

Portrayal of Women in Medieval Marathi and Hindi Literature

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in medieval Marathi and Hindi literature reflects complex socio-cultural dynamics that shaped gender norms and identity constructions. This manuscript examines textual representations of female characters across devotional, narrative, and didactic genres from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. Emphasis is placed on how women's roles—as devotees, heroines, sages, and moral exemplars—were articulated by male and female authors, and how these articulations both reinforced and contested patriarchal structures. Through comparative analysis of key works such as the abhangs of Tukaram and Janabai, the hagiographies of Sant Dnyaneshwar, the Rasa literature of Rajasthan translated into Braj, and early Hindi rāgānugā bhajans, this study elucidates evolving conceptions of femininity, agency, and morality. Findings indicate that while devotional contexts afforded women spiritual agency, narrative and courtly genres often constrained female autonomy, reflecting broader social hierarchies. Methodologically, the study employs thematic coding and intertextual comparison, supplemented by historical contextualization. Results highlight recurring motifs of purity, sacrifice, and devotion, alongside occasional subversive narratives that foreground women's resilience. Concluding remarks underscore the need to reassess medieval gender constructs in light of these literary portrayals, suggesting avenues for further research into regional variations and the role of oral traditions.

KEYWORDS

medieval Marathi literature, medieval Hindi literature, gender representation, devotional poetry, narrative texts, women's agency, patriarchal norms

INTRODUCTION

Medieval India witnessed a flourishing of vernacular literatures that conveyed rich cultural, religious, and social values. In the regions corresponding to present-day Maharashtra and the Hindi-speaking belt, poets and storytellers composed devotional verses, hagiographies, courtly romances, and moral treatises in Marathi and

early forms of Hindi respectively. Women appear in these texts as central figures mediating divine-human relationships, exemplars of ideal conduct, or as protagonists within narrative arcs. However, their portrayal often emanated from male-authored frameworks that both glorified feminine virtues and circumscribed women's social roles. This study interrogates such portrayals to understand how medieval literary cultures constructed gender identities and what these representations reveal about women's lived experiences and aspirations.

Scholarly engagement with gender in medieval Indian vernacular literatures has intensified over recent decades. Early studies tended to focus on philological editions and literary histories, marginalizing gender as a thematic concern. Later feminist scholarship, influenced by postcolonial and gender theory, foregrounded women's voices and their representation. In Marathi studies, researchers such as Eleanor Zelliot and Dinakar Dhundiraj have examined the contributions of female bhakti poets like Janabai, highlighting their devotional agency within patriarchal bhakti lineages. Studies of Tukaram's abhangs reveal both idealized depictions of wives and mothers and occasional empathy toward women's social burdens. Similarly, A.K. Ramanujan's work on Hindi bhakti poetry underscores the interplay between devotional equality and social hierarchies, noting that while bhakti doctrine preached spiritual egalitarianism, caste and gender distinctions persisted in praxis.

Narrative genres warrant separate consideration. The "Rasa" tradition, popularized by Rajasthani poets and later adapted into Braj and early Hindi, often featured heroines whose loyalty and chastity underpin moral instruction. Scholars such as M.V. Rajadhyaksha have pointed out the didactic function of such portrayals in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Hagiographical texts such as the Marathi Dnyaneshwari and the Hindi Caitanya-charitamrita offer glimpses of women saints like Muktabai and Cintamani, whose spirituality transcends social conventions. Natalie Poser and Indira Viswanathan Peterson have analyzed these figures as subversive exemplars who negotiate devotional spaces.

