

# FEMALE BODY, NUDITY AND SHAME IN JAINISM : A FEMINIST VIEWPOINT

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## Abstract

This article explores the Jain concept of the female body with regards to renunciation and attaining *mokṣa*. The probing into the concepts of Jainism is primarily based on the *Digambara* sect of Jainism and the fact that the *Digambara* sect denies complete renunciation to women nuns specifically because of the female body while the same is available to men. The female body is not only considered to be inferior but also in denying it the option of nudity the attainment of *mokṣa* is also taken away from the women nuns. This paper argues from a feminist standpoint that the shame which emanates from nudity of the female body is because of the male gaze and that the subjugation of the female body relegates her to an inferior status. At the same time, the given identity of the female body is an irrefutable one and the denying of spirituality on the basis of one's sex is an attempt at erasure of the very concept of being female.

**Key Words :** Nudity, shame, disgust, gaze, female body

Serenity Young in a review of Padmanabh S. Jaini's *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* says that both the sects of Jainism, the *Digambaras* (the sky clad) and the *Śvetāmbaras* (the white clad), agree at least that "being born a woman is having committed vices, such as cheating and crookedness, in other lives...[and that] once a person, female or male, is so advanced spiritually that they have generated the Jaina view of reality, called *samyaktva*, they cannot be reborn as a female. The highest wisdom, short of liberation itself, erases any

femaleness".<sup>1</sup> The ultimate aim of achieving deliverance or *mokṣa* from the relentless cycle of birth and death is believed to be achieved if one gives up the attachment to worldly luxuries and pleasures and lives an ascetic life. The problem is not one of easy dissemination of core ideals of Jainism to women to follow and assimilate them in their lifestyles but more of a conflict of ideology between the two primary sects of Jainism and in their conceptualization of attainment of *mokṣa*. One of the primary differences between the two sects lies in the concept of nudity. The *Digambaras* believe that ultimate salvation can never be achieved without nudity while the *Śvetāmbaras* do not consider nudity as essential for salvation. The *Digambaras*, through a logical implication, also therefore say that since women cannot or rather should not embrace nudity they can never achieve true *mokṣa*. One of the earliest texts to talk about salvation of women in Jainism is *Sūtraprābhṛta* (*Suttapāhuda*). Digambara Ācārya Kundakunda (c. 150 CE) is generally attributed to be the author of the text and he relates the necessity of nudity as also the biological factors due to which women cannot attain *mokṣa* :

According to the Teaching of the Jina, a person wearing clothes cannot attain *mokṣa* even if he be a Tirthaṅkara. The path of *mokṣa* consists of nudity (*nagna*); all other paths are wrong paths.

In the genital organs of women, in between their breasts, in their navels, and in the armpits, it is said [in the scriptures that] there are very subtle living beings. How can there be the mendicant ordination (*pravrajyā*) for them [since they must violate the vow of ahimsā]?

Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows. [Therefore] there is no meditation for them free from anxiety<sup>2</sup>

The reasons forwarded by the *Digambaras* for prohibiting nudity among women include the disgust generated in visualizing a naked woman and more importantly a naked, menstruating woman, the fear of sexual attack on women, as also inciting sexual

urges among men. This paper therefore contextualizes these reasons of negating nudity as emanating from the problem of male gaze which incites shame in women. This in turn paves the way for restricting women from attaining salvation and thereby depriving them merely on the basis of their sexual orientation which by itself is an irrevocable identity in this one cycle of life. The necessity to take rebirth as a man to attain salvation not only questions the status of the female body in itself but also relegates the necessity of a female body as a means to an end in itself. The paper will look into the ways in which the female body is construed in Jainism particularly among the *Digambaras* to come to an understanding regarding the limitations imposed upon it.

