Introduction to the Special Issue: Celebrating Unheard Voices of Charismatic Women in Indian Writing in English

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Introduction to the Special Issue: Celebrating Unheard Voices of Charismatic Women in Indian Writing in English

By Smita Jha, Bhushan Sharma, and Aruni Mahapatra

To celebrate the Azadi ke Amrit Mahotsav, a two-day national conference titled “Celebrating Unheard Voices of Charismatic Women in Indian Writing in English” was organized by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee in association with the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. It is indeed a matter of pride to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence earned after the sacrifice of many lives. The official journey of Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav commenced on 12th March 2021 which started a 75-week countdown to the nation’s 75th anniversary of independence that will end on 15th August 2023. While giving the inaugural speech, Honourable Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, addressed that Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav means an elixir of energy of independence, an elixir of inspiration from the warriors of the freedom struggle, an elixir of new ideas and pledges, and an elixir of Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance). Therefore, the Mahotsav here means a festival of the awakening of the nation, a festival of fulfilling the dream of good governance, and a festival of global peace and development.

India is a land of cultural diversity, natural resources, and rich history but has been invaded by several foreign rulers for almost eight hundred years. Since that time, we have many heroes in the gallery of history who sacrificed their lives to free India. Although India has always been regarded as the “Empire of the Spirits,” because of its unmatched philosophical contribution to matters of the soul and spirit, it is also the “Empire of the Intellect,” with an outpouring of creativity over our long history. Yet the creative contributions of Indian women are still underappreciated. The Indian tales passing from generation to generation primarily focus on strong male characters, and we rarely come across the portrayal of a strong woman or female character from those tales. Yet many women were involved in India’s history and freedom struggle. They were intelligent, trusted their sensibilities, and were blessed with sharp acumen. Hence, publications are needed to unearth the unheard voices and to highlight the participation of female figures who contributed substantially to the freedom struggle of India.

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One of the women who is yet to be celebrated is Jhalkari Bai, a Dalit woman virangana (soldier) in the Indian rebellion led by the Durga Dal, the women’s brigade of Jhansi. She had an uncanny resemblance to Rani Lakshmibai, which she used to trick the British. She successfully took command of the army and helped the real Queen Lakshmibai escape. Another unsung woman was Azizun Bai, a young courtesan who lived in the Lurkee Mahil, under the refuge of Umrao Begum in Kanpur. During the uprising of 1857, her home became a meeting point for sepoy soldiers. She formed her own group of women to support the revolt, who rallied for the armed men, tended to their wounds, and distributed arms and ammunition. The story traces back to the battle in Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow in 1857. Only at the end of it battle did they discover it was a woman who was the undercover rebel. With her pouch full of ammunition and old pistols, she had successfully killed more than six men. There are several women personalities like Begum Hazrat Mahal, Bhikaji Cama, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sucheta Kriplani, Kanaklata Barua, and many more who deserve a thorough discussion in literary and historical scholarship. One of the best ways to celebrate the Independence of India is by celebrating unsung women heroes.

Indian Writing in English

English is read, written, spoken, and used creatively all over the world, and it continues to be used in Britain’s erstwhile colonies, such as India, Sri Lanka, Canada, Australia, and quite a few African countries. The English that is used in these countries is different from British English in idiom and expression, texture and structure, in sound and syntax; Indian creative writers in English have tried to Indianize English. To be Indian in thought and feeling and emotion and experience yet also to court the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression is an experiment in mutation. It is an undeniable fact that because of the long use of English in India for various purposes by educated speakers and writers, a distinct variety of English has developed, intelligible internally as well as internationally, with a national identity of its own. And it has been a living speech of the Indian intelligentsia for more than a hundred years. Indian English writing in various fields is a significant body of writing, to which many gifted individuals have richly contributed, and is distinct in its character. We have to reckon with the prime reason for which Indian creative writers have nativized English in their books. The characters that we come across in Indian novels in English are mostly Indians; they are educated, semi-educated, uneducated, or even illiterate, they are not supposed to speak in English in local surroundings, and the situations that are created in these writings are Indian. It is therefore quite proper, especially for the sake of naturalness and verisimilitude, to make use of Indianisms in Indian fiction in English. Indian writing in English conveys a distinct sense of Indian culture and sensibility.

The Theme of the Conference and Special Issue

The theme of the conference, “Celebrating Unheard Voices of Charismatic Women in Indian Writings in English” brings forth the hidden history or stories of heroic figures to the global platform. The papers presented at this conference demonstrate how Indian women writers created their own “little narratives” as a replacement for the “grand narratives” dominated by canonical writers. Their writings also reveal that many Indian women have played a vital role in the formation of Indian history, but their struggle and endurance were not represented, and they remained marginalized. The papers presented at the conference unearth the struggles of charismatic women and also bring their voices to the forefront.

In these papers, literary scholars situate powerful texts by Indian women writers in the context of sociological and political conflicts that affected the lives of women and women writers. The papers thus examine both real conflicts and the different ways in which writers described and attempted to resolve those conflicts. Together, these reflections on unheard
voices constitute an honest acknowledgment of the challenges faced by a postcolonial feminist project and a spirited attempt at resolving those challenges. Through their meticulous case studies, the papers collected here acknowledge the difficulty of defining real women outside of the imagined claims of community, nation, caste, and religion. Additionally, through their astute theorizations, these scholars also construct figures of Indian women who are not simply the objects of discourses about nation and sexuality, but active participants in the unique drama of modernization that was played out in the Indian subcontinent. As such, the collective scholarly effort represented by these papers is in line with Professor Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s foundational arguments in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. Rajan cautions against the tendency to assume that all historical and literary documents by women constitute resistance. Rajan urges scholars to read accounts of subalternity before deciding what kind of resistance or conformity inspires those accounts.

