

Feminist Fragility and the Politics of Breakdown: Mental Instability as Structural Response in Indian Women's Writing

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Abstract

In this article, mental fragility in Indian women writers is explored as a structural response, rather than individual pathology. In this way, it challenges conventional notions of trauma and recovery by exploring how mental breakdown, withdrawal, and emotional instability operate as epistemic critique in patriarchal, caste, and post-colonial societies. By drawing on feminist theories of affect, feminist theories of psychiatry, and narrative ethics, this article will analyse how **Fire on the Mountain**, **Tomb of Sand**, **The Lowland**, and **Clear Light of Day** represent the mental fragility of women as revealing the impossibility of gendered expectations of care, respectability, belonging, and relational endurance. Rather than pathologising female instability, these works of literature reveal structural exhaustion that is produced by unpaid emotional labour, nationalist memory, and transnational displacement. By engaging with theories of affective circulation by Ahmed (2004), cruel optimism by Berlant (2011), and depression as public feeling by Cvetkovich (2012), this article will show how fragility is used as a diagnostic tool that makes visible hidden violence. Feminist fragility is not weakness; it is embodiment that resists moral and relational over-extraction. By placing breakdown as critique, women's fiction from India undermines the neoliberal ideologies of resilience and recovery, instead highlighting the political value of breakdown.

Keywords: Feminist fragility, affect theory, breakdown, structural exhaustion, emotional labour, psychological resistance.

1. Introduction: Rethinking Breakdown Beyond Pathology

Mental instability in women's narratives has been seen as an individual failing, an impact of trauma, or emotional fragility. This may result in the privatisation of structural issues. However, feminist theorists have been at the forefront of challenging the psychiatric individualisation of women's suffering, suggesting that instability may result from social overburden rather than individual failing (Herman, 1992; Cvetkovich, 2012). Depression, anxiety, or withdrawal are not individual states but socially and historically constructed responses.

Feminist affect theories also highlight that emotions are not individual feelings but part of a complex web of power relations. Ahmed (2004) suggests that emotions are ways of being orientated towards or away from the world, attaching oneself to or dislocating oneself from the world. Breakdown, in that sense, may be a form of disorientation, a dislocating or disowning of oneself from oppressive worlds. Berlant (2011)

suggests that fragility may result from “cruel optimism,” or an attachment to impossible ideals that may not be sustained in the world.

Such a collapse is a recurring feature of Indian women’s fiction. In **Fire on the Mountain**, Nanda Kaul withdraws from domestic performance, in **Tomb of Sand**, Ma’s collapse subverts widowhood performance, in **The Lowland**, Gauri withdraws emotionally from motherhood, and in **Clear Light of Day**, Bim’s emotional instability points to the cumulative impact of performance. What these novels show, rather than the need to cure such collapse, is the psychic toll of gender performance. In this article, I suggest the term feminist fragility, wherein emotional collapse serves as a structural critique. Fragility, in this sense, is not about the fragility of character but the fragility of the system that requires endless performance from women.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Affect and Structural Exhaustion

Feminist affect theories offer important resources to rethink breakdown. Ahmed’s (2004) work shows that emotions are not individual possessions but forces that “stick” to bodies by circulating among them. Shame, grief, anger, and exhaustion are not evenly spread among gendered subjects. Stewart’s (2007) concept of “ordinary affects” points to the idea that affects are built up from intensity and impact experience beneath the surface of events.

Cvetkovich’s (2012) work on depression as a “public feeling” offers an important corrective to seeing affective states as individual failures. Instead, she points to depression as a response to political conditions such as precarity, racism, and gender inequality. This approach is particularly important when reading Indian women’s fiction, in which emotional instability often emerges in relation to caste hierarchies, national rupture, and unpaid caregiving.

The idea of emotional labour, as developed by Hochschild (1983), further illustrates the role of women in the regulation of emotions in the maintenance of the relational system. Emotional labour, which is the smoothing out of conflict, the containment of anger, and the absorption of disappointment, is the unpaid labour that holds families and societies together. Where emotional labour outstrips capacity, collapse occurs.

Butler’s (2004) extension of this idea is the concept of precarious life. She argues that the idea of vulnerability is socially constructed. The bodies of women are more exposed to violence, displacement, and relationality. Thus, the idea of fragility is not an inherent human condition but a socially constructed one.

These models offer a framework for reading the idea of mental instability not in terms of illness but in terms of exhaustion.

3. Withdrawal as Structural Response in **Fire on the Mountain**

In Anita Desai’s **Fire on the Mountain**, Nanda Kaul’s seclusion at Carignano seems to be an idiosyncratic form of solitude. Nevertheless, her seclusion is a result of decades of performing elite domestic femininity, hosting, entertaining, mediating, and maintaining social distinction. Her husband’s infidelity meant that her work was emotionally unreciprocated.

Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour explains Nanda's fragility; decades of emotional labour culminate in her breakdown.

