

**NEGOTIATION OF SELF AND IDENTITY: A
CIXOUSIAN STUDY OF GENDER AND
SEXUALITY IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF
INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH BY INDIAN
WOMAN WRITERS**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

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for the degree of
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BWVG</i>	Before We Visit the Goddess
IFE	Indian Fiction in English
<i>TMOUH</i>	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness
<i>WIW</i>	Well-Behaved Indian Women

**RUNDINGAN ANTARA DIRI DAN IDENTITI: KAJIAN CIXOUSIAN
TERHADAP GENDER DAN SEKSUALITI DALAM NOVEL INDIA
BAHASA INGGERIS TERPILIH OLEH PENULIS WANITA INDIA**

ABSTRAK

Dalam bidang sastera Fiksyen India dalam Bahasa Inggeris, penulis wanita India dari negara asal dan diaspora telah muncul untuk mengeluarkan naratif wanita berkenaan gender dan seksualiti melalui watak wanita dalam penulisan mereka. Penggambaran dalam karya-karya ini menekankan konflik yang dihadapi oleh watak wanita akibat pertembungan nilai tradisional dan kontemporari tentang gender dan seksualiti yang mempengaruhi (semula) pembentukan diri dan identiti. Dalam kajian ini, tiga novel Fiksyen India dalam Bahasa Inggeris telah dipilih: satu ditulis oleh penulis wanita India dari negara asal *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) oleh Arundhati Roy, dan dua ditulis oleh penulis wanita India dari diaspora *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) oleh Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni dan *Well-Behaved Indian Women* (2020) oleh Saumya Dave. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji strategi yang digunakan oleh watak wanita dalam menentang normativiti heteropatriaki dan cara berbeza watak wanita mentakrifkan semula diri dan identiti mereka dalam novel yang dipilih. Menggunakan rangka kerja feminis Perancis Hélène Cixous, “the feminine”, “the other”, other bisexuality dan *écriture féminine* yang dicadangkan Cixous telah digunakan dalam analisis bertema enam langkah yang dipeloporkan oleh Braun dan Clarke. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan bahawa watak-watak wanita dalam tiga novel terpilih telah menunjukkan manifestasi terselindung untuk menentang normativiti heteropatriaki seperti melalui prinsip tidak bersuara dan subversi aktiviti feminin. Di samping itu, watak wanita telah membina semula diri dan identiti mereka dengan

menuntut semula jantina dan seksualiti mereka. Kajian menyimpulkan bahawa watak wanita dalam novel terpilih berjaya mencapai tahap kepuasan selepas menilai semula kepercayaan peribadi mereka tentang kewanitaan dan/atau keibuan yang mengukuhkan dan mengesahkan diri dan identiti mereka.

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ABSTRACT

Within the literary sphere of Indian Fiction in English, Indian woman writers of home country and diaspora have emerged to bring forth women's narratives about gender and sexuality through the female characters in their writings. The portrayal within these works emphasizes conflicting circumstances faced by female characters as a result of clashing traditional and contemporary values about gender and sexuality affecting the (re)formation of self and identity. In this study, three novels of Indian Fiction in English have been selected: one written by Indian woman writers from home country *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy, and two written by Indian woman writers from diaspora *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave. This study intends to examine the strategies employed by the female characters in resisting heteropatriarchal normativities and the different ways the female characters redefine their self and identity in the selected novels. Using Hélène Cixous's French feminist framework, the notions of "the feminine", "the other", other bisexuality and écriture féminine Cixous proposes are applied through Braun's and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis. The findings of the study reveal that the female characters in the three selected novels have demonstrated covert manifestations of resisting heteropatriarchal normativities such as through silence and subversion of feminine activities. In addition, the female characters have reconstructed their sense of self and identity by reclaiming their gender and sexuality. The study concludes that the female characters in the selected novels

have managed to reach a state of fulfilment after having reevaluated their personal beliefs about womanhood and/or motherhood that solidify and validate their self and identity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Indian fiction in English (IFE hereafter), as the name suggests, is a category of literary works of fiction written in English by Indian writers about Indian community and their culture and identity, whether of those within the home country or abroad. IFE is a part of the umbrella category of ‘South-Asian’ fiction in which both Indian writers from resident country as well as diaspora or overseas are included in the re-mapping and the voicing of Indian consciousness (Tickell, 2014). With the rise of Indian writing in English, the world has witnessed the arrival of an array of original works imbued with highly extensive Indian experiences in themes and representations that deviate from common literary patterns of English novels (Prasad & Singh, 2008). The significance of IFE can therefore be viewed as carrying and giving life to the singularity of Indian spirit in multi-strata social reality.

