

Original Research

Received 11 May 2026

Revised 24 June 2026

Accepted 08 July 2026

Natural Resources for Human
Health 2026, Vol. 6 (11s): 165–176

KEYWORDS:

Cultural psychology, New Woman,
Moral Agency, Relational Selfhood,
Vernacular Modernity, Odia
Literature

Reimagining the New Woman: Socio-Cultural Models of Female Agency and Moral Selfhood in Contemporary Odia Writings

Aniket Beuria¹, Dr. Malavika Mohapatra²

¹Research Scholar, ITER, Siksha 'O' Anusandhan (Deemed to be University),
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, ORCID Id: 0009-0007-4278-4797, Email:
aniketbeuria121@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, ITER, Siksha 'O' Anusandhan (Deemed to be University),
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, ORCID Id: 0009-0007-4414-083X, Email:
malavikamohapatra@soa.ac.in

Corresponding Email: Aniket Beuria, aniketbeuria121@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Literary narratives have been a major influence on the construction of socio-culturally shared conceptions of gender, morality and personhood. The concept of 'New Woman', emerging during colonial modernity, has typically been analysed within literary and feminist historiography as a socio-cultural and ideological construct. In this study, the 'New Woman' is reimagined as a socio-culturally induced psychological construct of selfhood by looking at the writings of Odia women, which are used to narrate and analyse moral agency, emotional life and relational identity. Based on cultural psychology and feminist and postcolonial theory, this study examines the works of Binapani Mohanty, Pratibha Ray and Susmita Bagchi to identify ways, in which female agency is envisioned in vernacular landscape. The domestic realism of Mohanty carries forward the moral endurance and reflective agency. Similarly, reimagining of myth by Ray gives them a narrative authority and an ethical voice, while the contemporary fiction of Bagchi shows the psychological ambiguity of aspiration in late-modern social situations. The article examines how literary narratives act as cultural models of personhood, highlighting incorporation of local narratives of autonomy, obligation and identity formation from Odia context. The study suggests that regional (Odia) literary traditions are not just foundational for feminist literary scholarships, but for cultural psychology, supplementing non-western constructions of agency and moral selfhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "New Woman" is a central figure in literary history and serve as a catalyst for changing cultural notions of gender, morality and personhood. Although the figure has been largely understood as a socio-cultural by-product of colonial modernity in feminist historiography, there is a great potential to rethink her in a refined psychological perspective. This research not only challenges the purely ideological configurations, but also considers a culturally-mediated model of selfhood in Odia women's literature. These narratives are examined as active sites of negotiation and the results show how moral agency, emotional interiority and relational identity are negotiated and developed. This analysis is rooted in cultural psychology, feminist theory and postcolonial theory, and examines the works of Binapani Mohanty, Pratibha Ray and Susmita Bagchi, showing how female agency is represented in the particularities of vernacular modernity (Arshad, Khaliq, et al., 2025; Arshad Khan, et al., 2025; Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p.2; Jat et al., n.d., p.74). The New Woman was a symbolic but key response to the colonial modernity, the nationalistic reform and the evolving conception of gender. This figure, at the crossroads of modernity in education, domestic morality and cultural integrity, was a bearer of the hopes for social change and yet carried the fears of moral continuity. In the nationalist discourse, Partha Chatterjee claims gender was used to construct the psychological image of the nation in such a way that women were positioned in the domestic sphere as guardians of spiritual and cultural authenticity. (Chatterjee, 1989, 1993) The division not only influenced the social roles, it also established the concept of moral

psychology where in feminine values was characterized by emotional restraint and moral responsibility (Sharaby, 2019, p.14; SINGH, 2008, p.55). The New Woman was thus envisioned not as a self-reliant individual but as an “ethically disciplined” woman whose modernity was still grounded in rational thought. This specific form of ambivalence shows agency not only being expanded but reconfigured. For the Odia Woman this identity formation was an ongoing process of negotiation between modernist expectations and relational obligations. However, as Bell Hooks and other feminist theorists explain, the concept of agency cannot be understood through a lens that only focusses on the individual’s independence, particularly in a society where identity is formed in the context of community and kinship.(Hooks, 2000) In all such settings, agency is expressed in the form of negotiation, endurance or ethical accommodation, as opposed to an overt opposition. This reconceptualization is made possible by the framework provided by cultural psychology which suggests that understanding of the self is a culturally organized formation that develops through shared meanings and narrative practices. Jerome Bruner proposes that humans construct meaning from experiences through the culturally accessible narratives that offer models for understanding intention and responsibility. (Bruner, 1992) With this perspective, literary texts can be read as a cultural form of personhood aiming to encode socially recognizable modes of feeling and reasoning. The focus of the article is not only on the esthetics of Mohanty, Ray and Bagchi but also on the idea of narratives as cultural sites where psychological concepts of agency and selfhood are visible that emerge with in the local context. The study of these works reveals the ways in which Odia literary modernity inherited and reconstructed gender ideals towards a more complex understanding of how the self is narratively constructed across various cultural contexts. (ସାହୁ, 2026; Mishra,2026; Amatya, 2025).

