



Original Article

Constructing Female Beauty: A Comparative Analysis of Mahasweta Devi and Selected Contemporary Indian Feminist Writers

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Manuscript ID:

IJAAR-130615

ISSN: 2347-7075

Impact Factor – 8.141

Volume - 13

Issue - 6

July – August 2026

Pp. 117 - 123

Submitted: 17 July 2026

Revised: 29 July 2026

Accepted: 01 August 2026

Published: 10 August 2026

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Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://ijaar.co.in/>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.22160981

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22160981>



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Abstract:

The representation of women as symbols of beauty has remained a persistent feature of literary and cultural discourses across historical periods. In the contemporary era, however, beauty has increasingly become a commodified construct shaped by consumer capitalism, digital media, and patriarchal ideologies. While women continue to be evaluated through standards of physical attractiveness, feminist literature has challenged such reductive representations by foregrounding women's agency, subjectivity, and resistance. This paper critically examines the notion of women as symbol of beauty in contemporary society through a comparative study of Mahasweta Devi's short stories and the writings of contemporary Indian feminist authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundati Roy, Bama, and Manju Kapur. Drawing upon feminist theories articulated by Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Naomi Wolf, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kimberle Crenshaw, the study explores how physical beauty functions as a social, cultural, and political construct. Through textual analysis of Draupadi, Breast-Giver, Rudali, Sangati, That long silence, and The God of Small Things, the paper argues that Mahasweta Devi offers a radical redefinition of beauty by locating it not in physical appearance but in resistance, labour, dignity, and political consciousness. The study concludes that Indian feminist literature challenges dominant beauty narratives and proposes alternative models of womanhood rooted in agency and social justice.

Keywords: *Feminism, Beauty, Mahasweta Devi, Contemporary Indian Literature, Female Body, Postcolonial Feminism, Agency, Representation.*

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How to cite this article:

Khushboo & Dr. Pooja. (2026). Constructing Female Beauty: A Comparative Analysis of Mahasweta Devi and Selected Contemporary Indian Feminist Writers. *International Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 13(6), 117 – 123. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22160981>

Introduction:

Beauty has historically occupied a central position in the representation of women across literature, art, mythology, and social institutions. Throughout different cultural traditions, women's identities have often been constructed through their

physical appearance, resulting in a persistent association between femininity and beauty. Such representations have contributed to the objectification of women by reducing their social value to aesthetic standards determined largely by patriarchal structures. In the contemporary era, the



significance of beauty has intensified under the influence of globalization, consumer capitalism, mass media, and digital technologies. Social networking platforms, advertising industries, and entertainment cultures continuously reproduce idealized images of female beauty, creating standards that shape women's self-perception and social status.

Feminist scholars have long argued that beauty is not merely a natural attribute but a socially constructed category that functions as a mechanism of power. Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" highlights the cultural processes through which femininity is produced. Naomi Wolf's concept of the "beauty myth" further demonstrates how beauty standards operate as forms of social control that regulates women's bodies and maintain gender hierarchies. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity reveals how beauty practices contribute to the performance of socially sanctioned femininity.

Within the Indian context, feminist writers have consistently interrogated dominant constructions of beauty and womanhood. Their works expose the complex intersections of gender, class, caste, religion, and social power that shape women's experiences. Among these writers, Mahasweta Devi occupies a distinctive position due to her portrayal of tribal, subaltern, and marginalized women whose lives remain largely absent from mainstream literary narratives. Unlike conventional representations that celebrate feminine beauty, Devi foregrounds women whose identities are defined by labour, resistance, survival, and political struggle. Her stories challenge aestheticized notions of womanhood and expose the violence embedded within patriarchal and state structures.

At the same time, contemporary Indian feminist writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita

Desai, Arundhati Roy, Bama, and Manju Kapur have explored different dimensions of women's experiences, including domestic oppression, psychological conflict, caste discrimination, and social exclusion. While these writers engage with questions of femininity and bodily representation, their approaches differ according to the social locations and experiences of their female protagonists.

