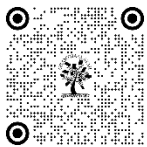


# REIMAGINING THE FEMININE VOICE: ANALYZING WOMEN'S AGENCY IN LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ARUNDHATI ROY AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

S Meena Priya dharshini <sup>1</sup>✉, S Moorthi <sup>2</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor and Head i/c in Women's Studies, Mother Teresa women's University, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor in English, Sree Sevugan Annamalai College, Tamil Nadu



## Corresponding Author

S Meena Priya dharshini,  
[drmeenapriyadharshini@gmail.com](mailto:drmeenapriyadharshini@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is devoted to the transformation of female voices and power in the art of Virginia Woolf and Arundhati Roy, paying attention to their different but complementary contributions to English literature. Woolf, who is the first modernist female author, dismantles the mechanisms of male domination and argues for the intellectual and financial autonomy of women, as in *A Room of One's Own*. Roy, in her postcolonial magnum opus *The God of Small Things*, explores the socio-political space of India to give a portrayal of the women whose voices are suppressed and the subversive ones. This analysis, by comparing Woolf's 20th-century demand for the inclusion of women in the literary field with Roy's 20th-century questioning of gender, caste, and colonial heritage, shows how women's voices in English literature have changed over time. Using feminist and postcolonial approaches, the work brings out the authors' ways of restructuring subjectivity through the narrative form, the use of language, and resistance. At the same time, the paper shows that Woolf and Roy create connections across time and culture as they see new possibilities for gender egalitarianism and literary representation.

**Keywords:** Feminine Agency, Postcolonial Literature, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Narrative Resistance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of women's expressions in literature as a living reality has been a dynamic, facing the changing socio-political landscapes and cultural contexts in which they were written. Virginia Woolf, a forerunner of modernist literature, and Arundhati Roy, a well-known figure in postcolonial literature, are replicas of the critical points in the development of the women's voice exploring. Woolf, with her first major achievements, e.g. *A Room of One's Own* (1929), recognizes the deep-rooted obstacles women run into while trying to achieve free expression in the intellectual spheres. By way of hypothetical space, through one such room, women can receive both the opportunity to be the writings and copies as well as the room as a metaphor. And Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) describes the dire aspects of postcolonial India such as gender and caste and the ways in which women survive oppression and are able to express themselves in such situations.

On the contrary, sometimes, the different periods and places that Woolf and Roy lived through Passed differently and circumstanced divergently, or they were limited by or had many chances". However, the main idea of their works—a feminist approach that entails the courtship of the feminine literary voice—is the ground of such identities for both. Woolf's self-conflicting plays along with Roy's info stories shedding light on the resistance and subversion of women in patriarchal societies. The research, by comparing them, aims to demonstrate how English literature functions politically and sociologically to challenge existing worldviews, to surround marginalized voices, and to assist social transformation.

The very space of women's words, in spite of the ways they differ in the times and cultures concerned, unified Woolf and Roy in their own point of view towards the issue of the female voice. Woolf's and Roy's emotional prose and Raj's description of his own painful imagination by hearing birds and the voice of nature all around his mind provide an echo of the two authors' converging viewpoints onto the topic. Sustainability is the final aim of the project which does not stray from the broad goals of the Collegiate Researcher of sustainability and engagement. Focusing mainly on feminist and postcolonial theories will enable the paper to realize the understandable language that the afore-stated authors today create and to recognize their eternal imprint in the discourse of gender progression and representation.

## **2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

The representation of women's agency in literature has long been a topic of exploration, particularly through the lens of feminist theory and postcolonial studies. Both Virginia Woolf and Arundhati Roy have contributed significantly to these fields, albeit within their respective contexts. Their works engage with the complexities of gender, identity, and resistance, addressing how women challenge patriarchal norms and societal structures.

### **2.1. VIRGINIA WOOLF AND FEMININE AGENCY**

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is one of the seminal texts in feminist literary theory. Woolf argues that a woman must have financial independence and personal space to create art, which directly addresses the material and intellectual barriers women face in a patriarchal society. Woolf's exploration of women's struggle for creative and intellectual freedom reflects the broader societal constraints placed upon women. In her essay, she states that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," emphasizing the need for autonomy (Woolf, 1929). Scholars like Showalter (1977) and Cott (1987) further build on Woolf's arguments by analyzing the historical and social conditions that have hindered women's voices in literature. Showalter, in particular, highlights how Woolf's modernist techniques subverted conventional narrative forms to reflect the complexities of women's inner lives and experiences (Showalter, 1977).

