

The Woman Question in Western-occidental and Eastern-oriental Religious Traditions

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Abstract

This paper explores the "woman question" in Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions, analysing the roles and status of women within these diverse religious contexts. By conducting a comparative study, the paper aims to identify the similarities, differences, and underlying factors that have shaped the treatment of women in these traditions. The study begins by providing a historical and cultural overview of the contexts in which these religious traditions emerged. Through a comprehensive literature review, a gap in the existing scholarship becomes apparent, specifically regarding a thorough comparative analysis of the treatment of women in both Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. Consequently, this paper seeks to address this gap by offering a nuanced understanding of the roles and status of women in these religious contexts. The findings indicate that while there are some shared characteristics in the treatment of women, there are also significant variations between Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental traditions. Western-Occidental religious traditions often exhibit patriarchal and hierarchical structures, while Eastern-Oriental traditions demonstrate more diverse attitudes towards women, ranging from elevating them to positions of spiritual leadership to marginalising their roles. In conclusion, this paper highlights the relevance of these findings for contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's rights. It emphasizes the importance of engaging with religious traditions critically and constructively, considering the diverse perspectives they offer. Furthermore, the paper calls for further research in this area, particularly through comparative studies of religious traditions and their treatment of women, to deepen our understanding and promote greater inclusivity and gender justice in religious contexts.

Key Words: Women, Western-Occidental, Eastern-Oriental, religion, tradition

Introduction

The topic of the "woman question" has been a matter of profound significance throughout the history of human civilization. This complex and multifaceted inquiry delves into the examination of women's roles, rights, and status within various religious traditions, both in the Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental spheres. Scholars, philosophers, theologians, and anthropologists have long grappled with understanding the portrayal, treatment, and empowerment of women within the religious frameworks that have shaped societies and cultures for millennia. In Western-Occidental traditions, ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle pondered the nature of roles and equality within their philosophical frameworks. Their ideas, while products of their time, laid the groundwork for subsequent discussions on women's roles in society and the inherent power dynamics. Similarly, influential theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas shaped Christian thought, exploring the theological implications of gender and the social order. As we move into modernity, thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton emerged as champions of women's rights and gender equality. Their works challenged traditional norms and patriarchal structures, demanding a reevaluation of women's place within society and religious institutions. Through their critical perspectives, they invited deeper reflections on the intrinsic biases and systemic inequalities present in Western-Occidental religious contexts.

Turning our attention to Eastern-Oriental religious traditions, we encounter a diverse range of philosophical, religious, and cultural systems that have addressed the woman question in unique ways. Ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius emphasised the importance of social order and family values, shaping gender roles within the context of hierarchical relationships. Laozi, the central figure in Daoism, offered insights into the balance of yin and yang, which encompassed concepts of feminine and masculine energies. In the realm of Indian philosophy, Nagarjuna's Buddhist teachings touched upon the nature of gender and reality, while the poems of Persian mystic Rumi reflected on love, spirituality, and the dynamics of gender relationships. Moving into the modern era, figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Li Yinhe, and Sadhguru have contributed their perspectives to the woman question in Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. Their works have explored women's empowerment, challenged social norms, and

advocated for gender equality within the religious and cultural contexts of their respective regions.

The literature review on "The Woman Question in Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental Religious Traditions" reveals a significant gap in existing scholarship that justifies the need for this study. The identified gap is the lack of comprehensive comparative analysis that examines the status, roles, and experiences of women across both Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. While there is a wealth of research available on women's roles within individual religious traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, there is limited scholarship that comparatively explores the similarities, differences, and patterns across these traditions. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of the broader issues and challenges faced by women within religious contexts.

Through this comprehensive examination of the woman question, we seek to highlight the diverse range of voices, perspectives, and approaches that have shaped the discourse within Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. By engaging with ancient and modern thinkers, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary challenges faced by women, as well as the transformative potential for gender equality within religious frameworks.

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis of women's roles, rights, and experiences in Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. It seeks to explore commonalities, differences, and the underlying socio-cultural factors that shape women's positions within these traditions. By exploring the philosophical, theological, and anthropological dimensions, we hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on gender, power, and equality within the broader context of human spirituality and religious practices.

The East-West Dichotomy Question

The first point to make here is that the use of East and West is as complicated and ethnocentric as the discussion of women itself (Huntington, 2002, 44.). Put differently, the ethnocentric emergence of the use of the two terms poses serious complexity. What does it mean to say that something belongs to the Eastern or Western bloc? What does it suggest when we say an ideology or religion is based on the tradition and thought system of the East or West? That fundamental question will lead us to a broader one bothering on whether Islam belongs to the Eastern culture or Western one. But let us first address the East-West dichotomy debacle. Like Samuel Huntington will ask, 'east and west of what?' (Huntington, 2002).

