

## Gender Performativity and Literary Discourse in Indian English Contemporary Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

Gender is not a fixed or biologically predicated category but is instead enacted, negotiated and contested through cultural practices and through discourses. Borrowing from Judith Butler, the groundbreaking theorist on gender performativity, the paper examines the manner in which gender is represented in the Indian English fiction as performance, rather than essence. Through close readings of chosen texts, this book demonstrates how writers such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Amitav Ghosh problematise normative gender ideologies and reconfigure them in the specific context of postcolonial India of the country's more recent global avatar. The paper draws upon already existing studies and breaks new ground to move toward a review of how literary discourse has been a forum for staging out, excavating, and rethinking gender.

**Keywords:** *gender performativity, Indian English fiction, postcolonial discourse, feminist literary criticism, narrative identity*

Gender rhetoric has held a privileged position in literary studies for some time. If early feminist criticism stressed the representation of women and the politics of patriarchy, newer theories have focused on how that very category of gender is produced in and through social and cultural practices. Judith Butler's writing, notably in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), disrupted understandings of gender as simply a matter of being by arguing that it is performative: not something one "is," but something one "does" through repeated acts. Butler argues that identity as sex and gender is fundamentally produced and maintained through social acts—gestures, discourses, and rules that make particular identities intelligible while marginalizing or excluding others.

As in the Indian case, gender identity cannot be discussed independent of colonial histories, caste-based hierarchies, religious beliefs and class formations. Indian English fiction has emerged as a crucial site of confluence of these complexities, particularly since the 1990s. Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Jhumpa Lahiri, for instance, are some of the writers who privilege characters from within spaces where individuals are continuously struggling for an identity in the midst of patriarchy, postcolonialism, migration and globalization. These stories highlight the performance and critique of gender, frequently undermining a strict division between masculinity and femininity.

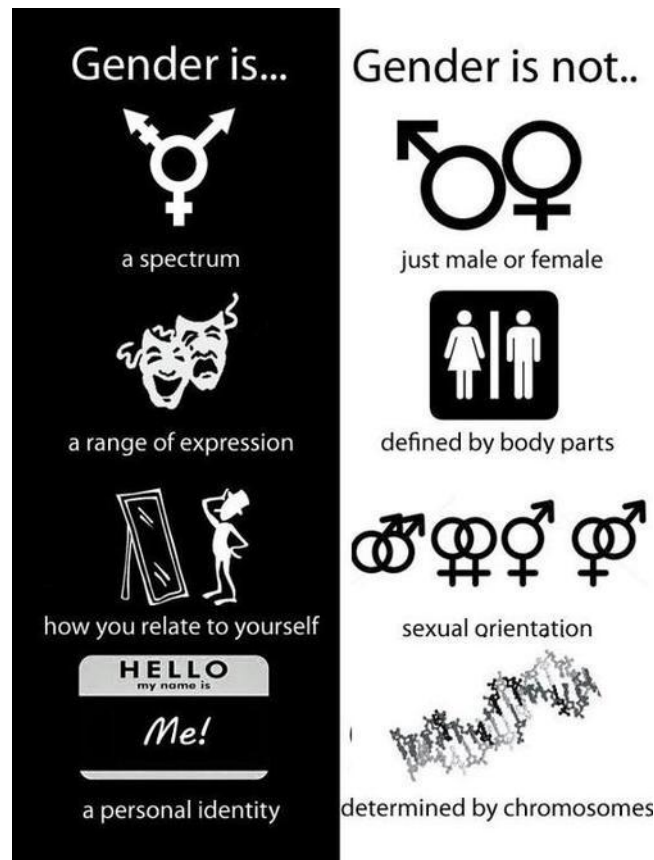
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Source: <https://performancegenderlatrobe.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/first-blog-post/>

This paper is an attempt to examine, through the lens of the theory of gender performativity, how gender identities get inscribed performatively in literary discourse in the contemporary Indian English fiction. By locating Indian narratives in the larger arena of global feminist discourses, this review project underscores the convergence sex, identity, and authority in Indian English literature.

