

Compromise with Life: The Contradiction between Women's Image in Jainism Doctrine and in Life

Introduction

In Manisha Sethi's article "Chastity and desire: representing women in Jainism", she analyzes in depth the image of women in Jainism based on scripture and religious stories. On the one hand, Jainism recognizes women's ability to seek salvation through asceticism, but on the other hand, the text and story are filled with a great deal of misogynistic depictions. Meanwhile, Knut Aukland in his paper "How to Study Jainism? Constructing 'Jainism' as an Object of Study" mentions a contradictory point that exists in the study of Jainism, that is, by different methodologies, one may reach very different, even contradictory, conclusions about Jainism. These two seemingly unrelated theories somehow share a striking similarity. Therefore, in this article, by comparing and analyzing positioning and portrayal of women in the Jain tradition through different methodological approaches, I will argue that Sethi's framework of the women as both salvation sakers and temptress demonstrate the inconsistency between textual and anthropology methods in study of Jainism mentioned by Knut Aukland. The contradictions in Jainism reflect an aspect of religious functionalism, which is how religious practices and teachings adapt to society in response to the changing of the times.

Women in Doctrine: Temptress, Poison and Fire

The image of the female as temptress corresponds to the textual approach of Jain studies, showing both the strictest religious rules of antiquity and giving us a glimpse of the social environment of the time. According to a Jain census taken in the 1990s, there are about eight thousand female mendicants today, about four times as many as men (Sethi, 44). However, in

contrast to the number of mendicants, women appear only a handful of times in Jainism texts, and are also often given more negative qualities. Of the twenty-four Tirthankara, only one female (Mallinātha) exists, and her identity and gender are still disputed in different versions because of lack of enough evidence (Sethi, 47). The Digambara, a school of Jainism, has always believed that the nineteenth Tirthankara should be a male, because it claims that for an enlightened Jina who should be free of all karma, it is no longer appropriate to have worldly signs such as breasts and menstruated (Long, 19). In more texts, women are seen as natural seducers, lacking the capacity for abstinence. This is reflected both in the rules for male and female ascetics. In the male rules, women are portrayed as serpents, burning and dangerous hunters who disturb their minds and divert them from the right path. And in the rules for women, on the other hand, women are portrayed as vulnerable individuals, who are physically more flawed than men and unable to control their own desires. For example, in the *Brihatkalpabhashya*, which is a rules that particular for nun, nun are not allowed to hold fruit in elongated or oblong shape, because that was considered will stir sexual desires in nuns and influence their ascetic (Sethi, 52).

Admittedly, positive images of women also appear in the Jain text. One of the most famous examples is the story of Chandanbala, a Jain female renouncer who is said to have led a monastic order of 36,000 female ascetics (Sethi, 45). But the small number of female model stories still does not deny that male ascetics are viewed more positively in Jainism. For example, the male monk is portrayed more of a victim, needing to constantly protect his chastity from women (Sethi, 50). Also, by questioning women's ability to refuse sex and hold fast to their vows of celibacy, many monastic codes have almost unwittingly eliminated the presence of female monks, viewing them more as obstacles on the path of men seeking salvation (Sethi, 50).

If only by studying the scriptures of Jainism, the numerous negative portrayals of women would diminish the status of women in Jainism and lead to the conclusion that Jainism is not friendly to women, which can be compared with the phenomenon mentioned by Aukland in his argument that if we look only at the Jain texts, also known as "prescribed religion", the focus on non-violence will be very harsh and almost impossible to implement. In the study of Jainism texts, scholars have found textual evidence of Jainism in ancient Buddhist and Hindu sources, such as *nirgrantha*, and defined it as Jainism in the traditional sense (Aukland, 3). These texts focus on practices related to asceticism. The ultimate goal of orthodox Jainism is to obtain the liberation of the soul from a world of violence and suffering (Evans, 5). The violent events in Jainism range from inhaling tiny particles in the air to eating plants, and these practices are also largely impossible to accomplish without detaching oneself from any social or ethical structure (Evans, 5). A small group of Jains even commit to a hunger strike to the point of death in order to achieve their ultimate goal (Brett, 5).

From the perspective of the modern gaze, the description of practice and of women in the Jainism textual is harsh, strict and almost unattainable. But this phenomenon should be analyzed together with the context in which the text was produced. The long-standing male-dominated social structure and the ascetic culture of Brahminism may have contributed to these phenomena. As Aukland mentions in his article, the Jain texts provide a specific representation of 'Jainism', providing an "ideal" way of practice for religious practitioners, and is also the most intuitive response to society's attitude toward women's quest for liberation in the context of the times (3).

Women in life: Salvation Saker, Mothers and Virtuous Wives

In contrast to questioning women's capacity for abstinence, Jainism believes in women's ability to act as salvation saker, which coincides with anthropological observations in Jain studies,

showing that the religion changes to compromise with normal life. As mentioned in Aukland's paper, the religions of life are often not fixed and uniform, Jainism in life is not a set of teachings, but a way of life constituted by discussions and practices in the society around them (6). The practice of Jainism is not as harsh and rigid as the ancient texts. Jainism's impact on the community extends to every aspect of people's lives not simply by ritual (Evans, 7). The people of the Jain community may not be able to remember every rule from ancient text, but they practice a moral code rooted in the tradition of "non-violence" and discuss and practice Jainism (Aukland, 7). To quote a quote that appeared in an Ethnographic written by religious scientist Brett Evans for the Diaspora Jain Community, interviewees from the Jain Community believe that: "If walking in nature makes you think positive, if helping your neighbor, if being in the community anything that leads to ahimsa (non-violence), aparigraha (non-greediness), or anekantavada (non-one-sidedness) to me is promoting Jainism" (7).

