

Feminist Agency as Killjoy Misalignment in Indian Diasporic Women's Narratives: Embodiment, Refusal and Digital Circulations

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of feminist agency in Indian diasporic women's narratives of the twenty-first century, drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy. It posits that agency does not merely appear through self-liberation, but through continuous misalignment with socially constructed notions of happiness, relationality, and gendered expectations. Through close textual analysis, this article demonstrates how feminist agency becomes legible through affective discomfort, hesitation, refusal, exhaustion, and disruptive speech that unsettles familial and cultural scripts of marriage, obedience, and belonging. Drawing on feminist theory with an affective orientation, feminist diaspora studies, and digital diaspora scholarship, the article further examines how feminist agency becomes legible through killjoy politics embedded across embodied and digitally mediated contexts. While the embodied dimension foregrounds relational negotiation and affective friction, digital contexts intensify feminist disruption through visibility, fragmentation, surveillance, and networked circulation. Ultimately, the article argues that feminist agency operates as a continuous politics of misalignment across embodied and digital relational spaces.

Keywords: agency, diaspora, digital relationality, embodiment, killjoy politics, misalignment

Introduction

Contemporary Indian women's narratives have frequently resisted linear frameworks of feminist agency that associate women's empowerment with a progressive emancipation and autonomy. Rather than presenting agency through complete liberation, these narratives foreground subjectivities shaped by relational obligation, cultural expectation, and affective tension, in which agency emerges through acts of articulating discomfort, exhaustion, refusal, and hesitation. In this sense, agency aligns with the "everyday cultural practices in which the agent is both enabled and constrained by larger political and cultural forces" (Bhatia 4). Within the diasporic and transnational familial contexts, women are often positioned as emotional stabilizers and carriers of cultural continuity, who are expected to sustain relational harmony through gendered emotional labour. Therefore, the notion of "creating new homes is seen to primarily fall on the shoulders of women in the diasporic family" (Mehta 6), marking women as the affective custodians of diasporic continuity. Consequently, this position ensures that departures from normative expectations are understood as disruptions to the everyday structures through which women's roles are sustained.

Recent scholarship on diaspora has emphasized hybridity, fluid identity formations, and mobility. Ang Hua describes diasporic identities as “fluid, always changing, and heterogeneous” (193), while Dhaliwal notes that diasporic positionalities “disrupt linear accounts of diasporic subject formation” (3). Such formulations foreground diaspora as a space of mobility and transformation; however, they often underplay how such fluidity is unevenly experienced across gendered locations. Yet Amba Pande argues that women’s experiences within the diaspora are often “subsumed under male-centric homogenized perceptions and meta-narratives” (6). This encapsulates a need to foreground gendered and affective dimensions of diasporic subjectivity. This gendered gap becomes central when diaspora is read as a lived negotiation within the affective and structural constraints.

Feminist diasporic scholarship has, therefore, increasingly complicated the celebratory accounts of diaspora and agency by attending to how women negotiate power within constrained social structures. Diasporic women can exercise agency in myriad ways, both individually and collectively. The assertion of their individuality in familial, economic, and institutional matters highlights the situational and dispersed nature of agency across social-political domains. Such interventions shift the attention away from agency as an emancipatory resolution towards the relational and embedded forms of action within structural and affective constraints. In this context, even postcolonial feminist scholarship has been central in “rethinking categories of thought such as marginality, agency, and voice” (Ponzanesi 8), while also foregrounding the lived conditions through which diasporic subjectivities are produced. Shilpa Daithota Bhat notes that it is necessary to examine the paradigms and thematic formations through which characters are situated to understand “the nature of their expressions and how they embody the conditions of the migrating South Asian women” (xxiv). This shift is further reflected within literary studies where the recognition of the South Asian diasporic women writers “take charge of their subjectivity and... resist imposed state subject positions” (Naidu 370), where the ethnic and gendered stereotypes are negotiated and reconfigured through narrative forms.

