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INDEX

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
1	A Comparative Study On Load Balancing Algorithms And Its Types **Methily Johri & Aditri Ashish**	1–10
2	Optimizing Supply Chain Management with Ethereum 2.0: Innovations in Blockchain Technology **Ayush Gupta & Dr. Ambuj Kumar Agarwal**	11–17
3	Smart Surveillance: "A Real-Time Crowd Analysis System for Density and Anomaly Detection" **Komal Sharma, Dr. Pankaj Kumar Varshney, Aditi Aggarwal & Gaurav Kumar**	17–22
4	AI-Driven Network Optimization: Matching Policyholders to Cost-Effective Providers Using Business Intelligence **Ruchi Mangharamani & Prof. (Dr) Sangeet Vashishtha**	23–29
5	The Future of UX: Designing for Emerging Technologies (AI, AR, VR, Voice UI) **Ojas Gupta & Prof.(Dr.) Arpit Jain**	30–37
6	Enhancing Liquidity Stress Testing: Best Practices for Modern Banking Risks **Padmini Bulani & Dr Abhishek Jain**	38–45
7	AI-Powered Investment Strategies: Optimizing Risk and Returns in Modern Banking **Aditya Mehra & Dr. Shakeb Khan**	46–53
8	Scaling Customer Journey Optimization in a Multi-Tenant Distributed System **Sumit Kumar Agrawal & Prof. (Dr) MSR Prasad**	54–61
9	Object Detection Using Convolutional Neural Networks: Advances, Techniques, and Applications	62–69

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
	Bharath Thandalam Rajasekaran, Saravanan Thirumazhisai Prabhagaran & Prof. (Dr) Punit Goel	
10	AI-Augmented Intrusion Detection Systems for High-Speed Optical Networks **Sattvik Sharma & Prof.(Dr) Avneesh Kumar**	70–77
11	Generative AI in Data Security: Opportunities and Challenges **Vybhavreddy Kammireddy Changalreddy, Piyush Bipinkumar Desai & Prof (Dr) Ajay Shriram Kushwaha**	78–86
12	Integrating Salesforce with Cloud-Based Data Warehousing for Unified Analytics **Nidhi Shashikumar & Dr S P Singh**	87–94
13	AI-Powered Cybersecurity: A Unified Approach to Protecting Enterprise, Cloud, and SaaS Applications **Varun Grover, Khushmeet Singh & Er. Siddharth**	95–103
14	Sales and Order Analysis Using Excel-Based Dashboard: A Case Study on Vrinda Store **Mohd Ammar Khan & Harun Faridi**	104–106
15	ChatMania: A Realtime Chat Application **Dr. Kirti Shukla & Anshika**	107–110
16	Digital Surveillance and Domestic Abuse: A Legal Vacuum in Indian Marital Relationships **Vishal Nehra & Dr. Rakesh Kumar**	110–116
17	The Role of Emotional Appeal in Online Advertisements Targeting Working Women in Delhi-NCR **Mona Mishra & Dr. Praveen Mittal**	116–120
18	AI-Driven Data Governance Strategies for Enhanced Cloud Security in Enterprises **Chandana Pandey & Dr Gauri Shanker Kushwaha**	121–123

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
19	Evolution of Social Media Advertising and Consumer Behavior **Mr. Pramod Rana & Prof (Dr) Punit Goel**	124–129
20	Sustainability Accounting Practices in Indian Manufacturing Firms **Mrs. Sonal Jain & Dr. Ajit Singh**	129–134
21	Fundamental Rights vs. Reasonable Restrictions: A Study of Evolving Judicial Balances **Mrs. Anshika Agarwal & Dr. Vijay Kumar Singh**	134–139
22	सतत शिक्षा के लिए हिंदी साहित्य की भूमिका: सतत विकास लक्ष्य-4 (गुणवत्तापूर्ण शिक्षा) का सांस्कृतिक विश्लेषण **श्रीमती रेणु गुप्ता, डॉ. बृजलता शर्मा**	140–144
23	Mind–Gut Synergy in Chronic Lifestyle Conditions: Evaluating Psychotherapy-Driven Behavioral Change and Microbiota-Mediated Metabolic Repair **Krithika. V, Dr. Sarbesh Kumar Singh**	145–151
24	प्राचीन शिक्षा प्रणाली से आधुनिक AI आधारित शिक्षा की ओर संक्रमण **गौरव जोशी, डॉ सारिका गोयल**	152–159
25	पर्वतीय क्षेत्रों में शिक्षा के डिजिटलीकरण की चुनौतियाँ एवं संभावनाएँ **राकेश उनियाल, डॉ. मीनाक्षी हर्राव वर्मा**	160–168
26	Women Leadership and Democratic Participation in India: Challenges and Opportunities in Parliamentary Politics **Renu Yadav, Dr. P.P.S. Rana**	169–176
27	Evaluating GST Effects on Competitiveness and Industrial Development **Aman Goel, Dr. Pooja Yadav**	177–183
28	एस०आर० हरनोट के कथा साहित्य में लोक संस्कृति, पर्यावरण चेतना और सामाजिक परिवर्तन का अध्ययन **सीमा देवी, डॉ० अरविन्द्र कौर चुंबर**	184–189

