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# Digital Feminism in Indian Literature: Instagram Poets and the Changing Voice of Indian Women Writers

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### **Abstract**

The rapid expansion of digital platforms in India has brought about a profound transformation in the landscape of women's literary expression. This research investigates how Instagram and other social media platforms have enabled Indian women writers to redefine poetic traditions and amplify feminist discourse through the emergence of "Instapoetry." By bypassing traditional publishing barriers, poets such as Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill, and Aranya Johar, along with feminist collectives and activist groups, have democratized literary space, foregrounding issues of trauma, identity, gender-based violence, intersectionality, and mental health. This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on textual analysis, digital ethnography, and systematic literature review, to examine the unique aesthetics, participatory culture, and community-building enabled by digital feminism. Findings highlight both the opportunities and tensions of this new literary culture—including the risks of commercialization, performative activism, and exclusion based on class, language, and technological access. Despite these challenges, Instagram poets and digital feminist collectives are reshaping the voice and agency of Indian women writers, catalysing broader movements for gender justice and creative freedom in the contemporary era.

Keywords - Digital Feminism, Instapoetry, Indian Women Writers, Intersectionality, Instagram

### **Introduction**

Indian literature, particularly the participation and visibility of women writers, has changed dramatically at the turn of the 21st century. For decades, Indian female literary voices have been navigating complex social realities and institutional barriers, battling patriarchal publishing practices, social censorship, and limited access to public literary forums. While pioneering writers have long contributed, many women's stories, poetry and criticism have remained confined to private spheres or small circles, rarely achieving the scope or recognition of their male counterparts. However, the spread of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of social media have irreversibly changed this landscape. The rise of the internet and digital devices democratised writing and publishing, enabling women from diverse socio-cultural and regional backgrounds to share their voices publicly and freely. This digital revolution has been particularly significant for feminist thought and practice and provides new tools to imagine newer narratives. Initially designed as a platform for sharing photos, Instagram has evolved into a vibrant space for micro literature and poetic expression. With the emergence of "instapoetry" - short, direct, often visual poetic works - inspiring a renaissance in contemporary poetry, attracting large audiences and breaking traditional literary stereotypes, Instagram has become much more than a medium of artistic display for Indian women poets; it is a site of feminist intervention, where personal stories, social critiques and collective struggles find immediate resonance and wide dissemination.

This shift is epitomised by the success of poets like Rupi Kaur, whose work Milk and Honey (2014) and subsequent social media posts articulate issues of trauma, resilience and women's empowerment, as well as those of Nikita Gill and Aranya Johar, gender-based violence, mental health, inter-identity, cultural expectations, and more. Unlike traditional poetry publishing, which uses digital platforms to navigate and

counter issues often mediated by a small elite, instapoetry on Instagram is accessible, interactive, and community oriented. It facilitates dialogue between writer and reader, blurs the boundaries between public and private, and invites immediate feedback, support, and solidarity. Moreover, digital feminism in Indian literature is not limited to individual writers. Artistic collaborations and collectives – such as the Pumpkin Collective – bring South Asian women together to create magazines, comics, and multimedia projects on sexuality, eroticism, and social justice, raising awareness among younger and more diverse audiences. Activist initiatives such as Dalit Women's War leverage Instagram and other platforms to foreground marginalized experiences, counter caste-dominated narratives prevalent in mainstream literature and activism, and advocate for intersectional feminism.

Yet the new digital literary culture is not without its tensions and contradictions. Access to digital platforms is asymmetric, influenced by class, language, urban-rural divides, and technological infrastructure. Critics have also drawn attention to the commercialisation of Instapoetry, questioning whether algorithm-driven popularity and brand sharing have compromised the promises of digital feminist writing's networker transformative potential and the echo chamber risks of digital feminism, performative activism and the under-representation of regional vernacular voices; and this underscores the importance of nuanced, critical engagement with the network

Against this complex backdrop, this paper systematically explores digital feminism in Indian literature, with a particular focus on Instagram poets and their role in shaping the changing voices of Indian women writers. Drawing on academic scholarship, media commentary, primary literary works and digital archives, the study examines how Instagram and related platforms have catalysed new literary forms, feminist community building and social activism. Considers emerging challenges and opportunities in the ongoing struggle.

#### **Literature Review**

#### 1. Theoretical Foundations and Early Digital Feminism

The conceptual framework for digital feminism in India draws from global cyberfeminism discourse. Gajjala and Oh (2012), in their seminal edited volume, map how digital spaces have enabled women—especially those marginalized by caste, class, or geography—to articulate agency and challenge patriarchal narratives. Their analysis situates Indian online activism within a larger movement, exploring the creation of "digital subaltern" voices that bypass mainstream media gatekeeping.

