

Redefining Femininity: Contemporary Narratives of Female Defiance in World Literature

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Abstract

For many centuries, the notion of a 'good woman' across nations has been rooted in values such as obedience, sacrifice, patience, silence, and morality.

From Sita in Ramayana to Desdemona in Shakespeare's Othello, the definition of a 'good woman' has been her act of suffering, sacrifice and endurance. The history of women can be understood through what Carl Jung calls the collective unconscious (Jung). However, this collective unconscious wasn't just a matter of the past—it exists even today, though in a different form.

Contemporary writers, especially women, have attempted to dismantle the stereotypes associated with women by presenting female protagonists in their works. They have given long-overdue, well-deserved space to women and have shown them as brave, powerful, assertive, defiant, and unapologetically flawed. Despite differences in geography, culture, and personal experiences, women writers across the world are creating a strikingly similar feminist discourse in contemporary literature.

This paper examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Indo - American), Ottessa Moshfegh (American), Bernardine Evaristo (English), and Margaret Atwood (Canadian), all belonging to different countries, are writing narratives that come together on common themes of female resistance and defiance of patriarchal norms. They have all attempted to bring women to the forefront, proving that an ideal woman is not just someone who conforms to her circumstances but one who chooses her own path and stands up for herself.

Through an analysis of selected works, this paper aims to study how these authors, despite belonging to different continents, reflect a shared struggle against gender oppression, challenging conventional representations of womanhood and attempt to create a new idea of femininity.

Keywords: Feminism, Contemporary Fiction, Female Resistance, Patriarchy, Women Writers, Gender Oppression, Female Protagonists, Stereotypes.

Introduction

The narrative of women's literature is one of struggle, progress, and metamorphosis. For centuries, female voices in writing have been suppressed or distorted through masculine lenses, with women characters often confined to roles that upheld patriarchal standards. Female authors who ventured to contest these norms frequently faced criticism, suppression, or complete exclusion from literary traditions.

Nevertheless, even when denied formal education and literary platforms, women discovered ways to share their narratives. In the 17th century, Aphra Behn emerged as one of the pioneering professional female writers in English literature to challenge conventions with works such as *Oroonoko* (1688). The subsequent centuries witnessed a growing number of women writers questioning gender norms—Jane Austen employed humour and satire in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to scrutinize matrimonial institutions, while the Brontë sisters, particularly Charlotte in *Jane Eyre* (1847), introduced female protagonists seeking independence and self-esteem. Mary Ann Evans, using a male pseudonym (George Eliot), broke with convention by producing such novels as *Middlemarch* (1871) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) that probed the intricacies of female ambition and social constraint.

As feminism gained momentum in the 20th century, so did its influence on literature. Virginia Woolf's best-known writing, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) promoted women's intellectual and creative freedom, whereas Simone de Beauvoir's iconic work *The Second Sex* (1949) laid the foundation for feminist existentialism. Writers like Sylvia Plath (*The Bell Jar*, 1963) and Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985) explored the issues of female oppression, mental health, and social expectations, revolutionizing the representation of women from passive victims to active opponents of their fate. Toni Morrison, in works like *Beloved* (1987), expressed the plight of Black women, further expanding the feminist literary movement beyond the lives of white, Western women.

In modern literature, female writers persist in challenging long-standing gender stereotypes by presenting women protagonists who are strong, complex, and assertive. The four selected writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ottessa Moshfegh, Bernardine Evaristo, and Margaret Atwood, have all added to this emerging feminist conversation. Regardless of their different backgrounds, they all take up issues of female resistance and opposition to patriarchal norms. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indo-American writer, recovers historical and mythic female characters in novels such as *The Last Queen*, while Moshfegh offers disturbing and intensely psychological female viewpoints in *Eileen*. Evaristo, in her Booker Prize-winning *Girl, Woman, Other*, interrogates the plurality of Black British womanhood, and Atwood's *The Testaments* re-explores the dystopian atrocities of gender repression that were inaugurated in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Margaret Atwood: Dystopian Feminism and Resistance in *The Testaments*

Margaret Atwood (b.1939), a Canadian poet, novelist and literary critic, has long been regarded as a key figure in feminist literature, particularly for her exploration of dystopian themes that highlight systemic oppression.

