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Critical Analytical Study: Woman, Silence and Philosophical Authority in Classical Indian Texts

(*With Special Reference to Gender Bias in Vedic, Upanishadic and Dharmashastric Traditions)*

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Abstract

This study critically examines how women, silence, and philosophical authority intersect in classical Indian texts, arguing that gender bias is central to the formation of authority within Vedic, Upanishadic, and Dharmashastra traditions. While these texts present influential metaphysical and ethical ideas, they are constructed within patriarchal frameworks that systematically restrict women's access to philosophical authority. The analysis contends that women's voices are often suppressed or mediated through cultural constructions of silence, which function both as a contemplative practice and an instrument of exclusion. In early Vedic and Upanishadic texts, exceptional figures like Gargi and Maitreyi display intellectual agency, but their rarity underscores a tradition that largely sidelines women's philosophical participation. Dharmashastric literature further institutionalises silence by prescribing it as a normative social and moral expectation for women, thereby formalising their exclusion from education, scriptural access, and debate. This enforced silence perpetuates male dominance and codifies authority as masculine. The central argument of the study is that these gendered structures of silence and authority are maintained by social power—not necessity—linking philosophical legitimacy to masculinity and silence to femininity. Through a feminist philosophical lens,

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the research uncovers the logic by which classical Indian philosophy often marginalises women and challenges this gender hierarchy by advocating for reinterpretation and recovery of suppressed voices. Situated within feminist epistemology and the concept of epistemic injustice, the study insists that women's systematic exclusion from philosophical discourse reflects broader issues in the politics of knowledge. Ultimately, the project contends that only by directly addressing how silence and authority are gendered can Indian philosophy become more inclusive and ethically robust, thus contributing meaningfully to global debates on gender, knowledge, and power.

Keywords: woman, silence, philosophical authority, classical Indian philosophy, gender bias, Vedic tradition, Upanishads, Dharmashastras, feminist epistemology, epistemic injustice

1. Introduction

Classical Indian philosophy holds a key place in global thought, shaping metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and concepts of liberation (*mokṣa*). The Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharmashastras offer complex perspectives on reality and moral order (Phillips, 2012), but they predominantly reflect male perspectives. This study's central argument is that patriarchal structures have made women's presence marginal or silenced within these traditions (Tharu & Lalita, 1991), not by accident but by systematic design. Although some women—such as Gārgī, Maitreyī, Lopāmudrā, and other ṛṣikās—are named, their rare inclusion illustrates both exceptionalism and a broader pattern of regulated exclusion (Ganguli, 2016). The rise of Dharmashastric norms intensified this exclusion by transforming silence into a prescribed virtue for women and equating authority with masculinity (Chakravarti, 2003). This research foregrounds the argument that silence in these contexts is not merely the absence of speech, but a symbolically and socially produced tool of patriarchal power. While silence (mauna) for men often signifies wisdom and self-mastery, when imposed on women, it operates as a disciplinary mechanism restricting their legitimacy and agency. This gendered distinction establishes and reinforces the association between authority and masculinity, relegating women to objects of regulation rather than participants in knowledge creation (Keller, 1985). By adopting a feminist critical perspective, the analysis directly interrogates these sources of gender bias and reads the exclusion of women from philosophical authority as a specific form of epistemic injustice (Jaggar, 1983; Nussbaum, 2001). The study contends that Indian philosophical texts are internally complex, containing resistance and alternative possibilities. Through careful examination of canonical texts, it demonstrates how gendered authority is established and contested (Sen, 2005). Ultimately, the central thesis is that only feminist reinterpretation can effectively challenge entrenched exclusion,

paving the way for a more inclusive philosophical discourse (Ram-Prasad, 2013).

