

Marking Gender Oppression: Surveiling the Ideology of Marriage in Hinduism

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Abstract

Hindu religion is one of the noted religions in the world for its wide variety of ritualistic notions, cultural denotations and traditional conventions. Similarly, the trajectories of gender oppression can also be traced back since ancient times. Gender concerns are also different in different cultures. In India, women's issues and experiences are distinct owing to the peculiarities of caste and cultural notions. In the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries the cultural specificities were so complex and the lives of Hindu women especially upper caste women were so constrained within the religious, traditional system. This paper tries to map out how far the ideology of marriage influenced and accelerated women's oppression in Hindu religion. This study also attempts to look at how feminists viewed and understood this notion of marriage and how the patriarchal centered religion used marriage as a tool to mark gender oppression.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Hindu religion, marriage, feminism, caste, oppression.

Hindu religion has been playing a significant role in the cultural ethos of India. The taming nature of Hinduism upon women could be traced back since ancient times. The status of women was not in a better phase in any of the centuries. A woman had to live according to the prescriptive and religious texts of the Hindus in different roles as daughter, wife, mother and widow. This paper attempts to probe how women were put into the hands of patriarchy of peculiar nature and how different manifestations of patriarchy construct gender oppression. This paper also intends to explore the feminist critique of the notion of marriage and how far Hindu religion uses the ideology of marriage as a powerful religious symbol to bring out the oppression of women. Like any other religion, Hinduism also gives prime position to men. General subordination of women is a universal phenomenon. Using orthodox religious conventions and ritual practices, Hindu religion ordains its women to be subservient to its rules and thereby facilitates gender oppression.

As feminist theorists opine, gender refers to "the ways of seeing and representing people and situations based on sex difference" and "Gender" is a social or cultural category, influenced

by stereotypes about ‘female’ and ‘male’ behavior that exists in our attitudes and beliefs. Such beliefs are often said to be ‘culturally produced’ or ‘constructed’” (Goodman vii). In a similar vein, Sherry Ortner suggests that the imbalance in the position of men and women is not only a biological but also a culturally attributed one. Not only that, she problematizes equating women with ‘nature’ (because of their role in reproduction and child care) and men with ‘culture’, thereby causing a kind of division which itself is a patriarchal construct (Polity Reader 7). A similar view can be seen elaborated in the essay “Literature and Gender” by Lizbeth Goodman and Alison Smith that

Gender can be seen as a pattern constructed in society, which in turn influences our views of ourselves. When we write and read, we do so as gendered individuals, not just as women and men, but as people who have been taught that there are values assigned to sex, though we may no longer believe that male=power, authority, and female= passivity, compromise. (2)

Therefore, needless to say, it can be seen that gender establishes a firm position at the moment of birth and continues its influence throughout every individual’s life. Moreover, as an organizing principle in society and culture, gender makes significant differences in human experience. Writers like Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg, and Audrey Kobayashi opine that it is not gender alone that brings differences in human life, but other discursive factors like class or race, different experiences in work, play, family and social life with their interaction with gender produce various diverse outcomes (1).

Apart from the diversity in the perspectives of these theoreticians and the way they approached the concept of gender and its representation, these scholars concede that gender is a culturally attributed one. Gayle Rubin argues that every society has a sex/gender system, i.e., “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159). Rubin further explains that this domain of social life which Rubin calls as sex/gender system can also be named as “mode of reproduction” and “patriarchy” which forms the place of oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and also represents certain aspects of human personality within individuals (ibid). Therefore, it can be seen that, both sex and gender are related at times and make people contented through this established system of patriarchy.

Marriage plays a vital role in Hindu religion. Marriage denotes the status of a person’s social existence along with various other aspects like power and well-being both material and spiritual (K. Roy 223). In *Manusmriti* (also in *Grhyasutras* and *Dharmasutras*) eight forms of marriage are specified. These are: Paishacha, Rakshasa, Asura, Gandharva, Arsha, Daive, Prajaatya and Brahma which is the most accepted form of marriage by Manu and Vedic people (Kane 260; Samatani 40-41). Both the *Grhya Sutras* and the *Dharma Sutras* give more focus to the ritual of marriage because marriage is considered as a turning point in a person’s life. Along with this, various meanings are associated with the socio-ritualistic existence of a person. For example, it provides an autonomous ritual life to the male sacrificer (Roy 225). Arranging the marriage of the girl was a right as well as a responsibility. If the guardian did not arrange the

girl's marriage at the proper time, he is said to have committed the sin of the murder of an embryo (Kane 252).

