

The Politics of Respectability and the Discipline of the Female Voice in Indian Literature: Speech, Desire, and the Moral Economy of “Good Womanhood”

DR. DEVASHISH KUMAR

Department of English, PhD from Malwanchal University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0124-3243>

Abstract- This article explores the politics of respectability as a system of patriarchal control that disciplines women's speech, desire, and mobility in Indian literary discourse. It contends that "good woman" discourses constitute moral economies that control female subjectivity in ways that are not necessarily marked by violence but through ideals of female purity, self-control, domesticity, and emotional regulation. Contrary to mainstream perceptions of respectability as simply a value judgment or a neutral social preference, the article proposes that respectability constitutes a system of control that generates self-censorship and facilitates compromised agency in the context of the middle-class family in India. By engaging with feminist theory, feminist narrative ethics, and intersectional feminist critiques, the article interprets the ways in which women are schooled in self-surveillance to negotiate acceptable femininity through the control of women's speech and desire. The article also contends that women's speech in Indian literature is often disciplined through the mechanisms of stigma and exclusion entailed in moral censure that returns deviance to agency and renders silence virtuous. In hypothesizing respectability as a modality of discipline rather than a cultural value, this work ambitiously extends the Indian feminist literary tradition from the paradigm of empowerment and illustrates that feminist resistivity actually manifests itself through subtle moments of refusal and transitivity rather than moments of affirmative subject-formation.

Keywords: *Respectability Politics, Female Voice, Patriarchal Discipline, Desire, Middle-Class Femininity, Indian Literature, Feminist Ethics*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the cultural fictions of India, femininity is often constructed not only on the basis of gender but also on the basis of morality. The ‘good woman’ is figured through her silence, control, chastity,

management of emotions, and devotional commitment to the family. While these norms appear to be ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ itself, the feminist literary discursive space has come to recognise these very norms as instruments of control that regulate the bodies and voices of women. This paper argues that ‘respectability’ is more than just a social virtue; it's also a technology of discipline that governs femininities through the regulation of feminine voices, desires, and movements.

Indian literature focusing especially on middle-class domestic discourse offers a fertile area for the study of the role of respectability as a patriarchal technology. Respectability in middle-class culture invariably entails the moral policing of women, where women's behaviour becomes translated into a symbolic discourse through which the respectability of the family and community becomes negotiated. Women's voices become politicised in such a culture where women speaking become acts of transgression and where women's desire becomes an act of moral compromise.

This paper contends that respectability functions as a moral economy that rewards silence through punishment and articulation with stigma and exclusion. It involves, as it were, no mere obedience but self-regulation wherein women internalise the disciplinary gaze to become agents of their own containment. Reading respectability as structure and not as choice, this study will reframe resistance within feminism as emerging not solely through voice but also through refusal, opacity, and the rupture of moral norms that render women's agency conditional.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist criticism has drawn on how patriarchy governs women through institutions such as marriage, family, religion, and law. In the Indian context, there has been considerable engagement with issues of gender socialisation, honour politics, and sexuality. There has been some consideration in literary studies of how women are usually relegated to the domestic sphere and how they are measured against certain notions of morality in which womanhood itself represents the things that women must give up in order to be feminine.

However, respectability is sometimes more in the background, serving as context rather than a focus in analyses. Many analyses are concerned with oppression in overt terms of violence, forced marriage, or outright banning, while giving relatively little attention to how respectability, in its more tacit terms, regulates through shame, rumor, moral designation, and emotional regulation. The "good woman" trope can easily be asserted rather than theorized as an apparatus of regulation.

Existing scholarship on middle-class subjectivity has identified clearly how colonial modernity, education, and nationalism forged new models of femininity that were rooted in domestic virtue and cultural purity. The precise relationship between respectability and voice, how speech itself gets disciplined, remains little explored. Women's silence is often read as victimhood, while articulation tends to get seen as liberation, thereby producing a merely binary model of agency.

