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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Comparative Study on Women in the Manusmṛti and the Qur'an

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this paper is to focus on the status of women in the light of the Manusmṛti and the Qur'an. I have no intention to support or criticise any religious scripture blindly; rather I aim to shed some light on the treatment of women and then social status in these religious scriptures. Importantly, both of the religious scriptures are generally alleged to be responsible for the degradation of women's status in society. I find this view to be ill-founded or at least not cognizant of the full range of the discussion of women's rights status, and social treatment as present in these scriptures. When we do take a look at the full-range of the discussion, we also find evidence suggesting that both the the Qur'an and the Manusmṛti have paid many discussions giving equal importance to man and woman, and even in some particular cases, they recommended giving more respect to women. The matter, in other words, is more complex than what the general critique of these scriptures would suggest.

**Keywords:** : Status of women, Manusmṛti, Qur'an, property rights, education, marriage

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## 1 Introduction

The status of women in religious aspects is a controversial issue. The religious texts in question – the Manusmṛti (a Hindu religious scripture) and the Qur'an (the central Islamic religious scripture) – both are stigmatized regarding the status of women. For example, it is widely held that the prescriptions of these texts allow for little to no independence or educational rights for women. This is the view that I hope to bring under question. It should be noted that the primary focus of this paper is not to support or criticise any religious scripture blindly; rather the purpose is to shed some important light on the actual status of women in respect to these religious scriptures. This I hope will demonstrate that the common wisdom regarding these texts' treatment of women is not based on a complete

grasp of what these texts actually say about women. To put it succinctly, there is quite a bit of tension between such a view and many cases of discussion on women's rights, status, and treatment in these texts. Take the case of the Manusmṛti. In a verse it is stated that it is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason, the wise men always guard themselves in the company of women (02:213). It may then be understood that Manu has attributed women's nature with vulgarity, exploitation, sensual desire, the bed, ornaments and disloyalty, etc. All the same, it is not uncommon in India to hear people often cite the verse (03:58) from Manusmṛti which says that the houses on which women were not honoured properly and cursed by women are destroyed like a magic. This suggests that Manusmṛti is not degrading the position of women at all. So, the matter as I said, is complex and certainly the case that Manusmṛti degrades women is not so clear cut. Such apparent contradictions in ideas on women are not unique at all to Manu. In Qur'an also on the one hand, it is stated that men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has made one more efficient over the other and so, they can spend out the wealth of their wives (04:34), but on the other hand, we find that Allah has made men and women from a single soul and that's why they are equal in nature (07:189). Thus, again the view that the Qur'an devalues women is not so easy to conclude.

In what comes next, I shall try to provide a bit more extensive survey of the teachings of these religious scriptures on women to show that the generally held view is not appreciative of the full range of evidence available regarding the discussion of women's rights, status, and social treatment present in these scriptures.

## 2 Most Discussed Verse of the Qur'an and the Manusmṛti

In the present scenario, we find the most prevalent belief that Islam and Manu (the first lawgiver in Hindu Śāstras) have secured an inferior status for women to men in their scriptures. They think that both the scriptures degrade women and excluded their activity and contribution to society. Gender-based inequalities are very clear in both the scriptures. Thus, some feminist thinkers have burned the Hindu scripture Manusmṛti and also rejected the Islamic scripture the Qur'an. In addition, they also claim that both the scriptures provoke the patriarchal gender system in our society. They considered Islam and Manu as the major sources of women's subordination. That's why, Muslim as well as the women of Sanātana dharma have to fight against male domination, early marriage, restriction on their behaviour and so on. We find a telling example of such a view in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who, reportedly, was immensely hurt to see the permanent denial of education and religious rights to women in the Hindu śāstra e.g., Manusmṛti (Das, 2017, p. 177). Nowadays, many scholars and feminist thinkers consider Islam and Manu as the major sources of the 'anti-women' view. Some criticise Islamic thoughts on women and concentrate on a particular Qur'anic verse (4:34), (Arlandson, 2005) which is stated as

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا آتَفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ

That means –

*“Men are the protectors*

*And maintainers of women,*

*Because God has given  
The one more (strength)  
Than the other, and because  
They support them  
From their means.” (Qur’an 4:34) (Ali, 1937, p. 190)*

