

Reproductive Labour and the Feminist Politics of Survival: Beyond Motherhood as Symbol in Indian Fiction

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Abstract

In this article, the concept of motherhood in Indian English fiction is re-theorised through the lens of reproductive labour and feminist political economy. The concept of motherhood in literature has been widely interpreted as symbolic endurance and emotional crisis. This article suggests that unpaid domestic and reproductive labour performed by women maintains colonial modernity, nationalist development, and families without recognition and remuneration. This article draws upon Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction and feminist political economy at the global level and explores Nectar in a Sieve, Clear Light of Day, That Long Silence, and Dalit women writers' narratives to illustrate how gendered subsistence labour maintains economic systems and renders women structurally disposable. These narratives reveal care extraction as a foundational process through which agrarian, middle-class, and caste-based social hierarchies reproduce themselves. Women's labour serves families, maintains property, and regulates economic and social crises and respectability without recognition and remuneration in the formal economy. These narratives do not romanticise motherhood as symbolic endurance and emotional crisis. They reveal survival as a gendered responsibility imposed through moral and emotional discipline. The article contends that the feminist literary discussion in India should go beyond symbolic motherhood to the politics of reproductive work. By highlighting the survival economy supported by the unpaid work of women, the present study positions the fiction of India in the global discussion of social reproduction, precariousness, and feminist resistance.

Keywords: Reproductive labour, Social reproduction, Care extraction, Feminist political economy, Gendered subsistence, Indian English fiction.

1. Introduction: From Motherhood to Reproductive Labour

The construct of motherhood in Indian writing has been that of emotional endurance, moral sacrifice, and cultural continuity. However, feminist theory has also explored the construct of motherhood in terms of suffering and domestic confinement, but the construct of motherhood in terms of labor, specifically, has not received due consideration. The construct of reproductive labor is the unpaid work of caring, maintaining the household, managing emotions, and bringing up children, thereby ensuring the reproduction of labor power at the individual and collective levels. Marxist feminist theorists have explored the construct of reproductive labor in the context of the invisibility of unpaid work and the non-compensatory nature of such work in the context of capitalism.

The present article seeks to explore the construct of reproductive labor in the context of the colonial agrarian economy and the role of unpaid work in the context of Indian English fiction, specifically, in the context of *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Clear Light of Day*, *That Long Silence*, and Dalit women's testimonies, thereby suggesting that unpaid work by women stabilizes the colonial agrarian economy, middle-class respectability, and the caste hierarchy.

Instead of seeing the figure of maternal endurance as a model of goodness, care extraction as a mode of demanding women's unpaid work in addressing crises is revealed. Survival is depicted as a feminized imperative. This article extends Indian feminist scholarship by thinking about the figure of motherhood through a feminist political economy.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction and Care Extraction

The social reproduction theory was developed by feminist theorists such as Silvia Federici, Lise Vogel, and Nancy Fraser. These theorists argue that the capitalist system is sustained through the unpaid domestic work of women in reproducing the workforce. Reproductive work in colonial and postcolonial societies is not limited to the nuclear family. Women's work in maintaining subsistence agriculture, coping with shortages, and keeping social cohesion in the face of structural inequality is what holds property relations together and supports the narrative of national development.

The concept of care extraction is the appropriation of women's work without institutional support. These are the economic shocks, crop failure, unemployment, and displacement, which are absorbed by women through increased reproductive work. The appropriation is through a sense of obligation rather than a wage contract. Feminist Political Economy shows how caste stratification affects reproductive labour. Dalit women may be engaged in reproductive work in their own community and exploitative wage work in upper-caste homes. Reproductive labour is not equally distributed.

Indian literature offers narrative evidence of these processes. By placing reproductive labour at the heart of our examination, we may rethink motherhood beyond its archetypal form and locate it as an economic formation that is part of colonial modernity and caste patriarchy.

3. Agrarian Survival and Gendered Subsistence in *Nectar in a Sieve*

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani's work maintains an agrarian family during economic change under colonialism. Reproductive work includes cooking, cleaning, having children, emotional labour, and assisting with agriculture. Drought and the encroaching tannery industry disrupt the agrarian economy, but Rukmani's work offsets these challenges by managing her subsistence agriculture. Rukmani's work supports Nathan's agrarian economy and maintains family continuity despite land insecurity. However, her work is economically irrelevant. Colonial economic development transforms the agrarian economy, but reproductive work offsets economic precarity.

Nectar in a Sieve presents an economy of survival that is made possible by feminine endurance. When her sons migrate or die, Rukmani continues with her reproductive work. She copes with hunger by rationing food for others' consumption. Such self-sacrifice is an expression of care extraction under agrarian patriarchy. Instead of celebrating maternal sacrifice, a feminist political economy perspective shows how structural exploitation is at work. Rukmani's reproductive work supports colonial capitalism by offsetting the economic costs of displacement. Her survival strategies prevent social ruin without recognition.

