

Jaydeep Rishi

Sarojini Naidu College for Women

A Body of One's Own: Women and Religious Fundamentalism

Introduction

The history of female emancipation has been the history of gaining control by the women of their own bodies. The patriarchal system has always worked towards putting woman in a private dominion and identifying her with nature as opposed to culture. The feminist scholars and activists have fought against this stereotyping of women's role in accordance to her gender. However, the small progress made by women is being threatened anew by the rise of the fundamentalist forces in different nooks and corners of the world. There is a renewed attempt in the present day to rejuvenate the traditional religious discourse interpreted from a strictly patriarchal viewpoint. What is more worrisome is that almost all major religions in the world today are somehow afflicted by the malady of fundamentalism to different extents. This greatly endangers the accomplishments made by the critics in underscoring how "body politics" victimise women. There is thus a direct clash of interest between gender activists and the religious extremists. It is more worrisome that the latter tend to shape and formulate the state policies and use the nation state as a platform for spreading their agenda. But before one analyses how fundamentalist forces shape up body politics there is a need for understanding how "body politics" have affected women and how "sexuality" and "politics" have been intertwined more and more in feminist discourses. There is also the

further need for building the theoretical premise of “fundamentalism” and understanding the agenda of the fundamentalist forces in today’s world.

Women and Body: Feminist Overview

From the earliest realms of the development of political thought the division and distinction between the public and the private, between the political and the personal has been explicit. Some theorists like Aristotle have held this division to be sacrosanct and felt that it only goes to help in the smooth functioning of the society. Others, including Plato and Marx, though maintaining the need of such explicit distinction emphasizes so heavily on the supremacy of the former so as to destroy the other sphere in all practicality. This distinction between the two has been profound over the ages. “As liberal practice puts the private realm of family and property beyond the gaze and touch of the state, so modern liberal theory has made the private sphere a realm beyond the touch of political thought. Feminist theory in the latter half of the twentieth century began to realize how potent this duality was for the ways in which male and female roles are constructed and the means by which women, from the very understanding of what is ‘political’, may be excluded or simply made invisible” (Arneil 43).

The realization that “gender” and “politics” are interconnected necessitated the reconstruction of what “politics” stood for. There was an emergent debate within the feminist circle as regards to the distinction between the “private” and the “public” realm; a growing recognition that “adding women back into the polity would require a rethink of the basic political categories and perforce, the dissolving of the false barrier between public and private” (Reverby and Helly 8). The basic premise of political theory that affects women most is the connection of the role of women to that of the family in the political sphere.

“Those who have regarded the family as a natural and necessary institution have defined women by their sexual, procreative and child rearing functions within it. This has led to the prescription of a code of morality and conception of rights for women distinctly different from those that have been prescribed for men” (Okin 9). The role that women primarily play in the familial context is basically a reproductive and a nurturing one. The patriarchal culture essentially identifies women in a biological context and identifies them on their reproductive capacities. Women are thus socially enslaved by their own bodies. Zillah Eisenstein brings out this truth in her book *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*: “My concern is to elaborate the historical formulation of motherhood that equates childbearing with childrearing and as a result assigns woman a place outside the public sphere of life. In this study, we shall see woman’s exclusion from public life operating on two levels. Woman is relegated to childrearing by biological fiat on an individual level, which is then reformulated through the formation of the state and the institutionalization of public-private domains on a political level” (Eisenstein 14).

The realization that the female body was the root cause of sexual subjugation shaped much of the second wave feminism thought process. Shulamith Firestone, Susan Brownmiller, Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin are all of the opinion that that the exploitation of women’s bodies is the edifice on which patriarchy is established¹. Robin Morgan feels, “the patriarchal control of women’s bodies as the means of reproduction is the crux of the dilemma” (Morgan 6). Andrea Dworkin writing in the same vein says, “Male domination of the female body is the basic material reality of women’s lives; and all struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control of one’s own body” (Dworkin 203).

