

UNDERSTANDING GENDER RELATIONS:
A STUDY OF SOME CONTEMPORARY
WRITINGS IN FEMINIST THEORY

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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1998



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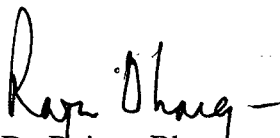
CENTRE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES
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21 July 1998

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "**Understanding Gender Relations: A Study of Some Contemporary Writings in Feminist Theory**" submitted by **M.S.Sreerekha** in partial fulfilment for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university. This is her original work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepfelt gratitude to my guide, Dr. Rajeev Bhargava, who gave me consistent help and support in completing this work and minimised the impact of academic hierarchies by always being democratic and accessible.

Rochelle Pinto has helped to edit this work and both of us shared the tensions and disappointments over the many technical disasters that dotted the production of this dissertation and also the fruitful intellectual debates which dragged us outside our rooms at night.

I am extremely thankful to the staff of the Centre for Women's Development Studies where I spent much time in research.

I also thank my friend Ramki (Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala) for his valuable suggestions and help towards the completion of this work.

I thank Prof. Tom A. Travis, Bucknell University, USA, for providing me with otherwise unaccessible material.

I am extremely thankful to many others, real friends in times of need, whom I do not name for fear of inadvertently missing out some names, who have been the real source of strength during my stay here, who looked after me with love and affection while I was seriously ill during the completion of this work.

Finally, my mother to whom I dedicate this work, from whose silence I learnt to speak, from whose love and care I received strength .

SREEREKHA

Introduction

The conceptualization of gender forms the core of much contemporary feminist thought. Its interpretation as a social construction is a major contribution to political philosophy. My study is not specifically focussed on a particular theme or problem associated with gender, but is more of a survey of the important contemporary debates inside and outside feminist theory on the concept of gender. The purpose of this study is to explore different possibilities of gauging the relevance of the concept of gender in understanding power relations. Power is all the more important to political theory and to feminist politics since politics is all about power. There are three essays in the study. The common thread which links these essays together is the assumption that gender relations are power relations and understanding gender relations as power relations could be helpful in revising and reinterpreting some of the fundamental notions of western political philosophy such as the relation between subject and object, the rational and the irrational, nature and culture, feminine and masculine and so on.

To understand gender, we need first of all to define gender. Theoretical discussions on the concept of gender are the most important contribution of contemporary feminist theory. The first chapter “defining

gender”, is an attempt to capture the fundamental arguments between different schools of thought, over a fixed definition of the term. My study does not review a particular thinker’s writings for a deeper analysis of her or his views. Instead I have chosen certain *feminist* writers whose writings are well known and whose writings on the concept, for me, constitute genuine effort towards a change in understanding gender relations.

The second chapter deals with the concept of power and its role in constructing gender relations. Power is fundamental to all gender relations. It is strange, then, to see that all traditional and modern writings on power have shown scant regard for gender as relevant in the conceptualization of power. All these theories, although they significantly contributed to political thought, are gender blind and could be considered as male centred theories. What I am trying to convey is the need to revise these male-centred theories and its notion of power. This study focusses on certain feminist and non feminist writings on power. Michael Foucault’s view on power which gained great attention in political theory and the feminist reading of his writings is also analysed in this study.

The third and last chapter is an overview of certain dualisms visible in modern philosophy which are relevant for understanding gender relations. The critique of a dualism in gender analysis is basically against the social and political values it creates. Within feminist philosophy, an

analysis of the gendered character of these dualisms is of fundamental importance since these dualisms are hierarchically structured where one element is devalued in relation to the other. Since the male and female or masculine and feminine divide is a primary and widely used dualism, the category of gender is a fundamental category to analyse power relations. My analysis is not a review of all the literature available on these dualisms. It is just an attempt to point out different schools of thought and their differing views on these dualistic concepts.

Denise Reily wrote, "It not possible to live 24 hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered self consciousness has mercifully, a fleeting nature" (Reily 1988). What is interesting about reading on gender, for me, is the conflict it creates with the awareness of being 'human' and a 'woman' at the same time.

Assuming the identity of a woman makes it impossible to neglect it even for an hour while at the sametime I am forced to remind myself that, it is absurd to be just a woman. Words can simplify these matters to an extent. But when it comes to politics and philosophy, it is interesting to see what others have thought about it.

Chapter I

Defining Gender

The relationship between men and women is hierarchically structured in most modern societies. The difference they exhibit is derived not only from their difference in biological sex, but from what they have been socially assigned; separate life-styles and language, differential allocation of space and time and even difference in the expression of the way they experience life. At times, in certain contexts, these distinctions get blurred, when some women happen to enter the space, time, language and life styles of men and vice versa. These movements which cut across gender formations are inflected by the culture, race, class in which they occur.

Feminist theorising of women's issues which debated whether woman could exist as a separate theoretical category or whether the category itself should be questioned, began with the critique of modernist principles. Many feminists are of the view that modernism identifies women as a *separate irrational category* of beings who are distinct from those people who attained freedom and authority through rationality. The modernist conception of a stable, unchanging self, which acquires 'truth' through universal reasoning

was not applicable to women. The nature of modernism and the definition of 'modern' were, according to Janet Wolff, "derived from the experience of men and hence excluded women".¹ Naturally, people who are irrational could never participate in the political sphere. Throughout the enlightenment period, women were celebrated in its literature, art and painting. But, rarely did women intervene or participate in articulating the principles of the modernist movement. Those who did participate could only do so by creating a separate category of 'women', thereby claiming a separate identity for themselves. Modernist theory required that the identity of 'women' be given a conceptual basis. There were many questions which needed to be answered: what makes a human being 'woman' or 'man'? Is it her/his body? Is it because their bodies have different functions and their consciousness structured according to these functions? Do all women live like women and all men like men? An analysis of these issues inaugurated an important debate within feminist theory.

In this chapter, we seek to address the origin and development of this identity question, the story of the term gender and its advancement in feminist theory. Secondly, an attempt is made to analyze the way in which the term

¹Janet Wolff, "Feminism and Modernism", The Polity Reader in Social Theory (Polity Press, 1994), p. 219.

gender is being problematized. The views of different theorists of gender are also discussed, where we look into the writings of four important feminist writers - Joan W. Scott, Sandra Harding, R.W. Connell and Judith Butler. Thirdly we will discuss the differences between these writers and will explain the importance of gender as a concept and its usefulness in feminist theory.

Feminist engagement with philosophical debates in the social sciences began with the critique of enlightenment. New concepts and a theoretical basis emerged through their critiques of existing social science methodologies. The major conceptual problem which feminists had to address was related to the dominant notion of the identity of woman as the 'other' of man. Beginning with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir in late 1940s, to Joan Scott, Sandra Harding and others in the 1990s, the question of a separate identity continues to be a debatable issue in contemporary feminist theory. Simultaneously, feminists tried to analyze the origin and cause of the oppression and exploitation of women even as they struggled for allocation as equal participants within that same world. They were fighting against universal patriarchy² at the same time as they were forced to compromise and adapt themselves to a definitely patriarchal society.

²The term 'patriarchy' was first used by Kate Millett in "Sexual Politics" (1970) which literally means, 'the rule of the father'. Later it became part of the feminist writing to refer to the fact that everywhere men exert control over women.

PROBLEMATIZING GENDER: The term gender first appeared among American feminists who insisted on 'the fundamental social quality of distinctions based on sex'.³ The primary intention was in some ways to integrate women's scholarship with other disciplinary paradigms. A shift from the term 'woman' to 'gender' was an important development as it theorised patriarchy as a practice in which both men and women participate. In other words, such a shift contributed towards understanding patriarchy and also in deconstructing and contextualizing particular experiences of women.

Even though the feminist concept of 'gender' is not found in classical Marxist literature, Marxist writings provided crucial tools for the creation and understanding of the term 'gender'. 'A critical review of Marxist theory was done by Marxist feminists, who emphasised its inability to historicise women's labour and its negligence of the gender factor. Engels' materialist analysis of production and reproduction was crucial to this evaluation. From the late 1960s onwards, Rubin, Mitchell, Benston, Seccombe, Barrett, Boserup, Maria Mies⁴ and others analyzed issues pertaining to the

³Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 28.