Parallel work in digital diaspora scholarship has focused on mediated belonging and connectivity, as Alonso and Oiarzabal observe that digital technologies allow the diasporic subject to “re-create our own reality” (9-10), reshaping experiences of intimacy, distance, and memory. Such mediated environments enable “cross-border solidarity” and “new subjectivities, including feminist subjectivities” (Sassen 506), even if they remain structured by regulation and surveillance. However, while this illuminates transformation and connectivity, the digital space often privileges coherence, adaptability, and relational continuity as dominant modes of diasporic gendered subject formation.

Therefore, what remains underdeveloped is how feminist agency operates not through coherence or connectivity alone, but through sustained affective disruption that unsettles the normative structures of obligation, gendered expectations, and emotional labour. This article intervenes this gap by arguing that feminist agency in contemporary Indian diasporic women’s narratives becomes legible through Sara Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy, as developed in *Living a Feminist Life*, which this article reads as killjoy politics and conceptualizes as a sustained mode of killjoy misalignment through which agency emerges through the refusal of socially mandated happiness scripts. This article examines these concerns through two contemporary Indian diasporic novels: Sanjena Sathian’s *Gold Diggers* and Anuradha D. Rajurkar’s *American Betiya*. Both these novels foreground women negotiating diasporic experiences through affective tensions, familial obligations, gendered concerns, and digitally mediated relationality. Rather than presenting agency as liberation, these narratives depict feminist agency as uneven and structured through ongoing forms of hesitation, refusal, articulation, interruption, and discomfort.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in interpretive and close textual analysis of selected contemporary Indian Diasporic women's narratives. The selected texts- *Gold Diggers* and *American Betiya* are examined as literary and affective sites through which feminist subjectivities are negotiated within familial, transnational, and digitally mediated contexts. Therefore, the corpus has been selected for its sustained engagement with questions of gendered embodiment and relationality, affective labour, diasporic belonging, and mediated forms of intimacy and communication. Methodologically, the study employs a feminist literary analysis informed by feminist theory through an affective orientation, alongside feminist diaspora studies and digital diaspora scholarship. The analysis is primarily guided by Sara Ahmed's formulation of the feminist killjoy, which this article extends through killjoy misalignment to examine how feminist agency emerges through and circulates across embodied discomfort, refusal, affective disruption, and networked relational spaces.

Feminist Agency as Killjoy Misalignment

This article conceptualizes feminist agency as a form of killjoy misalignment, drawing on Sara Ahmed's articulation of the feminist killjoy as a figure of embodied discomfort, ethical refusal, and a critique of the normative structure of happiness inscribed by society. For Ahmed, feminism begins as an embodied orientation towards the world, emerging as a "sensible reaction to the injustices of the world" (21), first registered through a body "not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around" (22). This embodied misalignment signals the beginning of feminist consciousness, where discomfort is experienced before it can be articulated. Therefore, killjoy politics becomes legible when such embodied unease is brought into speech, disrupting the socially sustained norms of harmony, propriety, and happiness. As Ahmed argues, the "feminist killjoy begins as a sensationalist figure" (37), refusing what is collectively maintained as desirable or proper. Therefore, happiness, in this framework, functions as a directional force- a "path... often assumed to be an endpoint" (Ahmed 48) that organizes normative trajectories of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity itself.

Read through this lens, killjoy politics refers to a feminist mode of critique in which the exposure of structural injustice disrupts socially mandated happiness scripts by generating socio-affective and relational friction. While Ahmed conceptualizes the feminist killjoy as a figure who exposes the coercive dimensions of normative happiness through acts of critique and refusal, this article extends her formulation through the concept of killjoy misalignment. This shift from killjoy to misalignment redirects attention from the figure of feminist disruption to the uneven affective and relational processes through which feminist agency becomes negotiated, perceptible, and sustained across embodied and digitally mediated contexts. Misalignment foregrounds the gradual accumulation of hesitation, discomfort, exhaustion, and relational friction that may precede explicit refusal, while also accounting for the ways feminist critique persists, circulates, and is renegotiated beyond the moment of articulation. Therefore, killjoy misalignment refers to an analytical framework for understanding how feminist agency emerges through recurring disruptions of normative happiness scripts across diasporic and digitally mediated life.

