
Gender Construction in the Rituals of Muslim Women

Madhurima Dasgupta

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Adamas University & PhD Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,
Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

Abstract: Muslim women are regarded and cited as more active participants in ritual ceremonies or *majeles* than men. Muslim women from Indonesia and North-west Pakistan actively participate both in *salat* and *majele* rituals respectively, where though they participate, are either mostly granted secondary roles or their commitment are not recognized. Looking at the present status of Muslim women, their role and participation in ritual ceremonies and other activities has excelled than that of men. However, though women involved on a large scale like men in Muharram rituals, their roles were different from that of men. Such gender inequality was encouraged when Muharram rituals were performed. Their commitment to such rituals coerced them to confine themselves within authoritarian structure of patriarchy. However, Shi'a women still try their best to resist the patriarchal norms in rituals by creating new ways to increase their self-esteem for the betterment of their position and also to construct an egalitarian society for both men and women. In contemporary society, Muslim women conduct research and publish suggestions for the better treatment of women and critically analyze male traditions of Islamic texts. Since Islam and women's rights are incompatible, so the first step for the achievement of women's rights for Iranian women was eradication of Islam. In this context, the present paper analyses the ritual practices of Muslim women (especially women from Shia community) from North-West Pakistan and Indonesia and debunks the gender construction of rituals of Muslim women from Peshawar, Pakistan by using secondary data --- content analysis.

Keywords: Rituals, Salat, Majale, Mavlid, Sofreh

1. INTRODUCTION

Rituals are a socially recognized formal action enveloped in a pattern of symbols that helps to relate humans to the sacred realm. It is also a repetitive physical act accompanied by vocalization and necessary for exchange of information.

Though religious rituals in Islam are rare, yet they have important significance. There are five pillars in Islam which enunciates five practices which are necessary for Muslim faith. There are also other Muslim rituals which include Shi'ite and Sufi practices. These five pillars comprise the five major religious duties which should be performed by every Muslim:

Confession of faith (shahada)

Shahada is the Muslim profession of faith which is expressed in the saying :

"There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God."

Ritual prayer (salat)

The second pillar comprises the most well-known Muslim practice among non-Muslims which is the ritual prayer or *salat* performed five times a day: at dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset and evening.

Almsgiving (zakat)

The third pillar involves almsgiving which is a central activity in Islam. Almsgiving is a central activity in Islam. It is explicitly mentioned in Quran, the holy book of Islam which places great importance to it alongside prayer while discussing Muslim's duties.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan (sawm)

Fasting also known as *Sawm* in Islam commemorates the revelation of Quran to humanity during Ramadan, the ninth month of Islamic year.

Pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj)

It is obligatory for each Muslim to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca, the sacred city of Islam at least once in his or her lifetime. This holy journey is also known as hajj in Arabic.

Against this backdrop, the present paper analyses the ritual practices of Muslim women (especially women from Shi'a community) from North-West Pakistan and Indonesia and also emphasizes on the gender inequality prevalent in rituals of Muslim women from Peshawar, Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious rituals in Iran:

In Islam, Muharram involves certain important rituals which are carried out by Shi'i Muslims and are based on popular symbolic perceptions of Karbal Pradigm. As per Kamran Scott and Aghaei, "*This "root metaphor" of Karbal?' is grounded in the Battle of Karbal?', which occurred in 61/680 during the reign of the Umayyad ruler Yazd.*" [1]

However, men and women Muslims have equally participated in both Karbala and Muharram rituals. Though on one hand, the norms of rituals have restricted the role of women in society, on the other hand, it has also provided a platform so that women can participate and contribute to the large scale society. Muharram rituals being highly complex and myriad, portray the contribution of the organizers for promotion of traditional concept of gender identity. The significance of rituals among Muslims in Iran can be analyzed both at the group and individual level. Such significance can be understood only with respect to participation of women in Muharram rituals.

Participation of men and women in Karbala narratives:

Both men and women Muslims have been highly portrayed in Karbala narratives though the type of roles they have played might be different. Gender division of labour is highly prevalent in the narratives where men are portrayed as military fighters while women play the role and epitomize the primary educators of new generation, sacrificers of loved ones and victims of humiliation through captivity.