⁴ Readers can refer the following works for details: Gayle Rubin, "The traffic in women: notes on the political economy of sex" in Rayna Rapp Reiter ed., Toward an Anthropology of Women (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975), pp. 157-210; Juliet Mitchell, Woman's Estate (Vintage Books, New York, 1973); Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Literature", Monthly Review, New York, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1969); Wally Seccombe, "Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism",

domestication of women, sexual division of labour, and their relationship to the construction of gender identity. Developing their studies through psychoanalysis, another group of feminists produced a series of writings on the sex/gender dichotomy, which were published in the US in the 1970s and 1980s. These writings became prominent critiques of biological determinism (strict categorization on the basis of sexual identity), sexist science and technology. Major methodological approaches such as dialectical materialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, ethno-methodology, hermeneutics, structuralism, postmodern deconstruction etc. examined the multiple divisions of 'gender' identity.

These approaches demanded a reconceptualization of 'male' and 'female' identities. The change and inconsistency within the gender of an individual and between individuals could not be explained by existing traditional theories. Conceptions about gender roles were critically analyzed by explaining the feminine/ masculine dichotomy through an analysis of the major elements which constituted gender.

New Left Review, No. 83 (1973); Mitchell Barrett, Women's Oppression Today (Verso, London, 1980); Ester Boserup, Women's Role in Economic Development (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1970); Maria Mies, Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale (London, Zed Books Ltd., 1986).

Traditional feminist theory which ascribed to a male/female dichotomy, used a commonsensical perception of gender derived from the acceptance of certain "natural attitudes". Harold Garfinkel defines the natural attitude as "a series of unquestionable axioms about gender, including the belief that there are two and only two genders, gender is invariant ... the male/female dichotomy is natural ... and all individuals can be (must be) classified as masculine or feminine".⁵ Masculinity and femininity were perceived as mutually exclusive and opposite categories. Any discussion on gender explained attributes of this categorization. Therefore an analysis employing the conceptual categories of 'feminine' and 'masculine' delineated the different connotations of a particular gender.

Rubin, Barrett and Mackinnon interpreted gender difference as a social organization of the relationship between men and women, while for Henrietta Moore, it is a key element of the symbolic order. To Sylvia Walby and R.W. Connell, gender difference is created through the institutional order.⁶ Nancy Chodorow interprets gender as closely linked to individual identity. To Daly

⁵ Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1967) cited in Mary Hawkesworth, "Confounding Gender", Signs, Vol.22, No.3.

⁶ For further details see, Catherine Mackinnon, Feminism Unmodified (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987). Henrieta Moore, Feminism and Anthropology (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988). Sylvia Walby, Patriarchy at Work (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986). R.W. Connell, Gender And Power (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987).

it is a linguistic product and again for Mackinnon, Connell and Scott, it is relations of power maintained through male definition of reality.⁷

(Writings on gender within the modernist school, can be divided into two groups: one 'Feminists for equality' and, two, 'Feminists for difference'. Feminists for equality stands for a separation between sex and gender, where gender is being used for social and political analysis. They believe that the discrimination faced by women can be ended only by achieving equal status with men in all areas of life. For them, 'women' should be considered as a separate category. Gender is not merely determined by biology. An individual as a 'man' or a 'woman' is socially constructed, since these differences are not permanent and individuals assume these differences through socialization. Through socialisation, gender is culturally and politically created, shaped and reshaped throughout the life cycle.)

Feminists for equality accept sexual difference as natural yet at the same time try to change the historical system of sexual difference which is hierarchical and antagonistic. For them, gender is a concept central to feminist theory with a political commitment.

⁷ For details see, Nancy, Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978). Mary Daly, Gyn - Ecology (Boston, Beacon, 1978). Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (Columbia University Press, 1988).

'Feminists for difference' have a totally different approach towards the concept of gender. Their position is generally interpreted as an essentialist⁸ one. For them, the division between sex and gender is questionable. The subject's sex is important in understanding gender identity whereby each person's body chooses its gender according to its sex. The female body naturally accepts those attributes which can be interpreted as 'feminine' and a male body accepts those which are 'masculine' in nature. Hence the subject's sex is the important factor, where the body and its sex integrate into its consciousness the qualities of a particular gender. Moria Gatens, one of the important supporters of the 'essentialist' school, explains it as follows:

Gender is not the issue, sexual difference is... The very same behaviours (whether they be masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significance when acted out by the male subject on the one hand and the female subject on the other... that the male body and the female body have quite different social value and significance cannot help but have a marked effect on male and female consciousness.⁹

⁸ In feminist theory, this term is used to indicate the biological or psychological essence of a 'woman' and the feminine. An essentialist view would imply that female subjectivity stands outside historical or social change.

⁹ Moria Gatens, "A critique of sex/gender distinction", in Sneja Gunew, ed., A Reader in Feminist Knowledge (Routledge, New York, 1991), p. 145.

✓ The *interaction* between feminism and post-modernism contributed to the widening of the understanding of gender by utilising the concept of difference. Post-modernist feminists are for a feminism based on 'difference' rather than for equality. But their understanding of difference is not that of the essentialist position of the 'feminists for difference', which is a struggle for recognition and validation of 'feminine' autonomy. ✕ The term difference as used by post-modernists is opposed to an essentialist understanding of sex and influenced feminist theory, by contextualising and deconstructing the idea of a unified subject. This undermines the possibility of a unified subject as they envisage an unstable self constantly transforming itself, lacking a foundational fixed sexuality. A post-modernist feminist understanding of difference is more an issue of epistemology, where difference is not that of difference between men and women but that between individuals as such and differences within an individual's self.

For post-modernists, gender creates a false unity out of heterogeneous elements. They have tried to clarify the dangers in theorizing gender inequality in such simplistic ways as constituted by 'masculine' and 'feminine' dualism. They explain the complications in the concept through a deeper analysis of the formation of identity and power. Foucault's writings have been used extensively by some of them in clarifying their position on the

concept of sex in which there is no distinction between sex and gender at all.

Foucault argues in the History of Sexuality (Vol. 1) that:

Sex is an effect rather than an origin, and that far from being a given, an essential unity, it is as a category, the product of specific discursive practices... the notion of sex does not exist prior to its determination within a discourse in which its constellations of meanings are specified and that therefore bodies have no 'sex' outside discourses in which they are designated and sexed.¹⁰

And so post-modernists argue that if gender is culturally variable, sexual difference as male and female can also be culturally constructed.

Joan W. Scott, Sandra Harding, R. W. Connell, and Judith Butler are four among many feminist theorists whose writings cut across the categories of 'feminists for difference' and post-modernist feminists listed above.

Joan W. Scott defines gender as a concept involving two inter-related but analytically distinct parts: "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationship based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power".¹¹ Scott's writings have

¹⁰ Michael Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction (New York, Vintage, 1980).

¹¹ Scott, n. 3, pp. 42-43.

been noticed in feminist theory because they theorise gender as an analytic category specifically in the academic discipline of history. For her, gender is a social organisation of sexual difference. It creates 'difference' and this 'difference' leads to the creation of women as the other and thus women are silenced in the power system. She suggests that history should be rewritten by using gender as an analytic category, by challenging an objectivism which does not signify anything 'real'. In her most important work Gender and the politics of History, she argues that:

Gender offers a good way of thinking both about history and about the ways in which hierarchies of difference - inclusions and exclusions - have been constituted. For theorizing feminist politics, such an admission of partiality, does not acknowledge defeat in the search for universal explanation rather it suggests that universal explanation has never been possible. It is precisely by exposing the illusion of the permanence or enduring truth of any particular knowledge of sexual difference that feminism necessarily historicizes history and politics and opens the way for change.¹²

¹² Scott, p. 3, p. 10.

available symbols that evoke multiple representation: normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols; social institutions and organizations and subjective identity".¹³ According to her, "gender provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction".¹⁴

To her, both gender and language are essential to any historical analysis. She thinks that "there is a connection between the study of 'language' and the study of 'gender' when both are carefully defined. Through linguistic analysis, gender will be revealed because language assumes from its beginning a phallogocentric¹⁵ form which makes women the 'other' and the 'different'.¹⁶ To Scott, language is a primary category which has a direct link with the construction of gender. Even though experiences are not reducible to language, it is only through language that experiences of life which are the origin of real knowledge, can be known. Analysis of language provides a starting point for understanding how social relations are conceived, and how

¹³ Scott, n. 3, pp. 43-44.

