INDIAN WOMEN'S WRITING: FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT[1]

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Abstract
Indian women have been writing for millennia but their voices have been lost in a male dominated conservative world. This is being remedied by scholars who wish to provide readers and students of literature with a balanced view of literature as an activity undertaken by both men and women. This provides women readers, students and academics with self-esteem when they realise that women have been writing for ages and literature has not just been written by DWEMs (Dead White European Males). Women's writing should be moved to the centre of literary discourse from the margins where it has stagnated for centuries. For men it provides a corrective to a male centric world, which can also restrict men with stereotypes of expected masculinities.

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"Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1974: 161)

1. Introduction

This paper provides an overview to Women's Writing in India from the ancient past to the present times. India is generally considered to be a conservative society where in spite of religious worship of women as goddesses, there have been and continue to be overt and covert discrimination and even violence perpetrated against women. With patriarchy being rampant across religious and regional divides women's voices tend to be drowned under the male chorus that alternately lauds, critiques and belittles them. This makes it absolutely essential for women's voices to be heard so that their independent identities, concerns and needs are heard. This is where writing

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comes into focus. Writing depends on literacy and women's education is often neglected in patriarchal societies, so women's education is the key to women's writing. Even literate women do not automatically write literature or even of their own lives, as Virginia Woolf famously said, women unlike men do not have a room of their own. They have usually neither the time nor the space to write themselves and their sisters into existence. This makes the necessity of making visible the writing of women, of those who can and do write.

In spite of these societal and educational constraints Indian women have been writing from the ancient times right down to contemporary ones. This writing offers their own world views which are usually a challenge to those of their patriarchal world. Also, women have consistently challenged male myths and histories that have subordinated their existence or even demonised them. The demonising of powerful women as witches is not restricted to Indian male discourse alone.

So, in addition to writing their own stories from their own perspectives, women's writing also seeks to redress the stereotypes about them made available in texts written by men. Gender discrimination and stereotyping is also a matter of power and since even today around the world and not just in India, the male voice or female voices which have internalised male values reign, there is the need to challenge them.

2. Women writers in ancient India

Although in ancient India the status of women was better than it was in the later historical periods, there is still not enough availability of texts written by women. As noted by Tharu and Lalita in their introduction to the Literature of the Ancient and Medieval Periods, in their 2 volume *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present* (1991), the paucity of female voices in the Vedic period (c. 1500 – c. 500 BCE) is illustrative of the male dominated Vedic traditions. Vedic literature consists of the four Vedas, namely: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda. There were women scholars and philosophers of this age such as Ghosha, Lopamudra, Sulabha Maitreyi, and Gargi.

Scholars also say that since Sanskrit was the language of religion and court culture few women would have known it. They would have spoken Prakrit (meaning 'derived' 500 BCE and 500 CE). There are some records though of writing by women in Prakrit such as Avantisundari, in the 9th century AD who wrote in Prakrit.

There is also recorded writing by women in Pali and Tamil. The best-known examples in Pali is the collection of poems written by Buddhist nuns, known as Therigatha (6th century B.C.E.) and poetry in Tamil from the Sangam period (100 BC to 250 AD).

Poems in the *Therigatha* were composed orally in Magadhi and then written in Pali. These hymns are often strongly critical of patriarchy and focussed on female autonomy to be found in the monastic Buddhist tradition, which freed women from the bondage of marriage, child-rearing and domestic chores. The songs composed by the Buddhist Theris (senior nuns), were collected into the *Therigatha* and were composed as early as the 6th century B.C. and scholars are of the opinion that many of the nuns whose songs can be found in this collection were contemporaries of the Buddha. However the *Therigatha* in the written form probably dates back to 80 B.C. [3] Many of these songs actually carried the names of their composers. So from a feminist point of view these compositions become even more valuable as they have the names of their authors appended to them, a practice which was not common in the West till late into the 19th century. One of the songs from this collection exemplifies the female freedoms offered by Buddhist teachings. It was composed by a nun named Mutta:

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I! —
from three crooked things set free:
from mortar, pestle,
& crooked old husband.
Having uprooted the craving
that leads to becoming,
I'm set free from ageing & death
(Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, Tharu and Lalita, 1991:68)

Tamil like Sanskrit, is a classical Dravidian language, but, unlike Sanskrit, it is still a living language today spoken widely not just in Tamil Nadu, but also in other Indian states such as Karnataka, in Sri Lanka and Singapore. The Tamil Diaspora still speak, read and write it in different parts of the world such as the U.K., USA and Canada.
Writing by women in Tamil goes back to the Sangam period (roughly between the 3rd century B.C. and the 3rd century A.D.) in Tamil Literature. It was called after the Sangam academies that flourished under the Pandya kings of Madurai[4].