In discussing IFE, among the literary works that stand out as most significant are works that translate Indian history and culture into fictional representations. Through its linkage with reality, works of fiction involve the “chronological, metaphysical, religious, personal, political, aesthetic, historical, and geographical dimensions” where “India emerges not just as theme or imaginative object, but also as a point of debate, reflection, and contestation” (Gopal, 2010, p. 6). The mix of real-world and human elements throughout production of fictional writing enables the access to authentic Indian experiences that do not shy away from critical discussion about the nation and its people. In other words, IFE is given meaning through analytical assessment and association of the existing history, culture and societal values of India in its portrayal of female characters’ identity (re)formation. While the

writers and their works do not represent the whole of India as a nation and its people, their writings are representative of parts of their lived experiences that validate the substantial essence of Indian identity.

IFE includes a plethora of works ranging from postcolonial struggles and identity dissonance faced by Indian characters to a more niche category of gender. It is unsurprising that gender has not been a massive focus in IFE due to the inclination to emphasize “grand narrative of state, scrutinizing the exclusions, subjugations, and delegitimization that have occurred in the process of nation building” in fictional representation (Arora, 2020, p. 135). Even in the diaspora, IFE adopts a trend that highlights postcolonial dilemmas and identity specifically addressing male characters—for example Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* and *Half a Life*. In recent years, however, women’s issues have become among the most prominently discussed themes of IFE produced in home-country as well as diaspora. Recent works from the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century demonstrate the rise of Indian women’s voice by Indian women writers. Some of critically acclaimed titles are *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The God of Small Things* (1997), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *The Palace of Illusion* (2008). Such literary works under the category of IFE effectively bring into focus the multifaceted postcolonial struggles and identity dissonance faced by Indian female characters that require redefining their identity. Diasporic Indian woman writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai as well as home-based Indian woman writers such as Arundhati Roy have emerged to bring to light the challenges in achieving a self-constructed identity faced by Indian women inside and outside of India. There is a thematic variety on the subjects of women, gender, and sexuality in IFE due to woman writers having come

from different backgrounds. These woman writers have “different histories of English education, are culturally different and have completely different perceptions of what it means to live in modern India” (Dutta, 2014, p. 145). This not only leaves the portrayal of female characters in IFE to be of varied backgrounds, but also of varied experiences in relation to their perceived gender and sexuality.

Home-based and diaspora Indian women writers have different approaches about women’s issues that they bring into their writing. Historical events in India inevitably reinforce specific conditions that have implications on gender and sexuality that are carried into fictional representation. For instance, the works of IFE by home-based Indian women writers are affected by the “New India” that witnessed societal changes due to economic liberalization in 1991 (Arora, 2020; Sen & Roy, 2014; Tickell, 2014). These changes are captured within IFE whereby “the impact that government policies of liberalization in pursuit of economic prosperity have had on gender relations” are explored and investigated (Arora, 2020, p. 135). Meanwhile, IFE by Indian women writers of diaspora discuss gender in relation to “the ‘root’ and the ‘route’ [of woman] characters who shift their places and spaces”, basing on the ideas of movement and assimilation of culture (Salunkhe, 2021, p. 12). In other words, home-based Indian women writers take historical events and modernization as important factors through which female characters’ identity are built and understood. Whereas, diasporic Indian women writers centralize the narrative of female characters amidst foreign culture as a condition that influence identity construction—by negotiating gender roles and expectations.

While it is easy to dismiss Indian women’s experience in the diaspora as homogenous to their male counterpart, the element of gender is a variable that brings about a different outcome in the reading of IFE. Indian women of diaspora are viewed

as responsible for sustaining their culture and community tradition in a new land (Mehta, 2015; Salunkhe, 2021). Their experience cannot be equated to male for “women in diaspora families [...] find themselves torn between the freedom and liberty offered by the western culture and environment and the force of tradition binding them to their own value system, which is often backward” (Sharma, 2018, p. 44). In other words, Indian women in diaspora face and internalize the conflicting need of pursuing personal happiness and freedom all the while preserving their seemingly unprogressive cultural heritage and values. This splitting urgency between the two desires creates a crisis of identity for the women that requires reassessment of multiple aspects of their lives. Relocation brings with it “narratives of separation, issues of identity, quest of belongingness [...] quest of finding meaningfulness of purpose, and desire to connect what is lost and what is found” (Sharma, 2018, p. 42). Due to this, the exploration of such narratives in literary works take priority, especially in regard to their importance in gendered space for Indian women in diaspora.

