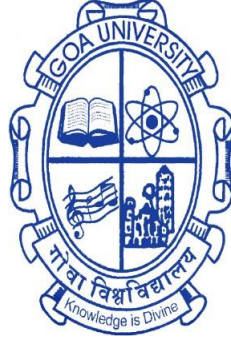


Religion and Women: A Study in Feminist Philosophy

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies
Goa University



By

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DECLARATION

I, Ms Shefali Kamat, hereby declare that this thesis represents work which has been carried out by me and that it has not been submitted, either in part or full, to any other University or Institution for the award of any research degree.

Place: Taleigao Plateau.

Date : 23-09-2022

Ms Shefali Kamat

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that the work was carried out under my supervision and may be placed for evaluation.

Prof. Koshy Tharakan
Dean, School of Sanskrit, Philosophy
and Indic Studies, Goa University.

Acknowledgement

Led me from the untruth to the Truth.

Led me from darkness to light.

Led me from death (ignorance) to immortality (episteme)

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She sat at the back and they said she was shy.
She led from the front and they hated her pride.

They asked her advice and then questioned her guidance.
They branded her loud, then were shocked by her silence.

When she shared no ambition, they said it was sad.
So she told them her dreams and they said she was mad.

They told her they'd listen, then covered their ears,
And gave her a hug while they laughed at her fears,

And she listened to all of it thinking she should,
Be the girl they told her to be best as she could.

But one day she asked what was best for herself,
Instead of trying to please everyone else,

So she walked to the forest and stood with the trees,
She heard the wind whisper and dance with the leaves.
She spoke to the willow, the elm and the pine,
And she told them what she'd been told time after time.

She told them she felt she was never enough,
She was either too little or far far too much,
Too loud or too quiet, too fierce or too weak,
Too wise or too foolish, too bold or too meek,

Then she found a small clearing surrounded by firs,
And she stopped...and she heard what the trees said to her.

And she sat there for hours not wanting to leave.
For the forest said nothing, it just let her breathe.”

Contents

1. Charting the Course of an Ideology	1
1. Understanding Feminism	1
1.1 A Brief History of Feminism	1
1.1.1 First Wave Feminism	1
1.1.2 Second Wave Feminism	2
1.1.3 Third Wave Feminism	3
1.1.4 Fourth Wave Feminism	3
1.2 Varied Nuances of Feminism	3
1.2.1 Socialist Feminism	5
1.2.2 Liberal Feminism	5
1.2.3 Marxist Feminism	6
1.2.4 Radical Feminism	6
1.2.5 Individualist Feminism	7
1.3 Indian Feminism	7
1.4 Feminism and Feminist Philosophy	8
1.4.1 Prejudices Against Feminist Philosophy	9
1.4.2 Women in Academics	10
1.4.3 Nature of Feminist Philosophy	11
1.4.4 Main Issues in Feminist Philosophy	12
1.4.5 Religion and Feminist Philosophy	13
1.5 Methodology	14
2. Women in Indic Religions	18
1. Hinduism	18
1.1 Origin of Woman	18
1.2 Women in the Vedic and Upanishadic Period	19
1.3 Women in the Smritis	21

1.4 Women in Tantra	23
1.5 Women in Medieval and Pre-independent India	23
1.6 Women in Contemporary Times	24
1.7 Woman and Worship	24
1.8 Ordination of Woman	25
1.9 Sacred Feminine	25
1.10 Feminist Response	28
2. Jainism	31
2.1 Origin of Women	31
2.2 Attitude Towards Women	31
2.3 Women and Theology	32
2.4 Sacred Feminine	34
2.5 Feminist Response	35
3. Buddhism	36
3.1 Attitude Towards Women	37
3.2 Women in Theology	37
3.3 Sacred Feminine	38
3.4 Feminist Response	40
4. Sikhism	41
4.1 Attitude Towards Women	41
4.2 Woman in Theology	42
4.3 Sacred Feminine	42
4.4 Feminist Response	43
5. Santal (Tribal Traditions)	44
5.1 Origin of Woman	44
5.2 Role of Women	45
5.3 Sacred Feminine	45
6. Summary	45

3. Women in Semitic Religions	47
1. Women and Judaism	47
1.1 Origin of Woman	48
1.2 Woman at Home	48
1.3 Woman and Worship	50
1.4 Woman and God	50
1.5 Ordination of Woman	51
1.6 Sacred Feminine	52
1.7 Feminist Response to Judaism	52
2. Christianity	54
2.1 Origin of Women	55
2.2 Woman at Home	56
2.3 Woman in Theology	57
2.4 Ordination of Woman	58
2.5 Sacred Feminine	58
2.6 Feminist Response to Judaism	60
3. Islam	62
3.1 Origin of Women	62
3.2 Woman at Home	62
3.3 Woman and Worship	67
3.4 Ordination of Woman	67
3.5 Sacred Feminine	67
3.6 Feminist Response	68
4. Aboriginal Religion of Australia	71
4.1 Rituals and Women	71
4.2 Women as Healers	71
5. Summary	72

4. Feminist Deliberations on Religious Ontological Concepts	74
1. Woman and Body	74
1.1 Menstruation, Purity and Impurity	74
1.2 Purity and Impurity	86
2. Woman and Nature	90
3. Woman and the Divine	93
4. Feminist Philosophy of Religion	94
5. Feminist Theology	99
5.1 Theology	100
6. Summary	102
5. Women and Problem of Religious Knowledge	104
1. Feminist Epistemology: An Outline	104
2. Feminist Epistemology and Traditional Epistemology	106
3. Androcentrism in Traditional Epistemology	108
4. Common Misconceptions of Feminist Epistemology	109
5. Traditional Philosophers on Women	109
6. Feminist Epistemology as Alternative Epistemology	110
7. Reason and Gender in Feminist Epistemology	111
8. Feminist Notion of Science and Gender	115
9. Feminist Religious Epistemology	116
10. Pamela Sue Anderson and Religious Epistemology	117
11. Feminist Standpoint Theory: Western and Indian	119
1. Nancy Hartsock	119
2. Sandra Harding	122
3. Dorothy E Smith	124
4. Donna Haraway	125
5. Shefali Moitra	127
6. Hilary Rose	128

7. Patricia Hill Collins	130
8. Uma Narayan	131
12. Summary	132
6. Conclusion	135
7. Bibliography	140
Appendix	
The Sacred and the Profane: Menstrual Flow and Religious Values	

Chapter One

Charting the Course of an Ideology

1. Understanding Feminism

Feminism has been derived from the Latin word '*femina*,' which means woman. Feminism does not have a single fundamental definition. This is exemplified by 'waves' of feminism wherein one finds a change in what is perceived as a concern of feminist thought differs within the time periods. Concurring with it, Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan are of the opinion that no definition of feminism can remain static and universal. Being based on dynamic factors such as historical and cultural realities and levels of consciousness, no definition of feminism can capture it in toto. A detailed understanding of feminism can be attempted by inquiring into how the term has been engaged by feminists.

1.1 A brief history of Feminism

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the first woman feminist of the western tradition was Christine de Pizan, a 15th-century Italian French writer. English Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1781) encouraged equality amongst the sexes and woman's suffrage. In 1791, Olympe de Gouges published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. An impetus to the feminist movement was rendered by Mary Wollstonecraft in her 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She championed for the cause of social and moral equality. She has been rightly referred to as the 'grandmother' of British feminism.

A popular model to articulate the history of feminism is the 'Waves' model. According to which the development of feminism can be explained through the 'Four Waves.' Each wave deals with a set of key issues which were either carried forward from the last wave or an attempt to deal with newer issues. The waves are referred to as the First, Second, Third and Fourth Wave of feminism, respectively.

1.1.1 First Wave Feminism

The term 'first wave' came into parlance in 1968 when a need was felt to distinguish the concerns of the second wave from the earlier women's movement. The period of

this wave was from the 19th to the early 20th century. The primary concern of this wave was to secure suffrage for women. The prominent contributors to this wave were Barbara Bodichon, Matilda Mary Hays, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Marie Stopes, Susan B Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Ida B Wells, and Lucy Burns, amongst many others.

The American feminist movement began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. It aimed at discussing the social, civil, and religious rights of women. It was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. A *Declaration of Sentiments* was signed by 100 people, men and women, out of 300 people present for the convention. Besides the movement for suffrage, two women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage, criticized the role of religion in infringing upon the rights of women. They denounced the patriarchal outlook of the Church and argued for a matriarchal basis in religion. They collaborated on the work *Woman's Bible* and individually authored, *The Matriarchate or Mother- Age and Woman, Church and State* by Stanton and Gage, respectively. However, their work was neglected during this movement. Religion as an instrument of oppression was revisited in the subsequent waves.

Some of the key developments in the early 20th-century scenario in England and America were, women moved out of homes for work in larger numbers due to World War I. They enrolled for education and higher education in medical school. The American Medical Association began admitting women members. The Sex Disqualification Act 1919 was abolished, and women were free to practice professions such as joining Civil Services. The Matrimonial Causes Act 1923 gave women the right to divorce men on the same grounds as men. In World War II, American women served as typists, nurses, secretaries. It is believed that the first wave ended when white women in America got the right to vote by the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920.

1.1.2 Second Wave Feminism

It was a journalist for the *New York Times Magazine* named Martha Lear who named the movement as 'second wave feminism' and who also gave 'first wave feminism' its name. The time of this wave was from early 1960 to early 1980, primarily based in America. The movement later spread throughout the world. One of the most important influences of this wave was Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Freidan was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's 1940s work *The Second Sex*. In 1960 the oral contraceptive pill was approved and made available to the public by 1961. This gave control to women over reproduction and their bodies.¹ This movement focused on issues such as sexuality, family, workplace, reproductive rights, and unequal treatment in official legal matters. There were proposals for marital rape laws, the establishment of shelters for victims of rape and battery and change in custody and divorce laws.

1.1.3 Third Wave Feminism

The term 'third wave feminism' was coined by Rebecca Walker, an Afro-American woman, in a 1992 written essay "Becoming the Third Wave". The wave is believed to have begun in the 1990s. The movement arose mainly as a response to the failures of the initiatives of the second wave. A strong criticism was levelled against the second wave for its single-pointed attention to the concerns of white women. And its subsequent failure to include 'women', women of color, diverse ethnicities, nationalities and religions. The concerns of this wave were further empowering women, changing the media portrayals of men as equal or superior to women and the language used to describe and define women. It also focused on issues such as queers, individualism, and rejection of gender stereotypes, amongst others.

1.1.4 Fourth Wave Feminism

The fourth wave is believed to have started from 2008. Diana Diamond explained the fourth wave as a movement that incorporates politics, psychology, and spirituality with a vision of bringing about change. For Kira Cochrane, it is a movement which arose out of the use of technology. It is viewed as an online movement which relies heavily on Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media.

1.2 Varied Nuances of Feminism

Feminism arose mainly as a revolt against patriarchy. Patriarchy may be commonly understood as a social system wherein a male (either the father/brother or an elder male/males) is the head of the family or community. Such a social system exerts its influence on the political and economic structures, in turn paving the way to gender inequality. It buttresses an androcentric approach where male/masculine is valued, and female/feminine is undervalued. Jill Johnston in *Lesbian Nation* (1973) explains feminism as 'a massive complaint' to which lesbianism is the solution. She believes

there will be no true political revolution unless a man has been removed from the picture. For Adrienne Rich in *'Of Woman Born'* (1976), feminism is like a process involving unlearning and relearning. One unlearns, by renouncing the knowledge about oneself and the world, from the fathers and attempt to relearn it. It means to recognize fully the distortions created by male ideologies and to act of that consciousness.

Being opposed to patriarchy, feminism supports social, political, and economic equality of women. It reinforces that everyone is a valuable human being in his or her own right. It includes, under its umbrella, any individual who is aware of and seeking to end women's subordination in any way and for any reason. Margaret L. Andersen understands feminism as an ideology which takes women's interests and perspectives as not being inferior to men. Where women are treated as inferior citizens, there should be liberating social changes to be made on their behalf. It thus acknowledges that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women and by affirmative action seeks to eliminate the subordination and oppression, inequalities and injustice.

As a political movement, feminism seeks justice for women with an aim of ending sexism. Barbara Smith, in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), describes it as a political theory and practice which aims to free all women, including women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this, she declares, is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement.

For Donna Hawxhurst and Sue Morrow, feminism is a call to action. It can never be simply a belief system. Without action, feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself. Since so, feminism can have only a working definition owing to its dynamic nature. Juliet Mitchell and Anne Oakley, in *Rights and Wrongs of Women* (1976), describe it as a method of analysis which leads to the discovery of new material. Nancy Hartsock (1979) also perceives it as a mode of analysis and a methodology for enquiring into life and politics. Bell Hooks in *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981) links it to ending an ideology of domination which has permeated the Western ethos, leading to a reformation of the society, ensuring self-development. In *Learning Our Way* (1983), Charlotte Bunch holds that feminist theory provides a gestalt switch to perceive all areas of our lives, thereby affecting the world politically, culturally and economically.

The various meanings of feminism gave rise to different kinds of feminism as socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, material feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, lesbian feminism, separatist feminism, individualistic feminism, and many others.

1.2.1 Socialist Feminism

It is the oldest form of feminism, where it was believed that by gaining suffrage, women's position in society would be elevated. The Suffragist movement in the first wave can be described as being under social feminism. Later this movement also included issues of women's labour and their protection of their rights therein. The term 'social feminism' was coined by William N O'Neill in his work (1969) *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America*. In *Social Feminism* (1989) by, Naomi Black in 1989, she describes feminism as being based on female values, which broadened the horizon beyond the private to transform society. It views interconnection of capitalism and patriarchy as responsible for women's oppression. It is opposed to radical feminism, which identifies patriarchy solely as an oppressor. They identify economics and patriarchal culture as twin causes.

1.2.2 Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminists are individual feminists who base their philosophy on the rejection of commonly held false notions of men and women. Notions that suggest males' superiority over females are responsible for discrimination against women in various forums. The prominent liberalists were Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Judith Sargent Murray, Frances Wright, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Rebecca Walker and others. This movement spanned across all three waves of feminism. Their issues included suffrage, reproductive rights, right to work and equal pay, education, and freedom from domestic violence and sexual harassment. Growth of several organizations such as The National Organization of Women (NOW), The National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), Feminist Majority Foundation and the passing of legislations as The Equal Rights Amendment and The Constitutional Equity Amendment can be attributed because of the work of these feminists.

1.2.3 Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism attributes women's oppression to ownership of private property and capitalism. It takes its source from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* by Friedrich Engels (1884). Engels links ownership of land with the morality of women. He argues that since men wanted to ensure that the land holdings should be passed down to their bloodline, men made it mandatory for women to practice moral rules such as fidelity, virginity, etc. Women became agents by virtue of their childbearing capacity to facilitate ownership of land etc. A newer offshoot of Marxist feminism is material feminism, which believes patriarchy and capitalism to be responsible for the oppression of women. Jennifer Wicke understands material feminism as that which examines the material conditions under which social constructs as gender hierarchy develop.

1.2.4 Radical Feminism

Radical feminism identifies patriarchy as the sole cause of woman's oppression. It believes all other forms of oppression as legislation or class conflict as offshoots of patriarchy. It arose mainly during 1960s, the period of second-wave feminism. It perceives patriarchy as a binary relation between the oppressor (male) and the oppressed (mainly women and other non-dominant men). The oppressor, through the use of social and other systems, systematically oppresses women. Thus, if women are to be liberated, abolishment of patriarchy is a pre-requisite. Radical feminists brought together women of different wakes of life and held discussions within them. These groups were called 'consciousness-raising (CR) groups. These women discussed their victimization by patriarchal setups. They came to a unanimous conclusion that if society were to be free, patriarchy in all its forms (domestic and governmental) should be abolished completely. Radical feminism gave rise to many off-shoots as separatist, lesbian and radical lesbian feministic movements. Separatist feminism demands the total exclusion of men from women and focusing exclusively on women. Though some separatists allowed space for the practice of heterosexuality, some propagated lesbian and radical lesbian separatism. Lesbian feminism is defined as a movement encourages women to direct their energies toward other women rather than men and often advocates lesbianism. It arose in 1970 as a reaction against second wave feminism and the gay liberation movement.

1.2.5 Individualist Feminism

Focusing on the concept individualism, it believes feminism should no longer be about communal solutions to communal problems but individual solutions to individual problems. It seeks to remove any kind of interference, especially by the government, on the bodies and lives of women. It attempts to bring a change through the legal system, guaranteeing equality under the law to their person and property. It proposes freedom to the women to decide their sexual preferences without the interference of any government regulations.

1.3 Indian Feminism

Some of the factors contributing to the rise of Indian feminism are closely associated with colonialism, western education, Christian missionaries, English speaking middle class, according to Maitrayee Chaudhuri. The change first came about in the idea of a woman as a homemaker to an educated homemaker. The education may not have been as provided to the males but to aid her domestic life.

In the 19th century, the social reforms led to growth in writings by a woman and voicing their concerns. An idea was prevalent at the times that judged the status of a nation depending upon the status of the women. Indian society fared badly by this measure. The social reformers, mainly the male of the time, then strove hard to change this image by focusing on women's education. Along with this, there was a reclamation of the image of women in accordance with the Hindu scriptures. This movement did not seek to reform the patriarchal structure of the society. The attempt was to reform women according to Western standards but did not pay attention to societal structuring.

The 20th century, i.e. (1915-1947), was marked by the active role of women in India's freedom struggle. Gandhi encouraged women to actively participate and take the forefront in *satyagrahas*. This resulted in the emergence of many women's organizations as All India Women's Conference (AIWC), All India Muslim Ladies Conference (1914), Women's India Association (1917), the National Council of Women in India (1925) and the All-India Women's Conference (1926). The years from 1947 to 1960, after Independence, the partition of India and Pakistan resulted in the massacre and destruction of human life and property. Crimes against women increased exponentially. Many bills as The Marriage Act (1954), The Hindu Code Bill (1955-56), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956),

The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), The Maternity Benefits Act (1961) came into force. The period between 1970s and 1980s, coincided with the second wave of feminism. In India, the political situation was of instability. A state of emergency was declared in 1975, which suspended the civil and political rights of the citizens. In the mid-seventies, the media began to raise woman's issues by reporting violence against them, raising issues about their marginalization, and exploitation by economic factors. The 1990s ruled by capital markets which changed the class and gender dynamics. The working women were projected as images of development. In the current times, women have challenged the patriarchal foundations and are striving towards economic and social liberation.

1.4 Feminism and Feminist Philosophy

In contemporary times, feminist philosophy has carved its niche in the field of philosophy as a serious discipline which makes unique and valuable contributions. Feminist philosophy is recognized today as a sub-division of Philosophy. It developed in America around the 1970s, with the initial contributions coming from liberal or reformist feminists. They critiqued mainly the male bias in the history of philosophy. Many feminist philosophers had training in analytic philosophy and used its methods to philosophize. They challenged the universalist conceptions prevalent in philosophy and strove to highlight its departure from the mainstream by seeking its unique content and method. By critiquing the history of philosophy, epistemology, science, art and philosophical methods, they sought to redefine moral and political philosophy from the perspective of woman's capacity to nurture and support.

In the 1980 and 1990s, the concerns were broadened to study women's unique contributions to philosophy in the past. The notion of women's experience was strengthened by including perspectives from care and the body. Epistemology and science were subjected to feminist insights from emotions and redefining reason and were reformulated. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir influenced continental philosophy. Some made use of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories to philosophize. Ethics has included notions of particularity, and concern which have their roots in feminist experience. Applied ethics has incorporated feminist issues as reproductive technologies. Political philosophy deals with feminist issues as a representation of women in politics with an endeavor to end discrimination and

oppression. Critique of traditional democratic theory and its related concepts have given rise to newer notions of social individuality and relational rights. Gerda Lerner cited educational disadvantages, material constraints, gender indoctrination, and discontinuity/isolation as reasons why feminist philosophers could not flourish prior to the 1970s.

Feminist philosophy primarily required women philosophers who could sensitize the masses of the unique issues faced by women. For women philosophers to be possible, women would be needed to be given philosophical education. To the question of whether men could be feminist philosophers, McAlister (1994) is of the view that men can be feminists provided there are women feminist philosophers who have paved a ground. It would be less probable for males to empathize to such an extent with women². The primary factor responsible was education since women were excluded. The second wave of feminism was responsible for bringing women to places of higher learning, which led to the development of feminist political consciousness (McAlister,1994). Such a consciousness made women to deliberate on their conditions and strive for better prospects in various fields.

1.4.1 Prejudices against Feminist Philosophy

It is because of the method the established authorities used to claim that feminist work on relationships or gender was not philosophy-or worse, that it was incompetent and confused philosophy (Addleson,1994). Gerda Lerner cited educational disadvantages, material constraints, gender indoctrination, and discontinuity/isolation as reasons why feminist philosophers could not flourish prior to the 1970s.

Sharge (1996) narrated a few incidents which bring into the fore a prejudice mainstream philosophy practitioners share against feminist philosophy. In one case, a philosophy position was denied to an applicant on the grounds of wanting someone who did serious philosophy like Kantian ethics or other ethics study. A teaching position could not be given to someone who specialized only in feminist philosophy. Secondly, it was conveyed to junior teachers that to get tenure in the department, they would have to publish outside the area of feminist philosophy. Thirdly, senior positions in the department were deliberately relinquished as they were directed to hire feminist philosophers. Fourthly, a graduate student once asked her to brief him on the fundamentals of feminist philosophy as he wanted to apply for a teaching position on

feminist studies to be floated by his department. These incidents expose an opinion held against feminist philosophy as not being genuine philosophy as compared to other areas in philosophy. She is then led to reflect upon whether there exists a glass ceiling for feminist philosophers and on the factors responsible for shaping the discipline of philosophy.

1.4.2 Women in Academics

It was difficult in the 1970s for women philosophers to get their foot in the teaching profession. One of the challenges was to overcome gender indoctrination which had permeated philosophy for centuries. McAlister describes it in the following words, “It seems pretty likely, in retrospect, that in the 1970s, philosophers of both genders were all working, in one way or another, under the (usually) unspoken assumption and/or fear that we as women were intellectually inferior and didn't really belong in the hallowed halls of the philosophers” (McAlister,1994, p.191-192). It brings into light the role of gender indoctrination in raising doubts over women's rationality and, consequently the ability to philosophize.

McAlister states further, that there was an opinion prevalent that before the 20th century, there were no women philosophers. This was confirmed in her initial years of training when she looked up the index of the *New Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) to discover no mention of any woman philosopher. The only two names that she came across were G.E. Anscombe and Phillipa Foot, who were her teacher's contemporaries³. This (supposed) absence in the philosophical scene naturally led women to believe they lacked the ability to philosophize. “Because we were ignorant of women philosophers who preceded us and because we had been indoctrinated to believe in women's intellectual inferiority, many of the women philosophers starting out in the early 1970s thought, and with good reason, that we were on trial, that we had to prove ourselves as philosophers, and the best way to do that was to beat the boys at their own game-or at least show that we were good enough to have the right to play in the same league with them Many of us, I think, quietly shared the view of our colleagues that if we wrote about our own experiences and issues that concerned us as women rather than more "universal" themes, it would not be philosophy but at best philosophical anthropology or some kind of lesser endeavor” (McAlister,1994, p.192).

The scene changed when Judith Jarvis Thomson's article "A Defense of Abortion" in 1971 was published in the first issue of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. The article was responded to by many women generating confidence in that women could deliberate on issues pertinent to women with their own methods. In 1970, American Organizations such as Society for Women in Philosophy, the American Philosophy Association's Committee on Status of Women, and FEAST (Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory) yielded support. Journals such as *Hypatia*, *Signs*, and *Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* gave space for feminist philosophers to voice out their thoughts and concerns. In 1970, Nancy Holmstrom and Irene Brawer organized an APA meeting, which was attended by more than a hundred women. As a result of it, by 1971, The Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) was formed. The first meeting of SWIP was held in 1972. Though, at that time, there was no feminist philosophy as a discipline, but there was present a strong sense of feminist consciousness.

The next step was to create content of feminist philosophy. Addleson (1994) mentions how in 1972, students and faculty worked together in Chicago to earmark source material to teach feminist courses. At Roosevelt University, led by Judy Wittner, students searched for any book they could find on women in the library. A similar endeavor was undertaken at Chicago Circle by Assistant Professor Sandra Bartky and graduate student Holly Graff. The courses were then co-taught by faculty and students. Janet Farrell Smith taught the first feminist course titled "Women and Philosophy" in 1975 at Smith College. By the 20th century, feminist philosophy has firmly established itself as an independent sub-discipline in Philosophy.

1.4.3 Nature of Feminist Philosophy

"Feminist philosophy is a kind of philosophy, a skilled philosophical discourse with its own conceptual tools, rhetorical tropes, problematics, and base of references. It is a kind of philosophy, not a female or feminine activity.... Feminist philosophy is a method, not a topic." (Walker, 2005, p. 157). A description as this gives, in a nutshell, the meaning, scope and method of feminist philosophy. Though feminist philosophy is about women, it's not necessarily only about women. At its base does lie issues related to women as the impact of gender on life and thought, the notion of difference.

Philosophers generally treat questions from epistemology and metaphysics as central to their enquiry. Issues such as causation, nature of universals, truth, knowledge and

justification, and nature of apriori are treated as core issues. In contrast, feminist philosophy deals with issues such as gender, justice, equality etc. This may give a false appearance that the work of a feminist philosopher is restricted to the field of moral, social, and political philosophy. On the contrary feminist philosophy has made important and significant contributions to epistemology and metaphysics. The task is to expose the androcentric biases in disciplines, and to highlight the issues such as race, class, and other related factors neglected by studies influenced by the socially privileged. It works in nexus with other theories such as feminist theory, race theory, gay and lesbian theory, transgender theory, postcolonial theory, disability theory etc.

Feminist philosophy is not a mere application of philosophical principles to feminist concepts but also aims at bringing to forefront the perspectives of the marginalized. It questions and rejects biased and false premises. For instance, feminist philosophers reject the notion of a universal subject or knower who is independent, unemotional, and isolated. They believe such a knower does not exist and is nothing but a projection of masculinist cultural ideal. Instead, they discuss the perspectives about women, which are interdependent and subjective. Knowledge is hence perceived as social and historical. This brings out another feature that since perspectives are many, not singular, feminist philosophy supports pluralism.

1.4.4 Main Issues in Feminist Philosophy

The scope of feminist philosophy is very vast. Some of the important issues which feminist philosophers are concerned with are sex and gender, essentialism, body, sexual difference, etc. A few of these concepts are discussed below.

1) Sex and Gender

This distinction is one of the most fundamental distinctions in feminist philosophy. Sex stands for a biological fact. By this criterion, individuals are male or female depending upon their biology. Gender is a social construct comprising of social and psychological expectations of what is the appropriate behavior for males and females. The view commonly held was that sex determined the gender of individuals. This implied that one's social positions in life were dependent upon one's sex, as every society had fixed roles for men and women. Simone de Beauvoir challenged this distinction by maintaining that a woman is not born but becomes a woman. Feminists find this notion

of gender useful as it can be used to challenge and bring about a change in the societal roles which are used to undermine women.

2) Essentialism

One form of essentialism entails making claims that a woman's biology is responsible for her social position. It makes universal claims about all women when actually, the matter at hand applies only to some women. It makes a claim that certain situations and circumstances are common to all women. It also assumes that the word woman has one universal meaning. Feminists question whether it is meaningful to ask whether all women share a certain set of properties or property.

3) Body

Feminist studies on the body can be divided into kinds. One kind treats the body as an empirical issue, focusing on how bodies become feminine in different cultural contexts where different senses of gender apply. Second is conceptual thinking about the general nature of the processes by which bodies become gendered.

4) Sexual Difference

Sexual difference refers to the difference between gendered individuals, i.e., individuals who have taken masculine or feminine norms. Most feminists treat sexual differences as an alternative to the sex/gender scheme. They believe that the sex and gender scheme misses the point that individuals live and experience bodies as possessing meaning and not simply as a biological fact.

1.4.5 Religion and Feminist Philosophy

Feminists have accused religion as one of the agencies responsible for meting out injustice to women. The central argument is that most religions have an androcentric basis due to the patriarchal structures upon which they have been constructed.

The present study, titled, 'Religion and Women: A Study in Feminist Philosophy', attempts to use the standpoint methodology to uncover the hermeneutic injustice meted out by the agency of religion through the use of patriarchal social structure towards women. Exploring the attitudes of major and minor religions of the East and West towards women, using the conceptual structures of feminist philosophy, it seeks to uncover the androcentric bias and prejudices perpetuated by patriarchy against women

in religions. Comprising of six chapters, the study delves into some of the core philosophical areas of feminist philosophy, religious feminism, metaphysical feminism, and feminist epistemology. Chapter One, “Charting the Course of an Ideology”, looks into the meaning, forms, and history of feminism, a brief sketch of nature and concepts in feminist philosophy, and standpoint theory as the methodology of the study. Chapter Two, “Women in Indic Religions”, studies how Indic religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and the tribal religion of the Santals account for the origin of women, attitude towards women in the scriptures and rituals, the role of women in theology, the sacred feminine and the feminist responses to religion. Chapter Three, “Women in Semitic Religions”, studies religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the aboriginal of Australia from the perspective of the origin of women, attitude towards women in the scriptures and rituals, the role of women in theology, the sacred feminine and the feminist responses to religion. Chapter Four, “Feminist Deliberations on Religious Ontology”, studies metaphysical concepts such as body, gender and divinity, feminist philosophy of religion and feminist theology. Chapter Five, “Women and the Problem of Religious Knowledge”, explores themes such as feminist knowledge, reason and gender, feminist objectivity, standpoint theory and feminist religious epistemology. The Chapter Six, “Conclusion”, is followed by a Bibliography and the paper published in the journal *Journal of Human Values* titled, ‘The Sacred and the Profane: Menstrual Flow and Religious Values’.

1.5 Methodology

Oxford’s Learner’s Dictionary defines the method as, a particular way of doing something’. Google’s English Dictionary, provided by Oxford Languages ,defines it as ‘a particular procedure for accomplishing or approaching something, especially a systematic or established one’. Llyod (1995) argues there are distinct ‘feminist methods’ which have been developed from the perspective of sex and gender. The feminist methods yield tools to detect and analyse sex and gender in philosophical discussions. Their function is three-fold, firstly ,to detect false assumptions based on sex and gender. These false assumptions include stereotyping of women, and displaying sexist attitudes and theorizations. Secondly, it detects the subtle undertones of gender symbolism and androcentrism. Thirdly, to bring out the sexism underlying the seemingly neutral principles, such as ‘objectivity’ when applied to women.

The nature of the object of study imposes restrictions on the methodology employed. The object of study of feminist philosophy being largely women, who are situated⁴ in a definite space and time. Since the objective of the present work is to study the relation between women and religion from the perspective of feminist philosophy, the methodology adopted is feminist standpoint theory. The three feminist philosophers who made major contributions to standpoint theory, namely Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock and Hilary Rose. The other important contributors who followed them were Sandra Harding, Jane Flax, and Alisson Jaggar, besides others.

In clarifying the meaning of a standpoint, Harding emphatically states, 'women's standpoint' must not be confused or equated with 'women's perspective'. A woman's perspective could be coloured with racism, patriarchy, sexism, one's social standing and other prejudices, so that may not be a viable start to any research. Contrarily, for a position to count as a standpoint, one must insist on an 'objective location' of women's lives as the starting point of feminist research. This objective location yields authenticity and value to women's experiences. From such experiences, one can observe and theorize from thereof on nature and social relations.

To justify the validity of the standpoint theory for feminist research, Harding (1991) outlined eight features. Firstly, the different lives of women have been devalued and neglected as starting points of research. Men and women experience the world differently owing to gender-based social constructs. When the lives of women are included as part of the research, it lays bare the practice of using the lives of dominant men as the standard. The inclusion will yield a lesser distorted and partial view of natural and social life. Secondly, women are treated as 'strangers' traditionally, they have been kept out of social order and knowledge making. Traditionally, in social order and knowledge making, men have been treated as 'natives' and women as 'strangers'. Patricia Hill Collins believes such a position imbues at once contradictory values as remoteness and nearness, concern, and indifference, which are crucial for achieving objectivity. Thirdly, women being oppressed, exploited and dominated, develop a unique perspective which supplies a fresh and critical perspective to the research. Fourthly, constructing accounts of nature and social relations from the perspective of the oppressed generates views which are less partial and distorted. Fifthly, women's labour is centred around everyday chores. Such work is not included or respected, resulting in them being excluded from men's conception of history and culture. Sixthly,

the uniqueness of a women's perspective lies in the integration of dualisms, such as mind/body, and nature/culture, which is ingrained in her labour. The sphere of her labour includes varied activities such as reproduction (creating more men and women), processing food, working with machines and maintaining social relations. Seventhly, women researchers acquire a unique status of being 'outsiders within'. By being women, they are 'outsiders' in the traditional framework of knowledge seeking. Working on women's issues, they are at once 'insiders' since the object of study is their bodies, in which they participate in. Lastly, viewed through the sex/gender system, many hitherto hidden facets have been revealed to the women researchers.

The term situatedness used by Harding called as 'epistemic advantage' by Rolin (2009). By epistemic advantage, Rolin means a belief that unprivileged social positions generate perspectives which are less partial and less distorted. She bases this belief on Harding's concept of strong objectivity. Harding holds when research starts from the lives of the marginalized, hidden aspects of the social relations between the genders and the institutions that support them are revealed. Rolin interprets this to mean that relations of power include certain hidden aspects which are challenging for any study on them, as they can suppress or distort relevant evidence. She understands by relations of power, the ability of an individual or group to constrain the choices of another individual or group. Relations of power can be used to dominate people, thereby leading them to conceal or distort relevant knowledge. Such a suppression can be brought about by two ways, firstly, by intimidating the informants by evoking in them uncomfortable emotions as or inflicting upon them 'hermeneutical injustice' (a term borrowed from Miranda Fricker). Secondly, access to relevant information can be limited by unsettling the relationship between the informant and the researcher. Power can be used to create uncomfortable feelings such as fear, disgust, shame, anger, embarrassment and other similar emotions.

