



Feminist labour and the political economy of care: Emotional work, exploitation, and refusal in Indian women's writing

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Abstract

Using the twin frames of feminist labour and the political economy of care, this paper contends that women's care work functions not as an innate moral virtue but rather as a structurally exploited resource. In turning care into a gendered system of labour extraction enabled by moral compulsion, emotional discipline, and social surveillance, this frame contests cultural frameworks that naturalise nurturing into feminine destiny. The paper brings together the insights of feminist care ethics, feminist political economy, and feminist narrative ethics to show how the domestic and emotional labour of women works as the invisible infrastructure that undergirds familial stability, masculine command, and social respectability. Indian women's writing is, therefore, teeming with portrayals of care as not consummating identity but depleting obligation marked by depletion, silence, and compromised agency. The study further finds that within these narratives, it is refusal-refusal to nurture endlessly, to forgive without accountability, or to absorb harm as duty-that takes on the figure of a radical feminist ethics. Thus, by focusing on the theme of emotional labour, unpaid labour, and responsibilities, the paper extends feminist literary theory in India beyond the empowerment model, which highlights the exploitation of Indian women. Finally, this article argues, feminists in Indian literature struggle in a process of boundary-making, indicating a resistance to the very idea of care being made mandatory in the first place.

Keywords: Care work, emotional labour, feminist ethics, domestic labour, exploitation, refusal, indian women's writing

Introduction

The value of care has been espoused as an aspect of culture as women's virtue. In Indian society at large, care has been seen as the key virtue that evaluates a woman's value in proportion to her ability to care for, adapt to, sustain, and support others in need. Similarly, motherhood has been personified as sacred, marriage as sacrosanct, and feminine service as a sacred duty. The feminist literature propounds the view that care work cannot be seen simply as an emotional entity but involves work that calls for time, energy, and mental well-being invested in it. Compulsory care translates into exploitation.

Time and again, there is a repetition that women's caregiving and other forms of unpaid labour have been acting as invisible infrastructures, which have been allowing families to survive based on this unpaid labour carried out by women and how this labour has been made invisible and never recognised as labour and has been taken as natural femininity. The naturalisation of femininity is actually one of the most effective forms of patriarchal oppression, as women need to give without expecting any return. The present paper contends that Indian women's writing constructs feminist discourse by laying bare the political economy of care - the system through which women's labour is extracted, moralized, and tamed. Care becomes political not because nurturing is by nature oppressive but because women are coerced into caregiving through guilt and respectability. The cost of such coercion: exhaustion, silence, and erasure of self.

It also contends that within such narratives, refusal becomes a radical feminist ethics. Women's retreat from care is passed off as selfishness, while feminist ethics would say refusal may be self-preservation. In cases of refusing the

duty of obligatory nurturing, women reveal the exploitative structure underlying the ideology of care.

This paper thus extends the Indian feminist literary discourse beyond empowerment models by theorizing care as labour and refusal as resistance, and points out that feminist struggle is not just about voice or desire, but also labour distribution, emotional extraction, and moral violence of compulsory care.

Review of Literature

Feminist care ethics has long debated the meaning of care within patriarchal societies. Early care theorists emphasized relationality and responsibility, arguing that care is essential ethical practice. However, feminist critics have warned that care can be weaponized against women when it becomes gendered obligation. Women are expected to care at the expense of autonomy, while men benefit from care without comparable responsibility.

Feminist political economy expands this critique by locating care within labour systems. Domestic labour and emotional labour sustain capitalism and patriarchy by reproducing daily life without payment. Scholars argue that unpaid care work is fundamental to social order and economic productivity, yet women remain economically and socially undervalued because their labour is hidden within "love." Indian feminist scholarship has emphasized domestic oppression, marriage as institution of control, and women's unpaid work as structural inequality. Literary critics have explored women's silence and compromise, revealing how middle-class domestic life depends on women's adjustment. Dalit feminist critiques add that care work is unevenly distributed along caste lines: some women are expected to provide care as domestic service while being denied dignity.

Nevertheless, "a lot of literary theory understands care fundamentally, again, as an emotion rather than a structure of work." Women's exhaustion is frequently figured, not as a structure, but rather an emotion, whereas "refusal of care," again, is sometimes figured, not as a feminist politics, but a morality.

The paper attempts to address this question with the help of a theorization of 'care as exploited labour' and 'refusal as feminist intervention'. It contends that women's writings emerging out of India are characterized by a practice that discloses and lays open the exploited labour of caring as entailed by moral duty or social observation. Emotional labour, or the maintenance or management of harmony, conflict, and gratitude, thus occupies a central place as exploitation. The paper attempts to extend and move Indian feminist literary studies away from 'empowerment discourses' to 'liberation discourses'.

Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by feminist care ethics, feminist political economy, and feminist narrative ethics. Care ethics provides moral understanding that challenges the moralization of women's nurturing roles. Though care is valuable, feminist critics argue that care is oppressive when it is mandatory or obligatory for women to care irrespective of cost.

The feminist political economy of care is centered on its characterization as work, upon which attention is called to the fact that domestic work is economic infrastructure, that unpaid work such as cooking, cleaning, caregiving, relationship management, etc., forms economic work. The patriarchy profits from feminine work, despite its failure to recognize it as work:

Feminist narrative ethical theories enable the analysis of refusals by women without any moral connotations involved with the act of refusal itself. The ethical theories of the patriarchal society term women who turn away from caregiving acts as selfish or immoral beings. Narrative ethical theories resist any such interpretation by highlighting the element of exploitation involved with the act of refusal itself.

Another factor that is taken into account is intersecting awareness. Care work is distributed unevenly along caste-class lines in society, where women in some castes perform unpaid labour in their own spaces, while women in another caste do similarly undervalued paid work outside their spaces. Feminist discourse has to recognise this inequality in care work.

Collectively, these frameworks create the potential to contextualise women's writing in India as an encoded critique of the 'care' thesis. In this paper, "care" is understood as a form of 'political economy,' and 'refusal' as a form of 'feminist ethics.' Feminism as resistance is not understood solely as speech or revolution but as the practice of 'drawing boundaries.' 'Care' is understood as the location in which patriarchal capitalism seeks to turn women's labour into 'morality.'

The Domestic Economy of Care: Labour Hidden as Love

The care work within the home disguises itself as love. The women cook, clean, provide care to children, care for parents at home - but these activities are portrayed as having something to do with women being feminine, rather than having anything to do with hard work. Indian feminism

reveals this unseen world to some extent with its discussion of how women's labour makes homes run. The home functions as a workplace with no pay. The women are living on credit. This invisible economy is conducted through moral codes: duty, sacrifice, devotion. Women are celebrated as good women when they give more and are blamed as demanding women when they require rest. This invisible labour is secured by being moral. When the value of work is love, women are not given the right to complain.

The other part of the domestic economy is related to 'emotional management.' Women manage conflict, act as a buffer, and maintain harmony.' Emotional labour is a significant "agent" in the maintenance of a stable and functioning family," but it is "invisible." The woman is "the foundation upon which a patriarchal society rests." Labour in Indian feminist writings often signifies a state of depletion. A woman's identity reduces to service work. A woman's desire or aspiration becomes subsidiary in nature. The family becomes the space in which a woman finds value vested only in her service work. Significantly, this is an economic system with hierarchy involved in it. In this system, women have the responsibility of serving their husbands and children, while men have very minimal responsibilities in providing care. Patriarchal power is maintained by an imbalance in distributing work in lieu of real gender differences.

Furthermore, feminist stories disclose the fact that at home, care is work, and therefore, feminist stories lay bare care ideology as a process of exploitation. Family is not just a home but also a site of political action in which feminism is a response to the idea that women's unpaid work sustains patriarchal society. Feminist discourse is any discourse in which stories make visible the work being done at home and assert that love is not an excuse for exploitation, and care cannot exist as a source of obligation without justice being served.

Emotional Labour and the Moral Discipline of Women's Patience

Care work does not remain limited to physical work, but also involves emotional work, for which women are expected to remain poised, forgiving, and extremely patient, requiring the self-regulation of emotions to sustain the peace within the household, which, according to Indian feminist discourses, proves to see women being punished for refusing work, but also for refusing to remain soft. anger is taken to point to moral failure, patience to virtue. This emotional work is coercive because women are asked to silently internalise suffering. Women are required to silently endure disrespect, neglect, and injustice without undermining social order. The emotional work women do becomes the patriarchy's source as men derive energy from women's emotional management with minimal contribution themselves.

The moral behaviour code of patience is one of the tools of exploitation. The spin put on patience as a requirement for women was challenged by feminism to unveil patience as enforced submission. The requirement for patience equates to a requirement for silence. Women should not complain; they should not confront; they should not challenge. Indian feminist literature reflects on the way women experience emotional exhaustion, separation, or numbness, which is an integral part of such disciplinary practices. Their emotions are controlled by pent-up anger and unsatisfied desires.

Emotional work is expressed as slow violence, where women's self-erasing continues. To sustain this discipline, there are respectability politics. A good woman should never conflict with others. Emotional work, then, means performing virtue; that is, a woman's moral value lies in being able to endure suffering.

