

Relevance of Manusmriti and Sanskrit Texts in Contemporary Gender Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrsml.v13.i6.2>

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of ancient Indian literature and contemporary gender studies presents a complex field of inquiry that demands a multidimensional approach. This paper examines the relevance of *Manusmriti*, one of the foundational Dharmaśāstra texts in Sanskrit literature, and other classical Sanskrit texts in the context of modern gender discourses. By revisiting ancient prescriptions on gender roles, duties, and social norms, this study offers a critical analysis of how these texts have historically influenced societal perceptions of gender and how they are interpreted or contested in the present. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that blends textual analysis, feminist critique, and historiography, this paper explores both the prescriptive roles assigned to women and the subversive readings of feminine agency within Sanskrit literature. While *Manusmriti* has been both revered and vilified across historical timelines, its impact on legal, religious, and cultural frameworks remains significant. The study also investigates how contemporary feminist scholars and sociologists revisit these texts to either challenge their patriarchal foundations or to retrieve empowering narratives buried within them. The findings suggest that while certain aspects of *Manusmriti* are incongruent with modern values of gender equality, Sanskrit texts also contain progressive elements that can contribute to a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in Indian society today.

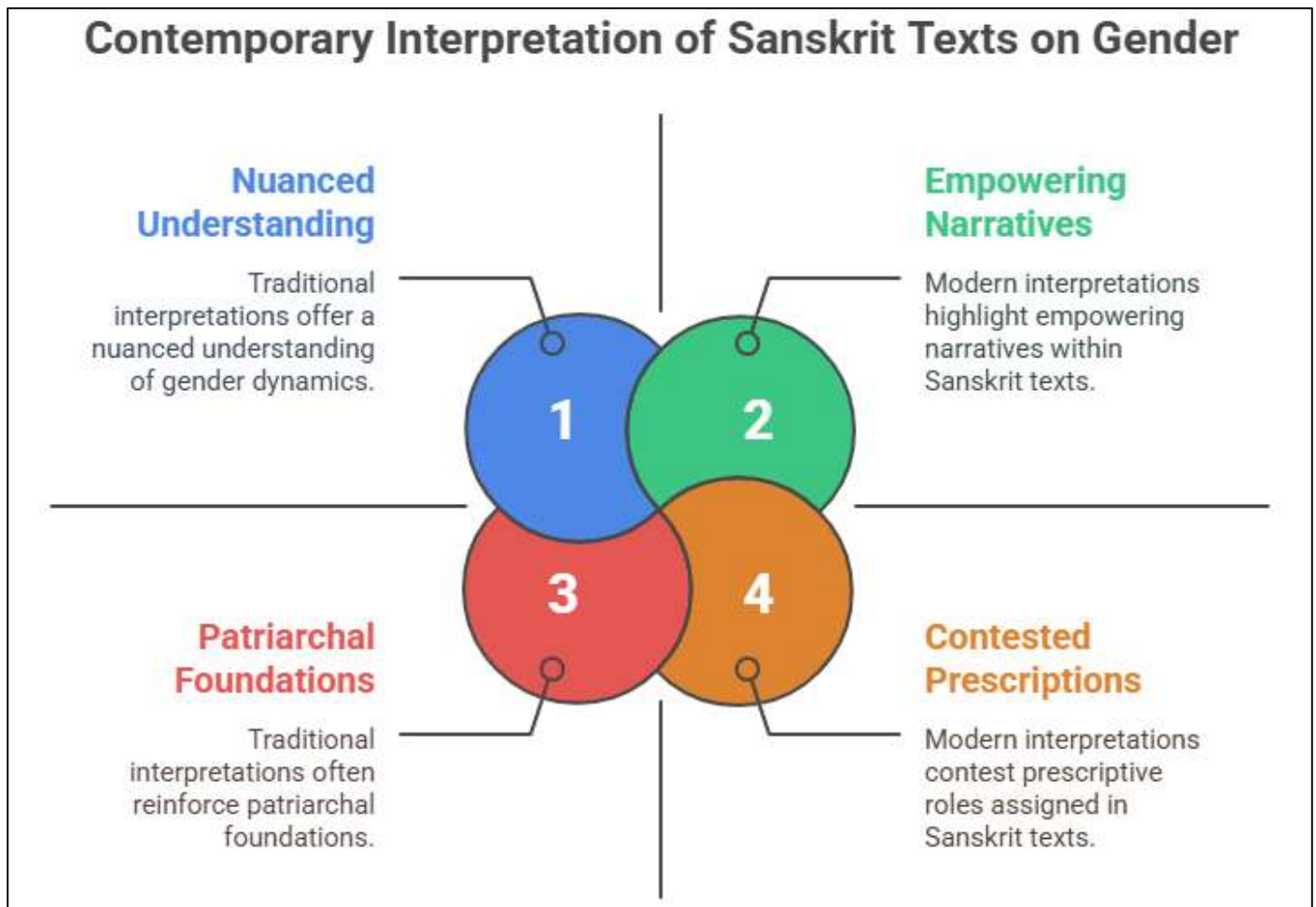
KEYWORDS

Manusmriti; Sanskrit Literature; Gender Studies; Feminism in India; Dharmaśāstra; Patriarchy; Feminist Hermeneutics; Ancient Texts and Modernity; Intersectionality; Women in Sanskrit Texts