2. Conceptual Framework: Silence, Gender and Philosophical Authority

Philosophical authority may be broadly understood as the socially and intellectually sanctioned capacity to produce, interpret, and transmit knowledge within a given tradition. In classical Indian philosophy, such authority is not merely a matter of intellectual competence but is deeply embedded in institutional, ritualistic, and textual frameworks (Phillips, 2012). Access to sacred knowledge—particularly the Vedas and their interpretative traditions—was historically regulated through gender, caste, and social status (Chakravarti, 2003). Consequently, philosophical authority functioned as a structured privilege rather than an open intellectual field, with women occupying a marginal position within these epistemic hierarchies. In Vedic and post-Vedic traditions, philosophical authority was closely associated with mastery over sacred texts (*śruti* and *smṛti*), ritual competence (*adhikāra*), and participation in public discourse such as debates (*vāda* and *śāstrārtha*). These domains were largely male-dominated, as women were often denied formal education in the Vedas and excluded from ritual and pedagogical institutions (Bühler, 1991). As a result, authority over philosophical knowledge became gendered, reinforcing the idea that men were the primary bearers and interpreters of truth, while women were positioned as recipients or followers of prescribed norms (Narayanan, 1997). Silence, within this framework, emerges as a significant conceptual category. In classical Indian philosophy, silence (*mauna*) holds a paradoxical status. On the one hand, it is revered as a spiritual and philosophical ideal. Silence is associated with self-discipline, meditative absorption, and the realisation of the ultimate truth beyond linguistic expression (Olivelle, 1996). The Upanishadic emphasis on ineffability (*anirvacanīyatā*) and the yogic valorisation of inner stillness confer a positive epistemic value upon silence. For male ascetics and philosophers, silence often signifies depth of understanding and mastery over the senses, thereby enhancing philosophical authority. On the other hand, silence also functions as a marker of exclusion, particularly when imposed upon women. In Dharmashastric literature, women's silence is repeatedly emphasised as a moral and social virtue. Prescriptions that encourage women to be restrained in speech, obedient, and deferential reinforce silence as a form of social discipline rather than philosophical choice (Bühler, 1991). This enforced silence effectively limits women's participation in philosophical dialogue and knowledge production, thereby undermining their epistemic agency. Unlike male silence, which is interpreted as transcendence, female silence is construed as submission. From a feminist philosophical perspective, silence is not a monolithic phenomenon but a complex and ambivalent one. Feminist theorists argue that silence can simultaneously signify

oppression and resistance (Young, 1990). Imposed silence reflects mechanisms of power that restrict expression, visibility, and authority. In the context of classical Indian texts, such silence serves as a tool of patriarchal control, preserving male dominance within philosophical and religious institutions (Spivak, 1988). Women's silence, in this sense, is symptomatic of their exclusion from recognised forms of knowledge and authority. At the same time, feminist philosophy cautions against interpreting all silence as passive or purely oppressive. Strategic or chosen silence can function as a form of resistance, contemplation, or critique (Jaggar, 1983). In certain philosophical contexts, silence may serve as a refusal to conform to dominant discursive norms or as an assertion of inner autonomy. Some representations of women in Upanishadic dialogues suggest moments where silence follows profound questioning, indicating a depth of insight that transcends verbal articulation. However, the crucial distinction lies in whether silence is self-chosen or socially enforced. When silence is mandated by normative codes, it ceases to be a philosophical practice and becomes an instrument of exclusion. Gender plays a central role in determining how silence is interpreted and valued. The same act of silence acquires different meanings depending on whether it is performed by a man or a woman. This asymmetry reflects broader gender biases within classical Indian epistemology, where rationality, speech, and authority are implicitly masculinised (Keller, 1985). Women's voices, when they appear, are often framed as exceptional or symbolic rather than normative. Consequently, silence becomes a gendered condition that reinforces unequal access to philosophical authority. The concept of epistemic injustice provides a useful analytical tool in this context. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers (Nussbaum, 2001). Women in classical Indian traditions often experience testimonial injustice, in which their credibility is diminished, and hermeneutical injustice, in which their experiences lack adequate conceptual representation within dominant philosophical frameworks. Silence both results from and contributes to such injustices, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. This conceptual framework underscores the need for a nuanced and critical analysis of silence in relation to gender and philosophical authority. Rather than treating silence as inherently negative or positive, this study examines the conditions under which silence operates and the power relations it sustains. By situating silence within feminist epistemology and classical Indian philosophical contexts, the study aims to reveal how authority is constructed, contested, and gendered (Collins, 1998). Such an approach enables a deeper understanding of the ideological structures that shape philosophical traditions and opens the possibility of reinterpreting classical texts in more inclusive and equitable ways.

