



From Commodity to Catalyst: Tracing the Evolution of the Daughter Archetype in Indian Fiction Across Eras

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolving representation of daughterhood in Indian literature, emphasizing its intricate relationship with themes of family, gender, marriage, and social obligation. The figure of the daughter is often caught between emotional belonging and societal expectations, historically evaluated through her connections to marriage, reproduction, domestic values, and family honour. Analyzing the works of Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* (1936), Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), the paper asserts that the literary portrayal of the daughter does not follow a linear trajectory from oppression to empowerment, but rather demonstrates a gradual change in narrative significance.

In *Godaan*, daughterhood is linked to economic vulnerability and familial duty. Conversely, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, it serves as a platform to critique gendered expectations about marriage, fertility, and female respectability. By the time of *The God of Small Things*, daughterhood is increasingly tied to themes of memory, personal subjectivity, and a critical examination of familial and social frameworks. The paper employs feminist literary criticism and postcolonial feminist theories to illustrate the shift in the daughter's role from a mere "commodity" within familial exchanges to a "catalyst" that highlights and interrogates these very structures. This transformation indicates a change in narrative agency, although it stops short of claiming full emancipation for the character. The study posits that the evolving representation of daughters in these texts marks a significant cultural commentary on the agency and significance of women in South Asian literature.

Keywords: daughterhood, Indian fiction, feminist literary criticism, patriarchy, female agency, domesticity, South Asian literature



Introduction

The daughter plays a complex and often paradoxical role in representations of Indian family dynamics, embodying both connection to her natal household and anticipation of her eventual departure. She is depicted as a source of affection and emotional intimacy, yet also exists within societal norms that dictate her marriage, domestic responsibilities, reproduction, and family honour. This duality makes the concept of daughterhood a rich lens through which Indian literature explores the intersection of familial spheres and broader social power structures.

Literary portrayals of daughters transcend mere childhood or kinship, serving as a focal point for discussions surrounding class, caste, gender, sexuality, economic fragility, and social respectability. Daughters often find their futures negotiated by parents, their bodies subject to societal reproductive norms, and their marriages framed as family matters, all while their personal choices are filtered through dominant expectations of femininity. Nonetheless, contemporary literary narratives increasingly imbue daughters with agency, allowing for critical examination and negotiation of these societal constructs.

This analysis delves into the evolving portrayal of daughters in three key works of Indian fiction: Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* (1936), Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Each text, though distinct in historical context, literary style, linguistic background, and narrative techniques, interrogates themes of family and gender within wider social power dynamics. Premchand addresses issues of rural poverty, caste, and social obligations through a lens of social realism. Markandaya explores women's experiences amid the intertwined challenges of poverty, marriage, and the transitions of rural life during industrialization. Meanwhile, Roy employs a fragmented, nonlinear narrative to probe themes of childhood, memory, caste, gender, sexuality, and family life in twentieth-century Kerala, centering on the twins Estha and Rahel alongside their mother, Ammu, and grandmother, Mammachi.

These texts collectively offer valuable insight into daughterhood as a fluid literary construct, revealing the

daughter's role as an object of familial concern, a subject shaped by social regulation, a bearer of reproductive expectations, a witness to familial strife, and a voice negotiating inherited legacies (Premchand 379; Markandaya 63; Roy 32, 134).

The central thesis of this paper posits a noteworthy evolution of the daughter archetype in Indian fiction from the early to the late twentieth century, emphasizing that this change should not be perceived merely as a linear progression from oppression to liberation. Rather, it highlights a shift from the objectification of daughters within the family context toward a growing narrative subjectivity.

In the literary work *Godaan* by Premchand, the daughter's existence is heavily shaped by economic and marital frameworks, illustrating how these structures confine her identity and agency. Conversely, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya depicts daughterhood as a pivotal point through which themes such as marriage, fertility, and female vulnerability are critically explored. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the narrative further evolves as daughterhood is linked to concepts of memory, perception, identity, and the challenging of established social boundaries.

The terms “commodity” and “catalyst,” outlined in the title, are intended to be conceptual. “Commodity” indicates how the social value of the daughter can be evaluated through factors such as marriage prospects, economic exchange, reproductive capabilities, and familial honour. On the other hand, “catalyst” pertains to the role of the daughter as an increasingly significant figure through whom the narrative critiques and exposes the societal constructs that dictate her position and experiences.