The literature of the Sangam period in Tamil had several women writers. There were at least 3 women writing under the pen name, Avvaiyar (respectable woman). The first Avvaiyar lived during the Sangam period (circa 3rd century B.C.) and wrote poems, which are available in the *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, an anthology of poetry. One of her poems speaks of learning and the liberation it offers women:

[3] For details see Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Vol. 1 *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present*, OUP, 1991: 65-68; Uma Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, OUP, 1987.
[4] See https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/tamil-literature-sangam-period, Accessed in March 2022.

Real learning
is that which places
you in the state
of Deathlessness;
And real food
is what you consume
when you are totally
Liberated
and where you are not
under any command
and where you are neither
slave nor servant…
(Retrieved from https:// www.poemhunter.com/avvaiyar. Accessed in March 2022.)[5]

Documented writing by women becomes more widely available from the time that the modern Indian languages began to evolve from the *Apabhramsa* which were current right till the 13th century A.D. The Apabhramsa which literally means a decline or falling away (from Sanskrit), were the vernacular dialects which had sprung up in Northern India after the decline of Sanskrit. In South India, too, classical Tamil began to sprout off shoots in the form of modern Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam. This period both in the North and South of India coincides with that of the Bhakti age in which a large number of women found their voices and had challenged patriarchy. This gender challenge was matched by the challenge offered by male writers of the Bhakti period who belonged to the lower castes and questioned the hegemony of the Brahmins, the Hindu upper castes, in matters of religion and social constructs.

3. Women writers in the Bhakti Period

The Bhakti movement is generally considered to have arisen in the 7th century AD, gained momentum in the 12th century and continued till the 17th century It first arose in the South and then moved Northwards. What was unique about this movement was that it included lower caste men and also women belonging to all strata of society. This movement was basically a quest for a direct connection with the divine without the mediation of men from the priestly caste. This was bhakti, devotion, in the language of the people and not Sanskrit.

The saint poets, as they were called, wrote in the local and not the classical languages but it was also a movement that focussed on the oral transmission of poetry by the itinerant saint poets. These men and women were often shunned by upper caste male

[5] More poetry written by the Avvaiyars is available in modern English translation in *Give, Eat and Live: Poems of Avviyar* by Thomas H. Pruiksma (2009).

dominated society as they had dared to transgress into Brahmin strongholds of religion and worship, which were denied to lower caste men and women of all castes[6].

Unlike the women writers of ancient India, the women writers of the Bhakti period were in the main householders and wrote of their domestic lives. However, some of these women had abandoned their married lives and put on the garb of the iterant celibate mendicant. One of these poets was Akkamadevi from Karnataka, also known as Akka or Mahadevi. She was a devotee of Shiva and lived in the 12th century AD. There are several unique features about Akkama, one of them was that she refused to wear clothes and went around naked, covered only by her long hair. This was in reaction to the male gaze that looked upon women as sex objects and the reason why women had to be kept in seclusion and made to wear veils. Akkama's is a very powerful voice that sang of her lord, the Hindu god of destruction and regeneration, Shiva. This too is unique as the chosen deity of most of the other Bhakti poets, male or female, was Vishnu, the Creator[7]. Most of her poems sing the praises of Shiva, who she calls Chennamallikarjuna and have been composed in Kannada. They also challenge the male gaze. One such poem is called "Brother, you've come":

Brother, you've come
Drawn by the beauty
Of these billowing breasts,
This brimming youth.
I'm no woman, brother, no whore.
Every time you have looked at me,
Who have you taken me for?
All men other than Chennamallikarjuna
Are faces to be shunned, see, brother.
(Translated by Susan Daniel, in Tharu and Lalita, 1991:79)

Akkamma's poetry is still sung in Karnataka and she has become an iconic figure for contemporary Indian feminists and is celebrated in films and her songs are available on YouTube.
Yet another Bhakti poet whose poetry challenged gender discrimination was the 13th century Janabai from Maharashtra who was born in a low caste. She was a maid in the house of Namdev, one of the most famous Bhakti saints. She wrote over 300

[6] The Hindu caste system is broadly divided into four main castes – Brahmin (priests/ teachers), Kshatriya (rulers/soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (menial workers, labourers). Each of these castes is further divided into several sub-castes. Many of the sub-castes of the Shudras were considered to be 'untouchables' and the upper castes considered themselves 'polluted' by their touch.

