WOMEN IN RELIGGION

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Women in Religions

**Introduction**

Prehistoric people, may be in stone age, or Paleolithic times or even during proto-Neolithic and Neolithic periods, though they had no religions, yet they all had a feeling /thought of sacredness to a powerful Being, and so had a niche in their hearts for it. They expressed this sacredness in the form of worship or homage to that particular aspect of nature originated either from gratitude for the support and protection received or even from fear which led them to appease the anger of their image of God by some form of worship, for example: The sun was worshiped in gratitude for all the natures’ gift that man enjoyed in his life, due to the cause of sun shine. The lightening is symbolically taken as the expression of anger of god, and the worship is done to appease the deity’s anger. The archeological evidences seemed to suggest that, it is nonacceptable to deduce that earliest man had no religion precisely because of the fact that no evidence of religious artifacts had been revealed (on prehistory, 202) The hunter and gatherers’ study shows that they had a developed conception of a powerful Being, who has the power to punish or protect and preserve the world for that matter their own lives. Shamanism developed, especially among the pastoralists of central and northern Asia. This dualism of the masculine and feminine aspects can possibly be interpreted in terms of father sky and mother earth, and in their union as a couple by which they become parents of the world. This is what the Romantic poet John Keats speaks in his “Ode to Autumn” where the earth is the “Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; Conspiring with him how to load and bless with fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run” John Keats (Veller, March 15, 1985)

With agriculture coming into existence, social, economic set up appeared and as people began to live in groups, the formation of classes hierarchical organizations, division of labor administrative division gradually were formed and in these set up polytheism like Hinduism developed. The concentration of power and people in one place, as opposed to the earlier nomadic culture, led the way to erect central shrine in cities, towns and villages. Female fertility continues to remain prominent, such as the Great Mother and the Earth Mother. As time went monotheistic religions like Judaism, Islam, Christianity came into existence. The essence of this brief development of religions shows, that the belief in God, expressed in a concrete form or otherwise, is something that is inbuilt in human being. Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism is a not a religion but a philosophy of life, led by Buddha about 5th century B.C. era. Since the topic chosen here is women in Religions, the research would pin point as to how these religions looked at women, were they considered equal or as the ‘other’ and, were they dominated?... subjugated? or rather liberalized?... and how women experienced religions in the bygone age, as well as currently. The study of four major world religions is so extensive, and formidable to go into detail, therefore, the discussion on each would be abbreviated in this assignment and how women experienced religions in the bygone ages, as well as currently will be the main concern here.

**Hinduism and Women**

The ancient Hindu Vedic texts as well as from the Tantric ideas have displayed conflicting views on womanhood. The Sacred texts and Legend maintain women very high up as goddesses to be worshipped, and simultaneously it is deeply suspicious about women's sexuality. In Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage, Arti Dhand (2008)delves deep into the religious foundations upon which Hindu ideas of sexuality and conduct of women are constructed .The author speaks sexuality as a tool which helps to unearth the classical Hindu understandings about the Self, about individuals, their personalities, their unique characteristics which leads to their unique relationships with each other. In order to acquire this, the author takes up ‘Mahābhārata’, the great Hindu epic and focuses on that text, which as clear as crystals display the cultural, Religious, social, economic, political and sextual aspects of the Hinduism by using Legend, myths, as well as quoting from the sacred texts. “Hinduism” represents multifarious and polyvalent movements around intuited core of values. These values develop their fullest theological dogma in the mythology of the Puranas. The world (samsra) is seen as ‘Maya’-a place of eternal suffering as the consequence of one’s actions (karma, both of a moral and a ritual nature). Hinduism advocates that the only noble well-intentioned goal of human striving is to liberate oneself from the cyclical shackles of birth and death if one wishes to achieve lasting peace, and permanent happiness (‘moksa’- heaven).

The Hindu texts such as certain ‘Upanishads’ (.J.Olivevellw. (1992) communicate techniques for breaking a man’s sexual attraction to a woman. Examples of such negative appraisal are found in some Bhakti literature. For example, the Sangam-era poet Avvaiyar, who was deeply attached to god Siva, in order to escape marriage, she detached herself from the sexualizing and deceptive beauty of a young body and transformed herself into an old woman, (1989). The study of ‘moksa’ dharma, - the religious activity is said to be of two basic types. ‘pravrtti dharma’ and ‘nivrtti dharma’; “these are the two paths upon which the Vedas are established” (Arti Dhand 2008 XII.233.6).

