

“NATION, REFORM AND RESISTANCE:

Indian Women Writings in the pre-Independence era”

¹ Sanghita Jash (Reja)
Research Scholar, Department of English,
Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam University, Indore

Abstract

Indo -Anglican literature began as a byproduct of an interesting encounter between an enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India. The ruled hapless subjects of the British Raj attempted producing English writings with native strain which conditioned their artistic endeavour. Gradually the foreign tongue became nativised and inevitably began to offer the Indian flavour in the hands of the Indian authors. Though the Indian literary firmament of the 19th century was predominantly twinkled by some brightest male authors, women contributors were not too far away. From Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu to the youngest Indian women writers, the continuous absorption of the spirit of nationalism, the freedom struggle, the Gandhian whirlwind, and finally the partition produced a sizable and significant school of women writers. The 1890s saw two literary interventions in English authored by Indian women-- one by Shevantibai Nikambe and the other one by Krupabai Sathianadhan. Both being Christian converts, were almost obsessed to show the real position of Indian women of the then society. They highly spoke about gender disparity, caste, ethnicity and cultural identity. The thrust in early Indian women writers was on the questions pertaining to conversion, colonialism, female subjectivities, etc. Later on they focussed amply on the national reforms and their texts threw light on the contradictions within the native female social position and how they were influenced by the dominant discourse of the time. The reform movement in the different parts of the country was really an offshoot of English education and thus revealed how in spite of being thought of as an entirely male project, there were still a few educated women who established a parallel discourse through their works. Early Indian women writers incorporated in their works the recurring female experiences, the

unexplored female psyche which had no male accessibility. They often raised a voice of protest against the actual condition of the disadvantaged section of the society in the mid 19th century and demanded action against social hegemonies through their pen . In this paper the author has tried to show the bulk of women writings of the pre-independent India as the point of reference to explain the discourse of education and hegemony that influenced colonial modernity as it proved to be a significant factor in the nationalist movement of India.

Key Words: Nationalism, Feminine Discourse, Colonial Modernity, Gandhian whirlwind, cultural identity, hegemony.

Introduction:

From time immemorial, human civilization has tended to assign different roles, norms and morality, and even different sentiments, feelings and thoughts to men and women. Following the process, they (the dominating male section of the society) used the biological distinction of sex (between male and female) to construct and enforce the social distinction of gender (between masculine and feminine). For example, in the enlightened European world, “according to 18th and 19th century English standards of femininity, middle and upper class women — as opposed to men — were supposed to devote themselves almost exclusively to the domestic sphere of “health and home” as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers caring for fathers, brothers, husbands and children” (Pázmány Péter Catholic University). They were expected to adopt a suitably modest behavior and a moral code of sexual purity and self-sacrifice, and avoid having strong desires and strong opinions, especially in opposition to the men who were seen as their ‘guardians’. Such differences of gender roles, by affecting access to factors like education, experience, time and financial support, have had their influence on the ways in which men and women could participate in literature as writers, readers, critics, and arguably even as characters. The heroine of Jane Austen’s last complete novel *Persuasion* (1818), Anne Elliot says, “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands, I will not allow books to prove anything.” (Tanner, 1979) and indeed until a few decades ago political, economic and cultural power rested

overwhelmingly with men in the English-speaking world and also in many other cultures around the world. Therefore, gendered approaches to literature have often sought to counterbalance the male focus that this involved by concentrating more strongly on women's perspectives. India, being a colony under the British rule was no exception from the male dominating societies.

In the present paper, the author is entirely focused towards the Indian female writers of Nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The period is a period of transformation in all segments of Indian society. Before going in the details, let us think about socio-political condition and the related reforms and nationalistic movement of the then Indian sub-continent. In next section, the author tries to analyze those conditions and transformations in the prevalent patriarch Indian societies, where women were generally treated as a subject.

Reforms and Transformations:

In the proactive reforms model related to women, it is aimed to bring improvements in women's lives, bringing them the opportunities of education and greater participation in public life, freeing them from the traditional ritual based lifestyle of the pre-nineteenth century. This happened in four spheres of social life – ritual sphere, educational sphere, social and public & political sphere. In ritual sphere, active efforts were made in the 19th and early 20th centuries against the prohibitive practices related to women. The three most prominent issues countered were *Sati system, the custom of child marriage and the restrictions on the widows, including the issue of widow-remarriage*. In educational sphere, active efforts were made to induct the *Indian women to the modern educational system* introduced by the British government. This was important as it aimed to *introduce Indian women to the outside world keeping aside their domestic engagements*. In social sphere, efforts were made to *abolish caste-related mistreatment of women and men*. Although the mistreatments were upon both men and women, still women suffered a few degrees more as they represented the feminine class. In public & political sphere, efforts were actively made to engage the women to the public and political life of the society.

