

Reimagining Dharma Through Feminist Lenses: A Comparative Study of the Second Sex, the Madwoman in the Attic, and Indian Philosophical Texts

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of gender, philosophy, and literature through a feminist re-reading of the concept of **dharma**. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, it examines how patriarchal structures across Western and Indian contexts construct and confine womanhood through literary and philosophical narratives. The study juxtaposes Western feminist theory with classical Indian texts such as the *Manusmriti*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Stridharma Paddhati*, and *Ramayana* to reveal how dharma has historically legitimized gendered submission and denied women subjectivity. Through comparative analysis, the paper argues for a reinterpretation of dharma as an ethical space grounded in autonomy, resistance, and self-realization. It proposes a feminist dharma that moves beyond obedience and silence, embracing freedom, ethical agency, and inclusive justice.

Keywords: Dharma, feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, Gilbert and Gubar, Indian philosophy, gender, literary theory, ethics, patriarchy, subjectivity

Introduction

The concept of **dharma** in Indian philosophy—broadly understood as duty, morality, and the ethical path—has long served as a foundational principle in shaping individual and social life. However, traditional interpretations of dharma have often reinforced rigid **gender roles**, prescribing different duties and expectations for men and women based on religious and cultural norms. Feminist theorists across the world have challenged these normative frameworks, revealing how such roles restrict women's autonomy and voice.

This paper seeks to **reimagine dharma through feminist lenses**, using Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* as critical tools. These texts, though rooted in Western feminist discourse, provide powerful insights into how patriarchal structures define woman as the "Other," confine her within male-authored myths, and suppress her agency. When read alongside Indian texts such as the *Manusmriti*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, a comparative framework emerges—one that highlights the intersection of **gender, literary symbolism, and ethical duty**.

By tracing parallels between Western feminist critiques and Indian philosophical traditions, this paper argues for a **reinterpretation of dharma** that centres **freedom, self-expression, and ethical subjectivity**,

rather than obedience and silence. Reimagining dharma in this way allows for a more inclusive and liberatory framework of gender justice. By critically analysing how gender roles have been historically constructed and sustained through both literature and philosophical doctrine, this paper argues for a reinterpretation of dharma that centres agency, freedom, and ethical self-realization.

I. The Second Sex: Woman as the Other

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* presents a foundational argument that woman has been historically defined not as a subject but as "the Other." In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that woman has not been defined in herself, but always in relation to man—as his Other. Rather than being treated as a fully autonomous human subject, woman has been cast as a derivative, secondary, or oppositional identity within a male-dominated worldview. Here are some thought-provoking quotes from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir that vividly capture her critique of patriarchy, gender roles, and woman as the Other.

“He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” This quote summarizes how men define themselves as the norm, while women are made into a deviation—something secondary, incomplete. One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” One of the most famous feminist lines ever written. Beauvoir stresses that womanhood is socially constructed, not biologically destined. — Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)”

Philosophical Foundations:

- Drawing from **Hegelian dialectics**, Beauvoir shows how every identity is formed in relation to an Other.
- However, unlike in the master-slave dialectic, women **have not claimed subjectivity**; they have been **made the Other** by men **without reciprocity**.

Myth-Making and Patriarchy:

- Over time, cultural myths (religious, literary, philosophical) have **objectified women**: as temptress, mother, goddess, or whore—but never as a full human subject.
- The woman is not seen for her **individual essence**, but for her **function** in male-defined systems (much like traditional **gendered dharma** in Indian thought).

Passivity and Immanence:

- Beauvoir contrasts **immanence** (being-for-others, passive, static) with **transcendence** (being-for-itself, active, self-directed).
- Woman, reduced to roles like mother, wife, or muse, is **trapped in immanence**, while man claims the right to transcend—to **act, to define, to create**.

Relation to Dharma:

- Traditional Indian dharma often mirrors the structures Beauvoir critiques: it assigns women roles based on birth, not choice.
- The concept of svadharma (personal duty) in the *Bhagavad Gita* can be reclaimed to support women's autonomy.

In Indian texts like the *Manusmriti*, woman is similarly treated as **dependent, secondary**, and in need of **male supervision**. For example: “A woman must be subject to her father in childhood, to her husband in youth, and to her sons in old age.” (*Manusmriti* 5.148)

This mirrors Beauvoir's critique: **woman is denied full ethical agency and reduced to a relational existence**. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* challenges the myth of woman as a fixed essence, urging

that freedom—not function—defines human existence. In parallel, Indian philosophical dharma, when rigidly gendered, traps women in inherited duties rather than enabling ethical growth. A feminist reading of both reveals the urgent need to move from **prescriptive roles to lived autonomy**, where dharma becomes not a rule imposed, but a path chosen. Thus, the reclamation of *svadharma* aligns with Beauvoir’s call for women to become full subjects—free to act, define, and transform their world.

II. The Madwoman in the Attic: Literary Confinement and Rebellion

The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore how **19th-century women writers** were psychologically and creatively confined by **patriarchal literary traditions**. They argue that these writers navigated their oppression by creating literary doubles: the “**angel in the house**” and the “**madwoman**”, representing the **split identity** forced upon women by Victorian ideals.

- **The Angel vs. The Madwoman:** The “angel” symbolizes the ideal woman—pure, passive, obedient—while the “madwoman” embodies the repressed, emotional, creative, and rebellious aspects of the self. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is a quintessential example.
- **Literary Confinement:** Women writers had to work within male-dominated genres and expectations, often using metaphor and gothic tropes to voice their resistance.
- **Writing as Rebellion:** The act of writing became a form of ethical resistance. The madwoman, often dismissed as insane, symbolized a rational and justifiable rebellion against patriarchal constraints.

