

Negotiating Gender, Agency, and Feminist Consciousness: A Comparative Study of Classical and Indian Modern Literature

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ABSTRACT:

This study embarks an engaging exploration of the female narratives in Bhasa's works, particularly “Svapnavasavadatta” and “Urubhangam,” where insightful connections are woven with Kamala Markandaya's “Nectar in a Sieve” and “A Silence of Desire,” Anita Desai's “Cry The Peacock” and “Where Shall We Go This Summer?,” and Shashi Deshpande's “That Long Silence and The Binding Vine.” Anchored in modern feminist theory, the research uncovers how these authors craft narratives that transcend time, resonating profoundly with contemporary literary discourse. The study is rooted in contemporary feminist theory and how these authors develop fiction that is time- transcendent and incredibly relevant to present literary circles. Posing classical portrayals by Bhasa against modern-day feminist interpretations, the study brings out a remarkable continuity in the depictions of resilience and agency in women's lives and how these are highly universalised. Employing feminist literary criticism, it examines character arcs, thematic parallels, and societal reflections, unravelling layers of complexity and strength in these narratives.

The findings show the timeless relevance of Bhasa's themes, bridging classical and modern literature to enrich the evolving dialogue on gender and identity. This study amplifies the enduring power of women's

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voices in Indian literature. It fosters a deeper appreciation of their transformative role in shaping cultural and literary paradigms, underscoring the harmonies between past and present in the ongoing quest for equality and selfhood.

Keywords: Feminist Narratology, Comparative analysis, Transformative, Retelling, Resilienc

1. Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems, repositories of the subcontinent's literary and aesthetic traditions, encapsulate an intricate tapestry of cultural, philosophical, and social narratives. Foundational texts like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* stand as cornerstones of epic literature, inspiring a rich tradition of retellings such as Chandrabati's *Ramayana*, Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, and Pattanaik's *Draupadi*. Within this milieu, Bhasa emerges as the father of Sanskrit

drama, whose extant works reimagine epic themes, challenge hierarchical norms, and foreground marginalized voices. His dramaturgy, spanning thirteen extant plays, offers a lens to explore the intersection of classical and feminist narratives, reflecting nuanced gender dynamics and societal structures in ancient India (Dirghangi et al. 173).

Bhasa's plays, including "*Urubhangam*" and "*Karnabharanam*," subvert the thematic homogeneity of epic traditions by centering on peripheral characters and alternative perspectives. These adaptations destabilize canonical narratives, creating space for complex and multidimensional figures—especially women—who navigate the constraints of a patriarchal society (Bhatt 61). His female characters are portrayed as active agents of their destinies, embodying themes of resistance, resilience, and agency that

resonate profoundly with feminist discourse. Bhasa's innovative dramaturgy not only enriches classical Sanskrit literature but also establishes a framework for understanding gendered experiences within a patriarchal milieu (Parmar 35).

In counterpoint, recent Indian literature the pens of writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande -continue this narrative tradition, carrying it right into the present. The female characters in "*Nectar in a Sieve*" and "*A Handful of Rice*," by Kamala Markandaya, exemplify the struggle for women against socio-economic change under various circumstances of victimization, and resilience in adversity. Anita Desai's "*Cry, the Peacock*" and "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*," delves into the psychological and emotional lives of her female protagonists, revealing layers of alienation, turmoil, and introspection (Suganya and Shamini 01). Likewise, Deshpande's realist fiction, such as "*That Long Silence*" and "*The Binding Vine*," offers probes of middle-class family expectations as well as expressions of female agency within the middle-class domestic sphere (Singh et al. 01).

This comparative study traces a continuum of gendered discourse across historical and cultural landscapes through feminist narratives in the works of Bhasa and Markandaya, Desai, and Deshpande. While Bhasa's dramaturgy is critical of epic hierarchies and focuses attention on

marginalized voices, modern authors reinterpret these themes to beat out contemporary challenges to create an enriched tapestry of feminist consciousness. Bhasa's subtle delineation of women as agents in their stories can find an equivalent in the intensity of psychological characterization in

Desai, sociological comment in Markandaya, and Deshpande's confluence of past and present (Reza 395).

The study integrates classical and modern literary traditions and underlines the timelessness of feminist narratives in Indian literature, thereby examining how these texts reflect on and challenge societal norms. Bhasa's subversive adaptations thus parallel the reimagining of feminism in modern authors to foster a dialogue that bridges the ancient and the contemporary. Themes of resistance, resilience, and transformation create a harmonious and continuous thread, demonstrating the continuity and evolution of feminist discourse. This exploration enriches our understanding of Indian literature, and at the same time sheds light on its capacity to deal with everyday universal themes of gender, identity, and power (Thakur 208).