‘**Nivrtti’ dharma and pravrtti’ dharma’**

Nivrtti’ dharma is projected as the structural opposite of ‘pravrtti’ dharma’, the latter which is harnessed completely toward the achievement of personal spiritual ends. It has been proved that the Ideal ‘nivrtti’ adherents enrobed by calmness, patience, and a perfect balance of mind. ‘Pravrtti’ dharma is the religious principles of the ordinary folk in society, using the familiar method of sacrificial aspects of religion they aim at the modest goal of worldly prosperity. Furthermore, the patriarchy oriented Vedic religion had theologized that the lives of women are inextricably interwoven with that of their husbands, past, present, or future, and their devotion to their husbands even leads to ‘Sakti’. These are the ideologies of the development of the of the ‘pativra’. Nivrtti dharma on the contrary is the extraordinary call, requires extraordinary effort, powerfully introspective, and demands the chosen one, to reorient his or her whole self -physical, mental, and emotional- patterns toward the accomplishment of equanimity. The practice of ‘nivrtti dharma entails earnest internal transformation, the renunciation of (ritual) all - the home, sextual attraction, property, relationship, detachment is the very hallmark of ‘nivrtti’ dharma, which is stated to be the highest penance (Torino.1985).

The functional system associated with ‘pravrti’ is altered to the lower-order values, the process is harnessed with the help of myth and its “method” of practice is taken up in accordance with the Vedic tradition to be adhered faithfully. All rituals should be carefully participated and observed in the Vedic sacrifice by those who choose that path, in the capacity in which they are permitted to participate. The origins of both types of religion are located in a myth that in the ‘ntiparva’. Pandu in ‘Mahabharata ’captures the archetype in a passage from the ‘niparva’, and he determines to adopt ‘nivrtti’ practices, and his decision communicated to his wife was, that he would maintain a holy indifference all the time, even when a man comes and dismembers his body as well as another one comes and takes care of him. He will neither be happy when he is given chance to live and no will he be sad if he is destined to die. It is through austerities, the birth of great souls, are purified themselves. Early scholarly writing on women in Hinduism generalizes about the duties of married Hindu women (strdharma), the “status” of girls and women in society, the prevalence of ‘sati’ and the prohibitions against widow remarriage, the practice of female infanticide and dowry deaths. It symbolizes one’s reentry into the world of suffering, anguish, and misery.

**Meditations on women’s creative spot**

Meditations on the womb are taught with certain Buddhist texts: on the foulness of the womb, creating a disgusting and a very repulsive image of a womb in which the fetus wallows sustain its life in filth, pain, silly matters. Through this kind of meditation, specially, the Hinduism, Jainism, Vaishnavism and even Buddhism display the birth as a sign of one’s failure to achieve ‘nirvrtti’ (heavenly matters). (Leslie, (1994):63–8) It is also said to be found in some of the self-denying tracts of Hinduism; for example, in the ‘samnysa’ texts of mediaeval Hinduism, the body is seen as the location of obscenity, and exhort the rightful emotion to create the feeling of repugnance and disgust. In order to discipline the sextual desire of the ascetics, it is astonishing that the sacred scriptures are authenticated to dumb the life-giving part of the woman as something destructive. In this case, one would even think of proposing that perhaps, the male lacks the mental and moral strength to withstand his desire, and so the blame is directed on female’s body, just as Adam did to Eve in the book of Genesis. (Genesis. Chapter 3/11-12) By creating a loathsome view of the womb the part of the woman’s body, patriarchy discards God’s creation, which He ‘found very good” (Genesis1/ 31) Ascetics are encouraged to abandon this body. It is alright that ascetics are encouraged to leave the home for a homeless state, but in order to enforce the asceticism, to discriminate and create in the mind a loathsome function of the womb, is not acceptable, as this is the seat of life where the life is created for the continuity of the human race. On the contrary, the positive aspects of asceticism and its consequences could be presented.

The problematic issue of this religion is that as sinful as women are, they are prevented from learning or even listening the ‘Mandra’ (formula) and therefore, they cannot enter into Nivruti. In his book, *“Female Ascetics in Hinduism*” (Lynn Teskey Denton 2004.) Lynn expresses that, due to the cycle of menstruum and at child-birth, due to the flow blood, she is considered as innately impure. Moreover, as she is intrinsically sinful (adharmik), , she has no natural inclination to dharma. Woman is thus belittled and cornered as an inappropriate candidate for holy information or knowledge. Since she is “without a mantra” (amantravat she is unfit to hear and pronounce the sacred Sanskrit formulae (mantra) essential to orthodox religious practice. “Being sinful, a woman is ‘amantravat’; being ‘amantravat’ she cannot purify herself of sin; she, therefore remains sinful all her life” (Leslie 1989). Despite all these hurdles that are placed before the women, it is interesting to know that Hinduism also has women saints. Doesn’t Hinduism present itself to be a world-negating religion? The ascetic part – ‘Nivruti’ is superimposed on that ‘Pravrtti’-of a ‘lauhik’- (worldly) religion. How well suited are they? How possible could be, for both of them to amalgamate harmoniously? Or are they logically found incongruent with each other?

