REINTERPRETING THE FAST FOR THE LONGEVITY OF THE HUSBAND: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S AGENCY IN A HINDU TEMPLE IN MONTREAL

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INTRODUCTION

This essay deals with Indian women's agency towards the Hindu faith as practiced in Montreal and the role of Hindu women in Quebec. As suggested by Butler (1997), women's agency, which is the cornerstone of this essay, assumes "reflexivity" towards religious and patriarchal institutions to redefine one's self-identity. While focussing on the practice of fasting for the longevity of the husband[1], I intend to present if first-generation immigrant Hindu women transmit their traditional ideal of the exemplary wife (*pativrata*) to their daughters. The question I will be addressing is: by means of this fast, do Hindu immigrant women reproduce and transmit the ideology of the *pativrata* to their daughters or do they re-interpret this very ideology on more liberal grounds?

The results of my study rely on qualitative data obtained from a five-year participant observation and forty semi-structured interviews conducted with first and second-generation Hindu women from various regional backgrounds: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and South India (Betbeder, 2012). In my sample, the proportion of respondents from Uttar Pradesh (20), Gujarat (10) and South India (10) roughly reflects that of the *Hindu Mandir*. More specifically, this fieldwork was conducted in one of Montreal's Hindu public places of worship where one can find devotees from various regions (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat and South India) and sectarian affiliations or even reform movements (Vaishnava, Shaiva and Arya Samaj). I will here assess how their participation within a selected diasporic temple may impact their self-identification and alter the way this fast is conducted.

According to Mackenzie (1996), the observance of this fast allows women to achieve the ideal of the pativrata as they show devotion to their husbands and ensure their well-being by fasting for their long life. In the Indian state of Maharashtra, McGee (1992) reveals how her female respondents mostly fast for marital felicity or the longevity of their husbands while others assign different meanings to this observance. Far from restricting my analysis to these meanings, I also intend to study the places of observance, the choice of the officiant, the deities worshipped, the texts and languages used, the socialization patterns they generate and the relationship with food. As observed by Mackenzie (1996), fast rituals can be conducted by women or priests and vary from one family to another since different deities can be praised.

THE PUBLIC PLACE OF WORSHIP: UNVEILING WOMEN'S AGENCY

At the public place of worship, the 2008 ceremony for the longevity of the husband, also named *Karva Chauth*, was conducted by a female devotee from Uttar Pradesh and gathered approximately a hundred women originally from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. As women are not allowed to enter the main shrine (*garbha griha*), the female devotee responsible for the ceremony improvised an altar at the center of the prayer hall with a pictorial representation of the goddess *Durga*. In sum, she managed to invest the "public sphere"[2] of the temple by selecting her story of the fast and the presiding deity as it was customary in her family (Rayaprol, 1997).

In this regard, it is important to note it is not a priest who officiated at the ceremony, but a respondent from Uttar Pradesh who was responsible for preparing the sacred plates (*thalis*) and reading the *Karva Chauth* story in Hindi[3]. In many ways, the selection of both the oral tradition and the use of Hindi as a vernacular language reflect a distance from the Brahmanical tradition. The "great tradition" or the tradition of Hinduism which has been maintained by the Brahmin, values the use of the Vedic texts and Sanskrit, whereas the "little tradition" of Hinduism resorts to folk texts and vernacular languages. Nevertheless, this

respondent was unaware of this particularity and was mostly interested in socializing with her female friends in the absence of an extended family. My respondents of first generation immigrants from Uttar Pradesh were on average 22 years old at the time of migration which explains their poor exposure to the notions of the "great" and "little" traditions of Hinduism. In this specific case, women's agency can be viewed as an analytical tool since the subject is not always fully aware that her choices may lead to social or symbolic changes. Once the story was completed, the gifts that they placed on the sacred plates were exchanged not with their mothers-in-law but with their female friends to celebrate the unity of a reconstituted sorority.

As this female devotee proceeded to the public reading of the *Karva Chauth* story, she provided her own egalitarian interpretation of its meaning by concluding with a sentence which emphasized the importance of assuring the longevity of both spouses. This egalitarian re-interpretation of the ideology of the *pativrata* occurred within the "public sphere" of this temple which publically questions the "polysemy" of this mythical story. According to Levi Strauss (1983), it is precisely when an individual takes a stand on a given symbolic structure that various interpretations can emerge, hence the term "polysemy."

In 2010, this same respondent inquired to the priest if he could perform the ritual, for it would allow her to express her egalitarian concerns by reciting *Karva Chauth* songs in vernacular Hindi. These field data challenge Robinson's (1985) study in which some of her female respondents from West Bengal voluntarily resorted to the services of a priest to compensate for their Brahmanical ignorance. As a matter of fact, the songs pertaining to this fast stipulate that married women are not allowed to do any housework on that occasion. Likewise, using multiple vernacular languages that are Hindi and Punjabi along with the content of their songs attests of the pan-Indian and egalitarian claims of my respondents.