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary gender studies in India are increasingly turning toward indigenous knowledge systems to contextualize the origins and evolution of gender roles in society. Among the ancient Indian texts, *Manusmriti*,

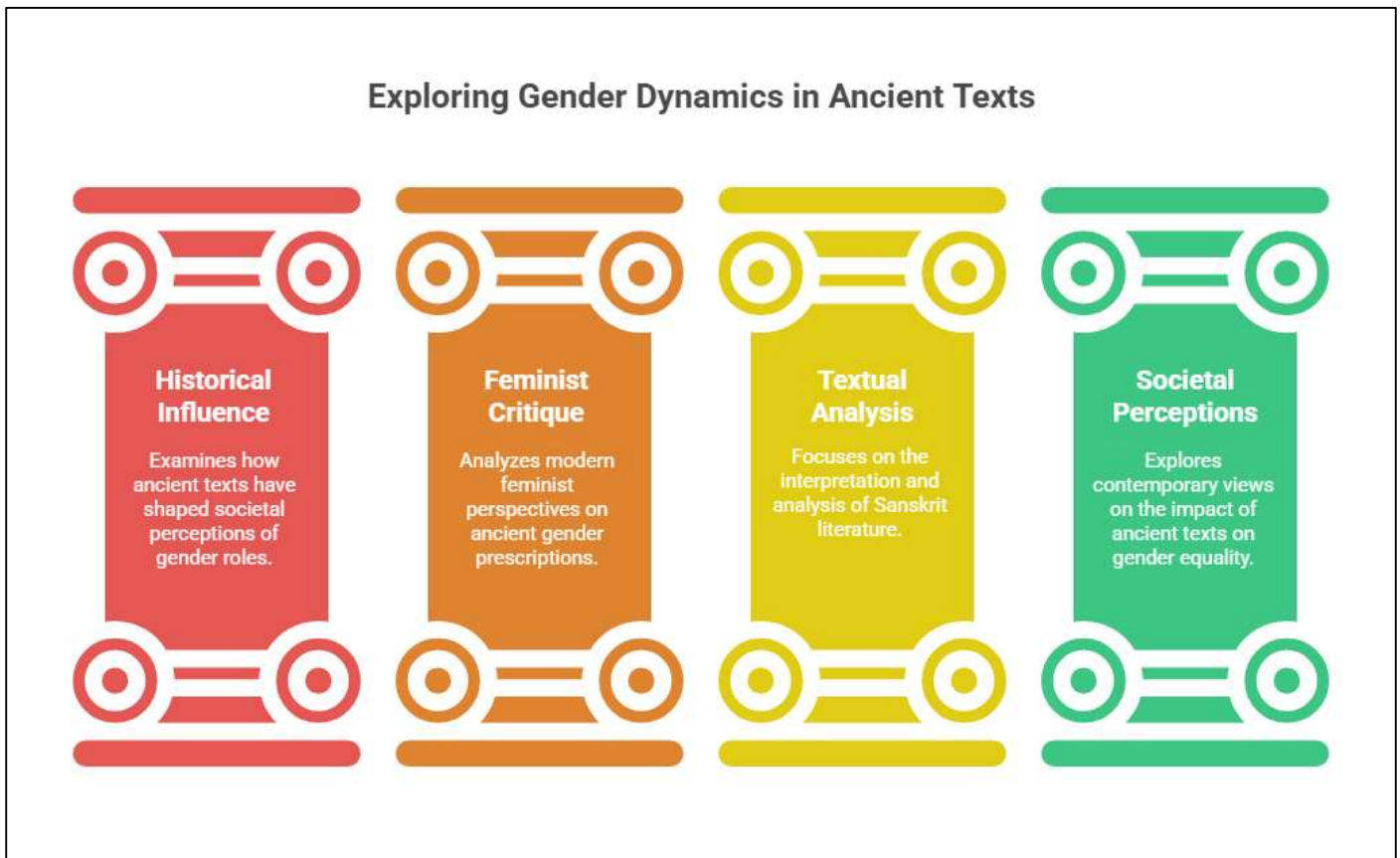
also known as the *Laws of Manu*, stands out as one of the most influential scriptures governing social conduct, including gender roles and familial responsibilities. Written between 200 BCE and 200 CE, *Manusmriti* has been both a source of traditional authority and a target of modern feminist critique. It forms a significant part of the Dharmaśāstra literature, prescribing rules that touch upon every aspect of life—from birth and marriage to inheritance and moral behavior.



