



Book Review

Oly Roy. (2023). *Chastity in Ancient Indian Texts: Precept, Practice, and Portrayal*. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-032-32126-4

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The word chastity is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the state of not having sex with anyone or only having sex with the person you are married to’, and from this definition, sex outside wedlock is considered a key criteria that defines chastity in modern times. However, the situation was different in ancient India, according to Oly Roy, whose book shifts the focus to ‘male consent’ by identifying it as a key criteria to define a woman’s chastity in ancient Indian society. The book comprises six chapters besides an introduction and a conclusion, and author critically engages with “a collection of narrative literature from ancient India... to understand the social facet related to the central theme, i.e., chastity” (p. 2). Her analysis highlights the role played by narrative texts in convincing people to “follow what the authority of various traditions wanted the society to pursue’ by conquering their minds and also by telling ‘the audience about the laws and customs of the society that should be followed” (p. 136). While the narrative literature (*Maha-Puranas*, epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Hala’s *Sattasai*, and the Buddhist Jatakas) developed an image of an ideal married woman by making chastity an integral part of her life, this book argues that this image of an ideal married woman was socially constructed by upper caste males, predominantly, brahmins in ancient India.

We are told that the man “played a major role in forming the ideology of chastity and maintaining it” (p. 61), and that the status of a woman’s chastity depended on the degree of her husband’s control over her body and mind. A married woman’s body belonged to one man (p. 27), and a chaste (*pativrata*) woman was expected to always think and be interested “in the welfare of her husband” (p. 66). In addition, “it was also important for her to give birth to a son”, and according to Oly Roy, the “welfare of the husband was supposed to be the sole purpose of a chaste woman’s life” (ibid.). The “entire concept of *pativrata* is spun around the institution of marriage, which was patriarchal in nature” (p. 67). Contrary to a chaste woman, a *vesya* (prostitute) was an independent woman: someone, who could have multiple “sexual relationship out of her own choice. Such a woman could live without her husband and was not dependent on any male counterpart” (p. 73). And like *vesyas*, *apsaras* (celestial damsels) too were considered “public women as they were denied marital status by the gods and the demons” (p. 41). In view of the author, both *vesyas* and *apsaras*, who were ‘independent’ women, “challenged the norms of society, and thus degrading and demeaning their character was the only way to control them” (p. 73). Owing of her ability to decide on her own body, a *vesya*—and also an *apsara*—were characterised as the anti-thesis of a chaste woman in early Indian literature.

Seemingly, if a woman indulged in a sexual act with another man, but with her husband’s consent, primarily for progeny, then she was still considered chaste (*pativrata*), according to ancient Indian Brahmanical tradition (p. 50). Giving birth to a son was not only expected from a woman, but a man too required a son to continue his lineage (p. 137), and therefore, wives were supposed “to do what their husbands tell them to do, even if it meant going to another man for progeny” (p. 56). To support her proposition, Oly Roy cites several examples from the Indian epics and the *Maha-Puranas*. For instance, Pandu, who “could not get sexually involved

with his wives, Kunti and Madri, due to a curse,” allowed his wives to have sons from other men, who were male divinities (pp. 57, 59). However, if a woman engaged in a sexual act with another man or with a sage or a divinity willingly or unwillingly, but without her husband’s consent, then she was seen as a fallen woman, and the story of Ahalya in the *Ramayana* is an example of this. Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama, was violated by Indra. Indra disguised himself as sage Gautama and copulated with Ahalya, and when Gautama came to know of it, he cursed his wife and called Ahalya unchaste (*dushta chaarineem*) (p. 60). Another example cited by the author is of the *Ramayana*’s female character Sita, who was made to undergo a fire-ordeal (*agnipariksha*) to prove her purity of mind as well as of character. Since she had been abducted by Ravana against her will, Sita stayed under the control of another man without her husband’s consent, and therefore, Sita’s chastity was subject to social scrutiny (pp. 32-33). Not only during her husband’s lifetime, but a chaste woman was expected to remain under her husband’s command even after his death. She was made to prove her loyalty to her dead husband either by committing *Sati* (self-immolation), or by living a life devoid of all sensual pleasure. Widow remarriage was despised, and the *Skanda Purana* “prescribes a widow not to speak or listen about sexual matters or to look at a man with impious intention” (p. 74).

Caste too played an important role in shaping the definition of chastity in the writings of the brahmin authors of the *Maha-Puranas*. In Oly Roy’s words: “The hierarchical structure of the society was maintained through women, and thus maintaining the purity of the first three *varnas* was a matter of great concern within the Brahmanical tradition” (p. 67). According to the author, a woman’s body was an instrument through which caste identity and purity was ensured. The concept of chastity is argued to have been “a vigorous attempt... to stop women from forming any union with men of lower caste” (pp. 50-51). In case, a man fails to give birth to a child due to impotency or any other reason, then with his consent, his wife could copulate with another man of brahmin caste or any divinity for progeny. However, such copulation with a man of a lower caste (e.g., a shudra) was strictly condemned. In the epics and the *Maha-Puranas*, a woman’s body was transformed into a symbol of purity and honour of a community. She was considered to be the pivotal agent in maintaining the balance of social stratification, and therefore, the concept of chastity was defined along the caste lines. This implies that the upper class/ caste women could either be chaste or unchaste, but the same was not the case for lower class/ caste women (or shudra women). They were invariably branded as unchaste (p. 14). For instance, Rama and Lakshmana in the *Ramayana* had been mostly self-restrained in their behaviour towards women, but their conduct towards Surpanakha, a Raksasi, is morally unacceptable. According to Roy, it “reflects how the Brahmin-dominated society became intolerant towards” people who did not follow their conventions (p. 42).

In her discussion on chastity based on legends and stories contained in the epics and the *Maha-Puranas*, the author particularly underlines the question of brahmin privilege, and we are told that in most of the stories present in the *Maha-Puranas*, “the husband sends his wife to a brahmin” to obtain a progeny (p. 92). Privileges enjoyed by brahmins in the case of adultery are further glaringly visible in one of the several stories of the *Maha-Puranas* that describe the liberation of an adulterous woman, owing to her indulgence in sexual acts being associated with a brahmin man (p. 94). In Oly Roy’s words, these stories in the *Maha-Puranas* clearly show that “the caste of the partner with whom a woman is involved in the ‘illicit’ relationship determined the code of conduct towards the offender” (pp. 94-95). Furthermore, “women are portrayed as ‘fickle’, ‘ungrateful’, ‘treacherous’, ‘insensible’, transgressing every law, shameless, and acting according to their desires” (p. 22) in Buddhist literature (Jatakas). And yet, according to Buddhist traditions, a woman could attain spiritualism without getting married. Contrary to this principle, Oly Roy writes that the epics belonging to Brahmanical

tradition mostly portrayed the salvation of female ascetics, for instance, of Sabari, and Ahalya in the *Ramayana*, to be made “possible only through a man”, i.e., Rama (p. 40).

In brief, the book under review has successfully shown the role of narrative texts in the creation of a male-centric definition of the expression of chastity that privileged male consent over a woman’s will in her everyday domestic life in ancient India. The book enables the reader to enter into a complex world of ancient Indian myths and legends and acquire an in-depth understanding of a multilayered discourse on chastity as well as its divergent precepts, its practice and portrayal in early Indian literature. This book authored by Oly Roy is a valuable addition to the gender studies in particular, and to studies on ancient Indian society in general, and it will be useful for students as well as researchers.