

Revolutionizing Feminism in Hindi Literature

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1 Introduction

In Hindi literature, women writers have historically occupied a complex position, often confronting societal expectations and barriers to self-expression. Figures like Mahadevi Varma, a pioneering voice in pre-independence Hindi poetry, set a foundation that many contemporary female poets build upon today. Over the years, the themes explored by these poets have evolved to reflect shifting cultural landscapes and the increasing complexities of female identity. Modern Hindi women poets delve into subjects such as gender identity, personal freedom, empowerment, and mental health, capturing both the enduring struggles and the newfound freedoms that come with contemporary life. Through their unique styles and diverse themes, they offer insight into the lives and perspectives of Indian women in a rapidly changing society.

2 Purpose of study

Through this term paper, I seek to explore the evolution of themes in contemporary Hindi poetry by women, examining how today's poets reinterpret and expand upon issues initially brought to light by early figures like Mahadevi Varma. By analyzing the works of poets such as Anamika and Savita Singh, this study will investigate how modern Hindi literature continues to address themes of gender, identity, and empowerment, highlighting the transformation in both content and poetic form over time. The paper aims to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary Hindi women poets challenge stereotypes, advocate for equality, and provide a voice to previously marginalized experiences in Indian literature.

3 Mahadevi Varma: A rebellious feminist but magistic poet

3.1 Early life & education

Mahadevi Varma, born on March 26, 1907, in Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, is known as one of the most important figures in Hindi literature. Her parents, Govind Prasad Varma and Hem Rani Devi, were liberal-minded and supported her education, which was rare for girls at the time. Although she was married at the young age of nine to Swarup Narain Varma, Mahadevi chose to stay with her parents until she completed her education. In her childhood biography *Mere Bachpan Ke Din*, she expresses her gratitude to her family for giving her the chance to study. She credits her mother, who was fluent in Sanskrit and Hindi, for sparking her interest in poetry.

Mahadevi made some bold choices that went against the norms of society. After her graduation in 1929, she decided not to live with her husband and wanted to lead an independent life. She even tried to convince her husband to remarry so she could remain single. With her family's support, she went on to pursue a master's degree in Sanskrit and became the principal of Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth, where she focused on improving women's education. Mahadevi was passionate about supporting other women in literature and was one of the first to organize women poets' conferences in India.



3.2 Her literature and related themes

Mahadevi Varma's poetry, though known for its beauty and calmness, also carried a strong feminist voice. Her writing often touched on themes like freedom, solitude, and inner struggles. She used poetry to express her thoughts about women's experiences and the limitations society placed on them. In her poem "Cha," for example, she writes about female desires and the hope for a world where women are free. She also addressed marriage critically in her book *Hindu Stree Ka Patnitva*, comparing it to a form of slavery. In her story "Biblia," she explored issues like domestic violence and the mental toll it takes on women.

In her poem *Cha*, Mahadevi Varma explores deep and often hidden desires, imagining a world where emotional and spiritual fulfillment exist without restrictions. The poem speaks about the longing for a "new world"—a place where freedom, beauty, and tranquility replace the societal expectations placed on women. Through powerful and vivid imagery, Mahadevi paints a vision of a world where love, dreams, and aspirations can bloom unchained by social norms.

The verses describe love as a "crazy yearning" that dreams of creating "a unique new world," symbolizing a space where women can freely experience and express their emotions. Mahadevi writes about natural images like buds, dew, and the sea meeting the sky, using these to represent purity and the harmony of nature. By using these symbols, she challenges societal norms that restrict women's voices, desires, and inner lives.

Writing about such themes was a bold step in Mahadevi's time. Women were rarely encouraged to explore or speak openly about feelings of passion, dreams, and personal freedom. By bringing these thoughts to the forefront in her work, she disrupted the conservative structures that confined women. Her poetry thus stood as a quiet rebellion against the traditional roles expected of women and paved the way for later writers to discuss topics of desire and self-identity more openly. Mahadevi Varma's *Cha* and other works contributed to a shift in Hindi literature, helping it evolve from traditional themes to more introspective and personal explorations.

4 Evolution of themes in Hindi Literature by women

In the 1950s, Hindi women's literature primarily explored traditional roles and resilience. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is an example, depicting Rukmini as a character embodying sacrifice, hope, and faith despite hardships. Stories from this time often showcased rural life, focusing on themes of survival and endurance.

The rationale behind depicting such emotions and characters might be the effects of partition since it deeply affected the social structure, identity and themes of resilience in literature across all Indian languages in fact. Rural life and survival were main points as many authors captured the everyday struggles in a newly independent but economically challenging India.

