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Patriarchy in the Name of God: How Religion Controls Women

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the operation of patriarchy through the mechanism of religion which enforces gender inequality. This happens by making women accept roles within the society which will have them oppressed. After analysing Islam and Hinduism, we come to the conclusion that despite the diversity, common patterns are seen in which men possess religious authority while excluding women from important roles and expect them to follow strict norms. Women facing discrimination across various religions, due to the age-old supremacy of men in the spheres, with special focus on Islam and Hinduism, has been highlighted in the paper. Women face subjugation throughout their life due to religion's patriarchal interpretation and even in the present age with financial/managerial responsibilities the religious expectation is upheld. Furthermore, the Matilda effect worsens conditions by stealing rightful credit that is deserved by achieving women and is an even bigger demotivating factor. Socialisation processes encouraging passivity, obedience and tolerance have encouraged this. Safety is not a choice for women who must adhere to religious communities. The study emphasises the powerful role played by religion in shaping the psyche, reinforcing the existing gender hierarchy. Overall it aims at providing a nuanced explanation of religion's intersection with patriarchy and its influence on women's lives across different fields.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Patriarchy, Religion, Interpretation, Gender

INTRODUCTION

“Fueled with the terror of becoming prey, see how quickly we become predator.”

— Suzan Collins

Historically, religion has been the biggest designer of moral values, cultural norms and gender roles within societies. While

religion provides spiritual meaning and social cohesion, feminists have argued that it has also been used as a system that reproduces and reinforces patriarchal authority. Most religious traditions developed in societies where men held political, social and even intellectual power therefore as a result, the religious laws and interpretations reflect man-centred perspectives.

This paper argues that religion has frequently functioned as a mechanism to regulate women's (and people of other genders') roles, bodies and even sexuality. By examining practices in Hindu, Muslim and Christian societies, and incorporating feminist scholarship from Merlin Stone, Gerda Lerner, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, this study explores how patriarchy has become embedded within religion.

We try to establish religion not just as a set of beliefs but a formal system through which social problems can arise! This is due to the imposition of religion as an actual deciding factor of laws for the public. Now the real target is not "public" but the believers of the said religion, i.e. the subjects of the religious laws.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Roots of Patriarchy

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*¹, Gerda Lerner states that patriarchy did not appear out of nature but develop historically through social and economic changes. She said that the control of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity became a central foundation of patriarchal societies. Control of women's bodies implied men could control lineage, inheritance and social order!

Religion played an important role in legitimizing the system. Religious narratives, moral rules and traditions were used to justify the hegemonic authority of men and demanded submission from women. Over time the structure was normalized and started to be perceived as divine rather than socially constructed.

Merlin Stone, in her *When God Was a Woman*² explores the idea that early civilisations once worshipped deities, which were women, who were associated with fertility, nature and life. According to her, as patriarchal societies expanded, these women-centred spiritual traditions were gradually replaced by religions dominated by men. In this transition, there was a shift in the authority of religion from priestesses and women deities to men becoming priests and man-Gods, reinforcing their own dominance

¹ Lerner G, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986)

² Stone M, *When God Was a Woman* (1976)

within societies and even over their own religion.

Religion and the Construction of Gender Roles

The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, in her *The Second Sex*³, famously argued “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman.”. She explained that the constructed gender role by society for women is passive, obedient and dependent on men. These qualities are imposed by religion by presenting them more as virtues and moral duties that women ought to have.

Modesty, sacrificial nature, purity, chastity and obedience are frequently the qualities that are attributed to women only for which they are also praised for. Although these qualities can be considered good to possess, the intent with which they are projected onto women is for them to function as a limit, or a barrier to women’s autonomy and maintain men’s authority. Women are only seen as wives, sisters, mothers, caretakers, etc. but this is only due to the domination of men still present in religion.

Gender as performance: Gender theorist Judith Butler, in their book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*⁴ mention how gender, as it is seen in society is just a regulatory, not an inherent, but a performative act to reinforce the narrative that is already created within the said societies itself. Gender is just a repeated process that becomes an illusion of reality in our minds.

