

## **The Rationalization of Gender Disparities in Light of Religion**

In her paper, "From Mary to Modern Woman," Jane Collier argues that "culture concepts of gender must be interpreted as aspects of cultural systems through which people manipulate, interpret, rationalize, resist, and reproduce relations of inequality within complex social wholes" (Collier 1986, 101). In order for us to accurately analyze views of gender within a particular culture, we must investigate the methods in which the society "rationalizes" gender disparities. I assert that one way societies, specifically agrarian patriarchal societies, "rationalize" the dynamics of their gender hierarchy is through religion and spirituality. Through glorified images of religious figures or through religious rituals and practices, as well as various other means, women are encouraged to fulfill their particular culture's expectations of a "good woman." As gender expectations are legitimized in the light of religion, a belief that the society is the "natural order" and the "will of God" results, discouraging women from defying societal norms.

Although cultures throughout the world vary in their spiritual beliefs, all religions share a common characteristic: the ability to endure. Despite the industrialization and penetration of the modern world into agrarian societies, religion can be reinterpreted to account for social change and modified in order to remain as a central force in an adapting society. Thus, religion serves as an elastic, persevering means in which women and societies in general can interpret and justify the gender dynamics of their culture, which often causes inequalities to remain uncontested.

Throughout history and around the world, agrarian societies have followed and continue to practice a system of "honor and shame," in which a man's honor and a family's reputation is a result of the chastity and sexual modesty of his family's women, especially his mother, sister, and wife, along with that man's willingness to defend the honor of his women should their purity be questioned (1986, 101). But why is a woman's sexual modesty valued so highly? In "The Virgin

and the State,” Sherry Orner answers that: “the purity of women is seen as adaptive for the social coherence, economic viability, or cultural reputation of the group, regardless of whether the group is a caste, lineage or family” (Orner 1974, 4). Collier provides a more concise and detailed reasoning by describing the system of inheritance and status, particularly in agrarian societies. She argues that due to the determination of rights and privileges based on status groups, female chastity becomes a “cultural concern,” for people use legitimate birth as the primary rationale to claim their status and inheritance (Collier 1986, 101). Although the reasoning for the concern of a woman’s virginity is implicitly tied to the desire to preserve social status and reputation, cultures turn to other ways, such as religion, to explain this gender disparity in order to prevent its females from questioning the fairness of their roles.

How can religion serve to rationalize such gender inequities? To explore this question, I will look at Collier’s study of the married women of a small village of Los Olivos in southwestern Spain through her work “From Mary to Modern Women,” which has undergone a radical change since 1960s, as modern society penetrated into its culture due to its transformation from a agrarian society to a more industrialized one. As an agrarian society previous to its modernization, Los Olivos followed the “honor and shame” principle. Women during this time period were often overweight and expected to wear drab, shapeless clothing, observe 10 years of mourning following the death of a parent by wearing heavy black wool during both the summer and the winter, as well as never spend a *perra*, the form of currency, on herself (Collier, 103). Women who dared not to follow these societal rules, or displayed signs of sexual immodesty, were subjected to the harsh gossip of the town, resulting in bringing shame upon their family if the legitimacy of any of their children was questioned.

Describing the standards to which the women of Los Olivos were compared, Collier states that “the women of Los Olivos were judged to how well they emulated the Virgin Mary” (Collier, 104). Through the analyzation of this simple statement, we can gain insight into one way in which societies rationalize gender through religion: by perceiving their gender roles as a way to imitate or honor iconic figures. As the Virgin Mary is the model of an unconditionally loving mother and a devoted wife, she represents the principles of a “good woman.” Thus in order for the women of Los Olivos to mirror the virtues of Mary, they must emulate the values of a dedicated mother and of a faithful wife. As Heather Paxson expresses the way Athenians view the image of Mother of God in her work *Making Modern Mothers*, she describe how the most domestic icon in the Orthodox tradition is that of Mary holding the Christ child, as it serves as a testament to the idea that “there is no love stronger than that between a mother a child” (Paxson 2004, 95). Although Los Olivos is Christian, not Orthodox, this view of motherhood is still upheld, as women are expected to be willing to endure sacrifices for their children.

To be a “dedicated mother and a faithful wife” in Los Olivos prior to its modernization required observing the societal expectations of drab dress and sexual modesty in order to secure the status of your children, and therefore ensure their future property through inheritance, as well as preserve the honor of your husband. They view their situation as a means of sacrificing for their children and helping to establish their future. By maintain the reputation of your husband and children, one met the societal criteria of a “good woman.” Thus in order to model Mary, one had to fulfill roles of mother and wife and the societal expectations coherent with these roles. Through the lens of religion, women rarely see the disparities of their gender, as they believe they are being devoted religious women, along with being loving mothers and faithful wives.

In the 1980s, however, Los Olivos experienced a significant cultural shift, as its society transformed from agrarian to industrial. As this societal revolution occurred, the societal expectations of women experienced a drastic change as well, for in an industrialized society, status, reputation, and inheritance does not depend solely upon legitimate birth, but instead results due to a person's wealth. Therefore, their chastity no longer became the primary concern of men. Now, her "most important feature is the 'womanliness' that differentiates her from, and makes her attractive to men" (Collier 1986, 104). Whereas before, women were unconcerned about their appearance and became the gossip of the town if they did, for any reason, dress attractively, today they must dress in a way that obtains the notice of men.