### **The Male Gaze and Shame**

The *Digambaras'* most important assertion for renunciation of this world is nudity as they believe that Mahāvīra also practised nudity. As a codicil to this argument they also argue that the female mendicant can never be completely a renouncer as she is incapable of nudity. Rather they insist that women should not adopt nudity as it can give rise to disgust and sexual desires in men along with possible sexual attacks on them too. Also, nudity gives rise to shame among women and therefore it is not a plausible option at all for women.<sup>3</sup>The fact that nudity gives rise to shame in the female body also posits the question of the visualization by the society. The male gaze is inextricably connected with the female body and thereby the body becomes a sexual identity which is then inscribed upon.

Shame as a human emotion is essentially derived from the judgement that a person receives from another person. Shame therefore is in many ways linked to visibility and arises from how one is seen by someone else to be doing something inappropriate. Aristotle cites a Greek proverb – *the eyes are the abode of shame* – to emphasize that shame is mainly associated with seeing and being

seen. Etymologically therefore, shame is connected with nakedness of the human body and somebody seeing the naked body.<sup>4</sup> The visual factor associated with shame is also associated with the concept of who sees and who is seen? The female body is not only grotesque but is also a site of shame as her nudity will eventually lead to humiliation and even sexual attack. However this conditioning of the female body is also a double bind as her nude body radiates shame while her covering of it is also because of her shame. The act of covering of her body originates from shame as otherwise it will display her body aroused in sexual desire. Only a body free of desires can be completely nude. On the other hand, the female body in its nude condition arouses sexual desires in others and therefore it cannot be nude. Digambara Ācārya Prabhācandra in the concluding part of *Nyāyakumudacandra* discusses about *strīmokṣa*. As regards to shame, the Digambara in a dialogue with an Yāpanīya says :

The same can be said about the presence of shame. It is not proper to say that shame is compatible with freedom from desire, for it is the nature of shame to wish to cover the loathsome parts of the body when one is aroused by desire.

A person who is free from desire will not feel shame; like a child; you consider nuns to be free from desire.

[However, since you maintain that nuns wear clothes in order to dispel shame, they therefore cannot be free from desire.]<sup>5,6</sup>

The process of instigating shame and shaming someone includes a subject-object relationship. The object is invariably gazed at while the subject gazes at the object. Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity* posits his argument that shame necessarily entails a loss of power. The observation of the object in this state of weakness is the main element of inducing shame. The subject gazes at the object to remind it of its state of being shamed or shameful and also emphasizes a loss of power.<sup>7</sup>

Another important aspect associated with the concept of power relations is the condition under which somebody is gazed at. In this

regard, Max Scheler's concept of shame in "Shame and the Feelings of Modesty" provides an important parameter to understand how shame originates. He gives the example of a coy woman posing nude for a painter. In this case, the woman does not feel any sense of shame as she is posing as a model and her state of nakedness is essentially to serve the purpose of art. The artist views her as a model for his art and not as a naked woman leading to a negation of any feelings of shame in her. If per chance, he looks at her even for an instance without his artistic glance she will immediately experience shame. The purpose of her being nude has changed and with it the gaze has also changed. She is no longer an almost asexual model but a woman very much imbued with sexuality. The shift in her sexuality is not one of her own doing but one that has arisen from the shift in the painter's viewpoint or gaze. However, shame as an emotion arises only in the woman and not in the man as it her experience of nudity that has transformed the situation from an aesthetic one to a sexual one.<sup>8</sup>Scheler's example is a powerful one as it conclusively shifts the onus of shame from the woman to the man. It is not the woman's fault that she has been shifted from an asexual being to a sexual one through the shift in the male gaze. Feminist theory predominantly exerts, unlike Scheler, that no vision is free of judgement or opinion formation, not even an artistic one. The vision is always formed through the notions with which the world is viewed. Feminism is therefore in a way reiterating an argument forwarded by E.H. Gombrich that any visual impression is followed by categorization of the vision however mundane or unimportant the vision is. There is nothing called an unbiased vision and all observations are a result of one's outlook and beliefs. At the same time, the feminist assertion that any depiction of women is marked by a male gaze engages within itself something more crucial than just the negation of the innocence of the eyes. Gender plays a pivotal role in determining how gaze is formulated. The gaze is therefore very much conditioned by male needs, desires, and beliefs. The society,