Hermeneutic injustice is a form of epistemic injustice, i.e., a wrong that is done to a knower (woman) in her capacity as a knower. Fricker defines it as the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource (Fricker, 2007). Unequal hermeneutical participation of a subject (knower) in a significant area of social experience owing to being a member of a disadvantaged group (i.e., woman) is termed as being hermeneutically marginalized. Hermeneutical

marginalization results in subordination and subsequent exclusion from practice/area, which would have been of value to the participant. A characteristic of such a marginalization is that it is always socially coerced and is a form of powerlessness. She explains the epistemic injustice of being hermeneutically marginalized by giving examples such as sexual harassment being perceived as flirting, marital rape as non-rape, post-natal depression as hysteria, etc. Such instances bring out the power play of hermeneutically powerful groups versus the non-powerful, and the non-powerful groups suffer from hermeneutical marginalization. Such a hermeneutical disadvantaging renders the subject incapable of making sense of her mistreatment and thereby unable to prevent or seek measures to stop it. Feminist standpoint theory used as a methodology to study power relations gives voice to the perspectives of the marginalized.

¹ In June 2022, the Supreme Court of the U.S., in the context of a Mississippi case *Dobbs v. Jackson's Women's Health Organization*, overturned the right to abortion, upheld by the 1973, *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973. Such a move can be viewed as a move on the part of the Conservatives to deny bodily autonomy to women.

² Incidentally, the feminist movement in India was spiraled by the males as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Gandhi, Dayanand Saraswati, Jyotirao Phule and others.

³ In 1980, Mary Ellen Waithe produced a four-volume work *History of Women Philosophers*, tracing their presence from 600 BCE.

⁴ The term 'situated' is used in the sense meant by Sandra Harding (1991).

Chapter Two

Women in Indic Religions

1. Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world. Sometimes it is termed as *Sanatana dharma*, 'the eternal law' or the 'eternal way.' The Vedas and Upanishads are the *srutis*, and *Mahabharat*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* are *smritis*. There are other texts such as *Agamas* and *Tantras*. Hinduism is a collection of many philosophical systems. Though the systems are diverse, they generally accept the concept of *Purusarthas* or aims of human life. They are four in number (*Caturvarga*), viz *dharma* (duties), *artha* (economical activities), *kama* (desires) and *moksha* (salvation). Generally, all systems believe that the final goal of an individual is to attain *moksha* and prescribe different paths for its achievement. The different denominations of Hinduism are *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, *Vaishnavism* etc.

1.1 Origin of Women

Each cycle of creation begins with the flood waters covering the universe. The cosmic egg (*Hiranyagarbha*) was floating on the water for a thousand years. When this period ends, the egg bursts to reveal the lord of the universe, who takes the form of the first eternal man. He is called as *purusha*, whose soul is identical with the universal spirit and who seeks to destroy all the sins by fire. He was entirely alone, communicating with himself for so long; when he emerged from the egg and saw the empty water around him, he was very afraid, and that is why man feels afraid when he is alone. But still, he comforted himself that since he was alone in the universe, there was no fear or nothing to worry about. But on the other hand, he felt no delight, and that is why no one feels delighted when alone. Then he felt desire for another, and so he divided himself into two, one-half male and the other half female.

The *Satpatha Brahmana* describes creation as an act by Prajapati. Earth acts as support and bearer of all forms of life by sustaining water, which in turn begets trees and fruits. These, in turn, sustain man, who has semen that contains seeds of human creation.

Prajapati thought as the earth bears water, there should be some substratum which would bear and shelter the semen. Thus, a woman was created.

1.2 Women in the Vedic and Upanishadic Period

The word '*nari*' in the Vedas conveys the sense of dignity meaning '*netri*', directress. The position of women in the Vedic age was believed to be high. She was assigned full responsibilities and freedom to rule her house and discharge her feminine duties. Many of the Vedic *rishis* were women. Women, either single or married could be authorities on the Vedic wisdom. Gargi authored several Vedic hymns which speculated the origin of existence. They also contain dozens of verses credited to the woman philosopher Ghosha and Maitreyi. It mentions philosophical discourses between the sage Agasthya and Lopamudra, his educated wife. The presence of female deities in the *Rgveda*, as Usas, Ratri, Prithvi, Saraswati leads Paranjape (2003) to deduce that the position of the women must be high. The Vedic seer blessed couples with progeny comprising of boys and girls¹, indicating girls were not undesirable. The girls were encouraged to adorn themselves with jewelry and clothes. They were at liberty to choose their mates through a social ceremony '*samana*'².

Women have been referred to by various names depending upon her position and role in the family. She has been called as '*grihini*', '*patni*'. The *Rgveda* says, "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore, both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular" (*Rgveda*, V.6.8). An important rite of the Vedic wedding ceremony is *Saptapadi*. Here the bride and bridegroom take seven steps together around the nuptial fire (*Agni*) and make the following seven wedding vows to each other. "With God as guide, let us take, the first step to nourish each other, the second step to grow together in strength, the third step to preserve our wealth, the fourth step to share our joys and sorrows, the fifth step to care for our children, the sixth step to be together forever, and the seventh step to remain lifelong friends, perfect halves to make a perfect whole" (*Rgveda*). The word '*patni*', etymologically means one who participates in sacrifices. *Patni* in the *Brahmanas* indicates her equal share in the social and religious side of the husband's life. Whenever man makes offerings to the gods according to the ritualistic form of worship, the wife must participate in the ceremony with him.

The wife has been identified with the Vedic Hindu house and home and is called the “*grihini*”. Visvamitra in (*Rgveda*, III.53) describes a wife as home. As a ‘*grhini*’, she was expected to look after the whole home. A mantra chanted during the marriage ceremony asks to adopt ‘*samrajni bhava*’, which indicated that though the general family system was patriarchal, the family affairs were looked after by the woman. The bond between husband and wife was one of love and honor. Women as wives were adored, hence even Gods had wives (Paranjape, 2003). Oblations had to be offered jointly, hence, in all religious ceremonies, sacrifices or festivals, woman’s role was dominant. Women, independently of men, used to perform the *Sita-Yagna* or the harvest sacrifice where many Vedic verses were recited, according to *Paraskara Grihya-Sutras*. The woman as a mother, was greatly respected. The term ‘mother’ or ‘*mata*’ was used to indicate respect and veneration. The earth and rivers were referred to as mothers. Paranjape (2003) notes that the mother of the Gods, Aditi and mother of demons, Danu were depicted to be kind and loving.

The widow in the *Rgveda* was permitted to remarry according to interpretations of the following verse (Bhaduri, 1984) (Dutt,1931) (Paranjape, 2003). The verse of *Rgveda*, “Rise, woman, (and go) to the world of living beings; come, this man near whom you sleep is lifeless; you have enjoyed this state of being the wife of your husband, the suitor who took you by the hand” (*Rgveda*, X.18.8). This verse is to be spoken by the husband's brother or an elderly man of the house, etc., to the wife of the dead man. It is spoken so that she may leave her husband's body and go to the home of the living. The phrase ‘go back to the living’ has been interpreted variously. Paranjape (2013) understands it to indicate that the widow then entered the home as the wife of the man of the house. Dutta (1931) explains that the man addressing the widow to be the ‘*devara*’, the brother of the deceased. On addressing the woman, he takes her (the widow) as his wife and continues the lineage through her. The *Rgveda* verse, “Where are you, Asvins, by night? Where are you by day? Where do you sojourn? Where do you dwell? Who brings you into his presence in the same place (of sacrifice) as on her couch a widow (brings) her husband's brother, as a woman (brings) her husband (to her)?” (*Rgveda*, X.40.2), hints at widow remarriage. Manu was strongly opposed to the practice of widow remarriage. The wife had to be faithful and chaste even after the demise of her husband. If she did not immolate herself, then the widow would have to practice severe austerities till her death.

Rgveda mentions that women should be given the lead in ruling the nation and in society, and that they should have the same right as sons over the father's property. "The entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is symbol of prosperity and daughter of brilliance. May we respect her so that she destroys the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society" (*Rgveda*,I.48.8).

The *Atharvaveda* states that women should be courageous, scholarly, and intelligent. Being knowledgeable, they must partake in the matters of the legislative and protect their family and society. After marriage, along with her husband, she must rule over the other members of the family, like a queen. However, it also contains mantras to bring about miscarriage in the female embryo, indicating there was prevalent an attitude of discontentment for girls. The *Yajurveda* mentions, a scholarly woman can influence through her intellect and actions, the lives and conduct of others. She thereby promotes virtues, which in turn leads to an efficient management of the society. Women inclined to spirituality wore the sacred thread and were taught the holy mantras of the Vedas. Women of the *kshatriya* clan received martial arts coaching and arms training.

The Upanishads clearly declare individual souls are not gendered. Each soul passes through countless births as male or female. It further teaches the law of karma, which informs us that what we do to others will in turn be done to us—and that ahimsa, non-hurtfulness, must be the guiding precept of our lives.

1.3 Women in the Smritis

In *Mahabharata*, Bhishma Pitamah declares, "The teacher who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such teachers of true knowledge and the mother is more important than ten such fathers. There is no greater guru than mother" (*Mahabharata*,30.9). In the *Mahabharata* one comes across many strong woman characters as Kunti, Drapuadi, Gandhari, Savitri, Amba, etc.

The *Manu Smriti*, written long after the Vedic period, is one of the *Dharma Shastras*. Opinions vary amongst scholars regarding the regressive attitude. Some have defended Manu on the grounds that foreign invasions made women unsafe as compared to the

Vedic times. To defend the woman's honour stricter rules were imposed. Feminists accuse it to be as based on patriarchy and promoting misogyny for women. *Manu Smriti* upholds, "Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased. But where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (*Manu Smriti*, III.55). Although women may be classified according to *varna*, they are also considered a section of society. They do not pass through the four stages available to men. Rather the *Manu Smriti* talks of three stages for a woman:

As a child she protected and cared for by her father. In contrast with boys, girls did not receive a formal education. Her traditional role was to preserve the social and cultural values which were taught at home. Girls tended to be betrothed and married early. After marriage, her custodian was her husband. The wife's role was centered around home, and she was not expected to contribute to earning income. On becoming a mother, she was expected to fulfil the responsibility of a loving and available parent. Upon widowhood or if the husband took *sannyasa*, she was looked after by the eldest son. Elderly ladies were to be treated with respect.

The following are some of the obligations expected from a 'good woman' at various stages of her life. As a child, she must be obedient and respectful towards her parents and elders. As a householder, to serve her husband and treat his friends and relatives with respect and affection. She had to be well informed of the religious practices and run the household efficiently. She was responsible in keeping the home clean and well-decorated. She ought to dress and decorate herself to be pleasing to her husband and avoid dressing up if her husband was away from home. She should control her greed and passions and to speak truthfully and pleasingly. She must follow certain *vratas* (vows) such as fasting on days like *Ekadasi* (the 11th day of the moon). As a mother to love, protect and nurture children. In the later life, to dedicate time to spiritual practices and to give counsel to younger family members.

Manu Smriti says, "those who abduct women should be given death sentence" (*Manu Smriti*, 8.323). "Those who kill women, children or scholarly virtuous people should be given strictest punishment" (*Manu Smriti*,9.232). "Those who rape or molest women or incite them into adultery should be given harshest punishment that creates fear among others to even think of such a crime" (*Manu Smriti*,8.352). "But if any man through insolence forcibly contaminates a maiden, two of his fingers shall be instantly

cut off, and he shall pay a fine of six hundred (*panas*)” (*Manu Smriti*,8.367). “But a woman who pollutes a damsel shall instantly have (her head) shaved or two fingers cut off and be made to ride (through the town) on a donkey” (*Manu Smriti*,8.370). “A *Brahmana* who approaches unguarded females (of the) *Kshatriya* or *Vaisya* (castes), or a *Sudra* female, shall be fined five hundred (*panas*); but (for intercourse with) a female (of the) lowest (castes), one thousand” (*Manu Smriti*,8.385).

Manu Smriti provides a woman with property rights to six types of property. These include those she received at her marriage (*stridhana*), or as gift when she eloped or when she was taken away, or as token of love before marriage, or as gifts from her biological family, or as received from her husband after marriage, and from inheritance from deceased relatives.

1.4 Woman in Tantra

The left sided *tantra* with the *Devi* as their object of worship also flourished at this time. In the right hand *tantra*, Siva was the deity of worship, who is a male deity. In the left *tantra*, a female deity is at the apex. In the left hand *tantra*, women were an integral part of the higher stage rituals as sex was the medium to achieve state of bliss. However, such practices did not lead to emancipation of women.

1.5 Women in Medieval and Pre-Independent India

The *bhakti* culture was conducive to the long-neglected spiritual needs of women. Many women saints openly flouted the rules of traditionalism. Andal, Mahadevi, Janabai, Bahinabai, Mirabai became popular as spiritual leaders. Saints as Mirabai looked at God as her husbands and not as husband as her God and Andal was married to God.

A problem area in this age were the courtesans (*ganikas*) and *devdasis*. The courtesans were specialized in the arts and some were associated with the king’s court. The *devdasis*, though were married to the Gods were practising prostitutes.

This age witnessed the rise of prominent women in history as Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Swarnakumari Devi, Subbalakshmi who were social reformers. There were reformers as M.G. Ranade, Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati and other thinkers who rebelled against the practices

as child marriage, polygamy, lack of education, treatment of widows, sati etc. Women as Rani Laxmibai, Tarabai, Ahalyabai Holkar etc. were famous rulers.

Women from all walks of life were followers of Mahatma Gandhi. Many of them participated in the satyagraha and the freedom struggle movement. Gandhi said about women in general and husband-wife relationship that the wife is not the husband's bond-slave but his companion and his helpmate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows. She is free as the husband to choose her own path. Neither is woman superior to man, nor is man superior to woman.

1.6 Women in Contemporary Times

The state of present Hindu woman is much emancipated than those of the past. One finds a break down in the traditional joint family systems to nuclear family. In nuclear set up, there is a greater empowerment of women in terms of finance, decision making, position of authority, etc. Of course, one cannot deny that most households are patriarchal but there is subtle change in power dynamics. Public policies are conducive to women on a general tone. Political reservations have given place for women in governance at all levels. Many older laws detrimental to women have been replaced by favourable ones.

1.7 Woman and Worship

The *Satapatha Brahmana*, describes *yajna*, as modelled on the act of creation. Since creation requires male and female elements, a woman is given place in it, even though it is secondary.³ The woman participated in *yajnas* as the wife of the man conducting the sacrifice, the sacrificer. The man was referred as *yajamana* and his wife as *yajamanapatni*. During the *yajna* a chord was tied to the waist of the woman, attempting to separate her upper body from the lower. The upper body which was believed to be pure only could participate in the *yajna*. No such separation was warranted in case of the males.

In the same text where the rituals are not motivated by creation, women are not included, observes Kulkarni (2003). For instance, in a *yajna* as the *pravargya*, which was aimed at bestowing a divine body, like the Sun to the sacrificer, women and *sudras* were not permitted to attend. A man or woman alone could not conduct the *yajna*. In

the *Srautasutras*, a practice is mentioned wherein on the death of the man of the house, all the sacrificial items are thrown into the funeral pyre and the widow could not remarry. On the death of his wife, before him, he was required to marry again.

1.8 Ordination of Woman

According to some scholars, sociologists and theologians, no Hindu scripture prevent women from playing the role of a priest. However, in practice women could not become priests at temples. The reason commonly cited were that women are 'impure' during their menstrual cycles. Women are thus not allowed to enter the temples till the purificatory bath was taken. Pune-based Thatte's, *Shankar Seva Samiti* and *Jnana Prabhodini* are two leading schools that train women to conduct rituals, prayers for initiation, engagement, marriage, conversion, housewarming, ancestor worship and last rites. Women study Sanskrit, learning the verses from ancient texts that are essential to conduct ceremonies. Pandharpur, a place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra appointed a female priest, breaking its centuries-old tradition of a male Brahmin priest leading ceremonies. Women priests are also appointed in temple of Gorakhnath in Mangalore and Mannarassala temple in Kerala. In certain temples as the ancient Shani temple in Shingnapur, women were not to be allowed into the inner sanctum of the temple. After a long crusade by women activists demanding entry to the inner sanctum the temple trust finally granted women devotees passage into the temple. Trimbakeshwar Temple in Nashik and Sabarimala temple too do not allow women inside the temple.

1.9 Sacred Feminine

In Hinduism, the supreme reality has clearly shown itself in male and female form. It is also known that every male god has a female counterpart, and it is believed that much of the power of the male gods came from their wives and without the help of the female goddesses they did not have their maximum powers. The goddesses were and even now are considered more powerful than their male counterparts. A religious sect called the *shaktas* came into being whose main object of worship were the goddesses namely Shakti, Savitri, and Lakshmi.

Devi or the divine goddesses are said to be equal counterpart of the god and hence shows herself as the trinity – the creator (Durga), preserver (Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati), and destroyer (Mahishasura-Mardini and Kali). The goddesses are different

from one another i.e., some have strong motherly characteristics whereas some others do not have it at all. Some goddesses have strong independent natures and are also great warriors along with that whereas others are domestic in nature and are identified closely with male deities. Some goddesses also express the nature of devotion and the divine human relationship with the gods, Radha and Sita are such examples. Some goddesses in their mythologies also express the Hindu thinking about sexual roles and relationships. All the goddesses have different mythologies, theologies, and their own meanings as well. It is also said that the study of Hindu goddesses is a study of Hindu tradition.

The deification of the feminine is beautifully expressed in one of the forms of Lord Shiva, the *Ardhanarishvara*. The name *Ardhanarishvara* means 'the Lord who is half woman'. *Ardhanarisha* ('the Lord who is half woman), *Ardhanarimateshvara* ("the Lord of Dance who is half-woman") is a composite androgynous form of the Hindu god Shiva and his consort Parvati, *Ardhanarishvara* is depicted as half male and half female, split down the middle. The right half is usually the male Shiva, illustrating his traditional attributes and the left is the female Parvati. In rare depictions belonging to the *Shaktism* school, the feminine holds the dominant right side. *Ardhanarishvara* symbolizes that the male and female principles are inseparable. The composite form conveys the unity of opposites in the universe. In one of the interpretations, the male half of *Ardhanarishvara* stands for *purusha* and female half is *prakriti*. *Purusha* is the male principle and passive force of the universe, while *prakriti* is the female active force. The union of *purusha* (Shiva) and *prakriti* (Shiva's energy, Shakti) generates the universe. This idea is also manifested in the union of the *linga* of Shiva and *yoni* of Devi creating the cosmos.

Shaktism is the denomination of Hinduism that worships *Shakti* or Devi in her many forms, both gentle and fierce. *Shaktism* along with *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism* are the three primary schools of Hinduism. The goddess is the *adya shakti* the original energy out of which all things were created. Shakti is the mother goddess, the source of all the things. She is said to be inseparable from the one who beholds her. She is believed to have no end nor beginning it was always there and will always be there. She is the divine force to destroy the demonic forces and restore the balance of the world. It is believed that every God has shakti and without this energy they have no power for e.g.,

Lakshmi is the power of Vishnu, Parvati is the power of Shiva etc. She is also called a Devi or Mahadevi.

The female principle is worshipped in the form of a *yon*i image sometimes substituted by a naked woman. As the eternal virgin she is represented by a young girl of about 15 years, who is object of devotion. She is worshipped in several ways. The *pooja* is performed by offering sweets, flowers, to the goddess and by chanting *mantras*, using *mudras*, and by offering some sort of sacrifice. She is most powerfully worshipped by chanting her *bija mantra*, and this *mantra* is different for each goddess. During the *pooja*, animal sacrifice is performed in some parts of India like Kalighat in Calcutta. One of the mantras of *shaktism* is, ‘*Aum Hrim Chandikayai Namah*’ which means ‘I bow to the goddess who tears apart all dualities’.

Durga is described as beautiful and serene. She has ten arms each of which holds a weapon that is gifted from all the gods and her sole desire is to destroy evil and the demons. She rides into battle seated upon a lion or a tiger (who is the personification of Dharma). She is known as the goddesses of power and strength and also as the mother of bounty and wealth and also of beauty and knowledge in her forms i.e. Lakshmi and Saraswati. She is an embodiment of purity, knowledge and self-realization. She is the energy aspect of the world and without her there is no existence of the world. The meaning of the word ‘*durga*’ in Sanskrit is a fort or a place that is protected and is thus difficult to reach. She is also called as the divine mother; it is believed that she protects mankind from evil and misery by destroying the evil forces like anger, hatred, jealousy, and selfishness etc. She is said to be associated with three different aspects of the cosmos (world) and they are: *Shakti*, *Maya*, and *Prakruti*.

In addition to the Brahmanical goddesses, one also come across folk goddesses in the South Indian tradition as Pandilamma, the Goddess from Pandil, Mamillamma, the Goddess who sits under a mango tree, Kokkamma, Goddess of coughs; Poleramma and Ellamma, who are boundary Goddesses. Goddesses from the 'great' tradition who have been added to the folk (or 'little') tradition, such as Kaliamma (Kali), and Gengamma (Ganga), the water Goddess of the Ganges (Diesel, 1992). These Goddesses believed to be unlike the Brahmanical Goddesses in not being fierce and adopt a caring attitude to the villagers.

1.10 Feminist Response

Sugirtharajah (2002) observes, most Indian scholars who write on Hindu subjects are from other disciplines. She takes an example of a book recently published, “Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India by Oxford University Press, 2000. The Indian women contributors, from India and the West, are from diverse fields such as English literature, classical Sanskrit literature, journalism, history, psychology, comparative literature, Oriental studies, Intercultural, and Asian Studies. There are far more Western feminists writing on Hinduism as Diana Eck, Katherine Young, and Kim Knott as compared Indian women scholars. She names some of them as Vasudha Narayanan, T.S. Rukmani and Lina Gupta. Often there is a tendency in Western scholars to confine the study of Hinduism to certain patriarchal texts. This has led to side-lining cultural aspects as dance, music, folklore, art etc. Such an approach would provide a holistic picture of women's position in society. Religion in Hinduism is text based. However, in the recent times scholars are beginning to study subaltern voices from geography, caste and class and language. Saints as Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi are misleadingly considered as championing women’s movements. It is misleading as, they rebelled against the system of that age for their spiritual quest and not aiming to lead a feminist movement.

The *Satapatha Brahmana*, contains many references, which point out to the inferiority of the women. During the conduct of a *yajna*, a girdle is tied to the waist of a woman, separating her lower body from the upper. The text enjoins such a separation to separate the impure lower part of the body from the higher. It also describes a woman as not possessing strength. *Taittiriya Upanisad*, adds a woman has no generative power and hence is powerless. Her powerlessness does not render her eligible for receiving inheritance. The gendering of the vessels used for the sacrifice indicate the inferior status given to women. The dipping spoon for ghee ‘*sruva*’ is referred as male, and is brushed first, followed by brushing the smaller spoons, ‘*sruc*’, which are female. The explanation given is males must be honored before females.

The gender dichotomy of male and female is observed in the notion of *beej-ksetra-nyaya*, where ‘*beej*’ means ‘seed/ semen’, ‘*ksetra*’ means ‘field/land’ and ‘*nyaya*’ is a metaphor. Literally means seed-field metaphor, the seed/semen stands for the male and

field/land for the woman. This metaphor which is found in the *Manusmruti*, forms the basis of the entire text, sanctioning subjugation of the woman to the man.

One can perceive three models of man-woman relations in Indian Philosophy, the *Brahman-Maya* model, the *Purusa-Prakriti* model and the *Siva-Sakti* model (Kelkar, 2021). In the *Brahman-Maya* model, the *Brahman* is the ultimately real and *Maya* has a phenomenal existence. *Brahman* transcends masculine and feminine, the various forms of all divinities are nothing but its manifestations. On the other hand, *Maya* is the illusion, it is lifeless and has no purpose in itself. Just as *Maya*'s existence belongs to the lower level, so also is the woman's. She lives for the sake of man. The *Manusmruti*, makes procreation and satisfaction of man's sexual desires the prime duty of a woman. She does not possess any independent existence and hence has no identity of her own. The *Bhagavadgita*, in one of its *slokas*, clubbed women, *vaisya* and *sudra* together. The *purusha-prakrti* model, makes both realities as independent of each other. *Purusa* is pure consciousness and *prakrti* being material is devoid of consciousness. When the *purusa*, wrongly identifies itself with the *prakrti*, it suffers from bondage and death. The *prakrti* being *trigunatmak*, is responsible for creation. When the proximity of the *purusha* disturbs the equilibrium of the *prakrti*, creation begins. From man by nature is supposed to be superior and a woman, being identified with nature is inferior. Woman's existence is on a lower level as she is not intelligent and possesses the prowess of being a temptress. This model fares a little better than the *Brahman-Maya* model. The *Siva-Sakti* model when perceived through the *Sakta* philosophy, makes *Sakti* as the creator, sustainer and the destroyer. *Siva* is a part of Her. In this model, the woman gets recognition. She is not inert but is living and intelligent. She is the mother and brings up her young ones.

Belsare (2021) brings to fore the ramifications of a gender analysis of the doctrine of *purusharthas*. It becomes clear that this model kept man's life at the center in its conception and practice. *Moksa* as a value is denied to women and association with women was seen as obstacles to the path. *Sudra* women and men were excluded from the study of the *Vedas*. The *artha purushartha* was denied to her and she became completely dependent upon the males for her subsistence. Her *dharma*, was tied up to the household chores and it was instructed to her that she implicitly served the society thorough her home chores. Her roles at home were restricted to playing a dutiful wife

and mothering. She was identified with the *kama purushartha*, by being called as the seductress.

Prof. Mahadevan (2002) (2014), discussed in the feminism of Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (formerly Ramabai Dongre). Pandita Ramabai critiqued the Western and Indian societies as being anti-woman. She believed that all the three stages of a woman's life as childhood, married life and widowhood were riddled with degradation and suffering, which were sanctioned by religion. Subjugated women will produce a subjugated nation, she argued. She championed actively for education, freedom, remarriage of women.

On the 67th Republic Day, 2016, the Ranragini Bhumata Brigade, spearheaded by activist Trupti Desai along with, around 500 women supporters tried to enter the inner sanctum of Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. The attempted entry was to challenge and break the patriarchal tradition of barring women from entering the inner sanctum of the temple. After much debates and legal actions, the temple authorities opened the inner sanctum to women in April, 2016, bowing down to the Bombay High Court directives.

The Sabarimala temple, dedicated to the deity Ayyappa is in the Pathanamthitta District of Kerala. Since the deity is a *naishtika brahmachari*, there has a tradition of denying entry of women between the age group 10– 50 years, which coincided with their fertile years. In 2018, a group of five women lawyers, challenged the Rule 3(b), Kerala Places of Public Worship (Authorization of Entry) Rules, 1965 which authorized this prohibition. The Kerala High Court upheld the Worship Act and the temple management also reiterated that they are allowed to frame rules for their temple without any interference by the government. The judgement passed by the Supreme Court of India, by Hon. Chief Justice of India, Shri Dipak Misra and Justice A.M. Khanwilkar, allowed the entry to the temple, mentioning the following in their judgement;

“Any relationship with the Creator is a transcendental one crossing all socially created artificial barriers and not a negotiated relationship bound by terms and conditions. Such a relationship and expression of devotion cannot be circumscribed by dogmatic notions of biological or physiological factors arising out of rigid socio-cultural attitudes which do not meet the constitutionally prescribed tests. Patriarchy in religion cannot be permitted to trump over the element of pure devotion borne out of faith and the freedom

to practise and profess one's religion. The subversion and repression of women under the garb of biological or physiological factors cannot be given the seal of legitimacy. Any rule based on discrimination or segregation of women pertaining to biological characteristics is not only unfounded, indefensible and implausible but can also never pass the muster of constitutionality".

2. Jainism

Jainism is an ancient religion. It does not have a single founder. It has been passed down through the ages by teachers known as *Tirthankaras*. There have been 24 *tirthankaras*, the last one being Mahavira. They appeared in the world to teach the way to *moksha*. Jainism is based on asceticism. According to Jaina philosophy, reality comprises of souls (*jiva*), matter (*pudgala*), motion (*dharma*), rest (*adharm*), space (*akasa*), and time (*kala*). It is dualistic, matter and souls are thought to be entirely different types of substance. It denies God as a creator. The universe, matter and souls are uncreated. All beings including gods and others subject to karma and rebirth as human beings. Through their actions, souls can accumulate karma and undergo birth and rebirth. Jains believe, all souls have undergone infinite births and will continue to be reborn until they attain *moksha*. Each new life is determined by the kind and amount of karma accumulated. *Moksha* is achieved by purging the soul of all karma, good and bad.

2.1 Origin of Women

A Jaina text authored by Mahesvarasuri, *Nanapancamikaha*, asserts that when a man has deception in his heart, he becomes a woman in the next life. Similarly, when a woman has a pure heart, in the next life she will be born a man. Gender then indicates reward or punishment. Woman's body being linked to deception thereby is a sign of the immorality of the past life.

2.2 Attitude towards Women

In principle, Jainism treats men and women as equal. A woman enjoys the same position as a man does in religious and social functions. Achievements of man and woman should be considered as being on equal level. Matters of religious achievements and self-development are related to the soul rather than to the body. Since there is no difference or distinction in the nature of the souls of a man and a woman, it is illogical,

irreligious, and ignorant for a man to treat woman as an inferior. Women are thus given an equal opportunity to achieve liberation.

Contrary to the general spirit, Mahavira also spoke of women as temptation. Mahavira is quoted to have said, "Women are the greatest temptation in the world. . . He should not speak of women, nor look at them, nor converse with them, nor claim them as his own, nor do their work" (*Akaranga Sutra*, 22.48). "He, Mahavira, to whom women were known as the causes of all sinful acts, . . . (*Akaranga Sutra*, 22.81).

The significance of the word 'nari' has been fully explained in *Sutrkrutang Niryukti*. In *Churni* women have been classified as 'dravya stri' and 'bhav stri'. *Dravya stri* means the physical formation of a woman and *bhav stri* the temperament. In *uttradhyayan churni*, *nishith churni* and *acharang churni* the female temperament is described in detail. *Tandulvaicharik prakirnak* discusses ninety-four innate characteristics of a woman. The *bhagvati aradhana* dwell upon the shortcomings of ordinary women and women of no chastity. It maintains that women who observe chastity do not possess such shortcomings. In praising the virtuous woman, it says, her glory spreads everywhere and she is like a goddess on earth. She is worshipped even by the gods and no words are adequate to praise her.

The wife is regarded as 'dhammasahaya' (as one who helps in religion). It is the Jain lay women responsible for rituals and preparing food. Many women opt to remain at home to take care of family and children and pass cultural practices and ideals to the next generation. Lay women are in charge of food preparation and dietary rules. She is expected to know the rules related to alms giving to monks, cooking right kind of meals during festivals, various types of fasts on relevant occasions.

2.3 Woman and Theology

In practice, some Jaina sects within Jainism do not permit women to enter the sanctum sanctorum and worship the idols especially during the childbearing years. When a woman is born, her parents guard her. When married, it is the husband and the in laws. Upon widowhood, her father, brother, and son protect her. In the same way, a nun is also (guarded) by the teacher, by the male group-leader, and the female group-leader. A Jaina nun was known as *sadhvi* or *kanti* or *ganti*.

According to the *Digambaras*, a woman cannot achieve liberation without being reborn as a man. Also, since a woman's nature is to care for children and other dependents, she will find it much more difficult to break free from these earthly attachments, and unless she does this, she cannot achieve liberation. As, nakedness is an essential to the path of liberation, Mahavira himself has set an example of total nudity. The ban on female nakedness is partly intended to protect both men and women. If women went around naked it would cause men to experience sexual desire and the desire produced would hinder the man's progress to liberation. Also naked women would feel ashamed of their state and such a feeling would hinder their spiritual progress. The *Svetambaras* disagree on nakedness, emphasizing on internal purification. A *Digambara* female ascetic can never go naked. Her clothing depends on her position in the ascetic community which itself depends on the degree of her spiritual advancement. A female novice keeps two pieces of clothing. She wears a white sari and covers the top part of her body with a long shawl. She removes this shawl while eating. Whereas, the *Digambaras* do not allow women into the *sangha*, the *Svetambaras* allow them to take ascetic vows and become nuns. It is hoped that they would be incarnated as males, thereby may even become the *tirthankaras*.

There have been in the past women monks, even at times outnumbering the male monks. Many have written religious pamphlets and autobiographies. They generally stay away from public eye and would not participate in debates, discussions and preaching. The female monks are generally under the subordination of male monks, being a matter of a practice, not of decree. These are underlying beliefs to imply that more control and rules are required for women as compared to men. Though the general rules for both men and women are the same, there are discriminations faced by the women. At times, nuns are kept under the authority of junior monks for long periods. To reach higher positions in the hierarchy, the females need to serve for a longer period than the males. Their religious titles are inferior than the males. They are believed to possess lesser intellectual capacity than the males.

Mallinath was the 19th *tirthankara*. According to Jain beliefs, Mallinath became a *siddha*. The *Svetambara* maintain that Mallinath was a woman, Mallibai. In *Shathkhand-agam*, also it is stated that Mallinath was accepted as female *tirthankara*. But later Acharya Kund-kundacharya wrote *Shath-Pahud* and stated in that

granth that as woman cannot sacrifice their clothes it is not possible for them to attain *moksha*. Later he wrote that as they are of very unstable mind, they cannot meditate for long time, which is necessary for *moksha*. He also stated that as they have less grasping power, they are not supposed to study *granthas* like *Drusthiwad* etc. Slowly *Digambars* started believing that women could not attain *moksha* nor become *tirthankaras*. Some texts admit that men can ordain without permission of family members, whereas women need their permission because men are not dependent on others, while a woman depends on others.

Whilst a male monk owns three pieces of clothing, the female monk's attire includes an additional set of eleven items viz the menstrual pad, underpants, the waist-cover and short petticoat, inner and outer skirts, cover for the breasts, left-shoulder and right shoulder-covers, cloak and the wind-cover. *Bṛhatkalpa-bhāṣya* says when she is well-covered by the waist-cover and the long skirt, she is protected down to her feet. Cultured people will agree to meet the nuns if they move in groups of three and make noise. But if a nun wears only one cloth, she will quickly come to ruin.

Bṛhatkalpa-sūtra says for Jain nuns, certain ascetic postures are prohibited: A nun may not take up the standing posture of penance, not stand like a statue, not thus sit down, not squat, not sit like a hero, not sit like a stick, not like a cudgel, not lie face down, not supine, not bent like a mango, or on one side. It is feared that someone seeing the nun in a posture of ascetic practice, someone might pursue her.

