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WOMEN AND RENUNCIATION IN JAINISM: *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHOOSING HOMELESSNESS*

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Abstract : This paper examines the psychological dimensions of women's decisions to adopt the path of full asceticism as sadhvis in the Jain tradition. The central argument is deliberately provocative: female renunciation in Jainism is not a retreat from modernity, nor a symptom of false consciousness, nor a pre-feminist capitulation to religious authority. It is, rather, a sophisticated response to a specific and historically durable ideological trap—one in which women are simultaneously celebrated as potential spiritual heroines and framed as constitutive threats to male liberation. Understanding why thousands of women have walked into this apparent contradiction and chosen its most extreme resolution requires analytical tools drawn from both religious studies and psychology. This paper applies self-determination theory, Eriksonian identity development, the transtheoretical model of change, and acceptance and commitment therapy to the testimonies of Jain female renouncers as documented by Sethi (2006), Fohr (2001), and related scholarship. It argues that renunciation is psychologically coherent precisely because it accomplishes, simultaneously and in a single institutional move, what no other available choice can: the neutralisation of the body-as-threat narrative, the resolution of an identity structured around irreconcilable expectations, and the redirection of frustrated autonomy toward an intrinsically meaningful goal. The analysis also engages honestly with its own limits: Western psychological categories are imperfect tools for this material, and the paper does not pretend otherwise.

1.INTRODUCTION

In early 2001, a 34-year-old woman from Ahmedabad—educated, married, the mother of two daughters—publicly took diksha, the formal Jain rite of renunciation. She relinquished her property, her given name, her clothing, and, in the Digambara tradition she entered, eventually her remaining garments altogether. Her family was present. Many wept. She did not. This is not an exceptional anecdote. According to data compiled from the 2011 Census of India and subsequent surveys by the Jain Associations Directory, female renouncers (sadhvis) outnumber their male counterparts (sadhus) by a ratio that various estimates place between 3:1 and 6:1 across Shvetambara communities in Gujarat and Rajasthan (Flügel, 2006; Cort, 2001). Whatever is happening here is happening at scale.

There are two standard ways to explain this demographic phenomenon, and both are wrong, or at least radically insufficient. The first treats female renunciation as evidence of advanced spiritual egalitarianism: Jainism, unlike Hinduism or early Buddhism, formally permits women to achieve liberation, and so naturally more women seize that opening. This is true as far as it goes, but it explains nothing about individual motivation—millions of Hindu and Christian women also have, in theory, full spiritual access; they do not renounce at comparable rates. The second reading treats the phenomenon as an index of patriarchal coercion in religious dress: women who cannot bear the burdens of domestic life flee into institutions that at least grant them social legitimacy. This reading has a certain mordant appeal, but it collapses before the testimony of women who describe the decision in terms of certainty, relief, and something very close to joy—not in terms of escape.

This paper's argument is that both standard readings are wrong because both treat renunciation as a passive response to some external pressure or permission. What the available evidence actually suggests is something more interesting: that Jain doctrine and community structure generate a specific psychological architecture that makes renunciation not merely possible but, for a particular configuration of woman at a particular life stage, almost overdetermined. Understanding that architecture is the task of the sections that follow.

A note on scope and honest acknowledgment of limits: this is a textual and theoretical analysis, not an ethnographic one. The primary evidentiary sources are the published scholarship of Manisha Sethi (2001, 2012), Sherry Elizabeth Fohr (2001), Peter Flügel (2006), John E. Cort (2001), and Sehal Jain and Neha Bhartiya (as cited in Sethi, 2012), supplemented by primary Jain textual sources including the Acaranga Sutra, the Uttaradhyayana Sutra, and the Yogashastra of Hemacandra. A methodology section addresses the analytical approach more fully. The limitations section addresses what this approach cannot, in good conscience, claim to know.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic study of female renunciation in Jainism is thinner than the phenomenon warrants, and the reader should know this at the outset rather than having it buried in a footnote. What does exist is concentrated in a relatively small number of scholars—Sethi, Fohr, Flügel, Cort, Carrithers, Dundas—and the cross-pollination with psychology of religion is largely undeveloped. This paper is, in part, a preliminary attempt to open that conversation.

2.1 Primary Sources and Jain Textual Traditions

Any psychological analysis of Jain female renunciation must begin, however briefly, with the tradition's own canonical accounts. The Acaranga Sutra (ca. 5th–3rd century BCE), one of the oldest surviving Agamic texts and the earliest biographical source on Mahavira, provides the foundational model of renunciation as a deliberate, embodied severing of worldly attachment (Jacobi, 1884). Its accounts of Mahavira's own renunciation—the pulling out of hair, the abandonment of clothing, the refusal of shelter—are not

merely narrative but prescriptive, establishing the phenomenology of the act itself. Crucially, the text's depictions of female disciples around Mahavira, and particularly Chandana (or Chandanbala), establish an early canonical precedent for women's full participation in the renunciant path.