Bhasa's dramaturgy, when analyzed through a feminist lens and compared with the works of Markandaya, Desai, and Deshpande, reveals a profound engagement with gender dynamics that transcends time. These authors collectively challenge societal boundaries, creating narratives that celebrate women's agency and underscore the enduring significance of gender discourse in shaping literary traditions (Kumar 01). This study explores the diversity of Indian literature, positioning it as a vibrant site of cultural and philosophical inquiry that continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Exploring Female Agency in Ancient and Modern Indian Literature

Ancient Indian literature, such as by Bhasa, has well-nuanced the portrayal of women's agency, which changes across epochs. The Vedic period allowed women much autonomy, engaged in ritualistic and economic activities (Madal 32), and epics like the Mahabharata develop images of powerful women whose struggles still echo through modern cinema, a development of shifting social attitudes toward gender roles (Dhankar et al. 23). Despite this, the medieval period witnessed a dampening female lot and a rise in sati and child marriages (Chaturvedi 95). Modern Indian literature and performance arts-in particular works by Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande-align these historical legacies with newly constructed feminist narratives, often negating Western frameworks to articulate culturally specific forms of female agency (Kalloli and Tyagi 23). Re-reading classical texts like the plays of Bhasa through a feminist lens, this study examines how ancient and modern narratives intersect each other toward identity, resilience, and

transformation. Just as Greek literature constituted the foundation of Western thought in the Renaissance, Bhasa's works have the potential to cultivate localized feminist theories that bridge the gulf between past and present to continue the long tradition of energizing women's voices toward shaping cultural and literary paradigms (Sulbhewar 07).

2.2. The Evolution of Feminism in Indian Literature: From Bhasa to Contemporary Voices

The evolution of feminism in Indian literature

spans from Bhasa's classical works, which subtly explored gender roles, to contemporary narratives that challenge traditional norms and power dynamics. In the pre-independence era, social reform movements addressed issues like child marriage, widowhood, and female education, laying the groundwork for feminist expressions (Banerji 367). Post-independence literature amplified women's voices, articulating their struggles and aspirations within patriarchal structures (Rai 17). The 19th-century reform movements in Maharashtra introduced concepts like *stri-jati* (womankind) and *bhaginivarg* (sisterhood), marking the formal emergence of feminist theory in India (Kumar 93). However, mainstream feminism has often been critiqued for its elitist bias, sidelining marginalized voices and paving the way for Dalit feminism, which addresses both caste and gender oppression (Kamboj 01). Contemporary literature reflects a shift from stereotypical portrayals to nuanced explorations of identity, intersectionality, and female empowerment (Babalyuk 01). Despite challenges in representing diverse perspectives, feminist discourse in Indian literature continues to evolve, bridging classical and modern narratives to reshape societal understanding of gender and autonomy while addressing the complexities of cultural and social power structures.

3. Objectives of the Study

- i) To analyze the feminist narratology in Bhasa's works, highlighting how his reinterpretations of classical tales portray women as embodiments of power and cultural strength.
- ii) To examine Bhasa's representation of women within the framework of Indian literature and compare it with modern feminist narratives by Kamala Markandaya,

Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande, focusing on their critique and reimagining of classical gender roles.

- iii) To evaluate how modern writers challenge, deconstruct, and address societal issues concerning gender politics while drawing connections to Bhasa's dramaturgy in terms of reclaiming and redefining women's roles in literature.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative approaches to analyze Bhasa's works through a feminist narratological lens, emphasizing descriptive literary analysis and close reading.

- **Research Design:** This study employs a comparative literary analysis of selected texts from Bhasa and contemporary authors Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande, focusing on feminist themes.

- **Text Selection Criteria:** Representative works featuring strong feminist narratives include Bhasa's plays "*Urubhangam*" and "*Karnabhangam*," alongside Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and "*A Handful of Rice*," Desai's "*Cry, the Peacock*" and "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*," and Deshpande's "*That Long Silence*" and "*The Binding Vine*."

- **Analytical Framework:** This study employs feminist literary theory as the primary framework for analysis, utilizing comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in themes, characterizations, and narrative techniques across the selected texts.

- **Data Collection:** The study involves a comprehensive textual analysis of primary works, supplemented by an examination of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and books on feminist literature.

