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Sex, Age and Iconoclasm: Power, Transgression, and the Censorship of the Aging Tantric Goddess

Nishita Rao

Independent Researcher, The United States

Abstract

A woman is a socio-political construct, a category produced and maintained through institutional power to channel bodies into reproductive, economic, and social functions, while systematically restricting autonomy to preserve structural control. This Reproductive Axis of Control is a conceptual reference line along which directional movement is regulated as womanhood occupies ontological statuses and performative spaces—maiden, mother, and crone.

This presentation investigates the censorship and discomfort surrounding aging Tantric goddesses, focusing on the mutilation and veiling of Chamunda at the Jasmalnathji Temple in Gujarat. Through comparative visual analysis, it examines how patriarchal religious frameworks suppress divine feminine figures who defy reproductive utility. Chamunda's seductive gaze, skeletal body, and transgressive presence challenge sanitized devotional norms. By tracing visual erasure, it argues that the aging erotic goddess is marginalized not for obscenity, but for embodying sovereign, post-reproductive power, thus disrupting sacred aesthetics shaped by gendered taboos and discomfort with feminine autonomy beyond motherhood. This visual censorship enforces a sociopolitical narrative that maidens embody pure femininity, mothers serve reproductive functions, and crones, having surpassed reproductive age, are expelled from societal and political relevance and stripped of any sexual desirability.

Through an analysis of religious sculptures, iconography, and cultural texts, this research reveals the intersection of ageism, sexism, and power in regulating female bodies and identities. It argues that the censorship of the crone figure reflects broader mechanisms of control that reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal structures by erasing older women's visibility and agency.

Keywords: tantra; gender; religion; sex and aging; feminist theory