

The Significance of Religion For Gynist and Gender Studies

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Abstract

The subjugation of women and the reconstruction of reality to masculine advantage are mostly rooted in religious myths. These myths foreground feminine disobedience as opposed to perpetual submissiveness thereby aiding and abetting sexism, misogyny and gender hierarchy. Long usage has made of these myths, God-given articles of faith. Consequently, the woman question dangles on the halter of faith and reason. On the front burner of this treatise are the myths of Pandora, Lilith, and Eve, the dress code for Moslem women, the purdah, the burning of widows in Hindu religion, the exclusion of women from Catholic priesthood, *trokosi* in African traditional religion, and the disparagement of women in general. The paper argues that religion is indubitably implicated in gender struggle. Adopting the critical analytic method, the research scrutinizes the significance of religion for emancipatory gynist and gender studies, with the conclusion that religion is significant for gender studies, especially gynist epistemology which, in its quest for the very truth, asks critical questions and unmasks sexist politics and fabrications, deconstructs masculine significations and cultural constructs, and brings philosophy to bear on gender issues.

Keywords: *Religious Myths, Gynist Critique, Gender Studies, Sexist politics, misogyny.*

Introduction

The human question is a perennial one, and women no doubt are involved in the human question. Thus, to investigate the distinct nature of women is to inquire into the distinguishing characteristics of human beings. There are as multiple views on the nature of human beings as there are multiple cultures, philosophies and traditions. One of such myriad of views is the religious view, which consists of the understanding that the human person is fundamentally religious by nature. But Emile Durkheim claimed that religion is more of social constructs than an anthropological feature (qtd. in Joseph, p.10). Despite the divergent views, a human being is conceived as a physical, socio-political, intellection-meditative and religio-metaphysical entity, a delicate balance of bodily and ethereal attributes. This is true, regardless of the perennial debate on the question of human beings and their relation to religion both as subjects and objects of the discourse. Nevertheless, whether it is a social construct, a human, or an anthropological feature, it is indubitable that religion has much to do with human existence. As communicative beings endowed with the power of transcendence, humans commune with nature and the immortals. St. Augustine attested to this in his *Confessions* when he averred that God

made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. The diversity of religion and religious experiences makes the definition of religion complicated, and there are more than fifty ways to define the term (Nye, p. 17). The term religion, which is taken from the Latin *religare* - to bind back or to tie back implies that the human spirit is an appurtenance of God. The divine spark in humans yearns to bond with the absolute Divine whose speck it is. However, because humans have a soft spot for the supernatural, clever people use religion to brainwash and manipulate societies and people.

In the Middle Ages, there was a serious argument on *fides et ratio* and it was decided that reason should guide faith otherwise faith could take off in any direction and there would be no check on its claims. However, in order that reason may guide faith, faith was privatized, whereas reason was kept in the public domain. Public reason was mediated through laws that control religion. This seems to be the case at the surface, nonetheless, as Madhavi Sunder argued, it was not controlling it, but rather, law protected religion. According to her,

Religion qua religion is less the problem than is our traditional legal construction of this category premised on a centuries-old Enlightenment compromise that justified reason in the public sphere by allowing deference to religious despotism in the private... (Sunder, p.1402).

This reason-faith dichotomy, which Sunder called the Old Enlightenment, constitutes an obstacle to the New Enlightenment that is the search for reason in the private sphere of religion (p.1403). Additionally, reason itself is gendered, conceived as objective and pure spirit, embodied by the male over and above the female, which is passive, subjective and affective (Idika, pp.221-224).

In contemporary times, gynism questions religious orthodoxies. There are many politico-religious myths to critically think through and demystify, many fundamental falsities to debunk, many misogynic mistakes to correct and many structural injustices to dismantle. These include the masculine conception of reason. Invariably, gynist and gender studies have a lot of religious issues to grapple with and the rationalities that uphold and protect it. It is all about being sensitive and fair to every human being, valuing males and females alike.

