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Conjugal Conflict and Marital Discord in Indian English Novels

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Abstract

Marriage has, since ancient times, been revered in India as a sacred bond between a man and a woman. A house becomes a home only when it is coloured with emotional bonding, mutual understanding, and shared responsibilities. The conjugal relationship, therefore, plays a pivotal role in shaping the growth and stability of a family. Yet, happiness in such relationships often emerges through pain and sacrifice. Fathers undergo hardship for their children's future, and mothers embrace innumerable struggles to sustain their families. However, tension frequently arises when these two roles intersect as husband and wife. Differences in temperament, background, and values often cause friction. Conjugal conflict, then, is not merely a private issue but a cultural phenomenon, often rooted in patriarchal traditions and societal expectations. Indian English novels explore this complex terrain with depth and sensitivity, depicting both the agony and resilience embedded within marriage. Writers such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao reveal how conjugal discord reflects wider struggles of individuality, identity, and gender roles. This paper examines their portrayals to decode the multifaceted realities of conjugal clash in Indian fiction.

Keywords: Conjugal, Marriage, Relationship, Individuality, Disharmony, Domestic, Fiction, Wedlock

Introduction

Wedlock brings together two individuals—husband and wife—under one roof. Though united by law and custom, they come from different social and cultural backgrounds that shape their thinking, behaviour, and lifestyle. This diversity, while enriching, also complicates conjugal life. Many conflicts in marriage arise when one partner fails to appreciate the individuality and

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identity of the other. In Indian contexts, these tensions are often exacerbated by patriarchy, where the man dominates with the reinforcement of societal norms.

Internal and external factors fuel conjugal discord. Internal reasons include immature behaviour, lack of communication, psychological incompatibility, absence of harmony, or temperamental imbalance. External factors may involve over-attachment to parents, cultural differences, obsession with habits, or extramarital relationships. Each of these destabilizes the conjugal bond, producing a sense of hollowness in married life. As R. K. Verma observes, marriage is “the physical, mental, and spiritual unison of two souls” (61). When that unison is fractured, the result is disharmony both within the family and in society.

Indian English novelists have long explored conjugal conflict, using marriage as a microcosm of cultural and psychological tensions. Their works not only depict domestic discord but also probe its deeper causes in societal traditions, patriarchal practices, and shifting values. The novels of Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao provide a rich canvas for examining the fragility and resilience of conjugal bonds.

Anita Desai

Human relationships are largely shaped by the interplay of inner emotions and external circumstances. Where communication is absent or insufficient, discord intensifies. This truth underpins the marital conflicts Anita Desai portrays in her fiction.

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Maya and Gautama exemplify conjugal disharmony rooted in psychological and emotional incompatibility. Maya, sensitive and imaginative, craves intimacy and emotional depth, while Gautama, rational and detached, embodies insensitivity to her emotional needs. Their differences escalate into conflict, as Maya reflects:

“Nothing was hidden. All was revealed, and it was not what I haunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so” (*Cry, the Peacock* 114).

This chasm between Maya’s emotional hunger and Gautama’s rational detachment results in alienation and eventual tragedy.

Similarly, in *Voices in the City* (1965), the marriage of Monisha and Jiban demonstrates the suffocating effect of patriarchal conventions. Monisha struggles within the traditional structure of her husband’s joint family, where individuality and privacy are stifled. Her inability to communicate her distress or assert independence leads to despair and eventual suicide:

“I think what separates me from this family is the fact that not one of them ever sleeps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, starless and dark. Mine is all dark now” (*Voices in the City* 137).

Desai thus reveals how the absence of emotional reciprocity, coupled with patriarchal expectations, transforms marriage into a space of alienation rather than intimacy. Through these depictions, she highlights communication failure, psychological incompatibility, and oppressive familial structures as critical sources of conjugal conflict.

Nayantara Sahgal

Nayantara Sahgal consistently foregrounds the vulnerable position of Indian women in a society where, despite apparent independence, they remain emotionally and socially constrained. Her fiction reveals how patriarchal structures silently undermine women’s autonomy, often leading to conjugal disharmony.

In *The Day in Shadow* (1971), Sahgal portrays the disintegrating marriage of Som and Simrit. Their relationship is marked by a lack of mutual understanding and empathy, ultimately

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culminating in divorce. Yet, the irony lies in their post-separation emptiness; though they sought release from each other, freedom does not fill the void. This emphasizes that without care, respect, and compromise, conjugal life cannot sustain happiness. Sahgal here suggests that love and emotional bonding, rather than force or authority, are the true panacea for marital harmony.