In the same way, Manusmṛti is also criticized by citing the śloka

पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने ।  
रक्षन्ति स्थविरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति ॥ ३ ॥

That means “Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (Buhler, 2015, p. 373). In both cases, most of the thinkers claim that the textual reference of these verses refers to men are the protectors, providers and they have the authority over women. It justifies the male as the head of the family and final decision-maker. Thus, one may say that both Islam and Manu have denied equal rights and responsibilities for women. I think the above-mentioned views are not acceptable. Because, if we look at the scriptures – the Qur’an and the Manusmṛti then it will be clear that both Islam and Manu have provided significant rights for women. To discuss the women’s position in Islam and Manu’s view, we must return to the Qur’an and Manusmṛti. There are lots of verses or Śloka in both scriptures that discuss the affirmative views on women. In support of the above Qur’anic verse, it has been argued that Islam never accepts man’s ‘authority over women’ as making them superior to women (Ahmed, 1992, p. 92). This ‘authority over women’ is a responsibility and duty for men towards their women and not a sanction to rule over women. It rather imposes considerable duties and responsibilities on men for the security of women. In the same way, we can also elaborate the above Śloka of Manusmṛti. According to Manu, tentatively women need and required their protection but at the same time, we have to remember that this protection should not be externally enforced upon them. Such possible arguments can be added weight to if we carefully read the religious texts. We can find there that these scriptures weren’t focused on the inequality of men and women; rather they advocated that all human beings are the creature of God. Thus, men and women both are equal to God. For example, we can see the Manusmṛti chapter 1, verse 32 as

द्विधा कृत्वाऽत्मनो देहमर्धेन पुरुषोऽभवत् ।  
अर्धेन नारी तस्यां स विराजमसृजत् प्रभुः ॥ ३२ ॥

That means “Dividing his own body, the Lord became half male and half female; with that (female) he produced Virāt”. And in the same way, the Qur’anic verse 189 from surah Al-A’raf states that –

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا  
 فَلَمَّا تَخَشَّيْتُهَا حَمَلْتُ حَمَلًا خَوِيفًا فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ  
 فَلَمَّا أَتَتْ دَعَا اللَّهَ رَبُّهُمَا لِيُنزِلَ صَالِحًا لَنُكَونَنَّ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ

That means –

*“It is He Who created  
 You from a single person,  
 And made His mate  
 Of like nature, in order  
 That he might dwell with her  
 (In love) When they are  
 United, she bears a light  
 Burden and carries it about  
 (Unnoticed) When she grows  
 Heavy, they both pray  
 To God their Lord, (saying)  
 “If Thou givest us a goodly child,  
 We vow we shall  
 (Ever) be grateful.” (Ali, 1937, pp. 398-9)*

Thus, we can experience almost the same thoughts expressed in these scriptures i.e., God created us both male and female from the same body or same soul and made us in races and tribes just because the purpose is to know each other and to produce our successor.

In what comes next, I shall take up specific issues relating to women’s rights and their social treatment and discuss some often ignored passages from both the religious texts to show that the general view is not well founded.

### 3 Status of Women in Manusmṛti

Manusmṛti is considered as the divine law, where divine code of conduct and the status of women are depicted carefully. Manu, the first lawgiver, strongly believed in the coordinated and harmonious developments of a human being. He had believed that there is a biological and structural difference between men and women. Thus, they are not equally fit for the same work. According to him, man is perfect to do the rough and hard works by nature where physical strength is necessary; women is fit for less strenuous works e.g., design for household works. He also suggested that only women can make a good deal of love and affection in their own house as well as in their society (Das R. M., 1962, p. 39). He granted a reasonable place to women in society. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has also appreciated the importance of Manusmṛti regarding the status of women, he mentioned that “I know of no book in which so many delicate and kindly things are

