

# BASHALINI A PLACE FOR BIOLOGICAL GENDER IMPURITIES SEGREGATING WOMEN DURING MENSTRUATION IN KALSAH

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**ABSTRACT:** *The study was conducted in Bumburet valley of district Chitral, Pakistan. Qualitative anthropological research technique was adopted for acquiring the ethnographic data for the research in hand. This research paper is an attempt to understand ancestral and cultural traditions, faith, mystic experiences, oral history and mythology of the Kalash people. Among the Kalash religion is the main divine force for their cultural identity which sometimes become a cause of gender discrimination and segregation. They claim that they consider both the male and the females as equal but actually they treat females as dependent group. Religion is related to divinity and spiritualism it again is the domain of man. Native religion is based on the fundamental principle of purity and impurity. They regard high mountains, lakes, green pastures, cooking area, gods and deities, goats, sanctuaries and worship area as pure, whereas the females, bashalini (Menstruation home) and graveyard as impure. The females during their biological impurity are forbidden to touch and share anything with the males. They are segregated during their menstruation cycle and spend a week in the Bashalini. In their absence their relative ladies perform their household chores. The male members and pure women of the society are forbidden to enter this Bashalini. Sending womenfolk to bashalini is considered to be a punishment for them as they are cursed by the gods.*

**Keywords:** gender, social structure, religious beliefs, contact, menstruation, purity, impurity, men and women

## INTRODUCTION

Gender is the term which is often used or replaced by “sex”. Gender is related to the psychological, social and cultural attitude of human beings (man and women) in the society. Sex is the term used when referring to women as a *biologically sexed body* [1]. Gender is the socio cultural dimension of being male and female while, sex refers to the biological dimension or non-physiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to male and females [2]. Gender role is an important aspect of gender; it is defined as the set of expectations that prescribed how females and males should think, act, and feel. Male are expected to be tough and more assertive. Hence the term (be a man). The females are expected to be more sensitive, submissive, obedient, and cultured to assume the role of care giver and nurturer (act like a lady). The symbolic meaning and status of the women is changed when they are referred as sex objects. In literature the gender difference are treated with cynicism. Every society claims that they consider both the male and the females as equals; with equal rights, respect and same treatment without any discrimination however besides the rhetoric they often include the issues like female’s nature, social treatment and performance in developing and strengthening the society. They regard females as dependent group who are unable of assuming independent responsibilities on the basis of their biological and psychological weaknesses. Dinda [2] interprets this dependency on relationship based upon race, sex, and class being perpetuated through social, educational and economic institutions. The generalized belief that females of the third world countries constitute an identifiable group purely on the basis of dependency is a prejudiced statement. But when applied to intelligence, morality, sense of responsibility, social interaction and adjustments, size rarely matters. Morris [3] believes that the concept of social identity comprises of number of strands, with gender and race comprising relevant. She identifies four types of equalities: Ontological equality is applied when all the human beings are equal without any

discrimination due to sex, age, color, status and race. The equality in opportunities related to jobs without involving any bias, conditional equality where attempts are made to provide equal chances to any special group and the fourth is equality as an outcome which requires some form of legislation or intervention to compensate for initial inequality [4]. Religion is related to divinity and spiritualism it again is the domain of man. The religious preacher manipulates the religious meanings and doctrine to their advantage to assume authority and legitimacy over the weaker. The society in fact is suffering from the “universality of female subordination”[5]. Females are devalued because of their role, physical strength, and biological needs.

