

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ANCIENT INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This research paper conducts a comprehensive feminist critique of select ancient Indian philosophical texts. It aims to identify implicit biases, offer alternative interpretations, and illuminate the multifaceted nature of gender constructs within these foundational works. It evaluates gendered constructs in diverse philosophical traditions from Vedic literature to epics and classical philosophy employing the qualitative methodology. The study utilizes feminist frameworks, qualitative content analysis and interpretative strategies to uncover hidden biases and discern variations in gender constructions across different traditions and time periods. The findings reveal pervasive implicit biases and portrayals of feminine deities' societal norms and legal codes emphasizing the interplay between spirituality culture and gender. The implications extend to reshaping historical narratives, challenging normative interpretations, and fostering a nuanced understanding of contemporary societal norms while acknowledging study limitations. The research includes in-depth case studies and interdisciplinary approaches to examine complexities in ancient Indian gender dynamics.

Keywords: Ancient Indian philosophy, Feminist Critique, Gender Constructs, Implicit Biases.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian Philosophy stands as a cornerstone of intellectual exploration, providing profound insights into diverse realms of existence (Radhakrishnan 1957). It discusses the historical and cultural milieu of Indian philosophical traditions, setting the stage for an in-depth examination of feminist critiques within these ancient texts. The term 'critique' is often used interchangeably with 'criticism' typically understood as a negative assessment or evaluation. The critique holds a more specialized meaning in philosophy. When undertaking a critique in this context, it involves thorough examination of the condition under which something exists. (Levin 1957). within the rich tapestry of Indian philosophical discourse, a notable gap exists and comprehending the intricate nuances of gender constructions articulates the problem at hand emphasizing the necessity to unravel implicit biases and untangle the complex web gender norms within the philosophical fabric. The exploration of gender dimensions within Indian philosophy carries profound implications for understanding cultural narratives and shaping contemporary dialogues on gender (Ruth 2019). This research paper discusses the broader significance of the study highlighting its potential to reshape perspectives which will challenge the preconceptions and contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender in both historical and contemporary contexts. This research endeavors to conduct a comprehensive feminist critique of select ancient Indian philosophical texts aiming to identify implicit biases with alternative interpretations and illuminate the multifaceted nature of gender constructs within this research. The inquiry is guided by overarching research questions that seek to unravel their gender dimensions of Indian philosophy specific rejections are outlined providing a road map for the study including the critical analysis of gendered constructs and their implications in selected ancient texts. Each section consist of literature review methodology findings discussion and conclusion plays a pivotal role in contributing to a holistic understanding of the nuance interplay between spirituality, culture and gender within these foundational texts the literature review sets the stage while the methodology outlines the approach, findings reveal implicit biases with the discussion prompting societal reevaluation the conclusion synthesizes insights advocating for a feminist reclamation of marginalized perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of gendered constructs within ancient Indian philosophical texts has garnered significant attention from scholars seeking to understand the nuances of societal perceptions and biases embedded in these foundational works. A cornerstone of this inquiry lies in the feminist critique applied to these texts, which unveils obscured perspectives on gender roles and identities.

One key aspect of this exploration is the examination of Vedic literature, whether Vedas one of the oldest sacred texts, reflects early conceptions of gender. The work of scholars like Wendy Doniger provide insights into the portrayal of feminine deities such as Saraswati and Usha, shedding light on the complexities of gender

dynamics in ancient Indian thought (Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* 1999). The gender symbolism within the Rigveda prompts questions about the intersections of mythology and societal norms offering a rich avenue for feminist analysis. Moving forward in time, Upanishads and Puranas presents philosophical thought intertwined in mythological narratives. The works of Uma Chakravarty contribute significantly to the feminist exploration of ancient Indian text. In her groundbreaking work, “The Social Dimension of Early Buddhism”, Chakravarty dissects the portrayal of women and their roles in early Buddhist literature, challenging traditional interpretations and revealing the agency of women in ancient societies (Chakravarti 1987). This opens avenues for similar investigation into other philosophical traditions, emphasizing the need to critically reassess prevailing notion of gendered constructs.

