Critical gender analysis has become an important part of contemporary study of religion. New Religious Movements (henceforth: NRMs) open challenging debates from this point of view, as they try to adapt their discourses to the changes in the consciousness and in the social life of our present times. Most of the Asian NRMs try to promote methods of “global” transformation, assuming the philosophy that all humanity is one and framing themselves as supra-religions. In order to “conquer” the Western societies, they transcend the mainstream religions and avoid their narrow and limiting concepts, including gender issues on their agenda. Even if they do not succeed in operating significant changes of gender roles, they do try to implement certain innovations and modifications. Their spiritual leaders get acquainted with the gender issues, with the feminist ideas too and, consequently, bring them into attention and sometimes assert their own point of view on the matter. Among Asian NRMs, those religious movements that offer members a theology rooted in Hinduism (the Neo-Hindu Movements) co-exist with a plethora of books and articles about the feminine principle in Hinduism. Along with the doctrine, the followers of these religious movements get a comprehensive cultural system of rituals, daily routines, eating habits, dress styles and patterns of relationship, that speak of the lives of actual women in neo-Hindu contexts. And this is the point that warrants our attention. Although most of the neo-Hindu movements are grounded on a profoundly patriarchal society and reiterate traditional values that perpetuate androcracy, some of

1 Osho and Shri Mataji (two of the leaders of neo-Hindu movements that sometimes attack each other in their public discourses) comment upon the misogyny of the main religious systems. Both of them disagree with the aggressiveness and masculine characteristics that may result in women due to the feminist movement. Osho says: “The feminist movement will create more and more masculine women. They will be more and more aggressive and for them the abandonment path becomes unsuitable.”

them as Osho’s movement\(^3\), Brahma Kumaris\(^4\) or Shri Mataji’s Sahaja Yoga\(^5\), for example rise a significant interest for the gender perspective they trigger\(^6\).

The basic questions that require to receive an answer in order to establish the genderized dimension of neo-Hindu movements are\(^7\):

**I. About the women’s role and status in these NRMs:**

I.1. **What is their participation in ritual and liturgy?**

A real revolution in the field is triggered by those NRMs that have a woman leader. In Sahaja Yoga movement for example, women are often entitled to conduct collective meditations or perform Vedic rituals as *puja* or *havan* (i.e. worship ceremonies with water – for *puja*, and fire – for *havan*). Moreover, during the *pujas* performed in the physical presence of Shri Mataji, mainly women are privileged to participate to the adornment of the deity for which the (stage) ceremony is dedicated to. There is no specific mentioning regarding the prohibition from full participation in public sphere religious activities in the menstruating periods (as it happens in Hinduism and in all main religions of the world as well, where women during these periods are viewed as polluted). On the contrary, this woman spiritual leader emphasize strongly on the fact that nobody should feel guilty for any reason whatsoever, because – in her vision – guilty consciousness acts against human beings and represents a sin. This perspective intends to cut the strings that bound women to a lower status, due to the punishment “they deserved for their sinful nature” as we know it was patterned by religion.

1.2. **What religious authority do women hold?**


\(^7\) I have structured my article (the answers to the gender questions) having in mind the types of women’s experience and their content, following which are the consequences they have in NRMs’ contexts.
- They are regarded as *shaktis*, as dynamic powers, who can work efficiently to instate religious principles in the world.

- They become resources of energy, of spirituality.

**1.3. - What access are they given to priesthood, monasticism or religious leadership?**

- This is the case of women occupying powerful leader positions within the Brahma Kumaris, Osho and Sahaja Yoga movements. In her article *The Brahma Kumaris and the Role of Women*[^8], Vieda Skultans states that, undoubtedly, [Brahma Kumaris] is “a movement where women control men. Women occupy positions of power and status, whereas men (...) are subordinate to women.” Under certain aspects, we are dealing with a complete role reversal. Although Skultans does not explicitly term it a feminist movement, her study makes it clear that we may talk about an implicit feminist ideology.

Similarly, Osho’s movement shows a majority of women in leadership and administrative roles: women held 80 per cent of the highest positions (at a given moment).