In ancient days, marriage was not a religious institution. The girl had the freedom to choose her husband through *Svayamvara* (selecting husband) until the 11th century A.D. But, infant marriage is said to have been universalized with the advent of the Mohamedan rule from 12th century A.D. Hence, Brahmans chose the marriageable age between 5 and 11 for a high caste girl and 10 to 12 for boys (Ramabai 58). In Brahmanical society marriage was considered indissoluble only when it was sanctioned by sacerdotal authority. Manu validated the legality of marriage, only when, it was held with the consent of the father or the brother of the maiden (Bader 35).

In ancient times women were seen as the worthy companions of the heroes and Aryans considered their marriage as a way to purify their faults (49-50). Bader observes the status of a wife and says, "With what a shining aureole is she crowned there!" (48). According to Manu, the only divinity a woman should adore was her husband and the only religion imposed upon her was family affection (55). "Married woman" said Manu "must be honoured with attention and by presents from their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, and from the brethren of their husbands, when these desire abundant prosperity" (qtd. in Bader 54).

Manu opined that women are "as impure as falsehood itself" (Ramabai 82). He observes, "No man can completely guard women by force; but they can be guarded by the employment of the following expedients:" and writes, "Let the husband employ his wife in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping everything clean, in the fulfillment of religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils" (qtd. in Ramabai 82). Quoting from Manu's injunctions on the marital rights of men over their wives, Ramabai shows how despicably the women were treated: "The wife is declared to be the "marital property" of her husband, and is classed with "cows, mares, female camels, slave-girls, buffalo-cows, she-goats and ewes" (qtd. in Ramabai 89).

According to the Rig Veda, the purpose of marriage was to help man to become a complete householder by performing sacrifices to the gods and procreating sons (Kane 216). Aitareya Brāhmana. I. 2.4. says "Therefore a man, after securing a wife, regards himself as more complete" (qtd. in Kane 216). The Satapatha Brahmana V.2.1.10 says:-"The wife is indeed half of one's self; therefore as long as a man does not secure a wife so long he does not beget a son and so he is till then not complete (or whole); but when he secures a wife he gets progeny and then he becomes complete" (qtd. in Kane 216). Woman participates in her husband's duties and helps him to discharge his two obligations among three. Man has three major obligations like: to the sages, to the gods, and to the *pitr* (ancestors). Man fulfills his obligation to the sages through brahmacharya (celibacy) before marriage. The other two obligations are fulfilled together with his wife by performing sacrifices to the gods and by procreating sons to his *pitr* (forefathers) (Kane 283). But, wife is not permitted to do the religious performances of her husband alone or without his consent. Manu (V.155= Viṣṇu-dharma-sūtra Samhita 25.15) proclaims: "there is no separate yajna for women (independently of the husband) nor vrata (vows) nor fasts (without his

consent)” (qtd. in Kane 282). Therefore, the goal of a woman’s life was to get married and procreate sons.