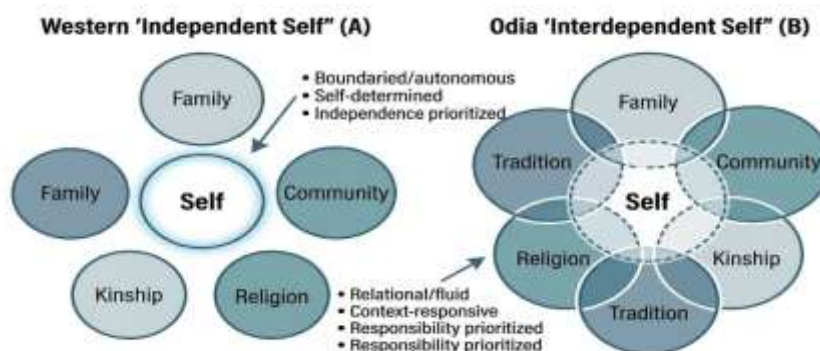
2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative and narrative-analytical study that examines how the female subjectivity has been constructed in the regional literature in the context of a purposive sampling of the most critical Odia texts, including the domestic realism of Binapani Mohanty, the mythic reinterpretation of Pratibha Ray and the contemporary urban fiction of Susmita Bagchi. These writers were chosen because of their careful study of the internal moral worlds of women and the different ways in which they represented vernacular modernity. The analytical process consists of two steps: the first one focuses on the close reading of a text to uncover narrative techniques of agency, including the use of interior monologue, the strategic use of silence and the passage from private reflection to public voice; and the second one involves the synthesis of these techniques to establish a model of selfhood that is uniquely regional. This methodology goes beyond broad thematic summaries to investigate the formal aspects of storytelling, such as emotional pacing, and how they contribute to formation of identity, while the texts are viewed as a narrative archive to reveal the psycho-cultural nuances of the “New Woman” being constructed in the particular cultural and linguistic context of Odisha.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: AGENCY AND VERNACULAR MODERNITY

Throughout feminist theories one can see agency in the center of debate primarily in terms of autonomy and social constraint. Early liberal frameworks saw agency as resistance to patriarchal authority and as individual autonomy, but these approaches were based on the assumption of a rational, autonomous subject that was historically and culturally specific to western models of selfhood. In contrast, contemporary scholarships have been critical of the universalist assumptions by emphasizing on the ‘cultural and relational aspects of action’ (Binswanger & Zimmermann, 2021, p. 77; Rabaan et al., 2021, p.10)

Figure1: Contrasting Models of Selfhood: Independent vs Interdependent.



Source: Author’s own creation

The figure shows that there is a difference between the Western 'Independent self' (A) who is bounded and autonomous and the 'Interdependent self' (B) found in the Odia context where the self is bounded and overlapped with relational contexts like Family, Community and Tradition. In societies where identity is constitutionally interdependent, as shown in figure 1, agency turns away from rebellion and towards a prevalent practice deeply rooted in social relationships. This shift is supported by cultural psychology, which identifies independent and interdependent models of selfhood, thereby showing how cultural surroundings influence the experiences of the responsibility and belonging. In this view, agency is not just an internal capacity, but a culturally mediated way to act defined by historically specific moral worlds. This reconceptualization is furthered by the argument that agency may be expressed through inhabiting and reworking norms in place of resisting them completely. Saba Mahmood demonstrates that ethical self-formation in terms of normative traditions can take meaningful forms of action instead of defiant acts of freedom (Mahmood, 2011). Emotional labour plays a significant part within this framework as a crucial component of women's selfhood. Emotional labour, which involves in the regulation of emotions in order to maintain social relationships seems to appear in the Odia stories as a burden and a primary source of moral power. Arlie Hochschild pinpoints this labour as an integral part of gender experience and in Odia context as a space of moral authority in selves are formed and relationships are maintained. (Hochschild, 1983). Thus women's activities become meaningful and comprehensible not mere compliance but as a part of the culture. In the Odia context, modernity is not a rejection of tradition but a vernacular modernity- A locally mediated reinterpretation of change that is influenced by linguistic specificity. This tradition has a long history of addressing issues of morality and responsibility. Early texts like the Odia Mahabharata of Sarala Das in the fifteenth century illustrate how epic stories were localised to make abstract ideals more clearly understood in terms of socially recognisable moral dilemmas that are relevant to everyday life. These vernacularisations produce particular moral philosophies which emphasized relational ethics and interdependence over individual autonomy. This space was broadened in the nineteenth century with the advent of modern Odia literature where the intellectual struggled with the constraints of colonial modernity while preserving regional Identity. Early female authors made women's emotional and moral experiences visible, making room for the expression of interior lives. This became an investigation into psychological interiority and affective conflict in the mid-twentieth century. This interiorization was not a cultural rejection but a reshaping of these traditional culture meanings. Therefore, the Odia literature serves as an archive of narration where the 'New Woman' deals with modern aspirations in the context of ethical networks. These vernacular models bring us closer to a theoretical foundation to render South Asian female agency as a rational and morally grounded psychological construct (Bhandari, 2026; McHugh, 2004).

4. NARRATIVE VOICE AND EMOTIONAL INTERIORIZATION

The shift from the 'New Woman' as a sociological concept to a psychological model necessitates an investigation of the system of narrative techniques used for the construction of subjectivity. If agency is indeed relational and morally embedded with the Odia context, then the literary voice is the primary location for rehearsing agency. Narrative voice is not just a stylistic option; it is also a cognitive tool which enables interiorization of social experience. In the works of Mohanty, Ray and Bagchi, the interiority is a major shift from previous reformist didacticism that engage with the question of what women do, to how they process their lived experience in the moral matrix of their society.

Central to this process is Jerome Bruner's (1992) notion of narrative identity which is based on the idea that the self is an ongoing act of meaning making. In this framework, people are identified but they also tell a story that brings into being to reconcile lived contradiction. Interior monologue and reflective narration become an essential tool to control independent self for the Odia female protagonist. While these women face pressures of domesticity, mythic expectation or modern aspiration, the internal voice gives them a chance to consider relational consequences and carry out the ethical regulation of self that is required to maintain them in their social worlds (Gilligan, 2024; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).