2.4 Sacred Feminine

The mothers of the *tirthankaras* are revered and their motherly characteristics extolled. The *sola satis* are projected as role models to lay women as they remained faithful to their husbands in difficult circumstances. The *yaksinis*, the female spiritual attendants of the *jinas*, are revered as the female deities. Padmavati, Ambika and Cakresvari are some one of the important ones. They are generally worshipped for fulfilment of desires like progeny, wealth, and good health as they appear more approachable to women than the illustrious *tirthankaras*. Saraswati, the goddess of learning, is the protector of the knowledge of the *Jinas*. The eight *matrkas* or eight mothers stand for the eight basic notions of Jain ethics. There are 16 *Vidya devis* who represent various sciences are revered as all of them represent symbols of knowledge. These are carved on the ceilings of *Svetambara* temples.

2.5 Feminist Response

Feminist's critique the rule which deny the Jaina nuns to govern themselves as autonomous and make them to be placed under the care of the male monks. Stuart (2013) argues that the probable reason why male authorities emphasize on male guardianship of women is that they share a notion of collective honor in which women's bodies function as an index of the purity and status of their community. Patriarchal societies commonly deny their women their sexual and personal autonomy. The virtue of the woman is inextricably tied up with their honor and pride, hence men tend to control and regulate the behavior of the women. What applies in the case of lay women is applied in the case of renunciates. Though the monks and nuns are not related, they act as their guardians. The modesty of nun's conduct makes a statement about the uprightness of the monks

Preliminarily, male monks must fulfil the role of the male guardian and overseer for the female monks of their order. Consequently, they end up becoming sometimes too involved in their practical affairs. Ironically, renunciation from worldly life, was warranted to remove oneself from attachments of all kinds. Yet, the monks ultimately indulge in the very behavior they sought to disassociate from.

The *asvātantrya* doctrine manifests in two primary ways in *dharmasāstric* objections to renunciation or asceticism by women. Women could not engage in any religious practice, rite, fasting on their own and could not wander outside the homes, leaving the confines of home. These two practices make it difficult for a woman to seek renunciation. Jain texts also assume that a woman's social identity is attached to the men with whom she is associated with. For instance, female characters in Jain stories are identified simply in terms of the man to whom they are related: the lay devotee's wife, the Brahmin priest's wife, the merchant's wife, daughter of a holy man, the sister of King Muraṇḍa, and so on.

Saṅghadāsa, a Svetambara monk portrays nuns predominantly as weak and unimportant. They possess little sattva, physical and spiritual strength. Hence it undermines their capacity to determine one's actions and choices. They can be easily swayed by external coercion or one's own whims and desires. This necessitates greater protection and support than the male monks.

Nuns are thereby characterized as weak, vulnerable, and corruptible. They are most vulnerable to external threats as attack or seduction and internal, as to their own passions, emotions, and inclinations. As such, their bodies are the site of the monastic community's weakness. Jains celebrate passionlessness as a central virtue, and it is a requirement for enlightenment. Enlightenment arises, passions cease. Emotions are seen as part of the world of suffering and rebirth. Enlightened beings are perfectly passionless and equanimous. Any desire leads to the attraction of karma to the soul and thus prevents liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Hence, a person who is not in control of her body poses a problem. The only solution then would be to place them in the care of male monks, who are seen to have the capability of regulating their own behavior and those of the nuns.

3. Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE. It was founded by Gautama Buddha. Buddhism is an anti-metaphysical religion and ethical religion. It is anti-Vedic as Buddha did not believe in Gods and sacrifices. The central teachings of Buddhist philosophy are expressed in the Four Noble Truths viz life is full of suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is cessation of suffering and there is a path leading to cessation of suffering. The *triratnas* of Buddhism are Buddha, *dhamma* and *sangha*. The Buddha is revered as a teacher. The *dhamma* is both the teachings of the Buddha's path and the truths of these teachings. The *sangha* is the community of noble ones, who practice the *dhamma* and have attained some knowledge and can thus provide guidance and preserve the teachings.

Buddha teachings were open to both males and females. He did not discriminate between them in matters of learning the scriptures or attainment of *nirvana*. The Buddha taught that women had a similar potential as men to attain *nirvana*. He praised various female lay disciples for their wisdom and allowed women to become ascetics. The *Therigatha* is a collection of poems written by Buddhist nuns. The two female disciples of the Buddha were Khema and Uppalavanna.

Early Buddhist literature speaks of free intermingling of the sexes. The celibate monks and nuns had separate quarters, were not cut off from the rest of the world. Buddha was known to have long conversations with his female disciples.

3.1 Attitude towards Women

Buddha in the *Sigalovada Sutta* has laid down the duties of a husband and wife. The husband should treat the wife with respect and courtesy, be faithful to her, provide for her and hand over the household to her. In turn the wife should perform her duties by being hospitable to kin of both, practicing faithfulness towards her husband, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all the matters of the household. Buddha's injunctions are thus bilateral. Every relationship whether between husband and wife, parent and child, or master and servant have to be mutual.

In Buddhism, woman do not suffer degradation on her widowhood. She does not have to shave her head, relinquish her ornaments, not forced to fast nor sleep on hard floors. Neither does she have to absent herself from ceremonies and auspicious events. Most importantly there is no religious barrier to her remarriage. The remarriage of rejected wives was also common practice. Women were free to remarry if their marriages did not work. The *Lakrajalosirita*, states Buddhist permitted the remarriage of women after getting separated from their spouses.

3.2 Woman in Theology

Buddhist nuns are bound by an extra eight precepts not applicable to Buddhist monks called the eight *Garudhammas*. Feminists have criticized this as gender discrimination. The *Vinaya-pitaka* contains rules of discipline for monks and nuns. A *bhikkuni* has eight rules *Garudhammas* in addition to the *bhikku*. The most senior nuns are considered as a 'junior' to a monk of even a day.

There are discrepancies between the Pali *Bhikkuni Vinaya* and other versions of the texts. It is believed, that more rigid rules were added after the death of Buddha. These rules discouraged women from being ordained. It was prescribed that a senior nun and monk had to be present at a junior nun's ordination. When no senior nuns were available, it implied that no nun can be ordained and would be a novice only. Hence in the *theravada* orders of southeast Asia, women can only be novices. In Tibetan Buddhism too there was no nun's order but there are women *lamas*. There exists an ancient order of *mahayana* nuns in China and Taiwan. Some *theravada* nuns were ordained in the presence of these *mahayana* nuns which was considered as

controversial. Buddha is believed to have refused his stepmother Mahaprajapati's request for women to be able to become ordained and participate in the *sangha*, the Buddhist community, three times. He agreed to admit them only if the ordained women would follow some extra rules.

Several monastic lineages in Sri Lanka, parts of Southeast Asia, and Tibet till today deny full ordination to women nuns on the grounds that the lineage of nuns was broken long ago and without the Buddha's authority cannot be restarted. Some argue that nuns should focus instead on their practice and service and leave aside matters of worldly rank. Others argue that the issue of ordination is less important to the immediate difficulties faced by female renunciates, who are often housed in economically marginalized institutions and require institutional and educational support, rather than debates over Buddhist monastic jurisprudence.

3.3 Sacred Feminine

The Goddesses can be roughly classified under the following three heads, viz, *dharma*, *yidam* and *guru*. The *dharma* is the protector, usually portrayed as an enlightened being in wrathful form, a protector's primary function is to eliminate the spiritual obstacles hindering the practitioner. The *yidam* is an enlightened meditational deity, embodying the union of wisdom and compassion. She is not separate from the meditator. The *guru* figure is generally the founder of a lineage. She is a fully realized being with whom one identifies wholly with and serves as one's spiritual guide.

i. Dharmapalas

Dharmapalas are 'protectors of *dharma*' or teaching. They are regarded as ferocious divine beings that protect the faithful from the evil demons and bad influences which might thwart their spiritual progress.

a) Kaladevi: Kaladevi, known as Lha-mo, is the only female *dharmapala* or protector of the Buddhist law. She is said to have been created by the other deities and provided with weapons, in order that she might defend *tantrism*. She rides a mule whose reins are made from poisonous snakes and whose back is covered with skin of *Yaksha*. According to one myth the skin is that of Kaladevi's son, whom she is said to have devoured. She has three protruding eyes, ten arms and like all *Dharmapalas* wears a

crown and garland of skulls. She is sometime to be the wife of a *yaksha* or consort of Yama, god of a death. She helps those who earnestly seek her protection.

b) Kurukulla: Kurukulla is a goddess who emanates from Amitabha. She is said to be able to cast spells on men and women to ensure that they serve her. In Tibet, she became a goddess of riches. Her main attributes are a red lotus a bow and an arrow. She is often represented as reddish in colour, seated in a cave and with four arms. Her two upper arms are held in a threatening posture, while the two lower arms offer comfort.

c) Tara: Tara is one of the most popular deities. Her names mean both ‘she who delivers’ and ‘star’. She is regarded as an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and is said to have been born from a lotus floating in one of his tears. According to the other legend, Tara was born from a light beam from one of Avalokiteshvara’s eyes. She embodies the feminine aspect of compassion and incorporates the essence of goddess. As a result, her name is sometimes applied to other female deities. The most common forms are green Tara and white Tara.

ii. Yidam goddesses

a) Machig Labdrn: She is usually depicted in deified form as a peaceful white dancing figure with three eyes, playing a *damaru* (two-sided drum) with her right hand and holding a bell with her left. She also appears in wrathful form as the dark blue *yidam*.

b) Mayadevi: Queen Mayadevi mother of Buddha. She died after his birth and is believed to have been reborn. Buddha is said to have taught her the *dharma* leading to her enlightenment.

c) Vajrayogini / Vajravarahi: Vajrayogini is the principal female *yidam* of highest Yoga *Tantra* of Tibetan Buddhism. She is a slightly wrathful red female figure shown holding a curved knife in her right hand, a skull cup in her left and a *khatvanga* (trident or staff) in her left elbow

iii. Guru Goddess

a) Niguma: This woman was a formidable *mahasiddha*, variously described as the sister or consort of Naropa. The practice of the six *yogas* of Niguma is attributed to her.

b) Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi): Palden Lhamo as female dharma protector is common to all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. She is portrayed as wrathful, riding her mule through a sea of blood, surrounded by wisdom symbolized by fire.

c) Prajnaparamita: Prajnaparamita embodies the blissfulness or emptiness. She is called as the Mother of all the Buddhas. She appears as a tranquil seated figure with four arms. Her first two arms are in meditation posture. One right hand holds a *vajra* and the other the Heart Sutra text.

1.4 Feminist Response

Gross observed Buddhists were very wary of the term 'feminist'. One of the probable reasons being, feminism is looked at as a movement which prioritizes ego-centric behavior and as holding a grudge towards a particular set of thinking. This would go against the fundamentals of Buddhism, which has a compassionate and encompassing outlook⁴.

Buddhist institutions allegedly perpetuate gender biases. They are criticized to support and encourage the dharmic potential of men more effectively than that of the women. Teachings on Dharma do not do justice to women's experience as the focus seem to be on the male experiences. For instance, in discussing about ego and egolessness, the content of discourse would be male oriented, leading to a feeling of disconnect with the women aspirants. Also, women generally experience low self-esteem and so much pressure to consider themselves last, that they wonder how developing egolessness or walking the bodhisattva path can possibly be relevant to them.

Majority of women are engaged in domestic life, so to facilitate women into Buddhist practices, this sphere should not be neglected. According to Buddhist history, the evidence of such an engagement is dismal. The probable cause is domestic life seen as web of attachments, stands in opposition with spirituality. A life with attachments is a hindrance in the path of *dharma*. Women being traditionally relegated to the domestic duties is thus given scant attention.

Like most religions, there are separate orders for men and women in Buddhism. The general justification given is to avoid temptation which is a threat to celibacy. By limiting women's movements to certain spaces, the source of temptation is handled.

The males occupy a place of prominence in the key positions. In the *sanghas*, the *bodhisattvas* are all males. It leads to further devaluing positioning of women. Like Jainism, female monks are placed under the care of the male monks. Just as in family, a woman lives in the protection of the father/brother/husband/son, similarly the woman monk is subservient to the male monk.

4. Sikhism

The founder of the Sikh religion was Guru Nanak. It teaches there is only One God of all religions. The soul goes through countless cycles of rebirths and finally reaches the human form. The goal of one's life is to lead a moral life so that one may merge with God. By always remembering God, one must live a virtuous and truthful life. By living the life of a householder, earning an honest living, and avoiding worldly temptations and sins, salvation can be attained. Renunciation or celibacy is not mandated. It confers equality to men and women. Women are allowed to participate in religious functions. They can perform ceremonies and lead prayers.

4.1 Attitude towards Women

The Guru Granth Sahib asserts life comes from a woman, she is a mother, wife, sister, and friend. Through her family is possible and the other worldly bonds. She cannot be called as evil, from whom all world leaders have taken birth. Without the woman no world is possible. Thus, men and women are treated as different, but one is not superior to the other. In the eyes of God, they are equal. No position is reserved for men, each have equal opportunity. Women can participate in prayers and politics alike.

Women had equal rights to education and ancestral properties. Women's education was treated as a matter of importance. Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru, set up many schools. Fifty-two of the Sikh missionaries sent out by the third Guru were women. For the Guru, education to take root, women had to be equal participants. Women, whether married or unmarried could have a share in property along with the male children. The father's property was equally divided amongst all children irrespective of their gender.

Women were empowered to defend themselves and not to depend on others for their protection. They were taught to wield *kirpans*, for their own and others safety. The Guru used the term '*sant-sipahi*' to denote women. They were not to be blamed for any lustful

thoughts in men, it indicated moral degradation of man. It was not considered appropriate for a Sikh woman to hide her face with a veil or cover.

The *khalsa* (initiation) ceremony was opened to men and women, by Guru Gobind Singh. At the time of *Amrit* a man is given the title '*singh*' (lion) and the woman '*kaur*' (princess). This exempting them from using the husband's surname after marriage. The Guru perceived women as equally worthy as men and hence did not see any distinction between the *khalsa* ceremony for men and women. The women like the men could keep the 5 K's. Female infanticide was strictly prohibited. Women captured in battle, were to be treated with respect and could not be kept as slaves. To abolish the sati system, widow remarriage was encouraged.

Sikhism considers marriage is considered a part of the spiritual journey to realize God. It is not considered a hindrance to the human's goal to realize God within. The marriage ceremony is known as, *anand karaj*, '*anand*' means bliss and '*karaj*' means something one does. Marriage as the union of two souls is considered as a step on the path of spirituality. The Guru rejected renunciation and celibacy and advocated the responsibilities of the householder as spiritual. The union of man and woman is an important part of the individual's spiritual journey. Thus, it's in the ordinary life that God can be found. There is thus no notion of the woman being considered inferior to her husband.

4.2 Woman in Theology

Women are permitted to enter *Gurdwara* and offer prayers. She can join in *Gurbani* recitals, *naam simran* and *kirtan*. It is not allowed for a woman to enter by covering her face with a veil. According to *Guru Granth Sahib*, human birth is important and to achieve salvation should be available to woman also. God is present in all of us, male and female. By meditating on God's name, a woman can attain salvation.

4.3 Sacred Feminine

The notion of sacred feminine occurs in Sikhism in the form of Mother Earth. Though the Earth is not worshipped as a form of goddess, she is one that makes life possible hence is honored. The Transcendent being i.e., God is only one, but it is as much female as much it is male. There are two terms '*kudrati*' and '*mati*' which are used in the Sikh literature. '*Kudrati*' in Punjabi means 'nature' and '*mati*' stands for 'intellect'. *Kudrati*

includes Earth, sky, regions, states of joy, word of God across all religions and even physical activities as eating, drinking, dressing. Harjot Oberoi (1992), observed in the nineteenth century, the Sikh communities have begun worshipping the Goddess, *Devi*. She is understood as a divine being and is called by various names as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Kalka*, *Bhiwani*, *Maheshri*. She is also known as the lesser deities as *Sitala devi*, *Mansa devi* and *Naina devi*.

4.4 Feminist Response

The family setup of an average Sikh family is patriarchal in nature. The head of a family is generally a male. The males take major decisions in key matters of childcare, child rearing, and family finances. Wives have stronger domination in decision-making in the domestic-work sphere. The egalitarian perceptions supposed to be existing in the religious and cultural ideology were not reflected in real practice.

Nicky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2000), a Sikh scholar, began to question the core beliefs of Sikhism after she underwent a personal tragic experience. During the funeral rites of her mother, she was not allowed to light the funeral pyre. She questioned the male authority in death rituals. She pondered over what could be the justification for letting a distant male relative to light the pyre of her mother, when she shared a blood bond with her mother.

She recounted how the process of feminization of Sikhism had reached at the epoch during the presence of the Gurus. Beginning from the birth of Nanak (1469) till the death of the Tenth Guru (1708) women could be seen in all religious and political spaces. This was not restricted only to the elite but to rather to all women, irrespective of their caste, class, or marital status. Women were not segregated, did not have to veil themselves or be confined to their homes. Women were not restricted from entering sacred spaces like the *gurdwara* even during menstruation or childbirth. They could enter *gurdwaras* from any of their four doors. They could see, touch, and recite from the *Guru Granth*. There were no rules stating that they must eat apart from or after men. In the *langar* they sat along with men, but also cooked, served and ate with them. Women spoke, saw, and acted, and they were heard, seen, and followed.

Five centuries after Guru Nanak, patriarchy began to infiltrate into the system and women lost their presence. Today it is the men who occupy the prominent place in the

Gurdwara, by being the ones who touch the *Granth Sahib*. They dress the scripture, read from it, perform the *kirtans* and any other chores which bring them in direct contact with the scripture. Women are seen today in the periphery performing tasks as cleaning and cooking. During menstruation they are not allowed to perform any religious deeds. The women too have forgotten their illustrious history and perceive themselves as polluted in tune with the prevalent practices. The birth of a daughter is no more rejoiced as it was in the past.

5. Santal (Tribal Traditions)

The Santal is the largest tribe of Jharkhand, also found in Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Chattisgarh and Tripura. They are an extremely tight-knit community and live in a harmonious relation with nature, like parts to a whole. There is no sense of individual, but rather a sense of community, with everyone participating in joys and sorrows of birth, death, festivals. Just as with community bonds, the Santals share similar bonding with nature, comprising of the land, valleys, mountains, rivers, sacred groves, etc. To understand the role of women in Santals, it needs to be looked at from two, *binti*, the creation narrative and *jaher-than*, the goddess of the sacred grove.

5.1 Origin of Woman

Binti describes creation as an act by *Thakur*, the supreme God, who lives with *Thakuran*, his consort. One day, *Thakur* expressed a desire to live on Earth. The arid earth then had no life, so the secondary god *Lita*, created creatures with no face or limbs, aquatic creatures, and plants. *Thakuran*, from her collarbone created a pair of geese/swans named *Has* and *Hasail*. They laid two eggs, which were protected by *Jaher-era*, the goddess of fertility. The male child was named *Pilchurharam* (primal man) and the female child, *Pichuburhi* (primal woman). To them were born five sons and six daughters, and then on the Santal community was created. To *Pilchurharam* was entrusted the task of ploughing, sowing and growing fruits. *Pichuburhi* was made to reap and thrash grains, husk rice, and cook food.

The act of creation is indicative of the general spirit of complementarity of genders amongst the Santals. Each gender has a specific a task assigned. The boys are taught agriculture and the girls, household chores and agriculture-based activities as threshing, separating, and winnowing the grain.

5.2 Role of Women

The Santal women are on an equal footing with the males with respect to economic, social and cultural aspect. The women folk traditionally indulge in domestic and agricultural chores, rice-beer making and decorating homes. Modern women after receiving formal education are preferring to take up jobs in offices.

The birth of a girl is not stigmatized in the Santals. The stages of life of the girl-child are a mixture of domestic and economic activities. She begins her domestic chores from the age of 3-4 years by babysitting her younger siblings. As she grows up, she participates in other tasks as filling water, fruit picking, collecting roots and leaves, other agricultural activities. In her teens she interacts with her peers and is more independent. On reaching adulthood she is expected to marry. The Santali bride may be older or younger than the groom. The relationship between men and women is open and free. At home, the women are responsible for financial affairs.

5.3 Sacred Feminine

The Santals do not worship idols or have temples but worship the scared groves, *jaher*. These groves⁵ are found outside of the settlements. The nature is treated as sacred. *Jaher-era* is the presiding deity of the grove, the mother goddess. She is believed to wield power over germination, fertility, growth, and plenitude. She is prayed to for protection, abundance, and good fortune of the people and the whole of nature. Corresponding to every activity of the harvest, there exists a festival dedicated to *Jaher-era*.

Though the presiding deity is feminine, lay women are excluded from performing any significant activity at the grove. It is only during the festival, that the wife of the priest is attributed sacredness as the living embodiment of *Jaher-era*.

6. Summary

In conclusion it can be observed that the major religions barring the tribal cultures are patriarchal in their structures. The stories of creation bring out the inferior status by indicating how women are created for men in Hinduism or a deceptive male born as woman in Jainism. Though Hinduism speaks of a glorious past of women in the Vedic ages, there was a steady decline in her societal status. All religions, including the tribal

cultures do not allow women to occupy place of importance in religious practices, priesthood, or worship. The sacred feminine is accepted in the Eastern religions, but it is only in Hinduism that the feminine principle is revered even above the male deities. In religions as Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and tribal cultures she is ancillary.

¹ The blessing given was '*putrinastah kumarinah*', Paranjape (2003).

² The '*samana*' was a cultural fair wherein girls and boys would participate to seek their mates.

³ Kulkarni (2003) also notes that some objects utilized in the ritual are also gendered, for instance, water is female, fire is male, etc.

⁴ Hamington (2004), mentions the 'care-ethics' by Gilligan was rejected by earlier feminists as it seemed to base itself on the essentialist conception of woman. Ironically, Buddhists reject feministic approach as it underscores gender differences.

⁵ The grove comprises of trees as the sal, mahua, karam, pipal, palas and kusum

Chapter Three

Women in Semitic Religions

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are Semitic religions. They are named as Semites, after Shem, the son of Prophet Noah. These religions are also known as Abrahamic religions. Jewish tradition claims descent from Abraham. Christians call Abraham as a 'Father of Faith' and Islam too claims to have roots linked to him. These religions are prophetic religions which believe that guidance was sent through the prophets of God.

1. Women and Judaism

Judaism is an ancient religion. It is said to have started with establishment of the covenant between God and Abraham. The main principles of Judaism are belief in one God who is the creator. Jews should treat one another with dignity and love. They should worship God, pray and study the *Torah*. Judaism is based on the Old Testament of the Bible. Scriptural authority comprises of the books of the *Torah* and the Prophets. The books of the *Torah* include the Biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Jews believe God knows the thought and deeds of the follower and that they shall be rewarded the just deeds and punish evil ones. God's nature is beyond human comprehension. Judaism teaches that every human is equal as each person is created in God's image. Judaism also teaches that God is to send the *Messiah*, a descendant from Israel's King David, to bring peace and unity to the world.

The three denominations of Judaism are the Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism and Conservative Judaism. The Orthodox sect is the most conservative of the three. They believe that the *Torah* is revealed from God, and it is something that should be followed strictly. Reform Judaism is the most liberal. Believers of this sect do not think the *Torah* was written by God and do not follow its tenets strictly. Conservative Judaism is somewhere in the middle. They believe *Torah* was given by God, but that it came through human beings.

Though it is a divinely revealed religion, its custodians have been mainly males. During the 1970s feminist critics began to criticize the absence of women's voices within the

patriarchal structures and attempted to reconstruct the lost voices of women, trying to recover evidence of women's history and self-understanding.

1.1 Origin of Women

The Hebrew Bible gives two separate accounts of creation of man and woman, in Genesis 1-2:4 and Genesis 2:5. In Genesis 1, man and woman are created in the image of God. In Genesis 2:5 Eve was created from the rib of Adam. To compliment the two contradicting accounts, the Rabbis in the *Genesis Rabbah* interpreted it by holding that the primordial being had male and female qualities, and later split into two male and female. First Adam was created, with two backs, one for each side. Then from a rib of Adam, Eve was created. So, they are a result of a simultaneous creation, yet Eve was made from Adam.

Such an account makes Eve subordinate to Adam and this understanding is held throughout in the rabbinic literature. There are queries sought regarding woman as, why was Eve formed from the rib of Adam? The reply is the rib was chosen because it is covered, so it ensures modesty of woman. Yet women have vices as conceited, flirtatious, eavesdroppers, jealous, making them lesser in virtues than men. Another question asked is regarding their position whilst birth, why are men born with face upwards and woman with face downwards as they take birth. The justification being, man looks at the earth, his place of creation, whereas woman looks at the rib, her place of creation. To the question why man does not need a perfume and a woman does, it is replied that earth from which does not decay, hence man does not need perfume. Whereas a woman is born from bone, which decays hence woman needs perfume.

1.2 Woman at Home

Traditionally women treated as separate from males but equal. Their obligations and responsibilities were different from males, but important. They were believed to possess greater intuition, understanding, intelligence than men. They had the right to buy, sell, and own property. They were believed to possess business acumen and could enter contracts.

The Talmud spoke many negative things about women. Rabbis described women as lazy, jealous, vain, and gluttonous, indulging in gossip and prone to the practice of the occult and witchcraft. On these grounds, men were advised not to associate with

women. Women were discouraged from pursuing higher studies or religious studies. The intention mainly seems to refrain them from neglecting their duties as mothers and wives.

Men and women were expected to dress modestly. Orthodox Jewish women tend to wear clothing that is not too bright or tight-fitting, with sleeves that cover the elbows and skirts that cover the knees. Married women cover their hair as a sign that they are no longer single. The *Talmud* recounts a tale of a remarkable woman named Kimchis. She had seven sons and each served as High Priest. She attributed this honor to never exposing her hair, even at home.

Marriage is bond commanded by God in which a man and a woman come together to create a relationship. They are merged in a single soul. Without marriage, man is considered 'as incomplete. Woman's consent was mandatory for marriage. The *Talmud* states that a man should love his wife as much as he loves himself and honor her more than he honors himself. It condemns domestic abuse and an overbearing husband as it is believed that God counts the woman's tears. Reciprocally the wife should not leave the home frequently. She was also expected to be modest, even if the only other person present with her, was her husband. According to the *Talmud*, a husband must provide to his wife, food, condiments, oil for cooking and lighting purposes and an allowance of a silver coin each week.

The position of husband and wife about divorce is not an equal. As per the *Talmud*, it is only the husband who can initiate a divorce, and he cannot be prevented from doing so by the wife. Later, the rabbis eased the rules by prohibiting a man from divorcing a woman without her consent. A rabbinical court can force a husband to divorce his wife under certain conditions, as when he is repulsive due to a medical condition or some other condition, if he neglects his marital obligations or on the grounds of sexual incompatibility.

A woman is referred to as an *agunah*, if her husband is missing, either because of disappearance, desertion, or is presumed dead. A divorce in such a case cannot be granted hence she cannot remarry. The *rabbis* deliberated over this problem, balancing the need to allow the woman to remarry with the risk of an adulterous marriage if the husband had to reappear. Till date no solution has been found. A temporary system in place is to give the wife a conditional *get*, in case the husband goes to war.

In Judaism, sex is the right of woman, and the man is obligated to fulfil her needs. A man hence may not take a vow to abstain from sex for an extended period and may not take a journey for an extended period of time, because that would deprive his wife of sexual relations. A man can be compelled to divorce his wife if he refuses to fulfil her sexual needs. In a similar vein, a woman too cannot withhold sex from her husband. As punishment it could even invite divorce, wherein no divorce settlement is paid. Forced sex, even in marriages is not permitted.

1.3 Woman and Worship

Traditionally, Jewish men and women pray separately. In the ancient times women could go only as far as the second court of the Temple. In the medieval period women were allowed to study the Torah and women's prayer groups were formed. Synagogues had a woman's section like the balcony, essentially separating her from the men. The rationale was that the woman's body was a distraction to men, which could induce impure thoughts in them during prayer.

Consequently, the role of woman in the synagogue became limited. The beautification of the synagogue was one of the tasks allocated to women. They wove tapestries for the synagogue and covers for the *Torah*. However, in the recent times the role of women in the synagogue and the community has increased.

For the Orthodox Jews, women's prayer groups are forbidden by law. Liberals, hold that women's prayer groups may be allowed but they cannot carry out a full prayer service.

1.4 Woman and God

One of the major theological topics to be addressed by Jewish feminists was the male imaging of God. In the opinion of Rita Gross, the Jews did not develop female imagery of God, which resulted in degradation of the Jewish women. The use of male language for God suggests and reinforces an androcentric view. To give an equal footing for women in the religion, the referencing to God must also be 'God-She.'

Plaskow (2009) refers to two feminists, Lynn Gottlieb and Marcia Falk who are commentators on feminist theology. Gottlieb's book (1995), *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism*, describes "She who dwells within" as the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling feminine presence of God in Jewish mysticism. She used

metaphors as *Rahmana*, mother of wombs, or *rakhmania*, compassionate giver of life, Birdwoman, Dragonlady, Queen of Heaven, Tree of Life, invisible web, and many others to refer to the *Shekinah*. It treats telling of women's stories as central, rather than peripheral, in the Bible.

Marcia Falk in her book '*The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*', pondered on the gendering of God. Instead of the gendered imagery, she conceives of God as awareness, a unifying wholeness pervading the creation, which is dynamic and alive. In prayer, she uses natural or non-personal images of God in order to emphasize that God is not separate from a unifying wholeness.

On this issue, some *rabbis* have maintained, that God in Judaism has never been viewed as gendered. God has masculine and feminine qualities. Since God does not possess body or genitalia, to contend God as male or female is absurd. Masculine pronouns for God are simply for convenience's sake, as Hebrew language has no neutral gender. God is no more male than a table is. An objection can be raised, that a female pronoun too could have been used instead. Failure to do so clearly points out to androcentric conceptions.

1.5 Ordination of Woman

The first woman to be ordained was Regina Jonas, who was a Reform *rabbi*, which took place in Germany. Ordination of women as *rabbis* and cantors was initiated in the United States in the 1970s. Since then, several women as *rabbis* and cantors have been ordained in the United States and Britain.

Reformists movements have attempted to revise the prayer books and liturgy by gender-neutral language and included references to the biblical matriarchs as well as patriarchs. Feminist biblical commentaries, written from a range of religious perspectives, have also been published. Feminist rituals to mark occasions in women's lives have been developed, including feminist Passover liturgies, prayers for the birth and weaning of a baby, ceremonies for naming baby girls, celebration of *Rosh Hodesh*, the New Moon, as a women's holiday.

In the 21st century, women now have opportunities for studying rabbinic texts, until now limited to men. Women now serve as legal advisors to women regarding issues

connected with divorce and *niddah* observance. Women-only prayer groups and *rabbinic* study groups have been established. A few forward-looking synagogues have permitted women to read from the Torah under certain circumstances and conditions, deliver a sermon, and even lead the service. The problem of the *agunah* remains a central issue for feminists, particularly in Israel, where the Orthodox rabbinate has exclusive control over Jewish marriage and divorce.

1.6 Sacred Feminine

Judaic texts mention important women as Esther, Leah, Rebecca, Sarah, and others. Kabbalah the mystical side of Judaism, gave the name *Shekinah* to the immanent power of God. After creation, when God retires from the world and became transcendent, *Shekinah* remains in the world, as a mark of His divinity. Some treat *Shekinah* as a real person, hinting at the notion of a divine couple, where she is the 'bride of God'. About women, she plays a dual function. She protects the women from lustful gaze of men at the same time makes them desirable and attractive. She is present at the *Shabbat* and renews the faith between God and his covenant.

1.7 Feminist Response to Judaism

Jewish women as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, have been in the forefront of the second wave of feminism in the 1960's. Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* and Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* are two important works in Jewish feminist theology. The re-emergence of a Jewish feminist movement, as part of the Second Feminist wave, led to major changes in women's status in Judaism and to a flourishing of Jewish feminist scholarship and theology. Changes as equality of women in the worship at the synagogue, the *Bat Mitzvah*, the honoring of women in the synagogue, women in the prayer quorum, calling women to the *Torah*, allow women to lead synagogue worship services and ordaining women as rabbis are the most significant.

Adler investigates into the infallible authority of the *Halakah*. It derives its authority from the *Law of Pentateuch* and from the *Torah*. Both the texts are infallible, as they are believed to be communicated to Moses. Drawing its authority from the texts, the code of conduct following from *Halakahic* laws were regarded as infallible. Being a

critique of these laws, Adler calls it as ‘methodolatrous system’ which has developed into a false God. This method now chooses the questions, instead of vice versa.

For Plaskow, Jewish theology has been a product of male thinking. For instance, the *halaklah* (Jewish law) does not count women’s presence in the *minyan* i.e. the quorum of the prayer, at the reading of the *Torah*, besides other things, is an expression of the ‘othering’ of women. Women have become *rabbis*, not because of women, but because of men. Hence, a man defines religion and is an active agent, women are others, as if they were any less human.

Judaism makes a distinction between the spirituality and physicality, representing man and woman. One of the needs to regulate a woman’s behavior is her association with body and thereby sexuality. The sexuality of woman is a threat to the spirituality of the man. Hence the Halakha, imposes restrictions on the woman as dressing modestly, indicating women are custodians of public morality. Woman is a temptress, and the man is the victim of temptation. It is said to be safe to walk behind a lion than behind a woman.

Feminists observe that the term ‘Jewish tradition’ connotes only the tradition of Jewish men, not of men and women. Women have been equal partners in creating history, but that contribution is totally ignored and consequently forgotten. The experiences of women have been eliminated from tradition. The cause of it being the otherness of woman and maleness of God. When viewed from the parameters of male experience, female experience is othered and eliminated. The maleness of God makes the male as the representative of God and silences the female experience as inadequate. This in turn leads to women being othered in the religious texts. Any female student who studies the Rabbinical text, discovers that her existence and experiences are invisible. She reads the texts sanctioning selling daughters as slaves, annulment of a woman’s vows by the familial males.

Miriam is a considered a prophetess in *Torah*. The place of her death and burial is recorded in the *Torah*, indicating her importance. There is an account in which Miriam and Aaron, challenge the authority of Moses, God is believed to have struck Miriam with leprosy and she is forced to remain outside the camp. Aaron on the other hand is simply reprimanded.