While on one hand, men were depicted and portrayed as fighters, women were mainly portrayed as sacrificers who sacrificed their family to be with their husbands rather than being fighters themselves. Moreover, women indirectly lend support to the battlefield rather than being in the field themselves. However, even if women participated in the battlefield along with men, their participated were not publicized or valorized like that of their male counterparts. Thus, though the model of male fighter was clearly defined, that of female fighter was always regarded as subservient or defined unclearly. Women who were mostly depicted as educational masters of their male fighters were also represented as transmitters of Husayn's message.

In Muharram rituals, both men and women participated equally. Performances in rituals included mourning in grief or thrashing one's chest or head which at times went to the extent of using blades to cut one's skin for the purpose of bloodshed in grievance. Women played the role of socialiser of their children, gave more support, and were even portrayed as mourners. Men, on the other hand, were convinced to assume all the roles played by women along with the role of a powerful warrior.

Men as fighters and Women as mourners in rituals:

Though women were a part of Muharram rituals, still their role gave them a secondary position as mourners. Their role which was not properly developed was mainly confined to lending moral support to any tragedy. Their sorrow mainly symbolized the tragedy that they have encountered. Though women participated in mourning rituals involving chest beating at times, such acts were regarded as symbolic acts of self-mortification.

On the other hand, men were often involved in switching to different roles. They had complete control over their emotions and did not unnecessarily beat themselves. However, those men who did lose control over themselves would beat themselves.

Thereby, though women involved on a large scale like men in Muharram rituals, their roles were different from that of men. Such gender inequality was encouraged when Muharram rituals were performed. While on one hand, these

rituals created gender inequality for women, on the other hand, it also helped women to participate in the *public sphere*.

3. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The present paper involves the following objectives –

- a. To analyze the ritual practices of Muslim women (especially women from Shia community) from North-West Pakistan and Indonesia.
- b. To explore and debunk the gender construction of rituals of Muslim women from Peshawar, Pakistan.

4. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The present paper uses secondary data ----- subjective *content analysis* of the ritual practices of Muslim women (Shia community) from countries of North-West Pakistan and Indonesia and Peshawar, Pakistan.

As per Devi Prasad, Krippendorff defined “*content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. It is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text.*” [2]

5. RESULTS

Rituals of Shi'a women in North-West Pakistan:

Muslim community can be divided into ----- Shia and Sunni. Most of Shia women in North-west Pakistan did not protest against stringent gender norms since they were bound by family and religious obligations, and spirituality. However, their chanting of mantras followed by preaching and repertoire along with their outreach activities in Shia rituals portrayed their abilities to deal with the public which in a way helped them to challenge gender inequality.

The position and status of Shia women in Pakistan was submissive. By performing mourning rites in rituals involved, Shia women in *Mohajerin (emigrants from India)* tried to protest against their subordinate position in the male-dominated society.

Majles rites, an event or ritual originated due to the rivalry between Sunni and Shia groups of Muslim community and their opposing approaches to succession of leadership after Prophet Mohammed's demise. The rift was regarding the different demands of Sunni who demanded elections and Shia who wanted Ali, Prophet's son-in-law and cousin to be the next successor after Prophet. As per Elaine Hegland “*Thus a rift developed between the Sunni with their Caliphs and the Shi'a with their Imams-all the Prophet's descendants through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. (Mohammad had no surviving sons.*” [3] A case study which was conducted in Peshawar in 1991 revealed that the majles rites of women have been used to protest in order to bring about change both in gender and other related realms.

In terms of information of majele to other people, Shia women followed certain basic steps like communicating about the ritual through networks like phone, distribution of leaflets or personal communication with other women. At times, announcement of such rituals were done at earlier gatherings. The rituals involved a long-term and complex procedure with both men and women Muslims actively participating in it. The ritual of majles finally ends with the summoning of “*Husein, Husein, Husein*”.

