

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF AN IDEAL WIFE ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

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Abstract:

*The study of the picture of an ideal wife as prescribed by social structures also relates to the broader field of discourse of the study of the institution of marriage and the role of the patriarchy, religion and capitalism in creating idealistic roles for individuals in the society. In this paper, there will be the study of the idea of a noble and virtuous wife and what constitutes her qualities and characteristics according to the Holy Bible. The pursuit of an ideal spouse in marriage for an ideal married life has always been given a lot of importance and this leads to certain social constructs of the ideal nature of a wife as seen in the Bible. Primary sources will be Proverbs 31:10-31, (Old Testament, Holy Bible), Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3 (New Testament, Holy Bible). To critically analyze the study the secondary sources will be Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a damaged Life* (1951), J.S. Mill & Harriet Taylor's *Early Essays on Marriage and Divorce*, (1951) Genesis 24 (Old Testament, Holy Bible) Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874). The description of the virtuous wife in the Bible doesn't necessarily restrict women in their dignity, importance and socio-economic contributions to society but in the family structure, women are to be second to the man to maintain the hierarchical structure for the semblance of order.*

By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you'll be happy. If you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher.

The study of the picture of an ideal wife as prescribed by social structures also relates to the broader field of discourse of the study of the institution of marriage and the role of the patriarchy, religion and capitalism in creating idealistic roles for individuals in the society. The institution of marriage has been one of the most important social pillars that has been fundamental to the fabric of any society. The social system has prescribed the rules for marriage and has also defined ideal roles for the husband and the wife in the confines of marriage and the family, mainly for the purpose of order and smooth functioning of the society. The pursuit of an ideal spouse in marriage for an ideal married life has always been given a lot of importance and this leads to certain social constructs of the ideal nature of a wife.

A marriage is not a concrete reality that necessarily reveals itself to husband and wife in the same form. It is a history of actions and interactions, combined with mutual expectations based on that history and on broader cultural norms and values (Ross, Catherine E., 281).

These broader cultural norms and values go a long way in determining the mutual expectations one has in marriage and form the construct of the institution of marriage. The wife and the husband perform roles in the marriage and these roles are fixed by the broader societal spectrum, roles that have been gradually formulated since the time when humans started the family structures.

In order to understand the position of a wife in society at the present times and to fully grasp the changes that have come about in our worldviews regarding marriage we would have to look at how the position of a wife was constructed from ancient times in the sphere of authority and religion. It is important to examine and analyze the concept of an ideal wife as found in the Bible and critique it in the light of the position and situation of the woman in the hierarchy of the society.

An excellent wife *is* the crown of her husband,
 But she who causes shame *is* like rottenness in his bones (Holy Bible, NKJV, Proverbs 12: 4)

A wife of noble character is praised profusely in the Bible; a woman who is excellent to the husband is like a reward to him, while the wife who brings shame is like a disease to her husband. The Biblical society has constructed the wife to be someone who should adhere to the moral latitudes laid down by the Bible and also to be a woman who lives by society's standards of an honourable woman. In this way, the wife is like a 'crown', that is, like a reward or a trophy that he wins, in front of the people and as the wife is noticed by all to be noble, the praises for her character flows to the husband in being fortunate to be the spouse of such a noble wife.

The same exaltation of an excellent wife from the Bible is still carried over to this 21st century in certain urban terms such as 'wife material'. 'Wifey material' is described as "a phrase often used to describe a girl whom you feel possesses certain qualities that qualifies her to be a model wife for you" (urbandictionary.com) and the qualities that such a woman is supposed to be kind, caring, sweet, compassionate etc.. Thus, the social construct of an ideal wife has been prevalent in society from the earliest times till the present day.

We can further find what an excellent or noble wife is like in the Bible's description of the virtuous wife and in its instructions to the wife and husband. The description of the virtuous wife in the Bible doesn't necessarily restrict women in their dignity, importance and socioeconomic contributions to society but in the family structure, women are to be submissive to the man to maintain the hierarchical structure for the semblance of order.

The description of the virtuous wife is found in the book of Proverbs in the Bible in chapter 31 from the verses 10 to 31 and it begins with these lines:

Who can find a virtuous wife?
 For her worth is far above rubies.
 The heart of her husband safely trusts her;
 So he will have no lack of gain
 (Holy Bible, NKJV, Proverbs 31: 10-11).