[7] The Hindu trinity of chief gods consists of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the protector) and Shiva (the destroyer).

poems focused on domestic chores and her life as a low caste woman. Her poems too are still popular and today available as songs sung by women in the 21st century and many of them have been uploaded on social media platforms such as YouTube. Full length feature films in Marathi and Hindi too have been made on the life and work of Janabai. One of her most popular devotional songs, known as *abhang i*n Marathi, is "Cast off All Shame":

Cast off all shame,
and sell yourself
in the marketplace;
then alone
can you hope
to reach the Lord.
Cymbals in hand,
a veena upon my shoulder,
go about;
who dares to stop me?
The pallav of my sari
falls away (A scandal!);
yet will I enter
the crowded marketplace
without a thought.
Jana says, My Lord
I have become a slut
to reach your home.
(Translated by Vilas Sarang. From Tharu and Lalita, 1991:83)

Another iconic woman bhakti poet was Mirabai, a Rajput princess, who had after the death of her husband, the Rana, left his home. She led a wanderer's existence singing of the love of her beloved Lord Krishna, a manifestation of Vishnu the God of Preservation in the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Mirabai has been equally embraced in popular culture as well as in high literature. As a princess she had the visibility and means not available to other women poets of the time. She also belonged to a higher caste. Yet, in spite of these advantages she had to bear the brunt of patriarchy as her deceased husband's family felt offended by her not committing sati[8] on her husband's funeral pyre or at least leading the secluded and ascetic life as a widow, instead of going around the countryside with mendicants singing the praises of her beloved Lord Krishna. When her husband's brother the then ruling

[8] The word Sati refers to the ancient Hindu custom of widows burning themselves or being burnt alive on the funeral pyre of their husbands. This custom was usually followed by royal and upper-class women as property and inheritance rights were at stake for them although the social reason given was that the life of a woman was tied together with the life of her husband and if she committed sati she would along with him go to heaven.

king, the Rana, tried to poison her and his wives harassed her, she returned to her father's home, where she was not welcome, as a daughter once married, even if widowed, cannot return to her natal home.

So, she moved away to Mathura the land of Krishna. She kept travelling around the country and worshipped her beloved Krishna, dying finally in Dwarka where her beloved had himself left his earthly form. Her bhajans, devotional songs were written in the local dialect of Rajasthan as well as in Gujarati and the Braj Bhasha dialect of Hindi. Mira's poetry is erotic and it sings of a passionate relationship with her beloved god. She too has become a feminist icon today and a source of comfort and solace to women who like her find themselves in loveless marriages who sing her songs even if they do not have the courage or the means to, like her, leave their marital homes and wander around the country singing the praises of Krishna:

I am true to my Lord.
O my companions, there is nothing to be ashamed of now
Since I have been seen dancing openly.
In the day I have no hunger
At night I am restless and cannot sleep.
Leaving these troubles behind, I go to the other side;
A hidden knowledge has taken hold of me.
My relations surround me like bees.
But Mira is the servant of her beloved Giridhar[9]
And she cares nothing that people mock her.
(Translated from the Hindi by F.E. Keay. From Tharu and Lalita 1991:93)

4. Women writers in the Mughal Period

With the conquest of Persia by the Arabs, Islamic rulers knocked on the doors of India, first as periodic invaders who retired to their Central Asian strongholds after amassing gold and precious stones from Indian kingdoms which they attacked, and then as conquerors who stayed back to set up Islamic dynasties in India. Of the Islamic dynasties the most important and longest lasting was that established by the Mughals who ruled India from the 16th century till 1857, when at the end of the Great Indian Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence the last Mughal Emperor was exiled to Rangoon by the victorious British troops. There are many stereotypes about gender discrimination in Islam and the increasing isolation suffered by women in India after the advent of the Muslims. However, gender discrimination and atrocities

[9] Another name for Krishna, who as a little boy had held the mountain, giri, on his little finger, thereby defeating the power of Lord Indra, the Hindu god of thunder and lightning and also the King of the gods, who had till then held sway over that mountain and the village near it.

in India pre-and post-date the Islamic rulers as seen in the writing of women down the ages, belonging to different religious denominations.