There is a great awakening; the rationality of conforming to the practice of observing established social customs and definitions of appropriateness is seriously questioned. For instance, in the past girls were forbidden to play soccer lest their hymens break (Eboh, "Woman Being" p.9). In the same vein, clitoridectomy was religiously carried out in order to preserve virginity. But now, there are female soccer teams, and clitoridectomy is confirmed to be injurious to maternal health and safe delivery. In Ghana, by 1997, approximately 2.325 million women had undergone the procedure. The practice is common mostly in Muslim communities in the Northern Regions of Ghana. It is considered a precondition for marriage and it is regarded as a religious imperative (Waisman, p.41). Abraham was asked to circumcise every male in his household (Gen. 17:10) as an irrevocable covenantal bond between God and His people. Who then introduced and universalized female circumcision and why? An unknown author tweeted

on Social Media: 'Christianity left Israel as a family, came to Rome as a religion, went to England as politics and ended up in Africa as a business.' We cannot agree more. England and Africa took full advantage of the patriarchal dividend inherent in sexualised religion. Religion is indisputably a crucial social and political force in everyday life. Over time it has shaped many societies and psychologically sealed the fate of most people. The source of the stranglehold, which religious beliefs have on women and gender relationships, will be phenomenologically explained and critically analysed in this treatise.

Women and World Religions: An Overview

A section devoted to women and religion is necessary because, in addition to the rationalities and practices in religion, which oppress women, most scholarships on religion generalize the human experience. The generalization represents the experience of men and is used as the norm and standard of judging religious experience (Ellwood, p.42). We intend to highlight and make visible those experiences of women which have been made invisible through masculinization of human experiences. There are significant differences in women's experiences across various religions and cultures and times (Sharma Arvind, p.2). The overview is a legitimization of the discourse in general. The issues on women and religion stretch across canon, content and practice. It includes language, positions or authority and ministry. Most world religions also contain feminine legacies, which are often present but invisible and as unheard voices. Furthermore, "sexism and misogyny have been, and often still are, a part of most religions" (De-Gaia, p. xxix). We see misogyny in early Christianity, for example, in addition to St. Augustine, who saw procreation as the only good purpose a woman serves and Origen, who asserted that anything coming from the mouth of a woman is of little consequence, Tertullian said something worth emphasizing:

[y]ou give birth, woman, in suffering and anguish. You are under your husband's spell, and he is your master. And do you not know that you are Eve? She still lives in this world, as God's judgment on your sex. Live then, for you must, as an accused. The devil is in you. You broke the seal of the Tree. You were the first to abandon God's law. You were the one who deceived man, whom the devil knew not how to vanquish. It was you who so easily overcame him who was made in the image of God. For your wages you have death, which brought death even to the Son of God. And yet you think of covering your tunics with ornaments (qtd. in Alexandre, p. 409).

Origen, Augustine and Tertullian are celebrated Church Fathers and their theologies are canons, yet they were not free from gender prejudice characteristic of Christian religion. These kinds of comments on women are not exclusive to Christian religion. Almost all religions of the world represent women in ways that are more or less subjugating. The adverse comments on women in religious canons "are not merely rhetorical. They are used to justify restrictions on women's lives, including their dress, work, comportment, education, legal capacity and exclusions from positions of leadership and power" (De-Gaia, p. xxix). It is not simply religion itself that has been androgynously dominated, but

also studies of religion (Nye, pp.79-80). The study of women and world religions has grown steadily in recent years and there are veritable publications. However, many women scholars of studies in religion seem to be ignored or if acknowledged at all, are not engaged actively by the androcentric scholars (Juschka, p.1). The basic problem is that “the study of religion shares with a number of other humanities subjects, the pervasiveness of androcentrism” (De-Gaia, pp.79-80).

Sexist Politics

Ben Sira lent pointedness to men’s moral platitude on the woman question when he said: “A daughter is a vain treasure to her father. From anxiety about her, he does not sleep at night; during her early years lest she be seduced, in her adolescence, lest she goes astray, in her marriage years lest she does not find a husband when she is married lest she be childless, and when she is old lest she practice witchcraft” (qtd. in Cohen, p.171). “Is it not aberrant to perceive woman only in terms of sex? Is any person or society that does that not sick? This triteness points out serious lacunae in man’s moral judgement and understanding of woman’s nature” (Eboh, “Ethical” pp.115-123). Yoruba people would ask: ‘How many people do you see in the village?’ The answer is two: male and female. While the one is busy pursuing power and selfish political ends, the other, steeped in the ethics of care, is busy questing for love and the common good. Male and female are primal complementary modes of human being, formed by nature to counterbalance one another’s initiatives for nature tends towards a balanced state or harmony. The primeval urge to dominate turned these modes into opposition parties, and the family became the first political unit, as well as the primary space for socialization into ascribed gender roles.