These efforts were composed of two parts. First part composed of the British to pass laws related to the issues mentioned above alongside the second part composed of the social reformers to sensitize the society towards these restrictive practices. The efforts to create an awakening in the society against social and gender issues often drew support by giving evidences from scriptures to show that these practices didn't have any religious sanction and the efforts made by the women to participate in this reform movement as a constructive process.

In North and North – West part of British India, European schools and colleges were opened in the 19th century in Lahore, Delhi and Jalandhar to create a modern educational influence. In this backdrop, in 1875 Swami DayanandSaraswati founded his AryaSamaj. AryaSamaj advocated for women's education and widow remarriage. It prohibited its large number of followers from practicing caste hierarchy, unnecessary religious rituals, and restrictions on women and was against marriage of the girl child. KanyaMahavidyala, a prominent women's educational centre was opened at Jalandhar in 1891 as a school first and grew into a college later.

In West part of India, – Bombay was the centre of British rule since 1687. Besides, the Parsi population in the Western India had always given importance to education and the Parsi women enjoyed a high status in their society, running households and even in managing commercial ventures. Although being a small community in numbers, Parsis have made significant contribution in the development of every sphere of modern Indian society. Hence, the region around Bombay received modern education early and the women there also participated in the political process. The Bombay University decided in 1883 to admit women in Arts, Medicine, Civil Engineering and Law on the same terms as men. The first woman to graduate from the Bombay University was Cornelia Sorabji in 1888. Some other women to graduate at this time were PanditaRamabaiSaraswati, KashibaiKanitkar and Sharada Mehta. PanditaRamabai became a Professor at the Chettenham Women's College in England. KashibaiKanitkar learnt both Marathi and English literature at home. Anandibai Joshi began her education at home, but finally received a Doctorate in medicine from Philadelphia. A special mention needs to be made of SavitribaiPhule, who opened a school for untouchable girls on 1 May 1847. She learnt

to read and write from her husband Jyotirao Phule. They both were strong advocates of women's education, caste equality, widow remarriage and spoke against child marriage. Savitribai Phule became the first woman teacher of the first girls' school in Maharashtra. She composed a collection of 41 poems, published in 1854 as Kavyaphule. She also published a biography of her husband. Mary Carpenter, a British woman, opened the branches of National India Association across India in 1875. This association debated on various social issues, especially those related to women. Pandita Ramabai also opened Sharda Sadan on 11 March 1889. Apart from imparting learning, it also provided some professional training to women, especially widows. Organizations such as these encouraged women to come out in public and participate in the political process, helped by the political leaders, both men and women.

In Southern parts of India, the Christian Missionaries were very active in the Madras Presidency. By 1840s there were six girls' schools run by the Scottish Churches alone in Madras. By 1850s, the number of girls enrolled in these schools came up to 8000. The British government started girls' schools in 1871 in Madras. By 1891, more than 48,000 girls began to go to schools. Educated women in Madras played a vital role in organizing other women to join the freedom struggle and in engaging in social work to spread awareness about the education and upliftment of the condition of women. Some of these women like Durgabai Deshmukh, Paturi Balasaraswati Amman, Ammu Swaminathan and Lakshmi Sehgal became political leaders. The Theosophical Society under Annie Besant also played a vital role in awakening the social and political consciousness amongst the men and the women in Madras Presidency.

In Eastern part of India, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, the Law Member and President of the Executive Council and President of the Council of Education, opened the first schools for girls at Calcutta in Bengal Presidency in 1849 and maintained it from his own pocket. Following him, Lord Dalhousie also continued to maintain it and for some time spent his own money towards this cause. The spread of education in Bengal was directly linked to the British efforts. The 19th century was also the period when the British passed some important laws about women's lives, at the behest of educated Indians. Although the Sati system had been banned as early as in 1798, Lord William Bentinck

succeeded in imposing a formal ban on Sati in Bengal on 4 December 1829. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, born on 22 May 1772, is regarded as the pioneer in spreading awareness regarding women's rights in Bengal. He advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, their right to inherit property and spoke against child marriage. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a strong advocate of women's education. Rabindranath Tagore worked extensively against mistreatment of widows, child marriage, dowry.