According to Collier, "today they [the women of Los Olivos] are judged according to how well they emulate the Modern Woman" (1984, 104). I, however, wish to challenge this statement and assert that they are still viewed according to how well they mirror the virtues of the Virgin Mary. Collier describes that a "women's physical appearance is always opened to be interpreted as a statement about her moral and social worth" (1986, 104). Through a woman's appearance, she continues to explain, she demonstrates the judgement and character of her husband, as he must have been attracted to her display of her "moral and social worth." By securing a good husband through successively mirroring the dress and styles of modern women, they also ensure the status of their prospective children. The values of the agrarian society concerning motherhood and wifeness are therefore still perpetuated through societal roles of the modern woman, and consequently can still be viewed through the lens of religion. Despite the changes in the outward appearance of the culture's expectations of women, they are still judged according to how well they emulate the virtues of the Virgin Mary.

As not all societies are Christian-based, and therefore do not encourage its women to imitate the virtues of the Virgin Mary, I would like to explore the Balinese culture through Marissa Diener's work "Gift from the Gods" and how the Balinese society, also an agrarian patriarchal society, rationalizes gender disparities through religion.

The religion of the Balinese culture consists of a Hinduism influenced by Buddhism and indigenous religious practices. According to Diener's piece, the central tenets of the Balinese hybrid religion include "the belief that every act has consequences and that one's soul is reincarnated after each death until a perfect life is attained" (Diener 2000, 92). As a strongly religious culture, the Balinese hold high value in religious rituals and believe that if rituals are not practiced, family members and others in the community may fall ill. Many of these rituals, however, demonstrate the culture's gender dynamics and disparities.

As the article serves as a manual for a Balinese woman who is about to have a child, the author expresses the value of having a male child instead of daughter, writing "you are probably hoping to have a boy... try, however, not to worry about having a girl" (2000,101). Why the preference of males over females? Sons and grandsons are responsible for performing cremation ceremonies and purification rituals that allows the the liberation of one's soul upon death (2000, 98). Also, sons are needed to care for the house shrines to the ancestors. The justification in the higher value of sons instead of daughters therefore lies in religion and religious practices, causing the differences in gender worth to be deemed as a result of the gods and preventing women from questioning the reasoning behind their inferior status.

The expectations of women in Balinese culture can be further rationalized through religion. During the birth of a child, women must be removed from the household and isolated in a location, such as a household compound, with a *balian*, a Balinese midwife, to give birth to their children

since the childbirth is considered an impure ritual. Following the birth of the child, a woman's body is considered weakened by children and deemed impure for a period ranging from forty-two days to three months. During this time of ritual uncleanliness, women are isolated from others, except their child, and forbidden to enter any sanctified space or practice ritual activity. While fathers also experience a period of impurity, it lasts a mere three days (2000, 102-103). Women also must treat their child as a god, for the Balinese believe a newborn is closer to the world of the gods than to the human world. Therefore, for the first 105 or 210 days, depending upon region and status, women are expected to carry and remain with their child at all times. While the isolation of woman at birth, the deeming of mothers as impure, and the treatment of children as gods is all justifiable through the lens of their religions, these practices perpetuate the separation of gender roles, affirming women as strictly mothers and furthering the disparities between males and females. In light of religion, women are less likely to question the rules of society, as they are considered the rules of the gods.

In her work, Orner also notes examples in other cultures of some of the most extreme measures, past and present (as of 1974), in which men have controlled their women and ensure their chastity. Among the Brahmins of India and in classical Athens, for example, women were constrained the boundaries of the house throughout their entire lives (Orner 1974, 1). As these constitute the most extreme circumstances, Orner further describes the symbolic imprisonment men cast upon their women through rules concerning appropriate "body-disguising" dress, modest behavior, communication, and movement (1974,1). Citing Lawrence Watson's work "Social Socialization in Guajiro Society," Orner recites Watson's description of the practices of the Guajiro of Venezuela, a society which insists upon the virginity of women upon marriage, so much so that mothers may punish the wrongdoings of their daughter by placing the tip of a hot branding iron the their daughters' vaginas (1974,3). Women do not simply welcome this sort of punishment and

constraint, so why have women throughout history failed to resist these unjust practices and why do women continue to endure the oppression of their gender? Orner notes that “most of the societies concerned with female purity are involved in so called ‘great traditions,’ especially Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. This suggests that in these extreme cases I referred to, the women subjected to those injustices, like the women of Los Olivos and of Bali, rationalize their disparities through religion.

While religion does not necessarily create gender disparities, it serves a way to justify societal inequalities between the sexes, and therefore serves as a lens through which these differences are perpetuated. In order to comprehend why women submissively obey injustices, we must understand the context in which they view them, such as through a religious perspective.

As agrarian patriarchal societies give way to industrialization, as in the case of Los Olivos, the strict confinements of women deteriorated, yet their expectations as mothers and wives still followed the principles of the Virgin Mary. Likewise, as the Balinese feel slight effects of modernization, such as the use of hospitals instead of midwives during childbirth, they still follow the practices of post-childbirth of ritual impurity, maintaining the differences in the value of gender of their culture. As society changes, the elasticity and endurance of religion allows it to change, causing it to serve as a cross-cultural, adaptable means of rationalizing gender inequalities.

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