VEDA'S
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)
An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal
Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002 http://www.joell.in

Vol.13, No.1
(Jan-March)
2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ISSN: 2349-9753

RENOUNCING BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF HINDUISM AND HINDUTVA IN *WANDANA SONALKAR'S WHY I AM NOT A HINDU WOMAN*

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13110

Article history:

Received on : 07-02-2026
Accepted on : 09-03-2026
Available online: 14-03-2026

ABSTRACT

Wandana Sonalkar's *Why I Am Not a Hindu Woman: A Personal Story* (Women Unlimited, 2021) offers a reflexive savarna feminist critique of how Brahmanical patriarchy structures both Hinduism and Hindutva. Writing as an upper-caste Chandraseniya Kayastha woman, Sonalkar renounces her Hindu identity and argues that Hinduism's hierarchical caste system, legitimised by purity–pollution norms in the Dharmashastras, inherently sustains misogyny and exclusionary violence against Dalits, Muslims and women across social classes. As an atheist and Marxist, she rejects all organised religions that promote othering and hate.

The book characterises Hindutva as the political zenith of these structures, vilifying Muslims, women and other minorities as second-class citizens. Sonalkar shows how texts like the Manusmriti, Puranas and epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, though revered as sacred, normalise gendered and caste-based subordination by glorifying violence, naturalising hierarchy and devaluing women. Engaging with events like the Babri Masjid demolition, the Gujarat violence, the Latur earthquake, and the Khairlanji massacre, she links scriptural ideology to contemporary state and social violence.

This paper offers a textual and contextual analysis of Sonalkar's work, foregrounding reflexive Savarna critique and arguing that genuine egalitarian transformation requires Dalit feminist leadership. It evaluates the implications of her intervention for intersectional feminism and secular resistance in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Wandana Sonalkar, Brahmanical patriarchy, Hindutva, Dalit feminists, savarna critique, intersectional feminism, secular resistance.*

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary India is engulfed in rising majoritarian Hindutva politics—featuring events like the Babri Masjid demolition of 1992, the Godhra riots, the Khairlanji Massacre, Citizen Amendment Act Protests and the prevailing communal tensions across India. In such a backdrop, Wandana Sonalkar's memoir Why I am Not a Hindu Woman: A Personal Story stands as a deliberate act of public repudiation of religious identity that subscribes to violence, exclusion based on birth and othering of women, Muslims and minorities. The book echoes the voice reflected in the book Why I am Not a Christian (1927) by Bertrand Russell**,** Kancha Iliah Shepherd's Why I am Not a Hindu (1997) and contrasts with well-known Marathi stage and film director Atul Pethe's article in the Marathi Daily Loksatta 'Mi Hindu Ahe', or 'I am Hindu' and the polemic of Shashi Tharoor's Why I am a Hindu (2018). The book is written from a feminist standpoint. Born into an upper-caste Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu family and brought up abroad in a relatively liberal family, the author remarks, "I understand Hinduism to be a system of caste patriarchy, which has (Pethe) been described as Brahmanical patriarchy" (Sonalkar 30). She sensed the machismo and misogyny that are an essential part of the rhetoric and public sentiment of Hindutva. Therefore, though she is a Hindu by birth, she shrinks from the shrill, exclusionary, hate-filled version of Hinduism that is being expressed and manifested in contemporary India (65).

The renunciation by Sonalkar of her Hindu identity is not an abstract or intellectual rejection. It is based on the "lived experience" she has encountered in a dysfunctional Hindu family. Her rejection is also based on mythological analysis and observation of contemporary Indian politics. She rejects the "happy Hindu family" myth and the notion of Hinduism as tolerant pluralism insisting that relational normativity—enforced socially rather than by a central authority—sustains inequality. As an upper-caste woman, she does not suffer like a Dalit woman. However, she suffers from emotional trauma on account of failed marriage of her parents, on account of the patriarchal context (41). In his review, G. Sampat notes that the book distinguishes itself by drawing on "savarna trauma" from within an upper-caste perspective, unlike Dalit-Bahujan critiques, while addressing misogyny that "cuts across castes" (Sampath)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sonalkar's mediation is grounded in theoretical work on gender, caste, and Hinduism in India. In Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens (2013), Uma Chakravarti argues that "Brahmanical patriarchy" deploys stridharma or pativratadharma as a rhetorical device to ensure social control over women, functioning as an ideological mechanism that regulates women's biological capacities (74) and sanctifies gender inequality. She notes that dharma in Hinduism varies by varna, caste, and gender—a point echoed in Sonalkar's book: "Dharma for the Brahmins is not the same as dharma for the Shudra, who is born to serve others; or for Dalits, who is an outcaste because he does those jobs for society which religion has deemed polluting" (88).

