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Research Article

Exploring Women's Roles from Vedic to Modern Times: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This study critically explores the status of women across various historical eras from a feminist perspective, particularly through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's liberal feminist work *The Second Sex*. This paper analyzes the transformation of women's roles from the Vedic era to the modern era. Women's roles have evolved significantly from the Vedic era to the modern era, shaped by diverse influences including religious, social, and cultural factors. While ancient Hindu scriptures acknowledged gender equality, later eras imposed increasing restrictions on women's rights. However, the feminist movements have played in challenging these inequalities and advocating for gender justice. Employing a qualitative approach, this paper applies feminist theory, especially social constructionism and gender equality as outlined by Beauvoir. It examines historical texts, religious scriptures, and philosophical arguments from both Eastern and Western traditions to assess the shifting significance of women in different eras. Despite progress, women continue to face social and structural challenges. This paper emphasizes the need for gender equality through education, legal rights, and economic independence. By recognizing historical patterns and fostering mutual respect between genders, society can move toward a more inclusive and egalitarian future.

Keywords: Women's roles, Vedic era, gender equality, discrimination, inclusive society

Introduction

This paper explores women's roles from the Vedic era to the modern era through a feminist perspective, particularly drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and its parallels with ancient Hindu scriptures regarding equality and dignity. Today, the question of whether women are equal to men remains urgent. Western and Eastern traditions hold divergent views on gender equality.

In Western thought, the Bible serves as a foundational authority, asserting that God created woman (Eve) from man's rib to serve as his companion (Genesis 2.18–24). Adam was the first man created by God. God made everything, including women, for the pleasure of men. This narrative has historically been interpreted to justify women's subservience to men, sparking feminist movements in the West that demand equal rights.

In contrast, the Vedic tradition of Sanatana Dharma ("Eternal Righteousness") of the East posits spiritual equality between men and women. In this connection, Narayan Bats refers to the Vedas. Accordingly, Brahma ("the Creator") was alone. He wanted pleasure. Therefore, He divided His Self into two parts: male and female, or man and woman, who become complete by being together with each other. A man without a woman is supposed to be incomplete. The first man and woman created by Brahma were Swayambhuva Manu and Shatarupa, respectively. Therefore, a man and a woman are twin flames of the same light (13). This ancient story of the Vedas presents an account of the origin of men and women and their complementary roles. Thus, this Vedic account provides a spiritual explanation of gender complementarity and unity.

During the Vedic era, women held respected positions, participating in education, religious rites, and societal functions. They were treated equally to men. However, it became restrictive during the eras of Smritis and Puranas due to the controlling authority of intellectual Brahmins. As a result, gender discrimination increased.

The Vedic conception is that a woman can be divine and immortal through her incessant effort and spiritual practice. A woman like Parvati, the daughter of Himavan or the Himalayas, became divine and immortal by her single-pointed devotion to Lord Shiva. She got Him as Her husband and remained in His left part. Then, She was called Ardhanari ("a woman whose right half is Lord Shiva"). The combined form of Shiva and Parvati is called Ardhanarishwar ("an image of a half woman and a half Shiva"). When a woman is married, she becomes a *nari* or *patni,* whose job is to stop her husband from falling into ruin. The Ardhanarishwar form suggests that males and females are equal: one without the other is incomplete.

Praising the glory of Parvati or Shakti, Sri Shankaracharya sings that Shiva becomes capable of creating the universe only when united with Shakti ("Energy"). Without Shakti, even Shiva cannot stir. Therefore, only those of great merit can worship or praise Shakti, who is revered even by Hari, Hara (Shiva), and Brahma (*Saundarya Lahari* or *"The Waves of Beauty*"). Here, Shankaracharya's prayer to Shakti reflects a deep philosophical and theological concept central to certain schools of Hinduism, particularly those influenced by Shaivism and Shaktism. It underscores the belief that creation and existence depend on the interplay of passive and active forces, with Shakti as the dynamic, empowering force that makes everything possible, even for the gods. It invites us to consider the importance of the feminine principle in understanding the divine, creation, and cosmic order.

Citing the ideas of *The Manusmriti* (9.96, 5.155), Dev Mani Bhattarai restates the viewpoint of the Vedic eternal righteousness that religious sacrificial rites performed by men without the company of women do not become successful. Similarly, a spouse's religious fasting and practices do not become successful without the permission of her husband. Both a husband and a wife are necessary to perform sacrificial rites. Thus, the sacrificial rites without a wife or a husband do not get significance (157). It highlights the belief that the religious or spiritual practices of husbands and wives are interconnected and that a man has a right to perform sacrifices only after marrying a woman and vice versa.