**Male domination & women’s servitude**

Draudpadi who practices ‘Prvrtti’ in ‘Mahabharata’, tells Satyabhama, even if a well-accomplished wealthy and handsome man, appears before her, she would never even for a blink of an eye look at him. Until her husband had eaten, bathed or lain down, she would never think of, having her meal or sleep even when there were servants. When her husband, on returning home from his work place, she at once would be there before him to be at his beck and call. when he goes away, she would remove the flowers she wears, and would not do any make up but only observe vows. ( Dhand 2008, III.222.36). Women at that time were taught to imprint in their minds that their husbands are their gods and to worship him as they get up in the morning and as they go to bed in the night.; thus, she advises Satyabhama: not to neglect her husband.

Thus, this epic, (600 B.C -200 C.E) used to indoctrinate women to the level of care less of any one’s needs, be they children, parents or anything else, but the husband has to be satisfied and taken care of. This can be problematized. Wasn’t the man inadvertently being taught to be selfish in expecting a complete care to be given before anything else, by his wife.? And had he been ever stimulated with a thought for another one’s need or wellbeing? Society had constructed principles to subjugate women, at the same time, hadn’t it realized that in giving a total complete care to the male hierarchy, neglecting even serious matters it had only paved the path, for him to become gradually a dehumanized and super ego centric male? Stories from myths and Legend are used to make the woman to observe the responsibilities towards their husbands very seriously before anything else. What was the reward of such a self-negating service by the wives? (Narayanan. 1990). Draupadi, tells Satybahama, , what the women get in return, for their service from their husbands is that they are bestowed with children and flamboyant enchantment; a place to sleep and to rest and wondrous attractions, and dresses and wreaths as well as fragrances and the world of heaven and reputation (Dhand 2008 III.223.2–3). So, she exhorts her to fulfill all her husband’s desires and she would be blessed. And warns her if she discards her husband, she would be dead. Patriarchy of that time, successfully presents carrot and stick to the women to create in the minds of women, sweet and sensual desires as well as threat and fear. Isn’t it being slavish? In the name of Religious principles and virtues weren’t the women being controlled by patriarchal system? On the other hand, isn’t the ignorance of the women that leads them towards the pleasure-seeking behavior, than leading a purposeful life with their dignity and be at the service of family, and the society? Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas are indeed enlightening the women.; the men who received the high education, from the society, having become the enlightened men, ascetics, how could they prohibit women from receiving such an education? Drenched in patriarchal hegemony in order to protect their self-interest patriarchal system indoctrinated an ideology that that women do not need education, and all what they need is to learn how to satisfy men all the time. Rousseau declares that “a woman should never for a moment feel herself independent. And that she should be governed…. and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring of object of desire a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself” (Rousseau J.-J. , 1955). These philosophers of that time, reveal their pleasure-seeking intention, of using women only to please the males and against which Mary Wollstonecraft in her book “*A Vindication of the Rights of the woman*” attacks his position on the “Rights” of men. And she almost reprimands women, who without any critical, analytical thinking, about their own dignified state, cow down to satisfy themselves with sensational pleasures neglecting the higher purpose of life.

**Sati in Hinduism**

Sati is the logical end to the ‘pativrata’-faithfulness to her husband practiced by a woman. Since all of her life has been spent at serving her husband, being a pativrata also leads her, possibly, even terminating her own existence when he dies. This decision typically stems from two unhealthy concerns. One is that by following her husband promptly on his death, a wife can better serve him in the next world. This course of reasoning is said to be followed by ‘Mdrat’ at the death of her husband. She is so distraught by his death that she decides to kill herself along with him. One of the reasons she cites for this is that he had died before he could achieve sexual fulfillment. She would therefore, follow him to the other world to serve him sexually there. The second sense is that, it would be traitorous and disloyal, for a wife to remain to enjoy the joys of this world after her husband is gone. Since all of woman’s life is structured around the service of her husband, what purpose could there be to living once he is gone? The woman says as much in her parting words: “I have no purpose here, O Lord, living without you. (Jash, ,1991)

Mahabharata says that four of Krishna’s wives joined the fire at his funeral, to unite themselves with him at his death. Four of Vasudeva’s wives followed the same feat on Vasudeva’s death. The Hindu patriarchal society, in ancient time upheld and praised such life annihilating feat of women as a high level of spirituality of faithfulness. In the Ramayana epic, Guru Vyasa seemed to have encouraged the widows of the Kaurava warriors to plunge into the Ganga and unite themselves with their slayed husbands which was a noble act. A myth from the ‘Anusanaparva’ supports the different attitudes of hostility and fear of women’s sexuality. We hear much on the theme that: Woman as the most sinful creature, is a blazing fire. At the same time, she is the splendid illusion fashioned by Maya. Her quality is further described as the sharp edge of a razor, poisonous, a serpent and finally she is death and ends the description of woman she is the sum total of all these descriptions. The mythic framework of the text thus reinforces the prejudices already held by society.

For all these, sati, is not practiced in the Mahabharata. Widows such as Satyavat, Kunti, Ambika continue to perform their worldly functions much as before, are actively engaged in ritual life, and were shown as influential political figures. The Ramayana shows a similar pattern: the widows of Dasaratha continue to be active in the social and political sphere.