Building on Ahmed's framework, the article conceptualizes feminist agency in contemporary Indian diasporic women's narratives as sustained killjoy misalignment operating across relational, embodied, and digitally mediated contexts. In embodied contexts, agency emerges through affective discomfort, hesitation, refusal, and disruptive speech that challenge familial and cultural expectations. In digital contexts, killjoy politics is intensified through mediated relationality, circulation, fragmented visibility, and surveillance, where feminist articulation

is simultaneously amplified and destabilized within the networked environments. Rather than approaching digitality as a separate analytical domain, this article reads it as an extension and intensification of killjoy politics through infrastructures of care, exposure, and visibility. Digital circulation does not replace embodied misalignment but reconfigures it by producing new conditions under which feminist speech is surveilled, fragmented, and relationally sustained. Accordingly, the article aims to examine feminist agency as embodied and digital killjoy misalignment, to analyze its disruption of normative happiness scripts, and explore how feminist refusal circulates across contemporary diasporic relational spaces.

Analysis and Discussion

Embodied Killjoy Agency: Misalignment and Affect

Within contemporary Indian diasporic women's narratives, feminist agency initially emerges as an embodied disturbance of normative structures of happiness that organize gendered and familial life. These expectations are especially true in the diaspora, when women have to perform emotional labor, carry the task of cultural preservation, and engage in care work. Hence, any transgression of the assigned role is seen as an emotional betrayal of familial and communal relations. This is the case of Anjali Joshi's stance, which represents feminine desire influenced by limitations and boundaries in *Gold Diggers*. The inheritance becomes a burden for Anjali because her gifts consist of "Jolen-hair lightening cream" (Sathian 73), which symbolizes material lack, limited vision of her future, and denial of her desires. This reduction to cosmetic adjustment frames Anjali's femininity as surface management rather than her futurity as an independent woman. This also indicates how the desire for a traditional wife is pre-scripted within the familial economies. However, Anjali's secret consumption of the alchemical gold potion, meant for her brother's ambitions, reflects what Visweswaran identifies as where "there is assignation, there is also assertion" (6). The consumption further marks a bodily deviation and an early misalignment from this containment, in which sensation precedes the articulation of gendered injustice. Consequently, this moment registers agency as a pre-discursive disruption within those structures that deny feminine self-making and sustainability. Later, her marriage to Pranesh Dayal as her love match and subsequent diasporic life in Hammond Creek, Atlanta, encapsulates this very agency. However, Anjali's subsequent labour across myriad services such as running a catering business, "graduation or birthday parties... answered calls placed in response to flyers" (Sathian 26) further complicates the liberal framings of Anjali's agency. Her fragmented work-life across diasporic circuits produces a self-sufficient agentive practice within structural constraints. This highlights how agency operates across dispersed and situational domains. Yet Anjali's labour is re-signified through communal gossip that frames her as a "skinny-mini gold digger" (Sathian 41), revealing how feminine labour is continuously recoded through gendered suspicion. In this context, agency is reconstituted through "a form of constrained agency, even if it is ultimately not emancipatory" (Paret and Gleeson 282).

This dynamic intensifies when Anjali's marital breakdown and divorce are dismissed as "white women behaviour" (Sathian 102), exposing how such racialized femininity operates as a disciplinary framework that regulates feminine deviations. Anjali becomes precisely the figure who "puts others off their food" (Ahmed 39). Yet, in her response, she laughs and scoffs in such a manner that it "debilitated them a little" (Sathian 34), throwing off the balance in favor of those who try to impose the discomfort. Instead of internalizing and accepting the discomfort, Anjali channels it into her social interactions to unsettle those who seek to keep her in check. Anita Dayal experiences a heightened embodiment of aspiration, which transforms into a physical and emotional burden. From her feeling of "drowning in all her lemonade" (Sathian 99), we can recognize how the inherited expectations of achievement weigh down on her body.

