

Bundelkhand ki Sanskritik Pehchaan aur Mahila Kavi: A Study of Regional Identity in Indian English Women's Writing

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Received: 20 Nov 2020, Accepted: 30 Nov 2020, Published with Peer Review on line: 31 Jan 2021

Abstract

This paper explores the evolving cultural identity of Bundelkhand through the lens of women's writing in Indian English. Traditionally known for icons such as Rani Lakshmibai, Bundelkhand's history is woven with tales of courage, struggle, and resilience. Yet beneath the grandeur of legends lies a deeper narrative shaped by the daily lives, dreams and voices of ordinary women poets, storytellers, folk artists, and social rebels. Drawing from a range of sources, including classic poems, autobiographies, contemporary fiction, digital archives and field interviews, this study explores how Bundelkhandi women writers redefine their region's identity in literature, tracing the journey from mythic movie stars such as Lakshmibai to marginalised figures such as Phoolan Devi. The influence of oral traditions and ecosystems is examined, highlighting the shift from heroic tales to authentic portrayals of daily life. Despite the growing scope of the work, the research shows that the voices of Bundelkhand's women – particularly those writing in English – remain underrepresented and understudied. This enriches academic discussion, but also honours the living, breathing reality of Bundelkhand, shaped and narrated by its women. It shows that Bundelkhand's cultural identity is not static, but dynamic – it is constantly being rewritten through the creativity, agency, and resilience of its women writers.

Keywords: Bundelkhand, Women's Writing, Regional Identity, Indian English Literature, Folklore and Tradition

Introduction

Bundelkhand, spread across the heart of central India, is not just a geographical region – it is the living embodiment of history, folklore, struggle, and resilience. The name Bundelkhand conjures up the image of Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai, who, sword in hand, challenged the might of the British Empire. Thanks to Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's unforgettable poem "Jhansi ki Rani," several generations have grown up with the rebellious spirit of the region and its unique place in India's cultural memory.

But the story of Bundelkhand is not limited to its legendary queen. If we look beyond the grandeur of the forts and the echoes of old battles, we find the lives, dreams, and voices of countless women – some famous, many forgotten – who are shaping and reshaping the cultural fabric of this land. Over time, the region's identity has been influenced not just by royalty or warriors, but also by ordinary women—poets, storytellers, folk artists, and social rebels—who have added their own colours to the canvas of Bundelkhand. In recent years, there has been a welcome shift in scholarship and creative writing: a deeper, more honest exploration of what it means to be a Bundelkhandi woman, and how these women see themselves and their world. It is not just about retelling legends or heroic tales. Books by writers like Jaishree Mishra, Mahasweta Devi, and contemporary poets like Nandini Singh and Mrinalini Pandey have brought forth the everyday experiences of Bundelkhand women—joy, pain, protest, hope. Their works are inspired by local folklore, the harsh realities of drought and caste, the quiet wisdom of grandmothers, and the restless energy of new

generations. Yet, despite this growing work, Bundelkhandi women's voices remain surprisingly under-studied in Indian English literature. Most literary analysis of the region still focuses on Hindi or Bundeli texts or relies heavily on male perspectives. There is a real need to ask: how are Bundelkhandi women writers – particularly those writing in English – constructing their own identities? How do they combine their roots in oral traditions and folklore with the modes of modern literary expression? And how does their work challenge or complicate common narratives about gender, region, and social hierarchy?

This paper attempts to answer these questions. It explores how Bundelkhand women writers – through poetry, fiction, memoirs, and even digital media – redefine the cultural identity of the region in their own terms. From the regal persona of Rani Lakshmibai to the raw, clear voice of Phoolan Devi, from folk tales sung in village courtyards to new poems written in English, their stories reflect a Bundelkhand that is diverse, dynamic, and very much alive.

By bringing together historical accounts, literary criticism, creative writing, interviews and digital archives, this study aims to shed light on the emerging identity of the region – an identity that its women are shaping and speaking for, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly. In doing so, it hopes not only to contribute to academic discussions, but to celebrate the living, breathing reality of Bundelkhand, as seen and told by its women.