The study is framed around three critical inquiries:

1. How is the social and familial value of the daughter constructed in various periods of Indian fiction?
2. In what ways do marriage, economic dependence, reproduction, caste, and domesticity influence representations of daughterhood?
3. How does the daughter's narrative agency evolve within the selected texts across different historical contexts? (Premchand 379; Markandaya 63; Roy 32)



Daughterhood, Patriarchy, and the Question of Agency

Feminist literary criticism critically explores how literature mirrors, contests, or complicates gender structures, with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* being pivotal in understanding womanhood as shaped by social and cultural processes rather than mere biological factors. De Beauvoir's formulation of woman as the "Other"—"He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (16)—provides a framework for reading daughterhood relationally: daughters are defined through their connections to fathers, mothers, husbands, families, and communities. Her further assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (283) is useful because daughterhood is treated not as a purely biological status but as an identity produced through social expectations.

Postcolonial feminist analysis deepens this discourse, underscoring that gender cannot be appraised in isolation from historical and material contexts. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the production of a singular "Third World woman" in Western feminist scholarship, arguing that such representation overlooks differences of class, caste, religion, region, economics, and history. She describes the problem as "the production of the 'Third World woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (333). This intervention is particularly relevant to Indian literature because the daughter cannot be understood through a universal model of oppression; her position is shaped by specific familial, economic, caste, and regional conditions.

Furthermore, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's investigations into representation question how marginalized subjects are narrated within literary texts. Her distinction between "representation as speaking for" and "re-presentation as in art or philosophy" (275) directs attention to who speaks, who is spoken for, and how literary subjects are made legible. Her formulation that "the subaltern cannot speak" (308) exposes the structures through which marginalized speech may be mediated or appropriated. Thus, discussions of daughterhood must encompass both the character's position within the story and the narrative authority through which her experience is presented.

Within this analysis, agency is broadly defined rather than reduced to outright defiance. It can manifest through negotiation, reluctance, care, endurance, memory, or the ability to interpret one's situation. This prevents historical female characters from being reduced to passive victims despite limited choices.

The Daughter and the Economy of Marriage in *Godaan*

Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, published in 1936, serves as a critical examination of rural Indian life through social realism, focusing on poverty, indebtedness, caste hierarchy, and economic pressure. The novel highlights the precarious position of daughters through Rupa, whose marriage illustrates the intertwining of daughterhood with material necessity. When her marriage becomes a means of securing money, Hori objects to the implied transaction, asking whether he has reached a point where others can ask him to "sell my daughter" (Premchand 379). The phrase crystallizes the paper's idea of familial commodification: Rupa's marriage becomes inseparable from the economic survival of her household.

Hori's actions toward his daughters must therefore be contextualized within the prevailing economic realities shaping family decisions. His treatment should not be interpreted simply as individual cruelty but as a response to systemic poverty and a social paradigm in which daughters' marital arrangements affect familial economic standing. The same passage describes Rupa as his "flower of a girl" (379). Yet this emotional recognition does not free her from the material conditions governing the marriage. Affection and commodification consequently coexist within the same familial relationship.

In *Godaan*, daughterhood is not just an emotional bond; it becomes a measure of the family's economic viability. Love for daughters coexists with material calculations related to marriage and reputation. The daughter is emotionally attached to the natal household but is also prepared for departure through marriage, producing a gendered distinction in belonging and inheritance. Rupa's constrained position thus makes visible the pressure exerted by poverty on intimate decisions.



Premchand also introduces female characters such as Dhaniam, who contest patriarchal and caste authority and assert moral authority within the domestic sphere. Rupa's limited control over the economic circumstances surrounding her marriage is therefore read alongside other forms of female agency in the novel. Her later concern for her parents further complicates the idea that she remains merely an object of exchange. Daughterhood in *Godaan* thus becomes a figure through which gender, economics, marriage, and social obligation become mutually visible.

Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve*: Daughterhood, Marriage, and the Female Body

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, presents a nuanced exploration of Rukmani through a first-person narrative. The story follows her arranged marriage with Nathan and her struggle with poverty, agricultural instability, industrialization, and family loss. Central to this narrative is her daughter Ira, whose life becomes pivotal to the examination of women's vulnerability within patriarchal and economically unstable environments.

