



# Exploring Indian Texts: A Theological and Interdisciplinary Perspective on Injustice, Performativity, and the Restoration of Identity

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**Abstract**— This paper provides a comparative exploration of *Saguna* by Krupabai Satthianadhan and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* by Pandita Ramabai, emphasizing themes of ambivalence, performativity, and identity reconstruction within the framework of 19th-century colonial India. Both works examine the intricate relationship between gender, religion, and systemic injustice, portraying women's struggles to navigate societal constraints, reclaim their identities, and seek empowerment. Analyzing these narratives through a theological perspective, this paper investigates ideas of divine justice, redemption, and the Imago Dei. It illustrates how the authors critique patriarchal and caste-based structures while envisioning hope and transformative change. The study also highlights the significance of education, faith, and community in moving from oppression to empowerment, showcasing the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative potential of divine grace.



**Keywords**— *Krupabai Satthianadhan, Pandita Ramabai, Saguna, The High-Caste Hindu Woman, Indian Christian literature, Feminist theology, Postcolonial identity, Performativity and gender, Colonial India, Caste and patriarchy.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the late 19th century, India underwent profound social and political transformations under British colonial rule. The British colonial agenda brought with it not only political and economic control but also a powerful cultural and religious mission aimed at restructuring Indian society. One of the key battlegrounds in this process was the education of women, particularly through Christian missionary initiatives, which became a point of contention between British colonial authorities and Indian social reformers. Upper-caste Hindu women, in particular, found themselves torn between these opposing forces, balancing colonial expectations with the patriarchal norms of their own society.

Krupabai Satthianadhan's *Saguna* and Pandita Ramabai's *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* explore the intricacies of identity, religion, and social justice, particularly through the

lens of gender. Both texts offer valuable perspectives on the experiences of women in colonial India, highlighting the tension between colonial control, indigenous customs, and religious practices. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have highlighted how the intersection of gender and colonialism often resulted in a dual marginalization for women—first through patriarchal systems and then by the colonial powers that sought to "civilize" them.

In the biblical creation narrative, the doctrine of the Imago Dei asserts that every human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), emphasizing the intrinsic dignity and worth of all individuals. This theological concept is essential to understanding the struggles of the women in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, as they fight to reclaim their God-given identity in a world that seeks to define them solely through the oppressive lenses of patriarchy and colonialism. The principle that all people are

made in the image of God serves as a foundation for resisting systemic injustice. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, human dignity is rooted in divine creation, not in societal value. Consequently, the protagonists' struggles can be seen as attempts to restore this inherent dignity, which is continually denied by the social and colonial structures they navigate. Their stories align with the biblical understanding that any injustice toward individuals challenges the divine order.

Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory provides a valuable lens for examining how the protagonists in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* navigate their identities amidst oppression. According to Ricoeur, individuals and communities shape their identities through the stories they construct about themselves and those imposed by societal norms. Within the constraints of caste and gender hierarchies, such narratives act as instruments of control, influencing the protagonists' self-perception and reinforcing limiting roles. However, by reshaping these narratives, the women defy and resist the systems designed to confine them, ultimately presenting a hopeful perspective on reclaiming and restoring identity.<sup>1</sup>

This paper explores the ways in which both texts engage with themes of ambivalence and performativity, focusing on how the protagonists navigate the oppressive social norms imposed on them. Additionally, the paper delves into the theological dimensions of both narratives, particularly the concepts of divine justice and redemption, and examines how education, faith, and community contribute to the protagonists' journeys from subjugation to empowerment.

## II. SUMMARY OF SAGUNA BY KRUPABAI SATTHIANADHAN

*Saguna* is a groundbreaking semi-autobiographical novel that provides a vivid account of the life and struggles of its protagonist, Saguna, a woman from a converted Christian family in colonial India. Saguna's parents' conversion introduces her to a distinct religious and cultural identity that sets her apart within a society dominated by Hindu traditions and patriarchal norms. Her life becomes a negotiation between the inherited values of her family, the colonial education system, and her aspirations for autonomy.

Saguna's pursuit of education symbolizes both liberation and constraint. While it opens doors to self-discovery and empowerment, it also exposes her to the performative expectations of being a Christian woman in a colonial framework. Saguna reflects the tension between belonging

and alienation as she struggles with societal rejection and the weight of familial expectations. Her journey encapsulates themes of resilience, faith, and the quest to reconcile personal identity with broader social realities, making her story a testament to the transformative power of education and spiritual growth.

