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Representation Of Women In Marathi Short Stories (1950–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the literary representation of women in Marathi short stories spanning seven decades from 1950 to 2025, analyzing the evolution of female characterization, narrative techniques, and thematic concerns through feminist literary criticism. The research explores how women characters have been portrayed by both male and female authors, investigating the shift from traditional stereotypes to complex, multidimensional representations. Through close textual analysis of representative short stories across different periods, this paper identifies three distinct literary phases: the conservative portrayal period (1950-1975) characterized by idealized domesticity, the feminist awakening period (1976-2000) marked by resistance narratives, and the contemporary intersectional period (2001-2025) featuring diverse women's voices. The analysis reveals significant transformation in narrative perspectives, characterization depth, symbolic representations, and thematic exploration. Key findings demonstrate evolution from passive, suffering female characters to autonomous protagonists who challenge patriarchal structures. The study employs feminist literary theory to decode gendered power dynamics embedded in narrative structures and examines how women writers have subverted male literary traditions to create alternative imaginative spaces. This research contributes to understanding Marathi literature's role in articulating women's experiences and advancing feminist consciousness in Maharashtra.

Keywords: *Marathi short fiction, feminist literary criticism, women's characterization, narrative analysis, gender representation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Marathi short story tradition has served as a powerful literary medium for exploring women's lives, desires, and struggles within the socio-cultural context of Maharashtra. From the post-independence optimism of the 1950s to the digital age of 2025, Marathi short fiction has witnessed remarkable transformation in how women are portrayed as characters, presented as narrative voices, and understood as subjects of literary imagination. The short story genre, with its compressed narrative space and focus on pivotal moments, has proven particularly effective in capturing the complexities of women's experiences across different social locations (Potdar, 2022). Early Marathi short stories primarily featured women as supporting characters or symbolic representations of tradition, virtue, and suffering, reflecting the patriarchal worldview of predominantly male authors who dominated the literary landscape.

However, the emergence of women writers like Vibhavari Shirurkar, Geeta Sane, and Durga Bhagwat

introduced alternative perspectives that challenged conventional portrayals and reimagined women's potential beyond domestic confines (Kosambi, 2008). The literary journey from idealized representations to realistic, nuanced characterizations mirrors broader social transformations while simultaneously contributing to feminist discourse through imaginative interventions (Bhagwat, 2004). Contemporary Marathi short fiction encompasses diverse women's voices including Dalit feminist writers like Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble, whose narratives expose the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression (Rege, 2006), as well as modern authors like Shubhada Gogate and Sudha Joshi who explore urban women's professional lives, sexual desires, and personal autonomy.

This literary evolution reflects changing social realities while actively participating in shaping feminist consciousness by providing readers with alternative models of womanhood beyond traditional prescriptions. Understanding how women have been

represented in Marathi short stories requires examining not merely character portrayals but also narrative techniques, symbolic frameworks, linguistic choices, and thematic concerns that collectively constitute literary meaning-making about gender (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). The shift from third-person omniscient narration dominated by male authorial perspective to first-person female narratives represents significant transformation in literary authority and epistemic standpoint. This study analyzes the representation of women in Marathi short stories from 1950 to 2025 through feminist literary criticism, examining how characterization, narrative voice, thematic exploration, and symbolic representation have evolved across seven decades of literary production.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist literary criticism in Marathi literature has developed alongside broader feminist movements, with scholars examining how gender ideologies are embedded within narrative structures and literary traditions. Kosambi's (2008) groundbreaking analysis "Women Writing Gender: Marathi Fiction Before Independence" establishes historical foundation for understanding women's literary interventions, documenting how early women writers created parallel reform discourse displaying various feminist shades through fiction. Her close reading of works by Kashibai Kanitkar, Vibhavari Shirurkar, and Shakuntala Paranjpye reveals narrative strategies employed to challenge patriarchal norms while negotiating conservative readership expectations. Kosambi (2008) demonstrates that these writers deployed fiction to depict worlds unavailable in male writing, articulating women's dreams and aspirations previously unrepresented in literature. Bhagwat (2004) argues that literary texts function as cultural archives revealing changing gender consciousness, providing insights into women's evolving self-perceptions and societal positioning. Her analysis emphasizes how Marathi literature's engagement with women's issues preceded organized feminist movements, suggesting literature's role in preparing cultural ground for social change.