The 1960s saw a gradual shift toward introspection and questioning traditional values. Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* explored a woman's sexuality and self-expression within the restrictive framework of a joint family. Attia Hussain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* captured the life of a young girl, Laila, growing up in pre-partition India amidst political and family upheaval. These works brought personal identity and familial pressures into the spotlight, paving the way for women writers to question societal norms more openly.

There were waves of feminism across the world & the global feminist wave influenced Indian literature, encouraging writers to question traditional roles and explore women's desires and conflicts. Now the stories began focusing on urban-rural divides and the challenges of balancing modernity with tradition, reflecting rapid urbanization and industrial growth.

By the 1970s, women-centered narratives became more vocal about the rights and autonomy of women. Snehalatha Reddy's *Sita* challenged traditional representations by reinterpreting the character of Sita from *Ramayana*, critiquing patriarchal expectations and upholds the rights of Sita as a wife, as an individual and as a woman. Reddy depicts Sita as being a rebel against Rama and his pompous masculinity. Writers like Kamala Markandaya in *Two Virgins* (1973) and Ruth Praver Jhabvala in *Heat and Dust* (1975) examined female protagonists grappling with personal autonomy, societal expectations, and self-identity, reflecting the growing influence of feminist thought in literature. Many novels are woman-centered, and deal with domes-

ticity, such as Anjana Appachana's *Listening now*, which depicts the 16 years of the life of Padma, a lecturer in a university. It has six different female narrative voices.

With more women joining the workforce and becoming educated, literature started examining women's quests for identity beyond domestic roles.

With the advent of 1980's, a more nuanced, psychological approach to women's experiences emerged, influenced by shifts toward personal and inner journeys. There was a maturation in both style and subject matter. Writers like Shashi Deshpande (*The Dark Holds No Terror*) and Anita Desai (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) portrayed middle-class women dealing with inner conflict, alienation, and identity crises. These stories often emphasized psychological exploration, with female characters moving beyond traditional family roles and struggling with self-realization. They projected the alienation and identity crisis of their male dominated female characters. The tone of the literature shifted from self-effacing to self-assertive, capturing the voices of women asserting their identity against patriarchal expectations.

The 1990s focused on the experiences of modern Indian women, often addressing the clash between tradition and modernity. Their creations revolve around the general theme of middle class, in rural as well as urban set up and also the clash of values and systems, when the twain meet. Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves, and Grandmothers* used satire to explore social realism and religious duplicity, while Paro: *Dreams of Passion* (1984) offered a satirical take on the contrasting images of traditional and modern women. Paro was married several times and has an adulterous relationship with a younger man in contrast to a model Indian woman. This era's literature became more nuanced, with diverse themes reflecting a blend of cultural tradition and contemporary values. Many women authors also wrote about magic realism during the 90s, for eg- Suniti Manjoshi.

This change was observed as liberalization transformed India's economy and culture, writers addressed the tension between modern aspirations and traditional expectations. Literature explored the conflicts faced by women navigating a patriarchal society and shifting family structures, sometimes using satire to critique social norms.

5 Some Indian Female Contemporary poets

5.1 Anamika

Anamika, a renowned poet from Bihar, is an influential figure in contemporary Hindi literature. Her journey into poetry and writing began early, influenced by her family—especially her father, Shyamnandan Kishore, a respected poet. Anamika's works have received numerous accolades, including the Rashtra Bhasha Parishad Award, Bharat Bhushan Aggarwal Award (1996), Sahityakar Samman (1998), and, most notably, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2020 for her poetry in Hindi.

Reflecting on the Sahitya Akademi Award (for her poetry collection '*Tokri mein Digant: Therigatha 2014*'), *Feminism in India* remarked that this honor "is a symbolic acceptance of the women's experiences, ordinary as well as extraordinary, expressed in poignant and vibrant verse, into the canon of acceptable subject for the high art of poetry." This recognition highlights the significance of Anamika's voice in capturing the depth of women's personal and collective experiences, integrating both the political and the personal.

Anamika's literary range extends beyond poetry to include novels, critical essays, and social activism. As Abhishek Kashyap writes in the foreword to *Anamika: Ek Mulyankan*, "Whether it is poetry, fiction, or feminist agenda and discussion, in all her creations, Anamika has stood up as a polite yet firm activist."



