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Beyond Patriarchal Narratives: A Comparative Feminist Examination of Women's Spiritual Agency and Gender Roles in Buddhism and Hinduism

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ABSTRACT

The study of women's roles and spirituality within religious traditions has become a crucial area of feminist scholarship, challenging patriarchal interpretations and highlighting overlooked dimensions of spiritual experience. This article undertakes a comparative feminist analysis of women's spiritual agency and gender roles in two major Indic traditions: Buddhism and Hinduism. Drawing upon a review of scholarly literature, this study explores historical contexts, scriptural interpretations, and contemporary practices to illuminate the diverse experiences of women. While both traditions have historically presented complex and often restrictive gender norms, feminist scholarship reveals spaces of agency, powerful female deities, and the enduring spiritual contributions of women. In Buddhism, the historical struggles for the Bhikkhuni order and the symbolic power of female bodhisattvas offer unique insights. In Hinduism, the reverence for goddesses and the diverse roles of women in ritual and spiritual life provide a different lens. This comparative perspective uncovers commonalities in patriarchal challenges, highlights distinct avenues for female spiritual empowerment, and underscores the ongoing work of feminist reconstruction within these ancient faiths.

Keywords: Feminism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Gender Roles, Spirituality, Women's Agency, Comparative Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The study of religion, for much of its history, has often been conducted through a largely androcentric lens, overlooking or marginalizing the experiences, contributions, and spiritual agency of women. However, the rise of feminist scholarship in religious studies has fundamentally challenged these traditional narratives, demanding a re-evaluation of sacred texts, historical practices, and contemporary religious life from a gender-inclusive perspective [1]. This feminist critique seeks not only to expose patriarchal structures but also to reconstruct religious traditions in ways that are empowering and equitable for women [1].

Among the world's diverse spiritual traditions, Buddhism and Hinduism, originating from the Indian subcontinent,

offer rich ground for such feminist inquiry. Both traditions are ancient, complex, and encompass a wide array of philosophical schools, practices, and social manifestations. Historically, they have influenced vast populations and continue to shape cultural and spiritual identities today. While Buddhism emphasizes monasticism, the path to enlightenment (Nirvana), and the rejection of a permanent self, Hinduism is characterized by its diversity, its emphasis on dharma, karma, and moksha, and a pantheon of deities. Despite their differences, both traditions have navigated complex questions of gender, often reflecting and reinforcing societal norms, but also providing avenues for women's spiritual expression and leadership [4].

This article embarks on a comparative feminist examination of women's spiritual agency and gender roles

within Buddhism and Hinduism. It aims to synthesize existing scholarship to illuminate how women have historically participated in and been shaped by these traditions, how feminist perspectives have critiqued their patriarchal elements, and what possibilities exist for a more inclusive and egalitarian future [9]. By drawing upon a systematic review of relevant literature, this study seeks to highlight the unique challenges and opportunities for women's spiritual flourishing in each tradition, fostering a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within religious contexts [5].

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, comparative literature review approach, specifically from a feminist perspective, to analyze women's roles and spiritual agency in Buddhism and Hinduism. The methodology involves a systematic examination and synthesis of scholarly works, including books, journal articles, and published essays, that address gender, women's experiences, and feminist critiques within these two religious traditions.

2.1. Data Collection: The primary data for this review consisted of published academic works referenced in the provided bibliography [1-30]. These references cover a range of topics, including:

- Feminist histories and analyses of Buddhism [1, 5, 9, 30].
- Images of the feminine and women's roles in Buddhist texts and traditions, particularly Mahayana and early Buddhism [2, 7, 14, 18, 19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29].
- Discussions on the Bhikkhuni (nun's) ordination and monasticism [6, 22, 23].
- Broader perspectives on Buddhist women across cultures [13, 16].
- Social dimensions of early Buddhism [20].
- Specific discussions on Japanese, Thai, and Tibetan Buddhist women [3, 7, 17, 28].
- Resources from Buddhist organizations and digital libraries related to Buddhist feminism [10, 11, 12].

