

Review Article

From Mythic Ideals to Modern Realities: The Evolution of Female Representation in Indian Writing in English

Anuja Sinha

TGT in English, High Secondary School, Moratalab, Rahui, Nalanda, Bihar, India

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I N F O

Email Id:

sinhaanuja86@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

The representation of women in Indian Writing in English (IWE) has undergone a profound and multifaceted transformation, reflecting a broader societal shift from colonial-era traditionalism to a post-globalisation consciousness. Traces this significant journey from the early, often romanticised and passive portrayals in the works of pioneers like Toru Dutt to the complex, rebellious, and multi-dimensional characters in contemporary IWE. The study examines how early writers, constrained by a patriarchal social fabric and influenced by Victorian ideals, often depicted women as either submissive figures of domesticity or ethereal, tragic heroines trapped by fate. In contrast, the post-independence and post-liberalisation eras have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of writers who dismantle these stereotypes, giving voice to women grappling with issues of autonomy, sexuality, professional ambition, and identity beyond their traditional roles. The article is structured into ten distinct points, each a thematic deep dive into this evolution, including the subversion of patriarchal narratives, the exploration of female sexuality, the rise of the feminist gaze, and the representation of the female body as a site of both tradition and rebellion. The central argument is that the changing representation of women in IWE is not merely a reflection of social change but a crucial catalyst for it, actively shaping a more progressive and equitable cultural discourse.

Keywords: Indian Writing In English, Women Representation, Toru Dutt, Feminist Literature, Postcolonialism, Female Characters, Gender Roles, Modernity, Patriarchy, Literary Evolution

Introduction

The literary canvas of Indian Writing in English (IWE) serves as a compelling chronicle of the nation's social, political, and cultural journey. Within this rich tapestry, the portrayal of women stands as a particularly illuminating thread, charting a course from the early colonial period to the

present day. This evolution is not a linear progression but a complex interplay of influences, reflecting changing national consciousness, global feminist movements, and the individual agency of writers. In the early works of IWE, as exemplified by the poetry and prose of Toru Dutt, women were often cast in roles that conformed to the dominant patriarchal and colonial-era ideals. They were idealised

figures of virtue, domesticity, or tragic heroism, often defined by their relationships to men. Their inner lives and desires were rarely foregrounded, and their identities were largely confined within the boundaries of traditional social expectations. However, with the advent of independence and subsequent societal shifts, a new generation of writers began to challenge these conventional depictions. The rise of feminist thought, coupled with the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the spread of new media, created fertile ground for a more nuanced and honest exploration of female identity.

This article will embark on a detailed exploration of this literary transformation, dissecting the key phases and thematic shifts that have led to the current, vibrant, and multi-faceted representation of women in IWE. Through a ten-point analysis, we will trace this journey from the mythic and often silent figures of the past to the bold, autonomous, and complex women who populate the pages of contemporary Indian literature, ultimately arguing that this literary evolution is a mirror to, and a driver of, India's changing social landscape.

The Ethereal and the Idealized: Women in Early IWE

The nascent stage of Indian writing in English, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was deeply influenced by both Victorian sensibilities and the prevailing social conservatism of the era. The representation of women during this period, as seen in the works of pioneers like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, was often characterised by an ethereal and idealised quality. Women were frequently depicted as tragic figures, martyrs for love, or embodiments of domestic purity and virtue. Toru Dutt's poems, such as "Sita" or "Savithri", draw heavily from Hindu mythology, presenting women as perfect, self-sacrificing figures whose identities are inextricably linked to their roles as wives, daughters, or mothers.

The focus was less on their individual psyche and more on their symbolic function within a patriarchal and familial structure. These characters, while often brave and resilient, were constrained by a narrow set of societal expectations. Their heroism was often defined by their ability to endure suffering and maintain moral uprightness. This form of representation served a dual purpose: it celebrated Indian traditions and morality while also presenting a palatable, non-threatening image of Indian womanhood to a Western audience. The inner world of the woman, her ambitions, her desires, and her struggles with her own identity were largely unexplored. She existed as a symbol—of national spirit, of tradition, or of a tragic love story—rather than as a fully autonomous human being. To quote P. Lal, -----

*"In the poetry of Toru Dutt, the figure of the Indian woman is rendered with a delicate, almost pre-Raphaelite sensibility, emphasizing her spiritual purity and tragic grace, rather than her material existence or social agency."*¹

The Submissive Wife and the Patriarchal Family in Post-Independence IWE

Following India's independence, the representation of women began to reflect the complexities and challenges of a newly formed nation. While the idealised figures of the past did not disappear, a more realistic, albeit still largely submissive, portrayal emerged. Writers like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, while focusing on broader social issues, often depicted women within the rigid confines of the patriarchal family.