3. Women and Philosophical Authority in Vedic Tradition

The Vedic tradition represents the earliest stratum of classical Indian thought and provides crucial insight into the initial formation of philosophical authority. The *Ṛg Veda*, in particular, contains hymns attributed to women sages (*ṛṣikās*) such as Ghoṣā, Lopāmudrā, Apālā, Viśvavārā, and Romāśā (Ganguli, 2016). The presence of these women composers challenges the assumption that early Indian philosophical and spiritual reflection was exclusively male. Their hymns demonstrate not only poetic and ritual competence but also profound engagement with metaphysical themes such as cosmic order (*ṛta*), divine-human relationships, desire, suffering, and healing (Zaehner, 1962). These contributions indicate that women were, at least in certain contexts, recognised as capable of spiritual insight and authoritative expression. The hymns attributed to women's sages reveal an experiential dimension of Vedic thought that is often overlooked. Ghoṣā's hymns, for instance, articulate themes of bodily suffering, desire for wholeness, and divine grace, integrating personal experience with cosmic significance. Apālā's hymn reflects a transformative encounter with the divine that combines ritual symbolism with embodied healing. Lopāmudrā's verses engage directly with questions of desire, ascetic restraint, and marital partnership, offering a nuanced reflection on the relationship between spiritual pursuit and worldly life (O'Flaherty, 1980). These compositions suggest that early Vedic culture allowed limited spaces where women could articulate philosophical and existential concerns within the sacred framework. Despite these examples, women's philosophical authority in the Vedic tradition remains constrained and exceptional. The *ṛṣikās* constitute a very small fraction of the total Vedic seers, and their inclusion does not translate into sustained institutional recognition (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Their authority appears symbolic rather than structural, celebrated as individual inspiration rather than integrated into a broader pedagogical or ritual system. The fact that these hymns survive within the Vedic corpus suggests acknowledgement, yet their rarity underscores the gendered asymmetry of philosophical participation. As Vedic culture evolved, philosophical authority became increasingly tied to ritual specialisation, hereditary priesthood, and mastery over complex sacrificial practices. These developments contributed to the consolidation of male dominance in religious and philosophical institutions (Collins, 1998). Access to Vedic education (*upanayana*), ritual performance, and textual transmission was gradually restricted, reinforcing gender-based exclusions. While early Vedic society may have exhibited relative fluidity, the later ritualisation of knowledge marginalised women's voices and limited their participation in philosophical discourse (Doniger, 2009). From a critical perspective, the representation of women's sages in the Vedas raises important questions about the nature of authority itself. Authority in early Vedic thought appears to be linked to inspired vision (*darśana*) rather than formal institutional power. This may explain the presence of women seers whose authority derives from experiential insight rather than ritual hierarchy (Zelliot, 1996). However,

as authority becomes increasingly codified through lineage, textual mastery, and institutional control, experiential authority loses prominence, and women's participation diminishes correspondingly. Feminist philosophical analysis suggests that the marginalisation of women in later Vedic developments is not accidental but reflective of broader social transformations (Chakravarti, 2003). The shift from a relatively flexible, inspiration-based model of authority to a rigid, patriarchal structure mirrors changes in social organisation, property relations, and kinship systems. Women's philosophical contributions, though acknowledged, are not allowed to challenge the emerging male monopoly over sacred knowledge. Moreover, the framing of women's authority as exceptional reinforces their marginal status. By portraying women's sages as rare anomalies, the tradition implicitly normalises male authority as the standard (Sen, 2005). This narrative strategy allows for the inclusion of women without fundamentally altering the gendered structure of philosophical authority. Consequently, women's voices are preserved but contained, admired but not emulated. In conclusion, the Vedic tradition presents a complex and ambivalent picture of women's philosophical authority. While the presence of women sages in the *Ṛg Veda* indicates that women were not entirely excluded from early philosophical reflection, their participation remains limited and symbolic. The gradual monopolisation of ritual and textual authority by men led to the marginalisation of women's voices and the consolidation of gendered hierarchies of knowledge (Chakravarti, 2003). A critical feminist rereading of the Vedic corpus thus reveals both the possibilities and the constraints of women's philosophical agency in early Indian thought, highlighting the need to distinguish between symbolic recognition and substantive inclusion in the history of philosophy.

