

Pre-Independence Female Writers: Setting the Stage for Indian Women's Voices in Indo-Anglican Literature in India

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Indian Writing in English during the colonial period was not simply a literary phenomenon; it was a cultural negotiation or women, writing in English was doubly challenging: they had to overcome patriarchal restrictions and colonial hierarchies. Yet pioneers such as Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Cornelia Sorabji, and Krupabai Sathianadhan transformed English into a vehicle for expressing Indian identity. Therefore, the creative works of these writers mark the first stage in the evolution of Indian female writing in English, laying foundations for later feminist and postcolonial voices. Scholars have observed that Naidu and Dutt's writings demonstrate how Indian women used English to articulate both nationalist pride and feminist sensibility, the chores of their voices could be louder than the words could have pronounced for the larger reformist and nationalist awakening of the nineteenth century (Kalaifarasi and Saridha 2021). The nineteenth century was a period of reform and awakening in India. The introduction of English education created new opportunities, but also new tensions. For women, access to education was limited, yet figures like Dutt and Naidu emerged as voices of cultural pride. Their writings reveal how Indian women negotiated traditions and advancement with persisting socio-cultural conditions of Pre-Independence India. Where the challenges of identity, nationalism, and cultural revival had mounted to block their path of creativity.

This paradox—using English to assert Indian identity—defines the hybridity of early Indian women’s writing. The colonial encounter created a literary paradox. English was the language of power, yet it became the medium through which Indian women articulated cultural pride. As Homi Bhabha argues, colonial discourse creates a “third space” where hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha 1994). For Indian women, this third space was both empowering and limiting. They could speak, but only within the structures of colonial modernity. Gayatri Spivak’s famous question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” resonates here, as these women attempted to speak within patriarchal and colonial structures (Spivak 1988). Their voices may have been constrained, but they nonetheless articulated agency.

Toru Dutt (1856–1877) remains a remarkable figure in Indian literature. Her collection *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* retold Indian myths in English verse, blending Sanskrit tradition with European Romantic style. Her poetry embodies hybridity, preserving cultural memory through the English language while creating a new literary identity. As she herself reflects, “*The tree of life has many a leaf, and each leaf is a memory*” (Dutt 56). Dutt’s short life did not prevent her from becoming a pioneer.. Her translations of French poetry in *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* reveal her cosmopolitan thinking which she had been inspired and motivated by the ancient Indian Philosophy , education, while her Indian ballads assert cultural pride. Critics have noted that her poetic style combines the lyricism of Romanticism with the rootedness of Indian myth, making her one of the earliest

Indo-Anglian voices (Nisha 2016). A close reading of her retelling of the Savitri myth illustrates her feminist sensibility. In the poem, Savitri confronts Yama, the god of death, to save her husband. Dutt's verse emphasizes Savitri's courage: "*Savitri stood, her heart was strong / Against the god of death and wrong*" (Dutt 1882). This portrayal transforms Savitri into a proto-feminist figure, resisting patriarchal and divine authority. Dutt's choice to narrate this myth in English is significant: she asserts Indian cultural pride through the colonizer's language, creating what Bhabha would later call a "*third space*" of hybridity (Bhabha 1994). Her work demonstrates that even within colonial constraints, Indian women could articulate agency and cultural resilience (IOSR-JHSS 2022). Her poem *Lakshman* similarly re-imagines the Ramayana episode of Sita's abduction. By focusing on Sita's voice and her plea to Lakshman, Dutt highlights female vulnerability and agency which shows her way of re-telling the myth in the foreground of women's perspectives. subtly challenging patriarchal narratives (Mukherjee 1998). In *Our Casuarina Tree*, she turns personal memory into cultural metaphor, linking the tree to both family and homeland through blending personal and national identity which illustrates her ability to use English poetry to articulate Indian sensibilities.

Dutt's hybridity is not merely linguistic; it is cultural. She embodies the paradox of

colonial modernity: educated in Europe, fluent in French and English, yet deeply rooted in Indian tradition. Her poetry demonstrates that Indian women could use English to preserve cultural memory, creating a new literary identity that was both Indian and cosmopolitan.

Another significant woman in the Pre- Independence period was Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) who occupies a unique place in Indian literary and political history and freedom movement of India. Her contribution in the overall spheres of this country is remarkable.

Known as the “*Nightingale of India*,” she was both a poet of lyrical beauty and a nationalist leader who played a crucial role in the freedom struggle. Her dual identity as poet and activist illustrates how literature and politics intertwined in colonial India. Naidu’s poetry is not merely aesthetic; it is deeply political, giving voice to India’s cultural identity during colonial rule (Kalaiaarasi and Saridha 2021). Her first collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905),

introduced readers to her lyrical style. Poems such as *The Palanquin Bearers* and *Coromandel Fishers* reveal her ability to capture the rhythms of Indian life in English verse.

