



Women as Mortal Deities: A strategically systematic way of denying women their humanness.

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Abstract: Religion is one of the fundamental social constructs that plays a very important role in our lives. India is the land of peaceful cohabitation of people from diverse religions, one of which is Hinduism known for its pantheon of empowered Goddesses. However, careful scrutinization of femininity as represented in the religion of Hinduism helps us understand the subtle ways in which patriarchy permeates deep and strong. 'Power' of the Goddesses are only realized as symbolic and gender stereotypical perceptions are asserted. Similarly, in a country where female deities are celebrated throughout the year, mortal Indian women remain stifled under the weight of discrimination and abuse right from the womb to the tomb. Additionally comparing the mortal women to the divine deities and setting unattainable standards of unrealistic expectations for them seizes from them their basic right to human treatment. The objective of this essay is to discuss the paradox of the Goddesses and the mortal women in the Indian setting and elaborate on how pedestalization of women disempowers them. The essay, in conclusion, also discusses the current need for a paradigmatic shift in the perception of the Indian women to a radical one that gives them their much-deserved liberation.

Keywords- Feminism, Gender, Religion, Pedestalization, Dehumanization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion, one of the basic social constructs, is by far one of the most pervasive influences that percolates down to the collective mind of a society and shapes our personality, thoughts, emotions and behaviours thereby reinforcing certain standard norms and values that we live by. India, the land of 'unity in diversity' is known as a country that celebrates the multidimensional diversity among its people in terms of various aspects, one of which is religion. People of different religions cohabit peacefully and celebrate the essence of every faith. Popularly also known as 'the land of Gods and Goddesses', the majority of the Indian population, i.e., almost 83% are affiliated to the religion and philosophy of Hinduism which alone is the supreme reserve of 330 million Gods and Goddesses (Clark, 2004). The worship of femininity and the consideration of feminine energy as important and powerful is one of the most distinguished features of Hinduism which has its roots deep in ancient history.

1.1. The History of Worship of Femininity:

The worship of a feminine principle dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2500-1700 BCE). Archaeologists have successfully excavated clay figurines of the Mother Goddess, considered to be the symbol of fertility and maternalism. This was followed by the Vedic Civilization (1500-500 BCE) where the holy scriptures sung praises for Shachi- the supposed queen of the Gods, Aditi- the goddess of the time and fertility, Nirrti- the goddess of decay and death, Aranyani- the goddess of the flora and fauna and like (Flood, 1996). This was followed by the religion of Hinduism (Kumar, 2018). Although both the Vedic Civilization and Hinduism promoted a view in which women and femininity were acknowledged, celebrated and considered as preservers of life, Hinduism did bring into the picture non-stereotypical female deities, the ones to assert power and control to some extent.

1.2. The Paradigm of Femininity as represented in Hinduism: The Goddesses and their divine power:

The concept of Shakti resonates deeply with the representation of femininity in Hinduism. Shakti exemplifies the dynamic feminine energy which is responsible for creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe. The female deities and Goddess are considered as embodiments of the different aspects of the original feminine energy, that is, Shakti. For instance, Goddess Saraswati is the embodiment of knowledge, art and music, Goddess Laxmi is the embodiment of prosperity and wealth, Goddess Parvati is the nurturer, Goddess Durga is the embodiment of justice and Goddess Kali is the embodiment of death and destruction (Johnson). While certain Goddesses like Laxmi, Saraswati and Parvati definitely fit the tailor-made suit of the feminine stereotype, Hinduism evolved as a polytheistic religion with gender fluidity as a major motif. It was bold in its representation of female deities as warriors riding tiger and lions, displaying aggression, being assertive, standing up for justice and male deities as engaging in dance, music, art or leisure, adorning make-up and wearing jewelries. While Goddesses like Durga and Kali were allegorical of power, death and annihilation, Gods like Brahma and Vishnu were symbolical of balance and creation respectively, both representations alienating from the traditional gender stereotypes. Androgyny as a concept was represented as the Ardhanarishvara, a composite of lord Shiva and Parvati (Palapothu, 2018).