Her *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) depicts the troubled marriage of Saroj and Inder. Saroj, sensitive and emotionally perceptive, seeks meaning and intimacy in her conjugal life. Inder, however, is emotionally detached and insensitive, reducing their relationship to mechanical sexual encounters. The lack of genuine emotional exchange magnifies their incompatibility. Sahgal highlights that communication and empathy are indispensable to marital well-being, and without them, the union degenerates into conflict.

In *A Situation in Delhi* (1977), Usman and Nadira's marriage collapses under ideological differences. Nadira pursues pleasure in the physical world, while Usman seeks intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. Their divergent outlooks, though not inherently irreconcilable, become destructive in the absence of mutual respect for individuality. Sahgal illustrates that marriage should nurture rather than suppress innate qualities, yet in patriarchal contexts, women often sacrifice their individuality for conformity.

This theme is also evident in *A Time to Be Happy* (1958). Here, Ammaji, Govind Narayan's mother, resists the common expectation of surrendering her identity to her husband. She represents a "new woman" who asserts independence, refusing to subdue her personality. Similarly, the relationship between Kusum and Sanad highlights how Westernized influences and cultural dissonance create conjugal discomfort. Sahgal writes:

"They must have quarrelled over some trivial things—perhaps he had not returned her smile when he woke up or she had forgotten to do some little service for him which had become habitual between them" (*A Time to Be Happy* 215).

Sanad's eventual realization of his cultural roots restores harmony with Kusum, showing that reconciliation is possible when both partners adjust with sensitivity. In contrast, Maya and Harish in the same novel cannot overcome their differences. Harish's materialism and disregard for Maya's emotional needs extinguish any chance of conjugal intimacy.

Through such varied depictions, Sahgal emphasizes that conjugal relationships falter when ideological or emotional differences are coupled with insensitivity. At the same time, she demonstrates that individual assertion, cultural rootedness, and emotional reciprocity are vital for marital stability.

Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya focuses on the intersection of gender, patriarchy, and social norms in shaping conjugal relationships. Her novels repeatedly depict the ways in which women's identities are subordinated to patriarchal expectations, often reducing them to instruments of lineage and reproduction.

In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Ira is abandoned by her husband because she is presumed barren. Her worth as a wife is thus measured only by her capacity to produce children. This reduction of womanhood to biological function questions the fairness of conjugal bonds in rural patriarchal societies. Similarly, Rukmani's husband, Nathan, engages in an illicit relationship with Kunthi, further undermining the sanctity of their marriage. Rukmani, however, bears the weight of societal expectations, seeking medical help in secrecy to ensure she produces a male child. The narrative reflects the burden imposed upon women to conform to patriarchal ideals of motherhood. Markandaya's subtle irony emerges when she remarks that "Women can

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sometimes be more soothing than men” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 17), underscoring women’s resilience despite exploitation.

In *Some Inner Fury* (1955), conjugal conflict arises from ideological differences. Premala suffers humiliation in her marriage with Kit, who treats her harshly, leading to estrangement. Their disintegration is compounded by Premala’s emotional attraction to Govind, illustrating how unfulfilled needs within marriage often manifest in external relationships. Yet, Kit himself maintains an extramarital affair with Sylvia, underscoring the hypocrisy of patriarchal moral codes. The novel demonstrates how marital voids push individuals towards external attachments, further fracturing conjugal bonds.

Markandaya also explores faith and reason as sources of conflict in *A Silence of Desire* (1960). Here, Sarojini embodies religious faith while her husband Dandekar epitomizes rationality. Their silence and inability to communicate openly become the central cause of estrangement. Sarojini’s reliance on a swami for the cure of her illness is kept secret, while Dandekar, though skeptical, refrains from forcing her into medical treatment. This tacit avoidance and lack of dialogue, ironically, deepen suspicion and distance. Their marriage discloses how silence—not overt conflict—can equally corrode conjugal harmony.

Markandaya’s fiction, thus, exposes how patriarchal expectations, reproductive pressures, ideological differences, and silence all operate as forces of discord within marriage. Yet, in each case, she suggests that sensitivity, communication, and mutual respect could transform conjugal ties into spaces of resilience rather than suppression.

R. K. Narayan

R. K. Narayan, through his fiction, captures the fragility of conjugal relationships strained by extra-marital affairs, gendered expectations, and emotional disconnect. His narratives often show how the pursuit of fulfillment outside marriage destabilizes the sanctity of wedlock.

