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## **Problematization of Separatism, Gender Discrimination and Patriarchal Hegemony: A Critical Study**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper contends that separatist systems of discrimination not only unleash but stealthily sustain subordination in different guises through alienating strategies, thus creating hierarchical divides through oppressive control. Alternatives can be forged through an incisive analysis penetrating the very rudiments of such hostile systems in order to apprehend those devious strategies. Patriarchy is characteristic of a system of male domination and through its strategies controls the practice of religions that exert enormous control over all aspects of womanhood. Man invests himself with attributes loaded with positive values, thus developing an axiology grounded in those attributes. By contrast women is perceived and treated as inferior- marked by negativity, which becomes definitive of her being. Similar structures of perception get replicated creating separation and hegemony. Such are the structures that need dismantling.

**Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Patriarchy, Discourse, Empowerment.**

At the very outset, let me specify the concerns of this paper and anticipate its conclusions. It contends that separatist systems of discrimination, for ages, have not only unleashed but stealthily sustained subordination through their alienating strategies in different guises, marking hierarchical divides through oppressive control. And that, it is solely, through an incisive analysis and critical inquiry cutting through the rudiments of such hostile systems and their devious strategies that alternatives can be forged for the marginalized, creating spaces that are genuinely pluralistic and free from the strains of repression.

Ironically enough, the inception and overwhelming dissemination of one such strategy unfolds itself from the titled interpretations- a strategy that has polarized humanity and reduced the 'other' to an inhuman objectified triviality. The case in point is that patriarchal strategies steer in and control the practice of religions exerting enormous and persistent

control over all aspects of womanhood. Patriarchy is characteristic of a system of male domination, superiority and control that posits women as subordinate and lacking. Man defines and invests himself with attributes loaded with a positive value thereby developing an axiology grounded in those attributes. By contrast woman is perceived and treated as incomplete and belonging to an inferior order of existence marked by negativity, which in turn becomes definitive of her being. Similar structures of perception get replicated in nearly all cases of separation and hegemony- structures that need dismantling.

Within the social sciences and humanities most academic fields responded to the emergence and intervention of feminist theory functioning as meta-critical tool. Their critical engagement with the study of religions in its myriad aspects too, has been no exception even though this area has shown to be slow in responding to and incorporating gender critical submissions. Feminist theory has persistently called attention to the forms of misogyny, produced and legitimated by religious discourse and the subsequent marginalization and subordination of women within religious traditions. Gender-critical approaches towards an understanding and explanation of religion engage in explicitly political discursive practices, which place them at odds with the declared neutrality concerning religions. It becomes further pronounced when feminist scholarship intervenes in hegemonic discourses in opposition and resistance against those universalizing tendencies that either ignore or smother the specificities of gender.

Religion continues to be understood, generally, in rather narrow terms closely related to the existence of a divine or transcendental being conceived in terms of western monotheism and the corresponding structures which have, until recently, been largely or completely male dominated. This concept clearly does not reflect the diversity of actual religious praxis and belief that is related to the complete spectrum of spiritual, symbolic and ethical aspirations worldwide. Women have always had a part to play in this but privileging the male, male identified structures and male point of view have marginalized or excluded women from the power or the means of making their lives independently or even equally meaningful. Feminist methodology in the field of religion and spirituality works constructively to find a way of transforming the symbolic frameworks through which human beings acquire significance and value, so that they truly reflect the aspirations and desires of women as well as men. This aspect of feminism within the field of religion is consequently concerned with ethical issues of love, equality and justice.

A tentative definition of religion can perhaps be summed up as beliefs and practices through which an understanding of the spiritual dimension of human existence is made possible. In discussions of religion, particularly in the western world the emphasis still tends to be placed on belief in a single, transcendent and masculine divine being as creator and sustainers of human life. In a broad sense important differences exist between various world religions or in less formalized religious positions. Notwithstanding the difference, feminists offer a critique of existing religious beliefs and practices based on exposing the effects or privileging a particular perspective – typically a male perspective. Escaping from the privileged perspective is a key methodological concern of feminists because in terms of both the actual beliefs and practices of different world religions and also the way in which these beliefs and practices are recorded and interpreted, those at the margins of this perspective have difficulty in being seen or heard at all, let alone becoming a participant in a larger social discourse.

A study of Christian faith reveals that its organization was centered on homogenizing a tumultuous, subversive and multifarious movement due to the political expediency of unifying both, the Church and the Empire that aggressively required patriarchal practices of discourse and leadership. Relative gender egalitarianism did prevail in some early Christian communities along with a fluidity of gender imagery for the divine discernible as that of the Holy Spirit as Mother, but such discursive spaces were virtually eliminated by the privileged perspective. However, with the passage of time feminist theology arose against the exclusively masculine imagination of the divine and the corresponding exclusion of women from positions of ordained leadership from the churches.