While the 'North' and 'South' have universal acceptance in terms of reference points in the world map, the East or West does not. The factors of geography or location, ideology, history and origin come to mind when we discuss the bifurcation of East and West. While scholars have argued that the East-West dichotomy question should better be rested with the two prominent terms of Occident and Orient, which,

lexically speaking, respectively mean, 'sunset', (from Latin word *occidens*, West) and 'sunrise' (from Latin word *oriens*, East), one is not persuaded either because the argument is still location-based. Using the prism of geography, Samuel Huntington admits that it all depends on where one stands when deciding which country belongs to the East or West. For instance, a man standing in California from the American standpoint will refer as Far West as what we call the Far East.

A researcher in Chinese history will later find out that the use of the term 'West' meant India; whereas, in Japan the 'West' usually meant China, (Huntington, 2002.) This means that the criterion of location does not matter when discussing the East-West concern. Again, the factor of ideology, we understand, is also not accommodating of the categorization of Islam as Western culture. One important aspect to consider is the classification of Islam as an occidental culture, particularly when contemporary understandings of the West often associate it with consumerism, secularism, liberalism, capitalism, and an emphasis on absolute human freedom.

These characteristics contrast with the perceived regulatory strictness, conservatism, and religious austerity that are often associated with Islam. On the other side of the coin, there is question whether it is not more appropriate by way of location and ideology to categorize Islam as Eastern culture. The reason is that the orient-East consists of the Middle East and Asia countries where majority of the world Muslim population have lived, a factor necessitated by the spread of the religion and its overbearing presence and dominance in these areas.

We shall settle, in part, with Edward Oakes agreeing with Huntington's conclusion that our conception of East or West is relative to our location, but it is essential to recognise that the categorisation of East and West is not solely determined by physical geography. ("Oakes, E.") Following contemporary orientations and practice in Islam, which clearly distances itself from the liberal orientation and ideology of the West, one is tempted to create a separate world for Islam, outside the West. If geography and ideology then fail to explain the difference between East and West and justify the Westernization of Islam, scholars have attributed origin and seeming similarities it has with Judeo-Christianity as the most convincing and widely used justification for such classification.

Originally, Islam comes from a land not that far from the Sinai Desert, which is also the origin of Judaism. Jerusalem is also not far from Sinai, where Christianity, that quintessential western religion, at least in European "western" eyes, comes from. In fact, St. Paul, one of the writers of the New Testament epistles makes allusion to the fact that he sojourned in Arabia, (Galatian 1:17) and Saudi Arabia is today the home and seat of Islam. Thus, the classification of Islam as a western culture could be established. Besides history and origin, the other justification for categorizing Islam as western tradition is the essential features and close religious connection it has with Judaism and Christianity. Islam is an Abrahamic religion in the sense that it is Semitic. By that we mean that it has its ascendancy, just like Judaism and Christianity, in the Old

Testament Shem. Two, Islam, like Christianity is monotheistic in nature, that is, the adherents believe in only one God, the God of Abraham. Meanwhile, there is a lot of debate ongoing as to the commitment of Christianity to monotheism going by its doctrinal stand on a Triune God, that is, the idea that there are three persons in one God, or simply the doctrine of the Trinity.

Having run through some of the themes that make Islam western and the similarities it shares with Christianity and Judaism, let us flip to the other side of the discourse by looking at some of the central themes that strike a convergent point among major religions in the East. Buddhism and Hinduism are popular religions based in Indo-European countries such as India, China, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Burma, North/South Korea, and Malaysia, etc. The central doctrine of the religion is a belief in many gods. Both Hinduism and Buddhism together with many other religions in the East subscribe to the doctrine of variety of god, which in technical and proper terms, referred to as polytheism.

They have a different understanding and belief of the creation story. In fact, they don't share the idea that the universe has a beginning, while Darwin's evolution primarily addresses the biological development of species, Hinduism and Buddhism explore broader existential and philosophical questions about, the nature of reality, and the paths to spiritual liberation. For these religions, 'the universe was evolved, not created and it functions according to law, not according to the caprice of any God, (Omeregbe, 2004). These religions are also not based on the idea that the world would one day come to an end. Whether it is in the relationship of the Western religions or the Indo-European religions, there are variations in their teachings and views with regards to the themes highlighted here.