**Widow Chastity in Hinduism**

The same logic upholds the prevention of widow remarriage, for that would be damaging to the memory of the husband. Yet, Dhand taking from(Biardeau, Madeleine (1984) says in the Nala-Damayanti episode, Damayanti advertises her readiness for a second marriage, “assuming the death” of her first husband. This advertisement elicits no surprise or inquisitiveness from the general public. Her suitors respond positively to the invitation, and prepare to assemble for the proceedings. This interpretation by the author) can be problematized; The intention of Damayanti in advertising for her second marriage, was that Damayanti was sure that on hearing this advertisement, her husband who left her in the night, for a higher purpose, would return. Further, Nala did appear in disguise, to see the event and bless her. To every one’s surprise she recognized him and garlanded him, and she was successful in her plan. Further, Dhant, gives the impressions by generalizing the idea that ‘women from well to do families take up second marriage’ comes to be void, since, the Hindu widows in Sri Lanka about 90% of them prefer to uphold widow chastity and it is also not much encouraged.

On the whole, what one sees in Hinduism is that, indoctrinating women, with the deviated, wrong instruction based on Religious values and rewards. And women’s devotion to God is so great that they believe everything and act according to the instruction given by the selfish Brahmanical patriarchal system. During the time of painful chaos, the male Brahminic domination presents the view, that the cause of such a disruption and suffering is in the society is due to women who are of weak moral fiber, and they are corrupt and deceitful, and lecherously fornicate with slaves and cattle. Such were the treatment of women in Hinduism.

**Abrahamic Religions and Women**.

Today, globally and locally an increased awareness of the need of religions has erupted. Further, the pandemic COVID-19 has in an accelerated speed brought to consciousness of the humanity, the need to depend on God- the Supreme Power more than ever before. In addition to it, today, the universal interdependence has taken over our lives. The Communication explosion and the high-speed techno fixed transports help people move globally within a few hours to be at their desired spot from different cultural or political backgrounds on the one hand and, on the other, one experiences cultural or religious “strangers” as one’s neighbors. This makes it compulsory, for the people to increasingly become aware of this cosmopolitan plurality that characterizes the world of today. It means the acquisition of Knowledge about other religions becomes paramount. At a regular interval Inter-religious dialogues even in Sri Lanka take place and are gaining momentum.

It is perhaps because of this, the former U.S. secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, seemed to have commented that people need to take seriously the spiritual matters and religion, which seems to be the sole largest influence in forming the human conscience, and yet it can also be a source of conflict and hate. According to her, that the rejection of religions in the world of today blights politics: So much so, in the future, there should be checks and balances in assigning American ambassadors to a country where religious feelings are strong, unless the designated one, has deep understanding of the faiths commonly practiced there.

Having already discussed on the Hindu Religion, it becomes the concern of the writer here to pursue the argument on the three Abrahamic Religions namely, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, which are so strong in their beliefs that every human being is created in God’s image and hence, they, adamantly oppose the idea of the subjugation of one human being by another (Genesis chap.1). It indicates that the Creator himself has respected the uniqueness of His people, indicating that human beings are equal and are in fraternal sharing, and the Image of God, which is imprinted in both men and women designate, that there is no one is subjugated by another. Just as God respected the uniqueness and liberty of people, the humans too are expected to live after these values.

History opens up events /stories for many were the resourceful and strong women in all realms, for e.g., (Dhand., (2000). Medicine, Religion, Cultural, Political, Social fields and in others too, played very important roles and were spearheading new paths. Despite this fact, what is witnessed in common, is that none of the three major world’s faiths, has been unreservedly good for women, each of these three as well as Hinduism has strapped women into an inferior and to a marginal position, preventing them from full participation in the social, cultural, and religious life of the community. Even though such Religious figures as Saint Paul, or the Prophet Muhammad maintained a positive view of and had good relationship with women, relied on them, and treated them as valued colleagues. Despite such examples given by their teachers, some of the most esteemed mentors, theologians, and legal experts have preached outright misogynism. In recent years, women of all three faiths have challenged this patriarchal hegemony.

As it has already been shown in the discussion on Hinduism, women are considered to be low in Intelligent Quotient, sensuous, erotic, deceptive and morally equated to animals, and using the terminology as ‘Other’. Many have argued for a radical revision to correct the prevailing chauvinism, which, regards women not eligible to be human being, but equated to ‘cow’, otherwise as “Other” and ‘animals ‘. In Hinduism ‘cow’ is considered to be sacred as well as it will go to mate with ox from any breed, as and when it wants. So, does a woman the patriarchy say so.

**Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**

Notwithstanding all these discouragements levelled against women, women have acquired great achievements: for example, in recent times, in the domain of Religions - a great number of women have been intended as religious leaders, ministers, and vicars; besides they have authored many theological and legal works to contest and until now, the theological arguments go unchallenged by the male supremacy.