Further exploration leads to epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata where character like Sita and Draupadi become focal points for feminist analysis. Examining this text through the perspective of postcolonial feminist theory, Spivak’s work on subaltern voices proves insightful. Spivak’s explorations of “Can the Subaltern Speaks?” prompts reflection on this silence voices within these epics particularly those of women and challenges prevailing narratives that may perpetuate the patriarchal norms (Spivak 1988). In the realm of classical philosophy, the works of philosopher like Patanjali and Chanakya offers insights into early Indian political thought. However, the gendered dimensions of their teachings how often been overlooked. Applying feminist perspectives to the yoga sutras of Patanjali, the patriarchal undertones in the concept like “brahmacharya” and the marginalization of feminine experiences become apparent. Such analysis is complemented by the work of scholar like Chris Chapple, who critically examines the intersection of gender and spirituality in classical yoga philosophy (C. K. Chapple 2008). Turning to the Nyaya and Mimamsa schools, the emphasis on logic and ritualistic practices provides a unique vantage point for feminist critic. B.K. Matilal’s works on Nyaya philosophy delves into the intricacies of linguistic analysis and epistemology, yet a comprehensive feminist exploration of these school remains A relatively unexplored terrain (Matilal 1986). Integrating feminist perspective could uncover hidden assumptions and biases within the logical framework of these philosophical traditions. In context of Buddhism the teaching of Gautam Buddha Have been subject to feminist scrutiny. Rita gross, in “Buddhism after patriarchy,” challenges the conventional understanding of Buddhist enlightenment and monasticism, arguing for more gender inclusive interpretation of Buddhist teachings (Gross 1993). This prompt A broader investigation into the treatment of gender in diverse philosophical tradition, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding that transcends oversimplified categorization. Turning attention to the Dharma shastra tradition, Patrick Olivella’s translations and commentaries shared light on the legal and ethical dimensions of ancient Indian society. The patriarchal nature of this text is unmistakable. integrating feminist perspective such as those presented by scholars like Lise McKean in “Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu nationalist movement,” for an exploration of how these legal codes may have perpetuated gender inequalities (McKean 1996). The realm of aesthetics, classical Indian literature, particularly Sanskrit poetry, and drama, provides a rich tapestry for feminist inquiry. Abhinavagupta’s aesthetics, as elucidated in works like “Abhinavabhāratī,” have often been celebrated for their depth. However, examining the gendered dimensions of aesthetic experience and representation introduces a new layer of analysis. The works off post-colonial feminists like Leela Gandhi, in post-colonial theory, provide insights into how colonial narratives may have influenced and distorted indigenous perspectives on gender (Gandhi 1998). The works of scholars like Vidya Dehejia, in “Indian Art,” pave the way for exploring the role of gender in the perception and creation of artistic expressions (Dehejia 1997). Such investigations broaden the scope of feminist critique beyond philosophical and legal realms.

The literature review underscores the multifaceted nature of gendered constructs within ancient Indian philosophical texts. the interplay of mythology, law, aesthetics, and devotion provides a complex tapestry for feminist exploration. Scholars across disciplines have paved the way for critically reassessing traditional interpretations and unraveling the intricacies of gender dynamics. This review not only contributes to academic scholarship but also fosters a broader societal dialogue on the intersections of philosophy, gender, and culture in ancient India. This contextualization invites nuanced understanding of the historical forces shaping gender discourse in India.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the dimensions of gender within ancient Indian philosophical texts (Creswell 2018). This design is particularly suited to investigate into the complexities of textual interpretation and the subjective nature of feminist analysis. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper engagement with the selected text, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the embedded gendered constructs. By prioritizing depth over breadth, this research design ensures a thorough exploration of the chosen philosophical tradition.