Women in Ancient Civilization: an Eastern Overview

Perhaps the most appropriate way to approach this discourse is to look at the general overview of the place of women in world history and civilization. This will set a clear background for what many of the religions on which the paper will focus apparently seek to address. As earlier exposed through Elizabethan period as reflected in Tennyson and Shakespeare's remarks, women had been an object of derision and a symbol of retrogression and stagnation. Ancient Chinese civilization considered women as 'a bad omen and a byword for misery.' (Pietre, 1979.) They were not allowed to go outside the house or look people straight in the eye. The Manu law in ancient India, for example, regarded women as properties only suitable for inheritance. They had no right to education or any form of intellectual freedom. (Laws of Manu). The ontological interpretation and functional assignment given to women is the provision of pleasure and lust to satisfy men's orgies, (Durant, 1939, pp. 178-197) The denigration and subjugation of women in Hindu society is what Tahira Basharat clearly captures in this way:

Hinduism as a religion opposes the role of women and gives them no respect at all. In addition to that, the Holy Scripture, *Vedas*, also negates their significance all the more. In olden

times, people, being quite conventional, thoroughly practiced the injunctions laid by the religion such as *sati*, being subordinate to males and no access to education, etc. (Basharat, 2009, pp. 24-249)

The ancient Indian legal system within this Manu framework provided that the woman's life should end with the death of her husband. This reflected in the culture of cremating a woman at the stake with her dead husband. (Basharat, 2009, pp. 24-249). Scholars have argued to the contrary, insisting that this Basharat's description apparently runs in contradistinction to what the Indian society was during the Vedic period of its civilization. We shall do an elaboration of this point later in this essay.

The Greek and Roman civilizations were no different. In the former civilization, women were depicted as blemished creatures. Hesiod would describe them as having 'a dog's mind and a thievish disposition.' (Durant, 1939). Besides having a wife, a man was allowed to take a concubine. Women in ancient Greek civilization were considered as mere objects of pleasure. In this context, Demosthenes, a Greek orator, was quoted to have once said:

We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily health of our bodies, and wives to bear us lawful offspring and be the faithful guardians of our homes. (Durant, 1939).

The Roman's treatment and conception saw women as unclean and stained animals that should never have anything to do in the temples. The women were practically embargoed from entering Roman temples. They were not thought of as people who could make it to paradise. This filthy and blemished femininity of woman was, for the Romans, responsible for her scrawny incompetence in legal and legislative matters, (Pietre, p. 48.) The civilizations dated back to the Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian in Mesopotamia had no place for women. Women were treated with ridiculous contempt and had no opinion in civil and family matters. This treatment of women's opinion as irrelevant gave birth to the Hammurabi law which often ascribed blame to women even for offences and wrongdoings they did not commit. For instance, no one was made to die for any act of killing a woman. (Hammurabi law).

However, in the case of someone killing a man, there are very strict punishments. The law permitted that for anyone who killed a man, he was liable to lose their life, (Beirut, p. 205). The same was true of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The book of Genesis describes Eve, the woman, as the entrant through human eternal communion with God was made possible, with the original sin in the Garden of Eden, (The Genesis 3:6.) Although the sin of Eve was to be later regarded as a necessary sin, it remains a stigma up till today that the initial joy human beings enjoyed with God was damaged by a woman.

The conception of women in the Arabia civilization bore semblance to the civilizations of its time. The pre-Islamic Arabs saw the female specie of humanity as sub-humans, a category of life that was not worth giving birth to. For the

ancient Arabs, it was better for the conception of a female foetus to be terminated and prevented from coming into existence than breaking the news of a pregnant woman giving birth to a girl. This anti-woman worldview is captured succinctly in Othman Altwaijri's words:

The Arabs were ashamed of having female births, and burying girls alive was widespread. God the Exalted says: "When news is brought to one of them, of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has received! Shall he retain her on sufferance contempt, bury her in the dust? Ah! what evil choice they decide on?" (Altwaijri, p.10).

Hence, this passage indicates that these individuals would hide themselves from their community due to the perceived shame associated with having a female child. It questions the morality of such actions and reflection on the negative choices made in responses to the birth of a girl.

Hinduism and Women in the 'Vedic Period of Hindu Civilization

Despite the bleak past which has been attributed to the India society in relation to the place and status of women, Islamic scholars have argued to the contrary. Reiterating Basharat's position, 'historically speaking, whether it was ancient India/Bharat or the medieval India, the status and respect of woman was always at stake and unmaintained,' (Basharat, 2019, pp. 242-249:) an ugly remembrance of the past comes to the fore. These pro-Hinduism scholars contend that the Vedic period of Hindu civilization was bright and women-exalting. The Vedic period gave leverage for women. The argument is to the extent that there is a world of difference between the ancient Indian conception of woman and what Punam and Sharma would call 'later-Vedic tradition' (Punam & Sharma, 2017.) which advocated against women's freedom.

In order to have an adequate view of the place of women in orienting life and family, we shall examine the defining features of the Rig Vedic age as to how it viewed and placed women. Following the *Rig Vedas*, periodization, (Punam, et al) admit that women in the ancient period of Indian civilization 'enjoyed high status in the society and their condition was good,' (Punam, & Sharma, 2017). The women in this period were given opportunity to aspire and attain to any level of intellectual and spiritual standard they aspired to get to. The society was run on the principle of egalitarian and classless lifestyle, in which men and women were equal in status and roles. There was no inhibition of any sort. In Punam, et al's position, the *sati* system had no place in the traditional Hindu system and so the Indian tradition did not recognize or permit it. This period also did not have a preserved custom or imposed practice which forced women into early marriage. Women are expected to attain a certain age before they are given up for marriage.