The credit for bringing the body into the focus of the political debate, however, goes to Kate Millet. Emphasizing on the female body Millet underscores the patriarchal politics

that goes to shape femininity. Commenting on the title of Millet's pioneering work Maggie Humm states, "Kate Millet's choice of the two terms 'sexual/politics' for the title of her pioneering book powerfully identified sexuality, not as some simple, 'natural' experience of women and men, but as being socially constructed with political consequences and as being politically constructed with social consequences" (Humm 260). Millet thus rejects biological determinism and highlights the social construction of womanliness as the root cause of female subjugation. Judith Butler goes another step forward and is not ready to accept the division between sex and gender. She argues that sex as well as the female body is a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon. "On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, whereas those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable law. When the relevant 'culture' that 'constructs' gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology but culture becomes destiny" (Butler 8).

Fundamentalism

The origin of the term "fundamentalism" is quite interesting. The term was first used as a form of self-reference by a group of Protestant Christians in the United States, round about the year 1920. This group published a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* deploring the rise of modernity. Later the term "fundamentalist" was used by more secular groups of Christians to depict the conservative believers. The term thus had no pejorative connection during the initial period (Hawley 3).

The term received quite popularity during the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. It was gradually extended to depict the radical Islamic groups who made it a political and religious goal to challenge Western liberal, secular, modernism in its various forms. Soon the term was used in connection to the Christian groups who took a conservative attitude towards various debates as regards to Equal Rights Amendment, abortion and prayers in schools. The wide scale journalistic use of the word added to its pejorative value. Shortly, the term gained popularity (as well as notoriety) and was being used to describe all religious groups with a conservative attitude, be they Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists or Jews (Hawley 3).

The contemporary spread of fundamentalism shows its transnational nature and though it shares various common traits all across the globe, it is influenced by many regional ethnical, religious, cultural, sociological and national factors. As a result, many are of the opinion that the plural term “fundamentalisms” best captures the phenomenon (Howland xi). Critics also take different approaches to the connection of religious fundamentalism with religion. There are many who regard such fundamentalism as an abuse of religious conviction and hence do not consider such activities to be a part of religion. On the other end are scholars who regard fundamentalism to be part of religions, which must be countered by legal means when they cross the limits of general lawful behaviour. Finally, others regard religious fundamentalism to be cover for political and cultural movements. As Sahgal and Yuval-Davis notes that fundamentalist movements are “basically political movements which have a religious or ethnic imperative and seek in various ways in widely differing circumstances to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their gospel. This gospel, which can be based on certain sacred texts or evangelical experiential moment linked to a charismatic leader, is presented as the only valid form of religion, the ethnic culture, and the truth” (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis *supra note* 1, 61). Whatever be the approach there is an agreement

among the scholars that religious fundamentalism infringes upon the rights of the women including their rights to practice religion.

John Stratton Hawley points out that “issues of gender play a crucial role in the language of fundamentalism” (Hawley 4). Whereas scholars like Bruce B. Lawrence tend to focus on the appeal of the scriptural edifices, which proclaim a role of subjugation for women, as the motive force behind the fundamentalist groups; others including Gita Sahgal, Nira Yuval-Davis, Hawley, Proudfoot, Nikki Keddie² point towards an emerging “social fundamentalism”.

The fundamentalist groups are generally opposed towards a greater autonomy for women in the society and feel it necessary for women to remain within the role prescribed to them by the traditional society. Whether such fundamentalist groups give primacy to their religious text or propound cultural nationalism, they are predisposed towards a religion-defined sexual discrimination and want women to be under the protective umbrella of their male counterparts.

The fundamentalist design is to portray the women as essentially “different”, in accordance to divine will, and aim to maintain this difference in the form of separating between the “private” and the “public”, “male” and “female”, “nature” and “culture”. This disparity is observed by Charlotte Bunch when she notes that, “The distinction between private and public is a dichotomy largely used to justify female subordination and to exclude human rights abuses in the home from public scrutiny....When women are denied democracy and human rights in private, their human rights in the public sphere also suffer, since what occurs in ‘private’ shapes their ability to participate fully in the public arena” (Bunch 14). The fundamentalist movements generally make the control of women and the promotion of patriarchy central to their agenda. Their movement towards furthering the inequality between

