

Tradition and Modernity in Indian Women's Writing in English

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Abstract

Indian women's writing in English is a vibrant and evolving domain that reflects the intersection of gender, culture, history, and language. A central thematic concern in much of this literature is the tension between tradition and modernity. Through fiction, poetry, and memoir, women writers explore how inherited norms and values collide with changing social realities, particularly in the wake of colonialism, globalization, and liberalization. This paper examines how key Indian women writers—ranging from Kamala Das and Anita Desai to Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and others—negotiate this tension and contribute to feminist discourse. Their works show that tradition and modernity are not binary opposites but interdependent forces that shape women's identities, choices, and expressions. The study also considers the impact of caste, class, diaspora, and regionality in shaping diverse women's voices across India and beyond.

Keywords: *Indian English literature, women writers, tradition, modernity, feminism, identity, diaspora, patriarchy, postcolonialism*

The emergence of Indian women's writing in English is closely tied to the broader historical evolution of Indian English literature. In the early twentieth century, women like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, and Cornelia Sorabji began expressing themselves in English, a language that was both colonial and liberating. However, it was only in the post-independence period that women's voices in English literature gained critical mass and thematic diversity. One of the most enduring concerns in this body of work is the intersection between tradition and modernity—two forces that, while seemingly opposed, are often deeply entangled in the lives of Indian women.

Tradition, in the Indian context, is a complex tapestry of religious practices, social hierarchies, familial roles, and cultural values. It is not a static entity but one that evolves over time, often selectively interpreted by patriarchal systems to control female agency. Modernity, meanwhile, has arrived in India through a layered and often conflicted trajectory—first as a colonial imposition, later as a nationalist aspiration, and more recently as a neoliberal, globalized reality. For Indian women writers, the space between these two poles becomes a site of literary exploration and resistance.

In Kamala Das's poetry and prose, the individual female subject breaks through the oppressive walls of tradition. Das's frank discussions of sexuality, love, longing, and rebellion were shocking in mid-twentieth-century India but also liberating for generations of women who had no literary voice. Her autobiography *My Story* is a courageous act of self-narration, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, self and society. In writing her inner world, Das confronts not only social taboos but also the contradictions inherent in embracing modern freedom while remaining emotionally tethered to traditional expectations of womanhood, marriage, and family honour.

In the fiction of Anita Desai, the struggle is often internalized. Her female protagonists are introverted, sensitive, and alienated, negotiating solitude within a world that expects conformity. In *Voices in the City* and *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai captures the psychological burden of women who are educated and aware but still unable to escape patriarchal conditioning. The modernity her characters experience is one of intellect and emotion, not necessarily of action or freedom. Her work reveals that modern thought does not always translate into modern life, especially when the surrounding structures remain traditional and confining.

The works of Shashi Deshpande further complicate this dynamic. In *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande foregrounds the middle-class woman caught between duty and desire. Her characters are not radicals or rebels but women who question, reflect, and sometimes resist quietly. For Deshpande, modernity is a slow and painful process of self-discovery, not a dramatic rupture with the past. Her portrayal of silence—as both a weapon and a prison—is a powerful metaphor for the Indian woman's predicament.

With Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Indian women's writing in English took a bold turn into postmodern and postcolonial terrain. Roy dismantles linear narrative and social orthodoxy with equal force. Ammu's illicit love, her social ostracization, and her tragic

death expose the brutal costs of defying caste and gender norms. Roy's novel is a critique not only of traditional conservatism but also of the failures of modern institutions—legal, political, religious—to protect the vulnerable. Roy's linguistic innovation, too, breaks the formality of English and infuses it with subversive lyricism and local flavour.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores cultural dislocation, identity crisis, and the ambivalence of global modernity. Sai, the young protagonist, is caught between the elite colonial remnants of her grandfather's lifestyle and the rebellious energy of postcolonial youth around her. Her sense of identity is hybrid and fluid, reflecting the complexities of being Indian in a globalizing world. Desai's narrative suggests that modernity is no longer confined to the urban or Westernized elite but is shaped by transnational flows of people, ideas, and capital.