Though few in number, the women scholars and authors of Islamic India are not inconsequential. The women of the early Mughals Babur and Humayun fought in wars of conquest alongside their husbands and brothers and were excellent horse riders. In spite of being women, they enjoyed financial autonomy and political power. It is only in the later Mughal period that the royal women began to be veiled but even then continued to enjoy considerable power and autonomy[10].

The women writers of the Mughal period were mainly from the *zenana*[11] of the Mughal Emperors – sisters, daughters, mothers, wives. The first important woman writer of this period was Gulbadan Begum, who was the beloved and powerful daughter of Emperor Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India and the sister of Emperor Humayun. She was also loved dearly by Humayun's son, the Emperor Akbar, who commissioned her to chronicle the history of her brother's, and his father, Humayun's court, in *Ahval-I Humayun Badshah* in the sixteenth century CE, in which she also wrote of life in the *zenana*. She was a powerful figure at the court of Akbar and is mentioned often in *Akbarnama*, by its author Abul Fazal, who had chronicled the life and rule of Emperor Akbar. Like many other royal Mughal women, Gulbadan was independently wealthy, owned estates given to her by her father and brothers. She carried on trade in her own ships from the port of Surat, which was under Mughal rule and where the European traders had also set up their trading posts which were called 'factories. Gulbadan had also led a women-only haj to Mecca[12].

Another powerful Mughal woman was Emperor Jehangir's 20th and last wife, Nur Jahan, who rapidly became the de facto ruler of the Mughal empire and issued *firmans* (orders) and minted coins in her own name.[13]

The next important writer we have among Mughal women was Jahanara, Emperor Shah Jahan's beloved eldest child with his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal, in whose memory he had constructed the Taj Mahal. Jahanara was a close confidante of her father and well versed in state craft. He appointed her as the Padshah Begum,

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[10] For details see Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire*, Aleph Book Company, 2018.

[11] Secluded living quarters of the royal women – mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, widows and concubines.

[12] For further details see Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire*, Aleph Book Company, 2018; Jyotsna G. Singh, Boundary Crossings in the Islamic World: Princess Gulbadan as Traveler, Biographer, and Witness to History, 1523-1603. *Early Modern Women An Interdisciplinary Journal,* Vol. 7 (Fall 2012), pp. 231-240, The University of Chicago Press.

[13] See "The Mughal queen who became a feminist icon", BBC News 2nd September 2018 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45319055. Accessed in March 2022.

Princess Royal, of the Mughal Empire. She was a Sufi[14] poet and as a wealthy and powerful princess also commissioned poetry and translations. She wrote *Risālah-i-Sāhibīyahwas* – a biography of her spiritual master, Mullah Shah – and also *Mu'nis al-Arwā*, a biography of the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chisti. Like her great-aunt Gul badan, Jahanara, too, was independently wealthy and owned ships which traded from the port of Surat. When her mother Mumtaz Mahal died, the grief-stricken Emperor designated his favourite child the Malika-e-Hindustan Padshah Begum—the First Lady of the Indian Empire. This elevation and her support of her brother Dara Sikoh, also a Sufi scholar like her, earned her the ire of her other brother Aurangzeb, who ultimately had Dara assassinated, seized the throne and imprisoned his father. Jahanara chose to join her father in prison and stayed with him for eight years till his death. Upon his death, Aurangzeb restored her title of Begum Sahib, added to it Sahibat al-Zamani (Lady of the Age) and gave her a lifelong pension. Unlike her parents' grand mausoleum, the Taj Mahal, she chose to be buried in a simple grave in the precincts of her Sufi master, Nizamuddin's mausoleum in Delhi. By her own decree, her tomb is open to the sky and the earth and is covered only by grass.

Her niece, Emperor Aurangzeb's daughter, Zeb-un-Nissa was also an accomplished scholar, a patron of the arts and a poet. She was her father's favourite but later fell out of favour and was imprisoned for 20 long years. Her writings are collected in *Divan-i-Makhfi*, which translates into English as the collection of the Hidden or Invisible One. The term 'Makhfi' refers to the fact that as her father the Emperor was a staunch believer in traditional Islam, she had to hide her Sufi beliefs from him. She wrote ghazals[15] with Sufi symbolism of the union of the human with the divine and sang of love and freedom:

Though I am Laila of Persian romance
my heart loves like ferocious Majnun
I want to go to the desert
but modesty is chains on my feet.
A nightingale came to the flower garden
because she was my pupil
I am an expert in things of love.
Even the moth is my disciple!
(Translated by Willis Barnstone)[16]

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[14] Sufism is usually described as Islamic mysticism and has a focus on the direct connection between the worshipper and God. In that sense it is not very different from the Hindu Bhakti tradition. Sufism began to be more organised from the 11th century onwards and continues to hold sway in spite of revivalist conservative Wahabi Islam. Sufi poets such as Rumi continue to have followers even today.

