

Women's Marginalisation in Literature: Patriarchy, Identity, Intersectionality, and Resistance

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Abstract: Women's marginalisation remains a central concern in feminist literary studies because gender inequality is sustained through social, domestic, economic, cultural, and representational structures. This article offers a critical qualitative synthesis of selected scholarship published between 1984 and 2025, tracing major shifts in the study of female oppression, identity, and resistance. The analysis identifies patriarchy, domestic confinement, marital control, bodily violence, economic dependency, educational exclusion, and silencing as recurrent forms of marginalisation. It also demonstrates a movement from generalised accounts of women's oppression towards intersectional approaches attentive to caste, class, race, religion, colonialism, and economic inequality. Recent studies increasingly represent women not only as victims but as subjects who negotiate oppressive structures through education, mobility, economic independence, solidarity, refusal, storytelling, and literary expression. The article argues that women's writing functions as a counter-discourse that makes marginalised experience visible and reclaims female agency. It concludes by identifying the need for comparative, interdisciplinary literary research connecting domestic space, identity, narrative form, and changing strategies of resistance.

Keywords: Women's Marginalization; Patriarchy; Female Identity; Intersectionality; Resistance

Introduction

Women's marginalisation is a complex social, cultural, economic, and political process rooted in unequal gender relations. Across historical periods and cultural contexts, women have been excluded from positions of authority, denied equal access to education and economic resources, confined to prescribed domestic roles, and subjected to physical, psychological, sexual, and institutional violence. Marginalisation therefore extends beyond visible discrimination. It operates through family structures, marriage, religion, class, caste, race, colonial histories, and dominant cultural ideologies. These intersecting structures restrict women's mobility and autonomy, silence their experiences, and weaken their ability to construct independent identities.

Literature has played a significant role in exposing the mechanisms through which women are pushed to social and cultural margins. Feminist and postcolonial writers challenge representations of women as passive, dependent, submissive, and self-sacrificing by foregrounding trauma, alienation, bodily experience, and the struggle for selfhood. Literary narratives also reveal that marginalisation is not uniform. Gender interacts with class, caste, race, religion, nationality, and economic position to produce differentiated experiences of exclusion. At the same time, women's writing has transformed literary expression into a space for reclaiming voice, identity, and agency.

Existing scholarship encompasses literary, socio-cultural, political, and theoretical perspectives. Researchers have examined domestic confinement, marital oppression, gender discrimination, sexual violence, economic dependency, cultural displacement, subalternity, double colonisation, and institutional exclusion. Increasing attention is also given to resistance through education, economic independence, mobility, female solidarity, self-expression, and storytelling. This article critically synthesises selected studies published between 1984 and 2025 to trace the changing critical understanding of women's marginalisation. Rather than merely listing previous studies, it identifies major thematic and theoretical continuities, compares emerging trends, and discusses gaps that remain significant for feminist literary inquiry.

Method and Scope

The article adopts a qualitative critical-review method based on close reading and thematic synthesis of selected scholarly articles, theses, dissertations, and literary studies concerned with women's marginalisation. The corpus covers scholarship from 1984 to 2025 and includes studies from Indian, South Asian, African, Middle Eastern, European, and North American contexts. The studies were read comparatively and organised around recurring concerns: patriarchal regulation, marriage and domestic oppression, bodily violence, silencing and subalternity, intersectional inequality, education and economic dependency, identity, and resistance. A chronological overview is followed by thematic analysis to show both historical development and conceptual convergence. The purpose is not statistical generalisation but a secondary qualitative analysis of how literary scholarship has defined, represented, and interpreted women's movement from exclusion towards agency.

Critical Review of Scholarship

Early scholarship approaches marginalisation through cultural visibility and literary authority. Godard places women writers outside dominant male traditions and interprets formal experimentation as a challenge to inherited literary codes (57–75). Banerjee, in a different cultural setting, recovers women’s songs, sayings, and performances in nineteenth-century Bengal as spaces in which domestic inequality and male power could be questioned (127–79). These studies establish that marginality may silence women, but it can also generate alternative forms of expression and counter-discourse.