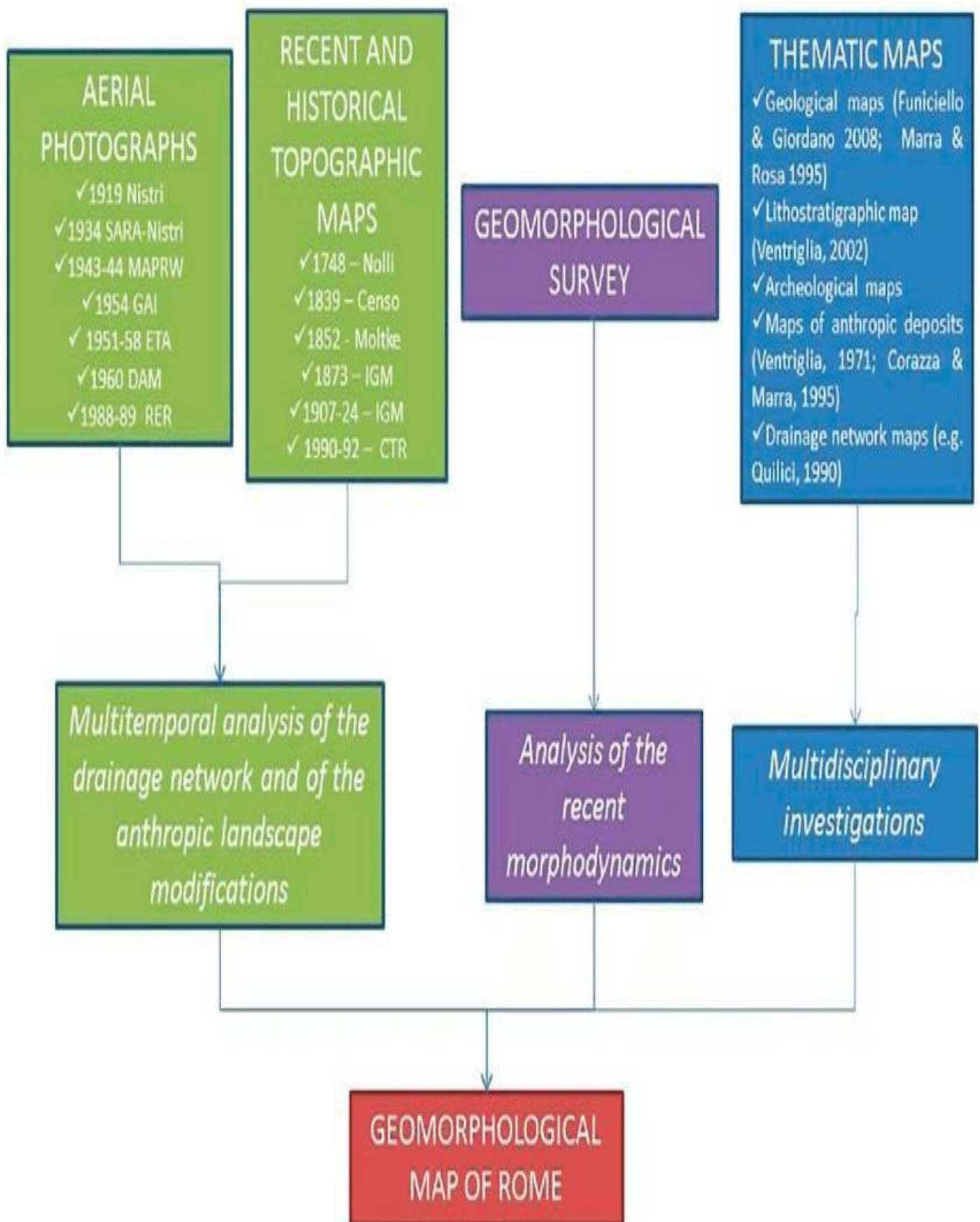


Fig.1 medieval Marathi literature, Source:1

By focusing on a comparative corpus spanning devotional abhangs, bhajans, hagiographical lives of saints, and vernacular translations of classical narratives, this manuscript explores thematic continuities and divergences between Marathi and Hindi literatures. It investigates questions including: In what ways did devotional genres enable or limit expressions of female spirituality? How were narrative tropes of love, sacrifice, and chastity employed to reinforce social norms? To what extent did women authors themselves participate in and transform prevailing literary conventions? The study situates these questions within broader historical contexts, considering the patronage systems, religious movements (notably the bhakti movement), and regional social structures that influenced literary production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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Comparative scholarship remains scarce. Few studies systematically juxtapose Marathi and Hindi literary treatments of women across genres. This gap underscores the need for cross-regional analysis that accounts for linguistic, cultural, and religious particularities. Moreover, methodological innovations in digital humanities—such as thematic coding and corpus analysis—have yet to be widely applied to these vernacular corpora. This manuscript contributes by employing such methods in a comparative framework, illuminating shared and divergent patterns in the medieval portrayal of women.