[15] Ghazal is a traditional form of poetry in Persian/Urdu, which is generally set to music and sung.

[16] For details, see Persian Literature in Translation website has The Tears of Zebunnisa, experts from the Divan-i-Makhfi also, The Diwan of Zen-Un-Nisa: The First 50 Ghazals.

5. The writing of the Reformist and Nationalist Period

At the end of the Mutiny of 1857 (First War of Indian Independence as Indian historians call it today), the rule of India was taken away from the East India Company and given to the British crown. The last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, a well appreciated poet whose songs are still sung today, was exiled to Rangoon. The Mughal official language of Persian was discarded in favour of English which now became the dominant and later the official language of British India. The movement towards the learning of English which had begun as early as the 1830s now received a further impetus with the setting up in 1857of the three modern universities in Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai). Creative writing in English by Indians which had begun in the 1820s with the poetry of Henry Derozio collected under *Poems* (1827) now became more widespread and both men and women in addition to writing in Indian languages also wrote poetry, plays and novels in English.

By the end of the nineteenth century, nascent nationalism in the Western sense had reared its head in India and the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. This was the Nationalist period which ended in 1947 with the independence of India. The Nationalist period in India coincides with the Reformist period as the nationalist leaders realised that caste and gender reforms would be needed if India were to ultimately take its place in the community of modern nations.

In India, unlike in the West, where the first wave of feminists who agitated for basic rights such as franchise and inheritance were rarely if ever supported by their men, Indian women in the 19th century had many male champions in the area of the abolition of sati, widow remarriage and inheritance rights. In the crucible of the first three modern universities of India set up in 1857 (in Calcutta, Mumbai and Madras) by the late 1880s and early 1890s, the first women graduates were already being forged. Cornelia Sorabji (1892) the first woman graduate of Bombay University stormed the male bastion of Oxford University and became the first woman to study law at Oxford University. She was also the first to practice law, much before it was allowed for women to do so in the U.K., at the Allahabad High Court. The work she did with the zenana women was her praxiated space[17]. Cornelia was also a creative

Retrieved from https://feminisminindia.com/2018/10/19/zaib-un-nissa-princess/ Accessed in March 2022.

[17] Praxiated space is the appropriate dynamic terrain in which ideas are engendered during actual grassroot work. These are ideas that are tested in practice and come to theory, as opposed to ideas that are derived from theory. For more clarity you can refer to Karl Marx's, Preface to Capital, in which Marx has contested Hegel's notions of 'the Idea'. Hegel transformed the abstract process of thinking, i.e., the Idea into the real world, but Marx overturns this Hegelian notion and has said that "the idea is nothing else than the material

writer and wrote short stories and her autobiography in two volumes[18]. Before Cornelia, Kadambini Ganguly nee Basu and Chandramukhi Basu had become the first women graduates of Calcutta University in 1883. Kadambini Ganguly and Andandibai Joshi became the first women medical graduates of not just India but Asia in 1886. Interestingly enough, even Cornelia had wanted to study medicine but was denied that privilege in England, but had resisted the attempt to channel her into the socially acceptable English Literature stream and had struck out for Law, at least, if not medicine. Yet another almost contemporaneous Indian woman, Krupabai Satthianandan, too, had wanted to study medicine, as she narrated in her autobiographical novel, *Saguna* (1887) but was weaned away from it on the pretext that the study of medicine was too strenuous for the female body and mind.

These women, although they undertook work for the uplifting of women in their own ways in their own times, were not in the ideological sense of the mid-twentieth century feminists. They did not theorise, they practised their beliefs that women were not children of a lesser god and lived their lives on their own terms.

