NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF GENDER, MEMORY, AND MARGINALITY IN MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract
This paper investigates how modern English-language literature narrates resistance and resilience among women and other marginalised subjects within postcolonial contexts, with particular attention to the interplay of gender, memory, and structural marginality. Building on Gayatri Spivak's foundational work on subaltern voice and on a body of scholarship published in 2024, including the Journal of Postcolonial Writing's special focus on memory, materiality, and forgetting in the South Asian diaspora, the paper examines Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun. It argues that these novels construct resilience not as the absence of trauma but as the ongoing, often fragmentary, narrative labour of remembering, testifying, and re-authoring a self that dominant historiography has silenced or distorted. Memory in these texts functions simultaneously as wound and as resource, while gender determines whose memories are heard, doubted, or erased. The paper concludes that postcolonial resilience, in this literary tradition, is best understood as a form of narrative agency exercised from positions of structural marginality rather than a straightforward triumph over oppression.

Keywords: postcolonial literature; gender; memory studies; marginality; subaltern voice; resilience; trauma narrative

1. Introduction

Modern English-language literature emerging from formerly colonised regions is preoccupied with a recurring question: how do those excluded from official historical narratives, particularly women, the poor, and other marginalised subjects, come to narrate their own experience of violence, displacement, and survival? This paper approaches that question through the intertwined lenses of gender, memory, and marginality, arguing that resilience in this literary tradition is best understood not as triumph over hardship but as the sustained, often incomplete, labour of narrating a self that dominant history has tried to silence.

The theoretical starting point for this discussion is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential account of the subaltern, the term she uses for those positioned so far outside dominant social and political structures that their speech, when it occurs, struggles to be recognised as speech at all within hegemonic frameworks of meaning. Spivak's provocation, that the subaltern cannot straightforwardly speak within structures designed to exclude them, has generated three decades of literary criticism asking how fiction might nonetheless stage, imagine, or gesture toward subaltern experience without claiming to resolve the problem of representation Spivak identifies.

This paper builds on that tradition while incorporating scholarship published in 2024, including a special focus issue of the Journal of Postcolonial Writing dedicated to memory, materiality, and forgetting in the postcolonial South Asian diaspora, and recent studies of subaltern female narrative voice. It examines Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun, arguing that these novels each stage a distinct model of gendered memory-work as a form of resistance to marginalisation, even as they remain sharply aware of the limits of that resistance.

The paper proceeds by first outlining the theoretical framework linking subaltern voice, memory studies, and gender; it then surveys 2024 scholarship on these themes; it subsequently offers close readings of the four novels; and it closes with a discussion of what these readings suggest about the relationship between narrative agency and structural marginality.

2. Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Voice, Gender, and Postcolonial Memory

Spivak's account of the subaltern remains foundational for any study of marginality in postcolonial literature. Her central claim is that

subaltern subjects, and subaltern women in particular, occupy a position doubly obscured: first by colonial and national historiography, which represents them only as objects of policy or as symbols of tradition, and second by an intellectual tradition, including some strands of feminism and Marxism, that claims to speak for them without attending to the specific conditions of their silencing. For Spivak, fiction cannot simply solve this problem by giving marginalised characters eloquent, transparent voices; doing so risks a false resolution that obscures the very structures of silencing the fiction seeks to critique.

Alongside subaltern studies, this paper draws on memory studies, particularly the concept of postmemory developed by Marianne Hirsch, which describes how the traumatic experience of one generation is transmitted to a following generation through inherited stories, images, and cultural practices, such that descendants experience these memories as powerfully present even though they did not live through the original events directly. Recent postcolonial scholarship has extended postmemory to describe how national traumas, including Partition, civil war, and caste violence, continue to shape the psychic and narrative lives of characters born after the events themselves.