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) also connects with Woolf's ideas by exploring the performative nature of gender and how societal norms restrict women's identities. Woolf's own works, especially her novels, serve as a counter-narrative to these norms, illustrating how women navigate and subvert patriarchal structures. Woolf's portrayal of women as active agents of resistance in works like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) exemplifies her vision of women as both intellectual and emotional beings, capable of challenging traditional gender roles (Butler, 1990).

### **2.2. ARUNDHATI ROY AND POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) offer rich portrayals of women's agency in postcolonial India, addressing issues of caste, gender, and colonial history. Roy's fiction situates women in environments of intense social and political constraints, yet the female characters in her novels navigate these oppressive structures in ways that reveal their agency. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy explores the intersections of caste and gender, depicting women who both internalize and resist the societal expectations placed upon them. As Bose (2009) notes, Roy's portrayal of the oppressed women in her works is deeply tied to the socio-political landscape of postcolonial India, where women must contend with both historical and contemporary patriarchal forces.

Nair (2005) adds that Roy's characters embody resistance, whether through silence, defiance, or the reclaiming of their identities. For instance, in *The God of Small Things*, the character of Ammu resists the caste and gender barriers imposed upon her, challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to silence her. This resistance is central to the novel's feminist narrative, as it addresses the intersections of caste and gender, demonstrating how these two forces combine to shape women's lives in postcolonial India.

### 2.3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: WOOLF AND ROY ON WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

While Woolf and Roy lived in different historical and cultural contexts, both authors address the challenges women face in patriarchal societies and offer narratives of resistance. Woolf's modernist techniques, which disrupt linear time and narrative coherence, reflect the fragmented and multifaceted experiences of women within patriarchal structures. Roy, on the other hand, incorporates the colonial and postcolonial context into her feminist critique, showing how colonial histories and caste systems intersect with gendered oppression. According to Mishra (2006), Roy's works reflect a "double marginalization" of women—first through colonialism and then through patriarchy, which compels women to resist on multiple fronts.

Basinger (2018) observes that both Woolf and Roy explore the psychic and emotional landscapes of women, delving into the complexities of female subjectivity and how women's voices are often silenced in both the literary and socio-political domains. The resistance of female characters in their works serves not only as a personal act of defiance but also as a broader critique of social norms. This resistance is political, as it challenges the structures that perpetuate women's oppression, whether in the form of intellectual confinement (Woolf) or social and caste-based exclusion (Roy).

### 2.4. OBJECTIVES

The major objectives of this paper are

- To explore the dynamic evolution of women's expression in literature, particularly through the socio-political and cultural contexts that have shaped women's ability to express themselves, with a focus on Virginia Woolf and Arundhati Roy.
- To analyze how both authors contribute to feminist literary theory by examining Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*, identifying the obstacles women face in achieving free expression and how they resist patriarchal norms.
- To compare the effects of diverse historical and cultural conditions on women's voices, reflecting on how Woolf and Roy, through their unique contexts, portray women's struggles and resistance in patriarchal societies.
- To investigate the intersection of gender and caste in Roy's work and explore Woolf's treatment of women's intellectual and social freedom, highlighting how both authors undermine the oppressive systems that restrict women.
- To demonstrate the political and sociological impact of women's literary voices, showcasing how Woolf and Roy challenge dominant worldviews, amplify marginalized voices, and contribute to social transformation through feminist and postcolonial perspectives.

### 3. FEMININE AGENCY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MODERNIST FRAMEWORK

Virginia Woolf is one of the most significant figures in modernist literature, and she explores the concept of feminine agency within her works in a very intricate way. The core of her modernist approach is that women's intellectual and creative potential has been historically suppressed by patriarchal societal structures. Woolf challenges these structures by advocating for women's autonomy in both the domestic and intellectual realms. In her seminal work *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she famously argues that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," emphasizing the necessity of physical and mental space for women to express themselves freely. The exploration of the inner lives of women, as depicted in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), throws further light on the complexities of feminine identity in a world governed by gendered expectations. The representation of women's psychological and emotional experiences also portrays Woolf's work as a presentation of feminine agency.