Savitribai Phule, in 19th century AD, the pioneer of women's education in India, together with her husband Jyotirao Phule, founded one of India's first girls' schools in Pune, at Bhide Wada, in 1848. She was married off at the age of nine and was illiterate at that time. Her husband taught her to read and write. She completed her basic education, and then trained as a teacher. Savitribai opened schools for girls and employed Fatima Begum Sheikh as a co-teacher. Fatima became the first Muslim teacher in that school. Savitri was opposed to the Sati tradition and female infanticide. She opened shelters for women whose female children were threatened with death by patriarchal in-laws. She also raised her voice in favour of widow re-marriage. In 1874 she, along with her husband Jyotiba, played a key role in the establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj (The Truth Seekers Society). Both Savitri and Jyotiba battled ceaselessly against both caste and gender inequities and violence. In 1890, when Jyotiba died, she defied social norms that did not allow women any role in death rites and lit his funeral pyre. When the bubonic plague broke out in India, she opened shelters for those stricken by that terrible disease.

She contacted it herself as she cared for a sick child and died in 1897. The Phules belonged to the Shudra caste (the lower castes today self-define as Dalit, which literally means those who have been ground down) and this makes their work in education and uplifting of women even more courageous and commendable, as they themselves had to fight social discrimination. The Pune University was renamed after her as the Savitribai Phule Pune University. Her work took her away from home

world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." (Britannica, 1993: 11).

[18] Cornelia Sorabji's books include – *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* 1902, *Sun Babies* 1904, *India Calling*, 1934 and *India Recalled* 1936.

quite often and the letters that she wrote to her husband during such times were collected together and published. She wrote of their social activism to her husband and these letters provide an interesting insight into their relationship[19]. She also wrote poetry which was published under the titles *Kavya Phule* – Flowers of Poems (1854) and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* - A Bounty of Fifty-Two Gems of Wisdom (1891).

Her poetry is a call to battle for education, as for women in particular and Dalits in general, knowledge is power:

If you have no knowledge, have no education,
And you yearn not for the same,
You possess intellect but work not on the same,
How then can you be called a human being?

Birds, animals, monkeys, human beings too,
All go through life and death
But if you gain no knowledge about this,
How then can you be called a human being?

She also advocated the learning of English as a means of socio-economic betterment of the Dalits:

Learn English
Make self-reliance your occupation,
Exert yourself to gather the wealth of knowledge,
Without knowledge animals remained dumb,
Don't rest! Strive to educate yourself.
The opportunity is here,
For the Shudras and Ati Shudras,
To learn English
To dispel all woes.
Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English.
(Retrieved from https://velivada.com/2015/01/03/few-poems-by-savitribai-phule/ Accessed in March 2022)

[19] The letters are available in Mali, Dr M.G. (2011 {1988}) Savitribai Phule Samagra Vangmay. (Edited). Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Aur Sanskriti Mandal and Tilak, Rajni. (2017). Savitribai Phule Rachna Samagra. (Edited). Delhi. The Marginalised Publication.

Pandita Ramabai was yet another reformist woman from Maharashtra in the 19th century. She married outside her community and caste, travelling within and outside the country, established educational organisations, studied medicine and converted to Christianity. She set many precedents for successive feminists. Her most important publication is *High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), which exposed all manner of gender oppression disguised as tradition and customs.

Bengali women too were contributors to the literature of the Renaissance and Reform. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's story *Sultana's Dream* (1905), is seen by gynocritics as early Utopian feminist writing[20]. The writings of these women could also be seen as the first wave of Indian feminism, independent of the influence of the West.

Tharu and Lalita (1993) write in their introduction to the Nationalist period that women were empowered by the task of freeing the nation from foreign rule and their own significant position in this endeavour. Women joined the nationalist movement in huge numbers and were at the forefront of the different aspects of the freedom movement lead by Mahatma Gandhi, such as the Salt Satyagraha (1930) and the Quit India Movement (1942). They were at the forefront of these agitations, clad in their homespun white sarees and were beaten as severely as the male freedom fighters by the British Indian Police who charged their processions with wooden batons. They were also imprisoned when, in the absence of the male leaders of the freedom struggle, the women took on positions of leadership. Mahatma Gandhi's wife Kasturba was one of them. There was also the frail young college girl from Bombay, Usha Mehta, who went underground in 1942 and broadcast regularly from a secret radio station. Her radio messages provided leadership to the freedom struggle when all the main leaders of the Quit India movement were jailed by the British. "This is Congress Radio calling on 42.34 meters from somewhere in India", uttered by this young woman kept the flame of the freedom struggle burning. She was caught after a few months and tried in a special court for five weeks and then sentenced to four years of rigorous, solitary imprisonment. Upon the independence of India, she went on to do an M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from the Bombay University and became the Head of the Department of Civics and Politics at her Alma Mater. She has spoken of her experiences in several interviews and in a book called "Freedom Fighters Remember", complied by Naveen Joshi. Usha Mehta also wrote on Gandhi's role in the uplift of women in books such as *Gandhi's Contribution to the Emancipation of Women*, Popular Prakashan, 1991. This book was co-authored with Aloo J. Dastur another staunch freedom fighter and feminist. To Indian women of my generation, they were absolute political and feminist icons and it was my good fortune to have met and been inspired by both of them at symposiums and lectures.