Literature Review

The literary and cultural identity of Bundelkhand, especially as mediated through the voices of women writers, has received increasing scholarly attention, though much remains to be explored in English-language literary studies. Early and foundational works like Chauhan's (1930) iconic poem "Jhansi ki Rani" established the region's enduring association with female heroism and resistance, while also embedding Bundelkhand's history into the national consciousness. Later historical and biographical accounts, such as Fraser's (1988) *The Warrior Queens*, Gupta's (2008) *Women in Indian History: Jhansi ki Rani*, and Misra's (2007) *Rani*, further interrogate the construction of female identity and leadership in Bundelkhand, with a specific focus on the legendary Rani Lakshmibai as both a literary and historical figure. Devi's (2010) novelistic portrayal, alongside Singh's (2010) *Bundelkhand: A Cultural History* and Gupta's (2012) exploration of the region's art and culture, collectively foreground Bundelkhand as a unique site of intersecting regional, gendered, and cultural narratives.

Moving from heroic queens to voices from the margins, the autobiographical and biographical accounts of Phoolan Devi (Phoolan Devi et al., 1996/1997; Sen, 1993) complicate the singular narratives of resistance, revealing how social banditry, caste, and gendered violence shape the contours of regional identity. This duality—of celebrated queens and subaltern outlaws—finds critical engagement in Fernandes's (1998) transnational feminist reading and in journalistic and academic articles such as Sharma (2010) and Dasgupta (2008), who explore Phoolan Devi's legacy and representation in Indian literature and culture.

Pandey's (2016) *Nadi Sutra* and Singh's (2013) *Stone Woman* mark a contemporary shift, drawing from regional folklore, ecological motifs, and women lived experiences to create a nuanced and localized poetic voice. Literary criticism in edited volumes such as Jain (2003), Pandey (2015), and Dwivedi (2017) contextualizes these creative works within broader debates on women's writing, Dalit and tribal voices, and gendered folklore in Bundelkhand, highlighting both progress and the continued marginalization of certain voices.

Scholarly articles deepen the analysis of Bundelkhand's cultural and literary landscape. Kumar (2007) documents the evolution of Bundeli folk songs, underlining their dynamic relationship with tradition and modernity. Mishra (2016) revisits the theme of the woman warrior, offering a critical lens on the enduring figure of Jhansi ki Rani in literature, while Narayanan (2016) interrogates myth, memory, and representation in constructing the queen's legacy. Roy (1994) and Roy (2010) open debates on the politics of representation, particularly in the context of adaptation, translation, and the commodification of women's suffering. Sharma (2016) and Varma (2018) focus on the negotiation of regional identity by Bundelkhandi women poets in English, exploring how orality and folk traditions are woven into modern literary forms.

Recent theses and dissertations, such as Joshi (2017) and Rai (2013), signal emerging scholarly interest in the intersections of gender, region, and identity, offering close readings of contemporary poetry and narrative centered on Bundelkhandi women. Government and NGO reports (Government of India, 2012; Niranjana & Nair, 2014; Cultural Survey of India, 2014) provide a valuable socio-economic and demographic backdrop, contextualizing literary production within broader patterns of gender, education, and empowerment in the region.

Primary and secondary sources are further enriched by personal interviews (Misra, 2008; Sen, 1995; Phoolan Devi, 2001), documentaries, and digital resources. Media productions like Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994) and NDTV's documentary (2011) have brought Bundelkhand's women and their stories to national and international attention, provoking ongoing debate about agency, exploitation, and representation. Initiatives such as Khabar Lahariya and the Bundelkhand Digital Library archive local voices and histories, while Pushpa (2015) in *Hans* highlights the continued relevance of women's narratives in contemporary Bundeli society.

Despite these valuable contributions, gaps remain—particularly in the sustained analysis of English-language women's writing from and about Bundelkhand, the literary treatment of subaltern and Dalit voices, and the ways in which folklore, gender, and regional identity intersect in contemporary texts. While recent scholarship and creative work have made significant strides, further research is needed to fully map the vibrant, complex, and evolving field of Bundelkhand's cultural identity as articulated by its women poets and writers.