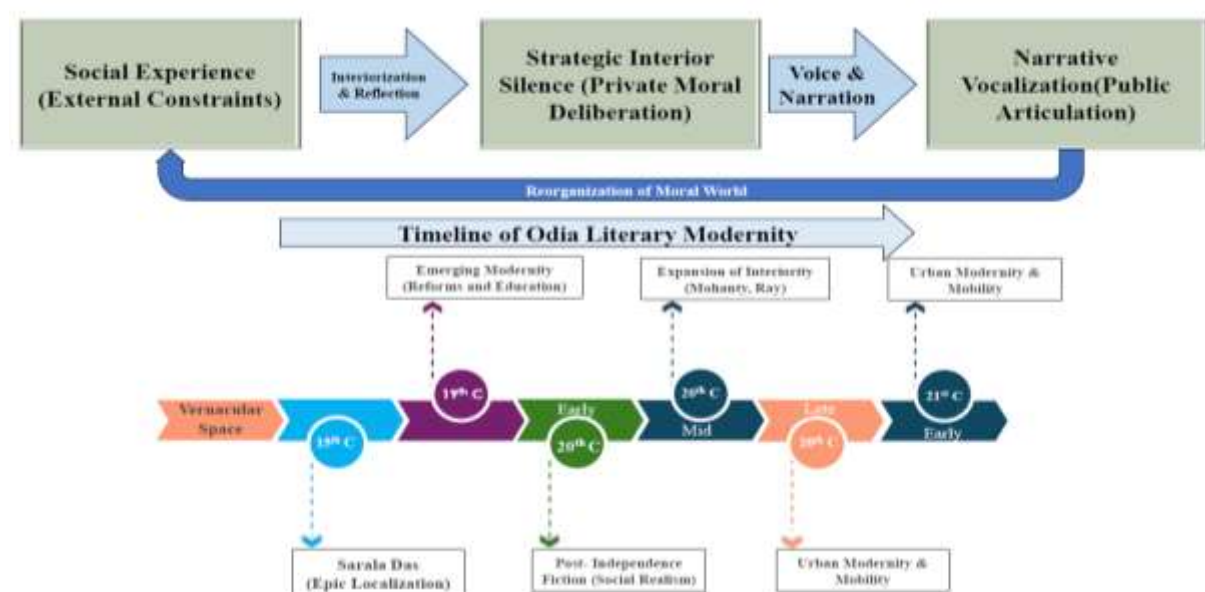
Feminist narratology proposes that the voice of the marginalized subject is more likely to function in what could be called relational silence. Silence is not passive in vernacular Odia writing. It is rather a powerful psychological state which is emotionally paced and has memory.

Interiority enables the portrayal of what is not said in the in the public sphere that is the suffocating pressure of anguish or the embers of truth that accumulate in the quiet of the domestic kitchen. By giving characters like Draupadi or Pata a vivid inner life, these authors transform silence as a form of interpretive power. Memory in this sense functions as an instrument for ethical reconstruction where the protagonist is revisiting the past not only to remember the acts of betrayal or failure to perform the duties but also to reconstruct the moral significance of their history. (Wilhelm, 2017, p.26; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016, p.243).

In addition, emotional interiorization enables these writers to portray the emotional labor as a field of moral power instead of mere subordination. Developing the art of reflective narration, the intangible work of reconciliation and the absorption of interpersonal tension is made visible to the reader as a sophisticated psychological competence. The emotional pacing of this is the slow, measured rhythm of the weighing of family obligation against individual desire which leads to create a female consciousness, deeply rooted and reflexive.

Odia women's writing deals with the interiorized voice, which is a model for understanding the process of maintaining subjectivity through narration. The self emerges not as a static entity but rather becomes a story, one that is marked by a continuous negotiation between aspiration and obligation. This connection between theory and text makes narrative voice a real laboratory that demonstrates how the Odia New Woman attempts to limit the extent to which she can be an agent, in which the act of reflection becomes a radical display of moral selfhood.

Figure 2. Timeline of Odia Literary Modernity



Source: Author's Own Construct

5. BINAPANI MOHANTY: ETHICAL AGENCY AND RELATIONAL SILENCE

5.1 The Architecture of Domestic Realism

Binapani Mohanty has made an important contribution to modern Odia literature, and has excelled in examining the "unseen" psychological topography of the domestic sphere. Her fiction marks a dramatic turn away from reformist, often didactic storylines to a more complex examination of the delicate ethical dilemmas encountered by women in the process of developing meaningful selves. But while the previous writers may have conceived agency as a departure from the past, Mohanty places it in the "thick" of everyday life, among smoke and steam in the kitchen, a judgement in the village square, and the stifling weight of family expectation. Mohanty challenges the patriarchy of ideas of 'social honour' and 'chastity' in the seminal short story 'Patadei' in which the protagonist is not linear and passive victim but an introspective consciousness that eventually dissolves or breaks the moral matrix of her life.

Patadei is a story of tension between exterior and interior labeling. The village community is a surveillance machine, which, traditionally, frames the protagonist, Pata, with masculine and punitive lenses. She is described as an "unchaste woman," a "silent devil," and a "burden" whose return to her father's home is said to have "killed her father alive. Mohanty challenges this social script, focusing on Pata's interiority to give her the interpretative authority to shape contours of her trauma and survival (D. Kumar; kumar; D. V. N. Kumar; Mishra, 2026).