Thus, Hinduism as a religion which emerged in the post-Vedic period was established on highly neoteric grounds, putting end to the hackneyed gender roles for the men and women and promoting an ultramodern perception of gender as belonging to a continuum and not a dichotomous construct.

However, translation of the theological and philosophical concepts of Hinduism into practice of the religion doesn't do justice to its radical essence. While Hinduism stresses on dispelling the gender stereotypes, in reality the practice of the religion reinforces patriarchy and gender roles in subtle ways by projecting the femininity not as independent on her own accord but on a leash of control held by the masculinity. Further, the respect that the immortal women receive from the common people is largely amiss in the life of a mortal woman until and unless she volunteers to strive for divine standards of behaviour and personality while her environment remains crude and cruel to her. Patriarchy deprives a woman of her right to humanness by pedestalizing her to the alter of the Goddess.

II. DISCUSSIONS

2.1. The Paradoxical Status of Hindu Goddesses: Are the Goddesses really Empowered?

While apparently, Hinduism with its pantheon of non-stereotypical Goddesses challenge patriarchy left, right and center, structural and strategic analysis of the religion shows us how it's not actually so (Singh, 2016).

Emphasizing the curvaceous figures of the Goddesses with the perfect facial features, body proportions and the pearly facial glow and a complete lack of consideration to the various changes that a female body has to go through is a stark depiction of the fantasized womanhood and not the one in reality (Eller, 2000). The anthropomorphised representation of the motherland- Bharat Mata is an icon of purity, pristine motherhood and fertility who is known for her hyper-masculine sons protecting her ever-fragile honor (Menon, 2017) while the scriptures tell us nothing of the daughters she has borne, if any. Strategically, this places sons as more desirable than daughters which stands in stark contrast with the theme of celebrating femininity in Hinduism. Additionally, it associates the power of the feminine only to the aspects of maternity and fertility, reducing the existence of the feminine for the sole purpose of procreation. The collective belief of the society of how it is the birth of a child that completes a woman without which the woman remains incomplete stems from such a selective power bias. This ideology deprives the women who don't bear children by choice or by biological reasons from feelings of satisfaction and wellness in life. Durga who is seen to challenge traditional gender roles by riding a lion and exuding power, kills not by her choice but at the behest of the Gods. Her wanton ways are attempted to be tamed and she has to take charge of her kids and household while her husband provides no support (Patel, 2019). This reinforces the concept that a woman may conquer the world but her identity and prime responsibility remains anchored to her family and household. The rage of Kali, the ever-powerful Goddess of annihilation also seems to under the control of her husband.

Instances in Hindu mythology- Sita, the loyal, devoted and docile ideal wife of Lord Rama who doesn't take a stand for herself when her character is questioned, Draupadi who is forced into polyandry over a lapsus-linguae, the forceful abandonment of Karna as a neonate by Kunti, the strugglesome life of Hidimba as a single mother only to later sacrifice her son for her husband's family (Ailawadi, 2019). and many more are proof enough of the central theme of ulterior and ultimate control of the masculine over the feminine irrespective of whether femininity is celebrated or not.

2.2. The Paradoxical Status of the Mortal Women of India: Is femininity celebrated in reality?

"According to Hindu mythology, girls are treated like goddesses, but in practical life they are deprived from many opportunities and are victims of deep-rooted discrimination."-Binod Singh, project manager of Prachar (The Guardian, 05.03.2014)

Analytical and strategic studies of the religious practices prevalent in India reveal their ulterior motives of sustenance of the patriarchal social construct through deep-rooted discrimination and exploitation of the women (Kapoor, 2020). The annual festival of Gangamma at Tirupati is celebrated by women intensifying their domestic duties to show reverence to the feminine creative power of Shakti (Priyamvada, 2019). The basis of this festival lies in the deep core of patriarchy that limits the women's worth to the domestic sphere and no point beyond that. The Kumari Poojan practice of worshipping a pre-pubescent girl to is chosen to sit on a pedestal (Priyamvada, 2019) associates the respect a woman deserved to her chastity. The illicit Devadasi practices (Priyamvada, 2019) still prevalent in remote parts of India subject women to forced prostitution seizing their right to autonomy and consent from them. It is quite the irony as well the Bengali month of 'Ashaad' is specifically celebrated owing to the symbolic menstruation of Kamakhya Devi, popularly known as the 'Bleeding Goddess' (Priyamvada, 2019), while for the mortal, non-divine women, it is considered a matter of impurity, shame and stigma.