said of women as in the Code of Manu" (Nietzsche, 1931, p. 160). According to Manu, women must be adorned and respected in their own house by their family members e.g., father, brothers, husband, brother-in-law, etc. who wants prosperity in their own life. Man can never make any progress in his life without the help of a woman (Buhler, 2015, p. 94). He needs a woman who could prepare to co-operate with him in all the activities. Though a man has an active power his power could remain inactive until a touch of a women's love and affection (Das R. M., 1962, p. 38). Only her spark of love and affection makes his power active. Women have a vital role in creation, without their involvement in sexual intercourse creation is not possible. Thus, to create the world creator Lord made His body into two halves – one is male and the other one is female (Buhler, 2015, p. 9). Thus, it is clear that Manu did not neglect the status of women from society. Individually no one is the perfect being but they (both men and women) unitedly make a complete being. We could compare it with the wings of a bird because wings help them to fly in the sky; both of the wings are equally important to get to fly the bird. In the same way, man and woman unitedly create a healthy and balanced family. Not only that woman is the counterpart of men that made them perfect. In Manusmṛti, chapter 9 verse 45 it is stated as –

एतावानेव पुरुषो यत्जायाऽत्मा प्रजैति ह ।

विप्राः प्राहुस्तथा चैतद् यो भर्ता सा स्मृताङ्गना ॥ ४५ ॥

That means "He only is a perfect man who consists (of three persons united), his wife, himself, and his offspring; thus (says the Veda), and (learned) Brāhmaṇas propound this (maxim) likewise, 'the husband is declared to be one with the wife" (Buhler [4], p. 382). Another similar verse in the Manusmṛti, chapter 03, verse 56, can be traced as –

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।

यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥ ५६ ॥

That means – "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (Buhler, 2015, p. 94). So, it is clear that Manu thought that women have a respectful place in society. Everyone should respect women otherwise God will be ill-fated to them.

#### 4 Status of Women in the Qur'an

The Qur'an maintains equal rights and status for every individual being. According to Islam, both men and women are equally worthy and precious in our human society. Islam gives the priority of women dignity and honour. According to the Qur'an, Allah created both of us from a single soul (Ali, 1937, p. 398). Thus, men and women both are equal to the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of the authority of man over women or women over man. According to Islam, men and women are equal in all respects; either in rights or duties, in punishments or rewards. Allah does not give any priority to one of them either man

or woman, in respect to their activities they will prove their eligibility equally to receive their rewards or punishment. There is no preference in punishments or rewards whether it is male or female. Both of them will be equally punished or rewarded concerning their deeds. So, according to the Qur'an, both men and women have equal moral responsibility for their activities (Ali, 1937, p. 254). Here we may say one Qur'anic verse, i.e., 05:41 where the theory of punishment is depicted carefully. This verse stated as –

فَدَّ خَسِرَ الَّذِينَ قَتَلُوا أَوْلَادَهُمْ سَفَهًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَحَرَّمُوا مَا رَزَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ افْتِرَاءً عَلَى اللَّهِ  
فَدَّ صَلَّوْا وَمَا كَانُوا مُهْتَدِينَ

That means –

*“As to the thief,*

*Male or female,*

*Cut off his or her hands*

*A punishment by way*

*Of example, from God,*

*For their crime*

*And God is Exalted in power.”* (Ali, 1937, p. 254)

So, according to this Quranic verse, it is clear that the punishment for theft is equally applicable whether the thief is male or female. There is no preference in respect to their gender. In the same way, in other places where punishment is needed, they would be equally punished and they would be equally rewarded concerning their deeds. According to the Qur'an, Allah never denies anyone's reward irrespectively of their actions, there are no gender discrimination (Ali, 1937, p. 254). There is another Quranic verse 40:40 that mentioned that the rewards of an evil action will be given with like evil and on the contrary, the rewards of a good action will be given with blessings for which both man and women would allow to enter the Gardens of Paradise (Ali, 1937, p. 1274).

According to Islam, also women have the legal rights to enter into contracts, build up their own business and they have the right to possess their inherited property independently (Ali, 1937, p. 180 189). For Islam, women should be treated carefully because they are half of our society. The Prophet had suggested to his followers to be careful and compassionate with women. According to Islam, every woman is a social and legal person, also she has a responsibility to our society. Most of the important thing is that Allah created them as human beings.