Analysis of Selected Texts

This is an especially important attempt to understand the tradition, struggle and change of this region. Today, when we see glimpses of women of mythology in the poetic tradition and English literature, it shows that it is only Rani Lakshmibai or Phulan Devi.

1. Rani Lakshmibai: Legend till Present

It is difficult to enter a conversation about Indian women's poetry—especially when discussing Bundelkhand—without encountering the towering figure of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. For many, she is not just a historical character but a living legend, an icon whose story is retold in classrooms, family stories, and across India's artistic landscape. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's unforgettable poem, "Jhansi ki Rani," gave a lyrical and stirring voice to Lakshmi Bai's courage. The poem, with its powerful lines and memorable imagery, ensured that the queen's spirit would resonate across generations, inspiring not only readers but also countless writers and artists.

But Rani Lakshmibai is far more than a distant movie star carved in stone. Over time, her image has shifted and evolved, adapting to the changing hopes and anxieties of society. Authors and historians—such as Antonia Fraser, Jaishree Misra, and Mahasweta Devi—have each offered new interpretations of the queen. Sometimes

she appears as a lone warrior on horseback, her face set with resolve; elsewhere, she becomes the embodiment of collective resistance, a symbol of what women can achieve when pushed to the brink. In some retellings, she is a mother, a ruler, and a leader torn between personal grief and public duty; in others, she stands as the ultimate expression of defiance against colonial oppression and patriarchal norms.

What is striking is how Lakshmi Bai's story adapts to the needs of every generation. For nationalists in the freedom struggle, she was a beacon of sacrifice. For feminists and modern writers, she stands for agency, autonomy, and the possibility of rewriting destiny—even in the face of overwhelming odds. In the context of Bundelkhand's regional identity, Rani Lakshmi Bai's legacy serves as a rallying point, linking local pride with a larger narrative of women's empowerment and voice.

Within contemporary Indian English women's writing, Lakshmi Bai's influence can be felt in the way poets and authors invoke her not just as a figure of the past, but as a living challenge: How should women's courage, suffering, and leadership be remembered? Whose stories become part of collective memory, and how do those stories shape the way women see themselves today?

By moving from the realm of legend into the everyday imagination of Bundelkhand and beyond, Rani Lakshmi Bai becomes both a mirror and a map—a reminder of the region's fierce history and a guide to what is still possible for women's voices in literature. Her story, recast repeatedly, continues to inspire, provoke, and redefine what it means to be a woman writer from Bundelkhand.

2. Voices from the Margins: Phoolan Devi and the New Definition of Resistance

If Rani Lakshmi Bai's story has long stood at the centre of Bundelkhand's heroic imagination, Phoolan Devi's journey emerges from its edges—raw, controversial, and impossible to ignore. Unlike the queen, Phoolan was not born into royalty or privilege. Her life, as told in her own autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi* and further explored in Mala Sen's compelling biography *India's Bandit Queen*, is a narrative shaped by poverty, caste, violence, and an unyielding drive to reclaim agency in a world that refused to offer her any.

Phoolan Devi's childhood and youth were marked by hardship and brutality, experiences familiar to many Dalit and marginalized women in Bundelkhand and across rural India. But what sets Phoolan apart in the literary and cultural imagination is not just the suffering she endured, but the way she rewrote her own destiny—refusing to be defined by the violence inflicted upon her. Her transformation from a village girl to a feared and revered “bandit queen” stands as a radical act of self-assertion in a society that often expects its women, especially those of lower castes, to remain silent.

The raw honesty of Phoolan's own words—her anger, her despair, her moments of vulnerability and strength—gives readers a rare window into a world often hidden or ignored. Through her autobiography, Phoolan does not seek pity; she demands recognition. Her story complicates easy notions of victimhood and villainy, pushing us to question our assumptions about justice, morality, and resistance.