Ira's journey connects daughterhood with marriage and fertility, shifting the emphasis from the economic transaction surrounding marriage to reproductive expectations placed upon the female body. Ira's marriage initially appears to offer security, but her husband rejects her after she fails to bear a child. Rukmani's response—"you must not blame him. He has taken another woman" (Markandaya 63)—is revealing because it demonstrates how patriarchal expectations become internalized within the family. The statement shows the difficulty of imagining the husband's decision outside the accepted logic of reproduction and male entitlement.

Markandaya consequently expands familial commodification by tying a woman's social worth to fertility. Ira's infertility becomes a social judgment rather than a private condition, while her return to the natal home complicates the conventional movement of daughterhood from one household to another. The daughter expected to leave becomes a daughter who must return because the marital household no longer recognizes her value.

Despite these constraints, Ira is portrayed as more than a victim. Her care for Kuti and later for her own child

creates agency grounded in responsibility and endurance. Rukmani observes that Ira was "meant to have children" (Markandaya 22), but the novel complicates this expectation by showing Ira becoming a mother under circumstances that challenge conventional ideas of legitimate reproduction. Her nurturing capacity becomes a counterpoint to the earlier rejection that defined her as barren.

The first-person perspective, mediated by Rukmani, adds an intergenerational dimension. Rukmani's reflections on Ira reveal the structures shaping her daughter's life and the mother's recognition of their effects. Ira therefore becomes a catalyst for examining patriarchal definitions of marriage, fertility, and female worth. Her agency is expressed through care, survival, and the reconstitution of familial value after the failure of the marital arrangement.

Rahel and the Emergence of Narrative Subjectivity in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, signifies a major formal and thematic shift in narrative style and subject matter. The setting revolves around Kerala and moves between childhood and adulthood while exploring caste, gender, family structures, sexuality, political history, and memory. Rahel grows up within a fractured family marked by divorce, gender inequality, caste hierarchies, and unresolved histories. The novel's reflections on Sophie Mol's arrival emphasize that "things can change in a day" (Roy 32), establishing memory and retrospective interpretation as fundamental features of the narrative.

Rahel's importance transcends the events of her life; the narrative positions her consciousness as a lens through which the adult world is perceived and re-evaluated. Her childhood perspective reveals contradictions within adult structures of authority and respectability. The daughter therefore becomes not simply an object acted upon by family structures but a perspective through which those structures become visible.

The relationship between Rahel and her mother, Ammu, illustrates intergenerational transmission. After Ammu's marriage fails, she occupies a precarious social position, while Chacko retains greater legitimacy despite his own marital failure. Rahel inherits this gendered legacy before she can fully



comprehend it. Her position as daughter becomes a site where the consequences of female autonomy, divorce, and patriarchal double standards are remembered and interpreted.

The novel further complicates daughterhood through caste. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha crosses boundaries that the family and social order attempt to maintain. Mammachi's recollection of caste exclusion reveals that Paravans were not permitted to "touch anything that touchables touched" (Roy 134). Rahel's childhood is consequently shaped by overlapping systems of gender, caste, family, and sexuality, reinforcing the need for the intersectional and postcolonial feminist framework used here.

The formal structure enhances this evolution. Roy employs a nonlinear narrative that moves between Rahel's childhood and adulthood, making her return to Ayemenem inseparable from memories of early life. Memory becomes a means of revisiting and reinterpreting the past. Daughterhood consequently transcends a merely transitional phase and becomes an enduring facet of identity. Rahel's adult consciousness is shaped by family history, and the narrative form allows that consciousness to expose persistent gender, caste, and familial power. The daughter thus functions

increasingly as a catalyst: her perspective makes structural constraints available for scrutiny.

From Commodity to Catalyst: A Comparative Reading

A comparative reading of the three novels reveals a nuanced evolution in the narrative role of daughters. In *Godaan*, the daughter embodies economic and social responsibilities related to marriage; Rupa's proposed marriage makes visible the connection between daughterhood and debt (Premchand 379). Conversely, *Nectar in a Sieve* shifts the focus toward reproductive expectations, as Ira's husband's rejection is explicitly connected with her inability to bear children (Markandaya 63). Finally, in *The God of Small Things*, daughterhood evolves further to encompass memory, perception, identity, caste, and a critical examination of inherited social structures (Roy 32, 134). The change is therefore not from "oppression" to "freedom" but from one dominant narrative function to another: the daughter becomes progressively more central to the text's ability to reveal the structures governing her life.

