

GENDERING OF ART THROUGH RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM: MAPPING DEPICTIONS OF FEMININE SEXUALITY IN HINDU TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

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I

INTRODUCTION

There always exists a strong male desideratum to force women into a theoretical space from where they are forced to reproduce the masculine (Irigaray, 1983: 117).

It is from this very conceptual position that we can trace the attribution of patriarchic hegemony. Male superiority has persisted, somewhat as a universal phenomenon, throughout the ages and manifests itself in different forms of intellectual endeavours and institutional practices that a patriarchic society engages in. These practices, by portraying different aspects of women's life from the prism of male suitability, tend to inflate patriarchy in such a manner that even a de-sexualized subject appears to be submitting to the cultural space created by the masculine re-construction of itself and the feminine. The attempt, thus, has been to conceptualize the feminine in the service of masculine self-representation and women so projected emerge as a figure of male desire, a phantasm of the male imaginary, who is appropriated in order to perpetuate male superiority (Robinson, 1989: 306).

One prominent mode of doing this has been the erotic representations of female bodies, amorous behaviour and heterosexual practices in diverse patterns of cultural articulation. The projection of a woman's body and passion as a commodity, and/or a seductive instrument, in the intellectual products emanating out of developed mental faculty of civilized human beings, be it in the form of material culture, or non-material forms of cultural expression, to instigate male gaze exemplifies this phenomenon.

In this regard, there arises a strong need for examining as to how the visual culture embodies women's sexual identity and also the necessity of analyzing the extent of culture's use and abuse of women's bodies (Breazeale 1986: 56). In view of this, the aim of this paper has been to make an epistemological inquiry into the ways in which the architectural representations embodied in Hindu temples have emerged as sites depicting aspects of female sexuality in the service of male gaze. Through this, the attempt here has been to map the genealogies of feminine sexuality, as archaically imbricated in the Indian psyche. The paper seeks to demonstrate as to how the archaeologies of patriarchy can manifest themselves through temple architecture wherein feminine sexuality is located in apparent masculine ontology. It is in the framework of this ontology, the paper argues, that feminine sexuality is pictured as being subservient to the male interests and woman's identity itself conditioned in the Manichean divide between a good household woman and a bad whore. The paper concludes by stating that Hindu temples, by virtue of being agencies of religion, tend to provide sacralized spaces to stage such patriarchic endeavours and in this way, impart a ritualistic legitimacy to the entire process.

II

ARTISTIC DEPICTIONS IN HINDU TEMPLES

Every religion is engaged in misogyny in one way or the other. 'Many of the world's traditions, cultures, including those practised within formerly conquered or colonized nation-states, are quiet distinctly patriarchal' (Okin, 1999: 14; 17). Hinduism is not an exception in this regard. The epitomes of Hindu religiosity, evident in the specifically Hinduised literature, art and architecture, are replete with misogynous representations. They constitute crucial sub-structures of the larger social framework that have subverted the agency of women. Exhibiting this tendency, the *Manu Smriti*, the ancient Indian Hindu code of law, has stereotyped women as soft and supine, justifying the masculine control over their socio-cultural behaviour as well as their constant surveillance by male kinsmen, whether father (childhood), husband (youth) or son (old age). It has essentialised women into mere domesticated selves. Treating women at par with property, it laid great restrictions on their sexuality by increased emphasis on feminine chastity. Pre-puberty marriage for the girls was one way of ensuring this. This is also indicative of the gaping age difference between the couple as

prescribed by Manu (9.94) that a 30-year-old man should marry a 12-year-old girl while a 24-year-old man should marry an eight-year-old girl.

More crucial demonstration of the misogynous tendency apparent in the symbols of Hindu religiosity is the bold depiction of feminine sexuality in temple architecture. The prolific use of female motif, especially with explicit sexual overture, on both exteriors and interiors of the Indian Hindu temple precincts, largely created during 500 AD to 1300 AD provides credence to this phenomenon. Although these sculptures accord 'visibility' to women, yet their content betrays the male-centric nature of social and cultural formations by presenting in full view females' complicity in such a private activity as sex.