Two elements are compulsory in the creation process. Male and female are two such elements. Though they seem to be opposing each other, they are of the same status. Internally, they are complementary to each other. Though their physical structures are different, one cannot be thought of without the absence of the other. Based on natural qualities, men and women are equal. Compassion, love, and tenderness are the special or dominant qualities of women, whereas determination, rigidity, and brevity are the special or dominant qualities of men. But all the hidden or subservient qualities may manifest in each other if the situation demands (Bats 15). Bats' ideas examine the concept of gender complementarity by emphasizing the interplay and balance between the opposite sexes in creation. Though Bats' ideas emphasize equality and interdependence, they contain elements that invite both praise and critique.

Beauvoir was an early feminist. In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, she indeed provides a deep and critical analysis of gender. She examines how societal structures and cultural norms shape gender roles and perpetuate inequality. Her philosophy challenges traditional views on gender, emphasizing the constructed nature of femininity and masculinity. She uses binary terms as a starting point to critique patriarchal structures, but her work ultimately challenges and seeks to move beyond traditional binary concepts of gender. Her ideas have paved the way for more expansive and inclusive understandings of gender identity and roles. Modern feminist discourse has evolved to include non-binary perspectives and a more fluid understanding of gender, which builds upon earlier feminist ideas but moves beyond them. The growing recognition of gender diversity highlights areas where earlier feminist theories, often framed in binary terms, may seem limited by today's standards. A more nuanced understanding of gender that embraces individuality, fluidity, and inclusivity is the demand of modern feminists.

The feminist movements of the West—namely, First-Wave Feminism, Second-Wave Feminism, Third-Wave Feminism, and Fourth-Wave Feminism—have influenced Eastern women's thinking today. Still, Eastern women are under the control of orthodox religion, though legally they are equal to men in political, social, and economic fields. Today, both Eastern and Western modern-minded women want to be free from the grip of orthodox religion, which has restricted their freedom. They have no proper education. Due to all these factors, they are facing many problems. The discussion of this issue is the problem of this research article.

Against this background, the objective of this article is to explore critically women's roles from the Vedic to the present era from a feminist perspective that is not fully highlighted in academia.

Literature Review

Researchers have long studied how women's roles and status in Hindu society have changed over time, from the ancient Vedic era to the modern era. This field has grown as feminist historians and scholars from different disciplines have brought new ideas and methods to the topic. This review summarizes key studies to show how women's power, the challenges they faced due to social norms, and their efforts to resist inequality have shifted across history. This analysis engages with contemporary discourses on gender and power in Hindu communities across South Asia, particularly in India and Nepal, while acknowledging regional and caste-based variations.

Scholarship on the Vedic era (1500–500 BCE) presents a contested narrative about women's status. Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* argues that early Vedic society granted women limited but significant ritualistic roles, such as participating in sacrifices ("*yajnas*") and composing hymns (23–25). However, she emphasizes that these privileges were confined to elite Brahmin women, underscoring the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies (Chakravarti 27). Similarly, Sukumari Bhattacharji's *Women and Society in Ancient India* notes that while texts like the *Rigveda* mention female sages like Ghosha and Lopamudra, post-Vedic Smriti literature increasingly restricted women's autonomy, mandating patriarchal control through codes like *The Manusmriti* (45–48).

In contrast, A.S. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, a colonial-era text, romanticizes the Vedic era as a “golden" age for women, citing examples of education and property rights (15–17). Feminist scholars like Romila Thapar critique such idealized views, asserting that Altekar's analysis overlooks the stratified nature of Vedic society and the marginalization of non-elite women (89). This divergence highlights the need for a critical re-examination of primary sources, as the present article seeks to disentangle myth from historical reality.

The medieval era (8th–18th centuries) witnessed complex shifts in women's roles due to Islamic influences, Bhakti movements, and regional state formations. Vijaya Ramaswamy's *Women and Work in Medieval South India* challenges the homogenized view of women's subordination by documenting their economic participation as weavers, farmers, and temple dancers, albeit within patriarchal frameworks (112–115). The Bhakti movement, as explored in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India*, provided a platform for women poets like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai to critique caste and gender norms through spiritual dissent (34–37). For instance, Mirabai's rejection of marital duties in favor of devotion to Krishna exemplifies a form of proto-feminist resistance (Tharu and Lalita 41). However, regional variations complicate this narrative.