Later scholarship turns to space, movement, and bodily regulation. Enevold reads mobility as a gendered privilege and argues that the travelling woman unsettles the conventional division between active men and domesticated women. Lasson demonstrates the violent consequences of regulating female conduct through concepts of family and communal honour (407–41). Together, these studies reveal that patriarchal control is spatial and bodily: it determines where women may move, how they may behave, and how female sexuality is interpreted. Ahsan links feminine identity to patriarchy, colonial history, feudal relations, and capitalism, presenting displacement and selfhood as interconnected concerns. Kerevel and Atkeson shift attention to institutional arrangements and examine whether apparently neutral legislative procedures produce gendered consequences (980–92). Scholarship of 2014 gives greater prominence to layered inequalities. Bari studies the pressure of conventional female roles in South Asian fiction, while Kaiser shows that women occupy unequal positions within social hierarchies. These works anticipate the later prominence of intersectional analysis.

Education, economic autonomy, and social conditioning become particularly visible in studies of the mid-2010s. Patil associates women’s recovery of selfhood with independent choices and financial security (1–3), while Abidi identifies educational exclusion as a product of overlapping religious, economic, regional, and gender inequalities (62–68). Patil and Ghosal examine psychological alienation in Anita Desai’s fiction (675–81). Hethcox uses double colonisation to explain simultaneous colonial and patriarchal pressures in “The Joys of Motherhood” (1842–45), and Dugaje foregrounds self-assertion as a challenge to patriarchy (36–38). These studies move between external structures of control and the psychological effects of gender ideology.

A strong concern with agency characterises scholarship from 2017 onwards. Bajaj and Parag examine women constrained by marriage, sexuality, and patriarchal authority in Taslima Nasrin’s fiction (1–16). Parthasarathi identifies rebellious “new women” in Shobha De’s novels who seek identity beyond incompatible marriages and commodification (37–43). Mouda traces female characters in Margaret Atwood’s fiction from bodily victimisation and alienation towards self-awareness and survival (8–14). The critical emphasis thus begins to move from documenting victimhood to examining the processes through which women negotiate or reconstruct the self.

The scholarship of 2020 further diversifies the field. Putri and Wahyuni connect gender discrimination with trafficking and sexual exploitation in “Sold” (134–49). Alam analyses Black women’s experiences through the combined pressures of racism and

sexism, demonstrating the inadequacy of universal accounts of female oppression. Asghar, Ahmed, and Fatima bring caste, class, religion, and gender into a shared analytical frame in their comparison of “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti” and “The God of Small Things” (204–16). Aalto uses gynocriticism to reconsider silence, motherhood, and female absence in “Frankenstein”. Such approaches make clear that gender alone cannot fully explain women’s marginal position.

Subalternity and intersecting inequalities become particularly prominent in studies from 2021 to 2024. Siraj et al. identify Alice Bhatti’s marginalisation through gender, Christian identity, and lower-class status (7427–34). Shukla and Pradhan show how purdah, child marriage, domestic confinement, and internalised tradition restrict women in “Inside the Haveli” (214–23). Twayej and Longhai interpret women in “Things Fall Apart” as doubly colonised by indigenous patriarchy and British colonialism (30–42). Khalid, Iqbal, and Liaquat expose the commodification of tribal women and the denial of female autonomy (20–27). Javed, Niazi, and Aslam, however, interpret negotiation and storytelling as forms of agency (1334–50).

By 2023, cultural materialism, Marxist feminism, and subaltern studies further widen the field. Ramzan, Nusrat, and Arif connect marriage with material pressures and limited economic choices in “Pride and Prejudice” and “Unmarriageable” (346–54). Nadeem et al. show how gender and lower-class status combine to render Halima voiceless in Sara Suleri’s “The Property of Woman” (882–88). Ijaz and Ashraf argue that patriarchy and capitalism jointly restrict women’s access to resources and economic autonomy (129–50). Yousaf et al. subsequently interpret Alice Bhatti’s experience through the combined effects of gender, religion, class, and ethnicity (3209–23). Arshad examines the use of women’s bodies as instruments of communal humiliation during conflict (702–09), while Mouaci and Kaced return to literary representation and emphasise autonomous female authorship and resistant reading (197–210).