inclusive of man and woman, sees the world through the male eyes and thus a deep rooted conditioning takes place which regulates how women not only visualize how others see them but also how they see themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The *Digambaras'* insistence that the nude female body is a shameful one is thereby a flawed one which does not take responsibility for society's or men's own desire and sexual feelings. It is interesting to note here with relation to Scheler's example that if the nude female nun's body is attempted to be visualized as a venerable figure who has renounced the world then the problem of shame or desire does not arise. The onus lies squarely on who gazes rather than who is gazed at. Shame emerges through an essentially negative impression that one forms of oneself and is primarily based on the gaze of the society. Shame or embarrassment is guided to oneself when the individual feels that the society negatively assesses them or there is a possibility of one's social status being undermined (Brown, 2006; Burton, 2015; H. B. Lewis, 1971). Therefore, unlike the female nuns, for the male monks of the *Digambara* sect, there is no societal backlash as their state of nakedness is looked upon as a necessary action towards attaining salvation and is venerable. Thus, for the male monks no shame emanates from their nudity.

Liz Wilson in "'There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed': Resistance to Indian Cultural Conventions regarding Female Nudity" comments on two examples of nudity in Indian scriptures. The first is that of Draupadī and the second is that of Akka Mahadevi. She posits the question of shame with regards to nudity and says that nakedness can be seen "as a means of resistance against culturally determined understandings of the body for someone whose values run counter to those prevailing in the culture,...[or] can also serve as a means of shaming those who look".<sup>10</sup>In the course of her essay, Wilson says that Draupadī's refusal in Vyāsa's *Mahābhāratam* to wash or tie her hair after her humiliation in the court by Duṣśāsana is a form of protest in order

to display her condition in its violated form. She has vowed that she will wash, comb or braid her hair only after her humiliation is avenged through Duryodhana's death and she will wash her hair with Duryodhana's blood. The actual instance of her avengement takes place after a long period and in the intermediate years she resides in a state of dishevelment. Having been exposed in the court, she displays her violated condition to highlight the atrocious act committed against her. On the other hand, Draupadī in Mahashweta Devi's eponymous short story is a revolutionary who is gang raped by her captors as a means of making her submissive. After the rape, she is presented with a pot of water by the guard to wash herself and clothes to cover her up and make herself presentable for the Senanayak. Draupadī knocks down the pot of water and tears the cloth given to her with her teeth. She presents her naked body to the Senanayak as a protest against the violence done on her body. She conceives of her nakedness as a means to make her assailants feel ashamed as it is the nakedness in their looks that makes her naked in turn. It is the shamelessness of her captors which has induced them to rape her and thus she feels no shame regarding her naked body. On the other hand, she also acknowledges that if the man standing in front of her is a man of virtue then she would feel ashamed of her condition. Wilson then focuses on Akka Mahadevi's story where the protagonist is married to the local chieftain of her village. The marriage is an unsatisfactory one and Mahadevi does not like the sexual interest of her husband towards her. He is also not appreciative of her devotion to Lord Mallikarjuna. It is believed that after a particularly difficult incident, Mahadevi leaves her husband's house in disgust and in a state of nakedness barring her hair which covers her. Such an act is of course looked down upon in society but surprisingly her husband, a Jain himself, understands her action. He realises her act as similar to that of the *Digambara* monks, as one of renunciation of family life and earthly attachments. Mahadevi considers her state of nudity as one of renouncing her

worldly life, especially her husband, and therefore frees herself from all forms of gaze and all shame. The Lingāyata saints' community, with whom she started living, on the other hand asked her as to why she covered her body with her hair to which she replied that it was to protect her from human weakness rather than any shame on her part. The problem of female nudity therefore lies more squarely on the feet of societal gaze as both Draupadī and Mahadevi feel inhibited by it albeit so in different circumstances.