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
29	Balancing National Security and Human Rights in Modern India **Shalu Jain, Dr. Vijay Kumar**	190–197
30	Economic Performance Drivers and Fiscal Resilience in Indian Airports **Lalit Kumar Sharma, Dr. Pooja Yadav**	198–203
31	Educational Governance and AI Learning Outcomes in Government Elementary Schools **Dr. Shubhra Chaturvedi**	203–210
32	Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teacher Roles in India Classroom **Neeru Verma**	211–220
33	Research Culture Among Undergraduate Students in Indian Universities **Dr. Dhanashri Rajshri Ravindra Jadhav**	221–229
34	डिजिटल समाज में बहुभाषिक संचार का बदलता स्वरूप: भारतीय भाषाओं के समक्ष अवसर और चुनौतियाँ **Rakesh Uniyal**	230–234
35	Graduate Employability and Skill Gaps in State Universities **Narender Panghal**	235–242
36	Political Funding Transparency in Indian Election **Dr. Anand Kumar Dwivedi**	243–252
37	AI-Powered Platforms for Data Analytics and Audience Development **Sachin Sangal**	253–258
38	Engineering Leadership Models in AI Startups: Balancing Innovation and Operational Efficiency **Dr. Kalpesh Rasiklal Rakholia**	259–269
39	Challenges in Integrating CWSN in Regular Classrooms **Anil Kumar**	270–280
40	An Artificial Intelligence-Based Legal Compliance Framework for Real-Time Environmental Governance to Advance SDGs 9, 12, 13, and 16 **Dr. Jyoti Janardhan Reddy**	281–288

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
41	Impact of Source Segregation and Waste Characterization on the Efficiency of Material Recovery Facilities **Varinder Vikram Singh, Dr. Pankaj Kumar Bharti**	289–296
42	Significance of Emotional Intelligence of schedule caste students in relation to Self-concept at secondary level **Mrs. Varsha Asher Wasker, Dr. Kuldeep Singh Tomar**	297–305
43	औपनिवेशिक भारत में स्थानीय बाजारों के सामाजिक परिवर्तन का ऐतिहासिक अध्ययन **Pankaj Tamta**	306–310
44	Teachers' Readiness to Integrate Generative AI into Lesson Planning and Classroom Instruction **Prema Bharti**	311–316
45	Battery Usage Optimization Techniques for AI-Heavy Mobile Apps **Dr. Akankasha Kathuria**	317–321
46	Gender, Technology, and Changing Family Structures in Urban India: A Socio-cultural Analysis **Prof. Sawant Jeetendra Madhukar Usha**	322–326
47	Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution in Contemporary Civil Justice: A Legal Study **Dr. Pooja Khurana**	327–331
48	English Literature and the Representation of Women in Contemporary Fiction: A Corpus-Based Study of Narrative Agency, 2000–2024 **Dr. Abu Farah Hoque**	332–336
49	Agricultural Impact of Biochar and Reduced Fertilizer on Mustard Soil Health and Yield **Dr. Bibhu Santosh Behera**	337–346
50	Ethical and Privacy Frameworks for AI-Driven Customer Data Analytics in Medical Profession **Dr. Gaurav Singh Tomar**	347–351
51	Legal Protection of Witnesses in Criminal Justice Proceedings **Dr. Jyoti Janardhan Reddy**	352–357

