



Women's In Indian Literature And Arts

Madhuri Madhu

Department of History, Jamia Millia Islamia University

Abstract

Women's representation in Indian literature and arts has a rich and diverse history, spanning centuries. Despite the societal norms and patriarchal structures that have often marginalized women's voices, Indian women have made significant contributions to the country's literary and artistic landscape.

In literature, Indian women writers have explored themes of identity, belonging, and empowerment, often challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Authors like Rani Rashmoni, Sarojini Naidu, and Mahasweta Devi have written about women's experiences, struggles, and triumphs, paving the way for future generations of women writers.

In art, Indian women have made significant contributions to various forms, including painting, sculpture, and dance. Artists like Amrita Sher-Gil, Roshanara Begum, and Kanak Lata are notable examples of women who have pushed the boundaries of traditional Indian art forms, experimenting with new styles and mediums.

The 20th century saw a surge in feminist movements in India, which led to a greater emphasis on women's representation in the arts. The Progressive Writers' Movement and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) provided platforms for women writers and artists to express themselves freely.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's representation in Indian literature and arts. The government has launched initiatives to promote women's participation in the arts, such as the Ministry of Culture's "National Mission on Women Empowerment through Art" program.

Despite these efforts, there is still a long way to go in ensuring equal representation and opportunities for women in Indian literature and arts. However, the works of Indian women writers and artists continue to inspire and empower audiences around the world, showcasing their unique perspectives on Indian culture, society, and identity.

Keywords : Feminism, Indian Literature, Women's Representation, Social Justice, Feminist Theory

Introduction

Women's representation in Indian literature and arts is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been shaped by various historical, social, and cultural factors. Despite the country's rich cultural heritage and diverse artistic traditions, women have often been marginalized and underrepresented in these fields. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in Indian literature and arts, and efforts have been made to promote their work and celebrate their contributions.

Women are intrinsically artistic in nature. India is a patriarchal society where Man occupied a very prominent position as compared to women. In such a situation to do something different and intellectual is a challenge. The contributions of Indian Women writers are appreciated in all literary categories. Women writers try to express the discrimination, dissatisfaction and agony through their works. Each writings of these women writers go beyond all those gender theories and react against it. Their writing come out that urge for freedom and to break all those oppressive forces. They have depicted the life woman who is trapped between their own aspirations and the constricting forces of patriarchy.

M.K. Naik in his A History of Indian English Literature has discussed in detail about Indian English plays and playwrights. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar also throws light on the growth and development of Indian English Plays and the contributions of many dramatists in establishing drama as a literary genre. Radha Kumud Mukherji's book Women in Ancient India is an important source of knowing the states of women in ancient India. The writer has beautifully recorded the role and status of women in India since the Vedic period and how they enjoyed full freedom in every aspect of life. Apart from it, Sanjay Saxena's Women's Identity in colonial India has also presented the condition of women during the time of the Britishers and attempts made by the British administrators to improve their poor lot in many respects. This book also describes the bold attempt of the Britishers to abolish sati-pratha, early child marriage etc in colonial India. P Dhanwel's book Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad also helped in bringing out the contrasting images of women in India.

Woman is the basic foundation of creation. She is 'nature' who has the ability to carry and bear everything. All the consciousness (energy) of the world is directly or indirectly governed by her as she is the source of everything. When the Supreme Lord, Parabrahma thought of creating the world, He first of all created women. It is said that woman was his most beautiful creation. The existence of this world is possible only because of her. She is the first dawn of light where all the darkness disappears. She is like that sun that enlightens everyone and has the ability to dissipate all the darkness of the world.

Women are, no doubt the origin of life as they are the ultimate creators of the very existence. They strengthen the very foundation of family, society and nation as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, administrators,

friends, doctors, scientists, engineers, writers, entrepreneurs and many more. She embraces everyone with her unconditional love, affection and care. She is the epitome of faith, love, trust, patience, forgiveness and strength. In spite of all these, they have not been given their due share in the patriarchal social order.

Early Beginnings:

The representation of women in Indian literature and arts dates back to ancient times. The epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana feature strong female characters like Draupadi and Sita, who play significant roles in the stories. Similarly, in Indian classical music and dance, women have been playing a vital role since ancient times. The devadasis, for example, were temple dancers who were trained in classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak (Bharatanatyam 1979).