Aristotle described man as a political animal; politics is about power sharing or power interrelationships. To subdue and make the female opponent subservient, her male counterpart invented vilifying politico-religious myths as tools and plausible basis for the conquest, suppression, oppression and marginalization of women. Gender has to do with social arrangements and the roles which society assigns to human persons on the basis of whether they are male or female. Unlike sex roles which are natural and biologically determined, gender roles are flexible and often differ from one culture to another. Thus, while sex roles strictly follow biological determinism, anyone, on the contrary, can perform gender roles. For instance, not everybody can lactate and breastfeed a baby but anybody, male or female, can be a leader or a breadwinner. The former is strictly a sex role.

Gender politics has to do with how roles are assigned and who gets what in a given society. Is it for nothing that women have no inheritance rights in most cultures and female children are disadvantaged in most societies? Only sons can inherit their father’s property. Where there is no son, a wife becomes part of the property to be inherited by the brothers of her deceased husband. Is it fortuitous that women are assigned domestic work in the unremunerated sector of the economy, but where cooking and housekeeping are remunerated, men become chefs? Is there anything in religion which obstructs gender equality and equal opportunity for all, if not manmade tradition?

In primordial times, male and female ruled societies. When the ruling party was male, the system of governance was patriarchy and the potentate, a patriarch, as among the Jews. Where the ruling party was female, the system of governance was matriarchy/gynarchy or gynecocracy and the head was a matriarch, as among the people of Ede in Vietnam (Waddington). Patriarchy and matriarchy may not be unconnected with traditional religion. Male/female divinities have implications. Where the supreme deity was anthropomorphized as male, patriarchy reigned supreme. Among the Ijo people of Nigeria where the supreme deity, *Ayeba* is perceived as Mother Goddess, matrilineal practices and 'mother is supreme concept' are upheld (Eboh, "Church" pp. 112-123). If such exist and women fail to leverage on things like that to liberate themselves, then "The fault ... is not in our stars. But in ourselves, that we are underlings (Shakespeare, "Julius" p. 12). According to Simone de Beauvoir, "Representation of the world is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view (qtd. in Hall *et al.* eds., p. 277). Sexist politics is the problem. Male ethnocentric stance – the belief in the superiority of man often accompanied by feelings of contempt for women, is responsible for the ethic of might is right, the ethic of domination and subjugation, the ethic of gender fission instead of fusion or complementarity, and the ethic of misogyny. The exploitation of women has reached its zenith and women can no longer take it; hence, the explosion of women's liberation theories and movements aimed at the removal of attitudes and practices that promote inequalities based on the assumption that men are superior to women (Eboh, "Androcentric" pp. 103-111). Implicitly, women have begun to interpret the world in order to change it positively. That is precisely the vision and mission of gynism, a gender theory aimed at the emancipation of both men and women.

Even though faith often plies irrational routes, the surest way forward is clear and correct reasoning, critical education, female bonding, and advocacy. Was it not when Hindu women resisted self-immolation that the burning of widows (*sati*) stopped? There is a limit to what enlightened women can tolerate. Therefore, they make their voices heard in order to inform, educate and emancipate people.

Gynist Critique of Sexist Politics in Sexualised Religions

To sexualise is to impose a sexual interpretation or perception on something or someone. Sexual interpretations and opinions have been perennially imposed on many inexplicable issues of the origin of humans, evil, suffering and death. Masculine politics capitalised on religious myths to enthrone male supremacy, and it yields patriarchal dividends. For millions of years it has crested because of the maxims: "The gods are wise"; "No one can question God," even when a god has a male mouthpiece of questionable character.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, salvation history is woven around original sin, the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Eve was alleged to have eaten the forbidden fruit and therefore brought death and suffering into the world. Repeated over time, it turned factual and became the gospel truth. Intellectuals could even swear to the reality of this creation myth, even when the creation account in the Bible resembles the epic of *Enuma Elish* of the Mesopotamians. Even the fruit story in the Bible resembles the apple incident at the wedding of Hera and Zeus in Greek mythology. Eve gave Adam the apple; Hera gave Zeus and also Paris the apple. The Daughters of the evening stole the apple. Women