the genders lies in their assignment of the role of preservers of family and culture to women. This part is attributed to the women because of their reproductive capacity. Women in the fundamentalist agenda come to be identified with their bodies. The fundamentalist is largely afraid of the woman's body since his religion teaches him to abhor sexuality whereas he cannot get over his desire over the female body. Susan Griffin puts this point forward when she says that "Christian traditions share a profound contempt for, and fear of, women – specifically a fear of women's bodies" (qtd. in Humm 75). Griffin further elaborates her point: "He says that woman speaks with nature... He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature... Now we are beginning to know why a woman's body is so hated and feared. And why this body must be humiliated. For a woman's body by inspiring desire in a man, must recall him to his own body. When he wants a woman, his body and his natural existence begin to take control of his mind... And this lack of control must recall him to all that is in nature and in his own nature that he has chosen to forget" (Griffin 28). Though Griffin deduces her theory in connection to the Christian tradition and while referring to pornography, one may conclude that her viewpoint holds well in connection to the fundamentalist attitude in every religion and can explain the fundamentalist approach to women's bodies and their sexuality.

Religious fundamentalism in its struggle against modernity views women as the metaphor for the wronged body. As Hawley points out, "Women regularly serve as the 'Othered' body upon which the struggles with the cosmopolitan, modernist 'Other' are enacted – even when women themselves are speaking. Women easily represent nostalgia for an authoritatively organized childhood now felt to have been lost. And women justify a certain 'religious machismo' on the part of the men who would protect them" (Hawley 6). A study of how fundamentalist forces are at work today in various religious spheres and how

they try to control women by putting restrictions on women's bodies would go a long way in explaining their attitudes to women in particular and society in general.

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church in its approach to the reproductive health of women meets the general definitions of being fundamentalists. In its opposition to the contraceptives, sterilization, abortion and fertility treatments, the Church tries to control the fate of the women in the present world. Its movement is set in the reverse to the popular international cry of providing women the right to control their own bodies, reproductive health and sexual behaviour. The vehement use of the Roman Catholic Church's influence on what should rightfully be state policies has its origin in the historical settings where the Church frequently appropriated the power of the nation states.

The identification of the Church with the state became complete after Constantine converted to Roman Catholicism. In the post-Constantine days, the Church has seen itself as an entity that anoints and proclaims state leaders. Frances Kissling portrays the Church to be still playing the role of a state particularly with reference to the position of the Vatican as a non-member state in the United Nations (Kissling 196). The role that the Church plays is a historic one. It sees itself as an interpreter of divine laws which none, whatsoever his/her religious belief might be should violate. In this context, the Church has systematically usurped the power of the nation states by objecting to laws, which according to its ecclesiastical interpreters violate the natural laws.

Under these circumstances, the Church works actively to promote its fundamentalist agenda. The conservative groups of Christians have taken on the secular people, particularly

in the United States, claiming that their rights have been threatened by the secular elite. Though they themselves portray themselves as victims of discrimination, they betray the fundamental doctrine of equality for all by persecuting non-conformists. The Church has been vigorous in seeking exemptions from the laws seeking indiscriminate employment. There are instances when the Church has fired divorced and remarried women or women who had children outside wedlock. The target of most of the fundamentalist doctrines of the Church seems to be women and their bodies in particular.

There is a growing discontent among the Catholics as regards to the Church's policies relating to women's rights, reproduction and sexuality. The support in favour of allowing women to take mature considered decision in matters concerning their sexual and reproductive behaviour is wide spread. The Church's opposition to contraceptives in general and abortion in particular hardly finds any popular support (Toner).

The Church's opposition to the birth-control measures is rooted in its traditional fear for women and sexuality. Though the Church opposes legal abortion based on a fundamental respect for life, its preaching is not justified by its silence in matters concerning human rights abuse, death penalties in various states or genocide during wars. In fact one may point out the Church itself has been active in taking away life; particularly during the medieval period and any talk on part of the Church for not granting women freedom in reproductive decisions can only be looked at with scepticism.

Kissling points out, "Women and sexuality are the historic and modern bane of fundamentalists, including Roman Catholic fundamentalists. Ever since Eve, women have been seen as the source of evil, and sex has been one of the greatest sins.... While none laud abortion as a positive moral good, all see it as a moral option, minimally a necessary but tragic choice. Can there be any doubt that official Catholic attitudes toward sexuality and

women are detriment in the oppositional, indeed, fundamentalist position taken by the Church?" (Kissling 199).

