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## PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO EMPATHY - A NEW PARADIGM IN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

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**S. ALWIN MATHAN RAJ**

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**Abstract:** Empathy is an art, skill, quality and condition for effective leadership. Empathy can be learned and developed through intensive training and practice. The quality of empathy will render a new paradigm to women leaders as they naturally manifest this trait in their leadership tasks. The assumption is that the psycho-spiritual approach to empathy enhances effectiveness in women's leadership. The fundamental questions behind this article are: how the articulation of empathy in women's leadership might be in their workplaces? How does psycho-spiritual approach of empathy can contribute to the effectiveness of women's leadership in their workplaces? Based on these questions the focus of this article is a unique attempt to integrate both psychology and spirituality of empathy in women's leadership based on the writings of SudhirKakar.

**Key words:** Empathy, Relational Theory, Spirituality, Women's Leadership.

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**Introduction :** Empathy is an important trait of an efficient leader. The effectiveness of leadership will be measured on how leaders both men and women deal their employees or different groups in relation to the vision of their workplaces. It is true that the effective execution of any task in workplace done mainly depending upon how leaders relate, understand, and respond to the feelings of their employees. Empathy gives the capacity to work with diverse personal and cultural backgrounds. It enables to respond appropriately to employee's emotion in their workplaces. It also provides the ability to understand the unspoken emotions of other employees and groups in workplace.

This article attempts to highlight that women leaders have natural quality of being empathetic in workplaces. As it is a natural strength for women who can easily become effective leaders in their workplaces. The various research findings support the author to argue that empathetic leaders can contribute profoundly in their workplaces. Caliper research and development department mentions in their *Women Leaders Research Paper* that 'the emergence of women in leadership roles and in the overall workforce has steadily increased; progress is occurring slowly. Their empirical research findings clearly show that openness, empathy, and flexibility are significantly high in women [1]. So, in the context of workplace how empathy could be a unique strength for women in their leadership? Does psycho-spiritual approach of empathy can contribute to the effectiveness of women leadership? Based on these questions this article focuses on psycho-spiritual approach of empathy in women leadership based on the writings of SudhirKakar.

SudhirKakar an Indian Psychoanalyst presently living in India. He emphasizes psycho-spiritual dimensions of healing where the healer works as guru and a healer at the same time. His books *Mad and Divine*:

*Spirit and Psyche in the Modern World [2]* and *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on religion and Mysticism [3]* are special contributions in this field. The present article analyses the psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy as connectedness with God, self and other. The author first emphasizes the importance of empathy in workplace, strengths of women's leadership and argues that this psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy could make women leaders as effective agents for personal and spiritual transformation in the minds of the employees.

**Importance of empathy in workplace:** An empathetic relationship between leaders and their employees is essential in workplaces. The studies of Wan Abdul Rahman who refers Goleman's idea, point out that empathy is a must-have virtue for leaders because it can inspire, motivate, envision, and lead others to greater effectiveness. He further adds that empathy has an important role in leadership because empathy enables leaders to connect with their employees. Empathy ensures that connections occur between people so that everybody is included and no employee feels left out, and as such, an empathic leader is perceived as an effective leader [4]. Szu-Fang Chuang in her work *The Essential Skills for Leadership Effectiveness in Diverse Workplace Development* emphasizes that for organizations to remain competitive in the global market, a close emotional interdependent link and an ongoing development of trust and loyalty between leaders and followers must be established. The relationship can be enhanced by spending time together and considering the members' needs, expectations, and values. Global leaders cannot have an outstanding performance without the ability to guide and influence employees to work toward the organizational goals [5]. Added to that William A. Gentry researched and analyzed data from 6,731 managers from 38 countries. His key

finding is that empathy is positively related to job performance [6].