Despite this new liberation, the ideology of religious feminism has enflamed hostility, including some women, who have been some of the most enthusiastic opponents of the ordination of women to the Christian priesthood. It’s the opinion of the writer, that a woman getting herself being ordained as a priest is not the vital factor for women, but what is significant is the attitudinal change on the part of the males, and accepting the fact that women, as human beings are in every way equal to them.

**Women’s Plight in Christianity**

Monotheistic Religions are the ones who committed the great injustice in dehumanizing women. Despite the fact that they inspire against fundamental principles of their faith, Jewish, Christian, and Islam, men have all misappropriated the revelation and had also imitated the old, unredeemed patriarchy. The Jewish Bible has been noted for its realistic text. The book of Genesis, even though undoubtedly presents itself as a patriarchal text, but in no way it has provided Abrahamic Religions with a strategy for the subjugation / oppression of women. One reads in the very first chapter that man and woman were both created in God’s image. Even though (Gen. chapter 1) Eve in the story had been the first to disobey, she is a far more investigative and striking figure than Adam, who comes across rather as a passive, lethargic and uninteresting figure, sheathing himself feebly passing the buck to Eve, when things go wrong. Abraham treats his wife Sarah deceitfully and manipulating her, by putting her into Pharaoh’s harem to save his own skin. God speaks to the diligent Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, and not to the blind, ineffectual and chosen Isaac and Rebecca takes control of the family fortunes. And Jacob’s unkindness to his wife, Leah, leads to inexcusable consequences, of creating the murderous sibling- rivalry, among his twelve sons. The text (Genesis. Ch.37/ 1-31) implicitly but strongly shows Jacob’s cold-hearted indifference to the rape of his daughter Dinah (Leah’s offspring) by the men of Shechem. (Genesis, Ch.34/1-31) Great number of incidents as such are displayed, in the Old Testament about callous acts of male.

The Bible and even history, treasures the memory of women who became the saviors and guides of their people: Deborah, the prophetess and leader, Judith who rescued Israel from their enemies, by killing Halophenols, Esther who protected her people from the plot of Haman, Vashti who had the courage defile the King refusing to appear in nudity before the kings’ friends and Joan of Arc who saved France from England invasion. But what do we see in these pages? Women were penalized or pushed to a remote corner or burnt alive. Even Mother Mary was forgotten until Dec.8th 1854. How many are the Religious women, who even gave their lives for the sake of faith and in the service of their brothers and sisters. For example, in the last century, the 12 Franciscans nuns who were expelled from the communist country were led to the shipwreck and were killed. Our contemporary, Mother Theresa of Golgotha and her caring of the poorest of the poor is a service done to the neglected.

In the New Testament, Jesus had already raised the dignity of women, the way he answered the pharisees and scribes, who brought an adulterous woman, they wanted, according to Moses’ teaching, the adulterous woman to be stoned to death; and failed to realize that behind every fallen woman, there is a fallen man. Jesus challenged them by the statement “let him, who has not sinned, first throw the stone at her’. (John 8/1-10) This opened their eyes and all left one by one. Women disciples also traveled with him and helped and supported him financially to his good news (Lk.8/1-4). When Jesus was arrested, sentenced to death and carrying the cross, on his way to Calvary, it was a woman /Veronica who had the courage to pierce through the crowds and Roman soldiers, reached Jesus and wiped his blood-stained face. On the contrary, Simon was forcefully taken by the Soldiers to assist Jesus to carry the cross with him, with the view of keeping Jesus alive until he went through the crucifixion. (Lk.23/26) It is only women had the courage to stay with Jesus throughout the crucifixion, at mount Calvary, while the male disciples went into hiding as soon as Jesus was arrested. (John 19/ 25-26) It was Mary Magdalene, a woman, who received the first news of the resurrection of Jesus, and when she carried this message to Jesus’ disciples as she was asked to do, she was pushed to a corner by patriarchists saying that she was mentally deranged. (John 20 /11-18) Saint Paul insisted that in Christ there was neither male nor female; the old gender inequality, like the inequalities of class and race, was gone for good. He spoke of women as his co-workers in ministry. But in an occasion, he commands the women of Corinth to wear their veils when they prophesy in the assembly. Does Paul allow the chauvinism of his time to get the better of him? (1 Cor.11/ 2-12)

What we see from this, is that Christianity originally was the good news for women, but at an early date, the gospel was made to serve patriarchal chauvinism. Like their Jewish counterparts, Christian women were also marginalized and pushed away from their menfolk. What one finds even in 2021, is that every part of the Liturgy is filled with exclusive Language and God is addressed as an old Father exercising His powerful authority, omniscient, omnipotent. Inclusive language cannot be found in any of the readings or prayers said there. (Ruether, 2001) Moreover, if men are the minority who go to Church then, why are the minority flocks to various worshipping centers to take up all leading positions? In almost every church, out of 8/1 of the participants, 7/1 are women and men are the remnants only. According to Saint Augustine that his priests should leave women strictly alone. He is of the opinion that a woman is still Eve, the temptress, and therefore one must be aware of all women. It is appalling, to read and hear, that men leaders who guide their young priests, instead of helping them to face the challenges and build up their moral strength, what they do is to protect them, like the baby being protected by the mother, saying terrible stories about women, help them to grow weakling. In modern Psychological view it is demoralizing and depersonalizing them.