Nevertheless, all of the female characters in IFE are equally significant in representing the feminine voice, as each is imbued with the subjectivity of her experience within the fabric of Indian society. Some works concern the subtle, everyday struggles of Indian female characters from a variety of different backgrounds, whereby the emphasis is often placed on resisting and forming identity within the space of home (Dutta, 2014). For instance, Anita Desai’s *Feasting, Fasting* and Shashi Deshpande’s *Small Remedies* portray domesticity and homemaking as inseparable from the female characters in their search for self-emancipation. There are also works that delve into the narrative of women within the grander narrative of nation and history—of womanly experience within an inherently “masculine” discourse—

such as seen in the highly-acclaimed *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. While the differences between the two categories are eminent, women's issues in IFE always come back to the underlying acts of subjugation and patriarchy defining the framework of female characters—in how resistance takes shape and reclaiming of womanhood is achieved to establish identity. Through literary works of fiction such as these, decentralization of the portrayal of female characters in IFE about gender and sexuality into multiple point of views of Indian women with different backgrounds offers multitudes of complexity and meaningful reading that are specific to the various struggles of South-Asian women.

In order to capture these differences of women's narratives against the backdrop of Indian patriarchal society, the study will be focusing on the portrayal of female characters in their resistance of heteropatriarchal normativities and reconstruction of the self and identity. There are three IFE that have been selected for the purpose of analysis. The first novel is written by a local Indian woman writer: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy. The remaining two novels are written by diaspora Indian woman writers: *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Well-Behaved Indian Women* (2020) by Saumya Dave. Hélène Cixous' feminist framework will be employed in analyzing the female characters from the selected novels—specifically with close reference to the notions of the feminine, the other, other bisexuality, and *écriture féminine* that Cixous has proposed.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Female characters in IFE have consistently been misunderstood and/or downplayed in their fictional representations as being isolated, abject, and passive

victims of patriarchy. The female characters in IFE are rarely seen as independent, autonomous, and unique individuals. Instead, certain roles are imposed upon them—roles that are often recognizable and commonly viewed through the categories of a woman, a daughter, and/or a wife. Due to this, female characters in IFE are also attached to stereotypes surrounding the notions of such gendered roles—of whether they are showing the qualities of a good or a bad woman, daughter, and/or wife. Although the issue itself may be oversimplified as being ‘fictional representation’, the real problem it derives from can be traced back to the actual socio-political and socio-economic conditions of postcolonial India where the state fails “to satisfy aspirations of diverse marginal groups and accommodate their interests”, including women (Arora, 2020, p. 68). There is an unrest that urges woman writers to “reveal [in] a sense of collective despair and rage against the insidious collusion of state structures and patriarchal institutions”, by which they take to representing in their works (p. 68). However, this goes against the usual Indian literature that reflects “the hegemony of patriarchy and its conscious conspiracy of discriminating women on the basis of gender [that] disallowed women to play any significant role in society”, constraining them into the existing roles shaped by heteropatriarchal normativities (Biswas, 2014, p. 69). The tendency to fall into stereotypical reading and understanding of female characters in IFE is happening due to “women being victims’ syndrome” that continues to dismiss repression and silence as forms of submission and lack of power (Arora, 2020, p. 2). It fails to consider the possibilities of other non-mainstream and subtle forms of subversion and resistance the woman writers may have employed in telling their stories.

In contextualizing the research problem, it is noteworthy to take a brief look outside of the fictional representation of female characters in IFE. One of the main

reasons such a stereotypical reading and understanding of female characters persists is due to the belief that Indian women are not only affected by patriarchy but are also the very agents that sustain it. Even in the diaspora, Indian women are viewed to adhere to traditional and cultural values that are tied to patriarchy—with certain stereotypes that outline what a woman is and should be (Pande, 2018; Pundir & Singh, 2019). Women in the Indian Diaspora have been centralized in most research as victims and passive agents keeping alive Indian culture and tradition (Pande, 2018). These same patterns of life established through formulation of definitive specifications on the basis of heteropatriarchal normativities—where women are to be a “wife, mother, or an ideal woman who is devoted, selfless, and sacrificial”—are carried over to diaspora space (Pundir & Singh, 2019, p. 718). With these existing specifications, the idea of passivity in Indian women is passed down from generation to generation. While Western-centric ideology seems to be influencing the Indian diaspora, patriarchal Indian tradition and culture persist as a core value of their life. As shown in a number of studies (Das, 2021; Jagganath, 2017; Sahoo & Shome, 2020), gender stereotypes and expectations remain a big part for Indians in the diaspora. Indian women are often regarded as passive, dependent, and victims who are unable to speak and defend for themselves because they do not display resistance outwardly and seem to be adhering to tradition and culture. These views of women have been circulating for a long time, shaping them into stereotypes that are difficult to overcome.

In literary works, these stereotypes continue to be reflected in the way female characters of IFE are understood. India is historically dominated by a patriarchal culture that not only demands women’s obedience and submission to their male counterparts but also encourages their silence when facing “discrimination,

subordination, exploitation, and subjugation” (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021, p. 427). Many scholars have indicated that the prevailing misogyny is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and is powerfully reinforced in its literary tradition, where the figure of an active Indian woman capable of contesting and dismantling patriarchy is relatively rare (Bhopal, 2019; Hapke, 2013; Singh et al., 2021). For this reason, female characters in IFE continue to be perceived primarily as mentioned without a more intricate understanding of their position and narrative within that particular social context.

