

Course : MPhil in Women's Studies (First year, First Semester)

Paper : Feminist Thoughts and Practices 1

Topic : The Sex/Gender System

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- What is this module about?

- ❖ This module traces the genealogy of *sex* and *gender* - two of the most important concepts in the field of feminist theory.

- What does this aim to achieve?

- ❖ To understand how the hegemonic understanding of sex and gender play key roles in perpetuating various forms of oppressions/discrimination, and to build a counter-intuitive, critical account of these two fundamental conceptual categories.

## Themes to be covered in the module

- Biological determinism
- Naturalist account of sex and gender
- Emergence of Gender as an analytical category in feminist theory

## Havelock Ellis (1859-1939)

### Three Levels of sexual differentiation:

- a) Primary differences (Sex organs)
  
- a) Secondary differences (linked to different reproductive functions)
  
- a) Tertiary differences (behavioural differences)

# Biological Determinism

# General Understanding

- Primary sexual differences define a person's biological sex
- Biological traits are universal (Chromosomal, endocrinological)
- Tertiary differences have their root in one's biological sex. Hence, one's gender flows directly from their biological sex.

# Biological Determinism

“We have seen that a deep difference in constitution expresses itself in the distinction between male and female, whether these be physical or mental. The differences may be exaggerated or lessened, but to obliterate them it would be necessary to have all the evolution over again on a new basis. What was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament.”

*The Evolution of Sex*, Patrick Geddes, J. Arthur Thompson (1889)

# Biological Determinism

“The reader need not be reminded of . . . the attitude of the ordinary politician, who supposes that the matter is one essentially to be settled by the giving or withholding of the franchise. The exclusively political view of the problem has in turn been to a large extent subordinated to that of economic laissez-faire, from which of course it consistently appeared that all things would be settled as soon as women were sufficiently plunged into the competitive industrial struggle for their own daily bread. While, as the complexly ruinous results of this inter-sexual competition for subsistence upon both sexes and upon family life have begun to become manifest, the more recent economic panacea of redistribution of wealth has naturally been invoked, and we have merely somehow to raise women's wages”

*The Evolution of Sex*, Patrick Geddes, J. Arthur  
Thompson (1889)



# Biological Determinism

“[t]he male element is the originating and the female is the perpetuating factor; the ovum is conservative, the male cell progressive. Heredity or adherence to type is brought about by the ovum; variation and adaptation through the male element; and the ovum is the essential, the male cell the secondary factor in heredity. . . . Like Aristotle and the ancients, we must believe that the two reproductive elements play widely different parts. Like Bonnet and Haller, we see that the structure of the adult is latent in the egg”

*The Law of Heredity*, W.K.Brooks

# Core values of Biological Determinism

- Biology/Sex determines the social being of a person in its entirety including their behaviour, actions, cultural predisposition, and emotional orientation
- Belief that a person's psychological framework is governed by their biology/sex
- Gender is wired into biology (Gender collapses into sex/biology)
- Anatomy is destiny
- Biological sex is portrayed as pervasive

“In the pervasive picture of sex, then, a woman becomes a woman to her fingertips: this is biological determinism with a vengeance. Because sexual desire is considered to trickle out from the reproductive glands, heterosexuality is taken for granted. Pervasive sex saturates not only the person, but everything the person touches. The modern world is a world steeped in sex: every habit, gesture, and activity is sexualized and categorized as male or female, masculine or feminine... The pervasive picture of sex gives rise to essentialism, biologism, accusations of degeneration and 'unnatural' behaviour. It can certainly only consider two sexes. It sexualizes not only the whole person, whether this person is a woman, a man, or a so-called 'pervert', but the whole world of human activities”

*What is a Woman?* Toril Moi

Comment on the general consequences of biological determinism

# Consequences

- Divides the world into two distinct categories.
- Incontestable, because it is rooted in nature.
- Has a normative thrust. Other types of sexualities/genders are rendered aberrations.
- Social roles are directly determined by nature, hence the way a person should act and roles they should assume is more or less codified
- Is based on and sustains sexed stereotypes
- Its phallogocentric structure normalizes various form of oppression and discrimination

# Critique of the Naturalist/Deterministic model of Sex and Gender

**“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny define the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.”**

*The Second Sex*, Simon De Beauvoir

**“A woman is a Woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money...and so on. What then are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman?”**

*The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*, Gayle Rubin

# Etymology

- “Gender” - comes from the latin verb *Generare* which means to beget.
- *Geslecht, Gender, Genre, Genèro* - these terms were used to designate class, character, kind etc.
- In English, the term Gender has been in use in this sense since the 14th century. Here, and in various other European languages, gender (or its equivalents in other languages) was primarily used as a literary and grammatical category
- Gender in modern English usage is used heavily in classificatory systems of difference.
- The usage of the modern conception of gender proliferated in the 20th century (But in the case of human sciences, this usage was deeply rooted in a deterministic understanding where it was thought of as derived directly from biological sex).