[20] For details see *Sultana's dream; and Padmarag: two feminist utopias by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*; translated with an introduction by Barnita Bagchi. New Delhi (India). Penguin, 2005.

Writers such as Nirupama Devi wrote immensely popular Bengali novels in which the women were traditional but had strength and influence. There were also the writings of Mahadevi and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan in Hindi, Dhiruben Patel wrote in Gujarati, Balamani Amma in Malayalam and many more women wrote in several other Indian languages.

Among those who wrote in English was the poet Sarojini Naidu, who was also a freedom fighter. Gandhi called her the 'Nightingale of India' and she was also his 'court jester' and she alone had the temerity to question the man and at times even poke fun at him. Naidu's poetry went through an eclipse during the 1950s and 60s when Indian poetry, under the mentorship of the poet and academic Nissim Ezekiel, strongly espoused Modernism and belittled poetry like that of Naidu's as old-fashioned and derivative. Today however, she has been re-discovered by academics and feminists[21].

The second wave of Indian women writers was spearheaded by the likes of Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam and Krishna Sobti. Their works explored the boundaries of bodies and sexualities. They were negotiating their place in a new nation still smarting from the fresh wound of Partition.
Sobti wrote in Hindi and her texts have been translated into several languages including English. Some of her most prominent books are *Dar Se Bichhadi* (Separated from the door of the house), (1958), set in pre-partition India challenged socio-religious boundaries. *Mitro Marjani* (To Hell with you Mitro!) (1966), boldly explored female sexuality. Sobti's fictionalised autobiography is entitled *Gujrat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan Taq (From Gujrat, Pakistan*, *to Gujarat, India*). This book looks at her own experiences of the partitioning of India.

Chughtai wrote in Urdu and was especially known for her radical feminist views and her story "Lihaaf" (1942) led to her persecution under obscenity laws. She continued to publish prolifically after the independence of India. *Masooma* (The Innocent Girl), published in 1962, is about the sexual exploitation of women in the Bombay film industry, which Chugtai knew from personal experience as a script writer and the wife of a director-producer of films. Like many other Urdu writers of her time, Chugtai was closely associated with the Progressive Writer's Movement[22] and was influenced in her ideology by its precepts.

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[21] See Chapter Two – "Sarojini Naidu: Feminist Nationalism and Cross-Cultural Poetics", in Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890–1945,* Cambridge University Press, 2017; *Eugenic Feminism: Reproductive Nationalism in the United States and India,* Minnesota Scholarship, online, 2014; "Sarojini Naidu; The Traditional Feminist", Hasi Banerjee, K.P. Bagchi & Co. 1998.

[22] For details on Progressive Writers Movement see, "The Progressive Writers' Movement", Bhisham Sahni, *Indian Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (116) (November-December, 1986), pp. 178-183, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

These women were not totally innocent of Western feminism but were not overtly impacted by its ideology.

6. Postcolonial Indian women writers

The Indian women writers who began their careers in the early years of postcolonial India, i.e. after India's independence in 1947, were more ideologically engaged from a feminist or Marxist angle, such as Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (translated from Bengali by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1997). The writer herself did not define herself as a feminist, because as a committed Marxist, who was also an activist for the rights of Indian tribals, social discrimination overrode gender. However, her translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines herself as a Marxist Feminist[23] and imputes similar ideology to her author too.

In the decades that have followed, Indian women's writing has become more prolific and more visible nationally and internationally. Many of these women are writing from the Indian diaspora and this gives a wider visibility and edge to their discourse. While writing by women in all Indian languages is an ongoing activity, it is writing in English that has captured the attention of critics and readers around the world, due the obvious reason of easy accessibility. Some of the prominent early writers, such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, have denied any sort of feminist bias in their writings, but an in-depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issues which are the chief concern of their plots. While not overtly feminist, the texts of these women engage with gender inequities, discrimination and violence against women. Deshpande's books, especially *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), have locked horns with the issue of domestic violence and marital rape.

