

GENDER

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One of the key contributions of feminist theory is the making of a distinction between "sex" and "gender", a distinction that has subsequently been developed differently by different strands of feminist thought. We begin with the basic distinction that is made, and its significance. A brief discussion follows on how the rigid male /female opposition is specific to modernity and to western cultures. We then look at four different ways in which the sex/gender distinction has been complicated by different kinds of feminist theory. We conclude with a brief look at an emerging field in feminist theory – the study of masculinity, how it is constructed, and its implications for men in patriarchal society.

Sex is to nature as gender is to culture

The initial move was to use the term *sex* to refer to the *biological* differences between men and women while *gender* indicated the vast range of *cultural* meanings attached to that basic difference. This distinction is important for feminism to make because the subordination of women has been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological differences between men and women. The philosophical reasoning which legitimises various forms of oppression as natural and inescapable, because the oppression arises supposedly from natural and therefore unchangeable factors, is called biological determinism. Racism is a good example of this, as is the caste system, because both ideologies are based on the assumption that certain groups of people are superior by birth, and that they are born with characteristics such as greater intelligence and special skills that justify their power in society. Biological determinism has also been one of the most important legitimising mechanisms of women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is therefore, crucial for feminist politics.

Feminist anthropologists, pre-eminent among whom is Margaret Mead, have demonstrated that what is understood as masculinity and femininity varies across cultures. In other words, not only do different societies identify a certain set of characteristics as feminine and another set as masculine, but also, these characteristics are not the same across different cultures. Thus, feminists have argued that there is no necessary co-relation between the biology of men and women and the qualities that are thought to be masculine and feminine. Rather, it is child-rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuate certain differences between the sexes. That is, from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender-specific forms of behaviour, play, dress and so on. This

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training is continuous and most of the time subtle, but when necessary, can involve punishments to bring about conformity. So feminists argue that sex-specific qualities (for example, bravery and confidence as "masculine" and sensitivity and shyness as "feminine") and the value that society attributes to them, are produced by a range of institutions and beliefs that socialize boys and girls differently. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but is made a woman."

In addition, societies generally value "masculine" characteristics more highly than "feminine" ones, while at the same time ensuring that men and women who do not conform to these characteristics are continuously disciplined into the "appropriate" behaviour. For instance, a man who expresses sorrow publicly by crying would be humiliated by the taunt, "*auraton jaise ro rahe ho?*" (Why are you crying like a woman?) And who does not remember that stirring line of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan - "*Khoob ladi mardani, woh to Jhansi wali rani thi.*" (Bravely she fought, the Rani of Jhansi/She fought like a man) What does this line mean? Even when it is a woman who has shown bravery, it still cannot be understood as a "feminine" quality - bravery is seen as a masculine virtue no matter how many women may display it or how few men.

There is nothing "natural" about the sexual division of labour. The fact that men and women perform different kinds of work both within the family and outside has little to do with biology. Only the actual process of pregnancy is biological, all the other work within the home that women must do - cooking, cleaning, looking after children and so on (in other words, the whole range of work we may call "domestic labour") - can equally be done by men. But this work is considered to be "women's work." This sexual division of labour extends even to the "public" arena of paid work, and again, this has nothing to do with "sex" (biology) and everything to do with "gender" (culture). Certain kinds of work are considered to be "women's work", and other kinds, men's, but more important is the fact that whatever work that women do, gets lower wages and is less valued. For example, nursing and teaching (particularly at lower levels) are predominantly female professions and are also comparatively ill-paid in relation to other white-collar jobs which the middle classes take up. Feminists point out that this "feminization" of teaching and nursing is because such work is seen as an extension of the nurturing work that women do within the home.

The fact is that it is not a "natural" biological difference that lies behind the sexual division of labour, but certain ideological assumptions. So on the one hand, women are supposed to be physically weak and unfit for heavy manual labour, but both in the home and outside, they do the heaviest of work - carrying heavy loads of water and firewood, grinding corn, transplanting paddy, carrying headloads in mining and construction work. But at the same time, when the manual work that women do is mechanized, making it both lighter and better-paid, then it is men who receive training to use the new machinery, and women are edged out. This happens not only in factories, but even with work that was

traditionally done by women within the community; for example, when electrically operated flour mills replace hand-pounding of grain, or machine-made nylon fishing nets replace the nets traditionally hand-made by women, it is men who are trained to take over these jobs, and women are forced to move into even lower-paid and more arduous manual work.