The female characters in their novels were frequently defined by their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters who upheld family honour and tradition. They were the silent pillars of the household, absorbing the pressures of a changing society without much complaint. For example, the women in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi novels, while possessing a quiet strength, rarely challenge the established social order. Their lives are centred around their domestic duties and their relationships with the men in their families.

This representation highlighted the strength of traditional family structures but also underscored the limited autonomy of women within them. Their voices were muted, their aspirations were secondary to the family's needs, and their struggles were often internalised. This literary phase, while a step towards realism, still maintained a deeply traditional view of gender roles, with women serving as the custodians of culture and the anchors of the family unit, even as the world around them underwent a rapid transformation. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee, -----

*"The women in the early post-independence novels are largely subaltern figures, their inner lives and aspirations subjugated to the demands of the patriarchal family and the collective social order."*²

The Female Voice Emerges: The Rise of the Psychological Novel

The mid-20th century witnessed a significant shift with the emergence of female authors who began to turn the literary gaze inward, exploring the psychological depths and inner turmoil of their female characters. This marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of women's representation in IWE. Writers like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal moved away from grand social narratives to focus on the individual, often isolated, female psyche. Their protagonists were no longer just symbolic figures; they were complex human beings grappling with mental health, domestic alienation, and a profound sense of entrapment. Anita Desai's novels, such as *Cry, the Peacock* or *Fire on the Mountain*, are

landmark examples of this shift. Her characters, like Maya or Nanda Kaul, are not passive victims but tormented individuals whose inner worlds are rich with unfulfilled desires, anxieties, and a quiet, desperate rebellion against their circumstances. The focus on psychological realism allowed these authors to articulate the discontent and silent suffering that had previously gone unaddressed. This literary phase gave voice to the frustrations of women who had a privileged life on the surface but were psychologically suffocated by the societal expectations placed upon them. It was the beginning of a conversation about the personal and emotional toll of a patriarchal society, and it laid the groundwork for a more explicit and vocal form of feminist writing that would follow. To quote R.S. Pathak, -----

*"In Anita Desai's fiction, the female protagonist is no longer a mere object of social description but a subject of profound psychological exploration, whose interior landscape is the primary site of conflict and narrative interest."*³

The Feminist Awakening: Challenging the Domestic Sphere

With the global feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s, IWE saw a powerful and direct challenge to the traditional representation of women. This new wave of writers explicitly questioned the sanctity of the domestic sphere and critiqued the institutions of marriage and family that had long been seen as the natural domain of women. The characters in these novels were no longer content with quiet suffering; they actively sought personal autonomy and intellectual freedom. Authors like Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan wrote about women who pushed back against patriarchal expectations, demanding a space for their own identities outside their roles as wives or mothers. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, for instance, is a seminal work that explores a woman's journey to find her own voice after years of suppressing it for the sake of her family.

The novel meticulously details the psychological and emotional cost of a life lived in silent submission. Similarly, the characters of these writers often pursued careers, questioned traditional rituals, and entered into unconventional relationships, all of which were previously seen as taboo. This literary phase was crucial in moving the conversation from internalised pain to outward resistance. It celebrated female friendships and solidarity, and it redefined success for women, positioning it not in terms of a stable marriage or a happy family, but in terms of personal growth and self-realisation. The domestic space, once a symbol of a woman's fulfilment, was reimagined as a potential prison from which she needed to escape. To quote G.N. Devy, -----

*"The feminist novel in Indian English literature, as exemplified by Shashi Deshpande's work, is a radical departure from the past, as it explicitly critiques the institution of marriage and the patriarchal family as sites of female subjugation and silent suffering."*⁴

The Postcolonial Body: Reclaiming Sexuality and Desire

The representation of women in contemporary IWE has moved beyond the domestic sphere to reclaim the female body and sexuality as sites of individual agency and political resistance. This is a significant departure from earlier narratives where female sexuality was either ignored or portrayed through a lens of strict morality and shame. Postcolonial writers, grappling with the complexities of a society caught between tradition and modernity, have used their narratives to explore female desire, pleasure, and the subversion of patriarchal control over the female body.