Theology distorted by patriarchy, becomes the responsibility of women to recreate as the holistic, inclusive theology, that would liberate both men and women from the sexist ideology and practice. Christianity had already very early prevented women from its official teachings on theology, spirituality, and sexuality, as did Judaism and Islam. According to Ruether women are unable to take up any topics and enter into dialogues on relating to spiritual matters: the dualistic thinking, for example heaven and hell, good and evil, certainty and fiction, from their own vantage point, and precisely because of the male elite had determined it normative. The hierarchy, the theologians, the interpreters of scripture and tradition, having been saturated in patriarchy model, taught in Christian theology God as male. Concepts were created in learners’ mind, that males were considered God’s redemptive ministers and leaders of the church. Faithful to their formation, these leading Church leaders and ministers imaged God in male terms, in terms of hegemony, and hierarchical relationships, while women were the equivalent objects of subjugation, domination, exploitation, and injustice, because society has constructed them as the source of evil, irrational and immoral, or as idealized mothers but unfit by their fickle immoral nature to teach and minister. As opposed to this idea, Ruether in her article, “*Christian Feminist Theology, History and Future*” (2008) provides a perspective on an alternative tradition in Holy Scripture, for a history of feminist theology’s global quest. What is being desired is for many feminist theologians to reclaim and reconstruct the symbols of faith and move from androcentric, misogyny to an egalitarian, as well be liberating, inclusive. Broader common theological symbols and doctrines such as God language, Christology, church, ministry, sin, and salvation are reclaimed and reconstructed.

In the developing nations, many still struggle from the effects of their religious colonization by Christianity, and local issues are pressing. In Sri Lanka, Christianity was introduced with sword in one hand and the Bible on the other, and the effect of which, is still like ‘the double-edged sword’ adversely affects both, the ruler and the ruled. Sinhala Buddhists as ‘victors’ and, the Tamil, & Sinhala Christians as ‘victims. The more prominent are socio-economic and cultural, colonialism, neo-dependency, and exploitation. The growth of Christianity, in Lanka, and feminist theology and its accomplishment seem to be rather scanty as the statistic shows: Buddhism, 70.2%, 14,222,844. Hinduism, 12.6%, 2,554,606. Islam, 9.7%, 1,967,227. Christianity, 7.4%, 1,509,606. Other, 0.05 Such a deplorable situation is one that inspired the writer, to opt for doing PhD in ‘Women Theology, perceiving that the writer could contribute feministic Theological ideas through print media

Saint Augustine made the doctrine of original sin central to the Christian vision; and since it was Eve who was the first to pluck the forbidden fruit, women sex, and sin became fused in the Christian belief.. For in Christianity, women besides bearing the usual burden of a perceived inferiority, they were also reprimanded and criticized for their sexuality. More than any other major religions, Christianity has found it difficult to integrate sexuality with the sacred. Several of the fathers of the Church, particularly in the West, equated marriage with prostitution. They saw sexual love as inherently sinful and incompatible with a true Christian life., (Rosemary Radford Ruether, 1979) The only good women, in the Christian view, were virgins: a woman, by denying her sexuality became an honorary man. Whereas in Judaism, Islam, and even in Hinduism women received honor and a measure of respect from being wives and mothers. For the greater part of Christian history, celibacy was the top vocation. It was not until the seventeenth century that Christian matrimony became truly holy. Christian women often had to bear the brunt of men’s disgust and repugnance with their own sexuality.

**Islam and Women**

Susannah Heschel and Amira Sonbol explore the pros and cons of Judaism and Islam. According to Susannah, “Liberation” has meant different things to Muslim and Jewish women. For the Jewish women “rights” were bund up and sublimated within western Enlightenment attitudes toward Jews; it also involves crusading for Jewish liberation, while for the Muslim women this “rights” habitually came as part of and persisted as another confrontation to colonialism. A great number of lived out rules according to ‘hadiths’ high lights strikingly the gender parity, and the formulation was reverted to Prophets’ wives, who have been accepted as knowledgeable and granted academic authority by male exegetes. It is insufficient to formulate Quranic knowledge using Religious literature alone as a foundation to study gender and this has caused great confusion and misunderstandings. For, women’s lives and their lived-out experiences amidst the ambience of socio -cultural, political and economic state, was not taken into consideration. Thus, Sonbol argues that the future researches on adaptation of hadiths must be deconstructed.