For Plaskow, the practice of *agunah*, is a crime against women which disgraces the Jewish community. She calls it a violation of human rights which warrants an immediate remedy. Till such a system is in place, it indicates women are not on an equal footing with man.

Feminists critique the male images of God. Rabbis call God names as, 'Father of mercy', 'King of all Kings', 'He', 'God as Lord', 'King of the Universe'. When God is male, maleness becomes the norm of the society. Women then become the 'Others' and are excluded from the *Torah* and subordinated in the community. Plaskow argues, when some symbols associated with God become deeply established, they lose their symbolic nature and become a part of the experience. In the case of male metaphors used for God, provides an access to the nature of divine reality.

2. Christianity

Christianity is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is one of the world's largest religions. The core teachings are the belief in Jesus as the Son of God and as the *Messiah*, belief in God as the Father and the doctrine of Trinity. Christ was anointed by God as saviour of humanity. His coming was believed as the coming true of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Christians believe that by believing and accepting the death and resurrection of Christ, their sins can be cleansed. On cleansing, they can be reconciled with God and salvation be made possible. Trinity refers to three distinct, eternally co-existing persons, the Father, the Son (Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Together, they sometimes called as the Godhead. Though distinct from another they are one. The Father has no source, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father.

Christians regards the Biblical canon, the Old Testament and the New Testament, as the inspired word of God. There are many denominations of Christianity as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Lutherianism, Calvinists, Eastern Orthodoxy etc.

Feminists have interpreted the Bible as subscribing to a gender-based hierarchy. Christian theology, they claim has placed woman under the man's authority — in the church, in marriage, and elsewhere. It has excluded women from church leadership positions that give women any kind of authority over men. The bias is also exemplified in the doctrine of creation in Genesis.

2.1 Origin of Women

Genesis 1:26-28:- God said, “Let us make mankind in our image and likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all the wild animals and every creature that crawls on the earth.” God created man in his image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. Then God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the animals that crawl on the earth”.

Genesis 2:18-24:- Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man is alone, I will make him a helper like himself.” When the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and the birds of air, he brought them to the man called each of them would be its name. The man named all the cattle, all the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field but he found no helper like himself. The Lord God cast the man into a deep sleep and, while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed its place with flesh. And the rib which the Lord God took from the man, he made into a woman, and brought her to him. Then the man said, “She now is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called Woman, for from man she has been taken.”

Since so, a man leaves his parents and becomes united with his wife, and they become one. God gave Adam and Eve the same degree of honor. Adam was not given the complete authority and management, but Eve too was included. She was to be his co-worker and equal partner in all things. The woman was meant to enjoy the same rights on his earth, he gave her the same right, rank, and honor. God created the woman as a ‘helper’ for the man. However, being a ‘helper’ does not imply that the woman’s inferiority or subservience. God created both men and women in His own image and made them equal custodians of all His creation.

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, God was angry. On being questioned, Adam pointed out it was Eve who gave him the fruit. He blamed Eve as he feared the punishment. Eve had no one else to blame, she blamed the serpent, saying she was deceived by the serpent. However, none of these excuses availed. God’s wrath prevailed and each of them was punished by removing them from Eden. To woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he

said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will."

God is not responsible for conferring inferior status to women, nor did men were commanded to rule harshly over their wives. However, in due course of history, it has sometimes been thought that God's punishment of Eve was justification for degradation and subjugation of women.

2.2 Woman at Home

According to Paul, as affirmed by the Biblical teachings, going back to Genesis, men were to be the leaders and authorities in the family. Just as God is the head of Christ, Christ the head of every man, in a similar vein, man is the head of his wife. In Corinthians, he said women should continue to observe the custom of wearing a veil in public. Any woman who prays without unveiling disgraces herself. If a woman should not veil it is better to cut off her hair. A man need not to veil, as he is the image and reflection of God. Man was not made from woman, but woman was made from man. Also, a man was not created for the sake of the woman, but woman was created for the sake of man. Consequently, a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, by veiling.

Ephesians (5:21-30) rejects the harsh subjugation of women that was characteristic of society at that time. Husbands were to love their wives tenderly, not to treat them as slaves. Men and women ought to subject themselves to each other for Christ. It uses the relation of Christ to the Church as a model for relation between man and woman. Just as the Church serves Christ, a woman must serve her husband and as Christ is the head of the Church, man is the head of the wife. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loved and cared and sacrificed for his Church. A husband must love his wife like he loves his body. Just as no person hates his body, but cares for it, similarly Christ loves each and every member of his Church.

For Thomas Aquinas, women were defective men, born imperfect in body and soul. Their conception was attributed to a defective sperm or blowing of damp wind at time

of conception. Aquinas's teaching found acceptance that women had a high-water content as compared to men, which made them sexually incontinent. Their watery nature made them weak and unreliable. This was incorporated as a fundamental premise of Canon Law that they were inferior beings.

The intellectual capacity of a woman was likened to a child. She was believed to be more carnal than a man. Her birth was regarded as defective since she was born from the bent rib of man. She is thus a deceiver as being made from a rib which is bent, away from the direction of man. Summing up, she is thereby deemed imperfect.

The Canon Law decreed women to not play any significant role before law as witnessing a will, testifying in disputes over wills or in criminal proceedings. They were put on par with children and imbeciles. They could not practice any professions as law, medicine, nor hold any public offices. The Canon made her husband her sovereign and guardian. After marriage all her property came to be owned by the husband, leaving her bereft of any land holdings. She could not sue or make contracts without the husband's consent. Unmarried women were under the dictates of the fathers. They were treated as personal property and could be swapped for other goods or for political advantage.

Martin Luther, a Protestant, espoused the view, home is the place of a woman. It was a woman's duty to bear children, even if it killed her. He is reported to have said that women were meant to give birth, even if they tire of it or even die.

2.3 Woman in Theology

The New Testament mentions Jesus interacting with women in public, which was unacceptable during those times. He is also known to have women sponsors. A long conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, leads to her conversion as Christ's disciple. Some of his prominent women followers were Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, Mary, Susanna. At his crucifixion, his women followers are believed to have comforted him whilst the others fled. It was Mary Magdalene and other women who were amongst the first to witness the resurrection of Christ.

The appointing of twelve male apostles is criticized as bestowing secondary status to women. It is defended on the grounds that the task of spreading the word was arduous

and filled with danger, punishable even by death. It would not be appropriate to let women come to facing such perils.

The spread of Christianity resulted in more involvement of women in the faith. In Paul's missionary movement, women were important agents within the different cities. The letters by Paul make a mention of women Chloe, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche and Phoebe. Chloe, appears to be the head of a household, told Paul of the divisions in the congregation of Corinth. Priscilla, the wife of Aquilla is mentioned seven times in the Bible, as a missionary partner with Paul. Out of seven times Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned as a couple, her name appears before Aquila's five times. Phoebe, another woman mentioned in Pauline letters, attaches to her three titles deacon, sister, and leader and president.

2.4 Ordination of Woman

As per the Canon law women were expected to be silent in church as was deemed as shameful for women should speak so. Till recent times this practice continued. Further, women were also expected to veil whilst in Church. They could not sing in the Church

Regarding the ordination of women, the Roman Catholics oppose the ordination of women as priests. One of the arguments refers to the twelve male disciples chosen by Christ. Since the chosen were all males, it indicates the choice for leadership. Pope Francis has ruled out a woman ever serving as a priest in the Roman Catholic church. But when he was asked and then pressed on the matter by a Swedish journalist during a press conference onboard the papal plane, Francis suggested the ban would be eternal since Saint Pope John Paul II had the last clear word on this and if it stands, this stands.

Evangelicals too oppose female ordination. By emphasizing on the Biblical authority, it bases the opposition on the writings of Paul, such as Ephesians 5:23, 1 Timothy 2:11-15. These demand male leadership in the Church.

2.5 Sacred Feminine

In Christianity, the veneration of Mary, as the mother of Jesus Christ has been practiced since long. Mary, commonly referred as 'Mother Mary' has been worshiped as a saint and not as a deity. She has been given titles like 'Mother of God', 'Queen of Heaven', 'Mother of the Church', 'Our Lady' and 'Star of the Sea'. St. Thomas Aquinas writes

on Mary that she is the recipient of infinite dignity, bestowed upon by a God who is infinite. Such a dignity is unparalleled as the bestower, God is unparalleled.

Mariology is the systematic study of Mary. It focuses on her veneration in daily life, prayers and hymns dedicated to her, the fine arts as art, music, architecture used in her worship, and her place in salvation within the Christian theology. A singular dignity that receives a higher level of veneration than all other saints. Her place in the plan of salvation and devotion is revealed through the four dogmas of Perpetual Virginity, Mother of God, Immaculate Conception and Assumption. However, Mariology can be pursued only in relation to the church and Christ. An isolated study of Mary cannot be performed. Pope Benedict XVI puts it, 'Mariology can never be purely Mariological', indicating her secondary status in the salvation.

The four Marian Dogmas among the teachings about Virgin Mary are as below:

1) Perpetual Virginity of Mary - It means Mary was a virgin before, during and after giving birth. The faithful believe that Mary was ever virgin for the whole of her life, and that Jesus was her only biological son whose conception at birth is held to be a miracle. Mary conceived Christ through the Holy Spirit without participation of any man. After birth she did not lose her virginity and remains a virgin after birth.

2) Immaculate Conception of Mary – Mary conceived without the Original Sin. Her conception was preserved Immaculate. Being filled with divine grace unlike others, she is stainless.

3) The Mother of God – Being a 'mother' to God means she became the vessel by which God becomes flesh. Scriptural basis for this dogma is found in John 1:14 which states "...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us". Galatians 4:4 which states "God sent forth his son, born of a Woman, born under the law". Luke 1:35 affirms divine maternity by stating, "The holy spirit shall come upon thee...wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the son of God".

4) Assumption of Mary - This dogma states that Mary was assumed into heaven with body and soul upon completing her earthly life.

Mary is deemed as the 'Mother of the Church' and 'Mother of all Christians'. Mary plays the role of being the mother of the church by bringing about the birth of believers in the church. and she also carries on in heaven her maternal role about the members

of Christ cooperating in the birth and development of divine life in the souls of the redeemed. She is also called the 'Co-redemptrix' referring to the participation of Mary in the salvation process. She cannot participate as equal to Christ in the redeeming of humans as Christ is the only redeemer. Mary was herself redeemed by Christ her Son, which means she cannot be an equal part in redemption. She has an indirect or unequal but important participation in the redemption process. Mary gave free consent to give life to Christ, the redeemer, shared his life and to suffered with him under the cross and ultimately sacrificed him for the sake of redemption of mankind. She is also called the 'Mediatrrix' as she was mediator between man and God. She plays in redemption a preparatory and a supportive role. She has the power of intercession and the believers prayed to her for that. She has been seen as dispensing God's grace and also as an advocate of the people to God. Mary has been crowned 'Queen of Heaven' because she has brought forth God as Man and even as Supreme King.

It has been seen that Marian devotions is not quite common in denominations of Protestantism. A typical Protestant view of Mary may be said to focus on her humility before God and her obedience. A newer, controversial Protestant view of Mary sees her as a feisty, assertive and radical Christian woman. However, Protestants believe that the term 'Mother of God' is controversial. God did not derive his divinity from Mary therefore, it is wrong to say that God is Mary's son. It is also a belief that Mary is an obstruction in the path of devotion to Jesus. Jesus is the one who helps in salvation and only he is to be worshiped. Focusing on Marian devotion can disturb their true aim that is, the worship of Jesus.

2.6 Feminist Response

Rosemary Radford Reuther delves into the issues arising out of creation. When man was believed to be made in the image of God, whilst theologians interpreted it to mean both Adam and Eve were created in the image of God and for others it was only Adam. This debate led to questioning whether woman possessed a soul or not, since she is not rational.

Paul, says in his letters to the Corinthians, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife and God is the head of Christ"(Corinthians 11.3). This hierarchy had implications for nexus of issues, as place and purpose of woman in Christian religion to veiling of a woman's head. Since God

is the head of Christ, Christ the head of man and being head of a woman. Also, it was the woman who was created for man, not vice versa. It follows that a woman be subjugated to man, and she is required to veil her head, but a man need not. Paul argues, man being the reflection of God, as he was created in the image of God, need not cover his head, but a woman is created from man, hence she needs to veil her head, when in prayer.

Women are requiring to be silent in church, finds its roots in the creation narrative. Through, the Original Sin and Fall, Eve's role as the transgressor stands prominent. Adam went against the command of God as he was tempted by Eve, who was in turn tempted by the serpent. Eve was thus deceived first and let Adam into deception. She is thus responsible for the deception and fall of humanity into sin. Her status as second in order of creation, coupled with being guilty of deception and fall of humanity, makes her culpable for sin and to be silenced in church. It is even deemed shameful for them to speak in church. She can be saved by childbearing and by being subordinate to man.

Calvin and Luther denied the power of prophecy to women, in terms of being recognized as a prophetess. Such a practice was allowed for a short while in the times of the New Testament but has been discontinued. The justification was not the inferiority of the woman, but to maintain the social order perpetuated by God into the society. God has decreed that woman be subordinated to men to ensure proper relations of authority. Women must thus accept their subordination to man for maintaining a good social order.

The common Christian woman shares the sin and punishment of Eve and continues to participate in her burden. She is to recognize and accept the past misgivings of the First Woman and live by subordinating her will to the man. She should be submissive and accept her husband's or other male authority over her. It is through her submission she should win the care and affection of her husband, which ensures her redemption.

Theologians insist, Jesus had to be a male figure and could not have been a female. Supplemented by the reasons for the woman's fallibility, a woman, the theologians insist, would not have been listened to by the community. From this it follows, the 'female-Christ' would not have represented humanity and possessed no authority. Women are redeemed through the maleness of Christ, but the vice versa would not have been possible. Hence Christ could have been female, and femaleness cannot be

conceived as including the male. Such a position has implications for the ordination of women as priests. Aquinas holds, women cannot be allowed to become priests as they are not eligible to receive the sacrament of ordination. Owing to their intrinsic nature of fallibility, they cannot embody the virtue of excellence which is mandated to represent God. It is only the males who represent the normative humanness which is shared by Christ.

3. Islam

Islam in Arabic means ‘submission’ and a Muslim is one who surrenders or submits to God. The fundamental tenets are belief in one God, Allah, and Muhammad as his one true prophet. God passed knowledge to Muhammad and other prophets as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The Quran contains this written word of God and is hence infallible. The philosophy of Islam is summed up in the Five Pillars which are to be mandatorily observed by all Muslims. They are *shahada* (faith), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (charity), *sawm* (fasting) and *hajj* (pilgrimage). *Sunni* and *shia* are its two major denominations

3.1 Origin of Women

In contrast with the biblical account of the Fall, in Islamic tradition Eve did not tempt Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Instead, they were tempted together by the Devil. This means that Eve was not the cause of Adam's expulsion from paradise, he was also responsible, and therefore both men and women are faced equally with its consequences. This has several important implications for the Islamic understanding of womanhood and women's roles in both religious and social life. In Islam, women are not seen as a source of evil because of the Fall. Moreover, the Biblical statement that Eve was created from Adam's rib finds no mention in the *Quranic* account. Both male and female were created 'from one soul'. Similarly, the concept that the pains of childbirth are a punishment for Eve's sin is alien to the *Quran*.

3.2 Woman at Home

Women are portrayed positively in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. They are frequently referred to alongside men, and both are described as being friends and partners in faith. The roles of man and woman are complementary and essential in the *Quran*. The following verses illustrate the claim. The *Qur'an* states, “O mankind! Be mindful of

your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them has scattered countless men and women (throughout the earth). Fear God, in Whose (Name) you demand your rights of one another, and (be mindful of your duty) towards the wombs that bore you. God is ever watching over you” (*Quran*, 4:1)

“Surely for men who surrender to God, and women who surrender and men who believe and women who believe; and men who obey and women who obey; and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth; and men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere; 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 modesty and women who guard (their modesty); and men who remember Allah much and women who remember - Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward”(*Quran*, 33:35)

In the *Quran*, *Sura 4* contains 176 verses ‘*An-Nisa*’ dedicated to women. Women were allowed to own, inherit and sell their property. They could not be forced to marry, could retain their names and initiate divorce if it seemed fit. They could get educated and hence many women in the medieval times were religious scholars.

Islam differentiates between the rights of a Muslim woman who believes in Islam from those who did not. Women captured in battles and slaves did not have rights. Men had a natural right to own women who were captives of the war. They could be kept as concubines or slaves. The children born from them were considered Muslims. Slave women could be bought and sold without their consent. Muhammad strongly condemned violence against women. Both men and women are accountable for those in their care or under their authority, he warned. Seeking knowledge was obligatory for every Muslim, either male or female. Aisha, his wife spread the teachings of Muhammad to the later generations. She was well read in poetry, medicine, and Islamic law.

In Islam women assume responsibility of the home whilst men look after the finances. The tasks of mothering and looking after the home are considered on par with the professional careers. Women are respected for their sacrifice and struggles faced during homemaking. Since it would be a burdening for a woman to work at home and at workplace, it is preferred that they dedicate themselves to work at home. However, if

she is able to balance outside work with house chores, she may take up a vocation, study further or volunteer for community work. Any wages earned are solely hers and she decides how to manage it.

The bond between spouses is based on interdependence, love, and tranquility. They must treat each other with respect and kindness. The *Quran* says, “And of His signs is this: He created spouses for you from among yourselves that you might find comfort in them, and He put between you love and mercy” (*Quran*, 30:21). If the wife is the homemaker, the husband assumes the responsibility of the provider. He is accountable to God if he fails to do his duties. The *Quran* permits a husband to mete out physical punishments on his wife on the charges of disloyalty. As per the *Sharia*, *darar* or harm comprises of abuse against a spouse. According to the laws of *darar*, if a woman is abused in a marriage, she can have it annulled.

Polygamy is allowed in Islam, but with conditions. Islam has not introduced polygamy but regulated it. Muslim men are permitted to have more than one wife in certain cases as, if the wife is chronically or mentally unstable, unable to bear children, women widowed due to war or when a marriage has ended but the wife prefers to remain married. When there is more than one wife, equal treatment to all terms of time and money are mandated. Women before marriage can stipulate in their marriage contracts that they have the right to divorce if their husbands take another wife. Muhammad’s marriage to first wife, Khadijah lasted for 25 years. It was only and till after her death, he remarried. He married subsequently, widows and divorcees for political and humanitarian reasons.

The *shia* sect recognizes temporary marriages, called as *nikah-al-mutah*. It is a marriage of pleasure wherein a bride is bought for a sum of money for a temporary spousal relation. The relation may last for as brief as an hour or up to a few months. On expiry of the contractual period the marriage dissolves. Women's rights groups have condemned it as a form of legalized prostitution. Such temporary marriages are not recognized by the *sunnis*.

A woman can divorce her husband for not supporting her financially, impotence, abandonment, madness, or a dangerous illness. Divorce by mutual consent is possible by agreement by the two parties. *Sharia* gives a woman two ways to obtain divorce, *tafrif* and *khul*. In *tafrif*, the divorce is granted by a *qadi*, if he accepts the grounds

claimed by the wife. If the *qadi* does not accept, then divorce is not granted. Such a divorce ends with the husband paying the *mahr*. *Khul* is divorce by mutual consent. If a husband accedes to the request of divorce, then such a separation can be granted. Generally, in such cases the woman must give up the *mahr*. In practice, the woman's right to divorce is limited as compared to men. A man can divorce his wife with a triple *talaq*, with no requirement to show cause¹.

The man can marry immediately after a divorce, but the woman must observe a waiting period of three lunar months termed as *iddah*. The practice of *iddah* is to establish paternity in case she discovers she is pregnant. In case of death of her husband, the *iddah* period is 4 lunar months and 10 days before she can start conjugal relations with another Muslim man. *Quran* says in this regard, "Divorced women remain in waiting for three periods, and it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have more right to take them back in this [period] if they want reconciliation. And due to the wives is like what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority]. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise" (*Quran*, 2:228). According to feminists this verse asserts that men are a degree above women.

There are restrictions placed on the attire of men and women. The dressing must be moderately loose and non-transparent. *Sharia* prescribes covering of the body, as neck, legs, ankles, below the elbow in public. The attire must be such that it does not lead to temptation. Additionally, women should cover their hair to avoid leading men to temptation. However, it should be noted that none of the traditional legal systems stipulate that women must wear a veil, it is only the wives of Muhammad who were instructed to wear this article of clothing. Islamic feminists feel that style of dress should be a personal choice based on an individual's understanding and belief, not a legal requirement².

Muhammad encouraged education for men and women. He taught women along with men. He believed to seek knowledge was a religious duty binding upon every Muslim. A woman too should seek knowledge, develop her intellect, and broaden her outlook. No restriction was placed on the type of knowledge to be acquired by a woman. She could freely choose any field of knowledge that interested her. Aisha, Muhammad's

wife also taught both women and men. Many of his companions and followers learned the *Quran*, *Hadith* and Islamic jurisprudence from her.

In Islam both men and women are independent economically. Women at will can buy, sell, mortgage, lease, borrow or lend, and sign contracts and legal documents. Women can give donations, become trustees, and set up business or company. When a woman marries, she controls the *mahr*, an amount the groom pays to the bride upon marriage. The Quran states, “For men is a share from what the parents and near relatives leave, and for women is a share from what the parents and near relative leave from less from it or more, a legal share”(Quran, 4:7). There is no known practice of a woman changing her name after marriage, divorce, or widowhood. She is known by her family name as a mark of her individuation.

In Qur'an, *Surah* 2:182 equates two women as substitute for one man, in matters requiring witnesses. Muhammad favored women to men in some aspects of testimony: in matters concerning women, the testimony of a man is not accepted by itself, whereas a woman's testimony alone is accepted.

Sexual intercourse between a woman and any man to whom she is not married is *zina*, a religious crime. This includes extramarital sex, premarital sex, and rape. It is listed as a crime against God. In the case of rape, the adult male perpetrator (i.e., rapist) of such an act is considered guilty and not a victim. Sex with non-Muslim slave women is not considered adultery, it applies only to free Muslim men and free Muslim women. Though the scripture upholds that the victim woman should not be punished for having been coerced into having sex, it is the burden of the victim to establish coercion with eyewitnesses. If a man does confess to *zina*, eyewitnesses are not required. Confession may be withdrawn and the need for four male Muslim eyewitnesses be reinstated. Failure to provide evidence is treated as a crime of false accusation, punishable with flogging. It therefore becomes common for a Muslim woman who makes a claim of rape not only to be denied justice but to be charged with fornication or adultery. Several Islamic countries, such as Morocco, allow rapists to avoid criminal prosecution if they marry their victim. In 2012, a 16-year-old Moroccan girl, having been forced by her family and the government prosecutor to marry her rapist and, subsequently committed suicide by swallowing rat poison.

3.3 Woman and worship

According to a saying attributed to Muhammad, women were allowed to pray in the mosques. With the spread of Islam, this practice was discontinued on the grounds that there would be unchaste interactions amongst the sexes. Also citing the need to avoid distraction during prayer, as in prostrations the buttocks are raised while the forehead touches the ground, could lead to temptation. Separation between sexes ranges from men and women on opposite sides of an aisle, to men in front of women (as was the case in the time of Muhammad), to women in second-floor balconies or separate rooms accessible by a door for women only. Women in the state of ritual impurity, such as menstruation, are forbidden from entering the prayer hall of the mosque.

The *Haji Ali Dargah* Controversy was an event of the recent times. The *dargah*'s board of trustees imposed a ban on women's entry, calling it a 'grievous sin'. It is sin as per Islam for women to be in proximity of a male Muslim saint's grave they said. Prior to it, the *digraph* did not discriminate against women and allowed free entry to all. In June 2016, the BMMA (Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan) filed a PIL against the ban, calling it unconstitutional. Because it violates the women's right to freedom of religion enshrined in Article 25 of the constitution. Women staged protests to lift the ban and demanded for prayer. In August 2016, Bombay HC verdict held that the exclusion of women from entering the inner sanctum of the tomb not only violated their fundamental right to religious freedom but also their right to equality and non-discrimination under the Indian Constitution.

3.4 Ordination of Woman

The right of a woman to become a religious head *imam* is rejected by many. One of the reasons offered is that the imam requires to lead *salat*, in the mosque. A woman is not allowed to lead such prayers, which involve both sexes.

3.5 Sacred Feminine

There are no references found of sacred feminine in Islam. However, one comes across women who play an important role in shaping of the religion, namely, Fatima (daughter of Muhammad), and Aisha (the last wife of Muhammad).

Fatima, daughter of Khadija (first wife of Muhammad), her husband Ali, and two sons al-Husayn and Hasan and their descendants are called as Ahl al-Bayt (people of the House). The *Shias* believe them to be the true custodians of the message of God and religious authority in Islam. Fatima is known as the ‘mother of Imams’ and even ‘the mother of the father’. Wendy Issac-Martin (2004) remarks, Fatima is seen extending her ‘emotional motherhood’ to her father, husband, and her sons. With the women of the family, comprising of her stepmothers and daughters, she assumes the role of authority, instructing the women to follow the path of the males. Her relationship with Aisha (youngest wife of Muhammad) is often of confrontation.

Aisha, the last wife of Muhammad and the daughter of Abu Bakr, is greatly contrasted with Fatima by the Shia traditions. The *Shias* exclude Aisha of divine legacy and treat her as daughter of Abu Bakr, the usurper of religious power. In contrast, some sources believe that Fatima was treated as the prophet for nearly seventy-five days after the death of Muhammad. Fatima, by being the mother of the Imam lineage, lead to Aisha being excluded by not bearing any children to Muhammad.

3.6 Feminist Response

Islamic feminism is not a new notion. Islamic thinkers as Sayyid Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Reza, Qasim Amin were feminists of the 19th century. However, their ideas did not become popular. Whilst clarifying the meaning of ‘Islamic feminism’, Ambar Ahmed (2015) writes, neither Islam nor feminism are generic terms. Islam has sects which have their own beliefs and practices, also, being practiced around the globe, it cuts across diverse geographic locations. In a similar vein, feminism is understood differently depending upon the cultural and geographic diaspora. However, there are common features like resisting patriarchy. Hence, she opines, a pragmatic way of understanding Islamic feminism is to understand what the Islamic feminists are doing practically.

There are a few common themes to be found across the globe against which Islamic feminists raise objections. They oppose the social control imposed on women by traditional cultural expectations that women should remain inside the home, associate only with males that are relatives, and follow strict moral precepts. They are critical of the legal and social status given to Muslim women. They deny that Islam itself is responsible for this situation. They assert that the *Sharia* law has been misunderstood

and misapplied by patriarchy. They also protest the Muslim Personal Law on the grounds that this type of legislation discriminates against women.

A Swedish scholar of theology, Jan Hjarpe, makes a distinction between Islamic and Muslim feminism. He believes Muslim feminism to be more liberal than Islamic feminism. Muslim feminism believes it is not the Quran but the Hadith and the Sharia that are patriarchal in their outlook. Such a patriarchal view of the Quran is not the right view. The argument offered is, if one believes God is good and Quran is the word of God then it cannot contain any notions of inequality against the genders. On the other hand, Islamic feminism believes, women need to participate in religious movements, which alone can lead to their emancipation. For the purpose of this study, a distinction is not made between the two and Islamic feminism is treated as the generic term.

They base their attempts of reinterpretation on the Shi'ite notion of *Ijteha*, i.e., interpreting religious injunctions was keeping in mind the socio-political frame of that time. Feminists attempt to look at the reasons for understanding the context of a particular law to bring out the original sense of woman-friendliness and the debauched interpretations of the clergy. For instance, Abdul Soroush, an Iranian Muslim scholar, distinguishes between the 'essential' and 'non-essential' features of Islam. The core beliefs of Islam, for instance the five pillars, form the essential beliefs and the non-essential are those which have been included due to the socio-political scene. The essential beliefs are unchanging and the non-essential may vary. He argues, for seventh century Arabia is different from today, injunctions pertaining to women should change.

Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian American historian, belongs to the group of Islamic feminists who object to men interpreting Quran, recording Islamic history, and excluding women from the scene. Ahmed contends due to such exclusions, it appears there are two Islams, one for women and one for men. To the women appropriated Islam, the focus is on the ethical code, meaning of life and promoting human values as mercy, justice, humanity, peace, compassion, etc. Men's Islam is restricted to propagating medieval Islam and 'training Sheikhs', disregarding the women's understanding.

Pointing out to a difference between the attitudes of sexuality between Christianity and Islam, Rita Liljestorm, says Christianity treats sexuality as sinful whereas Islam does not. For Christianity, sexual gratification stands for the victory of the body over the soul

and hence is condemned. Islam, on the other hand does not accord sex a sinful status but condemns women for leading men to temptation. Thereby justifying the need of man to keep a woman under his control. In this regard, Mernissi comments, “In western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in the biological inferiority of woman. In Islam, it is the contrary: the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for constraining her power” (Mernissi, 1987, p. 67).

Feminists like Mernissi and Assia Djebar attempt to retrieve the history of women in Islam. In the early days of Islam, i.e., during the lifetime of the Muhammad, women were actively involved in religious matters. However, with the passage of time, this was discouraged by patriarchal attitudes and women were pushed to the margins. To overcome the marginalization, women have tried to create their own spaces and on their own terms. For example, in Tamil Nadu, an all-women’s mosque is set up in Pudukkottai, by the Muslim Women’s Jammāt.

Many feminists are of the opinion that the *hijab* (the veil), is a sign of imposing patriarchal ideology on the woman. Mernissi (1987) explains the evolution of the *hijab* into the lives of Muslim women. She says the *hijab* has three dimensions, firstly, to hide from sight, secondly, to separate or mark a border and lastly, to denote it belongs to realm of the forbidden. The *hijab* thus demarcates a space that is forbidden. Mernissi narrates the evolution of the practice of Hijab took place in Medina, as a matter of deliberations between Muhammad and companions, primarily Umar. One of the pressing problems of the time was how to demarcate slave women from Muslim women, as slave women could be bought, possessed, and sold as commodities, but one could not behave so with Muslim women. It was Umar’s suggestion that Muslim women be asked to don the *hijab*, and this did not gain Muhammad’s favour. Unfortunately, for Islam, laments Mernissi, Muhammad was growing old at that time, and he faced other political pressures, Umar got his way. This led to the females of Islam being grouped into two, those who veiled and were thus free from attack and those who were prone to be dishonored.

In these words, Mernissi expresses her grief for Islam and its women, “Umar’s solution, imposing the *hijab* curtain that hides women instead of changing attitudes and forcing

"those in whose heart is a disease" to act differently, was going to overshadow Islam's dimension as a civilization, as a body of thought on the individual and his/her role in society. This body of thought made *dar ai-Islam* (the land of Islam) at the outset a pioneering experiment in terms of individual freedom and democracy. But the hijab fell over Medina and cut short that brief burst of freedom. Paradoxically, 15 centuries later it was colonial power that would force the Muslim states to reopen the question of the rights of the individual and of women. All debates on democracy get tied up in the woman question and that piece of cloth that opponents of human rights today claim to be the very essence of Muslim identity" (Mernissi, 1987, p.188).

4. Aboriginal Religion of Australia

The Aborigines are the native settlers of Australia. The literature available on them is generally androcentric by nature, and hence the general perception is the society is male centered. However recent studies have disproved the generalization.

4.1 Rituals and Women

The rituals of women center around pre-puberty, menstruation, and childbirth. During the first menstruation, menstruant is secluded being accompanied by other women. The menstrual blood is considered as sacred. Contact with men is avoided in this period. When the menstruation completes its term, the return of the girl is celebrated by various rituals. In a similar way childbirth and pregnancy mark a transition for the woman to another level. Others, including men, children and other younger women are kept away and the process of childbirth is secret. The woman giving birth is surrounded by old women, accompanied by songs to soothe her. To make the birth easier the pelvis and the genital organs are charmed. Correspondingly, women are excluded from men's rituals.

4.2 Women as Healers

The presence of women *shamans* or healers is a unique feature of this tribal society. There is not much literature available on this matter. The male and the female *shamans* are not functionally different from each other. There is a belief that women *shamans* are less effective when it comes to performing black magic and killing people.

5. Summary

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are also patriarchal in their ontological structures. The seeds of patriarchy are sown in their foundations by religions being passed to males by a male conception of divinity. In the accounts of creation this stands out, as in the order of creation when the males were created first and women ensued through them. Women are treated as the other and the male is the archetype in these religions. Regarding ordination and places of worship, the woman is deemed unfit to head any congregation and at best may assume the role at the periphery. Even in the aboriginal culture she has lesser powers than the male healer.

In summing up the major Eastern and Semitic religions, it can be said that generally these religions are androcentric in their approach. Their androcentrism is rooted in their metaphysical structures and later, that manifests in their religious beliefs and practices. The woman has a role only in the periphery or the margins and male is at the center. This othering of the woman by the patriarchal has systematically led to her devaluing herself and this has perpetuated through the ages.

¹ In August 2017, the Supreme Court had deemed triple *talaq* as unconstitutional. On 30th August 2019, the Indian government passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019. It made triple *talaq* illegal in India on 1st August 2019. This Act stipulated that instant *talaq* as the triple *talaq*, communicated through means as SMS, email, letter, spoken or written as illegal and void. The husband can be punishable up to three in jail and the woman can demand maintenance for her dependent children.

² In January 2022, in a government pre-university college for girls, six Muslim students who wanted to wear the *hijab* on the grounds that it was in congruence with their faith, were disallowed from doing so. The girl students argued that it was their constitutional right to practice their faith without interference, and they should hence be allowed to don the *hijab* over the college uniform. The college authorities denied them permission on the grounds, that it violated the approved design of their school uniform. This led to protests by the students, which were countered by the Hindu students. The issue escalated to other parts of Karnataka and eventually reached the High Court. On 10th February 2022, the High Court issued an interim restraining all students from wearing of religious attire over the approved uniform. On 15th March 2022, the Court gave a judgement that *hijab* is not essential to the practice of Islam.