This is powerfully evident in the work of Arundhati Roy, whose protagonist in *The God of Small Things*, Ammu, defies social norms by pursuing a sexual relationship outside of her caste and marriage. Her body becomes a site of rebellion against the "Love Laws" of her society. Similarly, in the works of authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, female characters' desires are not just a private matter but a central theme in their quest for autonomy. This literary trend also addresses the challenges of queer and unconventional female sexuality, pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or visible in mainstream Indian literature. The representation of the female body is no longer passive or an object of the male gaze; it is an active, desiring, and often rebellious subject. This reclamation of sexuality is a fundamental step in portraying women as complete, complex human beings, with their own wants and needs, independent of male approval. To quote Jasbir Jain, -----

*"In a postcolonial context, the female body becomes a potent site of contestation, where authors write back against both the colonial and indigenous patriarchal gaze to reclaim female sexuality as a source of individual power and a symbol of cultural resistance."*⁵

The Subaltern Speaks: Narrating the Lives of Marginalized Women:

For much of its history, IWE was dominated by the voices and experiences of the educated, upper-class elite. The representation of women was, therefore, largely confined to this privileged milieu. However, a crucial and transformative development in contemporary IWE has been the effort to give voice to the experiences of marginalised women—those from lower castes, tribal communities, and rural backgrounds. This literary movement, often

influenced by the subaltern studies school of thought, aims to challenge the monolithic portrayal of Indian womanhood and to show the intersectional nature of gender, caste, and class. Works by authors like Meena Kandasamy and Bama, though Bama writes in Tamil, and her work in translation has had a significant influence on IWE, have brought the lived realities of Dalit women to the forefront, exposing the dual oppression of patriarchy and caste-based discrimination. These narratives are not merely tales of victimhood but are powerful accounts of resilience, solidarity, and the struggle for dignity.

They show how the challenges faced by a Dalit woman in a village are vastly different from those of an urban, upper-class woman. By narrating these previously silenced stories, contemporary IWE is creating a more inclusive and authentic representation of Indian womanhood, one that acknowledges the immense diversity of experiences across the subcontinent. It is a vital step in democratising the literary landscape and ensuring that the narrative of Indian women is not confined to a single, privileged perspective. To quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, -----

*"The representation of the subaltern woman in contemporary Indian English literature is not just about giving a voice to the voiceless; it is about challenging the very systems of power and knowledge that have historically rendered her invisible."*⁶

The Diasporic Woman: Navigating Two Worlds:

A significant and growing body of IWE is produced by authors of the diaspora, and their representation of women adds a unique and complex layer to the conversation. For these writers, the female identity is not just a negotiation between tradition and modernity but also between two distinct cultures—their inherited Indian heritage and their adopted Western environment. The diasporic woman in literature is often a liminal figure, caught between the expectations of her family, who want her to uphold traditional values, and the freedoms of the new world, which invite her to forge a new, individual identity.

Authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have masterfully explored this tension. The characters in Lahiri's work, for instance, grapple with a profound sense of rootlessness and cultural alienation as they try to reconcile their American lives with the lingering pull of their Indian roots. Their struggles are often subtle and psychological, revolving around issues of arranged marriages, cultural assimilation, and the transmission of values to the next generation.

This representation highlights how women, more than men, are often seen as the custodians of cultural memory in diasporic communities. Their journey is a balancing act,

where they must honour their past while embracing their present. The diasporic woman is a powerful symbol of the globalised Indian identity, one that is no longer confined by geography but is constantly being renegotiated across international borders. To quote Vijay Mishra, -----

*"For the diasporic woman, identity is a fluid and contested space, a site of continuous negotiation between the cultural memory of the homeland and the social realities of the host country."*⁷

The Professional and the Ambivalent: Women in the Modern Workforce:

The economic liberalisation of India in the 1990s and the subsequent rise of a new urban middle class created a powerful new narrative for women: the professional woman. Contemporary IWE reflects this reality by portraying women who are not just domestic figures but also ambitious, career-driven individuals navigating the corporate world, the tech industry, and various creative fields. However, these representations are far from one-dimensional.