Sharmila Rege's Writing Caste, Writing Gender (2006) advances a Dalit feminist standpoint theory, urging non-Dalit feminists to adopt reflexive

positions. Sonalkar explicitly credits Rege with enabling Savarna women to critique without claiming victimhood ("Feminism in India," 16 Feb. 2021). Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's Why I Am Not a Hindu (1996) offers a cultural-economic critique from a Dalit-Bahujan perspective, exposing Hinduism's exclusion of productive castes; Sonalkar extends this discussion by foregrounding gendered Savarna trauma and adding autobiographical depth. As Sampath notes, it is "a first-person account of caste oppression that details not Dalit suffering but Savarna trauma" (Sampath). Ambedkar's writings—especially his resignation after the Hindu Code Bill's rejection (1951)—continue to shape analyses of the family; he sought to abolish polygamy and patriarchal inheritance, but orthodox Hindus prevailed (Sonalkar qtd. in Tharoor). Pandita Ramabai's 1880s observations on post-marriage dependency similarly prefigure Sonalkar's reflections on widowhood (Chakravarti, Gendering Caste).

Scholars such as Tanika Sarkar and Paola Bacchetta argue that Hindutva is sustained through specifically coded forms of Hindu masculinity and through women's active and passive participation in violence. Building on this, Sonalkar extends the critique to everyday Hinduism's normalization of disfigurement (for example, Surpanakha in the Ramayana). Recent assessments, including a 2023 Feminism & Psychology review of her work, describe Hindutva as "a march toward Hindu democracy" built on pre-existing inequities (Pooja). Marxist-feminist engagements, notably Juliet Mitchell's Feminism and Psychoanalysis and Sudhir Kakar's mytho-psychological studies, also inform Sonalkar's analysis of familial and epic violence.

Savarna critiques remain rare. Ruth Vanita's leftist work largely overlooks caste, whereas Sonalkar, via Sharad Patil, advances a Phule–Ambedkar–Marxist framework. Post-2014 work on the CAA, Bhima Koregaon, and WhatsApp-fuelled hatred supports Sonalkar's claim that tolerated internal violence enables external othering. This review reads Sonalkar's text as a bridge: it offers insider feminist renunciation absent in male Dalit critiques and contests liberal Hindu pluralism. Despite scarce quantitative data on urban caste reproduction and 2024–2026 communal incidents, Sonalkar's personal–political synthesis addresses key qualitative gaps in intersectional theory.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Wandana Sonalkar was born in Pune into an upper-caste CKP family. She spent her formative years in Singapore before studying mathematics and economics from the University of Cambridge. She earned Ph.D. in economics from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. She is a retired professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She also translated two Marathi books into English: *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkar Movement* by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon and *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds* by R. B. More.

Methodologically, Sonalkar weaves together autobiography, textual analysis and empirical observation across five chapters. She begins with her own "lived experience" in a dysfunctional family and then moves outward to examine myths and historical

events such as the 1993 Latur earthquake and the 1988 Aurangabad riots. This reflexive Savarna standpoint both recognises the privileges that make her recovery possible and exposes "the spirit of Manu" that continues to hover over ostensibly liberal households (Sonalkar qtd. in Sampath). Departing from purely theoretical critiques, her method deliberately ruptures the private–public divide: "Hinduism is about relationships between people; it lays down norms, and leaves it to us to censure each other" (Sonalkar qtd. in "Excerpt"). The book's apparent brevity (169 pages) conceals its polemical intensity, as she draws on Mitchell and Kakar to develop psychoanalytic readings of myth. Crucially, this methodology also models allyship by explicitly ceding theoretical and political leadership to Dalit feminists.