5.1.1 Analysis of her few poems

1. Anamika's poem "*Striya*" is a powerful reflection on the experiences of women, particularly how their identities and voices are often dehumanized, ignored, or reduced to stereotypes in society. The poem opens with a series of comparisons, portraying women as something to be read, seen, heard, and experienced in ways that **reduce them to mere objects or commodities**. They are seen as something to be glanced at briefly, like a watch in the morning, or heard but not truly listened to, like cheap cassette tapes in crowded buses. These comparisons depict the way society often regards women without truly seeing or understanding their full humanity. Anamika poignantly conveys the sense of **invisibility and neglect** that women experience. The metaphor of being "heard like a film song on cheap cassettes" suggests that women's voices are often drowned out or reduced to background noise. The turning point in the poem occurs when the speaker (presumably a woman) declares, "We too are human." This line marks a shift from passive acceptance to active resistance. The speaker demands that society "read" them properly, "one letter at a time,". This **demand for recognition** is a call for respect and equal treatment, urging society to see women for who they truly are, not as mere background figures or secondary characters. The latter part of the poem reveals the consequences of the speaker's demand for recognition: society retaliates with harsh judgment and stereotype. The "colorful rumors" and "cries" about women being "immoral" or "wild" echo the ways in which women who assert themselves or defy societal expectations are **labeled and stigmatized**. The final lines convey a **sense of defiance**. The poem ends on a note of **liberation**, where the speaker seeks not forgiveness but freedom from the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms. Through vivid metaphors and sharp commentary, the poem exposes the objectification, marginalization, and judgment that women face, while also calling for their rightful recognition as fully human, with all the complexity and dignity that entails.
2. Her poem "*Bejagah*" explores the themes of **displacement, gender, and identity**, focusing on the lived experiences of women in a patriarchal society. The metaphor of falling in the opening indicates a **loss of stability** and belonging, suggesting that women's roles and identities are always in flux, never truly secure or fixed. The poem reflects on the conditioning women undergo from an early age. The reference to the Sanskrit teacher and the ritualistic recitation of a verse teaches the young girls to conform to societal expectations. Several lines like "ram pathshala ja, radha khana pakaa" show the **deep rooted gender division** in our patriarchal society. The distinction made between the boy & girl emphasizes how girls are taught that their "place" is always secondary, defined by domesticity and service, while boys are allowed to have a more independent and defined identity. The poem suggests that when women break away from tradition or social norms, they are left **without a clear identity or place**. The final lines of the poem reflect a sense of fragmentation and the attempt to find meaning in a world that doesn't allow women to fully exist on their own terms.
3. The third poem that I read was "*Marne ki Fursat*" written by her. It was quite different from all the poems that I have read till now by any poet. I have never read any poet writing about menstruation and how it impacts women more socially than physically. The poem begins by speculating that if Jesus Christ had been a woman, he would have been burdened by the physical **realities of womanhood**, such as menstruation. It uses menstruation as a metaphor for how women are ostracized and oppressed by societal norms and institutions. The idea of menstruation as a barrier to sacred spaces highlights how women's bodies are seen as unclean or unworthy in certain contexts, which **restricts their autonomy** and access to power. Anamika contrasts the religious figure of Jesus with the reality faced by women, who endure physical, emotional, and societal pain. The poem imagines Jesus, had he been a woman, experiencing not just crucifixion but also the relentless suffering of women throughout history, such as rape, hunger, and loss. She argues that the oppression and suffering women face are so extensive that they are too preoccupied with surviving to be able to engage in grand, historical acts of defiance. The comparison of women to Jesus Christ—who, if he were a woman, would not have the luxury of martyrdom due to the harshness of the world's treatment of women—serves to highlight this isolation.

5.1.2 Writing style

Her poetry feels conversational, as if she is speaking directly to the reader, drawing them into a shared space of questioning and revelation. Often, her tone appears simple and gentle, yet it carries sharp and unyielding observations about the societal expectations imposed on women. This allows her to engage deeply with issues of gender and identity without overt confrontation; her approach is soft-spoken but firm, capturing the weight of her message through understatement. Rather than delivering her critiques in a confrontational manner, Anamika allows irony to flow naturally through her observations, which makes her points resonate deeply. Her language and imagery are rooted in the everyday—ordinary objects like hair, nails, or menstrual blood become symbols of societal norms that restrict women, while at the same time conveying their complex realities and internal resilience. Cultural imagery and folk motifs often appear in her work, enriching her poetry and also creating a familiar image in the reader's mind.