Ruby Lal's *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* reveals how Mughal royal women, such as Nur Jahan, exercised political influence through informal networks, even as *purdah* ("veiling") became a symbol of elite femininity (78–80). Conversely, social histories of rural communities, like those in Daud Ali's *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, suggest that lower-caste women faced harsher labor exploitation and sexual violence (156–158).

Post-independence feminist scholarship has grappled with the paradoxes of legal equality versus lived realities. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* critiques the homogenizing effects of state-led policies like the Uniform Civil Code, arguing that they often sideline marginalized voices, including Dalit and Muslim women (63–65).

Contemporary scholars like Sharmila Rege emphasize intersectionality, urging feminists to address how caste, class, and religion mediate women's experiences (22–24). For instance, the activism of Dalit feminists like Jyoti Singh Pandey underscores the inadequacy of upper-caste-led feminist movements in addressing intersectional oppression (Rege 45). This analysis matches the article's focus on bringing ignored or overlooked perspectives of marginalized communities to light across different historical eras.

While existing scholarship offers rich insights, significant gaps persist. First, few studies adopt a long-term view to trace continuities and ruptures from the Vedic era to modernity. Second, regional and subaltern perspectives remain underrepresented, as noted by Kumkum Roy in *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, who calls for micro-histories of non-textual communities (133–135). Third, the role of women in ecological and tribal resistance, such as the Chipko movement, demands deeper feminist analysis (Shiva 78).

While earlier research provides valuable insights, there are still major gaps. First, most studies don't look at the long-term connections between the ancient Vedic era and today, missing how women's roles have either stayed the same or changed over thousands of years. Second, there's a lack of focus on local and marginalized viewpoints, especially stories of communities that didn't leave written records.

This article tackles these gaps by combining writings about women from different fields and eras, highlighting the voices of marginalized groups, and questioning how feminist ideas are sometimes exploited in modern capitalist systems. By linking current movements like #MeToo to historical patterns, this analysis highlights how feminist resistance, both past and present, remains vital to challenging systemic patriarchy and advancing gender justice. Similarly, this article analyzes women's roles from the Vedic era to the present, especially from the feminist perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, to fill the gaps.

Feminist Approach to Literature

As a research method, this paper employs a feminist theory, especially Beauvoir's perspective on social constructionism and equality of genders from *The Second Sex*, to critically discuss women's roles from the Vedic to the modern era in this qualitative paper. There are different terms related to women's roles.

In this regard, "Toril Moi makes a useful distinction between three cognate terms that provide a good starting point: *feminism* is a political position, *femaleness is* a matter of biology, and *femininity* is a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Hawthorn 115). Moi's ideas provide a nuanced distinction between feminism, femaleness, and femininity, each of which represents a unique dimension of identity, culture, and political thought. A critical explanation of these terms allows for a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness and the debates they provoke. Regarding feminism, Beauvoir's feminist ideas are pertinent to the discussion of the topic of this article.

As Raman Selden analyzes, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* argues that society has always treated men as the "one" and women as the "other." This means that men are seen as the standard for being human, while women are seen as different or secondary. Throughout history, powerful figures like lawmakers, priests, scientists, and philosophers have reinforced this idea, keeping women in a subordinate position. To challenge this unfair system, feminists need to question and critique these ideas, but they should do it in their own way, not by following the rules set by men (521). Essentially, it is about redefining what it means to be a woman and asserting women's independence and equality by avoiding gender discrimination.

M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham critically explain Beauvoir's ideas of social constructionism and binary terms as found in her quote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," a famous remark from *The Second Sex*. It highlights that gender is a social construct rather than an innate quality. She argues that society shapes individuals into what is considered feminine or masculine, often reinforcing stereotypes. Masculinity is associated with traits like activity, dominance, and rationality, while femininity is linked to passivity, acquiescence, and emotionality (125). In fact, this cultural process limits individual potential and perpetuates inequality. To Beauvoir, genders are equal, but the male society cannot digest this idea. While her work focuses on the binary framework of her time, her rejection of biological determinism and her critique of societal constructions of gender remain highly relevant. Modern feminist discourse owes much to her pioneering insights, even as it expands to address issues she did not explicitly engage with.

Beauvoir strongly believes that men and women are equal. But "economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in the industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions" (29). This excerpt highlights the entrenched economic disparities between men and women, portraying them as forming two distinct "castes" in terms of access to economic resources and opportunities, calling attention to systemic issues and the urgent need for equity and justice.