As she writes in *The Palanquin Bearers*, “*Lightly, O lightly we bear her along, / She sways like a flower in the wind of our song*” (Naidu 7). This line demonstrates her musicality and the way she transforms everyday Indian scenes into lyrical English poetry. The musicality of her poetry reflects her training in both Indian and Western traditions. Critics have noted that

Naidu's verse is "*aesthetic nationalism*," where beauty and politics converge (IOSR-JHSS 2022).

A close reading of *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad* reveals her nationalist intent. The poem catalogues the goods sold in Indian markets: "*What do you sell, O ye merchants? / Richly your wares are displayed*" (Naidu 1912). By celebrating Indian crafts and traditions, Naidu resists colonial erasure. The poem becomes a cultural manifesto, asserting the richness of Indian identity. Scholars argue that Naidu's poetry transforms everyday scenes into symbols of national pride (Ramesh Chandra 2002). Her poem *The Palanquin Bearers* exemplifies her lyrical style: "*Lightly, O lightly we bear her along, / She sways like a flower in the wind of our song*" (Naidu 1905). While ostensibly romantic, the poem also reflects the social realities of women's lives, carried and constrained by patriarchal structures. The image of the woman swaying like a flower suggests both beauty and fragility, highlighting the tension between romantic idealization and social reality.

Naidu's second collection, *The Bird of Time* (1912), deepened her nationalist voice. Poems such as *The Gift of India* mourn the sacrifice of Indian soldiers in World War I: "*Is*

there aught you need that my hands withhold, / Rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold? ”

(Naidu 1912). Here, Naidu speaks as the motherland, offering her sons to the imperial war effort. The poem is both patriotic and critical, acknowledging the sacrifices demanded by colonialism. Scholars have argued that *The Gift of India* exemplifies Naidu's ability to blend lyricism with political critique (Mukherjee 1998). Naidu's nationalist role further amplifies her literary significance. As a leader in the freedom struggle, she became the first Indian woman to preside over the Indian National Congress. Her speeches and writings reveal her commitment to both women's rights and national independence. She demonstrated that women's voices could shape both literature and politics. Her poetry thus represents a fusion of aesthetic beauty and nationalist resistance, illustrating how Indian women used English to articulate cultural pride and political agency. Readers have emphasized the feminist undertones of Naidu's poetry. While she often celebrated traditional roles, her work also highlighted women's strength and resilience. In *The Queen's Rival*, she portrays a woman who challenges authority, reflecting her own role as a political leader. Scholars argue that Naidu's poetry oscillates between romantic lyricism and feminist assertion, revealing the complexities of female identity in colonial India (Nisha 2016). Naidu's use of English is significant. Like Dutt, she transformed the colonizer's language into a medium of cultural pride. Her poetry demonstrates that English could carry Indian rhythms, images, and traditions. As Bhabha argues, hybridity creates a space where colonial discourse is appropriated and transformed

(Bhabha 1994). Naidu's poetry exemplifies this hybridity, blending Indian themes with English forms.

Her legacy is both literary and political. As a poet, she enriched Indian Writing in English with lyrical beauty and nationalist pride. As a leader, she demonstrated that women could shape the nation's destiny. Her dual identity illustrates the intersection of literature and politics, showing how Indian women used English to articulate both personal and collective identity. While Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu worked primarily in poetry, Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954) and Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862–1894) contributed to prose, expanding the scope of Indian women's writing in English. Their works demonstrate that Indian women were not confined to lyrical expression; they entered public discourse, autobiography, and social critique, using English to articulate complex identities. Cornelia Sorabji was the first female lawyer in India and the first woman to study law at Oxford. Her book *India Calling* (1934) blends autobiography with social commentary, offering insights into the struggles of women in colonial society, particularly in law and education. Sorabji's prose reveals the intersection of gender and law, showing how women negotiated colonial structures. Scholars have emphasized that Sorabji's writings highlight the contradictions of colonial modernity: she was both empowered by English education and constrained by

patriarchal and colonial hierarchies (Basu 1993). Her narratives often focus on the plight of women in the *pardahnashins* (secluded women), who were denied access to legal representation. Sorabji's role as their legal advisor gave her unique insight into the intersection of gender, law, and colonialism. In her essays, she critiques both Indian patriarchy and colonial bureaucracy, revealing how women were doubly marginalized. Her prose demonstrates that Indian women could use English not only for poetry but also for social critique, entering public discourse and challenging structures of power.

