



A Religious Perspective on Gender Identity: An Analysis

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Abstract

Religion is as old as the human race itself. Humans have been associated with some belief or faith since the inception of humankind on Earth. People of different ages have undergone evolution with progress or advancement in social transformation. Throughout this social transformation, people have been inclined towards the ultimate reality or God. Different religious denominations have identified different characteristics or roles for individuals. Therefore, religions or religious traditions assign gender-based identities to individuals according to their doctrines or religious traditions. Thus, all major religions define the roles and duties of different gender identities. This study explores gender identities from a religious perspective. This study scrutinizes gender identities from the scriptures of the world's major religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. This study explores the possibility of identifying positive attitudes towards gender identity in different religions. This study explores the ways and means of balancing gender identity approaches in contemporary times and the roles of religious beliefs. Therefore, religious traditions govern faith-based identities, thereby resolving gender identity crises. Because faith-based societies are more dependent on religious beliefs, the role and attitude of religion toward gender identity must be highlighted. Understanding gender identity is a key factor in the development of societies, and it will ultimately help change the overall perception of gender bias and inequality.

Keywords

Gender and Religion, Gender Equality, Gender Identity, Religion, Gender Bias

I. Introduction

Gender is a social construct that encompasses the roles, expectations, and behaviours associated with being male or female in a given society. The issue of gender holds significant importance at present. The issue concerns both men

and women, but the term mostly specifies women since women are more vulnerable to societal inequalities. The study does not specify gender construction since men and women have different physical formations, but the analysis of gender in their societal and religious roles and their representation in society. By examining gender in its societal and religious context, this analysis will shed light on the gender roles of individuals and their impact on their lives.

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Defining Gender Identity

Gender Identity is the individual's sense of recognizing themselves in a particular gender category and defining their role. Many definitions of gender identity have been proposed. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, gender identity is defined as "an individual's self-conception as a man or woman or as a boy or girl or as some combination of man/boy and woman/girl or as someone fluctuating between man/boy and woman/girl or as someone outside those



categories altogether.”¹ According to Richard Ashmore, Gender Identity is defined as “the structured set of gendered personal identities that results when the individual takes the social construction of gender and the biological ‘facts’ of sex and incorporates them into an overall self-concept”² Wendy Wood and Alice Eagly defines gender identity as “individuals sense of themselves as male or female arising because most people accept, or internalize, at least some aspects of cultural meanings associated with their sex- meanings that in turn arise from the different social roles of men and women.”³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, gender identity is “an individual’s personal sense of being or belonging to a particular gender or genders, or of not having a gender.”⁴

While gender identity can be defined in various ways across different perspectives, religious traditions define it within the framework of their prescribed roles.

Gender Identity in Different Religious Traditions

Religion is more than just an area of academic study. It is a fundamental concern that explores and addresses the sacred, connecting to ultimate value. Religion organizes all aspects of reality, including gender, and encompasses the very essence of human existence. Therefore, studying religion, like any creative human endeavor, requires a subjective and reflective approach. Every religion articulates distinct perspectives about genders, thus specifying views on different genders widely elaborating on their roles and duties. Every religion thus specifies the culture and, accordingly, the roles of genders. Frequently, the term ‘culture’ is employed interchangeably with ‘religion.’ This usage tends to reinforce the perception of religion as immutable and resistant to change, particularly in its prescriptions concerning gender roles.⁵ The following are the perspectives of different faiths addressing the concept of gender identity:

In Judaism

The first chapter of the Bible, i.e., Genesis, describes in detail the creation and the role of genders. The relation between God and humanity is expressed in the idea that he created man in his own image and likeness (*Imago Dei*), expressing the thought that irrespective of gender identity, every human is a reflection of the divine dominating every living being as mentioned in the Bible:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.⁶

In Judaism, the relationship between men and women is stated clearly. The complementary nature of the relationship between the sexes is expressed in Genesis 2:21-23 when a woman is created from a man’s ribcage. Men and women were created to complete and support one another. Like how Eve was formed from Adam’s rib, she is viewed as fundamentally similar to him but with different roles and features.

