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Gender and Identity in Classical Indian Philosophy: A Feminist Reinterpretation

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ABSTRACT:

Classical Indian philosophy has long provided a rich tapestry of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical insights. However, much of its traditional interpretation has often been filtered through patriarchal lenses, marginalising or ignoring the experiences and identities of women and gender minorities. This paper attempts a feminist reinterpretation of key classical Indian philosophical traditions—specifically focusing on concepts of self (ātman), personhood, and liberation (mokṣa)—through the lens of gender and identity. Drawing from texts such as the Upaniṣads, Sāṃkhya, Vedānta, and Buddhist doctrines, the study evaluates how these philosophies address or omit gendered experiences. Employing feminist theory and deconstructive analysis, the paper questions binary assumptions and explores possibilities for a more inclusive and pluralistic reading. The reinterpretation reveals latent spaces within Indian philosophy for imagining a less hierarchical, gender-sensitive framework of self and liberation.

Keywords: Classical Indian Philosophy, Feminist Theory, Gender Identity, Ātman, Mokṣa, Sāṃkhya, Vedānta, Deconstruction

Introduction:

Classical Indian philosophical systems—ranging from orthodox (āstika) schools like Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta to heterodox (nāstika) schools like Buddhism and Jainism—have profoundly shaped Indian metaphysics, ethics, and ontology. However, their conceptualizations of identity, personhood, and liberation were developed in socio-cultural contexts deeply embedded in hierarchical gender norms. As a result, while these systems discuss the nature of self, mind, and liberation in great detail, they often do so from perspectives that assume male subjectivity as normative.

This paper investigates how gender and identity are constructed, silenced, or problematized in classical Indian philosophy. It critically examines whether these philosophies accommodate non-male experiences or whether they contribute to their erasure. Using feminist hermeneutics, particularly intersectional and post-structuralist approaches, this study seeks to uncover alternative readings that challenge the dominant, patriarchal epistemologies of classical thought.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the conceptualization of self (Ātman) and identity in classical Indian philosophical systems such as Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Buddhism, with a focus on their treatment (or omission) of gendered subjectivities.
2. To explore the implicit and explicit gender biases present in the foundational texts and commentaries of Indian philosophy.
3. To reinterpret key philosophical concepts such as prakṛti, puruṣa, mokṣa, and anātman from a feminist theoretical perspective.
4. To investigate the extent to which classical Indian philosophies allow for or resist inclusive interpretations that recognize non-male, non-binary, and embodied experiences.
5. To highlight the limitations of patriarchal readings of Indian philosophy and propose alternative feminist readings that challenge hierarchical gender norms.
6. To contribute to the discourse on decolonizing and diversifying Indian philosophy by incorporating feminist hermeneutics and intersectional methodologies.
7. To open up philosophical spaces for contemporary dialogues on gender justice, identity, and liberation grounded in Indian intellectual traditions.

Review of Related Literature:-

The intersection of *gender studies* and *Indian philosophy* has increasingly drawn scholarly attention over the past few decades. This review traces key contributions that form the backdrop for a feminist reinterpretation of classical Indian philosophical concepts, focusing particularly on notions of self (ātman), identity, and liberation (mokṣa).

1. Classical Indian Textual Traditions and Gender Silence

Classical Indian philosophical texts—like the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Yoga Sūtras*—are predominantly written by and for elite, upper-caste males. These texts often universalize the concept of self (ātman) or non-self (anātman) without acknowledging how gendered bodies and social positions might affect one's spiritual or philosophical status. Radhakrishnan (1951) and Dasgupta (1922) have provided authoritative overviews of Indian philosophy but lack a critical gender analysis.

2. Early Feminist Critiques

Feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (1993) and Madhu Kishwar (1990) have critiqued the androcentric nature of both classical texts and modern reinterpretations. Chakravarti explores how Brahmanical patriarchy systemically excluded women from philosophical and spiritual discourse. Similarly, Arvind Sharma (1994) in *Feminism and World Religions* presents a comparative study of religious traditions, including Hinduism, showing the minimal representation and undervaluation of women's experiences in canonical texts.

3. Gendered Readings of Sāṃkhya and Vedānta

Sāṃkhya's dualism—puruṣa (pure consciousness) and prakṛti (primordial matter)—has been a focal point of gendered interpretation. Loriliai Biernacki (2007) and Anantanand Rambachan (2006) argue that traditional readings often equate prakṛti with femininity and puruṣa with masculinity, reinforcing gender hierarchies. Biernacki's reading suggests that although prakṛti is essential to cosmology, its feminine coding relegates it to a passive, subordinate role in liberation.

