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Transnational Feminisms: How the Four Waves Shaped Gender, Identity and Agency Among Indian Diasporic Communities

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Abstract

This Article investigates the impact of the four waves of feminism – liberal, radical, intersectional, and transnational – on gender, identity, and agency within Indian diasporic communities. Situated at the crossroads of migration, culture, and gender politics, the Article analyzes how feminist activism and theory have shaped the lived experiences of Indian women and LGBTQ+ individuals abroad. Emphasizing the interplay of patriarchy, caste, class, and sexuality, the study uses an analytical approach grounded in feminist theory and literary criticism. Indian English diasporic literature, including works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Shyam Selvadurai, and Bharati Mukherjee, serves as a vital lens to explore negotiations of identity and resistance. The Article highlights the crucial role of transnational feminism in forging solidarities that respect cultural specificity while advocating for gender justice. Ultimately, it argues that Indian diasporic subjects continuously redefine their agency amid multiple intersecting structures of power.

Keywords: Transnational feminism, Indian diaspora, gender politics, feminist activism, Indian English literature, intersectionality, LGBTQ+

Introduction

The Indian diaspora, sprawling across continents and shaped by centuries of migration, colonial histories, and contemporary globalization, provides an intricate site where gender, identity, and agency are continuously negotiated and reimagined. The negotiation of these categories within diasporic contexts is deeply embedded in the political, cultural, and social milieus of both the homeland and host countries. Feminist theory and activism have played pivotal roles in interrogating and transforming the gendered experiences of Indian diasporic communities.

Feminist movements have not existed in a vacuum – they have moved, shifted, and transformed across borders. The four waves of feminism – each with its distinct emphases – have profoundly influenced diasporic subjects, who exist in a “double consciousness” shaped by both homeland expectations and host-country realities. For Indian diasporic women and LGBTQ+ individuals, the intersection of traditional Indian cultural norms and Western liberal values often produces complex

spaces of negotiation. These spaces are not merely sites of oppression but also fertile grounds for agency, resistance, and creative reimagination.

The rise of transnational feminism as a critical theoretical framework provides tools to examine these negotiations with sensitivity to context, power, and global interconnectedness. Unlike earlier feminist movements that often-universalized women's experiences, transnational feminism foregrounds difference, inequality, and the flows of power across borders.

This Article examines how the four waves of feminism have intersected with and shaped gendered experiences in the Indian diaspora. By combining feminist theory with literary analysis and activism case studies, it explores how diasporic communities have both absorbed and transformed feminist ideas. It aims to contribute to the growing discourse that centers diasporic voices in global feminist debates, highlighting the complex entanglements of culture, gender, sexuality, caste, and migration.

Review of Literature

The Four Waves of Feminism: A Historical Overview

First Wave Feminism: Legal Rights and Reform: First Wave Feminism (late 19th to early 20th century) focused primarily on legal reforms – women's suffrage, property rights, and access to education (Evans, 2015). Although this wave is often associated with Western movements, similar impulses were emerging in India during the colonial period. Reformers such as Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, and later Sarojini Naidu advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, and legal protections, laying early feminist foundations.

For Indian women who migrated during the colonial period as indentured laborers or professionals in the early 20th century, these legal and educational struggles carried over into diasporic life. The demand for recognition and participation in host societies often mirrored First Wave aspirations for citizenship and inclusion.

Second Wave Feminism: Challenging Patriarchy: Second Wave Feminism (1960s–1980s) expanded the feminist agenda from legal reforms to social, cultural, and personal domains. This wave focused on reproductive rights, sexual liberation, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination (Freedman, 2002). Radical feminists emphasized the systemic nature of patriarchy, famously declaring that “the personal is political” (Tong, 2013).

For Indian diasporic women, especially in North America and the UK, this period coincided with increased migration under new immigration laws. Many women began to question community-specific patriarchies that operated within the home and religious institutions. Simultaneously, they had to navigate racism and marginalization in their host countries, resulting in complex, layered forms of discrimination.

Intersectional Feminism: Exposing the Overlaps: Intersectional Feminism (1990s onward), introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), exposed how gender oppression intersects with race, caste, class, sexuality, and other axes of identity. Intersectionality has been crucial for understanding the positionality of Indian diasporic women and queer individuals, particularly those from marginalized castes, religious minorities, or working-class backgrounds (Parashar, 2016).

