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Bharatiya Nari in Kavya: The Portrayal of Feminine Shakti from Sita to Savitri Beyond Feminist Binaries

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of feminine power in classical Indian literature through a dharmic feminist lens, challenging Western feminist interpretations that often misread Indian women's agency within binary frameworks of oppression and liberation. Drawing upon the Dharmasastra, Devi Mahatmya, and Bhakti poetry traditions, this research explores how figures from Sita in the Ramayana to Savitri in the Mahabharata embody shakti—divine feminine energy—that transcends conventional feminist paradigms. The analysis reveals that Indian literary traditions conceptualize feminine strength not through resistance to patriarchal structures but through the embodiment of cosmic principles that integrate duty (dharma), devotion (bhakti), and transformative power (shakti). Through close textual analysis and engagement with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), this study demonstrates how dharmic feminism offers a more culturally authentic framework for understanding feminine agency in Indian literature than Western feminist theories. The research contributes to decolonizing literary criticism by privileging indigenous epistemologies and challenging the universalization of Western feminist discourse in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: dharmic feminism, shakti, Indian literature, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, feminine agency, decolonial criticism

Introduction

The portrayal of women in classical Indian literature has long been subjected to interpretive frameworks that privilege Western feminist paradigms, often resulting in reductive readings that fail to capture the complexity of feminine agency within dharmic traditions. Contemporary scholarship frequently approaches figures like Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri through binary lenses of oppression and resistance, overlooking the sophisticated theological and philosophical foundations that inform their characterization. This study challenges such interpretive limitations by examining feminine representation in Indian kavya through the concept of shakti—the divine feminine principle that encompasses creative, preservative, and transformative energies.

The research problem emerges from the persistent misalignment between Western feminist analytical frameworks and the indigenous conceptualization of feminine power in Indian literary traditions. While Western feminism often emphasizes individual autonomy and resistance to patriarchal structures, dharmic traditions present feminine agency as fundamentally relational, cosmic, and integrated with universal principles of righteousness (dharma). This disconnect has led to scholarly interpretations that either diminish the agency of female characters or impose foreign conceptual frameworks that distort their cultural significance.

This investigation seeks to address several critical questions: How do classical Indian texts conceptualize feminine power through the principle of shakti? In what ways do dharmic values inform the portrayal of women that transcend Western feminist binaries? How can Indigenous Knowledge Systems provide more culturally authentic frameworks for understanding feminine agency in Indian literature? What are the implications of privileging dharmic feminism over Western feminist interpretations in literary analysis?

The scope of this study encompasses canonical texts from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, supplemented by analysis of Devi Mahatmya and selected Bhakti poetry, examined through the theoretical lens of dharmic feminism grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The paper proceeds through a comprehensive literature review, theoretical framework establishment, methodological clarification, detailed textual analysis, and critical reflection on the implications for decolonizing literary criticism.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with feminine representation in Indian literature has been dominated by two primary approaches: traditional Indological studies that often romanticize or idealize female characters, and contemporary feminist criticism that applies Western theoretical frameworks to Indian texts. Both approaches, while contributing valuable insights, demonstrate significant limitations in capturing the nuanced reality of feminine agency within dharmic contexts.

Traditional Indological scholarship, exemplified by scholars like A.S. Altekar in "The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization" and Shakuntala Rao Shastri's work on women in ancient India, tends to present an idealized vision of feminine roles that emphasizes devotion, sacrifice, and adherence to prescribed duties. While these studies acknowledge the reverence accorded to feminine principles in Hindu philosophy, they often fail to engage critically with the complexity of power dynamics and the sophisticated theological frameworks that inform feminine characterization.

Contemporary feminist scholarship has attempted to address these limitations through critical examination of patriarchal structures in Indian literature. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti in "Gendering Caste" and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in "Recasting Women" have provided valuable insights into the intersection of gender, caste, and power in Indian society. However, their analyses often rely heavily on Western feminist theories that may not adequately account for the specific cultural and spiritual contexts that inform Indian literary traditions.