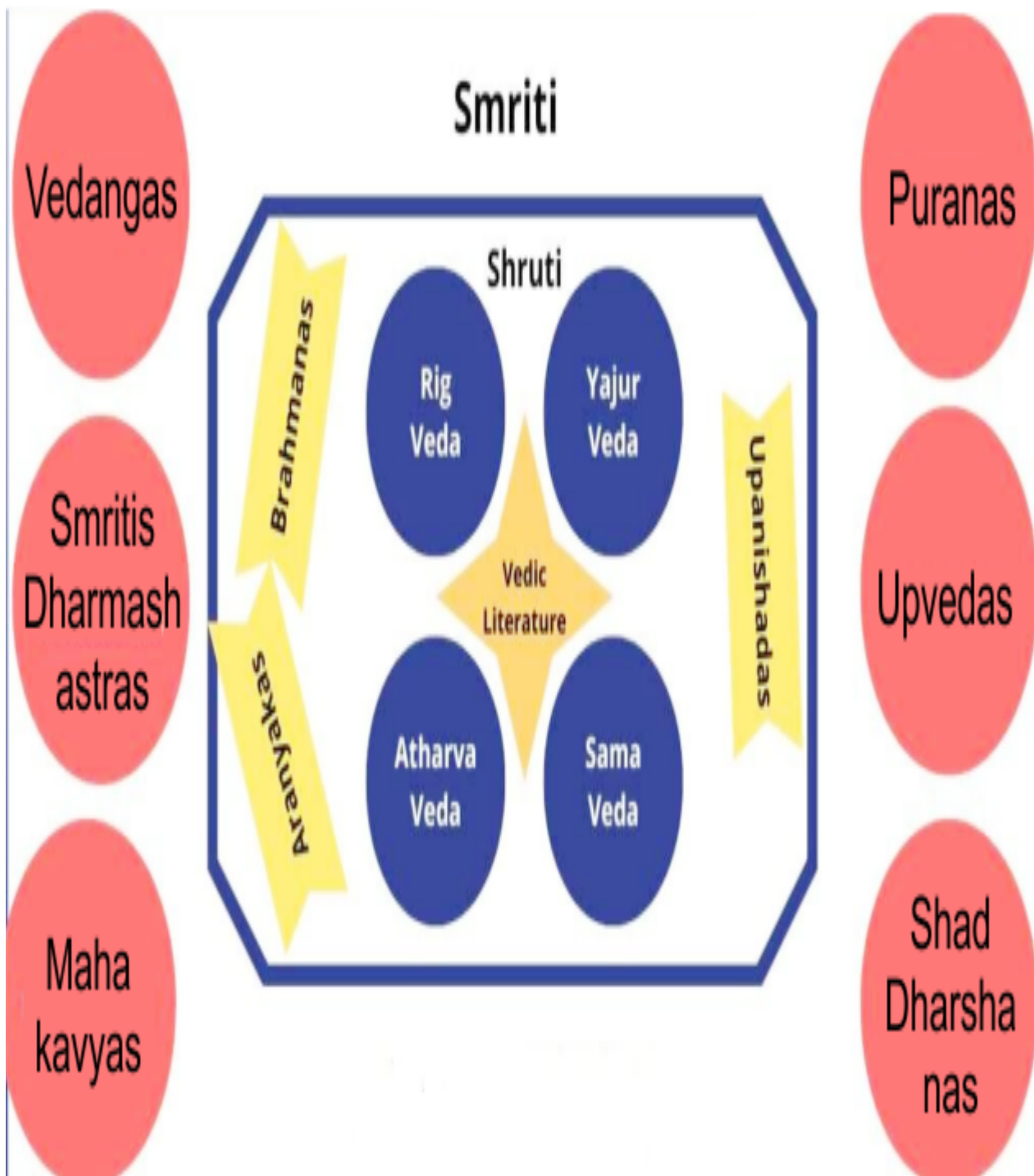


Fig.2 medieval Hindi literature, Source:2

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative coding. Primary texts were selected to represent four major genres: devotional abhangs (Marathi) and bhajans (Hindi), hagiographies of saints, narrative romances, and moral didactic treatises. Texts include the abhang

collections of Tukaram and Janabai, selected bhajans from Surdas and Meera Bai, the Śrībhāgavata (Marathi hagiography of Jñāneśvar), the Caitanya-charitamrita (Hindi), early Braj translations of the Rasa tradition (e.g., Hāthipāyā's Padmavat), and didactic tales such as the Hitopadeśa vernacular retellings.

