International Journal of Advance and Applied Research
www.ijaar.co.in
ISSN – 2347-7075 Impact Factor – 8.141
Peer Reviewed Bi-Monthly
Vol. 7 No. 2 January – February - 2026

Subalternizing Science: Angela Saini's Feminist Critique of Marginalized Knowledge System

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.18654591

Abstract:

This paper examines Angela Saini's critique of patriarchal subalternizing knowledge systems through the lens of intersectional feminism. Across works such as Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong, Superior: The Return of Race Science, and The Patriarchs: How Men Came to Rule, Saini interrogates the historical and contemporary biases embedded within scientific inquiry. Her writing challenges the supposedly objective nature of science and reveals how gender, race, caste, and social power function as shaping forces in the production of knowledge. Drawing upon intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, hooks, Haraway), this paper analyses how Saini exposes the overlapping structures of oppression that influence scientific discourse. The study argues that Saini's work extends beyond feminist science criticism and introduces a needed interdisciplinary intervention that reimagines science as a socially contingent and ethically accountable practice.

Introduction:

Science has long been regarded as an objective, universal, and rational discipline capable of producing neutral truths about human life and the natural world. However, scholars in feminist epistemology and science studies have argued that scientific knowledge is deeply embedded within cultural, political, and ideological frameworks. Among contemporary voices in this field, Angela Saini has emerged as a significant critic who interrogates the intersections of gender, race, and power in the history and practice of scientific research. Her works *Inferior* (2017), *Superior* (2019), and *The Patriarchs* (2023)—offer sustained critiques of patriarchal systems that shape scientific thought and public discourse. Intersectional feminism, first theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how gender oppression interacts with other axes of marginalization such as race, caste, class, and sexuality. Saini's writings resonate deeply with this approach because she consistently demonstrates that science has often reinforced not only patriarchal assumptions but also racial and cultural hierarchies.

This paper aims to analyze Angela Saini's critique of science from an intersectional feminist perspective. It examines how her work challenges biological essentialism, destabilizes scientific claims about female inferiority, critiques the resurgence of race science, and questions how historical patriarchies informed scientific "truths" about human societies. The study situates Saini's contributions within a broader intellectual tradition of feminist science studies, drawing upon scholars like Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, bell hooks, and Sandra Harding. The purpose of this research is to show that Saini's work is not simply a correction of scientific errors but a deeper epistemological intervention. She

argues that science must be reframed as a socially informed institution—one that requires accountability, diversity, and the dismantling of structural inequalities.

Subalternizing and Feminist Science Studies:

Subalternizing provides a methodological lens to examine power relations that operate simultaneously across multiple social identities. Crenshaw posits that "the experience of women of color is frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1244). When applied to the sciences, intersectionality reveals that scientific knowledge production has historically privileged male, Western, upper-caste or white perspectives.

Feminist science theorists such as Donna Haraway argue that scientific objectivity is a "god trick"—a claim to universal truth that masks its partial and situated nature. Haraway asserts that all knowledge is "situated knowledge," produced by bodies located in specific cultural contexts. Likewise, Sandra Harding's concept of "strong objectivity" challenges science to critically examine the social conditions under which research occurs, including gendered and racialized biases. Angela Saini builds upon this intellectual lineage by examining how scientific research—whether in biology, anthropology, or genetics—has been distorted by patriarchal and racial assumptions. Her work illustrates that science has historically constructed narratives of female inferiority, naturalized racial hierarchies, and ignored cultural diversity in favour of Western models of family, gender, and society.

Saini's Critique of Patriarchal Science in *Inferior:*

In *Inferior*, Saini challenges long-held scientific assumptions that women are biologically less intelligent, less rational, or less capable than men. She exposes how male scientists frequently interpreted data through patriarchal biases, leading to false or exaggerated claims about male superiority. For instance, she critiques Charles Darwin's conclusion that sexual selection made men inherently more evolved or intellectually superior. Saini exposes these claims as products of Victorian gender norms rather than empirical fact. Saini also shows how scientific arguments about women's supposed emotional nature or cognitive limitations often relied on small sample sizes or speculative interpretations. She writes that "science has been wrong about women, and wrong for a long time" (Saini, *Inferior* 4). Her engagement with primatology reveals how earlier studies celebrated male aggression in primate societies while ignoring or minimizing female cooperation, leadership, and social influence.