In real life, this is seen in cases where women are told to behave a certain way in their household, to comply to elders and be caged and make themselves smaller for the comfort of others. In these scenarios, they are *performing* the role of ‘the ideal woman’, which is yet another way of instilling misogynistic ideas to cater to the already existing matrix of the system of patriarchy and force women to continuously do acts which are not willful at all, but just done in obligation to the dominance of men presence in society.

Research Objectives/Questions

The motivation to study feminism with religion comes from the divine authority present behind almost all misogynistic practices. Practices across the Earth have put women (or people identifying with other genders) in a wretched state by announcing that it is the men who have the primary authority to run as the leader over all walks of life. This is not to say that religions are

³ De Beauvoir S, *The Second Sex* (1949)

⁴ Butler J, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)

inherently wrong but the point is that men have overtaken as the sole authority and claimed that the way to be a religious soul is to submit to religion with the rules they have designed. This establishment of their patriarchal rule only comes from the fact that the ones who wanted to put themselves in unfair power positions have done so by hiding the truths from the masses and either removing their access to sources which can falsify their claims or punishing people who dare to speak up against the exclusion that is happening in the society. A conclusion can be derived from this that we must take care of the epistemology possessed by the persons looking into the matters of developmental sociology, as what we know is what we think exists in the world. Everything changes with the perspective becoming different. We will look at practices/data from the 'normal' perspective and then from the feminist perspective, and we will try to test our conjecture of how religion and religiously motivated laws, even though revised⁵, are still not a tool for liberation.

Analysis/ Discussion

Defining Religion: Religion, here, is defined as a social institution which follows a particular philosophy about the origin of the world and its fundamental nature, usually by the means of a system of moral and metaphysical laws which are said to be holding the world in place, (usually)⁶ by some sort of *agency*, such as God(s) or other metaphysical beings, which may (usually) have a reward system or, contrary to that, a punishment system, which are granted to them in-life or after-life based on the morals of the *creation*. A creation is anything that came into existence due to the agency of that religion, and either, itself has a mind of its own, with (usually) some qualities that differentiate them from other creations, an example of this being humans and other animals. This is due to moral systems being designed around the intrinsic free will of the creations and how much of the moral laws are being submitted to by the creation. For anthropocentric matters we can call the creation a human and one who believes in some religion a believer. The believers, through *customary law* or jurisprudential views such as natural law theory can transform interpretation of their religious morals to codified laws through the means of public will.

How religion seeps into society?

It legitimizes the usage of religious scriptures as law due to the public appeal it generates by giving their life a sense of a having a

⁵ 'Revised' taken from revisionism (reinterpreting ideas to challenge the orthodox view).

⁶ "(usually)" means that there exist exceptions but they are not necessarily useful in the given context.

higher purpose. This makes the people believe that all their lives' objective is service of God. This is not an inherently bad thing to believe in but what ends up happening is that human laws, i.e. laws which can exist in a secular setting, without any motivation taken from a scripture, end up being revised to fit in either the religious law as a part of the whole secular law OR the religious law takes over completely. Basic examples of the second case can be Sharia law, Manusmriti, etc. but the examples of the first case are the family laws in India's judicial system. But right now, we will first explore what gives rise to such laws coming into picture in the first place. That is natural law. It is a jurisprudential view that claims that the laws of the State should be defined in accordance to God's will. Therefore the laws in the legal books must correspond to the religion. The main issue with this type of law is that it tries to integrate belief with applicable laws. Belief in supernatural forces is a subjective, emotional and psychological phenomenon⁷ while the construction of laws is a more inter-subjective and a sociological phenomenon. God is ineffable. It is useless to attempt deriving laws about society from a belief that is powered through emotion, but, this is what ends up happening, as when people put emotions to words, they reduce them to those finite inaccurate descriptions. This opens room for misinterpretation and this is where harmful consequences step in. Believers who are working as authority in the places of worship manufacture the meaning of the scriptures. This leads to rules full of biased reasoning and exploitative practices that are nothing short of absolute social stratification in the name of religion to be born. Caste, gender, sect, race, class, etc. are a product of religious beliefs projected onto the people who may not even believe in the said God. This gives rise to power dynamics coming into society and causing people to believe that one group of people is higher than the other.

