



Research Article

Narratives of Loneliness and Emotional Survival in Indian Women's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the pervasive theme of loneliness and the strategies of emotional survival in Indian women's fiction, tracing its evolution from the psychological explorations of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande to contemporary voices such as Banu Mushtaq, Anisha Lalvani, and Alina Gufran. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, the paper argues that loneliness in this literary tradition functions not merely as a personal emotional state but as a structural condition produced by patriarchal institutions, cultural dislocation, and the psychic costs of negotiating tradition and modernity. The study analyses how women writers depict the manifold manifestations of female isolation—within marriage, family, urban spaces, and diaspora—and the diverse strategies of survival their protagonists employ, ranging from psychic withdrawal and creative expression to small acts of defiance and self-destruction. Special attention is paid to the emergence of Dalit and Muslim women's voices that foreground how caste and religious identity compound the experience of loneliness. The paper concludes that Indian women's fiction offers a vital counter-narrative to romanticised depictions of womanhood, illuminating the quiet, often invisible labour of emotional survival in contexts that systematically deny women autonomous subjectivity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Loneliness emerges as one of the most persistent and resonant themes in Indian women's fiction, a narrative preoccupation that spans the evolution of the genre from its mid-twentieth-century emergence to its contemporary manifestations. Unlike loneliness understood merely as a personal emotional state, the loneliness depicted in this literary tradition is structural and systemic—a condition produced by patriarchal institutions, cultural dislocation, and the profound psychic costs of negotiating the competing demands of tradition and modernity. The loneliness of the Indian woman in fiction is not incidental but integral to her condition; it is the texture of her daily existence, the silence that surrounds her speech, the space between her desires and the roles she is permitted to inhabit.

This paper traces the narratives of loneliness and emotional survival in Indian women's fiction, examining how women writers have represented the manifold forms of female isolation and the diverse strategies of survival their protagonists employ. From the psychological interiority of Anita Desai's alienated heroines to the quiet resilience of Banu Mushtaq's Muslim women, from the urban anomie of Anisha Lalvani's young protagonist to the diasporic dislocation of characters caught between cultures, Indian women's fiction offers a sustained meditation on what it means to be alone—and to survive—in worlds that deny women autonomy, voice, and recognition.

Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, this paper argues that narratives of loneliness in Indian women's fiction function as critiques of patriarchal structures, exposing how marriage, family, and social institutions systematically isolate women. At the same time, these narratives illuminate the strategies of emotional survival that women develop—strategies that range from psychic withdrawal and creative expression to small acts of defiance and, in some cases, self-destruction. The paper further argues that contemporary voices—particularly Dalit and Muslim women writers—have expanded the genre's exploration of loneliness by foregrounding how caste, religious identity, and class compound the experience of isolation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Theorizing Loneliness and Survival

2.1 Loneliness as Structural Condition

Feminist scholarship has long recognized that women's loneliness is not merely personal but structural. As one critic observes of Shashi Deshpande's work, "women work round the clock but they are not given due regard, they remain a stranger in their family. They struggle between the dual identities and can't associate with any". This insight—that women experience a fundamental estrangement within their own families—is central to understanding the loneliness depicted in Indian women's fiction.

The loneliness of the Indian woman, as represented in fiction, is rooted in her position within patriarchal structures that define her primarily in relation to others—as daughter, wife, mother—while denying her autonomous selfhood. This structural condition produces what might be called "intimate alienation": the experience of being alone even within the closest

relationships, of inhabiting a home that is not truly one's own. Deshpande's narrator captures this paradox memorably when she reflects on being "an outsider in my own home" and asks, "Have they locked me out or have I locked myself in?"

2.2 Emotional Survival and Resilience

The concept of emotional survival is central to understanding how women characters navigate the loneliness that structures their lives. Rather than depicting passive victimhood, Indian women's fiction often portrays women who develop complex strategies for enduring and, in some cases, resisting their condition. Survival, in this context, takes many forms: it may involve psychic withdrawal, as in Anita Desai's Nanda Kaul, who retreats to a solitary existence in the hills of Kasauli; it may involve creative expression, as in the figure of the writer-protagonist; or it may involve small, defiant acts of refusal.

Banu Mushtaq's work exemplifies how Indian women's fiction portrays survival as a form of quiet resistance. As one critic notes, Mushtaq's stories "resist the temptation to romanticize women's struggles" and instead show "the fragile negotiations of power, survival, and hope". The women in her stories "never forget what their lives could have been or still might be"—a consciousness of possibility that sustains them even in the face of oppression.