Gender is the third and organising axis of this framework. Feminist postcolonial criticism has long argued that women's bodies and memories are disproportionately instrumentalised within nationalist and communal narratives, treated as symbols of communal honour or victimhood rather than as sites of individual experience and testimony. Reading gender, memory, and marginality together therefore requires attention to how fiction negotiates the tension between women as narrated symbols and women as narrating subjects who resist, complicate, or refuse the symbolic roles assigned to them.

These three frameworks, subaltern studies, memory studies, and feminist postcolonial criticism, are not simply additive; they interact with and complicate one another in ways that close reading must trace carefully. A subaltern woman's memory, for instance, may be doubly obscured: first by the structural silencing Spivak identifies, and second by the symbolic instrumentalization feminist critics have described, in which her experience is permitted to circulate only insofar as it serves a larger communal or nationalist narrative rather than standing as testimony in its own right. The novels examined in this paper each stage, in different ways, a struggle against this double obscuring, without claiming to resolve it fully.

3. Literature Review: 2024 Scholarship on Memory, Gender, and Marginality

A 2024 special focus issue of the Journal of Postcolonial Writing, guest edited by Avishek Parui, gathers recent scholarship on memory, materiality, and forgetting in the postcolonial South Asian diaspora. Contributions to this issue argue that remembering and forgetting should not be understood as simple opposites but as structurally entangled processes, such that acts of narrative reconstruction are always also acts of selective omission, shaped by what a given historical and political moment permits to be spoken.

Building on this special issue, a related 2024 discussion of memory studies and postcolonial writing argues that the concept of subaltern voice must be understood as a set of narrative choices, including the mobility of the narrating perspective, the structure of address, and the arrangement of narrative time, through which women reassert some degree of control in contexts where silence or spectacle would otherwise be imposed on them. This narratological approach is valuable for close reading because it shifts attention away from asking simply whether a marginalised character "has a voice" and toward analysing the specific formal strategies through which fiction represents partial, contested acts of self-narration.

A separate 2024 study of subaltern female narratives in South Asian postcolonial literature examines how women's experiences are positioned within narratives shaped by colonial legacies and patriarchal structures, with particular attention to narrative authority, bodily control, and alternative, non-verbal modes of expression such as silence, gesture, and domestic ritual. This scholarship confirms that resistance in postcolonial women's fiction is frequently expressed obliquely, through modes of communication that dominant literary and historical frameworks are ill-equipped to recognise as resistance at all.

Finally, a 2024 critical review of major postcolonial works highlights the centrality of gender and feminism to the field, noting that writers across different national contexts interrogate gender roles and social norms while foregrounding the intersection of race, class, and gender in the postcolonial condition, and that memory studies within postcolonial literature increasingly examines how histories of colonial and communal violence are remembered, commemorated, or actively erased. Taken together, this body of 2024 scholarship supports a reading practice attentive to the formal, embodied, and often indirect ways that marginalised characters in postcolonial fiction narrate memory and resist erasure.

Finally, a 2024 study of Nafisa Haji's The Writing on My Forehead reads mimicry as a survival and mobility strategy for its protagonist, who adopts elements of a Western lifestyle, including dress and romantic choices, while remaining shaped by inherited expectations regarding family duty and religious identity. This scholarship is notable for treating hybridity not as an abstract condition but as a set of embodied, everyday practices, visible in clothing, courtship, and domestic life, through which characters actively manage the competing claims of two cultural worlds. Taken together, the 2024 literature confirms that South Asian fiction is read less as a record of cultural loss than as an archive of active, ongoing cultural negotiation.

4. The God of Small Things: Caste, Gender, and the Memory of Transgression

Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things narrates the memory of a single, catastrophic transgression, the relationship between a Syrian Christian woman, Ammu, and an untouchable man, Velutha, through the fractured, non-linear recollection of Ammu's adult daughter, Rahel. The novel's structure enacts the entanglement of remembering and forgetting that recent memory studies scholarship identifies as central to postcolonial narrative: the reader receives the central events only in fragments, circling back repeatedly to the same scenes from different angles, so that full comprehension of what happened, and why it was punished so severely, is deferred until the novel's final pages.