Beauvoir explains that males and females are connected biologically and socially:

> . . . a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. The tie that binds her to her oppressors is unlike any other. The division of the sexes is a biological given, not a moment in human history. Their opposition took shape within an original *Mitsein* [fellowship], and she has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unit with the two halves riveted to each other: cleavage of society by sex is not possible. This is the fundamental characteristic of a woman: she is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each other. (28)

This passage presents a critical perspective on the unique nature of women's oppression. Here, Beauvoir argues that, unlike other oppressed groups who can envision complete separation from their oppressors, women are biologically and socially bound to men in a way that makes such separation impossible. Her argument remains a foundational critique of gender relations, emphasizing how deeply entrenched the male-female dynamic is in social and biological structures. However, modern feminist thought challenges the rigidity of this binary and explores ways in which gender norms can be deconstructed rather than merely acknowledged as inevitable.

With these concepts of gender discrimination, male-female dichotomy, essentialism, constructionism, and the need for gender equality, this paper critically explores women's roles from the Vedic to the modern era.

From the Vedic Era to the Modern Era: Critical Analysis of Women's Roles

Women's Roles in the Vedic Era

Women's roles in the Vedic era are worth noting. The Vedic women were significant and had a dignified and higher place in society. The Vedic literature beautifully describes their education, modesty, virtues, rights, and social roles. Their role and contribution can be seen in the Vedic background, as daughters, sisters, spouses, and mothers.

They had the right to education. They were educated with dedication and then married. Due to the importance of education, there were many female sages in the Vedic era, such as Apala, Ghosha, Saraswati, Sarparajni, Surya, Savitri, Aditi-Dakshayani, Lopamudra, Vishvara, and Atreyi. They were the seers of the Vedas. Likewise, some other women known for their wisdom, spiritual knowledge, or exemplary character include Arundhati, Madalasa, Vagambhrini, Shandili, Anasuya, Damayanti, and Chudala.

The "Brahmacharya Sukta" in *The Atharvaveda* of the Vedic era directs that the girl child should get married only after she has taken education by practicing celibacy (11.5.18). The bride's desire to find a bride was always there. The girl herself was allowed to be married (*Rigveda* 10.27.12). Gandharva marriage was also practiced, which was later approved by the parents. It refers to a type of marriage where mutual consent and love between the couple are the primary basis, without the need for elaborate rituals, family approval, or societal involvement. It was originally practiced by Gandharvas, who were celestial beings known for their love and music. It is often equated with a love marriage in modern terms.

In the Vedic era, women had the same rights as their husbands, who were involved in social and religious activities. No religious activity was started without the presence of women. The *Rigveda* (2.39.2) states that both the husband and the wife together need to light the fire in the house (Goyal 128). It indicates that women had the same equal rights as men in religious and societal activities.

Women have had the right to participate in religious rites since the Vedic era. The *Rigveda* states that a woman is Brahma, the creator of life. If a woman is spoiled, the world will also be spoiled (8.33.19). A woman is said to be "Purvahutika," meaning she has the right to give the first fire of sacrifice into a burning fire. As stated in the *Yajurveda* (20.9), both men and women have equal rights to be elected as rulers. Vishpala had lost one of her legs due to injuries, and the Ashwinikumars ("celestial doctors") had put an iron leg on her (1.112.10, 10.39.8). Another woman had driven the chariot of her husband and defeated her husband's enemy (10.102.3, 10.86.9). There was the practice of keeping an army of women cadres. There is also a description of how to encourage women to participate in the war (*Yajurveda* 17.45).

There was a general rule of marrying only one woman, but polygamy was also in practice in the Vedic era. The men of authority or higher status could marry more than one woman (*Rigveda* 1.104.3). Thus, The *Rigveda* certainly permits polygamy (I. 62. 11; 71. 1; 104. 3; 105. 8; 112. 19; 186. 7; VI. 53. 4; VII. 18. 2; 26. 3; X. 43. 1; 101.11, etc.), though monogamy may have been the rule (I. 124. 7; IV. 3. 2; X. 71.4)" (qtd. in Majumdar 390).

