



Navigating the Labyrinth: Struggles and Triumphs of the Indian Women's Movement

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Abstract— The paper highlights the dynamic nature of Indian feminism, emphasizing its diverse interpretations, intersectional approach, and unwavering commitment to achieving gender justice. It underscores the need for continued dialogue, critical analysis of successes and failures, and sustained efforts to dismantle the entrenched structures that perpetuate gendered inequalities. By exploring the ongoing struggles and celebrating the hard-won victories, this paper aims at inviting a deeper understanding of this ever-evolving movement and its crucial role in shaping India's future. Feminism in India is a vibrant, complex tapestry woven across centuries, marked by both remarkable progress and tenacious struggles. Rooted in colonial critiques and anti-patriarchal movements, Indian feminism has evolved into a multifaceted platform challenging gender inequalities across numerous fronts: economic disparity, political underrepresentation, social discrimination, and culture-specific injustices like dowry deaths and female infanticide. Its key achievements include constitutional guarantees of equality, landmark legislation like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, and growing representation in education and the workforce. However, the fight for a truly equitable society remains an ongoing battle. Challenges like entrenched patriarchal norms, religious fundamentalism, and systemic injustices against marginalized communities, especially Dalit women and those in rural areas, continue to impede progress.

Keywords— Indian feminism, intersectional approach, gender justice, anti-patriarchal movements, anti-patriarchal movements.



The roots of the feminist movement trace back to the Western world in the early nineteenth century. This transformative movement has consistently championed the cause of social, cultural, political, and economic equality between men and women. At its core, feminism actively opposes and challenges gender inequalities, aiming to secure equal rights for women in all facets of life. A fundamental aspect of feminist ideology is the belief that every woman should have access to sufficient information. This empowerment through knowledge is seen as a key catalyst for enabling women to make informed choices. By providing women with the tools to navigate various aspects of life, feminism seeks to break down barriers and empower individuals to lead lives free from discrimination. In essence, the feminist movement strives to create a world where women are not only granted equal rights but are also

equipped with the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive independently. By fostering a society built on principles of equality, feminism aims to create a future where women are not held back by societal constraints and can actively participate in shaping their own destinies.

Feminism, a movement advocating for the rights and equality of women, found a pivotal voice in the mid-20th century through the influential work of philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir. In 1949, de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*, a groundbreaking examination of the societal construction of womanhood. This seminal work played a crucial role in shaping the momentum of the feminist movement during the 1960s. *The Second Sex* delves into critiques of various societal pillars, including legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists, who have historically contributed to the marginalization of

women. De Beauvoir skilfully dismantles the notion of women's inherent inferiority, challenging deeply ingrained beliefs about femininity. One of the significant aspects of de Beauvoir's analysis is her exploration of the unique position of women in society. Unlike minorities or the proletariat, women are neither a numerical minority nor a historical product. This distinction underscores the pervasive and nuanced nature of women's subordination, highlighting that it is not solely rooted in numerical disparities or historical circumstances but is deeply embedded in cultural and societal structures. *The Second Sex* sparks a critical dialogue about the complex interplay between culture, history, and gender, urging society to confront the mechanisms that contribute to the subordination of women. De Beauvoir's work continues to be a cornerstone in feminist literature, challenging individuals to reevaluate ingrained beliefs and work towards a more equitable future where women can transcend the limitations imposed by societal expectations.

Earlier voices addressing gender inequality include Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from 1792, and Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour*, published in 1911, brought attention to the issue. Virginia Woolf, in her 1929 work *A Room of One's Own*, inspected the trials faced by women, encouraging for a harmony between 'male' self-fulfilment and 'female' self-annihilation. Rejecting the idea of a separate feminist consciousness, Woolf aspired to establish a femineity of the unconscious to eliminate conflicts between male and female sexuality. She argued against the societal constraints imprisoning women writers in the 'ideology of womanhood,' including the notion of the 'Angel in the house.' Additionally, Woolf highlighted the taboo surrounding women discussing their passions, hindering them from truthfully expressing their bodily experiences. According to Woolf, these obstacles could only be dismantled through the attainment of social and economic equality between women and men.

