

## From Silence to Self-Articulation: The Feminine Voice in Classical and Contemporary Sanskrit Literary Expression

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b> Received: 15<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025 Accepted: 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025 Published: 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Feminine Voice, Classical literature, Modern Sanskrit literature</i></p>	<p>Sanskrit literature shows an ongoing balance between silence and speech, where women are respected and admired but are not always given space to speak freely. This research paper studies how feminist literary reading helps us understand and recover the feminine voice in Sanskrit literature as thoughtful, aware, and meaningful. The paper examines selected classical texts such as Abhidnyanshakuntalam, Malavikagnimitram, Swapnavasavadatta, Mruchhakatikam and Kiratarjuniyam to explore how women express themselves through silence, patience, choice, and moral strength. In many classical works, women show depth and dignity, but their voices are shaped by social rules and male-dominated structures. The study also focuses on 21st-century Sanskrit literature, where women appear as confident, questioning, and self-aware individuals. Modern Sanskrit poets allow women to speak in their own voices, reflect on their experiences, and assert their identity. Through close reading of both classical and modern texts, this paper argues that Sanskrit literature is a living tradition that continues to grow. While remaining rooted in classical aesthetics, it now provides wider space for women's self-expression and feminist thought.</p>

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## Introduction :

Sanskrit literature occupies a distinctive position in world literature due to its philosophical depth, aesthetic sophistication, and refined emotional expression. Women appear frequently in Sanskrit poetry and drama as lovers, queens, ascetics, courtesans, wives, and moral exemplars. They are admired for qualities such as beauty, patience, sacrifice, and virtue. However, admiration does not necessarily imply agency. In many canonical texts, women are idealized but structurally constrained, revered yet denied full narrative authority.

Feminist literary criticism offers a constructive method to revisit these texts without rejecting their aesthetic or cultural value. Instead of treating Sanskrit literature as monolithic or static, feminist reading focuses on women's speech, silence, emotional worlds, ethical choices, and narrative positioning. This paper seeks to examine how the feminine voice functions in Sanskrit poetics—sometimes muted, sometimes strategic, and sometimes powerfully assertive—and how modern Sanskrit poetry consciously restores and redefines that voice.

## Feminism as a Literary Approach in Sanskrit Studies:

Feminism in literary studies emphasizes autonomy, self-expression, equality, and identity. When applied to Sanskrit literature, feminism operates not as an external ideological imposition but as a critical interpretative framework. It raises essential questions:

Classical Sanskrit aesthetics prioritize harmony, restraint and idealization. Feminist criticism does not dismiss these values but interrogates their gendered implications. It helps distinguish between silence as an aesthetic ideal and silence as a social compulsion. Feminist interpretation thus uncovers layers of meaning that have traditionally remained unexamined and allows Sanskrit literature to engage meaningfully with contemporary discourse.

## Feminine Voice in Classical Sanskrit Poetics:

### 1. Shakuntala in Abhidyanashakuntalam

Shakuntala is portrayed as emotionally sensitive, morally upright, and deeply devoted. Her suffering arises not from personal failure but from social and patriarchal structures that deny her voice at a crucial moment. When rejected by Dushyanta, her response is marked by restraint rather than confrontation. From a feminist perspective, this silence reflects the limited space available to women for self-assertion within royal and patriarchal systems. Her emotional depth is acknowledged, yet her narrative power remains constrained.

### 2. Malavika in Malavikagnimitram

Malavika's character highlights the invisibility of women's talents when social recognition is absent. Initially positioned as a maid, her artistic and emotional worth remains unacknowledged until her noble identity is revealed. Feminist reading draws attention to how women's value is often legitimized only through lineage or male approval, rather than intrinsic merit. Malavika's journey symbolizes the systemic marginalization of women's abilities within hierarchical structures.

### 3. Vasavadatta in Swapnavasavadatta:

Vasavadatta represents a complex form of agency rooted in strategic silence and conscious self-sacrifice. Though physically absent from much of the dramatic action, she exercises significant control over the narrative. Her decisions are guided by political foresight and emotional intelligence. Feminist interpretation reframes her silence not as passivity but as deliberate, rational choice demonstrating that agency can operate even outside visible speech.

### 4. Vasantasena in Mruchhakatikam :

Vasantasena stands as one of the most autonomous female figures in classical Sanskrit drama. As a courtesan, she openly expresses desire, makes independent decisions and challenges social hierarchies. Her character disrupts conventional moral binaries by combining emotional depth with ethical clarity. Feminist reading recognizes her as a figure of consent, self-determination and emotional honesty qualities rarely afforded to women in classical narratives.