Marriage for women within this period and thought was not a state of servitude. Rather, women enjoyed independence and self-reliance. Beside their domestic role as wife, women had

every access to education with tremendous potential to seek the highest truths. During this period, too, there was also a claim that no cultural or legal inhibition whatsoever prevented women from pursuing and possessing all forms of spiritual and intellectual depth they could aspire for. It was a period of individual human beings having and laying their roles without any kind of conflict. Despite the individual roles, there was no limit to what anyone could become. Women were primarily custodians of the economic life of the family. They also had the opportunity to engage in various artwork, vocations and occupations, including spinning, weaving, and needlework. A section of the Rig Veda closes in on this understanding of equal status and treatment for both men and women, 'my commandments are same (common) for all human beings.' (The Rig Veda 10:191:3). Another *sukt* of the Veda also instructs children to be subordinate to their mother as much as they do to their father. It reads: 'the son should be subordinate to the father and obedient to his mother.' (The Atharva Veda 3:30:2.)

However, the 'later-Vedic' period of Hindu civilization had a different attitude towards women and that set a new tone for mental approach to the status of women in the society. However, the earlier portrayal of an ideal and equal society in which man and woman have equal status is in contrast to the later Vedic period. A section of the Veda which (literally) condemns women to the husband's house clearly highlights the attitude of the later-Vedic Hindu society. The women are expected to be indoors and be mates to their domestic duties. But in the event she (woman) needs to go out of the premises, the Rig Veda instructs that:

When women become like men (that means they go out of the house like men) she should keep her eyesight down and walk with feet close together and wear such garments that their body should not be visible to anyone. (The Rig Veda 8:33:19)

It is important to note that interpretation of religious texts can vary, and different scholars might offer diverse explanations for specific verses. While the quoted passage may reflect a specific cultural perspective prevalent during the time of the Rig Vedas was composed, it is necessary to consider it within its historical context and the evolving understanding of gender roles and societal roles

Women in the West

As I witnessed the degradation of the human person in nearly every facet of the industrialized society, I reflected upon the biblical and traditional Christian notion of the human person as the '*imago Dei*', but I saw that in spite of popular Christianity in the West, this notion has been obscured by exaggerated materialism and secularism that may now be called a cultural legacy-- a legacy...by which it (West) now leads the world in a race to oblivion...In its fascination with the powers of technology, the dominant culture of the West seems to have lost its Judeo-Christian matrix. (Ehusani, 1991, pp.1-2)

This is a feeling of George Ehusani about the contemporary technology-driven West. The fundamental implication of this

assertion is that the West which is the home of Christian traditions once had a human face that catered for the generality of humanity, regardless of sex, creed, profession, status, ideology or race. It could be inferred from this feeling that women like their male counterparts had a significant role and status they occupied in the old Western society. They had mental emancipation that allowed them the freedom to choose the best of life they desired for themselves. According to Ehusani, these were the features that defined the Western culture before the Industrial Revolution. What we can further imply from Ehusani's submission was that the West which harbours Christianity was a fair ground and a godly territory for justice, solidarity, humanness, intellectual freedom, knowledge, and all manner of features that stand for Christian values. Our examination of the global history and civilizations in ancient Greece, France, and Rome suggest that women had not been treated and regarded with an equal matrix like their men. Let us examine how this feeling tally with some of the pre-industrial western tradition, especially as it reflects in some of the scriptures of Islam and Christianity.

Yahweh is often portrayed as God of the fathers and the patriarchs. This portrayal makes God and the divine blessings appear patriarchal and androcentric. It puts men often at the centre stage, with women in the periphery. There are texts that are clearly and patently misogynistic in the scriptures, treating women as inferior to men. It seems impossible not to conclude that the Bible is written by men, about men, and for men. The argument presented here is that the Bible, as a religious text, exhibits a strong male-centric perspective. The statement suggests that the content of the Bible, including its authors, subjects, and intended audience, predominantly revolves around men. No doubt, attempts have been made in contemporary Christian churches and in the field of theology, to pay greater critical attention to the themes relating to women. There have been serious efforts to, as Lisa Wilson Davison would put, 'right the wrongs of sexist interpretations of the Bible and the resulting oppression of women throughout history in culture and in the Church.' (Davison, 2013.)

