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## Exploring the Female Identity of Krupabai Satthianadhan's 'Saguna' as a Pioneering First Feminist Women's Novel in India

**Subha Ranjitha R and Dr. Anita Virgin**

### Abstract

Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862-1894) is regarded as one of the first women authors in English. Her two novels, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* [1894] and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* [1895] are remarkable for their construction of Indian female heroines caught between different cultures (Indian and English, Hindu and Christian, Traditional and Modern). I would like to work on her novel *Saguna: A Story of Christian Life*, which is a poignant tale of a woman named Saguna, who faces all the struggles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during British rule over India. It is a story about a woman who received education in India during British rule as an Indian woman. She also faced all the tough situations around her caused by the male-dominated society in India. Even though this story is an autobiographical novel of Krupabai's own life history portrayed as Saguna, Krupabai explores her female identity through this novel by expressing her own story of education and writing about ancient violence against women. She was the first woman author to pioneer Indian woman's Feminist writing in English until the end of her life, with her second and last novel, "Saguna", published in 1895.

**Keywords:** Krupabai Satthianadhan, Saguna, pioneered women, Indian feminist, exploration of female identity

### Introduction

Feminism says to a number of social, cultural, and political movements, theories, and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pre-independence era, the women movement began as a social reform movement. During the time of the history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase began in the mid - 19<sup>th</sup> century, started when reformists began to speak in favor of women's rights by making reforms in education and customs involving women; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, that when Gandhi incorporated women organizations began to emerge and finally, the third phase focused on the good treatment of women at home and after marriage, as well as the work force and their right to political party.

Despite the progress made by the Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land ownership rights and access to education challenging for women. In the past two decades, it has been very cruel to do sex-selective abortions. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against, and feminism is often misunderstood by Indians as female dominance rather than equality. Savitribai Phule was breaking stereotypes by her fighting for her own struggles, and that inspired her to fight for others. She became India's first feminist. She is also regarded as the Mother of Indian Feminism. She also founded a community named Mahila Seva Mandal to raise awareness about women's rights.

### Feminist theory

"There is something so special about a woman who dominates in a man's world. It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and the nerve to never take no for an answer."

Mary Wollstonecraft was the greatest feminist in western history, whose works are about feminism and the theory based on feminism. She was one of the first feminist writers in the ancient tradition. There are many feminist theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Betty Friedan, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Carol Gilligan, and Adrinne Rich.

**Elaine Showalter's feminist theory**

Showalter says, "A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers; class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender."

**Showalter's three phases of feminism**

"Feminine" (women writers imitate men), the "feminist" (women advocated minority rights and protested), and the "female" (the focus is now on women's texts as opposed to certainly uncovering misogyny in men's texts).

**Mainstream Feminism**

The conversation of about violence are a repertoire of victimization are harassment, rape, abuse, femicide. Even these words shows a cruel reality but they also hide other reality like racial capitalism, imperialism and colonial occupation inevitably produce gendered violence with the complicity of the state. This mainstream feminism asks for more surveillance, more punishment, more protection from the state and the police to the men who produce violence against women only. The speaker of mainstream feminism is Prof. Françoise Vergès is a French Political scientist, historian, film producer, independent curator, activist and public educator. Her work focuses on postcolonial studies and decolonial feminism. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. Vergès is the author of many books including *A Decolonial Feminism* and *Wombs of women*. Vergès refuses the obsession of the state in favor of restorative justice for women. The feminist theory is based on gender based violence and all types of violence which is used in the women in everyday life.

**Krupabai's Novel Saguna-1895**

In 1887, *Saguna* was a first Indian feminist novel which was written by Krupabai Sathianadhan in English Literature. In Queen Victoria times Krupabai's novel was published by her inspiration only. The author describes her own struggles through the character of *Saguna* in her novel and she explores her female identity in a victorious way. At last, the character *Saguna* proves that how to be an independent woman and how she explores her own identity as a great woman.

**About the novel in 19<sup>th</sup> century of Krupabai Sathianadhan**

In 1887, *Saguna* is an autobiographical novel that appeared with largely autobiographical elements in English written which explore the female identity.

In 1895, this novel was published by an Indian woman writer Krupabai who wrote about an Indian women *Saguna* in the novel. This descriptive novel deals with issues of religion, colonialism and women. This reprint of this insightful psychological study and invaluable social document of its times. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, Krupabai's novel *Saguna* which is widely read both in India and England at the time, and received glowing reviews recommending the book for its high moral tone. But then, for the next hundred and old years, it disappeared from the public eye. It was only in 1998 that Oxford University Press decided to reissue it with an introduction by editor Chandhani Lokuge, and a new title: *Saguna: The First Autobiographical novel by an Indian Woman*.