The transformation can be understood through the three stages set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Evolution of the daughter archetype across the three novels

Text	Construction of Daughterhood	Dominant Structure	Form of Agency
<i>Godaan</i>	Familial and economic responsibility	Marriage, poverty, social obligation	Restricted negotiation
<i>Nectar in a Sieve</i>	Marital and reproductive identity	Marriage, fertility, poverty	Care, endurance, responsibility
<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Memory, identity, and subjectivity	Gender, caste, family hierarchy	Perception, memory, interpretation

The table should not be interpreted as evidence of a simple historical progression. The three novels share significant thematic overlaps, particularly in their portrayal of women and their evolving roles in family and social structures. Premchand's female characters exemplify different forms of resistance, while Markandaya's Ira embodies agency through care and endurance. Roy's Rahel, meanwhile, remains deeply affected by structural forces that she cannot simply escape. A crucial change across these narratives is therefore the shifting narrative role of the daughter,

transitioning from a figure whose social value is measured through marriage and reproduction to a figure whose consciousness helps expose those structures.

Rupa's marriage highlights the connection between gender and economic vulnerability, while the language surrounding the proposed marriage—Hori's fear that he is being asked to "sell my daughter" (Premchand 379)—makes the commodity metaphor explicit. Ira's rejection exposes the reproductive logic of marital



value, while Rukmani's acceptance of the husband's decision demonstrates how such norms can become normalized within the family (Markandaya 63). Rahel's reflections, by contrast, expose the enduring influences of gender, caste, memory, and family power across generations (Roy 32, 134). Consequently, the daughter's evolving social position becomes linked to the critical perspectives of the texts themselves: as her narrative significance increases, the daughter becomes increasingly capable of revealing contradictions within the social conventions that regulate her.

Beyond the Victim: Empowerment Binary

A chronological comparison of women in literature risks reductiveness when earlier works are viewed solely as representations of oppression and later ones as symbols of liberation, ultimately oversimplifying literary history. Premchand's female characters, like Dhania, display moral and emotional authority despite restrictive settings, complicating readings that depict women merely as powerless victims. Markandaya's Ira similarly exhibits agency through responsibility and care, while Roy's Rahel complicates the notion of a straightforward feminist heroine: greater narrative visibility does not equate to complete freedom. These differences support Mohanty's warning against treating women as a homogeneous category and against applying a universal model of oppression across culturally and historically distinct contexts (337–38).

The concept of negotiated agency therefore offers a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in literature. Women may assert agency through confrontation, negotiation, refusal, care, endurance, memory, reinterpretation, and alternative relationships. This framework is particularly important to postcolonial feminist literary criticism because it prevents the imposition of a singular model of liberation across diverse historical and cultural contexts. In the selected novels, the daughter need not overthrow the family to possess narrative significance; the act of perceiving, enduring, remembering, or revealing the contradictions of family life can itself become an important form of agency.

Daughterhood and Intergenerational Memory

Another important pattern connecting the three texts is the relationship between daughterhood and

generational transmission (Markandaya 63, 91; Roy 32).

Daughters inherit more than names and family relationships. They inherit expectations, memories, anxieties, and social rules (Markandaya 63; Roy 32).

Rukmani's understanding of Ira is shaped by her own experience of marriage and motherhood. Ammu's history shapes Rahel's understanding of gender and family. These relationships demonstrate that daughterhood is never entirely individual; it is produced through an intergenerational exchange of experience. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the first-person narration makes this transmission especially explicit because Ira's experience is filtered through her mother's memory and interpretation (Markandaya 63, 91). In *The God of Small Things*, Rahel's adult return to Ayemenem similarly turns childhood experience into remembered knowledge, with the narrative insisting that the past must be reconstructed and interpreted (Roy 32). The daughter therefore occupies an important position between inheritance and reinterpretation.

Yet inheritance does not necessarily mean repetition.

The daughter may inherit patriarchal expectations while simultaneously developing an awareness of their contradictions (Mohanty 336–37).

This is where the daughter becomes a catalyst.

She becomes the point at which inherited structures may be examined and potentially disrupted.

Literature is particularly suited to representing this process because narrative can move across generations and perspectives. It can show what one generation experiences, what another remembers, and what remains unresolved between them (Roy 32, 134).

The daughter consequently becomes a figure of cultural continuity as well as cultural change.