The selection of text is a pivotal aspect of this research involving a judicious choice of ancient Indian philosophical works spanning Vedic literature, Upanishads, Puranas, Epics, classical philosophy like Nyaya, Mimamsa schools etc. This comprehensive selection enables a holistic examination of diverse philosophical traditions and their implications for gender construction a primary text, supported by relevant commentaries form the core of the analysis.

The feminist frameworks applied in this research draw from a variety of perspectives, including but not limited to postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and postmodern feminist theories (Mohanty 1984). These frameworks provide analytical tools to enable hidden vices, challenging normative interpretations and explore alternative readings that may have been marginalized. By integrating feminist perspective, the research seeks to uncover implicit assumptions within the texts shedding light on how gender ideologies were constructed and perpetuated in ancient Indian Philosophical Thought (Chaudhuri 2012).

The data analysis methods encompass a multifaceted approach, incorporating both qualitative content analysis and interpretative strategies (Miles 2013). The qualitative content analysis involves a systematic investigation of textual content to identify recurrent themes, patterns, and gendered constructs. This process includes categorizing encoding textual elements related to gender such as depictions of characters prescribe rules and normative expectations.

Interpretive strategies involve hermeneutic exploration emphasizing the context, cultural nuances, and potential subaltern voices within the texts this interpretive examination is particularly crucial when with the complexities of ancient philosophical literature allowing for nuance understanding that translate rigid categorizations (Dey 1993). Additionally, the analysis employs a comparative method to discern variations in gender constructions across different philosophical traditions and time periods (Flick 2014). By juxtaposing diverse texts and philosophical schools the research aimed to uncover both commonalities and divergence in portrayal of gender.

FINDINGS

In the pursuit of unraveling gender constructs within ancient Indian philosophical texts, the research has yielded compelling findings that contribute to a nuanced understanding of implicit biases alternative interpretations and broader implication for general discourse.

The analysis of ancient Indian philosophical text revealed pervasive implicit biases woven into the fabric of gender constructs. Within the Vedic literature, the portrayal of feminine details such as Saraswathi, Ushas, Aditi was often laden with patriarchal undertones reflecting early societal norms (Donniger 1999) while primacy was given to Indra, Varuna, and Agni (Wulff 1982). Renuka Roy in her seminal work mention that some of the Indian feminist writers have witnessed Vedic period as a golden age for Indian women (R. Roy 1978). This portrayal accumulate the complex interplay between cultural beliefs and gendered constructs providing a foundational understanding of early Vedic perspectives on femininity. While women enjoyed higher status however, Vedic women were considered lower in the hierarchy comparing to the men. This view was manifested in Vedic ritual text which circumscribed involvement of female (Smith 1989). As we navigate through classical texts such as the Yoga sutras of Patanjali a more intricate tapestry of gender dynamics begins to emerge feminist scrutiny of the concept of Brahmacharya reveals not only the abstinence associated with spiritual practice but also the implicit biases that underlie notions of self-control and moderation within a gender framework (C. Chapple 2008). According to Mimansakas, women could not own property and should have limited joint responsibility within sacrifice performed by their husband (Leslie 1983). The findings emphasized at the intersection of spirituality and gender and ancient Indian philosophy is not a dichotomy but a spectrum where implicit biases shape normative expressions. The 'Law-books' of Brahmanical Hinduism took a more pronounced step by shifting their focus from rituals and knowledge to conduct. These legal texts emphasized the significance of proper behavior based on an individual's position in the varnashrama scheme. For women, this meant being categorized with the shudras at the lowest levels of the socio-religious hierarchy. The various life stages prescribed for elite males were considered unsuitable for women, whose primary responsibilities were associated with marriage and domestic activities. According to the Manusmriti, a highly influential law-book, women were prohibited from becoming ascetics, unable to attain a heavenly rebirth without serving men, and restricted from studying the Vedas or performing sacrificial rituals (Holden 1983). In the context of the value system in ancient Indian society, the pursuit of moksha or liberation led renouncers to shun women, while Tantric ritual practitioners embraced them, recognizing the indispensable role of a female partner in religious practices, both symbolically and physically. Regarding Dharma or religiosity, women were venerated when considered pure but despised when perceived as impure. In matters of artha or worldly prosperity, women received honor when fertile but faced rejection when barren. For Kama or sensual gratification, women were esteemed when capable of providing satisfaction but deemed valueless when unable

