



Religion – A Double-Edged Sword in Women’s Empowerment

1Venkata Ramana Manipatruni, 2Srinivasa Rao Gundu, 3Venkata Rama Rao Karibandi
1Assistant Professor of English, 2Assistant Professor of English, 3Assistant Professor of English
1Sri Vasavi Engineering College (Autonomous),
2Sri Vasavi Engineering College (Autonomous),
3Sri Vasavi Engineering College (Autonomous)

Abstract

Although Religion is strictly followed by women in society, “*Religion is against women’s rights and women’s freedom. In all societies women are oppressed by all religions*” once said Taslima Nasrin long back. But it’s quite apparent that Women even in the present era are suppressed by some monstrous and faceless customs of their religion, which make women burn at both ends of their lives from womb to tomb. Despite the livelihood of women in the 21st century seems much of a muchness to that of men, it’s not worth fully convincing. It’s not just India but the whole world witnesses today the way that the women are subjugated. At the behest of religion, women get victimized in such a way that it makes them slavish as if they were just the endorsement to help men execute their needs. Religion in a larger sense, if we dispense with the formalities, would not allow women to grow further by chaining them to both the family and kitchen in perpetuity. Till the late 19th century, religion witnessed a very brutal treatment of women in the form of Sati (an obsolete funeral custom where a widow immolates herself after her husband's death) and women weren’t allowed to live a life of their choice, even life in general till now.

Through this paper, I would rather present various eccentric religious practices that have been imposed on women in the name of traditional women and discuss how the religion made women helpless by putting the skids under them for ages. For instance, a man(Sunni Muslim) in Islam can divorce his wife on his whim(even without his wife’s consent) just with the pronouncement of Triple Talaq either in spoken or written form and there are many other uncivilized practices, still followed in the society in the name of traditions that are detrimental to women.

Keywords: Women’s Emancipation, Eccentric practices in Religion, Women’s sufferings, Women’s subjugation or subjection.

Although Religion is strictly followed by women in society, “Religion is against women’s rights and women’s freedom. In all societies women are oppressed by all religions” once said Taslima Nasrin long back. But it’s quite apparent that Women even in the present era are suppressed by some monstrous and faceless customs of their religion, which make women burn at the both ends of their lives from womb to tomb. The study of women in religious perspective typically examines the role of women within particular religious faiths, religious doctrines and particular women in religious history. Most religions elevate the status of men over women, have tougher and stricter sanctions against women and require them to be submissive. While there has been progress for women’s equality, religion still lags the rest of the society in addressing gender issues and yet there are some fundamentalists within a religion, who resist change. Another thing of paramount importance is dualism which depicts the way the religion glorifies women’s status on one hand and more painstaking displays of devotion towards women, is demanded on the other hand. This way religion for women coaxes us into believing it as the last barrier for their emancipation, though it is actually not. Here the words of famous Nobel laureate William Golding, who once rightly said that “Women are foolish to pretend that they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been”, wake my memories of women’s superiority to men. But women’s ever-deserving superiority remains a sour grape and even equality, a sterile and an unkept promise till today due to some religious practices.

Now I would rather bowl you a googly that keeps you at sixes and sevens. What else is left for the women to lose themselves in order to be equally treated in this patriarchal society? Nothing else in my view. Because women had already sacrificed more than they were asked for. The study of women from a religious perspective reminds me of a woman's duties in terms of caring for her children and being faithful to her spouse, on one side of the coin. But through this paper, I would rather present various eccentric religious practices, on the other side of the coin, that have been imposed on women in the name of traditional women and discuss how the religion made women helpless by putting the skids under them for ages. At the behest of religion, education and employment abroad would be no picnic for women till the late 20th century and as a result women couldn’t obtain employment that suited them down to the ground and therefore were considered just as an endorsement to help men execute their needs. Of course various eccentric religious customs didn’t allow women to mentally grow by chaining them to family and kitchen in perpetuity. We know pretty well that religious scriptures promote a kind of practice that even child preference in some families became quite unfavourable to women. This notion furthers the idea of killing female infants at their birth considering them as economic encumbrance. It means that the very gender inequality gets fathom deep at the birth of a female child and it prevails to perish the lives of women till death. These female infanticides now sarcastically turned out to be foeticides. I have come to know through some reliable sources that a famous personality in Srikakulam has recently passed away and his only daughter couldn’t have a chance of attending his funeral and even the last sight of him. Since she was away from home, she couldn’t reach the spot earlier but by the time she arrived at the graveyard, her father had already been cremated by his brother’s son. It shows that a woman is biased even at the funeral too. Other disastrous elements in women’s lives such as the dowry

system and the idea of a woman's belonging to her husband after marriage treat woman as an expensive and uneconomical commodity in her family by the members of her family.