In addition to female writers, male authors such as John Stuart Mill, with his 1869 publication *The Subjection of Women*, and Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family* from 1884, also addressed the issue of women's inequality in society. In the Western world, women writers have been prolific, largely due to the high literacy rates. The roots of feminism in the West can be traced back to books and literature.

However, in countries like India, where there is a robust oral tradition and a considerable rate of illiteracy, the impact of these studies was primarily confined to urban areas. Only recently has awareness begun to spread to rural areas, influenced by electronic media, which has revitalized the oral discourse of feminism.

The evolution of modern Western feminist movements is categorized into three distinct 'waves,' each addressing various facets of feminist issues. The first wave primarily encompasses the women's suffrage movements during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a primary focus on securing women's right to vote. The second wave is characterized by the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s. This phase concentrated on advocating for legal and social equality for women, extending beyond the suffrage issues of the first wave. The third wave denotes a continuation of and reaction to the perceived shortcomings of second wave feminism. Emerging in the 1960s, this wave reflects an ongoing effort to address and rectify the unresolved challenges and limitations identified in the prior feminist movements.

Feminism in India is characterized by cultural, economic, and political movements with a dedicated focus on establishing legal protection and ensuring complete equality for women. Esteemed Indian feminist writers, including Toru Dutt, Lakshmi Debi, Krupabai Sathianathan, Swarnakumari Debi Ghoshal, Santa and Sita Chatterjee, and Cornelia Sorabji, have played pivotal roles in using feminism as a nuanced tool to assess the genuine situation concerning women. These Indian feminist voices, particularly within the realm of English literature, adopt oriental approaches to feminism. Numerous novels in Indian English literature effectively depict the true status of women in India, providing insightful commentary on their experiences and the societal context.

Between 1850 and 1950, the early stage of feminism in India was initiated by men with the aim of combating the societal injustice of 'sati,' or widow immolation. This phase was dedicated to advocating for widow remarriage, opposing child marriage, addressing illiteracy, and establishing legal frameworks to regulate the age of consent and secure property rights. However, women in this period were often treated as subjects of social reforms and welfare, lacking recognition as independent agents with their own agency. The primary emphasis was on redefining and creating new roles within existing feminine responsibilities, particularly in caregiving. Women involved in this phase were typically aligned with male activists, belonged to the elite class, were educated in Western traditions, and hailed from upper-caste Hindu backgrounds.

From 1915 to 1947, the anti-colonial resistance in India intensified, propelled by the overarching cause of nationalism. This era witnessed a significant revival of Indian culture, marked by the resurgence of cultural identity. The assertion of Indian superiority during this period contributed to the formation of an essentialized model of Indian womanhood, reminiscent of Victorian

ideals. This conceptualization portrayed women with distinct characteristics, somewhat separated from the public sphere.

Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in Indian women's public foray by advocating for and fostering their participation in the non-violent resistance against British rule. He recognized the strength in traditionally feminine traits like compassion, selflessness, sacrifice, and resilience, and strategically leveraged them to create a space for women within the public sphere. However, this approach sparked internal debates among women regarding the limitations and possibilities of their political activism. Issues like full voting rights, communal representation, and leadership roles within political parties became points of contention as women grappled with defining their desired position in the emerging independent India. One crucial distinction between India's and Western feminist movements is the starting point. Whereas Western feminism arose organically from women's own struggles, India's movement initially found impetus from progressive men like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Keshav Chandra Sen. This paved the way for women's later substantial involvement and influence, eventually leading to their own independent articulation of rights and aspirations.