In *The Guide* (1958), Rosie’s marriage to Marco is devoid of emotional warmth. Marco is detached, consumed by his intellectual pursuits, while Rosie is passionate about dance and emotional expression. Their divergent inclinations create a vacuum in conjugal intimacy. Rosie seeks companionship and recognition from Raju, an outsider, thereby engaging in an extra-marital relationship. Narayan reveals that unmet emotional needs within marriage drive individuals toward external bonds, leading to inevitable collapse. The failure of Rosie and Marco’s marriage thus reflects the incompatibility between practicality and passion when left unreconciled.

Similarly, *The Dark Room* (1938) highlights the toxic impact of male dominance and extra-marital desire. Ramani, an authoritarian husband, indulges in an affair with Shanta Bai, whose opportunism exacerbates marital tensions. His wife, Savitri, feels emotionally abandoned and powerless against his dictatorial behavior. Her despair is revealed poignantly, “If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father’s pension; if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband’s earnings, and then on Babu” (*The Dark Room* 93).

Savitri’s helplessness underscores the lack of agency women often suffer in patriarchal marriages. Narayan critiques the absence of mutual respect in conjugal life, showing how dominance and infidelity create disharmony. His works suggest that only through equality and empathy can marriage become a space of fulfillment.

Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand delves into the socio-economic and psychological factors shaping conjugal life, particularly highlighting the struggles of women marginalized within oppressive

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familial structures. In *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), Victor's adulterous tendencies reveal his unstable and self-indulgent personality. Obsessed with physical beauty, he fails to maintain fidelity, leading to conjugal instability. His mistress, Ganga Dasi, manipulates his weaknesses, worsening dissatisfaction. Anand uses Victor's story to critique the decadence of aristocratic masculinity and its corrosive effects on marriage.

In *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), Anand portrays the marital upheavals of Gauri and Panchi. Gauri aspires for individuality and dignity, but her husband, influenced by his mother's regressive authority, obstructs her growth. Societal traditions and patriarchal pressures hinder Gauri's autonomy, yet she gradually transforms into a self-aware individual who resists domination. Anand vividly portrays her struggle:

The Old Woman and the Cow...is the sole novel dealing with woman and her status in society. It reveals Anand's emphatic plea for the amelioration of woman... Anand vividly portrays the wretched position of Indian woman in rural society and suggests the changes that are coming about by giving a lively description of heroine's enlightened reaction to traditions and customs corrupted through man's selfishness, ignorance and vested interest. (Gupta 95–96)

Through these depictions, Anand emerges as a strong advocate for women's emancipation, showing how conjugal clashes often arise from patriarchal oppression and regressive traditions.

Raja Rao

Raja Rao's exploration of conjugal relationships reflects his philosophical concerns and cross-cultural perspectives, blending spirituality with human intimacy. In *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), Ramaswamy's marriage with Madeleine, a French woman, collapses under cultural and ideological differences. Madeleine's rational and practical outlook contrasts with Ramaswamy's spiritual and philosophical leanings. Their divorce highlights the challenges of intercultural marriages where fundamental values clash. Yet, Ramaswamy finds spiritual fulfillment with Savithri, whom he regards as his true soulmate, "With Madeleine everything was explanation. With Savithri it was recognition" (*The Serpent and the Rope* 340). This distinction illustrates how emotional resonance and shared vision are essential to conjugal success, beyond mere intellectual compatibility.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), Ramakrishna Pai's relationship with Shantha transcends social conventions. Though not entirely acceptable socially, Shantha offers him mental and emotional solace. Rao thus portrays conjugal and extra-conjugal ties as not merely social arrangements but as spiritual and existential engagements, reflecting deeper human needs.

Conclusion

Conjugal relationships in Indian English novels serve as a prism through which broader societal, cultural, and philosophical concerns are refracted. Across diverse narratives, novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao expose the fragility of marriage when tested by silence, dominance, ideological conflict, infidelity, or cultural dissonance. Desai portrays the psychological fractures caused by silence and lack of communication, while Sahgal emphasizes ideological discord and patriarchal dominance. Markandaya highlights the crushing weight of reproductive and social expectations, Narayan critiques dominance and betrayal, Anand pleads for women's emancipation against oppressive structures, and Rao interrogates the philosophical underpinnings of intimacy and difference. Together, their works suggest that conjugal harmony

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is not automatic but demands empathy, respect, communication, and recognition of individuality. Where these are absent, marriage becomes a site of oppression and despair; where they are present, it becomes a potential space for self-realization, partnership, and even spiritual growth.

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