



Unsung Heroines: Military Wives, Resilience, and Feminist Voices in Contemporary Indian English Literature

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ABSTRACT

The heroism and sacrifice of soldiers have so long taken centre stage in the discussion of Indian war writing but the equally important role of their wives has not been well portrayed. The author attempts to explain how the modern Indian English literature places these very voices into the limelight. This paper, based on the close reading of *Soldier and Spice: An Army Wife Life* (2013) by Aditi Mathur Kumar, *Love, Whatever That Means* (2016), *Soldier girls: Love Story of a Para-Commando* (2018) by Swapnil Pandey, *Letters from Kargil* (2019) by Shivani Mehta, and a series of anthologies that have been published by the Army Welfare Association (AWWA), explores the manner of how resilience has been portrayed in the life of army wives. This paper will analyse and explore the following multidimensional quality and described resilience: adaptability to relocations, emotional resilience in times of separation, solidarity in military teams, motherhood and national service balancing, and humour as its coping strategy. Through these stories, it is clear that the heroism does not exist only in the field where they fight battles; it is also available in the daily lives of women who keep the home, raise children, and keep their heads high despite ambiguity. The works place the military wives in the role of unsung heroines because they emphasize female agency, narratives, and solidarity, which motivates military and non-military audiences. Finally, this paper explores that modern Indian English literature does a critical rightful job by bringing out military wives as the main protagonists of strength. They connect the world of the military and the civilian world, add to the feminist literature, and, most importantly, make sure that the unspoken heroism becomes a treasure trove to be held and glorified by future generations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The armed forces are a source of discipline, patriotism and sacrifice to the Indian socio-cultural imagination. The military holds a significant role in the literature, film, and common discussion, as its representatives are praised as the protectors of the security of the country and its independence. However, little light is often cast on women standing next to them, the wives who have to cope with the uncertainties, demands, and turmoil of military life. Their efforts, as they might go unnoticed, are absolutely necessary: they have the burden of keeping the house, bringing up children, and keeping the spirits high, going through long periods of separation and frequent changes of residence. Against this background, the Indian English literature of today has come out to embrace the realm of military wives and portray them not as the peripherals of their husbands but as strong people who have lives that bear their own inspirations and heroism. The Indian military occupies a niche in the minds of the country, as it is the embodiment of courage, discipline and sacrifice. The popular culture is full of soldiers, both in movies and the news, as well as in the memoirs about wars and national pride. Their tales of heroism on the frontiers and in the war-time have long been handed down by word and letter. But the existence of a soldier is not merely the battlefield and neither is sacrifice. At the back of each decorated officer or jawan is a family with the burden of uncertainty, absence and unacknowledged service. Of these, military wives represent one of the most interesting categories of people whose strength can make or break the entire family, and, consequently, the spirit of the army itself.

Military wives have always been on the sidelines of representation even though they play an important role. The accounts

of these women had circulated over the decades within military circles through mutual meetings and association publications or welfare departments like those launched in the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA). They were privately recognized as well, but were seldom credited with literary or cultural fame. This invisibility is in contrast to the reality that they live in: military wives are not passive observers but are active agents who run homes across the various relocations, raise children alone in cases of deployment, and form support circles that hold the social structure of cantonments.

These stories are especially suited to be relayed through Indian English literature due to its intermediary status between the global and the local. On the one hand, it addresses a global audience, placing Indian military life in the context of more general discussions about war, gender, and resilience. Alternatively, it is an indication of cultural specificities of the Indian society where the family obedience and national obedience frequently collide. Through the English language, the stories can go beyond cantonments and see national and international audiences, thereby deconstructing stereotypes and adding to the canon of women writing.

Therefore, the research gap, which the present study expects to address, consists of the lack of the narrative of military spouses in the Indian English literature and the cultural memory genre in general. This research says that the mix of different opinions does not only make the literature more diverse, it also makes the meaning of inspiration and resiliency in the modern world to be reformulated. In addition to the physical ability by the soldier to endure physical hardship, resilience has now also included ability of the wife to adapt to change, stay composed emotionally, and have support systems. Heroic deeds in the battlefield are no longer the sole things that would arouse people; every day bravery, like saving your honour when things go out of control, can inspire as well.