Chapter Four

Feminist Deliberations on Religious Ontological Concepts

1. Woman and Body

Simone de Beauvoir is the one who had articulated the sex/gender division. In the work, *The Second Sex*, she states, presence in the world necessarily implies there is a body which exists. But this does not entail the body to be limited to a particular structure. Bodily existence in turn entails a physical body which exists, irrespective of male or female, and a point of view of the world. A body by existing i.e., in living (lived experience) reflects the world according to it. She systematically rejects the use of a female biology as a means of her subordination by patriarchy. By linking a woman's body with menstruation, pregnancy and childbearing, her body is looked down upon by patriarchal structures. Thus, she refers to the body as a prison, a vehicle of enslavement of the female species which has been the cause of their alienation and trauma throughout their lives. Patriarchy perpetuates fear for the woman's biological and sexual body and the need to guard men from her. Such a system also constructs the woman as the 'Other'. In the ontological binaries, negative notions of passivity, matter and disorder is associated with the feminine and positive notions of activity, form and order are associated with masculine. Such a framework is completely patriarchal.

Most religions have subordinated the body to the soul. Since woman was associated with the body, it acted as one of the factors for her subordination by most religions. Mary Douglas believed the body acts as symbol of social and religious structures; the anxieties of the society are reflected on the body. The male body has been elevated and the female body devalued by patriarchy. Menstruation is one of the causes for devaluing woman's body by linking it with impurity.

1.1 Menstruation, Purity, and Impurity

Menstruation has been viewed by major religions as warranting exclusion. Exclusion begins with naming the state, menstruating woman is often referred to as '*rajaswala*' in Hindu tradition while Judaism labels her as '*niddah*' and Islam names her as, '*hayz*'

thereby rendering the woman as beyond 'normal'. Religious texts as Leviticus and Old Testament refer to menstruation as 'infectious time' or as the 'Curse of Eve'.

Hindu scriptures treat menstruation as '*asaucha*' or impure. World religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism too perceive menstruation as impure. In recent times, the Sabarimala temple issue brought to surface the perceptions of menstruation as impurity. Women from the age 10 to 50 were barred from entering the temple on the grounds that the temple deity is a '*naishtika bramhachary*' an absolute celibate. Feminists argued that the perceived notions of menstruation as impurity was the main reason. Though Rahul Easwar, President of Ayyappa Dharma Sena defended the exclusion as not being based on menstruation but as a prerequisite of personality of absolute celibacy of the deity.

Menstruants in Hinduism are forbidden from participating in religious and death rituals, touching sacred objects, entering any space which is demarcated as sacred as the altar or temples. She is isolated either in seclusion huts or rooms. In Islamic faith, the *Sharia* believes menstrual blood to be impure but the woman who is menstruating can lead a normal life. However, Christianity does not allow women to receive communion during their menses.¹ Feminists believe menstruation is the main reason to prevent women from occupying higher positions in the ministry.

Vashishta Dharmasastra, Part 1, Chapter 5, verse 5, says a woman is impure for three days and nights. She should not bathe, smile, beautify her body, gaze at planets, approach fire, amongst other things. A man who touches a menstruant must purify himself by fully dipping in water. A brahmin household which does not abide by these purity rules are equivalent to '*Shudras*'.

A passage from Leviticus clearly shows similar attitude towards menstruation. "When woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean, everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening" (Leviticus 15: 19-23). Islam holds that certain acts are forbidden to the woman who is menstruating such as offering prayers which involve prostration, entering or keeping any object in the mosque, touching the Holy Quran as the words of Allah cannot be touched by anyone

who is unclean. Even reformers like John Calvin called it as a “shameful thing”.(O’Grady, 2003, p. 11) It has also been referred to in other Levitical commentaries as ‘miserable state’, ‘illness’, ‘sin’, ‘sense of *natural* disgust or shame [that] has developed into an ethical and religious feeling of uncleanness’ (O’Grady, 2003, p. 12). St Jerome, a 4th century Christian priest and theologian contends, “Nothing is more filthy, unclean than a menstruant; whatever she will have touched, she makes it unclean, and still of whose filth is cleansed by the baptism of Christ, through the cleansing of sins”(Schultz, 2003, p. 97). In *Summa Theologica*, St Aquinas describes it as, “the menstrual blood, the flow of which is subjected to monthly periods, has a certain natural impurity...[it is] infected with corruption and repudiated by nature”(O’Grady, 2003, p. 8). The 3rd century Archbishop Dionysius ordered, “Menstruous women ought not to come to the Holy Table, or touch the Holy of the Holies, not to churches but pray elsewhere.”(O’Grady, 2003, p. 12). He also asserted that women of pious nature on their own good judgment refrain from entering the church whilst the flow. He says, “The question touching the women in the time of separation, whether it is proper for them when in such a condition to enter the house of God, I consider a superfluous inquiry. For I do not think that, if they are believing and pious women, they will themselves be rash enough in such a condition either to approach the holy table or touch the body and blood of the Lord....For the individual who is not perfectly pure both in soul and in body, shall be interdicted from approaching the holy of holies”(Schultz, 2003, p. 111). He treats it as an evident truth that menstruation is an unclean state not requiring any further enquiry or debate.

‘*Bussetsu daizo shokyo ketsubon kyo*’ translated as “The Buddha’s correct sutra on the bowl of blood”, speaks of women who suffer agonies in Hell due to not maintaining purity during their menses. In a dialogue between monk Mokuren and Buddha, he narrates the account of field in Hell with a pool filled with menstrual blood. The demon who was the lord of the place would torture women with iron rods and force them to drink their menstrual blood. When asked, the demon is said to have replied thus, the punishment is effected as these women polluted the earth deity by shedding blood in child birth. They washed their menstrual clothes in rivers which was used also by holy men and women polluting them in this course. To alleviate their suffering Buddha advised the women to observe purity, amongst other measures. It is interesting to note Buddha does not contest the ‘polluting’ notion of menstruation but rather reinforces the

popular opinion by suggesting measures for overcoming the state of impurity. In the 16th chapter of *Videvdad* (The Law Discarding /Against the Demons) a Zoroastrian text, a question is asked, how should the Mazdayasnian behave with a menstrual woman. In response the Ahura Mazda replies, "...here these Mazdayasnians should select a path for her, away from plants, growing things, and firewood. They should place her in a place with dry dust..." (Secunda, 2014, p. 85). These words echo the prevalent attitude of menstrual impurity as the other major religions.

In providing reasons to why women menstruate, most religions provide misogynistic accounts, even bordering on taking advantage of the benevolence of women. In the *Rig Veda* one finds an account of one such story². Indra accrues sin after slaying a brahmana, Vritra. To atone the sin, Indra is said to have begged women for help and offers a bargain. The women shall have to bear third of his sin by shedding blood monthly and in turn Indra would grant them progeny.³ Indra's approach to women is indicative of his faith that women would show benevolence and he strikes a chord by luring them with promise of progeny. According to an indigenous narrative by Hindus, in the beginning Shiva would menstruate from his armpits. Parvati, his consort, could not bear his discomfort and volunteered to menstruate for him. What is striking in the two accounts is women accepting menstruation to facilitate men. Ironically, the same menstruation is used by men to call them 'impure' and 'polluting'.

The Old Testament believe menstruation to be a punishment for Eve when she tempted Adam to eat the fruit from the Forbidden tree, from whence it continually passes to other women. O'Grady lists other Biblical commentators who regarded menstruation as a punishment given to women for the fall of man. These commentators interpreted the Leviticus to suit their views. Some such views are, "Because woman spilled man's first blood, therefore to her was handed over the religious duty involving menstruation", "Eve's sin meant that all women must "suffer torment and misfortune. And therefore she must have her period every month, and must fast once or twice [a month], so that she will always remember her sin and remain in a constant state of repentance. Just as a murderer constantly does"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 5-6). Kabbalistic literature treats menstruating Eve as the forbidden fruit, and she tempts Adam to have sexual intercourse with her, leading to disobedience of God's will. Menstruation is thus a punishment meted out by God himself to Eve and condemned all other women as children of Eve to part take of it.

Menstruation as a result of transubstantiation into the menstrual flow is accounted by a Buddhist and Zoroastrian text. Buddhist text, '*Kaie rakusotan-Ketsubon kyo ushitsu anyu no suishu*' (Random stories about the Buddhist ceremonies-origin and transmission of the Ketsubon kyo)(1801-1803) and Yukokuyoin (1821) explains the origin of menstruation as thus. It reiterates women by nature are weak, evil and jealous which transubstantiates into the menstrual flow, thereby polluting the earth and other deities. They shall for this misdeed be punished in hell. A Zoroastrian text *Denkard* explains it as the physical embodiment of all the physical and mental impurity possessed by women.

Attitudes as the ones discussed lead to banning of women from approaching anything holy as altars and other holy places. Kathleen O'Grady, a feminist scholar argues menstruation is the reason why women are kept away from attaining higher positions in the churches of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. "Menstrual taboos in Judaism and Christianity have functioned to keep women from attaining high-ranking positions and excluded them from ceremonial participation"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 12). De Troyer quotes Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Until recent times it was believed to be more pious if women did not come to communion when they were menstruating"(Troyer, 2003, p. 47).

Anne Jensen, a contemporary feminist writer in her work, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, referred to the *Testament of Our Lord*, a 4th or 5th century text for sanctioning exclusion. The text asks both women and men to keep away from the altar during specific periods. Women when they menstruated and men during involuntary ejaculation of semen. The purported reason was to uphold the dignity of the altar, not because the individual was unclean. Menstruation however in particular was regarded as a 'cultic impurity'. Jensen drew a connection between 'uncleanness' brought by menstruation and the 'weakness' and 'inferiority' of women as a sex.

Celene Lizzio quotes the following from the purity manual of Abu Ameenah Bilal, "It is very important for women to fear Allah and be very meticulous with regards to *tahara* (purity), because formal prayer is not acceptable without even if done one hundred times." (Lizzio, 2013, p. 176). Indicating even if women prayed or kept fast during menses it would not be accepted by Allah. On the contrary a non-observer of purity

rules is condemned as a disbeliever. Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi makes it a fundamental duty of every Muslim woman to know and abide by the rules of purity.

The menstruant was believed to be able to spread the 'impurity' to objects, places and even persons justifying the exclusion. The Hindus believe the clothes which are used during menstruation are also impure. She cannot enter the kitchen nor cook for herself as she may contaminate the food. Food items used for storage such as spices, pickles, food grains should be kept away from the shadow of the menstruant as the food items will spoil. During these 3 days of menstruation, women are impure and capable of polluting even by their shadow. The Torah says she's capable of polluting anyone who comes in contact with her hence must be secluded. Hippolytus believed that menstruant's being unclean could pollute water hence they could not be baptized during the flow.

Sexual intercourse is strictly forbidden in religions as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam during the flow. Leviticus holds if the menstrual blood touches the man, he too had to observe period of purification as he too could pollute anyone like the woman. O'Grady quoted the following from Leviticus, "If any man lies with her, and her impurity falls on him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 9). "If a man lies with a woman having her sickness and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people" (O'Grady, 2003, p. 9). 'Cut off from their people' has been interpreted to range from excommunication to death punishment. The Enga of Papua New Guinea believe that a man may suffer from persistent vomiting, blood may change colour to black, lead to dulling his wit and even in extremity cause his death on co-habiting with a menstruant (Das, 2008). In the Middle Ages, men were warned of coitus with menstruant as it could lead to children with physical deformities or leprosy. Aristotle believed that conception during menstruation could result in a deformed child. St Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* said, "Men ought to keep away from their [menstruous] wives, because thus is a deformed, blind, lame, leprous offspring conceived"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 11). St. Augustine endorsed the view of menstruation by Leviticus. Islam too forbids women to have sexual intercourse with their husbands as they experience discomfort during the flow and require rest. Al Ghazali a medieval Islam jurist contends intercourse with a menstruant leads to leprous children.

Though a state of impurity, it is a transitive state. It normally has duration of three to four days and can end with purificatory rituals. Hinduism considers the 'impurity' to last for three days, on which 'purity' is attained on the ritual bathing of the fourth day. The Torah says woman with irregular bleeding to be 'clean' of her impurity requires to complete seven days after her menses and offer a sacrifice of doves to the priest and a sin offering to Lord. Upon these, the menstruant is declared back to her state of purity. Normal bleeding does not require any offering and after seven days she is treated as purified.

Greek philosopher Aristotle associated menstrual blood with death. It was a foetus which was either aborted or miscarried. Menstrual blood provided 'matter' to the foetus and semen, the 'form'. Thus menstrual blood was, "an impure condition, i.e., it lacked one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul.... This principle has to be supplied by the semen of the male"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 8). Moses Maimonides a 12th century Rabbinical commentator echoes Aristotle's view of menstrual blood as an undeveloped "corpse"(O'Grady, 2003, p.8).⁴

Menstruation was regarded as 'symbolical of sin', 'type of sinfulness'(O'Grady, 2003, p. 6) and menstruants as evil persons, "evil persons [i.e., menstruants] tend to contaminate anything or anybody that they touch"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 6). Influential thinkers as Pliny and Aristotle too opined negatively. Pliny stated a menstruant could turn wine sour, crops barren, dim mirrors, rust iron and bronze, its taste could drive dogs mad and turn their bites poisonous. Zoroastrianism also shares such a view of the menstruant. Levine a modern commentator on Leviticus, equated menstrual blood with demonic powers. Commenting on the same, Milgrom stated, "It was the worldwide fear of menstrual blood as the repository of demonic forces that is likely the cause of the isolation of the menstruant"(O'Grady, 2003, p. 22). In the puberty rituals of Buddhists and Muslims of Sri Lanka, the menstruant is believed to be at risk of attack by blood thirsty demons (yakshas or pey). To avoid the attack the menstruant is always accompanied by females or brother and forbidden from eating 'heaty' foods as non-vegetarian which are attractive to the demons. Deborah Winslow notes that Lankan Buddhists believe that the first menstrual blood is dangerous, causing disease or opening of healed wounds. She reported the belief of urban Buddhist woman in this regard. The woman believed that even if a sparrow were to fly over such first time menstruant it could burst into flames. (Winslow, 1980) Zoroastrian text Denkard refers

to the menstruant as '*nasus*' (corpse demoness). She is capable of transmitting this evil through her breath hence one needs to distance from her. Her nearness can contaminate water, affect growth of plants and spoil the taste and smell of food stuffs. Extended conversation with her can lead to diminishing of intelligence, memory and wisdom. Similar sentiments are found in Vildevdad also.⁵

Nithin Sridhar in his series of articles on the Hindu View of Menstruation (Sridhar, 2016) explored the alternative view of menstruation as time for rest and of divinity. Some thinkers believe these restrictions were imposed to facilitate resting. Some hold during menstruation a woman is so pure during menstruation that she should not be touched to maintain that state. However, these views did not gain wide acceptance as the opinion of menstruant as a pollutant.

Christ too did not accept these taboos. It is noted that he allowed himself to be touched by a woman who was a hemorrhaging. Haye Van der Meer points out that the author of the text *Didascalia Apostolorum*, disapproves of women who believed that they were filled with unclean spirits during their menstruation and could be purified only by bathing. Muhammad is said to have encouraged menstruating women to be present during Eid festivities. He once allowed his wife who was menstruating to serve him drink. Sikhism treats women and men as equal before God. Menstruation is perceived as something natural and hence beyond any condemnation. Guru Nanak was critical of the menstrual taboos by other religion and strongly criticized any such views. He focused on mental purity rather than the physical. Women are not impure because of menstruation. Menstruation is positive as it signifies fertility and birth. It is God given and hence cannot be impure. Menstruating women could go to the Gurudwara and offer prayers.

Menstruation was believed to indicate the health of woman. If a woman was healthy, she bled heavily, and it helped her to stay healthy and calm. Ranade opines Ayurveda confers high respect to women, by naming them as incarnates of Dharma and Artha, shouldering the responsibility of birthing children and supplicating values to men. Nature of menstruation denotes the health of the woman.⁶ Some physicians have sought evolutionary explanation of menstruation. Citing Darwinian theory of natural selection, they argue, if menstruation did not serve a purpose, it would not have been propagated to the future generations.

An alternative view is provided by feministic traditions on menstruation. Their perceptions of menstruation stand in stark contrast to their patriarchal counterparts. The metaphysical feministic position of the *Shakta* tradition perceives menstruation as an event integrating nature and women. Menstruation as '*ritudharma*' connotes the seasonal orderly cycle along with the menstrual cycle. By drawing a parallel between nature and women asserts her position as a natural being. A being who is in sync with nature, a 'natural' being or a natural product of nature and as not as someone 'created'⁷ for the purpose of procreation or to complete someone (a male in particular). In India two goddesses, Kamakhya in Assam and Parvati in Kerala are known to menstruate.

In Assam, *Shakti* is revered in the form of Goddess *Kamakhya*⁸. The temple is unique as the Goddess is worshipped in the '*yoni*' form⁹. The *Ambubachi*¹⁰ or *Ambuvasi* festival, normally held from June 22nd to 26th June celebrates the menstruation time of Kamakhya. The waters of the Brahmaputra turn red during the monsoon, this redness indicates the start of the Goddess's menses. There appear to be paradoxes associated with the menstruation of the Goddess. Firstly, the river Brahmaputra is a 'male' river. Rivers are gendered as male or female depending upon factors as nature of their flow during regular course and floods. Those rivers are 'male'¹¹ which are unruly, can cause large scale destruction during floods and 'female' are gentle flowing, life sustaining and the like. Secondly, men participate heartily in the festival, beating drums and swaying gaily to its beats but keep away from ordinary women who menstruate. Mitoo Das in her study of the menstrual taboos of the Simlitola village in Assam, observes ironically that women have to practice seclusion during their menses (as it a state of impurity) whilst *Ambubachi* is celebrated with pomp and splendour. On one hand a woman's menstrual blood is treated with disgust and on the other the '*angadhak*' and '*angabastro*'¹² are treated as the harbringers of fertility and protection from all forms of evil. A folk lore explains why women in Assam have to practice menstrual taboos. King Noranarayan secretly watched the Goddess as she was dancing in the temple during her flow. When she became aware of the King's presence she cursed him and his clan, stating calamity would befall them if they dared to even look or visit the temple. To redeem himself of the guilt, the King made the practice of menstrual taboo¹³ and *tuloni biya*¹⁴ compulsory in every household.

The other goddess known to menstruate is Parvati in the Chengannur Mahadev temple of Kerala. It is the duty of the head priest who check blood stains on the Goddesses's attire. It is believed that the Goddess menstruates once in three to four months. Whilst menstruation the idol is kept in another room in the temple. On the fourth day the idol is taken for a ritual bath for cleansing and reinstated back in the original temple.

Such a situation throws the room open for interpretation of the link between the Goddess and an ordinary woman. Is the Goddess just a woman, but more powerful than the ordinary women? Does the Goddess possess a body? Is the Goddess an anthropomorphic version of the common woman? Is the Goddess a projection of the collective unconscious of women? Her menstruation makes her akin to every common woman, who feels an ally in her, who too in menstruation is forbidden to enter the sanctum she normally would share with her husband.¹⁵ When one reads the *Devi-Mahatmyam*, Goddess *Mahishasurmardini* is 'formed/created' out of the 'teja' (the being) of all the 'male' Gods present. Would that account make Her obey the rules of man? In dialogue between Shiva and Parvati in the *Siva Purana*, Parvati says, "With my blessings you become qualitative and embodied. Without me you are attributeless and incompetent to perform any activity. Being always subsevient to prakriti you perform all activities" (Patel, 1994, p. 72). On one hand where the supremacy of the Goddess over the male Gods is emphasised, She is subjected to the purity rules mandatory for a common woman to obey. Has patriarchy in some way claimed to give respect and reverence to the Goddess (feminine) and yet on the other hand make Her (like the ordinary woman) and reiterated that purity rules cannot be mended for anyone. One may dwell over it.

Korte bases her paper, "Female Blood Rituals: Cultural-Anthropological Findings and Feminist-Theological Reflections" on female dominated religions mentioned in the work *Priestess-Mother-Sacred Sister* by Susan Starr Sered. She observed in comparison to patriarchal religions, female-dominated religions do not focus on blood but on food. Since kitchens were controlled by women, food-rituals form the foundations which are more public and increase communal harmony. The food is generally vegetarian and does not involve slaughter of animals. This view is seconded by cultural anthropologist, Nancy Jay, who opines, patriarchy requires presence of blood in rituals as their blood-ties are ambiguous. Female-dominated religions do not require any reinforcement of blood ties as the ties are more pronounced and clearer.

Another difference is the absence of feeling of ‘uncleanness’ due to menstruation. On the other hand, rituals in these religions celebrate ‘womanhood’. Hence a woman is not excluded from any ritual or place of worship on the grounds of menstruation.

Fedele (2014) discusses in her work practices of a group of Spanish and Catalan women of the ‘Goddess Wood’¹⁶ group. These women refer to themselves as pilgrims of Saint Mary Magdalene and not as Christians¹⁷. They look upon Mary Magdalene as the guardian of menstrual blood¹⁸. They adopt a syncretic approach to nature and women. The emphasis of the Church on the spirit has led to demeaning of the body, in turn resulting in crisis of the environment and violence towards women according to its followers. The movement seeks to revision body and earth. It promotes a vision of the body as sacred and the earth as filled with divine beings unlike a naturalistic outlook, treating both as mere matter.¹⁹

Fedele discussed at length a ritual of menstruation conducted by Estrella a follower. It centered around collecting one’s menstrual discharge and offering it along with fruits in a hole dug in the Earth. The blood symbolises a woman’s personal power. Offering that to Earth is an indicative of merging oneself with the Earth and Mary Magdalene. Estrella describes the process in an interview as, “When you offer your blood to the Earth, it is as if you lower your blood inside a vessel down to earth.Then you pull up the container again and the energy is so powerful because it is the energy from Mother Earth. She makes the energy rise up to the heart and there you meet Mary Magdalene” (Fedele, 2014, p. 27). It purports to end distinctions and perceive continuity. Many followers in a heightened sense of integration, chose not to procreate in order to lessen the burdern of Earth. The women of Goddess Wood believe rituals as these ‘invert’ or turn ‘upside down’ the Christian traditions and rituals. Instead of an altar raised above the ground in Christian Church, the altar is a hole dug in the earth. This is indicative of submersion and not elevating from the earth. Wine (blood of Christ) offered as eucharist in the Church is replaced by menstrual blood. Thus sacralizing it, fit to be offered to the Goddess Earth and not as a source of impurity.

It is evident form the above that the perceptions of menstruation have been tainted with misogyny and prejudice towards women. A closer inspection of the behind reveals patriarchal thinking as the source of all damage. Most religion have men at the helm of affairs. Most scriptures have written by men or transmitted through men. Rules of purity

for women have been codified by men and its hence detrimental to the well being of women. Women learn about themselves from men not from women.

The metaphysical theories by religions on how women were created contribute to reinforcing the superiority of men over women. In Hinduism, accounts of creation vary amongst scriptures. But the underlying assumption is man and woman were created for perpetuating progeny. The essence of being a woman thus is identified with her biological ability to reproduce. Thereby citing divine authorization of fixing the essence of a woman ahead of her existence. In Christianity and Islam woman was created from the rib of Adam, as God saw that Adam was alone. She was created as a companion, as a response to a need. Al-Bukhari says the following about Eve in his Hadith, “Treat woman with care, for woman was created from Adam’s rib, the most crooked part of which is the highest. If you try to straighten it [the rib], you break it and you leave it, it remains crooked. So treat women carefully” (Spellberg, 1996, p. 311). Is the scholar warning men to be wary of the crooked nature of women? One may infer so.

Doctors and philosophers from the 5th century, B.C.E accepted the view that body was composed of four elements, namely, earth, water, air and fire and their qualities were dry, wet, cold, and hot. Man was composed of higher qualities of dry and hot and woman’s body was cold and wet. Schultz asserts that the idea of women made from the wet and cold element dominates the thinking of men of medicine and church for ages to come. She was perceived as formless matter as opposed to God who is pure Form. The uterus became the site of loss of control (unable to control menstruating) and her subsequent banishment from the ecclesiastical structures.

Celene Lizzio, reveals an exchange of opinions on the Islam web in 2010²⁰. A woman reported, her menstrual flow started whilst in the mosque. She chose not to leave the mosque owing to avoid separation from her family. A cleric reprimanded her for it and asked her to repent for this sin, revealing the continuance of menstrual taboos in today’s times.

The preceding findings seem to be at odds with a statement from *Manu Smriti*, which holds that where women are not worshipped, there the activities do not yield fruits. The worshipper of the woman in actuality worships the Goddess. Though Shakti cult

embraces a feminine deity, its priests are male. In my opinion that could be one of the major reasons why menstrual taboos are followed in the above-mentioned temples.

1.2 Purity and Impurity

Purity serves as a system of organizing categories according to Mary Douglas. Douglas claims that rules of purity and uncleanness offer a 'looking glass approach'(Douglas, 2001) into a pattern which a society seeks to establish. Pollution beliefs relate nature with moral order. Natural calamity may befall where pollution rules are not obeyed. Purity rules serve a social purpose than anything else ie to establish a social order in the community. "I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created"(Douglas, 2001, p. 4). "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death"(Douglas, 2001, p. 5). Rules of purity then seem to be found in highly developed cultures. Coinage of words as 'sacred' and 'holy' are based on this meaning of separation.

She refers to *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, the work of Durkheim wherein he opined that primitive religion did not aim at salvation of man but to acquire the favour of Gods. Preservation of society demanded placating the Gods through set of rituals and observances. These underlined the separation and demarcation of things as sacred and non-sacred. He argued that the sacred was contagious. As the deities were abstract projections of the collective experience that yielded them fluidity. There was a need to protect their identity from flowing into other ideas. The sacred thus needed to be cordoned by prohibition and separation.

Douglas observed that purity rituals of primitive culture are symbolic in nature than being based on hygiene. She quotes Professor Harper's study on Havik Brahmin pollution rules. A Havik Brahmin could get polluted by touching manure or a rope touched by an untouchable servant, consuming food not cooked following purity rules, touching people considered as impure as menstruating women or untouchables. Purity can be achieved by an act of bathing. Contact with water nullifies impurity and restores purity.

Drawing from the root meaning of the word 'holy' which means to 'set apart'. Douglas deliberated on the inter relatedness of notions of 'power' and 'danger'. The *Old Testament* reiterates the idea of God's blessings with prosperity and withdrawal of blessing with danger. With blessings arise order in society and other good as flourishing of one's lineage, live stock, etc and their withdrawal leads to disorder, loss of fertility and other evils. 'Holiness' also implies completeness. Stressing on physical perfection, *Leviticus* holds all goods offered and people entering the temple must be physically perfect. All discharges from the body were considered impure. Women after childbirth were allowed to enter the temple only after purification. Douglas inferred that the body had to be whole or complete in order to be perfect. "... the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as perfect container" (Douglas, 2001, p. 53). "Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order"(Douglas, 2001, p. 54). "To be holy is to be whole, to be one: holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind"(Douglas, 2001, p. 55).

Douglas believes that human body is the symbol of society. Society is the macrocosm and body the microcosm. The powers and dangers attributed to the society can be transferred to the human body. Primitive cultures believe bodily dirt to possess power and danger. Margins are believed to be dangerous. Bodily orifices are perceived to be the most vulnerable points of the body. Matter coming forth from them as blood, milk, urine etc are marginal stuff as they have transgressed the boundary of the body to the outer. Disorder is indicative of danger and power. People in marginal state evoke a response of fear and danger. According to Van Gennep, transitional states are considered as dangerous owing to its ambiguity. The person in transition posits a danger to oneself and also to others. Such a danger can be controlled by a ritual, leading to temporary segregation from the society till a more definite stage is reached. "The whole repertoire of ideas concerning pollution and purification are used to mark the gravity of the event and the power of ritual to remake a man"(Douglas, 2001, p. 97).

De Troyer brings out a radical interpretation of purity. She believes purity rules serve the function of protecting God from woman. She refers to *Leviticus* 12 which recommends one week of uncleanness at childbirth of a male and two weeks for a female child for the mother. De Troyer quotes the views of Walter Kornfeld, who believes that the double purification period at the birth of a girl child is explained at two levels. When

a girl child is born, she is perceived as a woman who shall menstruate and thus be a polluting agent in the near future. Secondly the mother whose life is at danger after loss of blood during birth needs to be kept away from God who is the source of all life. These views are seconded by Frymer- Kensky in her article, “Pollution, Purification, and Purgation”. She writes, “The condition of impurity becomes actively dangerous *to the individual* only when it comes into contact with the sacred. Since the impure can defile the sacred, the *sacred* must be protected”(Troyer, 2003, p. 53). She explains, the need for purification is felt when a person touches the boundary between life and death. In birth the mother touches that boundary hence needs to be purified before she can be accepted back into the society. The woman who births a girl child poses a double risk. By giving birth she touches the boundary and to a girl child, who may in turn give birth, the mother is treated as twice dangerous. She poses a double risk to God, hence she needs to be doubly purified. De Troyer in agreeing with the above thinkers reads more into it. The purificatory rules for the mother, though did serve the function of protecting the mother from the outside world also acted as reminder of pagan religions. The earlier pagan religions, it can be assumed involved active participation of pagan Gods in the childbirth. The God of Judaism was conceptualised as transcendent and association with mundane affairs of the world as blasphemy. Hence the purificatory rules, De Troyer believed guarded the God of Judaism from the pagan Gods, stressing the differences between them and upholding the magnificence of the Judaic God. De Troyer adds further, that these rules can also be viewed as ‘punishments’ for the mother. In her words, “... I believe them to be “punishments” for the women’s inherent capacity to give life. The new mother is a reminder of the pagan religions and is “punished” for it”(Troyer, 2003, p. 57).

Maria Lugones views purity rules as a exercise of control by man. Lugones centers her work around the notion of ‘mestizaje’ (multiplicity). “When I think of mestizaje, I think both of seperation as curdling, an exercise in impurity, and of separation as splitting, an exercise in purity”(Lugones, 1994, p. 460). People in control and who like to categorise attempt to analyze the impure to derive from it the pure elements. Mestizaje defies this attempt of fragmentation. Purity has the following concepts as clustered viz control, purity, unity, categorization. She believes, fragmentation follows the logic of purity and multiplicity of curdling (impurity). Seen from the perspective of curdling, the social world is heterogeneous, “in fragments, pieces, parts that do not fit well together, parts

taken for wholes, composite, composed of the parts produced by splitting imagination...”(Lugones, 1994, p. 463). Whereas seen from the logic of purity, it is “unified and fragmented, homogeneous, hierarchially ordered” (Lugones, 1994, p. 463).

She conceives each person to be, “fragmented, composite, or abstract and unified-not exclusive alternatives” (Lugones, 1994, p. 463). “Unification and homogeneity are related principles of ordering the social world. Unification requires a fragmented and hierarchial ordering. Fragmentation is another guise of unity, both in collectivity and individuals. I will connect mestizaje in individuals to mestizaje in groups and thus in the social world, and I will connect fragmentation within individuals to the training of the multiple towards a homogeneous social world” (Lugones, 1994, p. 463). The multiplicity is controlled by reason through the avenues of politics and ethics. The control is effected through constructing a vantage point. The control from multiplicity to unity is carried through a series of fictions. One such fiction being notion of unity underlying the multiplicity. Lugones at times refers to notion of unity as an assumption which later turns itself into a fiction. The process of fragmentation generates a fictional subject as occupying the vantage point and also the notion of the ‘other’. The vantage point is made to appear as one perspective from which the entire reality can be grasped. It also yields it possible for the subject to occupy such a vantage point. “Both the vantage point and the subject are outside historicity and concreteness” (Lugones, 1994, p. 464). The vantage point exists only as long as unity exists.

This fictional subject, the ideal observer is a male. This subject is characterised as rational as he can perceive the underlying unity. Lugones claims that the urge for control and passion for purity are conceptually related. The masses control the observer as the observer controls the masses. “If the women, the poor, the colored, the queer, the ones with cultures (whose cultures are denied and rendered invisible as they are seen as our mark) are deemed unfit for the public, it is because we are tainted by need, emotion, the body. This tainting is relative to the modern subject’s urge for control through unity and the production and maintenance of himself as unified”(Lugones, 1994, p. 467).

Purity rules serve as means of social cohesion for Amy Mulin. She believes that the 20th century replacement for ‘purity’ is ‘authenticity’. “Purity is basically about order, both social and personal”(Mulin, 1996, p. 510). “In particular both purity and

authenticity idealize unity at the expense of plurality...”(Mulin, 1996, p. 511). Robert Parker in his work, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, says pollution, “coincides with the intense early period of the gradual process of assimilating change”(Mulin, 1996, p. 512). He identifies two such times when these changes occur in a society viz death and birth. On a personal front, there is a perceived loss of control over the bodies during these events and society too cannot affect the situation. Personally and socially one experiences a loss of power. Hence the Greeks associated birth and death with pollution. Impurity is associated either with an anomaly or breach of order either or classificatory systems, bodily boundaries, social transitions, amongst others for the Jews. Sexual desires made one focus on the self, hence detrimental to social cohesion. The Jews emphasised on purity of thought and down played sexual needs. On similar grounds early Christians stressed on celibacy and purity of heart. Peter Brown remarks on the ritual of baptism by Paul as, “of gaining by each believer of a single, uncompartmentalized identity, common to all members of the community”(Mulin, 1996, p. 516).

Does purity as a notion require exclusion as a condition? A look into the Mahayana Buddhist notion of purity seems to suggest otherwise. Masao Abe in his article uses the term ‘purity’ in two contexts. He calls ‘Original purity’ as where in the initial stages all is undefiled and second ‘purity of ridding oneself of defilement’ as a state to be reached. In Mahayana Buddhism, the act of believing that one is impure is itself an impurity. To believe that one is impure and ‘purity’ lies out there is being impure. In the act of distinguishing, two things happen simultaneously; we objectify the other and centralize ourselves. In objectifying the other we become in one sense limited by it, viz Abe refers as ‘self-limiting’. At the same time we become self-bound by centralizing one’s own self. These two acts are the true expressions of defilement.

2. Woman and Nature

Karen Warren (1990) defines ecological feminism (ecofeminism) as, “the position that there are important connections—historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics” (Warren,1990, p.1). Warren discusses ecological feminism in the framework of Western society. She advanced the following argument to bring out the connection between equating women

and nature on the one hand and their subordination and oppression on the other. In the ontological binaries, woman and nature share the same value and are considered inferior to man. Since inferior they are vulnerable to domination and oppression by androcentric system, patriarchy. Warren (2000) uses the term 'others' to refer to women and nature. By 'human Others' she means the class that is oppressed by patriarchy, such as women, children, poor and by 'earth other' she means the non-living world as animals, forests, land. She uses the term 'Others' mean highlight the subordinate status of these groups by unjustifiable relationships and systems of domination. The term was similarly used by Beauvoir to point out that the 'othering' of the woman is parallely linked with 'othering' of nature by man.