## 5 The Right to Education

Education is a necessity in every strong civilization. Education has the power to build a developed society as well as a developed country. Thus, we can say as education is the main pillar of our society. It is often held that, according to the Manusmṛti, women have no right to read or write Vedic texts (Buhler, 2015, p. 376). It is true that Manu recommended that the study of the Vedas maybe very difficult for women. But this pertains only to the study of the Vedas. Manu thinks that after marriage, women may be unable to manage

their study along with the responsibilities in their father-in-law's house; so, possibly they may recite the Veda incorrectly. Given that the result of improper recitation of the Vedic text is not only failing to secure the desired result; it could ruin the reciter (Das R. M., 1962, p. 96), Manu suggests that women should engage with the study of the Vedas. It should be noted that Manu's injunction seems to be a practical one in response to the already existing status of women (as having many responsibilities in their father-in-law's household) and given the strict notion of the consequences of incorrect recital of the Vedas both of which he cannot be blamed for. Other than the Vedas, Manu simply does not prohibit women from having general studies.

The Islamic religious text, the Qur'an and Hādīth advocate equal rights to both the male and female to seek their knowledge. According to the Qur'an, all Muslims, including males and females have to put their effort to acquire knowledge (Ali, 1937, pp. 24-5). Another Qur'anic verse also states that only the failure people want to keep their children and slave girls away from knowing. This Qur'anic verse stated as –

قَدْ خَسِرَ الَّذِينَ قَتَلُوا أَوْلَادَهُمْ سَفَهًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَحَرَّمُوا مَا رَزَقَهُمُ اللَّهُ افْتِرَاءً عَلَى اللَّهِ  
قَدْ ضَلُّوا وَمَا كَانُوا مُهْتَدِينَ

That means –

*“Lost are those who slay  
Their children, from folly,  
Without knowledge, and forbid  
Food which God hath provided  
For them, inventing (lies)  
Against God, They have  
Indeed gone astray  
And heeded no guidance.”* (Ali, 1937, p. 331)

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam had repeatedly said that ‘everyone irrespective of their sex, should be educated properly’; not only that He announced and ordered His followers to educate their slave girls also (Khan, 1997, p. 410). Thus, neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet prohibits education for women. Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad had broadly accepted by His followers and it was reported that at that time when He demises, there were many Muslim women scholars like Umm Kulthum bint Abi Bakr and Na'ila bint al-Furafisa, they both were notable Hādīth translator at that time (al-Faruqi, 1985, pp. 64-5).

## 6 The Right to Inheritance

Manu discussed the ownership rights of inherited property. According to the Manusmṛti, after the death of parents, only sons have the right to hold the share of the inheritance that their parents had left but the daughters were remained exclude from the paternal inherited property, (Buhler, 2015, p. 394) though the son and daughter can equally share their mother's estate (Buhler, 2015, pp. 414-5). If the daughter would fail to hold their

shares, then it would be transferred to their brothers (Buhler, 2015, p. 394). The injustice is not confined within brothers and sisters, it extends between elder and younger brothers also. He allows two shares for the eldest son, one and a half for the brother next to him and rest of the younger brother can take one share each from their parent's property (Buhler, 2015, p. 397). While here we do find considerable inequality in the rights of men and women, we also find special provisions for women. For example, Manu also advised that a brother should give one-fourth share of their inheritance (which they have got from their father) to their maiden sisters (Buhler, 2015, p. 397).

According to the Qur'an, men and women both have equal legal rights in respect to property ownership. Islam authorized women as a share-holder of inheritance. Following by the Qur'an, women have the right to manage their property independently as a man did; the Qur'an authorized her to buy, sell, debt, rent, borrow or lend, may involve herself in a contract and could sign a legal document. Also, she has the right to donate her property as her wish or she could build up a business or company to act as a trustee (Ali, 1937, p. 189). There is a Qur'anic verse that mentioned that both men and women have a portion of the inheritance left by their parents and kinsmen. According to the Qur'anic legislation, everyone (whether male or female) has a share in their inheritance or what their parents or kinsmen had left; there is no exception of it even if the property is too little or much more (Ali, 1937, p. 180).