Thus, what we find is a wide lacuna in the theological scriptures and the translation of the same into practices. While, theologically subtle regression and discrimination of women are noticed, the same becomes much more prominent and magnified for the mortal ones.

2.3. Pedestalization of the Mortal Women: Empowering Women or Not?

"My idea of a woman is a combination of sacrifice, care and purity at one place."

- Premchand

Often more than not, we come across several instances where women are compared to goddesses and the divinity; "a multitasker like Durga", "the beauty of Laxmi", "the brains of Saraswati" and the list never seems to end. Although many misconstrue such practices of comparing women to female deities and pedestalizing them into elevated positions of divinity as a way of empowering them and fostering feminist environment, it's quite the contrary. While the society has established a norm of drawing the bizarre comparisons between mortal women and the divine deities and successfully reinforced the same into the mindsets of women, it has systematically and quite strategically denied women of their status as 'human being' and their entitlement to 'humanness'.

While many argue that comparing women to deities actually is a form of feminism and women empowerment, it isn't actually so. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2022), feminism is defined as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and the struggle to achieve this aim". The very basis of feminism lies in 'equality' - the equality of rights, privileges, opportunities, lifestyles, living conditions and liberty of choices irrespective of gender. Feminism in no way calls for women to be placed in the pedestal of divinity and worship, but actually strives to establish an equivalent footing for the women as that the man enjoys in our society; it demands an equitable treatment and entitlement to respect for a woman as for a man without the woman having to rise to divinity, display an endless pit of patience and emotional strength without any grievances. Surely then, comparing women to Goddesses is a practice quite far from what we establish as women empowerment.

The society promoting the concept of women as mortal deities roaming the earth has carved of the society breathes on a common perception of the woman as a frail and delicate creature who is the sole nurturer of the family, the epitome of multitasking, caring endlessly for people, being the most compliant, docile, passive, understanding and emotionally resilient. The representation that society chooses of Maa Durga is not her courage or her power but that of her 'Dashabhuja' or ten-hands, that is, her symbolical ability to multitask (Patel, 2019). Out of the analogy of every woman being a mortal 'Dashabhuja', an unrealistic image of the woman is created in the collective mind of the society whereby it is expected that a woman can work throughout the day at the office, handle the kids and the husband who has been a 'man-child' all along, do the dishes, make the food and yet wear a smile and a pleasant demeanor while the husband may get away with the bare minimum responsibilities, since he isn't obliged under the mortal imagery of a deity. Quite naturally, the mortal woman who has barely two hands and a limited capacity suffers stress and burnout while trying to live up to the inhumane expectation imposed by the society.

Pedestalization of women have actually stifled women and their uniqueness and robbed them of their right to make mistakes, to rebel, to question, to feel and display the emotions of anger, frustration, grievances and like.

Abuse of women, including rape, molestation or harassment mostly remains unreported and escapes legal reprimandment because it is the not the perpetrators whose honor is tainted but that of the woman and her family. Social scientist and activist Kamla Bhasin (2014) said on a Satyamev Jayate, a Star Plus show hosted by Amir Khan: "When I'm raped, people say that I've lost my honor. How did I lose my honor? My honor is not in my vagina. Why did you place your community's honor in a woman's vagina?" This collective mentality is an outgrowth of perceiving women as sentient beings of purity and sanctity that specifically resides in her privates.