4. Upanishadic Dialogues: Speech, Silence and Female Intellectual Agency

The Upanishads represent a significant shift in classical Indian thought from ritualistic concerns to explicit philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality, self, and ultimate knowledge (brahmavidyā) (Olivelle, 1996). Within this dialogical and reflective tradition, women appear more visibly as intellectual participants than in later normative texts. Most notably, figures such as Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī emerge as powerful exemplars of female philosophical agency. Their presence in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* complicates the assumption that women were entirely excluded from metaphysical discourse in classical India and demonstrates that women could, at least in specific contexts, engage authoritatively in philosophical debate (Ganguli, 2016). Gārgī's participation in a public philosophical assembly (*brahmayajña*) is particularly significant. In her debate with Yājñavalkya, she poses penetrating metaphysical questions concerning the substratum of reality, asking what underlies the cosmos "woven back and forth" (*otaprota*). Her questioning moves

progressively toward the limits of conceptual explanation, compelling Yājñavalkya to acknowledge the ineffable nature of ultimate reality (Ram-Prasad, 2013). Gārgī's intellectual courage, logical rigour, and metaphysical depth establish her as a philosopher in her own right, not merely as a symbolic presence. Her engagement demonstrates mastery of philosophical reasoning and temporarily positions her as an epistemic equal within a male-dominated space. Similarly, Maitreyī's dialogue with Yājñavalkya foregrounds a different but equally profound form of philosophical inquiry. When her husband offers her material wealth, Maitreyī questions whether such possessions can lead to immortality. Her insistence on knowledge over property reflects a clear philosophical orientation toward liberation (*mokṣa*) rather than worldly accumulation (Narayanan, 1997). Maitreyī's questioning reframes the discourse, shifting its focus from external assets to the nature of the self (*ātman*) and the meaning of fulfilment. This dialogue highlights women's capacity for philosophical discernment and critical reflection, challenging the stereotype of women as primarily concerned with domestic or material interests. Despite the intellectual authority displayed by both Gārgī and Maitreyī, their narratives ultimately culminate in silence. Gārgī is explicitly cautioned by Yājñavalkya not to question further, as pursuing the inquiry beyond a certain point is deemed dangerous. This moment marks a symbolic silencing, in which the woman philosopher reaches the threshold of metaphysical inquiry but is denied the authority to proceed (Zelliot, 1996). The warning serves as a boundary marker, reaffirming male control over the highest levels of philosophical knowledge. Gārgī's silence, therefore, is not a result of intellectual inadequacy but a structural limitation imposed upon her participation. Maitreyī's silence is more subtle but equally significant. After articulating her philosophical concerns and receiving instruction, she recedes from the dialogue without further questioning. Her silence may be interpreted as contemplative assimilation of knowledge, consistent with the Upanishadic ideal of inner realisation. However, from a critical feminist perspective, this silence also reflects the asymmetrical nature of philosophical authority, where women's role is limited to questioning rather than sustained teaching or doctrinal elaboration (Spivak, 1988). Maitreyī becomes a recipient rather than a transmitter of philosophical knowledge. The transition from speech to silence in these narratives reveals a fundamental tension within the Upanishadic tradition. On the one hand, women are recognised as capable of profound philosophical insight and are granted space within dialogical settings. On the other hand, their authority is circumscribed, and their participation does not culminate in institutional or pedagogical leadership (Collins, 1998). The recognition of female intellect coexists with mechanisms of restriction that prevent women from fully occupying the role of philosophical authorities. From a feminist epistemological standpoint, this pattern exemplifies a conditional inclusion. Women are permitted to speak and question, but only within boundaries that preserve male dominance over