As a leader of the Sahaja Yoga movement, Shri Mataji encourages women emancipation, both socially and politically[^9], and, within her movement, she appoints about one third of the leadership positions to women. Her sermons and her behavior towards her own disciples do stress out the great significance of the spiritual mother’s role, as she often refers the re-defining of a guru’s qualities from a maternal point of view. (*Guru* is traditionally valorized by the Indian culture from an exclusively masculine point of view).

- Discipleship used to be reserved mainly to men (and to those women only who chose to become nuns), but now it is accessible to women too. Moreover, once they are initiated in the respective doctrines, women also attain a status equivalent to priesthood (they become *gurus* as well, even though not quite “full-size” *gurus*, since they are to subordinate to their spiritual leader/*guru*), which most religions limit the access to or even forbid. Followers of Osho’s movement, Brahma Kumaris and Shri Mataji believe that the future will belong to a feminine era that will positively valorize the feminine dimension of spirituality.

I.4. **What kind of religious communities and rites of their own have women created?**

- All kinds of organized forms of solidarity inside these groups are strongly encouraged, and women benefit from strong sisterhood networks.
- Actions favoring collective interest above personal interest are given preponderance.

II. **How are women represented in religious language and thought:**

II.1. **What do neo-Hindu movements teach about women?**

- In connection with women experiences (i.e. gravidity, giving birth, woman and children, breast / own body feeding, menses):
  - Most religions sanctify motherhood as woman’s destiny and consider it her really greatest accomplishment, her true vocation. The conservative religious groups that follow the traditional family structures (such as Sathya Sai Baba’s movement or Sahaja Yoga or ISKCON movements) glorify the women’s capacity of procreation and state as the main purpose of the family the giving-birth to children. As a consequence, the *gurus* and the communities they instituted lead a policy in favour of natality, enforcing pregnancy – through the means of discourses and ideology. The access to contraceptives or to family planning is being obscured in such cases and forbidden to get debated upon freely and in public.
  - Osho’s movement is the most militant organisation against the family institution, but also the most liberal one as regards sexual practices. It *discourages* children bearing and birth for the following reasons: (a) most people are incapable of positive parenting and (b) children are a distraction from the spiritual growth that is the main purpose of life and of adhering to the movement. Nevertheless, women with children are committed to “giving birth to themselves as seekers of truth” and they are accepted in the community who thus gives them the opportunity to harmonize professional life, married life and pregnancy with spiritual evolution (development).
  - The groups preaching celibacy, the so-called *brahmacharya state* adepts (such as Brahma Kumaris or ISKCON members), impose on the control of women’s sexuality and fertility as main prerequisites of success.

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9 At the advice of her *guru*, one of the closest female disciples Shri Mataji had in the ’90s, known as Al-Ganesh, tried (as an independent) to win a seat in the Italian Parliament in the elections of 1994.
- Shri Mataji’s participation at the Beijing Conference\textsuperscript{10} (a landmark in contemporary feminist movement), in 1995, highlights her awareness that patriarchal ways have to be demolished. Thus she states that, in future, the history of humanity is going to be written in a different manner: taking into consideration women’s role and importance. After presenting a comparative analysis of the Eastern and Western women’s condition, Shri Mataji points out that “women are the potential power of every civilisation and every country”. Their mentioning in the world’s history should start with the acknowledgement that women are the creators and the preservers of the entire humankind. Such aspects were related to the divine, implacable, metaphysical role that women play: “This is the role that the Almighty God has assigned to women. Seeds cannot create anything by themselves. It is the Mother Earth, which provides the flowers and the fruits and other bounties. Similarly, it is the woman who creates the child, who nurtures the baby and eventually brings up the citizens of tomorrow. Women must therefore rank with Mother Earth as the edifice of the entire humanity.”