The graphic novel series named Priya's Shakti (2014) narrating how a woman avenges her rape when Goddess Parvati imbues her with godlike powers is based on a problematic concept that reinforces the idea of a woman entitled to justice only when she assumes a Goddess-like status and aligns to a divine imagery and not on accord of being an ordinary human (Kapoor, 2020)

Domestic violence also remains unreported and escapes legal censure because forgiveness is demanded of the battered women since she is the mortal divine, the ocean of patience and virtue. Women don't often have the option of separation or divorce due to the collective perception of the women as bestowed with the sole responsibility of safeguarding their marriage and keeping it viable while the men are granted independence of any demeanor, they feel like (Priyamvada, 2019).

2.4. The Abused Goddess Campaign:

The Abused Goddess campaign was initiated by 'Taproot', an Indian advertising agency portraying popular goddesses, namely Laxmi, Saraswati and Durga, in the battered and bruised form with the sole moto of trying to highlight the paradox of goddess worship and prevalence of intimate partner violence (The Guardian, 05.03.2014,). However, netizens and women rights activists argued that such deification of women are mere reflections of the 'patriarchal insinuation', expecting women to be deities if they want to be respected (Hindustan Times, 14.04.2022). That is, women in themselves, cannot be viewed as 'an equal human being of the same accord as that of a man' to access the basic rights a man is conferred with but has to rise to an elevated pedestal to access the same (The Hindu, 15.09.2013).

Additionally, the selective representation of Goddesses as the upper caste Brahmin Hindu women symbolically denies representation to the Dalit, Adivasi, North-eastern, queer or trans women further detaching them from the idea of Indian womanhood and femininity (Kapoor, 2020). Such women in reality are also never accepted by the society since they don't fit the image of how a woman should be and are subjected to discriminatory practices.

Pedestalization of women ultimately leads to a dichotomous classification of women either as idealized or demonized, that is, saints or sinners, with very little room in between. However, the crude irony lies is that both the saint and sinner women faced the brunt of patriarchy and misogyny, although under different pretexts. The compliant woman has to exhibit perpetual forgiveness, compassion, tolerance and a saintly lifestyle devoid the adventures that life offers to be socially accepted or she is shunned, disrespected and shamed by the same society. Rightly by Deepak Sehgal, the character of the movie Pink (2016), played to perfection by Amitabh Bachchan- while partying, casual relationships and moderated drinking are considered to be health hazards for males, for females they are a route to one's character assassination and disrespect. We might as well realize that pedestalizing women and expecting them to be kind, demure, forgiving, and docile is no less denigrating than considering women as mere sex-objects since none allow them to exercise their will, their opinion or authority (Priyamvada, 2019). Consequently, it all boils down to the objectification or dehumanization of women, with no other avail left for the Indian women (Kapoor, 2020).

Depicted quite well by the movie, Angry Indian Goddesses (2015) 20 reveals that women are tired of being called everything but a person and of continuously fighting for their right to equal respect not because they are forms of the divine Goddesses or procreators of the next generation but because they are humans in the first place, a basic fact that always seem to slip away from the collective mind of the patriarchal society (Wajiri, 2020).

III. CONCLUSION

Through this research, it has been established that Hinduism as a religion is based on the core concept of celebration of femininity, non-stereotypical gender roles for both the male and female deities and gender fluidity (Johnson; Palapothu, 2018). However, translation of the theological scriptures into practice has somehow confounded the progressive radical backdrop of the religion both by letter and spirit.

With emphasis on the unrealistic body images of female deities, the Bharat Mata considered important only for her fecundity and the undue emphasis on her sons, the ways Durga has to manage her children and household with absolutely no investment from her husband, Kali's rage that is under the control of her husband and the wrong that is meted out to the mythological female characters across the epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata are the instances of how in practice the femininity has been represented through the fantasized perception of the male and subdued rather than celebrated and empowered (Eller, 2000;. Menon, 2017: Patel, 2019: Ailawadi, 2019).

In the land of India, where Goddesses are worshipped and revered, the mortal women face an environment of discrimination and exploitation. Practices like the Gangamma Festival of Tirupati, Kumari Poojan during Durga Puja or Navratri Festival, the Devadasi practices put up a picture of India where religious activities rob the women of their freedom and liberty and thrust them towards a regressive lifestyle slogging throughout the day in the service of the others (Kapoor, 2020; Priyamvada, 2019).

