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## **Changing Japanese Society and religions**

(an overview of feminism in Japan)

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### **ABSTRACT**

Industrial advancements, economic growth, acceleration of urbanization and expanding process of modernization redefined the landmarks of everyday life across the globe with no exception of Japan. An explosion of new images of dynamic women, being key element of every society, was produced in this constant change. In magazines, media, including electronic and print, business, services, and religion and politics woman is a prominent icon of modern society. These new images of the feminine challenged previously existing widespread myths of a monolithic Japanese woman too.

Feminism, being a significant element in changing Japanese society, needs to be studied in the perspective of Japanese religiosity which will, certainly, be helpful in order to better understand the new modes of thinking and trends, modern challenges and the influential role of religions in contemporary Japan. This paper aims to answer the question how religious discourse in contemporary Japan tends to keep pace with the changing prototype of society, highlighting the dynamic role of women as mother, founders of New Religious Movements, leaders and teachers etc., in all spheres of life including media and politics.

It is hoped that this humble effort will help students of religion in Pakistan to some scholarly ways of looking at new paradigms of religious thinking in Japan focusing feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Religions, Japan, New Religious Movements, Society

### **1.0 Introduction**

Feminism is a bunch of various ideas and movements aimed at understanding the nature of gender inequality, defining, establishing and promoting the equal social, economic and political rights of women. There are many feminist ideas and

organizations working in multi dimensions including politics, social, cultural and post colonial affairs. These movements and individual activists aim to tackle a variety of issues and subjects concerning women such as contract law, right to vote, bodily integrity, workplace rights, sexual assault and harassment, pornography, trafficking and particularly patriarchy in their respective fields of life.

Feminism in Japan began in the late 19th century. Siever (1983, p- 189) mentions that *Meiji* was the beginning, not the end, of the woman's movement in modern Japan. The resistance of Meiji woman to male definitions of their proper social roles and their attachment to other dreams and visions were part of feminist legacy that, in spite of formidable obstacles, they managed to leave for later generations. In 1878, forty-five years old woman Kosunose Kita, in the island of Shikoku, is known to raise her voice and argue to have right for vote because she was paying taxes as a head of house since the death of her husband in 1872.<sup>1</sup>

After this, Kishida Toishiko supported this voice lecturing and writing about the equal rights for women in 1882. Sharon says that the sense of continuity that seemed so tenuous, that link from Kishida Toishiko and the popular-rights movement to the "Blue Stockings" was, finally, strong enough, flexible enough, to connect women in an expanding movement that is still developing.<sup>2</sup> This movement was later suppressed by the government. Nonetheless, efforts continued and following the Japanese victory in the Shino- Japanese War, government, in order to lend support to the family system, promoted girls' education. The Girls High School Law issued in 1899 aimed to educate girls to become good wives and wise mothers.<sup>3</sup> Hiratsuka Raicho formed a New Women's Association on a national level in 1920 which struggle for the promotion of woman's status in the society. There were 331 members in the first year. Furthermore, in the aftermaths of an earthquake in 1923, women's groups worked together to help the victims and other association named *Tokyo Rengo Fujinkai* (the federation of the Woman's Association in Tokyo) was formed.<sup>4</sup> Besides some other organizations, which were formed over the decades, particularly, in war times or economic depression, many individuals, like Kawasaki Natsu, also played a significant role to cater the problems and challenges including economic and social faced by women.<sup>5</sup>

In short, it was not until after the Second World War, that Japanese woman finally attained the right of suffrage and legal equality in marriage. The post-war situation in Japan can be rightly known by a catchphrase, "*onna no jidai*" (the era of women), mostly heard in Japan in order to elaborate the feminism in modern Japan.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.0 Scholarship on Feminism in Japan

In order to illustrate the problems of the Japanese women, history of feminism and various other issues like feminism and nationalism,<sup>7</sup> the liberation of women, traditional values, economic, political and religious pressure etc, efforts have been made by intellectuals, historians, anthropologists and feminist activists. Sato considers Inoue Kiyoshi's work "*Nihon joseishi* (A history of Japanese women) one of the most important book on constructing a master narrative of Japanese women. This book was published in 1948.<sup>8</sup> The main theme of books is to provide the mechanisms of the oppression of the Japanese women linking it with emperor system and painting a picture of the subjugated female populace waiting modernization and liberation. The studies of other historians such as Ide Fumiko, Horiba Kiyoko and Tanaka Sumiko are also remarkable for their focus on the upper class members of intellectuals and bureaucrats. However, Murakami Nobuhiko presented a new approach to women's history.<sup>9</sup> He was of opinion that it is not appropriate to select some women because of their popularity to constitute history. Rather his attempt was to observe the lives of women from outside the domain of the state. There was a remarkable shift in the focus of intellectuals as new emerging issues like child care, sexual slavery, comfort women, housing, hygiene and the problems of workplace, constituting a social, cultural, economic and political narratives were studied by the 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

