

Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri's *Swallowing the Sun: Stories Spun Indigenous Tongue*

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Abstract

Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri's debut novel *Swallowing the Sun* (2023) is an entwining of historical fiction, memoir, and feminist resistance. In the homage to ancestors, the story has been strung together from personal letters, oral history, and fictional invention. Surviving an indigenous language and affirming female empowerment resound in the story of life in pre-and post-independence India. Nonetheless, this is a story of women's agency, survival, transformation, and resistance to colonial and patriarchal power.

Swallowing the Sun has garnered much acclaim in journalistic reviews, but there is a marked absence of rigorous engagement with either the narrative style, multilingual poetics, or the endeavour to decolonise the reader's imagination. This gap is significant, particularly in the realm of contemporary postcolonial feminist literature, where the use of multilingualism, cultural memory, and myth as narrative strategies is understudied.

This paper seeks to redress this gap through a lens of postcolonial theory and feminist literary criticism examining Puri's use of linguistic hybridity, cultural memory, and myth as modes of resistance. Using qualitative content analysis and close textual reading, it demonstrates how Puri's idiom—at once personal, political, domestic, and historical—positions the novel within a corpus of decolonial works that celebrate local voices in redefining Indian modernity and womanhood.

The study previews key findings from research that demonstrates how Puri's multilingual narrative destabilises colonial hierarchies of language, and how Puri's female characters – Malati, Kamala, and Surekha – embody everyday resistance to patriarchal and caste-class power. Through these characters, this study argues that the novel complicates universalised notions of womanhood by foregrounding the intersections of gender, class, and caste in the construction of women's lived experiences.

Keywords: Postcolonial Indian Literature, Female Agency, Linguistic Hybridity, Indigenous Narratives, Action (Facet Fusion).

Introduction

Finding voice and representation continues to be a challenging endeavour for postcolonial Indian female subjects whose histories are completely lacking or are not part of the recorded narratives of freedom movements. Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri's *Swallowing the Sun* (2023) enters this discourse not merely as fiction but as a literary intervention that merges history, memory, and narrative experimentation.

As the daughter of freedom fighters and a former diplomat, Puri has both a personal legacy and professional experience to create a "faction" (blending fact and fiction) that crosses over the dividing line between recorded experience and imaginative creation.

She does in order writes against the colonial canon of historiography and patriarchal structures while paying homage to indigenous linguistic traditions.

This paper argues that *Swallowing the Sun* is a politically sensitive feminist text that recuperates indigenous languages, spaces, and memories through a lyrical multilingual narrative. Characters such as Malati and her sisters exemplify Gayatri Spivak's conception of the subaltern striving to speak—not from outside history but from within its intimate spaces.

The analysis draws on a postcolonial framework incorporating Homi Bhabha's "third space," Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's advocacy for linguistic decolonisation, and Pramod K. Nayar's work on cultural memory. These are paired with the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir on female subjectivity, Judith Butler on performativity, and contemporary feminist spatial theory. Methodologically, this study employs qualitative content analysis and close textual reading to examine the novel's formal and thematic strategies.

Literature Review

While *Swallowing the Sun* has gained even wider recognition in mainstream reviews of the Indian Express (Operajita), The Shillong Times (Our Reporter), and The Tribune (Tribune Web Desk), these appraisals have been emotive and historical in their tenor. They have underscored the novel's retelling of the memoiric-national history trope and the colonial-gandhian-post-independence socio-cultural transition. However, they have not analysed its narrative strategy, theoretical motivation, or place in the canon of postcolonial feminist literature. In the absence of serious peer-reviewed scholarship, there is a void in the academic response towards Puri's multilingual, feminist agency and decolonial narrative strategy. Hence, this study provides a missing link in this regard.

In postcolonial literature, multilingualism is not merely an aesthetic choice but an act of resistance against colonial language centrality in the literature and the revival of indigenous language traditions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critical response volume *Decolonising the mind* (1986) calls for

an undermining of colonial language centrality in literature and an overwriting of indigenous traditions, which the use of multilingual language traditions in Puri's novel abides by. It is not an act of local colour, but an act of cultural preservation and resistance. Furthermore, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their *Empire writes back* (2002) state that the linguistic hybridity in the postcolonial canon works to 'abrogate' the authority of colonial English, and simultaneously it is appropriated for local use. Ania Loomba in her revised *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2019) also discusses the postcolonial political implications of multilingual linguistic practices in contemporary literature, where linguistic diversity itself is a challenge to the assumed universality of the literary language of English.

