

**Rewriting Dharma: A Feminist Reading of Pandita Ramabai's  
*Stri Dharma Niti***

**Dr. Raj Sree M. S**

Associate Professor of English, All Saints College, University of Kerala, Trivandrum.

**Abstract**

*Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) by Pandita Ramabai can be read as a feminist text that constructs a counter discourse of dharma, subverts its brahmanical gender ideologies and provides a moral framework for an autonomous agency of women. This paper explores *Stri Dharma Niti* as a literary and socio-philosophical text that addresses the moral-philosophical themes of brahmanical patriarchy, caste domination and gender injustice in the 19th century Hindu society. Rather than subverting the religious authority in general, the text intervenes in the discourse of dharma to raise questions about the morality of the practices and laws that endorse the sufferings of women in terms of child marriage, child widowhood and lack of educational opportunities. Based on a close reading of the text, this paper locates *Stri Dharma Niti* as one of the early feminist attempts to bring women's everyday experiences into the realm of moral inquiry and public discourse. It argues that while Ramabai redefines the concept of stri dharma from ideal femininity (tyag and anuvrat) to rationality, moral obligation and self-esteem, her ideas about women's rights and responsibilities remain pertinent even today when forms of patriarchal domination continue to prevail in different modes. Reading *Stri Dharma Niti* as a literary-social text rather than a tract for social reform, the paper makes an attempt to retrieve its place in the history of feminist thought that draws upon the categories of the past to spell out the outlines of a feminist-modern future.

**Keywords:** Dharma, patriarchy, injustice, feminism, education, discourse,

**Introduction**

Pandita Ramabai was a scholar and theologian who had the courage to challenge the 'existing' socio-cultural, ethical, and religious constructions of women in India in the nineteenth century. She used the theoretical and literary space provided by Marathi language in 1882 to write *Stri Dharma Niti*, a book in which she redefines dharma and also locates it in the realm of women's moral subjectivity and rationality. Instead of completely rejecting religion as the dominant socio-cultural order, she appropriates the resources of dharma to contest patriarchy in the very framework of discourse in which it is located. *Stri Dharma Niti* is a literary production and a socio-political treatise. It deals with the problems like Brahmanical patriarchy, caste domination, child marriage, widowhood, and women's education. She constructs female subjectivity on the basis of experience and uses experience as the basis of socio-ethical theorization. While the text is located within the socio-cultural

---

ethos of the nineteenth century, it lays the foundation for a feminist praxis which is a forerunner to many later feminist formulations. The paper will try to explore the ways in which Pandita Ramabai creates a feminist counter-discourse which re-defines dharma for the empowerment and emancipation of women and how it can be a continuing resource in the twenty-first century for the same.

### Research Objectives

The present research aims to undertake a literary, critical, and philosophical analysis of *Stri Dharma Niti* by Pandita Ramabai. The aim of the research is to explore *Stri Dharma Niti* as a counter-narrative which locates ethics in women's subjectivity and subject position. Objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To read *Stri Dharma Niti* as a feminist counter-discourse that challenges Brahmanical patriarchy and gender socializations.
2. To read the reconstruction of dharma and stri dharma by Pandita Ramabai for the empowerment of women's ethical agency, rationality, and self-respect.
3. To study how Ramabai uses religious discourse and the reinterpretation of religious texts for a feminist counter-praxis within a dominant discourse.
4. To analyze the role of women's education and experience as resources for social transformation in the text and their relevance in the twenty-first century.

### Hypothesis

*Stri Dharma Niti* acts as one of the early feminist attempts that transforms dharma from a patriarchal regulatory discourse to a feminine discourse of socio-ethical agency and self-articulation. Within the dominant patriarchal discourse, Ramabai's appropriation of religious discourse and scriptural reinterpretation is a counter-discourse that resists gender and caste domination.

### Discussion

#### Scriptural Hermeneutics and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Brahmanical Patriarchy

What, then, was woman's place in nineteenth-century Hinduism? Hindu texts constructed this place in relation to the norms of scriptural injunctions, sacraments, and the discipline of caste. For the overwhelming majority of Hindus, the religious duty of woman was assumed to mean that a woman must serve and obey her father, husband, and then her son, and that self-immolation and resignation were the feminine ideals to be cultivated. For instance, the practice of child marriages, so prevalent in Brahmanical circles, was given religious justification. Similarly, a widow was supposed to pass the rest of her life in ascetic self-denial and suffering, and such suffering was extolled as spiritually rewarding. Under the influence of colonial modernity and Western education, however, novel ideas of individualism and social reform found space in Hindu social discourse. Reforms were critical of certain social practices and therefore had to selectively discredit tradition even as they sought to connect themselves with some sort of tradition. Ramabai's feminism is situated

within such a context: while she questions the male biases of scriptural interpretation, she does so in terms of a scriptural discourse that she apparently holds in high esteem.

### Reclaiming Dharma as Feminist Praxis

One of the smartest and most important manoeuvres in her argument is her reclamation of the notion of dharma. While dharma has often been understood in a static sense as law or rule, and applied to a woman's life by men, in Ramabai's writing it becomes a process of moral deliberation. Thus, she also challenges a man's exclusive right to create, interpret, or access moral codes. In *Stri Dharma Nīti*, for example, Ramabai translates svadharma, or duty of the self, to women, as the acquisition of education and character and the performance of righteous deeds. For her, the sole virtue of obedience is not the marker of a good woman's moral life. Instead, duty is the result of a deliberate and rational moral process: Where there is no deliberation, no thought or reflection, there is no righteous action. Where righteous action is absent, there can be no dharma. The treatment of figures from Hindu scriptures like Sita and Savitri, traditionally iconic figures of suffering, demonstrate her point. For Ramabai, these women are not simply figures to be pitied for their plight, but also models of valor, of deliberation, and of strong moral reasoning. By appropriating such figures in her narrative about women's empowerment, Ramabai uses religion to bolster her feminist ideas.

### From Martyrdom to Self-Respect: A Re-articulation of Stri Dharma

Another significant re-articulation of the counter-narrative of Ramabai is that of morality based on self-immolation of women to morality based on self-assertion and ethical subjectivity. She effectively questions the dominant Brahmanical idea that suffering, silence, and endurance are moral virtues of women. According to the dominant Brahmanical gender representation, the ideal woman is one who is completely passive, unresisting, and self-abnegating, who unquestioningly accepts suffering as a moral duty. Ramabai problematizes this moral economy by stating that virtue cannot be practiced through injustice and compulsion. Instead, she underlines rationality, discrimination, and dignity as the moral requirements of women. In other words, the re-articulation of morality from passive endurance to rational action makes women not mere passive objects of sacrifice but thinking subjects of moral responsibility.

In this re-articulated moral economy, Ramabai formulates three new duties of women: 1) to obtain knowledge, 2) to practice discrimination, and 3) to cultivate dignity and self-respect. These new duties replace the three former duties of women: to obey unquestioningly the father, husband, and son. To obtain knowledge is to equip women with moral power and agency to approach religious texts, social issues, and moral discourses independently without the mediation of men. The practice of discrimination extends the transformative potential of knowledge acquisition to moral life and enables women to discriminate between right and wrong customs and traditions rather than passively accepting them as divinely ordained. The cultivation of dignity and self-respect is the basis of knowledge acquisition and discrimination, and women cannot fight for their rights without it. The acquisition of knowledge allows women to read and interpret the scriptures by

themselves. This exercise of interpretative authority makes the Hindu scriptures open texts, challenging the authority of male priestly class. The practice of discrimination enables women to question social injustice such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, and denial of education to women. The cultivation of dignity and self-respect enables women to resist customs that injure their health and moral well-being. In this re-articulated moral economy, obedience is not a virtue in itself but an act of moral choice based on rational judgment. In this re-articulated moral economy, Ramabai reconstructs women not as passive objects of discipline but as active subjects of moral agency who make rational choices to shape their social life.

The second way in which Ramabai develops her project of women's education as an ethical and social reform is through direct textual appeals to parents and leaders. She argues that women must be educated and intelligent in order to fulfill their dharma. At one moment, she tells parents that they must send their daughters to school, for if they do, their daughters will not become irreligious, but will instead be able to distinguish right from wrong, and will be able to read the principles of the shastras for themselves. This is a crucial argument, as it overturns the position, common among conservatives in the late nineteenth century, that the education of women would lead to moral decay. For Ramabai, it is not education but ignorance which endangers religious and ethical life. In *Stri Dharma Nīti*, she repeatedly ties study, discernment, and the direct comprehension of scripture together, and notes that the lack of education has meant that men have interpreted the scriptures in such a way as to establish women's subordinate position. Again, she ties education to social transformation and to moral accountability: Because women were not educated, she notes, and thus had no authority to condemn them, many pernicious customs arose. If there had been educated women to serve as witnesses, she says, the customs of child marriage and severe widowhood would not have become so established. Not only will educated women become better people, she argues, but they will improve the society around them. Educated women, she says, will serve as interpreters, critics and reformers within both family and society. In this way, education is transformed from a private achievement into a public good, one which reinforces religion when it is identified with justice and reason rather than with superstition and fear.

Moreover, Ramabai's proposals in *Stri Dharma Nīti* for revising women's ethical agency are also an attempt to complicate the idea that it is the birthright and bounden duty of women to serve others in a spirit of mute devotion and obedient charity. While she does not abandon service to others (to family and society) as a crucial aspect of stri dharma, it is resituated within an experiential economy of thought, decision, and action. Stri dharma, she asserts, requires women to seek and practice knowledge, wisdom, and character. This formulation obviously does not entertain the paradigm of the selfless, passive caregiver. Even as Ramabai invokes the example of classical female paradigms such as Sita and Savitri, she celebrates their valour and determination, their resolute, firm and intelligent action, rather than simply their patience and perseverance.

In these ways, Ramabai's treatise proposes that care and devotion may be highly meritorious if coupled with wisdom and self-esteem. On the one hand, this is formulated textually by placing the responsibility to serve others, especially to family and society, after

---

the duty to cultivate one's own capacities of discernment and character. In effect, Ramabai suggests that a woman needs to fulfill her duty to acquire knowledge and develop her character in order to be of the greatest benefit to her family and society. This provision, as might be imagined, fundamentally alters the basis of a norm that calls for female self-sacrifice without self-cultivation. Moreover, such a reversal in the priority of self-cultivation over self-sacrifice renders care less of an imposed social mandate and more of an enabled ethical gesture. It thus disturbs the firm division between (feminine) private care and (masculine) public reason that organizes the terms of a patriarchal ideology. For Ramabai, care and reason are not necessarily counterposed; on the contrary, rational care is a higher form of ethical action. Women in *Stri Dharma Niti* are therefore reconfigured as subjects whose role in social life is motivated by their agency rather than their submission.

### Modern Relevance and Insight into Intersectionality

While *Stri Dharma Niti* was written in 1882, it is nevertheless able to foreshadow several principles of feminism today. For example, many modern feminists focus on the intersectionality of oppression: most importantly for our purposes, the intersection of caste, religion, and society with women's rights. Ramabai's argument is constantly grounded in the ways in which women are hurt by the caste system, by the interpretations of Hindu Scripture, and by the conventions of society. This shows that she understands that women are never just oppressed as women, but as members of a particular class, of a particular caste, of a particular sect, etc. In particular, she critiques Brahmanical patriarchy, the misinterpretations of the Shastras, and the restrictions on caste, foreshadowing the ideas of the gender-caste nexus. She also recognizes that the standards for the privileged upper-castes were privileged as the norm, and the ways in which all women were hurt by this. Additionally, her emphasis on the experiences of women is a fundamental aspect of standpoint epistemology, a particularly feminist epistemology. In addition to the feminist theoretical insight that *Stri Dharma Niti* offers, its strategies for reform are still relevant today. While most feminist critiques of religion today focus on the ways in which religion is inherently oppressive and should be discarded, Ramabai was still firmly within a religious framework. She offers insight into how the same principles of dharma and svadharma can be used to empower women. This is particularly relevant to India today, where debates about personal law, honor crimes, girls education, and rights within a religious community are all occurring. Ramabai's text shows us that the tradition is not fixed, but rather can be manipulated to fit the needs of those who need to reform it. This text shows us that the concepts of dharma and svadharma are not fixed concepts, but rather concepts that can be used for empowerment. Ultimately, her combination of scriptural reinterpretation, social critique, and the use of female education as a tool for reform has created a text that is still widely relevant today.

### Conclusion

*Stri Dharma Niti* is a landmark feminist text that converts dharma into a mode of ethical conduct, rationality and self-esteem for women. By translating religious discourse, reconstructing the duties of women and by consistently voicing her support for education, Ramabai contests Brahmanical patriarchy and caste domination from within the discourse of tradition. Rather than pitting religion against feminism, she shows how an ethics and a

---

scripture can be re-signified to enhance the cause of women's dignity. Her mode of speaking from within remains one of her most effective intellectual strategies. Although written in the 19th century, her text contains elements of ideas that later become part of mainstream feminist debates, especially, intersectionality, standpoint theory and ideas on the social construction of gender roles. At a time when patriarchy continues to be reconstituted through a digital culture, representations in the media, gender biased laws and an increasingly conservative socio-religious ethos, Ramabai's stress on the education of women, rationality and hermeneutic subjectivity assumes relevance. The issues of girls' education, feminist readings of religious texts, reform of personal laws, challenging honor crimes and women as heads of religious institutions are contemporary women's issues which have their precedence in Ramabai's 19th century text. Women must read, interpret and judge for themselves, she asserts in her text, a view that is echoed in the contemporary projects of promoting scriptural literacy among women, feminist theologies and community initiated gender reforms. As a literary-social text, *Stri Dharma Niti* inhabits the inter-space between tradition and modernity and seeks to carve out a notion of gender justice, not outside the framework of religion but through an ethical engagement with it. This makes the text especially significant in multicultural contexts where the domain of tradition is still pivotal in defining identity and normative social behavior. In such contexts, the text provides scholars and activists with a native route map to promoting gender equality, one that integrates critical reasoning, textual re-interpretation and social practice. In that sense, *Stri Dharma Niti* is both a foundational text of the past as well as a text for the future: it contains concepts and values that can aid on in the ongoing struggles for gender equality and women's rights.

## References

Ramabai, Pandita. *Stri Dharma Niti*. Internet Archive, Digital Library of India, 1892.