The impact of Phoolan Devi's life goes far beyond the written page. Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* and countless news reports and documentaries have carried her story into the living rooms of millions, igniting debates about representation, exploitation, and whose voices are deemed worthy of being heard. As writers, filmmakers, and scholars continue to grapple with Phoolan's legacy, important questions arise: Who gets to tell a woman's story? Whose pain is visible, and whose resistance is celebrated or condemned?

In the broader context of Bundelkhand's literary identity, Phoolan Devi represents a turning point. She challenges the tradition of glorifying only royal or upper-caste movie stars and carves out space for women from the most marginalized backgrounds to be seen as agents of their own fates. "Through her story, the literature of Bundelkhand becomes more inclusive, more honest, and—most importantly—more unsettling, as it refuses to let us look away from the realities so many women face."

Phoolan Devi's voice, echoing from the margins, continues to redefine what resistance means—not just for Bundelkhand, but for Indian literature. She stands as a living reminder that the struggle for dignity and self-determination is ongoing, and that the stories from the edges can shake the centre.

3. Contemporary Women's Writing: The Real Actors of the Everyday

In the vibrant landscape of Bundelkhand's literature, there is a quiet but powerful shift taking place. Where once queens and outlaws dominated the stage—by tales of war, resistance, and headline-making suffering—today, a new generation of women writers is turning our attention to the everyday dramas and silent strengths that shape real life in Bundelkhand. These writers are not only breaking away from traditional themes, but they are also reimagining what it means to be a woman, a creator, and a Bundelkhandi in the modern world.

Poets like Nandini Singh, with her collection *Stone Woman: Poems of Bundelkhand*, and storytellers like Mrinalini Pandey, whose *Nadi Sutra* (River Sutra) captures the essence of rural women's experiences, are giving voice to the rhythms of village life, to the song of rivers and the tales whispered by stones. In their works, folklore is not just nostalgia—it is living memory, woven into the realities of drought, migration, changing seasons, and the ever-present bond between women and the land.

What sets this contemporary writing apart is its honesty and its subtlety. These women are not interested in painting themselves as martyrs or mythic movie stars. Instead, they write about what it feels like to wait for rain, to sing at a festival, to face the judgments of a panchayat, to fight quietly for respect and opportunity, or to raise children with stories of both struggle and hope. Their poetry and stories are filled with local colours and sounds—village gossip, the smell of wet earth, the strength of a mother's hand, the wisdom in an old woman's eyes.

This new class of writers, many of whom are experimenting with English as a medium while remaining rooted in their Bundeli identity, are showing us that heroism is not just about grand gestures. Sometimes, it is about endurance, kindness, laughter in the face of hardship, or simply holding on to one's dignity. Through their writing, they invite readers to see the "real actresses"—the mothers, daughters, friends, and neighbours whose stories have long been overlooked—in all their complexity.

Importantly, these writers do not just spotlight their own talent. They celebrate the collective creativity of Bundelkhandi women, acknowledging the value of folk songs, rituals, and storytelling traditions passed down through generations. Their work is both an act of self-recognition and a tribute to the countless unnamed women whose voices echo through the region's oral and written culture.

Contemporary Bundelkhandi women's writing is an ongoing conversation—a way of saying, "We are here, and our stories matter." By blending the traditional with the modern, the local with the universal, these writers are quietly reshaping both the literary map of Bundelkhand and the broader narrative of Indian women's literature.

4. Tradition, Folklore and Literary Innovation

To utterly understand the soul of Bundelkhand, one must listen to the voices that drift through its folk songs, rituals, and everyday customs—many of which are lovingly preserved and passed on by women. For centuries, Bundelkhandi women have been the quiet guardians of tradition. Through songs sung at weddings and harvests, stories whispered in courtyards, and the observance of ancient rituals, they have shaped the rhythm and colour of daily life. But in today's Bundelkhand, this tradition is not frozen in time. Instead, it is in constant dialogue with change, thanks to the creativity of contemporary women writers.

