simplistic binaries of male privilege and female oppression.

The findings strongly support Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, particularly her argument that marginalized individuals are often denied the ability to represent themselves within dominant discourses. Although Spivak primarily discusses colonial and gendered oppression, the present analysis extends her framework by demonstrating that certain male characters also experience forms of silencing within patriarchal society. Characters such as Simon Jesukumar and Subbu are unable to articulate their emotional struggles because dominant masculine ideals discourage vulnerability and emotional

openness. Their silence does not arise from a lack of agency alone but from social expectations that define masculinity in terms of authority, strength, and emotional control. Consequently, these characters occupy a marginal position within the very system that ostensibly privileges them.

The study also reinforces Michel Foucault's theory that power is diffuse and operates through everyday social institutions rather than solely through political authority. In the selected novels, family emerges as one of the principal sites where disciplinary power shapes masculine identity. Social expectations regarding courage, authority, economic responsibility, and emotional restraint regulate male behaviour from childhood to adulthood. Simon's constant attempts to avoid conflict with Harini and Subbu's desire to prove his masculinity illustrate how individuals internalize these disciplinary mechanisms and ultimately become participants in their own regulation. Thus, masculinity is revealed not as an expression of natural superiority but as a social performance maintained through continuous surveillance and self-discipline.

Similarly, Edward Said's concept of the Other provides valuable insight into the marginalization of male characters. Traditionally associated with colonial discourse, Othering functions within gender relations by constructing identities that deviate from dominant norms as inferior or inadequate. Men who fail to embody conventional masculine ideals are frequently positioned as outsiders. Subbu's physical disability and emotional insecurity, for instance, distinguish him from socially accepted models of masculinity, rendering him vulnerable to self-doubt and social exclusion. Likewise, Simon's domestic subordination destabilizes traditional assumptions regarding male authority and exposes the relativity of power within intimate relationships.

The analysis further corresponds with Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of identity as fluid, negotiated, and culturally constructed. Rather

than presenting masculinity as a fixed biological attribute, the selected novels portray it as a continuously evolving social identity shaped by historical, cultural, and interpersonal forces. Characters negotiate multiple and often conflicting expectations imposed by family, community, and society, resulting in fragmented identities that resist simplistic categorization. This fluidity reflects the postmodern rejection of essentialist notions of gender and emphasizes the instability of traditional masculine ideals.

An important contribution of this study lies in its challenge to conventional interpretations of patriarchy. While feminist scholarship has rightly emphasized the structural oppression experienced by women, the present findings demonstrate that patriarchal systems also produce significant psychological and emotional consequences for men. This observation should not be interpreted as diminishing the historical experiences of women; rather, it highlights the broader operation of patriarchal ideology as a system that regulates the lives of all individuals through rigid gender norms. The selected texts therefore advocate a more inclusive understanding of gender justice that acknowledges the interconnected experiences of both women and men.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis of Nambisan and Adichie reveals significant similarities despite their distinct cultural contexts. Both authors reject stereotypical portrayals of masculinity by presenting male characters who possess emotional complexity, vulnerability, and moral ambiguity. Their narratives move beyond simplistic representations of men as either oppressors or victims, instead illustrating how power relations are dynamic, relational, and context-dependent. Such portrayals enrich contemporary discussions within postcolonial literature by demonstrating that gender identities are continually negotiated within broader structures of culture, history, and ideology.

The study also contributes to the expanding field of masculinity studies within Indian English literature. Existing scholarship has

largely concentrated on female marginalization, leaving comparatively little attention to the literary representation of male vulnerability. By foregrounding the experiences of male characters subjected to emotional repression, social expectation, and identity conflict, this research broadens current understandings of gender discrimination and encourages future scholars to examine masculinity as a legitimate area of critical inquiry within postcolonial literary studies.

Nevertheless, the present study has certain limitations. The analysis is confined to selected novels by Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and therefore does not claim to represent all postmodern Indian English literature. Future research may expand this inquiry by examining additional authors, incorporating comparative perspectives across South Asian literatures, or exploring intersections between masculinity, caste, class, sexuality, and disability. Such studies would further enrich contemporary debates on gender, identity, and social justice.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that postmodern Indian English literature offers a nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender relations by exposing the complexities of masculine identity within patriarchal society. Through their representations of emotional vulnerability, social marginalization, and identity negotiation, Nambisan and Adichie challenge traditional gender binaries and advocate a more comprehensive vision of equality founded upon mutual recognition, dignity, and human agency.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the representation of male discrimination in postmodern Indian English literature through selected novels by Kavery Nambisan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Using qualitative textual analysis supported by postcolonial and gender theories, the study investigated how masculinity is constructed, negotiated, and challenged within patriarchal social structures. The findings demonstrate that while patriarchy has historically privileged men in many institutional

contexts, it also imposes restrictive norms that limit men's emotional expression, personal autonomy, and individual identity.

The analysis revealed that male characters such as Simon Jesukumar, Subbu, Eugene, and Ugwu experience various forms of marginalization arising from rigid expectations of masculinity. Their struggles illustrate that patriarchal ideology not only regulates women's lives but also compels men to conform to socially sanctioned ideals of authority, strength, and emotional restraint. Consequently, the selected novels challenge the traditional binary that positions men solely as oppressors and women solely as victims. Instead, they portray gender as a complex social construct shaped by intersecting forces of culture, history, ideology, and power.

The theoretical perspectives of Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha provide valuable insight into understanding these representations. Their concepts of subalternity, power, discourse, othering, and cultural identity reveal that discrimination operates through multiple forms of social regulation rather than through gender alone. The novels demonstrate that masculine identity is neither fixed nor naturally dominant but continuously negotiated within changing social and cultural environments.

This study contributes to the growing field of masculinity studies within Indian English literature by highlighting an area that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. While feminist criticism has made significant contributions to understanding female marginalization, the experiences of men subjected to emotional repression, psychological conflict, and restrictive gender expectations also deserve critical examination. Recognizing these experiences does not diminish women's struggles but instead promotes a more

comprehensive understanding of gender justice that benefits society as a whole.

Ultimately, postmodern Indian English literature encourages readers to move beyond simplistic notions of privilege and victimhood by presenting gender as a shared human experience shaped by complex power relations. The selected works advocate empathy, equality, and mutual respect while challenging stereotypes that restrict both women and men. They reaffirm literature's capacity to question dominant ideologies and to promote a more inclusive understanding of identity and social justice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Future research should examine representations of male discrimination in a wider range of Indian English and South Asian literary texts to establish broader comparative perspectives.

Scholars should explore the intersection of masculinity with caste, class, religion, disability, and sexuality to better understand the multiple dimensions of male marginalization.

Literary criticism should adopt more balanced approaches that acknowledge both female and male experiences of discrimination without undermining the historical realities of gender inequality.

Educational institutions may incorporate literary texts that portray diverse experiences of masculinity to encourage critical discussions on gender sensitivity, emotional well-being, and social inclusion.

Further interdisciplinary research combining literary studies, psychology, sociology, and gender studies may provide deeper insights into the relationship between masculinity and contemporary social change.

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8. Author Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The authors further declare that no conflict of interest exists regarding the publication of this research. All sources of information have been appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines.