

Gender, Caste and Liberation: A Feminist Reading of Savitri Bai Phule in Dialogue with Simon De Beauvoir

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Abstract: *Through a comparative feminist analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy and Savitribai Phule's educational movement, this dissertation investigates the relationship between gender and caste. It contends that despite their geographical and temporal distance, both theorists share the fundamental belief that structural change, critical consciousness, and individual activity are necessary for emancipation. Savitribai Phule's groundbreaking work in 19th-century India shows how education can be a vehicle of emancipation for women and oppressed populations, upending patriarchal conventions and long-standing caste inequalities. In addition, Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" highlights the need for women to actively participate in changing their social reality by framing gendered oppression as socially produced. The paper highlights an intersectional and transformational feminist politics of liberation by contrasting Phule's practice with Beauvoir's theoretical findings. In order to fight internalized subordination and achieve social justice, it emphasizes education, consciousness-raising, and group social action as crucial tactics. The study emphasizes that liberation is a real, continuous process that calls for attention, introspection, and teamwork rather than an abstract ideal. In the end, the conversation between Phule and Beauvoir offers a framework for comprehending how caste and gender inequality might be challenged concurrently, providing important insights for modern feminist movements and social reform projects. By linking philosophical and historical viewpoints, this study advances feminist theory and shows how action and critical thinking are still relevant in the fight for equality and human dignity.*

Keywords: *Gender, Caste, Liberation, Feminist Politics, Savitribai Phule, Simone de Beauvoir, Education, Consciousness-Raising, Social Justice, Intersectionality.*

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In South Asia, systems of exclusion, subjugation, and inequality have historically been shaped by the interconnected patterns of gender and caste. The way that patriarchal norms and hierarchical caste structures limit women's lives and agency has been challenged by feminist study. This has resulted in multiple types of oppression that contradict universalist narratives of liberation (Pandey, 2019, p. 86). Savitribai Phule and Simone de Beauvoir are two unique but powerful voices that provide important insights into this complicated landscape. Savitribai Phule was a trailblazing anti-caste feminist who rose to prominence in nineteenth-century India. Her advocacy against gender inequality and caste oppression established the groundwork for intersectional feminist theory on the subcontinent. In *The Second Sex*, the twentieth-century French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir presented a methodical critique of women's oppression, emphasizing gender as a social and historical construct shaped by patriarchal forces. She argued that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. xx). Savitribai Phule's life and efforts serve as an example of how caste and gender oppression are interconnected systems that deny large populations access to education, basic rights, and dignity. By establishing schools for girls and women of all castes, promoting education as a means of emancipation, and relentlessly working for widows and impoverished women in colonial India, Phule—who was born into the socially marginalized Mali caste—challenged both gender stereotypes and caste hierarchy. Her campaign aimed to free women from systematic discrimination that denied them autonomy and dignity, rather than just literacy (Pandey, 2019, p. 89). Savitribai is an important person for analyzing gendered emancipation in anti-caste contexts because her efforts show how race, gender, and caste intersections affect women's unequal status in society, whereas mainstream narratives frequently prioritize gender alone.

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir offers a philosophical foundation for understanding this oppression outside of local settings. De Beauvoir criticizes the historical positioning of women as the Other, defined in reference to males rather than as independent beings. According to her, "men have presumed to create a feminine domain... in order to lock women therein," demonstrating how societal structures include gendered subordination into interpersonal relationships, culture, and the law (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. xx). Her well-known assertion that gender is socially created rather than innate sheds light on how patriarchal standards influence women's roles and identities, making freedom a process of self-realization and transcendence beyond imposed restrictions (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. xx). Despite being geographically and temporally apart, Phule and de Beauvoir's ideas share a fundamental concern: emancipation from repressive social systems. Both scholars show that emancipation must take into account institutional hierarchies, cultural norms, and material circumstances that influence individuals' lives in addition to legal or formal equality. While Beauvoir offers the intellectual tools to analyze how gendered identity formation is linked to structural power relations, Savitribai's work addresses caste gender violence and alienation by establishing spaces of empowerment and education for marginalized women. When combined, their perspectives allow for a dialogic feminist paradigm that emphasizes existential critiques of freedom and othering in addition to lived experiences of caste gender discrimination.