From an intersectional standpoint, *Inferior* challenges not only sexism but also the Western scientific tendency to generalize findings across all cultures and social groups. Saini argues that assumptions about gender roles often came from Western, middle-class norms and were falsely universalized as biological truths.

Race, Gender, and Power in *Superior:*

Saini's second major work, *Superior*, extends her critique to race science and its connection to gendered power structures. The book demonstrates how race has been constructed through pseudo-scientific classifications that supported colonialism, slavery, caste discrimination, and nationalist ideologies. Saini observes that race science, like gender science, emerged from the desire to establish hierarchies within human populations. She notes that nineteenth-century anthropologists used cranial measurements, bloodlines, and evolutionary theories to manufacture racial differences. In doing so, scientific institutions reinforced the

social dominance of certain groups—white Europeans, upper castes, and men.

Intersectionality becomes a crucial tool to understand how these hierarchies operated simultaneously. Saini shows that women of colour, Dalit women, and Indigenous women experienced the compounding effects of racial and gender exclusion. For example, racialized stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual or intellectually inferior were not only scientific errors but powerful tools of oppression. By exposing these narratives, Saini challenges science to dismantle the ideological structures that gave rise to race science. She illustrates how genetic research today overwhelmingly disproves biological race categories but also warns that political movements still revive these ideas in subtle forms.

Patriarchy, Anthropology, and Origins in *The Patriarchs:*

In *The Patriarchs*, Saini turns to the historical question: How did men come to rule? The book examines ancient societies, archaeological findings, and historical traditions to understand how patriarchal systems emerged and spread. Contrary to universalist claims, Saini argues that patriarchy is not a natural or inevitable social order. Rather, it is a historical development shaped by specific political, economic, and cultural conditions. She challenges the scientific assumption that early human societies were male-dominated by default. Instead, she notes that many prehistoric and early agricultural societies displayed egalitarian structures or forms of matrilineal inheritance. An intersectional perspective reveals that the emergence of patriarchy was not uniform; it varied across regions and intersected with race, class, caste, and empire. For instance, Saini briefly touches upon South Asian caste patriarchy, showing how gender norms intersected with caste rules to regulate women's autonomy and sexuality. By questioning the naturalization of patriarchy, Saini critiques scientific narratives that framed male domination as biologically determined. She argues instead that patriarchy is socially constructed through systems of property, inheritance, colonial power, and religious institutions.

Intersectional Feminism as a Framework in Saini's Work:

Angela Saini's body of work—particularly *Inferior* (2017), *Superior* (2019), and *The Patriarchs* (2023)—offers a sustained critique of how science has historically participated in constructing hierarchies of gender, race, and power. Her intellectual project draws deeply from the framework of intersectional feminism, a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how systems of oppression converge and interact to shape the lives of marginalized communities. Although Saini writes from the vantage point of science journalism rather than academic feminist theory, her approach consistently demonstrates that scientific narratives are inseparable from the social, political, and cultural conditions in which they emerge. Through meticulous research and attention to voices excluded from mainstream scientific discourse, she challenges the presumed neutrality of scientific knowledge and exposes how gendered and racialized assumptions continue to shape research agendas, interpretations, and public policy.

A central dimension of Saini's intersectional methodology is her challenge to the universality claimed by Western scientific traditions. She repeatedly argues that much of modern science has been constructed through the studies of a narrow, privileged demographic—primarily European men who presumed that their local observations represented universal truths

about human nature. In Inferior, Saini critiques the long-standing tendency of evolutionary biologists and psychologists to generalize male-centered assumptions, such as the belief that women are inherently submissive, emotional, or biologically predisposed to domestic roles (Saini, *Inferior* 42). By highlighting the diversity of human societies and the fluidity of gender roles across cultures, she dismantles the idea that scientific knowledge is culturally neutral. Instead, she demonstrates that such universal claims reflect the worldview of those who historically held intellectual authority. This challenge to universality aligns directly with intersectional feminism's insistence that knowledge must be situated and contextual, acknowledging differences across race, class, caste, culture, and geography.