# Feminist concept of Gender

- Feminist theories revolving around the concept of gender seek to understand and question the deterministic model of sexual difference and challenges the existing knowledge systems and practices which have hitherto been interpreting 'men' and 'women' as 'natural' categories of classification and labour distribution. Feminist notion of gender emerged as a challenge to the the normalization of oppression on/discrimination against women on the basis of biology, and against this hegemonic understanding created an paradigm to understand gender as a contingent, socio-cultural construction. That is, it is not governed by any natural law, but is rather rooted in our social norms/practices and cultural discourses.

# Genealogy of gender as an analytical category in feminist theory

- Emergence of liberal political thought during the period of enlightenment in Europe
- Various political movements that questioned forms of social and cultural hierarchies based on race, sex, and class.
- Inputs from Freud's theory of psychosexual development of human male and female
- Research in the domain of sexology in the late 19th and 20th century
- Development in biochemical and physiological endocrinology in the early decades of 20th century
- Comparative psychology
- Emergence of theories of social construction - for feminist theory, Simone De Beauvoir's formulations in *The Second Sex* played a key role.



# What is gender

- Gender is a relation structured within the existing heterosexual kinship system
- It is a socio-political constitution
- It is normative in nature
- Gender is ascribed to biological body (chromosomal and endocrinological structure), but does not have any direct relation to it. That is, the biological/sexed body does not function as its cause.
- It is sustained through its own reiteration

# Sex/Gender system

“ a “sex/gender system” is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied... Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained. Every society also has a sex/gender system—a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be..The realm of human sex, gender, and procreation has been subjected to, and changed by, relentless social activity for millennia. Sex as we know it - gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product. We need to understand the relations of its production...”

*The Traffic in Women, Gayle Rubin*

# Sex/Gender system

In light of the new concept of gender, the concept of sex too - at least in some quarters of feminist theory - underwent moderate to radical alteration over the course of next three decades. The relation between sex and gender was heavily debated among the feminists. Present, as well as feminist theories of the past, were analyzed through these newly emerged conceptions of sex and gender.

To provide a minimal generalization, three structures of sex/gender relation govern various schools of feminist thought. These structures are -

- a) Sex determines gender (Liberal)
- b) Sex and gender are independent. Sex is biological and gender is cultural (Radical)
- c) Sex/gender binary is itself unsustainable. Sex cannot be understood without presupposing the concept of gender, hence sex is always already gendered. Or in other words, nature is always already culture. (Poststructuralist paves way for the emergence of queer theory)

# Importance of gender as an analytical category

- This understanding of gender, and in turn sex, allowed feminist theorists to locate the root of oppression and discrimination against women not in some divine law of nature but within the social domain of the anthropos.
- It led to the understanding that what confines women to certain spaces is not natural, but rather is the result of a particular set of contingent cultural arrangements
- The concept of gender pioneered the emergence of a new paradigm for conceiving political emancipation of women.

# Critique of sex/gender system

- The understanding that sex is biological while gender is cultural was criticized by a number of feminist philosophers (Moira Gatens, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell) and feminist science studies scholars (Evelyn fox Keller, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Donna Haraway).
- The new concept of gender presupposed the well defined binary between nature and culture where body/sex (nature) was conceived as ahistorical, hence inconsequential from a political perspective. And theorized as contingent construction, gender (culture) became the ultimate site of political action. Such a position completely disregarded the question of the historicity of the sexed body.
- 'Degendering' feminism was accused of culturalism
- The constructionist framework of the concept of gender rendered the category of sex/body insignificant.

# Critique of sex/gender system

## *References -*

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- *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of “Sex”* by Gayle Rubin
- *Gender Aporias* by Tina Chanter
- *Interpreting Gender* by Linda Nicholson
- *Gender for a Marxist Dictionary* by Donna Haraway
- *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* by Toril Moi
- *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* by Moira Gatens
- *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* by Anne Fausto-Sterling