

DO THE IDEAS OF THE ‘MYTHS OF MATRIARCHY’ PREVAIL IN THE MODERN WORLD?

Dewan Mahboob Hossain,

Department of Accounting & Information Systems,
University of Dhaka,
Dhaka, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

Myths about women exist in the society. In many cases, these myths depict women as mysterious, deceptive and instigators of sins. This article concentrates on whether these ideas about women portrayed in the prehistoric myths still exist in the modern world. In order to fulfill this objective, the article takes Joan Bamberger's (1974) discussions on the myths of matriarchy in different tribes of South American Indians. The common characteristics of these myths were identified and the modern situations were analysed on the basis of those characteristics. The article concludes that though these myths represent the prehistoric world, some of these ideas are still prevailing in the world.

Keywords: Myths, Women, ideas

INTRODUCTION:

This article is an attempt to find out whether the ideas about women that are described in the prehistoric myths of matriarchy still prevail in today's world or not. In order to describe and analyse the situation of the present world, the article takes Joan Bamberger's (1974) classic anthropological work 'The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society' as the basis of analysis.

In order to find out the reasons of why patriarchy is prevailing in the primitive societies, Bamberger (1974) analysed the myths prevailing in some South American Indian tribes. Bamberger (1974; 264) referred to a classic work of the Swiss scholar Joahnn Jakob Bachofen titled *Das Mutterrecht* that talked about the 'moral and historical fact' about the 'primacy of "mother right"'. It was said that once upon a time there used to be civil rules governed by women. Even the feminists, when talking about their issues and rights, mention about this prehistoric matriarchal societies. But Bamberger (1974; 266) clearly mentions that there is no 'archeological' proof of this prehistoric matriarchy.

Though there is no proof for prehistoric matriarchy, it is true that there exist the myths and in these myths women are depicted in a degrading manner. In order to understand the main features of these myths, we have to go through Bamberger's (1974) article. In the next section, a summary of this article is presented.

A SUMMARY OF BAMBERGER'S (1974) WORK:

Bamberger, in her article titled 'The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society' has taken the cases of three myths (though she mentioned about some other myths but she did not describe those in details) prevailing in three different South American tribes.

The first myth was prevailing among the Yamana-Yaghan people and the myth was related to 'Kina' hut. The myth says that in past the women made a hut called 'Kina' in order to fool men. In that hut, women used to paint themselves bizarrely and used to put masks on their heads. After that they used to come out of their huts and frighten the men by pretending themselves as spirits. But one day, a man called 'Sun-man' found the women dressing themselves as spirits in the Kina hut. From that day men came to know that these women were fooling the men. They fought against women. They either killed the women or transformed them into animals. The second myth is related to Hain- a ceremonial lodge for men. The myth says that in past, only women used to know witchcraft. When the girls neared to womanhood, they were taught with 'magic arts and how to bring sickness and even death to all those who displeased them' (Bamberger, 1974; 270). Women were tyrants. That is why, in order to survive, men went for massacre by killing women.

The third myth is known as 'the Jurupari myth' that prevailed among the Tukanooan-speaking Indians in South America. Jurupari who was the born of a virgin girl, was considered as a culture hero and the lawmaker of the tribe. He taught people that women should not be permitted to interfere into the affairs of men. Women should also not be allowed to 'take part in the secret male rites when the sacred musical instruments were played' (Bamberger, 1974; 272). The myth talks about the story of a girl who spied upon the flutes and for that she was brutally killed.

Bamberger (1974; 280) argued that women are still not free and equal to men because of these myths prevailing in these societies and 'to free her, we need to destroy the myth'. This article takes this statement as the base of analysis. The next section of this article takes into consideration some common ideas in the myths of matriarchy and strives to find out whether these ideas prevail in the modern world also.

THE IDEAS OF THE MYTH AND THE MODERN WORLD:

Though the tribes in these myths were geographically dispersed and living in different areas, it can be seen that all their myths had some common features:

1. All these myths accept that in past the society was dominated by women. That means, matriarchy was there in the society.
2. Women were believed to be mysterious and evil-natured. That is why men had to fight with them and thus men took over of the power of the society. Thus patriarchy came into existence.
3. Brutal killing of women was common in all of these three myths.
4. The last myth of Jurupari also highlights the fact that women were kept detached from the making and ownership of instruments.

If we think of all these ideas described in these prehistoric myths minutely, we shall be able to find out that these ideas always existed in the history of human civilization and are still prevailing in the modern society. In this section of the article, some evidences are presented in order to establish the fact that these ideas have always existed in the history.