Many of Atwood's works have feminist elements in them however, *The Testaments*, which is also a 2000 Booker Prize Winner, weaves its narrative threads across gender and societal complacency. *The Testaments* is a 2019 novel of Atwood and a sequel to her earlier well-known novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel set in the 21st century, where a revolution has replaced the Government of the United States with the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic society run by radical Christian fundamentalists. The novel is narrated by Offred, a woman of 30 or so, who has been separated from her husband Luke and young daughter, and then sent to her brainwashing centre. There, she is trained to be a handmaid, obliged to serve any member of the hierarchy as birth mother of his children.

Unlike this novel, which has a constrained perspective of Offred, *The Testaments* (2019) is a narrative including multiple female voices such as Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy, who are also the narrators of the novel. It is set 15 years after *The Handmaid's Tale*. Aunt Lydia, who was earlier an enforcer of Gilead's oppressive laws is now presented as a morally complex figure who is working in the system while plotting its downfall. She is seen rescuing women from arranged marriages, bringing sexual predators to justice and compiling evidence of crimes committed by Gilead's membership. Agnes is a young woman who hails from Gilead itself and is unaware of the corruption happening in the country. As she grows up, her parents arrange for her to marry commander Judd, who is known for murdering young women. She escapes this marriage by becoming a Suppliant in the order of the Aunts and takes the name Aunt Victoria. Daisy, the third protagonist, also known as Nicole, grows up outside Gilead and presents an outsider's perspective highlighting the contrast between those conditioned by oppression and those free to resist it right from birth.

Atwood has successfully deconstructed the notion of a good woman through this novel. Traditional dystopian narratives often present women as victims of totalitarianism but Atwood's women actively resist and challenge their circumstances. By offering multiple female voices in the novel, Atwood not only expands the scope of feminist resistance but also critiques the idea that there is a singular way to be a 'strong woman.' Through this novel, she reaffirms that women's resistance is often multifaceted and complex. In *The Testaments*, a dystopian fairy tale, Margaret Atwood reveals the patriarchal nature of fairy tales by rewriting them in a postmodern feminist key and dramatizing gender politics. (Csürös)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Reclaiming Lost Histories in *The Last Queen*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b.1956) is an Indo American prolific writer, very well known for reimagining the lives of women's voices in history, particularly through works where she lends mythology, history and contemporary concerns such as *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). Amitav Ghosh, a renowned Indian author describes the latter as "One of the most strikingly lyrical voices writing about the lives of Indian women". Here, she reimagines the ancient Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata from the women's point of view. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she rewrites Ramayana bringing into life the portrayal of Sita and presenting her as a powerful woman. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, she retells the story of Mahabharata but from the point of view of Draupadi, depicting her as a courageous woman who is self-aware and knows how to stand up for herself and fight her own battles.

Through her novel *The Last Queen* (2021), Chitra Banerjee brings to life the story of Maharani Jindan Kaur, the last queen of Punjab. Conventionally, she is known as the wife of powerful king Maharaja Ranjit Singh. However, this novel is the story of Jindan Kaur, right from her childhood, the struggles she faced while growing up and when she got married to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Instead of depicting women characters as passive supporters or tragic figures,

Chitra Banerjee gives a life to her women characters, bringing them to the forefront and giving them a voice that was silenced for centuries. She presents Jindan Kaur as a powerful leader, a fierce mother, and a woman who sternly defied British rule at a time when women's presence and agency was barely recognised. Jindan Kaur, who was the daughter of the royal kennel keeper, fought many battles on the battlefield and within her heart. It was her inner strength that kept her going even after her husband Maharaja Ranjit Singh passed away. When this tragic event happened, many queens, following custom, chose to commit *sati* and end their lives with their '*sarkar*'. However, Jindan chose to live, not just for her son, but also for herself, for she understood that she was meant for greater causes. She remains resolute, embodying a version of femininity that is unapologetically assertive and defiant.