The intersectional reality of oppressed women who occupy several axes of marginalization are frequently not captured by universal frameworks of liberation, such as those that consider gender or caste in isolation, as contemporary feminist theory increasingly acknowledges. Although intersectionality was first conceptualized in Western study in the late 20th century, Phule's praxis—that gender and caste cannot be analytically distinguished—resonates with this idea (Pandey, 2019, p. 86). Because of this convergence, Phule's activity is positioned as an early example of intersectional feminist resistance, and Beauvoir's philosophical criticisms offer the normative basis for envisioning liberation as a change in the hierarchical systems that now exist. This essay suggests that by combining philosophical critique with grassroots emancipatory activity, reading Savitribai Phule in collaboration with Simone de Beauvoir

enhances our comprehension of gender, caste, and emancipation. It places Phule's social change in the context of larger feminist thought, contending that real emancipation necessitates challenging both cultural norms and institutional hierarchies that constrain women's lives. In addition to respecting the historical uniqueness of Phule's setting, this feminist synthesis expands de Beauvoir's universal critique to include caste-based exclusion as a key component of feminist liberation discourse.

2 | GENDER AND PATRIARCHY: STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

In order to comprehend patriarchy, one must look beyond personal beliefs to the institutional and cultural frameworks that support gender inequity. The idea of patriarchy shows how deeply ingrained power structures oppress women while upholding hierarchical social orders in the context of gender, caste, and emancipation. In addition to laws and institutions, cultural norms, daily activities, and internalized ideas about gender roles and identities all contribute to patriarchy, a system of male supremacy (Feminist Perspective on Patriarchy, 2023). The term "structural patriarchy" describes the manner in which women are socially subservient due to the unequal distribution of power and resources in favor of men by societal institutions such as the home, religion, education, and governmental regulations. Expectations that place males in positions of control and decision-making while assigning women to tasks centered on domestic work, caring, and obedience serve to maintain this system (Patriarchy and its Impact on Women's Struggles in Society, 2025). From a structural standpoint, patriarchal domination is upheld by laws that restrict property rights, cultural norms that legitimize male power, and cultural behaviors that normalize violence against women. Women from marginalized castes in India face additional disadvantages as a result of these institutions' intersection with caste hierarchy. Feminist sociological frameworks, for instance, note how caste and gender power relations interact within social structures to shape disparate experiences of oppression and reinforce patriarchal norms through gender roles specific to caste (Theorizing the interaction of caste, class, and gender, 2016).

Conversely, cultural patriarchy functions by defining what men and women ought to be through common beliefs, symbols, and customs. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir made the well-known claim that women are not born but rather are created as "other" in relation to males. This social process incorporates patriarchal presumptions into cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, pp. 16-17). From the socialization of girls into subservient positions to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in literature, the media, and religion, this cultural construction has an impact on daily behavior. Despite its origins in societal expectations rather than nature, women are frequently urged to embrace "femininity" as a natural destiny. According to De Beauvoir's critique (*The Second Sex*, 1949/2015), patriarchal culture maintains itself by normalizing women's secondary status and portraying gendered roles as "natural," rather than socially imposed. In India, women's identities and lives are shaped by both caste and patriarchy. According to academics, caste systems in India incorporate patriarchy into social practices like marriage, inheritance, and purity laws, turning women's bodies and labor into places of control for both gender and caste hierarchies. According to academics like Uma Chakravarti, the Brahmanical patriarchy paradigm illustrates how caste standards assign women responsibilities that support caste hierarchies, such as restricting women's sexuality to maintain caste purity (Theorizing Patriarchy in the Indian Context, 2025). Because of this dual system, women from different caste origins experience different types of oppression: lower caste women experience violence and exclusion that combine caste oppression with gendered vulnerability, while upper caste women are restricted by rules that uphold caste honor.

The work of Savitribai Phule is an early and potent critique of these cultural and structural aspects of patriarchy. Her advocacy in nineteenth-century India challenged the entwined caste and gender norms that barred Dalit and lower caste women from literacy and public life, going beyond just advocating for women's education (Locating Savitribai Phule's Feminism, 2019). Phule fought structural exclusions ingrained in caste and gender hierarchies as well as cultural expectations about women's responsibilities

by establishing schools for women of all castes, fighting against child marriage, and providing help to widows. Her work serves as an example of how destroying patriarchy necessitates both upending societal perceptions of women's responsibilities and changing the institutional frameworks that restrict women's access to social recognition, economic independence, and education. By bringing de Beauvoir into conversation with Phule, it becomes clear how institutional power and cultural norms work together to uphold patriarchy. Phule's anti-caste feminist practice shows how institutional injustices limit women's possibilities based on both gender and caste, while De Beauvoir's existential critique reveals how gender roles are created and internalized within culture. When taken as a whole, they demonstrate that patriarchy is a complex system that necessitates both systemic change and cultural criticism. By incorporating these feminist concepts, modern theory can gain a deeper understanding of how patriarchy operates as a societal structure that restricts women's liberties, defines their identities, and continues to call for all-encompassing liberation measures.

