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## Manusmriti And Misogyny: Deconstructing Ancient Hindu Law Through Feminist Lens

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### Abstract:

One of the most important ancient Hindu legal texts, the Manusmriti, has been at the center of arguments about gender, morals, and social order in India for a long time. Many people respect it as an important dharmacāstra, but feminist research has shown that it is based on patriarchy and supports the idea that women should be subordinate to men. Using a feminist view, this paper looks at the misogynistic parts of Manusmriti by breaking down its rules on women's rights, behavior, and choice. It says that the text not only supports the idea that men should be in charge of women and women should rely on men, but it also makes it normal for women to be denied education, property rights, and independence. The study shows how the Manusmriti was used to make gender inequality official in religious and law systems by using feminist ideas about patriarchy, power, and resistance. At the same time, the paper looks at these rules in the context of their time and asks whether they were based on normative goals or social realities. The goal of this critical deconstruction is to show how the text has shaped gender discourse in South Asia for a long time and to make room for reinterpreting tradition in ways that question and break down misogynistic structures. In the end, the paper stresses how important it is to use feminist hermeneutics when reading classic texts again to question their authority and how they apply to current battles for gender justice.

**Keywords:** Manusmriti, Misogyny, Feminist Critique, Patriarchy, Hindu Law, Gender Inequality, Women's Agency, Dharmasāstra, Feminist Hermeneutics, Tradition and Modernity.

### **Introduction:**

Many people think of the Manusmriti as the first book of old Hindu law, and it still makes people feel both reverence and anger. On the one hand, it is praised as a written record of dharma, including rituals, social order, and moral behaviour. On the other hand, it is closely examined because it is deeply sexist, especially when it comes to women's rights and standing. Feminist scholars have said that the book not only limits women's freedom, but it also sets up gender roles in society by using the language of sacred law. "[a woman] must never seek to live alone" is a well-known quote that captures this tension. In the text, this line (Manusmriti 5.148, as translated by Olivelle) makes it very clear that women are expected to be dependent on men. The language makes it clear that women should stay under the care of male family and not have any freedom of choice. Also, the Manusmriti doesn't just show one picture of women; it has many conflicts within it. In the same text that says women can't be completely independent, it also says, "Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears any fruit" (Manusmriti 3.55–3.56). This combination shows a complicated, maybe even mixed view of women, seeing them as both divine vessels and inferior people. Feminist hermeneutics is based on questions like these about whether these prescribed rules reflect real life or just ideological claims. Using a feminist view, this study breaks down how the Manusmriti both praises and limits women, creating a tension that keeps women in subordinate positions even though it seems to honour female divinity. This introduction sets the stage for a critical look at how gender inequality is written into old law texts and how feminist analysis can reveal and question these patriarchal assumptions.

### **Historical and Textual Background:**

The Mānava–Dharmasāstra, also known as Manusmṛti, is the most important work in the Dharmasāstra tradition. It tries to combine the power of rituals with the rules for society. The "Sources of Law" passage in the text explains how the law is known by praising Veda, learned tradition, and "the conduct of good people." It says, "The root of the Law is the whole Veda; the tradition and practice of those who know the Veda; the conduct of good people; and what is pleasing to oneself" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 104). This self-authorization is very important for understanding the historical context of the text because it shows that the law it talks about is both based on scripture and influenced by society. It's likely that the book came together over a number of centuries, with its oldest parts dating back to around 200 BCE to 200 CE (Kane, 1930, p. 5). It is clear from modern editing work that what we call Manusmṛti is passed down in different versions that have strong internal structure (for example, Book 5's "Law pertaining to women," 5.147–168). Olivelle's critical edition and translation (2005, pp. 71–72, 80–81, 102–105) goes into great detail about this. After the colonial encounter, the text's social imaginary became important all over the world.

