



Research Article

From Silence to Speech: Shifting Representations of Women in Indian Writing in English from Medieval Antecedents to Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines how representations of women in Indian Writing in English (IWE) have evolved, tracing a path from the silenced and mythologised figures of early colonial texts to the complex female protagonists of contemporary postcolonial fiction. Using feminist literary criticism as its main framework, and drawing on the work of Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Susie Tharu, the study argues that the portrayal of women in IWE is not a simple progression from oppression to liberation. Rather, it is a layered and contested process shaped by literary form, colonial history, caste, class, and religious identity, resulting in diverse expressions of female voice and agency. The analysis focuses on key works by Toru Dutt, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, positioning them within the wider context of feminist literary history and postcolonial cultural politics in India.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of women's representation in Indian Writing in English (IWE) is both a literary and a political history. To trace how women have been figured—named, silenced, celebrated, confined, and increasingly given the authority of self-narration—across the long arc of IWE from its colonial beginnings to the present is to trace the uneven, contested, and often painful process by which Indian women have moved from the margins to the centre of literary consciousness. This is not a triumphalist narrative: the movement from silence to speech in IWE has been partial, differentially distributed across lines of caste, class, and religion, and frequently complicated by the competing demands of colonial discourse, nationalist ideology, and feminist politics.

The development of Indian Writing in English is inextricably linked to the context of British colonialism. The earliest significant works in English by Indian authors, such as Rammohun Roy's reformist prose and the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Toru Dutt, emerged within a colonial educational framework that both provided new avenues for literary expression and imposed constraints on what could be articulated and to whom. In this early phase, women were primarily represented as objects of reformist discourse—figures to be emancipated from practices such as sati, child marriage, and purdah—rather than as autonomous literary subjects. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) has argued, the 'woman question' in nineteenth-century Indian intellectual and literary life was fundamentally shaped by the parameters of colonial discourse, even when these frameworks were ostensibly being contested.

This paper examines the literary-historical trajectory of women's representation in IWE across four distinct periods: the colonial era's contested construction of the Indian woman as both reformist object and nationalist symbol; the mid-twentieth century's focus on women's interiority and social constraint in the works of Kamala Markandaya and early Anita Desai; the post-Emergency period's explicitly feminist literary politics in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande; and the contemporary era's diversification of women's voices in the writings of Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapur, among others. The analysis employs feminist literary criticism as its principal framework, with particular attention to issues of voice, narrative authority, genre, and the politics of women's self-representation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Literary Criticism and the Indian Context

2.1 Western Feminist Literary Criticism and Its Postcolonial Revisions

The theoretical foundations of this study are informed by two intersecting traditions: Western feminist literary criticism and its postcolonial feminist adaptations. Elaine Showalter's (1977) influential model of women's literary history, which delineates 'feminine,' 'feminist,' and 'female' phases of literary production, offers a valuable starting point. However, this framework requires substantial revision when applied to the context of

Indian Writing in English (IWE). Showalter's model, rooted in the history of British women's writing, assumes a relatively autonomous women's literary tradition. In contrast, the history of women's representation in IWE is characterized by greater discontinuity, deeper entanglement with colonial and nationalist politics, and a more pronounced influence of language and audience considerations than Showalter's model accounts for.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) concept of 'the madwoman in the attic,' which refers to repressed female rage and creativity emerging within and against patriarchal literary constraints, is particularly resonant in the context of Indian Writing in English. Women writers in this tradition have often navigated the dual pressures of patriarchal literary norms and colonial cultural politics. As several critics have observed, Anita Desai's protagonists frequently exemplify a figure similar to the Gilbertian 'madwoman': women whose inner lives exceed the boundaries imposed by available social forms and who consequently endure significant psychological consequences for their heightened interiority.