This paper fills such gaps through the theorisation of respectability as patriarchal technology, with its critical focus on the discipline of the female voice as a key mechanism of control. It argues that respectability works through moral economies that regulate not only women's bodies but also their speech, desire, and mobility. The study thus extends feminist literary discourse by singling out respectability as an ideological structure that has moulded both narrative form and women's lived possibilities.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper will rely on feminist theory, feminist narrative ethics, as well as intersectional critique to analyse the concept of respectability as a disciplinary practice. The application of feminist theory on the normalisation of gender helps to illuminate how patriarchy maintains its hold on power not only through violence but also through normalisation. This implies the creation of femininity ideals to which women must conform themselves. Respectability is one of those ideals by which women regulate their behaviour through morality.

Based on feminist narrative ethics, the reading of the silenced or talkative women's discourse is morally complicated rather than fatally flawed. This implies that the notion of a silenced subject as the symbol of passiveness or the concept of expressed discourse as the embodiment of virtue is superseded by the notion of constrained choice, structural constraint, or the consequences of defiance.

Intersectional critique further situates respectability within class, caste, and communal frameworks. Middle-class femininity often acts as a site where cultural legitimacy is performed; women's moral conduct becomes central to social status. Yet, women's capacity to make a claim to respectability is distributed in uneven ways; caste and class inequalities shape how women's voices are heard or punished. Respectability often operates through the exclusion of "improper" women—those marked as lower-caste, sexually deviant, or socially threatening. These frameworks facilitate a reading together that views respectability not as a cultural value but as patriarchal technology, which disciplines women's speech, desire, and mobility under the cloak of morality.

IV. RESPECTABILITY AS PATRIARCHAL TECHNOLOGY: THE MAKING OF THE "GOOD WOMAN"

Respectability is a technology of power in that it is itself perceived as moral rather than force. The "good woman" is compelled to conform not merely through force, but through moral instruction. Social systems

inform women that respectability means survival and belonging, whereas transgression means embarrassment and death. This is a disciplinary setup that transmutes patriarchy into common moral sense.

“The good woman’s code is the way in which women are ruled by codes that operate in the detail of their everyday lives: the modesty of their speech, the governance of their desire, their domestic commitment, and the restrictions of their mobility.” The codes are rarely given the interpretation of oppression; they are “morality and virtue and family honour.” The codes disguise oppression in “structural inequality and cultural discipline.” “The female body is made the symbolic site of the community’s legitimacy.” The women in the family now have the task of maintaining the family’s identity and reputation.

Respectability is therefore a moral economy. Those women who conform receive moral value, which manifests in approbation, protection, and recognition by society. Those women who speak too widely, want too openly, and act independently are corrected by society via gossip, suspicion, and moral naming. This regime of power needs neither constant compulsion nor surveillance, because women police themselves, which makes patriarchy both sustainable and efficient.

The Indian literary traditions may reveal the violence contained in respectability through its psychological toll in terms of self-censoring, mental fatigue, and fractured subjectivity. Respectability is thus no longer a value-free code in society but becomes an instrument that turns women’s humanity into a moral spectacle. The feminist reading must thus decode “good womanhood” as a political production and not an identity.

V. DISCIPLINED SPEECH: SILENCE, SELF-CENSORSHIP, AND THE POLICING OF VOICE

In respectability regimes, women's speech is never neutral. The female voice is treated as potentially dangerous because she destabilises control. Speaking risks naming injustice, articulating desire, or

challenging domestic authority. For that reason, patriarchal systems discipline speech by equating feminine virtue with silence, softness, and emotional restraint. Women learn that speaking too directly is "disrespectful," "shameless," or "improper," while silence is framed as maturity and decency.

The women in Indian literature are repeatedly the ones censoring themselves to maintain their belonging. This is not mere fear; it is social conditioning. They grow up believing that their voice has a duty to protect family stability, preserve reputation, and avoid conflict. Speech becomes an ethical burden: speak only in a manner that sustains harmony, never in a way that exposes harm.

