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The Construction of Performative Identities in Patriarchal Religious Institutions: A Study of Annie Besant's *An Autobiography* with Special Reference to "Atheism as I Knew and Taught it"

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Abstract

Annie Besant was a Victorian radical whose outspoken views included advocacy of women's rights and atheism. In her mid-forties she went to live in India. Her *An Autobiography* (1893) charts her dramatic political and ethical awakenings, up to the point where she joined the Theosophical movement. It describes how she was unhappily married to a clergyman, contemplated suicide, embraced atheism, and legally separated from her husband. The present paper is an attempt to explore Annie Besant's rebellion against patriarchal and religious institutions through an in-depth study of her autobiography with special reference to the chapter "Atheism as I Knew and Taught It". The paper will analyze how Annie Besant revolted against the performative construction of identity which is the result of the patriarchal religious discourses, and how breaking the binary of theist/atheist gave her strength to further deconstruct the male/female binary.

Keywords: atheism, free thought, gender roles, women liberation, performativity, discourses, patriarchy, religion

Introduction:

Nonconformity to religion results in proclivity for free thought i.e. a commitment to question everything and to give priority to the reason above all. The same nonconformity gives strength to the idea that gender differences are the product of social and cultural discourses. The present paper based on the study of Annie Besant's "Atheism: As I Knew and Taught It", taken from her autobiography, is an attempt to explore her rational and radical opinions about religious teachings and their impact on developing a sense of rebellion against all patriarchal institutions. The analysis is done by applying the views and results of Judith Bultler's notion of performativity and Michel Foucault's idea of normalization of power.

Annie Besant's Conversions:

Annie Besant wrote *An Autobiography* after her conversion into Theosophy which is a spiritualist philosophy influenced by Eastern religion. She is a woman who lived multiple lives—First, as a devout Christian who married a clergyman, then refused to take communion at church, eventually resulting in her legal separation, converted into "a free thinker, then a scientific materialist, then

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an atheist, finally into the most prominent female advocate for secularism and a woman activist" (Miller, 2009, p. 248). She emigrated to India in 1898, and became the first woman President of Indian National Congress. Her multiplicity of self as represented in her autobiography seems to be the result of her various conversions. Her shift from staunch Christian to free thought to Theosophy to atheism to feminist individualism represent an ongoing search for identity and a rebel against the performative construction of identity. Thus, when people later attacked her atheism as negative, she replied that humans should live in accord with truth, not superstition: 'it is an error,' she explained, 'to regard my truth as negative and barren, for all truth is positive and fruitful'. (Besant, 1877, p. 7)

Construction of Performative Identities in Religious Institutions:

Atheists are the individuals who do not believe in the existence of God or gods. They "tend to be less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less racist, less authoritarian, less ethnocentric, and less dogmatic than religious individuals" (Stinson, 2013, p.40). According to Christine Overall, there are many reasons to support this argument that feminists should be atheists. She posited that feminists should be atheists because religion perpetuates gender inequity.

"Historically, women have been excluded from education, including religious and theological education; hence they have not been involved in shaping religions or theologies. Women have also been denied leadership positions as priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams and have had only a subordinate participation in the life of many religions." (Overall, 2007, p.235)

The roles based on gender are further institutionalized through religious beliefs. Atheists, however, are somewhat free to support women's independence and equality as is seen in Annie Besant's proclamations. Though the argument that atheists support gender equality is still under debate, atheists can realize how gender is constructed in the garb of religious systems as in education, family and social system. According to Judith Butler:

". . . we often describe ourselves as having identities as if those identities exist in the real world whereas, in fact, the phrases which refer to those identities create them. Identity talk is a performance in which its objects are conjured up as much as it is analysis of things that exist out there – and it's just one of the performances in which gender identities are maintained." (Butler, 2001, p.341)

Religion plays a major role in maintaining these identities. Annie Besant declaring herself outright an atheist advocated and voiced for women's rights in India along with other social reformers. "Known as Red Annie, she was a militant atheist, socialist, and trade union organizer, as well as women's rights advocate." (Nancy, 1994, p.563). Chastity for women has always been considered of having the utmost importance in most of the religions of the world. It is considered one of the human virtues. Holy Mary, because of her being pure and virgin, is considered a perfect woman.

"According to the teachings of Quran and the New Testament, chastity and avoiding infection of moral and sexual deviations have been considered as outstanding characteristics of believers in community for having Communal pathways to sustainable and health living; especially leaders and leadership authority have no stability without

emancipation of lusts and desires. Importance of modesty; that is the state of controlling against lust, has been repeatedly mentioned in Quran.” (Moosavi, 2016)

Annie Besant in her fervor for atheism “glorified human passion, and regarded sexual intercourse as perfecting the union of heart and mind.” (Nancy, 1994, p.565) In the essay taken up for study she puts forward:

“Virtue is an indispensable part of all true and solid happiness.... But it is, after all, only reasonable that happiness should be the ultimate test of right and wrong . . .” (Besant, 2018, p. 96).