In other words, the present subordination of women arises, not from unchangeable biological differences (sex), but from social and cultural values, ideologies and institutions that ensure the material and ideological subordination of women (gender). Thus feminists view questions of sex-differentiated work, the sexual division of labour, and more fundamentally, questions of sexuality and reproduction, as issues to be extricated from the realm of "biology", which is understood to be natural and unchangeable. The feminist agenda is to relocate these issues in the realm of the "political", which suggests that they can and must be transformed.

Male/Female in the non-West

In this context it is interesting to note that some scholars are of the opinion that the strictly bipolar model of masculinity/femininity and the devaluing of the feminine are characteristic only of modern western civilization. Even in Western culture, the two-sex model begins to become entrenched by law and the state only with the advent of modernity. Anne Fausto-Sterling points out that in Europe it was only by the end of the Middle Ages that biological hermaphrodites (people born with one testis and one ovary) began to be compelled to choose an established gender role and to stay with it. The penalty for transgression, she says, was often death. Until this period, people's sex was not necessarily fixed strictly into a two-sex model. Fausto-Sterling therefore argues that sex is "a vast, infinitely malleable continuum" that defies the constraints of all fixed categories.

Premodern Indian cultures too had greater space for a variety of sexual identities - eunuchs, for example, had a socially acknowledged status in Indian society that they have lost in contemporary times. Again, the Sufi and Bhakti traditions drew upon notions of androgyny and often rejected the two-sex model. Take, for instance, this poem by a 12th century Shaivite poet, Basavanna, who wrote in Kannada:

Look here, dear fellow,
I wear these men's clothes only for you.
Sometimes I am man,
Sometimes I am woman...

Another Shivabhakta, Devara Dasimayya, writing two centuries earlier, wrote:

If they see breasts and long hair coming,
They call it woman,
If beard and whiskers
They call it man.
But look, the self that hovers in between

Is neither man nor woman...?¹

Such examples would be found in all Indian languages. A thought provoking argument is made by Ashis Nandy, that precolonial Indian cultures accorded greater value to femininity. It was with the coming of colonialism that the western valorization of masculinity became the norm. Nationalists too, then played into this understanding, and tried to resist the deriding of Indian culture as "effeminate" by claiming to be as "masculine" as the colonial masters - the ideology of revolutionaries for example, was very masculinist. According to Nandy, Gandhi was unique in attempting to focus on "feminine" rather than "masculine" qualities as having the power to resist colonialism - that is, he emphasized spiritual and moral courage over aggression and violence.²

Developments in the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory

This distinction between "sex" and "gender" has been made more complex by feminist scholars over the years. Although the distinction continues to be broadly accepted by all feminists, the initial understanding that "sex" is related to nature while "gender" is related to culture has been reworked considerably. Broadly, we can discern four main ways in which the sex/gender distinction has been further developed in feminist theory.

1. Scholars like Alison Jaggar argue that "sex" and "gender" are dialectically and inseparably related, and that the conceptual distinction that earlier feminists established between the two is not sustainable beyond a point. In this understanding, human biology is constituted by a complex interaction between the human body, the physical environment and the state of development of technology and society. Thus, as Jaggar puts it, "the hand is as much the product of labour as the tool of labour." What is meant here is that two processes are involved: human intervention changes the external environment and simultaneously, changes in the external environment shape and change the human body. This is true in two senses. One, in a long-term evolutionary sense, over the millenia. That is, human bodies have evolved differently in different parts of the globe, due to differences in diet, climate, and nature of work performed.

Two, in a more short-term sense, in one lifetime, i.e. it is now recognised that neurophysiology and hormonal balances are affected by social factors like anxiety, physical labour, and level and kind of social interaction, just as much as social interaction is affected by people's neurophysiology and hormonal balances. For instance, certain chemical changes in the body may produce certain symptoms of stress that can be treated by drugs. But equally, high stress levels can in fact be the reason for higher chemical imbalances, and it may be possible to restore the body's balance only by changing the conditions in which it lives.