Another reason for underemphasis of the importance of female characters is due to their portrayal in IFE being built on the basis of “little narrative” (Dutta, 2014, p. 147). Dutta explains “little narrative” as a narrative that focuses on the insignificance – on “the reality of daily life against which people perform larger ‘life’ gestures” – and at times, with particular emphasis in preoccupation with the small, mundane things in everyday living (p. 148). In comparison to men’s writing and men’s literature that stress on the “grand narrative” of history and nation, women’s writing and women’s literature are often overshadowed due to the major influence of the aspects of domesticity and familial practices. Dutta emphasizes that the theme of family is the foundation of many IFE, whereby female characters remain mainly responsible for domestic and household affairs. Because of this, the Indian tradition of women’s space being in the kitchen to cook and provide for others—which is in agreement with patriarchal binary thoughts of gender—is often oversimplified as subduing and limiting their individual space. In other words, the space of home in women’s narratives is considered as lacking in complexity and merely functioning to contain women and to strip them of their freedom, instead of being a possibly empowering space. By highlighting this form of subversion of the female space in

fiction, this study draws a closer look into the principle of Third World Feminism that stresses on women's inclination "for gradual changes [in order to] to enhance their communal influence vis-à-vis other members and to improve living standards of their families and of the community itself" (Herr, 2014, p. 5).

The "little narrative" of female characters in IFE is drawn from the social reality where Indian women are often excluded from 'neutral' space, and are made to occupy a particular space i.e., kitchen space and/or home space. The kitchen has always been viewed as a female space in Indian culture, where femininity goes hand in hand with the ability to provide and satisfy the needs of the family (Karupiah, 2019). For this reason, kitchen/home space is commonly associated with woman subjugation and patriarchal oppression, where women's struggles are confined within and considered insignificant. However, this perspective is not entirely applicable to all Indian women, particularly in comprehending feminine subjectivity that manifests in such a space. This female space can also provide "a way [for women] to consciously reproduce, modify, and adapt values in ways that befit their specific situations" where they are using "these everyday experiences to change their gendered identity while ideologically staying consistent with established norms" (Karupiah, 2019, p. 121). Hence, kitchen space and/or home space being primarily associated with gender oppression is problematic and flawed as these spaces can enable a form of subversion of patriarchy and a form of gender resistance.

Nevertheless, the idea of little narrative being the sole structural narrative for female characters in IFE is still particularly restricting and inaccurate. There has not been sufficient emphasis in the remaking of Indian women's identities beyond the relative focus of home/kitchen space in IFE. Although the space of home/kitchen can certainly provide and fulfil a part of women's narrative, a shift of focus in terms of

how these female characters can recover and attain empowerment have to be reassessed through a different approach. By limiting the view of their act of resistance within, it closes off other possibilities that can take place outside of such a space. For instance, resistance beyond the space of home in nurturing and solidifying women's narratives such as through school for education and public space for entrepreneurship is important (Shettar, 2020). Going beyond the space of home/kitchen would enrich the interpretation of female characters in IFE, even though their stories are not necessarily translated into the "grand narratives" of history and nation.

Another important aspect to be considered is the fact that women's narratives in IFE are often built on the underlying principle of silence. Feminist scholars have raised the issues of interpretation of women's silence that is synonymous to submissiveness and lack of agency, although "silence can mean different things, and needs to be understood contextually" (Hutchings, 2020, p. xiv). The framing of women's agency has been focusing too much on the act of speaking out, without considering other modes of resistance that can manifest in silence (Parpart & Parashar, 2020). They also bring up that silence—particularly from women of postcolonial world—is often misunderstood despite it being "a source of comfort and reassurance", "a site for strategizing and resistance", as well as "a coping mechanism, a choice, an action" that entail the very opposite of the claim that silence is associated with being victims and being powerless (p. 4-5). Although there used to be a lack of exploration of such a complex narrative in Indian literary works, contemporary IFE by women writers have taken to representing a similar, compelling 'silence' in the narratives of female characters in their works that need to be unveiled (Islam & Islam, 2019). Therefore, silence has to be reevaluated as a mode of resistance—a force that

is neither stagnant nor indicates disempowerment—but as equally powerful as the act of speaking out.