The cited representations have been largely sculpted in the Hindu temples located in Central, Eastern, Western, and Northern as well as South India, created under various dynasties, in the form of structural or rock-cut shrines. To mention a few instances, sexually evocative forms are extant in the South Indian Chalukyan and Rashtrakuta monuments (Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh); Jagannath Puri, Bhubnesvara (Orissa); Modhera, Siddhapur (Gujarat); Ambarnath, Sinnar (Maharashtra), Belur, Halebid (Karnataka), etc. However, the most renowned erotic temple sculptures are concentrated in the Khajuraho group (Central India), and the Konarak Sun temple (Eastern India).

The representation of female sexuality lends itself into diverse patterns, ranging from an attendant (*paricharika*), anointing her body form (*abhisarika*), in amorous postures (*kamini*) inciting passions, playful with parrot (*shukasarika*), leaning on a creeper (*shalabhanjika*), with a male companion (*mithuna*), and indulgent in sexually explicit activities (*maithuna*). The last category includes coital and orgiastic acts and reveals the partners as engaged in copulation, masturbation, cunnilingus, fellatio, fondling, kissing and enticing. The female is primarily shown as a delicate and sensual accomplice of the male, yielding, responding and providing him pleasure, and as a synonym of beauty and nature, hanging like a vine upon him. In several of the sculptures, female attendants are assisting the couple involved in the process of intercourse, a possible marker of their subservient status. The image of *shardula* - modified lion form (Khajuraho) pouncing upon a female may also be viewed as representing masculine power dominating feminine nature.

Looking into the specificities of the depictions, some examples of their occurrences on Hindu shrines may be cited. The earliest

Hindu temple remains belong to fourth-fifth centuries AD. Among these, the Gupta period Dasavatara temple (Deogarh) represents pre-coital amatory couples. Southwards at Aihole, an important site nurtured with religious affiliations under the Chalukyas, comprising nearly seventy temples in a cluster, erotic sculptures carved in bold relief and highly sensuous poses indicate that the sculptors, donors, temple priests or worshippers did not object to the presence of such representations on their religious edifices. By this time, the temple was emerging as a significant socio-religious centre, employing a variety of professionals, celebrating periodical festivals in its precincts, developing various performing arts, and ensuring regular free feeding of scholars and holy men. Thus, such erotic figures were carved at a social centre related to cross-sections of the society.

Representations at Aihole include two couples engaged in mouth congress and a couple copulating in the sitting position (Kontigudi temple door jamb); a woman coyly resisting her partner who tries to reach her girdle (Lad Khan Temple); and love play scenes (Durga and Hachchhappaya temples). The Badami cave temple sculptures also show attendants with the couples. For instance, in cave I, the couple is in close embrace while an attendant with a jar stands with her face averted. In similar scenes at Nagda, Sinnar and Modhera (Gujarat), the attendants are shown with palms put across their eyes. Badami cave I has nine couples in copulation depiction. In Mandapesvara caves, several scenes show the woman sitting on her partner's lap. The Yeni temple has an orgiastic scene exhibiting oral-genital congress, frontal congress, and congress from rear. Orgiastic scenes were depicted in Pattadakal and Ellora cave shrines also. Thus, during fifth to ninth centuries AD, the erotic motif was initiated in the Hindu religious monuments, both Vaisnavite and Saivite (sects affiliated with Visnu and Siva, supreme Hindu deities) and assumed a somewhat standardised and conventionalised character in the succeeding period.