This paper seeks to examine the concept of women as symbols of beauty in contemporary era through a comparative analysis of Mahasweta Devi's short stories and selected works by contemporary Indian feminist writers. Using feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional theoretical frameworks, the study investigates how beauty functions as a cultural construct and how feminist literature challenges traditional assumptions regarding female identity. By comparing diverse literary representations, the paper aims to demonstrate that Indian feminist writing redefines beauty as a manifestation of agency, resilience, dignity, and resistance rather than mere physical attractiveness.

Literature Review:

The representation of women and beauty has occupied a significant place in feminist literary criticism. Early feminist thinkers such as Simone De Beauvoir (1949) challenged the patriarchal construction of womanhood by arguing that femininity is not biologically determined but socially produced. Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "other" laid the foundation for subsequent feminist inquiries into the relationship between female identity and bodily representation.

The connection between beauty and patriarchal control was further examined by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1991). Wolf argues that beauty functions as a disciplinary mechanism that



emerged with greater intensity as women gained access to education, employment, and political rights. According to her, modern beauty standards serve to regulate women's bodies and maintain gender hierarchies. Similarly, Susan Bordo (1993) demonstrates how cultural expectations surrounding beauty contribute to the surveillance and regulation of female bodies, particularly within consumer societies.

Within literary studies, Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" (1975) has provided a useful framework for understanding how women are represented as objects of visual pleasure. Mulvey argues that dominant cultural narratives frequently position women as passive spectacles rather than active subjects. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) further expands this discussion by suggesting that femininity and beauty are not inherent qualities but repeated social performances shaped by cultural expectations.

Scholarly engagement with Mahasweta Devi has primarily focused on her representation of subaltern communities, tribal resistance, and gender violence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential reading of Draupadi interprets Draupadi's violated body as a site of political resistance that challenges both state power and patriarchal authority. Critics such as Jasodhara Bagchi and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan have similarly highlighted Devi's commitment to representing marginalized women whose experiences are excluded from mainstream narratives.

Research on contemporary Indian feminist writers has explored diverse dimensions of women's oppression and agency. Studies on Shashi Deshpande emphasize the psychological effects of patriarchal domestic structures, while scholarship on Anita Desai focuses on female subjectivity and alienation. Arundhati Roy's work has been examined through the lenses of gender, caste, and

postcolonial resistance, whereas Bama's writings have generated significant discussions regarding Dalit feminism and intersectionality. Manju Kapur's novels have been analyzed for their critique of marriage, family, and gender expectations in modern India.

Despite substantial scholarship on Mahasweta Devi and Indian feminist writings, relatively little attention has been paid to the concept of beauty as a comparative analytical category. Existing studies often examine issues such as gender oppression, caste discrimination, or subaltern agency in isolation. Few scholars have explored how Mahasweta Devi's rejection of conventional beauty contrasts with representations of femininity in the works of other contemporary Indian feminist writers. Moreover, the relationship between contemporary beauty culture and literary representation of women remains underexplored within Indian feminist literary criticism.

The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating the construction of women as symbols of beauty in contemporary society and comparing it with representations of womanhood in Mahasweta Devi's short stories and selected works of contemporary Indian feminist writers. By bringing together feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and intersectional analysis, the study contributes to ongoing debates regarding beauty, gender, and female agency in Indian literature.

Research Methodology:

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and intersectional analysis. Since the research focuses on literary representations and cultural constructions of beauty, a textual and comparative approach has been employed.



The primary texts selected for analysis include Mahasweta Devi's short stories *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver*, and *Rudali*, along with selected works by contemporary Indian feminist writers such as Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Bama's *Sangati*, and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. These texts have been chosen because they represent diverse social locations, including tribal, Dalit, middle-class, and postcolonial experiences of womanhood.

The study employs close textual reading as its primary method of analysis. Particular attention is given to description of the female body, representations of beauty, constructions of femininity, and instances of resistance against patriarchal norms. The analysis examines how women are positioned within structures of gender, class, caste, and power, and how these structures influence perception of beauty and female identity.

