



Feminist Temporal Dynamics and Implications on Subjectivities: A Reading of select Indian English Female Saga Narratives

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Abstract: Female saga fiction is a literary genre which focuses on a rich tapestry of female characters across multiple generations, over extended periods of time, traversing different families, ages and geographical regions. Time as an expanding factor becomes an important aspect which governs the way in which female protagonists build upon their identities in varied contexts in female saga narratives. Rita Felski in her article on “Telling Time in Feminist Theory” points to four temporal modes namely, time as redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, which together contribute to the formation of multiple female subjectivities such as personal, maternal, psychological, domestic, social, corporeal etc. This study is a reading of the workings of the four modes of time and its implications on female subjectivities, in two recent Indian English female saga texts, namely *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Small Acts of Freedom* (2018) by Gurmehar Kaur. The study will substantiate the argument through a critical content analysis of the text through the theoretical framework of Felski. The present study contends that by superimposing various feminist temporalities, saga fiction provides women an avenue to articulate their subjectivities and thereby arrive at intertwining connections.

Keywords: feminist temporalities, redemption, regression, repetition, rupture, subjectivities.

Introduction

In the realm of literature, saga fiction is a genre that intricately weaves together the lives of multiple characters and families, spanning across ages, generations, and regions. When it comes to female saga fiction, the focus shifts to a multitude of female characters across different generations, interweaving their lives and connections in a captivating manner. While saga narratives traditionally tend to centre around male protagonists, often exploring themes of success, wealth, and power, female saga fiction takes a different approach. It delves into the complex and intricate lives of women, highlighting the gradual forging of their identity and thereby is a compelling exploration of the inner worlds and interconnectedness of the female protagonists. Thus, such narratives present a distinct perspective within the genre.

Within female saga narratives, time assumes a paramount role in shaping the development of the protagonists' identities across various contexts. As the narrative spans different time periods and settings, the female characters embark on transformative journeys that explore the intricacies of their lives. The expansive nature of time in this genre, in opposition to the bildungsroman, allows for a nuanced exploration of how their identities evolve, showcasing the interplay between personal



growth, and socio-historical events. Feminist temporalities refer to the exploration of time and its significance from a feminist perspective. This approach examines how time is experienced, constructed, and understood in relation to gender, acknowledging that temporal experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. The intersection of time and female subjectivities offers a nuanced lens through which the complexities of identity, agency, and the impact of historical and cultural contexts on women's lives can be examined.

In the ambit of Gender Studies, there have been varied theories which explore the interconnectedness between time and female subjectivities. For instance, Elizabeth Grosz introduces the concept of 'temporal drag' to describe the ways in which societal expectations and norms impose a temporal framework on women's lives. Iris Marion Young proposes the concept of 'relational time', highlighting the interplay between individual experiences and broader social structures. According to Young, women's subjectivities are deeply intertwined with their relationships and social contexts, and their experiences of time are influenced by power dynamics, care work, and the demands of emotional labour. According to Julia Kristeva, time is not merely a chronological dimension but a complex framework that influences the formation of women's identities and their experiences within patriarchal societies. Kristeva argues that women's subjectivities are deeply intertwined with the passage of time. The temporal dimension plays a crucial role in shaping women's identities as they navigate various stages of life, such as childhood, motherhood, and ageing. Furthermore, Kristeva highlights the significance of women's relationship with their own bodies in understanding time and subjectivity. She explores the unique temporal experiences tied to menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, which impact women's self-perception and the ways in which they are perceived by others. In her article "Telling Time in Feminist Theory", Rita Felski identifies four distinct forms of time namely redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture, that play a crucial role in the construction of female subjectivities.

While South Asian theories on feminist temporalities may not be explicitly codified in the same way as Western feminist theories, scholars and thinkers from the region have engaged with issues related to gender and time in various cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts. They have engaged with aspects such as the significance of intersectionality in shaping temporal experiences and subjectivities, critiquing conventional temporal norms that prescribe specific timelines for women's life course events and drawing on cyclical notions of time, the influence of colonial histories on gender dynamics and temporal experiences, proposing alternative modes of temporalities, exploring the temporal dimension of women's movements in South Asia and so on.