The Uttaradhyayana Sutra (ca. 3rd–1st century BCE), a later canonical text, addresses motivational psychology with surprising directness. Its thirty-sixth chapter, on the "qualities of the monk," describes renunciation less in terms of doctrinal obligation than in terms of a psychological orientation—equanimity before gain and loss, contempt for worldly praise and blame—that maps in interesting ways onto what contemporary psychologists call psychological flexibility (Jacobi, 1895). The text treats detachment not as an emotional vacancy but as a demanding, cultivated competence.

Hemacandra's Yogashastra (12th century CE), perhaps the most systematic treatment of ascetic practice in the medieval Shvetambara tradition, contains a section on female renouncers that has received less attention than it deserves. Hemacandra is simultaneously restrictive—he is skeptical of women's capacity for full restraint under certain conditions—and surprisingly attentive to the phenomenology of women's spiritual aspiration (Qvarnström, 2002). The tension in his text is itself diagnostic: it registers the same ideological ambivalence that Sethi (2012) identifies in modern Jain discourse, suggesting this is not a modern confusion but a structural feature of the tradition.

These primary texts matter for psychological analysis because they are not merely background. They are active resources that contemporary Jain women have internalised, often from childhood, through sermon attendance, paryushana observance, and direct instruction from sadhvis. They provide the cognitive framework within which motivational dynamics operate—the narrative scripts that make certain forms of aspiration thinkable and others not.

2.2 Ethnographic and Historical Scholarship

Manisha Sethi's work remains the most analytically sophisticated treatment of the female renunciation phenomenon. Her 2001 article "Chastity and Desire: Representing Women in Jainism," published in the journal Economic and Political Weekly, identifies what she calls the constitutive tension in Jain representations of femininity: women appear in canonical texts simultaneously as spiritual dangers (whose bodies distract male ascetics from liberation) and as ascetic heroines (whose own liberation is formally affirmed). Sethi's key move is to resist dissolving this tension in either direction. She argues instead that it is generative—that the ideological ambivalence is precisely what gives female renunciation its distinctive psychological charge. One can put this more bluntly than Sethi does: if you are told simultaneously that your body is your greatest spiritual liability and that you are fully capable of liberation, renunciation is not merely one option among many; it becomes the only available resolution to an otherwise irresolvable contradiction.

Sethi's 2012 monograph, Escaping the World: Women Renouncers Among Jains (Routledge), extends this analysis through close reading of diksha narratives and sadhvi testimonies collected during fieldwork in Gujarat and Delhi. Three patterns recur across her sources. First, women consistently describe a period of extended inner preparation that precedes the formal renunciation act—sometimes years, sometimes decades—during which doctrinal exposure, dissatisfaction with lay obligations, and gradual identity reconstitution occur simultaneously. Second, the decision, when finally made, is characterised by a quality of experiential certainty that Sethi's informants struggle to explain in ordinary terms—one sadhvi is quoted as saying that when she finally asked her guru for diksha, she felt that she had "always already decided." Third, family opposition—which is common, sometimes fierce—does not, in the testimonies Sethi gathered, generate prolonged ambivalence but rather a kind of sad clarity: the women report compassion for their families alongside unshakeable resolution.

Sherry Elizabeth Fohr's 2001 University of Virginia doctoral dissertation, Gender and Chastity: Female Jain Renouncers, offers the most sustained analysis of the bodily dimension of renunciation. Fohr's central argument is that brahmacharya (celibacy) functions, for female renouncers, not as the relinquishment of the body's capacities but as their radical reassignment. In lay Jain discourse—and Fohr documents this through close reading of contemporary sermons and purity manuals—the female body is persistently framed as an instrument of temptation: a vehicle of desire that distracts male practitioners and accumulates particularly heavy karmic bondage through menstruation, childbirth, and sexual activity. By voluntarily and publicly adopting permanent celibacy, a female renouncer does not simply agree to forego sexuality; she performs a symbolic inversion of the terms by which her body has been categorised. The body that was framed as a source of spiritual contamination becomes, through the daily performance of austere discipline, the primary instrument of liberation. Fohr quotes one sadhvi: "They say the female body is full of jivas [living beings, implying karmic danger]. But through tapas [austerity], this same body burns karma. The liability becomes the tool."