## RESEARCH SITE

The study was conducted in Bumburet valley of district Chitral, Pakistan. The modern state of Chitral district is located in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa Province. This state was once an old country with its borders extending up to *Badakshan* and *Bashagal* in the North West and the *Kunar* valley in the south all the way to *Bilam* and *Chaghasswari*. Most of these areas now lie in Afghanistan. Border of the state was not permanent due to the ongoing expansion of the neighboring state of Gilgit and Kashmir. Bumburet Valley of Kalash is situated some 35 kilometers to the south of Chitral which opens towards Kunar River. During 1959 the kingdom of Chitral was attached to Pakistan and therefore the Kalash people became citizens of Pakistan. The total area of Bumburet valley is 180 Sq. Km out of which 51 Sq. Km is habitable and cultivable. There are six main pasture units at elevation of 3500m above sea level and occupy about half of the total geographical area of the valley. The Kalash villages in all the three valleys are located at a height of approximately 1900 to 2200m [6]. The climate is generally semi-arid.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative anthropological research technique was adopted for acquiring the ethnographic data for the research in hand. The researchers lived in Bumburet valley, and participated in their festivals, feasts, offerings and prayers. Thus a complete immersion in the said culture has been adopted for a very good rapport, acceptance and recognition by the society. The basic data was collected through the socio economic survey. The survey facilitated me to gather information about the village regarding sex, education, family system, caste, population, ethnic groups, occupation, and number of household residing in the village. The Bouburet valley is composed of 12 hamlets and through random sampling we selected few hamlets where both Kalasha and Muslims coexisted and shared the geographical space. We visited every house of the village Anish, Brun, Batrik and Karakal and conducted in-depth interviews to collect detailed information about their religion. Audio recording was used during the interviews. The secondary data for this study was collected from library by reviewing, journals, articles and

documentary programs about the mythical people of Kalash. The data has been assembled in the form of photographs, maps sketches, and floor plans.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Kalash religion is based on the *fundamental* principle of purity and impurity. They regard high mountains, lakes, green pastures, cooking area, gods and deities, goats, sanctuaries and worship area as “*ongesta*” Pure, whereas the female “*Bashalini*” Maternity houses and graveyard as “*paragata*” impure. The Valley of Kalash comprises of the Muslims and non-Muslims Kalash with extreme diversity in religious and cultural ideologies and yet claimed to be egalitarian without any gender, race, class, status and religious discrimination. It is a fallacious claim because *there are certain spheres where females are bigotised in the name of either honor or religious decree. In the region of Himalayas special significance is given to the concept of verticality which is present in the contrasting high mountain tops and low valley bottoms* [7].



**Photograph 1 To preserve *onjesta* Girl is not Drinking Water “*uk*” from the Glass Directly.**

For the Pagan Kalash these geographical verticality and various dichotomies attached to it have greatly contributed in formulating their distinctive identity patterns through which they are recognized. According to the respondents there are certain portions in the kitchen or cooking area beyond the stove is considered pure and females are not allowed to enter these areas even when they are not menstruating. This opposition is particularly embodied in the topographical contrast between mountain and valley, where the high mountain pastures are considered as the home of clean supernatural beings, thus being a sacred and pure place [8]. These dichotomies can be observed in their social structure, religious beliefs, pantheons, rituals and gender [8]. This fundamentally is the basic reason for defining and distinguishing male and female spheres, in correspondence with the distinct division of agro pastoral labor [8]. The sexual division of labor among Kalash has reserved goat veterinary and hunting exclusively for men [9]. Few high mountain pastures where fairies reside are pure and forbidden for females. The symbolic values of the Kalash domestic and wild animals seem to be ordered based along a basic gradient of altitude, where their livestock together with the wild mountain goats forms a series of categories that encompass the entire ritual spectrum from total purity to utter pollution [10].

To attain women's perspective and position regarding gender discrimination and biases in religious and social setup one has to decode silences. Anthropologists often rely on open, verbal exchange as a sign of sincerity, openness and honesty, whereas the silences are absorbed and ignored both socially and professionally and are further interpreted as rudeness, weakness or apathy.

In Kalash society due to the female's biological impurity they are forbidden to drink any clear liquid from the glass directly they are also discouraged to share the same utensils as shared by the male members of the family. As a tradition the Kalash females are supposed to stay away from homes during their menstruation cycle and spend a week in the *Bashalini* (Menstruation home). They consider home as "*onjesta*" i.e. pure and so the females especially in these days are regarded as impure. The older women in Kalash say that when they were young they left immediately for the menstrual house, even in the middle of the night, at the first sign that their periods had started. But now they have the option of staying the night at home. This represents a radical departure from previous custom [11], signifying change and flexibility in the tradition.

#### **Menstruation Home "*Bashalini*"**

The Menstruation home is located outside the village. It is similar to the moon lodges of ancient Mayan and Greek cultures where women would come together and were given an opportunity to enhance their cognitive and creative faculties.