2.2 Spivak, Tharu, and the Politics of the Subaltern Woman

Postcolonial feminist critiques by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Susie Tharu are especially relevant to Indian Writing in English (IWE). Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern woman is doubly silenced by both colonial archives and patriarchal structures within her community, which significantly affects how women's representation in IWE is interpreted. Most women characters in IWE are not subalterns in Spivak's strict sense; they are usually middle or upper class, educated, urban, and often English-speaking. However, subaltern women still appear at the margins of IWE, represented by domestic servants, the rural poor, and tribal women who serve as supporting characters in stories focused on more privileged women.

Susie Tharu's (1991) work on women's literary history in India provides a valuable feminist framework for this analysis. Tharu highlights that women's literary history is shaped by social factors such as caste, class, religion, and regional tradition, all of which affect access to literacy and literary production. In IWE, women characters are not a homogeneous group; they reflect a diverse and differentiated field shaped by the authors' social positions and the specific literary and political contexts in which they were created.

3. The Colonial Era: The Woman as Reformist Object and Nationalist Symbol

3.1 Toru Dutt and the Reclamation of Sanskrit Tradition

Toru Dutt (1856–1877) holds a distinctive place in the history of Indian Writing in English (IWE) as its first major woman poet and as an author who engaged with representations of women in the Sanskrit literary tradition with both reverence and critical insight. Her posthumously published collection, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), retells narratives from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These retellings reflect her extensive knowledge of Sanskrit literature, her French

literary education, and her unique perspective as a young Indian woman composing in English for both Indian and BrDutt's portrayal of female figures from the Sanskrit tradition is notable for its empathetic specificity. Her depictions of Savitri, Sita, and Lakshmi present them not solely as embodiments of Hindu female virtue, but as individuals whose inner experiences—love, grief, and determination—are conveyed with emotional clarity. However, Dutt's poetry does not interrogate the patriarchal structures that shape her female subjects' lives; instead, it affirms women's devotion and endurance within these frameworks. As Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) observes, this approach reflects both a limitation and a historical context: Dutt wrote prior to the development of feminist critical consciousness in Indian intellectual discourse, and her literary reclamation of Sanskrit women is best understood as an expression of cultural nationalism rather than proto-feminism.

3.2 Nationalism, the 'New Woman,' and Her Constraints

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indian Writing in English introduced the idea of the 'nationalist woman.' This character represented a reformed version of Hindu or Indian womanhood shaped by the nationalist movement. She is shown as educated, virtuous at home, and spiritually advanced, created as a response to colonial criticism of Indian patriarchy. While this figure seems to give women more agency and visibility, she actually supports a form of nationalism that limits women's roles to cultural and spiritual areas.

Rabindranath Tagore's fiction in English, especially *The Home and the World* (1919), takes a closer look at the idea of the nationalist woman and her limits. The main character, Bimala, goes through a political awakening when she joins the swadeshi movement and meets the influential nationalist Sandip. This experience is both freeing and dangerous, as it brings her new understanding but also makes her vulnerable to manipulation. Tagore's novel is notable because it does not simply praise or criticize women's political involvement. Instead, it explores the complex and uncertain position of the nationalist woman.

4. Mid-Twentieth Century: Interiority, Social Constraint, and the Female Bildungsroman

4.1 Kamala Markandaya and the Social Novel

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) represents a significant shift in the portrayal of women in Indian Writing in English (IWE). Instead of presenting a feminist critique of patriarchy, the novel centers on the lived experience of a rural Indian woman. Rukmani, the narrator, confronts poverty, land loss, and traditional restrictions on women. Her reflective and honest narrative distinguishes her from earlier IWE characters, who were often depicted as subjects for reform or study. However, Markandaya's novel reflects its historical context and the expectations of its primary audience. Written mainly for British readers, it portrays India's rural poor sympathetically while maintaining a sense of distance. Rukmani's acceptance of

hardship, absence of political anger, and resilience within a patriarchal society are presented as cultural strengths rather than challenges to be questioned. From a feminist perspective, Rukmani's voice is authentic yet constrained, shaped by social norms and literary market demands.