THE HINDU FAMILY AS SITE OF BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY

The first chapter throws light on the entrenchment of Brahmanical patriarchy as it defines the role of men and women. She says, "A Hindu woman's relationship with religion is, first and foremost, tied up with the home, housekeeping, and the hearth" (30). She suffers due to the failed marriage of her parents. She feels that 'happy families' are a construct; unhappy families have stories(31). Her father's extramarital relations with Mrs. S after her husband's death in an aircraft crash ruined the family. Since childhood Sonalkar and her siblings encountered emotional traumas. She acknowledges the fact that even though she did not suffer directly from caste or patriarchy in her childhood, but her emotional traumas were a consequence of the patriarchal context in which her parents' marriage fell apart(41).

When Sonalkar's mother got to know about the exta-marital affair of her husband with Mrs. S she withdrew into even more longer puja rituals and more frequent fasts, eliciting outbursts of contemptuous anger from her husband, but her religion seemed to be more and more inadequate in terms of guidance or succour(47).

The affair of her made an adverse impact on the self-image of Sonalkar. She felt a sense of identification with Sharankumar Limbale when she read his autobiography Akkarmashi. The term Akkarmashi is used to describe gold that is adulterated. Sharankumar Limbale is born out of her mother's illegitimate relations with an upper-caste patil. He was rejected by his father and therefore, he was considered as a bastard child. Similarly, Sonalkar finds similarity of her identity with the identity of Sharankumar Limbale as in Hinduism it is the father who bestows legitimacy, but she was the child of the rejected wife (51).

It is believed that an extended Hindu family offers solace or support to the victim. However, Sonalkar's mother did not get any support from her family members. Sonalkar's paternal grandmother even warned family members not to say anything to her son about the extramarital affair as he is very sensitive(48).

The patriarchy can also be realised in Hindu homes through rituals like lighting the lamp by women before the holy basil(Tulsi plant). The lamp lit by women seems to illuminate the place of Vishnu, the husband of the goddess Tulsi. The ritual suggests that

it is performed not for the welfare of the wife, but for the well-being of the male householder.

MYTHOLOGICAL AND TEXTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MISOGYNY AND CASTE

Sonalkar's analysis of Hindu epics and sacred texts forms the intellectual core of her critique, revealing how mythological narratives sanctify misogyny, caste exclusion, and violence as intrinsic elements of Brahmanical patriarchy rather than as mere cultural artefacts. The Manusmriti does not consider women as independent individuals. Manusmriti claims, " In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Laws of Manu 5.148).

We also find misogyny in the Manusmriti that puts women in a bad light in terms of her moral character. She is portrayed as the source of all misconduct. For instance, " It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason, the wise are never unguarded in the company of females"(Laws of Manu 2.213).

Manusmriti presents an ideal of women as fundamentally dependent, assigning them a primary role of service to men and thereby constraining the autonomy of upper-caste women. Lower-caste communities, in turn, are described as emulating these endogamous and hierarchical norms as a strategy for social mobility. Sonalkar links this pattern to Brahmanical patriarchy as theorized by Chakravarti, who argues that caste is "constituted by gender": upper-caste women are tightly regulated to preserve notions of purity, while lower castes adopt similar restrictions, reinforcing the durability of the caste system (Feminism in India, 19 Oct. 2022).

This textual basis makes a universal ethic untenable, because dharma is conceived as relational and dependent on social status: "In Hinduism, dharma for the Brahmin is not the same as dharma for the Shudra" (Sonalkar qtd. in Sampath). This kind of relativity undermines equality and legitimizes supremacist ideologies, directly sustaining Hindutva's project of a homogenous "rashtra" organized under Rama-centric Brahminism (Sampath).