The earlier reticent expression of sex burst into an ostentatious display in the religious architecture following the ninth century. With the crystallising of feudalistic tendencies, social and cultural life witnessed a pervasion. During this phase, temple building was continuous and prolific. It was the royal and aristocratic class which commissioned the religious edifices and its tastes and outlook were reflected in the creations. The patrons rather vied with each other to build more magnificent and larger shrines. This led to an expanded size of the structures and ensured availability of more

space for embellishment and decoration. Erotic motifs, whether placed boldly on exteriors or projected within recesses, remained integral constituents of the temple ornamentation schemes.

Prominent instances may be cited from the Rajarani and the Lingaraja temples (Orissa) exhibiting amorous couples in copulating and pre-coital poses. Sex was very boldly depicted on the twelfth century temple at JagannathPuri. This famous Hindu shrine was one of the most venerated *tirthas* of India, visited by millions of Hindu pilgrims and the likes of Sankaracharya, Ramanujan, Jayadeva and Chaitanya. The depictions herein clearly expose the females' private parts. Mouth congress - both done by woman (fellatio) and done mutually (*kakila*) - and frontal congress poses were popular motifs with Puri artists. The depictions reached their acme in the monumental Konarak temple, designed as a chariot of the Sun God. The general effect around it is expression of joy of life in various phases. All the varieties of erotic motifs - couples in various poses, one man with two women, one woman with two men, attendant helping lovers in their sexual act, orgiastic scene; frontal, rear, and oral types of congress, in standing, sitting and sleeping attitudes; ascetics in sexual acts - have been carved amidst luxuriant foliage.

Khajuraho, an important political and religious site under the Chandella dynasty, emerged as a hub of developed Hindu temple architecture, with nearly eighty-five temple clusters. Herein, the erotic motif, placed on the prominent as well as recessed parts, including the exteriors, pillars, lintels, door jambs, cornices, sanctum wall, etc, was given prime importance in the sculptural schemes of Lakshmana, Visvanatha, Chitragupta and Kandariya Mahadeva temples. Alongside the usual projections, even the attendants helping the central couple are themselves shown in an excited state, with their own hands on their private parts. Pot-bellied ascetics participate in orgiastic scenes. Quite interestingly, a frieze in Lakshmana temple depicts numerous couples involved in a wild orgy while three persons may be seen pounding something in a vessel. Goetz has suggested this thumping as the preparation of an elixir, 'for a sort of hormone treatment and which as far as the informations are available seem to have been quite effective' (1961: 67).

Several scenes of chain orgy are extant at Khajuraho, Modhera, Ambernath, etc. Therein, one man excites a woman, who mates with another man and he, in turn, excites another woman, and so on. At Bavka, about fifteen people participate in the orgy. Amongst bestiality scenes, a woman mating with donkey, boar (Khajuraho),

dog or deer (Konarak), and rodent (Belgamve) licking the woman's private parts have also been sculpted.

III

USUAL EXPLANATIONS

It is feasible to consider the usually forwarded explanations of the motif to assess its proposed symbolism. Stella Kramrisch based her interpretation of the *mithuna* sculptures upon *Upanisadic* references and defined such sculptures as symbols of cosmic re-integration (*Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* IV, 3. 21 cited in 1946: 346-47). They are deemed as mere types, therefore, there is no attitude of secretiveness in doing openly what should be done privately. Kramrisch has further likened the female figures to celestial beauties (*surasundari*), or manifestations of working energies subservient to the primordial power and energy (*Maha-Sakti*) (Ibid.: 341).

The erotic aspect has also been assigned theistic affiliation such as influence of the *Kaula-Kapalika* sect¹ (Auboyer and Zannas 1960: 80). Even Mulik Raj Anand observed: 'It is true that these temples of Khajuraho cannot be explained except as part of the manifestation of the *Śiva-Śakti* cult ...' (Anand and Kramrisch, 1962: 3).