Warren (2000) believes, 'Nature is a feminist issue', could be the slogan of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism treats natural environment as trees, water, animals, food production, toxins as feminist issues because by understanding them, one can understand the interconnections between the subordinated 'human-others' and domination of 'non-human others'. She calls these interconnections as 'women-other human Others-nature'. Ecofeminism uses a feminist approach when exploring women-other human Others-nature' interconnections. Using a feminist approach indicates using the gender as the yardstick of analysis.

Warren offers three reasons explaining why the analysis uses a woman's perspective. Focusing on women brings to fore the interconnected systems of domination. Firstly, amongst all the groups, it is the women who suffer the most than men in the event of environmental destruction. Secondly, female-gender roles rather than male-gender roles, affect and influence environmental issues. Thirdly, the ideologies that underlie the conception of nature are male-gendered. Hence it is necessary to use women as the yardstick.

Ecofeminists charge language as reinforcing the conceptual structures which lead to equating women and nature. Women are referred as cats, pussycats, pussies, foxes, cows, vixen, bitches, hens. Parallely nature is described in terms applied to women as virgin forests, barren land, fertile soil. Hence women are naturalized, and nature is feminized, by patriarchal structures. Such associations add further to the devaluation.

As against Western thought which perceives nature as passive object of study, ecofeminists perceive nature as active. The reason of nature as passive is drawn from

the epistemological model of West, which treats the object as passive and the knower as active. Ecofeminists base their argument on Donna Haraway's notion of 'situated knowledges'. For Haraway, situated knowledges, regard object of knowledge as an agent or actor and not as a passive object of study. She wishes to propose a new model of science which studies at nature like conversing with nature.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist construes western development as 'maldevelopment' since it is devoid of any feminine content. Such a maldevelopment is based on assumption that work which does not produce profits and capital is non-productive work. It treats nature as unproductive if it is not interfered by man and technology. Since so, it looks down upon organic agriculture depending upon natural cycles as expressions of poverty. Women, tribal and peasant societies which are dependent on nature for their sustenance are treated as unproductive, since to be productivity is defined in terms of technology. For example, a clean river is not a resource till it is developed by constructing dams over it.

Shiva criticized the scientific revolution helmed by patriarchy's epistemological framework as being reductionist. It was called so because of two reasons mainly. Firstly, it promoted a singular view of nature by excluding from its fold the perspectives of other knowers and other ways of knowing about nature, for instance that of women, indigenous people. Secondly, it projected a picture of nature as inert and material, suppressing the indigenous view of nature as an alive, mother-figure, who was loving and caring. Such a mechanistic model of nature is supported by theory of matter as atomistic. Shiva argues, such a mechanistic model in turn affected the relations between nature and society. Whereas the previous organic model of nature and society was of interdependence and reciprocity, the newer mechanistic model, perpetuated a relation of dominance, manipulation, and control.

Shiva contends the marginalization of women and destruction of biodiversity are inextricably linked. The patriarchal model of progress values monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity which results in loss of diversity and conservation. On the other hand, women's work and knowledge fosters diversity. Women's knowledge has been essential in dairy farming, feed and fodders, fertilizers, firewood types, etc.

3. Woman and the Divine

God as 'male' has been treated as a problem by feminist thinkers of the Western tradition as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Naomi Goldberg, Judith Plaskow, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. Mary Daly sums it up succinctly by claiming, 'If God is a male, then male is God'. A corollary of this is, God as the Father stands in a hierarchical relation to the world in the same way, the male stands with society (comprising of women, children, nature). The woman then becomes 'the other' with respect to man.

The gendering of God leads to further issues in philosophy of religion as the problem of religious language, theodicy, issues of immortality, etc. The problem with religious language refers to the problem of metaphors, models, questions of truth and reference. With respect to Judeo-Christian God the masculine metaphors used are 'Father', 'Lord', 'Husband', 'He', amongst others. With respect to divine attributes is omnipotence, God being all-powerful, possessing perfect power. Such a notion of power has been associated with masculine ideals; an omnipotent deity stands for an idealized masculine quality. The implication of omnipotence is self-sufficiency. By emphasizing the transcendence of God over the world, the encompassing nature of divine power, self-sufficient divine will, theism produced a patriarchal consciousness, in which 'man' represented a God.

Debates on the issue of immortality have been shaped by androcentrism, which stress upon self-perpetuation and individuation rather than collective survival. Gilman calls the androcentric religions as death-based since they focus on the question. 'What happens to me after death?' Contrarily, the birth-based religion asks, 'What happens to this child, after it's born?' Ruether (2008), cautions against treating such an image as trivial or a matter of linguistics. She brings out the hidden connections between structure of society and nature of divine.

Feminists critique the way theology perceives God through male experience, by using male metaphors. Though God transcends gendering, it is common practice to refer to God by using male pronouns and male images. Such images are used to authorize subordination of women. In '*Coming of Lillith*', Plaskow, mentions Bishop C. Kilmer Myers of California who opposed the ordination of women on these grounds: "A priest is a "God symbol" whether he likes it or not. In the imagery of both the Old and New

Testament God is represented in masculine imagery. The father begets the son. This is essential to the givenness of the Christian Faith and to tamper with this imagery is to change that Faith into something else. Of course, this does not mean that God is male. The Biblical language is the language of analogy. It is imperfect. Nevertheless, it has meaning. The male image about God pertains to the divine initiative in creation. Initiative is in itself a male rather than a female attribute.” (Plaskow, 2005, p.43). The underlying idea is clear, the priest is a symbol of God, hence the priest must be male.

Pride and sensuality are sins in the Christian tradition which are male oriented and as such do not exactly apply to women. Valerie Saiving claims the temptations of man are different from those of a woman. Sins which are attached to terms as pride and will to power are not adequately accrued to woman. On the contrary, terms as triviality, distractibility, lack of focus, dependence on others, apply to women more correctly, due to the underdevelopment or negation of their self.

4. Feminist Philosophy of Religion

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines feminist philosophy of religion as that branch of study which questions religious texts, traditions, with an aim to critique, redefine or reconstruct the field of study by keeping gender in mind. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is regarded as the foremother of feminist philosophy of religion. The permeation of gender bias which has been traditionally observed in major religions, has subsequently found its way in guiding the problems and orientations in philosophy of religion. Major problems discussed in philosophy of religion as arguments for and against the existence of God, the nature and attributes of the deity, validity of religious claims, nature of religious and mystical experience, faith and reason etc. Taking a cue from the religions, traditional philosophers of religion have upheld the ‘male/masculine’ in religious discourse and systematically excluded and devalued the ‘female/feminine’. Though the 20th century, philosophy of religion has been influenced by logical positivism and empiricism, Frankenberry (2004) states feminist inquiry and gender biases continue to dominate the field. Naming some philosophers as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and D Z Phillips, as belonging to contemporary times, who have continued to espouse the traditional biases.

Gender bias in philosophy of religion is made apparent through, most of the contributing authors being male and dearth of women authors in leading textbooks and

journals on religion, lack of attention to feminist scholarship, singular pronouns used are generally masculine, etc. Bias and androcentrism can be observed in the assumptions, methods, and norms of traditional philosophy of religion. There exist binaries (dualisms) which are latent in the metaphysical systems of religions, as God/world, reason/emotions, mind/body, subject/object, transcendental/empirical. Feminists argue these binaries are gender coded and stand in hierarchical relations with each other. God, reason, mind, subject, transcendental is treated as masculine and world, emotions, body, object, empirical are treated as feminine. The pair on the left side, mapped alongside God are treated as sacred and on the right are profane. Thus, when one considers the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, the male and masculine are treated as sacred, female and feminine are profane. The metaphysical roots of oppression begin from here, according to most feminists.

Pamela Sue Anderson proposes to use an approach which she terms as an 'epistemological-ethical approach' to feminist philosophy of religion. She believes that modern philosophers have treated epistemology/ethics as a binary relation, thereby making epistemology more rigorous (hard) over ethics which is less rigorous (soft). With regards to women, Anderson states, they have been excluded from both. Since women are associated with the body and its bodily functions, attributes like irrationality, emotions are deemed unfit for epistemology and ethics. To overcome this exclusion, Anderson proposes cultivation of four intellectual virtues, namely, reflexive critical openness, care-knowing, strong objectivity, and principled autonomy.

a) **Reflective critical openness:** Anderson borrows this concept from Miranda Fricker. As an intellectual virtue it deals with anyone being unjustly given either too much or too little credibility. It provides an answer to the question whose knowledge is it, in terms of either religious practices or divine knowledge. Can the person in question provide reliable knowledge? Reflective critical openness would lay bare any such subjects excluded on the basis of their gender, race, etc. She points out, philosophers of religion would profit immensely by learning from feminist critiques as they represent voices from the margin.

b) **Care-knowing:** Dalmiya describes this as a reliabilist virtue exhibiting a 'knowing how'. She explains reliable as recognizing that care-receiving is dependent upon the one who cares and on the one who receives this care. It involves one to

critically self-reflect on the interactive practice of caring. In practice, it is the ability to listen to, to register what one says and needs. In the area of philosophy of religion, it entails 'bringing about a state in which the interactive practices of women and others who care are recognized and registered' (Anderson, 2004). Dalmiya holds care is five faceted, viz caring about, caring for, taking care, care reception and caring about caring. Such a disposition makes one to actively listen to and register the practices and perspectives of the other.

c) **Strong objectivity:** Using Harding's sense of strong objectivity, from feminist standpoint epistemology, Anderson looks at situatedness as a criterion. She believes we are transformed when we achieve knowledge about ourselves from others. 'To gain knowledge about from another's perspective on one's own life, we need to assess the nook and crannies in our subjectivities' (Anderson, 2004). In other words, to cultivate a virtue of reflective critical openness. When we look at our social location from another's perspective, it leads us to recognize the injustice in our epistemic practices and in our endeavour to become intellectually virtuous. Thereby we can eliminate the injustice and change how we see ourselves.

d) **Principled autonomy:** As against the Kantian notion of individual autonomy, Onora O'Neill proposes 'principled autonomy'. Principled autonomy stands for maxims which can be adopted and practiced by all. She says, "We do not offer other reasons for believing if we communicate with them in ways that we know they will find unintelligible; we do not offer others reasons for acting if we present them with proposals for action that we know they will find unadoptable" (Anderson, 2004, p.97). Used in the context of feminist philosophy of religion, it would provide an alternative to the ideal observer in the following manner. An ideal observer, who treats God as an ideal of cognition and morality, would be challenged by principled autonomy. This ideal observer would be perspective-less, failing to learn from the process of acknowledging one's own perspective, i.e., one's social location. Thus, would fail to offer reasons for believing or acting that all can follow. As no one can be this ideal observer since no one can see from the perspective of God's-eye-view.

Traditional theism conceives God as possessing divine attributes as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc. Feminists have critiqued the theistic notion of God as

the perfect ego-ideal of a male subject. The possession of perfect power, as indicated by omnipotence, points to androcentrism. Omnipotence with its reference to power of domination over all beings, has been associated with notions of masculinity. Closely associated with omnipotence is the attribute of aseity. God is complete in Himself and does not need depend upon any other being and therefore is free of any relations with any being. Feminists criticize that such a God cannot stand in affirmative relations with being. Contrastingly, a female-ego is constituted by her relations with others, being based on inter-relations. In the problem of evil rape, femicide, oppression related to women are hardly spoken of as evil.

Rita Gross, a Buddhist feminist contends we need to change the outlook of studying religions. Our present outlook is androcentric which has resulted in undervaluing the feminine in religion. She suggests we must develop a feminist paradigm shift in perceiving religion to give justice to the role of women in religion. The three characteristics of the androcentric outlook are, firstly, assuming there is symmetry between the male and human norm. Statements using masculine pronouns represent both the sexes. Secondly, since 'male' represents both 'male' and 'female' i.e., 'he' includes 'he' and 'she', no special study of the female is required. Wherever females need to be discussed, they are referred to as an 'object', as something external to mankind. There is a felt need to fit them in the general schema of things, according them a separate status.

Gross says man perceived as *homo religious* and woman as *vir religiosus*. Man in his *homo religiositic* ontic formulation makes the woman function externally in the religious world as either a 'symbol of good and evil, as deity or demon, an object excluded or included in ritual, as a being whose ontological status can be debated'. Hence making her *vir religiosus*. Women in religions are investigated as they are thought about by the males not as having her own place. The issue at hand, Gross believes, is not whether the religious systems are androcentric (which are to a certain degree) but whether the investigator is. She believes this after personally studying religious systems. The religious investigator is prone due to an androcentric bias study only the involvement of males in the religion and ignore the part of a woman's involvement.

The androcentrism of the investigator is exposed when books discussing religion mention women as either in passing or ignore it totally. Information of woman's role is

never discussed in full as is discussed the role of man. It is expected by the reader that if a text does discuss a woman's place in religion, it shall be about how men see the role of women, throw light on what women can or cannot do in religion, discuss feminine deities and symbolisms, etc. But the reader does not expect it to contain how women have integrated religion in their lives, how they might have modified it to suit them or how they may have moved away from it. In other words, woman's part in religion is that of an outsider, she is never independently perceived vis a vis the male.

She understands by feminism to be a movement which asserts that women are humans. She does not endorse any of the other views as woman is superior to man or more peaceful or caring than man. Such an understanding is warranted by her Buddhist leanings. She is particularly influenced by *Vajrayana Buddhism* which looks at humans as made up of body, speech, and mind. Women are not just body but speech and mind too. When gender is attached only with body, speech and mind are neglected. The feminist problem is about male gender as associated with mind, body, and speech while women are associated only with body. The perception of males is complete but of a woman is skewed. Males are expected to develop all three aspects but in females only body is emphasized. Buddhism places an emphasis on the mind rather than the body, body has a sex and gender, but mind does not. It is commonly believed that man's brain functions differently from a woman's, but one can't say this about the mind. Mind is free from the bodily restrictions. Though she also believes that body is as fluid as the mind. One can very easily dress the body to look any gender, for instance transgenders and cross dressers. To change the perspective, Gross suggests another model 'androgyny'. Androgyny is an inclusive term, standing for both men and women together, as parts making a whole. As advocated by Gross, feminist paradigm effectuates a shift in the method of studying religion from the androcentric method. The shift occurs when religion studies by keeping both man and woman at the centre instead of keeping woman at the periphery and man at the centre as was done by androcentrism.

To fulfil that objective, she proposes to study the ritualistic (practice of religion) and symbolic (myths, Ultimate) aspects from an androgynous perspective. She suggests two guidelines to carry out this re-investigation. Firstly, to study woman's role in religion as a pattern of exclusion and participation. This can be applied to man also hence treats man and woman equally. Exclusion and inclusion provide a holistic role, played woman rather than androcentrism which focused on exclusion. Secondly, such a study shall

reveal the hidden pattern of parallel experiences and expressions of sacredness. Religions allow man and women to participate in the sacred. The difference lies in the expressions of the sacred, exemplified by the separation of rituals for men and women. One cannot participate in the rituals meant for the other. Though both sexes can participate in the sacred in principle, in practice they are antagonistic to each other. This important facet of religion says Gross has been neglected in the androcentric model.

5. Feminist Theology

Theology is rational study of God and feminist theology is a movement which reconsiders through the perspective of the feminine, traditions, practices, scriptures, and theologies of religions. It is not a distinct theology for women as even men participate in the movement. “Feminist theologians seek to make a contribution, to ask critical questions of all endeavours of doing theology” (Watson, 2003, Pg. ix). In the same work she adds further, “It invites its readers to rejoice in the diversity of voices in today’s theological landscape and shows how theology done by the whole-body Christ cannot ignore the human bodies of women and men if it wants to be true to Christ incarnate” (Watson, 2003, p. ix).

“Feminist theology is the critical, contextual, constructive, and creative re-reading and re-writing of Christian theology. It regards women-and their bodies, perspectives, and experiences- as relevant to the agenda of Christian theologians and advocates them as subjects of theological discourses and as full citizens of the Church”. (Watson, 2003, p. 2-3) Though feminist theology had started in the West as a response to Christianity, today it has widened its ambit to include other religions including Asian.

Radford (2002) asserts feminist theologians perform a dual task of critiquing and reconstructing. Feminist theologians’ question male domination of traditional theology in areas as language (male pronouns used for God), common beliefs as males represent God more correctly than females, males as leaders in Church and subordination of women as sanctioned by God. Secondly seek to reconstruct theology by applying, female symbols for God (the Wisdom tradition); humanity male and female, both created in God’s image; the distinction of male and female overcome in Christ in a new inclusive humanity of redemption; and both males and females called to prophecy.

Some feminist theologians attempt to reconcile feminism with Christianity, as Leonard Swindler, Denise Lardner Carmody, early writings of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. These believe that Christianity in its true spirit i.e., the teachings of Christ incorporate justice and equality of women. Swindler argues that 'Jesus was a feminist'. Some like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza see to re-read the Bible as representing women's struggle for liberation. Some like Argula von Grumbach, Quaker Elizabeth Cady Stanton read Bible from feminist perspectives (feminist hermeneutics). In her work *The Women's Bible*, Stanton writes, "The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man, and not of our ideal great first cause, "the Spirit of all Good", that set the universe of matter and mind in motion, and by immutable law holds the land, the sea..." (Watson, 2003, p. 7).

5.1 Thealogy

The growth of 'thealogy' as opposed to 'theology' was attributed to the popularity of feminist theology. 'Thea' means 'goddess' and 'logos' is 'meaning'. Carol Christ explains thealogy as, "It (thealogy) describes the activity of reflection on the meaning of Goddess, in contrast to theology, from *theos* and *logos*, which is a reflection on the meaning of God." (Christ, 2002, p. 79). The roots of thealogy movement are traced in the 19th century works of *Woman, Church, and State* by Matilda Joslyn Gage and *Women's Bible* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In the 20th century, Mary Daly revived the movement with her work, *Beyond God the Father*. Others who notably influenced it were Zsuzsanna Budapest, Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove and Marija Gimbutas.

The dominant themes in thealogy are the emphasis on the Goddess (feminine principle) as divinity, historicity of Goddess worship, women's experience as authority, immanence of divinity, nature as expression of divine, body as sacred and ethics based on interconnectedness.

i) **Goddess as Divinity:** Feminists charge traditional theology as projecting an idea of God which is masculine. Such a projection leads to exalting men as superior and women and nature as inferior. By emphasizing on 'Goddess' instead of 'God' the feminists argue that there comes a radical shift in the way one perceives the world. The earth and nature become sacred. This in turn influences the way one perceives female body.

ii) **Historicity of Goddess worship:** Feminist historians point out ancient civilizations have been matriarchal. Men and women were treated equally. They saw themselves as interconnected with nature. Goddess worship was prevalent during Greek civilization. Traditional theology tended to separate man and woman, thereby placing man in higher position than woman.

iii) **Women's experience as authority:** The source of authority of traditional theology is the scripture. Scriptures are believed to be revealed texts and must be believed as true. Reason is the means to understand these texts. Feminists point out such a tradition has side-lined woman's perspective of understanding these texts. Theology in contrast begins with woman's experience. This allows for a plural view of truth as every woman's experience is unique.

iv) **Immanence of divinity:** Traditional theology posits God as transcending the universe. The creator as distinct from the creation, is placed in the heavens above. The Goddess as the earth in contrast is seen as immanent in the world. The earth gives and sustains life. Starhawk mentions three principles of Goddess movement as immanence, interconnectedness, and community.

v) **Nature as expression of divine:** God as transcendent is at the top in hierarchy, followed by man, woman, children, and nature. Man is thus placed immediately below God and above woman and nature. Nature can be used for the purposes of man. Theology equates Goddess with earth thus making nature as sacred. Life and death are considered as natural.

vi) **Body as sacred:** Traditional theology with reference to 'original sin' looks upon mankind as still affected by it. Woman tempted man hence partakes of that sin. A woman's body is 'sinful' and a 'temptation'. Whereas in theology it becomes sacred as it is the body of the Goddess. A female body can give life hence honoured. However, the same applies to male bodies too.

vii) **Ethics based on interconnectedness:** Traditional model of ethics is based on reason and dispassion. Feministic model is based on ethics of care. It is based on the

notion of interconnectedness of the universe and the feeling of ‘care’ that springs from thereof.

6. Summary

A feminist study of the body, nature, conceptions of divinity reveal the rising of feminist consciousness as a response to the androcentrism and patriarchy rooted in the religious metaphysical structures. By making menstruation as a case study, the various attitudes of religions demeaning the body are revealed. As pointed out by Douglas, the body is the microcosm, and society is the macrocosm. By deifying the male body, the female body is vilified.

¹ The Church has softened its stand on these issues in the present times. In the *Handbook of Moral Theology*, Dommmic Prummer writes: "involuntary pollution in the menstrual period does not render the body so unclean as to prevent the receiving of Holy Communion."(Phipps, 1980)

² Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda by Janet Chawla

³ One may find a connection between Indra and fertility of women. Vritra, the demon who withheld the waters, brought droughts, could be indicative of infertility in women. Indra on slaying him released the waters. He causes menstruation in women which can be likened to releasing of waters, indicating the start of fertility in women.

⁴ Such a belief is found even in the primitive culture of the Maoris. They believe that menstrual blood symbolises a person who would have lived if blood had not flown. Hence it is perceived as ‘a dead person that has never lived’.

⁵ See Shai Secunda (2014), pgs 96, 100

⁶ In the West as early as the beginning of the 20th century, biologist Margie Profet in 1993, *Quarterly Review of Biology*, proposed that menstruation flushes out pathogens from the woman’s body.

⁷ With special reference to the creation accounts of major religions explaining how and why woman was ‘created’, discussed in the preceding section of the paper.

⁸ In a parallel story Kamakhya is also referred as Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas found in the epic *Mahabharata*. Draupadi was menstruating when she was dragged by her hair to the Kaurav’s King’s court and humiliated in public. This action is the reason why the mighty empire of the Kauravas is said to fall.

⁹ As per the mythological story, when Sati jumped in the fire, Shiva flew away in rage with her body. Vishnu dismembered her body with his discus. Wherever the parts of Sati fell, that place is worshipped as a Sakti-peeth. It is believed that the yoni of Sakti fell on the Nilachal hill. It is where the temple of Kamakhya stands today.

¹⁰ Also referred as ‘Ambubasi’ or ‘Xaat’ (Das, 2008). Prof. Dhere understands ‘Ambuvachi’ to literally means menstruation.’ Ambu’ stands for ‘procreative water’ and ‘vachi’ means to ‘express’ or ‘blossom’ (Dhavalikar, 1980).

¹¹ Rivers as Damodar, Rupnarayan, Barakar, Barakeshwar, Ajoy, Pagla, Jaipanda, Godadhari, Bhairav (mostly found in West Bengal) are ‘male’ (Dandekar, 2015) whereas ‘Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati’ are female.

¹² ‘*Angadhak*’ is the red water of the natural spring flowing over the *yoni*, supposedly standing for the menstruating flow of the Goddess. ‘*Angabastro*’ is the red cloth covering the *yoni* which is shredded after the menstruation of the Goddess is over.

¹³ Yet another case of a woman penalized over a man’s folly.

¹⁴ *Tuloni biya* is a practice of marriage of the first time menstruant girl to a banana plant.

¹⁵ In Nepali-Chetris the girl before menses is worshipped as a form of the Goddess signifying her pure status. Post menarche, she loses the state of purity and becomes a threat to males, identifying her as a ‘female dog’ (Das, 2008).

¹⁶ This movement was started in 2002 .

¹⁷ They perceive the Church as patriarchal in its outlook and aim to re-appropriate a woman’s rightful place in religion.

¹⁸ The Christians of Sri Lanka prefer Virgin Mary to be the protector of the first time menstruant rather than their patron saint, St Rogus. Virgin Mary is the most apt as she shares qualities of virginhood and purity with the girl.

¹⁹ A parallel view is found in the *Markandeya Purana* (Hindu scripture) which describes a unique form of the Goddess, Devi Shakhambari. In *Markandeya Purana* the goddess herself says: "I shall support the whole world with life sustaining vegetables which I shall grow out of my own body during heavy rain. I shall gain fame then as Shakambari. (Dhavalikar, 1980, pp. 32-33) This form of the Goddess integrates Earth and womanhood.

²⁰ See Celene Ayat Lizzio, (Lizzio,2013, p. 175)

Chapter 5

Women and Problem of Religious Knowledge

Feminists have challenged traditional conceptions of knowledge and reality which have dominated western thought tradition of the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century saw new models of physics and social reality. A development of importance to the epistemological tradition was the formulation of Cartesian philosophy. Some salient features of this tradition are: firstly, it posits reality as being independent of the observer, known also as metaphysical realism. It is objectivist, for believing that this reality is accessible to humans for study. It is a solitary individual rather than a group is the subject of this knowledge, hence it supports epistemological individualism. It is rationalistic as reason is the principal means of acquiring knowledge of reality, supported by the senses. It subscribes to a universalist view which holds that faculties of reason and sensibility are the same for all individuals irrespective of their culture, class, race, or sex. It therefore endeavours to find the best method by which individual seekers of knowledge can attain valid knowledge of reality. Descartes himself, used the method of doubt in which he began with indubitable propositions as basic propositions and derived from them indubitable knowledge of reality.

These epistemological assumptions together with the opposing dualist ontologies as universal v/s particular, culture v/s nature, mind v/s body, reason v/s emotion, constituted a framework for understanding the natural world and human nature and knowledge processes. The culmination of this was found in positivism and neo-positivism of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Feminist epistemology pointed out the inadequacies of Cartesian dualism of mind and body and the ontological dualisms that ensued from them.

1. Feminist Epistemology: An Outline

Feminist philosophers have criticized the presumptions of traditional epistemology as being neutral and universalizing cognitive norms and standards (Mills, 1988). Feminist epistemologists argue, historically, knowledge producers have generally been men. This leads them to introduce androcentric biases into knowledge claims. It is

instantiated by use of words as 'man', 'mankind' (masculine words) when referring to all humanity. When knowledge is perceived from the perspective of sex/gender perspective there is a Gestalt switch. Feminists believe sex and gender influence knowledge, "...gender" is not just another factor to be included in analysis as it stands. Its "inclusion" fundamentally changes analysis..." (Friedman & Wilks, 1987, p. 61).

According to Friedman and Wilks (1987), women could be either excluded or included in the field of knowledge. Their exclusion is manifest by non-usage of feminine pronouns and/or gender-neutral terms when referring to mankind. Where women are included, writings on women are colored by androcentrism, by viewing them private or public sphere exclusively. Either perspective does her no justice. Regarding her solely from domestic sphere is to reinforce the traditional androcentric perspective. If she is perceived only from as public sphere, that too is incomplete as for her, public is dependent upon the domestic. If she studies from perspective of women's issues, the danger is that the study may be marginalized. Standards or norms set for evaluation are such which favour men than women. This often leads to devaluing women in terms of either their body or capacity.

Feminist epistemology asks the following empirical questions:

- 1) How hitherto researches in fields such as anthropology, psychology and philosophy have been affected by exclusion of women?
- 2) How gendering of terms in biology have made some phenomenon to be notable than others?
- 3) How would the content of medicine, history and economics change if it is viewed from a woman's perspective than the male?
- 4) How the feminist movements have changed our data, our ways of describing the world, theories of describing differences between women and men?

Lorraine Code in her article, "Taking Subjectivity into Account", critiques the approach of traditional epistemology (knowledge claims in the form *S-knows-that-p*) on the grounds that it neglects the social and individual dimension of knowledge. Traditional epistemology, she says claims to offer a 'view from nowhere', meaning making a knowledge claim from a place of ideal observation, which could be from anywhere and

everywhere (Code, 1993). A claim which derives from pure reason, transcending particularity and contingency.

“The ideals presuppose a universal, homogeneous, and essential “human nature” that allows knowers to be substitutable for one another” (Code, 1993, p. 16). She uses the phrase ‘surrogate knower’¹, standing for a knower, ‘who are able to put themselves in anyone else’s place and know his or her circumstances and interests in just the same as he or she would know them’ (Code, 1993). Such a claim is untouched by any individual emotions, circumstances, or interests. The claim being, if one cannot transcend subjectivity and the particularities of its “location”, then there is no knowledge worth analysing.

Code says for positivists, observation is the most accurate source of knowledge. Knowers are neutral and observe the objects in a detached manner. One knower can be substituted by another knower. The goal of knowledge is to predict, manipulate and control the objects of knowledge. Value-neutrality and pure objectivity are the two prized features of traditional knowledge claims. Code says in such a setup there is no place for subjectivity. On the contrary says Code, epistemologists should also study the location of ‘S’ (the subject of knowledge) as much as to ‘p’. Code calls her view as ‘variable construction hypothesis’ (Code, 1993).

2. Feminist Epistemology and Traditional Epistemology

Feminist epistemology is a branch of social epistemology. This view is held by prominent feminist thinkers as Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code and Pamela Sue Anderson. “Feminist epistemology can be regarded as the branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of *socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences* on the production of knowledge” (Anderson, 2014, p. 190). Knowers are polarized into two, one the privileged male, who has been traditionally at the center of knowledge production, the marginalized that include men who have lesser privileged, subdued by race, caste, class, and women. The argument is the privileged male’s account of what constitutes knowledge excluded the view of the marginalized, rendering it biased and partial. The problem Anderson deems for a feminist philosopher is that ‘experience’ used by theists traditionally refers to a “radically privileged, formally male-neutral ideas², impressions, perceptions, sensations, sense-data, evidence, or non-inferential beliefs” (Anderson,

1998). In the Western perspective, the privileged male is generally a 'white male' and in Indian context it is the upper class (Brahmin).

The lived experiences of the privileged male and the marginalized vastly differ. Knowledge being social in nature, a knower's situatedness affects hers/his cognitive abilities. Embodiment, first-person vs. third-person knowledge, emotions, attitudes, interests, and values, personal knowledge of others, know-how, cognitive styles, background beliefs and worldviews, relations to other inquirers are the factors identified by Anderson.³

Understood simply, feminist epistemology studies the interplay between gender and knowledge. It concerns itself with how androcentrism has disadvantaged women in the enterprise of knowledge seeking, by denying them a rightful place in discourse, by suppressing their voices, ignoring their perspectives, holding inferior and biased views about women.

Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, titled their book as 'Feminist Epistemologies' instead of singular 'Feminist Epistemology', as they believe, "...the term does not have a single referent and, it may never" (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). Feminists contend that a universal or generalized account of knowledge (as held by traditional epistemology) is questionable as it ignores the social aspect of the knower. They liken the essays in their book as creating a new 'research program in epistemology' (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). Writing about it further, they say, "...this new research program is internally heterogeneous and irreducible to any uniform set of theses" (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p.4). They believe that such a novel approach will attempt to 'reconstruct' and 'reconfigure' the borders of traditional disciplines as epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, and others. Alcoff and Potter stress that, "for feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to emancipatory goal: the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge" (Alcoff & Potter, 1993).

Some feminists identify feminist epistemology as a social branch of naturalized epistemology. "Naturalized epistemology considers knowledge production as an activity in which inquirers are subject to the same causal factors that affect their objects of study" (Anderson, 2014, p. 190). "Social epistemology is a branch of naturalized epistemology that investigates the influence of specifically social factors on knowledge

production: who gets to participate in theoretical inquiry, who listens to whom, the relative prestige of different styles and fields of research, the political and economic conditions in which inquirers conduct their investigations, the social settings in which they interact with the subjects of study, their ideological commitments, the availability of models and narrative forms in culture that can be used to structure scientific observation and explain phenomenon, and so forth.” (Anderson, 2014, p. 190)

3. Androcentrism in Traditional Epistemology

Androcentrism in epistemology manifest either in the content of the theories or in the interests of research areas. One way in which androcentrism is manifested in theories is to make the male as the standard measure and to treat the woman as a deviant. For instance, psychologists and biologists for a long wanted to know, why a woman is different from a man? Rather the question could have been why are boys less responsive, more pushy, more conceited, less synthetic minded than girls? Secondly, describing phenomena from the point of view of men or men’s lives without paying any attention to women’s lives. For instance, economist and political scientists have traditionally studied class and socioeconomic status from a man’s perspective and ignored the economic status of the full-time homemaker.

Traditional epistemology concerned itself with existence of the external world, other minds, reliability of perception and memory etc. Feminist epistemology asks the questions: why is the existence of other minds so problematic? Why do theories of knowledge presuppose an isolated knower? Does this isolated knower not have a body which was birthed and nourished by others? Does this knower not have a language learnt from society? Why are women not thought to have knowledge?

Feminist epistemologists question the following presuppositions of mainstream epistemology, subject of knowledge is an individual, this individual share the epistemic ability with others hence can stand for others, object of knowledge is a natural object, the logical form of knowledge is ‘S knows p’ and objective knowledge is impartial and value free.

Feminists approach knowledge from the following perspective, treating the knower as situated in a context, knower is an embodied member of the community, knowledge includes knowledge of persons as well as natural objects, acknowledges the role of

feeling and doing in the acquisition of knowledge, believe that “objectivity is strengthened by the contextualization of the practices of knowledge and its norms of justification” (Schott, 2003, p. 56).

Feminist epistemology being a supplement to social epistemology purports that knowledge must incorporate questions on nature of social community, power, and desire. Some answers it seeks in this regard as are to the questions; who is the subject of knowledge? How does the social position of the subject affect the production of knowledge? Does the sex of the knower affect the acquisition of knowledge? Can all knowledge be expressed in the propositional form “S knows p”? Does the notion of situatedness strengthen the notion of objectivity? Can the knowledge claims of the oppressed be treated as epistemically privileged? How does gender affect science?

Feminist epistemology inquires what impact gender biases have had on the women students and researchers, how it has impacted the growth of knowledge. There is evidence pointing out that findings of women scientists are not given the same credibility as their male counterparts. The gender of the researcher also makes a difference to the responses of surveys.

4. Common Misconceptions of Feminist Epistemology

Schott defends feminist epistemology against two common misconceptions (Schott, 2003), firstly, ‘women’s logic’ is special faculty possessed by women. She clarifies the commonly used phrase ‘women’s ways of knowing’ is meant to indicate the situatedness of women in deliberating about epistemological problems and to expose the male bias of present theory of knowledge. Secondly, feminist theorization on natural science and social science does not indicate ‘collapse’ of these fields and rejection of concepts as ‘rationality’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’. Contrary to this, feminists seek to reinterpret the terms considering the women’s situatedness.

