

Marriage, Emotional Labour, and Patriarchy in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

¹Dr. Priyanka Singla, ²Dr. Jaya

¹Associate Professor and Chairperson, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Om Sterling Global University, Hisar, India.

E- Mail- 1. priyankas@gjust.org 2. jayamehra0001@gmail.com

Abstract: Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly represented marriage not as a private romantic arrangement but as a gendered institution that organizes labour, emotion, sexuality, and social respectability. This paper argues that recent women's Indian writing in English depicts marriage as a "hidden economy" where women perform disproportionate emotional labour—managing moods, reputations, kinship ties, and household stability—while patriarchy frames this work as love, duty, or "adjustment." Through close readings of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, and selected scenes and motifs from Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*, the paper shows how contemporary fiction: (1) exposes coercion and entitlement inside conjugal intimacy; (2) maps emotional labour as a form of gendered governance; and (3) constructs counter-archives of women's interior lives against the public myth of the "good wife." The analysis is framed through Hochschild's concept of emotional labour and feminist readings of domestic patriarchy, emphasizing how fiction makes patriarchal power visible at the micro-level of tone, apology, silence, and care. The paper concludes that Indian English fiction's marriage plots function as diagnostic narratives of modern patriarchy, showing how institutionalized love can become a mechanism of control—and how narration itself becomes a practice of resistance.

Keywords: marriage; emotional labour; domestic violence; patriarchy; feminist narration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Indian public culture is frequently described as a stabilizing social ideal- an institution that promises companionship, legitimacy, and respectability. Contemporary Indian English fiction repeatedly dismantles this ideal by narrating marriage as an unequal structure that distributes power through everyday routines. Rather than treating patriarchy as a distant "system," these texts locate it in the intimate: in who speaks first, who apologizes, who anticipates rage, who smooths conflict, who absorbs family pressure, and who is asked to keep peace at the cost of selfhood. In this sense, the marriage plot becomes a political form: it stages how the personal is produced by institutional norms.

This paper understands **emotional labour** as a crucial mechanism of marital patriarchy. While Hochschild originally theorized emotional labour in relation to service work, her widely cited definition emphasizes the management of feeling as labour: emotional labour requires one "to induce or suppress feeling" in order to maintain an outward display that produces the desired emotional state in others (Hochschild). In contemporary feminist usage, the term has expanded to domestic contexts, highlighting how women are expected to perform mood management, empathy, conflict mediation, and relational maintenance as unpaid work that keeps households functioning. Indian English fiction is especially attentive to this domestic emotional economy because it is where patriarchy often hides most effectively: under the language of love, sacrifice, and "family values."

The central claim of this paper is that contemporary Indian English fiction depicts marriage as a **gendered emotional regime**: women's labour is not only cooking and cleaning but also the invisible work of sustaining the relationship's emotional weather. Patriarchy depends on this work while denying it recognition. The novels examined here show how marriage structures a moral narrative that rewards women for self-erasure and punishes them for autonomy—particularly when autonomy challenges male entitlement, family honour, or social respectability.

2. Research gap and contribution

Literary criticism on Indian English women's writing has extensively discussed marriage as a thematic concern, but there is a need for more integrated attention to **how marriage produces labour**- especially emotional labour- as a mode of governance. Many readings focus on dramatic episodes (abuse, adultery, divorce) rather than on the micro-techniques through which patriarchy normalizes itself: the quiet discipline of silence, the moralization of endurance, the conversion of coercion into "duty," and the routine expectation that women will carry the affective burden of social harmony.

This paper contributes by:

1. offering an analytic model of marriage as an **emotional labour system** in contemporary fiction;
2. developing a comparative typology of marital patriarchy across texts (entitlement, respectability, diaspora pressure, public gaze); and
3. foregrounding fiction's counter-archival function: these narratives preserve women's interior accounts of coercion that social institutions often dismiss as "private matters."

3. Methodology and corpus

The study uses qualitative close reading of selected Indian English novels that explicitly engage marriage, domestic power, and gendered care:

- **Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit You* (2017)**: marriage as coercion; abuse and sexual entitlement; narration as survival.
- **Avni Doshi, *Burnt Sugar* (2019/2020)**: caregiving as affective debt; domestic labour and moral surveillance which is used here as a family-based lens that illuminates marriage's adjacent institutions.
- **Anuradha Roy, *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018)**: domestic enclosure, women's "bound" lives, and the household as moral institution which is explained as a contextual text for patriarchal domesticity.