Explanations for the erotic sculptures have also been alluded to in texts dealing with the architecture and sculpture of Hindu temples. In texts such as the *Brhat Samhita*, *Agni Purana*, *Hayasirsaṅgacharatra*, *Silpa Prakasa*, etc, to cite a few, male-female sculptures are referred to as decorative elements in temple architecture, to be positioned on the sanctum door frames. They are suggested to portray in stone various sexual poses (*bandhas*), for embracing and coitus, prescribed in works on erotics like the *Kamasutra*.² The erotic sculptures, as suggested by the Buddhist text *Utkalakhanda* XI, were also intended to ward off evil, and to prevent the building being struck by lightning.³

However, considering their erotic nature and religious placement, these art manifestations cannot be comprehended merely as some ritualistic symbols or archaic attitudes to life. Rather, their understanding necessitates adoption of a more comprehensive approach.

IV

SYMBOLS OF MASCULINE CONTROL OVER FEMININE SEXUALITY?

The sculptures representing Hindu religiosity were aimed at catering to the voyeuristic pleasures of men and arousing their passions. In this sense, they have a bearing upon the prevailing socio-cultural milieu. The very fact that they are not carved in all Hindu temples invalidates their ritualistic symbolism. Or else they would have been mandatorily sculpted in all religious shrines. If they were illustrative of cosmic integration as suggested by Kramrisch, then why were they shown with the luscious and exuberant sensuality? If they intended to serve as types and shadows of cosmic unity, then why were they portrayed with the multiplicity of postures, the attendants, and the detailed variations of genital play – all serving as frills? The fact is that although they would not fit in the essence of spirituality, through their placement on sacred edifices, which served as an instrument of hegemony, they carried definite religious symbolism.

It would also be erroneous to ascribe the erotic sculptures solely to the *Śaivite* cult of *Kaula-Kapalikas* as they are found more on non-Saiva Brahmanical that is Visnu, Brahma, Surya and Jaina shrines. Regarding their decorative role, the overtly sexual depictions reveal that they could not be merely/purely decorative motifs. Besides, the cited texts like the *Agni Purana* and *Brhat Samhita* recommended carvings of couple (*mithuna*) and not erotic couple (*maithuna*). As an exception, only one verse in the eleventh century text *Samaranaganasutradhara* (XXXIV: 33) hints upon men and women, engaged in love play (*rati-krida*) under the branches of trees, to be exhibited on the temple structure. Furthermore, the figures' placement is also all around the temple body rather than just the prescribed door frames, thus ruling out their decorative purpose.

As to their being projections from erotic texts, the *Kamasutra* clearly forbade performance of sexual act in a holy place and enjoined that those who have intercourse in such places attract evil beings, causing illness. Instead, it prescribed a bedchamber within a private house as the best place. Considering these injunctions, temples sculptures could not have been mere textual illustrations. Their evil warding 'scare-crow' role is also nullified as their location is not merely on the specified spire (the *shikhara* and *kirtimukha*).

Likewise, if they symbolise ascetic practices (*yoga*), neither the

represented males appear as highly evolved ascetics (*yogis*), who alone were entitled to practise the symbolic union in the flesh with the assistance of female energy (*sakti*), nor do the seemingly ascetics exhibit yogic poses.

Thematically, the sculptures vary from normal sexual activity to a depiction of certain aberrations and this again renders any symbolic religious or philosophical interpretation inadmissible. Sometimes dwarfs or monkeys are shown as pulling off the female's drapery. What spirituality such scenes may convey is hard to conjecture. Or else what religious imagery may be advanced for bestiality scenes, that is, female mating with donkey, boar, dog or deer? The fact that the tendency found acceptance even under the Buddhist faith is indicative that sectarian affiliation of temple was not relevant for erotic representation and it could not have been religious in intent or purposes. If we accept the female figures as visualising celestial dancers in the service of the deity, then why have they been engraved on the exteriors and not inside the main sanctum, in direct view of the enshrined deity? Moreover, even in that capacity, the *sakti's* relation with God (male) remained that of the 'enjoyed' and the 'enjoyer' (*bhogya* and *bhokta*), and she served him through her beauty, music, dance and energies.

