

PATRIARCHY AND SEXUAL ROLES

Active-Passive Gender Roles versus an Ethics of Mutuality

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I. Introduction

Biological difference between man and woman is used as a justification to force them into different social roles which shape and limit their attitudes and behaviour. No society has been an exception to this. That is, the society is not satisfied with the natural difference of sex, but adds cultural differences of gender. This makes the physical differences associated with a wide range of psychological and social qualities and characteristics. Consequently, a man is supposed to be masculine, not only male; a woman is supposed to be feminine, not only a female. In other words, to be a man or woman means to behave in a certain way that is shaped and determined by the culture, though the expectations of these behavioural patterns may vary from culture to culture. The modern studies on sexuality and gender have shown that while sex is a biologically given factor, gender is a socially and culturally constructed reality.¹ Often we can find that a circular, often vicious, reasoning is at work in the case of sex and gender. Once the gender difference between men and women is established, it is taken as a further manifestation of the biological differences which confirm the need for different social roles. In other words, "sex differences are used to create gender differences which are then explained as sex differences which, in turn, require gender differences, and so on."² Thus, though 'gender' has been connected to the body and biological sexuality, it is the socio-cultural interpretations and misinterpretations that determine the gender difference. In most societies, this cultural construction of gender has been unfavourable to women.

One of the most long-standing and deep-rooted gender polarizations is the concept that in sexual relations men are supposed to take active role

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¹Today, many hold that even sex and sexuality are culturally constructed.

²http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/the_social_roles_of_men_and_wo.html

while women are to take passive and submissive role. Gender and feminist studies have focussed more on the social role of women and much lesser on the culturally assigned sexual passivity of women, which in fact is a main reason for the consideration of women as weaker and less important. This polarization results in diminished sexual fulfilment, not only of women, but also of men. Since sexual fulfilment both of man and woman is very important for the stability and well-being of marital life, this issue, which has been much ignored, has to be addressed seriously. Being passive or active does not refer to certain postures or positions in sexual intercourse, but the real question is whether the woman is considered a subject who has the equal right and ability for fulfilment, or an object that is meant only to provide satisfaction for the male partner. Moreover, assigning passive role to women and active role to men encourages different forms of degradation and exploitation of women.

In this article, we shall first try to understand the continuing impact of the gender prejudice that women are sexually passive and the consequent exploitation of women. We shall consider the data from empirical studies and the critical evaluation of the active-passive gender paradigm by Christian ethicists. Following that we shall consider how *Song of Songs*, formulated in a patriarchal background, challenges the notion of passive sexual role assigned to women. In the Scriptures, in general, we find the patriarchal concepts and practices. But, within that tradition itself we find a differing tradition, where woman's desire and fulfilment are acknowledged and presented as the design of God. It is important to make use of the sources (whatever is available!) in fighting the unhealthy gender polarizations that have entered into the tradition. Finally, we shall see the importance of mutuality in a Christian ethic of man-woman relationship.

2. Cultural Prejudice of the Sexual Passivity of Women

In general, cultures have considered women as sexually passive. Similarly, there is a long-standing assumption that women are inherently less sexually inclined than men. Such gender stereotypes result in women being subjected to negative socialization during which they are taught to suppress or deny their sexual feelings. That women engage in sex only to please men and that 'normal women' do not enjoy sex as much as men are some of the gender prejudices coming from this negative socialization.³

³Robert Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 8th ed., Pacific Grove, CA: Wadsworth, 2002, 74.

Seeking sexual fulfilment would be considered appropriate and normal for a man, but inappropriate for a woman. Woman seeking pleasure, is generally considered a pervert, or as indiscriminate and hence available to any partner. Only passive women and only those who do not enjoy sex or do not express their sexual desire are considered to be women of character. People who adhere to such gender stereotypes think that women who openly express sexual interest or respond sexually are 'easy' or 'sleazy.' On the other hand, active role expected of men conceives them as always virile and supersexual, an expectation that exerts undue pressure on men.⁴

The Greek tradition held the view that women were sexually passive. All females were considered as only passive, subordinate recipients of penetration. The specific Greek verbs for sexual intercourse are usually active when they refer to men and passive when they refer to women. For example, a man penetrates (*peraninei*) a woman, while a woman is penetrated (*perainetai*) by a man; a man marries (*gamizei*) a woman, while a woman is married (*gamizetai*) by a man. This active-passive gender categorization became foundational for the gender polarization in the Western tradition, including the Christian paradigm for gender relationships. It is probable that the Jewish tradition also was influenced by the Greek concept of gender roles. This cultural notion was one of the basic reasons for considering homosexual and lesbian activities as unnatural, since in homosexual relations a man was supposed to take the passive role and in lesbian relations a woman was supposed to the active role. Consequently, homosexual men were often depicted as effeminate males and lesbian women as "having become like men, that is, as trying to transcend the passive, subordinate role accorded to them by nature by attempting to take on a dominant, penetrating role."⁵ Taking roots from the Greek tradition, for centuries, gender norms and roles have dictated submission and passivity for women and dominance and agency for men.⁶

⁴Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 74.