5. Traditional Philosophers on Women

St Augustine, in *The Confessions* made the following comments. Regarding man’s nature there is parity. Man being made in the image of God shares the reasoning and understanding faculty of the divine. This places him at the apex above animals and women. With women it is not the case. Though she shares the rationality of man physically she subjects to man, as natural impulses to reason for ethical conduct.

In the Renaissance debates arose on a question, 'Whether mankind included women? The central virtue for woman was chastity. The underlying theme in most Renaissance debates was based on Genesis. Man being created in the image of God and women created as his companion.

The 17th century concept of reason was influenced by philosophy of Descartes. In his work *Regulae, the Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, 1628, he developed his epistemology. His method is to reach at indubitable truths. Truths based on intuition (hence beyond doubt) and later to deduce a series of other truths based on these indubitable propositions using deduction. The metaphysical assumption of such a theory is that Descartes seeks to unite all sciences by uniting method of seeking knowledge. He united reason with reality. As one seeks to understand the individual mind, one reaches the universal reason, through the intermediary of God. The reason can apprehend the reality as it is. Hence reason is united with reality. Reason, which is given by God, lends it a 'quasi divine' status. Consequently, man's rationality gets a quasi-divine status. With the quasi divinity accorded to reason, man gains supremacy over women, who is filled with emotions hence irrational. Their Biblical role of being a companion to man is seconded in 17th century by the divinization of reason.

In *Ethics*, Spinoza made a distinction between passion and emotion. Passions he says are confused modes of perceptions and emotions are clearer and more distinct. Spinoza calls a man of reason as a 'strong man'. Such a man discovers that things follow with necessity from divine nature. Things appear as evil, hurtful, unjust due to his own erroneous and fragmentary view of the universe. He attempts to overcome these limitations and strives to conceive things as they really are. In this process he stretches as far as his limits allow him and to do good. Perceptions render things as fragmentary and erroneous, reason shows him necessity and thereby the truth. He believed that the man of reason must shed pity. Pity is described as 'womanish'. The ideal then seems again to be masculine as to be 'womanish' is to live in distortions. To be free man one must live under the domain of reason.

6. Feminist Epistemology as Alternative Epistemology

Mills (1988) terms feminist epistemology as alternative epistemology. Such an approach does not deal with the problems of traditional epistemology as truth, justification, belief. Rather it aspires to transcend the framework which has given rise

to these issues. It blames the framework as being based on the white male outlook of the world. Thus, it seeks to reconceptualize the outlook by involving the women's perspective in it.

Alan Soble, (1983) has pointed out, two fundamentally different kinds of answers have been offered to the question of why subordinate groups may have differential, and superior, insight into the structure of social reality: (i) There are biological differences in the cognizing equipment, or the embodied interaction with the world, of the different groups involved; and (ii) there are significant socially caused divergences in their situation which differentially affect their perception.

7. Reason and Gender in Feminist Epistemology

Gender bias can be observed in the following cases

1. Observation of women's exclusion from theoretical inquiry
2. Girls are largely discouraged by parents, counsellors from studying mathematics and natural sciences (Masculine disciplines)
3. In a mathematics class, teachers usually favour the boys than the girls
4. Boys marginalize the girls by interruption and sexual harassment
5. In all girls schools and colleges women achieve better than co-ed institutions
6. Women share similar fate in engineering profession
7. In matters of epistemic authority men enjoy greater credibility, respect than women's claims
8. In academic publishing, men's work gets published more easily than woman's

There is a causal impact of the gender of the researcher on the object of knowledge. The character of knowledge is influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher. Women are said to be more intuitive and concern themselves more with particulars than abstractions. They engage themselves more emotionally with the individuals of study. They focus on the relational aspect than an atomistic ontology.

Feminists contend gender affects the way knowledge is perceived and traditional epistemology has kept women outside the circle of knowledge. When philosophers talk of rationality they implicitly mean 'ideals of manhood'. This gendering of 'reason' as 'male' and 'emotions' as 'female' is historical, dating back to Aristotle who understood women as 'lesser men'. Lesser, as, they lack soul, hence not possessing rationality,

which finds its fullest expression in males. Women are better than animals as the latter are not at all rational.

Traditional epistemology did not concern itself and/or ignored completely the influence of gender on knowledge. Till the reason is obvious, it was males who engaged in philosophy. Contrarily feminists, on the other hand purport that knowledge has been viewed as gendered and theorization of knowledge has been influenced by gender. “Gender symbolism appears on at least two levels of our knowledge practices: in the construction of a hierarchy of prestige and authority among kinds and fields and in the content of theoretical inquiry itself” (Anderson, 2014, p. 196). Feminist epistemologists observe that masculine/feminine conceptual dichotomy is used as a model for basing multitude of conceptual frameworks as mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, objective/subjective, tough-minded/soft-hearted and so on.

Impersonal and theoretical knowledge is coded as masculine and personal as involving the knower’s identity, biography, personal experiences as feminine (Anderson, 2014). Theoretical knowledge is perceived to be objective as it claimed to be based on objectivity, free from emotions, particularity, interests, and values. Natural sciences are ‘harder’ likened to the masculine body and social sciences and humanities are ‘softer’ being affected by emotionality and subjectivity. It is therefore more prestigious to do science than social science or humanity. Mathematics is treated as masculine. In the sciences physics is the most prestigious of all as it uses mathematics. Other sciences which are quantitative and experimental are ranked higher than the qualitative. Values are designated as feminine so any discipline which is normative is viewed lower than those that are based on observation. Biology is replete with examples in which gender symbolism is ingrained in the content of the theories. Evelyn Keller studied how evolutionary theory uses gender symbolism.

Reason was seen as male, and females came to be associated with intuition. Lloyd says that females have been seen as ‘less rational’ than the males’ as rationality is conceptualized not to include any reference to qualities assigned to the feminine. ‘Female intuition’ is more a pejorative term than complimentary, says Lloyd. In the 18th century reason lost its divine status and becomes earthly. Philosophers saw it as naturally associated with humans rather than divine. Woman and her thought relegated to the position of that of common man in the 18th century. The attitude towards emotions

changed in the 18th century. In this time they were accorded their own reality unlike their predecessors. 19th century romanticism critiqued reason and exalted emotions critiquing reason.

Elizabeth Anderson has identified four types of gender influence on theorizing:

1) **Studies of gender structure:** These theories examine the way gender structuring affect division of labour in society, incorporating the division of labour in academic realms as intellectual and manual, service labour, within different academic disciplines and their sub fields, and amongst primary researchers, teachers, and assistants. They focus on exclusion of women from sciences and feminist scholarship. It asks the question; would an equal representation of genders affect the theoretical inquiry?

2) **Gender symbolism:** It is the practice of representing inanimate phenomena as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Such practice is prevalent in theoretical inquiry. Feminist epistemologists ask 'how would our theoretical conceptions change if we eliminate or alter the gender symbolizations?'

3) **Androcentrism in Disciplines:** Disciplines as Biology, Social Sciences, Cultural and Literary studies take man, masculinity, and men's lives to be the standard for the study of humans or animals generally. Such an approach completely disregards the lives of women or treats it as 'deviant'. Feminist epistemology asks how different the phenomena would be understood if it viewed from the woman's perspective.

4) **Sexism:** A theory is sexist when it asserts that women are inferior to men, or subordinate to them, reinforcing prevalent gender stereotypes or makes assumptions which are sexist in nature. Feminist theories attempt to ask whether sexism can be rooted out from theoretical discourse to bring about equality.

Harding also supports the view that knowledge is dependent upon gender. In her article 'Women Standpoints on Nature' she asks the question, 'Are women and men exposed to different aspects of nature's regularities?' She affirms that naturally women and men are biologically different. Women's "biology" and culturally distinctive activities bring them into interactions with natural environments that are different from those with which their brothers daily interact. Consequently, women will tend to be repositories of historically developed knowledge about these aspects of the natural world. Research that starts out from feminist understandings of women's bodies and interactions with

nature-not just men's-will arrive at more comprehensive and accurate understandings of nature's regularities and underlying causal determinants. So, these gender-distinct locations in nature provide one source of women's distinctive standpoints on nature (Harding, 1997).

Lorraine Code (1981) defines knowledge as knowledge of an independently existing reality whose nature sets limits upon what can be known. It is a product of a combination of two factors, objective and subjective. The objective factor serves as the foundation of knowledge at all other levels, consists in (1) a framework of constant expectations, of common-sense knowledge about the everyday behaviour of material objects and one's ability to deal with them on a practical level; (2) the biologically-determined nature of human cognitive equipment, which is reasonably constant from knower to knower, regardless of sex, and which dictates the kind and scope of knowledge human beings can acquire. On the subjective side comprises of (1) the individual creativity of the human knower, (2) the location of every knower within a period of history, (3) the location of every knower within a linguistic and cultural setting, and (4) the affective side of human nature.

On analyzing the factors, she concludes that it is by virtue of the affective factor that gender influences knowledge. She writes, "... the affective side of human nature, the fact that human beings are as much feeling creatures as they are thinking creatures, constitutes a subjective constraint upon objectivity for knowledge in general... The interests, inclinations and enthusiasms of the knower have a central effect upon how and what he or she can know" (Code, 1981, p. 275). It is in this perspective that male knowledge differs from female. She mentions a range of experiences as experiences of sexuality and of parenthood, general self-awareness as a physical and emotional being, and some aspects of interpersonal relations, which must necessarily be different for men and women. She argues that the experience of what it is to be male or what it is to be female (in those aspects not connected with roles imposed by society) must constitute an area where it is logically impossible for one group of human beings to know what another does. She concludes by stating emphatically, "One might argue that women bring a richness of feeling and a depth of understanding to cognitive activity such that the final known Gestalt is richer, more multi-faceted, and better. Perhaps the admission of women to the kingdom of knowers, on an equal footing, will affect a shift in the

standard evaluation of knowledge claims, granting greater respectability to the contribution made by the affective side of human” (Code,1981, p. 276).

8. Feminist Notion of Science and Gender

A study of the feminist notion of science and the relation between science and gender, reveals the difference between the traditional (conventional) and feministic conception of science. According to Harding conventional epistemology argues that real knowledge is free of socially local values and interests. In opposition to it, feminist standpoint theories point to the androcentric, or bourgeois, or Eurocentric features of these knowledge claims (Harding, 1997).

It is generally believed that there exists a sharp divide between science and social science (or any non-science). Harding questions many of the common notions of science and proceeds to prove that like social sciences, ‘pure sciences’ too are social in nature. A central claim of the supporters of ‘pure science’ is that there exists a method and logic of science which makes it distinct from any other discipline. The statements of science enjoy credibility because of their quantitative and formal nature. Mathematics is posited as the language of science due to which scientific statements enjoy epistemic privilege. Harding points out that the results need to be interpreted to be meaningful. These interpretations are reached by the community of scientists.

Also, it is difficult to decide what is unique about the methods used by sciences for instance about ‘observing nature’. There are many ‘non-sciences’ which also use this method and make predictions using the results. There is also a debate in sciences whether science should declare deduction or induction as its primary method. Sciences cannot also be defended on the grounds of having a critical attitude, it is pointed out by thinkers like Thomas Kuhn that every theory has some background assumptions which are treated as beyond doubt and can never be questioned. Contrarily Harding holds the view that science is as social in nature as social sciences, “We could say that the natural sciences should be considered to be embedded in social sciences because everything scientists do or think is part of the social world” (Harding, 1991, p. 99). One may point out here that it is not only natural sciences and social sciences that are inflected with perspectivism related to gender. Even religious knowledge is susceptible to standpoint theories as far as knowledge is considered.

9. Feminist Religious Epistemology

It is clear from the above that women have a distinct standpoint and thereby their own unique position which has been hitherto ignored and/or sidelined by patriarchy needs to be emphasized. Religions have traditionally suppressed the voices of women. The question to ask now is can a feminist religious epistemology elevate the status of women by acknowledging and conceding women's standpoint. To pave the path for a feminist religious epistemology, it is imperative to view the present scenario in the area of religious epistemology.

Smith defines epistemology of religion as, "the branch of epistemology concerned with the rationality, the justificatory status and the knowledge status of religious beliefs - most often the belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and loving God as conceived by the major monotheistic religions" (Smith, 2014, p.135). Until Enlightenment, in the Western philosophical scenario, the issue centered around 'justification' of religious beliefs. As a result, in response to the question whether the belief in God is justified or not, the answer has traditionally been given in terms of offering arguments for God's existence. Thus, justification of religious belief became synonymous with finding evidence⁴ for that belief. This is supported by the epistemological theory of foundationalism, originating from the works of Descartes and Locke, which believes that a proposition can be accepted only if it is certain or more probable. Evidentialism, stemming from foundationalism, holds that if a person believes in proposition 'P', one must have evidence that adequately supports 'P'.

Evidentialist theories have come under criticism from reliabilist theories. According to reliabilism, a belief is justified provided the cognitive process by which it was produced is one that reliably produces true belief. Reliabilist theory (also called as externalist theories) believes that justification of belief depends upon empirical facts that are external to the believer's mind. Bergmann (2010) notes three recent trends in epistemology of religion, reformed epistemology, continued support of theistic evidentialism and thirdly, an appreciation of the similarities and differences between reformed epistemology and theistic evidentialism. Philosophers as Richard Swinburne are votaries of the older theistic evidentialism.

The chief proponent of reformed epistemology is Alvin Plantinga, who believes that religious beliefs can be justified or warranted non-inferentially. He defines warrant as,

“we may say that a belief B has warrant for S if and only if the relevant segments (the segments involved in the production of B) are functioning properly in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which S's faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production of B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true; and the more firmly S believes B the more warrant B has for S”(Plantinga, 2010, p.19).

Bergmann argues that the main difference between reformed epistemologists and theistic evidentialists is the basis on which one believes religious statements. According to reformed epistemologists, humans have knowledge of religious beliefs from non-inferential sources whereas theistic evidentialists, it comes from rational arguments.

10. Pamela Sue Anderson and Religious Epistemology

Anderson identified two issues with empiricist realism held by the theists, the notion of experience and the rational arguments offered to prove the existence of God. She criticized the practice of offering rational basis for or against theism and making experience as a criterion for justifying these arguments. A feminist philosopher of religion can level the following charges, “Whose beliefs are these that are given warrant, rational proof, or justification? For whom are those beliefs been constructed?” (Anderson, 1998) She contends that these beliefs support a ‘dominant Christian realist form of monotheism’ and the arguments for and against theism and atheism center around such a conception in the Anglo-American scene.

She objects to the formal arguments, firstly, on the grounds that it devalues any reference to materiality as the body, desire, and sexual difference and secondly, such because it supports a patriarchal conception of theism. Consequently, she argues, it leads to the conception of the divine as male and leads to prejudice against women. The theodicies of popular empiricist realist view have excluded from the notion of evil, the suffering of women and the under privileged.

She devises an alternative to counter these issues, seeking to develop, “...a feminist philosophy which builds into its epistemology tools to avoid both circular reasoning and oppressive, often pernicious beliefs. Epistemological tools are used to scrutinize critically and dialectically the construction of rational beliefs, as well as the principles

of rationality which perhaps unwittingly exclude the desires and needs of women and nonprivileged men” (Anderson, 1998, p. 18). Such a feminist philosophy of religion which studies feminist notion of objectivity and female desire to achieve beliefs which are less partial and less biased than found presently. Thus, one of the tasks of a feminist philosopher of religion is to develop critical tools for ‘assessing’ epistemological frameworks of belief and to ‘refigure’ reason.

She believes there has come about in this age a crisis of rationality. Reason is being called to question its own so-called principles of coherence, simplicity, objectivity, and impartiality. Feminist challenges to reason have accused it (reason) to be as referring to only males and as having a masculine character, excluding women by referring to them as being opposed to males. This results in femininity being typecast as irrational and bearer of man’s material conditions.⁵ Such an exclusion renders questionable justification of belief in search of knowledge. Construction of belief should precede justification of belief.

Extending the dichotomies (male v/s female, reason v/s body) to apply to belief, it too could be divided into its formal/logical aspect and the opposite, its biological aspect. The formal side of belief would include the apriori and empirical principles of coherence, credulity, simplicity whereas its material side, is the believer’s own body. Whilst a lot of attention has been paid to the logical construction of belief in religion, its bodily aspect has been devalued and ignored.

Anderson holds that it is the epistemological framework by which one’s beliefs are constructed which makes all the difference. One’s epistemology is of decisive significance. Anderson holds, “My contention is that a feminist philosophy of religion has a crucial role to play in transforming the overall framework of belief in contemporary philosophy of religion. This is an epistemological framework biased according to the sex/gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Hereafter the essential task is to supplement and reform philosophy of religion with less biased methods developed from certain feminist insights” (Anderson, 1998, p. 33). Thus, Anderson proposes to use new epistemological frameworks to assess rationality of beliefs formulated by empirical realism. “...my intention is to propose that for persons, whether male or female, to be rational with respect to their religious beliefs, it should be imperative both to probe the individual construction of their central beliefs and to examine the hypotheses which

become the ground of justified true beliefs. Ideally such probing and examining would be aided by feminist epistemology” (Anderson, 1998, p. 47). Anderson subscribes to feminist standpoint epistemology to address the issue of religious knowledge. She believes that the standpoint epistemology yields a reformist position to patriarchal conceptions of reason and objectivity. It offers strong objectivity and feminist standpoint epistemology to aid feminist philosophy of religion.

Anderson clarifies that she does not wish to replace reason with desire but rather to collapse borders drawn between the male’s disembodied rationality and his corporeality. She identifies sex/gendered configurations of rationality as a major challenge for feminist philosophers of religion. Embodied notions of rationality have yielded partial and biased forms of theistic beliefs shaded with patriarchy. “... claims to true belief, such as belief in associations of virginity, purity, and male divinity, on the basis of weak objectivity have oppressed women and all other nondominant classes, races, ethnicities, since derived exclusively from a privileged male position of knowledge-makers” (Anderson, 1998, p.74-75). She believes that for a feminist epistemology of religious belief, the content of female desire and expressions of sexual difference are crucial, which have been hitherto repressed by patriarchal conceptions of rational belief.

11. Feminist Standpoint Theory: Western and Indian

Standpoint theory emerged in 1970’s and 1980’s as a critical feminist theory. Later it was adopted as a method of feminist research. Harding describes it as multifarious, being a philosophy of natural and social sciences, an epistemology, a methodology of research, and a political strategy (Harding, 2004). Women needed knowledge that was for women as traditionally knowledge makers being men made women the object of study. The androcentric biases in knowledge produced conceptual frameworks which were detrimental to women. What was needed was an outlook that made them the subject of study, which was yielded by standpoint epistemology.

1) Nancy Hartsock

In her work ‘The Feminist Standpoint’, Hartsock attempts to develop on the methodological base of the Marxist theory, a feminist standpoint which she describes

is an 'epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination'(Hartsock, 1983).

Marx believed, process of production exerts an influence on human beings and theory of knowledge. The Marxian notion of labour includes on one hand, interaction of humans with each other and with nature on the other. Hartsock observed such a model may help one to retrospect leading to overcoming the nature and culture divide with respect to women. Women can be perceived at once as both natural and social, without being either one exclusively. She attempts to derive epistemological consequences using women's lives as the privileged vantage point to critique 'phallographic institutions and ideology' which form 'capitalist form of patriarchy'. Such a feminist standpoint allows one to understand 'patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse versions of more humane social relations.

Marx and Engels held an individual is shaped by what he produces, reality consists of 'sensuous human activity, practice'. In *German Ideology*, it is said, "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appears as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms" (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.42).

Applying this in case of women, woman's work differs from men in every society. Taking this sexual division of labour as the basis Hartsock tries to draw the epistemological consequences. Women's labour comprises of subsistence and childrearing. In a capitalist society she earns wages besides the other activities.

Women's labour interpreted as ability to reproduce is unique. A woman produces/reproduces another man or woman. Hartsock is aware that the term 'production' when applied for reproduction connotes a wide array of activities than 'production' of goods. She describes mothering as a process in which a woman is involved in the change and growth of another, involving helping another to develop and waning her assistance as time demands. The reproductive feature of women brings out

the essential difference between the proletariat of Marx and women. Production of goods involves a mere interchange with nature. Whereas in reproduction one experiences a unity with nature since the creative forces are at work within one's body.

Hartsock takes recourse to object relations theory to explain how mothering leads to formation of the male and female self. Both the sexes experience the mother differently as they grow up. The male child experiences the mother as 'the other' whilst the girl child experiences the mother as a continuation of herself. The girl's experiences of the world are shaped by the body on one hand (menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, etc.) and social demands (culture specific gender roles). She cites Chodorow who says, "...girls' gradual emergence from the oedipal period takes place in such a way that empathy is built into their primary definition of self, and they have a variety of capacities for experiencing another's needs or feelings as their own. Put another way girls, because of female parenting, are less differentiated from others than boys, more continuous with and related to the external object world. They are differently oriented to their inner object world as well" (Hartsock, 1983, p.295). Due to these factors, the female 'self' is oriented differently from the male 'self' and experiences the world differently. The female due to her more continuous relations with her mother (the other) experiences the world and others in continuum with herself contrary to the male. Males experience the mother (the other) and consequently the world as separate and distinct from their self. The effect of this on the epistemology is, for the male the world is expressed through dualisms known through oppositions and require maintaining special social relations to acquaint with to survive. Females do not experience this duality but only a continuum.

"The articulation of feminist standpoint based on women's relational self-definition and activity exposes the world men have constructed and the self-understanding which manifests these relations as partial and perverse...The experience of continuity and relation – with others, with natural world, of mind with body – provides an ontological base for developing a non-problematic social synthesis, a social synthesis which need not operate through the denial of the body, attack on nature, or the death struggle between the self and the other. . ." (Hartsock, 1983, p.303-304).

2) Sandra Harding

According to Harding, knowledge being socially situated, suppressed group produces distinctive knowledge than the dominant/dominating group. She argues socially situated knowledges and subjects of standpoint epistemology aid in creating stronger notions of objectivity as compared to the weak notions of objectivity created by 'regular science'. Donna Haraway explains strong objectivity as socially situated knowledges.

Standpoint theories begin when marginalized people raise their concerns. The dominant groups systematically disadvantage the marginalized epistemically by ignoring their concerns and imposing their ideological structures upon them. An effect of such an imposition is notions of objectivity, do not include the perspective of the marginalized. This lapse is taken care by the standpoint theorists. Hence Harding calls the notion of objectivity by standpoints as 'strong objectivity' contrasting it with the 'weak objectivity' by the regular/dominant sciences.

Such an approach assumes that those at the bottom of societal structure, the under privileged, can render a holistic outlook to the problems, as it is here that the relations amongst the members of the society and interactions with the natural world are crystal clear. Hitherto, research agendas underplayed their significance or left them out, as, the research programs were colored by conceptual structures borrowed from the dominant classes. Harding clarifies such an omission are not deliberate or ill-intentioned. They occur because one's social position interferes and influences one's knowledge acquisition.

Harding clarifies standpoint theories unlike the universalist theories do not perform the God trick. Every thought has some social backdrop as its starting point hence the societal aspect of knowledge cannot be ignored. The claims of science ignore this fundamental aspect and claim to give knowledge from nowhere (consequently performing the God trick). Hence the cultural assumptions go unnoticed and unquestioned, leading to lopsided claims. Such an omission is avoided by standpoint theorists who acknowledge the social situatedness.

Can a feminist be charged of ethnocentrism? Harding replies negative and lists reasons for doing so. Unlike ethnocentrists, feminists have not claimed that their culture is superior to any other in generating knowledge. Feminists simply claim that the lives of

the marginalized are ideal starting points for generating holistic knowledge. They do not advocate their own lives as good starting points. Such an approach finds support from other thinkers from the mainstream too. The ethnocentrists, have a clear conception of the culture they wish to promote. Contrarily, the feminists are not a homogenous lot, there is an ambivalence regarding the notions of 'femininity', 'womanliness', 'woman' and other such concepts. Some even oppose and seek to do away such notions on the grounds that it seeks to make them the 'other' versus the 'man'.

Harding emphatically rejects the claim that standpoint theories are another form of relativism. She draws a distinction between epistemological relativism and sociological relativism. Epistemological relativism is an undesirable consequence in any serious discourse. She argues standpoint theories do not commit relativism as their perspective stands in opposition to the pre-feminist views and are not complementary to them. Relativism holds a stance that two sets of views may be true together, one is preferred over the other based on personal preference. In the case of standpoint, the issue at hand is not a mere personal preference but the lived realities of a community (women in this case). Sociological relativism holds that different people may hold different views.

Harding clarifies the notion of 'only oppressed can produce knowledge'. She refutes any such notion that only the oppressed perspectives matter. Rather she believes, the view of the oppressed offers a fresh perspective when incorporated into research problems of natural and social science, not that solely such a perspective can offer solutions. Incorporation of this perspective can help in questioning the fundamental framework and raise critical questions thereby providing clarity to the researcher.

Harding lists out the differences between the subject of empiricist and standpoint epistemology. The subject (either group or individual) of empiricist epistemology is universal, devoid of cultural leanings and is disembodied. It is also 'homogeneous and unitary' (Harding, 1992). It stands in stark contrast with the object of knowledge which occurs in space and time. The knowledge that is produced is beyond history i.e., location. In contrast, subjects of standpoint are embodied and visible. Since they are embodied, the subjects of knowledge are not different from the objects of knowledge. What Harding hints at is the social forces that affect the object of knowledge also affect the subjects of knowledge. The plural 'subjects' indicate that it is the community of

knowledge producers very rarely an individual knower. As such, the subjects are not a homogenous and unitary but are heterogenous and multiple, from across cultures, nationalities, ethnicities. There is no essential woman but many women with a multitude of lived experiences.

Harding argues strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be included in the object of knowledge. The cultural milieu of the researcher exerts its influence on every aspect of research, ranging from selecting the topic, the hypothesis formulation, to collection and data interpretation, etc. Hence the subject becomes a part of the study. However most critical perspective is grounded in the lives of the marginalized.

3) Dorothy E Smith

Smith begins her article, 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology' with an assertion, "The women's movement has given us a sense of our right to have women's interests represented in sociology, rather than just receiving as authoritative the interests traditionally represented in a sociology put together by men" (Smith, 2004, p. 1). She asserts women's place and role in society is decided by man and is thus understood in the discipline of sociology. The conceptual frameworks used in the discipline are modelled on a male social universe. It through such conceptual frameworks that women experience the world and find their place in. The men are relegated to the outside sphere and the women to domestic, with the former dominating the latter and the latter being dependent upon the former.

Smith observes when a woman is made to interpret herself through such conceptual schemes it leads her to alienate herself. "...institutions which lock sociology into the structures occupied by men are the same institutions which lock women into the situations in which they find themselves oppressed" (Smith, 2004, p.8). Any attempt to unlock the latter would entail unlocking the former, leading to differently conceiving 'experience' to mean inclusively, men's and women's.

The task of governing of society is done through the instruments of concepts and symbols. In sociology, the lived experience of people is transposed into the abstract mode. It transposes the actualities of people's lives and experience into conceptual modes, yielding it fit for governing by agencies as business schools, sociologists, economists, etc. It is through these institutions that society is both ruled and

participates in its ruling. These institutions frame and identify the subject matter (facts to be studied) and the methodology to approach it. These then become the object of study of the sociologists.

When a student begins to learn the discipline of sociology, it is learnt as tailor-made. The content of study is already laid out and learning takes place through the approved conceptual structures. Smith terms it as a 'conceptual imperialism' (Smith, 2004). The notion of 'objectivity' further constrains the study. Objectivity, consisting of a set of procedures separates the knower from the objects of knowledge. It attempts to safeguard the study from any biases or interests which are not permitted by the discipline. This information is then fitted into the conceptual frameworks provided by the organizational structures. These conceptual frameworks are never questioned and are assumed to be infallible. In doing this, Smith observes he passes from bodily (in which is located the information) to the transcendental realm (conceptual frameworks).

Smith points out women are always outside and subservient to this structure. The role relegated to the woman the role of a facilitator in the process of enquiry. Women do clerical, secretarial, care and nursing work, computer programming and interviewing for the survey. They play a pivotal role in acting as an intermediary between passage of information from the bodily to the transcendental realm.

A woman's standpoint in sociology begins with her own original knowledge unfolding before her through the acts she performs and rendered by her understanding. Such knowledge is directly experienced as versus the given knowledge yielded by the conceptual frame works. "She aims not at a reiteration of what she already (tacitly) knows, but at an exploration through that of what passes beyond it and is deeply implicated in how it is" (Smith, 2004, p.12). When one begins with lived experiences it becomes possible to realize its locatedness and our one comprehends at the same time how the other is located too.

4) Donna Haraway

Haraway argues for situated and embodied knowledges in her article 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial

Perspective'. Harding had described objectivity as 'situated knowledges', simply put, it entails that only partial perspectives can bring objectivity. Being distinctive in nature from other Western thinkers, feminists define objectivity in terms of limited location and situated knowledge. It is neither about transcending nor splitting of subject and object.

Many feminists accept the point of view of the subjugated as the vantage point. Haraway agrees there is a merit on establishing the capacity to see from the periphery. But cautions about the dangers of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the subjugated. The positionings of the subjugated are also subject to critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation (semiological and hermeneutic)(Haraway, 1988).

Haraway believes standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. She describes them as 'more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world' (Haraway, 1988). However, to uncover such a vision requires skill with bodies and language. Such a position is starkly different from relativism and scientific standpoints of objectivity. She calls them mirror twins of each other as both perform 'God tricks'⁶, both do not accept locatedness, embodiment and partial perspectives. However, Haraway believes it is in these partial perspectives that the rational and objective inquiry exists.

She terms subjectivity as a vision since it is multidimensional. "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another"(Haraway, 1988, p. 586).

Haraway says struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over *how* to see. "...a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection. There is no way to 'be' simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (i.e., subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class...The search for such a "full" and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586).

Haraway stresses that she is arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating. Being a position of partiality (not universality), they are based on people's lives. A view from the body is always complex and contradictory.

Such a view is opposed to the view from above, from nowhere. Location is about vulnerability. Feminist embodiment resists fixation hence there is no single feminist standpoint. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, “science.”

5) Shefali Moitra

Moitra holds that the general (linear) model of communication is of a speaker who has a content to be communicated and a hearer who passively receives that message. She contends history has pointed out that in society, powerful men have always been those speakers and powerless women and men, the listeners. Such a style of communication is necessarily one way, issuing from the speaker, directed to the hearer who accepts it passively.

The formal structure of such content is that it is rational and objective. It implies that there is a body of truth which is out there, which can be discovered and communicated without any prejudice or bias. It is believed that the claims of natural science fulfill these characteristics. The content of natural science is rational, empirical, neutral and objective. Moitra argues that for any group to be dominant in the linear mode of communication they must be actively involved and in possession of such knowledge.

A corollary of positivist notion of science is to make knowledge claims more rational and objective, they should be purged of all value content. Moitra takes support from Harding who holds, "...the feminist standpoint, clearly asserts that objectivity never has been and could not be increased by the exclusion or elimination of social values from enquiry - at least in the cultures in which science has existed and in which it will exist in the foreseeable future" (Moitra, 1996, p.758).

Moitra argues the areas of scientific research, the researcher, the scientific policy planners and administrators are biased towards androcentrism. For a complete perspective it is essential to include female experience⁷ in science. The problem lies in perceiving women as end users of technology and not as actively involved in the making of science. She emphatically asserts if women do not actively participate in aspects of technology, planning and policy making, there will be no ‘humanization-of-technology’(Moitra,1996). Such a humanization will usher in new values as ‘human growth, conservation, decentralization, self-reliance, self-sufficiency and caring’ (Moitra, 1996) rather than economic profit, individual success and profit.

By adopting the feministic standpoint of 'humanization-of-technology', a radical shift can be achieved. 'Domination' of nature can be replaced with 'conversing' with nature. Consequently, the related concepts of domination as disempower, empower will then be replaced with freedom, emancipation, non-alienation, and creativity. In turn the linear model of communication will be swapped with the 'conversina' or a 'dialogue' approach. Moitra defines a dialogue as 'a mutual conversational process characterized by cogency of purpose' (Moitra, 1996). She believes such an approach will shift the epistemic focus from androcentrism to gender sensitive culture.

6) Hilary Rose

Rose sets to lay out the achievements that radical critique of science has attained. She believes women have been excluded from science, such a situation produces a new kind of science.

The socialist tradition, up till the sixties believed that science was accumulation of facts, theories rendering it neutral uninfluenced by class, race, gender, nationality, politics. Such a notion of science as neutral was discarded in the sixties and seventies. The radicals critiquing science pointed out that it was the privileged white male who oversaw science. In the recent times science as, social enterprise is the view gaining popularity. Correspondingly research today is aimed at how interests have a bearing on knowledge production.

Alongside Thomas Kuhn, Rose makes a special mention of Jerome Ravetz, who inquired into science as a social problem. Based on his study of the seventeenth till nineteenth century, Ravetz observed that science developed from being a craft to promoting industrialized production. This in turn changed how science was actually carried out. When science was a craft, it involved the craftsman working with or without his apprentices. The industrialized mode is based on a strict division of labour, comprising of a group of scientists, funding and a director who provides the goals and manages its achievement. It is thus clear that the 'elite of science', the one who actually run the show are men and women thereby occupy subordinate positions. This underlying patriarchy was never grasped by the radical critics. As critical work became more theoretical, women were pushed further away.

Rose explores through reproduction the possibility of a materialistic explanation for the subordination of women in science. She argues it is lopsided to view production solely as a social process with its corresponding division of labour, ignoring reproduction along with its corresponding division of labour. She says, "If we are to understand the character of a science denied the input of women's experiences, feminists must return to the sexual division of labour within the household, which, in science as elsewhere, finds its ironic echo in paid labour. Women's work is of a particular kind-whether menial or requiring the sophisticated skills involved in childcare, it always involves personal service" (Rose, 1983, p.83).

Rose uses the word 'love' to stand for this caring, intimate, and emotional labour. The survival of humans depends upon this labour. It is in this factor that the production of things differs from the reproduction of things. In reproducing, a woman 'gives something of themselves' to the other, a child or man.