Only to give an example we mention here a well known scholar Aoki Yayoi who is one of the independent scholar and critique and most widely known feminist in Japan. She has authored many books published extensively many topics ranging from the cultural construction of sexuality to abortion rights, woman in the work place, new reproductive technologies, teenage sexuality and woman and arts. One of her main contributions is to theorize the relationship between the Japanese imperialism and patriarchal system.<sup>11</sup>

So far women's sufferings in Japan are concerned, there is a lot written on this topic covering various aspects like comfort Japanese women. Yamashita Yeong highlights this problem describing that in terms of satisfying the sexual desires of the Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War, several military "comfort stations" were established in 1931. These stations were built when women being raped by Japanese soldiers in occupied territories became problematic, and in order to save the debilitating spread of venereal disease among the soldiers were turning to local brothels. It was also said that the comfort stations provided soldiers under the duress of duty and not knowing when the long war would end. A large number of comfort

women were recruited for these stations. First, the women recruited were mostly those already employed as prostitutes in Japan. When their numbers proved insufficient, women were brought from colonies in Korea and Taiwan, as well as occupied China. As the Japanese invaded Southeast Asia and the south Pacific, women from these areas were also recruited as comfort women. Many of these women were transferred along with the troops, from China to Southeast Asia and to the south Pacific.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.0 Feminism and Japanese religions**

Women, in modern societies, have active religious lives. Several studies of women and religion, aiming to examine various aspects like anthropological, historical, political, socio-economic and cultural issues, thoroughly documented different patterns of women's exclusion from significant religious positions. Nonetheless, in Japanese context, it is important to study the real picture of Japanese women and religion knowing the meaning of feminism in Japan, and answering the questions like how Japanese religions shape and reflect the differences in behavior and expectations for females from birth through adulthood to family, work and larger society. Admitting the fact that these lines are not sufficient to cover a variety of issues such as the sufferings of Japanese women and their struggle on both individual and collective levels, the core teachings of JR regarding the role of women in society, emerging phenomenon of women leadership in NRMs, eco-feminism and so on, our main target here is to highlight the role of religion in this regard exploring the ways through which we can better understand the current position of religion in Japanese society.

### **3.1 Patriarchy and Japanese Religions**

Before proceeding to main issue, it seems better to understand first the fundamental nature of Japanese family system.<sup>13</sup> In the Far East the natural cohesion of the family has been strengthened by Confucian teachings. The people of Japan being ill-attuned to Chinese language and hence thought, may have accepted their Confucianism with a difference and retained a larger role for natural affection, as contrasted with conscious duty, in their filial piety. These traditions were the staple of Japanese education for centuries which they pervaded more effectively than the Greek and Roman classics did in the West.<sup>14</sup>

The “*ie*” system has been playing integral role in Japanese society. The “*ie*”<sup>15</sup> refers to a concept and unit of Japanese society that denotes a household group based on family connections. This system, which was established in the Meiji period in order to modernize the nation's family system, is maintained through patrilineal

links between generations.<sup>16</sup> The eldest son inherits responsibility for the *ie*, taking over as its head. Strengthened by a patriarchal head and hierarchy by birth, the *ie* system preserved a strict gender-based role division within the family and household. What makes the Japanese *ie* distinctive, however, is the widespread use of adoption whenever the survival of the *ie* is at stake. If there are no sons, or if none of the sons is suitable to be an heir, the husband of a daughter may be adopted to become the new head of the *ie*. If there are no children at all, then a son may still be adopted. An important feature of this system, therefore, is the continuity of the *ie*, or family line, rather than an emphasis on blood relations.<sup>17</sup>