Therefore, this approach that brings women closer to nature does not lead to the idea of women’s inferior status, as cultural history has done so far. It is meant to highlight women’s creative potential, essentially from the moral, cultural point of view; this role is thus not reduced to a reproductive one. According to Shri Mataji’s vision, the attitude towards women accounts for the spirituality standards of a society, for the level of culture and for the development of that world (at a particular moment in time): “Unfortunately, men have utilised muscle power to gain a dominating position over women. They have not recognised that women are complementary and equal, but not similar partners in human endeavours. A society that does recognize this fundamental truth and does not give to women their rightful role is not a civilized society.” We can hereby spot the well-known idea of the Second Wave’s Feminism that speaks about the equality between men and women under in the context of structural differences. Similarly, Shri Mataji continues her discourse and refers the women’s full right of participation as men’s equal partners to any field of activity, be it social, cultural, educational, political, economical, administrative or any other field.

And (unlike the other leaders of neo-Hindu movements do) she is far from

\textsuperscript{10} The leader of the Sahaja Yoga movement addressed a speech on the global problems facing women today at the Inter-regional Round Table Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 13, 1995. It is one of the first participation of this kind expressing concern for women’s problems at such an important feminist event. For the complete text of Shri Mataji’s (Nirmala Srivastava) discourse on this occasion visit: http://www.sahajayoga.org/quotesandtalks/default.asp.
maintaining motherhood (children birth and education / “pro-creator and preserver of children”), housewife role or sisterhood role as unique roles for women in the society. Shri Mataji insists on the necessity of rising awareness on the gender roles’ issue and highlights the importance of defining women and men’s roles: man is assigned practical, technical, material progress and maintenance roles (“men are responsible for the politics and economics of the country”), and woman is assigned a social, cultural role (“women are responsible for the society”). In order to underline the importance of maintaining the gender roles’ limits independent of the position they hold, Shri Mataji encourages women that are in a position of playing a “masculine” role (i.e. when they are in leadership positions) to avoid assimilating men’s strategies and mentalities, but to manifest their own feminine specificity: “It is very important that they should not forget that they are women who have to manifest deep motherly concern and love.” 

From a power perspective, the preservation of the feminine qualities is rated as very important: “We need women as equal but not similar partners with men, but with a subtle understanding of the nature of men and how to bring them into the centre with inner balance. We need balanced women in order to have a balanced human race with peace within itself.” The true feminine power consists in the comprehension of the man’s nature for the purpose of reaching a good balance and harmony (argue/ fight is futile from this point of view).

On the one hand, women have a divine role in the creation of the world. On the other, they are the (sine qua non) prerequisite of the existence of the divine in the proximity of people: “Where the women are respected and respectable, there reside the Gods of our well-being.” (Sanskrit proverb). The position of the woman and the general attitude towards her speak about the existence of an awareness regarding personal value that becomes utterly important through relating it with the divine. And not only that: “Unless and until you bring a new culture by which women (…) can rise in their own esteem and express themselves in such a way that they create high moral standards for their society, women neither in the East, nor in the West will rise to their full stature of feminine speciality.” In conclusion, Shri Mataji’s view on women’s emancipation is based upon the achievement of one’s own self-awareness. It starts from this point. Morality can be achieved by knowing one’s own values, both as a woman and as a man. “All the fundamentalists who talk of religion expect women to
be absolutely moral and the men can do whatever they like. I feel we have to educate men more than women.” Morality is defined by the leader of Sahaja Yoga movement, based on sex and virtues (men have to observe the same fidelity/chastity duties as women). Shri Mataji also condemns those cultures that “relegate women to the level of an inferior human being, fit to be dominated by men and children”. Thus we get to the situation where mothers are not respected and children do not obey, nor listen to mothers, so that the result manifests a deep imbalance of the basis of the entire society.

II.2. - Do these NRMs project empowering or debilitating images, emphasizing equality and partnership or subordination?