Sinha (2017) further grounds this perspective within the Indian context, examining how feminist voices leverage social media for activism, support networks, and public debate. Her findings reveal that digital platforms lower barriers to participation and allow women to circumvent traditional silencing mechanisms. However, Sinha also highlights the digital divide, noting that internet access remains stratified by class, region, and language, thus impacting the inclusivity of online feminist movements.

### 2. The Rise of Antipoetry and Feminist Literary Expression

A significant shift in Indian women's writing emerges with the popularization of Instapoetry on platforms like Instagram. Menon (2019) analyses the aesthetics of brevity in feminist Instapoetry, arguing that its directness and emotional resonance make it particularly effective for digital consumption. She points out that this form disrupts the conventions of print poetry, democratizing poetic expression and encouraging more women to publish their work.

Das (2019) provides a journalistic overview of this phenomenon, chronicling how Instagram poets are reshaping Indian literary spaces. Her article identifies women poets—including Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill, and

Aranya Johar—who utilize Instagram to share poems about trauma, healing, gender, and resistance. These poets connect with readers in real time, transforming poetry from a solitary pursuit into a participatory, communal act.

Primary literary works, such as Kaur's *Milk and Honey* (2014) and Gill's *Fierce Fairytales* (2018), are emblematic of this movement. Their widespread acclaim and social media following demonstrate how digital platforms amplify women's narratives and validate diverse experiences.

### 3. Feminism, Community-Building, and Intersectionality Online

Digital communities and collective artistic projects have played a crucial role in sustaining feminist discourse online. The Kadak Collective (2018) exemplifies the collaborative spirit of new digital feminism, bringing together South Asian women artists to produce zines, comics, and visual narratives on gender, sexuality, and identity. Webcomics like Sanitary Panels (2017–2019) by Rachita Taneja use humour and simple visuals to address taboo subjects, from menstruation to mental health, thus engaging a younger, internet-savvy audience. Activist collectives such as Dalit Women Fight use Instagram to highlight intersectional feminist struggles. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit and Bahujan women, these digital projects challenge Savarna (upper caste) dominance within both mainstream feminism and literary spaces, expanding the definition of digital feminism in India.

Feminism in India's special issue "Poetry as Protest" (2019) consolidates these trends, offering interviews, essays, and poems from poets and artists across the spectrum. It provides evidence of how poetry and digital art are intertwined with protest and consciousness-raising in contemporary India.

# 4. Personal Narratives and New Subjectivities

First-person accounts and interviews, such as those with Mehnaz Farooque (2018) and Harnidh Kaur (2018), offer insight into the motivations and challenges faced by digital feminist writers. Farooque, both a poet and journalist, discusses the negotiation of identity, self-censorship, and creative freedom in online spaces. Kaur emphasizes how social media, despite its pitfalls, allows for candid conversations, emotional solidarity, and the building of feminist safe spaces.

Aranya Johar's viral spoken word video "A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender" (2017) exemplifies the potential of multimedia storytelling for feminist activism. Johar's work bridges performance, poetry, and social commentary, connecting with a diverse audience and inspiring collective reflection on gendered expectations in Indian society.

# 5. Critiques and Debates: Commercialization, Exclusion, and Caste

While digital feminism and Instapoetry offer new opportunities, critiques persist. Menon (2019) and Trivedi (2019) warn against the commercialization and dilution of feminist discourse through social media's popularity algorithms and branding imperatives. Trivedi highlights the risk of "Instafeminism" ignoring caste realities and favouring privileged, English-speaking, urban women over others. These critiques underline the ongoing tension between democratization and the reproduction of social hierarchies online.

# 6. The Ongoing Evolution of Digital Feminism

Instagram poetry archives maintained by poets like Rupi Kaur and Nikita Gill, as well as collective projects and activist pages (Dalit Women Fight, Feminism in India), are shaping an ever-evolving feminist public sphere. These digital archives, updated in real-time, not only document the emergence of new literary forms but also provide tools for activism, self-healing, and social critique.

Webcomics, community collectives, and special issues—such as those by Kadak Collective and Sanitary Panels—broaden the reach of feminist literature beyond conventional boundaries, inviting interaction from readers and aspiring writers alike.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to examine the emergence and evolution of digital feminism within Indian literature, with a particular focus on Instagram poets and the changing voice of Indian women writers. The methodology is rooted in systematic literature review, textual analysis, and digital ethnography, drawing on a range of academic, journalistic, and primary digital sources.