In the history of Christian theology claims to orthodoxy are not concealed behind appeals to pure reason. Unlike philosophy, no clear separation can be drawn between issues of institutional power and the thought that justifies or resists it. Foucault has shown all disciplines to be subject to the impossible inseparability of knowledge and power. In maintaining this claim, especially as engagement from the political perspective of feminist critique, there is the obvious advantage of forcing a disclosure of the terms of its power struggles with relative transparency.

The first creation story of Genesis holds human beings as made in the image of God, following which women would therefore be as entitled as men to fulfil their own significance. Cardinal O’Conner of New York made headlines by declaring ‘God is man’.

Other representatives of the tradition argue God has no gender, the biblical images behind just metaphors for carrying the message. In its feminist deconstruction, 'God' produces a version of what Gayatri Spivak calls 'catachresis' meaning 'brought of crisis'. When God is reconstructed as a woman, a sense of contradiction is produced; of women as female flesh mimicking but not imitating the personhood of a flesh-transcendent masculinity, claiming discursive authority within the patriarchy of theological authorship. To function as a field of discourse at all, feminist theology has no recourse but to relocate beyond both, pre-modern patriarchy and late modern reductionism.

Whereas from its very inception Christian feminism has defined transformation of theology as their principal goal, the threshold of the Jewish feminist project has been more amorphous. Jewish feminist project has been more amorphous. Jewish philosophical theologies being intra-communal as well as inter-communal constantly extend, defend and negotiate the confines of normative Jewish discourse. Jewish feminist theology, thereby responds to transformative events in the larger social environment that challenges the thought and practice of Judaism. The feminist critique of society and culture initiated during the 1960s and 1970s posed extreme challenges to every branch of Judaism, before which women were denied equal access to communal participation, leadership or religious education. Traditionally the main duty of women was confined to enabling the Jewish observance of men. The Holocaust that wiped out a large population of Jews further amplified women's responsibilities for enabling Jewish survival.

Two crucial controversies confronting feminist theory influence the nature and extent of the feminist force on Judaism. The first interrogates whether the feminist goal is to establish equal access for women within pre-existing structures or to transform them. As the study of Torah was both the obligation and privilege of men, women remained incompetent to assume liturgical leadership roles and remained peripheral and marginalized. However, equal access only integrates women into structures created by men, erasing the differences women possessed thereby making them honorary men (Prell 1983).

The second controversy concerns the nature of gender difference, questioning whether there are essential feminine and masculine natures that remain constant throughout different historical periods and cultural locations, or is gender a social construction in which features that typify femininity and masculinity are contingent upon socio-historical functions and hence vary widely. By contrast acknowledging gender as a social construct allows

challenging traditional assumptions and renders some practices problematic. Masculinity is no less constructed and context dependent than femininity. Rather than postulating a pure form of Judaism unaffected by gender considerations, one must assume that all representations of gender in text and tradition require critical scrutiny, which would profoundly affect the methods and process of textual interpretation and adjudication of Jewish law.

A study of Islam pronounces it to be the culmination of Judeo-Christian tradition in the sense of establishing a middle-path religion avoiding the extremes of Judaic transcendence and Christian immanence. The Qur'an, the revealed word of God to Muhammad, is the pivot around which the lives of its followers revolve. Some of its most important legal enactments are concerned with imparting an overall secure status to women. Islam recognizes the equality of men and women with regard to moral and legal issues – the right to inherit, a right to divorce, the right to remarriage, equality of creation and spiritual worth. The Qur'an is a guide to both. The pursuit of knowledge is incumbent on every man and woman and even though male is recognized as the main economic head of the family, women are not forbidden from taking part in professional activity. However, even though several Islamic countries constitutionally recognize parity between the sexes as perceived by the Islamic ideal, Muslim women are not perceived to enviable roles. For much too long Muslim women have been living under a shadow; voluntarily, out of habit, or because traditionally their menfolk have put them there.

Basharat Tayyab classifies gender perception within Islam broadly into traditional, eclectic and modern. The traditionalists represented the feudal-tribal who sought to locate women under the control of men. Maryam Jameelah, a spokesperson of orthodoxy writing in 1970s maintained,

In Islam the role of women is not the ballot box but maintenance of home and family. Her success as a person is judged according to her fidelity to her husband and rearing of worthy children (Jameelah 89).

She further adds:

The movement for female emancipation should be recognized by all Muslims for what it is – a malignant conspiracy to destroy the home and family and eventually wreck our entire society (Jameelah 89).

The eclectic school of thought originating from Muhammad Abduh of Egypt and Maulana Maududi maintains, Islam has in fact introduced the idea of imparting rights to women and a position of honour within the society. However having accepted the parameters of equality Maududi refers to the order of the Islamic social system as one that is 'natural' and goes on to segregate these spheres of activity of men and women recasting the distribution of responsibilities in accord with their respective 'natures'. Building on the grounds of fixed biological and psychological attributes his social system imposed segregation and the recognition of the natural superiority of one partner over the other.

