



FROM ARCHETYPE TO AUTONOMY: TRACING THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the portrayal of women in Indian literature across time, following their development from the idealised and divine characters of ancient Sanskrit epics to the complex, rebellious, and independent protagonists of contemporary regional and English-language literature. For centuries, patriarchal narratives dominated Indian literary traditions, which frequently reduced women to archetypes of the “ideal wife” (Sita) or the “temptress” (Menaka), structuring their identities exclusively in terms of male kinship. However the Bhakti movement brought about an awakening towards spiritual agency, and the colonial and post-colonial periods lead to an extensive reconsideration of female identity and domesticity. Through a comparative analysis of classical texts, the reformist literature of the 19th century, and contemporary feminist critiques by writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy, this paper argues that the portrayal of women has shifted from “objects of description” to “subjects of experience.” By examining the transition from silence to self-assertion, the paper concludes that contemporary Indian literature plays a crucial role in challenging the traditional gender stereotypes and recovering female agency in a rapidly modernizing society.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Feminism, Post-colonialism, Agency, Patriarchal Archetypes.

Introduction:

The literary landscape of India is not a singular stream but a vast combination of languages, religions, and social hierarchies. Within this complexity, the portrayal of women serves as a vital platform for negotiating national identity, tradition, and modernity. For millennia, Indian literature functioned under a patriarchal canopy, where women were frequently the objects of narrative—celebrated as goddesses or demonised as disruptors—but rarely the subjects of their own stories. This trajectory is mirrored significantly within regional traditions, such as Gujarati literature, where the transition from the devotional verses of Mira to the modern, search-oriented narratives of writers like Kundanika Kapadia marks a pivotal shift in the regional female consciousness. This paper explores the transition of the Indian female figure from the “Iconographic” to the “Existential,” analysing how the silence once imposed by



social norms has been systematically broken by the insurgent voices of women writers who reclaim their bodies and their histories.

Ancient Archetypes: Devotion and Domesticity:

The portrayal of women in early Sanskrit literature is frequently dualistic. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata created archetypes that have served as moral benchmarks for centuries.

- **Sita as the Moral Standard:** With her virginity and selflessness, Sita created the “Sita-Savitri” paradigm—the Pativrata (devoted wife). Her Agni Pariksha (trial by fire) set a cultural standard for the silent, suffering woman whose value is determined by her sexual purity and loyalty to her husband.
- **Draupadi as the Subversive:** On the contrary, Draupadi represents a more fiery, vocal resistance. Her challenge to the Kuru court during her attempted disrobing remains a foundational moment of female intellectual agency. Modern retellings, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, highlight that while she was bound by patriarchal honor codes, her inner existence was one of ferocious individual.

The Medieval Shift to The Bhakti Movement:

The medieval period witnessed a significant upheaval in the patriarchal narrative through the Bhakti movement. Women poets like Mirabai, AkkaMahadevi, and Andal used religious devotion as a means for personal freedom. By expressing a direct, ecstatic relationship with the Divine, they renounced the need for earthly husbands and marital boundaries. Their poetry embodies the first major “revolt” in Indian literature, where the female voice prioritized personal spiritual autonomy and the rejection of social “shame” (Lajja) over domestic expectations.

Colonial Modernity and the Question of Woman:

The representation of women was crucial to the Indian Renaissance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Moving away from straightforward stereotypes, reformist authors like Rabindranath Tagore began to explore the psychological complexity of women.

- **Tagore’s Women:** In *Binodini* (Chokher Bali), Tagore broke the stereotype of the widow as a submissive ascetic by presenting a widow with moral uncertainties and intellectual demands.
- **The Rise of Autobiography:** This era also saw the emergence of the authentic female voice in Rashundari Devi’s *Amar Jiban*. Written in secret, it documents her “theft of literacy,” signifying the transformation of the Indian woman from a subject of literature to an author of her own story.



Post-Colonialism and the “New Woman”:

After the independence in 1947, Indian literature had a “psychological turn.” Instead of being observed from the outside, women writers started writing from within the female experience.

- **Anita Desai:** In works like *Clear Light of Day*, she focused on the “interior landscape” and the alienation of the metropolitan middle-class woman. Trapped in domestic protection, her protagonists frequently experience existential neurosis.
- **Ismat Chughtai:** In Urdu literature, she broke long-standing taboos on female sexuality and the domestic politics of the household.
- **Mahasweta Devi:** Introduced a political lens to the female body, most notably in *Draupadi*, where the protagonist turns her physical trauma as a tool of defiance against the state, transforming the victim into a rebel.

Contemporary Trends: Intersectionality and Agency:

In the twenty-first century, the portrayal of women in Indian literature has become increasingly bold and fragmented. Writers like Arundhati Roy and Meena Kandasamy question against the idea of a monolithic “Indian Woman.” Kundanika Kapadia’s *Saat Pagala Aakashma* (Seven Steps in the Sky) also serves as a regional cornerstone for the “New Woman” in the Gujarati literature.

- **Caste and Gender:** Contemporary literature highlights that a woman’s struggle is intersected by caste. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy illustrates how society controls female desire to maintain social and caste boundaries.
- **The Reclamation of Space:** Women are portrayed in contemporary writing as taking space in the political, professional, and personal domains rather than asking for permission to exist. This often leads to “messy” and unrefined truths that completely reject the “Sita” ideal.
- **Ontological change:** Kapadia’s seminal work represents a radical break from the ‘Ghar-Sansar’ narratives that dominated 20th-century Gujarati prose. She deconstructs the sacredness of the patriarchal household by following the protagonist Vasudha’s journey from an oppressive marriage to an open-minded society. Her writing promotes a complete conceptual change in the Indian woman’s understanding of her right to spiritual freedom and isolation.

Conclusion: From Silence to Self-Assertion:

The portrayal of women in Indian literature has undergone a significant transformation, from the silent suffering of the epic era to the vocal, often uncomfortable truths of the contemporary period. We have moved from the pedestal of the idolised goddess to the grim realities of the streets. Though today, literature reflects the Indian woman not as a symbol of the nation’s honor, but as a person with the right to be flawed, ambitious, and autonomous.



While the patriarchal structures of the past have not entirely vanished, they are no longer the only voices in the room. As writers continue to break the “shackles of the Shastras,” the portrayal of women remains the most dynamic and transformative element of Indian literature. This transition represents a fundamental breakdown of the patriarchal “gaze” that has historically defined the female experience in the subcontinent, rather than just a shift in character tropes. The prevailing literary trend is one of radical restoration, even though the “Sita” archetype—which is based on silence and sacrifice—continues to have a spectral influence over the cultural imagination. In the Gujarati writing, this is best illustrated by Kundanika Kapadia’s *SaatPagalaAakashma* (Seven Steps in the Sky), which serves as a regional cornerstone for the “New Woman,” rejecting domestic entrapment in favour of intellectual and spiritual expansion. The “Indian woman” has evolved from a silent object of description to a vocal subject of experience, from the clandestine scratches on a kitchen wall in *Amar Jiban* to the tangible, intersectional defiance found in the works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy.

Ultimately, the trajectory from archetype to autonomy implies that the future of modern Indian literature lies in its ability to provide a platform for women to “perform” and embraces their own identities in all these complex, messy, and unrefined truths—moving beyond the mythic to ultimately recognise the human.

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