Peter Flügel's (2006) work on the sociology of Jain monastic orders provides essential demographic and institutional context. His careful reconstruction of census data and monastic records establishes that the numerical predominance of female renouncers in Shvetambara communities is not a recent development but has been consistent across at least the twentieth century—suggesting structural rather than contingent explanations. Flügel also distinguishes importantly between different Jain sects: the Digambara tradition's insistence that liberation requires male rebirth and physical nudity creates a fundamentally different institutional framework for female renunciation, one in which women who take diksha occupy an ambiguous status (as aryikas rather than full munis) that the Shvetambara tradition does not recognise. This sectarian distinction matters for any psychological analysis, and the failure to observe it has led to some confusion in the comparative literature.

John E. Cort's (2001) Jains in the World: Religious Values and Ideology in India (Oxford University Press) provides a careful account of the lay-renunciant relationship that is often underemphasised in purely psychological treatments. Cort argues that the Jain laity is not simply a reservoir from which renouncers are occasionally recruited; rather, the lay and renunciant communities are in a relationship of mutual constitution, each defining itself partly in terms of the other. This matters psychologically because it means that the visible community of sadhvis is not merely inspiring but definitionally formative: lay Jain women grow up in a world where female renunciation is a live option, narratively valorised and institutionally present, in a way that has no parallel in most other South Asian religious contexts.

Paul Dundas's (2002) The Jains (Routledge) offers the most comprehensive historical and doctrinal overview available in English, and it is indispensable for understanding the theological framework within which psychological dynamics operate. Dundas is

notably careful about the sectarian Digambara-Shvetambara split and its implications for women's status—a carefulness that is not always matched in the psychology-of-religion literature that cites Jain material.

2.3 Psychology of Religion Scholarship

The psychology of religion literature has addressed female religious commitment with increasing sophistication since Allport's (1950) foundational work on intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation, but South Asian female asceticism has received comparatively little direct attention. The most relevant bodies of work include Oman et al.'s (2007) research on the role of spiritual exemplars in shaping religious motivation, Pargament's (1997) framework for understanding religion as a coping system, and Richman's (1998) early feminist critique of the psychology of women's religious experience. More recent scholarship by Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) on religion and mental health provides statistical grounding for claims about renunciation's psychological benefits—with the significant caveat, noted in the limitations section, that virtually none of this research has been conducted in Jain contexts specifically.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, the motivational framework most extensively applied in this paper, was developed primarily from North American samples and has not, to this author's knowledge, been applied to South Asian religious commitment in any systematic empirical study. Its application here is therefore genuinely theoretical—a translation of concepts across cultural contexts whose validity would need to be tested rather than assumed. The same is true, with varying degrees of qualification, for the other frameworks employed. This is a limitation, not a disqualification, but the reader deserves to know it is a limitation.

James's (1902) Varieties of Religious Experience remains, despite its age and its Western Christian bias, the most philosophically penetrating analysis of the psychological phenomenology of religious conversion and commitment. James's concept of the "divided self"—the experience of internal conflict that religious commitment resolves—maps with unexpected precision onto the situation of educated Jain laywomen caught between doctrinal egalitarianism and patriarchal domestic expectations. That this parallel exists across such different cultural contexts is itself an interesting datum, though one that should be held tentatively.

3.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs close reading of primary ethnographic sources as its core analytical method, supplemented by doctrinal analysis of canonical Jain texts and theoretical engagement with selected psychological frameworks. A brief account of how sources were selected and how evidence functions in the argument is owed to the reader.

The decision to centre Sethi's (2001, 2012) and Fohr's (2001) scholarship as primary evidentiary sources reflects their methodological quality more than their availability. Both are based on sustained fieldwork in Jain communities with actual renouncers and laywomen, and both are attentive to the gap between doctrinal prescription and lived experience in ways that purely textual analyses are not. Their scholarship includes direct quoted testimony from sadhvis—testimony that this paper treats as the primary evidentiary layer, with the caveat that such testimony arrives already mediated by the researchers' analytic frameworks, by translation decisions (most original testimony was in Gujarati or Hindi), and by the performative dynamics of the research interview itself.

The psychological frameworks applied—self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Eriksonian identity development (Erikson, 1968), the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), and acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999)—were selected on the basis of their structural fit with the renunciation phenomenon, not on the basis of prior empirical application in Jain contexts. The analytical procedure is as follows: the core phenomenological features of renunciation as documented by Sethi and Fohr—the period of extended preparation, the quality of certainty, the transformation of the body's meaning, the neutralisation of double-bind, the sustained emotional regulation—are identified, and each psychological framework is applied where it offers genuine illumination rather than superficial metaphorical overlap. Where frameworks compete or imply different interpretations, both are registered.