Feminist discourses circumvent this by revealing emotional labor as labor. It is not easy, it costs us dear. By portraying patience as a discipline rather than a virtue, feminist discourse can be seen as a critique of patriarchal morality because it asserts that women are not morally enjoined to suffer the evil of Patriarchal harmony. Emotional labor is a site of feminist discourse because it reveals how patriarchy maintains itself through extorting female calmness as a social virtue and penalising female roughness.

Compulsory Motherhood and Care as Institutional Control

Thus, motherhood, as it is supposed to be, defines femininity at its peak; however, feminist theories suggest that motherhood may be used to exert institutional control. This mandatory or compulsory motherhood requires a woman to be centrally focused on being a mother to a family. Care or being caring is equated with moral duty: a woman must be "motherly" or caring to a husband, in-laws, or relatives. Ambivalence often surrounds motherhood in Indian feminist literature. Love may be there, but caring becomes an all-encompassing burden rather than an all-encompassing care for the other person. The woman's identity becomes completely defined in terms of caring, with no room left for herself in the equation. The draining of identity becomes virtue in itself.

Another area where compulsory motherhood regulates is in disciplining the female body, where a woman is seen to be of value because of her reproductive work, such that her use of sexuality is framed within a discussion of purity that is connected to being a mother, where, it is argued, being a mother needs to be a choice, not a mandate. Another institution that leads to guilt is that of motherhood: Women who admit to exhaustion or refusal are seen as immoral, causing one to equate such pressure to that of a discipline, encouraging them to remain within the institution of taking care of others, even if it hurts them. Indian feminist literary texts resist idealisation. They show the psychological cost of obligatory motherhood, which can lead to a woman being detached, angry, or fractured. This resists the idea of motherhood being a natural high. These feminist texts reveal how patriarchy uses motherhood as a tool of stability, tying a woman to domesticity.

"Thus, what begins as essential social reproduction evolves into political economy insofar as in providing care, women reproduce social order." Thus, the discourse of feminist discourse is realised in "motherhood as institution, rather than as an essence of unconditional love." Feminist discourse in Indian writing is an extension of feminist discourse by challenging compulsory care and advocating "liberation from any moral responsibility that presses women into endless reproduction of life without any recognition or reciprocity."

Caste and Class in Care Economies: Who Cares for Whom?

The care work in India is organized around caste and class systems. The middle-class lifestyle is maintained by care

work done by domestic workers such as maid servants or care workers or cleaners. The feminist critique should take note that care work is not only gender-based but organized around class systems with care work done by some women being extracted in their respective houses while care work by other women being extracted in the market place in relation to caste or poverty systems. Caste-based division of labour implies that the labour of some bodies historically positions itself or its kind to be service-providing bodies. This labour is not seen as skilled labour, but rather naturalised to social role categories. Domestic workers do intimate caring while being denied dignity, with their labour being underpaid, undervalued, yet essential to the space of the home.

Furthermore, another factor associated with class structures is seen in relation to rejection of care. While it is possible for middle-class women to be subject to exploitation in domestic life, it is equally possible for them to subcontract domestic labour. Working-class women lack such options, having to do "double duty." Hence, feminist discourse can't view care in such homogeneous manners. These contradictions are increasingly brought forth by Indian feminist narratives and feminist theory. Care is not purely intimate; it is political economy. The question "who cares for whom?" reveals the unequal distribution of exhaustion. Some women are expected to care as a moral duty, others are compelled to care as a labour necessity. Intersectional critique insists that feminist ethics must house caste-class accountability. It is not enough to critique patriarchy within the house without addressing the exploitation of the labour of women from the margins outside it.

Feminist resistance has to be structural too recognising care work as labour, claiming rights and dignity for care workers, and challenging the cultural systems that naturalise service as caste destiny. Indian feminist discourse is expanded when it recognises these hierarchies and refuses to romanticise care as a universal feminine virtue. Care becomes a political site where gender intersects with caste and class, revealing that women's oppression is both intimate and systemic.

Refusal as Feminist Ethics: Withdrawal, Boundaries, and the Right Not to Care

Therefore, 'refusal' is given the colourful name of feminist ethics, where women refuse care – a kind of compulsory care that is socially expected of them by patriarchy, where it is impossible to refuse care without being unmoral, where any woman who leaves is seen to be giving little, a concept reinforced by a patriarchy that refers to such a woman's attitude of refusal as selfish, where it is argued that refusal of care is actually self-love, where it is understood that. Often in Indian feminist stories, instead of defiance in the form of rebellion or refusal, we find withdrawal in the forms of emotional distance/separation, loneliness, quietness/silence, and non-performance or refusal of harmony. Such a refusal or withdrawal disrupts patriarchy in that patriarchy thrives by women's emotional availability; when they stop repairing or maintaining it, it becomes visible.