In Indian literary traditions, multilingualism has been an underused narrative technique in mainstream English fiction, where Indian English literary sensibilities have often produced a linguistic filter for the non-English lexicon used by writers who have shied away from standard literary English in the text. Sharma's (2021) book on Vernacular modernities also states that the integrations used in this novel, has produced a cultural legitimacy of the vernacular, which is not subordinate to the standard literary English.

The politics of feminism in the novel resounds with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), who emphasise the female subject's dilemma and performativity, respectively. Gender is seen as a sociocultural unit created by the play of forces within the lived experience of individuals. In the Indian context, the definitive writings of two feminist critics, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (*The Scandal of the State*, 2019) and Brinda Bose (2020), have also noticed the body as inscribed with political meaning—both as a site of control for the patriarch and as one of resistance. Puri's depiction of her protagonists—colonial subjects, educated women, and domesticated wives—echoes many seminal critiques. Surekha's passive rebellion in a marital home and Kamala's scholarly self-affirmation in academia are expressions of feminist agency. Like other forms of resistance theorised in feminist literary criticism, the latter is perhaps more overt in its manifestation.

Puri's corpus resonates with the earlier canon of Indian women's writing that engages with historical memory and gendered resistance. Kamala Das, Anita Desai and Mahasweta Devi have built narratives where the private space connects with the political much like Puri's hybridity between a personal memoir and nationalist history. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and *Breast Stories*, for example, use indigenous speech and oral narrative techniques to subvert patriarchal and colonial narratives. Puri also uses oral history and family archives but in a more autobiographical sense. The use of 148 authentic letters from her parents as both a historical document and narrative tool is an interesting choice. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* also employ a disjointed timeline and multiple voices to resist a nationalist historiography and a linear narrative structure which Puri also follows.

In the transnational postcolonial feminist canon, Puri's choices resonate with the strategies employed by writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) and Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions*), both of whom, like her, use linguistic hybridity and culturally embedded metaphors which render colonisation secondary to local experience.

Theoretical standpoint: One can certainly read *Swallowing the Sun* in the context of Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) and Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), as both texts define space as socially produced and charged with power. When Puri depicts the hostel, schoolyard and Banaras ghats as gendered and politically charged spaces, s(he) is resonating with Doreen Massey's argument that spatial configurations cannot be untied from the politics of gender. Therefore, Puri's novel finds its place in the canon of feminist spatial narratives—Indian as well as transnational.

The existing scholarship on feminist myth-revisionism also offers fertile ground for reading *Swallowing the Sun*. In her retelling of the Ramayana in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni recuperates the mythic narrative of the female protagonist, a technique that Puri employs to recontextualise the myth of Rama and Ravana as an epistemological tool for Malati's resistance. In

Sadhana Naithani's (2018) study of Indian folklore, s(he) argues that the reappropriation of myth is not only a tool of cultural survival but also a means to undermine patriarchal versions of tradition. The caste-class-gendered space of *Swallowing the Sun* resonates with Dalit feminist critiques such as those of the Sharmila Rege in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) which are guided against both Brahmanical patriarchy and class-based mainstream feminism. However, the protagonist(s) of *Swallowing the Sun* comes/hails from an upper-caste background and the text submits to the privileges and exclusions associated with that social location; hence, the text passively resists those structures which support and impede women's agency.

To summarise, contemporary Indian and international literature provides us with several keys to interpreting *Swallowing the Sun*: from postcolonial linguistic theory and feminist historiography to spatial politics and myth revisionism. As this review attempts to demonstrate, no academic study has thus far provided a holistic reading of *Swallowing the Sun* that not only incorporates these points of entry but also focuses specifically on Puri's novel. The present paper, in addition to contributing to the scholarship on Puri, aims to fill a void in the broader discourse on postcolonial feminist literary criticism.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This methodological study employed close reading as a technique. By closely reading certain significant scenes, metaphors, and narrative elements, this study attempts to correlate text with theory. The postcolonial schema includes the work of Homi Bhabha (particularly, the "third space"), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (particularly, his call for linguistic decolonization) and Pramod K. Nayar (particularly, his theory of cultural memory). Within the ambit of the feminist perspective, this paper includes the works of Simone de Beauvoir (particularly her concept of female subjectivity), Judith Butler (particularly her notion of performativity), and contemporary feminist studies on spatial politics.