However, most of Pakistani women depended on men for physical, social and economic support. Only a few sections of women were empowered and practiced feminism. Most women cannot question gender inequality explicitly which even goes to the extent of being victimized for any crime committed against Muslim women like rape. Any woman who charges a man with rape is bound to produce eye witness in order to prove that the sexual encounter was actually rape else she herself gets punished legally for the charge. (*Shaheed et al 1998*)

The women's lives of Peshawar were more restricted and inhibited than Pakistani women. Women were mostly secluded from men in terms of physical mobility and education. Peshawar men lived in separate buildings or rooms

to spend leisure time with their male peers and so that the exposure of women to outsiders or strangers is restrained. Peshawar women were not allowed to leave the household premises unless with a good reason or without covering themselves by a veil ----- mostly accompanied by a *male relative*.

On the other hand, most of the Shia women though being reluctant to attend the rituals were bound to attend since it was obligatory for them to participate and also because their absence might threaten Shi'a identity. However, male leaders were impressed by the brilliant performances of rituals by Shi'a women.

Rituals involving Salat ceremony in Indonesia:

A notable ritual of Muslims is *salat* which though have hardly received any attention, still has social and political significance attached to it. The *salat* ritual is regarded as one of the activities included in *ibadat* which signifies the rites and practices through God is worshipped. In other words, *ibadat* is confined to the sphere of prescribed activities of worship, especially the 'five pillars', which involves confession of faith, the *salat*, fasting in month of Ramadan, giving alms and pilgrimage to Mecca.

It is mandatory for all Muslims to perform the ritual of *salat* without regarding its conformity. The ritual initiates with purification after which the worshipper performs around four ritual cycles in the direction of Mecca. The worshipper has to execute fixed sequence of movements in each cycle (standing, kneeling, sitting and prostrating) which was also accompanied by Arabic recitation. The recitations included praises of God, reverence to the Divinity, few verses from Quran and even private prayers. The *salat* has to be performed five times on a daily basis followed by Friday noon worship which included sermon held in congregation. The social meaning of *salat* points to the fact that worshippers who are engaged in worship during *salat*, undergo various ideas and emotions along with hurdles which construct the event of worship.

In Islam, great importance is attached to worship since it acts as a symbol of Muslim identity. Rituals being an indispensable aspect of worship, allows Muslim religion to be '*inclusive*'. Moreover, performance of *salat* rituals works as an important sign of social identity and status among Muslims.

The *salat* performance of rituals has two other modes of discourse: dialectic and iconic. *Salat* procedures can be iconic and dialectic when they are represented through diagrams or as depictions of social or ritual relations.

Thereby, Muslims have constructed and regarded *salat* as containing not only iconic meanings but also portraying social, political and religious discourses. Besides, *salat*'s main importance lies in its historical discourse.

Rituals which transformed cultural lives of women:

Besides using the symbols of ritual performances as submissive, women mostly used them as symbols of socialization and competition. They also gained as reputed performers during Muharram rituals. Women from all age groups actively participated in the rituals ----- which ranged from preaching of religious duties and norms to sermons by small girls. Even women who were no longer physically mobile could gain reputation by hosting women's *majales* which would be enhanced by delicious food offerings.

Women tried their best to be committed preachers or singers and to showcase the greater shrines which would help to improve their family's social, economic and religious status. Such women *majeles* became notable sites of power for construction of their mobility and liberty. Thereby, women's carrying out of Karbala rituals provided the impetus to control and sustain the patriarchal structure on one hand and individual agency and creativity on the other.

Resistance through co-existence and inter-mingling of worlds:

Most of Shi'a women denied of composing private transcripts since they believed it would enhance their family or personal interests or demands. Sometimes, female elders substituted the task when men could not be present during *majeles*. Instead of being dependent on male spiritual donations followed by their expression of religious inadequacy and inappropriateness, Shi'a women portrayed their self-identity and competence through their outstanding ritual contributions.

