



# The Empowered Pen: The Enduring contribution of women writers in Indian Literature

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**Abstract**— *The contribution of women in Indian literature has been pivotal, shaping and enriching the literary landscape of the nation. Over the years, women have played a significant and transformative role in the landscape of Indian literature, showcasing their creative abilities, resilience, and the feminine identity. Their contribution spans across various literary genres, including poetry, fiction, memoirs, and plays, highlighting diverse themes. This paper explores the invaluable contribution of women writers in Indian literature, throughout history to the contemporary era as well as displaying their unique perspectives, thematic explorations, and literary achievements. It also discusses the emergence of feminist literature in India, emphasizing how women writers have given voice to the marginalized and championed gender equality. Moreover, it aims to highlight the indelible mark left by women in Indian literature, emphasizing their phenomenal contributions in enriching the literary landscape, empowering generations, and fostering social progress.*



**Keywords**— *Contribution, Feminine identity, Indian literature, Literary genres, women writers.*

## INTRODUCTION

the introduction Indian literature has a rich and diverse tradition that is characterized by great complexity and richness. It encompasses a vast range of languages, themes, and styles, reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent. The literary traditions in India can be traced back to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, which existed around 2500 BCE. However, the earliest surviving works of Indian literature are the Vedas, a collection of ancient religious texts written in Sanskrit. Throughout history, the voices of Indian women have often been silenced or marginalized. Nevertheless, Indian women have consistently used literature as a powerful tool to express themselves and to challenge the patriarchal norms and oppressive cultural practices that have dominated Indian society for centuries and carving out a space for their voices to be heard. Their contributions to literature have been significant, yet often overlooked.

Over the centuries, Indian literature displays the significant contributions of women writers, who contributed

across a variety of genres. A number of these talented and creative female writers and poets defied societal norms and showcased their immense talent and creativity. The contributions of Indian women in literature can be traced back to the ancient Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Mahabharata. Women such as Maitreyi and Gargi, who were part of the Vedic system, challenged traditional gender roles and advocated for equal rights.

Rishi Lopamudra is credited with writing the Vishnudharmottara Purana (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE). A prominent figure in the history of Indian literature, she is considered one of the earliest female authors to be known. In the Vishnudharmottara Purana, temple architecture, paintings, sculpture, and other arts are described in detail. In Buddhism, there is a collection of poems called Therigatha, also known as “Verses of the Elder Nuns,” which is a collection of poems that are attributed to the early Buddhist nuns. The text is composed of verses composed by Buddhist women practitioners. As they write these poems, they express their spiritual experiences, struggles, and

insights into the teachings of the Buddha that have helped them throughout their lives. One of the most notable figures from this period is the Tamil poet Avvaiyar, who lived in the Sangam era (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE). These poems are referred to as Sangam literature. Many women poets, known as “Auvaiyars,” contributed to this body of work. It is their poetry that has made them highly regarded for its literary beauty and wisdom, as they addressed themes such as love, morality, and social issues. Avvaiyar’s poetry also reflects a deep understanding of human emotions and a keen observation of society. Her verses continue to be revered and studied today.

Among the most renowned Tamil poet-saints of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE are Andal and Akka Mahadevi. Both of those poets are known for their devotional poetry. The Tiruppavai and the Nachiar Tirumozhi are two of Andal’s most renowned compositions. An important Kannada poet-saint, Akka Mahadevi composed vachanas, “I Have Taken Refuge” is one of her most famous vachanas, which illustrates the spontaneous expressions of devotion to Lord Shiva. Both of these women have played an important role in the Bhakti movement in South India and have made significant contributions.

During the medieval period in Indian literature, which roughly spanned from the 6<sup>th</sup> century up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, female writers contributed significantly to enhancing the literary landscape of the period, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of Indian literature. Often from diverse backgrounds and regions, these women writers contributed to numerous genres, including poetry, narrative literature, and religious texts. In this period, several women Sufi saints in India composed mystical poetry. Rabia Basri (8<sup>th</sup> century CE), Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (18<sup>th</sup> century CE), and Lalla Ded (14<sup>th</sup> century CE). They are among the notable female Sufi poets who expressed their devotion and spiritual experiences through their verses. Another mystic poetess, Lal Deb, who lived in Kashmir around the 14<sup>th</sup> century also known as Laleshwari and Lalla Arifa, in her verses, which are composed in Kashmiri, explores the themes of spirituality, love, and the emergence of one’s true selves. In her collection of poems, “Lal Vakhs,” she demonstrates an innate wisdom and spiritual insight that is both profound and insightful. Another notable poetess and devotee of Lord Krishna who lived in Rajasthan during the 16<sup>th</sup> century was Mirabai, who was regarded as a remarkable poetess. Bhajans (devotional songs) of hers are renowned for their emotional intensity and unwavering devotion. Her famous composition, “Mere To Giridhar Gopal,” expresses her devotion to Krishna and renunciation of social norms. Her works were widely circulated throughout India, and her bhajans are still sung today.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there was another important saint-poet of the Varkari Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra named Muktabai. She composed abhangas (devotional songs) in Marathi, emphasizing devotion to Lord Vitthal (a form of Lord Krishna). Her work, collectively known as “Muktabai Abhangas,” is revered for its simplicity, spirituality, and social critique.

While most of the aforementioned women writers were poets, Chand Bardai stands out as a female prose writer. She is known for composing the epic poem “Prithviraj Raso” in Avadhi language. The epic narrates the life and exploits of the legendary king Prithviraj Chauhan and is considered a significant work in medieval Indian literature and a classic literary work.