Critical Analysis

Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri's *Swallowing the Sun* can be read as a layered text that charters womanhood

across three levels of memory that converge in a subject position: personal memory, national history, and feminist consciousness. The resilience of this text lies in the manner in which it subverts the reassuring grand narratives of colonialism and patriarchy through an intense overlap of indigenous language, oral tradition, and personal experience. In the following subsections, I elaborate on the six thematic and structural strategies that locate the feminist postcolonial investment of the novel.

Female Agency Beyond Heroism

One of the remarkable things about Puri's novel is that she refuses to count her female characters among the "exceptional heroines" of nationalist discourse. Malati, Kamala, and Surekha do not do things that will be remembered in history books. Rather, their agency lies in the everyday — resisting humiliation, asserting dignity within the family and community contexts, and getting by without losing oneself.

Malati's wrestling match with Bhika is not just a schoolyard scuffle but a kind of rebellion pitting indigenous resistance against colonial control. When Malati dreams of herself as Rama killing Ravana, invoking the Ramayana myth, she is doing something remarkable because she is using a mythic, male heroic image and turns it inside out for a female end. This reminds me of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, where Draupadi tells the story of the Mahabharata from her own perspective, seizing mythic authority from male retelling.

Kamala's intellectual involvement and Surekha's negotiations of marital life are alternate models of female agency. Kamala gets an education, taking advantage of formal opportunities to carve out a place in institutions that are male spaces. Surekha, on the other hand, fits a more traditional domestic role, but one that she will not let fade into the background. Her strategic silences and subtle resistance are models for how resistance does not have to be overt or vocal, as Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

Through these portrayals of agency, Puri avoids reducing her female characters to a single feminist ideal. Given the limited social options available in colonial and early postcolonial India, survival could

itself be an act of resistance. Puri's depiction of these different expressions of resistance reminds me of Gayatri Spivak's argument, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that subaltern voices are reproduced in fragmented ways, resisting erasure but without requiring that they take on a heroic status.

Multilingualism and the "Third Space"

Swallowing the Sun refuses to submit to the monolingual norms of Indian English fiction. The novel incorporates Marathi proverbs, Hindi idioms, folk songs, and local imagery without glossing them to the reader. This refusal to translate or italicise enacts what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space" — a cultural site where meanings are constantly negotiated, and where colonial language hierarchies are destabilised.

For instance, when Malati's thoughts "rattle like a two-headed drum" (*dhol*), the simile operates beyond English semantic boundaries, drawing on the cultural memory of regional festivals and oral performance traditions. Bill Ashcroft's concept of "abrogation" in *The Empire Writes Back* explains how such images actively dismantle the authority of the colonial linguistic order.

The politics of code-switching in Puri's novel also parallels the argument that language is not merely a communication tool but a repository of culture. By introducing the regional dialect into the syntax of English, Puri compels her readers, even completely English speakers, to feel a position of estrangement, a disruption that bestows authenticity on the vernacular.

Unlike Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* and Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, who also mix languages, such incorporation is necessary for international readership due to the explanatory commentary. Puri's approach is less accommodating, and therefore more politically radical, insisting that linguistic hybridity is not a stylistic flourishing but a structural principle of the narrative.

Myth, Memory, and Feminist Reclamation.

Myths have frequently served in nationalist discourse to celebrate male heroism and patriarchal values. Puri's appropriation of myth is 'feminist

myth-revisionism at work, employing the resources of a given body of myths to speak about women's predicaments'.

Malati's recourse to the Ramayana episode during her wrestling match converts the token of male achievement into a symbol of feminine valour. Malati follows suit with a *démarche* in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, in which a mythic name is borrowed to stand for an assertion of resistance against state violence. Sadhana Naithani (2018) demonstrates how such a reappropriation can challenge patriarchal assertion over tradition though not break bonds with cultural legacy.

Memory also functions as a political tool for *Swallowing the Sun*. Puri weaves personal letters, family stories, and national events — from the Dandi March to Partition — into a nonlinear narrative that privileges lived experience over official history. Pramod K. Nayar's concept of "cultural memory" elucidates how such recollection operates not as archival record but as an ongoing, embodied engagement with the past.