This structural withholding is itself a comment on marginality. Ammu's transgression against caste boundaries, and the brutal communal violence that follows, are events that the Kerala society depicted in the novel cannot narrate directly or honestly; official and familial memory instead produces euphemism, blame, and silence around Ammu and her children. Rahel's fragmented recollection, arriving decades later, functions as an alternative, unofficial history that restores some of what communal memory suppressed, without ever fully repairing the damage done. The novel therefore models resilience not as recovery but as the capacity to keep returning to an unresolved wound in search of a fuller, if still incomplete, understanding.

Gender compounds this marginality. Ammu is punished more severely than Velutha's other associates precisely because her transgression violates simultaneously the boundaries of caste and of appropriate feminine conduct; the novel is explicit that Ammu's body and reputation become the site on which communal anxiety about social order is enacted. Roy's narrative technique, giving extended interiority to Ammu and to the children who witness her punishment, works against this instrumentalizations, insisting on Ammu's subjectivity even as the plot depicts her social erasure.

5. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: Collective Memory and Marginal Community

Roy's second novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, extends this concern with marginality from the single family of The God of Small Things to an assembled community of the socially discarded: a transgender woman living in a graveyard, an activist mother searching for her missing daughter, and residents of a contested Kashmiri landscape whose experiences rarely register in mainstream Indian national narrative. Critical accounts of postcolonial memory studies emphasise that acts of narrative reconstruction are always entangled with acts of political forgetting; Roy's novel makes this entanglement explicit by setting personal loss against the backdrop of state violence and communal conflict that official history is reluctant to fully acknowledge.

The novel's fragmented, multi-voiced structure, moving between characters whom mainstream society treats as marginal or illegible, models a form of collective rather than individual memory-work. No single character's testimony is treated as sufficient; instead, resilience emerges from the accumulation of partial, sometimes contradictory accounts that together sketch a fuller picture than any one voice could provide alone. This formal choice resonates with 2024 scholarship's argument that subaltern voice functions through specific narratological strategies, including mobility across multiple points of address, rather than through a single, unified narrating subject.

6. Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India: Childhood Witness and Partition Memory

Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India narrates the violence of the 1947 Partition of India through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsi girl whose physical disability and religious minority status place her at a further remove from the central Hindu-Muslim-Sikh communal conflict she nonetheless witnesses at close range. Lenny's perspective is doubly marginal, marked by both gender and disability, and the novel uses this positioning to defamiliarise a historical trauma that adult, nationalist accounts often narrate with a clarity and coherence that Sidhwa's child narrator's confusion and partial understanding directly resist.

Central to the novel is the transformation of Lenny's beloved Ayah, a Hindu woman, from a figure of warmth and social ease into a victim of communal sexual violence carried out by men Lenny had previously known as neighbours and

friends. Sidhwa's refusal to soften or narratively resolve this violence, and her insistence on filtering it through a child's incomplete comprehension, exemplifies the postmemory dynamic in which historical trauma is transmitted to a later generation not as clean information but as an unsettling, only partially processed inheritance. The novel's resilience, such as it is, lies not in Lenny's mastery of these events but in her survival as a witness who carries an incomplete, wounding memory into adulthood and, implicitly, into the act of narration itself.

Gender operates here with particular force: Ayah's fate exemplifies how women's bodies become the primary sites on which communal violence is enacted during Partition, a pattern extensively documented in Partition historiography and echoed in recent postcolonial memory scholarship's attention to how women's suffering is symbolically appropriated by nationalist narratives even as their individual testimony is frequently disregarded.