While the provided references are predominantly focused

on Buddhism, the comparative aspect for Hinduism will be drawn from the implicit understanding of gender roles in a dual religious context as suggested by the title, and where applicable, from the broader implications of feminist religious studies principles. The general principles of feminist analysis of religion, as discussed in the Buddhist context by authors like Gross [1, 5, 30] and Schuster [9], will be applied comparatively.

2.2. Analytical Framework: The analysis is guided by a feminist critical framework, which involves:

- **Deconstruction:** Identifying and critiquing patriarchal biases embedded in traditional interpretations, texts, and institutional structures [1, 9].
 - **Reconstruction:** Highlighting and amplifying narratives of female agency, spiritual accomplishments, and leadership that may have been marginalized or overlooked [1, 5].
 - **Comparative Analysis:** Identifying similarities and differences in the challenges faced by women, and the avenues for spiritual empowerment available to them, across Buddhism and Hinduism. This involves looking at scriptural depictions, historical roles (e.g., monasticism, goddess worship), and contemporary movements for gender equality.
- 2.3. Scope and Limitations:** The scope of this review is limited by the provided reference list, which heavily favors Buddhist studies. Consequently, the depth of discussion on Hinduism will be comparatively less detailed than that on Buddhism, primarily focusing on general comparative points derived from the feminist lens applied to religious studies. The emphasis will be on synthesizing existing scholarly perspectives rather than conducting new empirical research.

RESULTS

The comparative feminist examination of women's spiritual agency and gender roles in Buddhism and Hinduism reveals nuanced and often paradoxical findings. While both traditions have historically presented gender hierarchies, they also offer significant counter-narratives of female spiritual power and participation.

3.1. Women in Buddhism: Challenges and Enduring Agency

Feminist scholarship on Buddhism, as articulated by Rita Gross [1, 5, 30], argues for a reconstruction of the tradition that moves "beyond patriarchy." Early Buddhist texts, while containing narratives of the Buddha's initial reluctance, eventually record the establishment of the order of nuns (Bhikkhunis), indicating a foundational recognition of women's capacity for monastic life and enlightenment [6, 23, 29]. The Therigatha, a collection of verses by early Buddhist nuns, stands as a powerful testament to their spiritual realizations and struggles for liberation [14, 18]. These women, like their male counterparts, were capable of achieving arahantship, dispelling notions of inherent spiritual inferiority [18]. The self and feminine in Buddhist thought are explored, showing how Buddhist philosophy approaches these concepts [19]. The social dimensions of early Buddhism also shed light on how the community was structured [20].

However, the historical trajectory of the Bhikkhuni order has been fraught with challenges. The eight garudhammas (heavy rules) imposed on nuns, placing them in a subordinate position to monks, have been a central point of feminist critique [6, 22]. Despite these rules, scholarly work demonstrates the remarkable endurance and contributions of Buddhist women throughout history and across cultures [13, 16]. In various Buddhist traditions, such as Japanese Buddhism, women have played diverse roles, often within lay communities or less formal spiritual paths, sometimes reflecting unique cultural adaptations [7]. In Thai monastic life, meditation practices have also undergone changes that affect both genders [17]. Tibetan Buddhism also presents unique aspects regarding gender and monastic codes [3, 28]. The legality and history of Bhikkhuni ordination remain subjects of ongoing debate and efforts for revival in many Theravada countries, highlighting a modern struggle for equality within the monastic sphere [6, 22, 23]. Organizations like the International Association of Buddhist Women (Sakyadhita) are actively working towards this goal [10]. Resources from the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) further support research into these historical and contemporary contexts [12].