According to Chadwick, discomfort “merged and morphed into other feelings and affects” (6), which can be seen in the regularity of Anita being at “Chick-fil-A at six thirty” (Sathian 84). The notion of happiness and future success lies in productivity, discipline, and order. Yet, Anita’s rejection of a STEM career and Stanford University means her transition from the exhausting expectations of diasporic futurity toward articulation of herself in opposition to them. Even her escape from heteronormative futurity in her declaration: “If there is an extreme opposite of *getting married*, I am that” (Sathian 180) disrupts the normative sequencing of life trajectories for women.

In Anuradha D. Rajurkar’s *American Betiya*, Rani Kelkar’s misalignment unfolds through gradual accumulation. Her question to her mother, “What if I *am* a flaky-bikky American? Isn’t it important to be true to yourself?” (Rajurkar 12), introduces a normative identity formation as a second-generation Indian diasporic teenager. Even her practices of concealment and secrecy operate within surveilled familial environments, creating micro spaces of negotiation. These moments also align with Amba Pande’s observation that the “space of the ‘hyphen’ often gives them a freedom for self-exploration and deliberation to conceive new identities and move beyond the fixed definitions of femininity” (2), where diasporic in-betweenness becomes a condition for negotiating feminine subjectivity. Therefore, Rani’s misalignment emerges through a sustained negotiation within the affordances and constraints of hyphenated identity. Rani’s repeated encounters with racialized intimacies of being addressed as Princess Jasmine and Exotic Juliet produce affective dissonance that destabilizes her belonging. Her refusal to justify her vegetarianism signals a shift from accommodation to assertion. However, Rani’s misalignment becomes more apparent in her explicit speech to Oliver as she declares, “You respect none of my boundaries” (Rajurkar 279), asserting that their relationship is over.

At the same time, *American Betiya* complicates feminist agency through intergenerational and relational networks of women whose negotiations unfold evenly across diasporic domestic structures. This can be seen through the depictions of some of the female characters, including her mother Uma, who has “revolutionary ideas” and works as an activist at a “local woman’s shelter that found jobs for village women” (Rajurkar 298), and Bonnie, who leaves a marriage where she was being exploited and eventually works as “a secretary for mental health clinic” (Rajurkar 75). Together, these interconnected relationships among women show how feminist agency develops through shared experiences, everyday acts of survival, and emotional support. In this sense, Ang Hua’s quilting metaphor becomes particularly resonant, where women put “together, with bits and pieces of fabric and thread, a quilt that has its own history and ... with her life” (192), capturing how female subjectivity is collectively and materially stitched across women’s relational worlds.

Thus, embodied killjoy misalignment emerges as a cumulative operation of agency that emerges through hesitation, exhaustion, bodily discomfort, refusal, and articulation. However, it gradually accumulates into sustained forms of relational disturbance. In this sense, the agency of diasporic subjects is understood as an ongoing negotiation within the gendered and racialized structures that shape intelligibility, affective expression, and belonging. This shows that embodiment in these texts operates as a field of ongoing change, where feminist agency is created through lived misalignment rather than through emancipatory closure.

Digital Killjoy Agency: Circulation, Care, and Reconfiguration

Digital mediation does not constitute a separate domain of agency, but it extends and reconfigures embodied killjoy misalignment through infrastructures of circulation, visibility, and relational care. Besides the necessity of digital communication in sustaining relationships within diaspora communities, there is also an element of criticism and surveillance that comes with digital

communication practices. As observed by Minchilla and Ponzanesi, migrants engage in digital technologies in “banal” ways to “keep in touch and stay connected to their peers and loved ones” (2). Even across geographical distances, these mediated spaces fundamentally alter how memory, belonging, and intimacy are experienced. Feminist agency is transformed by digital media not because it ties a coherent narrative, but through circulating experiences that render visibility deeply fractured while altering the affective bonds between users.