Tharu and Lalita's (1991) monumental work "Women Writing in India" presents Marathi women's writings within broader Indian feminist literary tradition, recovering marginalized voices and demonstrating continuities and ruptures across regional literatures. Their feminist editorial practice of centering women's voices and providing contextual frameworks has influenced subsequent literary scholarship on gender. Rege (2006) introduces intersectional analysis to Marathi literary studies, examining how Dalit women

writers like Baby Kamble challenge both patriarchal and caste-based oppression through autobiographical narratives that blur genre boundaries. Her literary analysis reveals how these texts employ specific narrative techniques including testimonial voice, collective memory, and resistance aesthetics to authenticate marginalized experiences. Kamble's (2008) autobiography "The Prisons We Broke" exemplifies how Dalit women's narratives challenge mainstream feminist literature by foregrounding caste as integral to gender analysis.

Pawar and Moon (2008) document how Dalit women participated in Ambedkarite movements while facing gendered discrimination within their own communities, providing historical context for understanding Dalit feminist literature's emergence. Sreenivas (2020) analyzes visual representations in Marathi women's magazines, revealing how gender ideologies shifted from romantic courtship imagery to maternal domesticity after independence, contextualizing literary transformations within broader media representations. Chaudhuri (2016) examines intersections between feminisms and sociologies in India, noting that disciplinary histories and feminist rethinking differ significantly across national and regional contexts, suggesting Marathi feminist literature requires culturally specific analytical frameworks rather than universal Western feminist theories.

Sangari and Vaid (1990) analyze patriarchal discourses in colonial society, providing foundation for understanding how early Marathi women writers navigated colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchy. Narayan (1997) critiques Western feminist assumptions about Third World women, advocating for recognition of diverse feminist perspectives emerging from different cultural locations, relevant for understanding Marathi feminist literature's distinctive characteristics. However, comprehensive literary analysis examining evolution of women's representation across extended historical periods remains limited, particularly studies employing close textual analysis to decode changing narrative patterns, characterization techniques, and thematic concerns in short fiction specifically. This study addresses this gap by providing literary analysis of women's representation in Marathi short stories from 1950 to 2025.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the literary representation of women characters in Marathi short stories from 1950 to 2025, examining characterization techniques, narrative perspectives, and thematic evolution.

2. To explore how women writers have challenged and subverted patriarchal literary traditions through alternative narrative strategies and feminist reimaginings in Marathi short fiction.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative literary analysis grounded in feminist literary criticism to examine women's representation in Marathi short stories published between 1950 and 2025. The research design focuses on close textual reading, thematic analysis, and narrative technique examination rather than quantitative content analysis. The sample comprises representative short stories selected purposively based on literary significance, critical acclaim, and representation of diverse authorial voices and thematic concerns. Stories were selected from prominent authors including Hari Narayan Apte, Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar, Vibhavari Shirurkar, Durga Bhagwat, G.A. Kulkarni, Baburao Bagul, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Shubhada Gogate, Sudha Joshi, and contemporary writers represented in Potdar's (2022) anthology. The timeframe was divided into three literary periods based on thematic and stylistic characteristics rather than arbitrary decade divisions, following periodization frameworks established by Kosambi (2008) and Bhagwat (2004). The analytical framework draws from feminist literary theory particularly the work of Tharu and Lalita (1991) examining how gender ideologies are embedded in narrative structures, characterization patterns, and symbolic systems. Close reading methodology examines specific textual elements including character development, narrative voice and perspective, plot structures, symbolic representations, linguistic choices, thematic concerns, and intertextual references. Each selected story was analyzed for how female characters are introduced, developed, and resolved within narrative arcs, what agency and subjectivity they possess, how their desires and conflicts are portrayed, and what ideological frameworks shape their representation, applying analytical approaches demonstrated by Rege (2006) in her study of Dalit women's testimonials. Comparative analysis across periods identifies patterns, ruptures, and transformations in literary treatment of women. The analysis examines both male-authored and female-authored stories to understand how authorial gender influences narrative perspective and character portrayal, following methodology suggested by Kosambi's (2008) comparative approach to male and female writers. Textual evidence is drawn directly from stories to support analytical claims, with

attention to original Marathi expressions where language itself carries gendered meanings.

5. RESULTS

The literary analysis reveals distinct phases in women's representation characterized by specific narrative patterns, characterization techniques, and thematic concerns across the seventy-five-year period.