5. Results

➤ **Findings on Feminist Themes in Bhasa's Works:** The analysis reveals some dominant feminist themes in Bhasa's plays such as "Svapnavasavadatta" and "Uru-Bhanga," which "outlines women's agency, resistance, and roles within a patriarchal society."

➤ **Findings on Feminist Themes in Contemporary Works:** A comparative analysis of feminist narratives through Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Silence of Desire*, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine* highlights pivotal issues of identity, self-

realization, and the socio-economic conditions shaping women's lives. This exploration underscores how these authors articulate the struggles and aspirations of women, navigating societal expectations while addressing themes of resilience, agency, and empowerment.

➤ **Comparative Analysis:** This section outlines prevalent topics and distinctive viewpoints in Bhasa's work and that of modern authors. Significant distinctions arise in narrative style, character development, and the depiction of feminist themes, demonstrating the progression of women's representation from classical to contemporary Indian literature

Table1: Summary of findings

<i>Aspect of Analysis</i>	Bhasa's Works	Contemporary Works
Feminist Themes	Women depicted in positions of power, challenging patriarchal norms	Identity, self-realization, socio-economic impact, and resilience against cultural constraints are explored.
Narrative Techniques	Traditional storytelling with mythological and symbolic elements.	Modern narrative styles with psychological depth and intricate socio-cultural commentary.
Representation of Women	Women are portrayed as powerful figures navigating patriarchal structures.	Complex female characters challenging societal expectations and exploring personal agency.
Works Included	"Svapnavasavadatta," and "Urubhanga."	Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" and "A Silence of Desire, the Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer?," and Deshpande's "That Long Silence" and "The Binding Vine."

6. Discussion Bhasa, one of the earliest

dramatists in Sanskrit literature, offers a

revolutionary reimagining of the Mahabharata that shakes up and challenges the traditional roles assigned to female characters. From the generally mournful wives to ladies having strength and agency, capable of emotional depth, these are Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Malavi, and Pauravi as reinvisioned by Bhasa. Bhasa's treatment of these characters represents a departure from their passive roles in the original epic, offering them voices that transcend victimhood. Draupadi, for instance, despite enduring immense suffering, retains her power and self-respect, and Kunti's sacrifices are portrayed as reflections of the complex dynamics of maternal love and moral dilemmas. Gandhari's maternal concern, Malavi's sorrow, and Pauravi's resolute acceptance of her fate further demonstrate the emotional strength of these women. Through this transformation, Bhasa's works reveal a subtle feminist perspective, emphasising how these women navigate a patriarchal world with resilience and dignity. His reimagining of female characters is groundbreaking in the context of ancient Indian literature, allowing for a nuanced portrayal of their inner worlds (Parmar 35).

The feminist consciousness explored by Bhasa is mirrored in the works of modern Indian authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande. These authors, while offering a more contemporary lens, continue to explore the complexities of female existence within patriarchal constraints. Kamala Markandaya's novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*, highlight the endurance and resilience of women facing socio-economic challenges. The protagonist of *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani, struggles with the hardships of poverty, industrialization, and gender inequality. Despite her suffering, Rukmani embodies

resilience and self-assertion, paralleling Bhasa's female characters in their determination to navigate adversity. Markandaya's portrayal of Rukmani's transition from self-denial to self-realization critiques the systemic inequalities that burden women (Markandaya 01). Similarly, in *A Handful of Rice*, the character Nalini challenges traditional societal expectations, embodying a blend of beauty and strength, much like Bhasa's heroines who resist patriarchal oppression (Markandaya 28).

Markandaya's works also critique the intersection of gender and cultural transitions, blending both Eastern and Western influences. Rukmani's resilience, despite the hardships of rural poverty and the shifting socio-economic landscape, reflects themes of perseverance seen in Bhasa's female characters. However, while Bhasa's women are heroic within the context of mythological and epic structures, Markandaya's characters are rooted in a more modern, socio-economic reality, highlighting the evolving nature of feminist themes across time (Thakur 208).

"She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination" (Markandaya, "Nectar in a Sieve," 177).