erred and because of them, death came into the world. Therefore, they have to be perpetually subdued and kept in check lest they orchestrate more mischiefs. It must be pointed out, however, that the said fruit is presumed to be an apple. For it is said that Adam had not quite swallowed his own bite when God called him. That is why men have Adam's apple in their throats. Helena Kennedy expressed a similar view when she dramatically entitled her book: *Eve was Framed: Women and British Justice*. Thus we are not alone in our deductive reasoning and constructive criticisms of the male enterprise. Male biases are lurking furtively in the religious myths.

Supposing Eve actually ate the alleged forbidden fruit, the myth did not state that she ate it in defiance. She allegedly ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge in her quest for wisdom. She wanted to be like God, knowing what is good and evil (morality). Aristotle affirmed that all humans by nature desire to know. So what Eve did was quite natural. God said: "My people perish for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests ..." (Hosea 4:6). The Christian precept "Be ye perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5: 48) is in tandem with Eve's aspiration to be godlike, a quest for emancipation. Even so, Eve had a cogent reason for eating the said forbidden fruit; what reason did Adam have for eating it? He ate it unthinkingly like *mumu* (a fool), what Eboh termed the *mumu* theory long ago. The woman should be given credit for spearheading the pursuit of knowledge and technology. It was said that when their eyes opened, they became conscious, and sewed leaves as clothes to cover their nakedness. That was actually when technology started.

On the heels of Eve, the whole world is searching for knowledge to the point of scientists going to outer space using enhanced technology. Intellectuals engage in research but fail to acknowledge the mythical initiator of research! If Eve were male, she would have been celebrated like Prometheus, instead of disparagement and perpetual blame. Surprisingly, when the Catholic Church sings the *Exultet* on Holy Saturday, the Eve-occasioned Fall, the original sin, is eulogized to as *felix culpa* –happy fault of Adam which brought a Saviour into the world. Is it not strange that when it comes to panegyrics, it becomes the happy fault, a necessary sin of Adam instead of Eve? How do we explain this inconsistency?

The Jewish blame-trading illogicality is traceable to the influence of Greek mythology. A Titan, Prometheus, fashioned mankind out of dust. He gave mankind the gift of fire, but he stole the fire from Mount Olympus, the home of the greater gods. In order to punish mankind to whom Prometheus gave the fire, Zeus, the king of the gods, commissioned Hephaestus to create a woman. Hephaestus created Pandora, the first mortal woman from clay and endowed her with beauty. Zeus ordered Hermes to teach her to be deceitful, stubborn and curious. The woman's *raison d'être* was to be a scourge to mankind. All the gods gave her gifts stored in a jar which she was not to open. In fact, the Greek meaning of Pandora is "the one who bears all Gifts." Zeus gave Pandora as a gift to the brother of Prometheus, who accepted her as his wife despite Prometheus' warning that he should never accept any gift from Zeus. Like anyone else, Pandora longed to see her gifts. When she could no longer contain her curiosity, she opened the jar to have a glimpse of the wonderful gifts which the gods gave her. She was dismayed to see the evil spirits: death, diseases, sickness, suffering, etc., escaping from the jar later

known as Pandora's box (Hard, pp. 94-95). She quickly closed the lid, but only hope (deceptive expectation) remained in the jar. In the words of Julius Caesar, "What can be avoided whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?" (Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 2; ed. Wilson, p. 36). Pandora was created as a punishment to mankind; she merely fulfilled her destiny yet she was smeared and permanently associated with evil. If the gods did not intend to heighten her curiosity so that she would open the jar and fulfil their vindictive desire, they would have shown her the so-called gifts before enclosing them in the jar. It is highly probable that she would not have accepted the jar if she knew the contents.