While on one hand, women participated in mourning rituals with full-fledged commitment, on the other hand, such dedication restricted them to sex-segregated and patriarch ally defined religious activities. Their commitment to

such rituals coerced them to confine themselves within authoritarian structure of patriarchy. As per Elaine Hegland, Catherine Bell, a notable ritual practice theorist proclaimed, *"One might retain one's limited and negotiated involvement in the activities of ritual, but bowing or singing in unison imperceptibly schools the social body in the pleasures of and schemes for acting in accordance with assumptions that remain far from conscious or articulate"* [3]

However, women are regarded and cited as more active participants in ritual ceremonies or majeles than men since *"They have nothing else to do"*. Women, being emotional beings are mostly suitable for household tasks and upbringing of children rather than for material world which requires physical and mental strength and henceforth they have no other issue to be busy with other than being involved in such rituals.

The society of Peshawar was so patriarchal and orthodox that though women's achievement in ritual work proved to be a ground for their resistance to gender oppression, yet their position and situation only confined them to submissive, watchful and agreeable contestants.

Construction of power through ritual practices in Islam:

One of the major factors for existence of politics in gender construction was due to lack of emphasis, methodology and defined framework to investigate the political rift between submission and resistance. However, women by their submissive actions, personal experience, or alternative transcripts constructed within the male dominated culture, maintains their resistance, which can later be applied in other spheres to serve their personal interest or desires.

On the other hand, women who were from Iran, by discussing or sharing their personal life stories with others helped to inform them about the ways in which women were ill-treated which were hardly revealed to men. But such knowledge could not be used to transform the women's subordination without bringing about change in other arenas of society. Resistance by women was always unwelcomed by society. Any kind of resistance by women was regarded as shameful, sinful which could even lead women into punishment and loss of honor rather than autonomy.

6. CONCLUSION

Muslim women from Indonesia and North-west Pakistan actively participate both in salat and majele rituals respectively, where though they participate, are either mostly granted secondary roles or their commitment are not recognized. However, Shi'a women still try their best to resist the patriarchal norms in rituals by creating new ways to increase their self-esteem for the betterment of their position and also to construct an egalitarian society for both men and women.

Thereby, most Shi'a women from Peshawar, Pakistan could still evade and escape from the ritual teachings which depicted women's inadequacy and subservience. These women transformed ritual mourning into festival of performance by resisting patriarchal proclamations and constructing alternative scripts that would help to ensure their self-identity and worth in society.

Looking at the present status of Muslim women, their role and participation in ritual ceremonies and other activities has excelled than that of men. In contemporary society, Muslim women conduct research and publish suggestions for the better treatment of women. As per Elaine Hegland, Muslim women also critically analyze male traditions of Islamic texts. *Concluding that Islam and women's rights are inherently incompatible, other expatriate Iranian women even view the eradication of Islam as the necessary first step in struggling for women's rights"*. [3]

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would take the opportunity of acknowledging my supervisor, Dr. Piyali Sur for her immense guidance, encouragement and support for the paper. I would also like to acknowledge my parents without whose support I would not have been able to conduct my research on the paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aghaei and Kamran Scott., *Gender-Coded Symbols and Public Religious Rituals in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Islamic Studies, Vol 43, No. 1, pgs 79-82, 84, 87, 90, 94, 96, Spring 2004

- [2] Devi Prasad, *Content Analysis A method in Social Science Research*, pg 2, New Delhi: Rawat Publishers,
- [3] Elaine Hegland and Mary, *Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol 76, No. 3, pgs 411, 415, 416, 419-420, 421-424, 426-427, 429, 430, 433, Published by The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research, Summer 2003

John R. Bowen, *Salat in Indonesia: The Social Meanings of an Islamic Ritual*, *Man*, New Series, VOL 24, no. 4, pgs 600-601, 611, 613, 615, Published by Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, December 1989 Muslim Rituals and Practices, Retrieved 17-11-2014, Website:

<http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/practices.htm>

Ritual: A Working Definition, Retrieved 17-11-2014, Website: <http://www.trinity.edu/cspinks/myth/RITUAL.pdf>

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Mrs Madhurima Dasgupta has pursued her education from Calcutta University and Jadavpur University, respectively. She presently holds faculty position (Assistant Professor) at Adamas University and is also pursuing PhD under Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She has six publications in International Journals recognized by UGC and magazines. Her specialization includes **Sociology of Gender, Body, Technology and Society and Sociology of Human Relationships**.