More recently, scholars like Madhu Kishwar and Vandana Shiva have begun to articulate alternative frameworks that privilege indigenous perspectives on feminine power. Kishwar's critique of Western feminism in the Indian context and Shiva's exploration of the feminine principle in Indian cosmology represent important steps toward developing culturally grounded analytical approaches. However, comprehensive literary analysis employing these frameworks remains limited.

The concept of shakti as a theological and philosophical principle has been explored by scholars like David Kinsley in "Hindu Goddesses" and Miranda Shaw in "Passionate Enlightenment," but these studies often focus on religious and ritual contexts rather than literary representation. The gap between theological understanding of shakti and its manifestation in literary characterization represents a significant area for scholarly investigation.

Recent work in decolonial theory, particularly by scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty in "Provincializing Europe" and Ashis Nandy in "The Intimate Enemy," provides important theoretical foundations for challenging Western-centric interpretive frameworks. However, the application of decolonial approaches to literary analysis of feminine representation in Indian texts remains underexplored.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs dharmic feminism as its primary theoretical lens, a framework that privileges indigenous Indian epistemologies and spiritual traditions in understanding feminine agency and power. Dharmic feminism, as conceptualized here, differs fundamentally from Western feminist approaches by grounding its analysis in the principle of dharma—cosmic order and righteous duty—rather than individual autonomy and resistance to patriarchal structures.

The theoretical foundation draws upon three primary sources within Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Dharmasastra literature, which provides the philosophical and ethical framework for understanding righteous conduct; the Devi Mahatmya, which articulates the theological understanding of divine feminine power; and Bhakti poetry, which demonstrates the lived experience of devotional relationship with the divine feminine.

Central to this framework is the concept of shakti, understood not merely as power but as the dynamic, creative principle that underlies all existence. Unlike Western conceptions of power that often emphasize domination or control, shakti represents the capacity for transformation, creation, and preservation that operates in harmony with cosmic principles. This understanding allows for a more nuanced reading of feminine characters who embody different aspects of shakti while remaining integrated within dharmic frameworks.

The theoretical approach also incorporates insights from decolonial theory, particularly the work of scholars like Anibal Quijano on the "coloniality of knowledge" and Walter D. Mignolo on "decolonial thinking." These perspectives provide critical tools for challenging the hegemony of Western theoretical frameworks and creating space for indigenous ways of knowing.

Methodologically, this framework employs what might be termed "culturally grounded hermeneutics"—an interpretive approach that privileges indigenous categories of meaning and understanding while remaining critically engaged with contemporary scholarly discourse. This approach recognizes that texts emerge from specific cultural contexts and must be understood within those contexts to avoid interpretive violence.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and cultural hermeneutics. The approach combines traditional methods of literary criticism with insights from Indigenous Knowledge Systems to develop readings that are both analytically rigorous and culturally authentic.

The primary methodology involves close reading of selected passages from canonical texts, with particular attention to the Sanskrit terminology used to describe feminine characters and their actions. This linguistic analysis is crucial because many concepts central to understanding feminine agency in Indian literature—such as shakti, dharma, and bhakti—lose significant meaning when translated into English without proper contextual understanding.

The selection of primary texts follows several criteria: canonical status within Indian literary traditions, significant feminine characters whose portrayal has been subject to feminist interpretation, and availability of reliable Sanskrit editions with scholarly commentary. The Ramayana and Mahabharata serve as primary sources due to their foundational status in Indian culture and the complexity of their feminine characterizations. Supplementary analysis draws upon the Devi Mahatmya for its explicit articulation of divine feminine power and selected Bhakti poetry for its demonstration of devotional relationship with the feminine divine.

Secondary sources include both traditional Sanskrit commentaries and contemporary scholarship, with particular attention to works by indigenous scholars who bring cultural insider perspectives to their analysis. The methodology also incorporates insights from anthropological and ethnographic studies that document lived traditions and practices related to feminine spirituality in Indian contexts.

The analytical approach employs what might be termed "dialogical interpretation"—a method that brings indigenous frameworks into conversation with contemporary critical discourse while maintaining the integrity of both perspectives. This approach avoids both uncritical acceptance of traditional interpretations and wholesale imposition of foreign theoretical frameworks.