Moreover, in light of representation of Indian patriarchal culture imposed on women, one consistent problem that culture reinforces is the reliance of established notions to comprehend gender and sexuality. There is a universal perception underlining two categories of genders and/or sexes, and that “it [is] “natural” to be one or the other, no matter what the individual desire[s]” (Herdt, 2020, p. 13). This view has limited the idea about construction of identity, dismissing the significant issue of ‘fluidity’ in terms of one’s perceived notions of gender and sexual identity. Nevertheless, the idea of gender and sexual fluidity has existed and persisted for a long time despite being considered unnatural and perverse—it is simply downplayed by the predominant categorization based on biological differences (Herdt, 2020). For this reason, deeper exploration of third gender—a category assumed outside of such differences—is helpful in making sense and articulating the aspect of flexibility of gender and sexuality. By acknowledging the importance of third gender, contemporary representations of female characters and their motivation in IFE can be understood through the lens of resisting heteronormativities and embracing this manifestation of gender and sexual fluidity. In other words, reliance on traditional sex/gender conception of what is considered natural is problematic for it restricts the concepts into a rigid set of ideas and characteristics, when an alternative solution that is more inclusive can be found in third gender.

In addition, motherhood is most commonly associated with patriarchy. Feminist critics have debated about the different prospects of motherhood and women’s response to motherhood in association to gender and identities. There is a discussion addressing motherhood as “a fear of becoming one’s literal mother, or

figurative ‘mother’” which is “a common theme in feminist living and writing” (Kinser, 2008, p. 33). Nevertheless, scholars of South-Asian women studies have remarked that despite such a fear, motherhood can create a sense of longing and belonging that is empowering (Bagchi, 2015). Although mothering “is deeply embedded in larger patriarchal structures that oppress women” represented as lacking in power, female characters of IFE can “refute the image of the mother’s body as receptacle of male’s desire, and re-emerge to find ways of experiencing pleasure in maternal identity” (Aneja & Vaidya, 2016, p. xvii). Therefore, despite the undeniable connection between motherhood and patriarchal oppression of a woman’s agency, the intimate and subjective experience of being a mother may also be translated as a source of strength and liberation.

In conclusion, understanding the act of subverting and resisting gender stereotypes and norms to reconstruct anew self and identity would require a fresh and broad perspective on the issue. Focusing solely on the mainstream approaches of gender resistance proves to be invalidating and limiting the potential of realizing female characters’ strategic use of space and voice within their own narratives. As explained, although female characters’ stories are often overemphasized to be contained within home/kitchen space, the act of being in such a space in itself does not translate as their inability to resist and reconstruct heteropatriarchal normativities. Instead, female characters are inclined to reform home/kitchen space as their own. However, it can also restrict female characters from reconstructing identity outside of home/kitchen space e.g., in public spaces such as school. The most prominent characteristic of Indian female characters that is commonly misunderstood is the principle of silence, as their silence is not an indication of passivity and oppression but a form of resistance and empowerment. Furthermore, motherhood is not

necessarily an indicator of oppression of the female body, rather it can be subverted as an experience that positively strengthens one's sense of self and identity as a woman and a mother. Therefore, the reading and analysis of Indian female characters have to be approached through unconventional and subtle means of subverting gender norms and redefining identity with consideration of their cultural, historical, and social conditions.

1.3 Research Questions and Research Objectives

The overall aim of the research study is to challenge the stereotypical representations of Indian female characters in the face of heteropatriarchal relations of power and emphasize the portrayed female characters' active participation in resisting the prevailing perceptions of gender and sexuality in reforming self and identity. The two major objectives to be pursued to achieve this primary goal are listed below.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this research study are as following:

1. To investigate how the main female characters resist heteropatriarchal normativities in the selected novels using Cixous' notions of the feminine, the other, and other bisexuality.
2. To examine how the main female characters redefine their self and identity in the selected novels using Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*.

1.3.2 Research Questions

The research questions of this research study are as following:

1. How do the main female characters resist heteropatriarchal normativities in the selected novels using Cixous' notions of the feminine, the other, and other bisexuality?

2. How do the main female characters redefine their self and identity in the selected novels using Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine*?

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

As for the scope of this study, I have selected three novels by three different Indian woman writers. They are *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and *Well-Behaved Indian Women* (2020) by Saumya Dave (hereafter the novels will be referred to as *TMOUH*, *BWVTG*, and *WIW* respectively). While the first novel is written by an Indian writer in home country, the other two novels are written by Indian writers in diaspora. The selection of novels from Indian woman writers living abroad and in India is purposeful to encompass the similarities and differences of the main female characters that may or may not occur in their works. Furthermore, using materials from three different authors—from the literary canon like Roy and Divakaruni as well as the little-known figure like Dave—can provide insights and multitude of ways in representation of Indian female characters from different contextual backgrounds.

The focus of the present study is on the Indian main female characters and their respective journeys in remaking their own selves and identities. The study will examine the multifaceted ways these main female characters resist stereotypical representations associated with gender and ultimately the redefinition of prescribed sexual and gender identity that takes place. In analysing these novels about female characters and their stories, it is constructive to employ feminist framework as an approach. This study has selected the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous' framework to help assess the novels in order to achieve the aims of the study. The primary

concepts proposed by Cixous that are central in this research study are “the feminine”, “the other”, “other bisexuality”, and “écriture feminine”. Using these feminist concepts, the themes of woman, gender, and sexuality in the selected novels are explored through the female characters’ individual attempts at negotiating self and identity.