It also encompasses the concept of refusing forgiveness. Women are obliged to forgive the hurt inflicted upon them for the interest of the family. Therefore, the concept of women refusing forgiveness becomes a form of feminism because, through this act, a sense of responsibility is being taken. Boundary-making is at the centre of this. Women can

continue to care, but only to a limited extent. Such a boundary is a political one since it argues that women have a boundary. This is because patriarchy views women as having no end; however, a boundary views women as human. Still, refusal can also be risky for women since they may be abandoned or socially ostracised. The main influence behind risky refusal can therefore be attributed to its characteristic quietness or incompleteness. Feminist ethics highlights that partial refusal occurs to demonstrate agency under constraint.

This is how there is feminism and feminist ethics: refusal as a form of feminist ethics within a care economy. It is a challenge to ethical systems that normalise women's labour. It is a matter of asserting a right to not care as a matter of radical struggle and expression. The development and expansion of feminist discourse is rooted in the idea of refusal as a way to move feminism from the placement and sanctification of women's sacrifice to self-preservation as women.

Feminist Agency Without Triumph: Care, Exhaustion, and Survival

Indian feminist stories frequently deny triumphal empowerment conclusions. Women's freedom is not always achievable; the demand for care persists. Feminist agency is practised in restriction. Agency is represented as subsistence, survival, and strategic negating. Feminist realism argues vigorously for the in-irreducibly-inevitable lack of freedom in women's lives. At this point, care becomes a crucial concept within this kind of realism. Women may become aware of exploitation, yet go ahead with the caregiving duties because of a lack of alternatives. However, this feminist discourse should never begin to moralise this. Some of these women could never leave their families, and there would be extreme consequences. Agency, therefore, becomes a form of negotiation, deciding how much of oneself to invest. Exhaustion is politicised, becoming evidence of how the system is sustained by the work of women. The narratives of exhaustion highlight how the system is sustained by the work of women, even in a non-rebellious context, by simply naming exhaustion as a feminist act.

The survival in care extraction is therefore an act of resistance. This type of survival gives resistant form and substance by opposing complete effacement or erasure. The women have an internal life while providing for others in care work. The forms and forms of resistance by women may not override patriarchy but highlight its suppression by being a manifestation of its violence. Feminist narrative ethics emphasises that structural understanding is always needed for understanding. The choices that women decide to make need to be understood from an economic, social, and emotional point of view. Agency that isn't accompanied by triumphant feelings isn't failure; it's reality."

Therefore, feminist agency in care economies presents an ethical challenge. They do exist, but in a world where they do not exist completely, since true non-compliance outside these situations is impossible. Indian feminist discourse, therefore, adds more breadth by incorporating an understanding of non-existence in the sense of non-possibility, but at the same time, non-existence in a world of resistance. Feminism is, therefore, a process of enduring.

Conclusion

As this discussion has demonstrated, Indian feminist narrative constitutes a potent political critique of political economisation in care discourse through its unveiling of women's domestic and emotive labour as an exploited resource rather than an honest virtue. Care work is necessary for sustaining patriarchal societies, yet it remains invisible in society since it is misrepresented in the discourses of love, duty, and morality. Feminist narrative is moving away from psychological narratives of women's pain towards political narratives of gender exploitation. By drawing support from the theories of womanist care ethics, womanist political economy, and womanist narrative ethics, the present paper has shown how the unpaid work and emotional patience of women are managed through feelings of guilt, respectability, and compulsory motherhood, to the extent of the institution of care being used for controlling women through a sense of duty without any return or acknowledgment.

Most critically, the paper's location of refusals has taken place in feminist ethics. This makes withdrawal, boundary-setting, and inhibiting the imperative of forgiving emerge as forms of radical practice in the face of care coercion. Feminist agenting seems, nonetheless, often without triumph. Feminist realism argues that feminist agenting, while under care, is ethically important insofar as it underscores patriarchy's dependence upon the now-invisible woman.

Ultimately, we can say that feminist literature from India has helped to broaden the horizon of feminist discourse by emphasizing that, rather than simply being told stories of empowerment, a discourse of women's freedom has to dismantle the necessity of the structure of care itself, so that a feminist ethical perspective can begin to move beyond simply reinforcing the value of care as a virtue, towards seeing care as a political economy that allows the lives of women, rather than being seen simply as service, to be seen as subjects that can simply lay claim to rest, mutual exchange, and that can lay aside the burden of compulsory care altogether.

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