In the previous section, the author analyzed the reforms movement in all over India. The main thrust was on the social and educational reforms. These reforms paved the way for birth of nationalistic sentiment among the women of India. The impression of the change was evident in the literature of the period. Slowly but gradually, women writers penned the female sentiment of every color through their writings. The female characters in male fictions changed their natures gradually. In the next section of the paper, the author tries to find out the nature of women writing in India during that period.

Indian female writers of the Transformation period Nineteenth and early twentieth period:

It is very tough to get the names and dates from early women writers of India. The 'raison principale' behind it is very simple. Female authors did not want to get identified in a straight way as their creations, in most of the cases, were against the will of their male guardians. Their works of authorship were printed under the statement of responsibility like – '*dhakanibasini janeikovadramohila*' or 'a simple gentle lady' etc. In these cases, the author did not have much option to get the original names and associated dates.

Jogeswari and **Bhabani** both was the lady writers were born in early 19th century. They were engaged basically in the *kabigan* or *jhumur* or *tarja*. They form their own all women group and travelled through the districts of rural Bengal. These women kabiyaals did not make any secret of the various harassments; they were subjected to by the male kabiyaals and the high price they have to pay to pursue their art. The main content of their creation was the religious chapters of Radha-Krishna, lovers united or separated etc. Although, the content was basically religious, but the sorrows, sufferings and joyous

moments of contemporary women mind found expression through their songs. These had no relation with reforms movement or political movements, but they are important in the fact that these suppressed emotions found expression for the first time.

We have another female writer named **Rassundari Devi**, who was born in 1810. She was the first autobiography writer of Bengali language. Her autobiography named as '*amarjiban*' was published in 1876. The importance of her writing is that, the autobiography was not only the first one, but the distant second was by Debendranath Thakur in 1896. The content of her writing consists of joy, pain, agony, torture, child birth, child bearing etc. She expressed them in a smooth and easy way. Some of the painful parts of her account describe her struggle to escape the grind of petty domesticity and teach herself how to read and write. "Is this my fate because I am a woman?" she asked in her account.

Hannah Catherine Mullens was born in Kolkata on 1826. Her origin was disputed. Some says that she was born to a Bengali Brahmin and later changed her name after converting to Christianity. Some contradicts it by saying that she is an English woman by birth. She had written the first prose fiction in Bengali – a woman centric fiction named "*Phulmani o Karunar Bibaran*". It reads like a Victorian novel. The story describes the everyday story of ordinary village people, their superstitions, religious traditions and customs. The story tried to depict the influence of Christianity on the everyday domestic life. Leaving aside the Christian bias in her writing, first direct reform related prose appeared through it. She was also engaged in spreading the education by being a teacher in Bhawanipore Mission School for Girls.

Savithribai Phule was born in Maharashtra in 1831. Her identity was important to understand the nature of work she had done. She was the wife of **Jotiba Phule**. Both husband and wife were the relentless fighters for the cause of untouchables (mang-mahars) of Maharashtra. They were maligned, socially ostracized and attacked by the orthodoxy upper castes whose authority they questioned. She was the first women teacher of modern Maharashtra. They together opened schools for the girls of lower untouchable castes. Along with, being the activist for a social cause, she was a fine writer too. She founded schools and wrote a book named '*Kabyaphule*' – a collection of forty

one poems. The main theme of the poems is nature, advice to the children, decrying the caste system etc. She wrote a biography of her husband which contains the social reform based themes.

Now, we will study another Marathi women writer – **Muktabai**, who was born on 1841 and wrote her only essay in 1855. Much information was not available about her except that, she studies in a female school in Pune established by SavithribaiPhule. Her eassay – *‘About the grieves of Mangs and Mahars’*. She herself being an untouchable – a Mong, confidently put forward the plight and sorrowful condition the Mangs and Mahars. Through the vivid description of the then social condition of untouchables, she is considered a champion of Marathi reforms literature.