It is also important to note that the scope of this study is limited to selected contemporary novels written between the year of 2010 to 2020. Novels from this specific period of 2010-2020 are significant for they reflect the rapidly changing values and progressive worldview that have permeated the Indian community. Although the time setting within the novel may vary from twentieth century to twenty-first century, the representation of female characters is aligned with the present concerns and awareness about gender within the Indian community inside and outside of India. In order to encapsulate the traditional and the contemporary views about gender that have taken to shaping the narratives of female characters, the selected novels must be within the period of 2010-2020. With this, the foundation of the female characters is created with gender consciousness and sensitivity present today. In addition, globalization and modernity are reflected in the selected works within this specific period – not only in terms of beliefs and values, but also material and physical. They capture the transformations that permeate India and the Indian community in the form of fiction, such as changes stated by Sen and Roy (2014):

From around [year] 2000 onwards, the average Indian in an erstwhile Third World country suddenly encountered in rapid succession globalisation, the communications revolution and proliferation of electronic media, greater access to information and easier international contact, accelerated urbanisation, the rise of Indian multinational corporations, and new knowledge-based

industries with enormous employment potential [...] English has lost much of the old ideological baggage of being a colonial import since the aspiring youth in urban India now regard it as a necessary tool for global opportunities (p. 13).

Indian novels in the period of 2010-2020 have clearly shifted focus to encapsulate these transformations, all the while recognizing English as its own and a global tool, no longer entirely tied to colonialism. The current study examines the concept and practice of gender resistance and reconstruction of self and identity in the selected literary works with underlying basis of these rapid changes and globalization. It investigates the process of rewriting self and identity following the resistance against patriarchy taken by the female characters. This process of rewriting takes into account the feminine elements of love and motherhood and the element of Indian culture.

However, much like any other studies, this study has its own limitations. First, the study explores the aspects of women, sexuality, and gender almost exclusively from the narratives of main female characters in regard to themselves and to other female characters in the selected works. This gender-specific point of view excludes the male perspective about the themes and issues portrayed within the novels, confining the narrative within its own female subjects. Second, the study includes only three novels from three different Indian woman writers which is not representative of the entirety of IFE. In addition, although there are correlations between the novels and reality, the analysis on the female characters is constricted as fictional representation within fictional works, and therefore may not be taken as real or factual. Third, the study employs a French feminist perspective, Hélène Cixous's framework, to analyse the strategies for gender resistance used by the female characters and the outcome that is rewriting of identity. The employment of her theoretical framework may not be similar to theoretical approaches of Indian feminists and may result in a different

reading and a new interpretation of the female characters in the selected novels. Besides, Hélène Cixous' feminist perspective relies a lot on abstract concepts that some feminist critics consider to be essentialist and not constructive for women's social change.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The exploration of women, gender and sexuality is significant, particular due to the small number of studies that centralize the perspective of Indian female characters in fiction. Thus, the importance of research in this field of women, gender and sexuality from the perspective of female characters lies in the need to explore the smothered narratives of women not only due to hegemonic structure but also history of colonization. Indian women are considered as postcolonial subjects who are 'doubly colonized' in the sense of being oppressed simply for the facts about their race and gender (Holst Petersen & Rutherford, 1988). The emergence of Indian women writers writing about women's struggles, their subtle resistance against patriarchy, and their attempt of reforming self and identity become a reflection of the need to share the reality of Indian society with their own voice (Arora, 2020; Ranasinha, 2016; Tickell, 2014). Considering that women do not belong to a homogenous group, much thought must be given to the multilayered intersections that make up the formation of an authentic self. As such, in alignment of Cixous's feminist theory, this study shall provide an alternative insight into the reading of the portrayed female characters in the selected works.

This research work will contribute to an in-depth understanding of women, gender and sexuality in IFE in a number of important ways. First, the research work will contribute by critically assessing the subtlety and the complexity of the forms of

gender resistance employed by female characters in their everyday life as reflected in the selected novels. While Indian women still view traditional feminine ideals as significant, they also think it is important for them to instil their own subtle, indirect forms of resistance and independence; this has become a part of living within the culture for them to avoid conflicts (Karupiah, 2019). Similarly in IFE, particularly contemporary works written by woman writers, looking into these women's narratives—of what Dutta (2014) terms as “aesthetic of everyday” (p. 146)—gives insights into covert manifestations of resistance and desire for freedom taken by female characters. As the strategies for resisting patriarchal values about gender and stereotypes can take many forms in different culture and tradition, it is especially pertinent to uncover these covert manifestations that are not always mainstream, clear, and/or easy to perceive.