An autobiographical novel is defined as a work includes fiction and autobiographical elements. *Saguna* captures factual details about the author's life as well as the prevailing mood of the time with the help of wonderful descriptions, vivid character sketches and poetic language. It is as evident from the original title, it has predominantly Christian overtones and as the new title indicates, it also deals heavily with The Woman question. An author who is credited with being one of the first Women novelists in English from India.

From 1887 to 1888, The Madras Christian College Magazine serialized a story in English called *Saguna*. It was an autobiographical novel by Krupabai Sathianadhan, a young woman in her twenties. In 1895, a year after her untimely death, [*Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* was published posthumously by Srinivasa, Varadachari in Madras]. The book was presented to Queen Victoria who upon reading it that she was so impressed that she asked for more books by the same author.

**Krupabai's times in Queen Victorian period**

Krupabai was an Indian author who wrote in English in the Victorian age. Krupabai was born to Harijunt and Radhabai, Hindu converts to Christianity. Krupabai's times the education was not important for the people and at that times even she got her education and learning by facing hard times only; because at the times of Victorian age education and learning both were uncommon for women. The novel presents a faithful picture of the experiences and thoughts of a simple Indian girl.

**The Autobiographical elements in the novel**

*Saguna* / Krupabai was one of 14 siblings born in Ahmednagar [then in the Bombay Presidency] to the first Brahmin converts to Christianity. Her father was died early so she had to take a burden of her family from that time onwards. Her three elder sisters were married and she was left at home with four boys for company. At her childhood times she got a good person named Bhasker who helped her in her struggles and gave motivation for her studies by providing some materials that she need and he was the one who exercised a powerful and permanent influence on the young *Saguna*. But after Bhasker's death she felt sad and she didn't know what to do but she was in search of learning and wanted to get her education from somewhere and she got it too. There were two European women who helped her they introduced British way of studies and they made her to join Boarding school of Bombay and where she proved to be a brilliant student and developed in Medicine.

Due to her ill health she was admitted in the hospital and she couldn't continue her Study of Medicine. And then discontinued her studies of Medicine of her serious health only and so she went to the literature field after her marriage and she wanted to become an writer in English literature so she first published her autobiographical novel of about female and about how she explore her own identity by her writings. *Saguna* is the first autobiographical novel which was published in 1895, that written in English by an Indian woman.

**Theoretical Framework****Krupabai as a Pioneered women feminist in India**

Krupabai Sathianadhan is today recognized widely as a pioneering Indian writer in English, the first Indian woman

author of an autobiographical novel in English. Simultaneously, an account of the experience of conversion and a coming-of-age story of a vivacious young woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, her novel *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* received much appreciation in the 1880s and 1890s. Along with the Toru Dutt, she is now recognized as a pioneer woman author of Indian writing in English, celebrated for her style as well as the content of her novels which opens up the world of women's struggles and inner lives in 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

In Krupabai Sathianadhan's autobiographical novel *Saguna* the exploration of the female identity is a central theme. Through the protagonist, *Saguna*, Sathianadhan challenges societal norms and expectations placed upon women in 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

### 1. Breaking Gender Stereotypes

*Saguna* defies traditional gender roles by pursuing education and intellectual pursuits. She is a voracious reader and a talented writer, challenging the notion that women should be confined to domestic duties.

### 2. Asserting Independence

*Saguna's* journey to England for higher education demonstrates her independence and determination to shape her own destiny. She breaks free from the constraints of her traditional upbringing and embarks on the path of self-discovery.

### 3. Questioning Societal Norms

*Saguna's* experiences in England expose her to different social norms and values. She begins to question the patriarchal structures and injustices prevalent in Indian society, particularly the oppression of women.

### 4. Exploring Female Sexuality

*Saguna's* relationship with her husband, Govind, is complex and unconventional. She asserts her right to sexual pleasure and fulfillment, challenging the idea that women should be passive and submissive in sexual relationships.

### 5. Balancing Tradition and Modernity

*Saguna's* character embodies the tension between tradition and modernity. She embraces certain aspects of her cultural heritage while also advocating for progress social change. She seeks to find balance between tradition and modernity, creating a new identity for herself.

### 6. Voice For Women's Rights

Through *Saguna's* experiences and reflections, Sathianadhan amplifies the voices of women and advocates for their rights. She highlights the importance of education, equality, and self-determination for women.

### Conclusion

The article paper concludes as "*Saguna*" is a groundbreaking novel that offers a nuanced exploration of the female identity in a patriarchal society. Sathianadhan's portrayal of *Saguna* as a strong, independent, and multifaceted character challenges traditional notions of femininity and paves the way for a more progressive understanding of women's roles in society.

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