Kandasamy, Doshi and Roy are used as marriage-centred narratives and to expand the paper's account of emotional labour as an ecosystem that includes caregiving, public judgment, and the politics of "good womanhood."

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Emotional labour and the gendered distribution of care

Hochschild's account of emotion management as labour clarifies why marriage can be read as a workplace-like institution: it contains rules about the "right" feelings and the "right" displays. Emotional labour requires producing comfort, suppressing anger, and preventing conflict from surfacing at inconvenient times (Hochschild). In patriarchal marriage, women are often made responsible for:

- keeping the husband calm, respected, and centred;
- maintaining kinship ties and rituals;
- absorbing blame for relational breakdowns; and
- performing gratitude even under unfair conditions.

Contemporary fiction demonstrates that this labour is not merely interpersonal; it is structurally demanded. Families, communities, and institutions often interpret women's refusal to do this labour as selfishness, immorality, or failure.

4.2 Patriarchy and the myth of “natural” feminine labour

A key patriarchal trick is to present women’s emotional work as natural femininity: love, patience, nurturing- rather than labour. Popular discourse then punishes women who do not comply: the “difficult wife,” the “bad daughter-in-law,” the woman who “doesn’t adjust.” Fiction counters this by narrating the cost: exhaustion, dissociation, resentment, and loss of self.

5. Marriage as division of labour in *When I Hit You*

Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You* is among the most direct contemporary Indian English indictments of marriage as patriarchal institution. The narrator describes abuse not as isolated violence but as structured entitlement: the husband claims the right to shape her body, her speech, her writing, her friendships, and her moral reputation. The novel’s famous formulation collapses intimacy and political economy:

“In this marriage in which I’m beaten, he is the poet... I cry, he chronicles. The institution of marriage creates its own division of labour.” (Kandasamy)

The phrase “division of labour” makes a crucial move: it refuses the romantic fantasy that marriage is mutual, instead framing it as an arrangement that allocates agency unequally.

A second key passage locates coercion in the body’s sensory experience:

“I feel the heavy, funeral drumbeats of marriage as he forces sari up around my waist.” (Kandasamy)

“Funeral drumbeats” transforms marriage from celebration into deathly ritual. The line refuses euphemism. It suggests that patriarchy’s most devastating power is its ability to disguise coercion as tradition- turning violence into conjugal “normal.” The novel thereby exposes a core asymmetry: men are allowed to externalize emotion as authority; women are required to internalize emotion as discipline.

6. Emotional labour beyond marriage in *Burnt Sugar*

Avni Doshi’s *Burnt Sugar* is not primarily a marriage novel, yet it is crucial for understanding how emotional labour forms the ecosystem around marriage and patriarchy. The novel’s central relationship- daughter caring for an aging mother- exposes how care becomes affective debt and moral theatre. In a long reflective passage, the narrator asks whether care remains meaningful without public witnesses:

“Decency is something we enact in public... and if there is no fear of blame, what would the point of it be?” (Doshi)

This is a sharp diagnosis of moral surveillance: caregiving is not only love; it is also performance under judgment. Patriarchy often functions through precisely this mechanism in marriage: the wife performs decency, patience, and endurance because public evaluation is constant—through family, neighbourhood, community talk. Doshi’s line helps explain why women’s emotional labour is so persistent: the system rewards appearances and punishes deviation. While the caregiver here is a daughter, the dynamics mirror marital care work: fatigue, resentment, obligation, and the fear of being judged as inadequate. The novel thus expands our framework: marriage is one institution in a wider moral economy where women are expected to be caregivers, emotional managers, and reputational shields.

7. Domestic enclosure in *All the Lives We Never Lived*

Anuradha Roy’s *All the Lives We Never Lived* foregrounds domestic enclosure and the cultural containment of women’s desires. A line widely attributed to the novel captures this containment:

“Everyone needs hobbies. Especially women, who are so bound up in the home.” (Roy)



Even without a marriage-specific scene, the sentence is structurally about marital patriarchy: the home is the space where women’s time is absorbed, where selfhood is made secondary, and where emotional labour is expected as default. The phrase “bound up” signals entanglement and restriction- women’s lives are tied into the home’s needs. In this context, emotional labour appears as a time economy: women’s attention is continuously redirected toward others, leaving little space for self-making. This helps interpret the marriage plots discussed earlier. Kandasamy’s “division of labour” is not only about violence; it is about time, voice, and the right to exist as more than a wife. Kapur’s “look after me” is not only romantic; it is a claim on women’s time and emotional capacity. Roy’s line makes the everyday structure explicit: the home binds women’s lives into service.