In Montreal, Ghosh (1981) found that marital relationships within the South Asian community are not fully egalitarian since women remain mainly in charge of the housework. Given the situation, one can easily understand the relevance of the egalitarian claims made by my respondents as they sing for a fair distribution of household chores while targeting the private sphere. At this public place of worship, female devotees are also exempted from engaging in domestic chores, since a meal is served to them by volunteer men and women in order to break the fast. Overall, investing the "public sphere" of this public place of worship allows them to by-pass their social prescriptions, make egalitarian claims and redefine the meaning of this practice.

McGee (1992) reminds us to be mindful of the multiple meanings that contemporary Indian women assign to the fasting. Indeed, the majority of my respondents consider that the observance of *Karva Chauth* has for primary objective the well-being of the whole family and not just that of the husband, while a minority of them also assign mental and physical benefits to it. Overall, these multiple reinterpretations validate Butler's theory (2005) on gender which argues that even though women initially reproduce pre-established social norms, they are free to question them later on in their lives.

FOOD RESTRICTIONS: THE TRANSMISSION OF A MODERATE DIET

According to my interviews, the liberal interpretation attributed to *Karva Chauth* appears to have a significant repercussion on the dietary restrictions of my respondents from Uttar Pradesh. Considering that the public celebration of *Karva Chauth* reflects a regional normativity from Uttar Pradesh, this sub-section focuses on my sub-sample of married women from Uttar Pradesh. Such is the case of one respondent from Uttar Pradesh whose diet has evolved through her acculturation process as she started to question the androcentric meaning of this fast. Eventually, she renegotiated the purpose of her fast in egalitarian terms and adopted a moderate diet that she proudly passed on to her daughter. Therefore, one can argue that the observance of this fast is constantly evolving and can be placed on an analytical continuum ranging from the complete deprivation of food to its unrestricted consumption. This example illustrates my sub-sample composed of first generations from Uttar Pradesh who unanimously observe *Karva Chauth* with great freedom, while their daughters remain free to follow such a practice and adapt their diets.

Among the second-generations from Uttar Pradesh who are married, it is interesting to note that they predominantly retain the practice of *Karva Chauth* and join in half of the cases their mothers-in-law at the public place of worship. In other words, this strengthens the bonds they have established with their mothers-in-law and helps them build the foundations of an "extended family" whose unity is celebrated through this ritual. Furthermore, a significant number of them make sure they conduct this fast also as a couple in the private sphere, by observing a moderate diet and exchanging gifts as a sign of mutual respect.

In fact, one first-generation respondent from Uttar Pradesh stated that what genuinely matters is not to restrain from food, but to take the time to ponder over the significance of this fast. As suggested by Vatz Laaroussi (2007), immigrants generally readjust their family practices through their process of acculturation and this "flexibility" fosters the integration of the second generations for they can adapt their own beliefs to a constantly changing double symbolic referent. In concrete terms, such "flexibility" enabled the married

second-generations from Uttar Pradesh to deliberately accommodate their food restrictions since most of them eat a vegetarian meal that merely excludes meat.

THE HOME SHRINE: A SOURCE OF RE-INTERPRETATION

At the expense of the public temple, two-thirds of the first generations from Uttar Pradesh prefer to carry out this fast within their domestic spheres. As reported by Michaelson (1987), they not only invest the "private sphere" of their home shrines by conducting religious ceremonies, but also its "public sphere" by inviting their friends to participate in them. One respondent from Uttar Pradesh argues that home shrines allow for a pan-Indian claim as the region-based stories that were initially read on *Karva Chauth* were specific to their regions of origin: Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. As a result, home shrines gather the members of a "surrogate extended family" whose regional traditions constitute a "flexible" experiential framework, for it shows how to negotiate regional diversity. It is important to underline that the term "surrogate extended family" with regards to diasporic Hindu temples has been coined by Rayaprol (1997).

Over the years, this domestic practice has evolved, since they now retain only one regional-based story of *Karva Chauth* and allow more time for their egalitarian aspirations by reciting songs in vernacular languages. So in a way, they challenge the Brahmanical prescriptions of the "great tradition" of Hinduism as they resort to its "little tradition" and claim for an equal share of the domestic chores. Although the public temple supports all the chores, some respondents prefer to observe this ritual in their private sphere for it gathers a less inclusive "surrogate extended family." In other words, this reconstituted "surrogate extended family" is less inclusive as it is limited to their close-knitted network of friends that was formed upon their arrival in Quebec.