Historically, it is quite significant to note that the temples in which they are sculpted are largely products of times of opulence and affluence or turbulence or else marking phases of social transition. Under such situations, the urge to proclaim suzerainty over subjects and domination over territory becomes more pronounced. In the same context, the temple, as a royal assertion of personal power, is also believed to pronounce or underline a political statement. However, it serves a greater symbolism than mere religious or political in the sense that religion in India, as elsewhere, has always been a powerful ideological force. Therefore, as a sacred and organised space for worship of the divine, the temple served as the super ordinate institution of societal organisation.

If we analyse the historical circumstances during which the above cited temples and their sculptures were created, it is significant to infer that during sixth-seventh centuries the age of centralised monarchy in North India was over with the demise of the Gupta Empire. Instead, petty states were raised by the warlike, feudalistic clans of the Rajputs who were constantly indulgent in mutual strife, creating a sort of instability of political order. Socially, their women were confined to the households while the men rejoiced in war, wine and women.

As already stated, the subjugation of woman remained a constant trait in Indian society, since early times. More specifically, economic dependence on male relatives always made her position vulnerable. Her independent identity was seldom cultivated and she was more often acknowledged as an adjunct. At times, even in the philosophical sense, she was likened to enjoyable objects, both animate and inanimate, as a thing to be relished (*bhogyā*). For instance, as given in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*:

“Man issues forth from bodily identification to assume his real form upon attainment of the great illumination. Such a man is best among men. He lives like a king - eating, playing, and *enjoying women or chariots or friends*, without identification with the (idea of the) body” (8.12.3).

In a way, pleasure (*bhoga*) and ornamentation (*śringāra*) were glorified under the prevailing cultural conditions. It may be suggested that social forces were primarily responsible for the frequency or intensity of erotic representations. The comparatively lesser emphasis on erotic display at Khajuraho towards weakening of the Chandella dynasty may be cited to prove this assertion.

Southwards, the established Brahmanical order of the early *Sangam* ages was disrupted and dismantled in wake of the incursions made by the *Kalabhra* tribe with Buddhist theistic inclinations. Their succeeding periods witnessed the rise to power of the Chalukyas, Pallava, Pandya, Rashtrakuta and finally the Chola dynasties. The incumbent dynasties, not always with the best of lineages, got involved with the erection of religious edifices and extended generous patronage for their maintenance, in order to gain ascendancy in the social ladder. However, as in North India, in South Indian politics also feudalistic trends emerged with the aristocratic lifestyle and infringement of woman's freedom and subsequent commodification of feminine sexuality, as indicated by the erotic sculptures and the institutionalisation of *devadasi* practice, both surviving within religious precincts.

The *devadasi* cult of sacred prostitution may be seen as a flagrant violation of a woman's identity and sexuality, determined from the very time of her birth or sometimes even before it. The magnitude of the practice can be gauged from the fact that four hundred *devadasis* from ninety-one shrines all over the Chola Empire were brought to serve in the *Rajarajesvara* temple, Tanjore (Dehejia, 1988: 4). This was, in a way, a method of preserving power in the society through exploiting feminine sexuality for male pleasure which Foucault termed bio-power. In this context, he indicated

that prostitution is an explicit male construct, aided by the State for fostering masculine sexual interests; hence, it is the source of male domination (Foucault, 1984). Seen in this perspective, we may regard the institutionalisation of *devadasi* practice from early medieval times as a mode of controlling feminine sexuality. That the cult survives from pre-Christian centuries (200 BCE) to even current times, despite severe social protest and legal interventions, all in the name of god and religiosity, itself betrays the connection between religion and sexuality.

Thus, quite apparently, the temple had become a monument influenced by the ambience of the royal court. Abundance of donations converted it into sort of a feudal organisation and entailed consequent decadence in its functions. Its precincts were not necessarily used solely for religious purposes and it incorporated more and more sensuous and secular aspects in its activities (Desai, 1975: 165).

