

## **Expressions of Women Authors in India and World Literature: From Earliest Known Female Writing to Modern Era**

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### **Abstract**

From ancient times to the richness of the 20th century, women authors have played an exceptional role in shaping literature. Indeed, these authors, both in the West and in India, went further in setting cultural boundaries, challenging norms of societies, and turning literature into a space for social commentary as well as personal expression. From the seventh century BCE poet Sappho to revolutionary feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, and from the devotional poets of medieval India to modern feminist icons like Mahasweta Devi, women writers have adorned the pages of literary material with the ease and richness of how creativity can nestle with cultural heritage, personal identity, and societal change.

Indian women's contributions to the literary world have been significant in broadening the global literary canon, providing alternative narratives from the often patriarchal views of old. Indian women have documented their experiences, expressed identities, and expressed issues on the matters that affect them from caste and religion to gender and social justice-through their work. It continues into the present day where current Indian women writers write upon foundations laid out by earlier women writers; and contribute to a literature that reflects the diversity, yet complexity of the society it portrays.

**Key words : Cultural boundaries, Medieval, Feminist, Cultural heritage, Patriarchal, social justice, Diversity, Complexity.**

The earliest known woman writer was Sappho of Lesbos, who surfaced in the seventh century BCE. Her poetry often breaks into fragments, though it is rich in depth of love and longing with the emotional subtleties of relationships-a concern for most readers throughout the centuries. Sappho's voice is prized as that of a wonderland of antique literature; her legacy as a female poet is particularly empowering given the limited roles and opportunities afforded women in her lifetime. In the vivid expression of desire and longing, Sappho was bold in bringing those emotions into the public domain, often considered places for private thoughts. Partially preserved work inspired countless poets to venture forth, for this was evidence of how women writers throughout history used literature as a means of intimate self-expression and critique upon gender roles (Abby, 2023).

In the Middle Ages, the writer Christine de Pizan was a trailblazer in determining that women, when most opportunity for learning was available to men only, had potential for intellect. Her book *The Book of the City of Ladies* presents an argument for intellectual equality in direct opposition to the misogynistic attitudes of her time. Christine's writing touched a very significant chord in proto-feminist thought, especially the sense of female intellectuality. This is why later feminist writers, especially Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, went to become the bedrock for feminist philosophy. Wollstonecraft's call for women's education and equality reached well into the 20th century, inspiring many generations of women to reassess their roles in society and desire equal opportunity (UNA Academy, 2022).

Not only that, but the 17th century saw also the beginnings of professional writing among women, at least in England, in such figures as Aphra Behn, who is often celebrated as the first woman to earn her living by her pen. Behn's novel *Oroonoko*, although very daring for the time concerning its focus on slavery, has been an acknowledged part of English literature for a long time. This novel also touches much upon other concerns such as issues of sexuality and power play, so it was quite daring for it to be written during such a time of forbidden views on female sexuality. Her works inspired a later female author, Charlotte Lennox for instance to write *The Female Quixote*, based on satire which criticized feminine stereotypes and the impossible expectations bestowed on women.

Since the 18th and 19th century onwards, the writing by women in the continent has grown up concerning dealing with societal and political issues much more. Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, militantly opposed the establishment view that women were intellectually inferior to men and fueled feminist movements with arguments for equality and education. Ideas placed within the pages of the book would be heard in writers throughout the 19th century, all the way into the 20th century, leading figures like Virginia Woolf to continue building on ideas first proposed by Wollstonecraft. In Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*, she literally outlines the practical barriers that women writers come up against. She argued that for a woman to write, she needs economic independence and private space, which have been dominated by men for thousands of years. Woolf's essay is a masterpiece and a foundation for feminist literature because it points out the pitfalls that exist in the manifestations of gender inequality beyond the walls of the literary world.

The early years of the 20th century marked a turning point, as women began to be allowed into higher education institutions like Oxford. This represented new possibilities for women writers. Vera Brittain and Dorothy L. Sayers are but two examples of women who contributed to the novel after graduating. They brought their own experiences into their works, wove broader social issues into them-from the traumas of war to the pursuit of gender equality. Among other examples, Brittain's *Testament of Youth* and Sayers's *Gaudy Night* best capture the way women's literature

embraced personal experiences along with cultural and political issues pertinent to the era. Other writers of her generation from the newly open doors of Oxford are Iris Murdoch, Jeanette Winterson, and Wendy Cope. Murdoch's philosophical novels, such as *The Sea*, *The Sea*, handle explorations of identity and morality; Winterson's semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* deals with questions about sexual identity. Cope's *Two Cures for Love*, a collection of poems, through witticism, humor, can conveniently portray modern relations; hence, women authors continued to redefine literary themes in relation to the contemporary causes.