As Olivelle says in the beginning, Sir William Jones's English translation of Manu in 1794 made it "the first Indian legal text introduced to the western world," which had an impact on both Orientalist law and British India's efforts to make laws more clear (Olivelle, 2005, pp. 13–14). In this long period of time, the parts about women are especially important for feminist history writing because they both use women for ritual purposes and make their subordination official as a constant guardianship system. So, Book 5 says, "Nothing must be done alone by a girl, a young woman, or even an old woman..." She must obey her father as a child, her husband as a young woman, and her kids when her lord is dead. A woman should never be on her own (Manu 5.147–148, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 82). It's all the same in Book 9, but this time it's written in the language of household law: "Her father protects her as a child, her husband protects her as a youth, and her sons protect her as an old woman; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu 9.3, in Bühler, 1886/1991, pp. 138–139). When looked at as a whole, these programmatic claims support the tradition's normative patriarchy and show the difference between strict Brahmanical law and the many different ways people live their lives that other Dharmasūtras/Śāstras, commentaries, and regional customs tried to bridge. So, from the point of view of a feminist legal history, Manusmṛti is not a single "law code," but rather a historically contingent and ideologically charged textual node that has been canonized by its own theory of sources, re-inscribed by colonial codification, and contested by different Sanskrit and vernacular legalities over time.

### Conceptual Framework:

The main idea behind this study comes from feminist legal hermeneutics, which looks at how Manusmṛti creates gender roles and makes patriarchal rule official. The main idea of the text is that women should be dependent on others. This is most clearly shown in the commandment: "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an old woman, nothing must be done independently." In childhood, a girl should obey her father, then her husband, and finally her sons when her lord is dead. A woman should never be on her own (Manu 5.147–148, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 82). The main idea of this verse is repeated many times throughout the text, but it stands out in Book 9: "Her father protects her as a child, her husband as a youth, and her sons as an old woman; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu 9.3, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 138). Manusmṛti turns gender subordination into holy law by putting these rules in a dharma discourse. This makes patriarchy look natural, divine, and unchangeable.

This way of thinking can be broken down using feminist theory as a view. Simone de Beauvoir reportedly said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 283), which shows how culture shapes women's place of subordination. The Manusmṛti is a good example of this kind of writing because it sets male guardianship as timeless dharma and writes women's identities through rules of dependence and purity. However, the same text is also conflicted, recognizing the importance of women in rituals: "Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (Manu 3.55, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 75). This dual position—at the same time honouring and lowering—creates the conceptual terrain that a feminist analysis has to work through. So, the

structure of this paper combines readings from the Manusmṛti texts with feminist ideas about power and patriarchy. It doesn't just look at the text as a neutral set of laws; it also uses it as a way to justify gender roles by saying they are based on dharma. By comparing Manu's rules to feminist criticisms of gender roles that are made up by society, the study shows how ancient law normalized sexism and why it is still important to break down these kinds of texts in the search for gender justice.

### **The Architecture of Misogyny in “Manusmṛti”:**

The Manusmṛti builds a systematic framework of misogyny by putting together rules that control every part of a woman's life and make dependence, exclusion, and ritualized subordination official. “By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an old one, nothing must be done independently.” This is based on the idea of perpetual care, which says that women should never be left to make their own decisions. In childhood, a girl should obey her father, then her husband, and finally her sons when her lord is dead. A woman should never be on her own (Manu 5.147–148, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 82). For example, this verse shows how the text tries to erase any room for individual choice by merging female identity into male control. The sexist structure affects women's ability to go to school and perform rituals. It says that women shouldn't study holy texts: “Women, Śūdras, and those not initiated are excluded from the study of the Veda” (Manu 2.66, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 31). By not letting women learn holy things, Manusmṛti establishes a hierarchy of knowledge that makes men the natural leaders and keeps women in a place of ritual inferiority. By keeping women from participating intellectually, this exclusion also acts as a form of social control, strengthening sexism through control over cultural capital.