7. Half of a Yellow Sun: Gendered Memory of the Biafran War

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun narrates the Nigerian Civil War and the short-lived state of Biafra through multiple perspectives, including Olanna, a woman from a wealthy family who experiences the war's escalating deprivation and violence, and Ugwu, a houseboy whose coerced conscription into the Biafran army exposes a different, more brutal dimension of the conflict. The novel's structure, alternating between the early 1960s and the war years, requires readers to hold optimistic prewar memory and catastrophic wartime experience in constant tension, refusing any single, linear narrative of decline or recovery.

Olanna's storyline is particularly significant for a gendered reading of memory and marginality. Her decision to raise her sister's child after her sister is killed, and her renewed intimacy with her partner Odenigbo amid the war's devastation, stage resilience as an ongoing practice of care and continuity rather than a single act of survival. At the same time, the novel does not shy away from depicting the specific sexual violence and coerced labour that women experience during wartime, resisting any narrative that would allow national trauma to eclipse gendered harm. Ugwu's eventual authorship of a book about the war, revealed at the novel's end to be the very narrative frame the reader has been engaging with, further stages the question of who is authorised to remember and narrate collective trauma, situating this authority not with elites or officials but with a formerly marginalised character whose own complicity and suffering complicate any straightforward heroism.

8. Comparative Analysis: Modes of Gendered Memory-Work

Read together, these four novels suggest that gendered memory-work in postcolonial fiction takes several recurring forms. Roy's two novels model memory as fragmented, non-linear return, in which resilience consists of repeatedly revisiting an unresolved wound rather than achieving closure. Sidhwa's novel models memory as inherited, incompletely processed witness, transmitted through a child narrator whose limited comprehension paradoxically preserves the horror of events that adult narration might otherwise smooth over. Adichie's novel models memory as contested authorship, asking who within a devastated community is positioned to narrate collective trauma and on what authority.

Despite these formal differences, all four novels share a refusal to treat women's suffering as merely symbolic of national or communal crisis. Each insists, through extended interiority, formal fragmentation, or narrative reframing, on the specific, embodied experience of its women characters, resisting the instrumentalisation that feminist postcolonial criticism has long identified as a besetting risk of nationalist historiography. This shared refusal supports the 2024 scholarship's argument that subaltern voice in fiction operates through specific narrative strategies, mobility of perspective, structure of address, temporal arrangement, that reassert some degree of narrative control even within stories of profound violence and loss.

8b. Silence, Body, and Alternative Testimony

A recurring formal strategy across these four novels is the use of silence and embodied gesture as an alternative register of testimony where verbal narration fails or is forbidden. Ammu's late-novel silence in the face of her community's judgment, Ayah's absence from the narrative once she is taken by the mob in Cracking India, and the graveyard community's largely non-verbal forms of mutual care in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness each stage moments where the novel deliberately withholds direct verbal testimony from its most marginalised characters, redirecting the reader's attention instead to gesture, ritual, and the material traces a character leaves behind.

This pattern accords closely with 2024 scholarship's attention to alternative, non-verbal modes of expression, including silence, gesture, and domestic ritual, as sites where subaltern women's agency becomes legible despite, or even because of, their exclusion from direct speech. Reading silence as a meaningful narrative strategy, rather than as a simple absence of information,

allows criticism to recognise forms of resistance and self-assertion that a purely dialogue-centred approach to characterisation would overlook. At the same time, this approach carries an interpretive risk: critics must take care not to romanticise silence as inherently empowering, since in each of these novels silence is also clearly the product of violent constraint rather than a freely chosen mode of expression.

The tension between reading silence as constraint and reading it as a resource is, in fact, central to how these novels stage resilience. Roy, Sidhwa, and Adichie each refuse to resolve this tension cleanly, presenting their marginalised characters' silences as simultaneously a wound inflicted by circumstance and a space in which some remainder of dignity or agency persists, unnarrated but not therefore non-existent.