### 5. Draupadi in Kiratarjuniyam:

Although Draupadi's role in Kiratarjuniyam is limited, her moral presence is significant. She embodies dignity, ethical awareness, and righteous restraint. Her silence functions as moral resistance rather than submission. Feminist interpretation emphasizes that absence of speech does not imply absence of power; instead, it can signify ethical authority and inner strength.

### Feminine Voice in 21st-Century Sanskrit literature:

The 21st century has brought a significant transformation in Sanskrit literary expression, particularly in the representation of women's voices. In classical Sanskrit literature, women's expression was largely shaped by social conventions and mediated through male authorship. Consequently, women often appeared as silent, restrained, or idealized figures. In contrast, modern Sanskrit poetry consciously seeks to present women as active speakers and thinking individuals rather than as passive symbols.

In contemporary Sanskrit literature, women are no longer portrayed only as embodiments of beauty, sacrifice, or devotion. They emerge as individuals who think, question, create, and respond to their social and emotional realities. Themes such as personal identity, autonomy, injustice, social inequality, emotional struggle, and intellectual awareness find open and direct expression through feminine voices. This represents a clear shift from indirect and symbolic expression to confident and articulate self-representation.

A notable example of this modern literary sensibility can be seen in the works of Padma Shri Satyavrata Shastri, who revitalized the Sanskrit mahakavya by integrating contemporary ethical awareness. In his writings, female characters express self-respect, moral clarity, and emotional independence. Womanhood is no longer defined solely through sacrifice or compassion but through dignity, self-awareness, and ethical strength. Feminist values thus emerge naturally through character portrayal and narrative focus rather than through explicit ideological assertion.

Another important feature of 21st-century Sanskrit literature is the increasing presence of women poets. Their writings draw from lived experiences, personal

emotions, and inner conflicts, adding depth, realism, and authenticity to Sanskrit literature. Through poetry, women reclaim the power of speech and self-expression, transforming Sanskrit poetry into a space where women represent themselves rather than being represented by others.

Comparative and Analytical Perspectives:

Classical and 21st-Century Sanskrit Literature:

A comparative and analytical reading of classical and 21st-century Sanskrit poetics shows a clear change in the way the feminine voice is presented from indirect and mediated expression to open and direct articulation. This change does not break away from tradition; rather, it reflects an internal and gradual evolution within Sanskrit literary culture itself.

In classical Sanskrit literature, women's voices are generally shaped by social roles and dramatic conventions. Their expression is often indirect, conveyed through silence, emotional endurance, gestures, and acts of sacrifice. Although women do exercise agency, it remains limited by patriarchal structures, royal duties, and established social hierarchies. Silence, in many classical texts, is treated as a valued feminine quality and is often idealized as patience, modesty, or moral restraint.

In contrast, 21st-century Sanskrit poetics places speech at the center of feminine agency. Contemporary poets consciously question the glorification of silence and instead validate self-expression, inquiry, and dissent. Women speak in the first person, reflect on inherited ideals, and question social expectations while remaining ethically grounded. The feminine voice thus becomes personal and reflective rather than symbolic or representative.

This shift can be analytically understood through several key aspects:

**Mode of Expression:** Classical literature favors silence, suggestion, and restraint, whereas modern Sanskrit poetry emphasizes speech, dialogue, and assertion.

**Agency:** Classical heroines express agency through sacrifice, endurance, and strategic withdrawal, while modern poetic voices assert agency through choice, refusal, and self-definition.

**Narrative Position:** In classical works, women often support the emotional or moral journeys of male characters; in contemporary poetry, women become the central narrators of their own experiences.

**Ethical Framework:** Classical poetics links femininity with social harmony and balance, whereas modern Sanskrit poetry connects it with self-respect, autonomy, and moral self-awareness.

This comparative analysis shows that feminist consciousness in Sanskrit literature is not a borrowed modern idea but a natural development arising from reinterpretation and renewed engagement with classical aesthetics. Tradition remains intact, even as the space for feminine expression expands.

Conclusion:

The feminine voice in Sanskrit poetics reveals a clear evolution from restrained expression shaped by social norms in classical literature to conscious and self-aware

articulation in modern writing. Classical heroines such as Shakuntala and Vasavadatta embody emotional depth within social and ethical constraints, while figures like Vasantasena and Draupadi assert dignity, choice and moral agency within their respective narrative spaces. In modern Sanskrit literary expression, women emerge as direct speakers who question authority, articulate personal experience and assert identity. This transformation reflects not a rejection of classical tradition, but the intellectual openness and ethical sensitivity of the Sanskrit literary tradition itself, which has continually reinterpreted womanhood in response to changing social consciousness. The expanding expressive space for the feminine voice thus stands as a testament to the reflective depth of Sanskrit literature and its evolving engagement with questions of gender, agency and selfhood across time.

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