¹ English translation in AK Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin Classics, 1973, P 29, 110.

² Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983.

Consider this passage from Dorothy Dinnerstein:

"Humans are by nature unnatural. We do not yet walk "naturally" on our hind legs, for example. Such ills as fallen arches, lower back pain, and hernias testify that the body has not adapted itself completely to the upright posture. Yet this unnatural posture, forced on the unwilling body by the project of tool-using, is precisely what has made possible the development of important aspects of our "nature" - the hand and the brain, and the complex system of skills, language and social arrangements which were both effects and causes of hand and brain. Man-made and physiological structures have thus come to interpenetrate so thoroughly that we are what we have made ourselves, and we must continue to make ourselves as long as we exist at all."³

When we apply this understanding, that biology and culture are interrelated, to the sex/gender distinction, the relevant implication is that women's bodies have been shaped by social restrictions and by norms of beauty. That is, the "body" has been formed as much by "culture" as by "nature". For instance, the rapid improvements in women's athletic records over the past two decades is an indication that social norms had shaped biology and restricted women's physical development. Feminist anthropologists have also pointed out that in some ethnic groups there is little physical differentiation between men and women. In short, we must consider that there are two equally powerful factors at work - one, there is a range of interrelated ways in which society produces sex differences and two, sex differences structure society in particular ways.

"Sex", in this view, is not an unchanging base upon which society constructs "gender" meanings, but rather, sex itself has been affected by various factors external to it - there is no clear and unchanging line between nature and culture.

2. A second kind of rethinking of sex/gender has come from radical feminism which argues that feminists must not underplay the biological difference between the sexes and attribute all difference to "culture" alone. To do so is to accept male civilization's devaluing of the female reproductive role. This is a criticism of the liberal feminist understanding that in an ideal world, men and women would be more or less alike. Radical feminists claim that on the contrary, patriarchal social values have denigrated "feminine" qualities and that it is the task of feminism to recover these qualities, and this difference between men and women, as valuable. The radical feminist position on the sex/gender distinction is that there are certain differences between men and women that arise from their different biological reproductive roles, and that therefore, women are more sensitive, instinctive and closer to nature. Radical feminists such as Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin, for example, believe that women's reproductive biology, the process of gestation and the experience of

³ *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. New York. Harper and Row, 1976

mothering, fundamentally affects their relationship to the external world. Women are therefore, in this understanding, closer to nature and share in nature's qualities of fecundity, nurturing and instinct. These qualities have been rejected by patriarchal society but feminists should accepted and revalue these qualities.

Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice* is a significant example of this viewpoint. Using a psychoanalytical point of view, she argues that because the primary care-giver in childhood is invariably a woman (the mother) - given the sexual division of labour - the process by which men and women come to adulthood is different. Boys come into adulthood learning to differentiate from the mother, while girls do so by identifying with the mother. That is, in a sex-differentiated society, while all infants identify with the mother, gradually boys learn that they are "different" while girls learn that they are the "same" as their mother. This results in, Gilligan argues, women having a more subjective, relational way of engaging with the world, while men have a more objective mode. Women relate to others, while men learn to separate themselves. This explains, for example, the difference in the nature of male and female friendships.

Gilligan's focus in this work is the difference in the ways men and women take moral decisions, and she comes to the conclusion that women are less influenced by normative notions of what is right and wrong, and more by other factors like empathy, concern and sensitivity to another's predicament. Men, on the other hand, tend to take moral decisions based on well-accepted notions of what society thinks is right and wrong. Thus, Gilligan concludes that the basic categories of western moral philosophy - rationality, autonomy and justice - are drawn from and reflect the male experience of the world. The female experience is invisible here. To deny difference is therefore to agree with the patriarchal negation of femininity as worthless.

