



**PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN LITERATURE**

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**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 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.

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.

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.

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.

## 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.'

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 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.

Nayanthara Sehgal 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. Saghal'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. Saghal'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.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the number of women writers publishing their work. Writers like Nayanthara 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.

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.

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