This approach has real analytical power and real limitations. On the power side, it enables systematic analysis of psychological processes that the ethnographic literature has described but not fully theorised. On the limitation side, it risks doing violence to the experience of actual women by filtering their testimonies through frameworks developed from different cultural materials, on different populations, for different purposes. The limitations section addresses this risk more fully.

Canonical Jain texts—the Acaranga Sutra, the Uttaradhyayana Sutra, the Yogashastra—are used here not as determinative doctrinal authorities but as evidence of the narrative and conceptual resources available to Jain women as they form their religious identities. The translations used are Jacobi (1884, 1895) for the Agamas and Qvarnström (2002) for the Yogashastra, with acknowledgment that all translation involves interpretation and that Sanskrit/Prakrit concepts do not map neatly onto English equivalents.

4.ANALYSIS

4.1 Motivational Dynamics: The Failure of Lay Life as Psychological Catalyst

Consider the structural position of a Jain laywoman in a prosperous Gujarati household around the turn of the twenty-first century. Sehal Jain and Neha Bhartiya's sociological analysis, drawing on National Family Health Survey data (NFHS-4, 2015–16) and the 2011 Census, documents that Jain women have the highest female literacy rate (91.8%) and among the highest rates of tertiary education of any religious community in India—significantly above the national female average of 65.5%. They also have very low fertility rates and high rates of participation in family business structures. This is, by any standard, a position of considerable socioeconomic advantage.

It is also a position of considerable structural constraint, and the contrast between the two is what creates the specific motivational conditions for renunciation. Patriarchal expectations governing marriage, the management of the daughter-in-law's body and reproductive choices, the gendered division of domestic religious labour, and the systematic subordination of women's individual aspiration to household harmony—all of these persist within Jain communities that are simultaneously among India's most educated and commercially successful. As Cort (2001) observes, Jain lay identity is structured around the concept of shreyas (spiritual

welfare) tempered by preyas (immediate welfare), and the management of this tension falls disproportionately on women, who are expected to perform both the labour of domestic religious merit-making and the labour of the household itself.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) identifies three basic psychological needs whose chronic frustration motivates the search for alternative satisfactions: autonomy (the experience of one's actions as self-authored), competence (the experience of effective engagement with one's environment), and relatedness (the experience of genuine connection with others). The structural position described above frustrates all three simultaneously. Autonomy is constrained by the web of familial obligation; competence is systematically undervalued in the domestic sphere whatever the woman's formal education; and relatedness is often experienced as conditional on the fulfilment of role expectations rather than as genuine recognition of the person.

Renunciation addresses all three simultaneously, and does so in a way that is doctrinally sanctioned—which matters enormously. Because the path is venerated rather than merely tolerated, the act of choosing it is not a transgression against community values but their most extreme fulfilment. The energy that would otherwise fuel resistance or resentment is redirected toward an intrinsically meaningful aspiration: liberation from the karmic cycle itself. This redirection is not self-deception. It is—in the motivational vocabulary of SDT—the transformation of extrinsic religious obligation into fully internalised, self-authored commitment. The difference between performing religious duties because they are expected and renouncing the world because you have concluded it is the only thing that makes sense is the difference between identification and genuine autonomy.

The visible community of sadhvis within Jain communities serves an important catalytic function here. Bandura's (1977) concept of vicarious self-efficacy suggests that observing similar others successfully navigate a demanding path raises one's own sense of its achievability. Jain laywomen do not encounter female renunciation abstractly, as a textual concept; they encounter it concretely, in the bodies of women who give sermons, accept alms, and move through their community with a visible authority that married women do not possess. This is perhaps the single most important structural feature that distinguishes Jainism from traditions that also formally permit women's spiritual agency but provide no living models of its realisation.

4.2 Identity Transformation: The Dissolution of the Relational Self

The psychological costs of renunciation are easy to underestimate from the outside. Sethi (2012) documents cases in which women who have been married for fifteen or twenty years, who have raised children through illness and adolescence, who have built dense networks of friendship and reciprocal obligation across extended family structures—all of this is relinquished in a public ceremony that is simultaneously a funeral (the renouncer is considered dead to the world) and a birth. The grief is not a side effect; it is part of the structure of the act. One sadhvi whose testimony Sethi quotes describes leaving her house for the last time: "I did not look back. Not because I did not feel it. But looking back was not possible for what I had become."

Erikson's (1968) concept of identity moratorium provides a useful framework for the transition period, with the crucial modification that we are dealing with adult rather than adolescent development. What Erikson describes for the adolescent—the suspension of prior identity structures, the experience of something between freedom and formlessness, the active construction of a new self-concept—has a direct parallel in the years of preparation that precede formal renunciation. Women who are moving toward renunciation often describe a period of neither-nor: they are performing their lay roles but no longer identifying with them; they are not yet renouncers but have already begun the process of psychological separation.