This study aims to enrich the South Asian discourse on feminist temporalities by attempting to explore the workings of the four modes of time as explicated by Rita Felski, within the broader context of narrative time, in two contemporary Indian English female saga texts, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Small Acts of Freedom* (2018) by Gurmehar Kaur.

Before We Visit the Goddess by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a captivating novel that spans three generations of women, delving into their personal journeys, relationships, and the challenges they face in pursuit of their dreams and identity. The narrative begins with Sabitri, a young girl growing up in a remote village in rural India. Sabitri possesses a strong desire for education, seeking to break



free from the confines of her traditional upbringing. Despite her family's disapproval, she persists and secures a scholarship to study in Kolkata. Over a period of time, we find young Savitri mature into being a woman who etches her name in the food industry, by setting up her own sweet business amidst facing the loss of a partner, financial struggles, cultural clashes, and heartbreak. It is seen that her determination remains unwavering as she navigates the complexities of love, loss, and self-discovery. The story then shifts to Bela, Sabitri's daughter, who grows up in Kolkata, grapples with her identity as a single child and struggles to connect with her mother. As she enters adulthood, Bela's married life takes her to America, where she seeks independence. In this new land, she encounters the challenges of cultural assimilation, romantic relationships, and the clash between her past and present. Bela's experiences shape her perception of her mother, leading to a deeper understanding of their complicated relationship. Tara, Bela's daughter, is born and raised in America and is barely aware of her fragmented family history and yearns to unravel the secrets and journey of her mother and grandmother. Through her search for identity and belonging, Tara embarks on a transformative journey and she unravels the intricate tapestry of her family's past, discovering the sacrifices, aspirations, and resilience of the women who came before her. Divakaruni's storytelling beautifully captures the intergenerational dynamics in the form of shifts in narrative, cultural clashes, and the complex bond between mothers and daughters.

Small Acts of Freedom by Gurmehar Kaur is a poignant memoir that chronicles the author's personal journey and activism, exploring themes of resilience, social justice, and shaping up of one's own identity. The memoir centres around Gurmehar Kaur, who gained prominence as a young student activist in India. Through the memoir, Kaur delves into her own experiences of loss and trauma, having lost her father, an army officer, at a young age. She reflects on the impact of his death on her life and her journey towards healing and self-discovery. With shifts in narrative, the memoir introduces significant characters such as Kaur's mother, Raji and her grandmother, Amarjeet, both who were widowed at a very young age and who played a significant role in imparting strength and shaping Kaur's life and identity. Kaur also specifically explores the complexities of identity, navigating her dual heritage as an Indian with Pakistani roots and the challenges she faces in reconciling these two aspects of her identity. She also delves into her growth as an activist, detailing her experiences as she uses her voice to advocate for gender equality, peace, and social justice. The memoir explores the power of small acts of resistance and how collective action can bring about positive change. Throughout the narrative, she sheds light on the gendered inequalities around her and brings in intersectional perspectives on her own experiences and those of other women she has encountered.

In both these narratives, within the scope of the broader narrative time, multiple individual female-oriented subjectivities can be traced. Hence, this study precisely aims to arrive at the nuances pertaining to these subjectivities in the form of the four R's, redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture, as introduced by Rita Felski, in the select narratives.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

The theoretical frame of reference that underpins this study is derived from Rita Felski's article, "Telling Time in Feminist Theory" (2002) which offers a comprehensive examination of the intricate



relationship between time and feminist perspectives. Felski explores how different temporal modes, namely, time as redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, shape and influence women's subjectivities, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the temporal dimensions within feminist discourse. Redemption involves the idea of transformation and progress, wherein individuals strive to overcome past struggles and achieve personal growth. Felski investigates how this temporal mode intersects with feminist thought and how women's subjectivities are influenced by the potential for redemption within their lived experiences. Regression, another temporal mode explored by Felski, refers to a backward movement in time. This mode acknowledges the possibility of setbacks, regression, or the re-emergence of past challenges. She considers how this temporal dimension affects feminist theories and the experiences of women, recognizing that progress is not always linear and that setbacks can play a significant role in shaping subjectivities. Repetition is another temporal mode examined by Felski, highlighting the cyclical nature of time. She delves into how repetitive patterns and routines can impact women's subjectivities, emphasising the potential for both stability and stagnation within this temporal mode. Lastly, Felski explores the concept of rupture in relation to time. Rupture refers to moments of disruption, discontinuity, or profound change. Felski examines how ruptures in time, such as significant life events or social transformations, impact women's subjectivities. She recognizes the potential for rupture to create new possibilities for self-formation and the re-evaluation of societal norms. Through her analysis of these temporal modes, Felski highlights the complexity of temporal experiences and their profound influence on shaping women's subjectivities.