The Church takes a position whereby all sexual activity, including those taking place within the wedlock, are considered as a sin. The sexual behaviour is considered essential only for procreation. Sex is thus only a means of giving birth to future progeny and any form of contraception is opposed on the ground that sexual activity without the procreative aim is sinful. The Church thus makes sexual desire and enjoyment a taboo. By doing so, it places the women in the "natural" bracket, whose only function is reproduction. The aim is to reduce women to the role of a mother, a role that is completely desexualized.

To promote this desexualized image of womanhood, the Church preaches abstinence to the young. Instead of looking at the complex problem of teenage pregnancy, the Church simply puts the onus on the young women to practice celibacy. In preaching this, the Church seems to have hardly moved from the days of St. Jerome who asked women to appear physically as unattractive as possible so as not to distract the men's spirits. The reason behind putting the onus of sexual responsibility on the women arises from the fact that the Church views bodies to be bad, particularly bodies of women and holds spirits to be good, and particularly men's ones. By putting the responsibility on the women and asking them to practice abstinence, the Religious Rights have often condemned sex education arguing that it leads to greater promiscuity, contrary to the well-researched empirical data that a more open attitude towards sex actually leads to postponement of sexual intercourse³.

The original Christian fundamentalism started in the United States, at the beginning of the twentieth century with the stated objective of reining in women and thus protecting the social cohesion (Brouwer, Gifford and Rose *supra note 2*, 219-20). Though its facet has changed to some extent, Roman Catholic fundamentalism has retained its original goal.

Martin Reisebrodt argues that fundamentalism is “radical patriarchalism”, a protest movement against the growing equality between the sexes⁴.

The Roman Catholic Church thus plays an active part in controlling the male hegemony, which has been the foundation stone of fundamentalists across the world. By restricting women to sex-defined roles, it attempts to politicize the reproductive capabilities in a woman. Its attempt to identify women with sexuality and proclamation of a desexualized kind of motherhood as the ideal is a step towards reinforcing male rule. Challenging the Church decrees thus ends up challenging the very patriarchal system that promotes such fundamentalist principles. As pointed out by Kissling, “To liberate women from motherhood, to see them as persons in their own right, is to challenge directly male control of the family and to establish the blueprint for a social structure – and perhaps a Church structure – in which power and decision making are equally shared between men and women” (Kissling 201).

Islam

The fear of women and the sexuality associated with them is the driving force behind Islamic fundamentalism as well. Set in a patriarchal tradition Islamic fundamentalism has gone a long way in maintaining gender discretion and controlling the bodies of Muslim women. Like the Roman Catholic fundamentalists, the Islamic fundamentalists tend to put the onus of sexual control on women and hold females responsible for invoking the desire in the males. Like all Religious Right groups, they too put greatest weight on sexuality to determine women’s rights and duties within the Islamic parameters. The status of women is again determined by their reproductive role. The distinction between the sexes is thus considered

only within a natural paradigm and the social factors going into the making of a woman is totally ignored.

Nowhere is the idea of women being lustful creatures obstructive to the performance of the traditional duties by men so much visible as in the case the practice of veil. The *Hejab* requires the women to cover themselves from head to toe, since “The whole of a woman’s body is a pudendum except her face and hands” (Rugh 172). The veil acts as a protective cover between the men and the women, further eroticising women’s bodies. The veiled body of the woman becomes the central focus in men’s lives. As the sex libido in men is considered natural, women are reduced to the role of temptresses; it becomes the onus of the women to protect themselves as well as the males from the evils associated with their bodies.

The notion of female temptresses also guides the interpretation of Qur’anic verses as regards to *zina* (fornication). The Qur’anic verse 4:15 states, “Regarding your women who are guilty of fornication, call to witness four of you against them. And if they testify (to the truth of the allegation) then confine the women to the houses for the rest of their lives or (until) Allah provides them a way out (of this punishment)” (M. Abdel Halim 205). Though this verse is abrogated by a later verse (24:2-3), which proclaims a punishment of flogging the fornicators, both men and women, the interpreters have traditionally held the latter verse only as a specific proclamation of punishment for *zina*, rather than a verse upholding the equality between the two sexes.