⁵Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 241, 246, 256. This gender categorization can be seen in the condemnation of same-sex unions in the book of *Leviticus*: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22); "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (20:13).

⁶S. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York: Knopf, 1954; M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: A History of Sexuality*, vol. 11, London: Penguin, 1985; Amy K. Kiefer

Subsequently, the one who assumed the active role was considered to be more important and greater than the one who was assigned the passive role. Only in the recent decades feminists started questioning this traditional prejudice against women's sexuality. However, active-passive gender polarization is so deep-rooted that a good number of people, both in the West as well as in other regions, continue to adhere to this notion.

In her challenging work, *Just Love*, moral theologian Margaret A. Farley states:

It is easy for us today to sing the songs of mutuality in celebration of sexual love. We are in disbelief when we learn that it has not always been so. Yet traditional interpretations of heterosexual sex are steeped in images of the male as active and the female passive, the woman as receptacle and the man as fulfiller, the woman as ground and the man as seed.⁷

Although Farley acknowledges that no other interpretation of the polarity between sexes has had so long and deep-seated influence on men's and women's self-understanding, according to her, "Today we have a completely different view. We have learned that male and female reproductive organs do not signal activity only for one and passivity for the other..."⁸

It is true that the gender categorizations have drastically changed. Farley's opinion may be true to a certain extent with regard to the Western society. However, studies reveal that in traditional societies like India the polarity of active-passive role is still part of the gender concept.⁹ During my lectures on "Sexual Fulfilment" for the marriage preparation courses, I usually ask the participants, who according to them should initiate sexual relationship – the husband or wife? Invariably the answer is that only the husband should, and that the wife initiating sexual relationship is

and Diana T. Sanchez, "Scripting Sexual Passivity: A Gender Role Perspective," *Personal Relationships* 14 (2007), 269-290.

⁷Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York, London: Continuum, 2010, 220-221.

⁸Farley, *Just Love*, 221.

⁹L. Abraham, L., "Bhai-behen, True Love, Time Pass: Friendships and Sexual Partnerships among Youth in an Indian Metropolis," *Culture Health and Sexuality* 4, 3 (2002), 337-353; L. Abraham, "Redrawing Lakshman Rekha: Gender Differences and Cultural Constructions in Youth Sexuality in Urban India," *Sexual Sites and Seminal Attitudes, Studies on Contemporary South Asia*, Number 4, ed. S. Srivastava, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2004; Manas Ranjan Pradhan, "Real Man and Real Woman: Understanding the Gender Dynamics in Orissa, India," *Research and Practice in Social Sciences* 6, 2 (August 2010), 62-69.

something unnatural or awkward. Evidently, the question is not who in an actual relationship should initiate the sexual relationship; that is left to the privacy and spontaneity of the couples. The question targets the deep-rooted gender prejudices in the culture. Often, it is also added that if the woman (wife) takes the initiative, especially in their first sexual encounter, it means that 'she is experienced.' But, to the question, "If the man takes the initiative, doesn't it mean that he is experienced?" only silence or laughter is the answer. This is in fact, an example of the double morality inherent in the active-passive polarization. Indiscriminate sexual behaviour and sexual promiscuity of men are tolerated on the assumption that sexual aggressiveness and inability to control are natural to men.