This research is expected to achieve three objectives. It initially examines the representation of the military women in the contemporary Indian English literature, which has shown their steadiness and inspirational leaders. Second, it tries to show the importance of these images on culture and society by trying to show how they help in filling the divide between the military and the civilian world. Third, it shows how the tales add to feminist discourse by re-conceptualizing the meaning of being a brave, strong, and independent by contextualizing them in the greater framework of Indian women writers. This research is not just about literature analysis. The experience of military women is used to teach readers to be resilient in a world that is increasingly becoming less predictable. Their experiences prove that individuals can adapt, stay positive and cooperate, all the necessary qualities to deal with the challenges of the twenty first century. These books can teach the future generations what it takes to be bold in ordinary and extraordinary situations. Since literature respects and recalls such women, it is a great aspect of culture. It makes sure that the heroic deeds that fail to be noticed are not ignored or forgotten. Instead, they are preserved and propagated as an example of bravery.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Military wives in India have been comparatively underrepresented in literature when compared to the mass of the existing body of literature about war, which glorifies soldiers. Traditional representations pushed the women to the background as supportive friends, rarely delving into their inner existence. However, the trend has changed in recent decades and the voices of military wives have entered the foreground of Indian English authors (Mehta 14).

One of the most powerful writings in this respect is *Soldier and Spice: An Army Wife Life* by Aditi Mathur Kumar (2013). Through her personal experience as an army wife, Kumar is able to create a humorous and semi-autobiographical story of Pia, who is a civilian and who marries an officer and suddenly finds herself in the intensely organized and overwhelmingly confusing world of the Indian Army. The novel reflects the paradoxical blend of glamour, discipline and sacrifice that characterize the life of an army officer and predestines the strength of Pia who must adjust to constant moves, social expectations and long distances of her husband (Kumar 55).

Soldier Girl: Love Story of a Para-Commando by Swapnil Pandey (2018) has a more dramatic and romantic focus, and the author presents the subjects of love, sacrifice, and separation. Although it is essentially a love story, the novel shows the miraculous patience of women who are in love with soldiers where the emotions they possess and their patience are heroic by themselves (Pandey 73). This emotional experience of the military life on families, as depicted by Pandey, shows the courage of military life and loyalty as a source of inspiration.

Although the article by Shivani Mehta, *Letters from Kargil* (2019), does not explicitly draw attention to the voices of the soldiers, it indirectly speaks about the emotional work of the families and wives who were waiting the return of their loved ones. These letters remind of the silent endurance of spouses that have been abandoned and the idea that military wives get a part of the sacrifices of war even as they do not even move to the battlefield (Mehta 32).

Besides the novels published, there are memoirs and collections made by the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) and personal blogs made by army wives that add to this new space in literature. Through these writings, one gets to see the humour, solidarity and resourcefulness that characterize the army spouse fraternity. These stories are part of a larger project of the Indian English literature, which is documenting the experiences of women, as well as broadening the definition of heroism to incorporate domestic strength and emotional work.

The portrayal of the role of military wives in modern Indian literature in English language is a complex insight into the concept of resilience and inspiration. However, unlike the heroism of the soldier which is apparent and publicly proclaimed, the heroism of military wives most frequently appears in the distinct realms of life, namely, the domestic, domestic, and emotional ones. However, it is this invisibility that makes their stories meaningful since it demonstrates the patience and flexibility needed to keep their own families alive as well as the greater military ecosystem. The Indian English stories embody this strength on many levels: the ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment, emotional resilience in the case of separation, unity in military families, the negotiation between the needs of motherhood and family, and such coping strategies as humour.