to do so (Allen and Mukherjee 1982). British officials and missionaries generalized the dismal state of Indian women while Indian reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswathi argued that ancient texts portrayed women in authoritative roles nationalists challenged the British colonial narrative contending that women enjoyed high status in ancient times and were degraded by foreign rulers especially Muslim invaders both British and Indian writers made the condition of Indian women a focal point in their ideological arguments (Ramusack 1990). In a prior work Geraldine Forbes highlighted the pervasive influence of golden age rhetoric in the historical portrayal of Indian women (G. Forbes 1976). Uma Chakravarty and Kumkum Roy have delved into the nuanced creation of this tradition while Partha Chatterjee has examined how the nationalist depiction of women though distinct from colonial discourse remains confined within a framework of false essentialism despite acknowledging the colonial construction of Indian tradition nationalists granted women access to education and political involvement but maintained an objectified value for women tied to their roles in domestic settings. (U. Chakravarti and K. Roy 1988), (Chatterjee 1989).

The epic Ramayana provide a feminist critique where findings extend beyond the conventional readings. At closer examination, the literature hints at the agency and marginalization of female characters unleashes alternative interpretations highlighting the complexity of gendered constructs within epic narratives showcasing the tension between traditional roles and the agency inherent in female character. In a seminal Manushi article, Romila Thapar undertook the task of unraveling the utilization of specific versions of epics and myths in shaping the concept of the ideal Hindu woman (R. Thapar 1987). Her scholarly endeavor *Śakuntalā: Texts, Readings, Histories and Narratives and the Making of History* is useful source of early Indian Past (Thapar 2011). Sally Sutherland, more recently, examined the contrasting prescriptive role models presented by Sita and Draupadi. While both are depicted as ideal wives, Draupadi openly expresses resentment at humiliation by her husbands' relatives, whereas Sita internalizes her anger, becoming a culturally accepted outlet for aggressive impulses (S. Sutherland 1989). Velcheru Narayana Rao, drawing on folk songs from older Telugu-speaking Brahman women, reveals how they emphasize Ramayana episodes reflecting their daily concerns (Rao 1991). These studies highlight the diversity of epic versions and underscore the privilege given to certain aspects. They also show how prescriptive literature may be disregarded, reinterpreted, or subverted by Indian women in their own cultural expressions. This scholarship deepens our understanding of the evolution of the Sita-Savitri-Sati ideal for Indian women and illuminates how women may invert or redefine this model.

