



## Encountering Women Identity in the Face of Religion: A study of S. L. Bhyrappa's *Aavarana: The Veil*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to look at S. L. Bhyrappa's 2014 novel *Aavarana: the Veil* as a text which problematises the issue of woman identity vis-à-vis religion. Religion in its institutionalized form has often served as a site of power and conflict and gender roles have been determined by the religious rituals, practices and customs ascribed to men and women. Women are born into the religion of the male member, i.e. the father and after marriage, adapt to the religious practices prevalent in her husband's family. In the formation of women identity, religion operates at different subtle levels. Mehrdad Darvishpour in "Islamic Feminism: compromise or challenge to feminism?" rightly observes: "Generally, religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders." The identity of women is often manipulated by how they are viewed in religious practices and scriptures. What means to be an ideal woman is determined by her roles in the observance of various religious rituals and customs, irrespective of the religion in question. Every religion determines certain roles and responsibilities for the women in it to prove themselves to be conventionally ideal women, displaying unquestionable loyalty to and profound faith in the religion of her father or husband. This, in a sense, naturalises her inferiority to the male members of that religion and of the society, in general. In my paper, I will try to show how this vicious connection between patriarchy and institutionalized religion which tends to stereotype women, operates to problematise the identity of Lakshmi alias Razia, the protagonist and how religion turns out to be a tool of patriarchy to curb her physical, sexual, intellectual and ideological freedom.

### Keywords

women identity, patriarchy, institutionalized religion, stereotype

Gender roles and consequent identity formation undergo social, cultural, political and religious filters, discussion on the last among which has often been treated a taboo in Indian societies. Moreover, in the formation of women identity, religion operates at different subtle levels. Mehrdad Darvishpour in “Islamic Feminism: compromise or challenge to feminism?” rightly observes: “Generally, religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders.” The identity of women is often manipulated by how they are viewed in religious practices and scriptures. Al Hibri writes, “God was declared male, and man was declared to be created in His likeness. Eve became the symbol of temptation and sin. The woman was consequently judged as a less likely candidate for salvation and an everlasting life in heaven than man” (176). What means to be an ideal woman is determined by her roles in the observance of various religious rituals and customs, irrespective of the religion in question. Every religion determines certain roles and responsibilities for the women in it to prove themselves to be conventionally ideal women, displaying unquestionable loyalty to and profound faith in the religion of her father or husband. This, in a sense, naturalises her inferiority to the male members of that religion and of the society, in general. S. L. Bhyrappa’s 2014 novel *Aavarana: The Veil* which deals with issues like religious fanaticism, orthodoxy can be explored to discover the inherent connection between institutionalized religion and patriarchy and its role in the oppression of women. The patriarchal society has always been keen to use the advantageous position of religion being a sensitive and controversial issue to manipulate women identity, thereby marginalizing them. In my paper, I will try to show how this vicious connection between patriarchy and institutionalized religion which tends to stereotype women, operates to problematise the identity of Lakshmi alias Razia, the protagonist and how religion turns out to be a tool of patriarchy to curb her physical, sexual, intellectual and ideological freedom.

S. L. Bhyrappa’s 2014 novel *Aavarana: The Veil*, originally written in Kannada, is about a woman’s journey from one religion to another and her futile attempt at asserting her identity without the label of any religion. As the novel progresses through flashback and does not have a chronological narration of events, the protagonist’s search for an individual identity, irrespective of religion, becomes all the more complex. Bhyrappa has maintained, throughout his writing career, even in the face of acute opposition and controversy regarding his aforementioned novel that he has set out in his journey to unveil the truth regarding the institutionalized forms of two major religions prevalent in India. He has always declared that it was his long suppressed desire to expose the bitter truth, by unveiling the history and by setting it in a modern Indian context. He has been subjected to widely circulated criticism, and accused of a biased representation of the picture of India, from the perspective of religion. So, how far he has been able to tell the ‘truth’ or how objective he is in his representation of the characters of those two religions, are, ultimately, subject to a longer discussion in a different vein. But if we study the novel from a feminist perspective, it will open up conflicting areas between conventional religion and individual women identity. Religion, as a convention, has continued to manipulate women identity, by linking it to certain roles prescribed for them and they are expected to behave in a certain way, and in determining these roles, religion plays a significant role. Religion becomes a significant part of culture and society. In a particular

socio-cultural context, women identity is subjected to various manipulating religious agencies and their approval to consider a woman as 'ideal' becomes important.