The practice of speech also involves humiliation. In articulating grievances, some of these women come to be redescribed as selfish, irrational, or morally deviant. The gaze is shifted from the maltreatment of patriarchy to the imputed deficiency of virtue of women. This is how respectability transforms grievances into deviance.

A major point in feminism is that silence sometimes can't be translated into its absence. Sometimes silence functions through functioning. Respectability ensures that this functioning itself is expensive. This ensures that this silence and this functioning are translated into women living with their repressed rage and sadness.

VI. DESIRE UNDER SURVEILLANCE: SEXUALITY, SHAME, AND MORAL PUNISHMENT.

Respectability’s strongest disciplinary power is frequently focused on women’s desire. Female desire is constructed as a threat to the honour of the family and the demarcations of the community. Desire is not understood in terms of human freedom but in terms of dangerousness—conducive to stigma, to dishonour, to social disorder. Thus, respectability mandates women’s virtue in terms of chastity, modesty, and control, while sexual curiosity or autonomy is punished by moral categorisation.

The Indian literary texts illuminate the ways in which the desire of the woman is often articulated through shame. The woman comes to interpret her own desire as guilt; hence, patriarchy becomes internal to culture. 'Respectability' implies that desire itself becomes monitored even in the privacy of one's home because 'the good woman' not only needs to do the right thing but also needs to feel the right thing.

Also, patriarchal moral orders are full of asymmetry: male desire is banalised, while female desire is criminalised or moralised is female desire. The onus of restraint for women and their bodies becomes the site where social boundaries are upheld. Transgression invites social exclusion or even violence, proving that respectability commands both symbolic and material punishment.

In feminist discourse, desire becomes political because it reveals the limits of feminine freedom. To desire out in the open is to resist the notion that women exist primarily as moral guardians. Literature representing desire as conflict, as opposed to liberation, reveals the ethical cost of agency in respectability regimes. Thus, politics of desire are neither independent nor separable from the politics of voice and belonging.

VII. MOBILITY, SPACE, AND THE CONTROL OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT.

Respectability regulates the woman not merely through words and through sex, but through movement as well. It is a question of where the woman moves, whom she meets, and how she occupies space, as all this becomes a signification of her respectability. Often, patriarchal societies inhibit the movement of women in the name of her security and protection. Respectability makes the world outside dangerous and the home an obligation for the woman.

The freedom of women has always been depicted in Indian literature in terms of suspicion. A woman travelling alone means she is "suspect," and travelling unauthorised means she is "rebellion." This means freedom in space gets translated into immorality in behaviour. Respectability maintains the

virtue of confinement through freedom in space, becoming potential immorality in sexuality.

Importantly, class also shapes mobility. Middle-class respectability often permits only limited mobility when it serves virtue: education, domestic duties, and religious rituals. Autonomy, rather than service, is disciplined into mobility. Women are allowed to move, but only as controlled subjects.

Confinement due to restricted mobility creates psychological repercussions: fear, dependence, and internalised limitation. Women learn that independence invites punishment, and thus self-regulate movement even in the absence of direct surveillance. Often, feminist resistance within such frameworks manifests itself through small disruptions: going out alone, choosing companionship, refusing confinement. These acts might seem insignificant, yet they bring to light respectability as an apparatus that polices women's lives through spatial control masquerading as morality.

VIII. MIDDLE-CLASS FEMINISM AND THE TRAP OF RESPECTABILITY

In middle-class settings, respectability is magnified, since morality is also a means of maintaining class. Families's credibility is demonstrated by disciplined female behavior, which converts womanhood into cultural capital. Respectability is turned into a class undertaking, since the "educated yet modest" female figures as the ideal subject on which modernity is tamed, and tradition is sustained.