ultimate knowledge (Young, 1990). Silence thus functions as a regulatory device, signaling the limits of acceptable female participation. While male philosophers may attain silence as a sign of transcendence and mastery, female silence often marks the cessation of authority. In conclusion, the Upanishadic dialogues involving Gārgī and Maitreyī reveal both the possibilities and constraints of female intellectual agency in classical Indian philosophy. These narratives affirm women's capacity for metaphysical inquiry while simultaneously illustrating the structural barriers that restrict their philosophical authority (Nussbaum, 2001). The movement from speech to silence encapsulates the tension between acknowledgement and exclusion, highlighting the gendered dynamics that shape philosophical discourse. A critical reading of these dialogues thus underscores the need to distinguish between momentary recognition of women's intellect and the sustained authorization of their philosophical voices.

5. Dharmashastric Traditions and Institutionalised Silence

The Dharmashastric tradition marks a decisive shift in classical Indian thought from dialogical philosophical inquiry to normative social regulation. Texts such as the *Manusmṛti*, *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, and *Nārada Smṛti* articulate comprehensive codes of conduct intended to preserve social order (dharma) (Bühler, 1991). Within this framework, gender hierarchy is not merely assumed but systematically codified. Women's silence, obedience, and dependency are prescribed as moral virtues, thereby transforming philosophical exclusion into a normative and ethical obligation (Chakravarti, 2003). This institutionalisation of silence represents one of the most significant mechanisms through which women are excluded from philosophical authority in classical Indian traditions. Unlike the Vedic and Upanishadic texts, which allow limited and exceptional spaces for female intellectual agency, Dharmashastric literature explicitly restricts women's access to education, ritual participation, and interpretive authority. Women are consistently portrayed as dependent on male guardians—father, husband, or son—at every stage of life (Bühler, 1991). Such prescriptions deny women autonomy not only in social and economic terms but also in epistemic and philosophical domains. By barring women from Vedic study and public discourse, Dharmashastric texts effectively remove them from the sphere of knowledge production and philosophical interpretation (Narayanan, 1997). Silence in the Dharmashastric context is not presented as a contemplative or spiritual practice but as a disciplinary requirement. Women are encouraged to be restrained in speech, deferential in conduct, and submissive in attitude. Speech, when permitted, is confined to domestic and moral instruction rather than philosophical reasoning. This form of silence functions as a technology of power, regulating women's behavior and reinforcing male authority (Young, 1990). Unlike ascetic silence, which enhances philosophical status, women's silence diminishes their epistemic

presence and reinforces their subordination. The moralization of silence is a crucial feature of Dharmashastric ideology. By framing obedience and silence as virtues intrinsic to womanhood, these texts naturalize gender hierarchy and render it resistant to critique (Doniger, 2009). Women's exclusion from philosophical discourse is thus not perceived as an injustice but as fulfillment of moral duty (*strīdharma*). This transformation of exclusion into obligation exemplifies how power operates most effectively when it is internalized rather than overtly imposed. From a critical analytical perspective, it is essential to recognize that these prescriptions are socio-political constructions rather than philosophical necessities. The Dharmashastric emphasis on women's silence does not arise from metaphysical or epistemological arguments about women's intellectual incapacity. Instead, it reflects concerns about social stability, lineage control, and patriarchal order (Chakravarti, 2003). The regulation of women's speech and knowledge serves broader institutional interests, particularly the preservation of male dominance over religious and philosophical authority. Feminist philosophy interprets this process as a form of epistemic injustice, wherein women are systematically denied recognition as knowers and interpreters of truth (Jaggar, 1983). The denial of Vedic education to women is especially significant, as it deprives them of access to the primary sources of philosophical authority. Without textual training or interpretive legitimacy, women are excluded not only from producing philosophy but also from challenging existing interpretations (Spivak, 1988). Silence thus becomes both the cause and consequence of epistemic marginalisation. Moreover, Dharmashastric silence differs fundamentally from the Upanishadic ideal of transcendence through silence. While the latter seeks to move beyond language in the pursuit of ultimate truth, the former restricts women's speech to enforce conformity (Ram-Prasad, 2013). This distinction underscores the gendered nature of silence within classical Indian thought. Men are allowed to choose silence as a philosophical discipline; women are compelled to accept silence as a moral condition. The institutionalisation of silence also has long-term implications for the philosophical canon. By excluding women from education and authorship, Dharmashastric traditions shape the transmission of knowledge itself. The absence of women's voices in later philosophical texts is not evidence of their lack of intellectual capacity but the result of deliberate structural exclusion (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). This historical erasure reinforces the illusion that philosophy is inherently male, further legitimising gender bias. In conclusion, Dharmashastric traditions play a pivotal role in formalising and legitimising women's silence as a moral and social norm. Through prescriptions of obedience, dependency, and restricted speech, these texts institutionalise philosophical exclusion and transform it into an ethical duty. A critical feminist analysis reveals that such norms are rooted in socio-political considerations rather than philosophical imperatives (Fraser, 2009). Recognising this