In the case of *Gold Diggers*, the digital identity of Anita Dayal’s digital is constructed out of bits and pieces of pictures, videos, and comments from the online community. In other words, instead of presenting a clear picture of who she is, Anita’s digital self makes her vulnerable to public criticism. This shows how being visible online can actually become a way to police her. The YouTube recording labelled “guest spkr @ 2014 missindia teen new jersey”, together with commentssuch as “she is 1 ungrateful girl” (Sathian 172), shows how platformed visibility turns feminist critique into something that is publicly debated and judged. Anita is condemned as ungrateful precisely because she refuses to perform the celebratory narrative expected of a successful diasporic woman. Instead of using the pageant platform to reintroduce model-minority success or present an inspirational story, Anita redirects her attention to Shruti Patel’s suicide and the emotional violence embedded within neoliberal cultures of aspiration. In doing so, Anita occupies the position of a digital feminist killjoyby exposing the exclusions and pressures concealed beneath the promise of diasporic success.

Unlike embodied acts of feminist disruption that take place within the immediate social relationships, Anita’s critique continues to circulate through YouTube long after the original event. The YouTube platform allows her intervention to be encountered repeatedly, but it also subjects it to its ongoing judgment through comment culture and online spectatorship. As a result, the comment section becomes another space where killjoy politics continue to unfold. Anita’s disruption is repeatedly revisited, interpreted, and contested by networked publics. These digital traces can function as “alternate archives” that “shatter anonymity and create a better understanding” (Agnew 7) of lived experience. At the same time, these archives remain unstable because they preserve both feminist critique and the hostility it attracts. Digital killjoy misalignment, therefore, emerges through the tension between archival presence and the increased visibility that continually reopens feminist speech to public scrutiny and negotiation. Keya’s dating app platform, Dil Day, represents yet another example of how digital infrastructures reproduce inequality and uneven forms of relational labour. While the dating app helps others to find romantic relationships, Keya herself is deprived of being part of this recognition and intimacy offered by the platform. In other words, Keya’s situation reveals how digital platforms redistribute intimacy through digital and technological infrastructures that set the terms to form relationships for all participants. Personal profiles and preferences, and indicators of desirability and compatibility, turn romance into a process of digital calculation and performance in the digital world. The result of such calculation is an illusion of efficiency with which technology can help find emotional satisfaction. In this regard, Keya’s situation reveals that despite the seeming openness of the platform and choices offered by it, its logic supports the bias of algorithms toward the traditional understanding of marriage, romance, and the future.

Dil Day brings relational labor of women into the digital world. Keya’s example illustrates the fact that this transition does not mean equal access. However, this contradiction becomes even more apparent in Keya’s statement when she says that she is “an analog spinster in an era of digital soul mates” (Sathian 157). She describes the situation when a person experiences misalignment in the world of digital killjoys. Although she helps create the emotional world where others try to find their romantic fulfillment, she is denied the experience. Therefore, digital agency does not lie in rejecting this dating app but through its critical analysis and

exposure.

In Anuradha D. Rajurkar's *American Betiya*, the digital killjoy agency emerges through relational care networks rather than public visibility. Following Rani's final confrontation with Oliver, her friend, Cara's messages- "OMFG! Who invited him?... Want me to lurk/ attack O if necessary?" (Rajurkar 350) form a collective affective infrastructure of vigilance and protection. These exchanges extend what Radhika Gajjala describes as "the connection between the digital and the domestic has particular significance in relation to the gendered labor in the home space" (36), where relational labor and care work are extended into mediated space. Messaging platforms differ from physical interactions because it allows immediate and ongoing communication. Messages are exchanged in real time, which creates opportunities for immediate intervention, emotional support, and solidarity, which is communicated through text messages sent by Cara because they become part of the support that helps Rani maintain her refusal towards Oliver. Through constant communication and the possibility of an immediate response, feminist support becomes part of everyday interaction. As a result, the emotional weight of refusal is shared across the friendship bond rather than borne by Rani alone. In this way, digital killjoy misalignment is developed not only through public visibility and disagreement but also through the everyday acts of care that help to sustain feminist agency within diasporic life.