5.2 The Psychological Approach of Interiorisation

The “relational silence” is one of the most intricate interventions made by Mohanty, a dense psychological space. Pata's agency is not stated, it is the practiced withholding of emotion and sensation for a large portion of the story. Mohanty constructs this texture of the narrative by using a few moments of isolation within the household. At the same time, while the village rejoices in the Dola festival, we see Pata lying on a mat, with a physical stomach-ache, which correlates with her existential distress. The community's celebratory noises only emphasize her loneliness.

The journey back to her father's home is not marked by a lengthy speech, but rather by a speechless wonder. The silence between them on a rainy night as her father finds her closing the door behind her isn't the absence of words, but rather a psychological state shared between them. Jagu Behera's silent acceptance of the fame or shame of his daughter's reputation is an example of an intertwined moral regulation. The above behaviour is the enactment of Jerome Bruner's (1992) notion of meaning making, where the self is developed through the stories and the silences used to resolve contradictions of experience. Through her quietness, Pata creates a space of the self, a space in which she gathers the moral evidence which will ultimately lead her to question the fictionalising of all the facts of the community.

5.3 Vocalization and the Reclaiming of the Public Square

The moment of interiorisation to public vocalisation is the intellectual highlight of the story. With this change, Pata's agency changes from a personal endurance to a “radical socially disruptive force.” The scene in the village square is rendered in a vitally descriptive narrative. Pata is physically assaulted by an elderly aunt who tries to press her neck and cornered by the village elders, men who are celebrated as the guardians of dharma, has a moment of profound psychological crystallization. She rises to her full physical height, described by Mohanty as a “well-built woman of five feet,” a description that emphasizes her groundedness and physical presence against the “social humiliations” heaped upon her. Her vocalization is not an apology; it is an indictment. By naming her aggressors in the moonlight, she shatters the anonymity that the patriarchal moral order grants to male violence:

“Are you asking about the father of this child? Look, they all are father of this child who are standing over there... They all jumped over my body and squeezed out my flesh into pieces in the bush near the grave yard.” (Binapani, 2020, pp. 44–45)

This declaration is a “semantic rupture.” She takes the community's own language of “fatherhood” and “honor” and turns it against them, exposing the hypocrisy of a system that demands “shame” from the woman while protecting the “prestige” of her violators. Her subsequent statement to her child—

“Where is a male in the world who would identify himself as your father? Do not cry for that, for you have a mother” (Binapani, 2020, p. 45)

is a radical restructuring of the Odia kinship model. She effectively removes the necessity of patriarchal naming, centering the family unit instead on maternal presence and self-reliance.

5.4 Emotional Labor as moral authority

In an extension of this argument, Mohanty considers the “emotional labor” to be an essential aspect of female selfhood. The management of feelings to maintain social relations is a gendered expectation which is often invisible as theorized by Arlie Hochschild (1983). In ‘Patadei’, Pata's mediation of the emotional setting of her father's house, despite her ostracism, is a space of moral authority. She takes on the “second shift” tasks of emotional regulation, internalizing the community's “confidence and hatred” and developing an inward focus on survival.

Such an agency fits within the broad framework of the argument made by Saba Mahmood (2011) that agency can be found in the inhabitation and reworking of norms rather than their resistance. Instead, Pata remains in the village, claiming the place she rightfully owns as the “mistress of her parental home.” Her use of the structures of the “parental home” constitutes a fortress of selfhood. This is not a liberal feminist liberation of detachment but a vernacular agency of “ethical accommodation” and reclaiming space.

5.5 Memory and the Reconstruction of the Self

Mohanty shows how identity is constructed in the processes of remembering and reinterpretation. Memory in Patadei is a means of ethical reconstruction. Pata goes back to the scenes of her betrayal, the “bush near the grave yard”, not as a victim begging for sympathy and understanding, but as a witness demanding justice. She tells her own story of survival, and changes the focus of the narration from her supposedly “flirting” to the very violence of the men from the village.

This is a retroactive vocalization that enables her to emerge as an ethical subject. She collects "embers of her own truth" to illuminate a way through a "cruel world" of patriarchal exclusion. Mohanty ultimately presents the "New Woman" not as an outsider to her culture, but as a woman who takes over the role of interpreter in her own community. At the end of the story, Pata has become a site of primary ethical subjectivity from a past of victimhood. She is no longer a symbol to gauge the village's 'honor' but the creator of her own moral universe, demonstrating that the female self is a constant, dynamic, ongoing project of the reflexive mind in vernacular places of Odisha.

6. PRATIBHA RAY: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY, MYTH, AND MORAL SELFHOOD

6.1 The Symbolic Terrain of Cultural Memory

Pratibha Ray occupies a significant position in modern Odia literature. Her works involved translating feminine agency from the day-to-day chores to the symbolic and high stakes of cultural memory. In contrast to other authors who viewed social limitations of the vernacular present, Ray explores the foundations of the patriarchal moral order, by returning to the 'Master Narrative' of the Hindu Tradition i.e. 'Mahabharata'. Through her prominent work 'Yajnaseni', Ray reconfigures Draupadi as a multidimensional, contemplative consciousness idol, rather than a silent symbolic object of heroic competition or a passive instrument of God. In doing so, Ray makes myth a contested space for women to articulate themselves and investigate morality. This intervention occupies importance for cultural psychology as it paves the way for people to live in the ancient narrative frameworks without succumbing to the embedded gendered hierarchies within them (Fivush & Grysman, 2021, p. 1; "Gender and Culture in Psychology: Theories and Practices", 2012, p. 54; Hammack & Toolis, 2015, p. 351).