The story of Jindan Kaur can also be compared to Hilary Mantel's reimagining of Thomas Cromwell's world in *Wolf Hall* (2009) as Divakaruni is also reconstructing history through a feminine lens, ensuring that Jindan's struggles and triumphs are not merely footnotes but central to the narrative. Through this novel, Divakaruni adds to the ever-evolving discourse of feminist literature by establishing that strength, intelligence, and leadership are not the exclusivity of males. Jindan Kaur emerges not as a victim of history but as the maker of history in the making. Therefore, *The Last Queen* indeed becomes a great addition to the literary corpus of working towards reclaiming the female voice.

Bernardine Evaristo: Intersectionality and Multivocal Feminism in *Girl, Woman, Other*

Bernardine Evaristo (b.1959) is a renowned English author and academic. Her works span the genres of fiction, short fiction, poetry, essays, literary criticism and more. She herself defines her writing style as "fusion fiction" where she attempts to mix things up temporally, spatially, and stylistically.

Her most famous work *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is a groundbreaking novel that redefines feminist narratives through its intersectional approach. Conventionally, literary works primarily focus on the life of one lead character or protagonist, mostly male, however, this work presents a polyphonic structure, giving voice to twelve distinct women—Black, queer, working-class, middle-class, immigrants, and non-binary individuals—who challenge the rigid stereotypes of what it means to be a woman. The novel surpasses the simple idea of female oppression and discusses a spectrum of struggles, identities and triumphs making it one of the most significant contemporary feminist texts.

Girl, Woman, Other is about womanhood and the process of becoming an adult. In doing so, each woman shares how she has been othered whether on account of class, race, sexuality and/or some other dimension. These narratives, all about British Black women, illustrate how diverse their experiences and their narratives are, even as they have a commonality of being Black women.

Evaristo's characters do not conform to traditional notions of the 'good woman.' They are flawed, complex, and fiercely individualistic. Amma, a lesbian playwright, grapples with her radical past and mainstream success, questioning whether she has compromised her ideals. Dominique, another key figure, escapes an abusive same-sex relationship and finds empowerment in a feminist commune. Shirley, a conservative schoolteacher, rejects her working-class roots and resists being identified as a Black feminist, showcasing the internalized contradictions within feminism itself. Each character disrupts the expectation that women should be docile, morally upright, or bound by a single mode of existence.

The novel is known for its fluid style and the lack of conventional punctuation which also syncs with the identities of characters in the novel. Evaristo's experimental form challenges the traditional literary norms and aligns with feminist linguistic studies that emphasize how language itself can be a tool of oppression or liberation. The novel also successfully goes beyond the traditional feminist literary canon and a Western, white, middle-class perspective. It embraces the multiplicity of experiences, arguing that gender cannot be discussed in isolation

from race, class, and sexuality. In doing so, she asserts that the fight for women's equality is not a monolithic struggle but one that must recognise and include diverse voices. This book, therefore, is not only a rejection of the 'good woman' notion but also a celebration of the women in all their contradictory, and complex realities.

Otessa Moshfegh: The Antiheroine and the Grotesque in *Eileen*

Otessa Charlotte Moshfegh (b.1981) is an American author whose best-known works include the novels *Eileen* (2015) and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). *Eileen* was her debut novel. It was also made into a movie in 2023, earning her even more fame. The book features one of the most transgressive female protagonists in contemporary literature, subverting traditional femininity, morality, and likability. Contrary to the self-denying, morally upright woman that has been glorified in literary and historical accounts, Eileen Dunlop is a discomfiting, deeply imperfect, and gruesomely authentic figure. Through her, Moshfegh deconstructs the cliché of the 'good woman' and instead gives us a woman who is resentful, stifled, and obsessed with dark fantasies—yet irresistibly captivating.

Set in the 1960s, *Eileen* follows the life of its eponymous narrator, a socially isolated young woman working at a juvenile correctional facility. Living in a decaying home with her abusive, alcoholic father, Eileen is filled with self-loathing, resentment, and disturbing thoughts that run counter to traditional feminine ideals of warmth and nurturing. She is obsessed with her own body's filthiness, engages in voyeuristic behavior, and fantasizes about escape—though she is unable to act until a new woman, the glamorous Rebecca, enters her life. But whereas in most narratives female bonds result in empowerment or solidarity, this one rather propels Eileen into moral ambiguity, ending in a violent act and liberation.