As Quasi divine Sita, demonstrated the ideal of feminine behavior. When Sita was tamed by the marriage, she was considered highly auspicious. (Dube 1988). In the devotional hymns of Sri Vaishnavism, Lakshmi is depicted as embodying feminine qualities such as tenderness, submissiveness to her husband, mercy, and patience. (Narayanan n.d.). Similarly, in the Ramayana, Sita consistently expresses her unwavering devotion to her husband Rama, emphasizing the belief that a wife's destiny is intertwined with that of her husband. Sita asserts that a woman's ultimate purpose, both in this life and the afterlife, is singular: her devotion should be directed solely towards her husband, not towards her father, child, herself, mother, or friends (Cornelia Dimmir n.d.). This consequentiality of male dominance and female submission was normative model of securing hierarchy among deities and gods. In the Khedara Khanda of the Skanda Purana, satire, parody, and irony are employed as tools to undermine negative perceptions of womanhood. This text elevates the 'natural,' associated with the body and women, over the 'cultural,' which is identified as the domain controlled by men. The natural aspect, particularly the body, is also regarded as the site or locus of divinity. In various folk mythologies, Puranas, and popular cultural performances predominantly led by female artists, Sanskrit concepts are reimagined and subverted, giving rise to widespread mythologies that intersect with everyday life (Ramanujan 127-79). Altekar (1929), an influential writer, concluded the debate on the status of women in the 'ancient past' on a positive note (D. Altekar 1929). He opined that considerable freedom in the different activities of the social and political life of that time. This myth was challenged by Whetting the source where attention to the differing social locations of different categories of women were given and exposed the narrow patriarchal bias in the past which has erased women and other marginalized group from the very sources. As early as the 1930s Horner's sensitive study of women in Buddhism (Jatakas and Milindapanha) broke the binaries of colonialism/nationalism in historical writing by detailing and categorizing women as they appeared in Buddhist literature (Horner 2005). Earliest examples of women's writing The Therigatha, or the songs of the bhikkhunis, a text which was part of the Khuddaka Nikaya of the Buddhist textual corpus, is the earliest known text to have been authored by women. In this collection women describe a range of experiences, religious, social and personal. (K. Roy 2021). The song of Mettika and Mutta depicts the drudgery of women during the period. Dasis had tremendous powers of reasoning the understood and importance of their own work. The commonsense of a dasi Punna, of setthi Anathapindika- She questioned a brahmana making dips in the river and shivering in the cold and asked him why he subjected himself to such suffering? Brahmana replied that he was trying to acquire merit by the ritual dips he took in the water. Punna logically said that this meant the frogs and fishes who lived in the water must be going straight to heaven. Brahmana replied that he was

trying to acquire merit by the ritual dips he took in the water. Punna logically said that this meant the frogs and fishes who lived in the water must be going straight to heaven (Tharu 1991).

DISCUSSION

This discussion delves into the relevance of the findings to current gender discourse acknowledges the limitations of the study and proposes recommendations for future research implications of the findings, the implications of uncovering implicit biases and presenting alternative interpretations. Within ancient Indian philosophy, full texts are far reaching. They prompt a reevaluation of historical narratives challenging ingrained perceptions of gender roles and identities by highlighting the interplay of philosophy, culture, and gender. The research contributes to a closer understanding of the roots of contemporary societal norms. The implications extend beyond academia influencing broader conversations on gender equality cultural heritage and the role of historical perspectives in shaping contemporary identities relevance to contemporary gender debates. The relevance of these findings to contemporary gender debates lies in their potential to inform and reshape ongoing discussions on feminism inequality and societal expectations. The insights gained from analyzing ancient texts offer a historical context for understanding the roots of gender norms providing a foundation for contemporary debates surrounding gender roles in stereotypes. The research contributes to the broader conversation on the fluidity and constructive nature of gender emphasizing the need to critically reassess prevailing norms and ideologies. The findings also the interconnectedness of gender and caste shedding light on the intersectionality that shaped historical perspectives in ancient India. This intersectional perspective offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions on the multifaceted nature of oppression and discrimination providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and errands in both historical and contemporary gender dynamics