Raka's silence points to another form of fragility, generational fragility. Raka's experience of domestic violence translates to her lack of intimacy with others. Herman's (1992) work suggests that trauma destroys trust in relationships. Raka's silence points to the same. However, the novel does not suggest any form of therapeutic resolution. As Cvetkovich (2012) points out, not all breakdowns result in any form of resolution or cure.

The ending of the novel, characterised by destruction, challenges healing narratives. Fragility as structural indictment continues. Nanda's collapse illustrates the unsustainability of compulsory care under patriarchal respectability culture. Withdrawal becomes an epistemic protest as non-participation challenges the very fragility of home ideology.

4. Late-Life Fragility and Disruptive Mobility in *Tomb of Sand*

Geetanjali Shree's **Tomb of Sand** opens with the collapse of Ma into bed after widowhood. Her intransigence to food and speech subverts the expectations of the family in terms of dignified ageing. According to Ahmed (2004), emotions make bodies orient themselves in space; Ma's fragility makes the family orient itself in power relations. Ultimately, the re-emergence of Ma into mobility, including transnational mobility, makes fragility a disruptive force.

Memory related to the Partition finds its way into the narrative through the fragility of the subject. Das (2007) contends that the experience of violence infiltrates the ordinary, thereby influencing the subjectivity of the ordinary self. Ma's fragility, therefore, is not just a collapse but a historical intervention, not an outcome of senility. The novel subverts the notion of ageing by reframing fragility in terms of time disruptions. Stewart's (2007) theory of affective intensities can be used to understand the creation of new possibilities through the collapse of Ma.

5. Transnational Detachment in *The Lowland*

Gauri in **The Lowland** demonstrates affective fragility through emotional withdrawal. After the execution of her husband and forced marriage, Gauri withdraws from relational intimacy, including motherhood. The typical interpretation of Gauri as cold and immoral changes when we consider feminist fragility.

The cruel optimism of Berlant (2011) explains Gauri's failed relationships: her relationship with revolutionary ideology, marital relationships, and motherhood. These relationships are ultimately unfulfilling. The emotional crisis ensues.

Herman (1992) points out that trauma destroys relational trust. The disruption of the capacity for attachment occurs in the face of political violence. The precarity of Butler (2004) explains the effect of displacement. Gauri's migration to America gives her intellectual freedom and further alienation.

Lahiri subverts the redemption trope. Gauri remains in crisis, exemplifying Cvetkovich (2012), who points out that depression as a public phenomenon cannot be cured. Fragility exposes the impossibility of reconciling the unfulfillable relationships of ideological failure, diasporic displacement, and gendered expectation.

6. Domestic Strain and Interior Fracture in Clear Light of Day

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's emotional instability can be seen as a product of decades of unpaid care work. She stays in the ancestral home and takes care of the finances and her autistic brother. Stewart's (2007) concept of "ordinary affects" adds up in this space.

Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour explains Bim's unpaid work. Emotional labour becomes an expectation. The freedom of her siblings hinges on her emotional stability.

Butler's (2004) precarity theory explains the differential vulnerability of individuals in a familial setup.

The division of memory adds to Bim's emotional instability. Das's (2007) work shows how violence affects the lives of people. Bim's anger can be seen in this context.

Bim's emotional instability points out the inequality of the relational economy. The emotional stability of women is taken for granted. The breakdown of this expectation points out inequality. Desai did not attempt to heal Bim's instability.

7. Breakdown as Epistemic Protest

Throughout these texts, the concept of fragility is an epistemic rupture, and emotional collapse is a rupture in the narrative of resilience and power that is associated with neoliberalism. Ahmed (2004) indicates that emotions can redirect political orientation, and fragility redirects narrative orientation from resilience to exposure.

However, Cvetkovich (2012) indicates that it is important not to romanticise depression, and the same is true for feminist fragility, where it is recognised that the power of depression is not to be underestimated, and when women collapse, it is the fragility of the system that expects infinite care that is exposed.

Berlant (2011) indicates that emotional collapse occurs when sustaining relations fail, and these relations reveal the contradictions in domesticity, nationalism, and diaspora.

Fragility is a diagnostic lens, and it reveals the hidden violence of care extraction, relationship overload, and historical trauma.

8. Conclusion: Toward Affective Recognition

As such, this study has proposed that mental instability in Indian women's fiction has to be understood as a structural response, not a pathology. The withdrawal, disconnection, and emotional fragmentation that we see in women characters are evidence of exhaustion from care expropriation, nationalist memory, and transnational precarity.

This article has attempted to place fragility within feminist affect theory through thinkers such as Ahmed (2004), Berlant (2011), Cvetkovich (2012), Butler (2004), and many more. Fragility, as such, is not weakness but embodied critique.

The recognition of fragility as politically meaningful challenges psychiatric individualism and neoliberal empowerment. Indian women's fiction makes a crucial intervention in global feminist debates because it insists that collapse can be an epistemic event, an unmasking of structural unsustainability.



Feminist fragility does not seek healing as a form of closure. Feminist fragility seeks recognition of exhaustion as truth.

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