Women are perhaps the most misunderstood and misrepresented figures in the annals of history. This stands particularly true in male dominated societies like India where they are completely ignored or mostly seen as carriers of male community values. Indian texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women ranging from feminine leadership as the highest goddess, the Adimata, the Jagatmata, the Adishakti to limiting gender roles. The Devi Sukta hymn of Rigveda, declares the feminine energy as the essence of the universe, the one who creates all the matter and consciousness, the eternal and infinite. The woman is the most powerful and the most empowering force in Indian holy scriptures like the Puranas, the Upanishads and others. They are held there in high esteem and are highly revered. Worship of the mother goddess by men made them see women as personifying power, wealth and knowledge. In the Hindu pantheon these attributes are symbolized by the female deities. Hinduism has the strongest presence of the divine feminine from ancient times. The goddess is viewed as the centre of power. Matriarchy was prevalent in Sanskrit tradition. Still today there are many Hindu communities that are matriarchal.

The holy text 'Manusmriti' in verses 3.55-3.56 also declares that 'woman must be honoured and adorned' and 'where women are revered, there the gods rejoice, but where they are not, no sacred rite bears any fruit.' In simple terms it means – where women are worshipped, there lives the gods. Wherever they are not worshipped, all actions result in failure or ultimately become worthless.

Women's position in Indian Society from the ancient times to the present, has undergone many changes. During the Rigveda "Women were the equal of men in every aspect. They were in no condition the subordinate of men. They were highly educated and trained in all the Sixteen Kalas (arts). Moreover, they were actively taking part in performing Yajana. We have the examples of Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamundra, Sita, Shakuntala, Savitri and Draupadi who were highly respected and gained highest position as the history records. They had the freedom and opportunities to take part in religious activities, debates, chose their husbands and going to the battlefields. These women were never meek and docile at the mercy of the dominating male consciousness.

In Buddhism and Jainism also, women are given respectable place right from the beginning. But with the passage of time the high position and status enjoyed by women fell down to the lowest during the medieval and modern period in Indian history. Patriarchy started exercising full control over her position, restricted her freedom and suppressed her identity. She was as though kept in custody by the male of the family. In her childhood, her father protects her, her husband protects her in old age and thus, she was never thought to be fit enough for giving freedom. Further, many social evils like child marriage, Parda system, Sati pratha, dowry system, parents monopoly to select a bridegroom for her worsen their condition.

Colonialism and Nationalism:

The arrival of European colonizers had a profound impact on Indian society, including its literature and arts. The British colonial era saw the emergence of new forms of literature and art, such as English poetry and fiction. However, this period also saw a decline in the representation of women in Indian literature. Women writers like Rani Rashmoni and Pandita Ramabai wrote about social issues like women's education and women's rights, but their work was often marginalized and overlooked (Rashmoni 1858).

The arrival of European colonizers in India in the 18th century had a profound impact on the country's literature and arts. The British colonial era saw the emergence of new forms of literature and art, such as English poetry and fiction. However, this period also saw a decline in the representation of women in Indian literature. Raja Rao, a prominent Indian writer, noted that the colonial era saw a "silencing" of Indian women's voices (Rao 1985). This was due to the dominant patriarchal values of the colonial society, which viewed women as subordinate to men.

The nationalist movement, which emerged in the late 19th century, saw a resurgence of interest in Indian culture and arts. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi wrote about social issues like poverty, caste, and gender inequality. Women writers like Sarojini Naidu and Mahasweta Devi wrote about women's experiences and struggles during this period (Naidu 1917).

The colonial legacy continued to shape Indian society and culture long after independence in 1947. The country's post-independence literature and arts were characterized by a continued focus on male-dominated themes and narratives. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that there was a significant shift towards greater representation of women in Indian literature and arts. Writers like Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai won international recognition for their work, which explored themes of gender violence, poverty, and discrimination.

Nationalist Movement:

The nationalist movement in India, which emerged in the late 19th century, saw a resurgence of interest in Indian culture and arts. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi wrote about social issues like poverty, caste, and gender inequality. Women writers like Sarojini Naidu and Mahasweta Devi wrote about women's

experiences and struggles during this period (Naidu 1917). However, despite these efforts, women's representation remained limited.

Indian writers especially playwrights have always been responsive to the problems of woman and her position in society and culture since ancient times. Kalidas, Bhasa, Ashwagosh, Bhavbhuti, Vishakhadatta and others have beautifully portrayed immortal women characters in their plays. Later on Sri Aurobindo has created fine female characters who play an important role in the development of the major themes. The revolutionary depiction of Indian women's suffering, their anxiety for equality and freedom in Rabindra Nath Tagore's plays is worth mentioning. Tagore advocates women's education, widow marriage and criticises social orthodoxy, dogma, conservatism and patriarchal atrocities on women. Chitra, Vasanta, Malini, Supriya, Sumitra, Nandini are his spokeswomen who are very affirmative in their voices and roles. Tagore was a social realist and reformative in his approach and his creation of female characters in his plays.