2.3 The Psychic Costs of Patriarchal Structures

Indian women's fiction has been particularly attentive to the psychic costs of living within patriarchal structures. As one study of Anita Desai's work notes, she "is deeply concerned with the outer world" but explores "the fears, turmoils, doubts, and frustrations" of her characters, "probing into the dark interior of human psyche". Desai's protagonists experience loneliness not simply as social isolation but as a condition of being—a fundamental alienation from self and world that can lead to madness or death.

The psychic costs of patriarchy are vividly depicted in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, where the protagonist Maya's loneliness and marital dissatisfaction drive her to psychosis. As one analysis notes, "She has no peace or satisfaction at all since her husband is aloof, lethargic, and unfeeling. He doesn't comprehend her sentiments or distress. The outcome is that she turns psychotic and commits suicide". This trajectory—from loneliness to madness to death—represents one extreme of the emotional survival narrative, raising questions about the limits of endurance and the violence that structures women's lives.

3. Loneliness in Marriage and Domestic Space

3.1 The Alienated Wife

One of the most persistent representations in Indian women's fiction is the loneliness of the wife within marriage. The marital home, ostensibly a space of intimacy and companionship, becomes a site of profound isolation, as women find themselves cut off from their husbands by emotional distance, lack of communication, and the gendered division of labor and experience.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) offers a paradigmatic depiction of marital loneliness. The protagonist, Sita, is "a sensitive over-emotional, middle-aged woman saddled with four children" who "feels alienated from her husband and children". Her husband, Raman, is characterized by "practical, commonsense approach to life" and "regarded [people] with little humour and with restraint". The gulf between their temperaments—Sita's explosive emotionality and Raman's stolid pragmatism—makes genuine communication impossible. As one analysis notes, "Raman and Sita's attitudes are different towards life. Sita finds her life futile and hollow. Raman's approach towards life is realistic".

Deshpande's short story "The Inner Rooms" depicts a similar dynamic, where the narrator describes her husband's obliviousness to her emotional needs: "He sits and listens to music every night. I lie on my bed, eyes open, listening to the music streaming across the dark. I cannot understand this music; it is as incomprehensible to me as he is". The image of two single beds as "two islands that nothing can bridge" powerfully conveys the chasm between husband and wife.

3.2 The Instrumentalization of Women's Bodies

A recurring theme in narratives of marital loneliness is the instrumentalization of women's bodies—the reduction of women to vehicles for male desire and reproductive labor. Deshpande's story "My Beloved Charioteer" depicts a newlywed woman whose husband intrudes upon her privacy without regard for her feelings: "At last, mercifully, it was over, my body having helped him by some strange instinct beyond and outside me. And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself". This violation is compounded by the husband's immediate retreat into sleep, reinforcing the woman's experience of being used rather than loved.

The theme of reproductive coercion appears in Deshpande's "Death of a Child," where a wife is pressured to bear a third child despite being "not prepared mentally and physically". When she expresses her reluctance, her husband dismisses her concerns: "It is quite simple really- having a child. What's complicated about that?". The wife's anguished response—"I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed...any cow, any bitch can breed"—highlights the dehumanization implicit in this expectation.

3.3 The Elderly Widow's Loneliness

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) explores a different dimension of female loneliness: the isolation of the elderly widow. Nanda Kaul, the novel's protagonist, has retreated to a solitary existence in the hills of Kasauli after a lifetime of service to her family. Her loneliness is chosen and self-imposed—a strategy of survival after years of "mimicry, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess" of her married life. As one critic notes, Nanda Kaul's "married life with her husband was full of long suffering with obligations and duties of her position without any adoration attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish, infidel husband".

Yet Nanda Kaul's chosen isolation is fragile, threatened by the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka. The novel explores the tension between the desire for solitude and the human need for connection—a tension that remains unresolved. The fire at the novel's end, set by Raka, is a symbolic destruction of the old, meaningless life Nanda Kaul has constructed.

4. Urban Loneliness and the Anomie of Modernity

4.1 The City as Site of Isolation

Contemporary Indian women's fiction has increasingly explored loneliness as a condition of urban life. The city, with its anonymity, its brutal inequalities, and its illusion of freedom, becomes a site of profound isolation for women protagonists. As one review of Anisha Lalvani's *Girls Who Stray* (2025) notes, the novel "paints the city not just as a backdrop but as an active, breathing force—one that shapes, consumes, and mirrors the protagonist's own turmoil".