Though women stood many barbarous religious practices earlier, the most uncivilized ruthless practice would be Sati (A woman's Self-immolation after her husband's demise on the same pyre) which was nothing but a repercussion of Child-marriages that reminds me of another faceless custom of selling a girl (Kanyasulkam) at her early age to a man, regardless of his age, gives us a crystal-clear picture of women's subjugation against patriarchy till the half of 20th century. Of course Child marriage itself was a woman's self-immolation. This way, the notion of making women a scapegoat has been vividly represented through Sati. However, Sati was later thought to be against human rights, in particular, women's rights and was later on refrained from being followed. As if these were not enough to oppress women, another brutal practice that has been followed in Sunni class of Muslims for about 14 centuries now is Triple Talaq (An instant divorce in Arabic language) practice which makes the process of divorce so instantaneous that it even doesn't require spousal(wife's) consent. Through this practice a man can divorce his life-partner sarcastically at any time just with the pronouncement of Triple Talaq either in spoken or written form. However it was ironically made easier through the instigation of electronic forms SMS and suchlike. Millions of women as of today were reluctantly divorced in Islam in India, though around 22 other Muslim countries apart from Pakistan had already banned this kind of uncivilized tradition. In this, male-dominated society, religion became tantamount to women's sufferings. According to Sharia law in Islam, a man can marry four women and thus Triple Talaq is rampantly used by the men, to divorce, not minding women's consent. Though Triple Talaq is widely disturbing women, it's a gospel for women that it is recently prohibited from being uttered by men for divorce any more, as the Supreme court with a panel of five judges who considered it unconstitutional gave a righteous verdict recently, favourable to women, after Modi government had it passed by Loksabha in December 2017, warning that if anyone breaks the verdict hereafter, They will be imprisoned for three years. It was all made possible through the herculean efforts of Ms. Shayara Bano who crusaded against Triple Talaq, despite her reception of many death-threats. Shayara Bano was married in 2001 to a business man, who physically tortured and mentally harassed her for years and demanded surplus assets from her father, who arranged for his daughter's marriage beyond his capacity. Despite her stoicism, she was eventually divorced in 2015 by her husband who sent her a letter with the pronouncement of Triple Talaq by speed-post that is what actually made her fight this trivial practice.

As if it were not enough to look down upon women, another crest-fallen and tear-jerking tradition, named Nikha halala in Islam, is followed by Sunni class Muslims. Nikha halala (halala) is a practice that requires a woman to marry a stranger and share her bed with him to reconcile with her former husband. As in this class, as per the religious scriptures, a man can divorce his wife twice, but for the third time it shows her unlawfulness to her husband and it is believed that Nikha halala makes a woman's marriage with a stranger lawful and helps her to return to her former husband. So far we have seen women's endless subjection in all dimensions, but for someone like me this is rather disgusting to get to

know that in this process a woman is made a courtesan by her husband who thoughtlessly provokes her to spend with a stranger. No doubt, it's the thing that makes not just a woman's husband, for that matter, the whole society hang in shame. Many women succumb to this practice and are compelled to pleadingly follow it, as if there was no option for them to fight back. Even now in Hinduism, Women are not allowed to worship in certain temples on the pretext of their menstruation.

You all know about the laudable verdict that Supreme Court passed, with respect to Women's inequality that bars them from entering Sabarimala (a holy shrine for the Hindu) on some unconstitutional grounds and this kind of prejudice against women based on notions of impurity and pollution associated with menstruation is a symbol of exclusion. The social exclusion of women based on menstrual status is a form of untouchability which is against constitutional values and an exclusionary practice like this violates the right of women to visit and enter a temple to freely practice Hindu religion and to exhibit her devotion towards Lord Ayyappa, said the Supreme Court. Many victimized women want this kind of practice to be banned. This sort of treatment will certainly wreak havoc even on the development of our country too. Though we know that God created all equally, though we strive for an egalitarian society, though we deify mothers as goddesses, women's dream of equality remains a wild goose chase, unless and until the whole world is deeply touched by it.

If we thoroughly notice religion that has been a feature of the world by playing a major role in the evolution of mankind and society, we come to know how wonderfully it shaped this world. For instance Christianity gave us some vision of divine love and charity; Buddhism has shown us a noble way to be wiser, gentler, purer, Judaism and Islam how to be religiously faithful in action and zealously devoted to God; Hinduism has opened to us the largest and profoundest spiritual possibilities. But on the negative side Christianity, Islam and Judaism have all been deeply held up as oppressive to women. They believe in a father God, ruling the world through a network of men. In all three faiths, a majority opposes the admission of women to leadership or the priesthood, and opposes abortion, divorce, and even contraception. Yet all of them would claim that they respect women and protect them from exploitation and hence I would consider religion as a double-edged sword.

However, there would be a history behind the establishment of every religious doctrine and faith. Hence I cannot deny the very purpose of the establishment of religion which saliently paved a righteous path and helped us to grow further ethically and morally for centuries and which exquisitely described woman's role as a mother to her child, daughter to her mother, mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law or vice versa and as a wife to her husband. But it's also a known fact that no religion could prosper without women. While Hinduism illustrates women as important figures that play an important role in understanding how the world works, women in Hindu society have been overlooked through outside forces that make us think that women are not born, but made to feel lesser and not as important as men. Such actions really make one perceive Hinduism as a patriarchal religion, though it's not that rigid.

After my sober analysis, I came to know that women are subjugated by some fundamentalists in the name of religion that indirectly resembles a barrier for their empowerment, despite its consistent support in the evolution of society. Religion is a paradox that makes women so sacred by reminding them of their roles in their lives on the positive side, but it's the same religion that keeps a barrier for women's emancipation by being harsh and strict to them. But it's quite difficult for us to live without the pathfinder Religion. What if there was no religion in this unweeded garden?. Just imagine. Maybe unimaginable. Religion is not a person in particular, but a faith that all of us live in. Life may not be complete without religion, but religion should be a bastion for us. Here I recollect the words of Grenville Kleiser, a popular author once said that "A religion that is small enough for us to understand would not be large enough for our needs". This shows that any custom that we follow with in a particular religion shouldn't suffocate us in the long run, yet it should pave the righteous path without any discrimination between genders. Then women's dream of equal reception would certainly come true.

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