This active-passive role polarity does not seem to be the problem that continues only in the Indian society, but seems to be prevalent even in the Western societies, as studies have revealed.¹⁰ In spite of the advances American society has made on loosening the rigidity of gender roles in many areas of everyday life, stereotypes about gender roles and sexual behaviour persist. These stereotypes assume that males are innately more interested in sex than females, and males take active role in sex while females are characteristically passive.¹¹ That is, although the gender stereotypes are beginning to fade, many, especially women, are still influenced by such traditional views.¹² Socialization encourages heterosexual men to take on a sexually empowered, directive, dominant, and assertive role, whereas socialization encourages heterosexual women to take on a sexually disempowered, responsive rather than active role.¹³ Although women might

¹⁰D. T. Sanchez, A. K. Kiefer and O. Ybarra, "Sexual Submissiveness in Women: Costs for Sexual Autonomy and Arousal," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32 (2006), 512-524; D. T. Sanchez, J. Crocker and K. R. Boike, "Doing Gender in the Bedroom: How Investment in Gender Norms Affects the Sexual Experience," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31 (2005), 1445-1455; R. Coward, *Female Desires*, New York: Grove Press, 1985; H. F. Tevlin, and S. R. Leiblum, "Sex Role Stereotypes and Female Sexual Dysfunction," in V. Franks and E. D. Rothblum, ed., *The Stereotyping of Women: Its Effects on Mental Health*, New York: Springer, 1983, 129-150; Salynn Boyles, "Many Women Link Sex with Submission" in *Foxnews.com*, Monday, July 25, 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,163267,00.html>.

¹¹William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson and Robert C. Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 5th ed., New York: Longman, 1995, 299.

¹²Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 74.

¹³P. Blumstein and P. Schwarz, *American Couples: Money, Work, and Sex*, New York: William Morrow, 1983; P. Schwartz and V. Rutter, *The Gender of*

engage in passive sexual behaviour for a variety of reasons, such as having a dominant partner or from a lack of sexual desire, conformity to gender roles is a primary reason for this behaviour.¹⁴ Thus, social constructions of sexuality persist in the modern era. In movies, magazines, television sitcoms, soap operas, and mainstream literature, we see that female passivity and male agency are depicted.¹⁵ Women's tendency to associate sex nonconsciously with submission reflects these norms.¹⁶

4. Active-Passive Polarization and Sexual Fulfilment

The gender stereotype of the sexual passivity of women affects the self-esteem of women and results in diminished levels of sexual fulfilment of women as well as men. Active-passive polarization destroys the autonomy and initiative of the woman and imposes on the man the responsibility of satisfying his partner. Consequently, sexual passivity undermines sexual autonomy in intimate relationships and results in diminished sexual fulfilment.

A woman who feels compelled to accept a passive female role may have a very difficult time initiating sex. It could be even harder for her to assume an active role during sexual activity. Many women are frustrated, regretful, and understandably angry that such cultural expectations are so deeply ingrained within our society.¹⁷

Often, even today, women seem to internalize the female sexual role of submission. In the process of fitting their sexual behaviour and desires into this cultural mould, women may unwittingly undermine their sexual arousal.¹⁸ When sexual intimacy becomes active for one partner and passive for the other, sexual relationships are no more mutual. Lack of mutuality leads to reduced levels of satisfaction for both. It is sexual

Sexuality, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000; S. Sprecher and K. McKinney, *Sexuality*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.

¹⁴Amy K. Kiefer and Diana T. Sanchez, "Scripting Sexual Passivity: A Gender Role Perspective," *Personal Relationships*, 14 (2007), 272.

¹⁵C. N. Baker, "Images of Women's Sexuality in Advertisements: A Content Analysis of Black- and White-oriented Women and Men's Magazines," *Sex Roles* 52 (2005), 13-27; J. Kilbourne, *Can't Buy Me Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*, New York: Touchstone, 1999; Diana T. Sanchez, Amy K. Kiefer and Oscar Ybarra, "Sexual Submissiveness in Women: Costs for Sexual Autonomy and Arousal," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32 (2006), 513.

¹⁶Kiefer and Sanchez, "Scripting Sexual Passivity," 285.

¹⁷Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 75.

¹⁸Sanchez, Kiefer and Ybarra, "Sexual Submissiveness in Women," 522.

autonomy that promotes both men's and women's sexual function and satisfaction and hence passive behaviour means reduced sexual functioning and satisfaction for both men and women.¹⁹ Based on such empirical data, moral theologian Christine E. Gudorf observes that, "The sexes must jointly take active responsibility for mutually pleasurable sex, both because justice demands it, and because the more active a participant to sex is, the more sexually satisfied he or she is likely to be."²⁰ Gudorf considers the continuing influence of the gender roles in sexual relationships as one of the obstacles to sexual fulfilment.