## III. SUMMARY OF THE HIGH-CASTE HINDU WOMAN BY PANDITA RAMABAI

*The High-Caste Hindu Woman* by Pandita Ramabai is a poignant and unapologetic critique of the systemic oppression faced by women in 19th-century Brahmanical society. Drawing on her personal experiences and observations, Ramabai highlights the challenges of child marriage, widowhood, and educational deprivation, exposing the deep-rooted inequalities in caste and gender hierarchies. She portrays the high-caste Hindu woman as bound by a web of cultural and religious customs that deny her individuality and dignity.

Ramabai's narrative advocates for education as the primary tool for liberation. She argues that education is not merely a path to intellectual development but a means of reclaiming identity and dignity. Rooted in her Christian faith, Ramabai envisions a society where women are free to explore their God-given potential and asserts the importance of spiritual and societal transformation. By critiquing both religious and social structures, she calls for radical reforms to restore the autonomy and worth of women in Indian society. Her work stands as a manifesto for justice, blending personal conviction with theological insight.

## IV. THE CONTEXT OF GENDER, COLONIALISM, AND INJUSTICE: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The socio-political landscape of 19th-century colonial India was marked by rigid social hierarchies, where gender, religion, and caste played crucial roles in shaping women's lives. British colonialism exerted significant influence over the social fabric, often positioning itself as a civilizing force to reform what was considered the "backward" status of Indian women. British colonial officials viewed the social reforms, especially the education of women, as a means of cultural transformation that could soften India's rigid caste and gender systems.

In *Saguna*, the protagonist's identity as a Christian woman subjects her to a unique set of societal expectations and restrictions. Her journey reflects the ambivalence of being part of a marginalized religious community, yet striving for

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 243.

self-empowerment through education and personal growth. Saguna's experiences are shaped by the tension between her inherited cultural norms and the new religious identity she is trying to embrace. As Rosinka Chaudhuri has argued, the Christian conversion of Indian women was not just a personal spiritual journey, but also a confrontation with colonial ideas of education and womanhood.

Saguna is thus negotiating a complex intersection of religion, colonial expectations, and gendered restrictions. This is evident in her reflection: "To be a Christian was to be doubly alien—first to the community I was born into and then to the colonial rulers who shaped our education"<sup>2</sup>. Her struggle with identity is further exemplified when she notes, "I carried the burden of my family's expectations on one shoulder and the hope of self-realization on the other, often unsure which weighed heavier"<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, Ramabai's *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* offers a stark depiction of the rigid social structures that govern the lives of high-caste Hindu women. Ramabai exposes the systemic injustices, including child marriage, widowhood, and lack of education, that severely restrict women's autonomy and reduce them to mere objects within a patriarchal framework. Meera Kosambi suggests that Ramabai's critique of Brahmanical patriarchy was unique in its incorporation of feminist theology, which was grounded in her Christian faith and highlighted the systemic violence against Hindu women. Ramabai's personal transformation through conversion to Christianity allowed her to critique not only the religious practices of Hinduism but also the patriarchal structures embedded in Indian society. She writes, "The high-caste Hindu woman is bound not only by the chains of caste but by the invisible chains of custom that deny her any identity of her own"<sup>4</sup>. She further laments, "Her days are consumed in serving others, her nights in silent tears, for she knows not a moment that belongs to herself".<sup>5</sup>

The intersection of gender, religion, and colonialism in these texts presents a compelling lens for exploring how identity is shaped and contested within systems of oppression. For Saguna, her Christian faith serves as both a source of exclusion and a means of empowerment, offering her a foundation to challenge the cultural expectations that seek to restrict her. Likewise, Ramabai critiques Hindu

orthodoxy through the perspective of her Christian beliefs, which she embraces as a force for liberation, opposing caste-based and gendered inequalities in her society. This intersectional perspective provides a nuanced understanding of how religion can simultaneously perpetuate and challenge social injustices, depending on the specific context in which it operates.

## V. AMBIVALENCE AND PERFORMATIVITY: A DUAL ANALYSIS

Ambivalence and performativity are central themes in both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, as the protagonists navigate the complex social expectations imposed upon them. In *Saguna*, the protagonist's pursuit of education, while empowering, also subjects her to the performative expectations of being an "educated native" within colonial society. Her actions are both a submission to and a subversion of the identity imposed upon her, reflecting a complex interplay between conformity and resistance.