4.2 Anita Desai and the Interior Life

Anita Desai's novels, including *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), and *Clear Light of Day* (1980), provide a nuanced exploration of women's inner lives in mid-twentieth century Indian Writing in English. Her protagonists are typically educated, middle-class women from the post-Independence era whose private thoughts often conflict with societal expectations. Their marriages are characterized by misunderstanding, their families are both supportive and restrictive, and professional opportunities remain largely inaccessible.

Maya, the protagonist of *Cry the Peacock*, exemplifies Desai's most intense portrayal of feminine interior conflict. Her psychological decline, marked by heightened sensitivity, difficulty adapting to married life, and eventual violence, closely resembles Gilbert and Gubar's 'madwoman'—the emergence of repressed female agency that society can only interpret as pathology. Desai's technical skill lies in presenting Maya's inner world with lyrical precision, allowing readers to experience her perspective before forming judgments. While the novel does not explicitly identify patriarchy as the cause of Maya's suffering, its narrative choices offer an implicit feminist critique by highlighting how the social environment fails to accommodate her full humanity.

5. Post-Emergency Feminist Literary Politics: Shashi Deshpande

Following the Indian Emergency (1975–1977), Indian Writing in English began to portray women in new ways, influenced by the rise of feminist literary politics. The women's movement in India gained momentum in the late 1970s and 1980s, focusing on issues such as dowry deaths, rape laws, and domestic violence. This movement created a new social and political context for women writers. Shashi Deshpande's novels, particularly *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), stand out as significant literary responses from this period.

Deshpande's novels mark a fundamental shift in narrative strategy and serve as feminist political interventions. Her female protagonists not only possess interiority but also actively question the social structures shaping their lives. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya critically examines the sources of her silence, including her marriage, social role, and internalised expectations of femininity, all of which have constrained her literary voice. The novel's title underscores its central argument: the long silence is both personal and structural, shaped by ideological forces that Jaya begins to recognise and challenge by the novel's end.

To be a woman, I thought, is to live with the knowledge that you are secondary, that your needs, your desires, your ambitions are secondary. — Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (1988) Deshpande's approach to feminism differs from liberal feminism, as her female characters do not achieve freedom simply by overcoming social barriers. Instead, her protagonists often participate in their own silence, shaped by patriarchal ideas they recognize but find difficult to abandon. This realistic portrayal of their inner lives reveals how oppression operates both externally and by influencing thought. As a result, Deshpande's fiction offers a depth that protest narratives often lack.

6. Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction: Pluralizing Women's Voices

6.1 Arundhati Roy and the Politics of Form

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) marks a pivotal moment in the literary history of women's representation in Indian Writing in English (IWE), due not only to its exceptional commercial and critical success but also to the radicalism of its feminist-postcolonial politics. The character of Ammu, a divorced woman from a Syrian Christian family in Kerala who defies the 'Love Laws' of caste and community by loving Velutha, an Untouchable man, emerges as the most fully developed and politically nuanced female protagonist in the IWE tradition up to that point. Ammu's narrative is inextricably linked to the caste politics that render her transgression fatal: the patriarchal violence she endures is not solely a matter of gender, but rather the result of the intersection of gender, caste, and class within a specific historical and social context.

Roy's formal innovations, including her non-linear narrative structure, lyrical compression of historical time, and the use of a child's perspective to defamiliarize social norms, constitute a feminist political intervention. The novel's structural rejection of linear progression reinforces its thematic assertion: the 'Love Laws' that dictate who may love whom and to what extent are not natural or inevitable, but are instead human constructs that can be recognized, even if they cannot be transcended. Ammu's tragedy lies not in her inability to perceive these laws, but in her acute awareness of them, for which she ultimately pays with her life.

6.2 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Diaspora Feminism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction, previously noted in this journal for its emphasis on female solidarity, examines the challenges faced by Indian diaspora women. Her characters confront patriarchal Indian traditions and the alienation of immigration to America. These women experience double displacement: they are separated from families and communities that both support and restrict them, and they cannot fully adopt American feminist ideals of independence. This perspective on diaspora feminist politics contends that Indian women's liberation should be informed by Indian cultural traditions, community, and memory, rather than Western feminist standards. This approach represents a significant shift in contemporary Indian Writing in English. It

also links Divakaruni's work to broader postcolonial feminist debates about the limitations of universal Western feminism and underscores the importance of feminist practices grounded in specific cultures.