Symbolically, Mahayana Buddhism, in particular, offers rich imagery of powerful female figures. The emergence of female bodhisattvas, such as Tara and Guanyin (Kannon), and wrathful goddesses like Vajrayogini, represents a profound valorization of the feminine principle as a vehicle for wisdom, compassion, and liberation [2, 24, 25, 26, 27]. These figures are not merely passive symbols but active

agents of enlightenment, demonstrating the possibility of embodying spiritual perfection in female form [2, 24]. However, some feminist scholars caution that symbolic reverence does not always translate into equal treatment in institutional structures [5, 9]. The "changing perspectives on women in Buddhism" show an ongoing dialogue [9].

3.2. Women in Hinduism: Diverse Roles and Divine Feminine

In Hinduism, the position of women is complex and often contradictory, ranging from revered goddesses to prescribed social roles. While the Dharma Shastras and other smriti texts often delineate restrictive roles for women, emphasizing their duties within the household and subordinate status to men, the tradition also boasts a profound reverence for the divine feminine [4]. The concept of Shakti, the divine cosmic energy, is personified as goddesses who are often seen as the source of all creation, power, and wisdom. Goddesses like Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati are central to Hindu worship and philosophy, embodying immense power and independence, often without needing a male consort to define their existence. This emphasis on the goddess is a unique aspect that provides a powerful spiritual archetype for women's empowerment [4].

Historically, Hindu women have participated in religious life in diverse ways. While formal Vedic priesthood was largely restricted, women played crucial roles in household rituals, fasts, and festivals. Renunciant traditions also saw women embrace ascetic paths, though often within less formalized or recognized structures compared to male renunciants. The concept of the devoted wife (pativrata) has been both a source of spiritual strength and a tool for patriarchal control.

3.3. Comparative Feminist Perspectives

Comparing the two traditions from a feminist perspective reveals several commonalities and distinctions. Both Buddhism and Hinduism have struggled with patriarchal interpretations and institutional practices that have historically limited women's roles [1, 4]. Both have also faced a tension between the spiritual ideal of equality (e.g., all beings can achieve enlightenment in Buddhism, or the soul has no gender in some Hindu philosophies) and the social realities of gender hierarchy [1, 4].

However, the avenues for female spiritual agency differ.

Buddhism, with its emphasis on the monastic order, has seen a clear historical struggle for formal institutional equality in the Bhikkhuni lineage, which continues to be a central focus of feminist activism [6, 23]. The return to early Buddhist texts is a key strategy for this "reconstruction" [1, 29]. In contrast, Hinduism's diverse nature means that female spiritual power is often channeled through goddess worship and the recognition of divine feminine energy, which can be a source of strength for women even within seemingly patriarchal social structures [4]. While Buddhist goddesses are significant in Mahayana, the pervasive and foundational role of goddesses in mainstream Hinduism provides a different archetype. The discussions on "feminine ground" in Tibetan Buddhism [3], "images of the feminine in Mahayana" [2], and "Buddhist goddesses of India" [26] highlight these symbolic aspects within Buddhism.

Modern feminist perspectives in both traditions are engaged in challenging restrictive interpretations and advocating for greater equality. In Buddhism, this involves advocating for full Bhikkhuni ordination and re-evaluating scriptural passages through a feminist lens [6, 9, 30]. In Hinduism, it often involves re-interpreting ancient texts, reclaiming goddess traditions as symbols of empowerment, and challenging discriminatory social practices.

DISCUSSION

The comparative feminist analysis highlights that while both Buddhism and Hinduism are ancient traditions with deep spiritual legacies, their engagement with gender roles and women's spirituality has been multifaceted and often contradictory. The patriarchal tendencies observed in both traditions reflect broader societal norms prevalent during their formative periods [20]. However, feminist scholarship has successfully revealed that women were never entirely passive recipients of religious dogma; they actively carved out spaces for spiritual expression, agency, and even leadership.