These lines extol the worth of finding a virtuous wife, lifting her above the average woman. The virtuous wife is a woman who brings 'gain' to her husband, her worth seems to be 'far above rubies'. Thus, the ideal wife would be someone who would bring gain to the husband and the family at all areas, be it economically, emotionally and socially. It is to be considered extremely fortunate and a blessing from God if one were to be married to a woman who fits the bill of the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31. She is supposed to be a rare breed, treasured and valued way above the average and the search for her is supposed to be elusive. As we go through Proverbs 31, we find the example of a virtuous wife being described. She is not only a diligent caretaker of the house, taking care of the domestic needs of everyone in the house and excelling in womanly work like weaving, cooking etc., but she is also a clever businesswoman who earns through her intelligent dealings with merchants and in the fields. She is also wise and hardworking, "strength and honour are her clothing", she is a God-fearing woman who helps the poor and the needy; she is praised by everyone and her husband becomes a very respectable man. The verses end with the famous lines:

Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing,
 But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.
 Give her of the fruit of her hands,
 And let her own works praise her in the gates.
 (Holy Bible, NKJV, Proverbs 31:30-31)

Thus, the qualities and the great advantages that the virtuous wife brings, make someone like her as

a very prized catch and she is sought after by every eligible bachelor. Every marriageable man would dream of finding someone who comes as close to her likeness. This concept of a finding a virtuous wife could be because of the need for self-preservation and satisfaction of the man in having an able partner to help him to a better life and catapult his family above the social ladder. Theodor Adorno, in his *Minima Moralia*, reflects on the concept of modern day marriage and says, "Marriage, living on as an abject parody in a time that has removed the basis of its human justification, usually serves today as a trick of self-preservation" (Adorno, Theodor, 30).

Adorno could never have been truer in echoing the real reason of a man to be in the pursuit of an ideal wife- the so called virtuous wife of Proverbs 31, the reason being mainly the 'trick of self-preservation' that compels the patriarchy to define the social construct of an ideal wife and to aspire to get her for himself. The extolling of the quality of a virtuous wife can be understood in diametrically opposite directions. In one, like Adorno says, it can be a trick of self-preservation where the ideal wife is created and sought after for selfish motives by the patriarchy. In this direction, there is no freedom for the wife, no equality or elevation of position over the husband in the family, but it is just a business transaction where having the qualities of an ideal wife will land her in a good marriage that will give her some amount of respect in society and free her from the taboo of being an unmarried woman. The social construct of an ideal wife can be a means of subjugating women by pressurizing them to fulfil certain criteria to get a groom for herself, failing which she has to face the social stigma of being rejected for marriage and crossing the marriageable age without being hitched, thus facing shame and being stigmatized in the eyes of the society. J.S. Mill in his essay on marriage says,

A single woman therefore is felt both by herself and others as a kind of excrescence on the surface of society, having no use or function or office there (Mill, J.S. Mill, Harriet Taylor, 4).

Thus, the social construct of the ideal wife can be used as a means of creating a profitable capital of women by forcing them to conform to the ideals set up for them and failing which, they are left in a position of disgrace. The ideals set up in such a system where failure meant stigmatization, would only be achieved by women to appease the patriarchy and will not in any way help in their individual growth as a person who is free to take their own courses in life and choose their own dreams of being happy and shake off the shackles of the patriarchy.

Thus, there could be a gradual degradation of the situation and position of women as their individual liberties stand to be curbed through the impositions of a patriarchal society and the virtuous wife would no longer be the independent woman who stood on an equal footing with her husband, but would be someone who stands to fulfill only her husband's wishes and the standards set by a judgmental society. This direction would also gradually lead to the removal of the amount of independence of the virtuous wife and would lower her standards after the equal footing is removed. The stigmatization of independent women who aren't married would naturally lead to the inferiority of the wife in the realms of marriage and the subsequent domination of the husband over the wife.

The same ideal of the virtuous wife, when taken in the opposite direction, in a positively women-centric way, would mean a whole world of good for the woman in the society. Proper ideals are always a good thing to strive for through one's own desire, without being forced upon by a powerful extra entity. The ideals of the virtuous wife can also be the ideal of a virtuous husband. The description of the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31 gives a lot of power to the woman as she is seen not only as an able manager of the household but also as a clever manager of the estate that she buys with her own money; furthermore, she becomes a wealthy merchant outside the confines of her house. Thus, she is very progressive in the socioeconomic sphere and this virtuous wife can be a great role model to empower girls to stand on her own feet, on equal footing with men and then continue to do so even after marriage. As a praise to this amazing woman the Bible says, "strength and honour are her clothing" (Holy Bible, NKJV, Proverbs 31: 25), giving her the

qualities that normally would be ascribed to a man, that of having the stereo-typically masculine possession of 'strength' and also the 'honour' that comes from the people due to her extraordinary feats. She can be seen as an independent woman who has free reign of her works and she might be more admired than her husband for her virtue that is praised all over the town. The picture of the virtuous wife would also help men to see that women do not lack behind in any qualities and skills but that they can do better than men when they are given the right environment to bloom and that they are to be treasured invaluable for their virtues in the house as well as the outside world. In a world where women are seen as the 'weaker' sex, it is important to remove the inequality that has prevailed and it can only be done by realizing that women are equal before God, having equal dignity and honour and abilities, not lagging behind in any good work and are not just child-bearers and domestic helps. It is important for the patriarchy to realize that women can possess all the virtues that any man can possess that of strength, honour, wisdom and many others and should be given free rein in order for their virtues to come forth. Adorno in his *Minima Moralia* says,