Regarding the role of genders, women have also been elevated to the status of prophetesses. Jewish tradition recognizes seven prophetesses of Israel⁷- Sarah (Genesis 11:29-23:20), Deborah (Judges 4 and 5), Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Esther (Esther 4). Similarly, Judaism believes in the spiritual equality of men and women (Joel 2:28). Since the context restricts the term ‘all flesh’ to this specific group, it is meant for all Jews. It implies that every Jewish community member intends to have an ecstatic vision and expressiveness akin to a prophet, regardless of variables like age, gender, or social standing. Essentially, what is being said is that, among Yahweh’s people, the ability to speak with prophetic insight and receive divine insight is commonplace, with the idea that ‘all Yahweh’s people shall be prophets.’ Within the Jewish community, this emphasizes a vision of

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gender-identity> Accessed on 29/11/2023.

² Ashmore, Richard. “Sex, gender and the Individual”, in L Pervin ed., *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, New York: Guilford, 1990, p. 486–526(512).

³ Wood Wendy and Eagly Alice H. “Gender” in D.T Gilbert and G Lindzey ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998, p. 640.

⁴Oxford English Dictionary

<https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Entries?q=gender+identity&sortOption=Frequency>

⁵ Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee. “Gender relations, development practice and ‘culture’”, *Gender & Development*, 3:1, 13-18, p. 15.

⁶ Bible, Genesis 1:27-28.

⁷ *The Babylonian Talmud*. trans. Michael L. Rodkinson, Book 4, Tract *Megilla*, Chapter 1, 1918, 8:36.



universal access to spiritual experience and revelation.⁸

It is crucial to note that classical Jewish literature mostly neglects women. Contemporary Jewish scholarship and religious communities are reevaluating and reinterpreting these texts to promote greater inclusivity and a more nuanced understanding of gender within Jewish traditions. Many modern Jewish scholars actively work to amplify the voices and experiences of women in the study and interpretation of Jewish texts.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some women attempted to articulate their own feelings about Jewish self-identity, including their understanding of spirituality in general and Jewish spirituality in particular, through short stories, semiautobiographical novels, magazine articles, and, occasionally, explicitly theological works. Josephine Lazarus' *Spirit of Judaism*, for example, published in 1896, called for the creation of a new, universal religion through which liberal Judaism and liberal Christianity might be united. Her work sparked continuing theological discussions and debates among liberal Jews during the early years of the twentieth century.⁹

The development of Rabbinic Judaism diminished the status of women as less desirable than males. However, the participation of women in economics, family nurturing, and domestic religious rituals was also acknowledged (Talmud Breakhot).¹⁰

In Christianity

Christianity is derived from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and Saint Paul. The emphasis on gender equality in Christianity stems from core theological ideas drawn from biblical teachings. The attitude of Jesus towards women and their representation in his life elevated women's status, encouraged their involvement in his mission, and challenged the systems that marginalized them. Christianity does not recognize any difference between male and female. The New Testament mentions that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor

female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."¹¹ Christianity focuses on mutual submission to Christ (Ephesians 5:21). In the letters of Paul to the Ephesians, Paul has specified the gender roles in a family. The Bible commands wives to submit to their husbands as to their Lord. Similarly, husbands are commanded to love their wives as Christ used to love the church. Men are commanded to love their wives as their own bodies, for no man ever hates his own body; instead, he nourishes and cherishes it. Thus, every husband must love his wife, and every woman must respect her husband.¹²

Women are explicitly venerated in Christianity. Christian belief in the resurrected Jesus's appearance to Mary Magdalene underscores women's crucial role in witnessing and conveying pivotal aspects of Christian beliefs, particularly the resurrection. It challenges societal norms of the time, highlighting the equality and importance of women in the unfolding of key events within the Christian faith. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is revered as "the mother of God" by Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Women played an important role in Paul's mission. One such example is Priscilla.¹³ Her partnership with Paul exemplifies the collaborative nature of ministry in the early Christian communities, where women like Priscilla played integral roles in spreading and deepening the understanding of Christian teachings.

