

ALBERT DE JONG'S VIEWS ON WOMEN'S STATUS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Oct 11, 2019; updated Mar 1, 2020

Emphasis is often laid by feminist anthropologists on studying women not as the objects of religious principles but as religious subjects *per se*. However, as Albert de Jong notes in a well-researched and enlightening article so very characteristic of his expertise, what we can construct regarding Zoroastrian women is mostly derived from the dictates of priestly authorities which leaves little scope for tracing the total involvement of women in religious life and for reflecting their inner life, especially as there is little evidence for it until their own times (“Women and Ritual in Medieval Zoroastrianism,” in *Atash-e-Dorun: The Fire Within*, J.S. Soroushian Commemorative Volume, Volume II, edited by C. J. Cereti and F. Vajifdar, 2003, pp. 147-161). He observes that both Zoroastrian as well as non-Zoroastrian scholars make quite positive interpretations of women's status in Zoroastrianism. I am tempted to quote him as his studied and independent opinion as a non-Zoroastrian would carry much weight: “The cornerstone of such positive interpretations are the references to the quality of men and women with respect to their religious duties and to the rewards and punishments of the hereafter, which are found in the earliest layer of Zoroastrian literature. This fact in itself is incontrovertible; various passages make reference to the fact that men and women had equal hope of reaching heaven and equal fear of punishment in hell. Men and women were also required to wear the sacred girdle, the *kusti*, and the sacred shirt, nowadays known as the *sudra* (Middle Persian *shabig*). If one would stretch this religious equality to the present day, it would seem as if this was a constant factor in Zoroastrianism. Following this lead, women would be classified, in Zoroastrianism, as female humans, who are distinguished from male humans merely by their anatomy and the concerns for purity that result from their anatomy, to which we shall return. Closely related to this interpretation of women in Zoroastrianism is another idea that is much cherished by modern interpreters: that of the autonomy of the individual. The basic idea is this: every person, man or woman, is responsible for his or her own deeds, thoughts and words. These, and these alone are weighed at the judgment of the soul on the fourth day after death and these and these alone determine the fate of that soul: whether it will enjoy the pleasure and comfort of heaven, endure the hardship and punishment of hell or will reside in the place of mixture, where good and evil are both absent. Zoroastrianism, according to this interpretation of a doctrine that is

considered central to its system, does not know hereditary sin, collective sins, and does not allow of any interference by a third party between a person and the forces of heaven. Here again, it is possible to find similar ideas in the earliest layers of Zoroastrianism and in modern varieties of that religion. The problem, in both cases, lies in the intervening periods," when he sees a different picture emerging.

There is always a male lurking somewhere in the background who is in authority (*Salarih*) or (*Sardalrih*) over the woman's life." To make this picture a bit more complete," admits de Jong, "I must add that all men, too, are under someone else's authority: every Zoroastrian must have a priest who is in spiritual authority over him or her and decides what is proper and what (is) not, a system that is also found in Shi'a Islam. If there is one key word with which to describe the desired attitude of women and in a more limited sense of men in medieval Zoroastrianism, it is indeed "obedience," but regarding the individual autonomy, de Jong finds very little of it. The religious equality, can be found regularly: men and women had the same basic religious duties and enjoyed the same hope of salvation. Men and women were all bound by a very elaborate set of purity rules, but these were of far greater significance for women's lives than they were for men's, because menstruation, miscarriage, child-birth, still-birth and even breast feeding, all situations that pertain to women's bodies only, were considered polluting and required solitary confinement and sometimes elaborate purification rituals." However, as I have already noted, men too were not exempted from elaborate purification rituals and isolation lasting up to ten days and debarment from many usual activities, etc.

He too finds sufficient evidence that in the Sasanian period, women could perform several duties which came to be restricted to men in the further development of the tradition. Under certain restrictions, women could be witnesses in legal cases and perhaps even act as judges (*Denkard* 8.20.29). They could attend *herbedestan*, courses in religious studies, and they could perform some of the daily rituals; in particular, they could tend the sacred fire and perform some of the daily priestly rituals for the fire and libations to the water in the context of their own houses (H.5.5; N.224ff). One source interestingly adds that a woman is allowed to function as *zot* (meaning the priest who performs these rituals) for women only (*Shayast-ne-Shayast* 10.35)," which de Jong quotes in full.

He finds the evidence for women performing priestly duties "to be incontrovertible; in highly specified cases and circumstances (and under male authority), women did have access to functions we are in the habit of considering male prerogatives. The fact that women performing priestly functions have rarely ever been taken into consideration is due to the fact that all these options had been closed to

women at the time when Zoroastrian literature came to be written down.

From the fourteenth century C.E. de Jong finds a complete reversal in the religious status of women who are suddenly excluded from the most basic of all religious duties according to two texts both known as *Sad dar*, “a hundred chapters,” which however he finds as almost the only evidence on this subject heading, so curiously, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries C.E. Even though Mary Boyce judged them “as merely derivative texts, reproducing a poor understanding of a more glorious Middle Persian tradition,” he finds such an appraisal “as a bit unfair,” based mainly on their authority in the later *Persian Rivayats*. He concedes that their elaborate rules for lay behavior did not make it into the later tradition, such as the rulings on the prayer of women, which, however, may reveal much more about the reason why they were ultimately excluded – because they were too impractical and too unrealistic, over prescribed to be practical. What he quotes from the *Sad dar-e naste* or “*Prose Sad da*” chapter may substantiate it and seems to be reminiscent of the clergy recommending Khaetvadatha too emphatically for overcoming resistance to it but in vain. “In the good pure religion of the Mazda-worshippers women are ordered not to pray, for their prayer is this: three times ever day, in the morning, at the time of the noon prayers and at the time of the evening prayers, they must stand before their husband, fold their arms and say: “what do you think, so that I shall think the same, and what do you need me to say and what do you need me to do; what do you command?”