Sexuality also turns into a regulated area. The book sees women's bodies as sources of possible chaos that need to be strictly controlled. Manu, for example, says, “It is in the nature of women to seduce men. That is why wise people are always on guard when they are with women” (Manu 2.213, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 53). These kinds of statements make women seem innately dangerous and morally questionable, which is why they should be watched and punished. As a result, there is a system of ideas that keeps women's sexuality under suspicion while defending male guardianship as important and protective. This structure of sexism is not just rules; it's also a metaphor for how women are dependent, left out of knowledge, and sexually controlled within the very structure of dharma. Feminist readings show how Manusmṛti raises patriarchy to a metaphysical rule, making it seem natural because God supports it. The text says at the same time, “Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice” (Manu 3.55, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 75), which is not an attempt to weaken this structure. Instead, it shows how honour is used as a cover for systemic subordination. In other words, misogyny in Manusmṛti is not an afterthought; it is built in and used to keep men in power through law, ritual, and belief.

### **Deconstructing “Manusmṛti” through Feminist Lens:**

To get a feminist understanding of the Manusmṛti, you have to take apart its normative framework and look at how patriarchy is written into the book as sacred law. The rules that men put on women aren't

just social rules; they're also ways of talking about things that keep women under male control and in formal subordination. "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an old woman, nothing must be done independently" is a phrase that is central to this conversation. In childhood, a girl should obey her father, then her husband, and finally her sons when her lord is dead. A woman should never be on her own (Manu 5.147–148, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 82). From a feminist point of view, these kinds of orders turn dependence into a divine command, making structural injustice seem like dharma. In addition to liberty, Manusmṛti makes women subjects who are not included in knowledge. "Women, Śūdras, and those who have not been initiated are not allowed to study the Veda" (Manu 2.66, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 31) shows how men were kept from accessing sacred information to keep power. Feminist thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) say that dominant discourses silence subaltern voices. In this case, women's exclusion from Vedic study meant that they were erased as sources of knowledge within Brahmanical authority.

Manusmṛti also expresses mistrust of women's sexuality: "It is in the nature of women to seduce men; that is why wise people are always on guard when they are with women" (Manu 2.213, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 53). This portrayal makes women seem naturally dangerous, which makes surveillance and putting women under male control acceptable. Feminist deconstruction shows how this conversation makes female libido look like a disease, turning misogyny into a moral principle. But the text also says things that don't seem to go together, like "Where women are honoured, the gods rejoice; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (Manu 3.55, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 75). Feminists see these lines not as real praise of women, but as conditional respect that is used to make rituals work while keeping women in their place in the system. This contradiction shows how patriarchal texts are ideologically torn, going back and forth between symbolic respect and actual exclusion. Feminist hermeneutics shows that Manusmṛti is not just a set of laws; it is also a cultural technology of power that protects women's dependence, limits their intellectual freedom, and controls their sexuality. Deconstruction shows how sexism is built into the structure of dharma texts, which is why rereading these important works is still important for today's fights for gender justice.

### **Contemporary Relevance:**

The Manusmṛti was written almost 2,000 years ago, but it is still talked about today in India when people talk about gender, the law, and social justice. Its prescriptive framework, especially when it comes to women's dependence and subordination, is still a controversial area where feminist research tries to break down its ideological power. "Her father protects her as a child, her husband as a youth, and her sons protect her as an old woman; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu 9.3, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 138), is still echoed in the way people think about women who need male guardians. Some feminist critics say that this way of thinking still affects cultural practices like making it hard for women to move around, forcing women to get married, and promoting virginity as a virtue. The fact that both conservative and progressive groups have used Manusmṛti shows how important it is to people today.

Hindu nationalists sometimes use it as a sign of the authenticity of their culture, but the Dalit and female movements have always fought against its male-centered and caste-based roots. In his important work *Annihilation of Caste*, B. R. Ambedkar called the book the blueprint for Brahmanical patriarchy and said, “The Manusmṛiti is not merely a code of caste, but a code of gender slavery” (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 261). His public burning of Manusmṛiti in 1927 as a sign of protest against race and gender norms shows how the text became a center for fighting back against these systems.