Contrasting Eastern and Western Conceptions of Women

1. Unequal Rights

From Eastern to Western cultures, women are not seen as having equal rights as men. As earlier exposed, women play second fiddle to their male counterparts and the society is, historically speaking, structured along an androcentric line of thought. Although there is insistence on the contrary by Islamic scholars that Islam gives equal rights to both men and women, various passages of the Holy Quran clearly recognize that men have edge over women. Women! Various passages of the Holy Quran clearly recognize that men have an edge over women. Al Khayat argues that Islam gives a level playing ground for both male and female, and women have equal rights just as their male counterparts. Using chapters 4 verse 1 and 49 verse 13 as basis for his contention, Al Khayat argues that Islam does not discriminate between men and women, that

both have equal rights. 'Islam establishes complete and genuine equality between man and woman...Islam asserts the equality of men and women in their creation'. (Al Khayat, 2003.) He goes further:

The Qur'an states that God has created all mankind from a single soul; and from it He created its mate, and from the two of them He spread abroad so many men and women. [4:1] He also says: Mankind, We have created you all out of a male and a female. [49:13]. In the Islamic faith, both man and woman (and not woman alone) were equally responsible for the fault that they perpetrated in the first stage of creation. (Al Khayat, 2003).

But the specific instances in which Al Khayat admits the exclusion of women from inclusion (Al Khayat, 2003,p.8) do not suggest that women have an equal role as their men. On the contrary, the Quran considers women as mere objects and pitiable beings who are to receive from and obey men. Allah is quoted to have repeatedly said in specific and consistent terms that men are 'to give to women', 'to marry women', 'to pay dowry on women', (The Holy Quran. 2:236-237) 'to divorce women,' (The Holy Quran. 2:232) 'to take back women' (The Holy Quran. 2:229) 'to retain women', 'to release women etc. Women are at the receiving end of society.

In fact, the desire for reconciliation is to be taken by women, whether the man is guilty or not. And that suggests that they do not carry the same ontological weight like their male counterparts. (The concept of ontological weight in this context highlights a perceived imbalance in power dynamics and social roles between men and women. It suggests that women may be regarded as having a subordinate or secondary position, leading to different expectations and treatment when it comes to reconciliation or conflict resolution). In fact, one may find Al Khayat's position unpersuasive due to the explicit statements in the Holy Quran. For instance, the Quran states that women have rights and obligations that are comparable and just. However, it also acknowledges that men hold a degree of authority over women. This can be seen in the passage, "and women have rights similar to their obligations, according to what is fair. But men have a degree over them" (The Holy Quran, 2:228).

Furthermore, another Quranic passage describes women as a form of cultivation for men and suggests that men have the freedom to approach their wives as they please. The verse states, "Your women are cultivation for you; so approach your cultivation whenever you like" (The Holy Quran, 2:223). As clearly outlined above, Eastern traditions accord seeming equal rights for men and women. From the modern practice of Hinduism, women occupy the lower rung of the ladder. The Hindu also allows women the freedom to go on and marry any man whenever the husband dies. According to a passage in the Veda regarding women who choose to remain single after the death of their husbands, widowhood is considered a forbidden practice that stigmatises the woman, rendering her as an outcast and equating her status to that of a living dead. So, for a woman not to be in marriage or under the guardianship of a man is considered an abomination or violation of natural order.

Hinduism still gives women the liberty to remarry, bear children for the new husband and thus become mother to the new children she has with the husband.

O' widow, don't remain dependent on this deceased (expired) man. Walk towards the living society. Now you may be helpful for the children of your new husband. (Atharva Veda 18:3:2).

2. Limited Right to Religious Worship

In Hinduism, the level and extent of women's participation in worship can vary. Women are allowed to take on powerful and significant roles in the daily Puja, which is the act of worship and offering to deities. They can actively engage in various aspects of the ritual, such as performing prayers, making offerings, reciting hymns or mantras, and participating in religious ceremonies and festivals.

The extent of women's participation may depend on factors such as regional customs, family traditions, and the specific sect or community within Hinduism. In some households and communities, women may lead and conduct Puja ceremonies, while in others, their participation may be more limited or guided by certain cultural norms. However, their role in temple worship is limited and has not always been significant in some regard. Similar to worship, the role of Hindu women, as Monica Munoz notices, 'in rituals can be seen, in some aspects and at simple sight, as inferior to men.' (Munoz,2004) Like it was in the Vedic period, the role and influence of women in worship, Hindu texts, and society have gained some increasing place in modern day. In fact, as it stands in today's Hinduism, women have some specific rituals that are conducted exclusively only by women, just as we have those rituals which are conducted only by men.

Religious practices and worship are carried out in a manner of role performance as against the superiority mentality of men over women. Besides, there is a powerful female deity known as the Goddess that is seen by many Hindus as the supreme deity. The Goddess is one of the supreme and main deities in Hinduism which women worship. Women also spearheaded the ritual of gathering that is intended to worship the Goddess. During this ritual, Indian women gather on certain days of the year to celebrate the Goddess' fasting and feasting. They then perform the 'auspiciousness' rituals which are meant for the purification and for the happiness of the entire family. There is also the gathering of women ahead of a big family celebration, such as a wedding, to make supplication for the blessing of a particular group of female ancestors. All of these and many more are some of the religious rights and freedoms that the Eastern practice and society accord women.

The Jewish society historically excluded women from active religious participation, considering them lesser beings and unclean. They were denied essential religious tasks, barred from many feasts and festivals, and prohibited from participating in sanctuary services. Similarly, Islam and Christianity in the Western context also limited women's roles within religious practices, rituals, and worship.

3. Spiritual Equality

There is a seeming harmony among the major Eastern and Western religions that both men and women have equal spiritual significance. The equality of both sexes in Islam is subsumed in willingness to obey Allah and the reward they get in return. Put differently, both men and women have equal status before Allah and so it is only in obedience to his will that anyone will receive his mercy. The Holy Quran captures this when it affirms:

For men who submit themselves wholly to Allah, and women who submit themselves wholly to Him and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey Allah and women who obey Him, and men who are truthful and women who are truthful, and men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity, and men who remember Allah much and women who remember Him, Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (The Holy Quran 33:36)

This is further corroborated by another Surah of the Quran which upholds that women and men have no disparity whatsoever in terms of spiritual equality of men and women: "Allah will turn in mercy to believing men and believing women; Allah is Most Forgiving, Ever Merciful." (The Holy Quran 33:74) The important question to ask is whether Allah comes supreme when a woman refuses her husband sex during the holy days of spiritual obligation.

4. Historical subjugation

Women whether in the east or west suffered subjugation in many areas in ancient times. Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri has this to say about how the maltreatment of women across nations and civilizations manifested in different front going from the ancient to the modern period of civilization:

Over the succession of nations, women suffered many injustices that denied them even the most basic human rights and put them, in most times, in a lower position in terms of training and ranking. The Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations in Mesopotamia treated women with contempt and held their opinion to be simply irrelevant. The Hammurabi law would blame women for assumed wrongdoings they did not actually commit, and unlike in the case of killing a man, no one may lose his life if he takes a woman's. (Altwaijri, p.9)

As we have identified earlier, women whether in the Quran, Veda or Bible have had to battle serious mental subjugation and historical discrimination. While the vedic period of Hindu society had a more inclusive approach towards women, western culture has historically exhibited a tendency to undervalue and limit women's roles and contributions in various aspects. The Jewish society up until the second century A.D. placed women as either beings of little significance or no status. According to Rabbi Jehuda, the Jews were asked to recite the following prayer every day:

Praised be God, that he did not create me as a goy

(gentile)!Praised, that he did not create me as a woman!

Praised, that he did not create me as an ignorant person! (Kasomo,2010).

Women within this system are often placed on a level with slaves and children in respect of fulfilment of certain commandments. In fact, beating a woman was considered as doing the men a favour for which the beater deserves some praise: 'each time that I beat my wife, she has to thank me because she is closer to the Salvation.' (Kasomo,2010). The quote from Kasomo, 2010 explained the reason, women are considered inferior and unclean; they need to be tutored by any means.

5. Limit to religious participation

In both the west and the east, there is a limit to which women are allowed to take part in religious activity. Not until recently, early Christianity as practised during Jesus' time was male dominated. This is found in the selection of the Twelve, that is, the 12 disciples of Jesus, (Mark 3:13-19; Matthew 4:18; Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 15:29; and John 6:1), the election of the Seven (the seven deacons) in the Acts of the Apostles. The place of women in Jesus' time and ministry were restricted. The Jewish tradition in the Old Testament as practised even till today by Judaism only gave restricted roles to women. This is evident in the twelve Prophets whose works were recorded by the authors of the Judaic Old religion of the Old Testament of the bible. Similarly, the Old Testament Judaism also limits women from participating in worship that took place in the Holy of holies. They are only restricted to the entrance and periphery of the synagogue.

Islam does not allow women to call prayers in the places of worship. They are to sit behind men and keep some distance away from the centre of worship. While some Islamic scholars and writings have come to attribute this practice to role assignment, it is largely considered a way of limiting women from taking part in full religious activities within the community of believers. They are restricted from occupying certain political positions. This position is better captured by Altwaijri when he says:

Women are entitled to have access to various occupations, except for the supreme religious leadership (*Imama*) and judgeship, according to the consensus of Muslim scholars. (Kasomo,2010).