3 | CASTE AS A MEDIATING FACTOR IN LIBERATION: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

Caste appears as a mediating structure that reshapes the meaning of gendered emancipation rather than as an incidental backdrop when considering liberation within feminist theory. An Indian feminist perspective must take caste into account as a fundamental factor that determines social hierarchy, subjectivity, and freedom, whereas Western feminist theory frequently emphasizes gender as the main axis of oppression. A compelling example of how caste penetrates societal systems to affect women's liberation is provided by Savitribai Phule's praxis, which includes her education, activism, and criticism of traditional conventions. When her work is interpreted in light of more general feminist theory, it becomes clear that caste conditions the very possibilities and boundaries of emancipation for various groups of women, rather than just intersecting with gender. In India, caste is a deeply ingrained system of social stratification that combines with patriarchy to create uniquely multi-layered forms of oppression. Caste and gender interact to produce various experiences of marginalization and exclusion, as feminist sociologists emphasize. According to one structural feminist interpretation, gender, caste, and class all simultaneously generate "differential social relations and differential social locations," necessitating an analytical framework that goes beyond single axis explanations of oppression (Velaskar, 2016, p. 389). This means that a woman's caste status significantly affects her mobility, political voice, access to resources, and bodily autonomy. Caste is frequently the mediating factor that turns gendered vulnerability into compounded injustice.

This realization is historically embodied in Savitribai Phule's living struggle. She faced caste-based exclusion from public life and education in addition to patriarchal servitude because she was born into the Mali caste, a community that is socially categorized as lower caste. Realizing that gender justice is incomplete without caste justice motivated her groundbreaking attempts to create schools for girls across caste boundaries. Phule challenged the restrictive logic of the caste system by establishing educational institutes for women of all castes. This allowed women to overcome caste gender restrictions that restricted them to inferior social roles. Her approach was more than just teaching; it was an effort to use community agency and empowerment to reshape caste structures. The way that caste functions as a mediating factor to shape emancipation is further clarified by contemporary feminist studies. In order to explain how caste and gender combined produce distinct experiences of discrimination, intersectionality theory has been adapted to the Indian setting. According to a recent study, caste serves as "a hidden apartheid" in India, interacting with gender to cause systemic denial of rights, violence, and coercion—experiences that cannot be adequately described by focusing only on gender oppression (Ahmad, 2023, p. [Abstract]). In addition to adding another axis of subordination, caste also shapes how gender is experienced and disputed in society, as this intersectional framing makes clear.

This is more succinctly expressed in Dalit feminist interventions. Caste systems expose women to kinds of violence and deprivation that are mostly concealed in dominant feminist discourses, as demonstrated

by Dalit women's testimonies and scholarship. Research on the lived experiences of Dalit women demonstrates how caste oppression exacerbates gendered vulnerabilities in domains including labor, body politics, land rights, and community mobility, resulting in a type of marginalization that is both caste-inflected and gendered. According to these speakers, caste must be centralized as a constitutive force rather than just an additive category in any theory of liberation. Additionally, caste influences ideas about liberation itself, including what constitutes freedom, whose rights are acknowledged, and how social transformation is conceived. A caste-attuned viewpoint emphasizes the need to change structural hierarchies that restrict access to those very freedoms, in contrast to some feminist perspectives that celebrate formal rights or abstract equality. This dedication to structural freedom is demonstrated by Phule's insistence on education for all women, including Dalits and members of lower castes. Her study shows that emancipation needs both institutional reform that breaks down caste barriers to participation, dignity, and belonging as well as personal transformation.

Therefore, reading Phule in light of modern feminist theory emphasizes caste as a formative and mediating force in liberation struggles. It forces a reconsideration of freedom that takes into account the structural and historical factors influencing social inequality in addition to universal gender categories. By highlighting the diverse experiences of women and broadening the conceptual terrain of liberation to incorporate more inclusive and contextually grounded frameworks, the inclusion of caste in the study enhances feminist theory.