Wilson's account of Akka Mahadevi's nudity and her subsequent residence with the Lingāyata saints prove that there have been religious sects in India which do not frown upon female nudity and accept it easily. This account also proves that female nudity by itself is not one which can ipso facto give rise to shame. It is the viewpoint or outlook with which a nude body is visualized that gives rise to shame and fear. Mahadevi covered her body with her hair not because she felt ashamed of herself but because she felt that society cannot control itself while feasting their eyes on her naked body. Mahadevi's character could absolve herself of all shame associated with nudity and the community into which she sought refuge visualized her as a renouncer and a nun rather than a sexual female body. Similarly, naked *Digambara* monks are not repulsive nor do they exhibit shame as their nakedness is primarily viewed from a religious perspective rather than a worldly one. The evocation of shame is thus a clever societal policy through which the female body is not only sexualized but also kept in control.

### **Impurity and the Female Body**

The female body in Jainism is also a source of negation as it is primarily the sexual functions of the body which denies a woman of attaining *mokṣa*. Integral to the notion of sexuality in Jainism is the concept of *veda* which implies sexual orientation but is not essentially related to gender. There are three basic kinds of sexual feeling, *strīveda*, *pumveda* and *napuṃsakaveda*, which are attributes of



sexual feelings of a woman, man, and a hermaphrodite respectively. In opposition to generally understood concepts of sexuality, in Jainism however these are not considered to be related to the biological gender of the person. Therefore, a person can be a male because of his anatomical makeup (*dravyapuruṣa*) but he can be a female due to his emotional or psychological makeup (*bhāvastri*).<sup>11</sup>

The *Digambaras* not only harbour a distrust of the female body but also have profound disgust towards it particularly a menstruating body. Meghavijaya, acting as a representative of the *Digambara* ideology, postulated that the flow of menstrual blood each month is evidence of an impure body. Menstruation is a taboo in many patriarchal societies all over the world but Jainism inscribes the female body with violence in the process of menstruation. The Jain view looks at specific parts of the woman's body like the genital organs, the space between the breasts, the armpits, and the navel as breeding grounds to a large number of microscopic organisms termed as *aparyāptas*. These organisms are killed through the daily activities of the woman's body and at the same time the organisms give rise to an itching in her genitals which can be relieved only through intercourse. The situation therefore posits her in a double bind as she is not only guilty of not practising the fundamental Jain principle of *ahimsā* but also is never free from sexual desires which again act as an impediment to attaining spirituality.<sup>12</sup> A woman's body or rather anatomy is thus an immediate hindrance to the path of *mokṣa* and it is something which she can hardly shed in her lifetime.

The fact that the female body evokes feeling of disgust and repulsion is intricately connected to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject in *Power of Horror*. The concept of abject was used by Kristeva to refer to things which give rise to disgust and repulsion and in the process of doing so those who are abject are placed outside the ambit of society, community etc. Kristeva thus looks at the process of menstruation not necessarily as one which is impure

or unclean but rather as one which disrupts borders. Mary Douglas carries forward the concept of impurity associated with the human body, particularly with the female body, and says that the concept of dirt depends on the diverse interpretations in different societies and culture. She refers to dirt as not an absolute concept but merely as “matter out of place” and relates the concepts of purity, cleanliness, pollution and taboo with a social order that determines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> In conjunction with Douglas’ views, it is the conception of Jain society especially the *Digambaras* which visualizes dirt placed outside the female body as something which can be wiped or cleaned away with a simple *piṣchī* (peacock fan). On the other hand, the same dirt when it is placed on the female body makes her ineligible for salvation in this life. With regards to bodily fluids emanating from the body, another feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz argues that across societies bodily fluids are not given the same status.<sup>14</sup> Grosz thus criticizes Kristeva for looking at the menstrual blood as impure while categorizing semen or tears as non-polluting.<sup>15</sup> The same semen which flows from the male body to provide relief to the ‘itching’ that the female body feels is thus not categorized as disgusting by Jainism but the body into which it flows into is a disgusting one. Shauna MacDonald thus says that patriarchy visualizes the male body as ideal which is able to control within itself the flow of bodily fluids like semen. On the other hand, the female body is looked down as the ‘other’ as it is unable to control the flow of menstrual blood. The age old customs of hiding the fact that the female body is menstruating is a means through which the patriarchal structure and norms are maintained. MacDonald thus makes a very valid argument of differentiation of the female and male body where the ‘leak’ of the female body lays bare the fact that men and women are inherently different. Women are neither men nor can they exist as men.<sup>16</sup> The inherent difference in the male and female bodies is therefore a pure biological factor which is irrefutable by itself. The subjugation of the female body based on