There must have been something in the social climate of the times that permitted, rather encouraged, the use of the erotic motif in religious art. The shift from sacred to erotic themes suggests enhancement in sensuality during the period under consideration. Thus, while the influence of prevalent religious cults and beliefs in such building activities cannot be denied, the role of the social environment and realities should not be underplayed when discussing their sculptural motifs. Whatever the represented female forms, they primarily manifest the roles and responsibilities assigned to them by the normative setup and internalised through the very process of socialisation by means of the twin constructs of sex and gender, one biologically and the other socially-determined. It is well apparent that sex is the raw material upon which culture operates in the form of gender attributes (Giddens 1996; Ferrante 1995). While sex is the pre-social, biological body, gender is the cultural script that socialises the body and thereby produces women and men, in a given socio-cultural context. The content of sexuality, it seems, demands and eroticises the subordination of women. For men, this subordination coupled with women's collusive acceptance of male sexual authority feeds into their sense of themselves as essentially and powerfully virile and dominant. Depictions of one man with three or more women partners seem to substantiate this notion. Thus, pleasure is always feminine, while power is masculine.

The ways in which men have forced women into oppressive gender roles and sexual behaviour have been discussed by scholars at length. For instance, Kate Millett (1970: 23-58) held that sex is

primarily political because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships. Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialisation' of both the sexes to basic male-dominated polities with regard to their temperament, role and status. Ideologically the human personality is formed along stereotyped lines of sex category of 'masculine' and 'feminine' based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what the members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates. Such ideology, thus, exaggerates biological differences between men-women by basing psycho-social distinctions upon them. In a similar type of expression, the coy female in the temple depictions is often suggested as surrendering to the urge of the excited male, who is often shown in a commanding position. These vivid demonstrations may be deemed symbolic of her subservient status and as her possible identity markers defined/determined by hegemonic codes of the society. Thus, the sacred temple representations epitomise extra-religious and sensuous interests and rather betray the background of the male-dominated society making art reflective of gender-specific entities.

V

ART AND FEMININE SEXUALITY

In this specific milieu, it is significant to note that the female body and feminine sexuality have been the subjects of immense interest for not merely the feminists and the social scientists, but they have also attracted serious attention of the scientists, play writers, novelists, storytellers, poets, painters and other artists. Discourses related to the sexual behaviour of women and its influence upon external environment are often incited by feminine visual representations, scientific theorizing of femininity, conceptualization of the intricate interaction between space, feminine sexuality and heterosexual practices of women, etc.

In this context, if we problematise the artistic depictions of a woman's body as an object of erotic instigation (the Indian notion of *kamini* or instigator of sensual desires), the indication is towards the need for a deeper examination of the motif of art, architecture, paintings, literature, popular myths and scientific enquiries behind the portrayal of the nature of a woman's body and feminine sexuality. In any case, the gendered ways of imaging the world has been a crucial part of the cognitive processes among human beings. Its apparent manifestation has been visible in the rich artistic pedigree

manufactured by different civilisations which, through the objectification of women as symbols of pleasure for the purpose of male gaze, tended to perpetuate the gendered ways of visualising the world and also led to the masculinising of the sphere of femininity and feminine sexuality. In contemporary times, such a tendency manifests itself through the films and posters. Such objectification may also be discerned in the ancient times, wherein places associated with religious activities became safe haven for such practices. The ancient Indian visual arts, which played the role of a cultural signifier, manifest in the temple architecture may, in this regard, be seen at times as latent symbols of masculine hegemony and sanctification of feminine sexuality under the pretence of divinity.