She refers to Sohn Rethel's work, *'Intellectual and Manual Labour'*, wherein Sethel mentions division of labor amongst men. Intellectual labor is allocated to fewer men as compared to hard manual labor, assigned to the majority. In case of women, even though they are intellectual, they are assigned caring work. Rose observes commodity production attempts to 'unite the brain with the hand, but exclude the heart' (Rose, 1983).

Rose observes that only the privileged women who can delegate their caring work to other women are able to enter sciences. Ordinarily, women are excluded from elite positions of knowledge production. In natural sciences and engineering, women are entrusted with tasks parallel to their primary task as wife/mother. Many women in science face a conflict between caring and mental work. It is generally resolved by either withdrawing from science or holding a stance that women face no issues.

Rose acknowledges it is difficult to develop a feminist epistemology. Such knowledge involves creating a practice of feeling, thinking, and writing which is in opposition with patriarchal science. Feminist knowledge attempts to bridge the gap between subjective and objective ways of knowing. Its starts with and is based on subjective experience of oppression, which yields enlightening insights into women's experiences.

7) Patricia Hill Collins

Collins states a black woman can never belong to the white family she was involved with, so as an 'outsider' she creates a unique standpoint of an 'outsider within' to study notions of self, family, and society of Afro-American women. She quotes bell hooks who said, "living as we did -on the edge- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside and in from the inside out . . . we understood both" (Collins, 1986, p. S15).

Black feminist standpoint was created by Black women for Black women. It assumes that Black women share a unique perspective by virtue of their certain common shared experiences. Black intellectuals create facts and theories that make clear a Black woman's standpoint.

The Black women reject and seek to replace the stereotypical images rendered by white patriarchy, through notions of self-definition and self-valuation. Self-definition involves challenging the stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood and self-valuation involves replacing the stereotypical images with self-images by the Black woman. The attempts at such redefining are crucial to developing an authentic Black standpoint. The stereotypes were created by white patriarchy which treated the Black woman as the 'other', dehumanizing her. 'Othering' makes her an object and the white male is the 'subject'. Collins draws attention to an important concept of interlocking of oppression. Race, gender, and class oppressions operated simultaneously on Black women. Hence, they had a more distinct understanding of oppression owing to their lived experiences.

Black feminists as bell hooks seek to develop new theoretical understanding of prevalent theories. hooks claims, the either/or dualisms are the fundamental tools of patriarchal white domination. Black women have been dominated and dehumanized by attributing them the inferior position in the dualisms in the following ways. By denying them education they have been called as lacking rationality. They have been exploited sexually by stereotyping them as passionate and emotional.

In opposition to the stereotyping, Black women through self-definition and self-valuation, have chosen to highlight their uniqueness through culture and art. The notion of sisterhood plays a unique role in Black woman's culture. Stemming through

shared experiences of domination and oppression, Black women have developed strong sisterhood ties amongst themselves. Also, through art they express their unique standpoints. Applying the Kuhnian sense of sociological paradigm⁸, Collins asserts, the discipline of sociology is itself a paradigm. It consists of two components, the shared knowledge of the sociologists and its producers or the 'insiders'. Collins discusses at length the notion of an 'insider'. An insider of a community is one who possesses a similar world view as commonly experienced by others of that community. To become an insider, one needs to be 'immersed in group life' (Collins, 1986). To live the experiences and thereby develop a unique standpoint.

8) Uma Narayan

Narayan examines the repercussions the western notions of feminist epistemology have for nonwestern feminists. Nonwestern feminists do not constitute a homogenous group, she clarifies at the onset, since they exist across various strata of societies. In the nonwestern societies, it is generally the urban, educated, and middle class who are sensitive to feminist concerns. Narayan says nonwestern women share different concerns from western women hence the issues and methods of western feminism cannot be applied by nonwestern feminists.

The standpoint of the nonwestern feminists (speaking from the Indian perspective) is derived from a unique political position. Being the colonized, the feminists experience a unique predicament, on one hand they experience the innate desire to value their culture and traditions and on the other, they also experience them as oppressive from the colonized perspective. She expresses it in the following words, "As an Indian feminist currently living in the United States, I often find myself torn between the desire to communicate with honesty the miseries and oppressions that I think my own culture confers on its women and the fear that this communication is going to reinforce, however unconsciously, western prejudices about the "superiority" of western culture" (Narayan, 2008, p. 759).

She cautions about the incommensurability of issues when comparisons are casually made between the issues of nonwestern and western feminisms. For instance, western feminist epistemologists have declared the positivist philosophy as its target. Whereas the oppression of nonwestern feminists does not come from a positivistic framework alone as the postcolonial studies have shown.

In her work on postcolonialism, Leela Gandhi (1998), believes there are three areas of controversy around postcolonialism and feminism, namely the notion of third world woman, western feminists as imperialists and colonial projection of the feminist criteria. Some Western feminists have used 'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject observes Mohanty (1994). She calls such a categorization colonialist, as it disregards the differences between the actual third world women and it exposes the othering of the third world by the Western feminists. The third world woman is othered by representing her as the ignorant, poor, uneducated, traditional, domesticated, victimized as versus the woman of the West who is educated, modern, having control over her body and sexuality. Such a view says Gandhi reflects the dominant epistemological lens through which the third world woman is othered.

Ashis Nandy (1983), describes how Mahatma Gandhi, challenged the biological stratification to bring about political awareness, as he believed theoretical framework of patriarchy was responsible for political inequality and injustice. Gandhi held, patriarchy makes masculinity superior to femininity and femininity is in turn deemed superior to femininity in man. In contrast, he propounded femininity to be superior to masculinity, which is in turn better than cowardice or failure of masculinity. It achieved two things; femininity became stronger principle in the universe and man defied his cowardice by accepting his feminine self.

12. Summary

Standpoint theories are at once epistemological and metaphysical viewpoints. Hartsock explains a standpoint as an 'epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination'(Hartsock, 1983). "Standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as a bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged ... A standpoint, however, carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible . . . As an engaged version, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries historically liberatory role" (Hartsock, 1983, p.285). Harding (2004) explicates a standpoint as an 'ascribed position', yielding a unique perspective of the oppressed groups. It is never immediate but rather is reached by struggle of the oppressed class. Standpoint here

becomes a 'technical' term not a mere point of view or perspective. Such a position is not easily visible as the objects as 'seen' by empiricist sense but need to be unraveled aided by science and politics. For Haraway, situated knowledges are not about isolated individuals rather about communities. She interprets the science question in feminism as being about positioned rationality. To find a larger vision one has to recourse to particularity. It involves the joining of partial views into a collective subject position.

The concept of a standpoint brings out the duality of levels of reality rather than a simple duality of subject and object. "...it posits a duality of levels of reality of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the surface or appearance and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality" (Hartsock, 1983, p.285).

¹ A term Code borrows from Naomi Scheman

² Anderson explains male-neutral as, "...whatever primary stuff of phenomenal world, broadly constructed as experience, when gathered by philosophers it has been male but under the pretense of sex/gender neutrality" (Anderson, 1998, p. 13)

³ Taking a cue from Indian philosophy, the systems of philosophy have come about by interpretations of males. A common feature running through most systems (except Charvaka) is to search for a solution to transcend the pain/suffering of this existence. Where the male tries to transcend the pain, the woman has internalized this pain as an integral part of her life. From the time she is born, pain either mental or physical becomes her. Right from menstrual cramps, childbirth, compromising and/or sacrificing her desires, she is taught to accommodate pain and go about her duties Whereas privileged males can (like Buddha when he was Prince Siddhartha) go to great lengths to search for a solution for pain/suffering.

⁴ Post Gettier, the notion of justification came under scrutiny. Plantinga for instance, replaces the notion of 'justification' with 'warrant', which he believes to be a stronger criterion than the former.

⁵ By material conditions, Anderson means the sum of biological, cultural, economic and social conditions. (Anderson, 1998, p. 32)

⁶ She means by God-trick a view promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully

⁷ Moitra clarifies the feminist perspective is not singular term, rather a plural one (Moitra, 1996).

⁸ Kuhn defines a paradigm as the "entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (Kuhn, 1996, p.163)

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The rise of the feminist movement is essentially a rise of feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness, for Gerda Lerner consists of an awareness that women have been subordinated and hence, suffered wrongs. Such domination far from being natural has been enforced by a particular societal structure, namely patriarchy. This awareness has resulted in fostering a notion of sisterhood, leading to envisioning an alternate and autonomous vision of the future goals and strategies for women.

The present study titled, “Religion and Women: A Study in Feminist Philosophy” attempts to study how feminist consciousness has unearthed androcentrism embedded in the metaphysical structures and practices of major religions. Feminist critique of major world religions of the East and West, lays bare the patriarchal structuring of religion, which has systematically ‘othered’ and excluded the woman from its fold. Women suffered hermeneutical injustice when they were kept out of experiencing religion in its fullness. The major religions studied except the minor traditions are patriarchal in their metaphysical structures and androcentric in their approach, though of course in different proportions. Man being deemed more worthier than the woman, leads to religions catering to the moral and spiritual needs of man rather than the marginalized woman. The whole of the religious experience starting from the origin of the man/woman dichotomy, the societal roles expected to be played, the descriptions and notions of the divine, the ontologies of religions, the decision making in the matters of religion, the conducting of prayers, serving the divine are all tailor-made for the benefit of man.

The reasons for this marginalization are both metaphysical and epistemological. The metaphysical aspect is manifested by the ontological binaries which have pitted man against woman. The either/or binary renders their personhood and their worth as mutually exclusive, for instance male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion. Thus, male gets associated with ‘higher’ and more ‘valuable’ aspects as mind and reason and female with ‘lesser’ as body and emotion. Body occupies a pivotal place both metaphysically and epistemologically. Metaphysically, it pins your place in the societal hierarchy. Douglas believes that human body is of fundamental importance as, it stands

for the symbol of society. She likens society to the macrocosm and body as the microcosm. When the male body is placed higher than the female body, society becomes male-oriented and all that is associated with males becomes worthier than the female. This in turn affects the epistemology. Beauvoir says a body indicates a presence in the world, which in turn entails a point of view of the world. By participating with the world, one forms lived experiences. These lived experiences are expressions of individual consciousness.

Standpoint feminist epistemologists as Nancy Hartsock took recourse to object relations theory to explain the formation of the male and female self. The role of mothering in the child rearing makes the male and the female child experience the mother (the other) differently. The male child experiences the mother as 'the other' whilst the girl child experiences the mother as a continuation of herself. The female self is oriented differently from that of the male. The body plays an important role in shaping the female child's personality. Also, she has greater amount of empathy built in as she experiences the mother as one with herself and perceives the male as the other. Contrarily the male child experiences the mother as the other and the feeling of duality arises from thereon. The differentiation of the male and female consciousness stems from this point onwards.

Feminist epistemologists are of the opinion that privileged male consciousness is different from female consciousness. Privileged male consciousness (for instance, the privileged white male of the West and high caste privileged males of the East) is abstract, individuated, hierarchical in nature. The subject and object of feminist epistemology are different from that of the androcentric epistemology. In feminist epistemology both the subject and the object are transformed. Firstly, the subject of the androcentric epistemology is individuated, in feminist epistemology it is collective, being based upon the experiences which are diverse. Patriarchy renders a unique epistemological advantage to women by treating them as both, the subject and object of knowledge. Since so, they have an advantage of being 'outsiders within.' In this case there is no single privileged standpoint as women are located across race, class, cultures, etc. Secondly, the object of knowledge is socially constructed, not an object over which one can have control. By socially constructed means it is a product of human activity like history, technology, etc. The social categories as race, gender, and class are real as they are used by humans to structure their social actions. To know the world

is not to adopt a positivist outlook, is not to find the fixed underlying web of laws as explanations but to know that it is historically specific and changeable. Consequently, rational knowledge shares the quality of being open ended as the world on which it is based is so.

The standpoint methodology adopted makes it clear that since women learn about themselves from man, they are unable to perceive the androcentrism and abide by the patriarchal dictates. When the women's experience is not given value and is excluded, her knowledge is also disvalued. The epistemological marginalization is also the result of reason/emotion binary. Since only male are projected as reasonable while women are seen as emotional, male experience is valued and women's experiences are typecast as irrational and not valued. The omission of women to be acknowledged and accepted as valid contributors of knowledge has led to lop-sidedness and causing further damage to women leading to their exclusion from religions in all its dimensions.

Feminist standpoint epistemology, developed through feminist standpoint methodology brings the voice of woman from the margins to the centre. When seen from this perspective, there is brought about a Gestalt switch. It becomes evident that traditional epistemology has been projecting a 'view from nowhere' as the only reasonable view and such a view did not include the knowledge of woman. The 'view from nowhere' brings an imaginary 'universal man' and neglects 'the particular woman' who is prejudiced to be associated only with the body, with emotions, bereft of reason and hence ignored. The religious knowledge also suffers from such a bias. Traditional and contemporary philosophy of religion, drawing from epistemology bereft of the woman's knowledge has excluded woman's experiences of religion.

This can be substantiated through the study of religions of the East and West. In Hinduism, *beej-ksetra-nyaya* mainly forms the major metaphysical binary (female/male) binary on which the woman's role is cast. She is perceived as a companion or complimentary to man, which thereby determines her role in religion. In marriage and religious rituals, she assumes the role of supplementing man. A woman's role is relegated mainly to the affairs of home and child rearing. The women honoured in the ancient scriptures like Maitreyi in the *Upanishad*, or epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* where Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari were honoured as exemplary wives and mothers. The irony is though knowledge is revered as Goddess Saraswati (a

female divinity), Savitri, is revered for being a chaste and dutiful wife, and not for her wisdom which she demonstrated in arguing with Yama. The acceptance of *Ardhanarisvar* as an androgynous form of Shiva and the Goddess is one such way the ontological binaries are challenged by Hinduism.

In Jainism and Buddhism, the lay woman is treated as similar as in Hinduism, being expected to look after the home and child rearing. The body of the female is treated as impediment to the path of liberation as female monks are subservient to the male monks. To regulate and control the affairs of the females is parallelly carried out by the lay men and male monks. Being seen as creatures of passion, they are required to be cared for and protected by the males.

Sikhism propounded by Guru Nanak, did bestow equality to women in religious practices, in its infancy. But in the passage of time, women were kept in the margins as in the case of Hinduism.

In the Semitic religions as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, women are treated along the same lines. Being male dominated, the conceptions of divinity, account of creation, idea of salvation and sin are oriented towards androcentrism. The body of the female is viewed as a distraction, sometimes even impure and hence to be excluded or marginalized from any such sphere where man seeks communion with the divine.

These findings suggest that a new metaphysics and consequently a new epistemological model will be required if women are to be emancipated in religion. Carol Christ suggests a new metaphysics for religion, a feminist process paradigm which is based on experience, open and relational. She bases it largely on process philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne. Process philosophy with its emphasis on body, relationships, nature is assimilated in the many feminist theologies. It treats bodies of men and women as equal as both, are parts of nature and hence undergo change and decay. All individuals ranging from biotic to abiotic, even Goddess and God are interdependent and related to each other. Feminist process philosophy perceives the world as a place where all bodies, male or female are aspects of divinity and are free and creative. Hence it does away with the notions of the supremacy of mind over body, male over female. One of the ways to incorporate woman's knowledge into mainstream thought is to include feminist religious epistemology in the discourse of religion. Pamela Sue

Anderson suggests a new model of religious epistemology which keeps in view the feminist standpoint in mind.

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The Sacred and the Profane: Menstrual Flow and Religious Values

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jhvShefali Kamat¹  and Koshy Tharakan² 

Abstract

Most religious texts and practices warrant the exclusion of women from religious rituals and public spheres during the menstrual flow. This is seemingly at odds with the very idea of ‘Religion’ which binds the human beings with God without any gender and sexual discrimination. The present article attempts to problematize the ascription of negative values on menstruating women prevalent in both Hinduism and Christianity, two major world religions of the East and the West. After briefly stating the patriarchal values that restrict women from participating in religious rituals and shaming them during menstruation as seen from both these religions, the article highlights the alternate feminist perspectives in beliefs that positively value the menstruating bodies. Thus, the notion of profanity is revalued as sacred in these alternate religious perspectives.

Drawing from the writings of Mary Douglas, we then examine the connection between the notion of purity/impurity and menstruation and argue that what makes something pure or impure depends upon the archetype the society chooses to represent itself. In itself, nothing is either pure or impure in the sense of having a value or disvalue. This argument is exemplified through a feministic-hermeneutic approach to the religious practices in two major world religions. The article concludes by uncovering the patriarchal values held by religions as the cause of menstrual taboos in religious practices and argues that the notions of purity/impurity and sacred/profane are the results of the valuations made—from a patriarchal or feministic perspective.

Keywords

Menstruation, menstrual taboos, purity, impurity, religious values, feministic religions

Introduction

The menstruating body has been subjected to shame and trivialization by patriarchal societies both in the East and the West. As Fahs points out, ‘Negativity about menstruation subjects women to ridicule, dismissal and trivialization’ (Fahs, 2016, p. 4). The following words of a male jury member of the

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prestigious Oscar awards genuinely reflect the trivializing and shaming attitude of our society regarding menstruation:

[I'm not going to vote for] *Period. End of Sentence*—it's well done, but it's about women getting their period, and I don't think any man is voting for this film because it's just icky for men. (Donovan, 2019)

Period. End of Sentence is a short documentary film made about the attitudes on menstruation in a village in rural India. Like the male jury member, many people find the issue of menstruation as 'depressing', 'repellent' and 'uncomfortable'.¹ Attitudes as these have been prevalent throughout the ages on menstruation and the menstruants. The agencies perpetuating these prejudices mostly have been both religious and cultural institutions. In what follows, taking two world religions for our discussion, we critically address the patriarchal values that religions perpetuate to subjugate women by shaming the menstrual bodies.

Religious exclusion begins with naming the menstruating state. A menstruating woman is often referred to as *rajaswala* in Hindu tradition while Judaism labels her as *niddah* and Islam calls her *hayz*, thereby rendering the woman as beyond 'normal'. Religious texts like the Old Testament refer to menstruation as 'infectious time' or as the 'Curse of Eve'. Hindu scriptures treat menstruation as *asaucha* (impure). Early Christian commentators too perceived menstruation as unclean.

In Hinduism, menstruants are forbidden from participating in religious and death rituals, touching sacred objects and entering any space which is demarcated as sacred as the altar or temples. They are isolated either in seclusion huts or rooms. *Vashishtha Dharmasastra* says that a woman is impure for 3 days and nights during her periods, and she should not bathe, smile, beautify her body, gaze at planets or approach fire, among other things. A man who touches a menstruant must purify himself by fully dipping in water (*Vashishta Dharmasastra*, Part 1, Chapter 5, verses 5–9). In recent times, the Sabarimala temple issue in Kerala brought to surface the perceptions of menstruation as impure. Women from the age of 10 to 50 years (menstruating age) were barred from entering the temple.²

Some Christian sects do not allow women to receive communion during their menses.³ Feminists believe menstruation is the main reason to prevent women from occupying higher positions in the ministry. A passage from Leviticus in the Old Testament clearly shows a similar attitude towards menstruation.

When woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean, everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. (Leviticus 15: 19–23)

It has also been referred to in other Levitical commentaries as 'miserable state', 'illness', 'sin', 'sense of natural disgust or shame [that] has developed into an ethical and religious feeling of uncleanness' (O'Grady, 2003, p. 12). St Jerome, a fourth-century Christian priest and theologian, contends, 'Nothing is more filthy, unclean than a menstruant; whatever she will have touched, she makes it unclean' (Schultz, 2003, p. 97). Even religious reformists like John Calvin called menstruation a 'shameful thing' (O'Grady, 2003, p. 11).

Menstruation: Feministic Religious Perspectives

In this section, we shall examine the alternate feministic perspectives in religions on menstruation. Their perceptions of menstruation stand in stark contrast to their patriarchal counterparts. The syncretic

connection between Goddess, women and nature and menstruation by Goddess and the role she plays in menstruation is also discussed.

The metaphysical feministic position of the Shakta tradition perceives menstruation as an event integrating nature and women. Menstruation as *ritudharma* connotes the orderly female bodily cycle along with the seasons (Patel, 2005, p. 55). By drawing a parallel between nature and women, it asserts her position as a natural being: a being who is in sync with nature, a 'natural' being or a product of nature and not as someone 'created' for procreation or to complete someone (a male in particular). In India, at least two Goddesses, that is, Kamakhya in Assam and Parvati in Kerala, are known to menstruate.

In Assam, Shakti is revered in the form of Goddess Kamakhya.⁴ The temple is unique, as the Goddess is worshipped in the *yonis* form.⁵ The *Ambubachi* or *Ambuvasi*⁶ festival, customarily held from 22 to 26 June celebrates the menstruation time of Kamakhya. The waters of the Brahmaputra turn red during the monsoon, and this redness is interpreted as a symbol of the starting of the Goddess's menses.

On the one hand, a woman's menstrual blood is treated with disgust, and on the other, the *angadhak* and *angabastro*⁷ are treated as the harbingers of fertility and protection from all forms of evil. Folklore explains why women in Assam have to practice menstrual taboos. King Noranarayan secretly watched the Goddess as she was dancing in the temple during her flow. When she became aware of the King's presence, she cursed him and his clan, stating calamity would befall them if they dared even to look or visit the temple. To redeem himself of the guilt, the King made the practice of menstrual taboo and *tuloni biya*⁸ compulsory in every household. As the story suggests, prior to this episode, there was no such prohibition against menstruating women entering a temple; rather, the prohibition ensued from the hurt male ego of a king!

The other Goddess who is known to menstruate is Parvati in the Chengannur Mahadeva temple of Kerala. The head priest has to check bloodstains on the Goddesses' attire. It is believed that the Goddess menstruates once in 3–4 months. While menstruation, the idol is kept in another room in the temple. On the fourth day, the idol is taken for a ritual bath for cleansing and reinstated back in the original temple. This practice clearly shows how menstruation is viewed as a taboo even for a Goddess, but the significant aspect to be noted from a feministic perspective is that menstruation is natural for women, even for a Goddess.

The menstruation of the Goddess makes her akin to every common woman, who feels an ally in her, who too in menstruation is forbidden to enter the sanctum she usually would share with her husband.⁹ When one reads the *DeviMahatmyam*, Goddess *Mahishasuramardini* is 'formed/created' out of the *teja* (the being) of all the 'male' Gods present (*Devi Mahatmyam*, Chap. 2, verses 10–13, p. 27). Maybe this account makes her servile to the male, to obey the rules of man. In a dialogue between Shiva and Parvati in the *Siva Purana*, Parvati says, 'With my blessings you become qualitative and embodied. Without me you are attributeless and incompetent to perform any activity. Being always subservient to prakriti you perform all activities' (*Siva Purana*, Vol. II, Chap. 13, verses 19–20). On the one hand, where the supremacy of the Goddess over the male Gods is emphasized, she is subjected to the purity rules mandatory for a common woman to obey. Thus, patriarchy in some way claimed to give respect and reverence to the Goddess (feminine) and yet, on the other hand, made her like the ordinary woman and reiterated that purity rules could not be mended for anyone.

Korte (2003) observes that in comparison to patriarchal religions, female-dominated religious perspectives¹⁰ do not focus on blood but food. Since women controlled kitchens, food rituals form the foundations which are more public and increase communal harmony. The food is generally vegetarian and does not involve the slaughter of animals. This view is seconded by cultural anthropologist, Nancy Jay, who opines that patriarchy requires presence of blood in rituals as their blood ties are ambiguous (Jay, 1992, p. 36). Female-dominated religions do not require any reinforcement of blood ties, as the ties are more pronounced and evident. Another difference is the absence of feeling of 'uncleanness' due to

menstruation. On the other hand, rituals in these cults celebrate ‘womanhood’. Hence, in such cults, a woman is not excluded from any ceremony or place of worship on the grounds of menstruation.

In her work, Fedele (2014) discusses practices of a group of Spanish and Catalan women of the ‘Goddess Wood’¹¹ group. These women refer to themselves as pilgrims of Saint Mary Magdalene and not as Christians.¹² They look upon Mary Magdalene as the guardian of menstrual blood.¹³ They adopt a syncretic approach to nature and women. The emphasis of the Church on the spirit has led to demeaning of the body, in turn resulting in a crisis of the environment and violence towards women according to its followers. The movement seeks to revise our notions of body and Earth. It promotes a vision of the body as sacred and the Earth as filled with divine beings unlike a naturalistic outlook, treating both as mere matter.¹⁴ The *Shakta*-Hindu tradition too accords a prominent value to the body and integrates women, Earth and divinity, thereby offering a feministic religious tradition that protects the natural environment.

Fedele discussed at length a ritual of menstruation conducted by Estrella, a follower of Goddess Wood cult. It centred around collecting one’s menstrual discharge and offering it along with fruits in a hole dug in the Earth. The blood symbolizes a woman’s power. Offering that to Earth is indicative of merging oneself with the Earth and Mary Magdalene. Estrella describes the process in an interview as,

When you offer your blood to the Earth, it is as if you lower your blood inside a vessel down to Earth. . . Then you pull up the container again, and the energy is so powerful because it is the energy from Mother Earth. She makes the energy rise up to the heart and there you meet Mary Magdalene. (Fedele, 2014, p. 27)

It purports to end distinctions and perceive continuity between the human and the divine through the nature. Many followers, in a heightened sense of integration, chose not to procreate to lessen the burden of Earth. The women of Goddess Wood believe in rituals, as these either ‘invert’ or turn ‘upside down’ the patriarchal Christian traditions and rituals. Instead of an altar raised above the ground in a Christian Church, the altar for this cult is a hole dug in the Earth. This is indicative of submersion and not elevating from the Earth. Wine (blood of Christ) offered as eucharist in the Church is replaced by menstrual blood. Thus, sacralizing it, fit to be offered to the Goddess Earth and not as a source of impurity.

Theorizing Purity

One may reflect on the connection between menstruation and purity. How did purity come to be associated with menstruation? Is the relationship justified? To understand, one needs to examine the notion of purity and the place it has occupied in the everyday social world. According to Mary Douglas, purity serves as a system of organizing categories. Douglas claims that rules of purity and uncleanness offer a ‘looking glass approach’ (Douglas, 2001) into a pattern which a society seeks to establish. Pollution beliefs relate nature with moral order. Natural calamity may befall where pollution rules are not obeyed. Purity rules serve as a social purpose than anything else, that is, to establish a social order in the community.

I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas, 2001, p. 4)

Rules of purity then seem to be found in highly developed cultures. Coinage of words as ‘sacred’ and ‘holy’ is based on this meaning of separation. She refers to *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, the

work of Durkheim wherein he opined that primitive religion did not aim at the salvation of man but to acquire the favour of Gods. Preservation of society demanded to appease the Gods through a set of rituals and observances. These underlined the separation and demarcation of things as sacred and non-sacred. Durkheim argued that the sacred was contagious, as the deities were abstract projections of the collective experience that yielded them fluidity. There was a need to protect their identity from flowing into other ideas. The sacred, thus, needed to be cordoned by prohibition and separation (Durkheim, 1995, p. 303).

Douglas observed that purity rituals of primitive culture are symbolic than being based on hygiene. She quotes Professor Harper's study on Havik Brahmin pollution rules. A Havik Brahmin could get polluted by touching manure or a rope touched by an untouchable servant, consuming food not cooked following purity rules and touching people considered as impure as menstruating women or untouchables. An act of bathing can achieve purity. Contact with water nullifies impurity and restores purity. Drawing from the root meaning of the word 'holy' which means to 'set apart'. Douglas deliberated on the interrelatedness of notions of 'power' and 'danger'. The Old Testament reiterates the idea of God's blessings with prosperity and withdrawal of blessing with danger. With blessings arise order in society and other good as the flourishing of one's lineage, livestock, etc. and their removal leads to disorder, loss of fertility and other evils. 'Holiness' also implies completeness. Stressing on physical perfection, Leviticus holds all goods offered, and people entering the temple, must be physically perfect. All discharges from the body were considered impure. After childbirth, women were allowed to enter the temple only after purification. Douglas inferred that the body had to be whole or complete to be perfect. '... the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as perfect container' (Douglas, 2001, p. 53). Douglas believes that the human body is the symbol of society. Society is the macrocosm and body the microcosm. The powers and dangers attributed to society can be transferred to the human body. Primitive cultures believe bodily dirt to possess power and danger. Margins were thought to be dangerous. Bodily orifices are perceived to be the most vulnerable points of the body. Matter coming forth from them as blood, milk, urine, etc. are marginal stuff, as they have transgressed the boundary of the body to the outer. The disorder is indicative of danger and power. Van Gennep writes:

Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time. . . this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another. (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 18)

According to Douglas, people in a marginal state evoke a response of fear and insecurity. She interprets the transitional states (the *marge*) that Arnold Van Gennep describes in his book *The Rites of Passage* as dangerous, owing to the ambiguity of such states. The person in transition posits a danger to oneself and also to others. A ritual can control such a threat, leading to temporary segregation from society until a more definite stage is reached. Thus, one may interpret the prohibition of menstruants from religious worship is aimed at such segregation, which ensures the safety of menstruating women, but this interpretation is a vestige of primitive cultures reinforced by the patriarchal values and beliefs.

Conclusion

Majority of World religions being predominantly patriarchal in their social set up, the scriptures have either been written by men or transmitted through men. Rules of purity for women have been codified by

men and, hence, are prejudiced towards women. Women learn about themselves from men not from women, or even if transmitted through women, it is often within a patriarchal structure. An overview of these religious practices, as taken up in this article, reveals that these faiths display prejudice against menstruation and menstruants. By associating it with uncleanness and pollution, menstruation is projected as something unnatural, disgusting, shameful, undesirable, state of punishment, a sign of the demonic and negation of life. A menstruant is impure and can transfer this impurity either directly through touch, casting one's shadow or indirectly when a person touches the object touched by the menstruant. Not only can the ordinary be contaminated, but even the sacred needs to be 'protected'; hence, seclusion of the menstruant is mandated. The purported impurity can be cleansed using water and/or by longer duration of isolation.

Conversely in female-dominated religions, the notions of disgust for menstruation are absent. They are replaced with sacrality, as menstruation is accepted not condemned. Feministic religions centre rituals around menstrual blood, enabling the menstruant to feel pride and celebration during the period. It forges a bond of togetherness, connectedness with other women on the one hand and the Earth on the other. In the patriarchal religions, she is 'the other', whereas in feministic religions, she is 'one in many'.

The binaries of power in structuralism help one to theorize menstrual taboos. In the binary of man and woman, when a man is the archetype of society, as posited by patriarchy, every aspect of the male becomes the standard of value. The body of the male becomes sacred and that of the woman, 'the other', profane. As men do not menstruate, its issuance from the woman's body is described as unnatural, disgusting and so on. In feministic religions, the power shifts from male to female. In this case, it is the female body which thoroughly known and understood; hence, menstruation is perceived as natural and even celebrated. These binaries help in understanding the discourse of purity too. The body is the microcosm and society the macrocosm.

What makes something pure or impure depends upon the archetype the society chooses to represent itself. In itself, nothing is either pure or impure in the sense of having a value or disvalue. These notions have meaning when objects are valued, keeping a standard in mind. Sacredness and profanity are products of the clash of values brought by conflicting perspectives prevalent in the culture. Menstrual taboos are, thus, a product of the prevalence of patriarchal values in society to the detriment of gender equality in any society.

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Notes

1. Regardless of the opinion of the above Jury member, *Period. End of Sentence*, did win the Oscar award for best short documentary film in 2019.

2. Though Rahul Easwar, President of Ayyappa Dharma Sena defended the exclusion as not being based on menstruation, as a prerequisite of the personality of absolute celibacy of the deity, feminists argued that the perceived notions of menstruation as impurity was the main reason.
3. The Catholic Church has softened its stand on some of these issues in the present times (Phipps, 1980, p. 300).
4. In a parallel story, Kamakhya is also referred as Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas found in the epic Mahabharat. Draupadi was menstruating when she was dragged by her hair to the Kaurav's King's court and humiliated in public. This action is the reason why the mighty empire of the Kauravas is said to fall.
5. As per the mythological story, when Sati jumped in the fire, Shiva flew away in rage with her body. Vishnu dismembered her body with his discus. Wherever the parts of Sati fell, that place is worshipped as a *Sakti-peeth*. It is believed that the *yoni* of *Sakti* fell on the Nilachal hill. It is where the temple of Kamakhya stands today.
6. Also referred as 'Ambubasi' or 'Xaat' (Das, 2008). Professor Dhare understands 'Ambuvachi' to literally means menstruation'. 'Ambu' stands for 'procreative water' and 'vachi' means to 'express' or 'blossom' (Dhavalikar, 1980).
7. *Angadhak* is the red water of the natural spring flowing over the *yoni*, supposedly standing for the menstruating flow of the Goddess. *Angabastro* is the red cloth covering the *yoni* which is shredded after the menstruation of the Goddess is over.
8. *Tuloni biya* is a practice of marriage of the first time menstruant girl to a banana plant.
9. In Nepali-Chetris, a girl is worshipped as a form of the Goddess before menses, signifying her pure status. Post menarche, she loses the state of purity and becomes a threat to males, identifying her as a 'female dog' (Das, 2008).
10. Some of the female-dominated religions are the indigenous religions of Ryuku Islands (Japan), matrilineal cults of Northern Thailand, shamanism of Korea, Nat cults of Burma, Sande secret society of West Africa, Zar cult of northern Africa, Afro-Brazilian religions, Black Carib religion in contemporary Beliza, Christian science, nineteenth-century spiritualism, twentieth-century feminist and womanist spirituality of the USA (Korte, 2003, p. 168).
11. This movement was started in 2002 in Spain.
12. They perceive the Church as patriarchal in its outlook and aim to re-appropriate a woman's rightful place in religion.
13. The Christians of Sri Lanka prefer Virgin Mary to be the protector of the first time menstruant rather than their patron saint, St. Rogus. Virgin Mary is the most apt, as she shares qualities of virginhood and purity with the girl.
14. A parallel view is found in the *Markandeya Purana* (Hindu scripture) which describes a unique form of the Goddess, Devi Shakhambari. In *Markandeya Purana*, the goddess herself says: 'I shall support the whole world with life sustaining vegetables which I shall grow out of my own body during heavy rain. I shall gain fame then as Shakambari' (Dhavalikar, 1980, pp. 32–33). This form of the Goddess integrates Earth and womanhood.

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