¹⁴ Scott, n.3, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ The term combines phallogocentrism and logocentrism. These monolithic systems respectively privilege the 'phallus' as the signifier of sexuality and 'logos' as the signifier of truth.

¹⁶ Scott, n.3, p. 55.

they work, how institutions are organized, how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established. Without attention to language, *new interpretations* are not possible.

She accepts the struggle for equality, but for her the opposition between equality and difference is false. For her, we could have equality with differences. For her gender is an analytic category that escapes 'natural attitudes' which will clarify the social construction of identity. It is not a universal causal force, but must seek "a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference". Scott elaborates:

Feminist History then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. With this approach women's history critically confronts the politics of existing histories and inevitably begins the rewriting of history.¹⁷

Sandra Harding believes that female embodiment is different from male embodiment and women and men have to be treated differently. To her, sex and gender is different but "...these dichotomies are empirically false, but

¹⁷ Scott, n.3 p. 27.

(we)cannot afford to dismiss them as irrelevant as long as they structure our lives and consciousness".¹⁸

Extending her views on sex-gender system in The Science Question in Feminism, Harding stressed three interrelated elements of gender: (1) a fundamental category through which meaning is ascribed to everything; (2) a way of organizing social relations; and (3) a structure of personal identity. To her:

the fact that there are class, race, and cultural differences between men and women is not, as some have thought, a reason to find gender difference either theoretically unimportant or politically irrelevant. In virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes.¹⁹

According to Harding who critiques the unstated structures and assumptions about gender, prevalent in scientific discourse, "Gendered social life is produced through three distinct processes: it is the result of assigning

¹⁸ Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory", Signs, Vol. 11, No. 4, Summer 1986, p. 662.

¹⁹ Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1986). p.18.

dualistic gender metaphors to various perceived dichotomies that rarely have anything to do with sex differences (gender symbolism); it is the consequence of appealing to these gender dualisms to organize social activity, dividing necessary social activities between different groups of humans (gender structure): it is a form of socially constructed individual identity only imperfectly correlated either with the reality or the perception of sex differences (individual gender)".²⁰ For her, feminist investigations challenge the basic pre-suppositions of the natural attitude, thereby helping to dispel essentialized identities, while creating the possibility of a politics grounded in solidarities that cross the divisions of race, class, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Her major attempt is to construct a theory of gender as an analytic category that is relevant in the natural sciences. She tries to identify the causal tendencies in social life that leave traces of gender projects on all aspects of the scientific enterprise. Seeking an end to androcentrism²¹ in science she writes:

We do not imagine giving up speaking or writing just because our

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

²¹ 'Androcentrism' refers to masculine bias in the concepts, theories, methods and interpretations of research in both natural sciences and social sciences.

language is deeply androcentric, nor do we propose an end to theorizing about social life once we realize that thoroughly androcentric perspectives inform even our feminist revisions of the social theories we inherit. I am not proposing that human kind would benefit from renouncing attempts to describe, explain and understanding the regularities, underlying causal tendencies and meanings of the natural and social worlds just because the sciences we have are androcentric. I am seeking an end to androcentrism, not to systematic inquiry. But an end to androcentrism will require far reaching transformations in the cultural meanings and practices of that inquiry.²²

For the political scientist **R.W. Connell**, "Gender is a structure of social practice". It is a way in which social practice is ordered. Masculinity and femininity are gender projects. Gender discourse is beyond sex differences. For him, "gender should be understood as an interrelated set of social structures that define men and women in terms of their reproductive role and organize social life around sex and sexuality".²³ Further, to Connell, "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to what bodies do, it is not

²² Sandra Harding, No. 19, p.10

²³ R.W. Connell, Gender and Power (Polity Press, U.K., 1987), p. 140.

social practice reduced to the body. It exists precisely to the extent that biology does not determine the social".²⁴

He explains the structure of gender with a three fold model of (a) power relations, (b) production relations and (c) cathexis.²⁵ This structure interacts with race and class, with nationality or position in the world order. Gender structure is fixed in nature for the 'natural attitude' and is maintained by what he calls as 'sexual ideology' - which is "a practice, ontologically on par with other practices and equally involved in the constitution of social interests".²⁶

His Gender and Power blends the strains of Marxism, existentialism and post-structuralism in developing its account of gender. Where gendered experiences occur in specific institutions like home, workplace, school etc., he calls its structure as a 'gender regime'. And the historically connected pattern of power relations between man and woman which is being understood as femininity/ masculinity can be called as 'gender order'. Connell uses the term 'historical composition' to explain the imperfect and incomplete orderliness

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ By 'Cathexis', Connell refers to the structure that constrains and also shapes people's emotional attachments to each other, the category of structures to do with sexuality.

²⁶ R.W. Connell, Masculinities (Cambridge Polity Press, 1995). Cited in McDowell and Sheep (ed.) cited in Linda McDowell and Joanne P.Sharp Space, Gender and Knowledge, Fcminist Readings, (Arnold Publishers, London, 1997), p.45.

connecting different structures. For him, "as historical composition, gender is a linking concept". It is about linking other fields of social practice to model practices of engendering. His attempt is to understand gender relations in terms of historically specific social structures without any essentialist assumption. He asserts the primacy of social criticism and political struggles.

Judith Butler has analysed the concept of gender in a very innovative and complex way. She challenges the very notion of a feminine subject identity - the feminist assumption of the necessity of a unified feminine subject identity as a precondition of feminist politics. In her Gender Trouble, Butler explains how the 'naturalness' of sex, sexuality and gender are "constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex".²⁷ To her, being a 'sex' or a 'gender' is fundamentally impossible²⁸ and becoming gendered is a laborious process. She argues that gender must be understood not as a noun, nor as a set of attributes, but as a 'doing', a performance that constitutes the identity that it purports to be.²⁹ According to her "gender is a process that constructs the internal coherence of sex, (hetero) sexual desire and (hetero) sexual desire

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²⁷ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (Routledge, New York, 1990), p.X.

²⁸ Ibid., p.19.

²⁹ Ibid., p.24.

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within the modern subject".³⁰ The "effect of compulsory heterosexuality" gender reproduces a "natural" heterosexual world. It is a mechanism that produces a notion of a "pre-social body" shaped by culture. She identifies phallogocentrism and compulsory hetero-sexuality as the discursive sites that produce gender. To her only men are 'persons', and there is no gender but the feminine. Destruction of the category of sex would be the destruction of an 'attribute' sex.

Butler's account privatizes gender by interpreting gender in terms of the cultural production of hetero-sexual desire and psychoanalytic productions of gender identity. She makes it a matter of the self. She does not address the question of gender structures and gender symbolism beyond the individual psyche. Operation of gender in the political, social, economic fields remains untouched. Her explanation of the subject's identity does not support the concept of an agency for women. To her:

The question of locating "agency" is usually associated with the viability of the "subject", where the "subject" is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or, if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with

³⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness.³¹

Her attempt is to work against the construction of 'women' as a category, or against any variable constructions as "a normative and methodological ideal".³² According to her, we should think beyond gender categories, we must bid farewell to the "doer behind the deed" - to the self as the subject of a life narrative.³³

While they accept the differences and disputes in understanding gender, what these feminists have in common is that they challenge the gender dichotomy. They have questioned the dominance of one particular gender. They challenge the anthropocentric (regarding humanity as the central fact of the universe) definition of gender in modern enlightenment thought, which to them is male-centered. Both Joan Scott and Sandra Harding question the anthropocentric nature of enlightenment principles. But they do not want the dualism (male/female) to be resolved. Both question enlightenment ideals because it is male-centered and they want these ideals to be reversed,

³¹Ibid., pp.142-143.

³² Ibid., p.5.