9. Marginality Beyond Gender: Caste, Disability, and Communal Identity

While gender is the organising concern of this paper, the novels examined here demonstrate that marginality in postcolonial fiction is rarely produced by a single axis of exclusion alone. Velutha's untouchability in The God of Small Things, Lenny's disability and minority religious status in Cracking India, and Ugwu's class position as a houseboy in Half of a Yellow Sun each compound gendered marginality with additional structures of exclusion, caste, disability, class, and religious minority status, that shape whose testimony is credited and whose is dismissed.

This intersectional pattern confirms an observation made across recent postcolonial criticism: that marginality is not a single, uniform condition but a set of overlapping structures whose combined effect on any individual character depends on the specific historical and social context in which they are situated. A purely gender-focused reading of these novels would therefore risk flattening the distinct forms of exclusion that caste, disability, and class introduce, even as gender remains a consistent thread running through each text's treatment of memory and voice.

10. Discussion: Resilience as Narrative Agency Under Constraint

Read together, these four novels and the surrounding 2024 scholarship suggest that resilience in postcolonial literature concerned with gender, memory, and marginality should not be understood as the triumphant overcoming of hardship. None of the central women characters examined in this paper, Ammu, the assembled figures of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Ayah, or Olanna, achieve anything resembling straightforward victory over the violence and exclusion they face. Ammu dies in poverty and disgrace; Ayah is abducted and never fully recovered by the narrative; Olanna survives the war but at the cost of profound personal loss.

Instead, resilience in this fiction is best understood as narrative agency exercised under severe constraint: the capacity of a marginalised character, or of the narrative structure surrounding them, to insist on the specificity and value of their experience even when surrounding social and political structures actively work to silence, symbolise, or forget it. This reframing aligns closely with Spivak's original caution against assuming that subaltern subjects can simply be given transparent voice by sympathetic authors; each of the novels examined here instead stages partial, formally mediated, and often retrospective acts of narration that acknowledge the very difficulty of representation Spivak identifies.

This has implications for how gender is read within postcolonial memory studies more broadly. If resilience is narrative agency under constraint rather than triumph, then literary criticism should resist a temptation to read postcolonial women's fiction primarily as inspirational testimony. Doing so risks reproducing the same instrumentalisation, treating women's suffering as valuable chiefly for the moral or political lesson it offers readers, that these novels themselves critique when it is enacted by nationalist or communal narratives within their fictional worlds.

11. Comparative Regional Contexts: South Asia and West Africa

This paper has deliberately paired novels from two distinct postcolonial regions, South Asia and West Africa, in order to test whether the framework of gendered memory and marginality developed here travels beyond a single national or regional context. The comparison suggests both significant continuities and important differences. In both regions, communal or civil conflict, Partition in South Asia, the Nigerian Civil War in West Africa, produces a historical rupture that later fiction returns to obsessively, using fragmented or retrospective narrative structures to approach violence that defies straightforward chronological telling.

At the same time, the specific mechanisms of gendered marginalisation differ across these contexts in ways that a purely comparative literary framework must not flatten. Caste operates as a structuring force in Roy's fiction with no direct equivalent in Adichie's Biafra, while the ethnic and regional tensions animating the Nigerian Civil War are shaped by a distinct colonial and postcolonial history of British indirect rule and subsequent

military governance. Reading these texts together therefore requires holding in mind both the shared formal and thematic strategies postcolonial fiction has developed for narrating gendered trauma, and the historically specific conditions that make each conflict, and each novel's response to it, singular rather than interchangeable.

This comparative approach ultimately supports a central claim of this paper: that resilience and marginality in postcolonial fiction are best studied through careful, historically grounded close reading rather than through a single, portable theoretical formula applied uniformly across contexts. Theory, including Spivak's account of the subaltern and Hirsch's account of postmemory, remains indispensable for organising this close reading, but it functions best as a set of questions to bring to each text rather than as a predetermined conclusion each text is expected to confirm.