In parallel, other Sanskrit texts—such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Rigveda*, and various Upanishads—offer diverse portrayals of femininity, masculinity, and the socio-religious contexts of gender identity. These texts range from being deeply patriarchal to surprisingly progressive, depending on the interpretative lens employed. The dual nature of these works makes them fertile ground for reevaluation in the age of gender equality, intersectionality, and inclusive discourse.

This manuscript aims to interrogate the gender constructs embedded within *Manusmriti* and other Sanskrit texts using the tools of contemporary gender theory, including feminist critique, postcolonial analysis, and discourse analysis. The relevance of these texts is not only historical but also ideological, as they continue to shape cultural attitudes, legal norms, and public policies in various forms, often unconsciously.

By analyzing both the oppressive and empowering elements present in these texts, the paper seeks to present a balanced and comprehensive view. Furthermore, it investigates how reinterpretation and reclamation of ancient literature can contribute to a more rooted and contextual feminist praxis in India. It also raises critical questions: Can these texts be reconciled with contemporary gender ideals? Are there elements that can be re-appropriated for empowerment? What challenges do scholars face when reading Sanskrit texts through a modern lens?



LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on *Manusmriti* and Sanskrit texts in the context of gender studies is vast, complex, and often polarized. Scholars and commentators have engaged with these texts from legal, theological, feminist, and sociological perspectives, resulting in a rich, albeit contested, body of knowledge.

1. Historical and Traditional Perspectives

Classical Indologists such as Max Müller and Patrick Olivelle have translated and interpreted *Manusmriti* from a historical-philological standpoint. Müller viewed *Manusmriti* as a codified system reflecting the Brahmanical worldview of ancient India. Olivelle (2004), in his annotated translation, emphasized the

heterogeneity of Dharma literature and warned against reading *Manusmriti* as a static legal text. These early studies laid the groundwork for understanding the text's structure and linguistic complexity but often underplayed its gendered implications.

2. Feminist Critique

Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Madhu Kishwar have approached *Manusmriti* as a text that institutionalized patriarchy in the Indian subcontinent. Chakravarti (1993) in particular emphasized how the text constructed an ideal womanhood based on chastity, obedience, and dependence on male kin, effectively marginalizing women from public spheres. Kishwar, while critical, advocated for a more nuanced understanding that accounts for historical transformations and localized practices.

Leela Dube's anthropological studies explored the persistence of Manusmriti-like norms in rural kinship and marriage patterns. She argued that such ancient texts, though not legally binding today, continue to influence gender relations through cultural and ritual practices.

3. Revisionist and Subaltern Readings

Some modern scholars and activists argue for a revisionist reading of Sanskrit texts to recover lost or overlooked narratives of female agency. For example, Wendy Doniger's controversial translation of *Manusmriti* suggested that the text contains contradictions and negotiations that indicate social mobility and resistance. Others, like Romila Thapar, emphasize the need to differentiate between textual ideology and historical reality.

Dalit feminists and subaltern theorists critique the Brahmanical patriarchy embedded in *Manusmriti* and highlight its exclusionary practices that affected both women and lower castes. Kancha Ilaiah and Gopal Guru have challenged the legitimacy of such texts as representative of Indian civilization, arguing that they represent a narrow, upper-caste male perspective.

4. Contemporary Gender Theory and Sanskrit Texts

More recently, Sanskrit scholars and gender theorists are combining hermeneutics with gender studies. Laurie Patton, for instance, emphasizes feminist readings of Vedic texts and suggests that alternative translations and contextual readings can unveil complex gender dynamics. These approaches are supported by post-structuralist theory, which advocates reading classical texts not as monolithic truths but as open to multiple, even contradictory, interpretations.

Furthermore, Indian feminists working within vernacular traditions—such as Meena Kandasamy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni—have reimagined figures like Draupadi and Sita as symbols of resistance rather than submission. These literary interventions contribute to a broader cultural reappropriation of Sanskrit literature through a feminist lens.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a **qualitative textual analysis** methodology, drawing from interpretive frameworks within **feminist theory**, **postcolonial critique**, and **discourse analysis**. The study is structured around the examination of primary sources—particularly *Manusmriti*—along with selected Sanskrit texts (*Rigveda*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*). These are examined in both **original Sanskrit excerpts** and **scholarly English translations**.