This shift is also reflected in the attitudes of women. At a time when religion is inevitably entwined with secular matters, Jainism shows more inclusiveness towards women and tries to give them new value. Jainism's shift from viewing women as temptresses to accepting their religious values reflects how religion has adapted to society with the times. Unlike monks and nuns who completely reject secular things, the majority of Jains belong to the householder, meaning they have their own family and life. In the context of a time when abundant fertility was generally celebrated, fertility and family were often the two most common duties of women in secular life. As a result, other religions of the same period often chose to sacrifice women's religious competence for their role in the family. Brahminism, for example, regards the marital happiness of a married woman and the protection of her husband's interests as a primary duty, completely excluding women from religion (Sethi, 2). Jainism, on the other hand, encourages

female householders to have religious pursuits and uses the image of the great mother and good wife to somehow compromise the conflict between religious goals and secular life and to create a new religious pursuit based on life. When there is a clear competition between religious loyalty and duty to husband and family, Jainism resolves the conflict through the transformation of the family. Jainism believes that women are great not because they seek salvation for themselves, but because they serve as spiritual guides for their children and grandchildren (Sethi, 6). This transformation preserves the priority of the family without abandoning the ideal of a devout Jain woman (Sethi, 6).

Women's Contradictory Image: Functionalism Theory Behind the Scenes

The differences observed between the textual and anthropological approaches may be related to religious functionalism, and this theory can also be applied to the different images of women in Jainism. Kunt Aukland mentioned the contradictory point that was generated by using different methodologies in the study of Jainism (1). Jainism in anthropological methodological observation focuses more on the practice of religion and real life; whereas a text-focused approach would shift their attention to the more rigorous and ancient Jainism tradition (Aukland, 8). Sociologist Émile Durkheim stated religious functionalism in his book *The Elementary Form of Religious Life* that: “the function of religion and rituals is to reinforce social solidarity” (10). Therefore, depending on the needs of society, religion will change accordingly. For example, Evans Brett, in his survey of second-generation Jain immigrants in the United States, showed that the absence of the original religious authority and the increase in Western influence shifted the focus from ritual to moral practice (1). This change can be observed in an anthropological way but cannot be shown in Jainism texts, leading to a disconnect between different methodologies.

Religious functionalism can also be used to explain the contradictory images of women in Jainism. Both the temptress and the redeemer are female figures present in Jainism, this may be involved in the spread and development of Jainism in different stages. The portrayal of women in ancient literature tends to be closer to the Brahmanical paradigm, where the interests of the husband and family are paramount. And all women who depart from this paradigm are classified as temptresses. Because the main leaders of Jainism at this stage are majority men, women are less involved. At the same time, however, unlike Brahminism, Jainism practice raises the possibility of women's salvation and encourages them to pursue religious achievement to some extent. This heavily encouraged women's participation in religious affairs and expanded the influence of Jainism. Female ascetics were thus born, but in contrast to the traditional positioning of men away from family duties in society. The family system, rooted in the old society, gave women an irreplaceable reproductive function, and the demands of raising offspring prevented them from fully detaching themselves from secular life. The emergence of the Jain female head of household thus combines the conflict between the compromises of the female family and religious pursuits. For those women who completely relinquished their family responsibilities, they received religious permission on the one hand, but not full permission in the social sense. This disapproval may stem from a fear of reproductive vacancies in the community. Thus, in recognition of women's religious possibilities, later scriptures and popular stories were created in an attempt to bring women back into family life. This explains why Jainism gives women the ability to pursue liberation in practice, while questioning their ability to practice in scripture and undermining their religious status. A classic example is the story of Mayna Sundari. Mayna is a princess who is devoted to Jain values and performs strict ascetic practices, but this angers the king, her father. The king married Mayna to a leper and asked her to cure her husband from his

leprosy through asceticism and devotion. Mayna calmly taught her husband with the teachings of Jainism, turned him into a devout Jain, and because of their ascetic practices, her husband was miraculously cured (Sethi, 47). This example shows how Jainism balances the conflict between women's religion and family, but in some other versions, Mayna Sundari's religious fanaticism is taken away and the story becomes centered on her husband, the king who was cured of leprosy due to his wife's devotion (Sethi, 47). This shows how religion has weakened the religious status of women in response to social demands.

Conclusion and Future Path

The temptress image for women corresponds to the textual methods in study of Jainism, and believing women's capability as salvation saker corresponds to the anthropological observation in the study of Jainism. The observation for Jainism practice is more strict and rigid in textual methods and more flexible in anthropology methods; similarly the image of women in scripture is more stereotypical and negative, while the image in practice is more probative and tolerant. The differences in the observed images of women are related to religious functionalism, that is religion changes to some degree as society evolves and its inner rules and requirements change. In the contradictions and shifting images of women, we can get a glimpse of how religious thought inevitably interacts with secular matters, and the changing religious practices involved over time. As society evolves, traditions of practice derived from ancient scriptures may be refined and modified to make them more relevant to a given time.

At the same time, such modifications are inevitably rejected by "orthodoxies". They do not reject women as householders, but all possibilities of releasing women from their original gender identity. Religion makes us reflect on how we should view gender in religion, i.e., the cause of gender liberation, in a postmodern society that is constantly changing (Wilcox, 19). In her essay,

Sethi mentioned that Jainism offers a path for women at a time when South Asian religions have almost unanimously ruled out the possibility of salvation for women (43). Jainism's contradictions and inconsistencies show that it is still not exempt from the influence of secular society. Awareness of the changing nature of religion itself, and the uncertainty of "orthodoxy" itself, may open up a new path in religious practices.

Work Cited

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