The seed of Indian writing in English was sown during the period of the British rule in India. Now, that very seed has blossomed into an evergreen tree, with fragrant flowers and ripe fruits. The fruits are being tasted not only by the native people, but they are also being sought after, by the western world. It happened only after constant caring, pruning and feeding by various gardeners like Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao – to name a few; who looked after the tender plant day and night. In modern times, it is guarded by a number of writers who are getting awards and accolades all over the world. Indian English Literature is an honest enterprise to demonstrate the ever rare gems of Indian writing in English. From being a singular and exceptional, rather gradual native flare – made up of geniuses, Indian writing has turned out to be a new form of Indian culture and voice in which India converses regularly. Indian writers, poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists have been making momentous and considerable contributions to world literature since pre – Independence era, the past few years have witnessed a gigantic prospering and thriving of Indian English Writing in the global market.

Indian English Literature has attained an independent status in the realm of world literature. Wide ranges of themes are dealt with in Indian Writing in English. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture, tradition, social values and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments. There are critics and commentators in England and America who appreciate Indian English novels. Prof. M. K. Naik remarks, “one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of story-telling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the west”. English is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us in our own language and in English. We cannot write like “the English”. We should not. We can only refer to ourselves as Indians. Our method of expression will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the Americans.

Post-Independence:

The post-independence period saw a significant shift towards greater representation of women in Indian literature and arts. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Shashi Deshpande wrote about social issues like gender violence, poverty, and discrimination (Roy 1997). Artists like Anjolie Ela Menon and Reena Saini Kallat explored themes of identity, belonging, and empowerment (Menon 2010).

In the post-independence period the dramatists like G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb, Pratap Sharma, Guru Charan Das, Asif Currimbhoy, Bharti Sarabhai and others have also portrayed women characters who are more or less subordinate to their male counterparts. They were submitted to a 'culture of silence.'

Desani's 'Hali' is a male centred play wherein Mira, Isha and Maya are the subordinate women characters. Bharti Sarabhai's women characters are earthly human beings and find contentment in the existence on the earth with their fate. In her play Two Women, both the protagonists Anuradha and Uravasi are typical Hindu women who find fulfilment in a family. In Asif Currimbhoy's plays women are just ordinary persons contributing to the development of plots and themes. Kasturba, in My Experiment with the Truth is just caricaturized and not fully developed. Pratap Sharma has shown some boldness in the characterization of women in his A Touch of Brightness and Professor Has a Warcry. He has dealt with the topic of prostitution and a woman's illegitimate relationship with other person after her husband's death in both the plays respectively. But these plays were written with a view of the social reforms. However, the portrayal of woman is traditional and intermediary.

The dramatists in the post- modern era like Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, GirishKarnad, Badal Sircar etc were very much conscious about their social responsibilities as writers and this helped them create some powerful women characters. Their women characters are struggling for self-identity, quest for completeness, freedom and trying to break the shackles of the masculine society. They are rebels against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society.

Dattani takes up women's struggle for identity and dilemma of feminine sensibility in terms of the colonial perspective in the postmodern era. He boldly attacks the patriarchal social set up, old traditions and the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women's life and behaviour. One can easily find some of his female characters victim of traditional concepts which treat women as commodity and source of pleasure. Some of them who are bold and determined, revolt against the inhibition and emerge as postcolonial women in search of freedom and identity. Vijay Tendulkar projects a woman as both provocateur and victim. The body of the woman and the institutional body of power came into collision in Tendulkar's plays, speaking off and calling for varying intensities of violence. He rebels against the set norms and values of an orthodox society.

Contemporary Scene:

Today, there is a growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in Indian literature and arts. The rise of feminist movements has led to a greater emphasis on women's rights and gender equality. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Usha Gangadharan write about social issues like gender violence, casteism, and communalism (Sahgal 2011). Artists like Swati Khurana and Vibha Galhotra create works that challenge traditional notions of gender roles (Khurana 2015).

Representation of women in Indian literature and arts is a complex phenomenon that has evolved over time. From ancient times to the present day, women have played significant roles in shaping Indian culture and society. Despite challenges and limitations, there has been a growing recognition of their contributions, leading to greater representation in literature and arts.