Many women grow up believing that men always have sex on their minds. For such a woman, it may be a logical next step to become the controller of what takes place during sexual interaction. A woman may see her role as controlling her male partner's rampant lust by making certain he does not coerce her into unacceptable activities. Thus, instead of experiencing sexual fulfilment, her concern will be to control the active partner. On the other hand, men are often conditioned to see women as sexual challenges and to go as far as they can during sexual encounters. They may be confused or even threatened by a woman who switches roles from controller to active initiator.²¹

A woman may react to her gender-role stereotype by accepting the notion that from a sexual viewpoint she is a second-class citizen. She may consistently ignore her own needs for her own physical gratification and think that things are fine sexually as long as and because her 'man' is satisfied. She may be afraid to ask from a partner the kind and amount of sexual attention that is pleasing to her on the mistaken impression that to do so is inappropriate, that it does not fit the feminine gender role in the sexual sphere. The response of the female may even be worse if a woman who is bound by belief to the male-dominant, female-submissive gender role subjects herself to physical and emotional abuse within sexual situations because she does not really think that she has the right to stand up for herself.²²

¹⁹Kiefer and Sanchez, "Scripting Sexual Passivity," 272.

²⁰Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*, Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1994, 146.

²¹Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 76.

²²Masters, Johnson and Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 300.

3. Active-Passive Polarization and Exploitation of Women

The active-passive paradigm considers the woman as unequal, weaker and inferior. This facilitates many forms of exploitation of women and violence against them. Men who adhere to the active-passive model may find it as a justification for coercive sex. Sometimes, resistance from the part of the woman may be even interpreted as techniques to invite the 'active' role from the man. Since, in any heterosexual relationship the man, according to this paradigm, is supposed to take the active role, woman's resistance will be ignored as natural responses of a 'good' woman. Thus, men may consider even the disapproval and resistance by women as legitimising their violence. Similarly, any kind of interest shown by the woman may be interpreted by a man adhering to the active-passive model as an indirect invitation from a woman playing the passive role and hence legitimizing force from the 'active' man. Moreover, women who differ from the traditional model of passivity by the way they mingle with men, or the way they dress, may be viewed as 'loose' women or as 'easily accessible.' In such cases men may justify sexual violence arguing that they were provoked by the woman or that it was not an act of sexual violence since the woman was of 'loose' morality, or that they were encouraged by the indirect invitation of the woman.²³ These kinds of violence may take place within marriage, in the context of dating or friendship or even with strangers.

Objectification of women is a natural outcome of the passive gender role assigned to women. Often, the woman is made a passive object to prove the masculinity of the man. The whole existence of the woman is interpreted in terms of the needs and satisfaction of the man who is active. This objectification is evident in pornography. Most of pornography targets the male viewers. Even when the woman may appear to take an

²³Studies have revealed that such attitudes are a major reason behind date-rape. For example, in a study on male high school students, 39% of them said that it was justifiable to force a girl to have sex if she is drunk. In another study, men consistently reported forcing a woman into sex as justifiable if she asked him out, went to his apartment or to a party or 'parking,' if she wore sexy clothes, if she kissed him voluntarily, or if she drank alcohol. See R. Giarrusso, "Adolescents' Cues and Signals: Sex and Assault," in P. Johnson, ed., *Acquaintance Rape and Adolescent Sexuality*, symposium papers published by the Western Psychological Association, San Diego, CA, 1979; C. Muhlenhard and S. Andrews, "Open Communication about Sex: Will It Reduce Risk Factors Related to Rape?" paper presented at Association for Advancement of Behaviour Therapy, Houston, 1985: As referred to in Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 123-124.

active role, the whole intent is to satisfy the desire of the male audience, and hence even in the apparent 'active' role, the woman is made a passive object. Moreover, adherence to active-passive model compels women to accept themselves as objects and understand their worth only in terms of their being objects for the satisfaction of the males, because that is the only way for them to fulfil their sexual needs. Objectification of women by men and objectification by themselves have negative consequences for the psychological, as well as physical, health of women.²⁴

Active-passive paradigm legitimises the sado-masochist tendencies. The woman may interpret the pain inflicted upon her as legitimate, since that is necessary for the satisfaction of the male active partner. Consequently, she may identify her satisfaction with the pain, which is demanded for the satisfaction of the active partner. Similarly, male partner's demands may be accepted by the female partner, even if they do not give her any sexual fulfilment and even if they may be humiliating her.