### 1. Research Design

The research is designed as an exploratory and analytical study that synthesizes critical scholarship with primary data from digital platforms. The aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of how Instagram, as a social media platform, has become a site for feminist literary activism, and how Indian women writers are using it to challenge traditional literary and social norms.

# 2. Data Collection

# a) Secondary Sources:

A comprehensive review of scholarly literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and edited volumes, was conducted to establish the theoretical foundations of digital feminism and Instapoetry. Key works include Gajjala and Oh's (2012) *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, Menon's (2019) study on feminist Instapoetry, Sinha's (2017) analysis of feminist voices in Indian social media, and media commentary by Das (2019).

### **b) Primary Sources:**

The core of the analysis draws on primary digital texts, including:

• Instagram poetry archives and posts by Indian and diasporic women poets such as Rupi Kaur (@rupikaur\_), Nikita Gill (@nikita\_gill), and others

• Videos and performances, such as Aranya Johar's "A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender" (2017) on YouTube

- Digital activism pages (Dalit Women Fight, Feminism in India)
- Webcomics (Sanitary Panels), and collective projects (Kadak Collective)
- Special digital issues, such as "Poetry as Protest" (Feminism in India, 2019)

### c) Media and Interviews:

The methodology includes content from interviews and feature articles, such as those with Mehnaz Farooque and Harnidh Kaur, which provide personal narratives and critical reflections from key digital feminist voices.

### 3. Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using the following qualitative techniques:

### a) Thematic Analysis:

All sources were coded for recurring themes, such as feminist resistance, trauma and healing, intersectionality (caste, class, region), community-building, and critiques of commercialization or exclusion. The analysis also examined how poetic forms, visuals, and online interactions contribute to meaning making and activism.

### b) Textual Analysis:

Selected poems, webcomics, and digital posts were closely read to identify stylistic innovations, representational strategies, and rhetorical devices. Attention was paid to the aesthetics of brevity, imagery, and the interplay between text and visual elements characteristic of Antipoetry.

### c) Digital Ethnography:

Observational research was conducted within digital communities (Instagram pages, activist collectives, webcomic comment sections) to understand participatory dynamics, user engagement, and the ways in which readers and writers interact, collaborate, and debate.

#### 4. Scope and Limitations

This study is delimited to Indian women writers and feminist literary communities active on Instagram and related digital platforms. While diasporic voices such as Rupi Kaur and Nikita Gill are included for their influence on Indian audiences, the primary focus remains on the Indian context. Regional-language content, while recognized as significant, is not covered extensively due to constraints of language and access.

As with all qualitative research relying on digital sources, findings are influenced by the visible, accessible parts of the digital ecosystem. Private or ephemeral content, as well as quantitative user data, were outside the study's scope.

### 5. Ethical Considerations

The research respects the public nature of social media content used in analysis, with direct citations attributed appropriately to creators and platforms. Care has been taken not to intrude on private conversations or unpublished material. The study foregrounds ethical representation of marginalized and intersectional voices, recognizing both the agency and vulnerability of digital feminist writers.

#### **Analysis and Discussion**

### Key Figures and Their Impact

The emergence of Instagram poets marks a defining moment in the evolution of Indian women's writing. Poets such as Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill, and Aranya Johar have gained widespread recognition, not only for their creative output but also for the way they have used digital platforms to amplify marginalized voices and create new literary communities.

Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* (2014) is emblematic of this movement. Her poetry, cantered on themes of trauma, survival, and female empowerment, resonates with a vast audience, breaking the silence around topics such as abuse, heartbreak, and healing. By sharing her work on Instagram, Kaur bypasses conventional publishing gatekeepers, democratizing access to her poetry and creating space for real-time reader engagement. Nikita Gill's *Fierce Fairytales* (2018) similarly challenges traditional narratives, drawing on mythology and folklore to question gender roles, celebrate resilience, and reimagine women's identities.

Aranya Johar, through performances such as "A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender" (2017), uses the digital stage to address contemporary issues like body image, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations. Her spoken word poetry, disseminated via YouTube and Instagram, connects with a diverse audience, especially young women navigating the pressures of modern Indian society.