Just like the other women writers in the West, Indian women authors continually play a big part in literature as they sew together themes of cultural heritage, personal identity, and social change. The Indian women's literature has its roots in the ancient traditions that set down the narrative for centuries. The earliest Indian women's literature appears in the *Therigatha*, a collection of poems by female Buddhist nuns circa 6th century BCE, where poets such as *Mutta* engaged with themes of personal freedom and spiritual liberation. This tradition proves early literature that resides within a society where, though the voices of women seldom arrived, they emerged first and established a precedent for subsequent Indian women writers as expressions and empowerment (Koshy, 2004).

The Sangam period situated between 100 BCE and 250 CE enlighten the women poets who illuminated love and desire as sources of complexity in the emotional lives of women. These poems, just like those of the *Kuruntokai*, did pioneering work in becoming the voice of celebrating women's lives and emotions. By the 12th century, the Bhakti movement saw poets like *Akkamahadevi* challenge patriarchy and social norms and find expressions of personal devotion that redefined the role of women in literature. Her poetry, filled with self-awareness and spiritual longing, captured deep meanings for the readers, and this testifies to how women writers could share personal and universal themes with others. Similarly, other Bhakti poets, such as *Sule Sankavva* and *Janabai*, addressed issues like caste discrimination and harassment of unprivileged women.

The Mughal age gave a new type of cultural atmosphere, which comes forth beautifully in works like *Humayun Nama*, from *Princess Gulbadan Begum*, a historical account of life in the royal court from the women's angle. However strong the limitations were, what Begum's work shows is that Indian women were writing more about their lives and experiences, which contributed to the new literary trend in India. The colonial rule that came after was a hostile era where the old order of Indian society was broken by British rule, which enforced fresh cultural values. However, women's literature experienced renewed interest in the later part of the 19th century; therefore, the likes of *Savitribai Phule* would raise the banner of women's education and social reform through their own writing. Education was very much at the forefront of Phule's work; she challenged interpretations from patriarchal religious literature and touted education as a tool of empowerment.

Female spirituality in the form of sentiment was well done in the works of Andal and Mirabai during the medieval period. Andal was among the very famous Alwar saints of Tamil Nadu. She wrote devotional poems on Lord Vishnu, combining her intense religious fervor with the very powerful sense of personal agency. Her poems, Thiruppavai and Nachiar Tirumozhi, have survived so long. They are still chanted with the lyric beauty and great spirituality. Andal's work goes beyond her verses, as this contemporary feminist continued the principles of her writing by working against the normative expectations of women when dealing with personal devotion: She accepted female empowerment. Similarly, in 16th-century Rajasthani, Bhakti poet Mirabai, as an assertive countervoice to the social current of what was considered proper for a princess, devoted her life and work to Lord Krishna. The intensity of emotions and the deep personal devotion which permeate her poetry reflect her rejection of worldly pressures-a demonstration of how literature could be an outlet both for spiritual and social liberation by women (Kumar, 2018).

The literature of Indian women assumed new dimensions in the 20th century with the ever-increasing feminist overtones and political consciousness. Mahasweta Devi was one of the most influential feminist writers in India, who had utilised her work to reflect the struggles of the marginalized communities, especially the women of the tribal communities. This would be seen as a typical example in her short story, Draupadi, portraying a woman from the tribal background fighting oppression and violence. Novels such as Binding Vines by Shashi Deshpande render the intricate lives of women from various strata and weave issues of domestic violence and gender discrimination. Such writings not only bring up social predicaments among Indian women but also speak about the fragility of their strength and resilience. They reflect a shift towards more politically awakened and socially involved literature.

Indian women's contributions to the literary world have been significant in broadening the global literary canon, providing alternative narratives from the often patriarchal views of old. Indian women have documented their experiences, expressed

identities, and expressed issues on the matters that affect them from caste and religion to gender and social justice-through their work. It continues into the present day where current Indian women writers write upon foundations laid out by earlier women

writers; and contribute to a literature that reflects the diversity, yet complexity of the society it portrays. Women authors, throughout history-from India or elsewhere have not only enriched literature but have, more often than not, thrown literature as a vehicle for social change. Such works by writers who spoke their own personal experiences, questioned society, and spoke of inequalities created a legacy that was bound to inspire generations of readers and writers. Their works served as a cultural bridge, sparking conversation and resonance that continued to underscore the role literature played in shaping and reflecting humanity at its most complex for a very long time.

For a woman who does not depend on a man for happiness or professional fulfillment, the traditional notion that “a woman is, or ought to be, a kind, polite, and joyful companion in life, the honour and ornament of the household, and inclined towards tenderness” is unequivocally sexist. Feminism is broadly acknowledged as a challenge to patriarchal supremacy, both domestically and in society at large. The feminist intellectual movement transforms patriarchal modes of expression through discourse and writing to validate the emergence of a new class of authors as intellectual women. Feminism is a political movement that promotes women's equal involvement in all areas of society, encompassing electoral politics, education, the workforce, and corporate governance. Feminism, as a doctrine, posits that women possess the capacity to evoke a sense of deficiency in men.

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