Active-passive model has its consequences for male sexuality as well. Males are supposed to be aggressive and hence the whole meaning of their sexuality is reduced to virility and their ability to dominate and satisfy the female partner. As a result, the aspects of tenderness and affection become ignored and undeveloped. Gender stereotypes can cause a man to turn into a macho man who ignores or misread his female partner's cues or who considers sexual encounter solely as something that he does to the female partner. The masculine stereotype can create tremendous sexual performance anxieties for a man, making him wonder if he can possibly be as 'manly' as the gender stereotype says he should be. These anxieties may cause him to withdraw emotionally from intimacy, or avoid sexual contact altogether.²⁵ Christian ethicist Gudorf points out that although the society has begun to accept women's right to sexual fulfilment, the male domination is not abandoned and this increases the male anxiety around sex:

It is too often the case that as persons in our society come to accept that women should find sex pleasurable, the existing pattern of male domination in sex is not abandoned, but merely enlarged, so that women are in effect pressured to find sex pleasurable, and men are

²⁴For a detailed analysis of objectification theory and the consequences of objectification, see Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Towards Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21 (1997), 173-206.

²⁵Masters, Johnson and Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 299-300.

ordered to take responsibility for women's pleasure. Responsibility for women's pleasure as well as their own is an onerous burden for men, and is often the source of a great deal of male anxiety around sex.²⁶

5. *Song of Songs*: Biblical Model of a Woman Who Is 'Active'

As already mentioned, to overcome the gender role stereotypes, it is important to make use of the available sources in our faith tradition. In general we can say that the biblical tradition is patriarchal. Within the biblical tradition itself, however, we can see books, stories, anecdotes and other passages which challenge the patriarchal concept. Moreover, the way the Bible was interpreted often reinstated the patriarchal concept. Re-discovery of the original message by biblical scholars has helped to challenge the traditional patriarchal concepts attributed to the Bible.

In the biblical literature, *Song of Songs* is unique in many respects. It can be said to be a biblical model of erotic love. Although for many centuries it was interpreted symbolically as depicting the love between Yahweh and Israel, Christ and the Church, modern biblical scholarship is almost unanimous in considering it as describing the love between a man and a woman. Another unique feature of this book is its depiction of female sexuality and female sexual desire. Contrary to the often held view that the biblical tradition, promotes patriarchy, in *Song of Songs* we have a model where the traditional patriarchal concepts vanish. The book does not depict the picture of a usual Israelite couple, where the husband claims exclusive power over his wife's devotion, and where the existence of the wife is understood in terms of her service to the husband, especially as a means of procreating male children to continue his lineage. The book presents a woman who is well aware of her beauty, worth and desire and who is bold enough to acknowledge them; the husband is drawn by to her understanding her value as a person, acknowledging her worth and her desire. David M. Carr beautifully articulates it as follows:

Elsewhere in the bible, passionate women are often caricatured as promiscuous and wild, unless their passion is for having sons who will ultimately become the ancestors of Israel and its kings. Powerful women like Delilah and Jezebel are images of danger. Yet the *Song of Songs* ultimately celebrates this powerful, passionate woman. It is her voice that is featured through more than two-thirds of the book, and parallel to the praise of the "woman of power" in *Proverbs* 31, the man and others in the song end up praising her incomparable worth.

²⁶Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 146.

Moreover, the often overpowering male of Israel's legal and prophetic texts is replaced here with a male passionately bound to the woman who loves him. He is captivated by but one of her glances, but one of the strands of her necklace (*Song of Songs* 4:9). He stands in awe of her beauty, imaging her in ever more majestic ways as he continues his pursuit of her. Unlike many other biblical male characters, he is not filled with anxiety about infidelity or promiscuity.²⁷

The very opening of the *Song* is marked the expression of the sensuousness and desire of the woman:

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!

For your love is better than wine (1:2).

Even the memory of the sensations of his embrace is pleasurable:

O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me! (2:6)

On the other hand, we find a man who is not ashamed to declare his loving dependence on the woman and how much he values her. He does not consider it as undermining his masculinity:

You have captured my heart, my sister, oh bride!

You have captured my heart with one of your glances,

With but one of the strands of your necklace (4:9).

The man praises the beauty of his beloved:

How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden!

Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.

Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.

Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.

Your neck is like an ivory tower.

Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rab'bim.

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus.

Your head crowns you like Carmel,

and your flowing locks are like purple;

a king is held captive in the tresses.

How fair and pleasant you are,

O loved one, delectable maiden! (7:1-6)

It is not a pornographic description of the female beauty, but the recognition of the beauty and worth of the beloved by the lover, her worth as a woman. He is not ashamed to say that he is captured by her beauty.