Studies published in 2025 continue this movement towards structural and intersectional analysis. Miao examines globalisation, migration, race, and class in Tash Aw’s fiction and argues that neoliberal capitalism reproduces economic inequality and unequal social mobility. Although the study is not exclusively centred on women, it broadens the structural vocabulary of marginalisation. Ali et al. analyse female servitude and resistance across five postcolonial novels, identifying domestic dependency, sexual subjugation, and cultural conformity while also emphasising female-centred narration as a strategy of resistance (235–39). Singh and Singh examine tribal marginalisation in Mahasweta Devi and show how gender, caste, class, poverty, and institutional neglect converge in the experiences of subaltern women (6–15). Karam’s study of “An American Brat” demonstrates that geographical mobility does not automatically eliminate patriarchal regulation; Feroza’s resistance to familial control marks a gradual movement towards self-assertion (187–92).

Viewed chronologically, the scholarship has moved from broad concerns with exclusion, silence, and literary authority towards layered analyses of domestic power, embodiment, economic inequality, subalternity, intersectionality, narrative voice, and resistance. The category of “woman” is no longer treated as socially uniform.

Contemporary criticism increasingly asks how particular women are positioned within overlapping systems of power and how literary form makes these positions visible.

Analysis and Discussion

The reviewed scholarship reveals several major developments in feminist studies of marginalisation. First, the meaning of marginalisation has expanded. Early studies emphasise exclusion from literary culture, language, and legitimate knowledge. Later research incorporates domestic confinement, marital subordination, bodily violence, economic dependency, educational exclusion, and political or epistemic invisibility. These concerns are interconnected. A woman denied education, income, mobility, or property is more vulnerable to social silence, while the devaluation of her speech can normalise material inequality.

Patriarchy remains the most consistent explanatory framework, but recent scholarship rejects a monolithic account of patriarchal power. Studies of Alice Bhatti demonstrate that gender interacts with religion and class (Siraj et al. 7427–34; Yousaf et al. 3209–23). Alam's study of Black women emphasises the inseparability of sexism and racism. Postcolonial feminist readings identify the combined pressures of colonial history and indigenous patriarchies (Hethcox 1842–45; Twayej and Longhai 30–42), while Marxist feminist criticism adds capitalism and unequal access to resources (Ijaz and Ashraf 129–50). Marginalisation is therefore increasingly understood as an intersection of power relations rather than a single-axis experience.

Marriage and domestic space repeatedly emerge as central sites of gendered regulation. The home is conventionally associated with security and belonging, yet the reviewed literary studies frequently represent it as a space of confinement, emotional oppression, surveillance, unequal labour, and violence. Patil, Patil and Ghosal, Raj and Mishra, and Shukla and Pradhan show that domestic structures can suppress individuality and normalise male authority. The recurrence of these patterns across different literary and cultural contexts suggests that intimate oppression should not be reduced to individual moral failure. Family expectations, economic dependency, cultural respectability, and inherited gender roles enter the home and organise relations of power.

Control over the female body is another persistent theme. Honour-based violence, trafficking, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, commodification, and conflict-related violence demonstrate how patriarchal structures claim authority over women's sexuality and embodiment. Lasson's study of honour and Arshad's analysis of communal violence differ in context, but both reveal the symbolic burden placed upon women's bodies (Lasson 407–41; Arshad 702–09). Putri and Wahyuni and Khalid, Iqbal, and Liaquat similarly show how economic vulnerability and patriarchal authority expose women to bodily exploitation (134–49; 20–27). Violence is thus represented as structural as well as personal.

The politics of voice forms an equally important dimension of marginalisation. Families, institutions, research practices, and male-centred narratives frequently speak for women. Subaltern studies have helped critics examine the conditions under which

marginalised women become inaudible or are represented by more powerful subjects. Nadeem et al. connect Halima's voicelessness with gender and class (882–88), while Süner Koç shows how research itself may render women's knowledge invisible. Literary criticism therefore increasingly treats narration, silence, and representation as political questions.

