



THE PORTRAYAL OF THE IDEAL VS. REAL WOMAN IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A STUDY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE, R.K. NARAYAN, AND RAJA RAO

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Abstract

Indian English fiction has played a significant role in reflecting and reshaping social attitudes toward women within the Indian cultural milieu. Women characters in early Indian English novels are often portrayed through a dual lens: the ideal woman, molded by patriarchal expectations of sacrifice, chastity, and obedience, and the real woman, who embodies lived experience, emotional depth, and resistance to restrictive norms. This paper examines this duality through a close textual study of selected works by Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. Tagore presents women torn between tradition and individuality, highlighting their psychological conflicts. R.K. Narayan depicts women who appear domesticated and submissive yet demonstrate quiet resilience and agency. Raja Rao, particularly in *Kanthapura*, elevates womanhood through spiritual and mythic idealization while simultaneously portraying women as active participants in social and political movements. Using feminist and socio-cultural critical frameworks, this study argues that while the ideal woman reinforces patriarchal ideology, the real woman emerges as a transformative figure challenging social constraints. The paper contributes to feminist readings of Indian English fiction by revealing how early writers negotiated gender, identity, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Ideal Woman, Real Woman, Indian English Fiction, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Identity

Introduction

The portrayal of women in Indian English fiction reflects the complex intersection of tradition, modernity, patriarchy, and individual identity. Indian society has historically idealized women as embodiments of virtue, sacrifice, and moral strength. These ideals, deeply rooted in religious, cultural, and social practices, have shaped literary representations of women, particularly in early Indian English novels. At the same time, Indian English writers have increasingly depicted women as real individuals—thinking, feeling, questioning subjects who negotiate their existence within restrictive social structures.

The distinction between the ideal woman and the real woman is central to feminist literary discourse. The ideal woman is often portrayed as self-sacrificing, obedient, devoted to family, and morally pure, whereas the real woman represents lived female experience, marked by conflict, desire, resistance, and self-awareness. Indian English fiction, especially during the nationalist and postcolonial periods, reveals a gradual shift from idealized portrayals toward more realistic and psychologically nuanced representations of women.

This paper explores how Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao portray women in their fictional works, focusing on the tension between idealization and realism. Though differing in narrative style and ideological emphasis, these writers collectively contribute to an evolving literary discourse on womanhood. Their works reflect the changing status of women



in Indian society and anticipate feminist concerns long before the emergence of organized feminist movements in India.

Conceptual Framework: Ideal Woman vs. Real Woman

The concept of the ideal woman in Indian tradition is closely associated with patriarchal norms. She is expected to be silent, submissive, self-effacing, and devoted to male authority—first as a daughter, then as a wife and mother. Literature has often reinforced this image by glorifying female sacrifice and moral endurance.

In contrast, the real woman represents the lived reality of women who experience emotional turmoil, injustice, and internal conflict. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir argue that woman has historically been constructed as the “*Other*,” denied subjectivity and agency (Beauvoir 16). Indian English fiction reflects this tension by presenting women who either conform to or challenge traditional expectations.

The portrayal of women in the selected texts can thus be examined through a feminist lens that interrogates patriarchy, gender roles, and social conditioning. This study adopts feminist literary criticism and socio-cultural analysis to explore how women characters navigate the space between idealization and realism.

Rabindranath Tagore: Psychological Depth and Female Consciousness

Rabindranath Tagore’s portrayal of women is marked by psychological depth and emotional sensitivity. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Tagore presents women as complex individuals rather than mere symbols of virtue. His female characters often struggle between social duty and personal desire, revealing the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms.

In *The Home and the World*, Tagore presents Bimala as a woman caught between tradition and modernity. Initially confined to the domestic sphere, Bimala represents the ideal woman devoted, obedient, and sheltered. However, her exposure to nationalist politics and her emotional attraction to Sandip awaken her sense of individuality. This transformation reveals the tension between the idealized role assigned to women and their inner desires. Bimala’s conflict illustrates Tagore’s critique of rigid gender roles and highlights the psychological cost of suppressing female autonomy.

Similarly, Tagore’s women often suffer due to emotional neglect and social restrictions. They are not rebellious in the radical sense but assert their individuality through introspection and moral questioning. Tagore thus bridges the gap between ideal and real womanhood by portraying women as morally strong yet emotionally vulnerable.