From the previous discussions, it can be seen that these myths considered women as mysterious and evil natured. Though these myths talk about the prehistoric period, these ideas are prevailing for many years in different parts of the world. Though in general women are known for their tenderness and nurturing nature, the idea that women are deceitful and evil also prevails in the society.

A reason for this can be religion. In many religions, women are portrayed as deceptive and instigators of sins. For example, in the Hindu mythologies of India, we can find several female characters who are seductive and manipulative. In Hindu mythology, a well-known female character is *Menka* who was sent to *Viswamitra* (one of the famous sages), by *Indra* (a supernatural being/God) to break the mediation of *Viswamitra*. *Menka* becomes successful in her mission by seducing *Viswamitra*. She is represented as a sign of trickery and seduction.

In another Hindu mythology *Ramayana*, we get a character called *Surpanakha*. This widowed lady tried to approach love to two brothers – *Rama* and *Laxmana* and among these two, *Rama* was married. Being rejected by both the brothers, *Surpanakha* attacked *Rama's* wife. As a result of this a whole war broke off. Thus she was portrayed as an evil figure in Hindu mythology. *Ramayana* is considered as a holy religious book in Hindu religion. Though in Hindu mythologies we find the existence of Goddesses who remove the miseries of people, evil women characters are also created with enough importance.

In the Bible, woman is treated as the cause of the downfall of man (Mohammed, 2006; 124). Eve is considered as the instigators of the sin. According to Chowdhury (2008; 96):

“The biblical tale of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace was at the core of puritan belief that woman was evil. Eve was in many ways the archetypal witch”.

In Judaism, women are considered as weak, vicious and ‘an image of deceit’ (Shaikh, 1991; 7). Woman’s status in Hinduism is worse. According to a Hindu scholar named Chanakya, ‘river, armed soldier, animals with horns and paws, king and women must not be trusted’ (Shaikh, 1991; 9).

Even in the modern world, religion has a huge impact on the lives of the people. So, in modern world also, it can be expected that in many cases, women will be thought to be mysterious and evil natured.

From the myths described by Bamberger (1974) we can understand that women are accused of witchcraft from the ancient times. The notorious witch hunt of the 17th century in New England known as the Salem witch trial proves that the trend continued over centuries. In this trial many women were executed by accusing the charge of witchcraft. Chowdhury (2008; 96) commented that witchcraft was taken as evil because it challenged both God and the ‘hierarchy of the society’. According to Chowdhury (2008; 96), ‘witchcraft was associated with old age, frightful ugliness and female wickedness on one hand, with youth, beauty and female sexual power on the other’. The word ‘witchcraft’ itself is problematic also. The man who performs magic is a wizard. The woman who performs magic is a witch. That means, witchcraft is a craft of the witches, i.e., of the women.

Society, in different times, has treated women as evil. In England, in the year of 1864, *The Contagious Diseases Act 1864* was passed. At that point of time the soldiers were getting affected by various sexually transmitted diseases. That is why ‘it was decided that local prostitutes should be identified, examined and locked up to prevent further infections. Any woman walking through the insalubrious parts of garrison towns could be subjected forcibly to examine while the military men visiting prostitutes remained entirely free and unregulated’ (Palmer, 2010; 20). If we analyse this law we can see the double standard for men and women. Women were treated as the causes of the disease and the men who visited prostitutes were not accused or controlled.

Barnhill (2005; iv) in her research on the Victorian society found that ‘When a woman deviated from the Victorian construction of the ideal woman, she was stigmatized and labelled. The fallen woman was viewed as a moral menace, a contagion.’

We find this kind of depiction of women in literature and mass media also. Literatures and media are called the mirrors of the society. They try to portray the ideas that prevail in the society. Sometimes they inject the ideas in the society and influence people.

The Greek epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* talk about Helen of Troy. A whole war broke out because of her. The woman was depicted as the source of conflicts.

Shakespeare’s famous play *Hamlet* contains a famous comment about women: ‘Frailty, thy name is woman’. It was mentioned in order to portray the weak character of women. In this play, when the father of Hamlet dies, his mother gets married to his uncle Claudius within a month. In another Shakespeare play *Macbeth*, the lady Macbeth was called as the fourth witch. In another of this famous plays, *King Lear*, we can get the characters of two daughters who takes their father’s property and later did not help their father in need. Shakespeare’s plays still have huge impact on the minds of the readers.