²⁷ D. M. Carr, *The Erotic Word*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 133.

This was something unusual in the Israelite context, since the worth of a woman would be recognised by a man only in terms of her utility of providing male children to him.

But, what can be said to be characteristic of the *Song* is that the bride/beloved is not at all ashamed to describe the physical beauty of her lover. Her courage to acknowledge her sensuality and her pleasure in the physical beauty of her lover makes the *Song* something unique. She is not afraid that she will be considered as a pervert or sexual maniac; she is not anxious that her lover himself may be shocked by her erotic enjoyment of him and may consider her a freak. She expresses her desire and erotic enjoyment as natural and she is confident that her lover understands her:

His head is the finest gold; ...

His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.

His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.

His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels.

His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.

His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold...

His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable (5:11-16).

Here we do not have the picture of a woman who is passive, who understands her as an object of the male desire and an instrument of his enjoyment. The woman, as the man, is an active subject. In the *Song* we cannot trace the traditional active-passive gender polarization; instead, we meet a couple who are both active and receptive. The image is not that of a man possessing and controlling the woman and her sexuality, but of mutual possession and belonging to each other: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2:16); "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3); "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me" (7:10). In this way, the *Song* challenges the dependence-dominance paradigm after the Fall: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3.16). This relationship based on dependence-dominance is the effect of sin: "The sexual relationship which offers promise of loving unity becomes, through sin, an occasion of exploitation, dominance, and manipulation."²⁸ This connotes that many existing cultural and psychological dimensions of woman-man relationship are not the will of God, but are characteristics of the diminished existence brought about by sin. But, man-woman relationship founded on dominance-dependence was not the original

²⁸D. G. McCarthy, E. J. Bayer, and J. A. Leies, eds., *Handbook on Critical Sexual Issues*, Braintree, Massachusetts: The Pope John XXIII Centre, 1989, 4.

design of God. The ideal of man-woman relationship, as presented in the Yahwist creation narrative (Genesis 2:4b-25), is that of mutuality, interdependence and inter-subjectivity. The *Song* celebrates the original and uncontaminated beauty of the man-woman love, which is mutual and in which both of them have equal roles. Through the bold expression of mutual desire, the couple in the *Song* celebrates the mutuality, which is the original design of God.

Although mutuality of desire and enjoyment is the ideal presented, for our consideration, the *Song* becomes unique due to its recognition of the female sexual desire. As Carey Ellen Walsh puts it,

A woman's sexuality is developed, sustained, and celebrated, not as object, but from a woman's perspective and that of her male lover. Throughout the book, in first person voice, the woman retains control of her fate, of her pleasure. Hence, she is never in danger of being commodified... the woman retains autonomy over her desire and its satisfaction. She is in complete control of her sexuality, her voice offering it willingly, wantingly to her lover.²⁹

This extraordinarily positive approach to female sexuality has evoked some theologians to attribute female authorship to the *Song*. For example, Athalya Brenner holds that although no concluding proofs can be reached, there are compelling evidences for asserting female authorship of the *Song*.³⁰ Drawing upon this strong feminist note (as well as some other unique characteristics of it), Jannie H. Hunter contends that the *Song* was written as a protest literature. As pointed out, there is no doubt that the *Song* was written within the context of a patriarchal society. However, the values that the *Song* indirectly stands for are so different from those of a patriarchal society. So, Hunter argues:

The *Song of Songs* then, I contend, presents itself as a song of protest in a society within which women are not allowed to speak openly on many matters where they desire to express an opinion. The book takes as its theme an experience with which every woman of the day would have been familiar, a situation which society would have pressured her into – namely, a (loving) relationship with a man. By so doing the *Song of Songs* is able to demonstrate against the

²⁹Carey Ellen Walsh, "A Startling Voice: Woman's Desire in the *Song of Songs*," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 28, 4 (1999), 133.

³⁰A. Brenner, "Women Poets and Authors," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Sheffield 1995, 86-97; Also, see J. H. Hunter, "The Song of Protest," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 90 (2000), 115.

prevailing social constructs and to evince the fact that the issue of love can never be one of force because its central emotion is one that functions in relation to choice. Above all, women – as well as men – cannot turn on this emotion of love within a relationship of force but only in one of emotional will. A central desire experienced by every human being is thus taken as providing an occasion to demonstrate about a central problem in society on behalf of those who suffer the most under the prevailing rules of that society.³¹

Thus, though written in a patriarchal context, *Song of Songs* depicts the mutual love, desire and sexual fulfilment of a man and a woman. The man does neither feel ashamed of his loving dependency on the woman, nor does he consider her as a sexual pervert, since she takes an active role; his masculinity is not threatened by this active role played by his beloved. Instead, he enjoys it and appreciates her. The woman does not confine herself to the traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society. She considers her desire and feelings as legitimate and she is proud of being herself. She is not afraid that her lover may consider her as a pervert or ‘loose’ woman as she expresses her desire and enjoyment. Instead she is confident that her lover understands, accepts her and is proud of her as she is.