Theorist	Relevance to Indian English Fiction
Judith Butler	Gender as performativity; destabilizing binaries
Gayatri Spivak	Subaltern and gendered silences in postcolonial discourse
Chandra Talpade Mohanty	Critique of Western feminism; contextualizing Indian gender issues

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Indian English writing has seen the changing faces since the early 19th century. English was a means of resistance and identity formation in a colonial nation for many early writers. After independence, Indian English fiction moved gradually away from nationalist issues to more intricate considerations of self and community. The genre broadened in the late 20th century to incorporate themes of globalization, migration, hybridity and gender politics.

The 1990s proved to be a turning point, both internationally and in India. The publication of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) made Indian English fiction globally

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significant and raised questions of caste, gender, and sexuality that had not hitherto been addressed in English-public literary discourse. Around the same time, diasporic voices such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai were articulating gender identities that were influenced by displacement and the effects of trans-nationalism.

Period	Literary Focus
Colonial Era	Resistance, identity formation
Post-Independence	Nationalist narratives, cultural assertion
1970s–1980s	Social realism, emergent feminist voices
1990s	Globalization, diaspora, gender politics
Contemporary	Intersectionality, performativity, hybridity

In this writerly cosmos gender was a crucial aperture of investigation. Distinct from earlier representations that sometimes-presented woman as a symbolic carrier of culture, new texts foregrounded the actual experiences of gendered subjects. These texts do not simply represent but construct gender through narrative strategy, dialogue, and characterisation. This study is situated within this tradition, and attempts to explore how literary discourse enacts and questions gender performativity in Indian English fiction.

### Justification of the Study

The rationale for this study stems from a number of interrelated shortcomings and imperatives in the literature. The first is that while Butler's gender performativity has been extensively examined in western scholars in literature and culture it has been less discussed in the context of Indian English fiction. Second, the social and cultural contexts in India are unique in the way patriarchy, caste, class, and religion intersect, thereby requiring culturally nuanced study of the way in which gender performance is made representation. Itself a race as performativity, another corpus of Indian English fiction destabilizes the conventional gender roles in the same manner and leads us for an examination of performativity. Fourthly, the nuances of intersectionality – in which acts of gendering become entangled with those around caste and class — merit more scholarly attention. Finally, the study has pedagogical implications: a literacy of gender performativity in Indian fiction affords students and scholars the critical tools to read literature not just as representation, but as identity performance.

Research Gap	Contribution of This Study
Limited application of Butler in Indian fiction	Extends Butler's theory to Indian contexts
Overemphasis on Western feminist frameworks	Locates gender within Indian socio-cultural contexts
Neglect of intersectionality	Explores caste, class, religion with gender
Scarce focus on performativity in narrative	Analyzes discourse as gendered performance
Pedagogical gap	Provides critical framework for literary studies in India

### Objectives

1. To analyze how contemporary Indian English fiction represents gender as performative acts rather than fixed identities.

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2. To identify narrative strategies employed by authors to enact or subvert gender norms.
3. To examine the intersection of gender performativity with caste, class, and religious identity in Indian narratives.
4. To explore the impact of postcolonial and transnational contexts on the performance of gender in Indian English fiction.
5. To contribute to feminist and postcolonial literary theory by situating Indian texts within global debates on performativity.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is theoretically grounded in Judith Butler's theoretical framework of gender performativity. (Gender) is one of those repetitive acts, discourses, and practices which is produced in and through that reiteration (Butler, 1990). In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) she expanded on the idea of acts by suggesting that they are limited and regulated by norms of intelligibility that determine who 'matters' as a subject. Butler's theory supplies the paradigm for which literary texts can be read as performative spaces.

More directly relevant to India, feminist scholars like Mohanty (1988), Chakravorty Spivak (1988) among others critiqued Western feminist universalism. Mohanty critiqued the creation of monolithic "Third World woman" and emphasized culture specificity of gender oppression. Spivak's concept of the subaltern and her critique of *Can the Subaltern Speak?* highlighted the regulation of marginal voices by hegemonic discourses. Both criticisms are important to situate gender performativity in Indian literature, where caste, class and colonial inheritances make gender identification problematised.