Islam, like Christianity, began with a very positive message for women. It is said that on receiving the revelation of the Quran, for the first time, Muhammad was trembling and convulsively and with fear crawled to his wife, Khadija, who cradled him in her lap until his fear diminished. (Dhand 2008) Women were among the first converts to Islam, and the Quran gave women rights of inheritance and divorce that Western women would not receive until the nineteenth century. The Quran neither had prescribed the veiling for women nor did spell out their seclusion in the house of their male protectors; but after the Prophet’s death, Muslims followed the customs of the Greeks and the Persians and also picked up some of the Christian misogyny. Gradually women were pushed to the level of slaves by ‘shariah’ (Islamic law) even though the Quran explicitly had outlined the equality of all believers was as conclusive. The author Sonbol on her article- ‘Rethinking women and Islam’ points out that patriarchal favoritism was interwoven by jurists and clergy who interpreted the Quranic rules. (Sonbol, 2001) The progress towards liberal changes took place in the last century, which has conclusively changed the social, domestic, intellectual, and economic life of the society. It is the very conservative religious leaders, who were on the forefront to tighten the bridle of the ‘liberation’ of modern women by over-stressing traditional restrictions. In some Muslim circles, the veiled woman has become a sign of the integrity of Islam.

The biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, explored by Amy-Jill Levine, (Dauughters…) displays effectively how both have been wounded by patriarchy, and the counter effect of this, can be seen in the behavior of these two women. Each of them without any reflection, begin to illtreat one another. Abraham, made use of Sara for his protection and when he put Sarah into Pharaoh’s harem, gave the chance to the King to make use of her, later Sara treats her Egyptian slave Hagar (whom she may unconsciously associate with this humiliation) with similar contempt. When she gives Hagar to her husband, so that Abraham might finally conceive a son. She never mentions her by name and it is evident that Hagar has ceased to be a person to her. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she seems to taunt Sarah. In this male-dominated household enmity springs forth between the two oppressed women, which finally results in Sarah’s forcing Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness to face almost certain death. The story further illustrates that even though Sarah’s son Isaac is, according to the Bible, the son of the promise for Israel, Hagar and Ishmael are also chosen, in the wilderness. Hagar receives a divine revelation on par with that gifted to the Jewish patriarchs. She too “sees God”; her son will also be the father of a great nation, and he will become a prophet of Islam.

When women become empowered, they are to be careful not to fall in the same pit, as Sarah and Hagar did. The story of Sarah and Hagar, communicates that, they fell prey to the old patriarchal system; They used their suffering experienced in life, not as a redeeming factor, but as an oppressive one. Instead of bringing something new and positive to their faith lived life on equal with men, they hurt each other. What comes to be noted is for centuries, in all three monotheistic faiths, women have been marginalized and pushed to the periphery of religious life, even though this violates crucial monotheistic teachings. Both men women in this postmodern world must now engage in a ‘jihad’ - a struggle, for the women to be admitted to the stage of sacred orthodoxy on par with men.

**Judaism and Women**

Leila Gal Berner accounts that after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. the Talmudic rabbis gave a stricter interpretation of the segregation of the sexes in the synagogues, to prevent the evil inclination. Today, it is the fundamentalists who fear the destruction of true faith, the bodies of women have once again become the focus of acute anxiety and so they are to be covered, protected, and isolated from the ill-disposed world. But what seems to be more sinful more than these, are the marginalization and oppression of half the human race which harms the integrity of all three monotheistic religions. What is to be appreciated is the Abrahamic Religious women, cooperating together to make good of the failures of the past. Women in all three traditions have conspired with the prejudices of their menfolk, and have even condoned the persecution, deprivation, and disparagement of people who belong to the different faiths.

In Judaism, men hold the opinion calling women coming to the ‘bimah’ to read the Torah would result in the destruction of Judaism. In Jewish law, women are marginal creatures, excluded from mainstream social and religious life, like children and slaves. As one Jewish feminist observed, woman was “The Jew Who Wasn’t There” (Greenberg, 1981) Again, on thinking of Hannah’s intimate talking with God, and her bold, yet, respectful defense against Eli’s judgmental accusations, touch the edges of the contemporary systemic challenge of Jewish feminism. Hanna expressed her own feelings saying that, she has her own way of speaking with God, Hannah tells Eli. I am free to pray in this way! Hanna’s prayer is the first personal prayer to God. Similarly, today, all three- Jewish, Christians and Muslim feminists could make an equally bold statement: The believers of these three religions have their own way of engaging with scriptures. And in approaching the faith and belief in one’s own way, one brings about one’s own liberation. This multi-religious “pie” must be baked anew. (1Samuel Chap.1/1-18)

The Jewish women of today had taken up very conscientiously for hearing the silence voices of those by gone leaders of a millennia-old tradition, those who through the centuries contributed to Jewish theological and devotional literature, who acted as communal leaders, and who helped keep alive the folk tradition of Jewish ritual observance alongside the official religion formulated and executed by men. (Ruether 2008) The Jewish feminists in the USA, with a deep contemporary and new feminist consciousness carry out the work, especially with such motivation and purpose of releasing the women from patriarchal subjugation. What has been normative until now, the women are of the view, to redefine and reconstruct to include within it both female and male perceptions of reality, both female and male experiences of religious life and spirituality.