**Strength Based Relational Leadership Style in Workplaces:** Interestingly, women exhibit more empathetic and relational leadership style. According to Karima Merchant, men often use a more task-oriented approach in leadership, while women rely on leadership style heavily based on interpersonal leader-follower relationships (Eagly & Johnson, 1990 [7]; Gray, 1992 [8]; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002). This feminine style of leadership is democratic and participative. Democratic leadership behaviors are focused on maintaining interpersonal relationships in job including showing concern for employees' well-being and involving them in decision-making processes [9]. Karima Merchant points out the female leaders assume a more "take care" leadership approach compared to the males' "take charge" approach (Martell & DeSmet, 2001; Yukl, 1994; Hater & Bass, 1998) [10]. A significant number of scholars argue (Tannen, 1990, Gray, 1992; Eagly, 1987) that women leaders are good at maintaining intimate connections, being friendly, pleasant, and socially sensitive. Notably, women leaders exhibit naturally transformational leadership style in their workplace. Therefore, Women leadership is transformational, relational, and democratic. Having situated the need the need for empathy in women leadership this article explores further the meaning and psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy based on the writings of SudhirKakar.

**Empathy:** The English word is derived from the Greek word ἐμπάθεια (*empathia*), which means "physical affection, passion." The term was adapted by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer to create the German word *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), which was later translated by Edward B. Titchener into the English term empathy. Wan Abdul Rahman mentions that empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experience of others. Empathy is defined as a skill of understanding others' feelings, predicaments, and challenges. Empathy is also a skill of sensing other people's emotions, allows for understanding beyond someone's apparent surface behavior by putting oneself in another's shoes and taking an active interest in their concerns (Goleman, 2000; Mencl & May, 2009) [11]. John Antony puts the meaning of empathy in counseling context that "empathy is the mode of gathering subjective data about another self through vicarious introspection. It is the ability to enter into, and understand, the world (internal frame of reference) of another person, and communicate to her" [12]. Snyder and others explain empathy as the ability to feel and share another person's emotions. Some believe that empathy involves the ability to match another's emotions, while others believe that empathy involves

being tender-hearted towards another person [13]. Though the understanding of empathy differs according to the context but in simple terms it means feeling into other person, getting into the shoes of others and ability to understand others' feelings and thoughts.

During my personal interview with SudhirKakar who explains deeply the meaning of empathy psycho-spiritually. 'It is actually the ability to feel what the other person is feeling. It is ability to get into the other person. It is set to be your psychic process at times. It is like 'You become blank in that state where you will be able to feel the person who is next to you. And the maximum understanding of another person can only come when you have empathy moments. It is exactly the moments he or she feels. But the unity is of course there is no difference at all. But the empathy is temporary states of unity with the other person' [14]. Thus, according to Kakar the deeper spiritual dimension of empathy is oneness and unity with other in which 'I' is lost and 'we' emerges.

**Psycho-Spiritual Understanding of Empathy:** Kakar explains empathy both psychologically and spiritually in three different dimensions. Such as; empathy in spiritual healing, empathy an immanent quality to experience the divine, and empathy for connectedness with others.

**Empathy in Spiritual Healing:** The quality of spiritual guide's empathy Kakar explains that it can make a significant contribution to modern healing methods. He notes that the patient's feeling of being deeply understood by the guru, of the Swami being the 'indweller'-of the guru's empathy, is a primary feature of the healing discourse in Eastern, especially Hindu and Tantric Buddhist, spiritual traditions [15]. Kakar markedly points out the basic connecting factor between guru and disciple, healer and healed is through empathy. It is a journey and process of healing ends with spiritual attainment. The words of guru's are the least important part of what is happening between him and his listeners. If you listen to what he is saying, it is mostly banal and repetitive. Words are only the medium through which people are receiving the feelings of being completely accepted by the guru, of being safe, and of the guru's indefinable essence, his charisma, if you will" [16]. For instance Kakar quotes the words of Sai Baba who constantly reminds his devotees that they are not separate from him; 'I am in you, outside you, in front of you, above you, below you. I am all the time around you, in your proximity,' and 'anything coming out of the depth of your heart reaches me. So never have any doubt on this account' [17]. He claims firmly that empathy is common to both spiritual healing and psychoanalytic cure; the concept itself turns towards its 'mystical' pole in the former case and towards its rational, intellectual pole in the latter.

