



THE GENDER ROLES ATTRIBUTED TO WOMEN IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: IS IT A CHANCE OF EMPOWERMENT OR A CASE OF MARGINALIZATION?

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Abstract

With the rising influence of feminist movements, the roles between man and women are burning questions in the last century. The issue has debated and researched by both men and women scholars which sometimes result in controversion. One of the common point two parts have arrived that gender and sex is different, one is socially constructed, the other is biologically. When the issue is gender, many different roles are attributed to it based on societies' traditions and cultures. Religion is an important factor in shaping society which means specifically shaping gender roles.

New religious movements or alternative religious minorities offer people a different understanding and outlook to the world compared to the established religion. Many people, living meaning crisis, are attracted to such kind of movements in postmodern era according to their needs. In this paper, how and what kind of roles these movements attributed to women will be analysed and whether they offer empowerment or marginalization to the women will be discussed.

Keywords: *New Religious Movement, Gender Roles, Women Empowerment, Women Marginalization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The distinction between males and females is a controversial issue since humanity appeared on the world stage. This distinction differs from society to society. Every culture has its own peculiar, but sometimes similar characteristics of this distinction. What is the sources of this distinction vary according to the understanding of the roles they are playing in the society and the attributions of their biological functions. In social scientific studies, the concept of sex and gender is discussed. While the notion of sex refers to "anatomical, biological and physiological characteristics of female and male bodies", the notion of gender refers to "the culturally specific symbolic articulation and elaboration of these differences" (Barnard and Spencer, 1996, 253). Gender is used to differentiate between male and females, the main focus is the social factors of this differentiation, not the biological factors. In other words, gender, which is different from the notion of sex, can be defined and formed socially and culturally. Accordingly; the meaning and context of gender can be altered and evolved both socially and historically.

Gender is socially constructed and experienced in various and different social local contexts. No matter the workplace, political realms, the home, mass culture, the legal system are tried to be organised in both gender's benefit equally, it is still problematic and the regulations are still empowering men and disadvantageous in certain situation for women across the globe. There is still inequality in distributions of power in different parts of life. When analysed throughout the history, one can see the gender's role in power relations in society level. Gender-power relations include complex composites (Woodhead, 2007,13-26). In the formation of this relation, there are some factors which affect this situation's formation. Religion is one of them which shape these relations.

The feminist movements, in the late 20th century, have influenced the religion's power allocations among the genders. In general, traditional gender roles, deities, understanding of religious texts are making the women disempowered in many aspects. However, the new interpretations and assessment on the traditional forms of gender roles are started to change in established religion. The impact of modernization and feminist movements have also influenced the alternative religious groups. Gender roles, sexual relations, marriage, leadership allocations are started to be questioned.

Especially after 1980, with the influence of feminist movements some NRMs or alternative religions provide opportunities to have liberation from male subordination and empowerment in religious practices and organizations. Thus this case has increased the attraction and participation in new religious movements among women. For example; the Osho Movement, many Wiccan, goddess-worshipping and pagan groups, Brahma Kumaris's followers are formed by women. By contrast, men outnumber the

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women in authoritarian and traditional NRMs and Christian sects such as ISKCON and Unification Church (McGuire, 2003, 145).

In this paper, regarding the power relations between genders, the question of whether new religious movements provide for women to be empowered or marginalized will be analysed in terms of sexual relations, marriage, leadership roles.

1.1. Women in New Religious Movements

There is an increasing participation in alternative religious groups and spritual groups. Many people in Europe and Northern America do not accept being membership of an established religion and they take the decision of developing themselves spiritually. Hence, people who define themselves as spiritual, not religious, are increasing since 20 years. One of the reasons of not accepting established religions is regarding them much patriarchal, hierarchical, misogynist. In established religions there are external authorities to reach the divine but people are in the search of contacting with divine themselves. Accordingly alternative religions such as spirituality, new religious movements provide such kind of opportunities to reach the divine directly no matter your gender, social status, etc. (Fedelle, 2013).