1. Textual Corpus

The textual corpus includes:

- *Manusmriti* (with references to Patrick Olivelle's annotated edition)
- Select verses from the *Rigveda* (e.g., hymns praising goddesses and priestesses)
- Narrative sections of the *Mahabharata* (e.g., Draupadi's vastraharan episode)
- Sections from the *Ramayana* (e.g., Sita's agnipariksha)

These texts are selected for their recurrent citation in both scholarly and popular discourse on Indian gender norms.

2. Analytical Framework

The analysis is conducted through three overlapping lenses:

- **Feminist Hermeneutics:** Interprets the texts in terms of gendered power relations, representation of femininity, and prescribed roles of women.
- **Critical Historicism:** Contextualizes the texts within the socio-political and religious environment of their time, distinguishing between prescriptive norms and lived realities.
- **Postcolonial Gender Theory:** Recognizes how colonial readings and later nationalist narratives framed Sanskrit texts as either gloriously egalitarian or irredeemably patriarchal.

3. Data Collection

The primary data involved collecting specific verses and commentaries that reference gender roles, status of women, and caste-based stratification. Secondary data sources included journal articles, books, conference papers, and critiques from Indian and international gender theorists.

4. Analytical Procedure

The selected texts were coded thematically using NVivo-style manual categorization into:

- Female agency and subjectivity
- Normative gender prescriptions
- Metaphors of purity and honor
- Legal and social injunctions
- Representations of transgressive women

The coded data were then interpreted in terms of alignment or conflict with contemporary gender justice paradigms.

RESULTS

1. Prescriptive Gender Roles in Manusmriti

The *Manusmriti* presents a **codified patriarchy**, positioning women under perpetual male guardianship:

- “A woman must be dependent on her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons in old age” (Chapter 5, Verse 148).
- Women are largely excluded from independent property rights, education, and public duties.

Such verses suggest a hierarchical ordering of gender, legitimizing male authority and institutionalizing female subordination.

However, contradictions also emerge:

- The same text says, “Where women are honored, divinity blossoms; where they are dishonored, all actions remain unfruitful” (Chapter 3, Verse 56).

This duality suggests that women were revered symbolically but restricted practically.

2. Sanskrit Texts Offering Nuanced Gender Narratives

a) Rigveda

Contrary to *Manusmriti*, the *Rigveda* contains hymns composed by women like **Lopamudra** and **Ghosha**, illustrating a tradition of female intellectual contribution. Goddesses like **Saraswati** and **Ushas** represent wisdom and awakening. This reflects a **non-monolithic construction** of womanhood.

b) Mahabharata

While **Draupadi** is subjected to public humiliation, her defiant questions in the Sabha (assembly) are radical. She asks whether a woman can be wagered by a man who had lost himself, invoking an early feminist assertion of autonomy.

Other women like **Kunti**, **Gandhari**, and **Amba** reveal the complex interplay of duty, rebellion, and victimhood in epic literature.

c) Ramayana

Sita embodies both the **ideal wife** and a **contested figure of endurance**. Her agnipariksha is viewed as unjust, yet her final rejection of Rama's legitimacy by returning to the Earth is a powerful act of **self-assertion**.

3. Contemporary Readings and Cultural Reinterpretations

Feminist scholars in India argue for a **selective reclamation** of Sanskrit literature:

- **Rewriting myths:** Authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Volga reconstruct feminine characters to reflect autonomy.
- **Legal critique:** Activists argue that societal biases rooted in *Manusmriti* continue to influence court judgments and marriage customs, particularly in rural India.
- **Religious debates:** The role of women in priesthood and temple rituals is being reevaluated, with calls to revisit Vedic norms over post-Vedic restrictions.

CONCLUSION

The relevance of *Manusmriti* and Sanskrit texts in contemporary gender studies lies not merely in their historical value but in their **enduring socio-cultural influence**. While these texts contain clear instances of gender bias and patriarchal normativity, they are also sites of **ideological contestation** and **interpretative potential**.

Manusmriti—often demonized by feminist critics—needs to be situated within its **time-bound social order**, recognizing its **contradictory stances** on the dignity and roles of women. It should not be dismissed outright, but critically engaged with to understand how ancient moral codes still echo in laws, customs, and cultural attitudes.

Other Sanskrit texts, particularly the *Vedas* and epics, reveal **pluralistic voices**—from subjugated women to powerful goddesses, from obedient wives to questioning queens. These voices, when reinterpreted through feminist and postcolonial lenses, become tools not of oppression but of **cultural transformation**.

The findings advocate for a **contextual feminist pedagogy** that neither romanticizes nor rejects the past but engages it thoughtfully. Future gender studies in India should strive to **indigenize feminist discourse**, drawing from both Western theory and **South Asian intellectual heritage**. Only then can we build a gender-sensitive framework that resonates with both the historical ethos and the aspirations of modern India.

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