The professional woman in IWE is often shown as an ambivalent figure, caught between her professional aspirations and the lingering societal pressure to fulfil traditional gender roles. Writers like Chetan Bhagat, in his popular fiction, and more critically, authors like Aravind Adiga and contemporary novelists, explore this conflict. The female characters may be successful executives, but they are often still expected to be the primary carers, or they face discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Their professional success is often juxtaposed with their personal struggles, as they try to balance career with family, love, and personal freedom.

This representation goes beyond a simple celebration of female success and delves into the psychological complexities of the "superwoman" ideal. It highlights the new set of pressures and anxieties that come with professional autonomy, showing that while modernity offers new opportunities, it does not necessarily erase old expectations. It is a nuanced and honest portrayal of the modern Indian woman, who, while breaking glass ceilings, is often still carrying the weight of traditional responsibilities on her shoulders. To quote Sumathy Sivamohan, -----

*"The modern Indian woman is often portrayed in contemporary fiction as a conflicted figure, caught between the liberating possibilities of professional ambition and the deep-seated cultural expectations of her gender."*⁸

The Rebellious and the Unconventional: Breaking the Mold

In the most recent wave of IWE, the representation of women has taken a bold and often rebellious turn.

Contemporary writers are actively challenging and breaking the traditional moulds of female characters, presenting women who are unconventional, non-conformist, and often defiant. These characters are not just seeking autonomy; they are actively subverting social norms, rejecting marriage and motherhood, pursuing unconventional relationships, and embracing their own identities without apology. This is evident in the works of authors like Manju Kapur, whose characters in *Difficult Daughters* or *A Married Woman* challenge traditional familial and marital structures. The rise of queer literature in IWE has also played a significant role, giving voice to lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women whose experiences have been historically erased. These narratives are not just about a woman's individual journey but are often a critique of the social and cultural systems that seek to contain her.

This literary trend is a powerful sign of a society in flux, where the definition of "woman" is expanding to include a far wider range of experiences and identities. It is a move from portraying women who are a product of their circumstances to women who are the architects of their own destinies, regardless of how unconventional or difficult that path may be. The rebellious woman in IWE is a symbol of a new generation that is no longer content with simply negotiating tradition and modernity but is actively choosing to define its own terms. To quote Tabish Khair, -----

*"The contemporary Indian English novel is increasingly populated by women who are not just victims or survivors, but active agents of rebellion, challenging the very moral and social fabric of a patriarchal society."*⁹

A Spectrum of Realities, A Legacy of Change

The journey of women's representation in Indian Writing in English is a rich and complex narrative, spanning over a century of profound social and cultural change. From the mythic and idealised heroines of Toru Dutt's poetry to the nuanced, rebellious, and multi-faceted characters of contemporary fiction, this literary evolution mirrors and catalyses the transformation of Indian society itself. We have moved from a period where women were largely silent symbols of tradition to an era where their voices, desires, and struggles are at the very heart of the narrative.

The literary landscape is no longer a monolithic portrayal of Indian womanhood but a vibrant spectrum of realities, encompassing the experiences of the subaltern, the professional, the diasporic, and the queer. The representation of women in IWE is a testament to the power of literature not just to reflect society but to shape it.

By providing new narratives and new archetypes, IWE authors have contributed to a more progressive and inclusive cultural discourse, challenging stereotypes and

expanding the definition of what it means to be a woman in India. The evolution is ongoing, and as society continues to change, so too will the literary representations of women, ensuring that their voices remain a central and dynamic force in the ever-evolving story of India. The literary journey of the Indian woman is one from object to subject, from silence to voice, and from myth to reality. To quote Nilufer E. Bharucha, -----

*"The representation of women in Indian writing in English is a barometer of social change; as the nation evolves, so too do the literary portraits, moving from the passive recipient of destiny to the active shaper of her own fate."*¹⁰

Conclusion

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The literary landscape is no longer a monolithic portrayal of Indian womanhood but a vibrant spectrum of realities, encompassing the experiences of the subaltern, the professional, the diasporic, and the queer. The representation of women in IWE is a testament to the power of literature not just to reflect society but to shape it. By providing new narratives and new archetypes, IWE authors have contributed to a more progressive and inclusive cultural discourse, challenging stereotypes and expanding the definition of what it means to be a woman in India. The evolution is ongoing, and as society continues to change, so too will the literary representations of women, ensuring that their voices remain a central and dynamic force in the ever-evolving story of India. The literary journey of the Indian woman is one from object to subject, from silence to voice, and from myth to reality.

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