The Vedic women could read the Vedas. Even now, brides must utter some *richas* ("Vedic mantras") as a part of their rituals during their marriage (Pandey 136-67). The learned women elevated the Vedic culture through their intellect or conduct. As found in *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi participated in a philosophical debate with Ajatshatru (2.1.1.20) and King Yajnyavalkya, respectively, about the Self and Brahman (2.4.1-14). Based on these facts, we can say that the Vedic women successfully showed their personality, talent, and skills from housework to the agrarian field and from sacrificial work to spiritual practice. This suggests that women held a respected and influential position in the Vedic era.

Women's Roles in the Medieval Era

Women have been changing according to the situation of the era. Along with social changes, there have been many changes in the situation of women as well. Since the later Vedic era, women's roles started to deteriorate. In particular, from the times of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, their respect continued to decline, and the signs of questions were placed on their identity, honor, and glory. Not only this, but the sway of blindness and false conception in society did everything possible to hurt their purity and dignity.

The era from the 11th century to the 18th century is called the Medieval Era. By the time of medieval times, the condition of women had started to become miserable. Their place in society became secondary. All their rights were taken away. On the one hand, the fetters of subjugation were put on their feet, and on the other hand, the men continued to torture them arbitrarily. They were kept within the four walls. The practice of *purdah* ("the custom of veiling") was introduced. Education for them was banned. Widow remarriage was banned. They had no rights to property. From an economic viewpoint, they became dependent on men. Amidst these deepening social disparities, the arrival of a daughter became a muted celebration, overshadowed by the weight of prejudice.

Goswami Tulsidas, the author of the *Ramcharitmanas*, writes about the negative nature of women in the world. He criticizes women by saying that even Lord Brahma ("the Creator") cannot understand the ways of a woman's heart. It is a repository of all deceit, hypocrisy, and flaws

("Ayodhyakanda" 161.2). Not only this, he further says that a woman's nature is true, but eight flaws always reside in her heart: audacity, falsehood, fickleness, deceit, fear, lack of judgment, impurity, and cruelty ("Lankakanda" 15 Kha, 1-2). This line of argument reflects the patriarchal ideology and societal views of women prevalent during the time of Tulsidas. The "eight flaws" are described as inherent traits, likely stemming from cultural norms and religious interpretations of that era. Reading such verses in their historical and literary context is important, as they do not align with modern values or perspectives on gender.

As Tulsidas writes in the *Ramcharitmanas*, Anasuya teaches Sita about women's *dharma* ("righteousness") that a woman is impure by nature; however, such an impure woman, by simply serving her husband, attains an auspicious path ("Aranyakand" 5 Ka). Brahmins such as Tulsidas wanted to keep women under control. Therefore, he criticizes women by saying that the drum, the ignorant, the Shudra, the animal, and the woman are all deserving of beating ("Sundarkand" 58.3). This line of argument has been a subject of extensive debate and interpretation. Historically, it reflects a perspective from the time it was written, emphasizing discipline for maintaining order. Modern interpretations often consider the social and cultural contexts in which it was composed. It is also worth noting that many scholars interpret it metaphorically rather than literally, viewing it as a reflection of the attitudes of that era rather than a universal truth.

In the "Sundarkand," Tulsidas used the word "ताड़ना" ("beating"), which in the context of his time is often interpreted as "discipline" or "correction" but can also mean "beating" or "chastisement" depending on the context and intent. In the literal sense, it can refer to physical punishment, but in a broader or metaphorical sense, it can signify teaching, guiding, or correcting behavior. In the traditional context of the *Ramcharitmanas*, some interpret it as advocating for strict control over these entities as part of maintaining social or moral order, reflective of the hierarchical mindset of the era. However, interpreting it as purely advocating "beating" may oversimplify or misrepresent its intended cultural nuance. Many modern readings challenge and re-contextualize such lines in light of evolving ethical and social values. They might say that a man cannot be brave by beating women but by respecting them, and that beating is a sign of a cowardly man.

Perhaps it is these very characteristics that have completely eroded the status of womanhood. The great poet of the Hindi folk, Vidyapati, has brought out the reality of the present women's life and their thinking by saying that a woman is youthful but her husband is a child, and the wife curses herself, saying she must have made a mistake in her penance, because of which she had to be born as a woman (sahityapedia.com). The poet indirectly satirizes the mismatched and unemotional marriage system of the Medieval Era. Child marriage and polygamy were widespread. A child was married to a mature or elderly man, who could be unmarried or already married. By the time she turned out to be youthful, she found her husband old, diseased, or dead. This suggests that the notorious discriminatory gender system was prevalent during the Middle Era.

