

Re-reading *Women Writing in India* as a Feminist Anthological Archive

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Abstract: Rather than treating Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India* as a repository of feminist texts, this article examines the anthology as a paratextual archive that actively produces the category of the "Indian woman writer." Drawing on Gérard Genette's theory of paratexts, anthology studies, and contemporary debates on translation and canon formation, the article argues that the anthology's introductions, editorial notes, selection principles, and translation apparatus establish a powerful "generic pact" that directs the reception of women's writing within a national literary framework. The anthology does not merely recover neglected texts; it reorganises them through processes of selection, translation, and contextualisation that transform regional and vernacular literary traditions into a coherent feminist archive. Through what may be termed "triple decontextualization," the removal of texts from their original collections, linguistic environments, and regional socio-historical contexts, the anthology creates a new interpretive framework that standardises the category of Indian women's writing. By examining editorial strategies, translatorial interventions, and the anthology's critical apparatus, this article demonstrates how *Women Writing in India* functions as a foundational archive whose influence continues to shape feminist anthologisation in India. The study concludes by identifying emerging challenges posed by digital archives and by arguing for a more regionally sensitive model of feminist literary preservation.

Keywords: Anthology Studies; Paratext; Feminist Archives; Translation Studies; Canon Formation; Indian Women's Writing; Genette; Literary Archives

Introduction: Few anthologies have exercised as profound an influence on the study of Indian literature as the example of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India* (1991–1993) showcases. More than three decades after its publication, the anthology continues to occupy a foundational position in feminist literary scholarship. It is frequently cited as the text that transformed the study of women's writing in India from a peripheral area of inquiry into a legitimate and mainstream field of academic investigation. While numerous anthologies of women's writing have appeared before and since, few have achieved the same canonical authority or exerted a similar influence. It is worth investigating why this particular anthology has come to define the contours of feminist literary history in Indian academia.

The answer lies partly in the unique role anthologies play in literary cultures. Anthologies as literary repositories are not neutral. As scholars of anthology studies such as Barbara Benedict and John Guillory have argued, anthologies function as powerful instruments of canon formation within literary traditions. By selecting certain texts, excluding others, and arranging them within particular historical and thematic frameworks, editors shape how literary traditions are

remembered, transmitted and decoded by the readers. Anthologies actively construct literary value. They determine which authors enter classrooms, which texts circulate among readers, and which traditions become visible within national literary histories. In this sense, anthologies serve as cultural archives that simultaneously recover and regulate literary memory.

Main Text: The publication of *Women Writing in India* must also be situated within the broader context of feminist recovery projects that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. Across the world, feminist scholars sought to challenge male-dominated literary canons by recovering neglected women writers, editing forgotten texts, and establishing alternative literary histories. In India, this movement coincided with the growth of women's studies programmes, feminist publishing initiatives, and renewed scholarly interest in regional literary traditions. Scholars increasingly recognised that conventional literary histories had marginalised women's contributions by treating them as exceptions within the broader frameworks of literary cultures.

The emergence of women's archives during this period reflected a fundamental intellectual shift from recovery to documentation. Feminist scholars began to recognise that the absence of women from literary histories was not simply the result of historical neglect but also of institutional structures that determined what counted as literature and which voices were worthy of being called literature. In this context, archival projects sought not only to recover texts but also to reconstruct the conditions under which women's writing had been produced, circulated, and received. *Women Writing in India*, edited by Tharu and Lalitha, emerged on the literary horizon at this historical moment, positioning itself as both an archive and as a critical and intellectual intervention.

This article asks a central question, how did *Women Writing in India* acquire its extraordinary authority within Indian feminist studies, and what mechanisms enabled it to become the foundational archive of Indian feminist literary history? This article argues that the authority of *Women Writing in India* derives not merely from the texts it recovers but also from its paratextual elements and blueprint, which together construct an interpretive framework for understanding the fundamental category 'Indian woman writer.'

Recently, anthology studies have emerged as a significant area of literary scholarship, challenging the assumption that anthologies are apolitical devices for preserving pre-existing literary traditions. Instead, scholars increasingly recognise anthologies as powerful instruments of canon formation that actively shape literary history. Barbara Benedict argues that anthologies are 'sites of cultural selection' through which literary value is produced and transmitted (5). By selecting, arranging, and contextualising literary works, editors create new relationships between texts and establish frameworks through which readers encounter literary traditions. Leah Price also argues that anthologies are among the most influential technologies of reading because they determine which texts gain social and political visibility and therefore cultural authority (Price 12-15).