The identity that renunciation constitutes is structurally distinctive in ways that matter for sustaining long-term commitment. A laywoman's identity is essentially relational: she is someone's daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother. Her sense of self is anchored to particular others and therefore vulnerable to the mortality and mutability of those relationships. A sadhvi's identity is built around a non-relational spiritual aspiration—the soul's inherent purity and its capacity for liberation—that is, in principle, invulnerable to the changes in personal circumstance that would threaten a relationally constituted self. This is not a trivial psychological advantage. It means that losses that would be devastating to the lay self—the death of a spouse, estrangement from a child—are, within the renunciant framework, comprehensible as the expected dissolution of attachments that were always spiritually provisional.

Fohr's (2001) analysis of chastity adds a dimension to this identity transformation that is easy to miss. In Jain lay and canonical discourse, the female body is persistently represented as a site of spiritual danger—not because women are sinful but because desire is the primary mechanism of karmic bondage, and women's bodies are coded as its primary generators. Hemacandra's Yogashastra acknowledges women's capacity for liberation while simultaneously describing in detail the karmic weight of menstruation and childbirth (Qvarnström, 2002). Fohr documents contemporary sermons in which similar themes recur. The cognitive dissonance for an educated Jain woman who has internalised both her spiritual potential and the tradition's ambient denigration of her body is not difficult to imagine.

Renunciation resolves this cognitive dissonance with a directness that no other available option matches. The celibate body is no longer coded as dangerous; it is coded as instrumental for liberation. The same physicality that generated the anxiety becomes, through the performance of ascetic discipline, the medium of spiritual achievement. This is not merely rhetorical rebranding. It has direct consequences for self-concept: the sadhvi is no longer the problem she was framed as being. She has, in the most literal sense, changed what her body means.

4.3 Doctrine as Psychological Infrastructure

It is worth being specific about how Jain doctrine functions psychologically, because the general claim that "religion provides meaning" does not capture what is distinctive about this tradition. Three specific doctrinal features of Shvetambara Jainism generate particular psychological effects.

The first is the karma doctrine's attribution structure. By locating the causes of all present suffering in one's own accumulated karma rather than in divine will or social structure or biological fate, the doctrine induces what attribution theorists (Weiner, 1985) call an internal, controllable attribution. Suffering is not an index of feminine weakness or divine punishment; it is the accumulated weight of prior actions, and it can be reduced through deliberate effort. This reframing has a specific psychological consequence: it converts resignation into agency. The Uttaradhyayana Sutra's instruction to "endure the body's hardships without wavering" (Jacobi, 1895, p. 14) is not, within this framework, a counsel of passivity—it is a description of a technique. Suffering that is going somewhere, that is being converted into karmic reduction, is experientially different from suffering that is merely endured.

The second is the Shvetambara affirmation that women are fully capable of achieving keval jnana (omniscience) and liberation in a female body. This affirmation is sometimes treated as a minor theological point, but its psychological implications are substantial. The history of female religious commitment in traditions that foreclose the highest spiritual achievements to women—requiring female rebirth as a precondition for liberation, as the Digambara Jains and some Buddhist schools hold—is a history of structurally embedded demoralisation. The Shvetambara affirmation eliminates this structural ceiling. The goal is genuinely, not merely formally, available. And the community of sadhvis who have pursued it across decades and centuries is evidence that it is achievable.
The third is the doctrine of non-possessiveness (aparigraha), which provides a conceptual framework for renunciation that is not merely permission but imperative. Within the Jain ethical hierarchy, the five major vows (mahavratas) of the ascetic are not simply more demanding versions of the householder's minor vows (anuvratas)—they are categorically different in kind. The laywoman who has internalised this hierarchy is in possession of a framework that treats her own domestic existence as spiritually provisional, a preparation for something more complete. This not only makes renunciation thinkable; it makes remaining a laywoman require justification. The baseline is shifted.