There are lots of questions begging for answers. Instead of taking the pains to create a mortal woman, Pandora, why was the vendetta mission not entrusted to an already existing man? Who, on earth, can be given a wrapped gift and will not unwrap it to see the gift? How was Pandora supposed to treasure what she did not know? Why didn't the gods settle their issues among themselves without involving mortals? Are theft and vengeance not evil? It is in the nature of vengeance to rebound? Has anyone ever embarked on vengeance and emerged unharmed? Neither the Titan, who stole the fire, nor the greater gods, who packaged all the evils, were the cause of evil in the world. A woman had to take responsibility for the intrigues of vengeful gods! The gods are to blame.

In the Igbo myth of why the sky is far away that no one can touch it, woman was also to blame for God withdrawing from humans. In the beginning God dwelt nearby in the clouds and the clouds were within reach. Every evening the woman allegedly disturbed God by hitting the cloud with the end of her pestle as she pounded *fufu*. Moreover, she used to wipe her charcoal-dirtied hands on the clouds as she cooked. God warned her several times but she would not listen. So God withdrew; that is why the sky is so far away that no one can touch it (Eboh, p. 47). The question is, were there sins of omission? Instead of allowing the incorrigible woman to frustrate God and send Him packing, why did man not take over culinary chores? If he did just that, God would have been pleased to stay (Ibid. p. 49). Or what do you think? Probably, God expected this of man and when he failed to do it, God got disappointed and withdrew because of man's sin of omission. Why are men never held responsible for anything untoward? Why do religious myths portray women as mischief makers, and always use female disobedience to obfuscate male culpability? This is the crux of the matter. Men definitely use religion as a political and ideological tool for the sole reason of subjugating and oppressing women. Consequently, gynists represent the conscientized voice of impugned women, who speak truth to power in a logical constructive manner.

The myth of Lilith is even more vicious. As written in Genesis 1:27, God made human beings in His image and likeness, male and female He created them. Lilith was said to be this woman created at the same time with Adam and with equal rights. Lilith valued her independence and claimed equality with Adam, her husband. Instead of being subjugated, she fled from him. Adam complained to God and God sent three angels to search for Lilith and bring her back to Eden. The angels found her in the Red Sea region where she had become the queen of demons and begot daily thousands of little demons. The angels were unable to persuade her to return to Adam. So they threatened to slay daily a hundred of her demon sons. Lilith preferred her independence and did not yield to

their threat. Rather she avenges herself by harming newborn males on the first night of their existence and newborn females in the first twenty days of their lives. Her wicked plan can only be thwarted by hanging on the neck of a baby an amulet bearing the inscription of the names of the three angels. After a while, God said it is not good for man to be alone. So He made Eve from Adam's rib, a hidden part of the body so that she will be modest (di Nola, pp.33-48).

Men always win. What lessons did they learn from Lilith? Nothing! If they had but learnt from Lilith that women have a sense of their own self-worth and so they value respect, independence and equal status as men do, there would have been no sexism, no chauvinism, no subjugation, no oppression, no marginalization of women and therefore, no feminism, no womanism, no gynism, etc. The fact that Lilith bolted away to become queen, and refused to return to Eden where she would play second fiddle, should have taught men to moderate their ego and practise gender parity. Instead, they preferred to invent a submissive modest rib (Eve) whom they also vilified eventually. As a male-concocted myth, the Lilith story ended in male triumph. Adam was compensated with a brand new woman and he is resting peacefully in his grave while Lilith ended up as a wraith who lurks in dark places in order to frighten children. Is it not amazing that men will always be men even when they kill a God-man? But a corporeal mortal woman was labelled the queen of demons giving birth to thousands of demons on daily basis and ended up a roaming evil spirit simply because she said no to subjugation!