While this research has illuminated various facets of gendered constructs in ancient Indian philosophy, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The primary limitation lies in the scope of the selected texts which cannot comprehensively represent the entirety of ancient Indian philosophical literature. Additionally, the interpretation of historical texts is inherently subjective and alternative readings may exist. The research may also be constrained by language barriers as some nuanced meanings within the original text might be lost in translation. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on textual analysis potentially overlooking other forms of historical evidence or perspectives that could enrich the understanding of gender dynamics in ancient India. The Socio-political context of different periods and regions within ancient India might also necessitate more nuanced examinations in future research recommendations. The future research endeavors could explore the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups particularly women within specific philosophical traditions or societal contexts in-depth case studies that delve into the lived experiences of individuals considering factors such as caste, region, and socio-economic status could provide a more granular understanding of gender dynamics. Additionally interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate archaeological findings art, history and material culture could complement textual analysis offering the holistic view of gender and ancient India comparative studies across different philosophical traditions and geographical regions could further elucidate variations in gender constructions. Moreover, collaborative efforts between scholars from diverse backgrounds and including historians, philosophers, and gender studies experts could foster a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved. Lastly, engaging with contemporary voices and perspectives within the region could provide valuable insights into how ancient philosophies continue to influence and intersect with present day gender dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has undertaken a comprehensive feminist critique of select ancient Indian philosophical texts unraveling implicit biases and presenting alternative interpretations to illuminate the multifaceted nature of gender soundtracks within these foundational works. It has provided a thorough exploration of gendered constructs in various philosophical traditions from the Vedas to epic like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, classical philosophy, and legal and ethical dimensions within Dharma shastra. scholars across disciplines have paved the way for critically reassessing traditional interpretations and examining the intricacies of gender dynamics, contributing not only to academic scholarship but also fostering a broader societal dialogue on the intersections of philosophy gender and culture in ancient India. The methodology employed are qualitative approach to explore the dimensions of gender within ancient Indian philosophical texts prioritizing depth over breadth to ensure thorough examination of the chosen philosophical tradition. The selection of texts was diverse spending Vedic literature Upanishad, Puranas, Epics, classical philosophy and more. Feminist frameworks drawn from perspectives such as post-colonial feminism intersectionality and postmodern feminist theories were applied to uncover hidden biases and challenged normative interpretations the data analysis methods involved qualitative content analysis interpretative strategies and a comparative approach to discern variations in gender constructions across different philosophical traditions and time periods. The

findings of the research have been compelling, revealing pervasive implicit biases within the fabric of gender constructs in ancient Indian philosophical texts. From the Vedic literature the classical texts like the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and legal text like Manusmriti, The research has highlighted the intricate interplay between spirituality culture and gender showcasing how implicit biases shaped normative expressions the epic Ramayana often seen through a conventional lens has been subjected to Feminist critique uncovering alternative interpretations that showcase the tension between traditional Rules and the agency inherent in female characters. Implicit biases were evident in various philosophical traditions reflecting early societal norms the portrayal of feminine deities in the Vedic literature often carry patriarchal undertones and while women enjoyed higher status they were still considered lower in the hierarchy classical texts like the Yoga sutras revealed patriarchal undertones in concepts like Brahmacharya and legal texts like Manusmriti emphasized the patriarchal nature of ancient Indian society, categorizing women at the lowest levels of the socio-religious hierarchy. The findings emphasized the intersection of spirituality and gender portraying ancient Indian philosophy not as a dichotomy but as a spectrum where implicit biases shaped normative expressions. The discussion delved into the relevance of the findings to current gender discourse acknowledging the limitations of the study and proposing recommendations for future research. The implications of uncovering implicit biases within ancient Indian philosophy are far reaching prompting a reevaluation of historical narratives and challenging ingrained perceptions of gender roles and identities. The research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary societal norms emphasizing the need to critically reassess prevailing norms and ideologies.

The relevance of these findings to contemporary gender debates lies in their potential to inform and reshape ongoing discussions on feminism inequality and societal expectations the insights gained from analyzing ancient texts offer a historical context for understanding the roots of gender norms providing a foundation for contemporary debates surrounding gender roles in stereotypes. The research contributes to the broader conversation on the fluidity and constructive nature of gender emphasizing the need to critically reassess prevailing norms and ideologies However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the study primarily related to the scope of selected texts. The subjective nature of interpretation language barriers and the focus on textual analysis future research endeavors could explore the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups within specific philosophical traditions conduct in-depth case studies incorporate interdisciplinary approaches and engage with contemporary voices within the region. In conclusion, while this research offers valuable contributions to the understanding of gender constructs in ancient Indian philosophy, the acknowledgement of its limitations emphasizes the need for continuous exploration the new one's investigations to unleash the intricacies of gender dynamics in historical contexts. This research serves as a steppingstone towards a more profound understanding of the intersections between philosophy culture and gender and ancient India paving the way for future scholarship and fostering broader societal dialogues on gender equality and cultural heritage.

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