The superiority of males to females is asserted by the religious zealots, when they point out to the procedure laid down in the Surat-al-Nour (verses 6-8), by which a husband’s evidence alone suffices to convict a woman of *zina*. However, there is no equivalent verse by which a woman can convict her husband of the same without the help of four witnesses. This is interpreted by the religious fundamentalists as essentially pointing to the women as the

source of religious misconduct. This argument in turn allows a greater control over women and their sexuality.

The female circumcision⁵ is again a doctrine that goes against the spirit of Quran. It was incorporated from the practice of the Arab tribes. It is a direct means of controlling the sexuality of women and fits into the scheme by which female sexuality is considered a bane for the society. The Quran denounces the infliction of harm and deliberate mutilation of God's creation⁶. However, this has not stopped fundamentalists from proclaiming female circumcision mandatory in Islam. In 1996, when the Minister of Health in Egypt banned female circumcision there was a hue and cry over it and a former head of the Al-Azhar University, Sheikh Gal al Haq issued a *fatwa* against the ban⁷.

The state policies are also heavily governed by the Islamic institutions. In many countries the personal law for the Muslims is guided by the Shari'ah. In Sudan, the Personal Law enacted in 1991 provides for a male guardian, *wali*, who has the absolute right of fixing a woman's marriage. The view of the concerned woman or of any of her woman guardian is of any consequence in such matters. The woman is thus viewed within the course of the law as one designated to provide sexual satisfaction of her husband and a bearer of the family's prestige. India, which is a Hindu majority state, provides for a Muslim Personal Law. In the late 1980s, when Shah Bano, a Muslim woman divorced against her will, was provided alimony by an Indian court in accordance to the country's universal civil code, the Muslim fundamentalists raised a clamour over the matter and demanded that she should be restricted to the rights defined by the Muslim Personal Law.

Another sphere where the Muslim women are subjugated by the fundamentalist interpretation of Shari'ah is related to the forcible sexual relationship within a marriage. Marital rape is allowed by many Islamic interpreters on the ground that a wife has no right to

refuse sex to her husband. This position totally subjugates the position of the wives to that of their husbands and regards them as sexual toys. The observation that marriage is a contract whereby men agree to provide subsistence to their wives in exchange of unlimited sexual access to their wives is again rooted in the basic idea that looks women as primarily sex objects.

The patriarchal forces guiding the fundamentalist behaviour, is a feature governing Islam. The Western influence is often held responsible by the fundamentalist forces as the demand for greater dignity and equality for women grows larger. Nevertheless, as Asma M. Abdel Halim observes, “Muslims have to face the fact that women’s demand of their human rights has nothing to do with ‘Western’ ideas. Women have challenged the rules since the early days of Islam. Women’s challenges to patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the Shari‘ah have been, and are, based on the awareness of their humanity – a humanity that is, and should be, confirmed in Islam. Muslim women challenging patriarchal rules ... are seeking to invoke the best that there is in Islam and that supports them as full human beings” (M. Abdel Halim 210-211).

Buddhism

While focusing on religious fundamentalism, scholars have tended to concentrate on religions like Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, in other words religions that are considered fundamentalist in nature. However, religious oppression of women need not always take the direct form; there are subtle ways in which a religion may promote sex discrimination.

Buddhism is a case in the point. There is no direct coercion of the women by the Sangha but the attitude of Buddhism towards women has helped promote the sex trade in Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Thailand. As Thanh-Dam Truong observes, “The trade in

women in Thailand arose from social conditions which were external to Buddhism as a body of thought, but has been consolidated by the biases inherent in Buddhism” (Truong 131).

The association between the Government and the Thai Theravāda Sangha is quite close. There can be no formal separation between the Sangha and the state. The two are mutually dependent and hence are supportive of the others activities. Truong feels, “As a social and political institution, the Buddhist religion was a foundation of feudal law, and it still provides the people with a world-view, shapes their consciousness, and acts as a subjective form of power which provides legitimacy to social relations” (Truong *supra note* 5, 131). The Sangha thus tends to control both the private and the public spheres of Thai life.

The Buddhist scriptures have helped shape the gender identity by connecting women to a material world. According to the Buddhist tradition, women are inferior to men because of their sexuality. They are situated in opposition to men who can transcend the bounds of the world. The life of an ascetic is not for a woman since it is believed that she cannot conquer her bodily desires.