Through the stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf enters the minds of her female characters and depicts the clash between societal restrictions and individual desires. Characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are women who strive for self-actualization and artistic expression but are simultaneously confronted with the dual pressures of societal expectations and the constraints of their gender roles. Woolf's modernist style, which often breaks with traditional narrative forms, is an innovative way to articulate the complexity and fluidity of feminine

experience. In Woolf's writings, feminine agency is not only an individual struggle but also a collective attempt to counter and change the patriarchal structures that enclose and limit women's potential.

Her emphasis on the need for women to carve out spaces for themselves—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—remains a powerful call for gender equality and women's liberation. By analyzing the modernist framework of Woolf's works, we gain insight into the evolution of feminine agency in literature, and how it continues to resonate in contemporary discussions on gender and identity.

### 3.1. REWRITING WOMEN'S VOICES IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S POSTCOLONIAL LANDSCAPE

Arundhati Roy, a prominent figure in postcolonial literature, redefines the portrayal of women's agency in her works, particularly *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Roy's novels offer a complex depiction of women navigating the intersections of gender, caste, and resistance within the postcolonial context of India. In *The God of Small Things*, the character of Ammu defies the rigid social structures imposed upon her due to her caste and gender, and her tragic life reflects the consequences of breaking those boundaries. Roy highlights how women's agency in a postcolonial society is often stifled by both colonial legacies and deeply entrenched societal norms, especially in relation to caste and gender.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands her exploration of women's agency by presenting a diverse array of female characters who resist oppression in various forms. Through figures such as Anjum, a transgender woman, and the women who navigate the fraught political landscapes of Kashmir, Roy underscores how resistance is multifaceted and shaped by the intersections of identity. Roy's narrative technique, weaving together multiple voices and timelines, enables her to construct a complex portrait of feminine resistance that is not only an individual struggle but also a collective endeavor against the systemic forces of patriarchal and colonial rule.

### 3.2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: FEMININE RESISTANCE ACROSS TIME AND CONTEXT

A comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf and Arundhati Roy highlights how both authors depict women challenging patriarchal norms, albeit through distinct historical and cultural lenses. Woolf, writing in early 20th-century Britain, focuses on intellectual and emotional liberation in a society that limits women's access to education, employment, and creative expression. Her works, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, portray women who seek autonomy in spaces that are intellectually and physically constricted. Woolf's modernist narrative style, including stream-of-consciousness and fragmented structures, reflects the complexity of feminine resistance, offering a deep psychological exploration of women's inner lives and their confrontation with external societal pressures.

In contrast, Roy's works engage with the postcolonial landscape of India, where resistance is intricately tied to issues of caste, colonial legacy, and gender. While Woolf focuses primarily on the intellectual and artistic autonomy of women within Western patriarchal structures, Roy's portrayal of resistance is deeply rooted in the cultural and socio-political realities of postcolonial India. Both authors, however, share a common theme: the struggle for women to assert their voices in a world that marginalizes and silences them. Despite the temporal and cultural differences between their works, both Woolf and Roy illustrate that feminine resistance is a continuous process—one that involves not only breaking free from societal constraints but also reshaping the very structures that define women's roles in their respective societies.

## 4. SUMMATION

In conclusion, both Virginia Woolf and Arundhati Roy provide profound insights into the complexities of feminine agency, each navigating different socio-cultural landscapes yet united by a shared commitment to challenging patriarchal norms. Woolf, through her modernist framework, offers a critique of the intellectual and societal constraints placed on women in early 20th-century Britain. Her exploration of women's psychological and emotional landscapes in works like *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway* emphasizes the necessity of personal and intellectual space for women to express themselves fully. On the other hand, Roy's postcolonial narrative in *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* explores how women resist not only gender-based oppression but also the layers of social inequality imposed by caste and colonial legacies.

Through their distinct styles and historical contexts, both authors highlight the central role of women's voices in shaping social transformation. Woolf's focus on the intellectual autonomy of women and Roy's depiction of multifaceted

resistance demonstrate how women, across different times and places, confront the systems that attempt to silence them. The comparative analysis of Woolf and Roy reveals that while their specific struggles and cultural contexts may differ, the overarching theme of feminine resistance is universal.

Ultimately, their works contribute significantly to feminist literary discourse by illustrating the ongoing battle for women's autonomy, voice, and recognition within a patriarchal world. Both authors leave an indelible imprint on the feminist literary canon, encouraging future generations to continue questioning and challenging the structures that seek to limit women's agency.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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