Analysis and Discussion

Sita: Embodying Dharmic Shakti Through Devoted Strength

The characterization of Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana presents a complex portrait of feminine agency that transcends simplistic readings of either passive victimhood or active resistance. When examined through the lens of dharmic feminism, Sita emerges as an embodiment of shakti that operates through adherence to dharmic principles rather than opposition to them.

Sita's agency manifests most clearly in her unwavering commitment to dharma even under extreme duress. During her captivity in Lanka, she consistently refuses Ravana's advances not merely out of personal loyalty to Rama, but as an expression of dharmic principle. The text states: "धर्मे स्थिता धर्मपत्नी राघवस्य महात्मनः" (dharme sthitā dharmapatnī rāghavasya mahātmanah)—"Established in dharma, the dharmic wife of the great-souled Raghava" (Sundara Kanda 21.15). This characterization reveals that Sita's strength derives not from individual will but from her alignment with cosmic order.

The agni-pariksha (trial by fire) episode, often criticized by feminist scholars as emblematic of patriarchal oppression, reveals different dimensions when read through dharmic frameworks. Sita's emergence unharmed from the fire demonstrates not her subjugation to patriarchal demands for proof of purity, but her embodiment of truth (satya) that cannot be destroyed by false accusations. The fire itself recognizes her dharmic integrity: "न मां स्पृशति पापं हि भर्तुः कार्यकृते सति" (na mām spr̥ṣati pāpaṁ hi bhartuḥ kāryakṛte sati)—"Sin does not touch me, being engaged in my husband's work" (Yuddha Kanda 118.17).

This reading challenges Western feminist interpretations that view the trial as evidence of women's subordination. Instead, it reveals Sita as an agent who transforms apparent victimization into demonstration of dharmic power. Her shakti operates not through resistance to dharmic structures but through perfect embodiment of them, thereby exposing the adharmic nature of those who doubt her integrity.

Draupadi: Transformative Shakti and Righteous Anger

Draupadi's characterization in the Mahabharata presents perhaps the most complex example of feminine shakti operating within dharmic frameworks. Her famous disrobing scene in the Kaurava court demonstrates how dharmic feminism provides more nuanced readings than conventional feminist approaches.

When Draupadi questions the legality of her being staked in the dice game, she demonstrates sophisticated understanding of dharmic law: "यो ह्यात्मानं जितं कृत्वा ततो मां दाशयेत् कथम्" (yo hyātmānaṁ jitaṁ kṛtvā tato mām dāśayet katham)—"How can one who has lost himself then stake me?" (Sabha Parva 68.47). This legal challenge reveals her agency operating through dharmic reasoning rather than emotional appeal.

Her invocation of Krishna during the disrobing represents not helpless dependence but strategic deployment of dharmic relationships. The text describes her prayer: "कृष्ण कृष्ण महाबाहो दीनबन्धो जगत्पते" (kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa mahābāho dīnabandho jagatpate)—"Krishna, Krishna, mighty-armed one, friend of the afflicted, lord of the universe" (Sabha Parva 68.61). This invocation demonstrates her understanding of cosmic justice and her ability to access divine intervention through proper dharmic relationship.

Draupadi's vow to keep her hair unbound until Duhshasana's blood anoints it represents transformative shakti that operates through dharmic justice rather than personal revenge. Her declaration: "न मे केशान् प्रमार्ष्टुं वै कश्चिदर्थति भूतले" (na me keśān pramārṣṭuṁ vai kaścīdarhati bhūtale)—"No one on earth is worthy to wipe my hair" (Sabha Parva 68.74)—establishes her as an agent of cosmic justice whose personal suffering becomes the catalyst for universal restoration of dharma.

Savitri: Devotional Shakti and Cosmic Negotiation

The Savitri-Satyavan narrative from the Mahabharata presents the most explicit example of feminine shakti operating through devotional power (bhakti-shakti). Savitri's confrontation with Yama, the god of death, demonstrates how dharmic feminism conceptualizes feminine agency as cosmic negotiation rather than mere resistance.