3. A more recent feminist position takes the opposite view from that of radical feminists. While radical feminists argue that the sex/gender distinction underplays sex differences, a school of postmodern feminist thought holds that it over-emphasizes the biological body. Judith Butler, for instance, argues that if "gender" is the cultural meanings that the sexed body takes on, then gender cannot be said to follow from "sex" in any one way. What she says is that, "gender" is not the cultural inscription of meaning on to a pre-given "sex"; rather, gender as a way of thinking and as a concept, produces the category of biological sex. Butler thus suggests a "radical discontinuity" between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.

Butler uses the term *heterosexual matrix* to designate the grid produced by institutions, practices and discourses, looking through which it appears to be "a fact of nature" that all human bodies possess one of two fixed sexual identities, with each experiencing sexual desire only for the "opposite sex." From this

viewpoint, the removal of this grid or heterosexual matrix will reveal that sexuality and human bodies are fluid and have no necessary fixed sexual identity or orientation.

What is characteristic of this position is that it holds that the category of "woman" does not exist prior to the thinking about it. Gender is something that is constructed through relations of power, and through a series of norms and constraints that regulate what will be recognised as a "male" body and a "female" body. Through such norms, a wide range of bodies are rendered invisible and/or illegitimate. For instance, infants born with no clear determining sexual characteristics, or eunuchs, or men and women who choose not to follow the dress norms prescribed for their gender. All these are either marginalised, criminalised or forced to fit into the existing two-sex model in some way or the other. Most modern languages have no way of speaking of a human who does not fit into either sex. What this means is that language forces "reality" into certain pre-given patterns and prevents certain possibilities from being realised.

One of the most powerful languages determining "sex" is the language of the bio-medical sciences and feminist scientists have contributed to a thoroughgoing critique of this language. Feminist scientists such as Ruth Bleier and Evelyn Fox Keller have argued that a rigid sex/gender distinction restricts biological sex - that is, sex defined as anatomical, hormonal or chromosomal - as something to be studied by the bio-medical sciences while gender is to be studied by the social sciences. Such an understanding takes for granted that while cultural notions of gender may change, the body remains as an unchanging biological reality that needs no further explanation. These feminist scientists argue that on the contrary, our perceptions and interpretations of the body are mediated through language, and the bio-medical sciences function as a major provider of this language.

A startling study in the USA of intersexed infants (babies born with both ovarian and testicular tissue or in whom the sex organs were ambiguous) showed that medical decisions to assign one sex or the other were made on cultural assumptions rather than on any existing biological features. Thus, a baby might be made into a female but then still require hormonal therapy all her life to make her stay "female." In other words, maleness and femaleness are not only culturally different, they are not even biologically stable features at all times.⁴

Alison Jaggar discusses a similar study of children whose sex had been incorrectly assigned at birth due to such ambiguity - when the "real" sex of the child emerged at a later stage, both parents and medical practitioners generally decided on surgery to confirm the sex attributed at birth. This was invariably preferred to simply accepting that the child's sex was different from that attributed at birth. In other words, surgical intervention to change "sex" was thought to be

⁴ Suzanne J Kessler, "The medical construction of gender: Case management of inter-sexed infants" in *Theorizing Feminism* ed. Anne C Hermann and Abigail Stewart, Blackwell, 1994.

easier than eradicating years of cultural "gender" conditioning. Think about it - if you had a three-year old son whom you took to the doctor for some problems, and discovered that the child was more female than male. Would you prefer to now come to terms with the fact that you have a daughter, inform everybody, change the way you dress and think of your child, or would you prefer surgical intervention to retain your "son" as a son? The fact is that the latter option is what any of us would prefer. What does this tell us about the supposedly unchangeable "natural" category of biology and conversely, about the supposedly changeable category of "culture"? Does it not seem that culture is more concrete sometimes than biology?

Nelly Oudshoorn's work shows that scientists have understood "sex" in different ways over the centuries - from the ancient Greeks until the late 18th century, male and female bodies were understood by medical texts to be fundamentally similar. This "one-sex" model of humanity, with the woman as a lesser version of the male body, dominated biomedical discourse for thousands of years. In the 18th century, biomedical discourse began to emphasize differences between the sexes rather than similarities. Every part of the human body was sexualised, and physiological "facts" (for example, smaller brain size) were used to prove the lesser intelligence of women, their passive nature and so on. The feminine "essence" that supposedly differentiated women from men, was sought to be located in different parts of the body - in the 18th century, the uterus was thought to be the seat of femaleness, in the 19th century, it was the ovaries. By the 20th century, the essence of femininity was understood to be located in chemical substances called hormones.