This ambivalence is evident in the way Saguna balances her desire for self-empowerment with the need to conform to the expectations of both her Christian community and the broader colonial society. Her education, while a means of liberation, also places her in a liminal space where she must constantly negotiate her identity as a Christian, a woman, and a colonial subject. This performative aspect of her identity is further complicated by the expectations placed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society, where her worth is often measured by her ability to conform to traditional gender roles.

Saguna's inner conflict is poignantly expressed when she observes: "Each lesson I learned brought me closer to freedom but also tied me tighter to the expectations of those who thought education was a tool for obedience, not empowerment".<sup>6</sup> This highlights the ambivalence of her position as an educated woman in a patriarchal and colonial context. This is further emphasized when she states, "The classroom became my sanctuary, but also my prison, where I learned not just letters but the language of restraint".<sup>7</sup>

To further clarify the concept of performativity for readers unfamiliar with it, it is important to explain that Judith

<sup>2</sup> Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, edited by Chandani Lokugé (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 142.

<sup>3</sup> Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, edited by Chandani Lokugé (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.

<sup>4</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies' Mission Aid Society, 1887), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies' Mission Aid Society, 1887), 65

<sup>6</sup> Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, edited by Chandani Lokugé (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 188

<sup>7</sup> Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, edited by Chandani Lokugé (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 193

Butler's theory of performativity goes beyond simple actions or behaviors. Performativity refers to the way identity, particularly gender, is not something we are born with but something we continuously 'perform' based on societal expectations. According to Butler, identities like gender are constructed through repeated actions, behaviors, and norms that society imposes on individuals. These actions, over time, create the illusion of a fixed, inherent identity, when in fact, they are culturally and socially constructed.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of *Saguna* and Ramabai's narrative, performativity becomes a means of both conforming to and questioning the very systems that create these identities. For instance, when Saguna engages in educational pursuits, she is not only performing the role society has allocated to women but also subverting expectations by using education—a tool generally reserved for men or higher castes—to redefine her place in society. This performative act highlights that identity is fluid and open to resistance and reinterpretation, rather than fixed by societal norms. Through these performances, both protagonists expose the constructed nature of caste and gender roles, illustrating that such roles can be reshaped or dismantled.

Ricoeur's notion of narrative reconfiguration further deepens this analysis. According to Ricoeur, the stories imposed on individuals are not fixed but open to reinterpretation. For Saguna and Ramabai, their performative acts—whether through education, religion, or social reform—serve as tools of resistance that allow them to reshape the dominant narratives of caste and gender. By reclaiming their identities through these performative acts, the protagonists are able to challenge the very structures that perpetuate their oppression. As Ricoeur argues, narratives have the power to refigure reality, opening new possibilities for identity formation and social transformation.

In Ramabai's work, the ambivalence in adhering to societal expectations is equally pronounced. The practice of child marriage, widowhood, and seclusion is deeply ingrained in the culture, yet these practices also serve as potential sites of resistance. Ramabai's own life, as a widow who later became a Christian and a social reformer, exemplifies this ambivalence in both adhering to societal norms while simultaneously challenging them. Meera Kosambi argues that Ramabai's narrative highlights the tension between adhering to Brahmanical norms and critiquing them from a position of empowered resistance. From a theological perspective, this ambivalence can be interpreted as the

tension between the fallen world and the redemptive possibilities offered by faith.

Ramabai critiques the performative roles expected of Hindu women, writing, "A woman's worth is measured not by her mind or her spirit, but by her ability to suffer in silence and perform her duties without question"<sup>9</sup>. This performative aspect of gender roles underscores the systemic nature of women's subjugation, even as it reveals potential sites of resistance. She further asserts, "In every ritual, every ceremony, the woman's silence is demanded, for her voice has no place in the sacred or the mundane"<sup>10</sup>.

In both texts, the protagonists' actions can be seen as an expression of faith in the face of injustice—a faith that both conforms to and challenges societal norms, ultimately seeking transformation through the power of God's grace. The performative aspect of their actions can be understood as a form of spiritual resistance, where the act of conforming to societal expectations becomes a means of exposing and subverting the very structures that seek to confine them. Theologically, this performative resistance can be understood as a form of prophetic witness, where the act of resisting injustice becomes a means of bearing witness to the redemptive power of God.