As the novel opens, we find the protagonist Razia, along with her husband, Amir, visiting Hampi's ruins in Karnataka, as a part of a significant government project of making documentaries on the major heritage sites in India. The ambience was one of melancholy where Razia was in a resigned mood, after visiting the Hampi ruins. Amir, on the other hand, was apprehensive about his prospective future and Razia's silence keeps on disturbing him, for she was centrally associated with the project. Amir's failure to demystify Razia's silence leads to the birth of an anxiety in him. The Hampi project would report directly to the central government's Heritage Department, for which Razia and Amir have been together for quite a long time, but the relationship between them has already turned bitter. Razia, as she is referred to in the initial pages of the novel, seems to have turned into a silent, non-reciprocating wife and Amir, her husband, is seen to try breaking her silence through various ways. But it is only much later in the novel that we come to know about Razia's original name and identity. She had been a Hindu before her marriage and had reluctantly converted to Islam at the time of her *nikah* with Amir whom she had loved too deeply to consider any religious differences. After falling in love, she had decided to marry Amir, against the wish of her Gandhian father who would never allow an inter-religious marriage. Amir had promised her that this conversion was only a show and it would never affect anything associated to her life. Amir convinced her that he was also a progressive-minded individual who did not consider religion as essential in one's life. He said: "Listen carefully: your conversion is merely circumstantial and strategic. It's just a change of name. Remember, our marriage is also an effort at achieving a larger purpose—to build a society shorn of religion, the opium of the masses" (Bhyrappa 15).

This is how we come to know about the religion she was born into. Though it is initially apparent that her individual identity faces obstacles only after her marriage and her conversion to Islam, gradually it can be realized that every religion in its institutionalized form sets out to brand, label, oppress and marginalize women. Women especially those who are dissenters in the eyes of institutionalized religion, are targeted at, to ensure the so-called sanctity of that particular religion, for it is difficult to condition their brains to conform to whatever is preached. Thus, religious institutions tend to overpower independent-minded women, by imposing certain feminine behavioural patterns on them, according to which, their identity as 'pious' or 'transgressor' is determined. Religious institutions, thus, becomes sites of power and conflict, too. Lakshmi's case is no exception.

Thus, Lakshmi, the original Hindu name of Razia was officially abandoned and she had to carry her new name to which she could not relate, but as her progressive mind allowed her not to believe in such impositions like given names to be markers of her identity, she did not take it so deeply. She seemed to take it a bit lightly, as she did not realize the gravity of the situation she has herself chosen to create. But her 'new' life at her in-laws' proved her profound belief in Amir's words to be not only false, but also strategic. She was expected to play the role of a devout Muslim wife, by following certain rituals. Lakshmi "genuinely believed that all religions were meaningless nonsense

designed by capitalists to exploit people” and to her, “it was equally absurd to learn and practice the customs of another religion” (Bhyrappa 18). She felt suffocated and stifled to follow the restrictions her mother-in-law suggested to her to. Whenever she did not maintain the rules and regulations prescribed by her, her mother-in-law declared: “You are not a good Muslim woman if you do this” (22). In order to become a ‘good Muslim woman’, she had to follow certain rituals and maintain certain restrictions which are nothing but impositions of patriarchy to label women in order to naturalise their subordination and marginalization.