4. Buddhist Perspectives on Gender and Self

The Buddhist doctrine of anātman (non-self) is sometimes celebrated for its potential to deconstruct rigid social identities. However, feminist critiques like those of Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2000) and Rita Gross (1993) reveal that despite the philosophical openness to identity fluidity, Buddhist institutions have historically maintained strict gender roles and often denied full ordination to women.

5. Feminist Hermeneutics and Deconstruction

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) challenges the male-centric voice of philosophical discourse and warns against assuming that ancient texts are "universal." Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) critiques Western feminist misreadings of non-Western traditions and urges the use of intersectionality to uncover deeper gender, caste, and class dynamics in philosophical inquiry.

6. Contributions from Contemporary Indian Feminists

Contemporary scholars like Vandana Shiva and Meera Nanda have contributed to feminist reinterpretations of Indian traditions, though often focused on ecofeminism or critiques of spiritual nationalism. Urmila Pawar and Gail Omvedt have argued that without considering caste and class, feminist readings of philosophy risk replicating elitist hierarchies.

7. Need for Reinterpretation

Most classical Indian philosophy was interpreted and systematized during the colonial and post-colonial eras by male scholars trained in Sanskrit and Western philosophical frameworks. Bina Gupta (1998) and Purushottama Bilimoria (2006) call for a pluralistic, inclusive, and critical reading of Indian philosophy that allows for subaltern and gendered voices.

Summary of Gaps in the Literature:

- *Lack of embodied perspectives:* Classical texts and mainstream commentaries largely ignore women's lived and bodily experiences.
- *Essentialism and gender binaries:* Traditional philosophy often reinforces fixed roles for women through metaphorical and cosmological associations.
- *Neglect of intersectionality:* Few studies explore how caste, class, and sexuality intersect with gender in philosophical discourse.
- *Absence of feminist hermeneutics:* Indian philosophical traditions have yet to be widely re-read through feminist, deconstructive frameworks.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a feminist reinterpretation of key classical Indian philosophical doctrines, encouraging a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of identity and liberation.

Methodology of the Study:-

This study adopts a *qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary approach*, rooted in *feminist philosophical hermeneutics* and *textual analysis*, to examine how gender and identity are constructed, represented, or excluded in classical Indian philosophical traditions. The methodology involves a critical reading of primary texts, supported by secondary feminist and philosophical literature, to reinterpret foundational ideas in a gender-inclusive framework.

1. Research Design:

The research follows a *theoretical-analytical design*, focusing on conceptual reinterpretation rather than empirical data collection. It involves:

- Critical textual analysis of selected philosophical texts.
- Application of feminist interpretive lenses.
- Comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary interpretations.

This design enables the researcher to deconstruct philosophical concepts and re-evaluate them from the perspective of feminist theory and gender studies.

2. Data Sources:

A. Primary Texts:

- *Upaniṣads* (esp. Brhadāranyaka and Chāndogya)
- *Bhagavad Gītā*
- *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*
- *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*
- Core Buddhist texts (e.g., *Dhammapada*, *Majjhima Nikāya*)
- Commentaries by Śaṅkara (Vedānta) and Vācaspati Miśra (Sāṃkhya, Nyāya)

B. Secondary Texts:

- Feminist philosophical literature
- Scholarly works on Indian philosophy and gender (e.g., Sharma, Spivak, Biernacki, Tsomo, Chakravarti)
- Contemporary critiques of caste, patriarchy, and gender roles within Indian religious-philosophical systems

3. Analytical Framework:

The analysis is guided by the following critical frameworks:

- *Feminist Hermeneutics*: Applying tools from feminist philosophy (e.g., standpoint theory, intersectionality, deconstruction) to classical Indian texts.
- *Post-structuralist Deconstruction*: Inspired by thinkers like Derrida and Spivak, this approach is used to reveal silences, exclusions, and implicit biases in metaphysical and epistemological claims.
- *Comparative Philosophical Methodology*: Contrasting traditional interpretations (largely androcentric) with feminist reinterpretations to expose gaps and silences.
- *Intersectionality*: Considering how gender intersects with caste, class, and religion in the philosophical discourse and its implications for the concept of the self and liberation.

4. Steps of Analysis:

1. *Textual Reading and Selection*: Identifying key passages from classical texts that discuss identity, self (ātman), body, and liberation (mokṣa).
2. *Contextual Interpretation*: Understanding these texts in their historical, cultural, and religious contexts, especially concerning the role of women and gender minorities in society.
3. *Feminist Reinterpretation*: Re-reading these passages through feminist theories (e.g., standpoint epistemology, embodied subjectivity, critique of dualism).
4. *Comparative Critique*: Juxtaposing classical patriarchal readings with feminist alternatives to propose a pluralistic and inclusive philosophical view.