#### New Narratives and Intersectionality

One of the most significant contributions of digital feminism and Antipoetry is the creation of new narratives that foreground intersectionality. Instagram poets and feminist collectives challenge dominant stories by giving voice to experiences shaped by caste, class, sexuality, and regional identity. Activist pages like Dalit

Vol. 1, Issue 11, Nov 2022

Women Fight (@dalitwomenfight) use the digital space to highlight the struggles of Dalit and Bahujan women, countering the Savarna-centric focus of mainstream feminism and literature. These platforms not only document personal stories of resistance and discrimination but also serve as resources for community support and collective action.

Community-building is also evident in the rise of collaborative projects such as the Kadak Collective, which brings together South Asian women artists to produce zines, comics, and visual narratives on themes including sexuality, eroticism, and social justice. Webcomics like Sanitary Panels (2017–2019) engage audiences with humour and accessible visuals, breaking taboos around topics such as menstruation, mental health, and consent. This expansion beyond the written word demonstrates how digital feminism thrives through multiplicity—embracing various genres, formats, and voices to reach broader and more diverse audiences.

#### **Challenges and Critiques**

Despite its transformative potential, the digital feminist literary culture is not without its challenges and contradictions. Access to digital platforms remains uneven, shaped by disparities in class, language, urbanrural location, and technological infrastructure. As Sinha (2017) and others have observed, while social media offers new avenues for participation, it does not entirely overcome pre-existing social barriers. The digital divide means that many marginalized women—especially those from rural or non-English-speaking backgrounds—remain excluded from these new literary communities. Commercialization is another significant concern. Menon (2019) and Trivedi (2019) highlight how the popularity-driven algorithms of Instagram may privilege content that aligns with mainstream, market-friendly feminist narratives, sometimes at the expense of more radical or marginalized perspectives. The rise of "Antifeminism"—a version of feminism that is easily packaged, branded, and circulated—risks diluting the movement's critical edge and reinforcing existing hierarchies of power and privilege. There is a danger that digital activism and literary production may become performative or superficial, with likes and shares substituting for meaningful engagement and real-world change.

Furthermore, critics argue that the dominance of English and urban perspectives on Instagram and similar platforms may perpetuate exclusions, with regional-language and rural voices underrepresented or sidelined. This underscores the ongoing need for conscious efforts to include diverse linguistic, cultural, and social perspectives in digital feminist projects.

### The Ongoing Evolution of Digital Feminism

Despite these challenges, digital feminism and Antipoetry continue to evolve, shaping and reshaping Indian literary and activist landscapes. Instagram poetry archives maintained by figures like Rupi Kaur and Nikita Gill, alongside the vibrant contributions of collectives, webcomics, and activist pages, constitute an everexpanding feminist public sphere. These digital archives not only preserve new literary forms but also provide tools for activism, self-healing, and social critique. Real-time interaction between writers and readers enables instant feedback, solidarity, and collective consciousness-raising.

The success of digital feminist initiatives is measured not only in terms of audience reach but also in their ability to spark conversations, inspire new generations of writers and activists, and challenge traditional modes of literary production and social engagement. The integration of poetry, visual art, humour, and multimedia content makes digital feminism uniquely adaptable, dynamic, and responsive to the needs and realities of contemporary Indian women.

### Limitations

While this study provides a comprehensive examination of digital feminism and the evolving voice of Indian women writers on Instagram and other digital platforms, several limitations must be acknowledged.

#### 1. Digital Divide and Accessibility

A primary limitation arises from the persistent digital divide in India. Although the proliferation of smartphones and internet connectivity has expanded access, significant disparities remain. Access to digital platforms like Instagram is still largely concentrated in urban, middle-class, and English-speaking communities. Women from rural backgrounds, lower socio-economic strata, or those lacking technological literacy often remain excluded from these digital literary spaces. As a result, the narratives analysed in this research are shaped by those who possess both the means and the skills to participate online, potentially underrepresenting the experiences and perspectives of marginalized or offline populations.

#### 2. Language and Representation

The study primarily focuses on English-language Instapoetry and digital feminist literature. While there is recognition of creative work in Hindi and regional languages, such content is underrepresented in both the selected case studies and available digital archives. This linguistic bias limits the ability to fully capture the diversity of women's digital literary voices in India, where a rich tradition of vernacular literature and poetry also exists.

#### 3. Scope of Content and Case Selection

This research centres on well-known poets and prominent collectives—such as Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill, Aranya Johar, Dalit Women Fight, Kadak Collective, and Sanitary Panels—due to their wide reach and documented influence. However, this necessarily means that the work of lesser-known, emerging poets or activists with smaller digital footprints is less visible in the analysis. There is also a focus on public, archived digital content, rather than on ephemeral posts, private groups, or encrypted conversations, which can be important spaces for feminist dialogue and support.