Again, a woman is considered a temptress, who present hurdles before men vowing to be celibate. In this connection, Buddhism is no different from the other fundamental religions, which look at women as sexual beings. There are numerous stories in the Buddhist scriptures, where they are seen as seductresses trying to rob men of the results of their asceticism. The use of female body as a symbol of sensual attachment is quite common in the Buddhist tradition (Peach 218).

The Buddhist philosophy also holds the viewpoint that one is born a woman because of the bad karma of the earlier births. The scriptures state that a woman can achieve salvation only by being reborn as a man first. These attitudes which connect womanhood to sexuality goes a long way in providing for the theoretical basis of spread of prostitution, as a sex

worker only sees herself fulfilling the inferior and traditional sexual role assigned to her by her religion.

A further reason for spread of prostitution in Thailand is the attitude of the Sangha towards the prostitutes. Unlike other religions, Buddhism does not necessarily bear a negative attitude towards the sex workers. There seems to be some religious sanction for them too. The *Vinaya Pitak* speaks about wives who are to be “enjoyed or used occasionally” and about “temporary and momentary wives” (Truong *supra* note 5, 136).

Buddhists believe in karma or merit making. The sons usually indulge in such merit making by joining the Sangha even if for a few months. However, the option is not open to the Thai girls as there is no longer any monastery for women in Thailand. This distinction between the two goes a long way in fuelling further gender biases as a monk’s position is the most respected in the Buddhist society. By showing, that the women are not fit to be monks the Sangha indirectly focuses on the spiritual inferiority of women.

The only means of merit making often available to the women is to look after their parents, an act considered most pious in a traditional society. The obligation can be met by subjecting oneself to be a prostitute as the money earned can be used to look after the family and merits can thus be earned. A more direct means of earning merits is giving gifts to the Sangha. The family wilfully neglects what the daughter does as her money can be used in making lavish donations, thereby earning merits.

The traditional belief that a woman exists at an inferior karmic state and sexuality is a normal attribute to her serves to legitimize the prostitution racket in Thailand. The belief that one may attain penance by refraining from sex and abiding by the precepts indirectly encourages the women to join prostitution.

However, the Sangha does not condone the practice. Nevertheless, it does not condemn it as well. The Sangha gains much from the flourishing sex trade as a part of the money earned in the business is channelled back into the monastery. The close connection of the Sangha with the state also is reflected in the legal status of the Thai women. The women in Thailand are located in their social spheres, within the confines of the family. The need of the hour is to develop a sense of legitimate claim to reasonable control and determination of one's own life.

Hinduism

The movement of the Religious Right into the centre of the polity has been the most striking incident in recent history. The Hindu Right has primarily focussed on Hindutva, on what it calls a cultural pattern that has been the tradition of the country. However, the subjugation of other cultural patterns in a country as diverse as India is always a cause for concern. Hindutva thus according to its critics becomes the other name of militant Hindu fundamentalism.

The Hindu fundamentalist movement gained popularity with the demolition of a mosque at Ayodhya. What followed was the worst riot in independent India. The redefinition of the Indian political map on communal lines, however, has left its mark on the women. As in case of wars, the worst victims of the riots have often been women. The same formula was repeated in Bombay and most recently in Gujarat. The attackers of both the communities did not spare women and children. Though the riots were spurred by single incidents; the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and, the burning alive of karsevaks in Gujarat respectively; both the communities were affected. Therefore, even if the Hindu Right targeted the members of the Muslim community or vice versa, the repercussions directly affected its

own female members. According to a study by Maitreyee Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, women were chiefly made the targets of the Gujarat riot. Moreover, it was not so much women but their bodies, which bore the brunt of the attack. A chief feature of any riot in the Indian subcontinent is the planned rape of women of the other community. This goes to show how the bodies of the women are transformed into battlegrounds for the Religious Rights. According to the said study, in Gujarat the womb, female genitalia and breasts became the chief targets of the rioters⁸.