The visual media (like television and movies) also plays an important role here. They show that women can be as good or bad as any men and thus the idea that is women are just nice, wonderful and incapable of hurting

anybody is a misconception. Women can play seductive and manipulative roles.

In many Western and Indian television serials, showing manipulative and seductive women is a common phenomenon. In most of these TV serials some female characters are created who are cruel, greedy, manipulative and of evil nature. In these TV serials women are portrayed both as home makers and home breakers. Good woman versus evil woman is a common issue in these serials.

In many cases, movies, novels and television soaps introduce a character of 'the other woman' in a man's life. That also degrades the status of women in the eyes of the society. Sometimes funny comments of the celebrities also deteriorate the situations. In many instances we find that celebrities make hilarious comments about the nature of women in the talk shows and comedy shows. They portray women like over-demanding, and always nagging. In an interview published in *The Guardian* on the 4th of January 2012, Stephen Hawking, the greatest scientist of the world at this moment, commented that women are complete mystery. A comment from such a big personality portrays the perceptions of the society about women.

Moreover, in the product commercials, women are mainly represented as 'sex symbols'. In most of the media advertises the glamorous and seductive sides of women are highlighted. In the media, women are treated as nothing but commodities.

If we analyse the images of the nurses in the hospitals, it will be clear that still the tendency of seeing women as mysterious and seductive prevail in the society. Mee (2006; 46) mentioned that in the eyes of the society, the nurses are treated as 'the sexy', 'the crusty battle axe' and 'the physician's handmaiden'. She commented that the media portrays the nurses in this way:

"These stereotypes are often exploited and perpetuated in the media. Consider, for example, an extensive Canadian advertising campaign launched in 2005 by Virgin Mobile, a cellular phone company. It featured nurses with long glamorous hair, heavy makeup, skimpy skirts revealing stockings and garters, provocative blouses, and of course a nurse's cap."

This stereotypical idea about women prevails in some other professions (For example, office secretary, female cabin crews in the airways, waitresses, bar dancers etc.) also. In many cases, the organizations also demand that kind of role from the women. In a recent recruitment advertisement of Air Asia (found in their official web site www.airasia.com on December 08, 2012) the dress code was mentioned like "Ladies- Smart casual,(strictly, knee length dress/skirt only) with full make up".

Soniak (2012) in the article titled 'How do Hurricanes get their Names?' mentioned that meteorologists name the hurricanes that attack the different parts of the world in different times. This practice started in the 1950s and at the beginning, the names of all hurricanes and other storms used to be female names. This practice was abolished in 1970s because of the protest from the part of the female meteorologists. Now both male and female names are used alternatively. From this information, it can be inferred that because of the devastating nature of the hurricanes, male meteorologists named them using female names. They wanted to indicate that the nature of women is similar to that of hurricanes.

In the Jurupari myth described in Bamberger's article it was highlighted that women were restricted to own and use instruments, specially the sacred musical instruments. This particular issue can be explained and interpreted in several ways. *Firstly*, as the women were not allowed to own and play the sacred musical instruments, it can be said that from the perspective of religion, their status was not equal to that of men. *Secondly*, the instruments can be taken as a metaphor for technology and knowledge. Women were not allowed to seek knowledge, use technology and get advanced.

As discussed earlier, in many religions, women got a second grade status. In case of the technology and knowledge, still today, the male literacy rate is higher than that of females in many countries in the world. Especially in the Third World countries, governments had to take special initiatives for women education. In many cases, female education was suppressed in the name of religion. The recent case of Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan can be cited here. Malala Yousafzai, an education and women's rights activist, was brutally shot in her head and neck by the religious activists on October 09, 2012 because of her social welfare activities. Later she was sent to the UK for treatment and rehabilitation.

Women's participation in science and technology is also not very strong. According to Ainuddin, de Carvalho, Fan, Kellar, Munder and Taeb (2005; 5), 'in industry, women are more involved in jobs demanding physical labour, and very few are in the most rewarding positions that demand technical skills and creative minds'. This research also highlights that a very few women can reach to the top scientific positions.