5.1.3 Overall Analysis

Anamika's poetry is deeply tied to feminist ideas, but she talks about gender and identity in a way that goes beyond just "men vs. women." Her poems show how women's lives are shaped by society, family roles, and cultural expectations, and she writes in a way that connects personal feelings with larger social issues. In poems like "Striya," she talks about how women are often only valued for what they can do for others, treated as if they're invisible or unimportant. She brings out the quiet longing women feel to be fully seen and understood as people, not just roles. Anamika also shows that women's experiences aren't all the same. She acknowledges that things like class, tradition, and age affect women's lives in different ways. Her work speaks to readers from many backgrounds because she looks at both the personal struggles women face and the bigger social pressures they deal with. This approach makes Anamika's poetry powerful, as she uses her writing to challenge traditional roles and bring attention to the real, everyday lives of women in India.

5.2 Savita Singh

Savita Singh, born in 1962, is a prominent poet, scholar, and advocate for gender studies. She began her academic journey in India, completing her Master's and M.Phil. at the University of Delhi, and later pursued higher studies at McGill University in Montreal, where her doctoral work focused on "Discourse of Modernity in India." Her time in Montreal and London marked the start of her published poetry in English, with her work appearing in journals like *Critical Quarterly*. After returning to India in 1992, she joined the academic field and continued to write, eventually gaining widespread recognition for her first Hindi poetry collection, *Apne Jaisa Jeevan* (2001), which earned her the Delhi Hindi Academy Award. Singh's second collection, *Neend Thi Aur Raat Thi* (2005), solidified her reputation as a feminist poet and won her the Raza Award. Today, she is a Professor and Director at the School of Gender and Development Studies at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in Delhi, where her work continues to bridge the worlds of literature, feminism, and academic inquiry.



5.2.1 Analysis of her few poems

1. Her poem "*Main kiski aurat hoon*" centers around the theme of **self-identity and autonomy**, particularly from the lens of a woman's experience. The speaker questions her role and position in society, and in response, she asserts her own agency. The repetition of 'main kiski aurat hoon' highlights the feeling of being defined by others, whether it's by the societal roles imposed on women or by relationships with others. The speaker **rejects the idea of being controlled** or defined by a man or any patriarchal figure by saying- 'main kisi ki aurat nahi hoon, main apni aurat hoon'. The poem also touches upon the loneliness of women who have chosen to live for themselves, free from dependence on others. However, this loneliness is not presented as weakness but as a form of strength. The speaker embraces her solitude, finding power in her independence and **self-reliance**. During her journey, the

elderly woman seems to feel pity for the speaker's solitary life, asking how she will survive. However, the speaker responds with pride in her autonomy, implying that she understands the struggle for womanhood in a way that the elderly woman might not, given the historical and cultural context they come from. Through this interaction, the poem contrasts two different perspectives of womanhood: one that is shaped by dependence on others, and another that is rooted in self-autonomy and self-definition. The speaker's eventual declaration of freedom and self-assertion is a powerful affirmation. The poem ultimately conveys the message that true empowerment comes from **embracing one's individuality** and rejecting the notion of being anyone's property or defined by others.

2. The poem "*Prem karti Betiyan*" focuses on the relationship between fathers and daughters, illustrating the **complex dynamics of love, respect, and betrayal in a patriarchal society**. While daughters are often expected to love and serve their fathers unconditionally, they also face emotional and material neglect. The image of fathers "pushing them into the darkness of poverty" and "making them homeless" symbolizes how women, even within their own families, are frequently deprived of rights, security, and respect. The poem critiques this injustice, highlighting how patriarchy forces women to love and respect figures who, in turn, fail to provide the same care or affection. It calls attention to the emotional toll this causes, especially when the very people who are most revered by daughters are also the ones who harm them. There is a powerful irony in the poem. The juxtaposition of the daughters' love and the harsh treatment they receive from their fathers reflects the societal tendency to demand selflessness from women, while offering them little in return.
3. The poem "*Stree Sach Hai*" is a reflection on the inner journey of a woman who is in pursuit of **truth, self-awareness, and freedom**. She is depicted as crossing a vast, dry, and desolate landscape, symbolizing the external and internal struggles that women face in society and life. Her journey is one of awakening, as she moves beyond thirst and desolation, driven by an inner calling to find meaning, purpose, and identity. The woman in the poem is not passive—she actively engages with the challenges and obstacles around her. The imagery of thirst, dreams, and the ocean suggests that while external forces may try to subdue or silence her, she is determined to overcome these barriers and leap toward her own truth. The poem emphasizes her inner strength and relentless drive to push beyond limitations, both personal and societal, and to find a deeper connection with her true self.