In Christian theology, the concept of vocation or calling emphasizes that every individual has a divine purpose that transcends societal expectations. Ephesians 2:10 speaks to this, affirming that "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." This biblical understanding of vocation can be applied to both Saguna and Ramabai, who are called to resist the oppressive roles imposed upon them by society. Their pursuit of education and justice can be seen as an expression of their God-given vocation to live out their full humanity, rather than conforming to patriarchal or colonial expectations.

Moreover, the tension between conforming to societal norms and subverting them can be understood in light of Christian discipleship. Jesus himself subverted societal norms by empowering marginalized groups and calling his followers to reject the world's standards in favour of God's justice (Matthew 5:1-12). Saguna's and Ramabai's resistance to the performative roles expected of them can thus be seen as an enactment of their discipleship, where their actions bear witness to God's kingdom values of justice and liberation, even in the face of societal constraints.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies' Mission Aid Society, 1887), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies' Mission Aid Society, 1887), 89.



## VI. THE STRUGGLE FOR GENUINE IDENTITY: FROM SUBJUGATION TO EMPOWERMENT

The struggle for genuine identity is central to both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. In *Saguna*, the protagonist's journey from subjugation to empowerment is marked by her pursuit of education and self-discovery. She reflects, "In every prayer, I sought not just God's guidance but the strength to be myself in a world that refused to see me as more than a convert".<sup>11</sup> Her journey symbolizes the broader tension between inherited identity and chosen faith, highlighting the transformative power of education and spiritual growth. Her gradual empowerment signifies not just the overcoming of societal barriers but the restoration of her autonomy and identity, reflecting the Christian theme of redemption and the restoration of the *Imago Dei*.

This journey of empowerment is not just a personal struggle but also a reflection of the broader social and political context in which *Saguna* lives. As a Christian woman in colonial India, her identity is shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, religion, and colonialism, all of which seek to confine her within predetermined roles. Her pursuit of education is not just about gaining knowledge but about reclaiming her identity as a person created in the image of God, with inherent worth and dignity.

As Elizabeth A. Johnson asserts, patriarchal interpretations of *Imago Dei* have historically marginalized women by emphasizing male-centered metaphors for God. In reclaiming this concept, Johnson emphasizes that women are equally created in God's image, thus restoring their rightful dignity and affirming their role as agents of transformation in the world.<sup>12</sup> This theological affirmation empowers the women in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* to resist oppressive societal narratives and reclaim their divine identity, as both texts reflect the protagonists' struggle to transcend the roles imposed upon them by gender and caste.

In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the struggle for identity is both collective and individual. She writes, "To reclaim our identity, we must first break the chains of ignorance and tradition that bind us"<sup>13</sup>. For Ramabai, education serves as the key to empowerment, as she asserts, "Knowledge is the lamp that lights the way out of darkness for every woman

who dares to seek it"<sup>14</sup>. The high-caste Hindu women described by Ramabai are constrained by oppressive traditions, which represent a collective yearning for liberation. Ramabai's critique of these practices is not only a call for social reform but also a spiritual appeal for the restoration of women's dignity and worth in the eyes of God. Kwok Pui-Lan, a feminist theologian, argues that the *Imago Dei* serves as a powerful framework for reclaiming women's dignity and autonomy. Ramabai's work aligns with this broader feminist theological perspective, as she advocates for the restoration of women's dignity through education and spiritual empowerment.

Both texts emphasize that identity restoration involves resisting societal norms and embracing the divine image within. Ramabai draws on theological imagery when she writes, "We are not shadows of men; we are daughters of God, bearing His image and worthy of His grace"<sup>15</sup>. This perspective resonates with *Saguna*'s assertion that "faith is not an escape but a mirror that shows us who we are meant to be"<sup>16</sup>.

Through their narratives, *Saguna* and *Ramabai* illustrate that the struggle for genuine identity requires both personal resilience and systemic change. Their journeys reflect the intersection of individual empowerment and communal transformation, offering a vision of hope rooted in divine justice and grace.

Ramabai's narrative moves beyond individual empowerment, critiquing the broader societal structures that dehumanize women. Her transformation from a Hindu widow to a Christian social reformer reflects a deeper theological vision of societal transformation.

Phyllis Trible's feminist biblical analysis, particularly her focus on reclaiming "texts of terror," provides a framework for understanding how the women in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* reclaim their stories of suffering and marginalization. Trible argues that reclaiming these narratives allows women to participate in a redemptive process that heals the wounds inflicted by patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the protagonists in these texts engage in a redemptive re-narration of their lives, constructing new stories of dignity and freedom, thereby resisting the oppressive interpretations that have been used to subjugate them.