Religion mystifies itself with unverifiable myths and revitalises itself through rites and rituals, which re-enact events and keeps them fresh and undying in people's minds. It matters a lot who performs these rites and rituals. Traditional religions had priests and priestesses but in some world religions like Islam and Christianity, particularly the Roman Catholic denomination, there is no room for priestesses. St. Paul proscribed the active participation of women in the Church. As he put it, "Women should remain silent in the Churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the Church" (1 Cor 14:34). What about those who have no husband? Ignoring this gender-biased insult, women have attained exalted positions as foundresses, preachers and bishops in Pentecostal Churches; the world has not crumbled and God has not rejected them. Probably, St. Paul forgot that the risen Lord made Mary Magdalene an apostle to the apostles when He said to her: "Go and tell my brothers ..." (Mt. 28:10). Another sexist injunction of St. Paul was that women should cover their heads in worship or have their head shaved...for the sake of the angels (1 Cor 11: 2-16). Eboh x-rayed all these and yet more in her works: *Theological Sources of Male Domination: Who is to Blame, God or the Jewish Culture?* and *Philosophical Criticism: Anthology of Gender Issues* published in the year 2000. Just as educated men do not need the arbitrary rule of kings, enlightened women do not need over supervision. Fortunately, the covering of the head is no longer an issue in the West and yet God hears the prayers of women. As the angels have not yet protested, it can be surmised that they are not in support of the gender yoke which women are under in the name of religion. Islamic women were not spared. They were given modesty dress code that ranges from hijab, a headscarf which covers head and neck, to niqab, a veil that covers head and face leaving

an opening for the eyes, to burqa which covers the entire face, among others (Poushter) 08.01.2014.

Secular, free-thinking women working in the public domain are under constant surveillance and are frequently dismissed for minor dress code transgressions. The women in most Islamic states of Pakistan, Afghanistan and also Kashmir, are subject to inhuman and barbaric treatment under Islamic regimes. There is no spiritual and/or scientific basis to force women to adhere to Islamic dress hijab or hide themselves in burqua under threat of (acid) attacks, imprisonment, and/or discrimination, and physical torture (Sharma Dharendra, pp. 3-5).

In addition, Moslem women live in purdah apart from the rest of society. Women undergo sexist segregation even in Mosques. Khina Bahloul felt very bad when she went to the Mosque in the company of friends and was refused access to the main prayer room on a religious festival commemorating the Prophet's birthday. She stopped going to the Mosque until she founded an inclusive Mosque where men and women could pray together. Are Muslim men fighting for Allah or for themselves? No Muslim woman can be an Imam or guide a mixed congregation of men and women in Friday prayer. She can only conduct prayer in women-only congregation. As French Muslim women push for an inclusive Mosque, they insist that Islamic theology does not forbid women imams; the barriers are simply cultural (Hird). In the words of Dharendra Sharma:

...the misogynic morality of Islamic fanatics is derived from the traditional misconception about creative force of female and Motherhood. Human Rights of Women must be respected by all the nations and by all religions. We call upon all Islamic theologians to overcome their traditional misogynic belief in the Divine Will (pp. 3-5).

As for Catholic priesthood, it is said Jesus Christ chose twelve apostles and none of them was a woman. Therefore, in 1994, Pope. St. John Paul II declared in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 4, "...the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful." Hence, Pope. Francis said John Paul II ruled out women as priests (Francis). 01.11.2016. This statement is as good as "case dismissed!" *Roma loquitur causa finita – Rome has spoken the case is ended*. People, who could not intuit the tone of finality in the above declaration, hoped in vain for the Amazon Synod 2019 document to carry the approval of the ordination of Women Deacons. They forgot that the Catholic Church has very powerful conservatives.

Hindu Scriptures have three concepts of women: (1) as highly revered Shaktis - Deities or Goddesses, (2) as equal partners with men, and (3) as incapable of even understanding the scriptures; to be born a woman is the worst kind of karma; one must have acted badly to deserve such an unfortunate state (Jayanti, pp.63-68). The third concept of women is the most prevalent view. In the Hindu religious custom of *sati* or widow burning, religion sinned grievously against women. Widows were immolated on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands as though a woman's life is worthless. Jayanti affirmed that a widow had no choice. She was expected to terminate her own life

because her husband has finished his (Ibid). What made women's lives so worthless as to permit such an inhuman ritual? How can women be so highly revered (Shaktis) and so meanly debased in the same culture? It follows that the first and second concepts of women are empty and valueless. The concept of Shaktis is as empty as the concept of *Nneka* (Mother is greater) among the Igbo people. Given the second Hindu concept of women as equal partners with men, why were Hindu widowers not expected to burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased wives? Could the burning of a sati be a ploy to make a woman work assiduously and do everything humanly possible to preserve the life of her husband since her own life is tagged to his? The French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, rightly referred to marriage as the most persistent of myths imprisoning women.