³³ Ibid., p.142

maintaining the dualist nature, by now privileging the female. Scott wants to write women's history which criticizes the existing history by rewriting it. Harding seeks a new language which is ofcourse women's language which will transform the meaning of every language which is androcentric. She demands a feminist revision of social theories and natural sciences by foregrounding gender projects and thus charging them through with a women's perspective. According to these writers, who definitely have a strategic feminist perspective, what is desirable is to retain the `good' aspects of modernity by channelising the same towards feminist politics. But others like Butler or Connell do not welcome any kind of dualism. For them, it will result in another level of hierarchisation. Butler is more interested in the study of human beings, not of `man' or `woman' and the study of problems created through power relations and identity crises within and between individuals. Connell stands for a specific historical analysis of gender relations with a non-essentialist political programme for the future.

At the heart of feminist politics lies the idea that oppression and exploitation of women is the real problem which has to be solved. For a real feminist politics, then, the modernist intention of reversing the hierarchy from women's perspective seems to have a good political programme. At the same time, the post-modernist interpretation of a subject which is a non-fixed

identity does not leave many options for engaging in feminist politics. The social relations of the subject and other dimensions of power relations which operate through what Connell terms as the 'gender order' and the 'gender regime' cannot be explained by the post-modernists. Then whether post-modernist feminists can offer an adequate political programme to feminism is the most important question. In seeking to understand all problems as problems of the individual self, one is doubtful about the way certain 'woman'-specific questions would be addressed by the post-modernists.

Understanding gender and its implications in an individual's day to day life is linked with the power relations and social hierarchies created through it. Now keeping in mind the debates on the concept of gender within feminist theory, analysing power as a concept and as a social practice will be helpful for a better understanding of gender relations.

Chapter II

Gender and Power

Gender and power are closely linked social practices and there are many ways in which they intersect. In the first chapter we have analysed various ways in which gender as a concept is interpreted within feminist theory. Gender relations are not the only realm in which power is practiced. But once we realize the crucial role of gender in constructing hierarchies in social life, it becomes important for the study to explore how we conceive power in our 'gendered' life.

It is of fundamental interest to a gender analysis to explore the connections between the practice and experience of power. Earlier writings were mainly concerned with tracing a link between gender and power as a creation of capitalist patriarchy and its sexual division of labour.¹ The development of capitalism and the formation of capital itself as a product of exploitation of women's labour, were traced to be at the heart of the issue. Certain kinds of power relations like capitalist patriarchy as a

¹ For further reading see, Maria Mies, Patriarchy and Accumulation On World Scale (London; Zed Books Ltd., 1986); Michele Barrett, Woman's Oppression Today (London, Verso, 1990); Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (Avon Books, New York, 1970); Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in Reiter, Raina (ed.), An Anthropology of Women, pp.157-210.

system, its sexual division of labour and so on, are relevant for understanding gender relations, but has not been addressed in this chapter. But with more detailed studies in the area, the focus was shifted from capitalist patriarchy, to the concept of gender and its related notions of femininity and masculinity and so on. Defining masculinity and femininity by a clear cut division on the basis of sex created confusion among feminist thinkers since they found it as some kind of over-simplification of the issue of understanding power. Explaining gender identity of individuals within the patriarchal system and realizing it as a power relationship created and maintained through the patriarchal order, classified gender hierarchies as something more than biological sex difference. If we examine contemporary writings on power by feminists, we can see a new approach by which they are in a position to criticize the existing theories on power for its gender blindness. Their writing contributes a new dimension to the whole issue of understanding power relation in the social life.

Power

In this chapter we will concentrate on certain theoretical debates on the concept of power inside and outside feminist theory. Here we must clarify the fact that some of the theories of power even though gender-blind, could be useful to a certain extent, to influence the reinterpretation

of the concept of power with a gender perspective, for example, writings of Steven Lukes, Hannah Arendt, Michael Foucault, and so on. Further, the fact that all the feminists or non-feminist writings may not have a gender perspective is also important.

Power is defined in different ways by different analysts. Each discipline of knowledge analyses a particular dimension of power structure in social life. For contemporary writers, power is an "essentially contested concept"² whose meaning and criteria of application is forever in dispute. For most of the analysts, power refers to the agent or agency affecting the attitudes and action of another. It was carefully distinguished from other concepts such as authority, coercion, force and violence.

Max Weber defined power as "the probability that one actor in a social relationship will ... carry out his own will against the resistance of others."³ For behavioural political scientists like Herbert Simon, Robert Dahl⁴ and others, power relations are 'power-attempts' between individuals on particular issues; areas over which they disagree. Dahl defined power as 'one actor's ability to make another do something that the latter would not otherwise do.' This view is interpreted by Lukes as a 'one - dimensional

² Steven, Lukes, "Power a Radical View", (Macmillan, London, 1974).

³ See Max Weber, Economy and Society (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968).

⁴ For further details see, Harbert Simon, Notes on the Observation and Measurement of Power", Journal of Politics, 15, 1953, pp.500-516. Robert Dahl, 'The Concept of Power', Behavioural Science, 2, 1957, pp.201-15; Robert Dahl, Who Governs? Democracy and Power in An American City, (New Haven, CT and London Yale University Press, 1961).

view.' All these theorists tend to define power and its operations within relations of dominance alone. The agents of power in all these writings are, by implication, men, so that these writings may be collectively described as male-centred writings.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Barratz,⁵ explained the two - dimensional nature of power, with further focus on agenda setting. They revealed a hidden face of power through which it is exercised in more effective invisible ways. They suggested the two - dimensional view as the modest criticism of the pluralist model defended by Dahl and others. They claim that pluralists see only one face of power, in cases of observable conflict, whereas in reality certain issues, often to do with race and minority interests, although characterised by power relationships, do not appear on the political agenda. Bachrach and Barratz give 'non-decisions' a political significance which is neglected by the pluralists. This neglect is largely a consequence of their behaviouralist methodology; an approach to the study of power which is exhausted by observations of overt conflict. Both these views came under heavy attack when Steven Lukes proposed an alternative 'three -dimensional view' of power. For Steven Lukes, power can involve the involuntary shaping of beliefs and desires. His work Power: A Radical View is devoted to criticizing conceptions of power

⁵ See Peter Bachrach and Baratz, M. 'The two faces of power', American Political Science Review, 56, 1962.

advanced by social scientists of the pluralist persuasion (the one dimensional view defended by Dahl) and the non-decisionist critics (the two dimensional view defended by Bachrach and Barratz). The three-dimensional view lays emphasis on 'objective' interests and claims that a theory of power must take account of the way interests (preferences) are formed by prevailing social structures which grants opportunities to covert persons (or groups) to exercise power. It is the presence of unobservable power that prevents individuals becoming autonomous agents and capable of realising the true interests. For him, groups operating through social structures may influence or manipulate the preferences of individuals. This explanation is near to the Marxian notion of 'false consciousness' where individual, group or class believes her/his subjective interests, as the real objective interests. The critiques provided by Bachrach, Barratz and Lukes release the concept of power from its definition as a tool of traditionally defined ruling groups, and hinted at relations of dominance which emerge across various kinds of groups. Lukes' critique is significant in as far as it suggests that the workings of power may be unpredictable and unconscious.⁶

The hermeneutic model of power holds that power is constituted by the shared meanings of given social communities. It involves an

⁶ Lukes, n.2, p. 27.

ontological belief that humans are by nature linguistic beings and that it is thus in language that the character of a society, including its forms of power, is to be found. It also involves the epistemological belief that some form of hermeneutic understanding, rather than scientific empirical generalization, is the appropriate method of studying social power. The followers of this school include Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, Peter Winch and Talcott Parsons.⁷

For the structuralists power has a structural objectivity that is missed by both voluntaristic and hermeneutic approaches. For them, power is a property of impersonal social structures. The structural model can be traced back to Durkheim's Rules of Sociological Method.⁸ The structuralist perspective is not tied to any particular political or ideological perspective. According to the structural model power can be defined as the capacity to act possessed by social agents by virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate. It has a 'materiality' deriving from its attachment to structural rules, resources, positions and relationships.