The protagonist of *Girls Who Stray*, a nameless 23-year-old woman, experiences the loneliness of urban existence acutely. Her "aimless wandering," her "strategic stalking," her "nights of partying and drinking," and her "endless hours spent in coffee houses" are described as "both an escape and a declaration, a way of navigating a city that refuses to make space for her". The novel captures "the loneliness and alienation that shroud the city and the protagonist".

4.2 The Exhaustion of Contemporary Womanhood

Alina Gufran's debut novel *No Place to Call My Own* (2025) explores the loneliness of the contemporary woman who attempts to make a living from art in a society still stuck in patriarchal mindsets. The protagonist, Sophia, is "a single child of an Arya Samaji mother and a Sunni Muslim father," whose "half-Hindu identity" and "NRI privileges cannot shield her" when communal violence erupts. She belongs nowhere—"not Muslim enough" for Dubai, not authentically Indian enough for Delhi's film circles.

The novel "perfectly captures the exhaustion of contemporary women," depicting a protagonist who struggles with "the hurt and unresolved trauma" she carries. Sophia's loneliness is compounded by her financial precarity, her professional failures, and the difficulty of finding housing as an unmarried woman who smokes and brings men home. The novel's title—*No Place to Call My Own*—captures the fundamental rootlessness of her existence.

4.3 The Loneliness of the Diaspora

Diasporic Indian women's fiction explores a distinctive form of loneliness: the isolation of the immigrant caught between cultures. As one analysis notes, characters in these narratives face "dual worlds" and "two incompatible cultures" that leave them feeling "neither English nor Indian".

The loneliness of the diasporic woman is vividly depicted in Deshpande's story "Ghosts," where a young married woman who has moved to England with her husband experiences profound isolation. "Women feel alienated in their native place but her condition is worse as people do not communicate with

each other at all and she has to move in total isolation". Her husband is absorbed in office work, and she begins talking to herself—a sign of her desperate loneliness. The narrator's observation that "the volume of television" becomes "her only and best companion" captures the depth of her isolation.

5. Intersectional Loneliness: Caste, Religion, and Marginality

5.1 Muslim Women's Voices

The 2025 International Booker Prize awarded to Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* has brought renewed attention to the experiences of Muslim women in Indian women's fiction. Mushtaq's stories "portray the quiet strength of women amidst patriarchal violence" and reveal "the emotional and moral upheavals behind ordinary moments". Her writing "resists dramatic language and grand resolutions," instead depicting "how each ordinary moment holds the possibility of both resignation and revolt".

Mushtaq's work explores how religion and tradition compound women's loneliness, legitimizing their subordination. In "Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal," the narrator recalls a chilling belief about marital obligation: "Suppose there comes a situation where the husband's body is full of sores... even if the wife uses her tongue to lick these wounds clean, she will still not be able to completely repay the debt she owes him". This grotesque imagery reveals how devotion is framed as debt, love as servitude.

The emotional horror of this dynamic is powerfully expressed in "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!", where the narrator addresses God directly: "My body was his playground; my heart, a toy in his hand... He devoured me". The narrator's plea for God to "be a woman once" is "not out of irreverence, but as an act of moral insistence". It is a demand for understanding: "pain is not spiritual; it is material, it has its engulfing weight, texture, smell, and silence".

5.2 Dalit Women's Experiences

While Dalit women's voices are less extensively represented in the search results, the critical literature suggests that Dalit women writers have expanded the exploration of loneliness by foregrounding how caste compounds gender-based isolation. As one analysis notes, Dalit women's narratives depict protagonists who "rebel against the oppressors break the taboos and become revolutionaries". This suggests that for Dalit women, loneliness may be less a private condition than a collective experience, and survival may involve collective resistance rather than individual withdrawal.

5.3 The Loneliness of the Class-Displaced

Mushtaq's stories also explore how class and privilege can produce their own forms of moral isolation. In "The Shroud," a wealthy woman, Shaziya, dismisses an elderly woman's request for a shroud from Mecca with a thoughtless remark. When the woman dies, Shaziya's guilt becomes unbearable: "Only God knows. Shaziya alone knew the truth: it was not Yaseen Bua's last rites being conducted, but her own". The story "exposes

how privilege can dull one's capacity to recognize another's dignity, and how that blindness is a violence in its own right".