6. Active-Passive Role versus Mutuality

The acceptance of the equal dignity of man and woman demands abandoning of the active-passive gender categorization and the acceptance of mutuality as the basic norm for man-woman relationship. The Christian tradition was not an exception in considering women as passive and thus practically ignoring female sexual desire and fulfilment. In the recent decades, however, Christian ethicists have been recognising the need of challenging the active-passive paradigm and emphasising the need of a sexual ethics founded on mutuality. This does not mean that everything has changed. At least in the conceptual level, women’s identity and equal dignity as a sexual person is recognised. It may take much longer time for acceptance in the practical level, since the active-passive categorizations was one of the most long-standing and deep-rooted gender stereotypes.

Mark Oraison observes: “The first word coming to mind (*while considering the different aspects of sexual intercourse*) is mutual pleasure or, better, mutual sensual pleasure: to give sensual pleasure to the other and to receive sensual pleasure from the other – this, in a word, is the

³¹J. H. Hunter, “The Song of Protest,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 90 (2000), 115.

apparent ideal of the sexual exchange."³² That is, mutuality in sexual relationships and sexual fulfilment is considered one of the basic norms. Sexual encounter is not the encounter of one who is active and the other who is passive, but the meeting of two who are active and receptive. It is an encounter where both give and receive. Lack of mutuality in sexual intimacy and trying to exclude the partner from sexual pleasure will diminish the pleasure not only of the one excluded, but also of the one that uses the partner for pleasure. Using the partner or considering the partner as an object will result in the inability to feel any of the reflected pleasures of the other. For those who respect mutuality, the pleasure resulting from the pleasure of the partner is powerful.³³ Gudorf points out that mutuality in sexual pleasure implies also mutual consent to sexual intimacy. She shows that even in marriage very often sexual intercourse takes place without the consent of the partner.³⁴ Howard J. Clinebelle and Charlotte H. Clinebelle also emphasise mutuality in conjugal sexual intimacy and say that couples should be free to follow their own impulses sexually, to play and experiment with new positions, new settings, and new approaches to foreplay. Open communication about what gives each maximum pleasure is greatly helpful for developing a unique style.³⁵ In other words, mutuality presupposes abandoning of the active-passive gender stereotype. As we have seen above, sexual autonomy is a pre-requisite for the sexual satisfaction of both man and woman.

Mutuality in sexual intimacy means respecting the partner, knowing what is pleasurable to the partner and giving importance to the pleasure of the partner. It may not be contested that the search for selfish pleasure does not give real pleasure to oneself or to one's partner. At the same time, enjoying pleasure in sexual intimacy is not selfishness, if mutuality is respected. On the contrary, enjoying pleasure in sexual intimacy is an integral part of mutuality. Active-passive model, on the other hand, ignores the fulfilment of the woman, since her role is defined in terms of 'pleasing' the male partner, and being available to him. According to

³² Mark Oraison, *The Human Mystery of Sexuality*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967, 124.

³³ Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 119-120.

³⁴ Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 141-143.

³⁵ H. J. Clinebelle Jr. and C. H. Clinebelle, *The Intimate Marriage*, New York: Harper and Row, 1970, 143.

Håring, the acceptance and enjoyment of the pleasure by each partner is necessary so that the conjugal act becomes a positive experience:

The conjugal act would become distasteful if one of the spouses were to try to refuse its pleasure and thus kill the joy of being-together, being one flesh. The deeper the meaning in true love in mutual self-bestowal, the greater is the joy and pleasure also.³⁶

The twofold responsibility of the spouses is, "to give sexual fulfilment, and to strive to achieve it."³⁷ This giving and receiving is very important in sexual intimacy:

In sex, if one partner is consistently acting to pleasure the other person without openness to receiving pleasure him/herself, the pleasure of both persons in the relationship decreases. The active partner can over time become the controlling partner, which both partners can come to resent."³⁸

Mutuality entails

some form of activity and receptivity, giving and receiving – two sides of one shared reality on the part of and within both persons. It requires, to some degree, mutuality of desire, action, and response. Two liberties meet, two bodies meet, two hearts come together – metaphorical and real description of sexual mutuality.³⁹

Even here, extremes are to be avoided. Perhaps a couple may never grow into perfect mutuality; or, perhaps they may take a long time to grow into real mutuality. But, what is needed is to avoid the gender polarization, and to see each partner as active and responsible in the sexual encounter.