It is only after her marriage with Amir and her conversion to Islam that Lakshmi realized the inevitable agreement between patriarchy and institutionalized religion, irrespective of the belief working as a force behind it. She realized how her ‘staunchly Gandhian’ father’s comment was deeply influenced by patriarchal values, by suggesting Amir’s conversion to Hinduism: “If he truly loves you with the intensity that you say he does, let him become a Hindu and change his name. You will have my blessings.” (14) But when she decided to choose her love over her daughterly duties towards her father, his decisive words took this form: “You’re no longer my daughter...I disown you, not just until I’m alive but forever.” (15) The acute hatred that led her father to forsake her for his entire life and to keep up his stance even after his death seems to have been driven by the fact that she was a woman. Her father’s social activism and generosity towards mankind in general spoke of a different truth. Even Lakshmi herself was doubtful about the reason of such an uncontrollable rage that he did not soften even at the news of his daughter’s pregnancy: “It was the sheer moral face of his personality that changed people’s hearts. I couldn’t even dream that this person was capable of such filial ruthlessness...and for what? Because I was about to convert to Islam? ...Was that reason enough for him to kill his love for his own daughter?” (16) Later when she went back to her village, after the death of her father, she faced questions regarding her identity. She felt like an outsider in her own house, and the neighbours crammed her with questions like: “Why is your forehead blank, my child? When did your husband die?” (54) As a married Hindu woman, it is customary to wear a bindi or to use vermilion, while in conventional Islamic view; either of these is strictly forbidden for women. Lakshmi, in her journey towards Razia, while marrying Amir and again in her journey back to Lakshmi, in her return to her father’s village to fulfil her responsibilities as a daughter, fluctuates between these two positions. A progressive, self-reliant modern film-maker like her fails to acknowledge the truth and says: “I had worn it. I guess it must’ve fallen off.” (55) In this way, not only the presence of such identification marks on a woman’s body, but its absence, too, can be viewed as patriarchal tools to mark women as ‘conquered’ by men.

The oppressions and restrictions that Lakshmi has to face as Razia, in the name of religion, are, nonetheless, never tolerated silently. She breaks into vehement protests against such discriminations between the treatment of men and women, in conventional religious practices. She gives an example:

“Like any typical Muslim family, my house was split into two quarters—the mardana and the zenana. The zenana ...was separated from the mardana, the front portion of the house, by a huge wall. If a male visitor

was spotted at the gate, the custom was to shout ‘Ghosha! Ghosha!’ The women of the house would then retire to the inner quarters—or simply concealed themselves behind a wall or door. A male member or a woman servant would talk to the visitor and accompany him to the gate to ensure that he had left the house.” (Bhyrappa 22)

But the cruellest act to be considered from Lakshmi alias Razia’s perspective, was Amir’s betrayal in breaking the promise to her and also the myth that he was an individual without any kind of religious bias, declaring: “I don’t believe in religion, any religion... We’ll remain bonded with nothing but love.” (15) He not only persuaded her to follow the religious rituals and instructions of her mother-in-law, but also pronounced triple *talaq* on her, all of a sudden. That Amir is not that progressive-minded, unorthodox artist he seemed to be, was realized by Lakshmi through persuasions like “Please compromise a bit” (23) to orders like “Wear a black gown when you’re at home” (23) or “Eat a bit of beef, rarely” (25) and so on. Razia, being a free-spirited lady, however, failed to “vanish inside a *burqa* and murder [her] individuality with [her] own hands” (26). The greatest blow from Amir came when he, in a fit of rage, gave *talaq* to Razia, and if the scene is studied properly, it would be clear that not Razia’s transgressions against her adopted religion, but her indomitable power and dignity not to bow down to any kind of orthodoxy, that hurt Amir and led him to decide to give *talaq* to his wife. When Amir’s “left hand grabbed [her] hair roughly, pushing [her] neck down. She could sense his right hand raised high in the air, waiting to strike [her]” (27). But Lakshmi, being a girl of relentless determination, declared on Amir’s face, “Leave me! Now! If I turn around and slap you even once, nothing, nothing will help you regain your *mardaan*, your manhood!” (28) This threat to his ‘*mardaan*’ humiliated his self-esteem to a great extent. So, he decided to teach her a lesson, as a result of her disobeying the husband, the human embodiment of God or Allah, often considered a male god, by denouncing her: “A wife like you only deserves *talaq*. *Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!*” (28)