her biological sex is in fact an inherent violence on her body and the accusation of committing violence because of normal bodily functions is thus a means through which the original violence remains hidden.

### **Subjugation and Repression of the Female Body**

The path to salvation as laid out by the *Digambaras* is a complete renunciation of earthly possessions and attachment to which they add clothing as a form of possession. Female prohibition to nudity however does not imply that Jainism does not have any woman renouncers. There a large number of nuns in Jainism who have renounced the world and have moved forward with their ascetic life. However, the female body has been looked upon as inherently sexual in nature which creates a host of problems for these female renouncers where their vow of celibacy is questioned. Texts such as *Bṛhatkalpasūtra*, *Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya*, *Ṇīśītha Churni* and *Āvaśyaka-niryukti* describe the strict rules that women mendicants have to follow to keep their sexuality and sexual desires in control. Some of these rules include not allowing a nun from venturing out alone and also wearing eleven types of clothes while travelling. At the same time, some of the rules verge on the ludicrous and even prohibit nuns from using vegetables and fruits of an elongated or oblong shape. Such objects are phallic in structure and can give rise to sexual desires or can be used for fulfilment of sexual pleasures. Any stimulation of sexual organs or accidental touch of an animal is completely prohibited and strict penalties imposed in case of any aberration. The primary logic behind such an argument is that many women seek asceticism as a refuge from the chaos of life and therefore, by nature, unable to restrain their sexual urges. Complete renunciation on their part is not possible. The monk, on the other hand, is cautioned against such women lest he loses his chaste nature due to cunningness of such women. The dichotomy of the situation is evident from the

fact that nudity is prohibited so that the woman can be saved from the society and her clothed self needs to be saved from herself.<sup>17</sup>

The female body thereby becomes an abject existence which is forced into the process of normalisation. The body of the Jain nun is thus one which is attempted upon to overcome the very notion of being a woman, a body not only alienated from the society but also from itself. Judith Butler reconstitutes the concept of abject as different from that of Kristeva and says that what is considered as abject falls within the purview of outside and inside. The formation of the abject also necessitates “a domain of abject beings” who remain outside the “domain of the subject”.<sup>18</sup> Butler further argues that the subjugation of the abject being is dependent “not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects”.<sup>19</sup> The subjugation of the nuns is therefore also one where the nuns themselves co-relate to create a condition of being oppressed while remaining within the order of Jainism as nuns.

### **The Renouncer and the Temptress**

Some of the concepts on the basis of which the process of initiation (*dīkṣā*) takes place include a denial, rejection, or change of the earlier life and in the case of women this process is more pronounced than men. Historically in India, women have always been conceived to be unable to attain spirituality or live an ascetic life primarily because of their sexuality, emotional ties and family relations. The women are both glorified and censured because of their physicality. The attachment that a woman displays towards her family members is perceived to be a great deterrent to her achieving asceticism. The public imagination or the religious mindset of Jainism primarily views women as more attached to the worldly affairs which make renunciation of this life difficult for them. The very fact for which women are revered, her fecundity

and loyalty to family, makes her ineligible for renunciation and even if she does so it is viewed to be of a lesser degree than men. The Jain nun upon renunciation of an earlier life is not conceived to be wholly immersed in her religious life and is rather viewed to be in a luminal state or being within the Jain religious structure.<sup>20</sup>