Before the influence of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, there was the influence of the Smritis. From the times of the Smritis, women's roles started to diminish. There were various Smirtis. According to Shree Guru Prasad Sharma, Parashara Muni has mentioned the names of the following 18 Smriti authors: Manu, Vasishtha, Kashyapa, Garga, Gautama, Ushana, Atri, Vishnu, Samvarta, Daksha, Shatatapa, Harita, Yajnavalkya, Apastamba, Shankha-Likhita, Katyayana, Prachetas, and Aangira (6).

Among them, *The Manusmriti* (*The Laws of Manu*) was popular, and women were exploited and disciplined by referring to the rules prescribed by Manu for women. *The Manusmriti* both praises and condemns women. On one hand, it exalts women, declaring that where they are revered, the gods dwell in joy (*Manusmriti* 3.56). On the other hand, it criticizes women by pointing out that a father protects them in their childhood, a husband protects them in their youth, and sons protect them in their old age; so, women do not deserve independence (9.3). This traditional perspective does not allow women to enjoy their autonomy; it is against the norms of the modern feminist perspective.

People did not give much importance to the religious and moral laws suggested by the other Smritis. *Sri Parashara Smriti* (*Smriti Written by the Sage Parashara*) favors women. It recommends a second marriage for women. So, the sage Parashara says that if a woman's husband is lost, deceased, has renounced the world, is impotent, or has fallen from his caste, she is permitted to take another husband (4.30). This line of argument is supported by modern-minded women, who support feminism. Based on these facts, we can deduce that women's roles were very critical in the Medieval Era. As a result, modern-minded women started to raise their voices against gender discrimination, inequality, child marriage, polygamy, femicide, and rape widespread in the Medieval Era.

Women's Roles in the Modern Era

The position of women is pathetic even in today's socially and culturally prosperous society. The male-dominated society is not yet ready to appreciate the contribution and significance of women in the family, society, and nation. Even today, they are under the control of men in one way or the other. In medieval times, a husband was considered a deity and his wife a maid; however, the situation is improving now, owing to feminism, which regards spouses as equals.

In the middle of the 19th century, Christian missionaries started giving importance to educating women in India for women's upliftment. In India, the institutions of Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj worked enthusiastically to reform the poor situation of women. In his work, *Satyarth Prakash* (*Light of Truth*), Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, proposes that there must be compulsory education for sons and daughters after they are 8 years old (40). He advocated for the right to study the Vedas, even by women and Sudras, or the lower caste people (72-75). He believed in the Vedic principles of equality and worked toward eliminating social practices that discriminated against women. He emphasized the importance of education for women as a means of empowering them and restoring their rightful place in society. He condemned practices such as child marriage, the denial of education to women, and restrictions on their freedom. He supported the idea of free and universal education for all, including girls, as he believed that a well-educated society requires educated women. His efforts inspired the Arya Samaj movement to establish schools and colleges for women, promoting free and accessible education to break the cycle of ignorance and oppression faced by women in 19th-century India.

Modern society is making every effort to promote women's independence and ensure they have an appropriate and equal place in the contemporary world. As a result of the women's feminist movement for their rights, women are showing their efficiency, decision-making power, bravery, equality, and virtue. Now, the beauty of a woman lies no longer in her beautiful and tender face but in her determination to establish new records in the fields of her free life.

Today, some women are self-reliant, self-confident, and self-conscious and have displayed their ability even in the face of male challenges. They are adopting new professions such as engineers, pilots, scientists, technicians, soldiers, and journalists, and are establishing new records on the strength of their hard work. In Nepal, Vidya Devi Bhandari became the head of state of Nepal on October 28, 2015, when she was elected as the country's first female president. She served two terms, holding office until March 13, 2023. Likewise, Chitra Lekha Yadav became the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives (lower house) of Nepal in 1999. She served in this role during the parliamentary session from August 1999 to May 2001. Today, many women desire to stand at the forefront, holding influential positions and making a significant impact.

Despite legal reforms, even today, there is no proper, respectful status of women in society. Even today, illiteracy, insecurity, and poverty among many disadvantaged parents lead to early marriages of their children. Gender discrimination, social isolation, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, domestic violence, femicide, child abuse, childhood marriage, rape, prostitution, polygamy, Triple Talaq, sexual violence, and many other incidents of violence are seen in the media every day. Backward women do not yet have economic independence. They are still supposed to be guided by the religious and moral laws of orthodox religions.