6. Strategies of Emotional Survival

6.1 Psychic Withdrawal and Solitude

One of the most common strategies of emotional survival in Indian women's fiction is psychic withdrawal—the creation of an inner world that cannot be invaded by patriarchal demands. Desai's *Nanda Kaul* exemplifies this strategy: after decades of service to her family, she "cuts herself off from human concerns altogether," retreating to a "private universe of self-willed isolation".

However, Desai's treatment of this strategy is ambivalent. *Nanda Kaul*'s withdrawal is not a triumphant act of self-realization but a response to betrayal and disillusionment. As one critic notes, she "doesn't pick this disengagement readily, yet conditions have forgotten about no other path for her". Her isolation is both survival and symptom—a form of life that is also a form of death.

6.2 Creative Expression and Agency

For some protagonists, creative expression becomes a strategy of survival. In Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*, Simrit finds her "artistic 'self' intact" through writing. In contemporary fiction, the aspiring filmmaker protagonist of *No Place to Call My Home* attempts to make a living through her art, though her creative ambitions are constantly thwarted by financial precarity and social judgment.

The relationship between creativity and survival is complex in these narratives. Art offers a form of agency and self-definition, but it also exposes women to judgment and exploitation. The woman artist in Indian women's fiction often finds herself trapped between the demands of her art and the expectations of her society—a loneliness compounded by the difficulty of sustaining creative work without adequate support.

6.3 Small Acts of Defiance

Banu Mushtaq's stories emphasize the significance of small acts of defiance in women's strategies of survival. These are not revolutionary gestures but everyday refusals that assert a measure of autonomy. In "Heart Lamp," when Mehrun's brothers insist she return to her husband who has abandoned her, she refuses to comply: "Ammma, don't I have something called a heart? Don't I have feelings? Loving him is a very distant idea". In that moment, "honour returns to its rightful place, not in the eyes of the community, but in the integrity of the woman herself".

These small acts of defiance are depicted as crucial to emotional survival. They are the "heart lamp" of the title—"a flicker carried within, guiding women through their darkness". The light is "not bright" but "real," and "sometimes, that is enough".

6.4 Self-Destruction as Tragic Survival

At the extreme end of the survival spectrum is self-destruction. Several protagonists in Indian women's fiction respond to

loneliness and despair by taking their own lives. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* sets herself on fire; Monisha in *Voices in the City* also commits suicide. These deaths are depicted not as acts of weakness but as acts of defiance—refusals to continue living in conditions that are unbearable.

However, the critical response to these depictions is often ambivalent. As one analysis notes, while Desai's "delicate portrayal of her female characters' anxiety, dissatisfaction, and defiance gives her an understanding of their goals," the critic suggests that "making an end of one's life is not a solution in itself". The question of whether self-destruction is a form of survival or its negation remains unresolved in the literature.

7. CONCLUSION

Narratives of loneliness and emotional survival in Indian women's fiction offer a sustained meditation on the condition of women in patriarchal society. From Anita Desai's psychological explorations to Banu Mushtaq's stories of Muslim women's resilience, from Shashi Deshpande's depictions of marital isolation to contemporary novels of urban anomie, this literary tradition has illuminated the manifold forms of female loneliness and the diverse strategies women develop to survive. Loneliness in this tradition is not merely a personal emotional state but a structural condition—a product of patriarchal institutions, cultural dislocation, and the psychic costs of negotiating tradition and modernity. The loneliness of the Indian woman is her inheritance, woven into the fabric of her daily existence. Yet these narratives also depict strategies of survival: psychic withdrawal, creative expression, small acts of defiance, and, in tragic cases, self-destruction.

The emergence of Dalit and Muslim women's voices has expanded the genre's exploration of loneliness, revealing how caste and religious identity compound the experience of isolation. These writers have also emphasized the collective dimension of women's experience—the recognition that individual loneliness is connected to the suffering of other women.

Indian women's fiction refuses to romanticize women's struggles. Its protagonists "weep, falter, grow resentful, and sometimes collapse under the weight of their circumstances". Yet they endure. The narratives affirm "that women continue to endure, reflect, and resist with a quiet, persistent strength". This is the gift of this literary tradition: a recognition of the full complexity of women's lives, the depth of their suffering, and the dignity of their survival.

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