#### 4. Commercialization and Platform Bias

Instagram's algorithms and platform economics have their own limitations, often privileging content that aligns with certain marketable or easily shareable narratives. This commercialization may marginalize more radical, nuanced, or regionally specific forms of feminist writing, making the platform itself a filter that shapes the visibility and popularity of certain voices and aesthetics over others. The risk of performative activism— where engagement is measured in likes and shares rather than substantive change—remains a challenge.

#### 5. Temporal and Methodological Constraints

The study is limited to developments and materials available up to 2019. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital feminism, new voices, trends, and challenges may have emerged since then. Furthermore, as a qualitative study based on textual, thematic, and digital ethnographic analysis, the research does not include quantitative measures of reach, audience engagement, or the socio-economic impact of digital feminist writing.

#### 6. Intersectionality and Inclusion

Although the analysis foregrounds intersectional feminist perspectives—particularly the work of Dalit, Bahujan, and minority voices—there remains the risk of insufficiently capturing the full spectrum of marginalized identities. Factors such as disability, sexuality, age, and regional diversity may be mentioned but are not exhaustively explored due to space and resource limitations.

#### 7. Ethical and Privacy Considerations

The study is based on public posts, interviews, and media coverage. Private conversations, user experiences, and closed digital groups—often crucial for understanding support networks and the lived realities of digital feminist writers—are not accessed or included due to ethical and privacy constraints.

# Findings

The research on digital feminism in Indian literature—cantered on Instagram poets and the evolving voice of Indian women writers—yields several key findings:

# 1. Democratization of Literary Expression:

Digital platforms like Instagram have radically democratized literary production and dissemination for Indian women writers. By bypassing traditional publishing gatekeepers, women from diverse backgrounds can now share their work directly with wide audiences. Instapoetry has become a particularly effective medium, with its brevity, visual appeal, and accessibility resonating strongly with digital-native readers.

# 2. Emergence of New Feminist Narratives:

Instagram poets such as Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill, and Aranya Johar have used their platforms to foreground issues of trauma, healing, resilience, gender-based violence, mental health, and cultural identity. Their poetry not only challenges patriarchal narratives but also creates a space for personal stories, social critique, and collective healing. The immediacy of Instagram allows these poets to engage with readers in real time, building communities of support and solidarity.

# 3. Community-Building and Intersectionality:

Beyond individual voices, digital feminism thrives on collaborative and intersectional projects. Collectives like Kadak Collective and activist pages such as Dalit Women Fight have created spaces for women from marginalized castes, regions, and identities. Webcomics like Sanitary Panels use humour and satire to address taboo topics, further expanding the feminist discourse. These efforts foster greater inclusivity and representation, making feminist activism more accessible to younger and more diverse audiences.

### 4. Challenges of Access and Representation:

Despite these advancements, significant barriers remain. The digital divide—shaped by class, language, technological literacy, and urban-rural disparities—continues to limit access for many women. The predominance of English and urban-centric content can exclude regional-language and rural voices. Furthermore, Instagram's algorithms and commercialization tendencies often Favor content that is easily marketable, potentially marginalizing more radical or nuanced feminist expressions.

### 5. Ongoing Critique and Reflexivity:

The growth of digital feminism is accompanied by critical debates around the risk of performative activism, echo chambers, and the commercialization of feminist messages. While Instapoetry and digital activism have made feminist ideas more visible, there remains a need for vigilance against superficial engagement and the reproduction of privilege within digital spaces.

**Conclusion-** This research demonstrates that digital feminism, exemplified by Instagram poets and feminist collectives, is significantly reshaping the landscape of Indian women's writing. Digital platforms have empowered women writers to challenge established norms, amplify marginalized voices, and foster new forms of literary and social engagement. Instagram poetry, with its accessibility and immediacy, has emerged as a powerful tool for feminist intervention, enabling personal narratives and collective struggles to reach a broad, interactive audience. At the same time, the findings underscore that digital feminism is neither homogenous nor without contradictions. Access remains uneven, linguistic, and regional diversity are underrepresented,

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Vol. 1, Issue 11, Nov 2022

and the risk of commercialization and performative activism is real. Yet, despite these limitations, the movement's dynamism and adaptability continue to inspire new generations of writers, readers, and activists.

As digital platforms and literary practices continue to evolve, the future of Indian women's writing will depend on the ongoing negotiation of these opportunities and challenges. The voices and networks nurtured through digital feminism are not only shaping literature but are also contributing to wider struggles for gender justice, inclusivity, and creative freedom in contemporary India.

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