Scholars like Kumar and Pushpa (Hans, 2015) have beautifully captured how women are not just the transmitters of these old practices but are also their innovators. In their research and observations, we see that the wisdom and artistry of women—once expressed through oral traditions—are now taking on new life in poetry, short stories, and even modern novels. Where a lullaby or a festival song might once have existed only within the walls of a home, today's writers are transforming those memories and motifs into verses and narratives that reach far beyond the village.

Contemporary poets—whether composing in Hindi, Bundeli, or English—bring these folk colours alive with remarkable freshness. Their work is full of symbols and sounds from the region: the haunting call of a peacock at dusk, the hopeful waiting for the monsoon, the rituals of Chhath and Tej, or the quiet strength found in shared women's laughter. Rather than abandoning their roots in search of a modern voice, these writers are weaving new literary forms from the very threads of tradition, showing how deeply connected the old and the new can be.

This literary innovation is not about style; it is about identity. By drawing from Bundelkhand's rich folklore and shastra (classical texts), contemporary women writers assert their belonging and agency. Their works become a space where ancestral wisdom and modern challenges coexist—a bridge between generations, and between local and global cultures.

Moreover, this movement is not limited to print. Through digital media, oral recitations, and even social journalism platforms like Khabar Lahariya, Bundelkhandi women are sharing their stories and songs with new audiences, ensuring that their heritage is not only preserved but continuously reinvented.

In this way, tradition in Bundelkhand is anything but static. Through the imaginative power of its women, what was once confined to ritual and folklore is now part of living literature—dynamic, inclusive, and boldly innovative. These writers show that the real heart of Bundelkhand beats not just in its legends or landscapes, but in the creativity of women who find new ways to make the old sing again.

5. Beyond Literature: Digital Media and New Platforms

In the present era, Bundelkhandi women's creativity is no longer confined to the pages of books or the boundaries of the home. The vibrancy and playfulness that once echoed in courtyards and festival gatherings now travel far beyond, finding bold new life through digital media and modern platforms. Today, the stories, songs, and art of Bundelkhandi women are reaching wider audiences—across cities, states, and even countries—thanks to a wave of digital innovation that honours tradition even as it breaks new ground.

One of the most exciting developments in this journey is the rise of community-driven media platforms like Khabar Lahariya. Run by rural women journalists, this digital newsroom has transformed the voices of Bundelkhand's women from whispers into headlines. Here, everyday realities—struggles, celebrations, injustices, and achievements—are reported and debated in the women's own languages and styles. Khabar Lahariya's fearless reporting, storytelling videos, and on-the-ground interviews have made it a vital part of

both local empowerment and the national media landscape, setting an example for rural journalism across India.

But the digital renaissance does not end with news. The Bundelkhand Digital Library is preserving treasures that might otherwise have faded with time: folk songs, ancient manuscripts, women's poetry, and photographs of sculptures or art forms handed down through generations. This virtual archive is not just a museum—it is a living, evolving celebration of the region's creative heritage, with women's contributions front and centre.

Documentaries and interviews have also become powerful mediums for sharing the lived experiences and artistic expressions of Bundelkhandi women. Films like *Bundelkhand: Saanjh Savera* and NDTV's documentary on the life and legacy of Phoolan Devi (*Bandit Queen*) offer viewers a vivid window into women's worlds—highlighting not just their struggles, but also their music, humour, and resilience. Whether through the camera's lens or a recorded song, these platforms amplify voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

What is striking in today's Bundelkhand is how women are using these new spaces—not just to perform or display their talent, but to shape narratives, challenge stereotypes, and claim ownership of their identities. Through podcasts, social media, YouTube channels, and online poetry readings, women are forging supportive communities, inspiring each other, and creating dialogue between tradition and modernity.

In many ways, these new platforms are not replacements for old ways—they are the next chapter. They allow Bundelkhandi women to reach beyond regional boundaries, to learn from the world, and to teach it as well. Through digital media, the folk wisdom, artistry, and stories of Bundelkhand's women are no longer at risk of being lost or ignored. Instead, they pulse with new energy, shaping both the region's image and the broader narrative of Indian women's creativity in the twenty-first century.