The fusion of myth and memory in Puri's work produces a form of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory" — the transmission of traumatic and formative events to the next generation, shaping identity and political consciousness. In Malati's case, the memories and myths that she inherits become tools for crafting resistant subjectivity.

Space, Place and Embodied Geography.

The novel's geography is politically charged with its language. Puri maps spaces — the schoolyard, the hostel, Bombay's streets, and the Banaras ghats — not as neutral settings but as gendered and contested terrains.

Drawing on Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), we can read the hostel as a "liminal" space — neither wholly public nor entirely private — where the sisters can renegotiate gender roles. In contrast, the classroom embodies colonial authority, yet becomes a battleground for indigenous identity when Malati challenges its disciplinary norms.

Bombay in the novel is a space of both opportunity and risk, reflecting what Henri Lefebvre describes in *The Production of Space* (1991) as the "contradictory space" of modernity: simultaneously enabling and constraining. The Banaras ghats, too, are depicted

with ambivalence — sites of spiritual tradition, yet also suffocating in their ritual orthodoxy, especially for women.

The female body becomes a form of spatial resistance. Malati's physical acts — wrestling in mud, walking alone through urban streets, and occupying intellectual space — enact Butler's performativity, producing subjectivity through repeated gestures that defy normative expectations.

Narrative Structure and Dialogic Imagination.

Puri's adoption of the "faction" form — blending historical letters with fictionalised scenes — resists the teleology of nationalist historiography.

The polyphonic, nonlinear novel structure is an embodiment of Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic imagination", wherein different voices and perspectives do not submit to a single dominant narrative.

The cross-fertilisation of letters, dreams, silences, and rituals is thrown into a mix of elements that Western literary traditions often marginalise or mark as non-literary. However, in South Asian storytelling traditions, these elements are necessary for the narrative meaning. Puri sets them next to political events and commentary, thus giving them equal narrative status.

McRuer's essay parallels my reading of Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*, which similarly constructs national history out of fragmentary, localised narratives, resisting the essentialising impulses of state histories. Its refusal of closure in *Swallowing the Sun* is, in a way, a complement to the unfinished business of decolonisation.

Intersectionality: Caste, Class and Gender.

However, Malati and Kamala's experience also shows how caste and class affect women's experiences in quite different ways: Malati and Kamala's opportunities (Elphinstone College, Banaras Hindu University) indicate their upper-caste origin. Nonetheless, their gendered experiences as South Asian women reveal structural constraints on their freedom.

Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) reminds us that feminist analysis cannot be blind to class and caste questions. The experiences

of upper-caste women are not the same as those of Dalit or working-class women. In some ways, Puri's novel foregrounds the relative freedom of the sisters, women who have not had to submit to the subaltern lives led by women in the hinterlands, or women from lower-caste backgrounds.

Kamala's forms of resistance are enabled by the socio-economic status of the family. Surekha's marital strategies are grounded in the resources available. This is what the class does. This layered experience of oppression and resistance enriches Puri's feminist vision. It also risks universalising womanhood. An alternative is to collapse.

Conclusion

While *Swallowing the Sun* focuses on gender, it is not ignorant of the ways in which caste and class also impact women's experiences. Malati and Kamala's places at elite colleges like Elphinstone College and Banaras Hindu University are guaranteed by their upper-caste status, but gender has its own set of hurdles.

Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) is a timely reminder that feminist analysis needs to consider caste and that of upper-caste and upper-class women from very different experiences from Dalit and working-class women. In hints and glances, Puri's story suggests that the experiences of the two sisters are distinct from those of women who live in rural areas or come from lower castes.

In addition to its scholarly significance in the corpus of scholarship on Lakshmi Murdeshwar Puri's writing, *Swallowing the Sun* also has pedagogical and translational implications. In terms of pedagogy, *Swallowing the Sun* provides a valuable example of teaching postcolonial feminist narrative strategies with a focus on multilingualism and memory. In terms of translation studies, *Swallowing the Sun* raises important issues for translation regarding the loss or preservation of indigenous idioms and registers and thus invites readers to adopt a position against domesticating these hybrid linguistic practices as a form of resistance.

The form of resistance varies with class. Kamala's education and professional attainments are possible because the family belongs to a certain socio-

economic group. Surekha's marriage strategies are determined by the options available to women from a similar background. This adds another dimension to the feminist imagination that would risk making it universalising if it were to seek to transcend class and caste.

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