The mode of intervention in Ray's work is the dramatic change of the point of view of the narrative, from the third-person "God's eye view" of Vyasa to the first-person "thoughts of the character" interiority. In conventional tales, Draupadi was described in a male lens: She is termed as the reward won at the 'Swayamvara' - the pawn lost in the game of dice – or the 'commodity' distributed among five brothers, to ensure their fraternal bond. Additionally, Ray also disrupts this canonical structure. She grants the feminine character Draupadi the "interpretive authority" to describe her own suffering. This serves as a psychological form of agency. Draupadi not only narrates the known stories of the epic, but she challenges the actions of the "Sons of Dharma" (the Pandavas), she asks questions, and she emotionally reinterprets her role in the Kuru family.

However, it is also important to analyse how Ray rebuild this voice up as modern paraphrasing may turn the interpretation "fabricated". Draupadi's agency is often manifested in her intellectual interiority: a "gathering of truth" that occurs even though she is silent. She positions herself as being objectified with a sharp, analytical clarity that refuses to accept the "divine" logic of her circumstances:

"Was I just a trophy to be won, a pawn to be gambled away, or a commodity to be shared? No one asked for my consent, yet everyone expected my devotion." (Ray, 1995, p. 62)

Through her words, Ray makes this inner struggle audible, by taking the discussion into what might be considered the "emotional geography" of the epic. Despite occupying the centerstage of the greatest family conflict, Draupadi continues to be ignored existentially by the men who surround her i.e. her husband, her father, and her elders. Draupadi's voice emerges as an immediate evaluation of a life lived in compliance with the shortcomings of others' moral characters and ethical failures. This makes her past experiences of victimization a text of moral resistance.

6.2 Silence as strategic psychological space

Ray's reinterpretation of silence serves as a major aspect of her multiple works. In the patriarchal moral economy, silence is placed at par with 'Lajja' (shame) or 'Sahishnuta' (endurance/submission). However, in Ray's narratives, Draupadi's silence is portrayed as active, strategic gathering of moral heat. Draupadi herself notes:

"My silence is not my weakness; it was a space where I gathered the embers of my own truth." (Ray, 1995, p. 178)

This 'collect of embers' metaphor serves as a direct inversion of the tropes of 'Sati' or 'Agni-Pariksha'; in a 'tradition-burning' metaphor, Draupadi is not being burned in the fire of tradition but is 'burning' herself in the fire of introspection. This particular "interiorized silence" facilitates Draupadi to uphold her sense of subjectivity even though she is physically powerless and helpless. During the course of her public humiliation in the assembly, her silence doesn't denote absence of voice but a demonstration of the collective moral vacuum in the environment. This silence is delicately used by Pratibha Ray to create 'emotional spacing' with a protagonist's deliberation even before she commences speaking. This approach falls in line with the

psychologistic notion of agency as a psychological ability to regulate oneself and to construct meaning, even when action is limited outside of the body.

6.3 Dharma and the critique of Moral Vacuums

The reworking of Dharma (moral duty) by Pratibha Ray serves as a notable aspect of her feminist-based works. Through 'Yajnaseni', the inconsistencies of 'dharma' and its possibilities of patriarchal exclusion are revealed, rather than being viewed as purely universal. Draupadi repeatedly encounters a moral order requiring absolute sacrifice from women, but at the same time, barring them from the right to interpret the vested rules of the system. This is depicted through the dice game. Ray explains the "silence of the elders" such as Bhishma and Guru Dronacharya, not as a political mistake, or a cowardice of the moment, but as a moral inadequacy rooted in patriarchal setup.

The questioning of Draupadi to the elders at the critical juncture uncovers a high level ethical deliberation. She asks:

"Is a woman's heart a mere plaything for the 'Sons of Dharma'? If my five husbands are the pillars of righteousness, why did I feel so utterly unsupported in the assembly of men?" (Ray, 1995, p. 184)

Through this investigation, Draupadi is undertaking an act of "inhabiting a norm", as stated by Saba Mahmood (2011). She doesn't completely reject the idea of 'dharma', but she exposes the rooted contradictions in it. If Dharma is meant to protect the vulnerable, why does it fail the queen? By confronting the men around her with this pertinent question, Draupadi shifts the burden of shame from her to the men around her and the system. This falls in line with Sangari and Vaid's (1990) understanding of tradition as an active discursive space that is not simply an inheritance.

6.4 Krishna as Intellectual Confidant

A key element in the construction of agency of Draupadi is her relationship with Krishna. In Ray's version, Krishna is not so much a transcendent figure of intervention but an intellectual companion, a "Sakha" who gives her authority to question and doubt. Their speeches provide the context in which Draupadi is able to shift from a skeptical stance towards philosophy. Krishna does not give her "answers" that can silence her, instead he gives her the mirror that reflects and confirms her subjectivity. This relationship is an essential part of the novel's psychological depth; it is a relationship where even the most "independent" agency is sustained through relational validation and dialogue.

6.5 Narrative Identity and Ethical Reconstruction

The psychological complexity described in Yajnaseni is based on Jerome Bruner's (1992) concept of "narrative identity". As described through the characters enumerated in the novels of Pratibha Ray, the self is not just a static being of the past, but a story always described in the present to take note of the lived contradictions. For Draupadi, memory, is an 'ethical reconstruction'. She returns to the scenes of her public embarrassment and the complicated feelings she has for wanting to not be a victim, but to understand the relationship between betrayal and duty and the desire of the individual. This process illuminates Valsiner's (2007) conception of cultural traditions as semiotic systems which individuals have to inhabit and reinterpret.