"The Moon Lodge is the place of women, where women gather during their menstrual time to be at-one with each other and the changes occurring in their bodies. Long ago, during this special time of moon cycles, women were removed from duties of family and allowed to retreat to the Moon Lodge to enjoy the company of their Sisters" [12].

*Bashalini* is a small cottage with four wall boundary near the stream. Their families prepare food for them and leave it at the door step of the *Bashalini*. They dare not to enter the room or to touch these girls because of the fear of impurity. They associate this home with a goddess *Dezalik or disini* (goddess of fertility). This goddess holds power over life and death and controls the souls of the unborn children [13]. Her temple is located in every menstruation home; it is represented by a vertical roughly flat timber in form of female vulva. The temple is considered as a labor room for pregnant women and here they remain till complete recovery. The male members and pure women of the society are forbidden to enter this temple. Every Kalash girl enter this house when she has her first periods and takes part in a religious custom "*tus`ul`ek*" performed by the other females present in the *Bashalini*. These women wash the hands of the girls till elbow, bread is offered to the goddess. Later the females pray for the health, prosperity and fertility for the girl and consume the food. These women didn't touch the menstruating woman. The girls will attend her from a distance without touching her. Even they serve water from a distance pouring it in her hand. In case of contractions she waits quietly till it become worse. She then informs her husband that the time has come. Laboring women are accompanied to the *bashalini* by one or two females relative or friends. When a *zanti* i.e. a woman in labour enters *bashalini* for delivery, her relatives bring some walnuts, in case of any difficulty in delivery or if the baby doesn't come quickly, the females pray by saying

*"Oh my dear disini of the bashalini, make her deliver quickly, bring the new flower in her arms bless her with the baby, don't make things difficult. Then they break a walnut and throw it to the goddess. If there is more pain and complication and she doesn't deliver quickly someone will call, oh make an offering, ask for mercy and relieve. Then her relatives will go and break three walnuts and all the women present in bashalini will pray again and say " oh my dear disini of bashalini, one has come under your care, bless her with health, bless her with a healthy child, bring Health, bring health and through three walnuts towards the goddess. They repeat the ritual if she doesn't come quickly. This time they break seven walnuts and everyone will pray together loudly in choirs "oh my lord dezalik/disini of bashalini, one has come under your care, with faith bring health, bestow the flower in her arms. They repeatedly perform the ritual till she became zanti".*

Traditionally the cord is cut off with the sharp edged rock and then tied with a fringe broken from woman's belt. But today they have scissors and other surgical supplies for cutting the cords, which is arranged by the Government of Pakistan and some NGO,s. in the morning the afterbirth (placenta) is buried under a the big holy oak tree. After the baby is born the new mother will lie down and go directly to sleep where other *bashalini* woman clean the baby. They prepare a traditional meal i.e. thick wheat porridge topped with butter and walnut oil with adequate salt. This is the first food they introduce to the baby before mother's breast milk. A little

portion is offered to the god Disini with gratitude. Everyone in the *bashalini* shares the food and even urges the new mother to eat. Later the baby is put to her breast and the two of them are allowed to settle till the postpartum bleeding is stopped. They remain in the temple, till the state of purity is achieved. After being thoroughly purified, they can leave. Myth has it if a woman left the *bashalini* before purification than she might have experienced some harm on the new born like the sudden death of the newborn in such cases the baby is buried without any funeral.

The Kalasha people are very particular about the state of *onjesta*. In case if they had a physical contact with *Paragata* girls than they are supposed to take a bath to purify themselves. Even they requested the researcher after visiting the *bashalini*, to purify her before entering their house. Married women with kids having other responsibilities are also supposed to stay in the menstruation house. In their absence other relatives and neighbors use to perform their daily household tasks. The mothers are expected to take care of their daughters or daughter in-laws house, in case they are supposed to go to *Bashalini* either for menstruation or for “*Zanti*” i.e. woman who have just given birth or is ready for the birth. On the fifth day after the birth of the child the “*acha-mbi*” ceremony is celebrated in which the young girls gather at menstruation home to purify the mother with water and smoke [13]. After that, a small fire is built in where girls take turns jumping over it in jubilation. The mother stays in *bashalini* till she is fully recovered. Afterwards, she takes a complete bath and joins her family which is followed by a grand prayer and dancing.