Feminist thinkers of today talk about how Manusmṛiti’s control over women’s sexuality and independence has created long-lasting cultural fears. The verse “It is the nature of women to seduce men; for this reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females” (Manu 2.213, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 53) reinforces the idea that women are bad and can cause trouble. This line of thinking is still used in troubling ways when talking about sexual violence victims in India today, where women’s clothes, behaviour, and movements are restricted for moral reasons. At the same time, feminist readings and criticisms of Manusmṛiti create new ways to fight for gender equality. By breaking down the text’s sexism against women, scholars and campaigners show how making patriarchy seem like divine law has historically limited women’s freedom. By doing this, they are speaking out against modern uses of tradition that try to support gender roles. So, Manusmṛiti is still important today not because it tells us what to do, but because it can be questioned, taken apart, and read again through the lens of female hermeneutics as part of a larger fight for equality and justice in modern India.

### **Counter-Arguments:**

Feminist critiques have convincingly shown how patriarchal the Manusmṛiti is, but a fair analysis also needs to look at counterarguments that focus on the text’s historical background, internal contradictions, and mixed picture of women. For example, the Manusmṛiti says, “Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards” (Manu 3.55, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 75). This is in addition to verses that say guardianship should last forever. People who defend the text often use these verses to show that it doesn’t just put women down; it also knows how important they are to ritual and social order. This contradiction shows how hard it is to understand whether Manusmṛiti is completely oppressive or completely respectful. There are some experts who say that the text’s instructions were more like rules than true accounts of women’s lives. In his book from 2005, Patrick Olivelle says that the Dharmaśāstra texts are “mainly normative and theoretical, not descriptive of actual practice” (p. 19). In this reading, the strict rules about women’s subordination—for example, “Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (Manu 9.3, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 138)—may have been more about Brahmanical ideas than about how people really lived in ancient India.

In addition, the Manusmṛiti is not a single document; it is a composite text with different writers and mistakes within it. For example, one text says, “Women, Śūdras, and those who have not been initiated are not allowed to study the Veda” (Manu 2.66, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 31), but another says that the

presence and honour of women are necessary for rituals to work. This mixed feeling suggests that the text's view on women is more complex than just being misogynistic, even though sexism is still its main structural theme. Feminist hermeneutics doesn't ignore these details from a critical point of view; instead, it puts them in the bigger picture of how men control women. Women are often "honoured" in ritual settings, but they are not given much power in the real world, especially in the legal and social areas. Gayatri Spivak's (1988) idea of the silencing of subaltern voices is useful here: the symbolic elevation of women in ritual discourse can hide the fact that they are not given information, autonomy, or agency. So, even though there are reasons against this about reverence, context, and prescriptive ideals, a critical analysis shows that the text's structural weight makes people more dependent and left out instead of giving them power.

### **Conclusion:**

According to Hindu legal and moral theory, the Manusmṛti is one of the most important texts. However, its rules about women show that patriarchy was a big part of ancient law. When feminists break down the text, it shows that it's not a neutral dharmaśāstra, but a cultural tool of power that made women's dependence acceptable, limited their access to knowledge, and made their sexuality look like a disease. Feminist theorists say that systemic misogyny starts with denying women the right to be independent. One famous saying says, "A woman must be dependent on her father as a child, on her husband as a youth, and on her sons as an old woman; she must never seek independence" (Manu 9.3, in Bühler, 1886/1991, p. 138). But a critical balance tells us that the Manusmṛti is neither historically uniform nor completely one-piece. For example, it has passages that honour women, like "Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice" (Manu 3.55, in Olivelle, 2005, p. 75). But when you look at these statements in the context of the whole book, they seem more like empty rituals than real recognition of women's power.

Manusmṛti is still important today not because it is a rule, but because it continues to shape how people in South Asia think about and talk about culture and society. In 1927, Ambedkar burned the book in public as a political act of defiance and a powerful symbolic rejection of both caste and gender hierarchies. He said, "The Manusmṛiti is not merely a code of caste, but a code of gender slavery" (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 261). In this way, studying Manusmṛti isn't so much about restoring its authority as it is about questioning its history so that patriarchal values don't get rewritten under the guise of custom. In the end, looking at Manusmṛti through a feminist lens shows how important it is to fight against the idea that misogyny is morally good and to take back the power to understand things in order to give women equality, freedom, and justice.

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