Ultimately, Ray reconfigures a "New Woman" as the "Architect of Memory" i.e. she does not reject tradition; she still has the ability to make a moral judgment. In case of Draupadi, her stance and voice don't outrightly eliminate Mahabharata, but it transforms from a masculine triumph to modes of feminine inquiry. By doing so 'Yajnaseni' replaces the mythicized Draupadi of patriarchy with an essential ethical subject. Through its mythic reinterpretation, Ray extends the boundaries of vernacular agency, demonstrating that literary narratives can transform the collective moral imagination. Through the feminine character Draupadi, Ray offers a blueprint for the modern woman; one who gathered the "embers of her own truth" to illuminate a path through the void moral space of her own age.

7. SUSMITA BAGCHI AND ASPIRATIONAL MODERNITY

7.1 The Landscape of Urban Modernity

The conventional Odia women writers emphasized on the themes of moral negotiation in the household or mythic authority; however, Susmita Bagchi's fiction sets its scenes in the complex social context of the contemporary urban modernity. The works and most importantly, the stories of Susmita Bagchi are influenced by the real transformations of late-modern life, such as the nature of women's roles in the public sphere, the nature of higher education, and mobility in the world of work.

However, her modernity is a psychologically unstable and emotionally demanding terrain as opposed to earlier reformist narratives which had envisioned empowerment to be a linear path of social progress. The "modern" is viewed by her as a space of synthesis, where new versions of the self are designated by ambivalences of the deepest form.

7.2 The Burden of "Having It All"

Bagchi's protagonists are not the characters of lost opportunities, but of overburdened expectations and that tend to be mutually exclusive. Being employed and attainment of success in professional spaces is not a cure for the domestic duties but an added emotional stress and burden that tends to move between ambition and guilt. Bagchi's characters live in an aspirational anxiety with each progress towards independence being attached with relational duty. This split in the self is expressed in the novel "Children of a Better God" in the visceral struggle between outside triumph and inside apology:

"The promotion felt like a victory in the boardroom, but by the time I reached the front door of my home, it felt like an apology. I was climbing the ladder only to find that the rungs were made of the time I owed to everyone but myself." (Bagchi, 2010, p. 24)

This is the 'psychological cost of mobility'. For the "New Woman" of the 21st century, Bagchi proposes a distinctive existential fatigue, because she is called upon to create a way of life that has no set emotional patterns:

"We were the first generation of women allowed to have it all, yet no one told us that 'having it all' meant carrying it all on our own shoulders without a moment to breathe." (Bagchi, 2010, p. 42)

7.3 Emotional Ambivalence and the "Second Shift"

For Bagchi the ambivalent state of emotions becomes a central psychological state in his fiction. Loneliness and fatigue often go together with moments which are traditionally associated with empowerment employment, financial independence or romantic choice. She does not succumb to the triumphalist stories that are part of metropolitan feminism; instead, she emphasizes how aspiration can also be tiring. This mirrors Menon's (2012) claim that the narrative of gender in contemporary times can leave the reader unaware of structural inequalities as these are presented as individual choices, which can increase the emotional burden needed to deal with the contradiction between them.

In spite of being in positions of professional status, Bagchi's female characters still work in what might be called the "invisible labor" that is required to maintain the family's stability. They are still the main keepers of the emotional climate in the house and they are the ones who defuse the conflicts and take the interpersonal tension while working on their own careers. This reflects Arlie Hochschild's (1983) notion of "emotional work" and "second shift. Bagchi shows that modernization changes the circumstances of women's lives in the world, but does not dismantle the relational systems that evaluate them in terms of culture.

Building on Narayan (1997), Bagchi's work highlights the need to think about agency relationally, not as a complete autonomy. The selfhood she depicts is provisional, continuously adapted to changing circumstances in the professional as well as relationship life. Ultimately, Bagchi portrays the New Woman as an incomplete psychological state, an unstable, reflexive figure making its way through the insecurities of late modernity.

The protagonists of her stories live in liminal spaces where freedom is accompanied by fear and movement by fragility. These depictions reveal the fractured emotional nature of modern women's selfhood in a vernacular modernity. She demonstrates that in the modern Odia woman, agency is not an ultimate endpoint of 'independence' but rather a reflexive process, continually, and sometimes painfully, adapting to the conflicting demands of the changing world.

7.4 Comparative Perspectives on Vernacular Female Selfhood

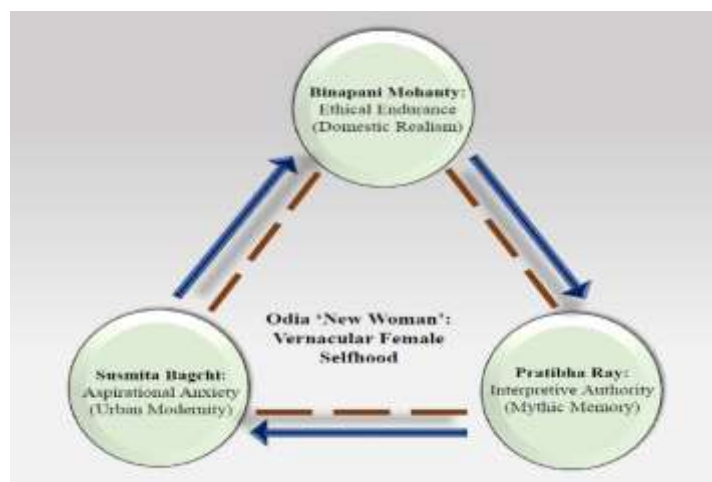


Figure 3. The Iterative Model of Odia Vernacular Agency.