In present-day India, this mythic template is echoed in concrete acts of brutality: acid attacks on women who refuse romantic advances or enter inter-caste/interfaith relationships, honour-related mutilations, and online misogynistic abuse. The depiction of Surpanakha as a dangerous "other" (pathologised for her desire) parallels Hindutva's construction of Muslim women as simultaneously oppressed—warranting paternalistic "rescue" narratives—and as alluring threats to Hindu masculinity. Sonalkar situates this within broader structures of patriarchal control, where women's bodies are seen as jeopardising male asceticism or ritual purity, as reflected in pollution taboos. The 1980s *Ramanand Sagar Ramayan* television series—broadcast amid the ascent of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement—disseminated a sanitised yet fundamentally violent narrative, galvanising millions and contributing to the climate that led to the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. In this way, mythology moves from epic text to political instrument, providing ideological cover for vigilante violence against women who defy prescribed norms.

The *Ramayana* has been sharply criticised for legitimising gendered violence, particularly through the episode of Surpanakha, whose disfigurement by Lakshmana is framed as just punishment for a woman's desire and "otherness." Sonalkar argues that this narrative symbolically "sanctions acid attacks, nose-cutting and other 'disfigurements'," normalising violence against women within a Hindutva framework (Feminism in India, 16 Feb. 2021). She links this mythic script to contemporary atrocities—acid attacks, honour-based mutilations, and online misogyny—and to Hindutva's portrayal of Muslim women as both oppressed and sexually threatening. This logic is further entrenched by the 1980s *Ramanand Sagar Ramayan* serial, broadcast during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which popularised a sanitised yet violent vision of the epic and helped create the climate for the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. Myth thus becomes a political weapon that authorises vigilante violence against women who transgress patriarchal norms.

The *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* extend this critique to militarism and "righteous" violence. Sonalkar argues that the *Mahabharata* legitimises a "righteous" war, presenting fratricide and mass killing as dharmic when aligned with cosmic order, while the Gita's opening "call to war" urges Arjuna to fight despite moral doubt, elevating dharma above personal ethics (Feminism in India, 16 Feb. 2021). These texts, she contends, furnish ideological support for Hindutva war hysteria—from Pulwama rhetoric and anti-Muslim pogroms to fantasies of "Akhand Bharat"—as the RSS and BJP mobilise epic masculinity and even exhort women to aggressive stances against Muslims and Dalits. As noted in a YouTube discussion with Sonalkar, mythic notions of "just war" in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* connect "Savarna trauma" in the domestic sphere to national communalism, where the same relativist dharma that accommodates infidelity or widow marginalisation also rationalises hostility toward external "Others."

Sonalkar notes that while other religions also contain patriarchal elements, Hinduism is distinctive for binding patriarchy to caste endogamy and sacralized inequality. Lower castes often reproduce upper-caste controls—such as Maratha women foregrounding caste pride over gender justice—forming a layered pyramid of oppression (Feminism in India, 19 Oct. 2022). Television serials and Hindutva cultural campaigns intensify this by using epics to legitimise a "return" to tradition amid neoliberal anxieties. Through close readings, Sonalkar shows how mythology normalises systemic violence—pollution taboos, widow "social death," and endogamy—thereby enabling overt atrocities. Thus, Brahmanical patriarchy emerges not as a distortion of Hindutva but as its textual foundation, making its renunciation crucial to feminist and anti-caste emancipation.

HINDUTVA AS EXTENSION OF INTERNAL OTHERING

Wandana Sonalkar argues that Hindutva is not a distortion of Hinduism but its political culmination, extending everyday Brahmanical hierarchies of caste and gender into a broader project of anti-Muslim hatred. The same structures that normalise violence against women and Dalits—purity norms, patriarchal control, untouchability, and mythological justifications—also enable the dehumanisation of

Muslims and fuel misogynistic, hyper-masculine hate speech. By mobilising toxic masculinity and drawing on epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Hindutva turns upper-caste women and men into active or complicit agents of communal violence. Sonalkar shows that societal tolerance for anti-Muslim violence, post-riot segregation, and everyday discrimination flows from the prior acceptance of caste- and gender-based oppression within Hindu families and communities. She therefore rejects both classical Hinduism and Hindutva, insisting that without dismantling Brahmanical patriarchy in lived Hinduism, resistance to Hindutva will remain shallow—an insight that is especially urgent in India's polarised, propaganda-saturated present.