Pedestalization of women and comparing them with the female deities is yet another subtle form of discrimination that takes place against women in the Indian setting under the veil of women empowerment. The expectations that women have to meet to be granted social approval and basic respect force her to give up her uniqueness and get into a straitjacket for life which demands her to be perpetually compliant, submissive, docile, passive, emotionally resilient, pure and pious. She has to ace the life of a multitasker without having the liberty to complain, falter occasionally, argue, rebel, question or hold opinions about things or situations. Such comparisons of mortal women to deities with overemphasis on purity and sanctity also do not allow women who are survivors of crimes like rape, molestation, sexual harassment or domestic violence to stand up and raise their voices against the perpetrators because it is their purity which is tainted for life and their respect and honor that is at stake and not that of the perpetrators. Goddesses represented as upper class Brahmin ladies makes it difficult for the Dalit, Adivasi, North-eastern, trans or queer community women to identify themselves as a part of the Indian femininity and also be accepted among the general. Usually, given the patriarchy that encapsulates every woman, they are labelled as either saints who are dehumanized or sinners who are objectified with no continuum in between (Priyamvada, 2019; Patel, 2019; The Guardian, 05.03.2014; The Hindustan Times, 14.04.2022; The Hindu, 15.09.2013; Kapoor, 2020).

Such practices of discrimination and oppression against women and a woman's acceptance of the same are usually incorporated in the generational cycle, where eventually observing parents, the children learn similar behaviour and the narrative goes on and on. Consequently, generations of women end up stifled under the narrative of 'what women should be and should not be', living life as if abiding by an intangible rule book. No wonder, amidst the many expectations to fulfil, the woman forgets what she needs, what she wants, what she likes, and what she loves, eventually turning all her attention to the people and the society and neglecting herself.

With regards to how pervasive the collective mind of the society is and how it is transferred across generations through socialization, there is an urgent need to change the narrative from 'what women should be' to 'what women want to be'. Here is an excerpt of Tagore in Chitrangada (1892), a dance drama, which perfectly illustrates what women want

“পূজা করি মোরে রাখিবে উর্ধ্বে
সে নহি নহি
হেলা করি মোরে রাখিবে পিছে
সে নহি নহি
যদি পার্শ্বে রাখ মোরে
সংকটে সম্পদে,
সম্মতি দাও যদি কঠিন ব্রতে
সহায় হতে,
পাবে তবে তুমি চিন্তিতে মোরে” ,

(Translation: If you want to know who I am, neither raise me up to a pedestal of worship nor neglect me to subjugation, but accept my company in moments of joy, tragedy or penance. Only then shall you know the real me.)

Chitrangada, a mythological character of Mahabharata was a famous warrior princess of Manipura and the wife of Arjuna. She was one of the many characters in literature that broke gender norms in a radical way. In this excerpt, Tagore sets a narrative to highlight what women actually want.

Women don't desire a special elevated status in the form of a pedestal in the society. They want to access the basic rights to life, liberty, work, education, privacy, freedom of expression and opinion, equal treatment, equal opportunity, and social services (News18, 10.12.2021) as that the man enjoys on the accord of being a 'human being' and not a divine deity. She also seeks equal respect as that of a man irrespective of her life choices and acknowledgement of her mind, hard work, professional or non-stereotypical skills and not the traditional acknowledgement of her beauty, the culinary skills or her skill of maintaining the household well. She wants to be given accepted as a normal human being with her mistakes, her flaws, her lacunas or her emotional outbreaks and wants to experience life the way she wants rather than abiding by a rulebook of what she can and cannot do.

What currently India needs is an immediate shift in the paradigm of focus from goddesses and fables of women and their sacrifices and self-negligence to real-life prominent, driven and empowered women role models like Malala Yousafzai, Michele Obama Kiran Bedi, Belinda Wright, Mary Kom, Indra Nooyi, Sudha Murthy, Serena Williams, Coco Chanel and many more from diverse backgrounds that may help young girls of today's India to be inspired and therefore aspire for an independent existence. This shall provide them with the much-needed head start of courage for the flight they have to take.

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