distinction is essential for re-evaluating classical Indian philosophy and for recovering the suppressed epistemic possibilities of women within its traditions.

6. Gender Bias and Epistemic Injustice

Contemporary feminist epistemology provides a critical framework for understanding gender bias in philosophical traditions as a form of epistemic injustice (Young, 1990). Coined and developed in modern philosophical discourse, the concept of epistemic injustice refers to the systematic wrong done to individuals in their capacity as knowers. Applying this framework to classical Indian philosophy allows for a deeper analysis of how women's marginalisation is not merely social or cultural but fundamentally epistemic (Nussbaum, 2001). Women are excluded not only from participation in philosophical discourse but also from recognition as credible contributors to knowledge. One of the central forms of epistemic injustice experienced by women is testimonial injustice. This occurs when a speaker's credibility is unjustly diminished due to prejudice. In classical Indian texts, women's intellectual contributions are often undervalued, ignored, or treated as exceptional anomalies rather than as legitimate expressions of philosophical insight (Ganguli, 2016). Even when women such as Gārgī and Maitreyī are acknowledged, their authority remains conditional and limited. Their testimonies do not lead to sustained recognition, pedagogical authority, or textual lineage. The philosophical canon thus privileges male voices as normative, while female contributions are marginalised or symbolically contained (Collins, 1998). Hermeneutical injustice constitutes another significant dimension of gender bias. This form of injustice arises when interpretive frameworks lack the conceptual resources to adequately understand or articulate the experiences of marginalised groups (Fraser, 2009). In the context of classical Indian philosophy, dominant interpretive traditions are shaped by male perspectives and social priorities. As a result, women's experiences—particularly those related to embodiment, domestic life, labour, and relational identity—remain under-theorised or excluded from philosophical reflection. The absence of conceptual space for women's perspectives reinforces their silence and perpetuates epistemic marginalisation (Spivak, 1988). The canonisation of classical Indian philosophy reflects both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. The preservation and transmission of philosophical texts have historically been controlled by male scholars, priests, and institutions (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). This control determines which voices are remembered, which interpretations are legitimised, and which questions are deemed philosophically significant. Women's exclusion from education and authorship further compounds this process, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of epistemic erasure. Silence thus becomes both a symptom and a mechanism of injustice, sustaining gendered hierarchies of knowledge. Feminist epistemology challenges the assumption that knowledge production is neutral or objective