After this brief overview on Japanese family system, now we come to the critique of Akiko Okadu<sup>18</sup> (Okuda & Haruko, 1998, p- 9) who argued that the meaning of patriarchy in Japanese context is different from that of West. The meaning of patriarchy in the West originates in the context of societies based on ancient Roman and Hebrew models, however, in Japan the actuality which conforms to the Western concept has never existed. It was household system of samurai or “*ie*” which shaped the meaning. Okadu traces the roots of Western patriarchy in Christian concept of “God the Father” which has been a chief instrument in the oppression and discrimination against women, while this does not necessarily applicable in the case of Japanese feminism. However, this should also remain in consideration that patriarchal structure of samurai society and *ie* system of military community played major role in the perpetuating of patriarchy. Thus, the argument that religion in Japan had almost no power to influence patriarchy is very potent.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, despite the definite existence of religion, there is no perception as such since, religion has not always functioned, neither in the past nor in the present, in the role of religion. In other words, there was no original universal religion with a transcendent principle established in Japanese society, not to mention the fact that all faiths have been baffled by the emperor religion.<sup>20</sup> This argument, no doubt, lead us to a diverse interpretations of religion among feminist themselves as there are frequent debates on issues like the necessity of religion, metaphysical traditions indispensable for human and religious cultural devices. Nonetheless, in spite of these variations, it seems also a well known fact that Buddhist, Shinto's and Confucius values cast deep shadows within the patriarchal framework of Japanese society.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the indigenous religion Shinto which is basically a combination of ancestor worship and primitive spiritual beliefs, has helped to maintain, rather strengthened the sense of family community and facilitated the ideology of the state as an extended form of the *ie* through the medium of ancestor worship in particular.

In addition to that, the answer to the question will make it more clearly as to whether sexual discrimination or oppression is a strategy or structural need of religion in the first place.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that the Western feminism has as a common initial point the Bible, edited to focus on men, and a Church established by patriarchal dynamics which justified and deepened women's subordination. Yes, Japanese feminism is facing the same issue of sexual discrimination but the phenomenon of women's subordination is quite different in nature to that of Western. The actual means of subordination of women in Japan is not, necessarily, the man who characterizes her as a head of *ie*. According to Haruko,<sup>23</sup> this problem lies somewhere between the *ie* and state structure, which are, no doubt, presided, mostly, by men.

### **3.2 Japanese Buddhism and Women**

Japanese Buddhism has been playing a crucial role in religious lives of Japanese people over the centuries as mentioned earlier. However, there has always been needed to look its pros and cons critically covering all spheres including the role of women. Rita mentions that the commentators on participation of women in Buddhism are likely to focus on two broad generalizations. The first observation is that the core teaching of this 2,500 year-old tradition is gender-free and gender-neutral. Contemporary Buddhist teachers themselves often respond to questions about the role of women in Buddhism by stating that the Buddha's teachings apply, without exception, to all sentient beings and that no relevant distinction can be made between women and men regarding their aptitude to become enlightened. However, on the other hand, interestingly, this has not meant that women and men have been accorded the same status or expected to accomplish the same things throughout most of the Buddhist history. As a historical fact, Buddhism emerged in a culture that was quite male-dominated and in which there were strong gender roles.<sup>24</sup>

Okano highlighted several Buddhist concepts and manifestations which have been preventing Buddhism from recognition of values that women hold in society. For example, acceptance of Buddhism and rejection of female priests by united Japan. Although, in the early history women used to be selected as nuns for instance, in late 584 the temple Sakurajji was built for nuns in Nara. However, with the passage of time their role had been reduced while coming under the control of Emperors and governments. After the year 730 women were gradually banned from chanting and then in the mid-ninth century they were restricted from religious life. Women were excluded from certain of the state Buddhist temples. In some cases, like the temple at Mount Koya and Mount Hiei, the temple and the entire mountain too on

which it stood were closed off to women.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of female impurity during menstruation and child birth in Buddhism has been remarked as a reason to exclude women from religious institutions. Consequently, this idea led to establishment of the belief that women are sinful and hence, cannot attain salvation. (Haruko, 1995, p -19) This image of women as “defiled” and “sinful” nurtured not only by way of the notion of impurity and blood but also from the concept of three obedience and five hindrances. It was, basically, in order to provide women a means to overcome those impediments to attainment of Buddha-hood and salvation that the belief of “metamorphosis”, according to which a woman could become a Buddha and reborn in Pur Land after first being changed into man, was anticipated.<sup>26</sup>

These are only some aspects and phenomenon of Japanese Buddhist concepts which were and still have been playing a significant role in constituting an attitude and consciousness of Japanese people in modern Japan in terms of their behavior towards women, an essential element of family, society and state.