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
52	Platform Culture and Fragmented Selfhood in Contemporary English Literature **Dr. Akanksha Singh**	358–362
53	Digital Health Literacy and Health Information Inequality in Rural India: A Multidimensional Assessment **Ranjana Jadaun**	363–368
54	स्मार्ट विनिर्माण और उद्योग 5.0 में कृत्रिम बुद्धिमत्ता, मानव-केंद्रित तकनीक और सतत विकास का अंतःविषयक अध्ययन **Dr. Ghamendra Kumar Sahu**	369–375
55	Contribution of Yoga-Based Breathing Techniques to Daily Stress Management **Dr. Sweta Kumari**	376–387
56	Algorithmic Silence and Unspoken Meaning in Contemporary English Fiction **Dr. Jyoti Devi**	388–396
57	Cost-Benefit Analysis of Custom Image Analysis Tools in Oncology Research **Sumit Malhotra**	397–405
58	उच्च शिक्षा में सूक्ष्म अधिगम तकनीकों का शैक्षिक प्रभाव **Ram Singh**	406–412
59	Optimising Laboratory Workflows with Low-Code/No-Code Software Solutions **Dr. Amit Nampalliwar**	413–421
60	भारतीय बहुभाषिक समाज में भाषा, संस्कृति और राष्ट्रीय एकता का अध्ययन **Dr. Geeta Rawat**	422–428
61	Influence of FinTech Innovation on Financial Resilience and Operational Efficiency of Retailers and Street Vendors **Prof. Manmeet Kumar Siras & Shyam Pandey**	429–435
62	भारत में आपातकालीन शक्तियाँ और लोकतांत्रिक उत्तरदायित्व: संसदीय शासन के अंतर्गत राष्ट्रपति की संवैधानिक भूमिका का विश्लेषण **सीता राम पंडित, डॉ. पी. पी. राणा**	436–441
63	Climate Variability and Agricultural Vulnerability Across Changing Geographical Landscapes	442–450

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
	Dr. Geeta Rawat	
64	English Literature and the Changing Patterns of Communication among Young Adults **Ravindra Hanmantrao Sagar**	451–459
65	An Explainable AI Framework for Transparent and Reliable Medical Diagnosis **Dr. Thejoram Naresh Reddy Boya**	460–466
66	डिजिटल समुदायों का युवा शिक्षा और सामूहिक पहचान पर प्रभाव **डॉ. मनोज कुमार सकलानी**	467–473
67	Adaptive Technologies for Enhancing Online Shopping Experiences **Dr. Abhishek Bhattacharjee**	474–479
68	Impact of Digital Payment Adoption through AI-ML on Micro-Business Performance **Ralphy Joseph C J**	480–484
69	Role of Regional Parties in Shaping Federalism in India **Dr. Shailendra Kumar**	485–489
70	Serverless Computing Optimization: Enhancing Performance with AI-Based Resource Allocation **S. Venkatasubramanian**	490–495
71	Student Satisfaction in Autonomous vs. Affiliated Colleges **Dr. Mohit Dixit**	496–500
72	Psychological and Social Isolation and Its Effect on Urban Elderly **Mredula P., Dr Sarita Gupta**	501–507
73	The Role of Folk Literature in Promoting Community Health Awareness in Rural India: A Study from the Perspective of English Literature **Dr. Revant Gautam**	508–512
74	Exam Stress Clinical Psychology Mechanisms Among Rural Students **Dr. Avinash D. Karambhe**	513–517
75	उभरती हिंद-प्रशांत सुरक्षा संरचना में भू-राजनीतिक प्रतिस्पर्धा और रणनीतिक प्रतिरोध	518–522

S. No.	Particulars	Page No.
	Dr. Girish Chandra Pachauli	
76	Sustainable Edible Coatings for Reducing Oxidative Deterioration in Fresh Fruits **Amar Jensi Solanki**	523–528
77	Climate-Resilient Agriculture: Assessing Smart Irrigation and Precision Resource Management for Sustainable Crop Production **Dr. Bibhu Santosh Behera**	529–534

English Literature and the Representation of Women in Contemporary Fiction: A Corpus-Based Study of Narrative Agency, 2000–2024