Second, the research work will contribute by critically examining the novelty of how self and identity of female characters are rewritten or reconstructed anew as reflected in the selected novels. Mehta (2015) states that female characters are viewed primarily as retainers of cultural heritage, and there is an urgency in fulfilling this role as well as urgency in seeking freedom outside of the role. Some studies have highlighted that Indian women are likely to continue keeping the culture and tradition alive despite putting themselves at a disadvantage (Bagchi, 2015; Pande, 2018). However, some studies also discuss Indian women's contemplative state and the possible departure from cultural and traditional patriarchal values (Sen & Roy, 2014; Mehta, 2015; Arora, 2020). With consideration to both sides of the discussion, more light has to be shed on how fictional representation of female characters achieve equilibrium between these two contrasting needs, and on how they manage to transform their “gendered identity while ideologically staying consistent with

established norms” (Karupiah, 2019, p. 121). In other words, there are indeed conflicting ideals the female characters face that require continuous reassessment, negotiation, and reconstruction of the body and the mind—for the female characters to find a middle ground without forsaking either of the two—through which a new self and identity is actualized as a result.

Third, this study will contribute to the field of Third World Feminism that urges for a more nuanced and compact fictional representation of Third World women. With particular focus on Indian women, the female characters in the present study will be examined in terms of the commonality of their struggles and challenges, as well as the different ways they approach and resist heteropatriarchal normativities. This is especially significant because unlike women in the Western, “Third World women’s resistance often does not involve an explicit demand for gender equality or radical social restructuring in order to achieve feminist goals”, but instead involves gradual changes that prioritizes harmony and peace in families and communities (Herr, 2014, p. 5). Due to this, the forms of resistance taken by third-world women like Indians are usually distinct and different (Herr, 2014). In the selected works of IFE for this study, the differences will be reflected to emphasize unique approaches used by the female characters in regards to the topics of gender and sexuality, and following that, their own individual redefinition of self and identity.

Furthermore, it is also significant to address the French feminist framework used in this study that does not seem constructive for analysis of literary works of IFE as compared to feminist framework of Third World feminists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As stated before, analysis of fictional representation of Third World women requires an emphasis on contextual and historical influences that highlights “Third World women’s multidimensional and complex oppression through

careful examinations of their local conditions in their historical specificity” (Herr, 2014, p. 6). Although Hélène Cixous’ works are not based on Third World women, she builds her feminist theory about feminine writing surrounding the existing patriarchal system to “create the framework for a new “language” and culture” that is transformative while being mindful of what have already been established (Sellers, 2003, p. xxix). Cixous strives to establish an analytical framework on women’s subjective gendered experiences that are deeply intertwined with the intricate makeup of culture and history, and the need to reclaim and rewrite them (Cixous, 1981; Cixous, 1986; Cixous, 1991), which aligns with the concerns raised by Third World feminists. For this reason, despite its Western origin, Hélène Cixous’ feminist framework is selected for this study because it addresses the appropriate requirements in analysing Indian female characters.

1.6 Definition of the Key Terms

In this subsection, the important key terms used in this research study will be defined in further detail regarding their specific usage and meaning.

1.6.1 Indian Fiction in English

Indian Fiction in English (IFE) are contemporary literary works that represent present day India and the concerns raised within the Indian community. According to Piciuccio (2004), it is difficult to arrive at a conclusive definition of IFE due to the extreme “composite nature of the multi-strata social reality” intended to be captured within IFE, in addition to the “complicated mix of traditions” underlying such works (p. v). The multifaceted quality of India as a nation has continued to be translated into contemporary IFE—that despite having varying expressions of culture and traditions, are sharing a similar overarching theme of ‘resistance’. This characterization persists

in IFE written by home-based writers as well as diaspora writers. These works are generally referred to as ‘postcolonial literature’, by which the term is used rather loosely and conveniently, in describing works centralizing in “any kind of resistance, particularly against class, race, and gender oppression” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 1). The present research study is focusing on contemporary IFE that aligns with Gilbert’s (2001) definition whereby the literary works are not characterized through tropes and stereotypes but through a form of resistance portrayed by the characters.

1.6.2 Gender

The term gender employed in this research study is adopted from the sociological perspective, where gender is viewed as a social construct. Although the term gender is sometimes used interchangeably with the term sex, there is a clear distinction between the two. According to Lindsey (2021), sex “refers to the biological characteristics distinguishing male and female” where there is much emphasis on “male and female biological differences in chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems, and physiology” (p. 6). Whereas gender “refers to social, cultural, and psychological differences between males and females that are associated with masculinity and femininity” (p. 6). Hence, sex is a prescribed condition an individual is born with and should remain unchangeable (with exception of individuals who undergo sex change i.e., through surgery and hormone treatment, for example). On the other hand, gender is largely a learned condition achieved and practiced on the basis of existing knowledge—a set of characteristics, behaviors, and thoughts that are classified as either masculine or feminine. Lindsey (2021) simplifies and sums up the two terms as following: “sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine” (p. 6). Thus, the term gender in this research study will rely on the definition

of gender as a social construct, influenced by the imposition of masculine and feminine qualities outlined by social and cultural backgrounds.