Source: Author's Own Construct

The emergence of the 'New Woman' in Odia literature cannot be said to be a linear process. This is a conceptual diagram of the recursive evolution of the Odia 'New Woman'. The central flow represents the interplay of three psychological models: Mohanty's Ethical Endurance, Ray's Interpretive Authority and Bagchi's Aspirational Anxiety, each of which creates a model of vernacular female selfhood which is free from Western individualist binaries of moving from tradition to liberation, but it is a series of negotiations which are recursive within the vernacular moral space. The works of Pratibha Ray, Binapani Mohanty and Susmita Bagchi, when juxtaposed in conversation, expose a femininity that is distinctly regional and which does not depend on either the Western binary of autonomy or the traditional passivity. These authors show how agency has transformed from being an object of patriarchal narration to a speaking subject in the Odia context.

It ranges from Ray's questioning of the ethics of the "Sons of Dharma" to Mohanty's Pata breaking a community's "fictionalized facts" to name the aggressors, or Bagchi's professionals dealing with the "second shift" of corporate and domestic accountability. All share the claim of interpretive authority over their own lived experiences.

It is an agency of the vernacular, in which the sophisticated subversion of silence is further defined. Whether it be Ray's mythic reworking or Mohanty's domestic realism, silence is reworked in both instances into a psychological laboratory, a space of strategically imposed silence. Whereas Draupadi's silence is seen as an active "gathering of truth" by Ray, Mohanty describes it as a "suffocating pressure" that bursts open into a public indictment of the community. In Bagchi's modern contexts, however, there is still silence and a space for reflexive adjustment in which the modern woman must engage in a process of negotiating the fragmentation of her urban identity. In a way, through a psychological model of selfhood, these writers represent silence as a space of moral deliberation, as a space of socially disruptive and highly interiorized selfhood.

Finally, this comparative mapping highlights the relational nature of the Odia "New Woman". In contrast to the Western conception of the "independent individual," these protagonists do not seek a "self" separate from community and family, rather they make their moral interventions manifest in their relational connections with children, confidants and families. This accords with the interdependent selfhood concept in which identity is created through an ongoing process of balancing aspiration and obligation. These three perspectives are synthesized and a model of agency emerges that is grounded in "relational resistance" and demonstrates how vernacular modernity can be a terrain for a female subjectivity that is culturally embedded and radically self-authored.

Table 1: Comparative Mapping of Agency across Odia Vernacular Texts.

Author	Narrative Mode	Primary Marker of Agency	Psychological Condition
--------	----------------	--------------------------	-------------------------

Binapani Mohanty	Domestic Realism	Ethical Endurance & Public Vocalization	Relational Integrity
Pratibha Ray	Mythic Reinterpretation	Interpretive Authority over Dharma	Moral Selfhood
Susmita Bagchi	Urban Modernity	Negotiation of the 'Second Shift'	Aspirational Ambivalence

This table summarizes the core findings of the study, mapping the distinct narrative modes and psychological conditions identified across the three primary authors.

8. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

Though this research is an elaborate exploration of the female selfhood in the work of three important Odia writers, it has certain limitations that constitute the scope of the research. First, the analysis is limited to literary depictions of the "New Woman," a rich narrative archive, but not necessarily representative of the full range of women's experiences outside of the literate or middle-class, professional population. Second, the selection of specific texts by Mohanty, Ray, and Bagchi—deliberate and representative of important transformations in Odia modernity—somehow neglected to include other emerging voices and subaltern perspectives that would provide alternative configurations of agency. Lastly, being a study that draws from cultural psychology and literary analysis, the results are culturally bound to the linguistic and moral context of Odisha. The insights offer a counterpoint to Western models of the self but are not meant as a universalising model. Future studies could include the use of longitudinal ethnographic data or comparative research with other vernacular literatures in the region to further validate these psychological models in other South Asian settings.

9. CONCLUSION

The figure of the "New Woman" has been re-imagined in this research by examining the writing of Odia women as a cultural archive that constructively narrates and negotiates gendered selfhood. The study has shown through the analysis of the three female authors of Odia literature—Binapani Mohanty, Pratibha Ray and Susmita Bagchi, that female agency does not appear in an unbroken opposition to tradition, but rather through culturally informed acts of moral reflection, interpersonal connection, and emotional negotiation. These stories show how women's sense of self is formed in the vernacular moral landscapes that are organized around responsibility, aspiration, and belonging.

This study is part of cultural psychology's efforts to grasp the ways in which selves are created within a shared symbolic domain, where texts of literature serve as cultural models of personhood. The Odia 'New Woman' is not a feminist figure in general, rather, she is a culturally constructed psychological type that is subject to change along gendered historical and linguistic lines. In Mohanty's ethical realism, Ray's narrative reconstruction of myth, and Bagchi's depiction of aspirational ambivalence, the voices of alternative selves are heard, voices that have found selves and lives outside the metrocentric parameters that have long structured the formation of South Asian theory.

The results counter the dominant feminist theories that identify empowerment with resistance, individual autonomy and public visibility. Rather, in the case of Odia women writers, relational ethics, emotional labour and everyday decision making are integral aspects of agency. These practices reveal both how women live in and transform cultural norms, and how they assert a deep sense of identity through social relationships. Moreover, this analysis suggests that cultural change is a more gradual process of reconfiguration of common meanings by means of narrative and practice, rather than sudden and erratic change.