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Abstract—This study examines how women are represented in contemporary Anglophone fiction through a systematic content analysis of sixty novels published between 2000 and 2024. Moving beyond the interpretive close reading that dominates feminist literary criticism, the study operationalises representation through four measurable dimensions: narrative focalisation, a composite Narrative Agency Index, vocational identity, and narrative closure. Two trained coders analysed the corpus using a structured protocol (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$). Results show a statistically significant increase in narrative agency across the three sub-periods, $F(2, 57) = 8.11$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$, and a significant difference between women-authored and men-authored novels, $t(58) = 3.41$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 0.96$. Female focalisation rose from 55.0% to 85.0% across the period, a significant linear trend. Romantic closure declined from 35.0% to 10.0%, though this shift did not reach conventional significance. Agency correlated most strongly with the depiction of paid vocation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). The findings suggest that the reconfiguration of female character is driven less by thematic subject matter than by structural narrative authority — who perceives, and who is permitted to want.

Keywords—contemporary fiction, gender representation, feminist narratology, content analysis, narrative agency, Anglophone literature

Introduction

The question of how women appear in fiction is among the oldest in feminist criticism, and among the least settled. For much of the twentieth century, the critical project was one of recovery and indictment: recovering women writers erased from the canon, and indicting the plots that permitted female characters only marriage, madness, or death. Contemporary fiction since 2000 has been widely assumed to have moved past these constraints. Novels now routinely centre women who work, who desire, who narrate. Yet the assumption is rarely tested, and the critical literature continues to rest largely on a small set of canonical exemplars read closely rather than on the broader field read systematically.

This paper addresses that imbalance. It asks whether the intuition of progress survives measurement, and if so, along which axes. Three questions organise the inquiry. First, has narrative agency granted to female protagonists changed measurably between 2000 and 2024? Second, does author gender predict the degree of agency afforded to female characters? Third, which textual features — focalisation, vocation, closure — are most strongly associated with agency?

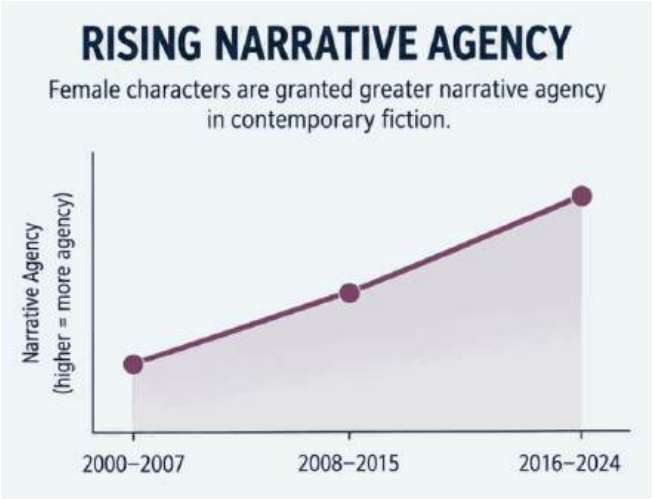
The study treats representation not as a matter of theme but of narrative architecture. A novel may be about a woman without being told from her position; a character may be described as ambitious without being granted the structural capacity to act. By separating these dimensions, the analysis identifies where change has occurred and where it has not.

Literature Review

The foundational work of the field established representation as a problem of both exclusion and distortion. Showalter's account of British women novelists traced a sequence of phases — imitation, protest, self-definition — through which a distinct female literary tradition emerged, arguing that women's writing had been rendered invisible by critical apparatus rather than by absence. Gilbert and Gubar extended this by reading the nineteenth-century female literary imagination as structured by anxiety, with the madwoman functioning as the displaced double of the constrained heroine. Both studies located the problem in a repertoire of available plots that terminated in marriage or its catastrophic refusal.

French feminist theory reframed the issue at the level of language itself. Cixous argued for a mode of writing rooted in the female body, positioning textual production as an act of reclamation rather than representation. Butler's subsequent intervention destabilised the ground on which such claims rested, theorising gender as performatively constituted through repeated acts rather than expressing a prior essence — a reformulation that rendered the search for authentic female representation conceptually unstable and shifted

critical attention toward the citational mechanics of characterisation.