19th century new religious movements reconsidered the women's role. In that sense, pivotal leadership positions were given to women and they took into the consideration of women's experiences and needs ritually. For instance, Christian science, Unity, Religious science, Spritualism women's representation in leadership was not in a proportionate way. In this movements, women were attracted by healing, relationships with dead and living, emotional matters and power such as mental power. This situation prompt women to look for different gender identities (McGuire, 2008, 169). They were in need of having equal rights or equal chance to have power. Traditional and established religion are not satisfying their such kind of religious needs. Therefore; the alternative source for power and authority provide women to find different roles in new religious movements. These kind of movements appeal to women who are oppressed, not given any privileged positions and given submissive roles in dominant religions. Late Victorian Era is a good example for this assertion as they were providing different gender roles for women (McGuire, 2003, 145).

In 19th century and later, many religious movements offered privileges to have equality. For instance the Shakers's belief to Monn Ann Lee, their founder was thought as the second coming of Christ. In Quakers' faith, the society of friends, women were encouraged to have an equal rights on having educating, public speaking roles, leadership. Some Quaker women took part in some human right activities such as Women Suffrage Movements, Slavery Abolition Movement, fair treatment to native Americans etc. Later in Victorian Era when was the start of feminist movements, some alternative roles for women were constituted in the beliefs, practices of different religious movements such as Holiness Religion and Pentecostal Movements, Spritualism, Seventh day, Christian Science, Adventists (McGuire, 2003, 145).

Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, Christian Science, Theosophy, Sprituality emerged after mid 19th century and also Women's Suffrage Movement causes context for these movements. Apart from Mormonism, these mentioned religious groups were founded by women. With both men and women's the participation to the new religious movements, new gender roles emerged which challenged the traditional ones. People were in search of these new roles sometimes gave empowerment and sometimes not. However it was certain that these movements were offering something new and not exist in traditional ones (Pike, 2007, 121).

Spiritual practices are likely to be developed in religious movements as they contest the gender and religious hierarchies. Some religious movements are challenging the gendered hierarchies and some are trying to challenge the social frames that are constituted by the hierarchical religions. Therefore, in that case, it is more likely to face with gendered spiritualities that are questioning and challenging the gender divisions (McGuire, 2008, 179).

New religious movement can both provide option for returning to extreme patriarchy such as the Happy-healthy-holy movement, Krishna Consciousness, Unification Church and antipatriarchy such as the Neo pagan/ Wiccant movement, the Rajneesh/Osho movement, the Church Universal and Triumphant, Theosophy. The second option provides for the women to have a new and superior power in spirituality and also it provides women for having the right of leadership in rituals and organizations (Pike, 2007, 121). As for alternative spiritual religions, it will be problematic if it is reduced to a kind of gender's dominating realm or empowering of this gender. They should be analysed in their social context. Women who are in need of power are changing the rules and roles of religions. While new alternative spiritualistic religions can both offer empowerment by giving new roles and they can cause gender domination or abusive



situations or new religious movements will be studied in terms of sexuality, motherhood, celibacy, deity, leadership issues, whether they are providing empowerment or marginalization will be questioned.

2. THE ROLES ATTRIBUTED TO WOMEN IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

2.1. Sexuality

Sexuality has an important issue on gender identity and women's position in the social groups. It both gives the opportunity of empowerment or the situation of abuse of power. In NRMs sexuality and marriage are important issues on gender roles and their empowerment over themselves.