The theoretical framework draws upon Simone De Beauvoir's concept of woman as a social construct, Naomi Wolf's theory of the beauty myth, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, and Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. These theoretical perspectives provide analytical tools for understanding the relationship between beauty, representation, and power.

In addition to textual analysis, the study incorporates secondary sources from feminist criticism, gender studies, and postcolonial scholarship. Scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays have been consulted to contextualize literary representations within broader social and cultural debates.

The research follows a comparative analytical method. Rather than examining individual texts in isolation, it investigates similarities and

differences in the portrayal of women across authors and literary traditions. This comparative framework enables a deeper understanding of how Mahasweta Devi's redefinition of beauty differs from and contributes to broader feminist discourses in contemporary Indian literature.

The methodology is limited to literary and cultural analysis and does not involve empirical data collection. Nevertheless, the interpretive approach is particularly suitable for examining the ideological, symbolic, and political dimensions of beauty and womanhood within literary texts.

Comparative Analysis:

While Mahasweta Devi challenges the reduction of women to physical beauty through representations of tribal and marginalized women, other contemporary Indian feminist writers engage with beauty and femininity in distinct yet interconnected ways. A comparative reading reveals the diversity of feminist responses to patriarchal constructions of womanhood in postcolonial India.

Mahasweta Devi and Shashi Deshpande:

Shashi Deshpande's novels such as *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* focus primarily on middle-class urban women negotiating domestic expectations and patriarchal constraints. Deshpande portrays how women internalize societal expectations regarding beauty, marriage, and femininity. Her protagonists often experience psychological conflict because their social worth is linked to their appearances and conformity to gender norms.

Mahasweta Devi, however, shifts attention from domestic patriarchy to structural oppression. Unlike Deshpande's educated middle-class women, Devi's protagonists belong to tribal and economically marginalized communities where survival itself becomes a central concern. Physical beauty occupies a relatively minor place in their



lives. Through figures such as Dopdi Mejhen and Sanichari, Devi demonstrates that women's identities cannot be reduced to aesthetic appeal.

Thus, while Deshpande critiques the psychological consequences of beauty-centered femininity, Devi rejects the very framework that evaluates women through beauty.

Mahasweta Devi and Anita Desai:

Anita Desai's fiction frequently explores the inner lives of women constrained by societal expectations. In novels such as *Fire on the Mountain* and *Cry, the Peacock*, female characters struggle with isolation, emotional repression, and the burden of ideal femininity.

Desai often examines beauty as a cultural expectation imposed upon women. Her protagonists' experiences alienation when they fail to meet prescribed standards of feminine behaviour and appearance. The focus remains largely psychological and existential.

Mahasweta Devi, by contrast, politicizes the female body. In *Draupadi*, the female body becomes a battlefield upon which state power and patriarchal violence operates. Beauty is stripped of its romantic associations and transformed into an instrument of resistance. Consequently, Devi extends feminist discourse beyond individual psychology toward collective political struggle.

Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* critiques social hierarchies related to caste, gender, and sexuality. Characters such as Ammu challenge conventional expectations of femininity and respectability. Roy demonstrates how women's bodies become regulated by patriarchal and caste-based institutions.

Both Roy and Devi expose the intersection of gender and social power. However, Roy often employs lyrical and symbolic narratives, whereas Devi adopts a direct, activist-oriented realism.

Physical beauty in Roy's work remains entangled with social respectability and desire, while in Devi's stories bodily suffering and resistance overshadow aesthetic concerns.

The two writers collectively demonstrate that women's bodies are political sites where power relations are negotiated and contested.

Mahasweta Devi and Bama:

A particularly productive comparison can be drawn between Mahasweta Devi and Bama. Both writers' foreground marginalized women excluded from dominant cultural narratives. Bama's *Sangati* exposes the everyday discrimination faced by Dalit women whose labour sustains society yet whose bodies remain invisible within mainstream ideals of beauty.