The only decent marriage would be one allowing each partner to lead an independent life, in which, instead of a fusion derived from an enforced community of economic interests, both freely accepted mutual responsibility (Adorno, Theodor, 31).

Adorno is signifying the importance of independence for an ideal marriage, which respects the interests of both the husband and the wife. However, the Biblical view of the ideal wife as seen in the New Testament calls for the submission of the wife to the husband. It can be seen in Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives like Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her (Holy Bible, NKJV)

Also in Colossians 3:18-19,

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them (Holy Bible, NKJV, Col 3:18-19)

And in 1 Peter 3: 1-4,

“Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward-arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel- rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God (Holy Bible, NKJV, 1 Peter 3:1-4).

It can be seen in all these verses that submission to the headship of the husband is the quality of an ideal wife. The Bible equates the submitting of the wife to the husband as the church being subject to Christ. Does it contradict the freedom and the position of the woman that can be seen in the Old Testament in the Proverbs 31 example of a virtuous wife? One cannot say that these views contradict, that the man and woman are unequal beings, but that in the family, for the semblance of order, the husband is supposed to be the head of the family by default. This cannot be construed to the fact that it demeans the worth of the woman in any means. Of course this command for submission can be taken to its illogical ends, that of dominating the woman and considering her as being of lesser worth and being inferior to the man. But the text in no way justifies that. The succeeding verses ask the husband to love the wife as Christ has loved the church, and in Ephesians 5:24 its written “So husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself”, the analogy of submission is as the submission and love of the church for Christ and the sacrifice of Christ in His love for the church to be His bride. The question of why the husband is supposed to be in headship and not the wife is going to be a fiercely debatable topic with a long drawn battle to topple the patriarchy and feminists would take the fight to remove the instruction for submission,

arguing that making the woman second to the man in the question of authority and headship as a tyrannical order and violates the position of equality of the woman. The critics on the other side of the camp would argue that this was given so that there be order in the family leading to order in the society if this was followed with proper context; they would argue that submission is necessary for love to exist and for anarchy to be contained.

In speaking of marriage, it is easy to fall into the habit of thinking of it as a concrete entity with features as readily observable as any three-dimensional object with volume, density and a visible surface. However, a marriage is actually a relationship between two people, not a concrete object. It is a dynamic system that emerges from the actions and interactions of people (Ross, Catherine E., 282).

Marriage is not just a concretely observable entity, it is a relationship between two people and their interactions and in this abstract nature of marriage lies the individual personal values, emotions and personalities that are a large part of the psychological nature of the family. A mutual respect and love between spouses would lead to a happy marriage full of happy individuals, while a marriage without those equations is likely to be an unsuccessful one.

J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor in their essay on marriage writes, "It may be assumed, as one of those presuppositions which would almost be made weaker by anything so ridiculous as attempting to prove them, that men and women ought to be perfectly coequal: that a woman ought not to be dependent on a man, more than a man on a woman, except so far as their affections make them so, by a voluntary surrender, renewed and renewing at each instant by free and spontaneous choice. But this perfect independence of each other for all save affection, cannot be, if there be dependence in pecuniary circumstances; a dependence which in the immense majority of cases must exist, if the woman be not capable, as well as the man, of gaining her own subsistence." (Mill, J.S. Mill, Harriet Taylor, 5)

Here, Mill and Taylor acknowledge the need for independence as well as mutual submission for the marriage. The Biblical virtuous wife does not in any way lack in this regard, she is not dependent on her husband for her subsistence, however she is submissive due to her affection. There is no diminishing of her worth but she is second to the man in terms of the hierarchy of the family order for the semblance of order. The quality of submission in the virtuous wife will always be questioned by people from the sceptical brigade, but the other camp would point out that if love humility are virtues to be sought after, then submission is also a good virtue.

The social construct of an ideal wife according to the Bible, lays down some ideals for women to aspire to in the realms of marriage and it definitely gives worth and value to the woman in all spheres. However, the Biblical virtuous wife is supposed to be submissive to her husband in the context of marriage and she is under the husband in the hierarchy of the family, but this position in no way diminishes her individual worth, respect and importance in the wider society.

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