6.3 Manju Kapur and the Ordinary Woman

Manju Kapur's fiction, particularly *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), and *Home* (2006), marks a significant transformation in the portrayal of women within the Indian Writing in English tradition. Kapur consistently centers ordinary women, whose lives are defined not by extraordinary events but by the ongoing negotiation of daily responsibilities, including marriage, family, desire, and ambition. These negotiations exemplify the everyday struggles inherent in feminist practice. Her protagonists are typically educated, middle-class women from contemporary Delhi, whose feminist ambitions frequently come into conflict with familial and societal expectations.

Kapur's literary contribution is her ability to render ordinariness politically significant. She contends that the everyday negotiations of middle-class Indian women warrant the same degree of literary attention as the more dramatic acts of transgression represented by characters such as Roy's Ammu or Deshpande's Jaya. Her fiction implicitly critiques a feminist literary politics that privileges only overt resistance, emphasizing that incremental, daily acts of self-assertion within ordinary social frameworks represent a substantive form of political engagement that literature is particularly suited to illuminate.

7. DISCUSSION: Continuities, Ruptures, and the Feminist Literary Project in IWE

Several key trends shape the representation of women in Indian Writing in English (IWE). Although more women's voices are present, progress remains uneven. Since the colonial period, women's perspectives have become more central and politically engaged, yet these advances primarily benefit upper-caste, educated, urban women. Dalit, tribal, and rural women, while more visible, continue to be marginalized in mainstream IWE.

Feminist literary politics in IWE are shaped by how gender connects with caste, class, religion, region, and diaspora. Critics who focus only on gender miss the complex ways women are represented in different texts and situations. The most thoughtful feminist writing in IWE, seen in the works of Roy, Deshpande, and new Dalit women writers, recognises that gender is always linked to other social identities. The history of women's representation in IWE shows that moving from silence to speech is not just a simple shift from oppression to freedom. Women who have found their voices in this tradition have done so within certain ideas, like colonial, nationalist, and feminist beliefs, which shape what and how they write. The most important women-authored texts stand out not because they go beyond these ideas, but because they work within them thoughtfully, revealing their limits and challenging them in creative ways. This ongoing and sometimes difficult process is

at the heart of how women's representation in IWE has developed.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the evolving representation of women in Indian Writing in English, beginning with Toru Dutt's colonial-era reclamation of Sanskrit female figures, progressing through the mid-twentieth century's focus on women's social constraints and interiority, and culminating in Shashi Deshpande's explicitly feminist literary politics and the intersectionally aware fiction of the contemporary period. The progression from silence to speech is evident: contemporary women writers in Indian Writing in English articulate their experiences with a directness, authority, and political self-awareness that was largely inaccessible to earlier figures such as Toru Dutt or the protagonists of Anita Desai. Nevertheless, the conditions that enable such expression have consistently been shaped by specific social and historical contexts. For feminist literary critics, Indian Writing in English constitutes a rich yet underexplored archive for investigating how literary form contributes to the social construction of gender. Writers' decisions regarding narrative voice, genre, plot structure, and figurative language are simultaneously aesthetic and ideological, reflecting the pressures and opportunities of their respective historical moments. Analysing these choices through feminist literary criticism, with attention to the politics of voice, the complexities of representation, and the intersectional dimensions of gender, remains a vital and productive endeavor within Indian literary studies.

The silence referenced in this paper's title does not represent a historical condition that has been entirely overcome. It persists in the marginalisation of Dalit and Adivasi women's voices within the mainstream of Indian Writing in English, in the structural dynamics of the literary marketplace that influence which women's narratives reach global audiences, and in the internalised silences embodied by characters such as Deshpande's Jaya and Roy's Ammu. The transition from silence to speech remains an ongoing process, requiring continual renewal by each generation of women writers in English as they respond to the distinct challenges of their respective eras.

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