CONTROL OF WOMEN

In Muslim Contexts

In most Muslim communities, cultural interpretations of Islam regulate women's behaviour and mobility to a large extent. An example is the veiling of women by the garments such as *burqa* or *hijab*. Some women choose to wear these garments as expressions of faith but critics argue that these are yet another tool to regulate women's visibility and sexuality.

Other grievous practices that are historically significant to Muslim communities are *triple talaq*, which allows men to formally divorce their wife instantly, upon utterance of the word *talaq* thrice in

⁷ Al-Ghazali, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (1105)

succession, or, *nikah halala*, where a woman who divorced her husband must consummate her marriage with some other man before re-marrying her former husband, if she ever decides to return to the former husband! These practices highlight the unequal distribution of marital power.

Another reflection of imbalance is polygamy. In many interpretations of Islamic law, multiple wives are permitted to men but women can only possess one husband. This system just demonstrates how men's desire and authority are of priority in everyday family structure.

An obvious historical gender expectation projected on women is that they must produce multiple children, for which they also face familial and societal pressure which make them prioritise domestic roles over being free.

Afghanistan in the recent times has taken this even further by not letting women wear any sort of make-up, allowing women to be beat by their husbands lawfully, barring education, damaging one eye so that only the other one is functional, and not even letting them to be seen out without a man.

In Hindu Contexts

Patriarchy is also ubiquitous in Hindu traditions, laden by caste and hierarchy of birth. An example is the claim that menstruating women are impure and their ill-treatment in certain contexts. In many communities, women who are menstruating get discouraged and sometimes even prohibited from entering premises of a temple or partaking in religious rituals. This is just a reinforcement of the notion that the natural biological functions of women make them essentially and spiritually inferior.

The historical practice of Sati within which women who have just become a widow, were expected to immolate themselves in their husband's funeral pyres represented an extreme version of the control of patriarchy. Even if the practice has been outlawed since a long time, the mere existence of such a practice speaks volumes on how women's devotion and sacrifice was glorified within their religious narratives.

Gender equality is also obvious in marriage customs. After marrying, women, by tradition, are expected to leave the house of their parents and live with the family of their husband. This transitions just symbolises loyalty's and responsibility's transfer, reiterating the idea of the primary identity of women being tied to her husband and his household.

HOW RELIGION BENEFITS MEN MORE THAN WOMEN

Religious authority has been dominated by men and many religious interpretations of the laws and traditions tend to prioritize the interest of men over women. Control over divorce, inheritance of property, leadership properties, and religious authority has been held greatly by men. Despite of this, an unrealistic expectation is present which is put on women to maintain the honour of the family, uphold traditional moral values and subserviently perform domestic labour. Narratives of religion often glorify sacrifice and obedience encouraging women to accept the hardship without any questioning just for the sake of the stability of the family.

Patterns like these do not necessarily imply that the institution of religion as a whole is oppressive in its essence. Rather the point is that religious traditions have been shaped by the culture of patriarchy wherein the respective religions evolved.

But, the problem is that this culture haunts us back.

CUSTOMARY LAW

An argument that may come to mind is that these laws are superseded by civil/criminal laws which are not motivated by religion. But that is not the point as of now.

To appeal to the masses, it tries to reinforce the culture of the singular practice because the whole culture gets tied together with these individual practices itself. This exposes the victim of the practice to even more interconnected beliefs/practices that hold together the particular group of people who are practitioners of the art to be “one of the said community members”.

The way law legitimizes these practices is due to the method of the popular will, or basically the legislative method. This gives validity to those laws becoming legally valid, even though the humanitarian grounds of those laws are rarely checked in detail as the said religious practice is merely a prideful thing for their “culture and heritage”.

The point is not something absurd like “Sati is still prevalent” or “Legalized dowry in the form of gift is an unrighteous law” but that both originate from the Brahminical practices which have been a propagator of the same problems that, in Christianity, are propagated by rules such as calling of the “marriage bands” or the Halala concept in Islamic re-marriage, and even the convention of men being allowed to marry up to 4 women; all these combined with unpaid household labour ostracise women in their own

home, because the structure of the family, where patriarchy thrives, the playground of patriarchy, destroys any kind of liberty that can be assumed by women.