Although Lakshmi initially failed to grasp the strangeness of the entire episode, she gradually came to realize that Amir had been most serious in his announcement of *talaq* or breaking of their marriage or *nikah*: “I’ve already completed the first round of *talaq*. Two more to go. I’ll complete that formality in the next two months. I’m sleeping next to you only because it is also part of the formality during the duration of *Iddat*—by not touching you despite sleeping next to you, I’d have proven that we are not compatible” (30). This is how Amir used the issue of ‘triple *talaq*’ as a means to prove men’s superiority over women. Lakshmi who had converted herself into Razia, only for the sake of her sheer love for Amir, found no point in maintaining her Muslim identity any more. She clearly realized that “by pronouncing *talaq* he’s used the special privilege reserved only for men in his religion” (29). It was her inability to do the same to Amir that made her utter: “I felt betrayed” (29). Patriarchy, in this way, has devised ways in which the independent-minded women, who refuse to give up their individuality in the face of patriarchal pressure, are subdued, suppressed and oppressed. Lakshmi felt the same way: “My mind conjured the analogy of a powerful, untamable beast, which he had trapped into his bone by deceit and was now torturing at will” (29). Religious practices and customs have always, in this way, essentialised women’s participation in establishing

male superiority. Women's role has been central to such customs, for it is they who are expected to protect the inner sanctum of the entirely politicized domain of institutionalized religiosity, by keeping their purity intact and by proving their obedience to their male guardians. Therefore, it is important to note the fact, as pointed out by Lakshmi's father's friend, Professor Sastri that "if [Amir] had married an original Muslim lady working in the theatre and film world, I'm sure you would've had the same clashes in your family" (39). As Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh observe in their article "Women's Rights in the Muslim World: Reform or Reconstruction?": "Protecting Muslim women from Western influences, therefore, is an essential tenet for Islamists. The urgency in distancing Muslim women from Western values presents profound questions regarding the extent to which Muslim women can and should draw on Western feminism and its guiding principles." (1490) Lakshmi expressed similar doubts about the labels that were given to her by the society: "Razia Querishi. Feminist. Progressive. Egalitarian. Potent combination of courage, rationality, scientific temper and the rest. Labels, all of them. Given by people who assigned it to themselves and doled it out to their followers and peers" (Bhyrappa 97).

The entire issue was further complicated when Amir did not give talaq to Razia, an act which could have cleared her position and determined her identity to some extent. But Amir's refusal to give her talaq left her torn between Lakshmi and Razia, a Hindu and a Muslim, thereby making her bound to both her male guardians—her Hindu father and her Muslim husband. She was sometimes forced to feel that she had failed to fulfil her daughterly duties to her father, by marrying out of her own choice and this conditioning led, to a great extent, to her frantic desperation to complete her father's incomplete work of writing a novel on Islamic past in India. On the other hand, she was made to feel that there must have been something lacking in her wifely responsibilities:

I suppose it's my fault. An ideal wife should wash her husband's clothes, press them, cook the food he loves and give him pleasure in bed. Either she should do all this or get them done by a maid...well, all except the pleasure-giving bit. But why does a wife need to be an ideal wife in an age when she works out of home like men do—in offices, construction sites, buses and hospitals? (Bhyrappa 137)

The politics inherent in the formulation of women's identity, is, thus, linked, very significantly, to the identity of their male counterparts. Amir, though initially shown as a progressive, open-minded individual, ultimately turns out to be a victim to dogma and age-old meaningless rituals ascribed to religion. But how far Amir himself is to be blamed is another significant question. Is he really responsible for Lakshmi's condition? Or if he is really to be blamed for this, to what extent is he responsible? The question remains. If it is perceived properly, though Amir is himself a victim to the system, his fault lies in the fact that he fails to come out of the vicious circle jointly created by religion and patriarchy. Amir, as a man, and as a Muslim, has been given that privileged position and here comes the question of power operating over women's roles and identity. Amir is enraged at Lakshmi's dissent, because he is not used to it.