The relationship between anthologies and cultural authority in the US has been theorised most extensively by John Guillory. In *Cultural Capital*, Guillory argues that canon formation is inseparable from institutional processes that regulate access to cultural prestige and educational legitimacy (Guillory 57–60). Canonical status, therefore, emerges not solely from aesthetic merit but from the social and institutional mechanisms that influence and moderate the circulation and reception of literary texts. Robert Scholes extends this argument by demonstrating that anthologies function as pedagogical instruments that construct interpretive habits and shape literary understanding within academic institutions (Scholes 143). Even in the Indian context, anthologies like the ones edited by literary celebrities like Salaman Rushdie (*Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*) and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*) have been considered milestones which have influenced the canonical status of certain texts and their reception by readers. The anthologies thus define the boundaries of literary canons and their heuristics.

The work of Tharu and Lalitha emerged alongside broader debates centred around Indian literary modernity and cultural plurality. Eminent critic Meenakshi Mukherjee has consistently challenged monolithic conceptions of Indian literature, emphasising the coexistence of multiple literary traditions and linguistic publics within the nation (Mukherjee 9-12). Similarly, G. N. Devy's work on linguistic diversity and cultural memory has highlighted how literary canons frequently exclude marginal languages and knowledge systems, producing forms of cultural erasure that extend beyond literature itself (34-38). Harish Trivedi's scholarship on translation and comparative literature further demonstrates that Indian literary culture has historically evolved through multilingual exchanges rather than through isolated linguistic traditions (19-22). Collectively, these scholars provide a framework for understanding *Women Writing in India* not simply as a feminist anthology but as a major intervention in debates concerning canon formation, translation, archival practice, and literary representation.

One of the most significant yet understudied consequences of anthologisation is what may be termed triple decontextualization. This is the process through which a literary text is successively removed from its original authorial context, its regional socio-cultural environment, and its linguistic matrix before being reinserted into a new interpretive framework. While anthologies often justify this process as necessary for accessibility and canon formation, it fundamentally reshapes the textual meanings and contexts through which readers access and decode the various texts included in any anthology. In the case of *Women Writing in India*, translation and editorial framing do not merely recover texts; they actively produce a new category of literary identity by repositioning disparate works within a national feminist archive.

The first level of decontextualisation occurs when a text is removed from its original collection or publication context. As Barbara Benedict argues, anthologies inevitably detach works from their original textual surroundings and create new relationships among texts that may not have existed previously (18). A poem, essay, or autobiographical fragment that originally participated in a specific literary conversation is reassembled alongside texts from different historical periods and linguistic traditions. The result is a new interpretive environment governed by editorial logic rather than authorial intention. The meanings and inferences that the various texts in an anthology can convey are redesigned through the editorial decision to select and arrange certain texts in certain frameworks and structures.

The second level involves removal from the text's regional and socio-historical context. India's literary cultures have historically evolved in the context of distinct linguistic, religious, and regional traditions. Anthologies often seek to construct national literary histories, rather than representing regional or Bhasha traditions, thus frequently translating these specificities into broader and more concretised categories and identity markers. G. N. Devy notes that linguistic traditions encode unique cultural memories and epistemologies that often become flattened when incorporated into national narratives (Devy 35-38). In feminist anthologies, regional experiences are frequently reinterpreted through the unifying category of gender, creating productive solidarities but also obscuring local differences.

The third and perhaps most consequential level of decontextualisation occurs through translation itself. Translation enables circulation but simultaneously transforms meaning. Harish Trivedi argues that translation is never a neutral transfer of content; it is a process of negotiation through which texts acquire new cultural functions and audiences (Trivedi 21). When vernacular texts enter English-language anthologies, they become legible to national and global readers but lose certain linguistic and cultural resonances embedded within the original language. This decontextualization also enables the editors to recalibrate certain ideological attributes to the translated texts according to the editorial mandate of the anthologies.

The case of Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* in the anthology illustrates this process clearly. Originally written in Marathi in 1882 as a polemical response to caste and gender inequalities

within nineteenth-century Maharashtra, the text is introduced in *Women Writing in India* primarily as an early feminist critique of patriarchy. While this framing rightly highlights its feminist significance, it simultaneously effaces the visibility of the specific anti-Brahmanical and regional reformist debates that informed Shinde's intervention. This is not an intentional effacement, and yet, due to the editorial mandate that Tharu and Lalitha follow, the intersectional potential of the text is reduced for readers who encounter the text primarily and initially through the anthology.

A similar transformation occurs with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's seminal text, *Sultana's Dream*. Written in colonial Bengal and deeply engaged with debates surrounding Muslim women's education, the text is repositioned within the anthology as a foundational feminist utopia. The anthology's editorial apparatus encourages readers to approach Rokeya primarily through feminist discourse, thereby expanding her relevance while partially displacing the specific colonial and Islamic reform contexts that shaped her work. This is instrumental in the task of historically locating hidden genealogies of texts which have dealt with feminist concerns before the academic and theoretical crystallisation of gender studies.