4 | EDUCATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AS EMANCIPATORY TOOLS:

According to Savitribai Phule and Simone de Beauvoir, education and the development of critical consciousness are intentional tactics for changing repressive social systems and promoting freedom rather than neutral acts of learning. This theory emphasizes how education must go beyond literacy or skill development to become an emancipatory practice that confronts internalized hierarchies and collective norms that support systematic oppression in the context of gender, caste, and freedom. In 19th-century India, Savitribai Phule's educational movement was fundamentally political and liberating. As a Dalit woman, she recognized how gender and caste inequalities combined to lock most women and lower caste subjects in a state of immanence, denied social agency and restricted to roles dictated by Brahmanical patriarchy. By pointing out that Phule's struggle intersected gender, caste, and social hierarchy, Renu Pandey's scholarly work places her feminism in the context of global feminist theory and offers an early example of intersectional feminist practice based on social transformation and education (Pandey, 2019, p. 36). Phule viewed education as a tool to combat ingrained ignorance rather than an objective in and of itself. Her poetry exhortations, such as the admonition to "awake, arise and educate, smash traditions – liberate," and her seminars for girls of all castes made it abundantly evident that education must be connected to challenging repressive cultural conventions and belief systems. This puts Phule in line with other world leaders who believed that social consciousness and group transformation were inextricably related to education.

In the late 1960s, the idea of consciousness raising emerged within Western feminist groups as a way to raise awareness of oppressive systems that were hidden. Small awareness raising groups were referred to as "the backbone of the Women's Liberation Movement" by the Chicago Women's Liberation Union because they enabled women to see their individual experiences as political rather than isolated episodes (Wikipedia, 2026). This strategy is quite similar to Phule's work; her teaching methods allowed pupils to consider gender subordination and caste-based exclusion as socially constructed injustices rather than immutable "natural" circumstances. The existential feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir offers a theoretical framework for incorporating awareness raising and education into liberation theory. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," as Beauvoir famously writes in *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. 13). This statement, which is frequently seen as a fundamental principle of feminist thought, demonstrates how gendered identities are socially produced rather than merely

biological. The claim that education must challenge internalized gender norms and expose the historically contingent basis of oppression is supported by Beauvoir's thesis. Beauvoir describes the emancipation effort as one of increasing human agency through critical reflection by viewing gender as a becoming rather than a fixed essence. Phule really accomplished this goal through her education and literary endeavors.

Additionally, Beauvoir maintains that social narratives that portray women as the Other—the secondary counterpart to male subjects—are the source of women's subjugation. Although accurate translations of *The Second Sex* would display exact pagination, Beauvoir's realization that emancipation entails regaining subjectivity and agency has had a lasting impact. Beauvoir made the case in her feminist existential critique that women need to actively participate in creating their own lives rather than passively accepting identities that are imposed by society. Thus, Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy and the results of a critical, consciousness-raising education are closely related: both seek to expose constraints and enable individuals to claim their freedom and reinterpret their social responsibilities. When taken as a whole, these frameworks imply that education as emancipation necessitates both the acquisition of information and in-depth critical thought. It involves more than just disseminating information; it also involves cultivating a critical consciousness that identifies the causes of oppression and empowers people to confront and alter social institutions. An applied version of this philosophy is demonstrated by Phule's activities, which included establishing schools for Dalit girls, writing writings that questioned caste scriptures, and insisting on logical investigation. The conceptual framework is provided by Beauvoir's philosophical insights: oppression endures because people are trained to accept hierarchical identities; liberation happens when people learn to question, critique, and reinterpret those identities in group practice. Together, education and consciousness-raising upend internalized subordination and make it possible for both the social order as a whole and individual subjects to undergo emancipatory transformation.