Similarly, many women have risen to the status of saints in Christianity, such as Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Aliva. Women embraced the gospel eagerly, undergoing baptism, and manifested spiritual gifts like prophecy and speaking in tongues without facing discrimination. Within the Christian communities, women engage in diverse forms of service, and substantial evidence indicates their appointment to leadership and responsibility positions. Women actively participated in preaching, teaching, and prayer, both publicly and privately. In certain instances, they may have even served as overseers and counselors.¹⁴ In the current scenario marked by a halted aggiornamento, the patristic era's innovative contributions and the matristic tradition's achievements serve as

⁸ W.L. Wardle, "Joel," in *A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Arthur S. Peake (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1920), 546.

⁹ Umansky, Ellen M. "Spiritual Expressions: Jewish Women's Religious Lives in the Twentieth-Century United States", in Judith R. Baskin ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1991, p. 274.

¹⁰ Baskin, Judith R. "Judaism and Gender", in Nancy A. Naples ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of*

Gender and Sexuality Studies, USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ The Holy Bible, KJV, Galatians 3: 28.

¹² Ephesians 5: 22-33

¹³ Priscilla has been mentioned at many places in the New Testament (Acts 18:2-3, Acts 18:18, Romans 16:3, 2 Timothy 4:19).

¹⁴ Massey, Lesly F. *Women in the Church*, McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers: London, 2002, p. 40.



exemplary models for necessary theological inculturation. The full humanity of God-language in theology is realized only when articulated through the lens of both women's and men's gendered experiences.¹⁵

In the initial stages of Christianity, emphasis was placed on gender equality, with both men and women serving as disciples and deacons. However, from around 400 CE, during the early Christian councils that addressed church matters, women were progressively excluded from these roles, resulting in a reduction of their societal functions.¹⁶

In Islam

The foundation of Islamic teachings lies in the Qur'an. Islam has laid much emphasis on gender identity, delineating distinct roles for men and women. There is no discrimination in Islam based on gender. The Qur'an explicitly emphasizes the equality of all people in the sight of Allah. The Quran mentions:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.¹⁷

And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer - those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed.¹⁸

Islam focuses on the concept of equity rather than equality of genders. Concerning the spiritual nature, there is no difference, but as far as social roles are concerned, Islam has prescribed separate roles for men and women. Qur'an has explained the basic attributes of successful men and women (Qur'an 33:35) for their salvation in the life to come. As far as societal responsibilities are concerned, a distinct role has been prescribed to the genders (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: 7138). "Islam has brought forth a balanced society that did not lead to any sort of gender clash or confrontation, rather each one celebrated their

distinctiveness and drove their sense of respect for their Lord."¹⁹

In Islam, the principle of gender equity extends to various aspects of daily life, and there are no inherent restrictions on the involvement of men and women in everyday responsibilities. Women are permitted to visit the masajids, attend funerals, and participate in battles and everyday activities within the religious limits. The goal is to fortify the societal framework within Islam. "The object of the Social Law of Islam is to safeguard the institution of marriage, prevent sexual anarchy and eradicate immoderate sexual excitements. For this end, the Legislator has devised three kinds of measures: moral purification, punitive laws and preventive measures."²⁰ Such measures are applicable for both genders to strengthen the social system in Islam. The accusations of Islam being unfair to women, however, stem from perceived natural and psycho-cognitive traits rather than asserting their inherent inadequacy or diminishment.