The colonial era witnessed a significant shift in the landscape of women’s writing in India. English became a prominent language of literary expression, and women writers began to use it to convey their thoughts and experiences. Toru Dutt, born in 1856, is often considered India’s first woman poet in English. Her collection of poems, “A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields,” showcases her talent for blending Western literary styles with Indian themes. Her another work “Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan,” beautifully captured Indian mythology and folklore, presenting them to a wider audience. Toru Dutt’s writings reflected her deep knowledge of Indian culture and her ability to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Another influential writer of the colonial era is Sarojini Naidu, known as the “Nightingale of India.” Naidu was a poet and political activist who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. Her poetry, characterized by its lyrical beauty and patriotic fervor, highlighted themes of freedom, nationalism, and women’s rights. Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surayya, emerged as a prominent voice in Indian literature during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Her bold and confessional style broke new ground in Indian literature, opening up discussions on taboo subjects and challenging societal norms. Kamala Das’s works, such as “My Story” and “The Descendants,” offered a unique perspective on the complexities of being a woman in India during the colonial era. Amrita Pritam, a Punjabi writer, left an exceptional mark on Indian literature with her evocative poetry and poignant novels. Her writings reflected her experiences as a woman and explored themes of love, longing, and the struggles faced by women in a male-dominated society. Pritam’s literary contributions resonated deeply with readers, earning her accolades and making her a celebrated figure in Indian literature.

However, it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that women began to emerge as writers. Indian women writers from this era, such as Kamala Markandaya and Ismat

Chughtai, explored themes of caste, class, gender, and identity in their works and started to challenge traditional societal roles and address issues of gender inequality, patriarchy, and social injustice through their writing. Ismat Chughtai, an Urdu writer, known for her frank and bold depictions of female sexuality. Her short stories in “Lihaaf” (The Quilt), openly discussed female sexuality, homosexuality, challenged prevailing norms and desire that were taboo at the time. While, Markandaya’s novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, chronicles the life of a peasant woman in rural India.

In the post-independence era, women writers such as Mahashweta Devi and Arundhati Roy addressed issues of socio-political injustice, human rights, and environmental degradation in their work. Devi’s *Draupadi*, is a powerful novel that portrayed the story of a young tribal woman who is sexually assaulted by upper-caste men, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender. Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997 and became one of the best-selling books by an Indian author which delved into the complexities of gender and sexual identity through the experiences of two young twins from Kerala and East-West cultural encounters.

Contemporary Indian women writers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy (who has also written non-fiction works), have explored issues of cultural identity, diaspora, and belonging. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* examines the complexity of identity through the experiences of a second-generation Bengali immigrant family in the United States, while Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* critiques contemporary politics while exploring the stories of marginalized communities. Desai’s work, in particular, has provided insight into the lives of Indian women and their struggles in today’s world.

Several Indian women writers have used feminist and postcolonial theories to analyze and critique the society around them. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels explore the experiences of South Asian women who have migrated to the United States. In her novel *Mistress of Spices*, she depicts the life of an Indian woman living in Oakland, California, who runs a spice shop. Shashi Deshpande, in her novel *That Long Silence*, examines the life of a middle-class Indian woman who is struggling to assert her independence in a patriarchal society.

The intersectionality of Indian women’s experiences of caste, class, religion, sexuality, and disability have also been explored by several writers. Bama’s *Karukku* is a semi-autobiographical novel that describes her life as a Dalit woman. This work demonstrates the importance of highlighting the diverse and multifaceted experiences of Indian women. Meena Kandasamy’s *When I Hit You* is a

novel that deals with domestic violence and the experience of being a feminist in India. The novel portrays the struggle of an educated woman who falls in love with a charming man and later discovers that he is abusive.

Many Indian women writers have also used their works to critique heteronormativity and explore queer issues. Writer and filmmaker Deepa Mehta addressed the stigma surrounding homosexuality and AIDS in her film trilogy *Fire, Earth, and Water*, while author and illustrator Priya Kuriyan’s *Amma and the Hamsters* portrays a young girl coming to terms with her mother’s sexuality.

Thus, we observed that the works of Indian women writers have contributed to feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional discourses. Their works can be seen as an effective tool for challenging dominant structures and providing an alternative perspective on issues that have been historically ignored or oppressed in Indian literature. The writers have used literature as a form of resistance, to challenge oppressive structures and norms, and to advocate for social justice.

The use of feminist frameworks in Indian literature has been crucial, as it has helped to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for women’s rights. Many Indian women writers have used their works to portray the complex and diverse experiences of women living in India today. By examining the intersection of gender and caste, race, disability, and sexuality, writers have highlighted the diverse experiences of Indian women and exposed the intersectionality of various forms of oppression.

Post colonialism has been another important framework used by Indian women writers. They have challenged dominant Western narratives about India and its people and provided a complex and nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and political realities of the country. The writers have highlighted the impact of colonialism on the Indian psyche and the ongoing struggles of postcolonial India.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Indian women writers have played a significant role in reshaping the literary landscape of India. Their works offer alternative perspectives on issues of gender, caste, class, identity, and culture and demonstrate the power of storytelling to challenge oppressive structures. By examining the works of Indian women writers through feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional frameworks, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and social issues faced by Indian women.

The influence of Indian women writers can be seen in the growing number of women authors being published and

recognized in the literary world. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality in the publishing industry and in society as a whole. It is essential to include Indian women's voices in literary discussions to provide a more accurate and nuanced picture of Indian society.

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