Tagore’s contribution lies in humanizing women characters and foregrounding their inner lives. He challenges the patriarchal ideal not by rejecting tradition entirely but by emphasizing emotional authenticity and ethical agency.

R.K. Narayan: Domesticity and Quiet Resistance

R.K. Narayan’s portrayal of women appears conservative on the surface, as his female characters are often confined to domestic spaces. However, a closer reading reveals subtle forms of resistance and agency. Narayan’s women may conform outwardly to traditional roles, but they possess inner strength and resilience.

In *The Dark Room*, Savitri embodies the ideal woman at the beginning of the novel dutiful, submissive, and self-sacrificing. Her husband Ramani’s cruelty and infidelity expose the emotional oppression faced by women in patriarchal marriages. Savitri’s temporary withdrawal from domestic life represents a moment of rebellion against patriarchal domination. Although



she ultimately returns, her experience reveals Narayan's critique of male authority and female subjugation.

Narayan's women are not overtly feminist, but their suffering and silent endurance expose systemic injustice. In *The Guide*, Rosie challenges social norms by pursuing her passion for dance. Despite facing moral judgment, Rosie asserts her identity beyond traditional expectations of wifhood. Her journey represents the emergence of the real woman who refuses to be confined by societal norms.

Narayan's realism lies in portraying ordinary women negotiating everyday struggles. His depiction of women emphasizes emotional realism rather than ideological rebellion, making his female characters relatable and socially grounded.

Raja Rao: Myth, Spirituality, and Collective Womanhood

Raja Rao's portrayal of women is deeply influenced by Indian philosophy, mythology, and nationalism. In *Kanthapura*, women are idealized as embodiments of spiritual strength and moral purity. At the same time, Rao presents women as active participants in the nationalist movement, thereby redefining traditional womanhood.

The women of *Kanthapura*, led by characters such as Rangamma, represent collective female power. While they conform to traditional ideals of chastity and devotion, they also engage in political activism, challenging colonial authority. Rao blends mythic idealization with social realism, portraying women as both spiritual symbols and agents of change.

Rao's women are often idealized, but their participation in social movements reveals their practical strength and resilience. The novel elevates womanhood by associating it with cultural continuity and moral leadership. However, this idealization sometimes limits individual psychological depth, as women function more as collective symbols than individual subjects. Nevertheless, Rao's portrayal expands the scope of female agency by situating women at the center of social transformation. His work highlights the role of women in shaping national identity and cultural resistance.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of Tagore, Narayan, and Rao reveals both continuity and divergence in the portrayal of women. Tagore emphasizes psychological conflict and emotional authenticity, Narayan focuses on domestic realism and quiet resistance, and Rao highlights spiritual idealization and collective strength.

All three writers engage with the concept of the ideal woman shaped by patriarchal norms. However, they also depict real women who question, resist, or reinterpret these ideals. The ideal woman functions as a cultural construct that reinforces male dominance, while the real woman emerges as a site of negotiation and transformation.

The transition from idealization to realism reflects broader social changes in Indian society, including the influence of education, nationalism, and modernity. These writers anticipate feminist concerns by foregrounding women's experiences and exposing the limitations of traditional gender roles.

Feminist Implications

Although these writers are not feminist in the contemporary theoretical sense, their works contribute significantly to feminist literary discourse. By portraying women as thinking, feeling individuals, they challenge patriarchal stereotypes and open space for gender critique.



Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is socially constructed rather than biologically determined finds resonance in these texts. The female characters' struggles reveal how gender roles are imposed and internalized. Indian English fiction thus becomes a site for exploring gender identity and resistance.

The portrayal of real women in these novels lays the groundwork for later feminist writers such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Anita Nair, who explicitly address women's autonomy and empowerment.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the ideal versus real woman in Indian English fiction reflects the evolving discourse on gender and identity in Indian society. Through the works of Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, this study reveals how women characters navigate the tension between cultural expectations and individual experience.

While the ideal woman reinforces patriarchal norms of sacrifice and obedience, the real woman emerges as a complex, self-aware individual capable of resistance and transformation. These writers contribute to feminist literary tradition by humanizing women and foregrounding their lived realities.

The study underscores the importance of early Indian English fiction in shaping gender consciousness and highlights its relevance to contemporary feminist criticism. By examining the dual portrayal of women, the paper affirms literature's role in questioning social norms and advocating gender equity.

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