

# Vow as a Multilayered Ritual Practice in Women's Lives: An Ethnographic Study in Yazd

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## Introduction:

Vow is a traditional ritual observed across various cultures, with historical references found in the Rigveda, the Avesta, and subsequent Islamic traditions in Iran. Rooted in the concept of a sacrosanct promise, a vow represents a reciprocal bond between humans and the divine, frequently intended for healing, crisis resolution, or the fulfillment of personal aspirations. Scholars have examined vows both as a religious act of exchange and as a social practice that sustains cohesion, identity, and gendered agency. Numerous studies emphasize its evolving meanings and functions. Building upon this of research, the present study examines how contemporary women in Yazd comprehend, enact, and reinterpret vows within their daily lives and cultural memory.

## Methodology:

This research utilizes a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic methodology to examine the significance, roles, and daily practices associated with vows among women in Yazd. Data were gathered through extended observation, unstructured interviews, document review, and photography, involving sixteen participants recruited through snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was performed employing MAXQDA 2024, with validity established through comprehensive fieldwork, member validation, and adherence to ethical standards, including informed consent and participant confidentiality.

## Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that the conditional acts of vow performed by Yazdi women function both as a spiritual offering and as an effective strategy for managing life's challenges. Viewed through Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift, these vows serve as a form of sacred exchange, wherein women aim to fulfill personal aspirations such as childbirth, children's marriage, or resolving marital disputes, and to surmount crises, anticipating divine reciprocation. Although the imperative to reciprocate is fundamental to Mauss's theory, within the context of vows, this expectation frequently transitions to the spiritual or afterlife domain, illustrating a belief in ultimate recompense even if immediate worldly results are not realized. In this context, vow functions as a spiritually mediated coping strategy, providing psychological comfort and strengthening a sense of control amid times of

uncertainty. Vow also serves as a conduit of meaning and social cohesion, harmonizing with Peter Berger's view of religion as a sacred canopy that confers significance upon everyday life. Through spiritual devotion to God and the Imams, women reestablish coherence and purpose in their daily lives. Furthermore, drawing on Victor Turner's social drama theory, vows serve as a stabilizing force amid life's disruptions, facilitating women in restoring social and emotional balance. The concept of ritual memory, inspired by Jan Assmann, further illustrates how vows connect individual experiences to collective traditions, facilitating the transmission of cultural and religious knowledge across generations. Through these interconnected functions, vow emerges not merely as a personal act of devotion but also as a crucial practice that upholds communal identity, moral harmony, and intergenerational continuity.

## **Results**

Vows hold a substantial significance in the daily lives of individuals. This research employs a qualitative methodology and an ethnographic approach to examine the meanings and objectives of vows from the perspective of women in the city of Yazd. Fieldwork was carried out at the shrines of Imamzadeh Nasrollah and Seyyed Jafar, complemented by semi-structured, in-depth interviews with sixteen women. The findings suggest that pledge empowers women to confront crises and disruptions in daily life, restore psychological and social coherence, and develop strategies for managing life's challenges. Data analysis identifies four principal dimensions of vow: support, a communicative bridge, conditional action, and ritual memory. Support pertains to the function of a pledge in individual reconstruction during periods of crisis. The communicative bridge emphasizes vows as a means of establishing a spiritual connection with God and the Imams. Conditional action embodies a reciprocal relationship between individuals and the sacrosanct, rooted in the anticipation of reciprocation or fulfillment. Ritual memory associates vows with personal and familial histories, integrating them into intergenerational narratives. The objectives of vow can be analyzed across three levels: personal, familial, and broader social contexts. At the individual level, vow offers psychological reassurance and aids in the attainment of material aspirations. At the familial level, it facilitates the preservation of ritual memory and enhances family cohesion. At the macro level, vow functions as a mediating practice between humans and the sacrosanct, influencing society through the reinforcement of values, social engagement, and cultural transmission. Overall, the vow in women's lives is not solely a religious act but a complex, multifaceted ritual that concurrently influences psychological, familial, and social spheres, emphasizing women's roles as custodians of ritual memory and essential agents in the reinforcement of religious and social identity.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest pertaining to this study.

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