All the traditional approaches face a challenge from the less conventional post-modernist writers. They argue that the structural model

⁷ For further details see, Hannah Arendt, On Violence, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969); Charles Taylor, Hegel and Modern Society (Cambridge University Press, 1979); Peter Winch, "The Idea of a Social Science in B. Wilson (ed.) Rationality (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1970); Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Power" in Politics and Social Structure (New York, Free Press, 1969).

⁸ See Emile Durkheim, The Rules of the Sociological Method (London, Macmillan, Newyork, Free Press, 1966).

remains wedded to certain typically 'modernist' beliefs in the unity of the subject and the privileged status of scientific discourse. It privileges certain conceptions of knowledge and certain conceptions of human agency. As Jane Flax writes, "post-modern discourses are all 'deconstructive' in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary western culture."⁹ The post-modernist writers on power share with contemporary feminist theorists, a critique of the modernist conception of a unified subjectivity.

There have always been agreements and disagreements about the concept of power which is likely to continue as a concept always "essentially contested." None of the above mentioned theories on power was developed with an understanding of gender. The traditional, modern and post-modern theories including the works of theorists like Althusser, Lacan, Gramsci, Foucault and Hannah Arendt did not consider how gender inflected power relations or how masculinity or phallogentrism had a constitutive role in power relations. A majority of feminist and non-feminist writings on power, criticises the interpretation of power as domination. But at the sametime understanding power relations with a

⁹ Jane Flax, "Post modernism and gender relations in feminist theory", *Signs*, 12: 1987, pp. 621-643.

gender perspective could be possible only with the assumption that, it is the aspect of dominance in power which creates hierarchies in *gender relations*.

This should be considered by feminists who attempt to suggest alternative ways of conceptualising power.

A few writings on power emphasise its energy, capacity and potential. Among these few, Hannah Arendt's work is the most important, along with Dorothy Emmett, Hanna Pitkin and others who stress the emancipatory potential of power.

The most important feature of Arendt's view on power is that she completely rejects the understanding of power as domination. The key words in her account of power are ability, potentiality and empowerment. Power is connected with the understanding of action in concert and its meaning in public life. Arendt's vision of the power of a community has many things in common with Marx's views on social relations in a communist society: "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. It is never the property of an individual, it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group keep together".¹⁰

Arendt's views clarify the conflictual nature of the oppositions between necessity and freedom, intellect and body, and social and natural worlds. To her, power "in distinction to strength which is the gift and the

¹⁰ Hannah. Arendt., 'On Violence', (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969), p.44.

possession of every man in his isolation against all other men, comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another”¹¹

Power operates for the good of the community. Arendt states that, “Power is ‘actualized’ where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new relations.”¹²

To Arendt, power is different from strength, authority and violence. Violence can never be legitimate and justifiable, but power needs no justification because like action, it is an end in itself. Violence and power are usually found together. But, they are opposites and where one rules, the other does not appear. Violence is a denial of the community and thus a denial of the possibility of political action. So it is fundamentally opposed to power. Power holds the community together. It keeps the public realm alive. Without power, the space of appearance constructed by action and speech will fade away. It enables the individuals to overcome their individual death and to live as a part of the community.¹³ Arendt’s views

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, "On Revolution" (New York, Viking, 1963), p.179.

¹² Hannah Arendt, "On Human Condition", (Chicago, University of Chicago Press,1958), p.200.

¹³ Arendt, "On Violence", n.10, pp.27, 51-52.

on power provides a vision of the political community as a shared and common world in which the individual merges with others and at the same time distinguishes oneself from others.

Dorothy Emmett provides a strong critique of the association of power with domination. Emmett mentioned clearly “the dislogistic associations of power with domination which are carried over into discussions of other aspects of power”.¹⁴ She links her view on differentiating power from domination to many other aspects like (1) causal efficacy (2) creative energy (3) legal power etc. She explains it as follows, “... there is a distinction between the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale and power which consists in moulding opinions and practices of others through various forms of psychological pressure”.¹⁵ These two features are recognizably different.

For Emmett also the relationship between power and community is important: “Power is not a thing but a capacity or relation between people”. Emmett modifies Arendt’s idea by giving central focus to power as “effectiveness” rather than potential or capacity, a redefinition of power which refers to any kind of effectiveness is performance. Her views go too far from reinterpreting power away from coercion or domination. To her,

¹⁴ See Emmett, Dorothy, “The Concept of Power”, proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, London, 1953-54, cited in Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christie Dr. Stefao (ed. “Revisioning the Political”, Westview Press, 1996.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.34-35.

power is something akin to rights and the capacity of a person to take certain action.

Hannah Pitkin in her discussion on “Wittgensteinian perspective and Austinian Tools of Analysis”,¹⁶ examines the concept of power. Her ideas heavily rely on Emmett’s view on power. She also suggests that ‘power over’ may differ from the concept of ‘power to’. For her, ‘power over’ is inherently relational and it differentiates it from ‘power to act’ and the links of power to community.

The main common thread which links these writers and their theories and distinguishes them from other theorists of power is that they interpret power as different from domination. The understanding of power as different from domination, the attempt to associate the term with ability, capacity, competence etc. and their urge to reconsider the conventional assumptions on power are their main contributions in common. This factor connects these writings on power with contemporary feminist views.

Feminists on Power

We can see striking similarities between the views of the writers cited above and the works of feminists. The earlier writings of feminists on

¹⁶ Hannah Pitkin, "Wittgensteinian perspective and Austinian Tools of analysis" Wittgenstein and Justice (Berkeley, University of California 1972) pp.275-77, cited in Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christie Dr. Stefao (ed. "Revisioning the Political", Westview Press, UK, 1996, p.35.

power are more in relation to the characterization of masculinity and femininity explained in terms of power relations. It is the oppressive aspect of power which usually all these writings explain as domination. The oppressive aspect of power as domination is usually linked with masculinity, and femininity is always accepted as the emancipatory aspect of power. Hence the problem we seek to explain is the following. Is masculinity always linked with domination? What are the ways in which power is being exercised when it is understood as feminine or feminist?¹⁷

These questions will bring us to the fundamental question related to the concepts of masculinity and femininity. As we have already discussed in the first chapter, there is no clear cut division possible between these concepts within a particular sex or gender. Even though it is possible to identify the important basic attributes of these concepts,¹⁸ the analysis itself makes it clear that at certain levels individual identities overshadow the gender identity. As we have discussed in the first chapter, there are many individual 'masculinities' and 'femininities' and the construction of masculinity and femininity happens sometimes within a particular individual self and also between male- female individual identities. So the

¹⁷ Hartstock, Nancy, "Revisioning the Political", in "Community, Sexuality, Gender- Rethinking power in Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christie Dr. Stefao (ed. "Revisioning the Political", Westview Press, UK, 1996, p.27.

¹⁸ Irene Visser, "Prototypicality of Gender" in Women's Studies International Forum, vol.19, no.6, (in which she analyses these concepts in detail), November-December, 1996, pp.589-600.

question concerning power relations is more a question related to the differences created through differential value and power given to particular gender identities.

Broadly speaking, the feminist concern is to analyse different forms of male domination of women in the institutions and organisational structures of patriarchy. They stand for a transformation of society through the redistribution of power. For the feminists, "the understanding of power as the property of some to the exclusion of others, and outside of and beyond the individual, sets up a dichotomous relationship between the individual and the social world, between powerful men and powerless women as largely internally undifferentiated categories and imputes a passivity to all women".¹⁹ In general, feminist writings on power stand for a new and restructured theory which will look into the matter with a radically different approach.

Kate Millett in the 1960s, defined power in terms of sexual politics,²⁰ that is, female power which conventionally existed only within the framework of male authority, but which urges emancipation. Jean Bethke Elstain writes about 'unintentional power which a group possesses because of its position in society'. She argues that the benefits of privilege

¹⁹ Deborah Kerfoot and David Knights, "Into the Realm of the Fearful: Power, Identity and Gender Problematic" in "Gender and Power" (ed) by H.L. Redtke and H.I. Stan, (Sage publications, London, 1994), p.70.