<sup>11</sup> Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, edited by Chandani Lokugé (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 210

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 120

<sup>13</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies; Mission Aid Society, 1887), 210

<sup>14</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies; Mission Aid Society, 1887), 155

<sup>15</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies; Mission Aid Society, 1887), 200

<sup>16</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the Indian Ladies; Mission Aid Society, 1887), 230

<sup>17</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 35

Miroslav Volf argues that the restoration of identity involves both personal and societal transformation, emphasizing the importance of reconciliation and justice. His framework emphasizes that the marginalized cannot achieve full restoration solely through personal empowerment; rather, it requires an active process of justice within the broader society. Volf's concept of "embrace" underscores the need for an open engagement with the "other," where both the oppressed and the oppressor are called to transformative reconciliation. This process, grounded in justice and forgiveness, is essential for healing and restoring fragmented identities. In the context of *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, this aligns with the protagonists' struggles to reclaim their identities within a patriarchal and caste-driven society. Their journeys reflect the intersection of personal resilience and the broader societal shifts necessary to address the injustices they face. Through Volf's lens, we can see how true restoration requires both inner renewal and systemic change, highlighting the inseparable link between personal transformation and the pursuit of justice in the quest for a restored identity.

Jacqueline Grant's assertion that Black women's redemption involves reclaiming the story of Jesus as the liberator who identifies with their suffering offers a powerful parallel to the protagonists in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*<sup>18</sup>. Both texts reflect the protagonists' attempts to reclaim their identities by challenging not only gendered oppression but also the intersections of caste, colonialism, and religion. By constructing new narratives of freedom and justice, these women participate in a theological and social process of reclaiming their full humanity in the face of oppressive systems.

This process of identity restoration can be further understood through Ricoeur's lens of narrative identity. Ricoeur's theory posits that individuals continually interpret and re-interpret their lives through the stories they tell. In *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the protagonists' struggles reflect a reconfiguration of their narratives, where they assert new stories of dignity, equality, and agency in the face of oppressive systems. By reclaiming their identities through education and faith, these women challenge the roles imposed upon them by caste and gender, offering a narrative of resistance that aligns with Ricoeur's vision of narrative reconfiguration as a means of social and personal transformation.

The concept of *new creation* found in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is central to understanding the protagonists' journeys of identity restoration: "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" In both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the protagonists' transformative journeys—through education, faith, and personal growth—can be viewed as an expression of this theological concept. Their empowerment reflects the Christian theme of redemption, where the restoration of personal dignity and societal justice is an integral part of the *new creation* that God promises.

N.T. Wright, in his exploration of the Kingdom of God, emphasizes that God's redemptive plan involves not only personal salvation but also the restoration of communities and systems of justice. Wright argues that human flourishing is tied to participating in God's mission to bring justice to the world. This can be applied to both texts, where the protagonists' struggles to restore their identities are not merely personal acts of empowerment but are tied to a larger mission of challenging and transforming the societal structures that perpetuate injustice.

## VII. INJUSTICE AND THE THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Injustice is central to both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. In *Saguna*, the protagonist faces multiple forms of injustice—gender discrimination, religious marginalization, and colonial oppression. Her journey reflects the Christian pursuit of justice, where faith and perseverance lead to both personal and societal transformation. This transformation can be likened to the process of sanctification in Christian theology, where individuals are shaped and restored through a divine pursuit of justice. Sanctification here moves beyond the personal moral journey to a broader understanding of justice that seeks the restoration of social and cultural dignity, especially for those marginalized by gender, faith, and colonial systems.

The injustices faced by *Saguna* are multifaceted, reflecting the complex dynamics of colonial India. As a woman, she is subjected to patriarchal norms that confine her within domestic roles. As a Christian, she faces marginalization from Hindu society, which views her with suspicion. And as a colonial subject, she navigates the tension between colonial authorities that use education as a tool for control and indigenous elites that resist reforms. This intersection of gender, religion, and colonialism reveals the deeply

<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989)155

embedded structures of injustice that define Saguna's life. Theologically, this can be understood through the biblical theme of justice as the restoration of the oppressed, where God's concern for the marginalized is evident in both the Old and New Testaments. Biblical justice is not merely punitive but restorative, aiming to lift the downtrodden and restore their full humanity. Saguna's journey can thus be viewed as a reflection of the Christian theological ideal of justice, where personal and communal restoration go hand in hand.