The relationship between being virtuous and being chaste is highly debatable as it has always led to a negotiable performative identity rather than a stable state of sexual virtue. At the same time the relation between chastity and social reputation is also more complex as in the case of Annie Besant. Though Annie Besant herself was convicted for obscenity along with Charles Bradlaugh during her controversial campaign against birth control, yet her public proclamations about human passions did not lead to that much of social disgrace as these got compensated through other performative means.

Annie propounded her belief in Hinduism also:

“You have not only the Vedas and the Upanishads showing a mighty intellect...You find the very foundation of modern science laid down as part of the Hindu philosophy.” (Pillai, 2017)

However,

“Neither Hinduism nor women are stable, unified categories with one specific meaning, for each comprises complex, sometimes even contradictory, realities.” (King, p.523)

Annie Besant could easily recognize how spoken discourses operate within each institution and performativity here becomes an important factor to influence the identities of both the individuals and organizations in order to maintain market position.

Annie Besant observed the condition of Indian women closely and decried their restricted lives. While questioning Indian patriarchal discourse, she stumped her radical causes. In her first public lecture, Besant openly debated on the issue of women’s emancipation. In the journal *National Reformer*, she has regularly expressed her feminist ideals.

“. . . men restrict women’s action to the home? I can understand that, in Eastern lands, where the husband rules his wives with despotic authority, and woman is but the plaything and the slave of man, woman’s sphere is the home, for the very simple reason that she cannot get outside it ... Shut any living creature up, and its prison becomes its sphere.” (Besant, 1885, pp. 10, 12)

Annie Besant who was a woman of dreams and was always willing to use new ideas in place of the old ones could easily grasp the complexities of the situation. Her unorthodox religious views and her inclination towards atheism made her believe:

“Never forget that life can only be nobly inspired and rightly lived if you take it bravely and gallantly, as a splendid adventure in which you are setting out into an unknown

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country, to meet many a joy, to find many a comrade, to win and lose many a battle." (Qtd. in Lewis)

During her twenties, she started developing serious doubts about her religious beliefs and eventually, she became anti-Church. She lost her faith in Christianity so much so that she refused to attend communion. She even got legally separated from her husband who used to order her to follow Christianity.

"I resolved to take Christianity as it had been taught in the Churches, and carefully and thoroughly examine its dogmas one by one, so that I should never again say "I believe" where I had not proved, and that, however diminished my area of belief, what was left of it might at least be firm under my feet. . . . that I lost all faith in Christianity." (Besant, 2018, pp 58-59)

She got notoriety when she along with Charles Bradlaugh published Charles Knowlton's 'Fruits of Philosophy', a pamphlet that advocated birth control. Her husband, Frank Besant, who was a clergyman and had always believed in the notion of husband's authority and the wife's submission.

"It is not your duty to ascertain the truth," he told me, sternly. "It is your duty to accept and believe the truth as laid down by the Church. At your peril you reject it" (Besant, 2018, p. 67)

He even appointed a detective to see if she was sleeping with Charles Bradlaugh. Annie always revolted against the conditions imposed upon her. Rebelling against her marriage and being against the denial of a woman's independence, she left her so-called religious husband and the secure life at home and ventured on a new path carving a niche for herself. For Foucault, the subject is constructed not only in language, as Lacan would have it, but through many different types of practices. Religion is one such practice through which power-knowledge effects are applied. Foucault rejected any notion of an essence of being, asserting that self and identities are constructed in particular contexts affected by non-discursive institutions, texts and discourses:

". . . discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is thing for which or by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized." (Foucault, 1970, pp 52-53)

Annie Besant, who began her life immersed in religiosity, got transformed into an atheist and championed women's cause. When she embraced atheism, she was charged with obscenity.

"Contraception was used as the convenient excuse to expose atheists as obscene and immoral. With this justification, the defenders of the Christian state could send atheist propagators to prison." (Conrad, 2009, 59)

She was called a deranged female too. She couldn't join any of the women's rights organizations because of her controversial reputation but wrote widely on women's emancipation and gender equality. Once free not only from Frank Besant, her husband, but also from her orthodox views, she challenged the whole of conventional thinking:

"Having demonstrated, as I hope to do, that the orthodox idea of God is unreasonable and absurd, we will endeavour to ascertain whether any idea of God, worthy to be called an idea, is attainable in the present state of our faculties." (Besant, 2018, p.88)

Her atheism made her believe strongly in human brotherhood. Instead of having warmth in showing reverence to God, she found more warmth in helping the poor people and improving their lot. By being an atheist, she started developing feelings for the sad ones.