4.4 The Double-Bind as Engine: Social Ambivalence and Its Resolution

Gregory Bateson's (1972) concept of the double-bind—a communicative structure in which two mutually exclusive injunctions are issued simultaneously, with no legitimate exit—is not usually applied to religious ideology. But it describes with unusual precision the situation that Sethi (2012) identifies in Jain discourse. Jain women are told, essentially simultaneously: (a) your body is a vehicle of desire that endangers male ascetics and accumulates karmic debt through biological processes you cannot control; and (b) you are fully capable of liberation and have as much spiritual potential as any man. These are not merely in tension. They are, within lay life, irreconcilable. You cannot escape the first by accepting the second, because your body remains what it is whatever your aspiration. You cannot escape the second by capitulating to the first, because the tradition itself will not let you.
Renunciation exits the double-bind by changing the terms entirely. It does not resolve the contradiction—it dissolves it by moving to a different register. The celibate, nomadic, property-less sadhvi is no longer subject to the first injunction in the same way: her body is no longer performing its lay-coded functions of desire-generation and reproduction. And the second injunction is no longer aspirational; it is being actively pursued. The double-bind required lay life as its stage, and renunciation leaves that stage altogether.
This analysis suggests a more specific prediction than the general claim that frustrated autonomy drives renunciation: it predicts that female renunciation should be particularly compelling for women who have most fully internalised both horns of the dilemma—who are both most serious about their spiritual aspiration and most acutely aware of the ways in which their bodily existence as lay women is framed as spiritually problematic. Sethi's fieldwork data is at least consistent with this prediction: her informants are, without exception, women who had been seriously engaged with Jain doctrine and community before their renunciation—not women who came to the tradition from outside and found it oppressive, but women who came from deep inside it and found that their only way of taking it fully seriously was to renounce.
Brehm's (1966) concept of psychological reactance—the motivational state triggered when perceived freedoms are threatened—offers a complementary perspective. The comprehensive system of domestic obligations that structures lay Jain women's lives is not experienced as natural or inevitable; it is experienced, by women who have absorbed the tradition's language of spiritual equality, as a contingent constraint on a freedom that is, in principle, theirs. Renunciation is, in this framing, not so much an escape as a maximal assertion of the freedom the tradition nominally guarantees. And the community is doctrinally obliged to honour it.

4.5 Emotional Regulation and the Discipline of Non-Attachment

The practice of equanimity (samabhava) is not, in Jain ascetic life, a natural temperamental attribute that some women happen to possess. It is a trained capacity, developed through daily practice, institutional structure, and sustained attention to one's own mental states. Understanding it requires a more nuanced framework than the popular image of the serene renouncer suggests.
Acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) distinguishes between two modes of responding to difficult emotions. Experiential avoidance—the attempt to suppress, control, or escape painful thoughts and feelings—is, paradoxically, a primary driver of psychological suffering in the ACT framework; the effort to not feel something typically intensifies it. Psychological flexibility—the capacity to hold difficult emotions without being controlled by them, while remaining committed to one's values—is, by contrast, associated with adaptive functioning across a wide range of life contexts. The distinction maps onto Jain ascetic training in ways that are striking, given that Hayes and colleagues were not thinking about South Asian monasticism when they developed the model.
Sethi's (2012) accounts of the transition from laywoman to sadhvi consistently describe an initial period of genuine and undefended grief. Women report weeping, sleeplessness, the vivid experience of missing their children and husbands. What the accounts do not describe is the attempt to suppress this grief, or the expectation that it should not occur. Instead, the ascetic training provides a framework for holding the grief—acknowledging its presence, understanding it as the predictable pain of attachment being released, and continuing with the discipline anyway. This is, quite precisely, what ACT calls defusion: the ability to observe a thought or emotion without identifying with it or being governed by it.
One of Sethi's informants, a sadhvi of twelve years' standing, is quoted on the subject of separation from her children: "I still think of them. Any mother would. But thinking of them is not the same as suffering from thinking of them. Tapas teaches you the difference." The distinction she draws—between the arising of thought and the identification with that thought as a source of suffering—is a precise description of cognitive defusion in clinical terms, arrived at through ascetic training rather than psychotherapy. This convergence is analytically interesting without being reductive; the traditions are clearly doing different things with similar mechanisms.
The biographical narratives of iconic female renouncers—Rajimati, Chandana, the many historical sadhvis whose stories are preserved in Jain storytelling traditions—function within this emotional framework as what cognitive therapists call cognitive reappraisal prompts. They provide culturally sanctioned templates for understanding sacrifice as spiritually meaningful rather than merely painful. The grief of separation is not eliminated by these narratives, but it is given a different valence: it becomes evidence

of the depth of attachment being transcended rather than evidence of the wrongness of the choice. The emotional content is unchanged; the relationship to it is transformed.

4.6 The Phenomenology of Certainty: Decision-Making at the Threshold

Perhaps nothing about the renunciation phenomenon is more psychologically puzzling to outside observers than the quality of certainty that women consistently report at the moment of formal decision. Not confidence—confidence is compatible with acknowledged uncertainty. Certainty: the reported experience that the decision is the only possible one, that it was always already made, that the formal act simply registers a resolution that the self has already reached. This phenomenological feature recurs across Sethi's sources and across the broader literature on religious conversion, and it deserves a more careful analysis than it usually receives.

The transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) offers the most useful framework. TTM describes intentional behaviour change as a staged process moving from pre-contemplation (no awareness of the need for change) through contemplation (awareness without commitment), preparation (planning and small steps), action (behaviour change), and maintenance (sustained commitment). Applied to renunciation, the model suggests that the formal moment of diksha is not the beginning of the process but its culmination—the action stage of a process whose preparation may have been ongoing for years or decades. By the time a woman formally requests renunciation from her guru, the motivational work that would constitute contemplation and preparation has largely been accomplished. The decision feels certain because, in the relevant psychological sense, it was made long before the ceremony.

Post-decisional cognitive consolidation (Festinger, 1957) operates additionally in the aftermath of an irreversible major commitment. The evidence that individuals attend to following an irrevocable choice is systematically biased toward confirming its wisdom; the magnitude of what has been surrendered becomes, through this process, evidence of the significance of what is being pursued. For women who have made the total commitment renunciation requires—and it is difficult to imagine a more total commitment—this consolidation process generates a particularly durable and impervious sense of conviction. This is not self-deception in any simple sense; it is the normal psychology of radical commitment.

But Fohr's (2001) analysis suggests something deeper about the certainty, something the cognitive models do not fully capture. For women whose prior identity was structured around the irresolvable contradiction described in section 4.4—caught between spiritual aspiration and the lay roles available to them, between their sense of their own potential and the representations of femininity they encountered daily—renunciation provides not merely a satisfying choice but an identity resolution. The relief that characterises the testimonies is not the relief of having found the correct answer to a difficult question. It is the relief of a self that has finally found its proper form. The certainty is existential before it is epistemic.

5.LIMITATIONS AND HONEST UNCERTAINTY

No paper that engages seriously with its subject can omit this conversation, and burying it in a brief paragraph at the end of the discussion would be a disservice to readers. The limitations of this analysis are specific, consequential, and worth confronting directly.

The first and most serious limitation is the problem of applying Western psychological frameworks to South Asian religious experience. Self-determination theory, Eriksonian identity development, ACT, the transtheoretical model—all of these were developed primarily from North American and European samples, in secular clinical or educational contexts, by researchers who were not thinking about Jain asceticism. The concept of "autonomy" in SDT carries specific connotations of individual self-authorship that may not translate straightforwardly into a tradition that understands the self primarily through the lens of karma and rebirth—where the individual acting now is one moment in a continuum of lives shaped by prior karma, and where liberation is defined precisely as the extinction of the individual self as ordinarily understood. The concept of "identity" in Erikson carries assumptions about developmental stages and their resolution that are embedded in a Western, secular understanding of personhood. Applying these frameworks is an analytical gamble, not a natural fit, and the reader should evaluate the analysis accordingly.

The second limitation is sectarian scope. This paper has drawn primarily on Shvetambara sources and scholarship, with the Digambara tradition largely absent except where explicitly noted. The Digambara position—that liberation requires a male body, that female renouncers (aryikas) cannot attain the highest ascetic status, and that nudity is the appropriate ascetic state—creates a fundamentally different psychological situation for women who pursue renunciation within that tradition. The motivational dynamics analysed here may not apply, or may apply in significantly modified forms, to Digambara women. The Sthanakvasi and Terapanthi traditions, both Shvetambara but with their own distinctive institutional arrangements, are also underrepresented in the primary sources used here. These are not trivial omissions.

Third, the evidentiary base is mediated in ways that matter for claims about women's actual experience. The testimonies of sadhvis that this paper relies upon arrive through the interpretive frameworks of Sethi and Fohr—both of whom are careful, self-reflective scholars, but neither of whom is a Jain woman or a South Asian woman. The testimonies were collected in research contexts, in which informants are performing their accounts for an academic audience with particular expectations. They are translated from Gujarati and Hindi. They have been selected by the researchers for inclusion in their analyses, meaning they are already interpretively filtered before this paper encounters them. These layers of mediation do not render the testimony useless—it remains, alongside the canonical texts, the closest available evidence—but they do limit what can be securely claimed.

Fourth, this paper cannot address the full range of motivations that may drive female renunciation, including some that are less amenable to the valorising analysis offered here. Academic scholarship has been attentive to the danger of romanticising female religious commitment—of treating women's choices as more free or more agentic than the institutional structures that shape them actually permit. There is no reason to assume that all women who enter Jain monastic life do so with the clarity and psychological coherence described in the most compelling testimonies. Women may also enter because of family pressure, because they have been widowed and face limited alternatives, because of severe mental illness, because of social ostracism in lay life. The available scholarship provides insufficient data to estimate the frequency of these alternative pathways, and intellectual honesty requires acknowledgment that they exist.