Ordering not to pray seems to go against the human nature itself – even gods would refrain from ordering it besides violating free will (Yasna 30.2, etc.). Moreover, as a clinical psychologist, I find it hard to explain how it is possible for women to lose or break with centuries of conditioning to women equality and, even more strangely, to suddenly revert to the original conditioning even though their oppressive religious condition in Iran had not changed at all, if not gotten worse which per de Jong led to the loss of their equality in the first place. This does not mean, however, that the status of women (or of men) did not change under or due to the oppressive period of Arab rule but it only questions the extent and degree of it. de Jong goes on quoting more such passages but makes it clear that “there is an undeniable difference” between the religious status of women he quotes here and their earlier one. “I must stress,” he quickly adds, “that this development was a dead-end street and not a lasting innovation. Later sources mention nothing of the sort and women pray just like men in all modern Zoroastrian communities.” Then how we can explain such sudden switches in ancient traditions? Evidently, more data is required to explain it as it was not easy for the people in the olden days to change

long established traditions due to a millennia of conditioning in absence of modern day means of mass communication.

It is not clear therefore how far *Sad-dar's* views represented those of the entire Zoroastrian community at the time, especially in view of Mary Boyce's considered opinion about it and also because *Sad-dar's* views here are not even hinted at in any other text. As de Jong himself relates, the Parsis in India were not affected by what is outlined in two *Sad dars*. Moreover, advising not to pray but to obey and serve the husband hand and foot as it were, clearly goes against the very grain of human nature, besides that of the Gathic principle of Free Will which the prophet emphatically declares applies "equally to men as well to women" (Yasna 53.6). While *Sad-dar* may represent a certain section of society or a certain segment of history, from a research angle it may contain too limited a sample to represent total reality in this regard, because if this subject was of real enormity and had suddenly changed the religious fundamentals in the seventeenth century C.E., it would have certainly attracted more attention, if not dissensions or debates than it did. Nevertheless, a sort of diminished women status is hard to rule out as the marginal existence of Zoroastrians in Iran, forced its remnants to move to "areas of Iran where barely anyone wished to live." de Jong wonders if it was the inherent guarding instinct of males that led them to tighten their grip on women and children in a hostile environment but concedes "it must certainly remain entirely speculative since such a practice "does not seem to have gained a foothold" among the Parsis, but then the Parsis were never subjected to persecution and hijacking of their women as were the Zoroastrians in Iran to this day, as I have detailed elsewhere. He finds at least part of the explanation in the tradition itself, namely, in *The Pahlavi Rivayat accompanying the Dadestani Denig* (PhLRDd). However, he finds no ritual implications in it for women and also finds that "earlier compilations stress the fact that (both) men and women are obliged to perform certain rituals." However, he does find "some restrictions that appear here for the first time," but he concedes that "the passages in question are PhLRDd 1722 and 1761 and their interpretation is very difficult." Even so, it is not certain if it was written before the ancestors of Parsis left for India and if it was, why it did not show any influence on them, especially as per de Jong (and many other scholars), it did represent some earlier views to which the Parsis must certainly have been exposed to. Any way such religious restrictions on women *vis-a-vis* on man as already noted, are not at all in conformity with Zarathushtra's original teachings even if some crisis unfortunately led to a temporary disruption in it, which it evidently did to some extent. As de Jong observes, it is "witnessed in two texts (of *Sad-dar*) from the fourteenth century" but "this development was a blind alley and did not last very long. By the (very next) fifteenth or sixteenth century, it is no longer found in Zoroastrian

texts,” for which he ascribes no reason, and which is hard to understand or explain at least from a socio- psychological angle. However, de Jong seems to provide a clue for this situation - “an increasing priestly grip on various rituals that “involved the participation of a lay individual and his or her priest: (for) the confession of sins and the larger rites of purification. These increasingly came to be performed vicariously, by the priest for a sum of money, without the presence or participation of the lay Zoroastrian for whom the ritual was intended,” unlike in the past. “In this and in other areas, personal ritual activity was taken away from lay Zoroastrians,” whether men or women, which then lowers the bar on religious inequality between men and women. So, one may wonder whether the priestly contrivance was more or less at the root of the said inequality. However, they could not possibly subject men to priestly authority without subjecting women to it too thereby doubling their benefit. We may never know the truth in the absence of proper data, but priests do seem to have played at least some role here.

However, what de Jong concludes vindicates in some ways my earlier contention that depriving women of prayers and/or religious participation is not in conformity with human nature and therefore such deprivations are bound to find some alternative attainments in other ways. de Jong believes they did so in the Sofre-rituals, though the period during which they first appeared may well be a question mark and, may perhaps become a subject in itself. In conclusion, the alleged break in women's religious equality ultimately illustrates the inherent and firm strength of conviction about it among Zoroastrians despite going through the darkest days of their history, which in turn may have indeed resulted in strengthening it.

Even so I wonder how to explain the plain truth that the Parsis were not influenced by the *Sad-dar* texts when all authorities on the subject tend to maintain that there are not many variations in religious practices among the Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians. Maybe both eventually ended up under priestly influence. But then how can we explain the lack of the latter in Iran during the *Sad-dar* days except perhaps that it was a localized, temporary, over-zealous movement or so that ultimately died out of its own weight as it had no historical textual basis to lean on or that the authors of the *Sad-dars* had an ax to grind and an ideology to propagate.