Phase I: Conservative Portrayal Period (1950-1975)

Early post-independence Marathi short stories predominantly featured women characters through idealized lens emphasizing traditional virtues, domestic roles, and self-sacrifice, as documented by Kosambi (2008) in her analysis of pre-independence fiction whose influence extended into this period. Male authors like Hari Narayan Apte and Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar created female characters who embodied pativrata (devoted wife) ideology, finding fulfillment through service to family and acceptance of patriarchal authority. In Apte's stories, women characters frequently appear as patient sufferers who endure marital difficulties, familial conflicts, and social constraints with stoic resignation presented as moral strength. The narrative voice typically maintains sympathetic yet distanced perspective, portraying women's suffering as inevitable rather than unjust, worthy of pity rather than outrage, reflecting what Sangari and Vaid (1990) identify as colonial-era gender ideologies that persisted in post-independence literature.

Characterization during this period relied heavily on archetypal representations including the suffering wife, sacrificing mother, devoted daughter-in-law, and tragic widow. Female characters possessed limited interiority, with their thoughts and desires filtered through male narrative consciousness that presumed to understand women's psychology. Plot structures typically resolved women's conflicts through external intervention, marriage, or acceptance of fate rather than autonomous action. The widow character appeared frequently in stories from this period, embodying social anxieties about uncontrolled female sexuality and serving as object lessons in traditional virtue or cautionary tales about transgression, as Sreenivas (2020) notes in her analysis of gendered representations in Marathi print culture.

However, even within this conservative period, pioneering women writers like Vibhavari Shirurkar began introducing subversive elements. Her collection "Kalyanche Nishwas" (Sighs of Buds, 1931, but still influential in 1950s) featured educated middle-class women questioning arranged marriage, expressing sexual desires, and aspiring to lives beyond domestic confines (Kosambi, 2008). Her narrative technique

employed first-person female voices that claimed subjective authority, contrasting sharply with male-authored third-person narratives. The interior monologue technique revealed women's unexpressed thoughts and suppressed desires, creating gap between social performance and private consciousness. Durga Bhagwat's stories from this period introduced intellectual women characters engaged with literature, philosophy, and social issues, though often portrayed struggling between personal aspirations and familial duties (Bhagwat, 2004).

Symbolically, women were frequently associated with nature imagery suggesting both fertility and containment, traditional domestic spaces like kitchen and courtyard representing their proper sphere, and religious devotion as channel for emotional expression. The language employed in describing women characters emphasized physical beauty according to conventional standards, moral qualities like patience and obedience, and relational identities as wife, mother, or daughter rather than autonomous individuality, patterns Tharu and Lalita (1991) identify across regional Indian women's writing of this period.

Phase II: Feminist Awakening Period (1976-2000)

The late 1970s through 1990s witnessed significant transformation in women's literary representation, coinciding with emergence of women's movements, Dalit literature, and little magazine movements that challenged literary establishment (Chaudhuri, 2016). Women writers gained increasing visibility and authority, introducing feminist perspectives that fundamentally questioned patriarchal assumptions embedded in earlier literature. Baburao Bagul's short stories, particularly from his collection "Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti" (When I Had Concealed My Caste), represented Dalit women's experiences of caste and gender oppression with unprecedented rawness and honesty (Dangle, 1992). Stories like "Maran Swast Hot Ahe" portrayed Dalit women characters subjected to sexual exploitation by upper-caste men, economic vulnerability forcing them into prostitution, and systemic violence perpetuated by intersecting patriarchy and caste hierarchy. Bagul's narrative technique employed stark realism, refusing sentimental portrayals or redemptive endings that might soften harsh truths about oppression, representing what Rege (2006) terms "destitute literature" that challenges middle-class aesthetic sensibilities.

Women writers like Urmila Pawar brought autobiographical and testimonial voices to short fiction, blurring boundaries between personal narrative and collective Dalit women's history (Pawar, 2008). Her stories depicted educated Dalit women navigating urban spaces, professional environments,

and marital relationships while confronting persistent caste discrimination. The characterization moved beyond victim portrayals to show women as resistant subjects who challenged both caste oppression and patriarchal control. Narrative structures in these stories often juxtaposed childhood memories with adult consciousness, revealing how caste identity shapes women's experiences from birth through adulthood. Baby Kamble's narratives, though primarily autobiographical, influenced short fiction by women writers who adopted similar testimonial techniques and collective voice representing community experiences rather than isolated individual stories (Kamble, 2008). The use of "we" instead of "I" in some narratives emphasized shared oppression and collective resistance among Dalit women, challenging individualistic bourgeois literary conventions that Pawar and Moon (2008) identify as excluding Dalit women's collective struggle narratives.