This wave disrupted earlier feminist tendencies to generalize “woman” as a homogeneous category, insisting on attention to difference. For instance, the experiences of a Dalit woman in the diaspora differ significantly from those of an upper-caste Hindu woman, even within the same host country.

Transnational Feminism: Rethinking Global Feminist Solidarities: Transnational Feminism (1990s onward) critiques Western-centric feminist narratives and emphasizes the global interconnectedness of gender

struggles (Mohanty, 2003; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). It draws attention to power imbalances between the Global North and Global South, advocating for solidarities built on respect for local contexts rather than universalizing experiences.

Indian diasporic feminists have used this framework to articulate struggles that are at once local and global: negotiating cultural identity, challenging patriarchal community structures, and resisting racialized oppression in host countries.

Theoretical Framework

This article integrates intersectionality and transnational feminism as its core theoretical frameworks. Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), is indispensable for analyzing how multiple axes of identity interact to shape experiences of marginalization and privilege. In diasporic contexts, these axes include gender, caste, class, sexuality, race, and religion. Transnational feminism extends this analysis by emphasizing the geopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts in which gender struggles unfold (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997). It critiques the dominance of Western feminist frameworks and underscores the importance of building coalitions that respect cultural specificity.

Indian diasporic gender politics cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the mediating roles of caste, religion, and class. Caste continues to shape social hierarchies within Indian communities abroad, influencing access to networks, marriage prospects, and leadership roles. Religion serves both as a source of identity and a site of gender control, particularly for women. Sexuality becomes a contested terrain where traditional expectations often clash with the liberal norms of host countries, creating complex dynamics for LGBTQ+ diasporic individuals.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative and analytical methodology grounded in feminist theory, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism. It conducts a literary analysis through close readings of Indian English diasporic texts, including *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003), *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee (1989), *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai (1994), as well as selected poetry and essays by Meena Kandasamy. In addition, the study examines feminist activism through case studies of organizations such as Sakhi for South Asian Women, Manavi, Southall Black Sisters, and various online platforms that emerged in the digital era. The research further integrates theoretical perspectives by synthesizing secondary literature from feminist and diaspora studies, thereby connecting broader theoretical frameworks with lived experiences of Indian diasporic communities.

Analysis and Discussion

Liberal Feminism and the Pursuit of Individual Rights

Liberal feminism's emphasis on individual legal and educational rights inspired many Indian diasporic women to seek autonomy through education, employment, and personal choice. Migration often provided new opportunities to break free from restrictive gender roles. However, these freedoms were not absolute; they were negotiated within cultural expectations of familial duty, marriage, and community reputation.

In *Jasmine* (Mukherjee, 1989), the protagonist's journey from rural India to the U.S. mirrors liberal feminist ideals of self-determination. Yet, her freedom is complicated by racialization, immigration precarity, and gender expectations. Similarly, many Indian women who migrated for education or work in the 1970s and 1980s found themselves negotiating between newfound legal freedoms and enduring community surveillance.

Radical Feminism, Domestic Violence, and Community Activism

Radical feminism's critique of patriarchy resonated strongly within diasporic communities

confronting domestic violence and gender-based abuse. For many women, migration intensified dependence on spouses due to visa restrictions, language barriers, and cultural isolation.

Organizations like Sakhi for South Asian Women (founded in New York in 1989) and Manavi (established in New Jersey in 1985) emerged to provide shelter, legal aid, and advocacy for survivors of domestic violence. Their work embodied radical feminist principles while carefully navigating cultural sensitivities.

Radical feminist critiques also exposed how domestic abuse was often silenced under the guise of “cultural preservation.” Many women feared ostracism if they sought help, illustrating how patriarchy operates both privately and publicly.

Intersectionality and the Multiplicity of Identities

Intersectionality reveals how gender oppression in diasporic contexts is intertwined with caste, class, religion, and sexuality. Caste remains embedded in diasporic spaces, often invisibly, influencing employment networks and marriage arrangements, while class stratifications shape access to resources and social mobility. Religion structures community norms that frequently reinforce gender hierarchies, and sexuality remains a contentious terrain, particularly for queer Indians who face both homophobia and racism. Meena Kandasamy’s work foregrounds caste as a critical feminist issue, challenging the erasure of Dalit women in both Indian and Western feminist discourse. Similarly, Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* portrays the formation of queer identity amid ethnic and familial pressures, reflecting the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ diasporic youth.