Moshfegh's own writing style—unflinching, bodily, and willfully uncomfortable—is reflective of the novel's thematic refusal of sentimentalized representations of women. In contrast to the heroines of traditional feminist fiction, like Jane Eyre or Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Eileen is not a woman demanding justice or acknowledgment; she is merely struggling to exist in a world that has dehumanized her. In doing so, Moshfegh is more aligned with modern writers such as Gillian Flynn (*Gone Girl*), who champion the concept of the 'unlikable woman'—the female protagonist who will not do what society deems as right and beautiful.

What makes *Eileen* a feminist classic is its refusal to give us an aspirational heroine. Rather, Moshfegh makes us confront a protagonist who is unlikable yet profoundly human, defying the assumption that women need to be sympathetic or morally good in order to be worth writing about. In so doing, *Eileen* broadens the feminist literary canon by demonstrating that resistance to patriarchal norms can manifest in a variety of ways—even those that are unpleasant, messy, and transgressive.

Implications for Feminist Literature and Future Directions

The feminist writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Otessa Moshfegh, Bernardine Evaristo, and Margaret Atwood point to a defining turn in twenty-first-century fiction. While initial feminist works such as of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir established a groundwork for questioning the gender-roles, twenty-first-century women authors pushed the conversation forward by diversifying feminist experiences and challenging the multi-faceted nature of womanhood beyond an individualised context.

Perhaps the most important work these authors have done is breaking down the monolithic vision of a feminist heroine. Traditional feminist works tended to focus on the experience of white, middle-class women, but postmodern feminist literature shows a greater and more diverse range. Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is a groundbreaking effort to represent Black British women of all classes and ages. Atwood, while widely renowned for her dystopian novels, particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, continues to explore how

institutional power exploits differences among women. Moshfegh's Eileen resists not only patriarchal norms but also the literary convention of likable female heroes. Likewise, Divakaruni, in *The Last Queen*, retells historical narratives and restores voice to women who were erased or diminished in male-patriarchal retellings.

The future of feminist fiction seems to be turning more toward increasing diversity and subversion of conventional storytelling methods. The increasing number of contemporary writers, including writers from underrepresented communities, are deconstructing the traditional feminist narratives to make room for new voices and perspectives. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), Roxane Gay (*Difficult Women*), and Celeste Ng (*Little Fires Everywhere*) follow this line of tradition in their writing by exploring how race, class, sexuality, and nationality shape women's lives.

Also, with the advent of digital storytelling and social media, feminist stories are no longer relegated to traditional publishing. Online platforms have enabled the proliferation of new voices, thus establishing a democratized medium where women's stories can be disseminated far and wide and in an instant. This development points to the next wave of feminist literature not only challenging traditional publishing conventions but also reshaping how literature is consumed.

Conclusion

The development of feminist literature captures the continuous struggle for gender equality and the ever - evolving landscape of women's roles in society. By examining the works of Divakaruni, Moshfegh, Evaristo, and Atwood, it becomes apparent that contemporary literature is no longer just resisting the existing patriarchal norms in society, but it is also about reimagining the very essence of narratives. These authors distort the conventional narratives by describing women not in terms of their suffering, submission, or virtue but by their courage, self-awareness, agency, and resistance.

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While traditional literature often celebrated the 'good woman' as one who endures, contemporary feminist fiction refuses to accept endurance as a woman's defining trait. While Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revives forgotten historical heroines in many of her works, Moshfegh crafts unsettling and consequently unlikable protagonists, Evaristo presents experimental and challenging narratives of diverse experiences, and Atwood envisions dystopian worlds that mirror our own societal structures.

However, feminist literature is not static. It is an ever-evolving genre that is constantly pushing its own boundaries and experimenting and exploring new things. In whatever literary form - historical novel, psychological thriller, nonlinear narrative, speculative dystopias, feminist writers will continue to reshape the literary canon and make space for themselves.

Therefore, modern feminist fiction is not a matter of replacing one archetype with another. It is a matter of deconstructing the notion that women should fit into predetermined roles altogether. And as more and more voices add to this ongoing discourse, the feminist narrative will continue to evolve, change, and challenge the boundaries of literature itself demonstrating that the 'good woman' is not one who stays within the guidelines but one who has the courage to rewrite them.

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