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## From Silence to Sovereignty: Feminist Refusal as Political Method in Contemporary Indian Writing

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### Abstract

This article presents a theory of feminist refusal as a politics in contemporary Indian literature. Going beyond the discursive paradigms that read silence, withdrawal, melancholy, and anger as indices of damage, trauma, and victimhood, this article contends that these acts are strategic epistemologies and politics. Based on the theories of subaltern studies, feminist politics, affect theory, Dalit feminism, and postcolonial state studies, this article shows that contemporary Indian women's writing inscribes silence as counter-speech, withdrawal as labor disruption, and anger as epistemic clarity. Feminist refusal is not absence but interruption—disrupting the imperative of care, nationalist respectability, and moral reconciliation. This article presents a Refusal-Sovereignty model to think through how embodied refusal produces micro-political sovereignty in literary representation. This model pushes the frontiers of Indian feminist literary studies from trauma-based interpretation to a structural account of interruption and non-compliance.

**Keywords:** Feminist refusal, Sovereignty, Silence, Anger, Withdrawal, Subaltern agency, Gendered citizenship, Affect theory, Indian feminist literature, Political interruption.

### 1. Introduction

#### Why Refusal Matters Now

In the contemporary women's writing of India, whether realist, diasporic, caste-conscious, or postnational, one finds a regular pattern: women who no longer explain, no longer reconcile, no longer heal, no longer forgive. Silence intervenes where confession is due. Withdrawal occurs where emotional labour is required. Anger bursts out where moral civility is expected.

The traditional reading of such acts in feminist literary studies has been through the lens of trauma, repression, or patriarchal damage. While such readings are not invalid, they remain incomplete. They fail to account for the strategic and structural dimension of non-compliance.

This article argues that silence, anger, and withdrawal in Indian women's writing constitute a coherent political logic:

#### Feminist Refusal

Refusal is not simply saying no. It is the interruption of systems that depend upon female compliance:

- The family depends on unpaid emotional labour.
- The nation depends on women's moral respectability.
- The caste order depends on female regulation.
- The state depends on gendered care work.
- Narrative closure depends on feminine forgiveness.

When women refuse these functions, they disrupt social

reproduction itself.

Thus, the central question becomes:

What if refusal is not absence, but a method?

### 2. Theoretical Framework: From Subaltern Speech to Feminist Interruption

#### i). Beyond "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Subaltern studies posed a foundational question about voice and representation. Yet feminist writing in India complicates this debate. The issue is not only whether women speak, but whether they choose to speak within coercive structures.

Silence in feminist writing often operates as:

- Refusal of confession
- Refusal of testimonial extraction
- Refusal of therapeutic closure
- Refusal of narrative healing

Silence becomes epistemic opacity.

This reframes the debate: speech is not inherently emancipatory. Sometimes silence withholds legitimacy from oppressive interlocutors.

#### ii). Feminist Political Theory and Non-Compliance

Feminist political theory has long examined how governance depends on gendered compliance. Citizenship is not neutral—it is structured through domestic labour, moral respectability, and reproductive expectations.

Women are expected to:

- Care without resentment
- Heal without recognition
- Endure without interruption
- Forgive without justice

Refusal interrupts these circuits of expectation.

### iii). Affect Theory and Negative Emotion

Affect studies have challenged the idea that anger, melancholia, or shame are purely pathological. In feminist contexts, negative affect becomes diagnostic, revealing injustice.

Anger signals structural injury. Melancholia registers slow violence. Withdrawal marks exhaustion with asymmetrical care. Thus, affect becomes epistemology.

### 3. Silence as Counter-Speech

Silence in Indian feminist fiction often occurs at the point of rupture following betrayal, caste insult, domestic violence, or emotional exploitation.

This silence does not restore harmony. It produces discomfort. It interrupts:

- Patriarchal demand for explanation
- Family demand for reconciliation
- National demand for virtue
- Reader demand for redemption

Silence becomes a refusal to participate in the moral economy of emotional repair.

Instead of closure, it produces suspension.

Suspension is political because it denies the system its narrative completion.

### 4. Withdrawal and the Refusal of Care

One of the most radical dimensions of feminist refusal is the refusal of care.

Care in patriarchal societies is compulsory and asymmetrical. Women sustain:

- Domestic stability
- Emotional continuity
- Cultural morality
- Intergenerational transmission

Withdrawal from care destabilises the invisible infrastructure of the family.

Refusal of care may manifest as:

- Emotional detachment
- Physical departure
- Non-participation in reconciliation
- Refusal of motherhood
- Refusal of marital endurance

This does not always produce liberation. It often produces precarity. But precarity itself exposes how dependent the system is on female compliance.