²⁰ See Kate Millett, "Sexual Politics", (New York, Avon Books, 1970).

will belong to such social groups even though no single member may wield power. Elstain claims that males are the sole possessors of unintentional power which has any public meaning with political consequences.²¹

Feminists distinguish between power, authority and influence. Throughout cultures, male activities are the focus of value because men maintain a distance from the domestic sphere and in the outside world they have got the legitimacy to exercise power. Feminists describe the reason behind the domination of male activities in social life as their power in social decision making. Some feminists locate the source of power in consciousness and language. For Elizabeth Janeway, 'one of the most significant forms of power held by the weak (that is women) is the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful, women's power is the power to disbelieve.'²² For Sheila Rowbotham, language itself is one instrument of domination.²³

Radical feminists have a different view on power. For them the theories of power are completely inadequate to look into the problems related to sexuality. Sexual violation of women, pornography etc are the important problems through which the psychology of male power is

²¹ Jean Bethke Elstain, "Public Man, Private Woman", (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981).

²² See Elizabeth Janeway, Powers of the Weak, (New York, Alfred. A. Knopf, 1980).

²³ See Sheila Rowbotham, Women's consciousness, Man's World, (London, Penguin Books, 1973).

expressed. For Catherine Mackinnon, sexuality is a form of power and it is the fundamental factor of gender inequality. For her, "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away". Sexual politics should be considered fundamental to gender inequality. Male power takes the social form of what men as a gender want sexually, which centres on power as socially defined, and in a capitalist system it includes wealth also.²⁴ Julia Kristeva suggests that women's attempts to gain political power cannot change the power relations between gender.²⁵ Nancy Hartsock's critique of Marx, develops the idea of a sexual division of labour, towards a specifically feminist historical materialism.²⁶

Hartsock argues for a reinterpretation of history where women's perspectives will be developed as primary knowledge and will help us to place in perspective the marginalized voices in history. There is a need for creating a new epistemological base for feminist theory as well as a theory of power that recognizes the practical experiences of women for an understanding of the real world: a theory which clarifies that material life embodied in daily practice, limits our understanding of the social world; a theory which explains how social institutions are controlled by one gender, how gender inequality and gender identity are created. "It would neither

²⁴ See C.A. Mackinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, method and the state", *Signs*, 7 (3), 1982.

²⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1982).

²⁶ See Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power*, (New York, Longman, 1983).

reduce power to domination nor ignore systematic domination to stress only energy and community”- An understanding of power in Hartsock’s opinion must be rooted in and defined not simply by women’s experience but by the systematic pulling together and working out of the liberatory possibilities present in that experience.²⁷

Power and Gender: Alternate Interpretations:

As we have seen in the first chapter, the feminist critique of modernity, and the rejection of enlightenment principles of freedom, rationality and truth led to a change in their understanding of the power relations altogether. The interpretation of the concept of gender as different from sex, and masculinity and femininity as cultured constructions of a particular political system, produced a new criticism of the theories on power by adding a gender dimension to it. The change in defining subjectivity from modernism to postmodernism, as from a unified subject to fragmented positions of a particular subject, made the role of a particular individual as an active agent in society questionable. The explanation of power relations changed with the change in defining the subject and subjectivity and it is reflected in many of the writings within social

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.45.

sciences. The major shift in the focus of understanding power relations came with the writings of Michel Foucault.

Foucault on Power

Michel Foucault is prominent among the twentieth century scholars whose contributions are considered by many feminists to be very much complementary to feminist theory. Foucault has done an alternative theorization of power which he refers as the 'analytics of power'. He proposed a radical re-conceptualization of power with an emphasis on its positive empowering possibilities. Foucault's attempt was to rethink the concept of power in a very non-traditional way, connecting it with different social forms which create knowledge. For him, one is never outside a power structure. Power is always already there. It is not always in a binary structure with one side dominating and other being dominated. Rather it takes multiple forms. Power to Foucault, is relational in character and its existence depends on the multiplicity of points of resistance. It exists only in its exercise and it operates only through the production of particular knowledges. "Power exists in manifold relations - which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body (which) cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production.

accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.”²⁸ It is an effect of strategies and mechanisms embedded in social practices as a consequence of the operation of previous power/knowledge relations.

Foucault refuses to talk about power only at the sites of social structure, social institutions and practices. Rather, to him, power is both a historical system aligned across structures, institutions, rituals, practices and individual lives, bringing them together in some context, and dividing them in others - a ‘substratum’ of force relations - and the particular use of the products of these alignments (e.g knowledges, practices) to interrogate, regulate, supervise, observe, train, harness and confine the behaviours and subjectivities of individuals and groups.²⁹

Foucault has been concerned not with ‘power’ *per se* but with ‘relationships of power’. For him power is not centralized or global. It has no single source. Foucault has been pointing towards the capillary form of existence of power, “the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives”.³⁰

²⁸ M. Foucault, "Power/Knowledge", Selected Interviews and other writings, (Colin-Gorden, New York, 1980), p.93.

²⁹ Elizebeth Grosz, "Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity", in Sneja Gunew Feminist Knowledge (ed), (Routledge, Londn, 1991), pp. 87-88.

³⁰ M. Foucault, n.28. p.39.

For Foucault, “Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together”.³¹ To him, “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”³²

Foucault explains the play of power in the production of knowledge as follows:

Perhaps...we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful): that power and knowledge directly imply one-another: that there is no power relation without a correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not pre-suppose and constitute the same power relations. These ‘power-knowledge relations’ are to

³¹ M. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol I, An Introduction, Robert Harley, trans. (New York, 1980), p.100.

³² *Ibid.*, p.101.

be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge, who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamentals of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the process and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.³³

Foucault thinks of power as intentionality without a subject. 'Power relations are intentional and can be described without being attributed to particular subjects as their conscious intentions.' For him power is in reciprocal relation to subjectivity. Subjectivity can be defined as "individual self-consciousness inscribed in particular ideals of behaviour surrounding categories of persons, objects, practices or institutions. Subjectivity is constituted through the exercise of power within which conceptions of personal identity, gender and sexuality came to be generated. Subjectivity is constructed in and through discourse. Gender

³³ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. (Alan Sheridan, trans, Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 27-28.

identity of men and women is socially constructed. Gendered subjectivities are therefore not fixed and *unchanging*. They are historically shifting and unstable.” Foucault explains different ways in which power creates itself and the political uses that can be made out of it. For him, resistance and struggle are the key features of power relations. He considers power relations as basically constituted through disciplinary techniques and names resistance as the most important conjunct of power: “Power relationships.... depend on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations. The points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network”.³⁴ Foucault suggested that the analysis of power relations requires the investigation of, “the forms of resistance against different forms of power so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analysing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analysing power relations through antagonism of strategy... forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociates these relations”.³⁵

Foucault states that in our society, power, right and truth is organised in a highly specific fashion. We cannot separate truth from power. So we should work to detach the power of truth from the forms of

³⁴ M. Foucault, n.28, p. 95.

³⁵ M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power" *Critical Inquiry*, vol 8, 1982, p. 790.

hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.³⁶

Foucault notes the significance of the state in the relations of power.

For him:

State is not simply one of the forms or specific situation of the exercise of power—even if it is the most important—but in a certain way all other forms of power relation must refer to it'. This, to Foucault, is not because power relation are derived from the state: it is rather because power relation have come more and more under state control (although this state control has not taken the same form in pedagogical, judicial, economic or family system). In referring here to the restricted sense of the word 'government', one could say that power relations have been progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized and centralized in the form of or under the auspices of the state institutions.³⁷

Feminist Reading of Foucault: Agreements and Disagreements

Feminists have responded to Foucault's understanding of power in different ways. For many of them, Foucault's ideas on power are helpful in

³⁶ M. Foucault, n.28 , p.133.

³⁷ M. Foucault, n.35, p.793.

orizing gender relations, especially through his critique of modernity
of universal truth and reason. Foucault argued strongly against
versalizing discourses, totalizing thought and homogeneity. Foucault
questioned the enlightenment concept of man and its rationality and
phasized the need to 'unmake' man.³⁸

Feminists find Foucault's analysis more acceptable because it
cepts heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference. It helps to derive a better
understanding of women's experiences, the diversity among women, their
entities at the micro-level at which sexual politics takes place. Accepting
particularity of multiple relations of power helps to better understand
men as members of different classes, races, ethnicities and sexualities.
Foucault emphasises the body as the ever-intensified focus of power and
resistance. Among others, Foucault suggests how the body may be viewed
as an object of power and resistance without being committed to
biological, naturalistic and essential notions.