The *God of Small Things* of Arundhati Roy has been a product of wide feminist and post-colonial studies. Its complex narrative pattern, which is non-linear, as critics such as Das (2013) and Chakravarty (2019) have noted, subverts forward chronology, underscoring the breach of normative gender and caste borders. Roy's *Ammu* not only defies patriarchy, but also the social regulations of desire and agency are transgressed.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has been examined by critics such as Banerjee (2016) as a critique of globalized identities. The novel depicts characters adjusting to gender expectations in post-colonial legacies and contemporary spectacles of globalism. Desai's account reflects on the fragility of masculinity and femininity in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

Jhumpa Lahiri, and especially *The Lowland* (2013), locate gender performance within diaspora. Singh (2021) suggests, Lahiri's female protagonists subvert patriarchal and societal norms through small yet symbolic pronouncements.

Amitav Ghosh's novels have also been analyzed in relation to the figure of masculinity and gendered subjectivity. Kumar (2018) shows how Ghosh's fictions subvert colonial constructions of masculinity by depicting male protagonists grappling with vulnerability and displacement.

These interventions highlight an increasing acknowledgement of gender as performance in Indian fiction. However, there has yet to be a unified critique that explicitly synthesizes Butlerian theory with Indian English literature, on which this study is based.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative exploratory review study. The methodology is textual criticism of certain novels of the Indian English Fiction since 1990-2025. Primary texts will be Arundhati Roy's (*The God of Small Things*), Kiran Desai's (*The Inheritance of Loss*), Jhumpa Lahiri's (*Lowland*) with some works from Amitav Ghosh and Anuk Arudpragasam. This selection was made with the view that these texts have received a lot of attention in world and Indian literary dialogue and they help us address issues of gender and gendered identity.

**Ethical Approval:** The study is a literature-based review, there are no human participants. There is only one first order ethical obligation, which is to strive against inaccuracy, poor citation practices, and unfair treatment of authors' works. The article is sensitive both to textual cultural moorings and does not force universal interpretations on these texts.

### FINDINGS

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's disobedience of paternal authority serves as an exemplum of gender as performance in Roy. Not only is she violating the strictures of caste by loving Velutha, but she is intentionally acting against expectations of what it means to be a "virtuous woman" in Kerala Syrian Christian society. Echoing the transience of Lahiri's men, is her female protagonists in *The Lowland* performing gender through daily negotiations with family and diaspora responsibilities which suggest, gender identity comes (a performance) rather than as (an essence).

Narrative techniques such as fragmented chronology, multiple viewpoints and interior monologue, expose the performativity of gender. Through a non-linear and fragmented narrative technique Roy emphasizes the temporality and fragility of memory and identity. Desai employs polyphonic voices reminiscent of the shiftiness of gender roles in a global world. These methods emphasize the contingent and dynamic nature of gender.

Sex in Indian fiction is thoroughly entwined with caste and class. Caste restrictions in *The God of Small Things* magnify the policing of Ammu's gendered behavior. Banerjee (2016) suggests that Desai's story shows us how class privilege defines and delimits the possibilities for gender performance. Indian English fiction therefore emphasizes the intersecting axes that are sometimes overlooked by Western models of performativity.

**The Gender of Colonialism** The gender of colonization is enacted in multiple ways. The men in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are mindless reflections with broken masculinities wounded by the colonial emasculation. Lahiri's diasporic subjects balance gender imprints across transnational spaces, mirroring freedom as well as alienation. The writings of Ghosh emphasize that masculinity is undermined by colonial violence and migration.

Reading Butler through the lens of Indian fiction, this study illustrates how the performance of gender is not uniform, but is inflected by local cultural specifics. Indian English Fiction adds to feminist theory by showing how gender is played out-front and center-at the intersection of patriarchy, caste, class, and post-coloniality.

### CONCLUSION

The study has established that Indian English fiction in the recent times has been a veritable goldmine for enquiring into performativity of gender. Writers like Roy and Desai, Lahiri and Ghosh depict gender being lived and negotiated within complex cultural and historical

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particularities." Let me end by saying that their narrative interventions demonstrate the gender is volatile and, in their hands, deeply inflected by postcolonial and transnational forces.

Through a convergence of Butlerian theory with the Indian literary discourse this paper seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Indian English fiction does not merely mirror but re-imagines the global discussion of gender. The study highlights the need to consider performativity in relation to local cultural conditions, refusing to take a universalizing stance and accepting that some theoretical issues are held in common. Future research might also apply this analysis to other regional Indian literatures in translation, to digital narratives, and to visual culture, thereby expanding the agenda of performativity studies in South Asian milieus.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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