The present study has adopted a qualitative research design where the explication of the four modes of feminist temporalities will be analysed in detail in the select Indian English Female Saga texts. By undertaking such an analysis, the convergences and divergences among female subjectivities and their implications would point to the formation of various identities such as personal, maternal, psychological, domestic, social, corporeal etc. for each of the female protagonists. Employing a critical content analysis approach and drawing upon Rita Felski's theoretical framework, the study seeks to substantiate the argument. In doing so, it contends that through the integration of various feminist temporalities, saga fiction provides women with a platform to express their subjectivities and establish intricate connections.

The choice of Felski's template over other formulations is because her work not only contributes to feminist theory but also provides insights into the diverse ways in which time intertwines with gendered identities and lived experiences. Her framework provides a suitable model to undertake a critical examination of how the temporal dimension intersects with gendered experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the complexities and intersectional challenges faced by women in their formation of selfhood, in the Indian context. By intermingling global ideas with regional and temporal contexts, the framework helps to contribute to a richer and more authentic analysis of feminist temporalities.

Temporalities & Subjectivities: Explication of Four R's

Temporality and relativity are two concepts which recur in women's stories and there is always a mediation between the past and the future. In "Telling Time in Feminist Theory", Felski



delves into how different temporal modes shape and inform women's subjectivities, and theorises the workings of time in four ways such as redemption, regression, repetition, and rupture. It can be seen that all these four modes of times have been represented as general tropes in literature and more importantly women's writings.

Redemption is a trope which is associated with a female character undergoing a transformative journey or experiencing personal growth, thereby leading to a vindication of her circumstances. It can be a powerful narrative tool that explores themes of self-discovery, resilience, and empowerment. In women's writing, redemption can take on different manifestations such as personal, social, redemption through relationships, redemption through strength and resilience etc. Hence, Felski avers that for time as redemption, "This is a hopeful orientation to the future, or what we sometimes call belief in progress" (22). In both *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Small Acts of Freedom*, we find women protagonists navigate the complexities of their relationships, personal aspirations, and cultural identities. They experience mistakes, regrets, and missed opportunities and as time passes, they are given opportunities to reflect on their choices, confront their pasts, and seek reconciliation or forgiveness. For instance, the letter that Sabitri in *Before We Visit the Goddess* pens down for her grand-daughter Tara, is in a way a reference of her redemptive journey, as she implicitly spills out the fact that all through her life, her choices and actions were spurned in a way to emerge out of the guilt and regret of ruining her chance for higher education and for achieving upward mobility through a romantic relationship. Bela is also a classic example of how redemption operates over a period in time within the mindset of a mid-generation protagonist, when her marriage and career is jeopardised and she undertakes a transformative journey in a foreign country and thereby acknowledges the importance of her mother's wisdom. Same is the case of Tara, in whom there is a drastic shift with regard to mindset and the idea of building a family. Very importantly her journey of healing runs parallel to her abandoning a dangerous habit such as that of kleptomania, which is indicative of the fact that following the path of redemption has done wonders in her. Thus, Micah Orsetti rightly avers that,

Sabitri is a self-made woman who takes her future in her hands when her world seems to be falling apart. Bela is a romantic who thinks with her heart more than her head, but whose resilience guides her through the heartache. Tara is headstrong and rebellious and has all but severed herself from her Indian background.

Gurmehar's path of redemption in *Small Acts of Freedom* is rooted in the discovery of the fact that all through the years, she has been trying to strive and be like her father, in terms of agency and forging of identity. In her words, "My only dream is to be like my father, to be the same person he was and to emulate his personality. Would it comfort my mother to see me walking around the house giggling and happy, to see his shadow, a watered down version of him, alive? I think it would" (Kaur 108). In this sense, time can be seen as a catalyst for self-discovery, healing, and personal redemption. The characters grapple with their past actions and the consequences that arise from them, ultimately striving to find resolution, forgiveness, a sense of fulfilment and seek personal growth.