Next, coming back to Bengali, **MokshodayaniMukhopadhyay** – sister of W. C. Bonnerjee – the first president of Indian National Congress was a tall figure in the women authors of India. She published first journal for women authors – *‘BangaMahila’* in April, 1870. In the editorial of the first issue of the journal she discussed about the ‘Swandhinata’ – independence of the women from the male domination. Her first collection of poems, - ‘BanaPrasun’ was published in 1892. This collection helped her to secure a prominent yet controversial position among the authors of that period. The controversy came up as she countered HemchandraBandopadhyay’s poem ‘Bangalirmeye’ by her satirical poem ‘Bangalirbabu’.

BhandaruAcchamamba (1874 – 1905) was one of the stalwarts in the early stages of women's movement. She was a feminist historian of the period. She learned to read Telugu, Hindi, English and Marathi, sitting next her brother. After her brother left for Nagpur to continue his studies, Acchamamba worked on her own, learning Bengali and Gujarati as well as a little Sanskrit. Acchamamba had adopted five orphans providing them with basic necessities and education after the loss of her offsprings. Together with OrugantiSundariRatnamamba, Acchamamba established the **first women's association in Coastal Andhra called BrindavanaStreelaSamaajam (Brindavana Women's Association)** at [Machilipatnam](https://magazine.rkdfuniversity.org/) in the year 1902. In 1903, she traveled all over the state and helped

others to establish several women's organizations. Her most popular writing was a volume of biographies of 34 women, known as *AbaalaSaccharitraRatnamala*.

MahLaqaBai (1768 – 1824), was an 18th century Urdu poet, courtesan and philanthropist based in Hyderabad. In 1824, she became the first female poet to have a [diwan](#) (collection of poems) of her work, a compilation of Urdu [Ghazals](#) named *Gulzar-e-Mahlaqa*, published posthumously. Although, her poems basically deals with love making, but she being a women went to the highest post in Royalty.

SarasibalaBasu (1886–1929) was a writer and social activist from the Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent. In her short lifespan, she had published more than twenty novels, many short stories and poems, and made a big impact on Bengali literature. An equal quantity of her writings had remained unpublished. She wrote passionately about the social issues of that period and the world around her. She used to do as much social service to the needy as she could squeeze in. In her later years, Sarasibala responded to Mahatma Gandhi's call and worked for reform in the Hindu religion, particularly the rejection of the caste. She lectured widely on the promotion of women's education and other social welfare activities.

RokeyaSakhawatHossain (1880 – 1932), was a Bengali feminist thinker, writer, educator and political activist from British India (present day Bangladesh). She is widely regarded as a pioneer of women's liberation in South Asia. Rokeya held education to be the central precondition of women's liberation, establishing the first school aimed primarily at Muslim girls in Kolkata. In 1916, she founded the Muslim Women's Association, an organization that fought for women's education and employment. She advocated for men and women to be treated equally as rational beings, noting that the lack of education for women was responsible for their inferior economic position. Her writings essentially express her advanced liberating thought.

Binodini Dasi (1863–1941), also known as **Notee Binodini**, was an Indian Bengali actress and thespian. She started acting at the age of 12 and ended by the time she was 23, as she later recounted in her noted autobiography, *AmarKatha* (The

Story of My Life) published in 1913. She was one of the first South Asian actresses of the theatre to write her own autobiography.

Cornelia Sorabji (1866 –1954) was an Indian lawyer, social reformer and writer. She was the first female graduate from Bombay University, and the first woman to study law at Oxford University. Returning to India after her studies at Oxford, Sorabji became involved in social and advisory work on behalf of the [*purdahnashins*](#), women who were forbidden to communicate with the outside male world, but she was unable to defend them in court since, as a woman, she did not hold professional standing in the Indian legal system.

Gangabai Pranshankar Yagnik (1868–1937) is first female Gujarati writer from 19th century India. A teacher and an [*Ayurveda*](#)-practitioner by profession, she wrote *HunnarMahasagar* (1898) which was a compilation of about 2080 trades, skills and tips for self-employment. Yagnik's writing is considered rebellious and reformist. She opposed superstitions and social evils like witch-hunting, blind faith, child marriages and polygamy in her writing.

Priyomvoda Devi was born in 1871 in Gunaigacha, Pabna District, Bengal Presidency, British Raj. Her mother, Prasannamoyi, was a famous writer. Her uncles were PramathaChowdhury notable essayist as well. Her son died in 1896, after which she spend her time writing and engaged in her philanthropy work. She joined the BrahmoBalikaShikshalaya (Brahmo Girl's School) as a teacher. She served as the head of Bharat Stri-Mahamandal. She translated Svapnavasavadatta which was a Sanskrit play. She translated parts of the Bible and published it as Bhaktavani.