In Buddhism, the narrative of the Bhikkhuni order serves as a powerful testament to the tension between the radical spiritual equality espoused by the Buddha's teachings and the social limitations imposed on women. The historical marginalization and near disappearance of the Bhikkhuni lineage in some traditions represent a significant loss for Buddhist women and a clear target for feminist reconstruction [1, 6]. The ongoing efforts to revive and

fully legitimize the Bhikkhuni order globally [6, 10, 23] underscore the contemporary struggle for gender parity within Buddhist institutions. The symbolic representations of female bodhisattvas and deities in Mahayana Buddhism [2, 24, 26] offer a potent counterbalance to institutional patriarchy, providing aspirational figures of enlightened female wisdom and compassion. However, it is crucial, as noted by feminist scholars, to ensure that symbolic veneration translates into tangible equality in practice [5, 9].

Hinduism, with its rich pantheon of goddesses, presents a different dynamic. The profound reverence for the divine feminine, personified as Shakti, provides a unique framework for women's spiritual empowerment that is less tied to institutional roles and more to ontological principles [4]. This reverence for powerful female deities can inspire agency and respect for women's spiritual capabilities. Nevertheless, this theological elevation of the feminine has not always translated into equitable social realities for women within Hindu society, where traditional patriarchal norms often prevail. Feminist scholarship in Hinduism thus often focuses on bridging this gap between divine ideal and lived experience, challenging discriminatory practices while drawing strength from the tradition's emphasis on the goddess.

Common to both traditions is the process of re-examining foundational texts and histories to uncover and re-center women's voices and contributions. This process involves scrutinizing scriptural passages, re-interpreting narratives, and bringing to light the spiritual achievements of historical figures like the Therigatha nuns [14, 29]. The rise of Buddhist feminism and gender studies, as evidenced by articles on platforms like JSTOR and resources from BDRC [11, 12], signifies a robust academic and spiritual movement.

The challenges for feminist reconstruction in both traditions remain significant. They include overcoming deeply ingrained patriarchal interpretations, addressing institutional resistance to change, and ensuring that spiritual ideals of equality translate into practical lived realities. However, the comparative perspective reveals that both traditions offer unique internal resources for this reconstruction: the foundational egalitarian impulse of early Buddhism, the historical existence of the Bhikkhuni order, and the symbolic power of female bodhisattvas in Buddhism; and the pervasive and potent veneration of goddesses as embodiments of ultimate power and wisdom

in Hinduism.

Ultimately, a feminist perspective demands that religious traditions be judged not only by their spiritual ideals but also by their tangible impact on the lives of women. The ongoing dialogue and activism within both Buddhism and Hinduism suggest a dynamic engagement with gender roles and spirituality, pointing towards a future where these ancient faiths can more fully embody principles of equality and universal spiritual liberation for all.

CONCLUSION

The comparative feminist examination of women's spiritual agency and gender roles in Buddhism and Hinduism underscores the complex interplay between religious doctrine, social structures, and individual experience. While both traditions have been shaped by patriarchal contexts, leading to historical limitations on women's roles, feminist scholarship has successfully illuminated the profound spiritual contributions and enduring agency of women within these faiths.

In Buddhism, the historical establishment and ongoing efforts to revive the Bhikkhuni order stand as powerful symbols of women's determined pursuit of monastic equality and spiritual realization. The reverence for female bodhisattvas and deities in Mahayana also provides significant symbolic validation of the feminine principle as enlightened. In Hinduism, the pervasive worship of a diverse pantheon of powerful goddesses offers a unique and potent framework for understanding divine feminine energy and its potential to inspire women's spiritual empowerment, even amidst societal constraints.

The persistent challenges, such as reconciling historical patriarchal interpretations with egalitarian spiritual ideals and translating symbolic reverence into practical equality, remain significant. However, the ongoing efforts by feminist scholars and practitioners within both traditions to re-examine texts, reclaim histories, and advocate for institutional change demonstrate a vibrant commitment to forging more inclusive and equitable spiritual paths. By continuing to explore these narratives, comparative feminist studies not only enrich our understanding of religious diversity but also contribute to the broader global movement for gender equality and spiritual liberation.

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