6. Exclusion of Women's Writings in Scriptures.

Apart from the books of Esther and Ruth in the Old Testament, the entire books of the Judeo-Christian scriptures had records of male writers. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene was not included in the New Testament books. Mary Magdalene was said to be one of the foremost disciples of Jesus all through his ministry and was even instrumental to post-resurrection experience. However, there are arguments that the record of Magdalene did not pass the canonicity criteria because she was a woman. (Bruce, 1988) .And so there was a deliberate effort to silence the writings of women. In contemporary times, save

for Orthodox Roman Catholicism, women have been give some pride of place in the worship. They can become deacons and even priests. The Church of England Anglican communion currently ordains female priests and deacons.

Apart from Quran, the same argument holds for Islam. The Holy Quran is a record of one man. It is a command of Allah handed down to his messenger, a man and Prophet Muhammed. However, the entire Hadith were written by men. The Hadith, which is a set of revelation about the life and ministry of Prophet Muhammad were written and documented by men. Despite the high intellectual and spiritual freedom for which ancient Hindu women were said to have had, there are no known prominent Hindu female writers whose works or voices feature in the Vedas. Women are clearly excluded from both the intellectual and spiritual writings of the Eastern and Western religions.

7. Women as second-class citizen and after-thought

This is a clear theme that runs across all the major religions in the East and West. Apart from the Vedic period in which women were said to have intellectual and spiritual freedom, the Hindu society saw women as an after-thought. They were limited to domestic works such as fetching water, taking care of the house, managing the domestic economy, etc. Similarly, the Old Testament clearly depicts women and children as second citizens whose records of heroism, birth, conception, and death could only be a reference after men have been considered. The Biblical creation account suggests that the creation of the woman Eve was an after-thought by God. She is portrayed as a mere object of companionship and sexual intimacy after the Creator had found out that the man Adam needed to have someone, or what Robert Kruschwitz would call '*ezer kenegdo*' (Pokrifka, 2013,11), beside him. She was not intended to be in the first place by the creator, but because "it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him. (The Genesis 2:18.).

In many other passages of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, women are always referred to as second citizens and human beings not worthy of mention. The records of women who died when Israelites engaged in wars or were decimated through famine or starvation are either made reference to in passing, mentioned only after their male counterpart, or not documented. Exodus 12:37; Deuteronomy 2:34; Matthew 14:21; Matthew 15:38, etc. are few of the many instances that women aren't given any priority. The position that women are treated as second-class citizens by human authors of the Bible is corroborated by Cecilia Madu, a Dominican nun when she asserts:

The situation of women as second-class citizens, therefore, cuts across all cultures and people, even the writers of both Old and New Testaments of the Bible portrayed women as second-class citizens. (Madu. 2014, pp.123-128).

The Hindu tradition, as previously mentioned, does not attribute the creation of the universe to any specific act of

divine creation. However, it is important to note that within this tradition, there have been instances where women have been regarded with disdain and considered as secondary beings. A passage of the Rig Veda also clearly captures the conception and place of women and their level of intellectual prowess in traditional Hindu society in “the mind of woman brooks not discipline. Her intellect has little weight.” (Hymn XXXIII Indra of Rig Veda in Griffith)

8. Exclusion from social life

The Eastern-Hindu society, like the Western-Islamic society restricts women from participating in public affairs. As cited in Rig Veda 8:33:19 above, women are expected to be fully at home in Hinduism, not expected to mingle with the social environment. Islam will say that women should keep their beauty away from social gaze and keep their body away from social traction.

The women who believe in God, that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty. And they should not display their beauty and ornaments, except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof. They should draw their veil over their bosoms.’ (The Holy Quran 24:31.)

Until June 24, 2018 when Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman allowed women driving, women in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam, were proscribed from public driving. This was part of the attitude of Islam towards women. Women are under the male guardianship system which suggests that they are subject to their husband’s dictate and directive. Anything outside this system is considered a violation of Allah’s command.

8. Recognition of Women’s Role in the Economy of Salvation.

Each of the three religions under review recognizes the important role of women in the economy of salvation. Within the Judeo-Christian perspective, we find notable female spiritual icons and leaders, including Ruth, Esther, Deborah, Hannah, Sarah, Elizabeth, Mary (Mother of Jesus), Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Mary of James. Hinduism also has records of great iconic female figures who had been involved in the development of the religions. Akka Mahadevi was a 12th century poet, reformer and feminist influential for the role she played in the development of Veerashaivism, a form of Shiva-centred Hinduism which rebuffs the caste-based hierarchy. She was a woman who insisted on the rejection of the scriptural authority in favour of Bhakti, the personal revelation and ecstatic expression of God. Also significant in the development of Hinduism was Rani of Jhansi, known for being a warrior queen, freedom fighter and a folk hero. Others include Phoolan Devi, Kiran Bedi, Vandana Shiva and Anuradha Koira.

Although their names are not included in the Vedas, yet, the history of Hinduism and the development of Indian society cannot be complete without them. Islam also recognizes great

women in the development of its religion and cultures. Women played a greater role not only in establishing the Islamic religion but also in the fields of medicine, art, literature, science, and they are given full recognition in the Quran.