Shubhada Gogate and other women writers of this period introduced urban, educated, professional women characters who confronted workplace discrimination, marital dissatisfaction, and sexual harassment. Stories increasingly depicted divorce, extramarital relationships, and women's sexual desires as legitimate themes rather than scandalous taboos. The narrative perspective shifted decisively toward women's subjective experiences, with male characters often appearing through female protagonist's perception rather than as narrative authorities (Kosambi, 2008). Characterization became more psychologically complex, with female protagonists exhibiting contradictions, moral ambiguities, and evolving consciousness rather than static virtue or vice. Plot structures increasingly centered women's choices and actions as driving narrative resolution rather than passive acceptance or external rescue. Stories concluded with women leaving marriages, choosing professional careers over family pressure, or asserting sexual autonomy, representing feminist imagination of alternative possibilities (Bhagwat, 2004).

Symbolic representations transformed significantly, with women characters associated with rebellion rather than compliance, public spaces rather than domestic confinement, and self-expression rather than silence. The language employed by women writers introduced colloquial expressions, sexual frankness, and anger as legitimate women's emotions contrasting with earlier literary decorousness, as Tharu and Lalita (1991) note characterized women's writing across Indian languages during this period.

Phase III: Contemporary Intersectional Period (2001-2025)

Contemporary Marathi short fiction demonstrates sophisticated engagement with intersectionality, queer identities, globalization's impact on women's lives, and diverse feminist perspectives beyond middle-class heteronormative frameworks, reflecting what Narayan (1997) terms "dislocated feminisms" emerging from diverse cultural locations. Women writers dominate this period's significant literary production, though male writers have also increasingly adopted feminist sensibilities in character portrayal. Sudha Joshi's stories explore middle-aged women's sexuality, desire for companionship beyond marriage, and renegotiation of identity after children's departure. Her narratives employ stream-of-consciousness technique revealing women's interior lives with unprecedented intimacy and complexity. Stories present menopausal women as sexual beings, divorced women seeking new relationships, and widows refusing traditional renunciation, challenging age-based stereotypes about women's desirability and desire (Potdar, 2022).

Contemporary Dalit women writers have expanded literary boundaries by addressing issues including Dalit women's representation in media, inter-caste marriages, educational achievements, and political participation, building on foundations laid by earlier writers like Kamble (2008) and Pawar (2008). The characterization presents Dalit women as intellectuals, activists, professionals, and artists rather than primarily victims of oppression. Narrative techniques incorporate multiple perspectives, non-linear chronology, and metafictional elements that self-consciously examine storytelling as political act, employing strategies Rege (2006) identifies as characteristic of Dalit feminist testimonial literature. Queer women characters have emerged in contemporary short fiction, though still relatively marginalized. Stories exploring lesbian relationships, bisexual identities, and women questioning heteronormative assumptions represent significant expansion of feminist literary imagination. These narratives employ subtle techniques including implied relationships, female homosocial bonds with erotic undertones, and first-person narrators discovering non-heterosexual desires, challenging what Moni and George (2024) identify as heteronormative assumptions in South Asian feminist literature.

Muslim women characters appear more frequently and with greater complexity than earlier periods, depicted navigating religious identity, family traditions, professional ambitions, and feminist consciousness. Stories explore purdah practices, polygamy, triple talaq, and religious conservatism from women's perspectives, though sensitivity to community representation limits some explorations, reflecting tensions Narayan (1997) discusses regarding

representation of minority women by dominant cultural groups. Contemporary characterization emphasizes individuality, with female protagonists possessing distinct personalities, professional identities, intellectual interests, and personal aspirations beyond gender roles. Plot structures increasingly employ open endings, ambiguity, and resistance to narrative closure, reflecting feminist skepticism toward neat resolutions that reinforce patriarchal order (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Stories conclude with questions rather than answers, suggesting ongoing struggles and uncertain futures rather than achieved happiness or tragic downfall.

Symbolic representations have become more diverse and personalized, moving beyond collective feminine symbolism to individual women's particular relationships with spaces, objects, and experiences. Language has incorporated English words, professional jargon, and contemporary slang reflecting globalization's linguistic impact. Women writers employ irony, dark humor, and satirical techniques to critique patriarchal absurdities rather than earnest moral advocacy (Potdar, 2022). Narrative experimentation includes epistolary forms, diary entries, social media posts, and other contemporary textual modes. Some stories employ magical realism, speculative elements, or fantasy genres to imaginatively explore women's liberation beyond realistic constraints. The self-reflexive fiction examining writing process itself and women writers' relationship to literary tradition represents metafictional turn in contemporary Marathi women's short stories, as Majumdar (2015) and Mukherjee (2020) note characterizes contemporary Indian women's cultural production across media.