A major chronological shift is the movement from victimhood towards complex forms of agency. Recent scholarship does not deny oppression; instead, it examines how women act within unequal structures. Education, employment, mobility, refusal, storytelling, sisterhood, and collective activism recur as strategies of resistance. Patil connects selfhood with economic independence (1–3); Imran and Munir document organised resistance (132–56); Javed, Niazi, and Aslam foreground negotiation and storytelling (1334–50); and Ali et al. emphasise female-centred narrative strategies (235–39). Agency, however, is rarely absolute. Women may resist one form of oppression while remaining constrained by another, and patriarchal values may be internalised and reproduced within female communities. The strongest studies therefore move beyond a simple opposition between oppression and empowerment.

Women's writing emerges as a crucial counter-discourse. Godard identifies formal experimentation as resistance to male-centred literary codes (57–75), while Banerjee recovers women's cultural forms as records of domestic dissent (127–79). Mhana et al. show how feminist rewriting restores speech to marginalised female figures (176–83), and Mouaci and Kaced emphasise the role of female authorship and resistant readership in challenging stereotypical representation (197–210). Narrative form is not merely a container for feminist themes. Voice, fragmentation, rewriting, memory, and first-person testimony can alter who is authorised to narrate experience.

The review also reveals important limitations in existing research. Many studies concentrate on a single author, one novel, or one form of oppression. Although such studies offer valuable textual insights, they often isolate marriage from domestic space, violence from economic dependency, or identity from narrative technique. Comparative studies are fewer and generally involve two texts or broad postcolonial groupings. There is therefore scope for sustained diachronic analysis of contemporary Indian English novels by women writers that connects the home, marital power, bodily and psychological violence, caste, class, religion, identity, and resistance.

A further gap concerns the relationship between narrative technique and marginalisation. Some studies explicitly examine voice and feminist rewriting, but much of the scholarship describes oppression thematically without sustained attention to fragmentation, interiority, silence, memory, irony, or temporal disruption. Literary analysis can contribute more than sociological description when it investigates how pain and resistance become narratable. Comparative feminist research should consequently integrate thematic, spatial, intersectional, and narratological perspectives.

The cumulative evidence supports a relational understanding of women's marginalisation. Patriarchy operates through institutions, spaces, discourses, and intimate relationships; its effects are intensified or modified by caste, class, religion,

race, colonial histories, and economic position. Resistance is similarly relational. Education or income may alter a woman's position within marriage; storytelling may contest cultural silence; mobility may challenge domestic confinement; and collective organisation may transform private suffering into political action. Literature remains especially important because it reveals how structural power becomes lived, emotional, and psychological experience.

Conclusion

The scholarship reviewed from 1984 to 2025 demonstrates that women's marginalisation is a multidimensional and historically changing structure of exclusion. Earlier studies foreground women's displacement from dominant literary and cultural traditions, while later criticism examines domestic, bodily, economic, political, and epistemic forms of inequality. Patriarchy remains central, but contemporary research increasingly shows that gender is mediated by caste, class, race, religion, colonial history, ethnicity, and economic position. The idea of a universally marginalised woman has therefore given way to more contextual and intersectional accounts of female experience.

Marriage and domestic space emerge as persistent sites of patriarchal regulation. The reviewed studies document confinement, unequal labour, emotional oppression, sexual control, violence, and the denial of individual identity. Yet they also identify education, economic independence, mobility, solidarity, self-expression, storytelling, refusal, and collective activism as important forms of resistance. Recent scholarship consequently represents women not simply as passive victims but as subjects whose agency is negotiated within continuing structures of power.

The review also establishes the significance of literary form. Female voice, rewriting, fragmented narration, memory, and testimony can challenge dominant representations and return marginalised experience to cultural visibility. Nevertheless, existing research remains fragmented across individual writers, texts, and themes. Comparative and interdisciplinary studies are needed to connect domestic space, marital power, violence, intersectional identity, and narrative strategy, particularly in contemporary Indian English fiction by women writers. Such research can move beyond cataloguing oppression to examine how marginalisation is produced, internalised, narrated, and resisted.

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