These digital interactions are shaped by expectations of visibility and responsiveness. As a result, the pressure for immediate communication can become a source of support and emotional strain simultaneously. Digital care, therefore marked by this tension: while it strengthens relationships, it also heightens emotional responsiveness. In digital spaces, killjoy agency is sustained through everyday practices of care, communication and surveillance. The same platforms that support feminist refusal also expose it to greater public visibility and ongoing scrutiny, demonstrating that digital technologies do not resolve the tensions of killjoy politics but relocate them into new forms of digital interactions.

Across *Gold Diggers* and *American Betiya*, digital killjoy misalignment is expressed through online circulation, fragmented visibility, and digitally mediated forms of care. Digital forms of killjoy agency are tenacious, outliving technology's persistence, and enabling feminist critique to be revisited, debated, and sustained among dispersed diasporic publics. While embodied killjoy agency often begins in moments of private discomfort and interpersonal conflict, digital platforms create new possibilities for feminist expression to reach wider audiences, where acts of refusal are witnessed, supported, preserved, and regulated. Rather than replacing embodied resistance, digital technologies carry it into new settings shaped by visibility, intimacy, and forms of regulation. Feminist agency is therefore not displaced but continually reshaped under digital conditions. Across embodied and digital contexts, feminist agency takes the form of an ongoing process of killjoy misalignment. Hesitation, embodied discomfort, and refusal extend into digital circulation, where feminist speech is reassembled through visibility, fragmentation, and relational infrastructures of care. Consequently, both texts demonstrate that feminist agency in contemporary Indian diasporic women's narratives is accumulative and structurally uneven. Killjoy misalignment, therefore, provides an analytic framework for understanding how feminist subjectivity is continually formed across embodied and digital life, revealing agency as relational, evolving, and sustained rather than as a singular act of resistance.

Conclusion

In examining *American Betiya* and *Gold Diggers*, the article has shown that feminist agency in contemporary Indian diasporic women's narratives is more productively understood through the framework of killjoy misalignment than through standard liberal models that privilege choice

and autonomy. Agency does not seem to occur as an isolated act of resistance but appears through recursive moments of affective and embodied discomfort, relational negotiation, and digital mediation. These frictions show us that feminist subjectivity does not develop in a vacuum. It is forged directly within the very social structures that try to regulate and govern the gendered diasporic life and belonging. Across both narratives, the boundaries between the digital and embodied lives of feminist killjoys are difficult to separate. Many assume that the conflicts women experience within their families and communities vanish once they move into digital spaces. Yet their resistance, hesitancy, and discomfort are simply carried over into these spaces and exposed in a public arena where they invite approval, support, or harsh criticism. This way, online spaces expose the feminist subject to constant tracking, surveillance, and monitoring. Yet this very exposure is countered by a vital survival strategy, allowing women to build networks of care and solidarity within these digital spaces to sustain their refusal across diasporic communities. Moreover, the narratives show that feminist agency is relational at its core and it occurs along uneven paths. Reading this through the lens of killjoy misalignment highlights the exact moments of friction where feminist subjects push back against normative pressures to carve out their own space. Placing these negotiations center stage offers a fresh perspective on these findings, enriching contemporary dialogues surrounding feminist agency, diaspora, and digitality. This perspective lays bare the ways feminist disruption builds momentum, illustrating how individual acts of resistance steadily accumulate over time. Instead, these disruptions remain anchored through networks where they are continually reimaged within the rhythms of everyday diasporic life.

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