

The Nun's Priest's Tale: Analyzing the Disparities in the Gendered Roles of Nuns and Priests in the Catholic Congregations in the Indian State of Kerala

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ABSTRACT – Several convents and women religious associated with the religious institutions have been lately making news headlines in the southern state of Kerala, India. On 31st August 2008, Sister Jesme left the Congregation of Mother of Carmel, later followed by the publication of her controversial autobiography, ‘Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun’. In 2016, Sister Mary decided to leave the congregation citing harassment. In September 2018, five nuns from Kerala stood up to the church and spearheaded the fourteen-day long protest outside the High Court to ensure the rape-accused Bishop was brought before law, withstanding stiff resistance from the Church and their congregation. Later a congregation expelled Sister Lucy Kalapura, the nun who stood against the Bishop demanding his arrest, for ‘violation of the norms’. These instances which occurred in less than a span of two decades shook the basic foundations of religious life. This paper attempts to understand these events as a reflection of the loopholes in the gender roles practiced within the convents and churches. It also tries to bring to light the maladies faced by the inmates of the convents though they are portrayed as the brides of Jesus to the outside world.

KEYWORD-- Gender Roles, Congregation, Churches, Kerala, Sister Jesme, Sister Lucy

I. INTRODUCTION

The term *gender role* was first used by John Money and colleagues in 1954 to describe the manners in which the intersex individuals expressed that they were male or female. A gender role encompasses a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for a person based on that person's biological or perceived sex. The gender roles or sex roles are usually centered on the conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender roles as “socially constructed roles, behaviors and activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women”. Gender roles influence a wide range of human behavior including clothing preferences, the language used to communicate, the profession one chooses etc. It is also heavily drawn from culture - the religion one practices, family, friends and nationality. However ideas of appropriate gendered behavior varies among cultures and eras. Different religious and cultural groups within one country may have different norms that they attempt to popularize within their own groups. Throughout history women have been docile and obedient; one without an agency. Though there has been a drastic shift in the gender roles in the 21st century, the role of women in several religions are precarious. Role of women in Christianity, especially in holding the positions of formal ministry, continues to scintillate. Most leadership roles in the organized religions across the globe have been a male's pejorative. Though certain denominations are beginning to relax their longstanding constrains on ordaining women at the leadership roles, the Roman Catholic churches and Eastern Orthodox Churches, appoint only men to serve as priests or deacons, and in senior leadership positions such as pope, patriarch and bishop.

II. METHODOLOGY

Most organized world religions are reluctant to accept the service of women as equal to the service of men. In religions like Christianity, the problematic nature of gender roles within religions becomes evident. Most sects in Christianity have continued to treat women in terms of the biblical image of Eve- the deviant, the abhorrent. Man has viewed woman as a lower projection of himself rather than an equal. Though women constitute majority of

the members of consecrated life in the Catholic Church and have played commendable role as educationalists and health care administrators; in religious vocations, Catholic men and women are ascribed different roles. Unlike the priests, a woman who chooses to become a nun has to adopt the strict form of cloister, devoting themselves completely to contemplation and spirituality. The religious institutes for women may be dedicated to monastic life or apostolic work such as education, health care and spiritual support to the community.

Several women religious have already called for a place at the table of church leadership demanding amendments of the canon law, making it more relevant and inclusive irrespective of gender, class, caste and other divisions. According to several women religious toxic masculinity trickles down from the patriarchal society to the religious structures. These women religious who form a large percentile of the church’s workforce are programmed to conform and comply to the patriarchal demands that purport within the system. The women religious of the 21st century Kerala are challenging and resisting stereotypes that have constricted women to positions of enslavement and subservience within the society and religion. We are deeply analyzing the gendered lives of nuns within the Catholic congregations of Kerala with reference to interviews of nuns like Sister Jesme and Sister Lucy Kalapura who were labeled as ‘abnormal’ and ‘deviant’ for challenging themselves to bring about transformation in the Church. They had to resist and retaliate so as to free themselves from the irregularities within the church and try to keep up with the true vision of Christ.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender stereotypes and gender based discrimination are omnipresent. Though gender equality is the basic human right, the world has been persistently facing yawning gaps in access to opportunities, power and decision-making. Despite several attempts by different countries to guarantee equal rights to women, women have been often trampled under the patriarchal domination.

Behind the cloisters of nunneries and monasteries several women religious choose not to speak-up fearing the repercussions. The nuns are forced to adhere to the ‘Vow of Obedience’. Apart from the gender disparities within the monasteries class disparities are also rampant dividing the less-educated, less-privileged nuns as a lower-category trained by a separate mistress. These class distinctions are drawn on the basis of class, education, wealth and often complexion. In a century where asceticism has become synonymous with luxury and extravaganza, nuns continue to abide by the ‘Vow of Poverty’ and hence lead an austere life with regular fasting. On the contrary, the Diocesan priests, regardless of the Vow of Poverty “have the right to own private property...have more liberty in handling finances than the nuns” (Jesme 78).