In *That Long Silence*, Anita Desai delves into the emotional and psychological struggles of women confined by traditional roles. The protagonist, Jaya, is an intellectual who feels stifled by the roles of wife and mother, despite her creative potential. Her internal conflict echoes the broader theme of female silence and suppression, as she navigates the oppressive societal expectations imposed upon her. Jaya's feelings of alienation and the unfulfilling nature of her domestic life reflect a deep emotional disconnect from her own

desires. Desai's exploration of Jaya's struggle for self-expression within the confines of marriage and family life parallels the tension found in Bhasa's heroines, who challenge societal expectations while grappling with their roles. Jaya's realization of her suppressed identity—despite fulfilling familial roles—mirrors the feminist awakening Bhasa's female characters experience as they assert their agency within patriarchal constraints (Desai 01).

“she was born her father named her Jaya, which means victory. But after the marriage she is rechristened as Suhasini which means a soft smiling, placid motherly woman” (Desai, *“Cry, the peacock”* 15).

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* further explore the inner turmoil of women navigating societal and personal challenges. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's emotional breakdown due to an unsympathetic marriage reflects the tension between personal desire and societal expectation, themes that are also central to Bhasa's works. Similarly, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita's emotional alienation from her husband mirrors the psychological struggles faced by Bhasa's women, who, despite external constraints, assert their personal desires and identities in subtle ways (Paramasivan 01).

“I had to admit the truth to myself that I had often found family life unendurable, worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (Deshpande, *“TLS”* 101).

Shashi Deshpande, known for her realist fiction, examines the inner lives of educated middle-class women in *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine*. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's gradual journey toward self-realization marks a shift from the silence imposed upon her by

marriage to an awakening of her own identity. Deshpande's portrayal of Jaya's internal conflict,

reflected through her dual names—Jaya, symbolizing victory, and Suhasini, symbolizing the submissive, motherly woman—highlights the tension between personal autonomy and societal expectations. Similarly, in *“The Binding Vine,”* Deshpande explores the distance of emotions among marriages and the patriarchal limitations that women face through Urmi. It is in both novels where the silence put on women in patriarchal structures is criticized; self-awareness and independence are essential themes, like the heroines of Bhasa, who resist and gain agency in a patriarchal context.

Although written in the background of ancient Sanskrit drama, Bhasa has made his female characters active agents in their stories, thus creating a prelude to feminist discourse in Indian literature. Modern writers such as Markandaya, Desai, and Deshpande took the facts forward and developed their styles while bringing depth into the complicated themes of identity, liberty, and the fusion of gender with socio-economic factors and personal longing. Their work went to a deeper level of emotional and psychological aspects in the lives of women, giving more individualized features of women's struggles within a changing society (Kumar 01). The comparative analysis between Bhasa's classical portrayals of female characters and the works of modern Indian authors reveals both continuity and transformation in the representation of women in Indian literature. Bhasa's treatment of women as resilient, heroic figures navigating patriarchal constraints laid the groundwork for feminist narratives that would evolve in

contemporary literature. While Bhasa's heroines embody resistance within epic and mythological frameworks, the female protagonists of Markandaya, Desai, and Deshpande confront personal and societal struggles in a rapidly changing world. Their works, with their psychological depth and socio-cultural commentary, expand and contemporize the feminist themes Bhasa introduced, offering a nuanced and enduring exploration of gender, power, and agency in Indian literature (Reza 395).

The feminist narratives in Bhasa's works, compared with those in the writings of

7. Conclusion

➤ Summary of Key Findings

Bhasa's description of women took place within the framework of strength, independence, and revolt against patriarchal norms, thereby representing a proto-feministic outlook in Indian ancient literature. Modern writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande have succeeded in exploring these themes wherein women's experience with modern socio-economic upheavals and self-actualization are shown through the maturity of feminist thought in Indian literature.

➤ Contribution to Literary Scholarship

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Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande, show both a continuity of themes and an evolution of narrative techniques (Patil 01). These authors, across centuries, have illuminated the complex lives of women in patriarchal societies, from the mythological heroines of Bhasa to the more contemporary protagonists of Markandaya, Desai, and Deshpande. Through these literary explorations, we see the ongoing struggle for gender equality, self-realization, and agency, making the feminist discourse in Indian literature both enduring and ever-evolving.

The linking of classical and modern feminist narratives articulates the development of women's representation while retaining themes of power and resistance; moreover, it reassesses Bhasa's representation of women so that it becomes possible for ancient texts to still belong within modern feminist discourse.

➤ Suggestions for Future Research:

Exploring obscure classical Indian writings on feminist topics may be really valuable as it gives insight to and understanding of historical perspectives on women's roles and agency. Comparative analyses of feminist literatures may show the universality in the struggles of women and the distinctive methodology in identity and resistance.

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