The Daughter as a Site of Negotiated Agency

This section explores the evolving representation of daughterhood in *Godaan*, *Nectar in a Sieve*, and *The God of Small Things*, framing agency not as total



freedom from patriarchal constraints but as a negotiation of identities within them.

In *Godaan*, the agency of the daughter is restricted by economic conditions and societal expectations surrounding marriage. Rupa's fate is largely dictated by her family's financial struggles and marital norms, revealing the interplay between familial affection and economic necessity. The daughter's role, though limited, illuminates the significant pressures exerted on families and the inherent inequalities in female futures, thus intertwining themes of poverty and patriarchy within Premchand's social realism.

Conversely, *Nectar in a Sieve* presents Ira's experience, wherein traditional patriarchal expectations around marriage and fertility deeply influence her identity. Despite her rejection by her husband, Ira embodies a form of negotiated agency through endurance, care, and responsibility. Her actions, while not overtly rebellious, illustrate that agency can exist in subtler forms, allowing her to maintain dignity and familial bonds amid adversity. Markandaya's narrative complicates notions of resistance, suggesting that meaningful actions under constraints are also forms of agency.

In *The God of Small Things*, Rahel's agency is closely tied to consciousness, interpretation, and memory. Through a child's eyes, she perceives the societal contradictions of caste, gender, and respectability, questioning their legitimacy. Rahel's return to Ayemenem highlights a transformative relationship with memory, where remembering becomes a means of engaging with suppressed experiences and societal constructs.

The comparative analysis of these texts proposes that agency is a continuum, from constrained negotiation in *Godaan*, to embodied endurance in *Nectar in a Sieve*, and finally to interpretive agency in *The God of Small Things*. This continuum underscores that contemporary representations of daughterhood don't entirely liberate characters from patriarchal influences. Instead, they illuminate the complexity of negotiating power dynamics. Daughterhood emerges as a critical site where inherited expectations confront individual identity, facilitating a deeper examination of social structures. The movement from being perceived as a mere commodity to becoming a catalyst signifies a

shift from being valued for societal norms to actively revealing the operations of those norms (Premchand 379; Markandaya 63; Roy 32, 134).

Conclusion

The representation of daughterhood in Indian fiction demonstrates a complex evolution in the interplay between gender, family, and narrative agency, as illustrated through a comparative analysis of Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This transformation cannot simply be categorized as a linear progression from oppression to empowerment.

In *Godaan*, daughterhood is deeply influenced by economic hardship, marriage, and familial duties. The character of the daughter highlights how poverty and patriarchal structures exacerbate each other, illustrating her entrapment within the material conditions of her household.

Nectar in a Sieve broadens this framework by presenting Ira, whose experiences shed light on the connections between marriage, female sexuality, and societal expectations regarding reproduction. Her rejection by her husband symbolizes how women's bodies can equate to social currency, yet her subsequent behaviours reveal forms of agency derived from care and familial responsibilities.

The God of Small Things presents Rahel, who embodies a further evolution of daughterhood. Her focus transcends her familial role; rather, it encompasses an awareness of the family's contradictions, explored through memory, childhood perspectives, and a nonlinear storytelling style. This approach allows daughterhood to emerge as a complex site of narrative interpretation.

The metaphor of movement from “commodity” to “catalyst” captures this transformation within literature, highlighting a shift in literary function rather than indicating complete historical liberation. The daughter transitions from being an entity valued according to societal limitations to a figure that exposes, remembers, and interrogates those limitations.

This evolution is crucial in the context of South Asian literature, illustrating how intimate familial dynamics



relate to wider issues of gender, caste, class, economic power, and cultural expectations. Consequently, the daughter emerges not merely as a victim of patriarchy or a simplistic emblem of liberation; rather, she is a dynamic literary character through whom evolving perceptions of womanhood, familial roles, and social dynamics are navigated.

The core transformation across these narratives resides in what happens through the daughter, not merely to

her. Initially treated as a figure whose worth is dictated by external forces, she gradually takes on a role that brings those forces to light, enabling the narrative to challenge existing assumptions. Thus, the daughter evolves from a commodity into a catalyst—not through the eradication of patriarchy, but through her placement in literary contexts that allow for scrutiny, interpretation, and confrontation of patriarchal structures (Premchand 379; Markandaya 63; Roy 32, 134).

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