As it is in established religion, in NRMs sacred texts, social contexts, the interpretation of past and societies' ideals have the impact on shaping the marriage, life of families, sexuality (Pike, 2007, 219). Sexuality in established religion are generally in the infavour of women. Contrary to established religion's sex understanding, in some alternative religions, different understanding of sex are at stake. For example; in Osho movement, sex is regarded an emotion which gives out human powerful natural energy. It processes in three level. In first level is procreation which is animal level, the second one is intimacy and pleasure which is human level, the last one is a tool for self realisation which is divine level. Women are priviledged case as they have the ability of multiple orgasms which provide them to reach the divine easily and make them develop their spiritual growth. In that sense being woman has advantageous in reaching divine and spiritual growth.

The other example who is reacting against to the traditional gender roles is Raelians. They are advocating sexual freedom. Raelians are accusing Christianity as it is in favour of sexuality and women. Different varieties of sexual expression are welcomed such as bisexuality and homosexuality. They are even couraged to be bisexual (Pike, 2007, 221).

As well as Osho, Raelians, the pagan beliefs are opponent of traditional sexual roles. In the pagan beliefs sexuality is thought to be sacred as it is because of the Goddess belief. Sexuality is taking energy and power from Goddess. They regard orgasm a sharing energy as people have the feel of moving the stars. The great rite which is a kind of ritual sex has an important activity between priest and priestness in Paganism. Mestruation and childbirth are celebrated rituals as human body especially female body is thought to be sacred (Puttick, 2003, 151). As sexuality is considered natural and sacred by Pagans, sexual freedom is significant issue among Neo pagans. It means having right of homosexual relations, multiple lovers or being celibate. Lesbians and gays are attracted by such kinds of new religions as they allowed their follower to choose sexual freedom (Pike, 2007, 221). No matter it can be debatable that having sexual freedom is the sign of empowerment of women, at least new sexuality understanding gives freedom to the women as well as men when compared with the traditional sexual roles women have.

In some cases, although sexuality is seen a way being freedom, but sometimes women's sexuality or femininity is abused for the benefits of religious groups. For example, a Christian community, Children of god, uses sex to attract new devotee which is called "flirty fishing". Women are asked for using their sexuality to take the attention of men and persuade them to join their community. Furthermore, sometimes women are asked for satisfaction of their leaders sexual needs. Woman are used like a sexual resource and service in different ways. Similarly, in Krishna consiousness organization women have similar duties. To sell more books, they use their femininity as bringing money to community is one of the highly appreciated behaviours and by doing so they believe the purification of themselves and serve to their group (Jacobs, 1991, 175-176).

The same example can be observable in Turkey. Adnan Oktar congregation which is famous for its confrontation of theory of evolution and a popular group among the elite, intellectual, socially in well positions people. They use women's femininity to attract male followers. They advocate this case as explaining that their aim is to show that islam is compatible with modern age, women are not oppressed creatures. They have live religious programmes in their tv channel, the religious leader, Adnan oktar has a religious talk with mixed group in which women have very sexual outlook with decollette dressing and heavy make up and they are symbolizing heaven women according to their belief.¹

2.2. Celibhacy

Celibacy, polygamy and open marriage are the types of sexual relations that can be seen in alternative religious groups. Celibacy is highly appreciated in some religious groups. For example, Love Israel with giving references to the biblical patriarchs, they were legitimazing their sexual relations. They had the right of having sexual relations with many women, but his followers were need to be celibate. In

¹ For more details : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bH21w2R0hc&t=94s>



1971, Love Israel and some women were not celibate but the others were required to be celibate, later this rule were becoming broken. Elder men were allowed to practice polygamy and they had the sexual freedom. In terms of women situation they were required to submit their partners. Furthermore, this submission meant to being tolerant the men's sexual relations with different women (Pike, 2007, 221).

Celibacy provides women to be more advantageous positions in some cases. For instance, Buddhism's new forms take the attention of women to be celibate and who want to be interested in monastic lifestyles. This new celibate lifestyle provides women broaden their roles to the positions in which men are dominant in United States. In other NRMs (e.g. Brahma Kumaris), celibacy offer women progressing spiritually (Pike, 2007, 222).