Moreover, it is not only legalised but it creates a hegemony, by convincing them that this power dynamic is natural, and on top of that, religiously accurate as the divine agency has written down rules in the fabric of the universe that women are inferior to men. But this also happens due to more and more people trying to catch up with the ever-accelerating present world occupied by late-stage capitalism causing “development” in the world, which is anyways merely a facade as it just serves only the capitalist interest. It is a facade as it has made everyone feel detached, as looking back on it will only cause pain as nothing has been a fond memory, due to the whole point being selling our labour and creating value for the other class.

We have even designed a representation of the cycle in which the misogyny reproduces itself through the society and impressions on the minds of the individuals.

Rituals → Seeping into mentality → Culture of misogyny → Reinforcement in mind ↔ Metaphysical thought → Puritanism → Rituals (again)...

The abstract idea behind this is that religious rituals have certain practices which are biased towards men. Then, later on, these special rituals become inseparable from any “common activities” which makes it a culture of misogyny making it an “OUR traditional thing”, which in their mind is also “supported” by their religious texts which brings rise to rituals and also get turned into ‘rules’ that this world has to follow, but the coherence only comes from it being a circular argument. The vicious circle goes like this: My God is true because this holy book says so, and this holy book is true because God (from this book itself) says so!

The cycle of misogyny once started cannot really stop unless a pause is put to an axiom empowering the cycle. This requires questioning not what is being done but why is it being done. A classic example can be doubting whether there exists any inherent superiority between genders.

A common ritual during the hindu marriage is the Saptpadi and in it the wife must tell her husband that she devotes herself to him from her body, mind and soul⁸. Now the question that instantly should be risen in anyone’s mind is what is meant by

⁸ Borah L, ‘Philosophy of Hindu Marriage’ (Philosophy of Hindu Marriage, 21 May 2018) <https://pragyata.com/philosophy-of-hindu-marriage/> accessed 29 March 2026

the term body. Whether it is only an abstract comment on the body or an actual sacrifice of the physical, can be left as an interpretation for the reader, as mentioned earlier. Though, this is not what happens. Folk take the “body” part literally, and one can only imagine what violations take place. ‘*Ardhangani*’. Marital rape has not been penalised till date. Most of the justifications for such a heinous crime work on the concept of there existing some or the other scripture which in a way is not only legitimising this but also encourages it.

Another thing that needs to be mentioned is what this sort of treatment does to the mind of a person. Anxiety, overall mental distress, and depression are amongst the most common factors affecting the psychological health of the married women, which happens on an even larger scale than their unmarried counterparts. Many women who unfortunately try to commit suicide are taking such steps due to the burden that their in-laws put on them.⁹

CONCLUSION

The point is not as shallow as that customary law is religion dominated but that the mere existence of this reinforces the belief and gives a free pass to the already existing, and unquestioned vices to be perpetuated, while also creating a habitable environment for more vices to be easily brought in to the society and rolling back the wheel of social development becomes awfully easy when such conditions exist.

Religion has been significant in shaping the roles of each gender throughout history. Feminist scholars like Merlin Stone, Gerda Lerner, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have highlighted the influence of patriarchy in the development and traditional interpretations of religion.

Both communities, viz. hindu and muslim, have demonstrated how women’s bodies, behaviour, sexuality and overall social roles are regulated by religion. Although at the same time many contemporary thinkers have tried interpreting religion in ways which are inclusive of historically marginalised social classes so as to promote gender equality as well.

Developing an understanding of religion and patriarchy is therefore the most important for inequality to be challenged and for a society to be born where gender justice and faith happily

⁹ Sharma I and others, ‘Hinduism, Marriage and Mental Illness’ (Indian journal of psychiatry, January 2013) <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3705690/> accessed 29 March 2026

coexist.

If patriarchy is so bad for women, how does it still exist? Because patriarchy lives through other women more than men. The women who support patriarchy are rewarded with praise and considered morally right. That is why patriarchy lives from a woman more than a man.

In every century, a man's sins are folded into complexity. A woman's sins are etched onto her flesh.

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