5. Delimitations of the Study:

- The study is *textual and theoretical*, not ethnographic or survey-based.
- Focuses on select schools (Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Buddhism) rather than all systems.
- Considers *feminist reinterpretation*, not full-scale historical documentation of women philosophers in ancient India.

6. Ethical Considerations:

As this is a textual and theoretical study, no human participants are involved. Ethical engagement includes:

- Fair representation of philosophical schools
- Acknowledgment of cultural sensitivities
- Respect for the integrity of classical texts while allowing space for reinterpretation

Conclusion of Methodological Approach:

This methodology seeks to *bridge classical philosophical inquiry with contemporary feminist concerns*, using rigorous hermeneutics to reveal new dimensions of Indian thought. The study does not aim to dismiss traditional philosophy but to enrich it by incorporating *marginalised voices and embodied experiences* that have historically been overlooked.

Major Findings of the Study:-

The study, through a feminist hermeneutical analysis of classical Indian philosophical systems, arrives at several significant findings related to gender, identity, and the nature of self and liberation. These findings underscore the philosophical depth of Indian traditions while also revealing critical gaps in their inclusivity regarding gender and embodied experience.

1. Absence of Gendered Subjectivity in Classical Philosophical Discourse

Classical Indian texts often present concepts such as ātman (self), mokṣa (liberation), and puruṣa (consciousness) as universal. However, upon feminist reinterpretation, it becomes evident that these universals are *implicitly male-centric*, constructed without accounting for the lived experiences of women or gender-diverse individuals. The erasure of gendered embodiment leads to philosophical abstractions that fail to address real-world social inequalities.

2. Reinforcement of Gender Dualism in Sāṃkhya

While Sāṃkhya philosophy theoretically affirms the co-eternality of puruṣa and prakṛti, it *symbolically aligns puruṣa with masculinity* (pure, passive, spiritual) and prakṛti with femininity (active, material, and dynamic). This gender coding reinforces hierarchical binaries where the feminine is seen as the "other" to be transcended for spiritual liberation. Such symbolism indirectly devalues the feminine principle despite its cosmic significance.

3. Liberation (Mokṣa) as a Disembodied Ideal

The classical conception of mokṣa involves transcending bodily existence and social roles, including gender. While this might appear liberating, feminist critique reveals that such ideals *neglect and devalue embodied, relational, and gendered experiences*, which are central to many women's lives. This promotes an *androcentric spiritual model* that fails to affirm women's pathways to self-realization within embodied realities.

4. Buddhist Philosophy's Ambiguous Engagement with Gender

Buddhism, with its doctrine of anātman (no-self), theoretically offers *greater fluidity in identity construction*. However, its institutional history—marked by *gender restrictions in monastic orders and textual marginalization of nuns*—reveals a contradiction between philosophical openness and practical exclusion. Thus, even in supposedly egalitarian systems, gender hierarchies remain embedded in practice.

5. Textual Silencing and Absence of Women's Voices

Canonical texts rarely include women as philosophers or authoritative voices, resulting in a *gendered silence* that persists across interpretations. Where women appear, they are often depicted symbolically (e.g., as temptresses, mothers, or cosmic forces) rather than as philosophical agents. Feminist re-readings uncover this *epistemic erasure* and call for reclamation of subaltern perspectives.

6. Possibility of Feminist Reinterpretation within the Tradition

Despite their historical limitations, Indian philosophical systems are not static. Feminist reinterpretation finds *spaces of resistance, redefinition, and transformation* within these traditions. For example:

- Prakṛti can be reimagined as a powerful, non-subordinate cosmic force.
- The concept of anātman can be used to challenge fixed gender identities and social roles.
- Embodiment can be reclaimed as a site of philosophical and spiritual value.

7. Need for Intersectional and Inclusive Philosophical Engagement

The study highlights that gender cannot be understood in isolation. *Caste, class, and sexuality* significantly shape one's access to education, philosophy, and spiritual life in Indian society. Classical philosophy often mirrors the elitism of its authors and audiences. A feminist approach urges a more *intersectional reading* to make philosophy inclusive and socially grounded.

Summary of Key Insights:

Classical Concept	Traditional View	Feminist Finding
Ātman / Self	Universal, genderless	Implicitly male; lacks gendered experiences
Mokṣa / Liberation	Disembodied escape	Neglects embodied, relational existence
Prakṛti / Puruṣa	Cosmic dualism	Symbolic gender coding; reinforces hierarchy
Buddhist Anātman	No fixed self	Open to reinterpretation; institutionally gendered
Women's Voices	Rarely present	Need for inclusion and reinterpretation

These findings indicate that classical Indian philosophy, though rich and profound, *requires critical engagement and feminist re-reading* to become more inclusive, intersectional, and relevant to contemporary discourse on gender and identity.