They regard sending womenfolk to *bashalini* as a traditional practice transmitted to them by their elders “who believed that the females are cursed by the gods” so it is a punishment for them and they should suffer. Some relate this with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The Kalash has their own version of this story,<sup>1</sup> and still firmly believes in their mythical story and stress that Muslims also believe that Adam was punished by God because of his disobedience. So they don't want to commit a sin or to offend their gods like their pre Islamic ancestors had annoyed and called for his wrath. The reason to check seven generations is the presence of seven siblings.

According to Saif ul Allah Jan [14] our females are allowed to roam around with their friends and relatives. They can even go to areas beyond Chitral. Kalash believes that *Budock*

*Dehar* had received an instruction from the deity *Malosh* that the females should not come to him, and no male goat flesh was to be eaten by them. The fairy also added that all the women should be kept in separate confinements, each month and at birth [9]. They look forward to their days in *Bashalini* because there they can be with their friends without any domestic responsibility at all. For them it is a leisure time.

This is one statement by Saif ul Allah Jan to which few girls partially agreed to; but generally the married women are not happy with the idea to spend time away from their family and children. They miss their children and they often compare themselves with the Muslim women, that no one expects them to leave their homes during menstruation and consider them an outcast. Kalash women pleaded that since Muslim women do not leave home during their periodic menstrual cycle and their presence at home does not bring any misfortune on a Muslim household, then how can their presence would cast calamity on their loved ones and livestock. Muslims also regard this condition as impure and females are prohibited to enter the mosque or prayer area. It is regarded as taboo to hold holy *Quran*. Though their presence in the home is not regarded as the misfortune for the family and they can eat in the same utensils with the rest of the family. There are few Kalash families which do not allow their daughters to leave home and they are the ones who are directly under the influence of the Muslims relatives. They just confine their women to a distant room in the home where the males' members do not enter.

The young jubilant Kalash girl's wholeheartedly agreed, that they do manage to take pleasure at this time because they are free and can spend time with their acquaintances and can gossip about friends and foes. The dissatisfaction and antagonism on the part of these females who regard this tradition as a disgrace to their sanity and sense of shame was evident in their nonverbal communication. They believe that when they have to leave for the *Bashalini* they reveal very personal information public. Sometimes they are teased and suspected of illicit relation if they miss their cycle due to any biological disability. They share their disgust regarding the tradition according to their own need, since they are obliged to keep the tradition alive and respect the preaching of their shamans they suppress their innermost desire. Women in some instances have been using their stay in *bashalini* as an escape from their strict and angry husbands. According to Raziq Palwal:

“A man came and yelled at his wife who was inside the *bashalini*, wife came out and started running crossed the river water jumping over it from rock to rock and reached her husband. They took positions of about one to two meters apart from one another. They talked but did not reach any agreement on their mutual problem. The wife finally walked away, but the man rushed in front of her and tried to stop her. As he was not allowed to hold, push or pull, she continued towards him. The man, probably instinctively, grabs a stick and started brandishing it before her to keep her away. The woman continued walking toward him and forcing the man to retreat. Neither he nor the weapon was a taboo-proof and the result of endeavors was a failure”. [11]

<sup>1</sup> page 78 Loude “the forbidden sister” oral tradition has interpreted the myth of Adam and Eve to explain the origin for the exclusion of his sister in respect of marriage, and to express the aversion of the Kalash for the Muslims preference for marriage between first cousins. Adam and Bibi Awa driven from paradise in circumstances reinterpreted in the context of Kalash life, are never the less faced with the same problems of subsistence and procreation. On a single day Bibi Awa conceives seven boys and seven girls, who were born in pairs at intervals of a few moments. Not knowing how to assemble them all, Adam prays to *khodai* “God teach me what to do? *Khodai* says: “you must unite the first born son to his youngest sister, the last born, and split all the twins”. The last born of the sons, strongly desired his twin sister and refused to obey the law. They conclude the story by saying “because of his behavior he was forced to leave and he became the first Muslim”.