Feminism has captured global attention numerous Indian novelists act as powerful conduits for amplifying the voices and experiences of the marginalized woman. Their works become critical tools for shaping public discourse and challenging ingrained societal norms surrounding the treatment of women. Through their nuanced portrayals, they illuminate the complexities of these realities, fostering empathy and understanding. These writers skilfully present various facets of feminism using authentic and captivating language. The struggle of Indian women for their true identity is vividly portrayed in Indian English novels.

Shobha De's 1989 novel *Socialite Evenings* offers a powerful microcosm of Indian women's struggles for autonomy. Through Karuna, a fearless protagonist who defies her father's expectations by pursuing modelling and then boldly initiates a divorce, De depicts the myriad hurdles women face in defining their own identities and carving independent paths. Karuna's journey becomes a poignant reflection of the societal constraints and inner battles encountered by many Indian women as they strive to break free from traditional clutches and forge their own destinies.

Indian literature in English gleams with the brilliance of its female novelists, who stand parallel with their male counterparts, their pens enriching the fabric of the language. These women aren't mere literary footnotes; they are constellations in their own right, their stars shining with

international acclaim. Names like Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala, Attia Hossain, Nayantara Sahgal, Santha Ram Rau, Sashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Ram Mehta, Shobha De, and Arundhati Roy illuminate the literary firmament.

Their narratives, though woven with threads of British literary tradition – echoes of Austen's wit, Eliot's introspection, the Brontës' fiery passion – are tapestries uniquely Indian. They delve into the inner worlds of women with unparalleled depth, surpassing even their British counterparts in capturing the richness and complexity of the female experience. In their hands, the anguished silence of a victimized woman becomes a searing cry, their feminist brushstrokes painting portraits that pulsate with authenticity. These authors are not mere chroniclers; they are excavators, unearthing the hidden emotions, aspirations, and anxieties that pulse beneath the surface of Indian women's lives.

Trapped in tapestries of tradition, Indian women writers weave tales of quiet rebellion. They wield their pens like scalpels, dissecting the intricate workings of a society where the feminine spirit wrestles with societal expectations. Drawing on a wellspring of empathy and an acute understanding of the anxieties that simmer beneath the surface, these authors become conduits for silenced voices. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) stands as a poignant testament to this literary alchemy. Maya, the protagonist, becomes a canvas upon which Desai paints the stark realities of a woman imprisoned by societal norms. Her stifling marriage, marked by emotional distance and societal pressures, becomes a microcosm of the larger struggle for autonomy faced by many Indian women.

As Victorian shadows stretched into the dawn of the 20th century, a revolution blossomed in Indian literature. From their inkwells, a fearless tide of women novelists surged forward, recharting the landscape of fiction with feminist brushstrokes. Their narratives became kaleidoscopes, refracting the inner storms and quiet longings of Indian women, stories hitherto untold. And at the forefront, blazing a trail through uncharted territory, stood Toru Dutt – not just a gifted poet, but also the first Indian woman to weave a novel in English.

Toru Dutt's pioneering efforts in fiction writing include works like *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (2004) written in French and *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) written in English. Toru Dutt's novels are more than just fiction; they are confessional whispers etched in ink, mirrors reflecting the agony and anguish of her own short life. Her central protagonists Marguerite with her windswept French braids and Bianca with her fiery Spanish

tresses, their faces merging into Toru's own, and a melancholic smile plays on their lips. Toru's novels are tapestries woven with threads of her cultural identity. Her Indian attitudes, feelings, and sentiments bloom like wildflowers in the foreign soil of her narratives. Bianca's yearning for freedom, her defiance against societal constraints, echo Toru's own struggles within the confines of Victorian colonialism and traditional expectations. The pulsating rhythm of Bengali verse bleeds into the prose, imbuing even the French setting with a distinctly Indian flavour. Toru Dutt's novels are not just literary creations; they are windows into her soul, testaments to a spirit that dared to defy convention and explore the uncharted territories of female experience. Through her heroines, she not only reflects her own Indian identity but also paves the way for future generations of women writers to claim their voices and tell their own stories, tinged with the unique colours of their heritage.