## 7 The Right to Marriage

Almost all civilizations and religions authorise that marriage is a most desirable and necessary institution for all; except Buddhism and Jainism (Das R. M., 1962, p. 112). According to Manu, marriage has an individual, societal and religious necessity; everyone should get married at the proper age and time. He considered marriage as *śarira sanskāra* through which everyone could enjoy their physical satisfaction at the proper age (Das R. M., 1962, p. 113). The Qur'an also indicates almost the same thing that is, marriage is a way through which both men and women gain their satisfaction and peace in spirits (Jawad, 1998, p. 31). But both scriptures authorise that physical satisfaction is not the only purpose of marriage. According to Qur'an (17:32), adultery is strictly prohibited. Thus, Islam advises getting married through which one can fulfil his or her sexual desires in the right direction (Jawad, 1998, p. 31). According to the Qur'an, adultery is strictly prohibited (Ali, 1937, p. 703). According to Islam, marriage guarantees social stability and a dignified form of human life. It also guarantees women's rights in their society both as a wife and as a mother (Jawad, 1998, p. 32).

According to Medhātithi (a commentator of *Manusmṛiti*), marriage is not only a means to satisfy the lower passions or desires of a man; marriage is regarded as a holy and sanctified means of our life. He strictly denies marrying more than one. For him, in most cases, the main purpose of second marriage is to fulfil the passions of their lower part; there is no means of sanctity in second marriages (Das R. M., 1962, p. 113). According to Prophet Muhammad, every woman's consent is necessary for marriage, even if she is a virgin girl or a widow or a divorcee or a matron or whatsoever (Hādīth: 5136) (Khan, 1997, p. 58). Islam also recommended its followers marry only one person at a time, yet it allows four



women at a time under certain conditions. Such conditions are – if the women are slaves, orphans or widows then one can marry these girls to give equal rights, honour and dignity that she deserves. Though it has a provision that the husband should treat them equally (both mentally and physically) as their first wife; if equal treatment is not possible then only one wife is justified (Ali, 1937, p. 179). It is very difficult for an ordinary man to satisfy all these conditions, so it is better to have one wife beside many. Thus, we can say that both of the scriptures the Manusmṛti and the Qur'an recommended their followers to be monogamous concerning marriage.

## 8 The Right to Equal Respect

Both the Manusmṛti and Qur'an advocate equal respect for women in our society. Both the scriptures suggest and encourage their followers to behave in a friendly and compassionate manner. Women should be adorned and respected carefully in their own house by their family members like father, mother, brother, husbands and so on (Buhler, 2015, p. 94). The Prophet repeatedly inspires His followers to behave kindly and compassionately with women. Every woman should be treated carefully because they are half of society. According to Islam, mutual understanding and respect between men and women can make a healthy family as well as a healthy society. Manusmṛti emphasises that if a man does not respect women, then no sanctified ritual would be rewarded; (Buhler, 2015, p. 94) to give respects to an unknown woman Manu also advised that every unknown man must be addressed her as bhaginī (respected lady or beloved sister) (Buhler, 2015, p. 56). In the same way Islam advises to call an unknown woman as "janab-a-muhtarma" which means respected or honourable woman (Khan, 1997, p. 249). According to the Qur'an, everyone should revere Allah because He has made us equally (Ali, 1937, p. 178). Further, Prophet added that "Fear Allah regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of Allah and made their bodies lawful with the word of Allah. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you" (Doi, 1989, p. 7). Here both the scriptures advise us almost the same thing in respect to women's dignity and respect in our society. In a social or legal person, women should be respected.

## 9 Conclusion

Thus, we cannot say that the Qur'an or the Manusmṛti has degraded women though it does not mean that both of these scriptures say all good things about women. We can simply say that there are few verses in the Qur'an and the Manusmṛti that can be interpreted in favour of women's rights, duties and independence and a simple critique of these texts with respect to their treatment of women's issues must be altered to make way for them. The fault perhaps lies not in the scriptures but in the andro-centric society's misinterpretation of the texts validating the degradation of women's status in both religions. In the present-day scenario, we can see that women are not weaker than men. They held a large number of improvements in all the fields such as – in the fields of education, politics, business and many more fields. They make themselves qualified as a teacher, doctor, engineer, journalist, scientist, politician, business-woman, Head of the administration, etc. May be the number of successful women is little, but it is a hope for other women that they can also achieve this success. Till now, most of the women are facing a lot of difficulties in making

their improvements in all the places only because androcentric society makes it difficult for them. I think we need a faithful interpretation of these religious scriptures through which we can restore the sanctity and dignity of women in our society and at the same time the entire improvement of our society as well as the country.

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