The contemporary scene in Indian literature and arts has witnessed a significant shift towards greater representation of women. The rise of feminist movements and the growing awareness of gender issues have led to a surge in the production of works by women writers and artists. The last two decades have seen a proliferation of women's voices in Indian literature, with writers like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Shashi Deshpande gaining international recognition for their work.

In a male dominated society, it had been a serious effort for the women writers to show what society called as the mechanics of patriarchy. The work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to these patriarchal assumptions. To fight against the cultural mind set in men and women, one of the first things that these women writers did was to form their writings more eclectic. Another critical issue that was handled by these women writers was the difficulty of 'Style in language'. It was Jane Austen who devised a way for writing that was perfectly natural, elegant and proper for the utilization of women writers. Women could now write in clauses that were linked in loose sequences, instead of balanced and patterned as used by male writers. The majority of writings by Indian women writers depict the sufferings of the frustrated homemakers and questions of the prominent old patriarchal domination. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy represent their heroines defying patriarchal notions and they possess their own individuality and identity. They want to lead their life independently. They are bold, strong and independent human beings. They want to live freely and fully. By their novels these women writers try to tackle the systems that oppress and subjugate women.

In literature, women's writing has become a major force, with many writers exploring themes of gender, identity, and social justice. Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel "The God of Small Things" (1997) is a classic example of this trend. The novel explores the lives of two Indian twins growing up in Kerala and grapples with issues of caste, class, and gender.

The Indian women writers like Shashi Desh Pande, Nayanthara Seghal, Arundathi Roy, and Kamala Markandaya expressed the role and position of woman through their writings in English. They have expressed the real oppression and fight of women to achieve gender equality

Shashi Deshpande is the one novelist who is labelled as feminist novelist who dealt with the problems faced by women in our patriarchal society. Through her works she gave a detailed picture of women's issues, emotional and spiritual crisis they encounter in this male dominated society. The characters in her novel are having a quest for freedom and all they want is to come out of these oppressive bond and to reconstruct all those norms and patterns of womanhood. She talks about the women's struggle to secure self-identity and self-respect. Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988) tells the story of Jaya, an Indian upper- middle class house wife who retained her silence in Bombay throughout her life. Here she talks about the institution of marriage and its power to destroy the freedom of women. Through this work she tries to reveal the fact that women bear the levels of oppression not only within the male centred society but also within the institution of the family. In *The Binding Vine* (1993), through the narrator-protagonist Urmila highlights the despair of two women, one is Mira, who is a victim of marital rape and the other is Kalpana, who is a brutally raped outside marriage. This is a novel that takes up the issue of rape both within and outside marriage.

In another novel *Roots & Shadows* (1983), there is another rebellious woman who refuses to accept traditional family life and escapes to the city. In almost all novels of Deshpande dealt with a crisis in the heroines' life. This novel depicts the pain and suffocation of the protagonist Indu in the male dominated society. She tries to escape from an adulterous relationship with Narendra to find her real self.

Nayanthara Seghal is also another writer who portrayed the image of women who suffered due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society. Through her writings she envisions a world which is based on equality and the virtues of women to be equally valued as that of men. Her Novel presents the image of Indian Womanhood. Women are the principle characters in her novels. She comments on the freedom of females. Her feminist voice is strong and louder which is the result of her unhappy married life. Seghal's woman from *A Time to be Happy* (1957) to *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is all about the journey of women's struggle towards self-discovery. Motherhood is another category which has been critiqued and reviewed. Seghal's portrayal of motherhood is framed by a larger discourse. Her focus is more on women and value structures.

In *The God of small things* (1997), Arundathi Roy thinks beyond all the stereotypical characters of Women. The protagonist, Ammu –a mother of a son and a daughter – a divorcee is a rebel, who embarks on a journey with a man she loved - an untouchable thereby defies the planet altogether. She seems to assert that women is an individual soul who is having a voice of their own. She has the ability to shape her own destiny and is as capable as men. They are having their own identity and individuality. Roy attacks the age old traditional norms and tried to exert feminism in her works. She focuses more on the social injustices against women and she had changed all

the perception of women's identity in Indian society. Arundathi Roy succeeded in bringing down the existing social order. Being an activist, she is constantly writing about social problems and the plight of woman.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), depicts women's issues and problems very deeply. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of the women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding and shows that women are not lesser than human; rather they are sometimes more dignified than men due to their greater human virtues, qualities and creativity. They suffer heroically, though they are strong willed. A number of women sublimate their desires in religious faith. She describes that an Indian woman has to face between tradition and modernity. Kamala Markandaya's main focus, which she effectively presents, is the predicament of women in these situations. Her *Rukmani*, no doubt, may be a triumph of the spirit of tradition.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the number of women writers publishing their work. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Usha Gangadharan, and Githa Hariharan have made significant contributions to Indian literature. Sahgal's novel *"Rich Like Us"* (1998) explores the lives of three generations of women in an Indian family, while Gangadharan's *"The Wasted Crossing"* (2011) examines the experiences of Indian women living in exile.