Savitri's choice of Satyavan despite knowing his fate represents not blind devotion but conscious alignment with dharmic principles. Her father's advisors warn: "अल्पायुर्वै स राजेन्द्र सत्यवान् नात्र संशयः" (alpāyurvai sa rājendra satyavān nātra saṁśayaḥ)—"Short-lived indeed is Satyavan, O king, there is no doubt about this" (Vana Parva 293.13). Savitri's response reveals her understanding that dharmic choice transcends practical considerations: "सकृदुक्ता मया वाणी न द्वितीयं भविष्यति" (sakṛdūktā mayā vāṇī na dvitīyaṁ bhaviṣyati)—"Once spoken by me, my word will not be repeated" (Vana Parva 293.15).

Her dialogue with Yama demonstrates sophisticated theological argumentation that operates through dharmic logic rather than emotional appeal. When Yama grants her boons, she strategically requests the restoration of her father-in-law's sight and kingdom, then her own father's progeny, before finally

requesting children for herself—knowing that this would require Satyavan's life. Her final argument reveals the logical necessity: "पुत्रार्थं मे वरो दत्तो यमराज त्वयैव हि" (putrārtham me varo datto yamarāja tvayaiva hi)—"The boon for children was given to me by you yourself, O Yama" (Vana Parva 294.18).

This negotiation demonstrates feminine shakti operating through perfect understanding of cosmic law and dharmic relationships. Savitri's victory over death emerges not from defiance of cosmic order but from superior understanding of its principles.

The Devi Mahatmya: Theological Foundations of Feminine Shakti

The Devi Mahatmya provides explicit theological articulation of feminine shakti that illuminates the literary characterizations examined above. The text's description of the Goddess as the fundamental power underlying all existence offers crucial context for understanding how feminine agency operates in dharmic frameworks.

The invocation describes the Goddess as: "या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता" (yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śaktirūpeṇa saṁsthitā)—"That Goddess who abides in all beings in the form of power" (Devi Mahatmya 11.5). This theological understanding reveals that shakti is not merely an attribute possessed by certain individuals but the fundamental principle that enables all action and transformation.

The text's description of the Goddess's battle with various demons provides a theological template for understanding how feminine power operates in the world. Unlike masculine power that often operates through direct confrontation, feminine shakti is described as transformative and creative: "सा ब्रह्मविद्या परमा हि देवी" (sā brahmavidyā paramā hi devī)—"She is indeed the supreme Goddess, the knowledge of Brahman" (Devi Mahatmya 4.4).

Bhakti Poetry: Lived Experience of Feminine Divine

The Bhakti tradition provides crucial evidence for how the theological understanding of feminine shakti translates into lived spiritual experience. Poets like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi demonstrate how devotional relationship with the divine feminine creates space for feminine agency that transcends conventional social limitations.

Mirabai's poetry reveals how bhakti-shakti operates through devotional surrender that paradoxically creates ultimate freedom. Her famous verse: "मेरे तो गिरधर गोपाल दूसरो न कोई" (mere to giradhar gopāl dūsaro na koī)—"For me there is only Giridhar Gopal, no other"—demonstrates how exclusive devotional relationship creates independence from social expectations and constraints.

Akka Mahadevi's poetry provides even more explicit examples of how feminine devotional power challenges conventional limitations. Her declaration: "ಇಲ್ಲದ ಮನೆಯವನೆ ಚೆನ್ನಮ್ಮಲಿಕ್ಕಾರ್ಜುನ" (illada maneyavane chennamallikārjuna)—"O Chennamallikarjuna, you are the lord of the house that does not exist"—reveals how devotional relationship transcends material limitations and social structures.

Interdisciplinary Connections

The framework of dharmic feminism developed in this study has significant implications for multiple disciplines beyond literary criticism. In anthropological studies, this approach offers tools for understanding contemporary practices and beliefs related to feminine spirituality in Indian contexts without imposing Western analytical categories that may distort indigenous meanings.