Another notable woman novelist who vividly projected her own Indian sensibility and attitude through the women characters in her novels is Krupabai Sathianathan. Her works, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895), provide insights into her emotional responses stemming from her family's conversion to Christianity. These novels also function as a self-disclosure of her internal battles and sorrows.

Krupabai Sathianathan's novels, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895) stand as poignant testaments to the shared sorrows experienced by Indian women. Written in reverse chronological order, *Saguna* paints a vibrant picture of the author's younger years, brimming with hope and a yearning for education. This youthful exuberance finds stark contrast in *Kamala*, composed during Sathianathan's own final throes of illness. The protagonist, Kamala, embodies the crushing weight of societal expectations and the suffocating limitations placed upon women.

While the names of Toru Dutt and Krupabai Sathianathan resonate brightly in the pantheon of early Indian feminism, another crucial voice demands recognition: Shevanti Bai Nikambe. Nikambe, though less acknowledged, emerges as a passionate advocate for the rights of women, particularly those often overlooked – the ordinary, unassuming housewives navigating the treacherous waters of domesticity. Unlike her predecessors who explored themes of self-discovery or intellectual awakening, Nikambe unflinchingly directed her gaze towards the silent tragedies unfolding within the walls of home. Her novels became battlegrounds for the unheard whispers of suffering, spotlighting the injustices faced by women within the

confines of unsuccessful marriages and the ostracization of widowhood.

In the year 1895, amidst the rigid societal norms of colonial India, Shevanti Bai Nikambe dared to raise a voice for the voiceless. Her novel, *Ratnabai*, became a poignant cry for the emancipation and education of Indian women, with the eponymous protagonist's struggles serving as a powerful indictment of the prevailing patriarchal order. *Ratnabai*, a young girl brimming with intellectual curiosity, yearns for knowledge. Her desire to pursue higher education, however, clashes with the entrenched traditions of her new family. Her father-in-law's relatives, blinded by their narrow-mindedness, become the instruments of her persecution. Through *Ratnabai*'s agony, Nikambe masterfully exposes the cruel reality faced by women who dared to defy societal expectations.

Cornelia Sorabji stands not just as a pioneer of literature, but as a beacon of liberation for women trapped within the gilded cages of tradition. Her pen, wielded with both fire and finesse, became a torch illuminating the profound mental struggles hidden within the confines of the purdah.

Sorabji's fiction, far from mere reportage, transcends the veil to unveil the vibrant, though stifled, souls of its female protagonists. Works like *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun Babies* (1904), and *Between the Lights* (1908) are not simply stories; they are whispers of anxieties, frustrated dreams, and yearnings for a life beyond the suffocating limitations of societal expectations.

Within the seemingly serene landscapes of the purdah, Sorabji pries open the doors to reveal a tempestuous ocean of emotions. Married women, burdened by the weight of tradition and duty, find their aspirations smothered by the demands of family and household. Unmarried women, ostracized by societal constraints, navigate a world devoid of agency and fulfillment. Sorabji doesn't shy away from portraying the crushing sense of isolation, the gnawing loneliness, and the simmering resentment that festers beneath the surface of their respectable facade. Yet, amidst the darkness, Sorabji also paints glimmers of defiance. Her characters, though confined, are not without inner strength. They dream of education, of intellectual pursuits, of a life where their minds and voices are not silenced. In their quiet acts of rebellion, their whispered conversations, and their stolen moments of freedom, Sorabji celebrates the indomitable spirit of women who refuse to be mere bystanders in their own lives. The significance of Sorabji's work lies in its transformative power. She doesn't just narrate; she exposes, she challenges, and ultimately, she inspires. By giving voice to the voiceless, she sparks a dialogue about the need for social reform, for education, and for the emancipation of women from the shackles of

tradition. Beyond the borders of her India, Sorabji's writings resonate with women across cultures and eras. Her characters become universal symbols of the fight against oppression, a testament to the unwavering human spirit that yearns for freedom and self-determination.