The hormonal conception of the body is now one of the dominant modes of thinking about the root of sex differences. What Oudshoorn points out, is that the hormonal conception of the body in fact allows for the possibility of breaking out of the tyranny of the binary sex-difference model. If bodies can have both female and male hormones, then maleness and femaleness are not restricted to one kind of body alone. However, the biomedical sciences have preferred increasingly, to portray the female, but not the male, as a body completely controlled by hormones. In this process, a clear nexus has emerged between the medical profession and a huge, multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical industry. All sorts of "disorders" in women - such as the aging of the skin, depression, menstrual irregularities - are prescribed hormonal therapy. Such drugs are expensive, but even more disturbing is the fact that it is in the interest of the pharmaceutical industry that natural processes such as aging are treated as diseases. And that depression, which has social causes, is treated with drugs as if it were a purely physiological problem. If women can be made to feel that looking old is "unfeminine" or that their depression arises, not from their being undervalued and overworked, but from something inside themselves, then the profits of multinational drug companies are assured.

Such a feminist position rejects the idea that scientific facts about the body simply exist to be discovered. Rather, scientific facts are deeply embedded in society and culture. "Sex" itself is constructed by human practices.

4. A fourth kind of rethinking of the sex/gender distinction comes from locating "gender" in a grid of identities - caste, class, race, religion. This would mean that the biological category of "woman" does not necessarily have shared interests, life-situations, or goals. This kind of understanding has arisen from the political practice of women's movements all over the world, which has increasingly shown up the fact that "women" do not exist as a pre-existing subject which can simply be mobilized by the women's movement. That is, women identify themselves not only, and not even necessarily primarily, in terms of their gender, but as black, or muslim, or dalit, or peasant. So in many cases, women may be easier mobilized in terms of their religion, for example, than by the women's movement.

In the case of India, a good example of this is the debate over the Uniform Civil Code. All religious communities have their own Personal Laws which discriminate against women on matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance and guardianship of children. The demand for a uniform civil code which would give all women equal rights as citizens has therefore been a demand of the women's movement since 1937. However, in the growing atmosphere of communalism since the 80's, and the insecurity felt by religious minorities, most sections of the women's movement have gradually shifted to the opinion that the position of women should be improved by reforms within personal laws, rather than by forcing communities to obey legislation passed by the state. The state no longer has the legitimacy it had in the immediate post-Independence years, its role in communal violence is increasingly suspect, and it cannot be seen simply as an agent of progressive social change. Thus what was a simple feminist demand that all *women* should have equal rights has been considerably transformed by the politics of *religious* identity.

Further, all politically active women do not necessarily act as feminists – they may well be representing interests and structures of power which feminist politics in India has sought to struggle against. Thus, we find women active in Hindu right-wing politics and in anti-lower caste movements like the agitation against the Mandal Commission report. In other words, in this understanding, the feminist sex/gender distinction must take into account other modes of constituting identity. Depending on the context, even as feminists, we may have to privilege caste or class identity over gender in some cases, just as we expect marxists or dalit activists to privilege gender over class and caste in some contexts.

Masculinity

A significant body of scholarship that has emerged in recent years is around the construction of "masculinity". While feminist scholarship on gender has focused on the construction of femininity and the female body, it has increasingly begun

to be felt that it is equally crucial to expose the mechanisms by which the parallel construct of masculinity is sustained under patriarchy. How this construct empowers men, but also how it restricts and disempowers those men who cannot or will not obey the rules, or meet the expectations of masculine behaviour – for example old men, or homosexuals. The operation of masculine norms and the discourse of masculinity also “feminizes” powerless men as a way of rendering them inferior – working class or poor men, dalit men and so on.

Thus, the original sex/gender distinction made by feminists has been made considerably more complex by the theory and practice of feminist politics. The distinction thus, continues to be crucial for any feminist understanding of the subordination of women.

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