1.6.3 Sexuality

There are various meanings to the term sexuality, and nowadays it primarily refers to the modern definition of sexual orientation which indicates attraction between same and/or different genders i.e., heterosexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, and bisexual. However, this research study will focus on a different meaning of sexuality—one that is derived from its association with gender. In other words, it will employ the sociological definition that stresses sexuality as a learned condition within a societal context. According to Reiss (1986), “sexuality is not “natural,” nor is it individualistic; rather, it is a social outcome that we learn to achieve” (p. 234). Social factors contributing to formation of sexuality rule out essentialist view and establish sexuality to be of a similar nature with gender—“programmed just as other social behavior, and it will not “work” unless that social programming has occurred” (p. 234). Nevertheless, unlike gender that concerns itself with the concepts of masculine and feminine, the term sexuality is drawn from its relations with the physical body, of “physical pleasure” and the not-quite-so-obvious “self-disclosure, or the revelation to others of the intimate aspects of the self” (p. 234). In short, the definition of sexuality within this research study is established as a social construct that deals with the involvement of physical body—including opening up and baring of the body as a union or a merging point of one’s mind and reality.

1.6.4 Heteropatriarchal Normativity

In the feminist scholarship, the term is considered as a category under the umbrella term ‘patriarchy’. The term ‘heteropatriarchal normativity’ is made up of prominent concepts—‘hetero(sexual)’, ‘patriarchy’ and ‘normative’—to create a

meaning. At present, there is no clear definition for the term ‘heteropatriarchal normativity’, although each of these two words is significant in their own ways, as observed in recent studies of gender and women (Barker, 2012; Woodson & Pabon, 2016; Kelley & Arce-Trigatti, 2022). In assisting this research study, the two words will first be defined separately. In general, heteropatriarchy encompasses the aspect of heterosexuality as a pillar of patriarchy. It specifically “refers to systems and practices that normalize and center male dominance; male-female gender binaries; and heterosexual identities, family units, and sexual expressions” (Woodson & Pabon, 2016, p. 57). Whereas normative, in relation to gender and sexuality, carries the implications of gender norms and standards that men and women are expected to follow. Cambridge Dictionary defines normative as “relating to rules, or making people obey rules, especially rules of behaviour”. In the context of present study, the term heteropatriarchal normativities refers to principles and/or sets of behaviour considered as gender norms and stereotypes that benefit the narrative of male dominance and power against female.

1.6.5 Self and Identity

The Cambridge Dictionary defines identity as “the fact of being, or feeling that you are, a particular type of person, organization, etc.; the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others”. In other words, an identity is singular and unique to each individual, and is built upon social reality. Before delving further into the definition of identity, it is noteworthy to draw its association and distinction with the term ‘self’. In Cambridge Dictionary, self is defined as “the set of someone’s characteristics, such as personality and ability, that are not physical and make that person different from other people”. In other words, self is an accumulation of abstract concepts about oneself that internally manifest within a specific individual while

continuously responding to social reality to form an identity. Then, in turn, identity solidifies self and the sense of one's existence externally. Identity serves "as the building blocks of self-development and self-realization, while providing individuals with incipient understanding of large-scale social structures" (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010, p. 5). Although in the social sciences field there is such a view of identity being a static self, it is most commonly accepted that the situational context or institutional context produced "variability, novelty, and fluidity in the manifestation of self" that makes an identity (p. 3). Therefore, identity is not a fixed concept, but is fluid and influenced by variables like external factors (such as class, race, and gender) and/or other conditions unique to individuals (such as trauma). In this research study, the term identity is employed on this basis—where identity is viewed as changeable, flexible, and adaptable as a result of an individual's response to social reality and experiences.

1.6.6 Resistance

From sociological perspective, resistance comes in diversities ranging from settings to behaviors, making pinpointing and imposing a definition an impossible task. For this reason, resistance as a term is to be explored and understood as having multiple modes of actualization. One of the most common forms of resistance is physical, where the use of bodies is involved. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) states that this form of resistance includes social movements where activities such protests, marches, and formation of organization take place, as well as political actions that are identity-based. However, resistance also comes in other forms beyond the physical aspect, namely through "symbolic behaviors", "directions or goals of resistance" and even "silence" (p. 536). By considering these different modes, one defining quality of resistance that is shared by all is making "some kind of actions" that have "a sense of opposition"—involving the acts of countering, contradicting, rejecting, challenging,