

Rereading Motherhood in Hindi Novels: A Feminist Literary Analysis

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Abstract — Motherhood is one of the most persistently recurring human experiences in literary history. In Hindi novel literature, motherhood has traditionally been portrayed as a symbol of sacrifice, tenderness, and selfless devotion. However, modern and contemporary Hindi novels have offered a critical rereading of this concept — one in which the mother is not merely a nurturer but also an autonomous, struggling, and questioning human being. From Premchand's *Godan* (1936) to Mridula Garg's *Chittakobra* (1979), Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* (1994), and Alka Saravagi's *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* (1998), the image of motherhood in Hindi novels has evolved continuously. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, this paper analyses the diverse dimensions of motherhood — traditional, rebellious, absent, and reconstructed — across three broad periods of Hindi fiction.

Keywords: Motherhood, Hindi novel, feminist criticism, women's discourse, rereading, contemporary literature, Hindi fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is perhaps the most universally recurring sensibility in world literature. In Indian culture, the mother has long been accorded the status of a deity — the classical Sanskrit maxim *Matru Devo Bhava* ('the mother is God') encapsulates a cultural veneration that has shaped both social norms and literary representations for centuries. Yet this very deification constitutes a form of ideological control: by elevating the mother to divine status, patriarchal culture simultaneously confines her to a prescribed biological and social role, stripping her of complex selfhood.

Feminist scholarship has fundamentally challenged this construction. Simone de Beauvoir, in her foundational work *The Second Sex* (1949), argued that motherhood is not a natural destiny for women but a social construction imposed upon them by patriarchal institutions (de Beauvoir, 1949). This theoretical intervention opened the way for literary critics to reread canonical texts through a lens that foregrounds the contradictions, silences, and resistances embedded within literary representations of the mother.

Hindi fiction, spanning more than a century of print culture, offers remarkably rich material for such a rereading. This paper analyses motherhood in Hindi novels across three historical phases: (1) the Premchand era (c. 1920–1940); (2) the Nayi Kahani and new writing period (c. 1960–1980); and (3) the contemporary women's discourse period (c. 1990–2010). Through this tri-dimensional lens, the paper traces how Hindi novelists have progressively redefined motherhood — from an ideal of sacrifice toward a site of autonomy, resistance, and subjective inquiry.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION

In feminist theory, motherhood has always been a contested concept. Adrienne Rich, in her landmark study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), drew a crucial distinction between motherhood as a lived experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution. While the institution of motherhood functions as an instrument of male control over women's bodies and labour, the personal experience of mothering is complex, contradictory, and potentially subversive (Rich, 1976). This distinction is foundational to reading Hindi novels critically.

In the Indian context, psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, in *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978), argued that the Indian mother embodies both nurturing power and selfless surrender. He noted that the idealised mother figure in Indian culture — particularly as rendered in literature — is characterised by an intense bond with her son that simultaneously valorises her devotion and constrains her individuality (Kakar, 1978).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, developed in *Gender Trouble* (1990), further illuminates Hindi representations of motherhood. Butler argued that gender roles are not natural but are constituted through repeated performances — acts that appear natural but are, in fact, culturally scripted (Butler, 1990). Understood in these terms, 'being a mother' in Hindi fiction is itself a performance scripted

by society, family, and literary tradition — a performance that later women novelists increasingly refuse or rewrite.

3. MOTHERHOOD IN PREMCHAND'S NOVELS: TRADITION AND ANGUISH

Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), widely regarded as the father of modern Hindi fiction, situated motherhood within the framework of social realism. His masterpiece *Godan* (1936) features Dhaniya, arguably the most fully realised mother figure in the Hindi novelistic tradition. Dhaniya is not merely a biological mother to her children — she is a life partner to her husband Hori, an economic agent within a peasant household, and a decisive moral authority for her daughters Sona and Rupa.

Premchand's conception of motherhood in *Godan* transcends the purely biological. Dhaniya's suffering — simultaneously economic, social, and emotional — reveals that the mother's pain is structurally produced, not personally ordained (Rai, 1982). The novel's devastating closing image — Dhaniya placing a few coins before a priest and saying 'This is my godan' after Hori dies without a cow — crystallises a mother's final sacrifice rendered in the language of dignified resistance. It is an act of both submission and defiance.

In the earlier *Sevasadan* (1918), the character of Suman presents a different register of motherhood. After renouncing a life of social degradation, Suman dedicates herself to social service, and her maternal impulse — the drive to nurture and protect — becomes the moral engine of her transformation. Premchand thus signals that motherhood is not reducible to childbirth: compassion and care are themselves maternal acts.

4. REREADING MOTHERHOOD IN WOMEN'S HINDI FICTION

In the decades following Indian independence, women novelists systematically challenged the traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother. Writers such as Mannu Bhandari, Mridula Garg, Maitreyi Pushpa, Krishna Sobti, and Alka Saravagi placed women's lived experience at the centre of their fiction and revealed the inner contradictions of maternal identity.

Mridula Garg's *Chittakobra* (1979) is a landmark Hindi novel in which the boundaries between motherhood and desire are deliberately blurred. The protagonist Manu is a married woman, already a mother, who feels emotionally and erotically drawn to another man. Garg makes an unambiguous argument: becoming a mother does not — and should not — require the suppression of a woman's entire inner life (Garg, 1979). The

novel caused considerable controversy on publication, precisely because it refused to separate maternal identity from sexual subjectivity.

Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* (1994), set against the rural landscape of Bundelkhand, presents a mother in a semi-tribal community who struggles to secure education and self-determination for her daughter. The novel's title derives from the Sanskrit phrase meaning 'this is not mine' — conveying a mother's liberatory understanding that her child is not her property (Pushpa, 1994). In Pushpa's treatment, motherhood becomes a form of emancipatory consciousness: to love a child is to release her.