### **3.3 New Japanese Religious Movements and Feminism**

In response to religious desires of Japanese people, who were troubled with wars, sickness and poverty, new religious movements emerged during late *Tokugawa* shogunate and Meiji revolution. New Religions of Japans are based on worldly benefits, values and, more importantly, building a family community utopia. Their main focus is to provide the guidance and the solutions for various common problems such as sickness, poverty, conflicts and many other social anomalies including sexual discrimination.

One of the significant characteristics of these movements is central role of females in these new emerging religious groups, which later on known as New Religions of Japan, and their glorified gender in the form of rejecting existing male dominated religions.

The first of these groups was Fujiko, a famous religious organization that worships Mount Fuji, founded by a woman. This religious association considered women’s menstruation positively as an essential and effective social mechanism to guarantee offspring. Nakayama Miki, who is the foundress of Tenrikyo, refused the idea of women’s impurity and the foundress of “*Oomot*”, another religious movement, Deguchi Nao also took women’s menstruation positively. Inoue mentions ten names of women who founded religious groups and are deeply venerated by their followers. This new phenomenon is not confined only to founders but also extends to their successors and other high positions of the NJRs. Inoue describes that in case of

the religion of Oomoto, female descendents of the original foundress Deguchi Nao have continued to succeed to the status of leader, up to and including the present fourth-generation leader Deguchi Kiyoko. The leaders of Sekai Shindokyo, a branch of *Tenrikyo*, have also all been women, and Kitamura Kiyokazu, grand daughter of Kitamura Sayo, was made Second-generation leader of Tensho Kotai Jingukyo.<sup>27</sup>

According to Haruko,<sup>28</sup> the succession of women who subsequently founded religions during the last days of Shogunate were surely pioneers of feminism. Moreover, women also occupy roles of missionary staff and teachers in NJRs in addition to their frequent positions of leadership.

Okano thinks that they are indifferent to the notion of defiling a sacred world and the spirit of an essentially ascetic quest for truth. Accordingly, there was no phenomenon such as the barring of women for ascetic purposes and blood impurity, to take root in.<sup>29</sup>

The conception of imbalanced sexual positions is, commonly, acknowledged in new religions of Japan. In addition, their followers are encouraged to emulate this concept in their own family lives, with the husband assuming the role of leader and the wife that of wife. For instance, Soka Gakkai founded in the 1930s, upholds a domestic role for women, based on the teachings of *Nicherien* sect of Buddhism.

Another new religion *Jissenrinrikoseikai*, founded in the aftermaths of World War II, compares the status of husband and wife to those of engine car performing the dominant, active role and the trailed car which is subordinate and passive. Women are, often, taught to inculcate the quality of obedience instead of cleverness through various means such as religious magazines carry many stories showing how an obedient wife successfully manages the familial problems.

One of the most striking characteristics of Japan's NRs is that there a lot of women in these religious groups working in high positions as most of them acting as founders and current leaders. For example, students of the new religions occasionally refer to Deguchi Nao Nakayama Miki and Kitamura Sayo as "the trinity of foundresses". This is not only because these women held important positions and roles in Japan's modern religious history, but also because they exhibited even greater enthusiasm than many of their male counterparts. To this list we could add various others, such as Aida Hide, Fukada Chiyoko, Miyamoto Mitsu, Mizuno Fusa, Honjo Chiyoko, Koyama Mihoko, Omori Chiben and Sugiyama Tatsuko. These women are all profoundly respected by the members of their movements.

In short, as a matter of fact the role of women is perceived as that of maintaining the family by caring the stillborn children, spirits of ancestors and taking care for old

parents as well as the role of husbands is to contribute towards the national prosperity through working in industry. The new religions this way are providing their ethical support to the welfare policy of the ruling governments in order to maintain the unchanged central role of *ie* (household system) in the process of changing Japanese society.<sup>30</sup>

More interesting point here is in spite of that the expanding influence of new Japanese religions has not been reduced, rather females, in particular, are attracted by these religious movements. Inoue and Numata illustrate (as cited in Okano, 1995) the fact that these religions perform five<sup>31</sup> types of functions as following:

1- They offer support and advice in terms of familial problems which women quite often confront in regards to mothers in law, children education husbands and so on.

2- Housewives can find a sense of purpose by taking part in religious affiliated activities within their communities.

3. They provide companionship and activities to fill voids left by husbands who are busily caught up in their work and children who have grown and gone on their own.

4. They provide opportunities for women to engage them in self expression and gained experience in a larger society by giving the positions of leadership within organizations.

5. The notion of “obedient wife and responsible mother”, promoted by the religions facilitates their lives providing a measure of peace of mind and stability.

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