From an intergenerational perspective, it appears that two-thirds of the second generations from Uttar Pradesh who are married observe this fast, which takes place, according to their availability, either at the public temple or in their domestic spheres. This being said, one of them underlines the importance of the domestic sphere as it becomes a place where both spouses can exchange gifts and jointly conduct this ritual for a mutual longevity. Unlike their parents, the observance of *Karva Chauth* does not show a desire to connect with a "surrogate extended family," but to celebrate the union of the couple in an egalitarian way. So to speak, they appear to easily merge their family traditions with the values of the host society which is more concerned with the notion of the couple than it is with the family unit.

Half of my sub-sample of first generations from Gujarat and South India do not conduct this fast either by family tradition, egalitarian conviction or for medical reasons. To illustrate this point, here is the example of one female devotee from Gujarat who considers herself and her husband to be equally part of a transcendental God (*Brahman*). It is clear that she has been inspired by the Vedanta school of thought since she believes that regardless of one's gender each individual soul (*Atman*) is part of a transcendental God (*Brahman*). As she evokes the immortality of her soul and that of her husband, she challenges the androcentric meaning of this fast which suggests that the well-being of her husband prevails.

By contrast, the other half of this sub-sample unanimously observes this fast within the private sphere, considering that the ceremony which takes place at the public temple celebrates a regional normativity from Uttar Pradesh. As stated by one respondent from South India, it is with great pleasure that she visits her friend's house to celebrate this fast as it gathers a reconstituted sorority from South India. They mutually tie a bracelet around their wrists like a reconstituted sorority which reaffirms its intra-group unity since the custom requires that they tie this bracelet around the wrist of their husbands.

In regard to the meaning assigned to this fast, the first generations from South India and Uttar Pradesh mostly declare to wish for the "well-being" of their husbands, their children, their parents and their own. Although those from Gujarat and to a lesser extent from South India are struggling with an egalitarian practice in their relationship, such a liberal reinterpretation allows a subjectively experienced agency. This is the case of one respondent from Gujarat who expressly mentioned that she keeps on fasting against the advice of her husband as she wishes for her own longevity. Finally, none of the married second-generations from my sub-samples of South India and Gujarat seem to observe this fast as it is foreign to their family traditions.

CONCLUSION

This essay unveils the agency of my respondents in the public and private spheres as they challenge the androcentric content of this fast to redefine their religious identity on egalitarian grounds. At the public temple, women are unquestionably the ones conducting the fast celebration while configuring their own altar and singing egalitarian songs from the "little tradition." In the private sphere, those songs which claim for an equal share of the domestic chores can be recited in various vernacular languages, which attest for egalitarian and pan-Indian claims. Even though the second generations are equally willing to celebrate this fast in the domestic sphere or at the public temple, their elders like to socialize with the members of a members of a "surrogate extended family"

in the public temple. Finally, it seems that both first and second generations re-interpret the meaning of this fast on egalitarian grounds that are for the well-being of the family and adopt a "flexible" diet.

NOTES

[1] At the public temple, there is a majority of devotees from Uttar Pradesh and the fast for the longevity of the husband that is celebrated is called *Karva Chauth* that is a regional normativity from Uttar Pradesh.

[2] The concept of the "public sphere" of the public temple is used by Rayaprol (1997), a notion that I will transpose to the domestic sphere and thus to private altars. She also talks about "private tasks" that are conducted by women in the public temple as an extension of their home, which I will refer to as the "private sphere" of the public temple to echo her first notion of "public sphere".

[3] The sacred plates are passed around in circles seven times as the story is narrated.

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REINTERPRETER LE JEUNE POUR LA LONGEVITE DU MARI: L'AGENTIVITE DES FEMMES DANS UN TEMPLE HINDOU À MONTRÉAL

Cet article porte sur l'agentivité féminine hindoue à l'égard du religieux et de la conception du rôle de la femme d'origine indienne en contexte migratoire, c'est-à-dire à Montréal. J'entends analyser si les femmes immigrantes hindoues de première génération transmettent à leurs filles l'idéal du rôle traditionnel de l'épouse exemplaire (*pativrata*) par la pratique du jeûne pour la longévité du mari, que ce soit au sein des temples publics ou privés. Le lien entre la représentation de la femme hindoue projetée dans le rituel et l'évolution de cette même représentation retiennent donc mon attention, et ce, dans une visée intergénérationnelle. À ce titre, ma question de recherche se pose en ces termes: est-ce que les femmes hindoues de première génération reproduisent l'idéologie de l'épouse exemplaire ou introduisent-elles une réinterprétation de cette même idéologie selon des valeurs plus libérales, incluant l'égalité des femmes et des hommes ?