Resilience as Adaptability

Mobile life characterizes the military life. Women are supposed to adapt quickly to new locations, culture, and societies. Pia experiences confusion in *Soldier and Spice* when she is forced to start with a regimented life at a very young age. The matter is that she admits that she had married the man, not the uniform but at some point, I found that that uniform was also accompanied by its luggage of rules, expectations and tea cups, which never ended at fauji parties (Kumar 34). Flexibility is a way of resilience as Pia finds ways of surviving these problems without sacrificing her uniqueness.

In his follow-up novel *Love, Whatever That Means*, Kumar carries on with the character of Pia and focuses even more on the importance of being flexible. Considering the speed of the army life, Pia comments: "Right after I got to know the shortest path to the grocery store, it was time to pack up and relocate. Yet, maybe that is the beauty of this life you learn to bloom wherever planted in you" (Kumar, Love 89). Her lyrics emphasize the theme of perseverance by learning to accept and laugh at things, which is relatable to the readers that experience the aspect of continuous transition in their lives.

Emotional Power and Non-speaking Sacrifice.

The theme of separation is recurrent in the life of a military person, and the literature represents the strength of emotions needed to withstand the period. Swapnil Pandey, in *Soldier Girl: Love Story of a Para-Commando*, discusses the absenteeism of active duty. The main character describes the pain of waiting: "Every telephone call was a breath of waiting till I heard his voice, every silence a thousand and a million little deaths (Pandey 112). Her patience is used as a reference to the sacrifices of the millions of military wives who have to deal with the stress of not having answered whether or when their husbands will come back.

Although *The Lone Wolf* by Neha Dwivedi (2020) is more about the life story of a Major Akhilesh Saxena, the author indirectly illuminates the emotional baggage of wives and families. According to Dwivedi, behind each adorned soldier stood a woman, whose waiting was endless, whose courage remained unknown, whose sacrifice had remained unknown (Dwivedi 56). These lines remind the reader that resilience does not only mean physical strength but also that one can keep hope and dignity during the long period of absence.

Likewise, this theme of silent sacrifice is also present in *Letters from Kargil* (2019) by Shivani Mehta. The letter of a soldier says: Tell Amma not to be worried. And say to the children Papa coming home soon. What is not put on record though is the fear of the wife who has to console her kids as she silently deals with her own fears (Mehta 42). These silences in these letters increase the strength of military wives who stand strong in their uncertainty.

Solidarity of the Communities and Femaleness.

One of the leadership characteristics of the military life is solidarity, and Indian English narratives demonstrate the unity of army wives. Pia in *Soldier and Spice* confesses: "I would have packed my bags long ago had it not been the other wives who laughed with me, counselled me and even reprimanded me (Kumar 121). This open admission reveals how collective experiences change the state of disorientation to the sense of belonging.

Strength in Motherhood and Family Life.

The other aspect of resilience comes out in connection with mothering and the family. This is because wives are usually left alone during the deployment of their husbands to take care of children. Kumar is able to put this poignantly in *Love, Whatever That Means* when Pia reminds: I was a mother and a father when he was gone. I cried and patched pieces of toys and applauded at school plays with the sole purpose of reserving stories to be told by the day that he would come home" (Kumar, Love 134).

Similar experiences are also illustrated in AWWA memoirs, in which one of the wives writes: Why Papa cannot go to a birthday is perhaps the most difficult fight. However, we learn at a tender age that serving the nation is greater than cake and balloons (AWWA 58). Those stories emphasize the importance of resilience as part and parcel of motherhood, making the routine parenthood a patriotic act.

Comedy and Narration as Survival Techniques.

The use of humour is one of the main themes in the stories of army wives. Pia describes especially embarrassing dinner in *Soldier and Spice*: I stood motionless with the fork in my hand, and the Colonel's wife was teaching me about knives and

forks as though they were part of the military exercise (Kumar 76). These comic scenes make possible humiliating situations into resilience tales.