Due to these factors, they are still far from the desired development. Therefore, there is a need to take some concrete steps for women's empowerment and implement them so that this gap of gender inequality can be bridged. The #MeToo movement has helped women to be brave enough to raise their voices against their sexual abusers. For promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, one important piece of advice given by the sage Vashistha is worth considering here. He says in his outstanding work, *Vyas Samhita* or *Vyasa Smriti,* that a husband and a wife should properly engage in *dharma* ("righteousness"), *artha* ("wealth"), and *kama* ("desires") continuously, with single-mindedness (unity) and similar vows and conduct (2.18). Here, Vashistha's ideas about the spouses' roles present an inspiring vision of marital harmony based on shared goals and mutual commitment, deeply rooted in traditional Hindu philosophy.

However, a critical modern perspective highlights its limitations in addressing individuality, flexibility, and evolving dynamics in relationships. The challenge lies in adapting its timeless principles—cooperation, unity, and balance—to contemporary values like equality, autonomy, and personal freedom.

Female infanticide is on the rise in developing countries like Nepal and India due to narrow thinking. This disregard and disdain for female infants are shocking to humanity. As a result, the ratio of females to males is declining. Therefore, strict laws should be enacted to prevent this. The dowry system is one of society's problems. People should not hesitate to punish people who give and take dowries. Besides, they should change their attitude about the value of dowries. A parent's foremost duty is to nurture their children with good health and a quality education, laying the foundation for a bright and fulfilling future. Only then comes the responsibility to marry their children. The thinking that parents' responsibility ends when they give their daughters' hands to the bridegrooms should be left behind.

The primary cause of women's marginalized status today is the persistent bias in their access to education. Swami Vivekananda believes that we should give proper education to women, and after that, they could solve their problems themselves. He is sure that by doing so, Indian women will not lag behind any part of the world in solving their problems. Then we won't even need to intervene to solve their problems (51). In this context, it is important to debunk the traditional belief that salvation comes from the son, that the inheritor of the father's property is also the son, and that the mother gets respect only by giving birth to a son. Such a false notion should be avoided.

For the advocacy of women's freedom and betterment, someone could argue that if a man can love one woman after another, a woman should also have the same opportunity. Many traditional religious and cultural systems have historically enforced different moral and legal standards for men and women, particularly regarding love, relationships, and sexuality. Men have maintained double standards for women. Orthodox religions do not allow a woman to love more than one man but can allow a man to love more than one woman. In other words, they accept polygamy but forbid polyandry. Additionally, strict expectations of chastity and fidelity have often been imposed more heavily on women than on men.

However, not all religions or cultures follow this pattern, and interpretations of religious teachings evolve over time. In modern contexts, many religious communities emphasize equality in relationships and challenge historical gender-based double standards.

Osho believes that the fundamental mistake undermining education and civilization is that life has been constructed around men, not around women. So far, the whole civilization, the whole culture, and the whole education have been created by men, not in the manner of women. It is more useful to teach music and literature to women rather than mathematics (4). While Osho raises a valid concern about the male-dominated structure of education and civilization, his proposed solution—emphasizing music and literature over mathematics for women—perpetuates gender-based limitations. A more progressive approach would involve an inclusive education system that empowers both men and women to pursue any field of their choice based on interest and ability rather than societal expectations.

Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai says, "I raise up my voice not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. . . . We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back” (*Malala Fund*). She delivered these words during her speech at the United Nations Youth Assembly on July 12, 2013, which coincided with her 16th birthday. This day is often referred to as "Malala Day." In her speech, Malala emphasizes the importance of raising one's voice to advocate for those who are silenced and highlights the necessity of gender equality for societal progress.

Feminists blame patriarchy for their marginalization, dominance, and oppression. According to Raman Selden, “Kate Millett used the term ‘patriarchy’ to describe the cause of women’s oppression in *Sexual Politics*” (520). Patriarchal power keeps people unequal by giving power to men and taking it away from women. By citing Beauvoir’s arguments, Selden writes that “for feminists to break this patriarchal power, it is necessary to challenge men at the level of theory, but without entering the theoretical domain on men’s terms" (521). Selden’s argument, drawing from Beauvoir, highlights the importance of challenging patriarchal power intellectually while avoiding theoretical engagement on men’s terms. The argument underscores the need for independent feminist theoretical frameworks that do not reinforce male-dominated discourse. However, a strategic approach that combines critique and reconstruction may be the most effective way to dismantle patriarchal power structures and establish true gender equality.