Mannu Bhandari's *Aapka Banti* (1971) explores the profound psychological cost of maternal absence within the context of marital breakdown. Shakun, the protagonist mother, is an independent woman seeking selfhood after separation, while her son Banti is left to navigate devastating emotional confusion. Bhandari poses one of the central questions of feminist motherhood studies: is there always an irreconcilable tension between 'good mother' and 'autonomous woman'? (Bhandari, 1971).

Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* (1966) confronts conventions of maternal propriety in a radically different register. Mitro's uninhibited personality dismantles every cliché of the demure Indian mother. Sobti insists that a woman's desires, energies, and pleasures do not disappear upon becoming a mother — they persist, and they demand to be acknowledged (Sobti, 1966).

5. CONTEMPORARY HINDI NOVELS: FRAGMENTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD

From the 1990s onwards, the concept of motherhood in Hindi fiction became increasingly multilayered, shaped by the intersecting pressures of globalisation, urbanisation, Dalit emancipation movements, and organised women's activism. Novelists of this period moved beyond the binaries of sacrifice versus rebellion to portray motherhood in its full structural complexity.

Alka Saravagi's *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* (1998) weaves motherhood into a broader tapestry of historical memory and cultural identity. Narrated through the recollections of an elderly Marwari merchant, Kishor Babu, the novel presents the mother figure as a repository of collective cultural memory — a symbol not only of personal nurture but of communal and national continuity (Saravagi, 1998). Here, motherhood is transformed into a metaphor for cultural inheritance itself.

Chitra Mudgal's *Avan* (1999), awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003, is one of the most significant Hindi novels of the post-liberalisation era. Its protagonist Namita is simultaneously a trade union activist and a mother, and the novel's central tension arises from society's refusal to honour both identities at once. Mudgal exposes with sharp precision the social mechanisms by which the working, politically engaged mother is branded a 'bad mother' (Mudgal, 1999).

Nasira Sharma's *Shalmali* (1987) places the conflict between maternal self-sacrifice and personal dignity at its centre. *Shalmali* endures sustained humiliation for the sake of her children but ultimately places self-respect above social expectation. The novel interrogates the cultural assumption that sacrifice is the indispensable condition of motherhood.

6. THE ABSENT MOTHER AND ITS LITERARY IMPLICATIONS

A notable strand in Hindi fiction is the figure of the 'absent mother' — a presence that haunts the narrative even through physical disappearance, whether by death, migration, or abandonment. The absent mother is paradoxically one of the most powerful maternal archetypes in the literature, precisely because her absence structures everything around her.

In *Aapka Banti* (1971), *Shakun*'s departure from the family home produces a devastating psychological rupture in her son. Mannu Bhandari uses child psychology as a lens to raise the uncomfortable question: is mere physical presence sufficient for good mothering, or is emotional availability the more critical factor? The novel refuses an easy answer, holding the tension between a mother's right to selfhood and a child's need for stability.

Usha Priyamvada's *Rukogi Nahin Radhika* (1967) presents a protagonist who struggles to negotiate between professional ambition and maternal identity. In Priyamvada's world, motherhood emerges as a choice — but a choice with no neutral ground: whether Radhika chooses career or motherhood, or both, she remains accountable to a society unwilling to grant women full agency in either domain (Priyamvada, 1967).

7. DALIT AND TRIBAL PERSPECTIVES ON MOTHERHOOD

In Dalit and tribal Hindi literature, motherhood assumes yet another dimension: here, the mother's suffering is constituted by the intersection of caste, class, and gender — what contemporary feminist theory describes as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (1997) offers a searing portrayal of the Dalit mother.

Valmiki's mother endures systematic social humiliation on behalf of her family, yet continues to insist on her son's right to education and dignity. This maternal figure carries within her the liberatory pedagogy that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had identified as the only instrument of Dalit emancipation — education as the path to freedom (Valmiki, 1997; Ambedkar, 1936). Here, motherhood is simultaneously an act of survival and a political statement.

Dalit women's writing, as gathered in anthologies edited by Ramnika Gupta, consistently presents the mother not only as nurturer but as resistor. The Dalit mother risks her life to shield her children from caste violence — a motherhood that is, at its core, an existential struggle for the bare right to live (Gupta, 2003). This dimension of maternal experience is largely absent from mainstream upper-caste Hindi fiction, making its emergence in Dalit literature a significant literary-historical event.

8. CONCLUSION

A feminist rereading of Hindi novels reveals that motherhood in this literary tradition is neither monolithic nor static. From Premchand's *Dhaniya* to Maitreyi Pushpa's liberatory mother, from Mannu Bhandari's conflicted *Shakun* to Chitra Mudgal's activist Namita — the Hindi novelistic mother has been continuously reimagined, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

This transformation is not merely literary but socio-historical. As women's consciousness expanded in Indian society, Hindi novelists progressively represented motherhood in more complex, autonomous, and interrogative terms. The singular template of the 'ideal self-sacrificing mother' has given way to a plurality of maternal images: the struggling mother, the rebellious mother, the absent mother, the Dalit mother, and the self-seeking mother all now coexist within the Hindi novelistic canon.

bell hooks argued that feminism can succeed only when it takes seriously the experiences of women across different classes, castes, and communities (hooks, 2000). Understood in this spirit, the rereading of motherhood in Hindi novels is a multilayered, multi-class, and multicultural project — one that remains urgently unfinished. As long as the mother figure continues to be used as a site for the negotiation of social values in Indian culture, the critical rereading of her literary representation will remain an essential intellectual and political task.

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BIOGRAPHY

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