In the Islamic Maghreb, Fatimah al-Fihria built al-Qarawyeen Mosque in Fes, in the third century Hegira. Shortly after that, the mosque became the first Islamic university in the world. She was a virtuous, generous scholar, and so was her sister, Maryam, who built al-Andalus mosque in Fes, too. (Kosmos,op.cit)

Other women who were part of Islamic development and are considered as great pillars of the religion include Um al-Hassan bin Soulaïman, Asmae bint Assad bni al-Furat, Khadija bint Imam Sahnoun, Tamima, Um Amru Ibn Zahr, Bayram bint Ahmad ad-Dayroutia, among others.

9. Rights of Widows and Widowers

Across Hinduism, Islam, and Judeo-Christian religions, a woman-widow has a right to remarriage. Although Islam believes that widows are to be taken care of, it establishes some kind of disparity between a man-widower and a woman-widow. Islam recognizes that man has an edge over the women in every respect, especially in matters of entitlements after the death of one spouse. The Holy Quran says Islam recommends that a widow should be given one-fourth of the estate left behind by the husband provided there are no issues (children) between them; she is, however, entitled to one-eighth of the property in the event there are issues (children), (The Holy Quran 4:12). Regarding a woman-widow who chooses to leave the family of her deceased husband, she retains the right to remarry. However, if a man is widowed, he is entitled to receive one-half of the estate left by his deceased wife in the absence of children, or one-fourth if there are children. (The Holy Quran 4:12)In Judeo-Christian parlance, the widow is often considered as helpless.

The tradition of seeing women as weak sex is carried on. While there are provisions for widows, the widowers are not considered in the “Bible” a restatement that the woman is a fragile entity and a sort of burden for men whose individuality is meaningful only in relation to and dependence on men. The women-widows are put in the class and status of orphans who need help and should be protected from personal lack and social vulnerabilities. As such, the Old and New Testaments consider a widow as someone who needs special provision from God and his people. The Christian’s demand from people is an attitude of giving, care and charity towards widows. This is why a widow, according to the Mosaic Law, is expected to be remarried by her late husband’s brother in succession.

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. (Deuteronomy 25: 5)

Even though there is a revision to this law in the New Testament, the biblical expectation of people towards widows remains the same. And St James in his New Testament epistle

clearly corroborates this point when he says that pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress.' (James 1:27). St Paul stresses the place of true widows in the community of believers.

The Hindus society also considers women-widows as people who need social protection and financial security. Thus, they are also seen as poor people that must not only enjoy social security but also should not stand as a burden to society. Thus, the Veda will enjoin women-widows to go and get married to another man who will be responsible for their upkeep and sustenance.

O' widow, don't remain dependent on this deceased (expired) man. Walk towards the living society. Now you may be helpful for the children of your new husband. (Atharva 18:3:2)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the "woman question" in Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions has revealed the complex and diverse ways in which women's roles, rights, and status have been perceived and addressed throughout history. This scholarly article has delved into ancient and modern perspectives, examining the philosophical, theological, and anthropological dimensions of this discourse. In Western-Occidental traditions, the works of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, as well as influential theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, laid the foundation for discussions on gender roles and equality. Modern thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton challenged traditional norms and advocated for women's rights and gender equality.

In Eastern-Oriental religious traditions, diverse philosophical, religious, and cultural systems have approached the woman question in unique ways. From the teachings of Confucius and Laozi in ancient China to the insights of Nagarjuna in Indian philosophy and the poems of Rumi in Persian mysticism, these traditions have offered perspectives on women's empowerment, social norms, and gender relationships. Throughout our examination, it became evident that while there are instances where women have been marginalised or faced limitations in religious contexts, there have also been voices and movements advocating for their empowerment and equal rights. The interpretation and understanding of religious texts and teachings play a crucial role in shaping the status and treatment of women within these traditions.

It is important to recognize that the experiences and perspectives of women in religious traditions are diverse and nuanced. While some have found solace, inspiration, and a sense of belonging within their faith, others have faced discrimination, inequality, and exclusion. The ongoing dialogue on the woman question seeks to address these issues, challenge oppressive norms, and strive for gender equality within religious frameworks. Moving forward, it is essential to

continue engaging with the voices and perspectives of women within religious traditions, fostering dialogue, and advocating for inclusive practices. Scholars, theologians, and religious leaders have a significant role to play in reexamining and reinterpreting religious texts, teachings, and practices to ensure they align with principles of equality, justice, and respect for women.

By shedding light on the complexities and nuances of the woman question, this scholarly article has contributed to the broader understanding of gender, power, and equality within Western-Occidental and Eastern-Oriental religious traditions. It is our hope that this exploration will inspire further research, dialogue, and transformative actions that promote the empowerment and well-being of women in all aspects of religious and societal life.

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