More recent writers based in India as well as in the Diaspora, such as Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Anita Nair, Manju Kapoor, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri are more upfront about their feminist bearings.

In Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), her women Sita, Devi, Grandmother and Mayamma are separated by the gulf of time and caste, but are linked by the shared reductiveness of their gender. All three of them live within the confines of female spaces which they, in their own ways, seek to tear apart to create more space for themselves. Grandmother's stories taught Devi to dream, to fly, to tear to shreds the suffocating veils of femaleness. The old woman's myths, fables,

[23] For details on Marxist-Feminism see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak | On Revolution, September 14, 2017 Jesus R. Velasco, https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-on-revolution/

and fantasies subvert male discourse and assert female identity. If history is male, then myth is female and predates history.[24]

Postcolonial Indian women writers have also been re-writing the old Hindu epics from a feminist perspective. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a feminist retelling of the ancient Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. This epic tells the story of the warring clans of the Pandavas and Kauravas who ultimately fight a massive war, the Mahabharata, in which the Pandavas win but at the tremendous cost of death and losses. Intertwined in this tale of male violence and war, is the story of the joint wife of the five Pandavas, Draupadi. In the epic, she comes across as being guilty of exacerbating the enmity between the clans and the cause of the massive war. So, the responsibility and guilt of male violence is laid at the door of this woman who is more a victim of patriarchy than the perpetrator of war. In Divakaruni's re-telling, Panchali/ Draupadi is a sharp, witty, brave woman, with a dark complexion, who challenges the conventional Indian notions of beauty and has an assertive personality. Another re-telling of the Mahabharata, this time from the point of view of subaltern women, whose men were the cannon fodder sacrificed by both the royal clans in their warfare, is *After Kurukshetra* (2001), a collection of three stories written in Bengali by Mahasweta Devi and translated into English by Anjum Katyal. Kurukshetra was the name of the battlefield where the war was fought. These stories raise some very important questions about the situation of the surviving women after the war of Kurukshetra. It philosophizes about the malecentric nature of war and its impact on women. It also focusses on the difference in the status of aristocratic and proletariat women of that period. These stories provide good support to Gayatri Spivak's contention that Devi was like her, a Marxist-Feminist.

Irawati Karve's Marathi masterpiece *Yuganta* (1969), i.e. the end of an epoch, is a collection of essays on the main characters of the Mahabharata epic. It creates a very human persona for the larger-than-life characters of Mahabharata.
The other Indian epic Ramayana has been re-written extensively by women in English as well as in other Indian Languages, too. The Ramayana has also been appropriated by the folk tradition and is performed mainly by women in rural India. In the 21st century, the digital media has chipped in with its own versions of the epic. *Sita's Ramayana* (2018) by Samhita Arni is a graphic novel, that retells the story of the Ramayana from the point of view of Sita. *The Missing Queen* (2013) unravels the mystery of Sita's banishment in Ramayana through the eyes of a spunky woman journalist.

In Adrianne Rich's words, revisionist retelling of the past is not just an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical

[24] For details, see Nilufer E. Bharucha, "Inhabiting Enclosures and Creating Spaces: The Worlds of Women in Indian Literature in English", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 29:1, January 1998: 93-107.

direction."[25] For Indian women it is an act of survival. Revisioning myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and man-made laws are subverted.

7. Conclusion

As I have also said elsewhere[26], given the strength of the androcentric world, acquired through millennia of oppression and legitimized by the male logos, female discourse is not always successful in breaking out of the enclosures assigned to it. However, women's writing has the moral force of the marginalized as it strives to create spaces for itself. While most feminists urge that women should claim more fully this man-ordained space, they also agree that this should not be the ultimate goal. The aim should not be simply to claim more space for women under the existing social structures, but to deconstruct and transform the existing reality to reflect better the import of the old Chinese proverb that 'Women hold up One Half of the Sky'. The creation of female spaces entails going beyond the male-allotted spaces into the realms of true equality. Women's writing creates these spaces and hence is of utmost importance.

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[25] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*. 1966-1978.

[26] Nilufer E. Bharucha, "Inhabiting Enclosures and Creating Spaces: The Worlds of Women in Indian Literature in English", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 29:1, January 1998: 93-107.

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