- In connection with feminine experiences (i.e. children’s/ husband / elderly care, in terms of feeding and cleaning, domestic management, rape, pornography, sexual harassment):
  - As for those NRMs where gender roles are clearly defined, there is the benefit of stable families, but managing the domestic issues and nursing the family members remain women’s responsibilities. (In these cases, traditional private life roles are maintained while being ruled by religious ideology and simultaneously required by the guru and by the newly created community.) In Western societies, where such movements could establish themselves, these traditional patterns of gender roles may perpetuate among their female adepts the double-working day and, consequently, the double psychological and physical exhaustion as well as the unremunerated domestic work. However, the commune – as it is constituted inside these movements – is widely endorsed as a form of social organisation entailing many of the benefits of the extended family such as childcare (but also hospitals and asylums – various forms of support – for old and sick people). This way, they give women the opportunity to be mothers without sacrificing their own development. At this point, we may notice a stimulating involvement of the community in the process of child raising, and attempts of involving and charging men with the work of childcare as well.
  - The sexual abuses of male spiritual leaders represent the dark side of the master-disciple relationship within the general patriarchal context of power abuse. (Many gurus have been accused of sexual abuse, including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the leader of Transcendental Meditation, Osho, Sathya Sai Baba.) The women involved were not always passive victims, but they struggled a lot to seduce their
guru, as in most cases they were in love with them. Such situations are basically the result of harem-style structures where women have no access to power and high status unless they are the master’s lovers and therefore they are encouraged to compete for his favours. They are promised, in return, special teachings, the disclosure of high initiatic secrets, promises which may remain illusory and unfulfilled. A possible explanation for the reasons why women followers of these movements are driven into becoming victims of sexual abuses is precisely the lack of fatherly love in their childhood, the lack of a responsible moral father caress, since the only male caress they have ever known is the sexual one.

- In connection with anonymity experiences:
  - All these neo-Hindu movements reiterate the great importance given to the spiritual leader in the process of history-making. The disciples are given – from a historical perspective – a secondary collectively-anonymous value: disciples are the basis for a world-wide transformation on the premises of their own self-improvement, since it is the “chosen/saved ones” who will change the face of the future world. Although, under such circumstances, disciples have value as individuals, at the same time they are taken globally, as an amorphous mass that is meant to reflect in each of its particles the empowering image of the cult’s leader (the only one that actually does matter).

  - Redefining body and offering access to spirituality by its means\(^{11}\), these neo-Hindu movements transgress the boundaries of race, caste and gender and encourage open-minded approach and comprehension for diversity, for equality (of chances – in the realm of spirituality) in the context of difference and within the frame of the homogenizing tendency of the respective groups from the social cohesion point of view.

- Under the aspect of the woman’s relation with man in marital circumstances, Shri Mataji suggests that roles must be clearly separated and assumed, yet without – as feminists assert – any hierarchy between them: “Men should know all men-like things and women should know all woman-like things. Women and men can be equally intelligent. (If roles are reversed, imbalance pops in.) Doing something does not make you more or less valuable. (…) Man and woman are like the wheels of a car. If one dominates, if one becomes bigger than the other, the car will spin around

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itself. There should be no issue of domination in marriage, but there should be efforts for integration, for mutual understanding and perfect co-operation, this is what needs to penetrate both society and family.” (Getting Prepared for Becoming, Winchester, 17.05.1980)\(^\text{12}\). As different as they are, man and woman can evolve spiritually if only they work together to this end.

In the sermon entitled Mother Earth (Surbiton, 21.08.1983), Shri Mataji recommends women to follow their own path, in an attempt to take them out of the male models of servitude: “We must assume our (feminine) nature with full dignity and with full right. There is no need for women to do all the things that men had already done. (…) Everything is prepared now for the feminine nature to rise”.

When stating that man-woman equality does not mean adopting each and every masculine norm (“If you like to talk in contradictory, if you are rational, if you like to talk like a man, than you have a masculine development. Feminine development does not mean equality with men’s stupidity”), Shri Mataji contests the Feminism of the First Wave that used to promote Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that “in order to be man’s equal, woman should become a man”. Women should not make use of men’s weapons because they take the risk to loose the battle: “When women become arrogant and very aggressive, men win them over.” (Heart at Sahasrara, Delhi, 09.02.1981)

In the process of spiritual evolution, seen as an uplifting spiral, and not as a pendulum movement, feminity is allowed a decisive role. “In order to be able to follow the spiral-like motion, we need to use the power embodied in women’s feminine qualities. But where are those women gifted with feminity? They dress up like women; they try to be feminine and that is all. But this should not be the way. They should be feminine from inside. Christ proved in his life that he had a feminine heart: he forgave. Only a woman can forgive; man cannot because he is aggressive. How can he forgive? Krishna did not ever forgive anyone. He killed. That was his royal fashion. Christ forgave to such an extent as to show that he had added a new loop to the spiral, to show that humans need to develop a new feminine quality. This does not mean that you start to walk like women or to bring out your waist line. You need to be maternal and not paternal. Your behaviour towards others should have that