Therefore, **Nectar in a Sieve** is a forerunner of social reproduction theory. It shows how women's reproductive work maintains agrarian systems in the face of industrialisation.

4. Middle-Class Domesticity and Emotional Labour in Clear Light of Day

In **Clear Light of Day**, Bim's life revolves around unpaid work. She remains a spinster and looks after her aging brother. Her unpaid work involves emotional work. Respectability in the postcolonial middle class requires unpaid work. Bim's sacrifices allow for familial continuity as other siblings lead alternative lives. However, her unpaid work remains unrecognized as economic contribution. The emotional dimension of unpaid work in **Nectar in a Sieve** and **Clear Light of Day** involves emotional labour. Bim mediates conflicts and maintains memory and space. Her intellectual pursuits remain subordinated to unpaid work.

The novel shows how nationalist discourses of independence obscure gendered subsistence. While modernising, women continue to maintain households without pay. Bim's resilience is an example of care extraction under middle-class conditions. In that regard, reproductive work here transforms from agrarian subsistence to urban domestic maintenance. Yet, it remains invisible. The political economy of feminist thought transforms Bim's sacrifice into structural extraction, beyond individual choice.

5. Epistemic and Emotional Labour in That Long Silence

In **That Long Silence**, Jaya's reproductive work also includes the emotional stabilisation of the marriage relationship. She uses silence to deal with conflict, hence sustaining respectability in the marriage relationship. The reproductive work in the novel includes the maintenance of patriarchal harmony in the marriage relationship. Jaya uses tension absorption to avoid social embarrassment in the marriage relationship. Care extraction is also evident in the assumption that Jaya will regulate emotions.

The reproductive work in the novel also includes the maintenance of middle-class masculinity for Mohan, since his professional success is predicated upon the maintenance of the marriage relationship by Jaya's silence. The feminist political economy of the novel reveals the subsidies that Jaya's emotional work provides for Mohan's success. The politics of survival in the middle-class marriage relationship, therefore, mirrors the politics of survival in the agrarian subsistence in the earlier texts, even though the contexts differ.

6. Dalit Women and the Double Burden of Reproductive Labour

The narratives of Dalit women also indicate different dimensions of reproductive labour. They perform reproductive labour for their own households without pay, as well as exploitative wage labour for upper-caste households.

Unlike upper-caste women who enjoy symbolic purity, Dalit women do not possess symbolic honour but bear a heavy economic burden. Their reproductive labour maintains the village economy as well as the systems of caste-based property. Reproductive labour for Dalit women is a double exploitation: economic subordination as well as caste subordination.

The survival economy heavily relies on marginalised women, as Dalit women's testimonies indicate. Their reproductive labour maintains both upper-caste households as well as their own precarious lives. A feminist political economy approach helps us identify that reproductive labour is not equally distributed among castes. Indian fiction as well as Dalit women's narratives demonstrate this inequality, which challenges universalised motherhood discourse.

7. Beyond Symbolic Motherhood: Toward Feminist Survival Politics

In all of these texts, motherhood as an economic concept rather than a symbolic ideal has to be reinterpreted. The reproductive labour maintains colonial agrarian economies, nationalist middle-class families, and caste systems. Care extraction turns women's bodies into shock absorbers of economic crisis. Surviving the crisis becomes a feminised responsibility. Literature uncovers this economy of care through dramatic portrayals of exhaustion and invisibility.

Instead of idealising motherhood as a symbolic ideal, the narratives ask for a critique of this ideal. A feminist political economy requires an acknowledgement of reproductive labour as a foundational economic process. Indian feminist literary studies need to break free from the metaphor of motherhood and start looking at the economic process of unpaid labour. Gender justice requires an engagement with economic systems that rely on women's invisibility.

8. Conclusion

As has been discussed throughout this article, Indian English fiction holds the key to an understanding of reproductive labour as a political system. Women's unpaid labour, through agrarian subsistence strategies, middle-class domesticity, emotional labour, and exploitation through caste hierarchies, maintains economic and social orders. By using social reproduction theory and feminist political economy, this article has attempted to reimagine motherhood from symbolic endurance to structural extraction. Survival is not a personal attribute but a necessary economic activity that is coerced through moral compulsion.

The texts demonstrate how colonial modernisation, nationalist development, and caste hierarchies are underpinned by invisible women's labour. Reproductive labour manages crises, secures property, and maintains respectability. Re-reading Indian English fiction through this framework positions it as a contributor to global debates on care economies and precarity. It expands feminist theory to include gendered subsistence strategies.

Understanding reproductive labour as a political system allows for a more nuanced critique of patriarchy and capitalism. Literature becomes a site that holds evidence of survival economies, revealing how women's labour maintains worlds that fail to recognise it.

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