Regression as a trope typically involves a female character reverting to a previous state, often characterised by dependency, vulnerability, or a loss of agency. When examined in the context of intergenerationality, regression takes on added layers of meaning, suggesting a cyclical pattern or repetition of behaviours and societal expectations across generations of women. The concept of time as regression implies a longing for the past. In saga fiction, where the focus is typically on female growth, regression serves as a narrative device to delve into protagonists' pasts, confront unresolved issues, explore intergenerational dynamics, and rediscover identity. A major tool to depict regression is through flashbacks and memories. In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, the last chapter titled, 'A Thousand Words: 2020' is entirely built on moments of intergenerational convergences, which occurs through regression. Towards the end of the narrative, both Bela and Tara have met each other after long and have amicably decided to spend a week together and in due course of their conversation, late Sabitri is brought in through a photograph, few anecdotes and a crucial letter. In the words of Tara:

I pick up the picture and peer at it. My grandmother looks out at me, her gaze lovely and cryptic. It bothers me that I know so little about her. I search the photo for clues to her character...I want to keep staring until the photo yields its secrets to me. Maybe now that her own end flickers like a shadow in the corner of her eye, my mother will be ready to tell me more about my grandmother (Divakaruni 196-197).

The letter also turns out to be revelation for Bela regarding her mother's choices and hence she repeatedly remarks, "Oh, God, I didn't know" (Divakaruni 206). In spite of Tara being physically present there, the scenario literally translates to Bela invoking Sabitri and begging for forgiveness. A similar scenario is presented in *Small Acts of Freedom*, where the past is unearthed through flashbacks and memories and every time either Raji or Gurmehar falls back to Amarjeet for strength, it becomes a regressive tendency. As mentioned by Felski, "An attachment to the past can throw critical light on the present, allowing us to question the smugness of the now and the sovereignty of the new" (25). Thus, it can be seen that such moments of recollection reiterate this fact and allow characters to revisit significant events from their pasts and through these revisitations, they gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their choices, and the impact of their past actions on their present circumstances. The narratives reiterate the fact that despite the passage of decades, the past can resurface in the lives of women, influencing the present and potentially leading to moments of regression in behaviour, emotions, or relationships.

The concept of time as repetition is a fascinating element as it involves the idea that time does not progress in a linear fashion. Time as repetition reiterates that time is cyclical which can mean either transcending historical time and going back to the past or the mundaneness of everyday life. This notion can add depth and complexity to narratives, allowing authors to delve into themes of history, memory, fate, and personal growth. In feminist narratives, the bonds between mothers and daughters are built on repetition and continuity. The theme of time as repetition is the crux of both the select narratives, as it is depicted in the form of interconnectedness of experiences, themes of sacrifice and unfulfilled desires and recurring patterns in relationships. For instance, all the three women protagonists in both the narratives, Sabitri-Bela-Tara and Amarjeet-Raji-Gurmehar are interconnected based on their experiences across different time periods. Certain events and challenges, such as the pursuit of education, career, choice of love and marriage or feelings of longing



and displacement, recur among the characters to emphasise the ways in which similar experiences are shared and echoed through the generations. Anitha Ramkumar is of the opinion that:

On a cursory first glance it seems that this is the story of three women, Sabitri, Bela and Tara and the only thing that connects them is that they share the grandmother-mother-daughter relationship. But soon the reader would discover that these three women are connected not just by DNA, but also by how their actions, however insignificant it might seem from their own point of view, has monumentally affected the life of the other.

Similarly, in a review in the Free Press Journal it is opined that:

Through recollections across generations, Gurmehar narrates instances in the lives of her grandmother, the mother and herself that weave into a portrait of the family. Each instance is a snippet of this larger canvas and follows an unusual but effective flow. It's as though three parallel stories are moving forward together, and yet they remain incomplete without each other.

