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## Freedom or Fantasy? Rethinking Choice and Pleasure in Postfeminist Narratives in *Normal People* and *Othappu*

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### Abstract

This paper examines postfeminist ideas of choice and pleasure in *Normal People* by Sally Rooney and *Othappu* by Sarah Joseph. Drawing on Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and Catherine Rottenberg, it explores how contemporary narratives frame empowerment as personal autonomy while remaining embedded in neoliberal and patriarchal structures. Marianne's romantic self-fashioning and Margalitha's moral departure from the convent reveal agency as negotiated rather than absolute. The paper argues that these texts portray empowerment as emotionally meaningful yet structurally limited, where freedom and regulation coexist within late capitalist and religious contexts, complicating simplistic celebrations of postfeminist choice and pleasure.

**Keywords:** Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Self-surveillance, Malayalam Literature, Gender, Empowerment, Patriarchy

### Introduction

Today's stories in literature and culture often show women as strong because they can decide what they want in life. Feminist progress is presented as a woman's freedom to choose—whether that means choosing her career, her passions, her happiness, or her own way of living instead of following traditional expectations. Empowerment is seen as the ability to make personal choices, like putting career before domestic duties or pleasure before sacrifice. In many of these stories, women speak openly about their thoughts and feelings, which shows that they have control over their bodies, emotions, and dreams. This is different from earlier

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feminist writing that focused more on collective struggle and shared activism. Instead, these newer narratives highlight individual freedom and personal self-expression as signs of empowerment.

However, as Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, the idea of empowerment is often closely tied to the market, where feminism itself becomes something that can be packaged and sold as a brand. In this context, the language of “choice” is strongly connected to consumer culture. Empowerment is then judged not by social change, but by how visible, confident, and successful someone appears in their lifestyle. Angela McRobbie argues that postfeminism appears to acknowledge feminism, but only in a limited and strategic way. It recognizes the achievements of earlier feminist movements, yet softens their radical force by absorbing them into neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and self-management (McRobbie 16). Although feminist gains are admitted, serious structural critique is largely set aside. As a result, women are encouraged to view inequality as a personal obstacle to overcome through self-improvement, rather than as a broader political issue that demands collective resistance (McRobbie 16).

Rosalind Gill describes postfeminism as a “sensibility” rather than a clear-cut theory, one that places strong emphasis on the female body, presents sexualization as a matter of personal choice, and promotes constant self-monitoring (Gill 149). She explains that what appears to be freedom often functions as “self-surveillance disguised as freedom,” where women internalize social expectations and regulate themselves accordingly (Gill 149). In this framework, the ideal woman is expected to be attractive but not excessive, ambitious but emotionally controlled. As a result, agency is no longer rooted in open resistance; instead, it becomes closely tied to self-discipline and the careful management of the self (Gill 149). Catherine Rottenberg extends this critique by arguing that neoliberal feminism constructs women as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for their own well-being and success (Rottenberg 7). Structural inequalities are reframed as obstacles to be individually managed. Thus, empowerment becomes both real and regulatory.

## **Discussion**

Taken together, postfeminist ideas of choice and pleasure exist in a complex space where empowerment and illusion exist side by side. Women may genuinely feel empowered when they speak for themselves, make decisions about their bodies, or pursue personal happiness. These moments of self-expression can be emotionally meaningful and personally powerful. However, such individual acts rarely challenge the larger social and economic systems that limit women’s choices in the first place. As McRobbie and Gill suggest, postfeminist empowerment often creates the feeling of freedom without actually changing the deeper power structures that shape women’s lives. Contemporary literature becomes an important space to explore this tension, as it both celebrates women’s personal agency and reveals the limits of an empowerment based mainly on pleasure and individual choice within neoliberal and patriarchal systems.

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Some critics argue that just because choices are shaped by social structures, it does not mean they are meaningless. All actions happen within economic, cultural, and ideological limits, but that does not erase agency. Women often make practical decisions within patriarchy and capitalism to gain safety, stability, pleasure, or financial security. For those facing class, caste, or racial marginalization, such choices can genuinely improve their lives. Calling these decisions an “illusion” may ignore real lived experiences and undervalue everyday survival strategies.

From this view, agency is not complete freedom but careful negotiation. Women do not simply follow social norms; they work within them to their advantage. For example, performing femininity in certain ways may provide social acceptance or economic opportunity. These actions can be seen as strategic rather than submissive, showing that individuals actively weigh risks and benefits even within unequal systems. However, as Rosalind Gill argues, the postfeminist critique does not deny that women have agency. Instead, it questions how society shapes and rewards certain kinds of agency. Today, agency is often celebrated only when it fits dominant ideals such as beauty, heterosexual desirability, productivity, and consumer success. Women may have choices, but not all choices are valued equally. Society tends to reward decisions that support existing power structures, which means agency is shaped and limited rather than completely free.

A similar debate exists around pleasure. Some scholars argue that pleasure should not automatically be seen as politically shallow. For women whose desires have long been controlled or silenced, claiming sexual, creative, or professional pleasure can be empowering. Experiencing and expressing pleasure can help women reclaim their bodies and identities, making it a space not only of personal healing but also of subtle resistance. The postfeminist critique asks us to question how pleasure is shaped by culture. When pleasure is tied to beauty, consumption, and constant self-improvement, it can become another way of regulating women. What seems like freedom may also create pressure to meet social expectations. In such cases, pleasure does not challenge inequality but softens its impact. The point is not that choice or pleasure are false, but that they are shaped by social values. Empowerment and control often exist together, as women may feel autonomous while still working within limiting norms.