The portrayal of feminine motifs and actions, especially erotic, on the temple walls and pillars imparted a sense of being sacrosanct, to the theme of feminine sexuality which was otherwise proscribed as cultural degeneration by the hegemonic social order. Hence, in this context, art must not merely be seen as a product of human creativity; rather, the socially fine-spun cultural symbolism entrenched in every artistic piece needs to be unearthed. The epitomes of architectural magnificence, in this sense, tend to transgress the spatio-temporal boundaries within which they were created and express profound cultural symbolism that also seeps into the contemporary domain of our understanding of the dominant culture.

Therefore, representations of femininity and feminine sexuality in the temple architecture facilitated the hegemonic gripping of such artistic depictions over social attitudes and contributed in legitimising the existing social structures of power. This resulted in the reduction of women into passive objects for display and appropriation and it also became a signifier of certain broader notions of culture and tradition (Uberoi 1990). Thus, the cultural symbolism of art is entirely subverted when it is subdued into the dynamics of power equations in the society and its role is forced into mere exhibition and popularising of the existing socio-cultural power structures. The representation of women as material expression of sensual desires and feminine sexuality as an uncontrollable river, in art and literature, clearly signifies the male construction of femininity and women's sexuality and indicates towards the attempts at undermining the agency of women.

Putting things in this perspective, the portrayal of feminine sexuality in visual arts must not merely be examined from a sheer historical analysis of artistic constructs. A broad socio-cultural

explanation of the very agency of woman needs to be problematised here when we discuss about exhibitions of female bodies and their bold representations in heterosexual practices. Besides, the very concept of art, dealing with an otherwise censored subject like the nude projections of female bodies and an activity strictly confined to the private domain of an individual (his/her sexual activity), must bring in a normative debate over the question whether art and obscenity can go hand in hand. In exploring the relation between art and obscenity, it is easy to stray into a whole labyrinth of disconnected issues. The problem lends itself to examination through a variety of viewpoints. The purely analytic, the pragmatic, moral, religious, or political angle, for example, or a combination of the two, when it is hoped that theoretical enquiry will yield guidance for a working strategy. There are a number of avenues to choose from, for instance, Sociology or in broader terms, Culturology, Psychology, Ethics, Aesthetics, etc. Finally, this issue may be observed from a wider perspective, not so much scientific in the strictest sense as philosophical. The questions involved in such a field of enquiry may be: (1) Can art be pornographic, or in other words, is the aesthetic phenomenon compatible with those products of culture commonly branded as filth? (2) If the answer is no, can obscenity arise in art and if so, what place does it occupy in the artistic structure as a whole? (Morawski, 1967: 193). Furthermore, what if the art form is religious in character?

VI

RELIGION AND FEAR OF FEMININE SEXUALITY

Religion can act as an instrument at the disposal of the dominant class for hegemonising the society. Therefore, it would not be out of context there to overview the relation/attitude of religion towards sexuality. For centuries, the church in the West defined passion as a sin even for the husband and wife (See Boswell, 1980) and, religiousness has commonly been associated with limited sexual activity (Burris *et.al.*, 2009: 282). However, as a paradox, religion and sexuality have shared certain characteristics from the beginning of human history. Experiences in both the aspects are conveyed through words such as 'desire', 'mystery', 'ritual', 'passion', 'ecstasy', and 'union'. The early historical periods witnessed rise of the goddess-based religions in which human sexuality centered on the female. But the intrinsic linguistic and liturgical marriage between these two activities (religion/sexuality) with certain common

emotional, psychological and even physical goals, prevailing in early history ended up in defaming sexuality in most of the 'great religions' centuries ago, through divorces propelled by patriarchal fear and prejudice.