". . . where the cry of 'Atheist' is raised there may we be sure that another step is being taken towards the redemption of humanity. The saviours of the world are too often howled at as Atheists, and then worshipped as Deities." (Besant, 2018, p. 94)

Her atheism can be compared to Protestantism which was once considered as selfish and subversive of all order, leading to a dangerous kind of equality. The idea of "free examination" propounded by Protestants was seen as encouraging a sinful form of individualism that invariably led to the disrespect for community and tradition. However, for Annie Besant, this idea of free thinking can brighten sadness, can reform abuses and can be helpful in establishing equal justice for rich and poor:

"There is no warmth in brightening the lot of the sad, in reforming abuses, in establishing equal justice for rich and poor? You find warmth in the church, but none in the home? Warmth in imagining the cloud glories of heaven, but none in creating substantial glories on earth?" (Besant, 2018, p.99)

She realized that priesthood had become a profession and religious rule a prize for ambition. Her protestant spirit is quite evident here.

This made her approach more logical and scientific and made her think about equality at all levels, including gender equality. She raises her voice against all political structures. She evolved a system in which emancipation of women will not be "self-defeating" (Butler 342). She spoke against creating the "gendered subjects", having a differential axis of domination as nowhere in the autobiography she presumed to be masculine. Eventually, she proclaimed her vision of the world which has women who are liberated and free thinkers. When she denies the existence of spirit or soul, she at the same time refuses to believe in God and religiosity. According to her:

". . . that there can be only one eternal and underived substance, and that matter and spirit must, therefore, only be varying manifestations of this one substance." (Besant, 2018, p.88)

The underlying notion is to free oneself from becoming a gendered being. Annie Besant asserts that there is no evidence to prove the existence of God or spirit. She spread the gospel of free thoughts:

". . . we will spread the Gospel of Freethought among men, until the sad minor melodies of Christianity have sobbed out their last mournful notes on the dying evening breeze, and on the fresh morning winds shall ring out the chorus of hope and joyfulness, from the glad lips of men whom the Truth has at last set free." (Besant, 2018, p. 102)

According to her, men and women are too made up of different sets of matter only and gender in itself does not have any essence or intrinsic reality. There is nothing like predefined roles and

responsibilities. The effect of science, which continuously started overwhelming her, made her believe only in biologists and chemists to seek the explanation of all problems of life and existence. When, in the chapter "Atheism as I Knew and Taught it" focused for research, she defines life which according to her is just the result of the arrangement of matter, it is evidently drawn that she could talk about women's liberation and gender equality so openly because she considered that biologically and chemically male and female bodies are just the arrangement of different sets of matter. She appears to be very close to Simone de Beauvoir's "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" when she says:

"There is no sign here of an intelligent spirit controlling a mechanism; there is every sign of a learning and developing intelligence, developing paripassu with the organism of which it is a function." (Besant, 2018, p. 93)

According to Besant, a human being is just the result of what his parents were and what his circumstances were. There is nothing inborn. He can change the circumstances, make them good or bad, lead a happy and healthy life or a criminal's life as per his own will. This again reflects Butler's idea of performativity according to which gender is mainly the performative repetition. The concept of gender is not natural or innate. Besant while advocating that everything is the process of learning is entering into the realm of rejecting the traditional and religious definitions of gender roles. She considers that the crimes against women are sometimes perpetuated by religion:

"Another bestial tendency is the lust of the male for the female apart from love, duty, and loyalty; this again has been encouraged by religion, as witness the polygamy and concubinage of the Hebrews—as in Abraham, David, and Solomon, not to mention the precepts of the Mosaic laws—the bands of male and female prostitutes in connection with Pagan temples, and the curious outbursts of sexual passion in connection with religious revivals and missions." (Besant, 2018, p. 103)

Many bestial tendencies among human beings are the result of blindly following the religious teachings. She is speaking contrary to the general beliefs of the people that during adversities even the atheists turn towards religion, "For troubles and adversities do more bow men's minds to religion" (Francis Bacon's *Of Atheism*).

Her atheism and the rejection of the idea of God gave her the strength to believe that it is science and not religion that can eradicate such evils by tracing them to their source in the brute ancestry. Human beings can evolve without any discrimination only by losing faith in religion and gaining faith in science. Moreover, a theist can yearn for personal perfection but that will be a self-centered desire. As various religions have divided the people on the basis of class, colour, and gender, a theist will never be able to think scientifically. On the contrary, an atheist desires personal perfection not for his selfish motives but rather because science has taught him the unity of the race and gender too.

Conclusion:

Annie Besant, thus, grasping the complexities of the situation of women tried the idea of atheism as a religion in itself. It is her continuous rejection of the religion — as is evident in the chapter

taken up for study — gave her the strength to work for the poor and oppressed women of the country. Making humanity, not religiosity as her surging passion, she could easily attack the prevailing system of injustice and hardships. She organized trade unions, campaigned for birth control, helped in rising the age of marriage, abolishing Pardah system, and educating girls and women. She left her imprints on the sands of time. Her journey from a devout Christian to a free thinker gave her the necessary strength to fight against the patriarchal religious discourses constructing the performative identities and making them appear innate and natural.

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