Similarly, ancient scriptures teach this idea that a woman attains personhood only when she is linked up with her husband. Thus she becomes a ‘social entity’ and also she is called an auspicious woman (*Sumangali*) or a fortunate woman (*saubhagyavati*). Her social being is the outcome of her participation in the performance of rituals with her husband and also her role in procreation (Chakravarti, *Ideological* 66). Hindu marriage is full of rituals indicating the significance of procreation, in rituals like the *haldi* ceremony, wearing red colour saree, and the use of *kumkuma* on the bride’s forehead, which is an indication of her procreative power (ibid 68). Manu (IX. 96) says: - “women are created for procreation and men have to propagate (the race); therefore in the Veda it is declared that the wife shares in common (with the husband) the performance of religious duties” (qtd. in Kane 284). If the husband has no sons in his first marriage Smritis and Dharma Sutras permit him to marry for the second time even if his first wife is alive (Kane 284). All the prescriptive texts assert that the husband has the supreme authority in marriage. Similarly, the highest duty of a woman was to worship him as god. Yājñavalkya-Smṛti 1:77 ordains, “This is the highest duty (dharma) of women that they should obey their husband’s words if he is guilty of some mortal sin, they should wait till he is purified (and thereafter be dependent on his words)” (qtd. in Kane 284). In a similar vein, Manu states (V. 154):- “A virtuous wife should serve her husband as if he were a god, whether he be of evil character or lustful (loving another woman) or devoid of good qualities” (qtd. in Kane 284). Wife always has a dependent subjectivity in Hindu religion. Not only that, Manu lays down certain mutual responsibilities for husband and wife. He writes, “They should not prove false to each other till death (as regards *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*) and that their constant endeavour should be not to be separate from each other and not to break faith with each other (as to those three goals of human life)” (qtd. in Kane 281).

It is said that female birth happens on earth because of one’s bad actions in the previous life. In this birth, they have to suppress their bad karma through their role as wives. According to the Brahmanical prescriptive texts, women are lustful because of their *strisvabhava*-their innate nature of promiscuousness, which they inherit from their mother. Their other quality is *stridharma* (a woman’s duty) which they inherit from their father. Therefore, all prescriptive texts recommend the close observation of wife in marriage (Chakravarti, *Ideological* 68). Referring to G. Buhler’s translation of *The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East* (1886), Susan Wadley quotes: “By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seeds; the production of all corporeal beings (takes place) through the union of the soil with the seed” (Wadley 115). She further points out that in Hinduism this uncultured power is dangerous and therefore, the equation of “Women=Power+Nature=Danger” holds the core of femaleness in Hinduism (ibid). Therefore, the uncontrolled, or unguarded wife creates a dangerous condition in Hindu religion because the chances are more for women to lead a loose life. This would bring disgrace to her husband, her family and moreover to her husband’s caste.

Therefore, the control of women is achieved through the institution of marriage. In Hinduism, a woman gets recognition only when she is identified as a wife, but as a widow, she becomes an anomaly. But, marriage as an institution is prominent all over the world. Therefore,

it is important to note how western feminist theoreticians viewed and approached the concept of marriage.

The institution of marriage has been criticized by feminists since ancient times to the present day under the assumption that it facilitates women's oppression. Feminists disapprove the received notions of marriage on many grounds. "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" says Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1949). She views that marriage is considered as the standard to judge and define the condition of the celibate woman "whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution" (445). Generally, it is a union of two independent persons with mutual consent. The parts played by man and woman in the institution of marriage are different. Women use their reproductive capacity voluntarily and their economic independence disturbs the institution of marriage. But women do not get an equal dignity with her husband in that union. Simone de Beauvoir further observes, "A man is socially an independent and complete individual; he is regarded first of all as a producer whose existence is justified by the work he does for the group: we have seen why it is that the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity" (446). She notes the peculiarities that make the system of marriage a unique one. It is the men's group that helps the members of that group to search partners for them and to fulfill their wishes as husband, father etc. instead of approaching the woman individually. Hence, she writes the dependent position of women in marriage. "... woman, as slave or vassal, is integrated within families dominated by fathers and brothers, and she has always been given in marriage by certain males to other males" (446). Marriage is sometimes a woman's "means of support and the sole justification of her existence" says De Beauvoir. Because freedom is a restricted thing for a young girl and her celibacy always has the sacred character that again restricts her position to that of a dependent. An unmarried woman would be a lifelong dependent in her affinal household, but a married woman becomes the mistress of her home in spite of the fact that she lives as a slave to her husband. Woman has two major functions assigned by society – one is her role in reproduction and the other, her role in conjugality as the one who satisfies male sexual desire and looks after his household duties. She states that the functions assigned by society to the married woman are regarded "as a *service* rendered to her spouse" (447). So the act of love is a service and the body of a woman is a thing bought by her husband. Therefore, she views that "marriage is at the same time a burden and a benefit" to both parties (446-450).