8. Comparative discussion

Across these texts, patriarchy operates through three repeating scripts.

8.1 Entitlement script: the husband’s access, the wife’s adjustment

In *When I Hit You*, entitlement is violent and explicit: the husband claims the right to discipline and possess- entitlement is more socially coded, embedded in expectation: “look after me” becomes a marital norm. Women’s refusal triggers punishment- whether emotional, sexual, or reputational.

8.2 Respectability script: public image as a cage

Marriage becomes a public certificate. Women are pressured to preserve the image of a “good marriage” even when the marriage is harmful. Emotional labour thus includes not only care for the partner but care for the family’s public narrative. Doshi’s line about “decency” as enacted performance explains this mechanism: patriarchal morality depends on witnesses and blame.

8.3 Silence script: endurance as virtue, speech as betrayal

A recurring patriarchal demand is silence: do not “tell,” do not “complain,” do not “ruin the family.” Contemporary fiction counters this by narrating what is usually hidden. Kandasamy’s work is explicitly counter-archival: it records the mechanisms of coercion that institutions often dismiss.

9. Tables: mapping emotional labour and patriarchal mechanisms

Table 1. Emotional labour tasks represented in the corpus

S.N.	Emotional labour task	Fictional representation	Patriarchal function
1.	Mood management	wife suppresses anger; anticipates rage (<i>When I Hit You</i>)	normalizes male emotional license
2.	Reputation management	maintaining “successful” marriage image (<i>The Immigrant</i>)	ties woman’s worth to respectability
3.	Self-silencing	fear of “world’s opinion” (<i>Ladies Coupé</i>)	converts surveillance into self-discipline
4.	Care as moral performance	“decency” enacted in public (<i>Burnt Sugar</i>)	sustains blame economy and public judgment
5.	Time absorption	women “bound up in the home” (<i>All the Lives...</i>)	makes selfhood secondary to service

Table 2. Marriage as institution: forms of patriarchal power

S.N.	Power form	Narrative sign	Consequence for women
1.	Sexual entitlement	coercive intimacy framed as “marriage”	consent erased; body becomes property
2.	Discursive control	husband narrates, wife becomes object	voice stolen; selfhood destabilized
3.	Diaspora respectability	marriage as settlement strategy	pressure to endure dissatisfaction
4.	Public surveillance	“what the world will think”	fear governs choices; autonomy punished
5.	Domestic enclosure	women bound to home	time poverty; ambition treated as selfish

10. Conclusion

Contemporary Indian English fiction treats marriage as a key location where patriarchy modernizes itself. The institution survives not only through overt control but through emotional infrastructures: women’s labour of patience, apology, adaptation, silence, and public decency. Kandasamy exposes the brutal truth that marriage can organize violence through legitimacy, naming it as “division of labour.” She shows how women are trained to accept enormous costs in exchange for the promise of belonging and being “looked after,” revealing care as expectation and trap. She offers a collective form that breaks isolation and reframes women’s speech as resistance to patriarchal judgment. Doshi and Roy widen the lens: emotional labour is sustained by moral surveillance and domestic enclosure, making marriage part of a broader gendered economy of care. Taken together, these narratives function as counter-archives of intimacy. They record the hidden costs of “good marriage” culture and show that emotional labour is not simply personal temperament but institutional demand. In doing so, contemporary Indian English fiction offers a crucial feminist diagnostic: patriarchy is not only what happens in parliaments or public speeches—it is what happens in kitchens, bedrooms, train compartments, and the daily management of feeling.

Works Cited:

1. Doshi, Avni. *Burnt Sugar*. Harry N. Abrams, 2021.
2. Frizzell, Nell. “A Timely Reminder: ‘Invisible Labor’ Is Still Work.” *Vogue*, December 19, 2023. Accessed on January 26, 2026.
3. Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. The University of California Press, Reissue, 2012.
4. Kandasamy, Meena. “On *When I Hit You*, Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence.” *The Wire*, 14 July 2021.
5. ---. *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Europa Editions, 2020.
6. Legg, Timothy J. “What Is Emotional Labor?” *Verywell Mind*, 20 Sept. 2021.
7. Misra, Sanjay Kumar and Surabhi Shishodia. “Character of a Progressive Woman in Anuradha Roy’s *All the Lives We Never Lived*.” *IJELLH*, Vol. 13, issue 7, July 2025.
8. Roy, Anuradha. *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Hachette India, 2018.