5.2.2 Writing style

Savita Singh's writing style is emotive, introspective, and rich in symbolism, often drawing on nature and physical landscapes to convey deeper emotional and existential themes. Her poems explore the inner struggles of women, emphasizing themes of independence, self-realization, and the emotional costs of societal roles imposed on them. With a succinct, powerful use of language, Singh captures the complexities of human identity, portraying the tension between external appearances and internal realities. Her work is marked by subtle feminist undertones, presenting women's experiences with intimacy and raw vulnerability. Through simple yet evocative imagery, she reflects on personal struggles and desires, while challenging traditional gender norms and celebrating the resilience of women.

5.2.3 Overall Analysis

Savita Singh is a strong feminist poet who uses her writing to challenge the patriarchal systems that control women's lives. She asserts that women must be unapologetically firm in rejecting patriarchal systems, particularly in literary spaces where "couch culture" can compromise a woman's true feminist stance. She believes that if women writers accept such compromises, they are not acting in solidarity with feminist ideals or promoting genuine change. In an interview, Singh also highlights global inequalities, referencing the example of the Australian Labor Union to show that disparity and oppression are not confined to any one culture or region but are, in fact, systemic across the globe. This adds a layer of universality to her feminist stance.

Her work consistently challenges readers to reflect on the personal and social forces that shape women's lives and to take an active role in rejecting the patriarchal structures that limit freedom and self-expression. In this way, she emerges as a poet who not only gives voice to the complexities of women's lives but also advocates for a reimagining of the systems that govern them.

6 Evolution of Feminist Expression: Mahadevi Varma vs. Anamika and Savita Singh

Since Mahadevi Varma's time, Hindi literature has evolved significantly, especially in terms of the themes explored by contemporary poets like Anamika and Savita Singh. While Mahadevi's work, such as her poem *Cha*, focused on themes like freedom, solitude, and the emotional lives of women, her approach was often subtle, rooted in personal yearning and the quest for a peaceful, idealized world. Her poetry challenged societal norms but did so quietly, with an emphasis on spiritual fulfillment and purity.

In contrast, contemporary poets like Anamika and Savita Singh are more direct and confrontational in their feminist expression. They engage with issues like patriarchy, independence, and gender dynamics with greater boldness and urgency. For example, Savita Singh's poems, such as "Main kiski aurat hoon" & "prem karti betiya", critique the limitations imposed on women by society and question the roles women are expected to play in relationships and in society.

Anamika, too, explores similar themes but with a focus on the intersection of personal experience and broader social issues, using her writing as a form of activism. Her poetry speaks about women's rights, self-discovery, and freedom, but unlike Mahadevi, she doesn't idealize or romanticize the concept of women's liberation. She is more concerned with the struggles and complexities women face in a modern world.

The major shift from Mahadevi's time to now lies in the tone and openness of the work. While Mahadevi's writing was introspective, often hinting at desires and freedom through metaphors, Anamika and Savita are more explicit in their feminist themes. They openly confront societal injustices, such as patriarchy and inequality, with a more aggressive tone, reflecting the changing societal climate that allows for such open discussions. While Mahadevi was part of a generation that pushed boundaries subtly, today's poets are using literature as a platform for more direct confrontation with these age-old issues.

Thus, while Mahadevi Varma laid the groundwork for a new kind of poetic expression in Hindi literature, contemporary poets like Anamika and Savita Singh have built upon this foundation, exploring feminist themes in ways that are more assertive, diverse, and aligned with the struggles and changes women face today.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of feminist themes in Hindi poetry, from Mahadevi Varma to contemporary poets like Anamika and Savita Singh, reflects both societal progress and the persistence of certain gender-related challenges. While Mahadevi Varma's poetry paved the way for exploring women's emotional struggles and desires, her works were rooted in the context of a more traditional, restrictive society. Today, poets like Anamika and Savita Singh confront these themes more directly, with a bold critique of patriarchy, societal norms, and the personal freedoms women continue to fight for. As society has progressed, expectations from women have evolved, with greater opportunities for self-expression and independence. Yet, despite these advancements, many of the same challenges—such as gender inequality, societal pressure, and limited autonomy—remain both in India and globally. These poets help us recognize the ongoing struggle and the importance of voicing resistance. Their works not only serve as a reflection of contemporary issues but also offer empowerment and a call to action for future generations. By exploring their poetry, we are reminded of the need to continue questioning and dismantling patriarchal structures, while embracing the complexities of womanhood in both personal and societal spheres. Through their powerful words, Anamika and Savita Singh challenge us to look beyond surface-level progress and consider the deeper, unaddressed issues that still shape women's lives today.

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