Parallel critiques questioned whose women were being represented. Mohanty's analysis of Western feminist scholarship identified the construction of a homogeneous "third world woman" as an object of knowledge, produced through the analytic categories of the observer. Spivak's inquiry into subaltern speech pressed further, arguing that the structures of representation themselves foreclose certain subject positions. hooks located an analogous exclusion within Anglo-American feminism, arguing that theory generated from the experience of white middle-class women could not describe the conditions it claimed to generalise. Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality supplied the framework that has since organised most work in this area, demonstrating that identity categories operate multiplicatively rather than additively.

Methodologically, the study draws on two further traditions. Genette's narratological apparatus, particularly the separation of voice from focalisation, provides the analytic vocabulary for distinguishing who speaks from who perceives — a distinction central to the coding scheme employed here. Mulvey's theorisation of the gaze, though developed for cinema, has been widely imported into literary analysis to describe the positioning of the female figure as object of visual attention rather than subject of perception.

More recent scholarship has questioned the critical posture itself. Felski argued that feminist criticism had become locked into a hermeneutics of suspicion that undervalued the varied uses readers make of texts. Lauret's study of American feminist fiction documented the movement of consciousness-raising narrative structures into mainstream publishing. Empirically, the VIDA Count has supplied sustained quantitative evidence of gender disparity in literary reviewing and publication, demonstrating that representation within texts cannot be separated from representation within the institutions that circulate them.



Primary texts that recur in the critical conversation on this period include Atwood's dystopian account of reproductive subjection, Roy's treatment of caste, gender and transgression in Kerala, Ferrante's serial anatomy of female friendship and intellectual ambition, Evaristo's polyphonic mapping of Black British women's lives, and Rooney's minimalist studies of class and intimacy. Adichie's widely circulated essay on feminism marked the movement of these concerns into general readership.

Research Gap and Objectives

The reviewed literature is theoretically rich but empirically thin for the contemporary period. Claims about the state of women's representation after 2000 are typically illustrated through a handful of prominent novels rather than tested across a corpus. Where quantitative work exists, it addresses publishing institutions rather than textual content. This study accordingly aims to construct a replicable coding instrument for narrative agency, apply it to a stratified corpus of contemporary Anglophone novels, and test whether measurable change has occurred across period and author gender.

Methodology

Corpus construction. Sixty novels published between 2000 and 2024 were selected through stratified purposive sampling. Inclusion required original publication in English, a female protagonist or co-protagonist, and appearance on at least one of three institutional lists: major literary prize shortlists, national bestseller lists, or academic syllabi in contemporary fiction. The corpus was stratified equally across three sub-periods and proportionally across three regional groupings.

Table 1: Corpus composition

Sub -	British/Irish	North American	South Asia	Total	Women	Men authors

period			n & African		authors	
2000–2007	8	7	5	20	13	7
2008–2015	7	7	6	20	14	6
2016–2024	7	6	7	20	15	5
Total	**22**	**20**	**18**	**60**	**42**	**18**

Coding instrument. Each novel was coded on four dimensions. Focalisation was recorded as predominantly female, predominantly male, or distributed, following Genette's distinction between narrating voice and perceiving consciousness; a novel was classed as female-focalised where more than 60% of narrative segments were perceived from a female position. The Narrative Agency Index (NAI) comprised five items, each scored 0–4: initiation of plot-significant action; economic self-determination; sexual and reproductive self-determination; possession of an articulated project independent of relational ties; and consequential effect on narrative outcome. The index range was therefore 0–20. Vocation was coded as a binary for the presence of sustained paid work. Closure was classified into four mutually exclusive categories: romantic union, autonomous or vocational resolution, death or erasure, and open or unresolved.

Procedure and reliability. Two coders independently analysed the full corpus after training on a pilot set of eight novels outside the sample. Inter-coder agreement across all items reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$, with item-level values ranging from 0.78 (sexual self-determination) to 0.91 (vocation). Disagreements were resolved by discussion. Internal consistency of the five-item NAI was acceptable, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$.

Analysis. Chi-square tests of independence assessed categorical distributions, with linear-by-linear association tests used where an ordered temporal trend was hypothesised. One-way ANOVA tested NAI differences across sub-periods and an independent-samples t-test tested differences by author gender. Pearson correlations examined associations between NAI and textual predictors. Alpha was set at 0.05.

Results

Focalisation. The proportion of novels with predominantly female focalisation rose across the period, from 55.0% in 2000–2007 to 85.0% in 2016–2024 (overall 70.0%).