In addition to literature, women have also made significant contributions to Indian art. The 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in traditional Indian art forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. Women dancers like Mallika Sarabhai and Priyadarshini Govind have pushed the boundaries of these traditional forms, incorporating new themes and styles into their work.

Visual artists like Anjolie Ela Menon and Reena Saini Kallat have also gained recognition for their work. Menon's paintings explore themes of identity, belonging, and memory, while Kallat's installations examine the intersection of politics and personal experience.

The digital age has also opened up new opportunities for women's representation in Indian arts. Online platforms like YouTube and social media have provided a space for women to share their creative work with a global audience. Filmmakers like Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam have gained international recognition for their documentaries on women's issues in India.

Conclusion

The journey of women's representation in Indian literature and arts has been a long and arduous one. From the early days of colonization to the present day, women have struggled to find their voice and assert their presence in the literary and artistic landscape. Despite the challenges, women have continued to push boundaries, challenge societal norms, and create works that are innovative, thought-provoking, and deeply personal.

Throughout this journey, women writers and artists have explored themes that are both universal and unique to their experiences. They have written about love, family, identity, politics, and social justice, but also about the specific challenges they face as women in a patriarchal society. Their works have reflected their own voices, perspectives, and experiences, giving rise to a rich and diverse literary and artistic heritage.

The rise of feminist movements and the growing awareness of gender issues have played a significant role in empowering women to take center stage in Indian literature and arts. The emergence of women writers and artists has not only enriched the cultural landscape but has also provided a platform for marginalized voices to be heard.

In recent years, the digital age has opened up new opportunities for women's representation in Indian literature and arts. Online platforms have enabled women to share their work with a global audience, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and creating new avenues for creative expression.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the journey of women's representation in Indian literature and arts is far from over. There are still many challenges to be overcome, but the progress made so far is a testament to the power of creative expression and the determination of women to tell their own stories.

In conclusion, the story of women's representation in Indian literature and arts is one of empowerment, creativity, and resilience. It is a story that reflects the struggles and triumphs of women who have refused to be silenced or marginalized. As we celebrate the achievements of women writers and artists, we must also acknowledge the ongoing struggles they face and continue to support their efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive cultural landscape.

References :

1. Bharatanatyam (1979). A History of Indian Classical Dance.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. That Long Silence, New Delhi: Penguin India, 1989. Print.
3. Dhanwel, P: The Indian Imagination of GirishKarnad, New Delhi : Prestige Book
4. Gangadharan (2011). The Wasted Crossing.
5. Indian Women Novelists. Set III, Vol.4. New Delhi. Prestige books. 1995. Print.
6. Iyengar, K.R.S., Indian Writing in English, New Delhi, sterling Publication
7. Kallat (2015). Contemporary Art from India.
8. Karnad, Girish: Author's Introduction; Three plays, New Delhi; oxford university press
9. Khurana (2015). Contemporary Art from India.
10. Kumar Satish: A Survey of Indian English Drama, Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot.
11. Menon (2010). Art & Identity.
12. Mookerji, RadhaMukund: Women in Ancient India, New Delhi.
13. Naidu (1917). The Golden Threshold.

14. Naik, M.K. A History of Indian English Literature, New Delhi, SahityaAcademi, Govt. Of India
15. Rashmoni (1858). Memoirs.
16. Roy (1997). The God of Small Things.
17. Roy, Arundhati. The God of Small Things. New Delhi: IndiaInk. 1997. Print.
18. Sahgal, Nayantara. Plans for Departure 1989. Print.
19. Sahgal (1998). Rich Like Us.
20. Sahgal (2011). This Time is Different.
21. Sarin (2007). The Throne of Souls.
22. Saxena, Sanjay: Women's Identity In Colonial India, Journal of Women's studies, 2007
23. Sonam (2009). The Sweetest Thing on Earth.