Relation to Dharma:

- The “angel” mirrors the Indian ideal of the pativrata woman—pure, devoted, and self-sacrificing.
- The “madwoman” parallels figures like Draupadi who resist unjust dharma, asserting voice and agency.
- Reframing dharma includes legitimizing dissent and valuing self-expression as ethical imperatives.

III. Indian Philosophical References and Feminist Critique

Text / Concept	Traditional Idea	Feminist Critique	Ethical Reinterpretation
<i>Manusmriti</i>	Women must always be dependent	Beauvoir: women are denied subjectivity	Dharma must be based on agency, not obedience
<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> 3.35	"Better to fail in one's own dharma..."	Women live others' dharma	Reclaim svadharma for women
<i>Stridharma texts</i>	Prescribe loyalty, silence, suffering	G&G: leads to repression	Dharma should encourage expression and fulfillment
<i>Ramayana</i> (Sita)	Idealized wife, sacrifice and purity	Sita is both angel and silenced woman	Critical reading of Sita as symbol of erasure

IV. Extended Comparative Critique: Classical Texts and Feminist Reimagination

Text	Traditional Teaching	Feminist Critique	Insight /	Reimagined Ethical Reading
<i>Manusmriti</i> 5.148	“A woman must be subject to her father in childhood, her husband	Establishes a lifelong denying her adulthood.	a woman’s dependency, independent	Subjecthood must not be age- or relationship-based but founded on individual moral agency.

Text	Traditional Teaching	Feminist Critique	Insight /	Reimagined Ethical Reading
	in youth, and her sons in old age.”			
<i>Manusmriti</i> 9.2–3	“The creator made women to be mothers of men and to be under their control.”	Reduces women to reproductive roles; frames patriarchy as divinely sanctioned.		Feminist ethics reject divine justification for hierarchy; creation must enable freedom, not servitude.
<i>Stridharma Paddhati</i>	Emphasizes chastity (<i>pativrata</i>), silence, and obedience as feminine virtues.	Cultivates moral self-erasure as dharma; glorifies suffering and silences dissent.		Ethical dharma should value expression, self-worth, and dissent when duty becomes oppressive.
<i>Ramayana</i> (Agni Pariksha)	Sita must prove her purity by walking through fire.	Victim-blaming ritual masks male honor as divine morality.		Reimagining dharma means rejecting performative purity and honoring a woman’s own truth.
<i>Ramayana</i> (Uttarakanda)	Sita is banished while pregnant to preserve Rama’s public image.	Prioritizes public dharma (<i>rajdharma</i>) over justice to the woman.		Ethical dharma must be dialogical, not sacrificial; Sita’s voice must be central, not erased.

V. Toward a Feminist Dharma

From	To
Obedience to role	Ethical agency
Gendered submission	Freedom to define purpose
Social conformity	Existential authenticity
Male-authored law	Inclusive ethical dialogue

The Madwoman in the Attic reveals how literary women were silenced by the ideal of feminine virtue, forced to either embody the obedient “angel” or be condemned as the rebellious “madwoman.” Similarly, Indian dharma, when interpreted through a patriarchal lens, idealizes submission and stigmatizes resistance—casting figures like Sita as models of sacrifice, while voices like Draupadi’s are marked by transgression. Yet the madwoman, like the questioning woman in Indian epics, is not a symbol of chaos, but of ethical defiance. Reclaiming her voice within dharma allows us to view rebellion not as adharmā, but as the beginning of true ethical subjectivity.

Conclusion

The comparative study of *The Second Sex*, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and classical Indian texts reveals that both Western and Eastern traditions have contributed to the ideological construction of woman as subordinate, passive, and morally bound to male-defined roles. Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist lens exposes the systemic denial of female subjectivity, while Gilbert and Gubar reveal how women writers internalized and resisted literary conventions that demanded silence or submission. Indian philosophical sources—particularly the *Manusmriti*, *Stridharma Paddhati*, and *Ramayana*—illustrate how the concept

of dharma has been historically weaponized to ensure the continuity of gender hierarchies under the guise of ethical duty.

Yet, within these very texts and traditions lies the **possibility for reinterpretation**. The *Bhagavad Gita*'s emphasis on *svadharma*—one's own path—offers an opening for feminist ethics that prioritize individual conscience over collective conformity. Similarly, figures like Draupadi, who question and challenge dharma even while embedded in it, reveal that resistance has always existed alongside obedience.

Reimagining dharma through a feminist lens is not a rejection of Indian tradition but a **transformation of it**. It is an invitation to move beyond narrow prescriptions and toward a dharma that embraces **freedom, fluidity, and ethical self-realization**. In this reinterpretation, writing itself—like that of Beauvoir, Gilbert, and Gubar—becomes an act of dharma: a pursuit of truth, justice, and liberation.

In a world still governed by invisible codes of conformity, the need to reimagine dharma is more urgent than ever. As women across cultures navigate complex terrains of identity, family, and morality, they continue to face the burden of being both **symbol and subject, ideal and individual**. Feminist readings help us unravel these contradictions and offer new ethical frameworks that do not simply include women, but are shaped by their voices and experiences.

This study serves as a reminder that **dharma is not fixed**, nor is it inherently patriarchal. It is a living, interpretive principle that can—and must—evolve. When infused with feminist insight, dharma becomes not a tool of control but a **means of ethical emancipation**.

“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”

— Audre Lorde

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