Nalini Balbir puts forward another negative aspect that Jainism connects with women and it involves looking at the woman as a temptress. A woman is viewed as an obvious danger to the fourth vow among the five vows taken by the monk. The fourth vow is a vow of chastity which is one of the most difficult vows to adhere to and thus a woman always is seen as a threat to the monk. A woman is such a grave danger to a monk that even talking to her is prohibited and any talking done with or about women is termed as *vikahā* (bad talk). The five vows are interconnected to each other and thus breaking one vow signifies breaking others too which negates the state of mendicancy for the monk. The onus of the breaking of vows lies with the woman rather than with the man himself and there are lengthy treatises based on the wickedness of women who make monks break their vows. At the same time, Balbir also says that some scholars have pointed out that such tales about women's wickedness should be read only as means to warn the monks of the pitfalls involved in the process of renunciation and asceticism.<sup>21</sup> Balbir adds that the prejudiced mindset shared by Jains with other Indians visualize the woman as being erratic, deceitful, impure, and lacking determination.<sup>22</sup> She further points out that according to one Jain argument, a woman has been compared to an incurable disease and the birth of a female is the result of bad *karmas*.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

It would be wrong to say that Jainism is completely opposed to women or that women have only a subjugated existence. This paper has analyzed the position of women and that too only those

who renounce the world primarily from the perspective of the *Digambara* sect. The *Śvetāmbaras* neither consider nudity to be a prerequisite for salvation nor believe that women cannot attain salvation. At the same time, the position of a married woman and duties and functions associated with married life is different from that of the nun and those aspects have not been interrogated here. However, the Jain way of life in which renunciation is an option for many is not necessarily the only austere form of life. From the perspective of a laywoman pursuing her familial duties, life is full of duties pertaining to austerity and the onus of which lies predominantly on the woman member of the house hold. It is also to be realized that the harsh nature of the duties and regulations imposed on women renouncers do subscribe to the view that women are considered to be inferior than men as also impure and vile in nature. The innate defiling of the female body does prove that it is the sexuality of the female body which proves to be a source of fear and danger to the society.

At the same time, it is necessary to understand that the nuns by themselves may be complicit in their docile status and are desirous of the position that they have aspired to or have achieved. A feminist activist outlook might even be difficult to apply under such circumstances. It should also be asserted here that Jainism as a religion does have important women figures like Māllī Devi, Chandanbālā, Rājīmatī, Maru Devi, Trishala etc who are revered and held in high position. The fact however remains that like most religions in the world, Jainism and particularly the *Digambara* sect, is patriarchal in its treatment of women and there remains much space for improvement. Jain literature on *strīmokṣa* has visualized the female body as one associated with shame, sexual desire and violence. *Mokṣa* in the real sense of the term is difficult to attain in this *kaliyugā* but denial of even the possibility of doing so simply on the basis of one's sexual orientation is an attempt of erasure of the very essence of being born a female.

**NOTES :**

1. Young, "Review: *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*, by Padmanabh S. Jaini." 206.
2. Translation of verses 6-8 of the *Sūtraprābhṛta* in *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*, 35.
3. Goldman, "Introduction. *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women*." xix-xx.
4. Dolezal, *The Body and Shame*, 4.
5. Translation of verse 67 of the *Nyāyakumudacandra* Jaini in *Gender and Salvation*, 127.
6. *Strīmokṣa* in *Nyāyakumudacandra* is not only about shame and nudity. It discusses many other aspects of female salvation.
7. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*. 220-221.
8. Scheler, *Shame and the Feelings of Modesty*. 15
9. Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts". 337.
10. Wilson, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed." 139.
11. Goldman, xviii
12. *Ibid.*, xix
13. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.
14. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 199.
15. *Ibid.*, 207
16. MacDonald, "Leaky performances", 348-349.
17. Sethi, "Chastity and desire", 52.
18. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xiii
19. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination". 126.
20. Vally, "Ambiguous Symbol", 134.
21. Balbir, "Women in Jainism", 130-131.
22. *Ibid.*, 129
23. *Ibid.*, 134

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