Similarly, the theme of sacrifice recurs among the characters. The elderly protagonists, Sabitri, Bela, Amarjeet, and Raji, in both narratives grapple with unfulfilled desires driven by familial or societal expectations. Their reflections on life choices underscore a cyclical pattern of decision-making, highlighting the recurring theme of introspection and unmet personal aspirations. Both narratives explore the recurrence of socio-cultural traditions and the influence of markers like education, employment, and history on female subjectivities. Single women like Sabitri, Bela, Tara, and Raji leverage education and employment to maintain self-reliance amid societal pressures. The repetition of socio-cultural experiences underscores how subjectivities are predominantly shaped by societal expectations, emphasising the cyclical nature of this milieu in the narratives. It must be noted that the uniqueness of female saga fiction lies in the fact that repetitive experiences are evoked and brought out on a linear plane, in the generic form of the narrative.

Time as rupture is a concept celebrated in postmodernism where dislocation or change becomes incremental. Rupture is a significant trope in women's writing, often employed to challenge and disrupt societal norms, expectations, and power structures and involves a deliberate break from conventional patterns and traditions. In both the narratives, rupture is a key feature that is associated with the shifting ways of living of the younger protagonists. Many a time, with the passage of time, it is through a rupture of existing norms and conventions that the younger protagonists are able to forge a renewed sense of identity. When the same is undertaken in an environment where it is least expected, such women turn out to be harbingers of change. Apt examples are both Sabitri and Amarjeet, as their lives are a testimony of how single women can build and lead a family, in spite of various challenges and also within the scope of the socio-cultural circumstances that are available to them. In another sense, each woman protagonist goes through a rupture in different manners, be it psychological or through their actions, which in turn reveals a new path for them. While for Bela, it was a rupture in terms of her idea of a stable family, for Tara it is while mending her reckless ways



of living and yearning for stability. While for Raji it was a rupture in terms of leading a smooth life and embracing challenges at a young age, for Gurmehar it is when she unearths her true identity and decides to face harrowing challenges with determination and strength, instead of retracting into familial life and toying the line of what is expected out of women of her community. Thus, rupture becomes a significant trope which can be a powerful tool for exploring themes of liberation, resistance, resilience and transformation. It serves as a means to subvert and question the existing order, opening up possibilities for change and empowerment.

An in-depth analysis of the explication of the four R's also reveal that their workings are not in a linear fashion, but significant overlaps can be traced. A unique pattern of formation can be derived from both *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Small Acts of Freedom*. It can be asserted that, most often Rupture is the significant event which in turn leads to regression and redemption and thereby establishes the fact that repetition cannot be glossed over completely. While rupture is associated with moments of intergenerational divergences, regression and repetition is executed through intergenerational convergences and redemption becomes an eclectic mix of both, because identification of divergences is what leads to assertion of convergences, at a later stage. Thus, Felski's argument that all these four modes of temporalities are inter related for women and the formation of their subjectivities, and that we cannot conceptualise one single time for women, is precisely seen to be executed in both the select narratives.

Conclusion

This study has majorly intended to contextualise modes of feminist temporalities, as averred by Rita Felski in select Indian English female saga narratives. In doing so, it contends that Felski's argument, "Time knits together the subjective and the social, the personal and the public; we forge links between our own lifetime and the larger historical patterns that transcend us" (22) is seen to be adapted in a precise manner in both the structure and thematic content of female saga narratives. A major finding is that within the scope of the genre, there is a perfect blend of the idea that time functions in a cyclical or spiral manner and its manifestations are relational for women. Thereby, the nature of the subjectivities that get built across decades also turns to be transitional and shifting in nature. The four R's, redemption, regression, repetition and rupture contribute to the formation of a cyclical pattern which, with significant overlaps, point to the ways in which intergenerational convergences and divergences are represented in both the select narratives. The adaptation of the four R's also leads to the overarching finding which is unique to female saga narratives that, within the genre, a single subjectivity for women cannot be charted for any of the female protagonists, as it is always an ensemble of vivid subjectivities, built around varied contexts and is thereby experiential in nature. This precisely makes the present study unique and is also the first of its kind to echo Felski's template in the South Asian feminist narrative scenario. The limitation of this study is that it has not looked into other aspects of time and subjectivity as averred by various other feminist scholars globally. Future studies in this domain can be expanded to include multiple workings of time and subjectivity and thereby arrive at an eclectic model for interpretation, in the Indian scenario.



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