For feminists, his notion of the self-determining individual is useful
for a better understanding of women's condition. A feminist interpretation
of this argument conveys the need for women to struggle to locate
themselves as individuals to prove themselves as active human subjects.
For them, Foucault's view reveals the truth that 'woman' is a social

1. Foucault, "The Order of Things", (New York, Random House, 1971), p.379.

construction and that gender is a primary feature of the constitution of the self. The individual can either accommodate the attributes of a particular gender or resist it.³⁹

The defenders of Foucault consider his political position of local resistance as a coherent political stance. Foucault's political stance and idea of resistance are consistent with his rejection of absolute truth. Many feminists find such a stance very much useful for feminist theory. Foucault's account of marginal political struggles and subjugated discourses enables the practices and systems of organisations of women's groups to come together for strategic purposes. His notion of marginalised localized struggles rule out the concept of revolution. For him, patriarchal relations can be transformed, through strategically located power struggles.

Resistance according to Foucault, "is an exercise of power as a projection of alternative truths. We need to change the political, economic and institutional regime of the production of truth through local resistance and struggle for liberation."⁴⁰ Feminists interpret their struggles as resistance against hierarchical power relations. They challenge prevailing

³⁹ M. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of work in progress in P. Rabinow ed. *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin)

⁴⁰ M. Foucault, n.28, p. 133.

discourses. To feminists, resistance means "the power of women disrupting patriarchal truths".⁴¹

Examining Foucault's analysis of power and resistance, Jana Sawicki writes, "freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self understanding and modes of domination and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant cultures, characterization of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures".⁴² Sawicki argues that Foucault's advantage for feminism lies in the historical dimension of his position and his rejection of absolutes, but for her the element of pessimism in it is where the call for theoretical and practical pluralism is based on the implicit assumption that a power-free society is an abstraction and struggle, a ubiquitous feature of history. A Foucauldian sexual politics does not aspire to control history or to bring about global transformation all at once. Foucault's analysis of power and sexuality puts into question the viability

⁴¹ Faith Karlene, "Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and Feminism in H.L. Radtke and H.J. Stam, n.19, p.47.

⁴² Jana Sawicki, "Identity politics and sexual freedom in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds.) Feminism and Foucault, 1991, p.186. See also Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, power and the body, 1991.

of using essentialist notions of sexual identity as a basis for building a feminist theory and politics.⁴³

In whatever way Foucault's concept of resistance is complementary to feminists, the fact remains that Foucault himself dismisses gender from his analyses and thus contributes again to the dominant male discourse. He develops a thesis on sexual identity but neglects the factor of sexual inequality. When Foucault recognizes the inferior position of women as a result of the exercise of power, he never addresses the problem of material inequality or the production of hierarchies between sexes, or between masculinity and femininity. In his History of Sexuality Vol. I, he develops a thesis of sexual identity and the regulatory and productive potential of power at the level of the body. But he neglects sexual inequality and overlooks the differentiation between masculine and feminine sexualities.⁴⁴

Foucault does not distinguish between different forms of power that construct subjectivity. Thus, he is not making a distinction between dominated and subordinated subjectivity and no discourse has a privilege over the other. This is being interpreted as a drawback in terms of women's struggle to overcome their subordination. For some feminists, feminist

⁴³ Ibid., p.45.

⁴⁴ David Couzens Hoy, Foucault: A Critical Reader (ed.), (New York, Basil Blackwell 1986), p.127.

politics requires political action to challenge the subjugation of women, they are in need of an absolute basis of truth and knowledge.

In Foucault's writings, gender relations are not central to power relations, but for him power relations are engendered. Foucault suggests that "instead of appealing to an essential female nature, we should attempt to understand how femininity is socially constructed in particular societies: instead of deploring the universality of patriarchy we should analyze the historical evolution of patriarchal structures: instead of proclaiming universal male dominance we should examine the specific instances of that phenomenon".⁴⁵

According to Lois McNay, "Foucault is a theorist, not of post-modernity, but of modernity's dark side, a Romanticist struggling with the question of how the individual might be self-determining in an era of the atrophy of meta-narratives and organized through technologies of power which function through regulating and prescribing the category of the individual itself."⁴⁶ In her reading, Foucault is not implicated in all the false dichotomies which have underpinned post-modernist analysis, but he lacks a developed account of the social embeddedness of the individual and

⁴⁵ Susan J Heckman, "Foucault on Political Action" in Gender and Knowledge, (Polity Press, Uk, 1990), p.184.

⁴⁶ Lois McNay, Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992).

so opposing the individual to the social in a non-dialectical way. So feminism and Foucault can have, “a friendship grounded in political and ethical commitment.”⁴⁷

Our attempt in this chapter is to assert that the existing accepted notion of power is a product of male-centred theories of power and this reflects the fact that gender relations are the creation of patriarchal forms of power.

Gender is a social construction and in the construction of a gender identity and hierarchisation of gender relations, both the patriarchal structure of society and the conceptualization of a male-centered notion of power plays an important role. What some feminists seek is the reversal of male-centred theories into female-centred theories. But for me, a theory on power should be neither male nor female-centred, nor a feminist version of power which might be essentialist. However, it should be gender-specific. Thus, understanding gender relations as power relations will contribute to the attempt for a reinterpretation of the male-centred theories on power.

Different social forms of power, social structures, institutions and practices contribute to the creation of knowledge. A particular subject's gender identity, which is constituted through the social structures, should

⁴⁷ Diamond, Irene and Lee Quinby (eds.) Introduction to Feminism and Foucault, (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp.ix-xix.

be open to historical transformation. With a reinterpretation of the concept of power, what we expect is the reflection of this in ways of acquiring knowledge.

Chapter III

Gender and Knowledge: Male and Female Dichotomy

Knowledge is all about interpreting and understanding the world and human existence. The philosophical theory of knowledge is concerned with the nature, origins, varieties, object and limits of knowledge, an enterprise shaped largely by western science and philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Feminist theory and discourse on the concept of gender have been in conflict with the basic notions of western philosophy. One of the contending issues of western philosophy involves the notion of dualisms. The concern of traditional western philosophy or the philosophy of modernity is to create knowledge which is pure, neutral and objective. Western philosophy and its theory of knowledge fundamentally draws on concepts of rationality and subjectivity, as well as certain dichotomies such as subject and object, rational and irrational. The French philosopher Descartes regarded reason as the primary source of knowledge; his ideas are based on his conceptualisation of a dualism between mind and

matter. His philosophical reflections on the world, human knowledge and human nature are dominantly structured through dichotomies. He sought to explain all that exists by treating mind and matter as separate and distinct. He “gave complete distinctness to the anti-thesis of being and thought, existence and consciousness; and announced the conciliation of this anti-thesis as a philosophical problem, the problem, for the future, of all modern philosophy... Descartes isolates the two sides of the anti-thesis, thought and being in their mutual relation. The being of matter he places only in extension, or as pure self-excludedness; that of spirit only as thought, or intention, pure self-includedness. They stand opposed to each other like centrifugal and centripetal forces... the inability to overcome this dualism in the defect of his system.”¹

Philosophers like Kant and Hume also subscribed to a dualist structure when they questioned the possibility of objectively true cognition of the world. Kant seems to be a materialist when he admits that the world outside of us, the thing-in-itself, exists independently of us. But when he declares this thing-in-itself to be unknowable, transcendent and trans-intelligible, he seems to be an

¹ Albert Schwegler, *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Hegel. A Handbook of the History of Philosophy*, Vol.II, (K.P. Bagchi and Co. New Delhi 1982), pp.23-24.

idealist.² He attempted to reconcile reason and experience in his system of 'transcendental idealism' by seeing reason as a primary principle imposing form on our sense-perceptions about the outside world.