Another significant aspect of Saini's work is her commitment to amplifying marginalized voices within scientific discourse. She integrates the research and perspectives of women scientists, Indigenous thinkers, Black scholars, Dalit intellectuals, and experts from the Global South, demonstrating that alternative epistemologies often contradict dominant Western narratives. In Superior, for instance, she foregrounds the contributions of geneticists from Africa and Asia who challenge Eurocentric models of ancestry and evolution (Saini, *Superior* 118). Likewise, in The Patriarchs, she draws on feminist anthropologists and historians from non-Western backgrounds to argue that patriarchy emerged unevenly across civilizations and cannot be reduced to a single biological or evolutionary explanation (Saini, *The Patriarchs* 76). This prioritization of marginalized knowledge aligns with intersectional feminism's core commitment to expanding the boundaries of who is allowed to produce legitimate knowledge.

Saini also interrogates the power structures that underpin scientific practice, showing how scientific "truths" often reinforce the interests of dominant groups. She exposes how colonial governments, European racial theorists, and upper-caste Indian elites all used scientific rhetoric to legitimize social hierarchies. In Superior, she meticulously traces how race science—though discredited—continues to influence genetics research and public discourse, revealing how power shapes not only research questions but also the interpretation of data (Saini, *Superior* 162). Similarly, she notes how patriarchal ideologies influence studies on gender differences, such as neuroscientific claims about male and female brains that continue to circulate despite lack of robust evidence. Intersectional feminism offers a lens to understand these dynamics because it examines how scientific authority intersects with structures of race, gender, caste, and class to maintain systems of domination.

Closely connected to her critique of power is Saini's rejection of biological essentialism—the belief that gender or racial identities can be explained and fixed through biological attributes. She argues that essentialist claims have historically been used to justify inequality, from Victorian-era theories of women's supposed intellectual inferiority to colonial pseudoscience that ranked human races. In Inferior, Saini reviews contemporary scientific studies and demonstrates that many claims about innate gender differences collapse under rigorous scrutiny, revealing how social expectations shape scientific inquiry (Saini 58). In Superior, she highlights how essentialist assumptions about race resurface in discussions of genetics, often without acknowledging the political and historical baggage attached to such concepts. Her analysis aligns with intersectional feminist theorists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, who argue that sex and gender must be understood as dynamic and

socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined.

A further element of Saini's intersectional framework is her emphasis on connecting past scientific biases with their ongoing influence in the present. She does not treat misogynistic or racist scientific theories as mere historical errors but shows how their residues continue to shape modern technologies, research funding priorities, and societal beliefs. For example, she examines how ancestry testing companies rely on racial categories rooted in colonial science, or how modern neuroscience often repeats outdated assumptions about gendered brains. This bridging of past and present reflects the intersectional feminist understanding that power systems are historically sedimented; they persist through institutions, cultural narratives, and scientific paradigms unless actively challenged. Saini's narrative structure thus positions science not as a linear march toward truth but as a contested terrain shaped by ideological struggles.

Taken together, Saini's approach positions science as an arena where identity, power, and ideology intersect—a site that must be interrogated through an intersectional feminist lens to reveal the political interests embedded in knowledge production. She neither rejects science nor portrays it as fundamentally oppressive; rather, she calls for a more inclusive, reflective, and socially accountable scientific practice. Her work suggests that dismantling inequalities within science requires acknowledging the structural forces—patriarchy, racism, caste hierarchy, colonialism—that shape scientific inquiry at every level. Through her detailed critiques, she offers a blueprint for a feminist science that is methodologically rigorous, ethically grounded, and attentive to the voices and experiences of those historically marginalized by the scientific establishment.

Conclusion:

Angela Saini's critique of science through intersectional feminism challenges the long-standing belief that scientific knowledge is objective and detached from social hierarchies. Through Inferior, Superior, and The Patriarchs, she exposes how patriarchal and racial ideologies shaped scientific narratives about gender, race, and human societies. Her work redefines the relationship between science and society by demonstrating that scientific truths are often entwined with power. Saini's intervention is vital in an era where misinformation and pseudo-scientific claims continue to influence political and cultural debates. By advocating for intersectional and inclusive scientific practices, she calls for a reimagining of science as democratic, ethical, and reflective of diverse human experiences. Her contribution extends beyond correcting scientific errors; she challenges the epistemological foundations of science itself, urging scholars to acknowledge that knowledge is never neutral but deeply shaped by social context. Angela Saini's critique thus stands as a transformative contribution to feminist scholarship and contemporary science studies.

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