### 5. Anger as Knowledge

Women's anger is frequently pathologised—as hysteria, instability, excess. Yet feminist writing reclaims anger as clarity.

Anger functions as:

- Recognition of injustice
- Rejection of moral discipline

- Refusal of respectability
- Denial of reconciliation

Respectability politics require women to remain calm, moral, dignified.

Anger disrupts this script.

It refuses to perform virtue for patriarchal recognition.

Thus anger becomes epistemic rupture.

### 6. Caste and Intersectional Refusal

Refusal operates differently across caste locations.

Dalit feminist writing often performs refusal as:

- Testimonial rage
- Naming of caste violence
- Rejection of upper-caste feminist universalism
- Refusal of polite suffering

Upper-caste and middle-class narratives often depict refusal through:

- Domestic withdrawal
- Refusal of marriage
- Ethical isolation
- Silence as moral protest

Thus refusal is intersectional—not uniform.

It is shaped by caste, class, region, and labour location.

### 7. Refusal and Gendered Citizenship

Citizenship in India is deeply gendered. Women are imagined as:

- Custodians of cultural purity
- Moral guardians of the nation
- Reproducers of demographic continuity
- Carriers of honour

Refusal destabilises this structure.

When women refuse:

- To perform moral purity
- To maintain caste boundaries
- To reproduce quietly
- To absorb humiliation

They unsettle nationalist logic.

Feminist refusal thus becomes a critique of gendered citizenship.

### 8. Narrative Form and Refusal of Closure

Contemporary Indian feminist writing increasingly refuses:

- Redemption arcs
- Forgiveness narratives
- Healing endings
- Reconciliatory domestic reunions

Non-closure becomes structural refusal.

The absence of redemption is itself critique.

The text refuses to restore patriarchal equilibrium.

### 9. From Refusal to Sovereignty

The central conceptual move of this article is to link refusal with sovereignty.

Traditionally, sovereignty belongs to:

- The state
- The law
- The territorial nation

But feminist refusal relocates sovereignty within:

- The body
- The voice
- The labour relation
- The emotional boundary

Sovereignty becomes micro-political.

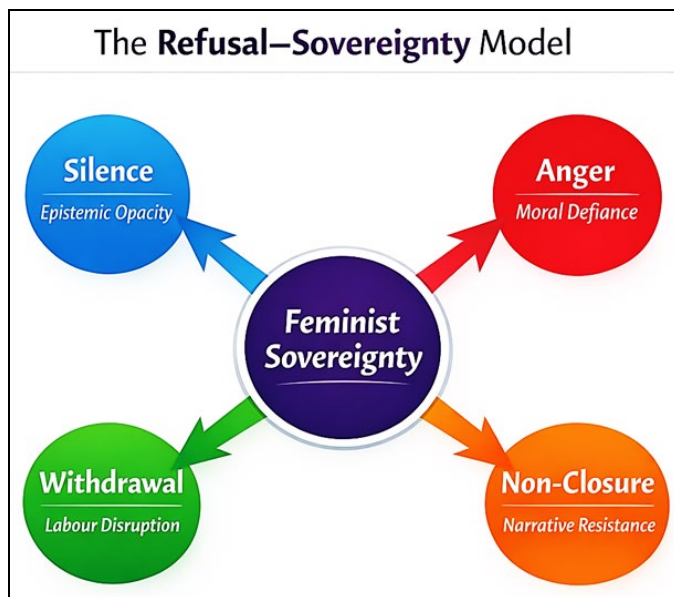
It means:

- Choosing silence
- Choosing withdrawal
- Choosing anger
- Choosing non-repair

Sovereignty here is not domination—it is boundary.

### 10. The Refusal–Sovereignty Model

This article proposes a conceptual axis:



At the centre lies:

#### Feminist Sovereignty

This model reframes agency as interruption rather than participation.

### 11. Implications for Indian Feminist Literary Criticism

This framework advances Indian feminist criticism in five ways:

- Moves beyond trauma-centred interpretation
- Moves beyond victimhood frameworks
- Moves beyond speech-centric models of agency
- Integrates affect theory with caste analysis
- Establishes refusal as an analytic category

It positions Indian feminist writing as a site of the production of political theory.

### 12. Conclusion: The Politics of Non-Compliance

- Silence is not absence.
- Withdrawal is not defeat.
- Anger is not a pathology.
- Non-closure is not failure.

Together, these acts form a politics of non-compliance.

Feminist refusal redefines interruption as sovereignty. In this manner, contemporary Indian literature redefines agency, not as empowerment within the same structures but as a disruption of them. From silence to sovereignty, feminist refusal is revealed as a political practice.

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