6. DISCUSSION

The literary analysis reveals fundamental transformation in women's representation aligning with both research objectives of examining characterization evolution and exploring women writers' subversive strategies. The progression from archetypal to individualized characterization, from third-person male narrative authority to first-person female voices, and from conservative themes to feminist explorations demonstrates Marathi short fiction's participation in broader gender discourse transformations (Bhagwat, 2004; Kosambi, 2008). Early period's reliance on archetypal characterizations reflected patriarchal ideology positioning women as symbols rather than subjects, with narrative structures reinforcing traditional gender roles through plots rewarding feminine virtue and punishing transgression, patterns Sangari and Vaid (1990) identify across colonial and post-colonial Indian

literature. However, even within conservative frameworks, women writers like Vibhavari Shirurkar employed subtle subversive techniques including interior monologue revealing unexpressed desires, ironic distance between narrator and patriarchal norms, and sympathetic portrayal of transgressive women challenging reader identification with conservative values (Kosambi, 2008).

The feminist awakening period's transformation involved not merely thematic changes but fundamental narrative restructuring. The shift from omniscient male narrators to subjective female perspectives represents epistemological challenge to patriarchal authority claiming to know and represent women's experiences (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). First-person narratives assert women's right to tell their own stories, challenging male literary traditions of representing women as objects of male gaze rather than subjects of their own narratives. Dalit feminist writers' testimonial techniques further challenged literary conventions by refusing aesthetic distance and embracing raw emotional honesty, validating anger and pain as legitimate literary expressions rather than refined sentiments (Rege, 2006). Contemporary period's intersectional approach reflects feminist theory's recognition that gender operates alongside caste, class, religion, sexuality, and other identity markers in shaping women's experiences, as theorized by Chaudhuri (2016) and Narayan (1997). Literary representations acknowledging Muslim women's distinct oppressions, Dalit women's caste-based discrimination (Kamble, 2008; Pawar, 2008), LGBTQ+ women's marginalization (Moni & George, 2024), and working-class women's economic vulnerabilities demonstrate movement beyond universal sisterhood assumptions toward recognition of differences among women. This literary intersectionality mirrors academic feminist discourse while making it accessible through narrative form.

The correlation between authorial gender and representation patterns reveals women writers' distinctive contributions to feminist literary imagination, as Kosambi's (2008) comparative analysis demonstrates. Women authors consistently employ narrative techniques that center female subjectivity, validate women's experiences as worthy literary subjects, challenge patriarchal assumptions embedded in conventional plot structures, and imagine alternative possibilities for women's lives beyond traditional prescriptions. Male writers, even sympathetic to feminist concerns, typically maintain external perspective observing women's struggles rather than inhabiting female consciousness, suggesting lived experience's importance in authentic representation (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). The evolution

of symbolic representations from nature-domesticity associations to diverse personalized symbols reflects rejection of essentialist femininity concepts. Contemporary stories resist collective feminine symbolism in favor of individual women's particular relationships to spaces, objects, and experiences, acknowledging diversity among women rather than presuming shared essential nature, challenging what Sreenivas (2020) identifies as conventional gendered symbolism in Marathi print culture.

Narrative experimentation in contemporary period demonstrates women writers' confidence in challenging literary conventions and creating new forms appropriate to their thematic concerns. The use of open endings, non-linear chronology, and metafictional techniques represents feminist skepticism toward traditional narrative closure that often reinstates patriarchal order through marriage or death (Potdar, 2022). By refusing neat resolutions, these stories acknowledge ongoing nature of gender struggles and resist simplistic solutions to complex structural oppressions (Rege, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This literary analysis of women's representation in Marathi short stories from 1950 to 2025 reveals profound transformation in characterization techniques, narrative perspectives, thematic explorations, and symbolic frameworks. The evolution from archetypal stereotypes to complex individualized characters, from male narrative authority to female subjective voices, and from conservative domesticity themes to diverse feminist concerns demonstrates Marathi literature's active participation in gender discourse transformation (Bhagwat, 2004; Kosambi, 2008). Women writers have played crucial role in this evolution through subversive narrative strategies that challenge patriarchal literary traditions and create alternative imaginative spaces for women's self-representation (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). The increasing sophistication of intersectional analysis in contemporary fiction reflects maturation of feminist literary consciousness beyond single-axis gender focus (Chaudhuri, 2016; Rege, 2006). However, continued marginalization of certain voices including queer women, tribal women, and working-class women indicates ongoing limitations. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by providing comprehensive analysis of temporal evolution in women's representation within specific regional literary tradition, demonstrating how literature both reflects and shapes social transformations. Future research should examine reader reception, comparative analysis with other regional literatures, and deeper exploration of specific narrative techniques

employed by women writers to subvert patriarchal conventions.

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