The modernist approach to Islam generally and towards gender in particular, has shifted to one of reconstruction. Seminal from the feminist perspective are modernists of the late nineteenth century. Ali Shariati in his book *'Fatima is Fatima'* exhorts every woman to 'make' and 'create' herself with responsibility both towards herself and the society she inhabits. Shariati insists that a Muslim woman must aspire to be a woman of a society who ought to make her decisions on the basis of reason and choice in relation to a history, culture, religion and society, which receives its spirit and origins from Islam. He stated that a woman who wants to be herself and build herself should be her own midwife. For Shariati, the Islamic role of model was Fatima in whose person the various images of being a woman are symbolized – a daughter, a wife, a mother, a responsible warrior when she needs to be, an Imam and a guide.

In spite of such progressive views and such emancipator ideals in place it is hard not to acknowledge that the true situation of women remains lamentable in Islamic cultures and societies across the world in struggle against the internal forces of religious orthodoxy and external patriarchal offences. When fragments of women's individual experiences converge a pattern begins to emerge clearly indicating that subordination is not the fate of the few who are unfortunate, nor is it some 'vicious' men who exploit or oppress. Women are up against a system – a system of male control that takes away from the self-esteem and confidence, setting limits to the creativity and aspirations of the subordinated. Linked to this system is the ideology that men being superior, women ought to operate under their unquestioned control and accept being under his ownership as part of his property. Women's productive or labour resources, their reproduction, their sexuality, mobility, property, children are all beyond her claims.

Despite this women become as much as a part of the system, with convictions in common with Maryam Jameelah, living internalized its norms and unable to distance themselves from that ideology. Gerda Lerner points out:

The cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; denial of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women by restraints and coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power and by privileges to conforming women... a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance (Lerner 115).

Once in a while a seeming self-possession or a trifling participation in decision making may be fleetingly visible but the point is they are never in control. Lerner makes a telling point,

Men and women live on a stage on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers... neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage set is conceived, painted, defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of actions. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles (Lerner 135).

In other words the problem is not what women do or are, it is how they are valued and more pertinently who has the right to assign values to people. The problem is with the framework itself – a framework that resonates to the call of men – its makers.

Feminist methodology in religion is not simply a matter of critique. It also has a pragmatic and constructive dimension which is founded in confidence that what has been represented and devalued in gendered terms or lost to sight because of a privileged male perspective, is of intrinsic value for women and for humankind as a whole, providing resources for an alternative human imaginary.

Amongst modern feminist theorists, Lucy Irigaray, in particular has been prominent in discussing the issue of religion, in contrast to some of her feminist contemporaries who have regarded religion as irredeemably entangled within patriarchal structures and masculinist way of thinking. Irigara's work incorporates both elements of critique and reconstruction. She argues that the existing symbolic framework of religion does not simply associate masculinity with the divine but makes the ideal of masculinity the measure of all

human aspirations. This in turn lends legitimacy to social and cultural practices that privilege male aspirations at the expense of human desires associated with women.

In the beginning of her book *'The Ethics of sexual Difference'* Irigaray states that sexual difference is

...one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through... sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation', if we through (Irigaray 16).

Irigaray suggests that women has occupied, literally and symbolically, the role of a mirror for the masculine subject and has become reflexively 'the other'. Further, being trapped in the role of reflecting the same of the Western intellectual tradition resulting in an impoverishment of forms of living for both the sexes. The 'otherness' with which woman is associated is either as a secondary complement, the devalued half which makes up an illusory whole; or as negative, absent black hole, Freud's mysterious dark continent. Woman as the 'other' is not only, as Simone de Beauvoir suggested in *'The Second Sex'* a subjectivity denied its autonomy and freedom, but also through a symbolic alignment with negativity, chaos and darkness, an ex-centric excess 'other' even to 'otherness'. Thinking through the site of subjectivity opened by such ambivalence Irigaray suggests a feminine philosophy of the subject functioning as the 'other'. In her view the opening of such otherness might allow for more fertile ethical and cultural fulfilment.

In her essay *'Divine Women'* Irigaray discusses the idea that in order for women actually to be able to develop an understanding of their own subjectivity or identity as women – rather than simply as factors that relate to a masculine subjectivity – they need a divine representation of the ideal to which, as women, they aspire. The idea of Divine is none other than a form of projection without which women cannot achieve a genuine sense of their legitimacy as women – a relationship with their own being apart from their relationship with men.

To conclude, let me note that practical reform is immediately contexted and accelerated through better informed societal support by empirical studies that sustain attention to issues which exhibit a sharp contrast between continuing practices and changing value systems. The next step would be to understand the historical and ideological basis of those phenomena that are subject of reform. However, what is of utmost relevance is the

investigation of the structures of nodal concepts of the dominant discourse – to analyze with precision the bias imbricate within them. Under theorization at this level has crucial implication for any programme of socio-political initiative. Synchronically it results in conflicts between different areas of reformative focus and diachronically in contradictions between immediate objectives and ultimate goals, leading to situation where tactical gains of specific reforms are overwhelmed by appropriate strategies of the dominant ideologies and end up reinforcing those very values and forms of life that negate the human status of the underprivileged and marginalized.

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