Upper-class beauty standards frequently marginalize Dalit and tribal women. Both Bama and Devi challenge these exclusions by presenting women whose dignity derives from labour, solidarity, and resistance rather than physical attractiveness.

Their writings anticipate contemporary intersectional feminism by demonstrating that beauty cannot be understood independently of caste, class, and social power.

Mahasweta Devi and Manju Kapur:

Manju Kapur's novels such as *Difficult Daughters* and *Home Examine Women's Struggle* for autonomy within patriarchal family structures. Her protagonists often confront expectations regarding appearance, marriageability, and feminine respectability.

Unlike Kapur's focus on middle-class domestic spaces, Devi's fiction locates women within broader systems of exploitations involving landlords, state institutions, and economic structures. Nevertheless, both writers critique social mechanisms that evaluate women according to externally imposed ideals.



Together, their works reveal how beauty functions differently across class and social locations while remaining a significant instrument of gender regulation.

Beauty, Agency, and Contemporary Feminist Discourse:

Recent feminist movements have increasingly questioned narrow definition of beauty. Campaigns promoting body positivity, body neutrality, and inclusively challenge dominant representations of the female body. These movements resonate strongly with Mahasweta Devi's literary projects. Long before such discussions became mainstream, Devi portrayed women whose value was independent of physical attractiveness. Her protagonists compel readers to recognize alternative forms of beauty rooted in courage, endurance, political consciousness, and collective resistance.

In this respect, Mahasweta Devi may be viewed as a precursor to contemporary intersectional feminist discourse. Her writings challenge not only patriarchy but also caste oppression, economic exploitation, and state violence, thereby offering a multidimensional understanding of women's experiences.

Conclusion:

The present study has explored the representation of women as symbols of beauty in contemporary society through a comparative examination of Mahasweta Devi's short stories and the works of prominent Indian Feminist writers. The analysis reveals that beauty, particularly physical beauty, remains a powerful cultural construct that continues to shape women's identities and social experiences. Contemporary media, consumer culture, and digital technologies often reinforce narrow standards of attractiveness that commodify

women's bodies and reduce their value to visual appeal. Feminist theorists such as Simone De Beauvoir, Naomi Wolf, Judith Butler, and Kimberle Crenshaw have demonstrated that beauty is deeply embedded within structures of power that regulate gendered behaviour and perpetuate social inequalities.

Against this backdrop, Indian feminist literature offers significant critiques of beauty-centered representations of women. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Bama, and Manju Kapur reveal the various ways in which women negotiate patriarchal expectations related to appearance, sexuality, domesticity, and social respectability. Their works expose the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of gendered beauty norms while simultaneously affirming women's subjectivity and autonomy.

Among these writers, Mahasweta Devi emerges as a particularly radical voice. Her portrayal of tribal, subaltern, and economically marginalized women fundamentally challenges conventional notion of beauty. Through characters such as Dopdi Mejhen, Jashoda, and Sanichari, Devi shifts attention from physical attractiveness to resilience, labour, dignity, and resistance. The female body in her narratives is not an object of aesthetic admiration but a site of struggle, exploitation, and political agency. By centering women who exist outside dominant beauty discourse, Devi exposes the limitations of patriarchal definitions of femininity and reclaims womanhood as a space of empowerment and defiance.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that beauty cannot be understood as a universal or neutral category. Rather, it is shaped by intersecting structures of gender, caste, class, and power. Indian feminist writers collectively challenge the reduction of women to physical appearance and advocate



alternative understandings of female identity grounded in experience, agency, and social justice. Their works contribute to broader feminist efforts to dismantle oppressive beauty norms and to recognize the diverse realities of women's lives.

Ultimately, the study argues that the most profound contribution of Mahasweta Devi and contemporary Indian feminist literature lies in their redefinition of beauty itself. By locating beauty in courage, resistance, dignity, and humanity rather than in physical perfection, these writers offer a transformative vision of womanhood that remains deeply relevant in the twenty-first century.

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