In addition to these canonical writers, a wide array of contemporary voices has diversified the discourse around tradition and modernity. Writers like Meena Kandasamy, Anuradha Roy, Namita Gokhale, and Avni Doshi tackle questions of gender violence, memory, mental health, and intergenerational trauma. In Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, the narrative is both intimate and political. The protagonist's experience of domestic violence is framed not just as personal suffering but as a consequence of deeply embedded patriarchal tradition, masked by modern liberal rhetoric.

Moreover, the intersection of caste and gender has been powerfully articulated by Dalit women writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Halder. In *Karukku*, Bama presents the everyday indignities faced by Dalit Christian women, challenging both Hindu and Christian patriarchy. Her use of Tamil idioms and her refusal to conform to Western literary aesthetics signal a radical redefinition of both tradition and modernity. These writers shift the focus from middle-class, urban female identity to the lived realities of marginalized women whose traditions are doubly oppressive and whose engagement with modernity is filtered through labour, survival, and resistance.

The diasporic experience adds another layer to the tradition-modernity discourse. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explore how Indian women navigate the pressures of maintaining cultural heritage in foreign lands. In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol's mother clings to Bengali traditions even as she adapts to American life. Her identity is shaped not by modernity or tradition alone but by the tension between them, as well as the spaces where they intersect and reshape each other. Diasporic

women's writing also reflects how the idea of "tradition" becomes romanticized or problematized in migration contexts.

A unique aspect of Indian women's writing in English is the localization of the global and the globalization of the local. Many authors take traditional myths, folklore, and regional histories and recast them in modern contexts. For instance, in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, classical myths of women from Indian epics are woven into contemporary narratives. The result is a conversation between past and present, suggesting that tradition is not inherently oppressive, but must be critically interpreted to remain meaningful in the modern age.

The use of English itself becomes a site of negotiation. For many Indian women writers, English is not a colonial residue but a tool of empowerment. They indigenize the language, infusing it with native rhythms, cultural references, and emotional cadences. This linguistic hybridity mirrors the cultural and psychological hybridity their characters often embody. The act of writing in English, then, becomes both an assertion of voice and a critique of dominant narratives—be they Western or Indian.

Academic readings of this literary phenomenon often draw from postcolonial feminist theory. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Susie Tharu have interrogated the idea of the "Third World woman" as a monolithic victim of tradition. Indian women's writing challenges this by showing a spectrum of experiences—rural and urban, elite and subaltern, devout and secular, submissive and defiant. These writers refuse easy categorization, embracing contradictions and complexity as the core of female experience.

The tradition-modernity axis is also inflected by religion, particularly in novels where spiritual practices are both liberating and confining. For example, in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the ashram—a symbol of Indian spiritual tradition—is revealed to be a site of abuse and exploitation. The novel critiques the commodification of tradition in the tourism industry while examining how modernity fails to provide ethical alternatives.

Finally, Indian women's writing in English has had a tangible impact on public discourse. These narratives have sparked conversations on marital rape, domestic abuse, honor killings, LGBTQ+ identities, mental health, and gender parity. Literature here functions not only as artistic expression but also as a catalyst for social change. Many authors are also activists, journalists, or public intellectuals who use their platform to challenge both regressive traditions and hollow modernities.

Indian women's writing in English is a dynamic, multilayered, and politically engaged literary tradition. Far from being confined to the binary of tradition and modernity, it interrogates and reimagines both. These writers do not reject tradition wholesale nor do they embrace modernity uncritically. Instead, they engage in an ongoing dialogue with both, uncovering possibilities for resistance, renewal, and self-fashioning. Their voices, diverse in background and bold in articulation, have transformed Indian English literature into a more inclusive and intellectually vibrant space—one that continues to evolve as Indian society itself redefines its relationship with its past and future.

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