Recommendations / Suggestions:-

Based on the critical analysis and findings of this study, several recommendations emerge to promote a more inclusive and gender-sensitive engagement with classical Indian philosophy. These suggestions aim to enrich both academic discourse and practical understanding of Indian philosophical traditions through feminist reinterpretation.

1. Promote Feminist Reinterpretation of Classical Texts

Academic institutions and scholars should actively encourage *feminist readings of classical Indian philosophical texts*, using interdisciplinary methods that include gender studies, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies. This will help uncover marginalized voices and challenge the male-centric narrative that dominates traditional commentaries.

2. Revise Curriculum in Philosophy and Religious Studies

University syllabi—especially in Indian philosophy and religious studies—should be revised to *include gender-sensitive content*, feminist critiques, and contributions from women scholars. Integrating texts by authors like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Uma Chakravarti, and Rita Gross can foster critical engagement and widen interpretive horizons for students.

3. Reimagine Key Philosophical Concepts

There is a need to *reconstruct and reinterpret concepts such as ātman, prakṛti, and mokṣa* in ways that affirm embodiment, relationality, and diversity of experiences, especially those of women and gender minorities. This involves moving beyond disembodied or binary models of liberation and identity.

4. Recover and Acknowledge Women's Contributions

Historical research should focus on *recovering the voices and contributions of women philosophers*, ascetics, poets, and mystics who may have been overlooked or marginalized in the mainstream tradition. Oral histories, regional texts, and non-Sanskritic sources can provide valuable insights into these lost narratives.

5. Apply Intersectional Frameworks

Feminist philosophy should be practiced with *intersectionality in mind*, recognizing that gender does not operate in isolation from caste, class, religion, and regional identity. A gender-sensitive approach must also be a *caste-sensitive, class-conscious, and culturally rooted* engagement with the tradition.

6. Create Spaces for Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity

Efforts should be made to *bridge classical philosophical insights with modern feminist ethics and politics*, especially in areas such as identity, autonomy, embodiment, and liberation. Such dialogues can help in creating a philosophy that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary concerns.

7. Encourage Inclusive and Decolonized Philosophical Research

Philosophical research must *decolonize its methods and epistemologies* by questioning not only Western dominance but also upper-caste patriarchal dominance within Indian traditions. Feminist and Dalit perspectives should be considered legitimate sources of philosophical inquiry.

8. Support Gender-Inclusive Spiritual Practices and Institutions

Philosophical ideas influence religious and social institutions. Therefore, there must be advocacy for *inclusive practices in temples, monasteries, ashrams, and academic centers*, where all genders can participate equally in spiritual, scholarly, and ritual roles.

Conclusion of Recommendations:

A feminist reinterpretation of Indian philosophy not only *challenges patriarchal readings* but also *enriches the tradition* by making it more inclusive, dynamic, and ethically relevant. These recommendations aim to initiate transformative practices in scholarship, pedagogy, and public discourse, paving the way for a pluralistic and just philosophical future.

Conclusion:-

This study has critically examined classical Indian philosophical traditions through the lens of feminist theory, revealing the often-overlooked gendered assumptions embedded within notions of self (ātman), identity, and liberation (mokṣa). While Indian philosophy claims to offer universal metaphysical insights, its historical development and traditional interpretations have largely centered on male experiences, leaving women and gender-diverse perspectives marginalized or invisible.

By revisiting foundational texts from schools such as Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Buddhism, the research highlights how dualisms (such as puruṣa-prakṛti), ideals of disembodied liberation, and symbolic gender codings perpetuate patriarchal ideologies—even within systems that advocate for spiritual equality. The study also reveals the gaps and silences in these traditions, particularly the absence of women's voices as thinkers, commentators, and philosophical agents.

However, the research also demonstrates that classical Indian philosophy contains conceptual spaces that are *open to reinterpretation and reimagination*. Feminist hermeneutics, post-structuralist critiques, and intersectional methodologies can be employed not to reject these traditions, but to *expand, challenge, and enrich them*. Concepts like prakṛti and anātman, when critically re-read, offer opportunities to reconceptualize gender, embodiment, and identity in inclusive and transformative ways.

Ultimately, this study advocates for a *pluralistic, gender-just, and socially grounded philosophical discourse* that transcends traditional hierarchies and speaks to the diverse realities of contemporary individuals. Through sustained critical engagement, Indian philosophy can evolve into a more equitable field—one that honors both its intellectual depth and its ethical responsibility to all human beings, regardless of gender, caste, or class.

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