In some NRMs, celibacy are not only for women but also for men attractive as it provides spirituality development. However in some others, this opportunity for both genders are not equally available. In Krishna Consciousness, celibacy is appreciated among men, women are regarded secondary and besides women are seen a threat to men's spiritual development. In ISKCON, women are inferior in terms of celibacy. In social issues their ideas are not important. Moreover women are expected to not to distract men. In order to do that women have to wear long dresses and cover their head in worship. What is more, they need to sit at the back which shows the signs of being the secondary in spirituality. As much as possible men are protected from women in order to carry out their celibacy that means subordination of women roles in group while men's role's value are dignified. In Rajneesh movement, traditional marriages or celibacy are recommended (Pike, 2007, 223).

Marriage Arrangements and Motherhood

The alternative religions offer different types of sexual and marital practices. One of them is a male dominant plural marriage type. The model based on ancient texts. The example of this type are seen in early Mormons, Branch Davidians. The second is traditional practices are reversed, free love, homosexual relations, extramarital affairs are dominant in this type and examples are the Oneida community and neo pagans such as Raelians. Third one is celibacy and the last one is conventional heterosexual marriages but in some aspects, different variations can be seen. When analysed the history of NRM it is clear that sexual practices and marriages are innovative such as Mormon polygamy, perfectionist plural marriage (Pike, 2007, 219).

In some conservative new religious movements, on the subject of marriage, they are following the traditional forms of marriages which is more patriarchal while the others are looking for more alternative ones. In the past mormons based their polygamy understanding on Hebrew Bible. Having multiple wives were the Gods will. Now polygamy is forbidden but still they believe the men superior role on women. In this sense, religious text or understanding is a way of legitimizing the sexual experiments in NRM. In some new religious movements marriage as a legal constitution is considered a way of dominating women and in some such as Pagans it is regarded a deep commitment between partners and it provides a physical and spiritual tie for them (Puttick, 2003, 152).

Types of marriage are indication of women's position in that groups. Arranged marriages are advised in ISKCON, but the women have the right of selecting their husband providing the permission of temple president. For women marriage is a way of gaining social status and spiritual growth. However, men are thought to be more superior to women in all levels of the life especially when they are celibate. Being temptress and a devotee are the roles of women in this movement and they are perceived as mechanism of temptress which can cause the agitation of men sexually. Hence, women are excluded from sharing power in the society (Puttick, 2003, 152).

In traditional forms, women are expected to be more altruistic and caring for their family rather than self-centred. Motherhood is a sacred vocation. For example in Moonie women are expected to be devoted wife and mother to have a happy family and to protect family unity. On the other hand men have the right of controlling sexuality, worship and work which resulted in direct spiritual development and having low status in the community. Men are in the role of having the autonomy of both women and family.

Motherhood is in general regarded valuable, but some NRM motherhood is considered a tool to develop spiritually in a religious group but it is not a biological motherhood. To exemplify it, Shakers discourage women not to give birth. In that situation motherhood is a spiritual power in teaching the right way and nurturing the followers. However biological motherhood prevents the women's empowerment as it limits their freedom (Pike, 2007, 220). One of the other example who regards motherhood is an obstacle to empower is Osho Movement. In Osho Movement, Osho regards it as outdated phenomenon and it prevents human progress. Additionally, Osho and Raelian women do not accept the contract of marriage



and also they generally delay or refuse motherhood. The role of wife and mother are not accepted by Rajneesh women (Palmer, 2004, 382).

Broadly speaking different options for women are presented in different alternative religion or movements as to marriage. One can both find traditional ones such as motherhood is highly encouraged seen as sacred, a way for securing the family such as in Moonie, the Unification Church etc. On the other hand one also can find more liberated and self determined women roles in marriage such as Paganism, Osho movement, Buddhism (Puttick, 2003, 157). This kind of marriage forms appeal especially the working women who are less altruistic more self centered and concentrating on their personal growth.