(Keller, 1985). It emphasises the situatedness of knowers and the role of power in shaping epistemic norms. From this perspective, the gender bias embedded in classical Indian philosophy is not an incidental flaw but a structural feature of its epistemic architecture. Authority is conferred not solely on the basis of rational insight but through social legitimacy, which has historically been denied to women (Jaggar, 1983). This insight allows for a critical reassessment of what counts as philosophy and who is authorised to practice it. A feminist reinterpretation of classical Indian texts seeks to address these injustices by recovering marginalised voices and re-evaluating dominant narratives (Ram-Prasad, 2013). This approach does not entail a rejection of tradition but a critical engagement with its internal tensions and exclusions. By foregrounding women's experiences and questioning androcentric assumptions, feminist analysis expands the scope of philosophical inquiry and opens new avenues for interpretation. Silence is no longer viewed merely as absence but as a site of power, resistance, and possibility. Furthermore, feminist reinterpretation highlights the ethical implications of epistemic injustice. Excluding women from philosophical discourse not only distorts the historical record but also impoverishes the tradition itself. A philosophy that fails to engage diverse experiences risks becoming abstract, exclusionary, and disconnected from lived reality (Sen, 2005). By addressing testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, feminist philosophy contributes to a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of classical Indian thought. In conclusion, gender bias in classical Indian philosophy can be fruitfully analysed through the lens of epistemic injustice. Women's marginalisation reflects both the devaluation of their intellectual contributions and the absence of interpretive frameworks that recognise their experiences (Zelliot, 1996). Feminist epistemology offers critical tools to challenge these exclusions and to reimagine philosophical authority in more equitable terms. By confronting epistemic injustice, contemporary scholarship not only restores the voices of the suppressed but also enriches philosophical inquiry itself, affirming the transformative potential of inclusive knowledge traditions.

7. Feminist Reinterpretation and Contemporary Relevance

Feminist reinterpretation of classical Indian philosophy has emerged as a vital methodological intervention aimed at addressing the historical marginalisation of women's voices within philosophical traditions (Ram-Prasad, 2013). Rather than dismissing classical texts as irredeemably patriarchal, feminist scholars advocate a critical rereading that engages with tradition from within. This approach seeks to uncover suppressed voices, alternative epistemologies, and neglected interpretive possibilities obscured by androcentric frameworks. By exposing internal contradictions and tensions, feminist reinterpretation reveals that classical Indian philosophy is neither monolithic nor static but dynamic and open to critical transformation.

Central to feminist reinterpretation is the recognition that philosophical traditions are historically situated and shaped by social power relations (Collins, 1998). Canon formation, textual transmission, and interpretive authority have been predominantly controlled by male scholars, resulting in selective preservation and interpretation of texts. Feminist scholars challenge this legacy by questioning whose voices have been privileged and whose have been silenced (Spivak, 1988). Recovering women thinkers such as Gārgī, Maitreyī, Lopāmudrā, and the Vedic *ṛṣikās* is not merely an act of historical correction but a philosophical endeavour that expands the boundaries of what is recognised as legitimate knowledge (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

A key contribution of feminist scholarship is the re-evaluation of silence as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Traditional interpretations often treat women's silence as evidence of passivity or the absence of agency. Feminist analysis, however, distinguishes between imposed silence and strategic or chosen silence (Jaggar, 1983). Imposed silence reflects structures of domination that restrict women's access to speech, education, and authority. Strategic silence, by contrast, may function as a form of resistance, contemplation, or critique, particularly within philosophical traditions that valorise non-verbal insight. This nuanced understanding allows for a reinterpretation of women's silence not solely as deprivation but also as a potential site of epistemic agency.

Reinterpreting silence in this dual manner enables a more inclusive conception of philosophical authority. Authority need not be limited to public speech, textual authorship, or institutional leadership. It can also be expressed through experiential knowledge, ethical insight, and contemplative depth (Nussbaum, 2001). Feminist reinterpretation challenges the masculinization of rational discourse and opens space for alternative modes of knowing historically associated with women. Such an expanded understanding of authority aligns with indigenous and non-Western epistemologies that value relationality, embodiment, and lived experience (Keller, 1985).

The contemporary relevance of feminist reinterpretation lies in its capacity to connect classical philosophy with present-day concerns about gender justice, education, and knowledge production. In modern academic and social contexts, debates about representation, inclusion, and epistemic authority continue to resonate (Fraser, 2009). Feminist engagement with classical Indian texts provides critical resources for questioning inherited hierarchies and reimagining philosophical traditions in ways that are ethically responsive and socially relevant. It demonstrates that classical philosophy can contribute meaningfully to contemporary feminist discourse when approached with critical sensitivity (Sen, 2005).