Kamala Das, a literary force of nature, emerges not just as a novelist, but as a revolution etched in verse and prose. Unflinching and unapologetic, her pen became a scalpel, dissecting the male-dominated Indian society. She threw open the doors of her inner world, baring her soul in a confessional tone that shattered taboos and sparked controversy. In landmark works like *Alphabet of Lust* (1980) and *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* (1977), she crafted ironic narratives that were far from mere stories. They were searing indictments of the physical and psychological torment inflicted upon women, particularly within the suffocating confines of marriage. Das didn't flinch from depicting the raw realities – the suffocating expectations, the silenced desires, the gnawing frustration of unfulfilled lives. But more than mere reportage, Das embarked on a profound exploration of the feminine psyche. Through her vivid characters, she delved into the hidden depths of women's minds, giving voice to their unspoken sorrows, their simmering defiance, and their yearning for autonomy. We see the helpless wife in *My Story*, trapped in a loveless marriage, searching for solace in fleeting moments of pleasure. In *Alphabet of Lust*, the protagonist's journey becomes a symbolic deconstruction of societal hypocrisy, where societal constraints clash with the unbridled human desire for fulfilment. Das's genius lies in her ability to expose the societal indifference to women's suffering. She doesn't simply narrate; she holds a mirror to the face of a society comfortable in its silence, forcing it to confront the injustices perpetuated against its women. Her protagonists become catalysts for change, their struggles demanding a reexamination of power dynamics and gender roles. Kamala Das's legacy extends far beyond the pages of her novels. Her words became rallying cries, igniting a vibrant feminist discourse in India. She gave voice to the voiceless, challenging societal norms and demanding a new narrative for women – one of agency, respect, and self-determination.

In the earlier novels penned by Indian women novelists, a traditional image of women was often projected. However, as time evolved, the portrayals became more realistic, emphasizing the women's sense of frustration and alienation. The characters created by these novelists, reflective of their creators, grappled with the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The crisis of value adaptation and the struggle to balance familial attachments with the allure of modernity tore these characters apart. The plight of working women was particularly challenging,

compounded by issues of marital adjustment and the quest for asserting their identity. Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal delved into the predicaments of the new woman, focusing on the challenges faced by educated women, primarily in urban settings.

The early tapestry of Indian novels often depicted women in traditional hues, draped in expectations of domesticity and piety. But as time unfurled, the brushstrokes on their canvas grew bolder, revealing the subtle frustrations and simmering alienation beneath the surface. The women penned by these trailblazing novelists, mirroring their own journeys, became vessels for a complex struggle – caught between the comforting embrace of tradition and the beckoning light of modernity. This struggle manifested in a crisis of value adaptation. Familial anchors, once seen as havens, now felt restrictive. The allure of education and independence cast long shadows, pulling these women toward a modern horizon. Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, two literary luminaries, trained their lens on the "new woman," primarily in the urban crucible. Their narratives resonated with the challenges faced by educated women, a burgeoning demographic wrestling with societal expectations and personal aspirations.

The working woman becomes another facet of this evolving portrayal. Her struggle is layered, a tapestry woven with financial independence, career aspirations, and societal disapproval. These evolving portrayals challenged the status quo, sparking conversation and introspection. By giving voice to women's frustrations and aspirations, these authors chipped away at the monolithic image of the traditional Indian woman. They showcased the multifaceted reality of their lives, the emotional turmoil of balancing tradition and modernity, and the unwavering quest for self-identity. Their legacy reverberates beyond the pages of their novels. These writers broke through the confines of convention, paving the way for a new generation of women in Indian literature to explore the human experience with nuance and depth. They served as a vital bridge, connecting the women of yesterday with the women who would continue to redefine their roles and rewrite their own narratives in the evolving landscape of Indian society.

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