In Hinduism

Hinduism is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sindhu*, who lived along the river Sindh. Both genders partake in the divinity in Hinduism. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva represent the roles of creator, protector, and destroyer in the universe. Brahma relies on the grace of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, while Vishnu finds an essential companion in Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Shiva draws power from Parvathi or Shakthi. This concept of male and female principles working together as equal partners in the universe reaches its culmination in *Ardhanareeswara* (The Androgynous Form). In this manifestation, Siva and Shakthi fuse into one body, each occupying one half, symbolizing that one is incomplete without the other. The earlier period of Hinduism greatly stressed the contribution of women. During the early Vedic period, women held predominantly stable positions, with many of them serving as Rishis and actively participating in the performance of chants in the Yajur Veda.²¹

¹⁵ Borresen, Kari Elisabeth, "Matristics: Mothers of the Church", in Kari Elisabeth Borresen and Kari Vogt ed., *Women's Studies of the Christian and Islamic Tradition*, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, pp. 252-53.

¹⁶ Crandall, Barbara, *Gender and Religion: The Dark Side of Scripture*, 2nd Edition, New York: Continuum, 2012, p. 7.

¹⁷ Al-Qur'an 49:13.

¹⁸ Al-Quran 4:124.

¹⁹ Khan, Zaira Ashraf. *Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) And Empowerment of Women: A Prophetic Model of Emancipation of Women*, Viva Books: New Delhi, 2022, p. 94.

²⁰ Maududi, Sayyid Abul A'la. *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*, Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers: New Delhi, 2003, p. 279.

²¹ Women and Hinduism, in Constance A. Jones and James D. Ryan ed., *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, New York: Facts On File, 2007, p.499.



Nevertheless, in later periods, there was a decline in the status of women within Hinduism. In a particular instance, where the scripture emphasizes the respect and freedom of both genders (Manu Smriti 3:56), the conflicting attitude towards women reflects the ambivalence within the broader Brahmanical ideals.²² While reformists have introduced numerous changes, there is still a necessity to alter the perspective on gender identity within Hinduism.

In Buddhism

Buddhism is derived from the teachings and practices of Gautam Buddha. The attainment of Nirvana, also known as Nibbana, is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. To do this, a person must overcome thoughts and actions specific to their gender. According to Buddhist thought on gender identity, “differences in the biological and mental state of genders have no relationship with one’s spiritual development.”²³ In another place, it is mentioned that in order to achieve salvation, both genders must go beyond their masculinity and femininity (Sānyogavisṇayogadhammapariyāya Sutta - AN III 7:1:5:8 Sutta pp. 365-67).

In Buddhism, women are not deemed inferior to men. Acknowledging biological differences, Buddhism sees both genders as equally valuable to society. The Buddha emphasizes women’s vital role as successful wives and nurturing mothers. Within families, equal responsibility is expected from both spouses, with husbands encouraged to view their wives as friends and partners. Wives were considered capable substitutes for husbands in family affairs, even familiarizing themselves with their husbands’ work to manage affairs in their absence. This underscores the equal standing of women alongside men in Buddhist society.²⁴

Thus, biological and psychological distinctions based on gender do not impact one’s spiritual growth. It is asserted that individuals can achieve the highest spiritual state, Nibbana, irrespective of gender. Consequently, the Buddhist community promotes gender equality by establishing four societies—Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upāsaka, and Upāsika—affording equal opportunities for both men and women to pursue a path to Nibbāna, as all four

possess the potential for spiritual attainment. The commencement of Buddha’s mission marked the initiation of a movement advocating for the emancipation of women. The Buddhist doctrine, centered on individual salvation, presumed the spiritual equality of all beings—both men and women—without necessitating masculine support, thereby raising the status of all beings collectively.²⁵

In Jainism

Jainism, derived from the word ‘Jina,’ which means conquerer, is based on the teachings of 24 tirthankaras. Gender identity is one of the most unresolved issues in Jainism. The two sects of Jainism, i.e., Digambara and Svetambara, have a parallel stand concerning salvation (*strīnirvana*). The acceptance of ordained people wearing clothing was one of the main points of contention between the two sects. Digambaras does not accept the salvation of women since she cannot renounce everything, including her clothes, to attain *Nirvana*. Svetambaras hold an opposite view of salvation.