5 | TOWARDS A FEMINIST POLITICS OF LIBERATION:

Education must be viewed as a profound practice of resistance, transformation, and collective self-assertion rather than just a means of obtaining skills or literacy in order to support a strong feminist politics of liberation. This viewpoint goes beyond reformist tactics to a more in-depth analysis of the social foundations that support caste and gender inequality. Savitribai Phule's life and work are a prime example of such emancipatory politics in Indian feminist philosophy since her activism combined extreme opposition to caste oppression and Brahmanical patriarchy with educational reform. Phule's feminism, according to academics who place her in the context of global feminist trajectories, was not just about establishing schools but also about upending inherited power structures that condemned women and lower caste groups to inferior social positions (Pandey, 2019, p. 87). Phule's conviction that access to information is a prerequisite for emancipation from slavery and that education should empower people to question oppressive standards rather than merely replicate them demonstrates her political agency. Her writings and teaching methods openly questioned the caste-approved social structure, promoting a politics in which the oppressed might acknowledge and resist their own oppression. Poems like "Awake, arise and educate; smash traditions – liberate!" demand a collective reimagining of identity and society, implying that emancipation is inextricably linked to active political involvement and reciprocal solidarity, according to a modern analysis of her writing.

The existential feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir provides a fundamental framework for understanding this kind of liberation politics. The famous claim made by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" emphasizes that gender is a socially created identity influenced by historical relations of power rather than a biological destiny (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. 13). This realization is profoundly political rather than merely descriptive; it identifies the cultural narratives and social behaviors that characterize women as the Other in relation to males as the source

of oppression. Therefore, eradicating the widespread misconceptions and power dynamics that deny women subjectivity, agency, and equality is necessary for liberation. Beauvoir goes on to say that genuine freedom entails engaging in social, political, and economic activities outside the confines of domestic subjugation. She demonstrates how emancipation is linked to structural change rather than tokenistic inclusion by arguing that "Woman cannot be emancipated unless she takes part in production on a large social scale and is only incidentally bound to domestic work" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, pp. 104–113). This represents a political perspective in which women assert agency through communal participation in changing their living situations as well as through individual choices.

Beauvoir's theory and the politics of liberation arising from Phule's practice agree that structural change must be interwoven with self-assertion. By tackling concurrent types of oppression—caste, gender, and class—and arguing that the education of girls and Dalit children was intimately linked to broader societal emancipation, Phule's educational initiatives foreshadowed contemporary intersectional critiques. Intersectional feminist perspectives that view marginalization as multi-layered and inextricably linked to broader systems of dominance are in line with this politics (Pandey, 2019, p. 95). By highlighting participation, agency, and self-creation as crucial to liberation, Beauvoir's philosophical formulation gives this politics a potent new dimension. According to the existential theory, which holds that people can transcend their circumstances via conscious action, oppressed people must not only acknowledge their oppression but also proclaim their right to remake social reality. In this way, a feminist politics of liberation is not only reformist or individualistic, but intrinsically transformational and social. In order for historically marginalized groups to establish complete subjectivity and equality, it calls for the transformation of educational, economic, legal, and cultural frameworks.

Education thus becomes a location of both individual empowerment and social transformation in the direction of a feminist politics of liberation. A politics in which learning itself is a challenge to repressive systems is embodied by Phule's bravery in establishing schools for socially marginalized girls, opposing caste violence, and establishing discursive spaces for critical debate. Beauvoir's argument that freedom entails active participation in the world highlights how liberation is a collaborative endeavor that depends on significant structural change as well as the active agency of oppressed communities and women. When combined, these viewpoints provide a potent ideology of liberation based on structural change, communal struggle, and critical consciousness.

6 | CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy and Savitribai Phule's feminist activism emphasizes the transformational power of critical consciousness, education, and group fight in destroying oppressive systems. Phule's groundbreaking work in 19th-century India shows that emancipation is a social and political enterprise that needs to address interlocking caste, gender, and class hierarchies rather than just an individual endeavor. A profoundly intersectional and practical approach to liberation is seen in her concentration on educating girls and vulnerable populations, establishing forums for critical thought, and questioning repressive norms. By understanding gendered oppression as socially produced and highlighting the need for women to exert agency and actively participate in remaking the world, Beauvoir's theoretical insights support this praxis. When taken as a whole, their viewpoints highlight the need for both institutional change and individual empowerment to identify and confront internalized subordination in order to achieve true liberty. Thus, the conversation between Phule and Beauvoir offers a convincing model for a feminist politics of liberation that combines individual initiative with group social action. This framework shows that emancipation is achievable when knowledge, introspection, and action come together to challenge hierarchical systems and promote equality by fusing education, consciousness-raising, and philosophical critique. In the conclusion, the study confirms that freedom is an ongoing, dynamic process that necessitates alertness, bravery, and

teamwork, making Beauvoir's existential philosophy and Phule's actual praxis extremely pertinent to current battles for gender and caste justice.

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