Many world religions have been very unfair to women. Religion ought to be a cult of the divine; why is it very much tied to human sexuality? Among the people of Ewe in Ghana, Togo and Benin, thousands of young girls and women are enslaved in traditional religious shrines as *trokosi*—wives of the gods and labour slaves – in atonement for the sins of their family members, not even their own transgressions! What an ingenious religious contraption! Only crafty lustful priests would visit the sin of an uncle on a girl child for the rest of her life, under the guise of the girl's family not incurring the wrath of the gods.

White male observers of African culture in the 18th and 19th centuries were astounded and impressed by the African male's subjugation of the African female. They were not accustomed to a patriarchal social order that demanded not only that women accept an inferior status, but that they participate actively in the community labour force (Okolo pp. 89-115). This implies that the African male is ingenious. The same ingenuity is exhibited by Ewe traditional priests who call innocent young virgins to quarters in the name of the gods. Perhaps, the gods inhabit the groins of men. Human loins were one of the primordial religious temples known to man. Abraham evoked the religious powers of his loins when he asked his chief servant to put his hand under his thigh and swear to the Lord, the God of heaven that he would not choose a wife for his son, Isaac, from among the Canaanites (Gen. 42: 2-9). The servant did put his hand under his master, Abraham's thigh and took the patriarchal oath. Before he died, the patriarch Jacob, also asked his son Joseph to put his hand under his thigh and promise that he would not bury him in Egypt, but in the land of his ancestors (Gen. 47:29). Such oaths were binding. Since the oath is termed "patriarchal oath," could it be that similar powers do not reside under the thighs of matriarchs?

St. Paul affirmed that the human body is the temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who is received from God (1 Cor 6: 19). Logically, if the human body is a temple and the genitals an altar, then the body is sacred because sacredness implies devoted to a deity or for religious worship. Implicitly, the Ewe traditional priests who run harems of *trokosi*, must be ingenious adepts. Supposing the traditional gods of the Ewe have priestesses instead of priests as ministers, would *trokosi* practice be in existence? The priestesses would not need young virgins or would they? As the human body is sacred, bodily acts cannot totally prescind from religion and religion cannot but be a dominant factor influencing the affairs of daily life, for whatever people do, they do as embodied persons.

As a crucial social and political force in everyday life, the significance of religion for gynist and gender studies should not be underestimated. But how the male gender exploited and intricately turned it to their advantage, and unitedly execute gender plans with clinical precision is a mystery. Religion is never apolitical.

The Relevance of Religion to Gynist and Gender Studies

Gynist and gender studies cannot afford to ignore religion, which is a notable prime factor in shaping the world. The myths and truths of religion continually govern individual and collective, private and public lives, especially the lives of women who are susceptible to religiosity. Religion is a regulatory agency; it regulates even the inner forum, the conscience. In the exploratory and pioneering spirit of their legendary foremother, Eve (the first knowledgeable human being), gynists explore and debunk myths that enslave people. Gynist's target is to enlighten and free both male and female from the clutches of irrationalities and entrench gender equality or equal opportunity for all. As Elechi explains that gynists fight for an egalitarian society and harmonious coexistence predicated upon equal rights for all gender categories. They advocate for liberation, emancipation, and gender complementarity. They seek a humanistic attitude toward the woman and the entire ecosystem (Pp.100-101). They detect sexist politics in every discipline including science, which lays claim to objectivity. Even language is heavily laden with sexism.

Religion ought to be a quest for inner peace acquired through self-mastery, respect for others and tolerance of other beliefs different from one's own, but gender politics made it a far cry. Now religious fundamentalists have made religion an agent of conquest, not of self anymore, but of territories, an agent of terror and of occupation of conquered lands. "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill," says Shakespeare (Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 2; Ed., Wilson p. 42). The foundation of religious fundamentalism, bigotry and terrorism was laid when religion was used to subtly subjugate women. The horror that the world is experiencing today is only an aftermath, an extension of the horror, psychological, mental and physical torture which women had been suffering over the years. With the advancement in technology, the terror unleashed spills over to males. Everybody is feeling the pinch and there are hues and cries, but when only women were groaning under the woe betide burden of religion and culture, it seemed normal. A man, who sharpens the teeth of his dog that it may bite his neighbour, forgets that dogs do play with their owners.