All the myths presented by Bamberger (1974) had a common ending, i.e., men took the power from the women through brutal violence against women. In all these myths we see the cruel murder of women by men in order to gain supremacy. Violence against women, in many forms, is still prevailing in almost all the societies in the

world. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) in their report on violence against women in the USA found that among the adults in the country, physical assault on women is a common form of violence. It was also found that a good number of American women become the victim of rape in their early ages. Most women become the victims of the violence of their intimate partners. Saravanan (2000) commented that this violence is partly a result of the feelings of male superiority in gender relations. She highlighted the common types of violence against women. These are physical violence (like blow, burn, hanging, sexual abuse and rape etc.), psychological violence (like insult, humiliation, coercion, blackmail etc.), economic and emotional threats and control over speech and actions. Kapoor (2000; 2) in a report published by the UNICEF commented that:

“Violence against women and girls continues to be a global epidemic that kills, tortures, and maims – physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. It is one of the most pervasive of human rights violations, denying women and girls equality, security, dignity, self-worth, and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms. Violence against women is present in every country, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age.”

From the discussions and the evidences presented in this section, it can be said that though Bamberger (1974) talked about some prehistoric myths prevailing in the tribal communities, many aspects of these myths are still seen in the modern world. We can notice the idea of considering women as evil, keeping them away from knowledge and education and continuing violence against them still in the modern society. We can find these ideas in several religions. We can notice the presence of these ideas in literature and media also. There are many evidences where we can see that the society has treated women as evil and deceptive, has kept them away from knowledge and technology and has allowed violence against them. All these happened because in most of the parts of this world, still the society is patriarchal. Male dominance in both the public and the private lives creates oppression on women and pushes them to a second grade status. That is why over many years we can see feminist movements through which women are trying to create their own identity, ensure their economic independence and get rid of patriarchy.

CONCLUSION:

The objective of this article was twofold: (1) Identifying the common characteristics/features of the myths of matriarchy described by Bamberger (1974) and (2) Finding out whether these ideas are still prevailing in the modern society or not. By analyzing the main three myths (Kina, Hain and Jurupari) described by Bamberger, it was found that there are some common features of these myths. Firstly, all these myths agree that there used to be matriarchal societies in the past. Secondly, all these myths considered women as evil-natured and deceptive. Thirdly, it was seen in these myths that men gained control over the society and established patriarchy through brutal violence. One other issue that was specifically identified from the Jurupari myth that women were given a second grade status in terms of religion and they were kept aside from knowledge and technology. Bamberger (1974) herself said that there is no empirical proof of the fact that there used to be matriarchy in the prehistoric period. But the fact is that myths of matriarchy are there. Over centuries, these myths are getting passed from one generation to another generation. So these myths are liable for stereotyping the nature of women in many ways. The idea of representing women as mysterious and deceptive can be found in religion, literature and media. Several historical facts (say attaching women to the issue of witchcraft) also work as evidences that women were degradingly stereotyped in the different periods of the history of mankind. We find these evidences in Puritan age, in Victorian age and even in the activities of modern media. Moreover, still today, women are having a backward position in terms of education and technology. Violence against women is a common phenomenon in almost all the societies in the world. That is why it can be inferred from these evidences that the ideas that were there in the myths of matriarchy in the prehistoric time continued to be there over the history and in many ways, still prevails in the modern society.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Ainuddin, N., de Carvalho, M. G., Fan, P., Kelar, G., Munder, I. and Taeb, M. (2005). *Revisiting Women's Participation in Science and Technology Emerging Challenges and Agenda for Reform*. Japan: UNU-IAS.
- [2] Bamberger, J. (1974). The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society. In Rosaldo, M.Z. and Lamphere, L. (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society* (pp. 67-87). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [3] Barnhill, G. H. (2005). *Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing in Victorian Novels*. A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree Master of Arts. Canada: University of Lethbridge.
- [4] Chowdhury, Z. (2008). The Scarlet Letter and New England's Witchcraft Beliefs. *Crossings: ULAB*

Journal of English Studies, 1(1), 95-100.

- [5] Hasan, A. G. (2004). *The Rights and Duties of Women in Islam*. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [6] Hassan, R. (2005). Feminist Theology: The Challenges for Muslim Women. In Moghissi, H. (ed). *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology, Volume I, Images and Realities* (pp. 195-208). London: Routledge.
- [7] Kapoor, S. (2000). *Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls*. Italy: UNICEF.
- [8] Mee, C. L. (2006). Painting a Portrait: How You can Shape Nursing's Image. *NSNA Imprint*, November/December, 44-49.
- [9] Palmer, B. (2010). *Victorian Literature*. England: Pearson.
- [10] Saravanan, S. (2000). *Violence Against Women in India A Literature Review*. India: Institute of Social Studies Trust.
- [11] Soniak, M. (2012). How do Hurrricanes get their Names?. *The Week*, October 30.
- [12] Tjaden, P. and Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*. USA: US Department of Justice.