By linking the personal and domestic to the political and communal, Sonalkar shows how private acceptance of caste and gender inequality fuels public, communal violence. Her framework becomes both a diagnosis and a call for radical, intersectional resistance that refuses to separate "good" Hinduism from "bad" Hindutva, demanding a deeper rupture for any casteless, egalitarian future. Speaking reflexively from a savarna location, she issues an especially urgent challenge to liberal Hindus in today's context.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Wandana Sonalkar's *Why I Am Not a Hindu Woman* (2021) offers a rare reflexive savarna feminist critique of Hinduism, Brahmanical patriarchy, and Hindutva. Building on Kancha Ilaiah's Dalit-Bahujan critique and Uma Chakravarti's gendering of caste, she shows how Brahmanical patriarchy structures everyday life in privileged Hindu families, especially around purity, sexuality, and endogamy. In conversation with Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, Sonalkar does not claim a Dalit position but models savarna self-critique, exposing her own CKP family and privileges. Drawing on Ambedkar's unfinished agenda of family reform and echoing Pandita Ramabai's renunciation of Hinduism, she argues that caste hierarchy and misogyny are foundational to "lived Hinduism," not distortions. Rejecting liberal efforts like Shashi Tharoor's to rescue a "good" Hinduism from "bad" Hindutva, she insists that Hindutva is a logical extension of Brahmanical Hinduism, not its betrayal. Her book thus bridges savarna feminism and Dalit-Bahujan thought, calls for Dalit feminist leadership, and demands deeper ruptures with Hindu identity and family structures. It disrupts comfortable liberal Hindu narratives and advances a more honest, intersectional, standpoint-based anti-caste feminist politics for contemporary India.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Wandana Sonalkar's *Why I Am Not a Hindu Woman* (2021) moves beyond memoir to demand that caste and patriarchy be confronted as everyday, lived norms rather than only as legal or constitutional problems. Modelling reflexive savarna allyship, she critiques her own CKP, upper-caste background to show how savarna women are both oppressed by and complicit in caste-gender hierarchies, aligning with Uma Chakravarti's call for Brahmanical patriarchy to be central to feminist analysis and for Dalit feminist leadership. Her insistence that caste hierarchy, misogyny, and exclusionary violence are

foundational to "lived Hinduism" directly challenges the idea that Hindutva merely distorts a tolerant faith. In an India marked by CAA, farmers' protests, escalating caste atrocities, communal attacks, and bulldozer justice, her public renunciation of Hindu identity becomes a disruptive political act that refuses cultural legitimacy to majoritarianism. The book links domestic violence in Hindu families with communal violence in the public sphere, arguing that the same purity, hierarchy, and exclusionary logics structure both. Rather than incremental reform, Sonalkar calls for a radical break with Brahmanical norms through atheistic, feminist, and anti-caste politics, pushing intersectional movements to centre caste alongside gender. Ultimately, her work serves as both diagnosis and provocation, offering savarna reflexivity and Dalit-led leadership as pathways toward genuinely secular, feminist, anti-caste futures in contemporary India.

CONCLUSION

Wandana Sonalkar's *Why I Am Not a Hindu Woman* offers a bold renunciation that shows Brahmanical patriarchy as the foundation, not a distortion, of Hindutva's majoritarian politics, linking caste hierarchy, misogyny, and communal othering in everyday "lived Hinduism." In an India marked by caste atrocities, communal polarisation, and an ascendant Hindutva, her insistence on Dalit feminist leadership becomes a powerful model of reflexive savarna resistance, pushing upper-caste feminists to move beyond liberal reclamation and cede space to the most oppressed. Her close readings of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Manusmriti, and other texts reveal how myth and scripture still legitimise purity norms, violence, and caste-gender control, making the book essential to anti-caste feminist thought. By rupturing the private–public divide and practising rigorous self-critique, Sonalkar advances a radical feminist vision of casteless, secular, and egalitarian futures that demands not minor reform but a transformative break with Brahmanical norms. Her voice endures as both a sharp diagnosis of Hinduism's complicity in oppression and an invitation to deeper, intersectional solidarity in the struggle for justice.

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