Feminist thinkers like Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer and Adrienne Rich etc. problematize heterosexuality and the traditional roles of women as dutiful wives and reproductive machines. According to them the oppression of women is the most fundamental form of oppression. The feminists declared in 1969 that marriage and the family must be eliminated. Kate Millet in *The Sexual Politics* (1969) views that women will get liberation only when gender discrimination is eliminated. She writes about the general legal assumption of marriage as "an exchange of the female's domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support" (35). She also writes, "The Victorian belief in marriage- nearly an article of faith- is an attempt to beautify the traditional confinement of women at any cost. The cloying sweetness, the frenetic sentimentality, all conspire to hide the fact that this is only candy-coated sexual politics" (79). Millet records the opinion of Mill that home is a place of "domestic

slavery” and the locus of the patriarchal setup. In Mill’s view, the place of women under the rule of force in the history of tyranny is that of a “bond servant” especially within marriage (99). While analyzing Engel’s contribution to the sexual revolution and his views on marriage and family, Millet notes that his belief is like, “Women are made chattels through the establishment of the male’s exclusive sexual possession over woman in marriage (a possession not reciprocal for women) already presupposes patriarchal circumstances” (sic) (112). In *Manifesta: Young Woman, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) Amy Richards writes that all feminists would want to avoid marriage by the 1970s and that “whether marriage was revolutionized or avoided like the plague, the lines were clear: marriage was a sullied state from a feminist perspective” (Baumgardner 39).

In *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) Shulamith Firestone addresses several unresolved problems within the feminist theory, especially the biological, social and the psychological power relations between men and women. She describes women’s oppression as “an oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself” (12). And women’s liberation means “a struggle to break free from oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man” (23). She views the locus of women’s oppression like family and home as a political institution that makes ‘the personal, political’ (Delmar 10). Firestone has a different perspective on marriage. She probes why people continue to stick on to the institution of marriage. By pitting marriage against the four feminist demands, she writes that though modern marriage provides needs like personal servants, and school, day care facilities for child-rearing, women get no freedom from the tyranny of reproduction and child bearing. Similarly, they satisfy themselves with physical security even if they do not get financial independence. Though women and children are segregated from the larger society as the members of the family which is a functioning social unit, they get their own space and help to avoid the disintegration of family. Family is the place where women are sexually repressed but at the same time it provides sexual satisfaction to husband and wife through their conjugal life. Firestone opines that the above mentioned advantages of marriage force people to be the recipients of it. Firestone writes, “in a world out of control, the only institutions that grant the individual an *illusion* of control, that seem to offer any safety, shelter or warmth, are the ‘private’ institutions: religion, marriage/family, and, most recently, psychoanalytic therapy” (209). Yet, she observes that marriage fails to satisfy the needs of its participants. She says that being an institution, marriage naturally creates an oppressive condition around it. Therefore, she advocates for a better alternative that would fulfill the emotional and psychological needs of its participants (209-210).

It can be seen that Hindu upper caste patriarchy endorses the subordination of women over generations and controls female sexuality as a crucial factor in the maintenance of the caste system. Uma Chakravarti points out how upper caste patriarchy controls the entire system of hierarchy through their socio-political power of material control. She is of the view that the system of endogamy¹ in the caste system uses as a tool for the manifestation and perpetuation of caste and gender subordination.

¹ The practice of marrying from within one’s own ethnic, religious, or social group.

As Uma Chakravarti puts it succinctly,

Class, caste and gender are inextricably linked; they interact with and shape each other: the structure of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction is the fundamental basis of the caste system. It is also fundamental to the way inequality is sustained: the structure of marriage reproduces both class and caste inequality and thus the entire production system through its tightly controlled system of reproduction. (*Gendering* 27)

Hence, the role of marriage is crucial in upper caste Hindu community because through marriage, they uphold the purity of women's sexuality. Therefore, it can be understood that, the hidden agenda behind the ideology of marriage is to preserve caste purity. If anyone marries from outside the endogamous circle will be punished through expulsion or outcasting (Ibid 33). Thus, using a very systematized and institutionalized ideology, Hindu religion perpetuates gender subordination and thereby facilitates gender oppression.

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