Transnational Feminism: Bridging Global and Local Struggles

Transnational feminism provides a valuable lens to examine the global-local nexus of gender struggles, highlighting how diasporic Indian women and queer individuals are situated within multiple structures of power, including patriarchal community norms, racialized host societies, and global capitalist systems. Activists and writers have employed transnational feminist frameworks to collaborate across borders on issues such as gender-based violence, immigration rights, and reproductive justice, to build coalitions with other marginalized groups, including Black and Latinx feminists in North America, and to leverage digital platforms to amplify voices and foster solidarity. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* captures the cultural ambivalence of diasporic identity, illustrating how characters like Gogol and Ashima negotiate belonging and otherness. Viewed through a transnational feminist lens, their experiences reflect broader struggles of gendered and cultural subjectivities in diaspora.

Feminist Activism in the Indian Diaspora

The story of feminism in the Indian diaspora extends beyond theory and literature and is deeply embodied in activism. Organizations such as Sakhi for South Asian Women and Manavi have addressed domestic violence using culturally competent approaches that consider the intersections of immigration status, language, and cultural stigma. In the United Kingdom, Southall Black Sisters has played a pivotal role in supporting women of color confronting gender violence, forced marriages, and honor-based crimes. In recent years, digital feminist networks—including Desi feminist blogs and Instagram collectives—have provided diasporic youth with spaces to discuss sexuality, gender, and identity outside traditional community boundaries. Activists have also linked gender concerns with broader social struggles, such as climate justice, labor exploitation of migrant workers, and anti-racist movements, highlighting the interconnected nature of global and local feminist efforts.

Literary Representations and Gendered Subjectivities

Diasporic literature plays a vital role in highlighting the gendered dimensions of migration. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist embodies the tensions between agency and structural constraint, and her

journey across continents illustrates how feminist ideals are negotiated in real life. Similarly, *The Namesake* reflects the gendered expectations placed on diasporic women like Ashima, who strive to maintain cultural traditions while adapting to new environments. Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* portrays queer subjectivity, emphasizing how sexuality and ethnicity intersect in diasporic experiences. Meena Kandasamy's poetry foregrounds caste, gender, and resistance, challenging sanitized narratives of the Indian diaspora. Collectively, these narratives illuminate not only the struggles but also the creativity, resilience, and agency of diasporic individuals as they reimagine their identities.

Emerging Trends: Digital Diasporas, Gender Fluidity, and Future Feminisms

The landscape of diaspora and feminism continues to evolve, with several emerging trends shaping contemporary discourses among Indian diasporic communities. Digital diasporas, facilitated by social media platforms, have enabled decentralized feminist activism, particularly among younger generations. Movements such as #MeTooIndia have gained transnational momentum, highlighting sexual harassment in workplaces and community spaces globally. Younger diasporic Indians are increasingly embracing gender fluidity and non-binary identities, challenging both traditional Indian norms and Western stereotypes. Feminist scholars are also beginning to connect environmental crises with migration and gender, recognizing how climate displacement will shape future diasporas. Moreover, queer and Dalit feminist voices are challenging the dominance of upper-caste, heteronormative narratives, enriching the inclusivity of diasporic feminist spaces.

Conclusion

The four waves of feminism have collectively shaped understandings of gender, identity, and agency among Indian diasporic communities. Liberal feminism offered pathways for legal and educational empowerment, while radical feminism politicized private oppression and fueled community activism. Intersectional feminism exposed how caste, class, religion, and sexuality intersect with gendered experiences, and transnational feminism provided a nuanced framework for understanding global-local entanglements. Indian diasporic women and LGBTQ+ individuals continuously navigate complex terrains shaped by migration, culture, and power. Their activism, scholarship, and literature reveal resilient efforts to redefine agency and resist oppressive norms. As the diaspora evolves, future feminist frameworks must engage with digital activism, climate displacement, queer and Dalit perspectives, and new solidarities that are flexible, inclusive, and context-sensitive.

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