D'un point de vue méthodologique, les résultats de cette étude portent sur une observation participante dont la durée est de cinq années, et la réalisation de quarante entrevues semi-directives avec des répondantes de première et de deuxième génération aux origines (Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat et sud de l'Inde) et sectes variées. Je tiens à préciser que ce travail de terrain a eu lieu dans l'enceinte d'un temple hindou montréalais qui a pour particularité de recevoir des fidèles aux appartenances

régionales (Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat et sud de l'Inde) et aux affiliations sectaires variées. Néanmoins, les fidèles en provenance de l'Uttar Pradesh sont majoritaires dans ce lieu de culte et la cérémonie du jeûne qui y est officiée relève d'une normativité régionale de l'Uttar Pradesh appelée *Karva Chauth*.

Plusieurs auteurs se sont posé la question de savoir si l'observance de ces jeûnes vise une reproduction stricte ou une réinterprétation des préceptes brahmaniques de manière égalitariste. Pour certains auteurs, les femmes hindoues sont libres de questionner la visée matérielle des jeûnes qu'elles observent en vue d'atteindre, par exemple, l'état de libération spirituelle (*moksha*). Pour d'autres ayant travaillé sur le terrain, la pratique des jeûnes par les répondantes offrirait une panoplie de significations qui se situent sur un continuum allant de la reproduction matérielle à la libération spirituelle, quoique cette dernière intention soit largement minoritaire.

À la lumière de ces données, il convient de se demander si l'observance des jeûnes offrirait la possibilité d'une réinterprétation religieuse en termes égalitaristes comme en témoigne l'état de libération spirituelle. L'agentivité féminine qui est le concept théorique angulaire de cet article suppose une « réflexivité » du sujet femme vis-à-vis des traditions patriarcales en vue de redéfinir son identité. Loin de me limiter à l'analyse de la visée du jeûne pour la longévité de l'époux, j'entends m'attarder aux lieux de leur déroulement, aux divinités vénérées, aux textes et langues utilisés, aux choix des officiants, aux modes de socialisation qu'ils entraînent et au rapport à l'alimentation.

Concrètement, cet article met en exergue l'agentivité dont font preuve mes répondantes de première et de seconde générations lors du jeûne pour la longévité de l'époux tant dans les sphères publique que domestique. Dans le lieu de culte observé, il leur revient d'officier la cérémonie du jeûne en improvisant leur propre autel et de réinterpréter ouvertement sa visée en stipulant que leur longévité doit être assurée au même titre que celle de leurs époux.

Au Canada, certains auteurs ont constaté que les rapports conjugaux au sein de la communauté indienne ne sauraient être pleinement équitables, ce qui légitime la nature égalitariste des revendications émises par mes répondantes. La preuve étant, les chants dévotionnels qu'elles récitent au temple public ont une teneur égalitariste en ce sens où elles font vœu d'une répartition équitable des tâches ménagères au sein de la sphère domestique. De plus, le recours à la « petite tradition » de l'hindouisme par l'entremise de chants dévotionnels récités en langues vernaculaires fait montre d'une revendication féminine pan-indienne qui souhaite s'affranchir des prescriptions brahmaniques présentes dans la « grande tradition ».

Bien que ce soit principalement les répondantes originaires de l'Uttar Pradesh et du Penjab qui assistent à cette cérémonie publique, leurs consœurs du Gujarat et du sud de l'Inde perpétuent cette pratique dans leurs logis. Au sein de la sphère domestique, une même tendance est observée étant donné que ces dernières officient elles-mêmes la célébration du jeûne et récitent des chants dévotionnels aux tenants égalitaristes, dans une ou plusieurs langues vernaculaires. Tant dans les temples publics que privés, cette cérémonie sert de prétexte à la socialisation intra-féminine et vient pallier à l'absence d'une famille élargie puisqu'elles échangent des cadeaux qui, traditionnellement, devraient être offerts à leurs belles-mères respectives.

Finalement, il apparaît que la visée égalitariste accordée au jeûne pour la longévité du mari semble avoir des répercussions à l'égard des restrictions alimentaires adoptées par les premières générations qui ont une démarche modérée. Pour ainsi dire, celles-ci s'accordent à véhiculer une pratique libérale de ce jeûne; leurs filles ne sont pas forcées d'y adhérer une fois mariées et peuvent librement adapter leurs régimes alimentaires. Une telle « flexibilité » en matière de transmission intergénérationnelle permettrait aux secondes générations de rendre intelligibles leurs pratiques familiales et de les adapter à leur propre système de valeurs. Une double tendance est donc observable chez les secondes générations qui accompagnent leurs belles-mères au temple public dans l'optique de construire les fondations d'une famille élargie ou retrouvent leurs maris dans la sphère privée pour y échanger des cadeaux en signe de respect mutuel.