Swarnakumari Devi (1855 –1932) was a Bengali poet, novelist, musician and social worker. She was the fourth amongst the daughters of Debendranath Tagore and was a granddaughter of Dwarkanath Tagore. She was actively involved in politics. In 1889 and 1890 she served Indian National Congress. That was the first time women participated publicly in the sessions of the Indian National Congress. She had authored several novels, plays, collection of poems etc.

Begum Faizunnesa Choudhurani (1834–1903) was a Zamindar of Homnabad-Pashchimgaon Estate in present-day Comilla District, Bangladesh. She is most famous for her campaign for female education and other social issues. In appreciation of her social work, in 1889 Queen Victoria awarded Faizunnesa the title of "[Nawab](#)", making her the first female Nawab in South Asia. Faizunnesa's educational and literary work belonged to the post-1857 era. She penned few other literary pieces such as Sangeet Saar, Sangeet Lahari and Tattwa O Jatiya Sangeet, and is renowned for her pioneering educational and charitable work and establishing of schools, madrasas and hospitals. However, Rupjalal has remained her most important work where she had tried to uplift the morale of Muslim people.

Ramabai Ranade (1862 –1924) was an Indian social worker and one of the first women's rights activists in the 19th century. At the age of 11, she was married to Justice [Mahadev Govind Ranade](#), who was a distinguished Indian scholar and social reformer. In that era of social inequality, women were not allowed to go to school and become literate. Ramabai, soon after her marriage, started to learn reading and writing with strong support and encouragement from [Mahadev Govind Ranade](#). Starting with her native language Marathi, she strove hard to master English. Ramabai Ranade with her husband and other colleagues established in 1886 the first girls' high school in Pune, the renowned [Huzurpaga](#). Inspired by her husband, Ramabai started 'Hindu Ladies Social Club' in Mumbai to develop public speaking among women. After the death of her husband, Ramabai devoted the rest of her life to the betterment of women's lives mainly through the activities 'Seva Sadan Society' in Mumbai and [Pune](#). She penned her autobiography where she had expressed her feelings as a social worker.

Kamini Roy (1864 –1933) was a Bengali poet, social worker and feminist in British India. She was the first woman honours graduate in British India. She picked up the cue for feminism from a fellow student of Bethune School, [Abala Bose](#). In 1921, she was one of the leaders, along with Kumudini Mitra (Basu) and Mrinalini Sen, of the Bangiya Nari Samaj, an organization formed to fight for woman's suffrage. The [Bengal Legislative Council](#) granted limited suffrage to women in 1925, allowing Bengali women to exercise their right for the first time in the [1926 Indian general election](#).^[3] She was a

member of the Female Labour Investigation Commission (1922–23). She penned many literary works and elected president of the Bengali Literary Conference in 1930 and vice-president of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1932–33.

Piro Preman (1832–1872) was the first female Punjabi poet. She was sold to prostitution in Lahore and escaped from there. She had written an autobiography, in which she presented the plight of women in the profession and society of North-West India.

Conclusion: We can conclude that the birth and growth of English writings by women are the outcome of the sweeping changes in the social political and cultural domains. The volumes by women writers grew in both variety and stature. They had left indelible mark in the myriad minded readers across the globe. This paper has tried to offer a critical appraisal of those women authors who had handled the recurrent themes of oppression and patriarchal domination, and thus upheld the emerging concept called 'womanhood'.

References:

Pázmány Péter Catholic University. (n.d.).
https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/135505/file/introduction/satellite/literature_and_gender.html. Retrieved 11 20, 2021, from
<https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/135505/file/introduction/index.html#links>:
https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/135505/file/introduction/satellite/literature_and_gender.html

Singha, Manjushri (2000). Unabingsha satabdir sahitya o sangskritite banga mahila. Grantha Samput, Kolkata.

Tanner, T. (1979, May 06). <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/06/archives/jane-austen-by-a-lady-austen.html>. Retrieved 11 20, 2021, from [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/06/archives/jane-austen-by-a-lady-austen.html):
<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/06/archives/jane-austen-by-a-lady-austen.html>

Tharu, Susie and Lalita, K. (Eds). (1991). Women writing in India. Vol 1, Oxford University Press