In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai offers a more direct critique of systemic injustice, particularly focusing on the plight of high-caste Hindu women. Here, the theological response to injustice is more explicitly framed in terms of liberation through knowledge and spiritual awakening. Ramabai's advocacy for women's education as a key factor in their empowerment is not only a socio-political argument but also a deeply theological one. Drawing from biblical principles of justice, Ramabai positions education as a form of liberation, echoing the biblical emphasis on wisdom and understanding as paths to freedom. Proverbs 31:26 speaks of the virtuous woman who opens her mouth in wisdom, and the book of Hosea declares, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). In this sense, Ramabai's call for women's education is a theological act of justice, seeking to restore women's God-given dignity and worth in a society that has denied them both.

Moreover, Ramabai's critique of widowhood practices and the exploitation of women within high-caste Hindu society also echoes the prophetic calls for justice found in the Bible. In Isaiah 1:17, the people of God are called to "seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." Ramabai's work can be seen as a modern-day prophetic voice, calling out the injustices faced by widows and high-caste women in Indian society. Her theological response to these injustices is not limited to mere advocacy; it is rooted in a deeper vision of the Kingdom of God, where all people—regardless of gender or caste—are valued and empowered.

Both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* reflect the Christian theological theme of divine justice. Jürgen Moltmann's work on divine justice emphasizes the restoration of right relationships—between individuals, between communities, and between humanity and God. For Moltmann, justice is not merely about punishing wrongdoers, but about creating conditions for human flourishing and the renewal of life. This concept of justice is deeply relational, concerned with healing and

reconciliation, not only at a personal level but within the broader social fabric. The theological vision of justice in both narratives is one that seeks not just individual redemption, but the transformation of societal structures that perpetuate injustice.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the biblical concept of *shalom*, often translated as "peace," further illuminates the theological response to injustice in these texts. *Shalom* is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, wholeness, and flourishing for all. In *Saguna*, her journey towards justice can be viewed as a quest for *shalom*—a state where gender, religious, and colonial oppressions are dismantled, and both personal and communal wholeness are restored. Similarly, Ramabai's vision in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* is one of *shalom*, where education, empowerment, and the transformation of societal norms lead to the flourishing of women in India.

Reinhold Niebuhr's concept of justice is particularly useful here. Niebuhr argues that justice is about more than just retribution; it is about creating systems that allow for human flourishing and reconciliation. In *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the protagonists' pursuit of justice goes beyond personal liberation. It seeks the transformation of societal structures that dehumanize and oppress. This broader theological understanding of justice is reflected in Isaiah 1:17, which calls on the people of God to "learn to do right; seek justice, defend the oppressed." Saguna's journey, therefore, aligns with a biblical vision of justice that is concerned with both personal and societal restoration.

Additionally, the concept of *prophetic justice* in the Bible, where prophets like Amos and Isaiah challenge systems of oppression, can be applied to Ramabai's work. In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai acts as a prophetic voice, denouncing the injustices faced by high-caste Hindu women and calling for radical reform, much like the biblical prophets called Israel to account for its treatment of the marginalized (Amos 5:24, Isaiah 58:6). Her role as a reformer is deeply theological, as she calls for a society that reflects God's justice and compassion.

In conclusion, both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* challenge their readers to see injustice not as an insurmountable force but as a call to action. The theological response in these works is one that moves beyond passive acceptance of suffering toward active engagement with the systems that perpetuate it. Justice, as seen in the Christian tradition, is not merely a concept but a lived reality that

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).110

requires both personal transformation and the reordering of societal relationships in accordance with God's vision for humanity. These narratives call for a justice that is holistic, encompassing personal dignity, social equity, and spiritual restoration, aligning with the biblical mandate to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Letty M. Russell emphasizes that justice is not merely about rectifying wrongs but about creating new possibilities for women to live out their identity as equal participants in God's kingdom.<sup>20</sup> This idea is evident in both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, where the protagonists' pursuit of education and empowerment reflects their desire to reclaim their agency and participate fully in the life and mission of their communities. Justice, in this sense, becomes both a personal and communal narrative of transformation, echoing the broader theological call for dismantling systems of oppression.