Culturally, the process by which sexuality began to get a bad name in religion and myth seems to coincide with the demise of female power and political importance due to the rise of a male-dominated, warrior-based system. The stories of Adam and Eve; Samson and Delilah; Greek goddesses like Hera, Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite; the Pandora myth, etc., represent the Western society's views in which sexuality acquired a bad name even if still associated with religious figures. In a way, the females were considered synonymous with sensual distraction and therefore, creators of impediments for higher worldly feats as well as spiritual pursuits. Consequently, the male hero was represented as refusing the sensual advances of the henceforth suspect and strength draining female that could deviate him from his chosen path. The Indian mythology presents similar instances wherein the females were represented as distractions. Mythical tales abound in the imagery of celestial maids (*apsaras*) like Urvashi, Rambha, Maneka, deputed by the god king Indra to distract renowned sages like Vishwamitra from pursuing their austerities (*sadhana*) by luring them through dances and sensual temptations. God Siva initially spurned the persuasions of Parvati to marry her. Even Buddhism furnishes an instance of the alienation between religion and women. Therein, the Buddha, for long, disfavoured entry of women and when finally they joined the congregation (*sangha*), he predicted perishing of Buddhism within a thousand years.

Thus, feminine sexuality itself is subjected to arbitrary positioning into the dichotomous notions of morally good or bad. Feminine sexuality obtains moral justification if it is passive and responsive to masculine desire, while it becomes morally bad if it involves women's initiation or active participation in sexual relations (Briant and Schofield, 2007: 324). In this line, women are categorised into the binary classification of wife or mistress, virgin or whore and Mary or Eve (Hollway, 1984: 232). In Indian traditions, overt feminine sexuality is a characteristic often seen with the demonic women, for instance the sexual advances of Hidimba for Bhima in the *Mahabharata* or those of Shurpankha towards Lakshmana in the *Ramayana*.

Therefore, feminine sexuality is considered to be inherently depraved and dangerous and needs masculine control in order to

protect social morality. This is how through art, literature and films the masculine order manipulates the agency of femininity and constructs feminine sexuality. Feminine sexual identity seen in this way does not possess any ontological substance (Butler, 1990: 173). Representations of sexuality, in particular erotics, serve as ‘a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms’ (Giddens, 1992: 14). Hence, art furnishes interpretive layers to the ways in which gender relations may be mapped out and how exhibitionism under normative cultural representations emphasises masculine determination of feminine gender and regulation over feminine sexuality.

VIII

CONCLUSION

The erotic representations of feminine sexuality in the Indian temple architecture appear to be serving binary objectives: representing women grossly in a misogynist form and celebrating masculine sexual ascendancy by veiling it with the tapestry of religiosity. In this regard, it may be argued here that the gynocentric depictions of eroticism in Indian Hindu temple architecture mainly seems to have been directed towards providing a sense of sacredness to the nudity of the figures, and also camouflaging the mass reproval of the male gaze. Here, the role of popular culture in promoting cultural difference in the name of divinity may be accented. The massification of ignorance through religion facilitates a male-centric order to get massive credence to its attempts at perpetuating the cultural difference based on gender. Female erotic representations, through art, thus served the purpose of facilitating the dominant male interests to stereotype women as objects of pleasure for men and essentialise their personality into a non-autonomous entity. The identity of woman was itself engulfed in the name of divinity expressed through art. Hence, art as a social structure tended to supplant the agency of femininity.

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NOTES

1. *Kaula-Kapalika* is a *Śaivite* sect whose followers indulge in five *makaras*: flesh (*mamsā*), fish (*matsya*), wine (*madya*), sexual indulgence (*maithuna*), and mystical poses (*mudrā*). They also perform their rituals over dead bodies in cemeteries and practise observances in solitude.
2. Authored by Vatsyayana, the *Kāmasutra* is perceived as a sex manual. However, it is a complex treatise on pleasure (*kāma*) with seven sections - general practices and precepts, heterosexual intercourse, obtaining a bride, duties of a wife, relations with wives of other men, courtesans, and secret formulae to ensure sexual success.
3. 'No lightning will strike the building where the union (*mithuna*) is imaged'. - Quoted in Guru Das Sarkar, *Alleged Buddhist Influence in the Sun Temple at Konarak*, in *Indian Antiquary* XLVII, p. 347.

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