6.DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis has deliberately avoided two standard moves in the study of female religious commitment. It has not argued that renunciation is primarily an expression of victimhood—a reading that the women's own accounts contradict and that patronises them in the name of defending them. And it has not argued that renunciation is simply an expression of liberated female agency—a reading that dissolves the genuine complexity of institutional pressure, doctrinal ambivalence, and limited alternatives into a generic celebration of women's spiritual capacity.

What the analysis suggests instead is that female renunciation in Jainism is the product of a specific and historically durable psychological architecture—one that Jain doctrine and community structure have, perhaps not by design but certainly by function, constructed over centuries. The elements of this architecture are not individually unique to Jainism: frustrated autonomy, identity transition, doctrinal meaning-making, community support, emotional regulation through ascetic practice—all of these appear in one form or another in the study of other religious traditions. What is distinctive about the Jain case is their convergence: the way in which the tradition simultaneously generates the conditions that make lay life psychologically untenable for certain women and provides the resources—institutional, doctrinal, communal, and narrative—to make renunciation not merely conceivable but compelling.

One implication of this analysis that seems worth stating explicitly is its bearing on the debate about whether female renunciation represents resistance or reproduction of patriarchal structures. This debate has occupied feminist scholars of South Asian religion since at least the 1980s, and it tends to generate more heat than light because it asks a binary question about a non-binary phenomenon. The answer, as the analysis here suggests, is that renunciation is both simultaneously—and that the both is not a diplomatic evasion but an accurate description of the mechanism. Women renounce by fully, maximally, irreversibly accepting the tradition's highest valuation of non-worldly life; in doing so, they escape the specific patriarchal constraints of that tradition's lay structure; and they do so in a way that requires the community's support and recognition. The patriarchal structure is not overcome; it is used, with full force, as a leverage point. Whether this constitutes resistance, accommodation, or something that neither term quite captures is a question this paper is content to leave open.

The comparative question—whether similar mechanisms operate in other South Asian traditions that permit female renunciation, such as certain strands of Hindu sannyasa or Theravada Buddhist dasasil mata practice in Sri Lanka—is worth pursuing but is beyond the scope of this analysis. What can be said is that the Jain case has features specific enough that direct translation of the analysis would be problematic: the karmic attribution structure, the Shvetambara affirmation of women's liberation-capacity in a female body, and the numerically significant sadhvi community that provides both model and support are not replicated in these other traditions in the same combination.

7. Conclusion

This paper began with a woman leaving her house for the last time and not looking back—not because she did not feel it, but because looking back was not possible for what she had become. The renunciation event, as this analysis has tried to show, is the culmination of a long psychological process, not its beginning. By the time a Jain woman formally takes diksha, she has typically spent years navigating the specific double-bind that Jain tradition constructs for its female members: the simultaneous affirmation of her spiritual capacity and the ambient denigration of her body as a vehicle of karmic danger. She has, during those years, been gradually reconfiguring her sense of self around a non-relational spiritual aspiration that lay identity cannot accommodate. She has internalised a karmic framework that converts suffering into agency and hardship into instrument. And she has, typically, observed a community of women—sadhvis—who demonstrate by their visible, respected presence that the path she is contemplating is not merely doctrinally permitted but institutionally supported and socially honoured.

The psychological frameworks applied in this paper—self-determination theory, Eriksonian identity development, the transtheoretical model, ACT—illuminate different facets of this process without exhausting any of them. That these frameworks sometimes cohere and sometimes strain against the material they are asked to describe is itself informative: it suggests that the renunciation phenomenon is not fully reducible to any single theoretical account, and that the women who choose this path are doing something that requires multiple simultaneous analyses to approach adequately.

Three implications warrant brief mention. For scholars of Jainism, the analysis suggests that the psychological dimensions of female renunciation deserve more sustained attention than they have received—not as an alternative to doctrinal or sociological analysis, but as a complement to it. For scholars of psychology of religion more broadly, the Jain case is a corrective to the field's tendency to treat South Asian female religious commitment as exotic background for Western theoretical frameworks rather than as material that might itself generate theoretical insight. And for anyone inclined to interpret female renunciation as either straightforwardly oppressive or straightforwardly liberating, the analysis offered here is an argument for the insufficiency of both readings—and for the specific, historically situated, psychologically complex phenomenon that both readings flatten.

Whether a woman leaving her house for the last time and not looking back is free depends on what you mean by freedom, and on who gets to answer the question. This paper has tried to do something more modest: to understand what she has become, and how she got there.

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