This creates a paradox in middle-class feminine discourse. Women can gain education and a degree of freedom, but they must be contained by strict moral codes. Empowerment becomes a qualified reality, as women can be encouraged to succeed, but not to challenge a patriarchal system. They are granted a voice, but it must be a harmless one. They can experience a degree of desire, but it must be within approved contexts. They can be mobile, but within approved ways.

Respectability is shown to lead to emotional exhaustion for women, as it is a constant performing of virtue, and this occludes all nuances because women cannot feel angry, ambitious, or sexually self-aware without feeling shame. Respectability is thus a hindrance to the process of feminist transformation because it objectifies patriarchy, making it a moral self.

To critique respectability is to do so in feminism because it is how domination functions in consent. In many cases, the middle class is how patriarchy is sustained in language that is value-based and not violence-based. What is necessary in feminist interpretation is to ask how “good womanhood” is a disciplinary form that is both non-respectable in culture.

IX. FEMINIST RESISTANCE BEYOND VOICE: REFUSAL, OPACITY, AND ETHICAL NON-COMPLIANCE.

To the extent that respectability polices women in terms of moral discourses, a feminist defiance cannot remain the preserve of spectacle and voice. The Indian feminist stories seem to indicate that defiance is effected through the refusal to do virtue, through the refusal to articulate pain, through the refusal to keep sacrificing. Silence may thus become a strategy rather than compliance.

Resistance can also be feminist in its opacity; that is, in its refusal to make its inner life transparent to social reading. Respectability expects women to be transparent and accountable; they need to be explicable, innocent, and morally intelligible. Yet this disposition is disrupted in its encounter with opacity, which shelters women from capture in narrative. Thus, feminist discourse veers towards its edges and its boundary.

Ethical non-compliance can be active, such as resisting mandatory care and refusing social scripts to be a woman through sacrifice. Ethical acts of silence and structure can be passive and may not necessarily tear down a patriarchy, but they lay bare the patriarchy’s reliance upon a woman’s conformity.

It’s essential to note that in respectability regimes, resistance has a cost. Belonging, safety, or support in the family could be at risk for women. “Feminist narratives that are aware of the cost of resistance offer a more ethically honest mode of discourse. Because resistance does not always succeed but matters, a vocabulary of empowerment must be challenged by a vocabulary that recognises a resistant agency in the opacity of women’s experience.”

X. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed that respectability can be seen as a patriarchal technology that conditions women’s speech, desire, and motility in Indian literary narratives. The “good woman” discourse can be seen as a moral economy that operates not by repression but by shame, stigma, the surveillance of the self, and the prospect of social inclusion. Respectability becomes particularly potent in a middle-class setting because women’s conduct becomes tied to family respectability and national identity. This enables women to practice a degree of censorship, repression, and limitation because patriarchy becomes moral sense.

The presented work has generalised respectability as a mode of discipline in a theoretical framework instead of a cultural ideal in feminist literary studies. This has helped to move feminist literary studies beyond the binary oppositions in which voice equals agency and silence equals oppression. The work has shown that patriarchal dominance often entails moralisation in respectability. This means that feminist subversion often resists not solely in terms of public defiance but also in terms of refusal or opacity.

Ultimately, then, the politics of respectability lays bare how women’s liberation is conditionally granted based on moral propriety. This condition set for women’s freedom is constantly reinforced in feminist texts that, far from merely demanding speech, demand the possibility of being in existence outside of respectability. On the feminist reading that respectability offers, it seems that it is possible, then, to discern in this quiet, limited, and very ethical

agency, one that is anything but easily controlled by patriarchal forces.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.
- [2] Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge.
- [3] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- [4] Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge.
- [5] Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press.
- [6] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- [7] Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press.
- [8] hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism Is for Everybody*. Pluto Press.
- [9] Loomba, A. (2015). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- [10] Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders*. Duke University Press.
- [11] Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born*. W. W. Norton.
- [13] Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- [14] Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1991). *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- [15] Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. Sage Publications.