The Hindu fundamentalist groups like their counterpart in other religions are greatly concerned by the free expression of female sexuality. The Hindu religion too discriminates against women for her biological role. The Hindu pantheon proclaims many goddesses and identifies them with *sakti* (energy) and *prakriti* (nature). The Cosmic Energy that a woman represents can bring about Creation only when she is united with the *purusa*, the Cosmic Man. Thus in the Hindu belief men are identified with culture, whereas women are regarded to be linked to nature. This nature can be both benevolent and malevolent. She is benevolent when she is controlled by *purusa*; she becomes the fertile bestower. Uncontrolled she represents the malevolent nature. Thus, the benevolent goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are all married and their sexuality is under control. Those with uncontrolled sexuality are to be feared⁹. The same principle is in operation in the traditional interpretation of Hindu femaleness. Hence, in spite of its attributing a key role to the women in the creative process, Hinduism nevertheless, ordains the control of female sexuality by male command.

Hindu fundamentalism, which has spread its tentacle all over India over the recent years, has targeted the sexual role of women, especially in public. An unwritten dress code for the females is quite common in many universities and colleges. The Right wing student groups take an active interest in implementing such *fatwas* in the name of traditional culture. The idea is again similar to that of other similar religious Rights. The onus is upon the

females to stop sexual promiscuity or even sexual harassment. It is a common practice on part of the law enforcers as well as the common citizen to blame the victim in case of any sexual assault. Women are thus identified with sexual temptresses, who must be controlled if danger is to be averted.

The same gendered role drives the Government policies too. Chetan Anand, a noted film director, had to resign from the post of the Chief of the Film Censor Board since he dared to moot a proposal by which nude scenes could be legally depicted in Indian films. In spite of pornography, being widely available, the Government led by the Rightists felt it sacrilegious on their part to allow nudity in theatres. Though the public posture made by the state is that of upholding of family values and protection of women, the real intention behind such hypocrisy is to restrict women and redefine their role in society as those of mothers and wives.

Another pet issue of the Rightist forces within Hinduism is one of violence against women.¹⁰ It shares the platform with the secular women's rights groups in deriding such offences. However, the similarity ends there. The agenda of the Hindu Rights in this connection is to reinterpret the role of the women in the society. The idea is evolved from a highly conservative approach of protecting the family and limiting women to the traditional roles of mothers and wives; thereby elevating them to the position of honour and respect supposedly enjoyed by them in the mythic golden age¹¹.

The issue of violence against women is interrelated with and framed within the communal discourse of the Hindu Right. The Muslim man is thus cast in a stereotype role of perpetrator of sexual violence against women. This serves a dual purpose by 'demonizing the Muslim community and deflecting attention away from the sexual violence caused by the Hindu male'¹². The patriarchal control of the Hindu male over the Hindu female is reaffirmed

by the demand of harsh penalties against an offender, presumably a Muslim, who by violating the honour of Hindu female has violated by implication the honour of the Hindu males and the Hindu community. Rape in communal discourse is thus projected as violence against the entire community rather than a wound to the bodily integrity of a particular individual.

The rise of the Religious extremists in India is a concern for the spirit of communal harmony. However, the communal discourse carries a subtext within it – that of subjugation of the women within a patriarchal framework. Secularism thus in the Indian context becomes a means not only of maintaining the unity of the country but protecting its women from religious persecution.

Conclusion

The fundamentalists in their endeavour to control and subjugate women resort to “sexual politics”. This is done by identifying women with their bodies. This identification helps to propagate the traditional value system whereby women are identified with nature and their role confined to the public sphere. Feeding and nourishing on patriarchy all fundamentalist forces attempts to promote and protect the traditional concept of family making women the mistresses of home and hearth. The developments in the last century have threatened this ideology as women have stepped into the public sphere more and more. Fundamentalist forces have tried to reverse the course of history by appealing to the patriarchal value system. Under such an agenda, women are regarded as the most coveted possession in the hands of the community and protecting their honour becomes the chief duty of the society. Though this is apparently done to protect women, it perpetuates the idea of women as being inferior to men who must remain under the guardianship of males. The close association of the Religious Rights with the nation states helps them to build upon this theory.

The fundamentalist plan can only be offset by building up a conscience among women, which would allow them to view themselves as individuals rather than bodies. The intellectual and human attributes rather than the sexual attribute should thus be the identity of a woman. The need for reconstruction of the female body from a feminine viewpoint thus becomes essential for empowerment of women. One may conclude with Adrienne Rich's observation, "the repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers" (Rich 285).