A prominent Jaina monk and philosopher, Kundakunda, writes that the road that leads to moksha is nudity. The scriptures claim that a woman’s genital organs, including her navel, armpits, and the space between her breasts, serve as breeding grounds for delicate life forms. For a woman, how is renunciation possible? They are not firm in body or mind by nature, and their minds are not pure. Their menstruation occurs every month. As a result, fearful meditation is not possible for women.²⁶ As a result of manifesting deception, a man in this world becomes a woman. As for a woman, if her heart is pure, she becomes a man in this world.²⁷ This view regarding gender inequality has led to the marginalization and the social unacceptance of Jainism as a universal religion.

In Sikhism

Sikhism, stemming from the life and teachings of 10 Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak, is the most recent among the Indic religions. Among the core teachings of the gurus is the equality of genders (Guru Granth Sahib p. 474- *Asa Di Var*). The social organization of Sikhs is notably characterized by equality. This principle emerged historically as a response to the entrenched social inequalities

²² Flood, Gavin, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 66.

²³ Ditu Sutta SN I 3:2:5-6, p 158-59

²⁴ <https://buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/position.htm> Accessed on 20/12/2023

²⁵ Dewaraja L.S. *The Position of Women in Buddhism*, Srilanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Jaini Padmanabh S. *Gender & Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*, University of California Press, California, 1991, p. 4

²⁷ Maheśvarasūri, *Nānapancamīkahā* 3.17



institutionalized in Hinduism, particularly through the caste system. Sikhism firmly proclaims the unity of all creation, stating, "From the same air and the same clay has all creation come forth. In all shines the same light" (AG. p. 96). Consequently, Sikhism rejects distinctions based on caste or gender. Women's liberation naturally followed from this fundamental tenet of equality and a profound reverence for justice.²⁸

The evolution of gender identity in Sikhism aimed at reshaping women's image, role, and status within both Sikhism and Punjabi society. While it is asserted that the sacred literature of Sikhism carries a feminine tone and consciousness, the practical implementation of women's roles often remained confined to domestic spheres despite their prominent position in Sikh scripture. Guru Gobind Singh mandated using the surname Singh for Sikhs, but Sikh women were generally identified as 'Sikhni' or 'Gursikhni.' While the name 'Kaur' is commonly associated with Sikh women, often attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, there is no documented evidence of it in primary sources, unlike the name 'Singh' for Sikh men, which is prevalent in all Rahitnamas. Despite the efforts of Sikh Gurus to accord women a rightful place, the culture of Punjab persisted as predominantly male-dominated.²⁹

II. Conclusion

Gender identity is one of the most divisive topics in religious societies, provoking much discussion and introspection. Gender consciousness has been raised by growing knowledge of the allegedly patriarchal aspects of many faiths, especially among women, who are now advocating for equal participation in religious communities. The realization that religious organizations are mostly patriarchal has sparked women's liberation movements and prompted a general demand for equal opportunities and a more inclusive role for women in religious settings. This dynamic transition reflects a larger social development in which people question established conventions and work toward a more varied and egalitarian religious landscape that values the contributions and viewpoints of all genders.

Addressing the gender identity disparity within religious communities requires the implementation of several essential measures.: Firstly, fostering understanding and transformation requires active dialogue within religious communities. In light of evolving societal attitudes

towards gender identity, it is essential for inter-religious discussions to take place, providing a platform for a reexamination and reinterpretation of religious teachings.

While acknowledging that roles may vary among different religions, it is crucial to note that none of these faiths inherently devalues gender roles. Each religion contributes to the diverse fabric of gender roles without diminishing their significance.

Furthermore, promoting inclusivity and respecting the various traditions within religions is vital. Engaging in interfaith initiatives can enhance understanding within individual religious communities and between different faiths. This collaborative effort can foster a more comprehensive and respectful perspective on gender identity across various religious traditions.

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²⁸ Singha, H.S. *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, New Delhi: Hemkunt Publishers, 2005, p. 67.

²⁹ Cheema, Khola and Chattha, Tohid, *Understanding Gender Identity in Sikhism*, : JRSP, Vol. 59, No 1 (Jan-March 2022) p. 132-141, p. 141.



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