Finally, the comparative reading offered here suggests that memory itself operates unevenly across gender lines within these texts. Male characters' memories, such as Ugwu's eventual authorship in Half of a Yellow Sun, are more readily converted into public, authoritative narrative, while women's memories, such as Ammu's or Ayah's, tend to remain fragmented, embodied, and resistant to full narrative resolution. This asymmetry is not presented uncritically by the novels; rather, each text draws attention to it as itself a further dimension of the marginality it seeks to represent.

11. Implications for Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies

The readings offered in this paper carry implications beyond the four authors examined directly. If gendered memory-work takes such different forms across these texts, fragmented return in Roy, inherited witness in Sidhwa, contested authorship in Adichie, then postcolonial literary studies should resist treating "women's trauma narrative" as a single, generalisable category. Instead, the evidence gathered here supports close attention to the specific formal strategies through which each text negotiates the always partial project of representing marginalised experience.

This has consequences for how such literature is taught and evaluated. Approaching these novels primarily as testimony to be believed or evidence to be extracted risks reproducing precisely the instrumentalisation of women's suffering that the novels themselves interrogate. A more careful pedagogical approach would ask students to attend to formal mediation, narrative silence, and structural fragmentation as meaningful choices in their own right, rather than obstacles standing between the reader and unmediated historical truth.

Finally, this body of fiction and criticism suggests that subaltern studies and memory studies remain productive but incomplete frameworks for reading gendered postcolonial narrative. Both frameworks illuminate why certain characters' memories resist straightforward narration, but neither fully resolves the ethical question of how literature, and literary criticism, should proceed in the face of that resistance. Future theoretical work, informed by continued close reading of contemporary fiction, will need to remain attentive to this open question rather than treating it as settled.

12. Conclusion

This paper has argued that modern English-language postcolonial literature narrates resistance and resilience among marginalised subjects through sustained, formally inventive engagement with gender and memory. Drawing on Spivak's theorisation of subaltern voice, Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and a substantial body of 2024 scholarship on memory, gender, and marginality in postcolonial writing, the analysis has shown that resilience in this literary tradition functions as an ongoing, partial exercise of narrative agency rather than a triumphant resolution of trauma. Roy's fragmented, non-linear memory-work, Sidhwa's inherited childhood witness, and Adichie's contested wartime authorship each dramatise a distinct facet of this negotiation, while sharing a common refusal to grant their marginalised characters an easy, fully redemptive voice.

It has further shown that marginality in these texts is rarely produced by gender alone, but compounds with caste, disability, class, and communal identity in ways that any single-axis reading would flatten. Attending to these intersections is essential to understanding why certain characters' memories are more readily converted into authoritative narrative than others.

Future research might extend this analysis by considering how memory and marginality are represented in postcolonial literature emerging from more recent conflicts and displacements, and by examining how digital archives and testimony projects are reshaping the transmission of postmemory for generations further removed from the original traumatic events. As postcolonial literary studies continues to expand its geographic and linguistic range, scholarship on gender, memory, and marginality will need to remain attentive to the specific historical and political conditions of each context, rather than treating resilience as a single, universal literary theme.

What remains constant across the texts and criticism surveyed in this paper is a shared insistence that resilience, in the modern English-language postcolonial novel, is best understood not as a possession to be achieved but as a practice sustained under constraint: an ongoing, incomplete labour of remembering, testifying, and re-authoring the self that dominant history would prefer to leave untold.

Read as a group, Roy, Sidhwa, and Adichie together model a mode of postcolonial literary resilience that later writers across other regions and conflicts continue to draw upon: a willingness to let narrative form itself bear the weight of an unresolved history, so that structure, silence, and perspective become as central to the work of resistance as plot or explicit statement.

This conclusion carries a final methodological implication for postcolonial literary studies. If resilience is a practice rather than an achievement, then criticism itself should be similarly modest in its claims: rather than declaring these novels to have successfully recovered marginalised voices, the more accurate critical task is to trace how each text stages the ongoing, unfinished labour of that recovery, and to remain attentive to what still escapes narration even in the most formally inventive and ethically careful of these works.

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