2.3. Deity

Understanding of divine has a great impact on the formation of roles of gender. The roles are constituted on the idea of deity. Having male God sense gives men the privilege of leadership roles and in these religion women are passive and they are in oppressed roles, men are restricting the women's positions. On the other hand in alternative religious groups which divinity is thought to be beyond gender, having two heads or thought to be Goddess, the equality between gender in the leadership is more widespread (Pike, 2007, 215).

The understanding of deity is pivotal when positioning gender roles in the society. It is also determinant influence on leadership allocations. Moreover, the traditional established God belief affect on alternative religious or new religious movement's deity belief. In 19th Century, Christian God models were revised and adapted to new ones in new religions. For instance the Mormons's God was male, they believe the Hebrew Bible's male God. However; Elizabeth Cady Stanton believes female God which is Elohim in Bible. On the other hand the Shakers's God has two head which is both female and male. This understanding of the divine has reflected on their understanding of leadership roles. The other example is the Love Family which is founded by Love Israel. Their theology is constructed upon Biblical God. Their communal structure are shapened according to the model of Hebrew Patriarchs. They use biblical scriptures to legitimize their power such as the practice of polygamy and they use these powers in other aspects of social life. That legitimized situation based on Bible making them more powerful on women (Pike, 2007, 214).

2.4. Leadership

In traditional established religion, mostly, male has the role of founders and charismatic leaders but in alternative religions movements, the allocation of leadership is slightly different. In terms of leadership, they can provide opportunity for women to have that kind of roles. While they provide fully leadership role for secondary leadership roles, in some occasions, they can offer the formation of male charismatic leaders with women. Accordingly, to some extent, having the privileges of leadership is giving an idea about the women's role, position and whether they are marginalized or empowered. In alternative religions, when compared with the established, one can find the example of equality between genders on leadership positions or submissive roles where males are dominant or submissive roles where female are dominant.

Like traditional established religions, in some new or alternative religious minorities the authority is given to the men, such as ministers, priests. In this circumstance, women need to obey them without questioning. Men, having leadership, take on fatherly roles which have a both gentle or authoritarian features to their devotees especially for the women as their devotee. In particular position it is observed that this authority create a circumstance to abuse women such as sexual submission to the leader. One of the reasons of male dominance on leadership is the legitimization based on sacred text on gender roles. As stated before, for instance, in Love Family based on Hebrew Bible, women are on the role of serving to the men in different ways. They could not be regarded in group's formal leadership. Women could only gain power in terms of their relations with men (Pike, 2007, 216). This case shows the situation of gaining a power or importance on the society via submission to the men which is a clear proof of being marginalized in such kind of groups.

As Weber points out, charismatic leadership is one of the three ways of leadership in the society. In new religious or alternative religious movements charismatic leaders are largely males which causes the institutionalization of hierarchy spiritualistically. In this hierarchy, male adherents act as godlike roles while women adherents are required to serve to these men who are idealized as stated (Jacobs, 1991, 172). In California, the women are taken on submissive roles to their husband in a Christian revivalist group. They thought they need to submit men who submit to God. This is another way of submitting to God through submitting pious husbands. On the other hand, some Christian communities women are complaining about the men's abusive behaviours which they are violating the moral contracts such as adultery, sexual



abuse, physical violence, but nonetheless, women are asked to submit their husbands by the church. As women are supposed to maintain family unity and as a result they need to serve their husband as men are considered the deserved head of household (Jacob, 1991, 172-173).