Sally Rooney is widely recognized as a major contemporary Irish writer and often described as a voice of the millennial generation. Critics observe that her fiction captures the emotional and economic pressures shaping young adults in late capitalist society (Murray 2018; O'Connor 2019). Marked by sparse prose and psychological depth, her novels explore how intimacy is shaped by class inequality and gender expectations. As a result, her work is frequently discussed within feminist and postfeminist frameworks, especially in relation to agency and choice (Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2018).

*Normal People* (2018) traces the evolving relationship between Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron from rural Sligo to Trinity College Dublin. Rather than a conventional romance, the novel examines how self-worth and social hierarchy shape emotional connection. Through free indirect discourse, Rooney reveals the gap between outward expressions and

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private insecurity. When Connell tells Marianne, “I’m not a religious person but I do sometimes think God made you for me” (Rooney 2018), the declaration suggests destiny. Yet the narrative unsettles this certainty, showing how miscommunication, class anxiety, and internalized doubt complicate the idea of free romantic choice.

Marianne appears confident, intelligent, and unafraid to reject traditional expectations of femininity. She chooses her relationships and expresses her sexuality on her own terms, suggesting modern female autonomy. Yet Rooney also shows her deep insecurity, rooted in a troubled family life. Marianne believes she is “not a good person” (Rooney), and this quiet self-doubt shapes her acceptance of unequal or painful relationships. This complexity makes *Normal People* especially meaningful in postfeminist terms. Marianne lives in a world of apparent choice—education, love, desire—but her decisions are shaped by emotional wounds and social pressures. Rooney presents empowerment not as simple freedom, but as something fragile and evolving, where agency exists alongside vulnerability.

Sarah Joseph is widely regarded as a bold feminist voice in Malayalam literature because she writes about women who think, doubt, and struggle from within oppressive systems. In *Othappu (The Sinner / The Outcast)*, she tells the story of Margalitha, a nun who leaves the convent after a deep moral crisis. Margalitha feels that her religious life has turned into “mere discipline and silence” (Joseph 112), where obedience matters more than truth. She begins to question whether faith built on fear can really be faith at all (Joseph 118).

Her decision to leave is not sudden or dramatic. It grows slowly out of inner conflict, guilt, and reflection. That is what makes it powerful. She walks away not to rebel, but to remain honest to her conscience. In doing so, she claims the right to define her faith and her selfhood on her own terms. At the same time, Joseph does not present this as an easy victory. Once outside the convent, Margalitha feels constantly watched and judged, as though her life itself proves her “sin” (Joseph 156). Freedom brings exposure and loneliness. Through this journey, Joseph shows that women’s choices can be real and deeply meaningful—but they often come at a painful social cost.

This is where Angela McRobbie’s argument becomes especially relevant. In *The Aftermath of Feminism*, she suggests that feminism is “taken into account” only to be redirected into individual life choices, where structural critique gives way to personal responsibility (McRobbie 2009). Margalitha can leave the convent, but the larger religious–patriarchal structure remains intact. Her departure reshapes her own life, yet it does not dismantle institutional authority (Joseph 112–118).

Joseph therefore presents empowerment as both genuine and fragile. Margalitha regains her dignity and moral clarity, but she continues to face surveillance and stigma; her every action is interpreted as evidence of “sin” (Joseph 156). Agency here is not triumphant freedom but a choice lived through consequence. The novel thus supports a nuanced feminist reading: women do exercise resistance, yet their choices unfold within enduring systems of power (McRobbie 2009).

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Postfeminist theory, especially as articulated by Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie, emphasizes how contemporary femininity is shaped through discourses of choice, pleasure, self-management, and empowerment. Women are increasingly represented as autonomous subjects who actively choose their lifestyles, careers, relationships, and bodily expressions. However, these choices often unfold within persistent structures of patriarchy, religion, media culture, and neoliberal capitalism. As Gill argues, agency today frequently operates through self-surveillance and self-discipline, while McRobbie observes that feminism's collective political struggles are often reframed as matters of individual success and personal responsibility.

## Conclusion

Post-2000 English literature offers rich material for exploring these questions because it often focuses on women's inner lives—their desires, doubts, ambitions, and emotional negotiations. Many contemporary novels portray women as independent and self-directed, seemingly in control of their futures. Yet their choices are frequently shaped by neoliberal ideas of success, heteronormative expectations, consumer culture, and class aspirations. When read through a postfeminist lens, these texts reveal that empowerment is rarely simple. It appears liberating on the surface, but it can also function as a subtle form of regulation. These narratives do not just celebrate agency; they quietly expose the pressure to perform confidence, success, and pleasure in socially acceptable ways.

Contemporary Malayalam women's writing similarly captures these tensions, though within distinct cultural and social contexts. These works portray women negotiating desire, morality, labour, faith, and identity within deeply rooted familial and community structures. Empowerment is neither fully embraced nor dismissed. Instead, it is shown as something lived—negotiated daily, sometimes enabling, sometimes limiting. Reading these texts through the ideas of Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie helps us see how Malayalam literature both reflects and complicates postfeminist notions of choice, pleasure, and self-making.

Post feminism, then, is not a simple or universal condition. It is layered and shaped by context. In societies like India, where feminist struggles are still ongoing, it may be premature to speak of women as fully "postfeminist subjects." At the same time, the language of choice, empowerment, and self-fashioning clearly circulates and influences cultural expectations. What emerges globally is a field of tension: women have gained visibility and autonomy, yet feminism is often reframed as personal lifestyle rather than collective politics. Empowerment becomes real but uneven, and freedom exists alongside new forms of social control.

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