The figures that emerge from the analyses presented here are Indian women, and as such, they are subject to the various ideological forces that seek to define both Indianness and womanhood. But these figures are also agents who choose the terms under which they are hailed by ideologies that may seek to recruit them for nationalistic or patriarchal projects. Numerous papers were presented at the conference, out of which ten have been selected for the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* special issue. The presentations describe Indian women negotiating for an agency in three contexts: revising misogynist stories from Indian mythology, questioning the unfair burden of care that is placed on women, and challenging the stereotypical notions of a woman’s place in public life.

The research article by Ruchi Kumari and Smita Jha, “Reinventing Marginalized Voices: A Study of Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita and Yashodhara*” underlines a rarely discussed issue in feminist theory, that complex issues can not be reduced to simply binaries between heroes and villains. The authors discuss one of the most significant works, Volga’s (or Popuri Lalitha Kumari’s) *The Liberation of Sita* (originally published in Telugu as *Vimuktha*), a collection of five interconnected short stories. Volga revises the marginalization of Sita and *Ramayana’s* five minor female characters in the original narrative and retells old stories in new ways from gynocentric perspectives.

Aruni Mahapatra’s article “Custodianship and Care” studies how Indian women’s rights are mediated through the sphere of the family. Many scholars have observed that the Indian state is able to contain the autonomy of women by placing them in the custody of male family members. Mahapatra draws on the ethics of care to evaluate the legal recognition of daughters and wives in postcolonial India as forms of care that may or not meet the needs of those who require care. Through a close reading of Anita Desai’s novel *Clear Light of Day*, Mahapatra demonstrates how the novel depicts an educated Indian woman resisting the ideological pressures that confine caregiving women to the custody of male relatives.

“Draupadi’s Polyandry: A Study in Feminist Discourse Analysis” by Saumya Sharma studies the character of Draupadi, a crucial link between warring characters in the *Mahabharata*, particularly through her polyandry. Born of fire, personifying purity, yet bound by a matrimonial covenant, she is caught in a complex marital relationship with five husbands that completely changes her life and also theirs. The researcher examines the varied representations of Draupadi in three texts of the *Mahabharata*, by J.A.B. van Buitenen, P. Ray, and C.B. Divakaruni.

“Traversing the Inner Courtyard to the Public Sphere: Exploring Lalithambika Antharjanam's Short Stories as Narratives of Protest in Early-Twentieth-Century Kerala” by Revathy Hemachandran and Maya Vinai attempts to locate the space occupied by women writing about women’s experience in the context of the socio-cultural and political transformations that Kerala underwent during the early twentieth century. The study shows that the short stories of Lalithambika subverted the popular representation of *antharjanams* in the
early 20th century as oppressed and vulnerable subjects by depicting them as strong voices of protest pioneering a new wave of feminism.

Neha Arora in “Redrawing the Contours of Nationalist Discourse through the Voices of Courtesans-Turned-Warriors” highlights that the hegemonic account of India’s independence struggle makes the inextricable links between power, history, and representation quite apparent. Women warriors involved in the struggle have been excluded from historical accounts. The author discusses the tawaifs (courtesans) of Awadh as unsung heroes who played a significant role in India’s freedom struggle, with the goal of problematizing their invisibility in academic and nationalist discourse.

Shivalika Agarwal and Nagendra Kumar in “Mothers Born or Produced?: An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Well-Behaved Indian Women” explores the debut novel of Saumya Dave to analyze this relationship in three generations of women. The authors examine how motherhood is practiced in ways a girl/woman is brought up by her mother, carrying the same set of beliefs to further transfer to her daughter. This shift edges towards an identity that is not one’s own but inflicted. The study also highlights the struggle of daughters and mothers in the novel, who suffer separation resulting from their conflicted identities, and their journey of self-analysis to resolve these conflicts in the light of select concepts of motherhood studies.

In the research article, “Why Ismat Chughtai Faced Trial: An Intersectional Reading of the Reception of ‘Lihaaf’ in Colonial India,” Mrinalini Raj studies Ismat Chughtai’s short story “Lihaaf” (1942) alongside her essay “The Lihaaf Trial” (2000) and analyzes the reception of the text with a focus on Indian society’s approach towards sexuality, women, and morality in the colonial period. Chughtai discusses many social taboos including female sexual desire and homosexuality which demarcated “Lihaaf” from other works produced by women in the colonial era. She can be viewed as a woman who challenged the boundaries set for women’s writing, especially during that era.

Rangnath Thakur and Binod Mishra’s research article, “Excavation of Silenced Voices: (Re)visiting Menka Shivdasani’s Frazil through the Modern Feminist Discourse of Indian Writing in English,” analyzes the thematic and structural aspects of Shivdasani’s poetry that connect her to the postmodernist phase of Indian writing in English.
women writers reinterpreted Indian women’s struggles, losses, and gains, and also their social, psychological, and personal identities, by questioning patriarchal domination.

**Works Cited**