The second way of hearing the silence is epitomized by the new religious law done by feminist men women to add to the body of Jewish ‘midrash’ explanatory engagement with sacred Jewish texts. For example, the leader of the group may call them for reflection, the interpretation from different angles. Questions like: “How and what did Sarah feel / think, when Abraham, himself according to God’s word, took Isaac, up to the mountain of the Lord for sacrifice? What did Dinah think or feel after she was raped? Did she really want her brothers to slaughter all her rapist’s male kin? What pain must Hagar would have felt at her banishment into the desert with her son Ishmael? Did Sarah really want Hagar’s death? What was Sarah really afraid of? Why was Miriam punished for demanding her rightful place of leadership alongside her younger brother, Moses? Are some of them to see it from the women view.

A third and very important way in which Jewish feminists are filling the “great silence” is by focusing attention on the personal and spiritual scopes of Jewish women’s life experiences. Where for example, just as the Jewish ritual sanctification is done for a young man, why not a young woman is given such type ritual sanctification for emerging procreative power with the arrival of her menstrual cycle? Where is an honoring of, instead of a grieving for, the biological changes that occur for women at menopause? Where is a Jewish ritual acknowledgment of the pain and sadness of infertility, or the grief of miscarriage? And beyond the biological life cycle, where are the rituals that mark in a significant and spiritually compelling way the changing seasons of our lives, such as parent or grandparenthood, adjustment to an empty nest, widow-hood, or the transitions brought on by divorce, shifting professional realities, and other life circumstances?

· Both, Jewish women and men alike require the necessity of far more ritual acceptance and blessing when they reach mile stones in their lives. Rabbi Debra Orenstein points out in her 1994 book, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life: Passages and Personal Mile stones*” each category of ritual innovation reflects the feminist orientation—to address the meta-level, systemic structure of Jewish ritual life. Leila Gal Berne says in her article, coming to know the suffering of a raped young woman, whom she calls Rachel, gives us the victim’s emotional expression:

“I am a survivor. I have endured the terror of a man who sexually abused me and forced me to keep the filthy secret. I have endured the shame, the near-annihilation of my soul, the terror of being touched, and the invasion of all my sacred spaces. “for many years, I felt like a pariah, outside the tent of my people, in exile” (Dhant 2000)

A ritual for women survivors of sexual abuse, in particular, may serve to “gather in the exiles.” (Berner 2008) Berne tells the readers her own view that the women ought to be offered a clear and unambiguous message that a sexually abused Jewish woman is not a “pariah”, cut off from the life of her people. The reason for it she the victim, bears no responsibility for the abuse. Any ritual becomes more gripping if it is deeply rooted in the authentic experience and feelings of its participants, and if it resonates authentically with the sacred text, liturgy, language, music, and modes of ceremonial expression of the faith tradition from which it emerges. The Steps are:

Step 1: Creating supportive space Step 2: Acknowledging anger,

Step 3: Survival and gratitude Step 4: Seeking healing,

Step 5: Self-affirmation, step 6. A final desideratum, a final prayer.

A healing and releasing negative & unhealthy emotions are dealt in this liturgy prepared by the Jewish feminists, to bring back health in mind, body and spirit of the victims. The feminist’s women and men congregation stand together, and take up the whole process to welcome and proving support to the victim, reading, music, prayer and meditation finally thanking in gratitude as well as final prayer. To a greater extent, Judaist feminists have moved ahead in comparison to the other two Abrahamic Religions.

Conclusion

The topic on “Religion and Women”, is an elongated, yet brief in view of the heading, that requires a justified lengthy detailed analysis, which would have certainly maximized the knowledge and the understanding of the subject’s matter. However, the assignment had fairly dealt as to how far Religions exert their power over all women human beings? To what extent women are ready to face the challenges in order to set their minds free from the Domination? Every aspects of women’s lives are dominated by some of the world patriarchy-controlled Religions, like Hinduism Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Besides, the contextualization in which both sections-women and religions find themselves, that include the cultural, religious, social and structural system, portray either increasingly or diminishingly their contribution had been curtailed and subjugate women. The paper presents origin of religions, and the process of their progress and expansion from ancient time, to the present day. The writer being a Sri Lankan, which is a multi-ethnic, and multi- religious country, the discussion here has maneuvered with Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity and passingly with Buddhism, all of which are present in the country

. Though varied, most Christian feminists are committed to working toward a future whose theological reflection include participation and leadership by women, by minorities, and by society’s oppressed of whatever sort. They work toward a future in which power can be shared, and the hierarchical relationships can be replaced, by relationships of mutuality grounded in a deep respect for human, ecological and cosmic interdependence. The emancipatory struggle for women’s liberation shares some features with other contemporary social justice movements, such as the effort to abolish racial discrimination, and the struggle to achieve civil rights all invoke notions of freedom, rights, autonomy, justice, and truth. These struggles for social justice appeal to normative ideals based on the idea that all human beings deserve respect, freedom, and fair and equal. (McLagan 2002).

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