Finally, the study proposes a transformation to a vernacular cultural psychology that embraces local literature as valuable resources for multi-disciplinary future theoretical development. This promotes a more sophisticated understanding of agency that draws on feminist scholarship alongside the psychological research on narrative, incorporating the rich cultural variation in the process of constructing gendered identities. The New Woman in Odisha is an unfinished psychological project, a character of transitional social worlds who asserts that freedom and anxiety, mobility and obligation do not exist in opposition to each other but are lived contradictions of vernacular modernity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amatya, N. (2025). Gendered Voices in Literature: Representation, Resistance and Redefinition. *Journal of Creative Research in English Literature and Culture*, 1(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.65962/jcrelc-sep-2025-5>
- [2] Arshad, F., Khaliq, A., & Ahmad, A. (2025). Subaltern Voices: A Critical Analysis of Female Narratives in South Asian Postcolonial Literature. *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies*, 3(4), 6720–6740. <https://doi.org/10.71281/jals.v3i4.564>
- [3] Arshad, F., Khan, A., & Faheem, M. (2025). The Role of Gender, Power, and Resistance in Shaping Female Subjectivity: A Feminist Study of South Asian Women Writers in English. *Journal of Humanities Health and Social Sciences*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.61503/jhhss/v3i2.83>
- [4] Bagchi, S. (2010). *Children of a Better God*. Penguin Books India.
- [5] Bhandari, N. B. (2026). Gender and Culture: The Evolving Agency of South Asian Female Immigrants. *Journal of Political Science*, 26, 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v26i1.90790>
- [6] Binswanger, C., & Zimmermann, A. (2021). Transitioning to Gender Equality. In MDPI eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03897-867-1>
- [7] Bruner, J. (1992). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- [8] Chakraborty, P., & Adhikari, K. (2020). Women at Crossroads: Reconfiguring the Gender Roles in Select Indian Genre Fiction. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(5). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s15n2>
- [9] Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: The contest in India. *American Ethnologist*, 16(4), 622–633. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1989.16.4.02a00010>
- [10] Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- [11] Fivush, R., & Grysman, A. (2021). Narrative and gender as mutually constituted meaning-making systems. *Memory Mind & Media*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2021.4>
- [12] Gender and culture in psychology: theories and practices. (2012). *Choice Reviews Online*, 50(4), 50–2374. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.50-2374>
- [13] Gilligan, C. (2024). Reprint: In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 94(1), 55–91. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-94.1.55>
- [14] Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2016). Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition : A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory. In *Directory of Open access Books (OAPEN Foundation)*. <https://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=search&query=rid:32410>
- [15] Hammack, P. L., & Toolis, E. E. (2015). Putting the Social into Personal Identity: The Master Narrative as Root Metaphor for Psychological and Developmental Science. *Human Development*, 58(6), 350–364. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000446054>
- [16] Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- [17] hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). South End Press.
- [18] Jat, D. H. S., Suganthi, D. M., & Mishra, D. D. S. (n.d.). Frequency: QUARTERLY – January, April, July, October.
- [19] Kumar, D. (2026). Feminist Refusal as a Method of Reading Indian Women's Fiction: From Silence to Ethical Resistance. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2026.v08i01.66972>
- [20] Kumar, D. V. N. (2026). The Politics of Respectability and the Discipline of the Female Voice in Indian Literature: Speech, Desire, and the Moral Economy of “Good Womanhood.” *Iconic Research and Engineering Journals*, 9(8). <https://doi.org/10.64388/irev9i8-1714219>
- [21] Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (2000). Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self. https://bvbr.bib-bvb.de/443/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&local_base=BVB01&doc_number=008922477&sequence=000001&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA
- [22] Mahmood, S. (2011). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- [23] McHugh, E. (2004). Moral Choices and Global Desires: Feminine Identity in a Transnational Realm. *Ethos*, 32(4), 575–597. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2004.32.4.575>
- [24] Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing like a feminist*. Zubaan.

- [25] Mishra, D. (Dr. P. (2026). Narratives of Endurance: Representation of Women in Odia Literature. In Neliti. <https://www.neliti.com/publications/669898/narratives-of-endurance-representation-of-women-in-odia-literature>
- [26] Mohanty, B. (2024). Patadei. In S. Mishra (Trans.), Best of Binapani: Selected Short Stories of Binapani Mohanty (pp. 34–46). Black Eagle Books..
- [27] Narayan, U. (1997). Dislocating cultures: Identities, traditions, and Third-World feminism. Routledge.
- [28] Rabaan, H., Young, A. L., & Dombrowski, L. (2021). Daughters of Men. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 4, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3432923>
- [29] Ray, P. (1995). Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi (P. Chakravarti, Trans.). Rupa & Co.
- [30] Sangari, K., & Vaid, S. (Eds.). (1990). Recasting women: Essays in colonial history. Kali for Women.
- [31] Sharaby, R. (2019). Agents of Patriarchy Teach Gender. Advances in Anthropology, 9(1), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aa.2019.91002>
- [32] SINGH, J. K. (2008). Representation and Resistance. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6gqtdv>
- [33] Valsiner, J. (2007). Culture in minds and societies: Foundations of cultural psychology. Sage Publications
- [34] Wilhelm, T. (2017). Historical Contemporaneity and Contemporaneous Historicity: Creation of Meaning and Identity in Postwar Trauma Narratives. Contemporaneity Historical Presence in Visual Culture, 6, 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.5195/contemp.2017.206>
- [35] ସାହୁ ଅଭିମନ୍ୟୁ. (2026). Ashi Parabartti Odia Khudra Galpare ProudhaManastattwa. In Open MIND.