The idea, that Amir's privileged position as a man had given him a privilege in religious views, disgusted the so-called progressive-minded Razia who failed to even

severe all relationship with her husband, even after his marrying another lady. While she was living in her native village, Narasapura, in order to write a novel on her father's research on ancient history of temple destructions in India, and 'neglect'-ing her wifely duties to Amir, religious issues became the greatest and unbreakable barrier between the two:

'Answer me, Amir! You must answer me, my angry Amir! I know you are upset because your bibi doesn't come to you as often as she must...At least tell me what's upset you this badly? If I've done something, I'm willing to rectify it.'

'Why have you begun to hate Islam of late? ... You've joined the anti-Muslim brigade and you've been brainwashed.' (Bhyrappa 148-9)

This was the actual reason behind Amir's marrying for the second time. Lakshmi alias Razia vented out: "...just as [Amir] expects me to go there and satisfy his needs, why hasn't it ever occurred to Amir that he could come to Narasapura just once and satisfy mine? Barely two hour of driving. His excuse that he is a Muslim and that the villagers here won't take kindly to him is not credible." (137) She is right in pointing out that citing such a reason is only an excuse to prove that it is the duty of the wife to come to 'serve' her husband and not the other way round.

Amir's second wife, Zubeida, was also subjected to the same patriarchal values embedded in him, for he was ready to give her *talaq*, as soon as Razia agreed to stay with him. The availability of advantages like triple *talaq* is somehow useful to persons like Amir to exploit more than one wife at the same time. When Amir met Razia at the ministry's meeting in Delhi, he wanted to assert his right over his first wife, for he had not yet completed the three phases of *Iddat*, after pronouncing triple *talaq* on her:

He flashed a playful smile before continuing, 'Anyway. Forget them. I want to stay with you. At least tonight.'

'Did you plan that before coming here?'

'Why should I? We're husband and wife.'

'Which means you have a right over me. Because you haven't said *talaq* yet. You just want to keep me. Right?'

'Right. And I won't. Ever. Tell me now. I'll give *talaq* to Zubeida. Right now!...' (Bhyrappa 343)

Zubeida, as a devout Muslim woman and a devoted Muslim wife, stood in a no better position than Razia, for she could also be abandoned any moment by her husband. Being economically dependent on her husband and without enough formal education, she was actually going to suffer a worse fate than Razia who could be independent at least in material terms.

Thus, Lakshmi alias Razia's question to Professor Sastri becomes the universal question of womanhood: "Sir, you told me that Islam is the only religion rooted in egalitarianism. Because my questions made Amir uncomfortable, he pronounced *talaq* just like that on the wife who had abandoned everything for him because his religion gives him that privilege. Where do I now stand, sir? Do you have any solutions for me?" (Bhyrappa 37)

But Lakshmi does not collapse before the religious oppressions inflicted upon her, and, instead, stands erect to face every challenge that Amir, his parents or the *Talibghi* on one hand, and her father or the dwellers of Narasapura on the other pose to her. Therefore, it may also suggest a kind of contradictory idea, as Fatima Mernessi, a famous Arab feminist, observes:

In Western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in the biological inferiority of woman. In Islam, it is the contrary: the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for constraining her power (16).

Lakshmi's sexuality, too, can be seen as a threat to the so-called male superiority of both Amir and Professor Sastri who come back to her again and again to prove that.

Lakshmi alias Razia, however, becomes the representative of every woman who has either broken the boundaries of the religion 'naturally' ascribed to them or has tried to form an individual identity, to be free from all religious repercussions. The ending of the novel, significantly, reminds one of Leila Ahmed's insistences "that Muslim women are able to work out their own path toward egalitarian gender relations from within their tradition" (Riesebrodt 454). The protagonist of Bhyrappa's novel embodies this possibility. Though she apparently fails to free herself from all religious boundaries, her indomitable courage and unbreakable mentality and also the open ending of the novel seem to lead to positive changes, as far as the status of women is concerned in the backdrop of religion.

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