Today, modern women are compelled to struggle at every step to assert their identity, sometimes with their parents, sometimes with their husbands, sometimes with society, and sometimes with others. They are bound to be commodified as recreation objects for their existence. A woman is the mother of creation. But why is the luck of such a mother of creation so pitiable? No clear answer. Nevertheless, the position of women today has become much stronger compared to earlier times. Today, the male-dominated society has been forced to acknowledge that modern women can think like men, work like men, and establish their own distinct and independent existence outside of the family. Undoubtedly, this transformation has been heavily influenced by Western civilization. However, it cannot be denied that during the Vedic era, society was structured in a way that accorded women a privileged status. Today's modern-minded women are heading towards the same Vedic path of the past, which treats men and women equally and requires the co-existence of men and women for women's roles.

While discussing the Samkhya philosophy, Devahuti tells her son, Lord Kapila, about the inseparable co-existence of Purusha ("man, consciousness, the Self") and Prakriti ("woman, energy, body-mind") in the *Srimad Bhagavata* (3.27.17-18). She says that Prakriti does not leave Purusha because both are mutually interdependent and eternally connected. It is just like Earth and its smell, or just like water and its flavor, which cannot be separated from each other. Similarly, Purusha and Prakriti cannot exist in separation (Tapasyananda 270). It means that a man without a woman, or consciousness without energy, or the Self without body-mind cannot exist. Both male and female elements are equally important to sustain the world.

Regarding the necessity of coexistence, Khaptad Baba argues that there are two energies in the world. One is negative energy, the energy of Prakriti ("nature," "woman," or "gross world"), and the other is positive energy, the energy of Purusha ("person" or "consciousness"). The two energies must meet each other for creation. If the dual energies (of male and female) are equal, the creation cannot run because difference is the cause of creation, and equality is the cause of destruction. In the case of spouses also, if semen and vaginal fluid become equal, often impotent children are born, and creation cannot continue from such impotent ones. Although a husband and a wife have the same Self, their natures are different, so their organs, duties, and rights are also different. By quoting the verse of the *Devibhagavat Mahapurana,* Baba further highlights that in men, male energy is dominant, and in women, female energy. When their natures are different, restraint will not achieve anything because they follow their nature and fulfill their duties (30-31).

Baba’s wisdom can be understood by drawing a vivid analogy to the interplay of positive and negative currents that spark the light of a bulb. When two positive or two negative currents collide, chaos or destruction results. But when the positive and negative currents unite, they give birth to illumination. This symbolizes the profound truth that the harmonious co-existence of male (positive energy) and female (negative energy) is essential for creating and sustaining life. It can serve as a gentle reminder for modern feminists to embrace the balance and interdependence inherent in this universal design. It is a call for mutual respect and collaboration between genders.

Conclusion

This paper explores women's roles from the Vedic era's egalitarian ideals to the modern era's feminist movements through a feminist perspective, drawing on Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. The literature review traces evolving scholarly debates about women's roles in Hindu society from the Vedic era to modernity, highlighting both progressive interpretations of women's agency and critiques of patriarchal structures. This paper compares Western and Eastern views on gender equality, highlighting that while the Bible suggests a discriminatory structure between men and women, Hindu Vedic traditions originally emphasized gender complementarity and equality. Over time, however, societal and religious shifts led to the marginalization of women, particularly during the medieval era. The feminist movement has since challenged these inequalities, advocating for women's rights and empowerment. Historically, women in the Vedic era were respected, educated, and played active roles in religious and social life. However, during the medieval era, social and religious norms restricted their rights, enforcing oppressive practices such as child marriage, the dowry system, and veiling.

Despite modern legal and social advancements, gender discrimination persists in many forms, including economic disparity, gender-based violence, and societal expectations. Feminist thinkers, from Beauvoir to modern activists, emphasize the importance of deconstructing patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality. While patriarchal structures have historically marginalized women, feminist theory and activism—rooted in Beauvoir's critique of the "Other"—offer pathways to reclaim agency. The historical and philosophical perspectives discussed in this paper suggest that gender equality is not just a modern ideal but has deep cultural and spiritual roots. Moving forward, societies should focus on ensuring women's empowerment through education, legal rights, and economic independence. Additionally, the recognition of gender diversity and the rejection of rigid binary roles are essential for a more inclusive world. True progress requires a shift in both mindset and societal structures, fostering mutual respect and partnership between men and women, as originally envisioned in the Vedic tradition of complementary unity ("Ardhanarishwara").

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