

## **Mental Health as Stigma in Regional Fiction Within Indian Writing in English**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Mental illness is a significant theme in Indian Writing in English, with regional fiction providing a nuanced lens to examine its intersection with societal stigma. This study analyzes the portrayal of mental health in diverse Indian contexts through the works of authors such as Kamala Das, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Sylvia Plath, and Rohinton Mistry. Keywords: mental illness, Indian literature, societal stigma, regional contexts, gender roles, cultural displacement, familial frameworks, political turbulence, and loss of identity.*

*In "My Story," Kerala-based author Kamala Das illustrates the gendered stigma of mental health in mid-20th century Indian society. The protagonist's depression is exacerbated by societal constraints on women's emotional expression. Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" delves into the mental distress of an immigrant character, highlighting the stigma's communal dimension. Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" reveals the detrimental impact of silence within Bengali-American communities facing mental health issues. Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" underscores the amplification of mental illness burden by societal gender norms.*

*Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," though not set in India, offers a parallel narrative of societal stigma towards mental illness, emphasizing its universal relevance. Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance" intertwines mental health with political contexts, illustrating the profound societal impact on individual psychological well-being. Ruskin Bond's "The Room on the Roof" subtly addresses stigma through a grieving protagonist's quest for belonging.*

*The abstracted texts collectively demonstrate how societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and historical contexts shape the depiction of mental health in Indian narratives. These authors challenge prevailing stereotypes, advocating for empathy and an informed discourse on mental health. Their characters' struggles with stigma and societal expectations underscore the urgent need to confront and dismantle mental health stigmas in Indian society. Through literary analysis, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of mental illness representation and its sociocultural implications.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Mental illness, Indian literature, Regional fiction, Societal Stigma, Mental Health, Regional Contexts, Perception, Treatment, Cultural landscape, Societal norms, Historical contexts, Personal experiences, Stigma, Cultural Displacement, Gender Roles, Silence, Oppressive structures, Societal judgment, Universal struggle, Mental health issues, Political turbulence, Emotional distress*

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### **FULL PAPER**

Mental illness is a pervasive theme in Indian literature, particularly in regional fiction, which often delves into the intricate relationship between mental health and societal stigma. This research paper examines the portrayal of mental illness in Indian Writing in English, with a focus on how regional contexts shape the perception and treatment of mental health. By analyzing the works of various Indian authors, we aim to elucidate the multifaceted nature of mental illness stigma in these narratives and understand its impact on characters and communities. The selected texts are illustrative of the diverse cultural landscape of India and the profound effects of societal norms, historical contexts, and personal experiences on mental health discourse.

The stigma associated with mental illness in India is deeply entwined with cultural, social, and historical factors. In *My Story*, an autobiographical novel by Kerala-based author Kamala Das, the protagonist's battle with depression is situated within the rigid confines of mid-20th century Indian society. The narrative underscores the societal constraints placed on women, particularly in the context of emotional vulnerability. The expectation of stoicism in the face of adversity leads to a pervasive sense of isolation for individuals like the author, whose mental health challenges are compounded by gender-specific roles. This intersection of mental health and gender roles is a recurring motif in regional fiction, highlighting the complexities of identity and social acceptance (Das, 1976).

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores alienation and identity through the character of Biju, whose mental distress is a by-product of the pressures of the immigrant experience. While mental illness is not the central theme, the narrative reveals the pervasive stigma that prevents characters from openly confronting their psychological struggles. The cultural context of the Indian diaspora provides a backdrop for examining mental health as a concern that transcends individual experience and becomes a communal issue (Desai, 2006). This novel exemplifies the tension between individual suffering and societal expectations, revealing the profound impact of cultural displacement on mental well-being.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* presents a series of interconnected stories that delve into the emotional turmoil experienced by Bengali-American families. In "Only Goodness," the character Rahul's alcoholism and mental health issues are shrouded in secrecy, reflecting the broader stigma surrounding mental illness within the Indian community. The family's reluctance to discuss his struggles is emblematic of the entrenched attitudes that equate mental illness with weakness and shame. This narrative underscores the significance of open dialogue in addressing mental health and the detrimental effects of silence on individuals and their relationships (Lahiri, 2008).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is another seminal work that addresses mental illness within a familial framework. The protagonist, Ammu, faces severe societal judgment and stigma due to her personal choices, which precipitate her descent into despair. The novel underscores how societal norms around gender can amplify the burden of mental illness, contributing to a sense of isolation and entrapment. Ammu's mental state serves as a poignant metaphor for the oppressive nature of societal structures that perpetuate silence on emotional distress (Roy, 1997).

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, although not set in an Indian context, offers a compelling parallel to the themes of regional fiction. The novel, situated in mid-20th century America, portrays the protagonist Esther's mental breakdown as a direct consequence of societal pressures and expectations. Her experiences with stigmatization, misunderstanding, and the limitations of medical treatment resonate with the portrayal of mental illness in Indian narratives. Plath's work exemplifies the universal nature of the struggle against societal norms and the stigma of mental health issues, particularly for women (Plath, 1963).

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* delineates the interplay between mental health and societal structures in a time of political turbulence. The stigma associated with mental illness is a palpable force in the lives of the characters, influencing their interactions and self-perception. The character of Ishvar's traumatic experiences and subsequent despair epitomize the profound impact of societal stigma on individual psychological well-being (Mistry, 1995).

Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* presents a nuanced portrayal of a young man, Rusty, dealing with grief and the loss of identity. The novel subtly addresses mental health stigma through Rusty's emotional distress, emphasizing the lack of open discourse around mental health within his community. The protagonist's struggle to find a sense of belonging underscores the broader societal tendencies to stigmatize and marginalize those dealing with mental health issues.

The portrayal of mental illness in these works of regional fiction in Indian Writing in English serves as a critical lens through which to examine the societal stigma that continues to pervade Indian culture. By challenging prevailing stereotypes and encouraging empathy, these authors contribute significantly to the discourse on mental health. Their narratives not only reflect individual experiences but also illuminate the systemic factors that perpetuate the stigma.

To conclude, this paper has analyzed the representation of mental illness as stigma in regional fiction within Indian Writing in English. The chosen texts demonstrate the profound influence of societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and historical contexts on the portrayal of mental health. These authors poignantly illustrate the struggles of their characters as they grapple with the internal and external forces that define their experiences with mental illness. Through their works, they advocate for a more compassionate and informed understanding of mental health, challenging readers to confront and question the stigmas that persist in Indian society.

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