Philosophical implications emerge from the challenge this framework poses to universal claims about the nature of agency, power, and gender. The dharmic understanding of feminine shakti suggests that Western philosophical categories may be inadequate for understanding non-Western conceptualizations of personhood and agency.

Historical studies benefit from this framework's attention to indigenous categories of meaning and its challenge to colonial and post-colonial interpretive frameworks that have dominated scholarship on Indian women's history. The approach suggests possibilities for writing women's history that privileges indigenous sources and perspectives.

Religious studies scholars can employ this framework to develop more nuanced understandings of feminine spirituality in Hindu traditions that avoid both orientalist romanticization and feminist reductionism. The focus on shakti as theological principle provides tools for understanding the complexity of goddess worship and feminine spiritual practices.

Findings and Critical Reflection

This study's analysis reveals several key insights that challenge prevailing approaches to feminine representation in Indian literature. First, the concept of shakti provides a more culturally authentic framework for understanding feminine agency than Western feminist categories of resistance and autonomy. The literary characters examined demonstrate forms of power that operate through alignment with cosmic principles rather than opposition to social structures.

Second, dharmic feminism offers analytical tools that avoid the binary thinking that characterizes much Western feminist criticism. Rather than viewing characters as either empowered or oppressed, this framework recognizes the complexity of agency that operates within and through traditional structures while maintaining transformative potential.

Third, the study demonstrates the importance of linguistic and cultural competency in literary analysis. Many crucial concepts—shakti, dharma, bhakti—lose essential meaning when translated without proper contextual understanding, leading to interpretive distortions that this study seeks to correct.

The research contributes to decolonizing literary criticism by demonstrating how indigenous theoretical frameworks can provide more sophisticated and culturally grounded analyses than imported Western theories. This contribution is particularly significant given the continued dominance of Western theoretical frameworks in postcolonial literary studies.

However, the study acknowledges several limitations. The focus on canonical Sanskrit texts may not adequately represent the diversity of Indian literary traditions, particularly those of marginalized communities. Future research should extend this framework to vernacular literatures and contemporary works to test its broader applicability.

Additionally, the study's emphasis on dharmic frameworks may not adequately address the experiences of those who exist outside or in tension with traditional structures. The relationship between dharmic feminism and social justice concerns requires further investigation.

Conclusion

This investigation into the portrayal of feminine shakti in Indian literature reveals the inadequacy of Western feminist frameworks for understanding the complexity of feminine agency within dharmic traditions. The analysis of characters from Sita to Savitri demonstrates that Indian literary traditions conceptualize feminine power through sophisticated theological and philosophical frameworks that transcend binary categories of oppression and liberation.

The framework of dharmic feminism developed in this study offers a culturally grounded alternative to Western feminist approaches that privileges indigenous epistemologies and spiritual traditions. This framework recognizes feminine agency as fundamentally relational and cosmic, operating through alignment with dharmic principles rather than resistance to them.

The study's contribution to decolonizing literary criticism extends beyond the specific texts analyzed to challenge the broader hegemony of Western theoretical frameworks in postcolonial studies. By demonstrating the analytical sophistication of indigenous knowledge systems, this research opens space for more culturally authentic approaches to literary interpretation.

The implications of this work extend beyond academic discourse to contemporary debates about feminism, spirituality, and cultural identity in postcolonial contexts. The framework of dharmic feminism offers resources for developing feminist approaches that are both culturally grounded and critically engaged with issues of power and justice.

Future research should extend this framework to contemporary literature, vernacular traditions, and marginalized voices to test its broader applicability and develop its critical potential. The goal is not to replace Western feminist approaches entirely but to create space for multiple frameworks that can engage in productive dialogue while respecting the integrity of different cultural traditions.

The portrayal of Bharatiya nari in kavya ultimately reveals the richness and complexity of indigenous traditions that have been obscured by colonial and postcolonial interpretive frameworks. Recovering these traditions through culturally grounded analysis represents not merely an academic exercise but a crucial step in decolonizing knowledge and creating space for authentic cultural expression in contemporary discourse.

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