The norm of mutual pleasure presupposes the recognition of the sexual identity of the woman and her sexual desire. If desire and pleasure are defined only in terms of the male experience and only as those belonging to the male, then the question of mutuality is out of question. Even today, in many of the cultures, expression of sexual desire and enjoyment of sexual pleasure by the woman will be considered as something unbecoming even within marriage. Some may feel that it is strange to say that about a world that lives in the age of sexual revolution.

³⁶ Bernard Håring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol. 2, Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publication, 1979, 514.

³⁷ J. Bird and L. Bird, *The Freedom of Sexual Love*, New York: Doubleday, 1967, 54.

³⁸ Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 116.

³⁹ Farley, *Just Love*, 222.

But, for example, think about the virtues related to sexuality, such as virginity, fidelity, chastity, modesty, etc. They are often identified more as virtues of the female, and lapses in these from the part of the male will be tolerated more easily and considered as natural weakness of the male. It is not my view that women also should be given the freedom to be licentious, but that a sexual ethics that understands desire and fulfilment only in masculine terms will lead to double standards and encourage further the objectification and exploitation of women, and the ill-treatment of the female partner. An ethics that recognises female sexual desire will demand equal responsibility from the part of the male. Moreover, accepting the woman as an equal partner having sexual desire will facilitate building up a relationship of mutual respect and sharing.

Abandoning the active-passive paradigm and recognising the sexual identity of the woman implies an ethical responsibility of understanding the difference in the physiology of sexual response in the man and in the woman. The difference in man-woman sexual response is obvious especially from the difference in the way of experiencing orgasm. This difference demands an attitude of reciprocal understanding, self-domination and harmonious realization of the different phases of sexual behaviour. Adequate information regarding the physiology of sexual behaviour and differences in the sexual response patterns of the sexes are necessary for man-woman sexual relationship based on mutuality. Sufficient knowledge of one's own physiology and sexual response patterns as well as those of the partner will only help the couple appreciate and enjoy the God-given gift of sexuality and sexual love. It is with this insight that Jack Dominian opines:

In the future the morality of sexual intercourse will include how patient the spouses are to prepare each other for lovemaking and how patient and disciplined they are to reach orgasm together, thus ensuring that one does not peak earlier than the other, leaving one partner unsatisfied.⁴⁰

That is, sufficient knowledge about the different dimensions of one's own sexuality and that of the partner and sufficient knowledge of sexual response cycle is a moral responsibility. Even in this age of sexual revolution, a number of people, even after years of living together, lack sufficient

⁴⁰ Jack Dominian, *Let's Make Love: The Meaning of Sexual Intercourse*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001, 91.

knowledge of sexuality, especially that of the partner. In the male-dominant cultures, this naturally results in the denial of woman's enjoyment.

7. Conclusion

Active-Passive gender role has been one of the most long-standing gender polarizations in different cultures. In spite of the drastic changes in gender perceptions, this polarity continues even today. Active-passive paradigm denies the sexual autonomy of the woman, considers her as an object, and facilitates the exploitation of the woman in different forms. Moreover, such a model diminishes the sexual fulfilment of both men and women. Instead of active-passive or dominance-dependence model, what is needed is a sexual ethics based on the principle of mutuality and reciprocity, where both the man and the woman are active and receptive, where both are subjects. The contemporary culture, particularly from the time of sexual revolution, attempts to present as role model a liberated woman who seeks pleasure indiscriminately and asserts her identity as a sexual person, because denial of the sexual desire and fulfilment of the woman was integral to a patriarchal sexual ethics. Facilitating the sexual autonomy of women and developing a sexual ethics of women's sexual fulfilment is important to respond to the challenges that marriage and family face today. This does not mean that we need to blindly adapt to the ideals of the contemporary culture. Instead, we need to reflect upon whether we can develop an ethics of women's desire and fulfilment based on the Christian tradition. Moreover, creating an awareness of women's sexual desire and fulfilment is a matter of justice.