Krupabai Sathianadhan's novel *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895) is one of the earliest autobiographical novels by an Indian woman. It explores the tensions of identity, religion, and gender in colonial India. The protagonist's struggles reflect the complexities of being both Indian and Christian in a colonial society. As Saguna herself admits, "*I was neither wholly Indian nor wholly Christian, but something in between, and that in-between space was my burden*" (Sathianadhan 73). Sathianadhan's narrative anticipates feminist autobiography, showing how women could use fiction to articulate personal and social realities. Critics have argued that *Saguna* is a landmark in Indian women's writing, as it demonstrates how personal narrative could become a site of cultural negotiation (Mukherjee 1998). The novel is semi-autobiographical, reflecting Sathianadhan's own experiences as a

Christian woman in colonial India. It highlights the challenges of negotiating multiple identities: Indian, Christian, female, colonial subject. The protagonist's voice reveals both vulnerability and resilience, illustrating how women could articulate agency within patriarchal and colonial constraints. Together, Sorabji and Satthianadhan expand the scope of Indian Writing in English. Their works demonstrate that women's voices could flourish in prose as well as poetry. Sorabji's legal prose and Satthianadhan's autobiographical fiction reveal the diversity of women's writing, showing that Indian women were not passive recipients of colonial modernity but active agents shaping literary and social discourse. Their contributions also highlight the intersection of literature and politics. Sorabji's legal writings reveal how women engaged with colonial law, while Satthianadhan's autobiographical fiction illustrates how personal narrative could become political. Both writers demonstrate that Indian women used English to articulate complex identities, negotiating questions of gender, religion, and colonialism. In this way, Sorabji and Satthianadhan complement the contributions of Dutt and Naidu. Together, they represent the diversity of pre-Independence female writing in English, encompassing poetry, prose, autobiography, and social critique. Their works illustrate the first stage in the evolution of Indian female writing in English, laying the foundation for later feminist and postcolonial voices.

The pre-Independence female writers share several recurring themes that illuminate both their literary contributions and their socio-political significance. These themes include nationalism and cultural revival, negotiation of colonial identity, gender and voice, and hybridity. Together, they demonstrate how Indian women used English to articulate identity, resistance, and cultural pride. Nationalism and Cultural Revival Nationalism is evident in Sarojini Naidu's patriotic verse and Toru Dutt's mythological retellings. Naidu's *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad* celebrates Indian crafts and traditions, resisting colonial erasure (Naidu 1912). Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* re-imagines Indian myths in English, asserting cultural pride through the colonizer's language (Dutt 1882). Both writers demonstrate that literature could serve as a vehicle for nationalist sentiment, blending aesthetic beauty with political resistance (Kalaifarasi and Saridha 2021)

Dutt and Naidu transformed English into a vehicle for Indian identity, while Sorabji and Sathianadhan used it to critique colonial structures. As Homi Bhabha argues, colonial discourse creates a "third space" where hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha 1994). These writers exemplify this hybridity, appropriating English to articulate Indian sensibilities. Gender and Voice Gender is central to their writings. Dutt's portrayal of Savitri emphasizes female courage, while Naidu's poems highlight women's resilience. Sorabji's legal prose reveals the

struggles of women in colonial law, and Sathianadhan's autobiographical fiction illustrates the complexities of female identity. As Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex*, women's voices historically emerged against structures of silence (Beauvoir 1949). She observes, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" (Beauvoir 283), reminding us that female identity is socially constructed and that literature became one of the spaces where women resisted this imposed silence. These writers exemplify that struggle in colonial India, claiming literary space in a patriarchal society. Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation Hybridity defines their works.

Dutt blended Indian myth with European Romanticism, Naidu infused English verse with Indian rhythms, Sorabji combined autobiography with social critique, and Sathianadhan merged personal narrative with cultural negotiation. Their writings illustrate how Indian women created hybrid identities, negotiating colonial and patriarchal structures. Gayatri Spivak's question "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" resonates here, as these women attempted to speak within structures that sought to silence them (Spivak 1988). Their voices may have been constrained, but they nonetheless articulated agency. Intersection of Literature and Politics Their works also demonstrate the intersection of literature and politics. Naidu's nationalist poetry, Sorabji's legal prose, and Sathianadhan's autobiographical fiction reveal how women used literature to engage with social and political issues. They transformed English from a colonial language into a medium of cultural pride and feminist assertion. Their legacy is not only literary but also political, as they demonstrated that women's voices could shape both literature and nationhood.

Pre-Independence female writers in English laid the foundation for later generations.

Toru Dutt's hybridity, Sarojini Naidu's nationalist lyricism, Cornelia Sorabji's social commentary, and Krupabai Satthianadhan's autobiographical prose together represent the first stage in the evolution of Indian female writing in English. They moved from silence to voice, from margin to center, demonstrating that Indian women could use English to articulate identity, resistance, and cultural pride. Their contributions remain essential to understanding the trajectory of Indian Writing in English, as they opened the path for post-Independence writers like Kamala Das and Anita Desai, and contemporary voices such as Arundhati Roy and Meena Kandasamy.

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