According to the preface by Kumar herself, she writes: If you are able to laugh at the mess, you will manage to survive. The army wife uses humour as the initial weapon and it is her last resort (Kumar ix). Storytelling therefore turns not only therapeutic, but also empowering, re-agitating a system where wives are often silenced.

National Service: Resilience.

Lastly, Indian English literature gives an account of military wives as being involved in service to the nation indirectly. Smita Deshmukh notes: To every soldier who went to the border, there was the wife who struggled on their own battle's loneliness, responsibility and fear. Her work was also not less patriotic, but rarely honoured. (Deshmukh 61).

By these representations, military wives are re-branded as active players in the defence mechanism in the country. Their endurance turns into a patriotic gesture and the readers are motivated to re-define national service as something that is not just on the battle field.

Comparative Perspectives

As Indian English literature predicts the themes of solidarity, humour, and community, Western army wife stories tend to focus on individuality and institutional criticism. To illustrate this, American memoirs such as those by Tanya Biank as in *Army Wives* (2006) emphasize on bureaucracy and identity confusion, but Indian stories such as those of Kumar emphasize on humour and flexibility in the communal context. The given contrast highlights the cultural peculiarity of resilience: in the Indian context, resilience is strongly connected to the bonds with the community and cultural norms of responsibility and sacrifice. The military wife may provide an example of emotional intelligence and resilience in a world that is changing at a pace never seen before, is uncertain, and is facing many global crises. Their capacity to bloom where they are planted (Kumar, love 89) can be applicable in any setting and helps young readers to have structures to deal with professional unstable, social crisis or any other personal problems. Besides, the focus on the system of solidarity and community is a reminder that resilience is not a single quality but a group task.

Collectively, these novels and memoirs paint a picture of the military wives as being a strong force that goes well beyond the boundaries of the military life. Their capacity to adapt, to survive the distance, to create solidarity as well as laugh in case of adversity is something to be learned by the common civilians. The results highlight that these stories widen the horizons of the writing of Indian English women as they no longer focus on stereotypical figures of wives as inactive and dependent people but on lively, strong and funny characters. More so, the inspirational nature of these stories goes beyond military scenarios and provides some universal lessons of being flexible, optimistic and persistent as they apply to modern-day life. These writings serve as cultural memory and ethical compass to future generations and, in a way, help young readers to find strength in the silent bravery of military wives.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the modern Indian English literature about the lives of military wives demonstrates the impressive change of the definition of heroism and strength in literature. Historically, war fiction predicted soldiers as the only bearers of sacrifice and national obligation. The results of the present research highlight a number of important lessons. To begin with, the concept of resilience among military wives is multidimensional: it is expressed as resilience to relocation, emotional resilience when facing separation, cohesion in military communities, and humour as one of the coping methods. Secondly, these stories underscore the invisibility and forthcoming nature paradox- military wives do not normally feature in the daily discourse, but they play a central role in the operation of the military. Third, the literature proves that inspiration is not only in deeds of heroism on the battlefield but also in the silent courage of daily perseverance. The experience of army wives presented in the stories makes resilience a human trait that all of us can achieve and thus the stories are easy to relate to and be inspired by. Notably, these stories can offer a lot of lessons to the future generations.

The literary point of inclusion of the voices of military wives in the writing of Indian English expands the range of the narratives of women beyond the stereotypical characters, to depict women as forceful, funny, and strong characters with a sense of endurance. This growth does not just diversify the canon of Indian English literature, but it also means that the generations of the future can be provided with the stories that praise various displays of courage. Pre-empting both national service and sacrifice by prefiguring domestic heroism and battlefield glory, these texts provide a more comprehensive view of national service and sacrifice.

To sum up, the strength and inspiration of military wives, which are reflected in the current Indian English literature is testament and guide. They witness to the silent but vast sacrifices of a people who are sometimes neglected and they are leading the new generations to the spirit of flexibility, solidarity and honour. Since literature is still recording these stories, it is guaranteeing that the messages of resilience are being maintained, passed on, and glorified so that future readers will find a source of strength in the silent strength of these unsung heroines



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