\(^{12}\) The quotes from Shri Matajì’s sermons are to be found in “Divine Cool Breeze” magazine collection, 1978-2006.
gentleness, that kindness that is specific to maternal behaviour.” (*Mother Earth, Surbiton, 21.08.1983*)

When talking about women and drawing guidelines related to the behaviour and attitude towards them in Sahaja Yoga movement, Shri Mataji takes out of the anonymity – on the practical level – what women do and reevaluate their social and spiritual importance. This woman-*guru* thus succeeds – within her own religious group – in eliminating the women mistrust, the suspicion concerning their social and spiritual company, and succeeds in establishing an honest cultural and social partnership between sexes, since this is a possible and desirable state to achieve. She also succeeds in eliminating women’s low self-esteem by providing them with a new identity profile. Shri Mataji encourages women to focus on themselves for self-transformation, self-reliability within an ideal of human perfection. For this purpose, she brings the idea that one cannot justify herself/himself in front of God for her/his own spiritual failure; one cannot blame parents, family, children or husband for being unable to achieve the true purpose of one’s life (that is a state of a higher spirituality). The main moral resulting from this discourse perspective and asserted by Shri Mataji is one that belongs to a gynocentrical ethics. In this light, all patriarchal “values” based on self-sacrifice do “faint”. Shri Mataji’s lectures stress out the importance of everything that may lead to women’s *empowerment*, so that they do not depend on men. Sahaja Yoga’s leader condemns the women’s practice of attracting and maintaining a man for the protection purposes. She considers this practice a cause for deep feelings of insecurity and disrespect towards one’s own body (mutilated for the sake of complying with a certain fashion model or cinema stars): “The insecurity between men and women comes out from the fact that they need to feel attracted to each other, to be uncivil to each other in order to feel attracted.” (*Getting Prepared for Becoming*, Winchester, 17.05.1980)

As far as marriage is concerned, Shri Mataji fairly ranges among radical feminists. In the same line with them, she militates for an institution of honest and balanced relationships inside the family, being convinced that this will definitely go beyond the limits of the religious group and have an impact on the overall social outer life, too. Shri Mataji wishes to build healthy families that give joy, based on love relationships where husband and wife support each other and are not interested in domination strategies (i.e. power relations). Marriages should be meant to have a positive impact on society: “Marriages that are not useful to society have no meaning
at all, they are just a waste.” (*idem*), says Shri Mataji while having in mind – just like Carol Gilligan\(^{13}\) – an extended vision over the world that supposes care for as many persons as possible.

**II.3. Are feminine images and symbols used in relation to the transcendent?**

- Taken globally, such religious communities get “feminized”, in the sense that both women and men are encouraged to develop and adopt feminine qualities (it is such qualities that are considered adequate and propitious to spiritual development) that they should manifest through *bhakti* (devotion, love and worship of God in the heart – taking the *guru* as an intermediary), and they are encouraged to show complete obedience towards their master/teacher/guru (both on a spiritual level, and on a material level).

- Models, either women or goddesses, as the ones Shri Mataji refers to, represent – as a copy – the image of the spiritual leader.

**III. What are women’s own religious experiences (how women themselves speak about their religious life in the context of these newly adopted religious constructs).**

In “tiri Sahaja” (*Sahaja News – Romanian edition*), No. 18/ October 2003, Doina Mira Dasclu recounts about one of her journeys in which she met her *guru*. She was one of the four Romanian ladies appointed to be in charge with Shri Mataji’s visit in Paris, as the movement’s leader herself asked for. Although coming from different parts of the country and unknown to each other before, these ladies confess sisterhood: “From the moment we all four met, a subtle extremely strong bond\(^{14}\) started to work in between us: a bond of love, of protection and of mutual support. We were four parts of a single body and any time we were encountering difficulties of any kind, we were all there to help each other at once. During this special period of time, we all had a permanent and intense communication with many common intuitions. The daily happenings were bringing the signs of the Divine that we were decoding, according to our own personalities. After communicating and confronting our individual understanding, we were able to build an overall image, meant to make us open our eyes regarding the meaning of the subtle work of the Divine.”