Discussion

Exploring Bundelkhand's cultural identity through the lens of women's writing in Indian English opens a fascinating dialogue between tradition and change, voice, and silence, the mythical and the constant. As research and selected texts show, the identity of a region is not a static or one-dimensional construct—it is a living process, constantly renegotiated through celebrity icons and less audible voices on the margins.

One recurring thread is the symbolic power of Rani Lakshmibai, whose story continues to be reimagined for generations. Her journey from historical figure to literary fiction enabled successive writers and poets, especially women, to find inspiration and agency in Lakshmi Bai's transformation—from lone warrior to Chauhan's iconic poem to symbol of collective resistance and female empowerment in later retellings—reflects not only the region's past but its ongoing struggles and aspirations. The Queen's story has become a touchstone for debates about memory, gender, and the politics of representation, especially as women writers in English claim and reinterpret her legacy for new audiences.

However, the story of Bundelkhand is not merely a narrative of royalty or heroic myth. The figure of Phoolandevi—emerging from the margins as a symbol of Dalit resistance's radical agency—complicates and deepens the region's sense of self. Her life, autobiography, representations in literature and film expose strains of caste and gender violence that continue to shape Bundelkhand's social fabric. Through her call to think about whose struggles are recognized, whose pain is seen, and who defines whose resistance, Bundelkhand's literature expands to include the realities and aspirations of those outside traditional power structures.

Contemporary Bundelkhand women writers bring analysis full circle. Not content to echo the stories of mythic heroes or criminals, these writers focus on the everyday realities of rural and small-town life—the quiet dramas, small joys, and persistent hopes of ordinary women. Their works, whether poetry or prose, often blend local folklore, ecological motifs, and lived experience to create an authentic voice that is both regionally based and universally resonant. These texts reveal the richness of oral traditions and the innovation with which women adapted them to modern literary forms. Here, the strength of the Bundelkhand's identity is found not only in its past heroism but in its present creativity, resilience, and endurance.

A notable innovation in the region's literary culture is the expansion beyond print into digital, audiovisual and platforms. Platforms like Khabar Lahariya, digital libraries and documentaries like Bundelkhand: Saanjh Savera or NDTV's Daku Raji offer new spaces for women's stories, songs and voices. This shift democratizes literary expression, women from all walks of life can participate in shaping and sharing Bundelkhand narratives, as well. It ensures that marginalized stories are not left unheard.

However, the discussion has opened continuing gaps and challenges. Though women's writing, especially in Hindi and Bundeli, is gaining visibility, the body of Indian-English literature by Bundelkhandi women is small and under-analysed. The intersection of regional identity, gender, caste and modernity is still often filtered by male or urban perspectives. And, although tradition is an important source of inspiration, there is an ongoing negotiation between celebrating heritage and confronting the social hierarchies embedded in it.

In summary, the findings of this research reveal the Bundelkhand as an area of creative flux—a space where women writers not only patronize tradition but actively reshape and challenge it. Through their stories, poems, and digital interventions, they offer a nuanced, evolving portrait of the Bundelkhand: one that honours its legends, listens to its margins, celebrates its everyday movie stars, and embraces the old and the new. The dialogue they begin—between past and present, oral, and written, centre and margin—enrich regional and national understandings of identity, agency, and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This study finds that Bundelkhand's cultural identity, as seen through the creative and critical expressions of its women writers, is far from a static monolith – it is an evolving mosaic woven from legend, folklore, struggle, and modern innovation. Nandini Singh and Mrinalini Pandey have further enriched this landscape by blending local life rhythms, oral tradition, and ecological consciousness into new literary forms. They do not just defend the past, they actively re-imagine it, using poetry, prose, and digital media to forge an identity about gender for their community and claim their place in the broader conversation. Yet the creative agency and resilience demonstrated by these writers underscores a powerful truth: the story of Bundelkhand, as told by its women, is one of constant renewal, hope and the promise of new possibilities.

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