Table 1: Analyzing the biased treatment of priests and nuns in the congregations of Kerala based on information gathered from interviews and books. The table has 5 questions/statements and have been answered with YES or NO

	ACTIVITIES	NUNS	PRIESTS
1.	Liberty in handling finances	NO	YES
2.	Freedom to wear civil dress in public places	NO	YES
3.	Ceremony of taking vow and entering convent accepted as a sacrament	NO	YES
4.	Officiate Holy Mass or hear Confession	NO	YES
5.	Ordained into the Church as priests	YES	YES
	If YES how many nuns has been ordained as priests so far	2	

Sister Lucy was expelled from her congregation for speaking against a Bishop and supporting the nuns who took to the streets demanding justice. She was also warned by the congregation for publishing a book, participating in TV debates, taking loan without seeking permission and publishing her articles in non-Christian dailies. In a television interview Sister Lucy openly slashed the biased religious institutions for serving as a fertile ground for propounding gender disparities. According to her, she was banned from church activities and was relieved from her duties for taking part in the protest of the nuns simply because she was a nun. The ‘Vow of Obedience’ and ‘Vow of Poverty’ seems to be non-existent for the priests as most of the male religious rarely follow these vows. While a nun who refuses to abide by the rules of the congregation are scrutinized by the higher authorities and

branded as deviants and abnormal. Priests enjoy more freedom- freedom of speech and expression and freedom of movement. Sister Lucy, unlike the docile nuns, took her fight against the Church to India’s civil courts and is hoping that the judicial system will protect her from being thrown out of the religious order for just demanding her rights.

Sister Jesme, Sister Lucy and the five nuns who took to the streets demanding the arrest of a Bishop for his misconduct turned game-changing events in the history of Kerala as it unapologetically questioned the celebrated convent narratives of the state. It is a known fact that the Churches across the globe does not take too kindly to rebels. The women religious who decide to quit the convents are often petrified that the institution that preaches them tolerance, kindness, compassion and charity might harm them.

Table 2: Analyzing the experiences of the two nuns Sister Jesme and Sister Lucy inside the congregation. The table has 4 questions and have been answered with YES or NO.

	QUESTIONS	Sister Jesme	Sister Lucy
1.	Experienced abuse- physical, mental or verbal as a nun	YES	YES
2.	Scrutinized for breaking the ‘Vow of Obedience’	YES	YES
3.	Branded ‘abnormal’ for speaking-up against the irregularities within the convent	YES	NO
4.	Openly discussed about gender disparity within congregations	YES	YES

IV. SOCIO CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Gender disparity and inequality is not a novel issue, it is fundamentally a question of power. In a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture, a hidden layer of inequality is built into the structures that govern us. Inequality and discrimination has continued to be the norm, slowing down progress. Violence against women, including female feticide and femicide is at epidemic levels. While marital rape is considered legal in several countries, legal protection against domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape is often diluted. Moral policing of personal freedom and attire is a daily reality for millions of women across the globe.

Gender inequality is inbuilt within patriarchy and this has continued to affect women in every area of their lives. There has always been a relentless pushback against women’s rights. While men are assumed to be the standard, women are treated as the other with a lack, hence their experiences and contributions are seldom counted. Women/girls have been taught and trained to content themselves with misogyny. When 150 men have walked in space, no woman has walked on the moon. Adverbs like ‘brilliant’ and ‘genius’ has always been a man’s description. From mansplaining to victim-blaming, from ridiculing women based on their looks to mystifying women’s natural body functions- misogyny has been everywhere. Even today women are excluded from the top tables of corporate boards, government offices, peace negotiations, religious positions and award ceremonies.

The 21st century should consider inequality of gender as a subject of shame and stigma just as colonialism and slavery were considered a stain in the earlier centuries. Gender equality, in all realms, is a pre-requisite for a better world. It promotes inclusive development and is vital to stability. Despite young women like Malala Yousafzai and Nadia Murad breaking barriers and creating new models of leadership, the state of women’s rights remains dire. It is high time women came out of their catacombs and speak/ retaliate against the injustice that has been perpetrated upon them for centuries.

V. CONCLUSION

Organized world religions have immensely fostered gender inequality around the globe. The deviant women have often been ridiculed and brandished as witches, hysterical and hormonal. The 21st century Kerala has been witnessing a drastic shift in the attitude of the women religious as they are leaving their cloisters to explain to the society the maladies faced by nuns within the panoramic yet veiled religious enclosures. The nuns who have chosen to fight against the irregularities in the garb of spiritual chastity and charity have opened-up about the

gender disparities among the nuns and priests. While Sister Abhaya was found dead in a water well at the convent in 1992, Sister Mary Sebastian and Sister Jesme, were branded as mentally unstable for demanding the freedom to quit the congregation on accounts of harassment at the hands of superiors and sexual abuse respectively; Sister Lucy was scrutinized for breaking the 'Vow of Obedience', Sister Anupa Mary along with four other nuns had to garner public support in order to demand the arrest of rape accused Bishop. Even today a large number of nuns choose to remain silent over issues pertaining to sexual abuse, violence and bullying fearing stigma and social repudiation. The church expects the nuns to adorn themselves modestly and learn in silence with submissiveness. Tracing the reason for gender inequality within churches Sister Jesme quotes the preaching of St Paul, who never married and spoke against the prominence of women in Church. Sister Jesme quotes: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent, For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (qtd. 111).

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