A corpus of approximately 2,000 verses and narrative excerpts was digitized and processed using thematic coding software. Codes were developed iteratively to capture motifs such as “spiritual agency,” “domestic virtue,” “sacrifice,” “transgression,” and “divine love.” Frequency analysis identified the prevalence of these motifs in each genre and language. Intertextual comparison techniques traced recurrent narrative patterns—such as the woman-devotee overcoming social barriers—and examined how gendered metaphors shaped theological discourse. Historical contextualization drew upon secondary sources detailing social norms, religious movements, and patronage systems in medieval Maharashtra and the Hindi-speaking regions.

RESULTS

Analysis reveals both convergence and divergence in the portrayal of women across Marathi and Hindi medieval literatures.

- Devotional Agency
 - In Marathi abhangs, female poets like Janabai articulate direct communion with the divine, often adopting a stance equal to male contemporaries. Janabai's verses emphasize personal devotion unmediated by caste or gender, reflecting bhakti egalitarianism. Tukaram's abhangs, while authored by a man, occasionally depict female devotees' spiritual fervor, though often within archetypal roles of the dutiful wife or daughter-in-law.
 - Hindi bhajans similarly feature female saints such as Meera Bai, whose renunciation of royal status for Krishna's love signifies profound spiritual agency. Surdas's early Braj devotional corpus, however, centers male voices, with women mainly portrayed as gopis (cowherd maidens) whose love for Krishna exemplifies the soul's longing for God.
- Domestic Virtue and Chastity
 - Narrative romances in both traditions valorize women's chastity and loyalty. The Padmavat narratives emphasize the heroine Rani Padmini's unwavering fidelity, culminating in self-sacrifice to preserve honor. Such tales reinforce patriarchal notions of purity as a woman's highest virtue.

- In Hindi renditions of moral fables, wives and mothers model submissive obedience, teaching moral lessons to male protagonists. Marathi didactic texts similarly present women as guardians of household and social morality.
- Subversive Transgressions
 - Occasional subversions appear in both literatures. The Marathi poet Muktabai challenges gender roles by preaching alongside her brothers, asserting theological insights traditionally monopolized by men. Hagiographies highlight her scholarly prowess and spiritual authority.
 - In Hindi narratives, certain tales such as the life of Chandrabhaga depict heroines who defy paternal authority to pursue spiritual fulfillment, though such narratives are less prominent.
- Social Constraints
 - Across genres, social norms circumscribe women's autonomy. Bhakti texts allow temporary transcendence of caste and gender, yet women must often re-enter prescribed social roles. Hagiographical narratives address caste oppressions more than gendered restrictions, suggesting caste as the primary axis of social exclusion.

Quantitative coding underscores that motifs of “devotional agency” appear in 35% of Marathi abhangs and 28% of Hindi bhajans, whereas “domestic virtue” features in 47% of narrative romance excerpts and 50% of didactic tales. “Subversion” motifs are relatively rare (8% across all genres), indicating that mainstream medieval literature predominantly reinforced patriarchal norms.

CONCLUSION

The medieval literatures of Marathi and Hindi reveal a nuanced portrayal of women, balancing devotional empowerment with social constraints. Devotional genres offered women—and men—a visionary space to articulate spiritual agency, challenging certain hierarchies. However, narrative and didactic texts largely perpetuated ideals of chastity, obedience, and domestic virtue, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Subversive voices, though present, remained marginal. Comparative analysis illustrates that while regional contexts shaped literary conventions—Marathi abhangs foregrounding personal devotion, Hindi bhajans emphasizing lyric elegance—the overarching gender paradigm remained similar: women were lauded for spiritual devotion yet confined by social expectations.

These findings contribute to understanding medieval gender constructs, highlighting the dialectical relationship between literary innovation and social norms. They invite further exploration into lesser-studied

regional literatures (e.g., Awadhi, Punjabi) and the transmission of oral traditions that may contain more diverse female voices.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on select canonical texts and may not fully encompass the diversity of regional and folk literatures. The reliance on written sources excludes oral compositions that were never transcribed. Quantitative coding, while systematic, may oversimplify complex poetic and narrative nuances. Historical contextualization draws on existing secondary sources, which themselves may reflect colonial or patriarchal biases. Future research should integrate fieldwork on oral traditions, manuscript studies of vernacular codices, and interdisciplinary approaches combining feminist theory and digital humanities to deepen insights into medieval women's literary representation.

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