In order to reach a social status and regarded as important, charismatic authority is seen a crucial vehicle for women especially in the social contexts where patriarchy is dominant. Charisma can develop the authority of religious leader. In some social context where women are oppressed, they become mentally ill. If the medical treatment do not get the women better, it is believed that the women are possessed by a spirit. In Christianity it is regarded as women have to preach in that situation. If she does not obey these, she will get punished and killed by divine power. Therefore, she let the spirit speak through herself. She can resolve her problems as using this spirit power. She can even behave like a male or authority as it is believed to be caused by spirit. By doing so, she gains authority as what she says is important for followers because of the spirits power. Because of having spirits power, woman can be a spiritual guider, shaman, religious leader. Such kind of charismatic women examples are seen in religious movements such as Christian Science, Tenrikyō, Shakers (Hammer and Rothstein, 2012, 89).

No matter, generally, the male charismatic leaders emerged in religious groups, in some cases, the influence of charisma of a women can reverse the traditional gender roles. To illustrate this case, in Brahma Kumaris movements the leader see women rightful heirs. Because of valued feminine characteristics, women have important roles. The founder of this movement constitute a committee whose membership are all women. Generally the Brahma Kumaris women are regarded as spiritual leaders as they are seen superior spiritually over men. Their superiority over men stems from their natural femininity which is exceptional case in religious movements. Therefore femininity offers them empowerment tool in the group (Pike, 2007, 217). In addition to have a total leadership, in some cases, women take on the secondary leadership. Osho movement, Neo pagan movement, Brahma Kumaris, the Rajneesh are the religions in which generally women have the leadership roles compared to men. However; it can be said that generally men have the role of leadership in alternative religions as in the traditional established religion. This similarity stems from due to mirroring the the majority of traditional religions (Pike, 2007, 218).

Interestingly, being empowered is not the demand of all women. Some of them are opposed to female authority and favour of the male charismatic authority. For example; Nirmala Devi who is the founder of Sahaj Yoga is one of them. She advocates that women should not behave like a men because it will cause the losing of their femininity. Hence, women are expected to be submissive to their husbands and playing the traditional women roles if one wants to be an ideal Indian woman (Puttick, 2003, 158). As they are satisfied with the what the society expect them to be ideal Indian woman rather than having equal or superior roles over the men. This is because their identification of femininity with obedience to their husband. The more women have power on men the less femininity they have which the religion does not appreciate.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with the increasing influence of feminist movements, many women can prefer leaving the organized traditional religions which male discourse and male deity image are dominant. To be empowered, they try to find new forms of deity, spirituality and they convert to other alternative religions such as neo paganism which attracting women because of having a woman centered theology. The understanding of deity, or religious scriptures can influence their leadership role's placing in the society.

Alternative religious groups are attractive way of expression of women's discomfort, they can offer and create alternative roles. However with time passing, as they become more established, they are returning to traditional and hierarchical forms of authority which causes male dominant controlled and submissive forms of new religions. This situation can be explainable with Weber's analysis that the new religious movements give opportunities to women to have a different roles in developmental and formation years of these movements. In this years, they are offering equality to women who are nonprivileged positions in the society. Later in the developmental years of these groups, the submissive roles of women can be again dominant in such kind of social groups.

As stated before, no matter alternative religious minorities are generally considered to present new roles for women, some religious movements are reclaiming the traditional roles rather than offering new kind of gender roles. Jesus people, Krishna Consciousness, the Unification Church, Neo Pentacostal Movements are offering very conservative roles for women. This condition may be explainable in terms of demand side of this religious movements. What followers are expecting is definition of gender roles according to their needs, interest. For instance many converted Orthodox Judaistic women ask traditional religion pattern which offering unaltered traditional gender roles such as the roles legitimizing desire for family. Accordingly, it can be said that some alternative religious movement attract women as they are



offering traditional roles which are disempowering women whereas others offer different new roles for them.

As many of the alternative religious movements are based on world religions, they are influenced by the practices, beliefs, values of major religions. No matter alternative religious movements offer their followers various range of experimentation in practice and belief, the gender roles are changing but still women are in oppressive and marginalized positions. Although some new religious movements are contemplating equality, in practice generally women are still performing submissive role and they are abused in the religious groups.

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