Thus, according to Kakar the empathetic relationship with guru and disciple leads to spiritual healing.

#### **Empathy a Quality to Experience the Divine:**

According to Kakar empathy is equated with spiritual discipline. Spiritual discipline seems to open the doors to and empathic responsiveness that can extend to a high degree of identification with another person. A radical increase in empathy for another person, claimed by spiritual adepts, is a part of their heightened responsiveness- empathy in its widest sense-towards the animate and inanimate worlds. The empathy is also translated a heightened metaphysical openness towards the Divine [18]. Hence, the guru's quality of empathy enhances the patients to experience the seeker-patient's interaction with the teacher have the aim of establishing him as a highly reliable, always available self-object for merging experiences. Kakar refers that, Hindu spiritual traditions give importance to empathy but however not the point of affective identification with another's experience. A complete empathic knowledge of another person, they claim, involves the activation of a normally dormant 'higher' faculty or consciousness.

**Empathy and Spiritual Connectedness:** Kakar who emphasizes that his view of spiritual attainment is a journey and continual progress. In which one has to pass through different base camps of tolerance, compassion, empathy and unity. Empathy makes people feel that we are not alone, I am connected to the self and others. And the higher form is that I am not self-centered, and accepted and again connectedness. This connectedness between self, others, social and god lead into the process of spiritual attainment [19]. Kakar further explains the process of spiritual attainment that the awareness of psyche is the first process that understanding the distortions to why it is hurt? Why is it egoistic? Why is it narcissism? Why does it need to rebel? Why is it so angry? Those can be controlled but it is not to get rid of. If you know what makes you rage, what makes you feel hurt, what are the things, where they come from, and then you can modulate them. In which He explains clearly that the self-awareness or tolerance leads to compassion with oneself and others and grows further to level of empathy and finally unity, the oneness with God. So empathy is the process which helps the spiritual stream of tolerance, compassion, empathy and finally experiencing unity. Thus according to Kakar empathy is a spiritual quality that is a process for connecting God, people, and self, enables the seeker to experience healing and closeness of divine. With this theoretical background of SudhirKakar this article attempts to interpret empathy in women' leadership.

**Psycho-Spiritual Approach of Empathy in Women's Leadership:** Ability to have and display

empathy is an important part of women's leadership. Women leaders exhibit empathy in their workplace as it is a natural trait in themselves. It is 'feeling into' the mind of employees which is in fact an important foundation of women's leadership. The capacity of empathy the women leaders develop a capacity to partake in the inner experience of another through unconscious healing energy that covers over the underlying mystery of the process. It is understood that a women leaders have to adopt to surrender themselves to their own unconscious mental activity to the employee's unconsciousness with their own unconscious. Empathy, they assert, is not only an unconscious process in which the women leaders share the employee's experience in a larger, more objective and complex understanding of the people and then responding with an appropriate interpretation. The women leaders' unconscious resonance with the people oscillates with a more intellectual attitude, to produce what has been called 'generative empathy', 'vicarious introspection' or 'emotional knowing'. This women leader' communication of empathy to the employee's inner state is primarily conveyed through words, symbolic gestures, loving presence and other limited attention sources like aural, visual, tactile and olfactory senses.

**Empathetic Women Leaders are Emotional Healers:** It is the immanence of the healing moment in the leader-employee relationship which inevitably pushes the women leaders' image towards that of a divine parent and of the disciple towards that of a small child. In which Kakar explains the dynamism of healing with Kohutian psychology of the self what he calls a self-object. Self-objects, strictly speaking, are not persons but the subjective aspect of a function performed by a relationship. It is thus more opt to speak of self-object experiences, intrapsychic rather than interpersonal, which evoke, maintain, and give cohesion to the self [20]. The very emergence and maintenance of the self as a psychological structure, than, depends on the continued presence of an evoking sustaining-responding matrix of self-object experiences. Kakar argues that this self-object experience is always needed, from birth to death, the absence of these experiences leads to a sense of fragmentation of the self, including in extreme states of narcissistic starvation, the terrors of self-dissolution. Interestingly, a woman leader who is very empathetic can offer this self-object experience to the employee in a healthy relational workplace.