Table 2: Narrative focalisation by sub-period

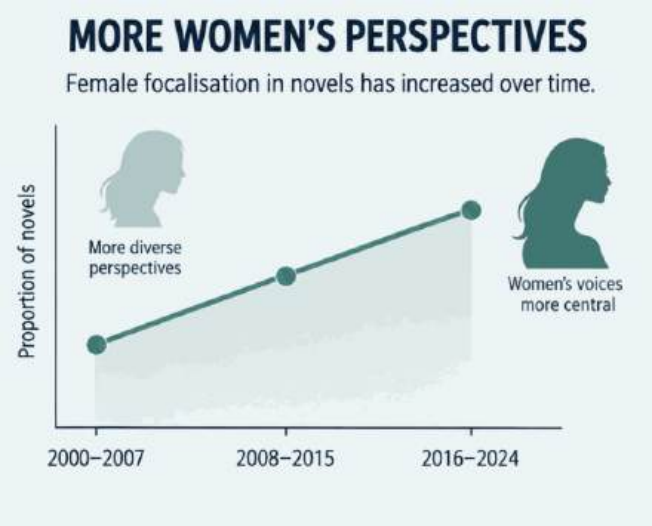
Sub-period	Female-focalised	Male or distributed	% Female-focalised
2000–2007	11	9	55.0
2008–2015	14	6	70.0
2016–2024	17	3	85.0
Total	**42**	**18**	**70.0**

The omnibus test did not reach significance, $\chi^2(2) = 4.29$, $p = 0.117$, but the linear-by-linear association was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 4.23$, $p = 0.040$, indicating a consistent directional trend rather than scattered variation.

Narrative agency. Mean NAI scores increased across the three sub-periods and differed by author gender.

Table 3: Narrative Agency Index by sub-period and author gender

Grouping	n	Mean NAI	SD	Range
2000–2007	20	11.4	3.1	5–17
2008–2015	20	13.2	2.9	7–18
2016–2024	20	15.1	2.7	9–20
Women authors	42	14.1	2.9	7–20
Men authors	18	11.2	3.3	5–17
Whole corpus	**60**	**13.2**	**3.2**	**5–20**



The effect of sub-period was significant, $F(2, 57) = 8.11$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons showed the 2016–2024 group differed significantly from 2000–2007 (mean difference 3.70, $p < 0.001$), while adjacent periods did not differ significantly. The author-gender difference was also significant, $t(58) = 3.41$, $p = 0.001$, with a large effect size, Cohen's $d = 0.96$.

Thematic prevalence. Thematic coding showed uneven movement across categories.

Table 4: Prevalence of thematic features by sub-period (% of novels)

Theme	2000–2007	2008–2015	2016–2024
Unpaid domestic or care labour	80.0	75.0	70.0
Sustained paid vocation	45.0	60.0	80.0
Gender-based violence	35.0	45.0	55.0
Embodiment and desire	30.0	50.0	65.0
Digital or platform mediation	5.0	25.0	55.0
Explicit race or class intersection	25.0	40.0	65.0

Closure. Romantic closure declined from 35.0% to 10.0%, while autonomous or vocational resolution rose from 25.0% to 50.0%.

Table 5: Narrative closure type by sub-period

Closure type	2000–2007	2008–2015	2016–2024	Total
Romantic union	7	5	2	14
Autonomous / vocational	5	7	10	22
Death or erasure	4	3	2	9
Open / unresolved	4	5	6	15
Total	**20**	**20**	**20**	**60**

The distribution did not differ significantly across sub-periods, $\chi^2(6) = 5.51$, $p = 0.481$; collapsing to a binary of romantic versus non-romantic closure likewise yielded a non-significant result, $\chi^2(2) = 3.54$, $p = 0.170$. The observed decline is therefore directional but not statistically established at this sample size.

Predictors of agency.