Similarly, Mahadevi Varma's writings emerge within the anthology less as products of the Chhayavad movement in Hindi literature and more as expressions of women's subjectivity. While such framing enables comparative feminist readings across regions and languages, it also detaches specific texts from the literary and aesthetic debates that originally informed its production.

The process of triple decontextualisation therefore produces both gains and losses. It enables the creation of a national feminist archive, allowing readers to recognise shared histories of gendered experience across linguistic and regional boundaries but also creates a contextual void. The power of *Women Writing in India* lies precisely in this tension. Its achievement is not simply that it recovers forgotten texts, but that it recontextualises them within a coherent interpretive framework that has profoundly shaped subsequent understandings of the "Indian woman writer." In this sense, translation functions not merely as a vehicle of transmission but as a constitutive act of canon formation.

The emergence of digital humanities has fundamentally altered the conditions under which literary archives are created, accessed, and interpreted. While scholarship on *Women Writing in India* has largely focused on its role as a feminist recovery project and a print archive, relatively little attention has been paid to how the anthology's paratextual authority is transformed within digital environments. As Gérard Genette argues, the paratext functions as a threshold that guides interpretation (Genette 1–2), and the migration of literary texts from print anthologies to digital platforms raises important questions about how authority, context, and reception are negotiated in contemporary media ecosystems.

Traditional anthologies derive much of their authority from editorial control. Editors determine which texts are included, how they are arranged, and what explanatory apparatus accompanies them. In *Women Writing in India*, introductions, headnotes, chronological organisation, and translator notes collectively construct a coherent narrative of women's literary history. Digital archives, however, operate according to different principles. As Johanna Drucker argues, digital archives are not passive repositories but dynamic systems of information retrieval that shape knowledge through interfaces, metadata, and search functions (Drucker 85). In such environments, readers increasingly encounter texts through keywords, hyperlinks, and database searches rather than through editorially curated sequences.

This shift has significant implications for feminist anthologies. The authority of *Women Writing in India* rests partly on its ability to situate individual texts within a broader feminist narrative. Digital archives potentially weaken this narrative coherence by enabling readers to access texts independently of the editorial framework that originally contextualised them. A user searching for Tarabai Shinde, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, or Lal Ded within a digital repository may encounter the text directly, bypassing the anthology's prefatory arguments and interpretive scaffolding. The

anthologies carefully constructed "generic pact," to use Genette's terminology, becomes fragmented when texts circulate independently through digital platforms (Genette 7).

At the same time, digital environments create new opportunities for feminist archival practice. One of the most significant developments has been the emergence of feminist metadata, a concept that recognises that cataloguing, tagging, and classification are not neutral activities but political acts. Scholars such as Marika Cifor and Anne J. Gilliland argue that metadata structures influence which histories become visible and which remain marginalised (Cifor and Gilliland 4–6). In feminist archives, metadata can be used to foreground categories such as gender, caste, region, language, labour, sexuality, and resistance, thereby making previously overlooked relationships between texts more visible. Unlike print anthologies, which are constrained by linear organisation, digital archives allow multiple modes of classification and retrieval.

The expansion of online repositories has also transformed access to regional and vernacular literatures. Projects such as the Digital South Asia Library, the Internet Archive, the Bichitra Tagore Variorum Project, and numerous university-based digital repositories have demonstrated the capacity of digital technologies to preserve and disseminate literary materials that might otherwise remain inaccessible. For feminist scholarship, this development is particularly significant because many women's writings exist in fragile manuscripts, little magazines, local publications, and oral traditions that have historically remained outside institutional archives. Digital preservation offers new possibilities for recovering such materials and making them available to wider audiences.

However, the democratising potential of digital archives should not be overstated. As Leah Price observes, greater accessibility does not automatically produce greater visibility (Price 214). The quality of being searchable can only privilege texts that are catalogued, categorised, translated, and institutionally recognised. For this to be achieved, digital archives reproduce existing hierarchies, even though the aim might be inclusivity and increased accessibility. G. N. Devy's work on linguistic diversity similarly reminds us that many Indian languages remain underrepresented in digital spaces, creating what might be described as a digital extension of the "representative vacuum" found in traditional literary canons (Devy 42). Texts written in smaller regional languages frequently lack the metadata, digitisation resources, or translational infrastructure necessary for meaningful circulation.

The future of feminist anthologies lies not in the replacement of editorial authority by digital access but in a productive negotiation between the two. It would be useful to understand anthologies and digital archives as complementary forms of literary preservation. If the anthology provides interpretive coherence, digital archives provide multiplicity and expansion. The challenge for future feminist scholarship is to develop digital archival practices that preserve the contextual richness of editorial frameworks while exploiting the accessibility and inclusivity offered by digital technologies. Such a shift requires moving beyond Genette's concept of the paratext as a static threshold toward a more dynamic understanding of literary archives in evolving digital and media ecosystems.

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