Moreover, feminist reinterpretation has implications for pedagogy and curriculum development. Reframing classical Indian philosophy to include women's voices and feminist perspectives challenges the assumption that philosophy is inherently male-centred. This shift encourages more inclusive educational practices and fosters critical thinking about the relationship between knowledge and power (Young, 1990). Students are invited to engage with classical texts not as static authorities but as living traditions subject to reinterpretation and debate.

Importantly, feminist reinterpretation does not advocate a simplistic reversal of hierarchies or the uncritical valorisation of women's voices. Instead, it emphasises reflexivity, contextual analysis, and critical engagement (Chakravarti, 2003). By interrogating both the limitations and possibilities within classical texts, feminist scholars avoid romanticising the past while remaining attentive to its emancipatory potential. This balanced approach allows for constructive dialogue between tradition and critique.

In conclusion, feminist reinterpretation offers a powerful framework for re-engaging with classical Indian philosophy to address historical exclusions and contemporary challenges. By recovering suppressed voices, rethinking silence, and expanding notions of philosophical authority, feminist scholarship enriches the tradition and enhances its relevance for the present (Ganguli, 2016). Such reinterpretation affirms that classical Indian philosophy, when critically engaged, can serve as a resource for inclusive and transformative philosophical inquiry rather than a relic of patriarchal thought.

8. Conclusion

This critical analytical study has demonstrated that gender bias in classical Indian philosophy operates systematically through the regulation of women's speech and silence, thereby limiting their access to philosophical authority. Across Vedic, Upanishadic, and Dharmashastric traditions, silence emerges not as a neutral or purely spiritual category but as a deeply gendered mechanism that shapes epistemic legitimacy. While classical Indian philosophy is often celebrated for its universal metaphysical insights, this research paper reveals that its philosophical structures are historically embedded within patriarchal social orders that privilege male voices and marginalise women's intellectual agency.

The analysis of early Vedic texts shows that women were not entirely excluded from philosophical reflection. The presence of women sages and hymn composers suggests that experiential and inspired forms of authority once allowed limited spaces for female participation. Similarly, Upanishadic dialogues featuring figures such as Gārgī and Maitreyī reveal moments of explicit female intellectual agency, in which women engage in profound

metaphysical inquiry and challenge dominant assumptions. These instances demonstrate that the exclusion of women is neither inevitable nor philosophically necessary.

However, the study also highlights a gradual shift from dialogical inclusion to normative restriction. With the rise of Dharmashastric traditions, women's silence becomes institutionalised as a moral obligation rather than a philosophical choice. Prescriptions of obedience, dependency, and restricted speech transform philosophical exclusion into ethical duty, effectively removing women from the domains of education, interpretation, and knowledge transmission. This transition marks the consolidation of gendered hierarchies of philosophical authority, wherein men are positioned as legitimate knowers and women as regulated subjects.

Through the lens of feminist epistemology, this study interprets these patterns as forms of epistemic injustice. Women experience testimonial injustice when their intellectual contributions are undervalued or rendered exceptional, and hermeneutical injustice when dominant interpretive frameworks fail to recognise or articulate their experiences. Silence functions both as a consequence of these injustices and as a tool that perpetuates them. The philosophical canon, as it has been preserved and interpreted, reflects these exclusions and reinforces the illusion of philosophy as an exclusively male enterprise.

At the same time, feminist philosophical analysis opens possibilities for reinterpretation rather than rejection of classical Indian traditions. By critically engaging with texts, recovering suppressed voices, and rethinking silence as both imposed and strategic, feminist scholarship reveals internal contradictions and emancipatory potentials within the tradition. Such reinterpretation expands the scope of philosophical authority beyond narrow institutional definitions and affirms alternative modes of knowing grounded in experience, reflection, and ethical insight.

In conclusion, reclaiming women's philosophical agency is essential for developing a more just, inclusive, and comprehensive understanding of Indian philosophy. Addressing gender bias and epistemic injustice not only corrects historical marginalisation but also enriches philosophical inquiry itself. A critically reinterpreted classical Indian philosophy, attentive to questions of gender and authority, can serve as a dynamic resource for contemporary debates on knowledge, ethics, and social justice, reaffirming its relevance in the modern intellectual landscape.

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