### VIII. EDUCATION AS EMPOWERMENT

Education plays a central role in both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. In *Saguna*, the protagonist's pursuit of education is not only a personal journey of empowerment but also a means of reclaiming her identity as a child of God. Her education enables her to resist the societal constraints imposed upon her as a woman and a Christian, allowing her to assert her autonomy within both her family and the broader colonial society. Education is depicted not simply as intellectual growth but as a spiritual and social process of reclaiming her divine identity.

Similarly, Ramabai emphasizes education as the path to liberation in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. Ramabai argues that women must be educated to understand their worth, resist social structures that oppress them, and restore their dignity. For Ramabai, education is deeply connected to her Christian faith, which calls for the recognition of every human being as made in the image of God and endowed with dignity. In advocating for the education of women, Ramabai is engaging in a broader theological vision of liberation, one that transcends the boundaries of intellectual achievement to touch on the core of human worth and divine justice.

Paulo Freire's concept of education as liberation further illuminates the role of education in both texts. Freire argues that education must go beyond simply transmitting knowledge; it must awaken the oppressed to their condition and empower them to transform their world. Both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* reflect this view of

education, as both protagonists use education not only to improve their own lives but to challenge and transform the structures that oppress them.

The Bible places a high value on education and wisdom, especially in the context of liberation and empowerment. Proverbs 1:7 states, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." In both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, education is depicted as a means of spiritual and social liberation, not merely intellectual development. Ramabai's advocacy for the education of women echoes the biblical emphasis on wisdom as a path to freedom and flourishing.

Jesus himself demonstrated the power of education in his ministry, particularly in how he elevated the status of women by teaching them directly (Luke 10:38-42). Ramabai's vision for educating women, therefore, aligns with the biblical model of using knowledge as a tool for liberation, empowering individuals to reclaim their God-given identity and dignity in the face of societal oppression.

#### The Transition from Subjugation to Empowerment: A Comparative Model

The transition from subjugation to empowerment serves as a powerful framework for understanding the processes of identity restoration in both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. In *Saguna*, this transition is marked by the protagonist's pursuit of education and spiritual growth. Her empowerment reflects the Christian theme of sanctification, where individuals are transformed through faith and perseverance in the face of injustice.

In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai's critique of oppressive practices faced by high-caste Hindu women is rooted in her belief that true justice can only be achieved when individuals recognize their inherent worth as children of God. Ramabai's own life, as a widow, convert, and social reformer, exemplifies this process of transformation. Her advocacy for women's education and social reform reflects her theological vision of justice, where education, faith, and community play critical roles in the restoration of human dignity.

Both narratives emphasize the importance of justice in the process of identity restoration. The struggles faced by *Saguna* and the women in Ramabai's text are not only personal battles but part of a larger cosmic struggle for justice and redemption. Karl Barth's theology of reconciliation highlights the importance of restoring right relationships between individuals, communities, and God. This process of reconciliation and transformation is at the

<sup>20</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).65



heart of both narratives, as the protagonists move from subjugation to empowerment through education, faith, and community.

## IX. CONCLUSION

The narratives of *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* offer a rich exploration of ambivalence, performativity, injustice, and the restoration of identity in 19th-century colonial India. Through their respective journeys, the women in these texts navigate the complex interplay of gender, religion, and societal expectations, ultimately finding their true identity in the pursuit of knowledge, justice, and self-realization.

Theologically, these stories reflect broader Christian themes of redemption, justice, and the restoration of the divine image within every individual. Both *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* challenge readers to consider the role of faith in addressing societal injustices, emphasizing the transformative power of education, self-discovery, and divine grace in overcoming societal barriers and restoring true identity. These narratives remain timeless testaments to the resilience of the human spirit and the hope of redemption in the face of profound injustice.

The concept of *restoration* is central to both the biblical narrative and the journeys of the protagonists in *Saguna* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. Revelation 21:5 captures this theme: "Behold, I am making all things new." This eschatological hope of God's ultimate restoration is reflected in the protagonists' pursuit of justice and identity. Their struggles represent a microcosm of the larger biblical story, where God works to restore humanity to its intended dignity and relationship with Him.

Both *Saguna* and *Ramabai's* narratives are deeply rooted in this theological vision of restoration, where justice is not merely about correcting wrongs but about bringing about God's *shalom*—a state of peace, wholeness, and flourishing for all. Their stories remind us of the biblical call to participate in God's redemptive work in the world, where justice, dignity, and reconciliation are at the heart of the divine mission.

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