There are numerous incidents of such nature, which often lead to domestic violence since the females of Kalash can freely meet their lovers in *bashalini*, some husbands suspect that their wife may have developed illicit relation with someone. This is more common when there is a large difference in ages of the spouses. They watch the *bashalini* closely to guard against a possibility of their wife's elopement with a new lover.

The Kalash society is very open minded in comparison with the Muslims of the same area. The women in Kalash do not observe purdah, but are bound to obey their own religious and societal norms. Their role in religious occasions, social setup of the community, and in decision making for the family is largely ignored. They, like any other society around the world, are considered responsible for the housekeeping, and nourishment of the babies. This is a society which is recognized by the distinctive traditions and customs through female projection. People from all over the world visit Kalash to see the dancing and singing of beautiful Kalash women clad in their black embroidered garbs, adorned with beads and their traditional headdress, but instead females live in a very protected environment and are not trusted to deviate from the social traditions and norms. The people in the Kalash treat their women as a personal possession. They decorate them; exhibit them to the tourist under the blanket of their cultural projection. These females just to earn money pose and perform in groups and accept money in return. There are few exceptions. The males preferred to utilize their linguistic skills and act as a tourist guide. In this society, they don't accept their boys to marry outside the tribe or group. But they don't mind a little flirting of their daughters with the tourists. Levi Strauss in the elementary structures of kinship states that; "Women are the commodity and they could be exchanged".

Robertson claimed in his book that kafir women were practically household slaves. They seemed to have no civil rights of any kind. To all the intents and purposes, they are bought and sold as household commodities [5]. Levi Strauss points out that "in an egalitarian society, women are not exchanged by men, instead they exchanged goods and services with men. They don't intend to treat them as a commodity, they just follow the tradition [5]. Marx analysis of value and of commodity as an elementary form of wealth is taken as a displaced interpretation of the status of woman in a patriarchal society. "In our social order women are product used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, commodities ...' so women have to remain in an infrastructure unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The uses, consumption of their socialized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order in which they have never taken part as subject" [15].

## CONCLUSION

The basic purpose of the study was to understand the role and significance of traditions and customs as a prime tool for establishing identity for the conventional people of the Kalash, who have managed to maintain their identity through their unique and nonviolent way of life based on their traditions and practiced through centuries. The study leads towards establishing the fact that a culture is an actual

ambient, legitimate and flexible space in which a small group of individuals can survive, maintain and perpetuate their unique way of life. It is a known fact that rituals, beliefs and practices which are based on religions survive the longest.

Staying at *bashalini* during menstruation is their religious norm which has to be abided by all means. The Kalash society is very open minded in comparison with the Muslims of the same area. The women in Kalash do not observe purdah, but are bound to obey their own religious and societal norms. Females are responsible to conform and utilize these identity kits, so that they can be recognized as proud Kalash women. These women are appreciated and respected in their efforts to keep the legacy and tradition alive. People from all over the world visit Kalash to see the dancing and singing of beautiful Kalash women clad in their black embroidered garbs, adorned with beads and their traditional headdress, but instead females live in a very protected environment and are not trusted to deviate from the social traditions and norms.

The conversion to Islam started with the arrival of Arabs in the region and gradually it took the momentum, though it had effected their religious ideology, but it had no influence on Kalasha culture because the Kalasha who converts to Islam formed another community Nuristani following Islamic culture, the converted Kalasha seems to have taken the whole of chitrali culture in all its aspects as synonymous with Muslim culture. It is believed that the concept of formulating identity through culture or religious beliefs is a reactionary phenomenon and people adapt it to guard themselves from the persecution and atrocities exercised by the powerful oppressor. They seek salvation in being loyal to their religious and cultural ideology. The Kalash people have maintained their centuries old traditional culture, despite the fact of current globalization, and modernization. Media is invading their privacy, esteem and societal norms by introducing new ideas, and inspirations to the youth. Albeit the people have subjugated to the latest trends of globalization and modernization, but are also striving to keep pace with their socio- cultural and religious traditions transmitted to them by their forefathers. Currently the society is passing from the phase of transition and trans-culturation due to the impact of modernization, and change, but still the people are trying hard to preserve and maintain their identity.

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