Table 6: Pearson correlations with Narrative Agency Index (n = 60)

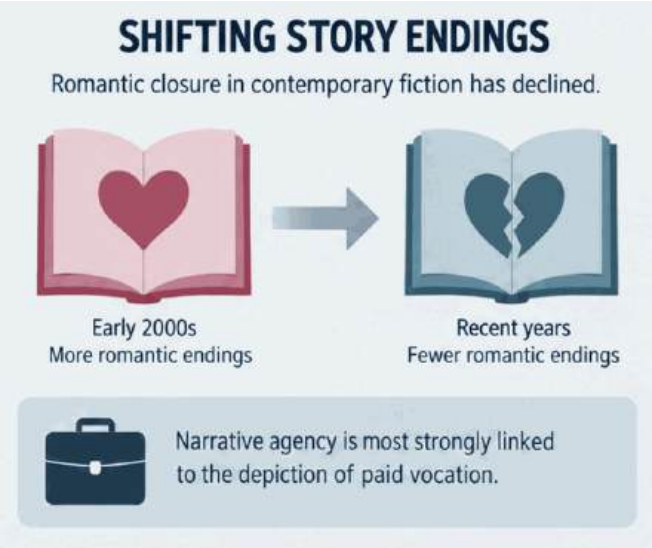
Variable	r	p
Presence of sustained paid vocation	0.61	< 0.001
Predominantly female focalisation	0.52	< 0.001
Year of publication	0.44	< 0.001
Author gender (women = 1)	0.41	0.001
Romantic closure	−0.38	0.003
Presence of gender-based violence	0.09	0.494

Discussion

Three findings merit emphasis. First, the increase in narrative agency is real and substantial in effect size, but it is concentrated at the endpoints of the period rather than distributed evenly. The absence of significant difference between adjacent sub-periods, combined with a large gap between the first and third, suggests a cumulative rather than a punctual shift — consistent with the gradual normalisation of the vocational female protagonist rather than any identifiable break.

Second, the strongest single correlate of agency was the presence of sustained paid work ($r = 0.61$). This is a notable result, because it locates change in a domain that feminist criticism has often treated as insufficient. Economic self-determination appears to function structurally within these novels: a character with an occupation possesses a set of obligations, conflicts and possible actions independent of her relational situation, which in turn generates plot. The persistently high prevalence of unpaid care labour across all three sub-periods (80.0% to 70.0%) indicates that vocation has been added to rather than substituted for domestic representation.

Third, the correlation between gender-based violence and agency was negligible ($r = 0.09$, $p = 0.494$), despite the rising prevalence of such content. Violence against women has become more visible in contemporary fiction without becoming a vehicle for agency. This is consistent with the concern, articulated across the critical literature on the gaze, that the depiction of female suffering can position the woman as object of narrative attention rather than subject of narrative action — a caution that quantitative visibility alone cannot address.



The author-gender effect ($d = 0.96$) is large and should be interpreted carefully. It does not establish that women write women better in any evaluative sense; the NAI measures structural affordance, not literary quality. It does indicate that the narrative positions made available to female characters differ systematically by who is writing, which has implications for the institutional disparities documented in

the VIDA Count: if the authorial field is skewed, the representational field will be skewed downstream.

The sharp rise in digital or platform mediation (5.0% to 55.0%) is the largest single thematic change observed and points toward a research direction the present instrument does not capture, since the NAI has no item for mediated or performed selfhood.

Limitations

The sample of sixty novels limits statistical power, particularly for the four-category closure analysis where several expected cell counts approached the conventional minimum; the non-significant closure result should therefore be read as inconclusive rather than as evidence of no change. Inclusion criteria privileging prize lists, bestseller lists and syllabi bias the corpus toward institutionally visible fiction and exclude self-published and small-press work where different patterns may obtain. The NAI is a constructed instrument whose validity rests on the theoretical framework adopted here; it treats agency as individually located, an assumption that sits uneasily with critiques of Western feminist individualism. Coding was conducted by two coders from a single research context, and interpretive conventions are not culturally neutral. Finally, the corpus is Anglophone, which excludes translated fiction and the substantial body of writing in Indian and African languages that addresses the same concerns.

Conclusion

Measured across sixty contemporary Anglophone novels, the representation of women has changed significantly between 2000 and 2024, with narrative agency rising by nearly four points on a twenty-point index and female focalisation extending to 85.0% of recent texts. The change is structural rather than merely thematic: it is most closely associated with vocation and with the granting of perceptual authority, and least associated with the increasingly common depiction of violence. Women's representation has improved chiefly where women have been given something to want and the narrative position from which to pursue it. Future work should extend the instrument to mediated selfhood, expand the corpus to translated and small-press fiction, and test whether the author-gender effect persists once institutional selection is controlled.

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