Notes

1. See Firestone Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*, London: The Women's Press, 1979; Brownmiller, Susan, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1975; Griffin, Susan, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Women*, London: The Women's Press, 1981; Dworkin, Andrea, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London: The Women's Press, 1981.

2. See Sahgal, Gita and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Introduction: Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain' in Sahgal, Gita and Nora Yuval- Davis (eds.) *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, London: Virago Press Limited, 1992; Hawley and Proudfoot, *Supra* note 2, at 3-4, 16-35 in Sahgal, Gita and Nora Yuval- Davis (eds.) *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, London: Virago Press Limited, 1992; Keddie, Nikki, 'The New Religious Politics and Women Worldwide: A Comparative Study' in Brink, Judy and Joan Menscher (eds.), *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross Culturally*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997.

3. See *People for the American Way, Teaching Fear: The Religious Right's Campaign Against Sexuality Education*, Washington D.C.: People for the American Way, 1994, 22-26.
4. See Riesebrodt, Martin, *Pious Passion: The emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in Iran and the United States*, Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993, 176-208.
5. See Toubia, Nahid, *Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Action*, New York: Women Inc. 1993.
6. See Qur'an 95:4 (Surat al-teen) in Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, *supra note 10*, at 1759 and n.6199.
7. Gad al Haq Ali Gad al Haq, *al-Khitan*, al-Azhar, Cairo: Jumada al Awola, 1415 hijri.
8. See Chattopadhyay, Maitryee and Soma Marik (eds.), *Garbhaghāti Gujrāt*, Kolkata: People's Book Society, 2002.
9. See Wadley, Susan, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition' in Ghadially, Rehana (ed.), *Women in Indian Society, a Reader*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988.
10. The religious right raised the demand of death penalty for rapists considering the rise in the number of rape cases in the country. In raising this demand, the political Right ignored the apprehension expressed by various Women Rights group that the introduction of such a penalty would end in fewer convictions. However, the brutality associated with the rape of *Nirvaya* in the national capital and the public outrage associated with it forced some amendments into the law and certain offences related to rape are now punishable by death.

11. See Sarla Mudgal, President, Kalyani and Others v. Union of India and Others, J.T. 1915 (4) (S.C.), 233-34.

12. See Sarla Mudgal, President, Kalyani and Others v. Union of India and Others, J.T. 1915 (4) (S.C.), 249.

Works cited

Arneil, Barbara. *Politics and Feminism*. Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999.

Brouwer, Steve, Paul Gifford and Susan Rose. *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London: Women's Press, 1981.

Eisenstein, Zillah. *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

Griffin, Susan. *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

Halim, Asma M. Abdel. "Reconciling the Opposites: Equal but Subordinate." *Religious Fundamentalism and the Human rights of Women*. Ed. Courtney W. Howland. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Hawley, John Stratton. "Fundamentalism." *Religious Fundamentalism and the Human rights of Women*. Ed. Courtney W. Howland. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Howland, Courtney W. "Introduction." *Religious Fundamentalism and the Human rights of Women*. Ed. Courtney W. Howland. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Humm, Maggie, ed. *Feminisms: A Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Kissling, Frances. "Roman Catholic Fundamentalism: What's sex and Power got to do with it?" *Religious Fundamentalism and the Human rights of Women*. Ed. Courtney W. Howland. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Morgan, Robin. "Introduction/ Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century." *Sisterhood is Global: the International Women's Movement Anthology*. Ed. Robin Morgan. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

Okin, Susan Moller. *Women in Western Political Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Peach, Lucinda Joy. "Buddhism and Human Rights in Thai Sex Trade." *Religious Fundamentalism and the Human rights of Women*. Ed. Courtney W. Howland. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Reverby, Susan and Dorothy Helly. *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1976.

Rugh, Andrea B. "Reshaping the Personal Relations in Egypt." *The Fundamentalism Project: Fundamentalisms and Society*. Eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Sahgal, Gita and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds. *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*. London: Virago Press, 1992.

Toner, Kathy. "Is Anyone Listening?" *17, Conscience*, 3, 1996.

Truong, Thanh-Dam. *Sex, Money and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in Southeast Asia*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1990.