

POSITION OF WOMEN AMIDST THE CLASH BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a surge of feminist movements and different offshoots like Queer, Gay and Lesbian theories. Students of literature usually consider the beginning of Feminism from late 19th century. But the platform was laid before. Much of that remains unknown. There were social reformers, prophets and sages who worked for the welfare of women. The scriptures are replete with examples of equality to women but some interpretations by people are controversial and seek further explorations. The purpose of this paper is to review the position of women due to the clash of cultural forces and religion. It will help students and scholars to bring in and explore new perspectives in literary field. After the advent of civilisation, humans started to live in groups. Sometimes they would come into contact with other groups who would have other norms and modus operandi. To protect their group, they emphasised on the strict following of norms which led to the developed of culture. Every group followed a different culture with intensity. As the population grew, the needs propelled some of the humans to crimes. Then to keep individuals away from evils and to pervert them from wrong paths to right paths, religion came into being.

“Religion, true Religion as explained above, teaches that there is a God, Who knows everything and sees everything; who is Just and Virtuous Himself, and wants us to be just and virtuous; that we are responsible for our deeds in His eyes, and we have to give account of our deeds to Him after our death. If a person believes in it, then (and only then) he can restrain himself from committing sins and crimes and inflicting injustice upon other people.” (Al-Islam.org)

Messiahs, prophets and sages did their best to preach and keep the people on right track. But the roots of culture were so deep rooted and outgrown that people drew the meanings of teachings of prophets according to their own interests. People follow culture more than religion. This is the reason that many things forbidden in religion are still practised by society under the influence of culture. Male baby obsession, violence against women and female subjugation are few of the issues that always bring culture and religion on the forefront. Sometimes, these shackles are hard to break for priests, clerics and religious heads in order to keep balance in culture and religion, viewing rival religions. E.O. Wilson states that ‘Every major religion today is a winner in the Darwinian struggle waged among cultures, and none ever flourished by tolerating its rivals.’

Indian culture and religious scriptures consider women with high esteem and respect in the form of mother, daughter and companion. This honour and respect is more in letters than in

spirit. There has been always a tension between prominent religions and local cultures. People follow religion, generate their own meanings and misinterpret the quotes to serve their own purposes. We humans gave interpretations to these holy texts. As the time has passed, do these interpretations need reinterpretations? Sikh women were not allowed to enter the inner sanctum of Golden Temple for many years for *sukhasan sewa* and cleaning purposes because of biological phenomenon of their menstruation cycle, as they were not considered clean. But pioneer of Sikh religion Guru Nanak Dev ji said,

"Man is born from a woman; within woman, man is conceived; to a woman he is engaged and married. Man is friends with woman; through woman, the future generations exist. When his woman passes away, he seeks another woman; to a woman a man is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From a woman, woman is born; without woman there would be no one at all". (Guru Granth Sahib ji. 473)

Most of the Sikhs go to Gurudwaras, relish the kirtana (hymns) and gurbani (writings in Holy scripture) but do not get the real meaning when it comes to give equality to women or other lower castes. Gurus did their best to change the psyche of followers but deep rooted cultural traits are hard to be eradicated. People are still divided in the names of caste. This discrimination has made people to incline toward other sects of Sikhism and Hinduism. Dowry system, violence against women, male son obsession and sex selection has further deteriorated position of women in society.

The deep rooted cultural values are main barriers in the freedom of women. Before Sikhism, Hinduism was a prominent religion in Punjab. The ideology and hegemony of culture and male dominance have its roots in Manu Samriti. At one instance, he says,

‘Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control... These and other females of low birth have attained eminence in this world by the respective good qualities of their husbands.’ (Manu Samriti)

He further puts women in difficult position by asserting,

‘Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands.’ (“Asheela kamvrto.....” – 5/157).

On the contrary, in Hinduism, the *aad shakti* (omnipotent source of power) is considered to be feminine. Even the incarnations of Durga, Sarswati, Lakshmi (list is long) represent women as symbol of power, wisdom and beauty. Even then female subjugation, female foeticide are prevalent in society.

Leo Tolstoy raised the question of this inequality in *Anna Karenina* that why a sin by a woman is sin for her but a sin by a man is not sin for him. Same voice was raised by famous novelist, Thomas Hardy, in *The Tess*. Though there are voices raised by optimistic feminists against this discrimination but things need seriously to be done at ground level. The Iranian poetess Tahirih rejected polygamy and wearing of *hijab* (veil). She was executed for asking a right. Once she said,

"You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women." (Effendi. 75)

This struggle has resulted in fight for existence, the existence which was negated from times immemorial. Women in Islam are also given equal status. So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying):

I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female.
You proceed one from another ... (Qur'an 3: 195).

Some of the customs, like female infanticide in some Arabian tribes, are considered crimes. The Qur'an forbids this.

"And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed." (Qur'an 81:8-9).

Prophet Muhammad's sayings in this regard are very important. Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise. (Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957)

The Qur'an states:

"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Qur'an 2:228).

This is misinterpreted as male's dominance over female. It is the role of safety and protection which is talked about here. It does not refer to any kind of other superiority of male over female.

Some may counter argue with a statement generally translated in The Hadeeth: "A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader." This interpretation is due to the clash of culture with religion where on one side religion provides freedom to women and culture restrains the movement of women. Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have been in power since 1991. This is a record not only for an Islamic country but for whole world that women have been in power for so longer period of time. Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Indira Gandhi in India are other examples of women who have influenced world politics negating the fact that only males can be potent leaders.

All the propaganda to restrict women in four walls and giving limited opportunities indicate to the inherent fear of males. Males have to shed this egoistical psyche and fear of losing the 'centre' to women.

The position of women cannot be improved unless this paradox between religion and culture subsides. She will not get due recognition despite all her hard work and kindness. Religious heads, clerics, priests have to sit together to make a quantum leap by making certain changes to improve the deteriorating position of women. Whatever qualification people, including male and female, may achieve, they will remain illiterate till the day women get full emancipation to equally participate in all the activities of politics and religion.

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