Kakar elaborately explains the self-object experience that how in the family a child requires self-object experience occurs primarily, though not exclusively by mother's touch and affirmative voice. In the adult, symbolic self-object experiences supplied by his culture, such and religious, aesthetic, and group experiences, may replace some of the more concrete

modes of infancy and childhood. In the language of self-psychology, the woman leader is the primary cultural, institutional self-object experience for adults in workplaces. According to the Allen M. Seigal with satisfaction of self-object needs, a person's feelings of healthy grandiosity, idealization, and connectedness are strengthened, and he or she gradually acquires self-regulatory capacities [21]. Thus, the empathetic leader-employee relationship is an important way an extension of the parent-child relationship, constituting a developmental second chance for obtaining the required nutrients for the cohesion, integration, and vigorousness of the self.

### **Empathetic Women Leaders and Workplace Spirituality**

The broad perspective of spirituality in workplaces is significant to understand how empathetic women leaders express their workplace spirituality. Sunitha Singh who mentions different definitions to highlight the workplace spirituality. According to Mitroff and Denton (1999) spirituality is 'the basic feeling of being connected with one's complete self, others and the entire universe. And Dehlera and welsh (1994) who define spirituality as a specific form of work feeling that energizes action [22]. Added to that Dail L. Fields points out the interconnectedness is an important dimension of workplace spirituality which he calls it Indian approach to spirituality. He defines that 'workplace spirituality is a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feeling of completeness and joy [23]. So, the workplace spirituality has been experienced through women leaders when it is understood in line with psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy. This approach enhances the employees to experience transcendence, energize them to work well and find fulfillment in their workplaces. Hence the empathetic women leaders in their connectedness can become an agent for personal and spiritual transformation of the employees in their workplace.

**Implications of Empathy in Women Leadership:** Empathetic women leaders are the greatest assets to the society and they are able to lead effectively and maintain relationships in their work places. The

relevance and implications of empathy in women leadership such as;

- It enhances human relationships in work place and gives the ability to understand the pain of the employees.
- It enables people to have the nearness of divine experience through the person of empathetic leaders.
- It greatly diminishes the narcissistic tendency of 'I' rather it helps to develop 'we'.
- It heals the wounds of the employees as one feels that I am understood by the leader.
- It empowers women leaders to be appropriate in caring deviated groups in the work place.
- It facilitates pro-social motivation among members in the workplace and to handle the difficult persons easily.
- It gives the ability to respond employee's problem constructively and motivating towards the goal.
- It provides a flexible and smooth way of social interaction and affective empathy to produce a self-sacrificing, altruistic behavior in their workplace.
- It recognizes the potential strengths of others and makes leaders within the workplace.

Consequently, empathetic women leaders effectively make impact in their relationship style and connectedness within the self and employees, and creating healing atmosphere wherein the employees might experience the divine closer and nearer.

**Conclusion:** Women leaders are relational, interpersonal, motivational and transformational. As it is women's natural strength who can become efficient leaders easily. Perhaps, empathy is a skill which can be learned and developed through conscious practice and training. This article is an attempt to bring out the psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy in which a new paradigm of women leadership in their workplace is highlighted. Finally, the summary of this article is psycho-spiritual approach of empathy enables the employees to experience self-object experience in their emotional healing and also to experience the divine. In deed there is no doubt that the success of future women's leadership is based on empathetic leaders who can understand and motivate employees with vision and goal.

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**AlwinMathan Raj S.**, Research Scholar, URF,  
Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras,  
Chennai. Mail: alwinmathanraj@yahoo.co.in