Rational interrogation of religious beliefs is on the front burner of gynist agenda and should be on that of the United Nations and all well-meaning organizations, especially now that Islamic extremists are waging religious war and spearheading terrorism in many countries of the world. The fact that jihadists can take to suicide bombing, dying in the hope of being rewarded with virgins to cater for them in Paradise makes some religious beliefs ludicrous. "It paints a picture of paradise that is sensual; will the dead go to paradise with their mortal bodies, which decay in the grave? If the spirits of the dead transcend to the metaphysical realm without their physical bodies, will there be libido to assuage in paradise?" (Eboh, "Philosophy" pp. 35-54). As human life is the highest human value, if suicide bombers make the ultimate sacrifice to relinquish

their lives in pursuit of a reward in paradise, then that reward must be more priceless and larger than life (Ibid). Are women, therefore, men's *summum bonum* – highest good? Woman ought to be studied assiduously; there must be something extraordinary about her, which men and gods cannot dispense with.

The contention between God and the Devil preceded the Fall, which allegedly brought death into the world. Neither God nor the Devil forgave the other. The Devil needed the woman (Eve) in order to get back at God. In the same way, the problem between Zeus and Prometheus preceded the inadvertent release of death from Pandora's Box. Zeus needed the woman (Pandora) in order to get even with Prometheus. It was not enough to chain Prometheus to a rock, and send eagle to eat his liver which grew back nightly until Hercules released him; Zeus had to involve a mortal woman (Pandora). Created for the very purpose of vendetta, the gods must have programmed her accordingly.

In each of the two analogous cases, the immortal created the mortal woman and must have endowed her with whatever will serve the purpose of creating her. The two women were scapegoats, yet men unthinkingly persecute women in the name of religion and the gods. We are yet to find where the gods commissioned men to violate, oppress, suppress and relegate women for bringing suffering and death into the world. Does the fact that Pandora was created a mortal not imply mortality/death? A critical look at what transpired after the eating of the aforementioned forbidden fruit, reveals that Adam and Eve were quickly banished from the Garden of Eden lest they eat the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. Logically, it implies that they were not created as immortals. Given the principle of excluded middle, they were either mortal or immortal; since they were not immortal, they must have been mortal *ab initio*. Mortality connotes death. Thus, adducing the origin of death as the reason to keep oppressing and subduing women is a charade.

Equally a farce is the inferior status accorded to women. Gynandrist position is that such androgenized views are unfortunate and untrue. For instance, the Aristotelian position on women as naturally inferior to men is chauvinistically based on the human social condition, rather than on the natural biological nature of human beings. Natural gifts are found in both men and women. Women subservience of any form will discourage self-determination, self-reliance and self-improvement of the women. It is an aberration to both womanhood and social egalitarianism. Women are generally viewed as weaker and fragile, but such weakness and fragility is not one we can refer to as weakness and fragility of the mind, intellect, or rational capacity. It is neither that which can be attributed to laziness nor the refusal to work hard. On the contrary, from experience women are known to be hardworking with the ability to combine several roles at the same time, while functioning very well in various other capacities in society (Elechi p. 485).

Conclusion

From the phenomenological exposé done above, religion is very much implicated in gender and social ills that beset humans, particularly women. Religion is unavoidable in matters of gynist and gender studies. An Igbo maxim has it that when water stays too

long in the mouth it becomes saliva. Analogically, unverifiable metaphysical assumptions have held sway for too long and concretised into religious myths and beliefs. *As the Igbo would put it: The ojoo gbaa afo ya aghoo omenala – When evil thrives for a whole year, it becomes a tradition.* Because of the notion that the gods are wise and cannot be questioned, women were constantly coerced to accept notional ideals of what women should be as well as irrational customs as their lot, and they gave in believing them to be the dictates of the gods. But men were the mouthpieces of the gods and they had their own interests to protect. Thus, religion is very significant for gynist and gender studies and every systematic gender, gynist and women's studies should start from religion because that is where the original sin is.

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