\(^{13}\) I refer to the *ethic of care* Carol Gilligan talked of in her book *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), an important contribution to the development of the feminist theories.
The narration taken here as an illustration for a personal experience in the frame of an Asian NRM is relevant as an evidence of gender issue awareness of the movement’s female leader and her women disciples. “A very important fact – understood and clearly felt all the time by me – was that Shri Mataji («Mother») wanted «to work out» world women’s problems. Her attention on this aspect was revealed to us in the previous meetings (that we had at Guru Puja), where we were presented a documentary about the horrible situation of many women from India who are at the periphery of the society and where we were acquainted with the ongoing projects aimed at supporting women, as it is the case of that Center for Care and Rehabilitation settled with compassion at Mother’s wish.” It is well known that it is a common practice among the (new) religious movements to build and run philanthropic institutions, such as those mentioned above, hospitals or environmental projects such as ecologically sensitive farms. But the Romanian disciple of Shri Mataji finds a deeper significance of the action that rises above the level of help and solving problems for the women in need. In Doina Dasclu’s opinion, her spiritual leader brings these problems into the collective attention and talks about these projects, because actually she aims somewhere else: “The message addressed to all the sahaja yogis was not intended only to sensitize and to draw our attention with appeal to our compassion, but also, and particularly, to realize what should be the attitude towards women and to determine us all to change it even inside our Sahaja Yoga group.” And the argument she brings to strengthen her conviction is: “We were four women aged between 40 and 50, with many common features, but being – at the same time – different enough, brought together by Mother; each of us had and was still having a hard and complex life, with many difficult experiences before conversion to Sahaja Yoga and after this moment as well.” Moreover, there was another Indian lady, around 55 years old and widow, and – in connection with her, as the Romanian lady recollects – Shri Mataji explained that (in India) such women that lost the protection of the husband find themselves in the position that neither family, nor the society respects them. Doina Mira Dasclu feels herself pointed out: “It was exactly our case! All four of us were single at that moment, so we were lacking the protection of a husband. This situation’s consequences were felt by us in many circumstances due to a large variety of behaviors we had to confront to outside the

14 My underlines are meant to point to a use of language that is characteristic to feminine speech.
Sahaja Yoga group, but inside it also. And I mainly refer to domineering or aggressive attitudes, to lack of respect or common-sense etc. We all felt intensely (in our subtle understanding) that Mother wanted to change something in the attitude towards women. Also she wanted to «work» on the ways women can get the respect of others, developing and using their subtle qualities.” (The last statement speaks about the subtle energetic work that it is assumed the spiritual leader is doing in order to change the world and also relate to the women qualities and respect they deserve according to the teachings woman disciple follows.)

Another significant event Doina Mira Dasclu mentions in her story is the retreat of the male leadership of France in favour of the ex-leader’s wife. As he was having an Islamic background, his reaction was relevant for the degree of transformation he has undergone through his conversion to this particular religious movement. Although he was coming from an environment renowned for its women’s oppression, the ex-leader accepted his guru’s decision “gently and innocently”, praising women’s role and qualities.

Conclusions:

The groups belonging to the category of neo-Hindu movements promote basically strong patriarchal structures with conservative gender norms (as those of the world they come from), norms that are better structured than the already existent ones in the outside Western society (the case of ISKCON movement and Sathya Sai Baba’s movement). Still, there are some of these movements that may be considered remarkable in the way they bring to the fore interesting and innovating aspects of gender concern. The study – far from having exhaustive intentions – is focussed particularly on underlining certain positive gender orientations of these Asian NRMs, that were not observed so far. The numerous ways in which women’s spirituality express itself in these NRMs (women’s role and status, their representations and their own religious experiences) reveal – in some cases – a paradigm shift that opens perspectives for further investigations.

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