It was Hegel who suggested how it was possible for the two opposites, i.e. the cognizing subject and Kant's thing-in-itself, to be identical, while retaining their opposition. He tried to do away with all kinds of dualism through his concept of Absolute Idea and the Philosophy of the Spirit. Marx and Engels explained the universe and human consciousness in terms of material reality. For them, the ideal world is no more than a reflection of material reality in the human mind. In their writings, dichotomous categories structure the relation between culture (history) and nature, civilized and primitive, and production and reproduction.

In their account of western philosophy, feminist philosophers have focused on its emphasis on dualism. Different philosophers have focused on different dualisms at different periods. Good and bad, reason and emotion, male and female are some of the earliest dualist categories of thought. However the gendered character of

² Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism", Collected Works, Vol.XIII, p.163, Quoted in Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach, (Martin Lawrence Press, London), p.33.

these dualisms is examined only by feminist philosophers.

This chapter attempts to explain certain fundamental dichotomies visible in the enlightenment theory of knowledge which provides the basis of gendered ways of knowing. This section initially deals with the meaning and the basic features of the dichotomous categories of philosophy. It discusses those dualisms which are foregrounded in feminist theory in its exposition of the phallogentric³ nature of western philosophy. The dichotomies of subject and object, rational and irrational, nature and culture and feminine and masculine are relevant in interpreting the gendered character of modern philosophy. Finally, we make an attempt to analyze the contribution of the concept of gender in revising the discourse of knowledge.

Critiques of enlightenment theories of knowledge reveal that concepts which are structured as dualisms inevitably exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other which results in a denied

³ Phallogentricism: For Luce Irigaray, phallogentricism is a specifically discursive series of procedures, a strategy for collapsing representations of the two sexes into a single model, called human or man, but which is in fact congruent only with the masculine. It is the universalisation of particular features of masculinity, as if these were genuinely representative of both sexes. The masculinity of the human goes unrecognized. In other words, phallogentricism effaces the autonomous representation of femininity. Within phallogentric paradigms, femininity can only be represented in some necessary relation to masculinity. [Luce Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', Ideology and consciousness, vol.I, 1997 , pp.62-76].

dependency on a subordinated other. Concepts are determined by a logical structure in which denial and dominance shape both sides of the dualism.

It is necessary to clarify the exclusions and inclusions and hierarchies underlying all dualisms. Gender plays an important role, because of its universality in all dualistic ideas. Further, dualisms are formed by power and their development can be linked to the development of institutionalized power. An analysis of all dualisms reveals that they are weighted in favour of one concept, against the other. If the male and female dichotomy universally inflects all dualisms, it is possible to associate or link all the weighted concepts of a conceptual structure to men or to humans, and the devalued concepts as those excluded from male ideals and usually associated with women.

Dualisms do not merely divide the world into separate categories, but contain certain assumptions of prominence and dominant value, through the creation of another. What is important when we think about any kind of dualism is “not that it is bad or oppressive *per se*, but rather that it can covertly promote social and political values by presenting a conceptual division as if it were a

factual or natural division".⁴

It is the gendered character of a dualism which is emphasised in critiques by feminist philosophers. Both in earlier and new dichotomies, maleness is associated with concepts which have positive connotations and femaleness is associated with those which have negative ones. The predominance of dichotomous thought and its tendency to sexualize the two sides of any given dichotomy is important for gender studies. Even though modernist thought accepts men and women as 'different', women are defined only in relation to men. This phenomenon cannot be explained simply in terms of conscious or unconscious male prejudice or sexism. It can be explained only in terms of the form of thought termed as phallogentrism.

Simone de Beauvoir writes,

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute she is the other.⁵

⁴ Val, Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, (Routledge, London, 1993).

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, (Foursquare Books, London and New York, 1965), p.8.

Feminist derivations from psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction also generated new theoretical frameworks which helped to conceptualize reason and emotion, the mind and the body, nature and culture, without assuming a dichotomous structuring to these distinctions. Feminist theorists like Nancy Hartsock, Nancy Jay, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and others have commented about the dichotomous hierarchical creation of gender identities. Hartsock writes,

the master's power is reflected in the fact that his qualities are taken as primary, and as defining social value, while those of the slave are defined or constrained in relation to them, often as negations or lack of the virtues of the centre. Dualism also provides bases for various kinds of centeredness, the rendering of the world in terms of the views and interests of the upper side, the centre.⁶

For Irigaray, male and female dualism does not allow women to occupy a space on their own account, but they are construed as enclosing a space for another.⁷ Nancy Jay remarks, "Hidden for

⁶ Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power, a theory for Women"? in Linda Nicholson (ed.), Feminism and Postmodernism, (New York, Routledge, 1990), p.161.

⁷ Luce Irigaray, The Ethics of Sexual Difference, 1984, cited in Val Plumwood, n.4, p.52.

granted, A/Not A distinctions are dangerous and, because of their peculiar affinity with gender distinctions, it seems important for feminist theory, to be systematic in recognizing them".⁸ For Helen Cixous, "dualisms are always both oppositional and hierarchical and never neutral and they all stem from the fundamental opposition of that between men and women".⁹ To her,

Man/Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior... means high or low, means Nature/History, means transformation/inertia. In fact, every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems - everything that is, that is spoken, everything that is organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition....¹⁰

Subject and Object

The Cartesian dichotomy in modern philosophy between the subject and the object have been criticized in a major way by

⁸ Nancy, Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy", Feminist Studies, (1981, n.7, pp.38-56), p.47.

⁹ Helen Cixous and Catherin Clemant, The Newly Born Woman, 1986, cited in Val Plumwood, n.4, pp.63-64.

¹⁰ Helen Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation", Signs (7, 1981, pp.41-55), p.44.

feminists. This critique is wide-ranging, at the same time it is significant for contemporary feminist thought. Beginning from The Second Sex, the otherness of women, as the negative side of man, the subject, *feminist theory* has challenged the representation of the subject as the self-conscious guarantor of all knowledge. For thinkers like de Beauvoir, it is a question of admitting women as well to the realm of the subject. Contemporary feminist thinkers do not agree with this view as according to them, knowledge is acquired not by separating the subject and object into autonomous positions, but is rather collectively constituted along with the subject and object. For contemporary feminists, the notion of the subject in modern philosophy is not acceptable not because it defined women as inferior which is an essentialist view of it, but because it is hierarchical and gendered. Their demand is to deconstruct the subject. For them the subject is socially constructed and this notion which is central to feminist theory undermines the coherence of traditional political philosophy which fixes the subject in its biological and historical determinants. Contemporary feminists suggest that the subject can be infinitely reconstituted, so that it is only through the destruction of gender as a fixity, that women are allowed subjectivity as individuals.

Rational and Irrational

Genevieve Lloyd has written a book titled The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy, in which she analyses the history of conceptions of reason. Most critical studies of the 'maleness' of rationality in western philosophy emphasise two factors. One is language, the other discourse.¹¹ For Lloyd, the "maleness" of the Man of Reason is not just a superficial linguistic bias. She argues that, "the latest conceptual connections between reason, masculinity, truth and the intellect on the one hand and sense, femininity, error and emotion on the other are so entrenched and pervasive in the history of philosophy that they virtually prohibit women from reason. Women have experienced, and still do experience, practical limits to their participation in reason, such things as lack of access to institutions, illiteracy, forced confinement to the domestic sphere and so on." To her, there are also *discursive* barriers between reason and femininity.¹²

¹¹ For further reading, see (1) Joan Scott, "Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: or the use of post-structuralism theory for feminism" Feminist Studies, 14(1), 1988, pp.33-50; Dale Spender, Man-Made Language, London, Routledge, 1980; Walter Org., Fighting for Life, Context, Sexuality and Consciousness, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981; Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Women, Trans. Gillian C.Gill, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985; Barbara Fried, "Boys will be boys, will be boys", the Language of sex and Gender", in Ruth Hubbard, M.S. Heifin and B. Fried (eds), Biological Woman, (Cambridge, 1982), pp.47-69.

¹² Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason, 1989, cited in Moria Gatens, "The Dangers of a Woman-centered Philosophy", The Polity Reader in Gender Studies (Polity Press, UK, 1994), p.102.

Linking irrationality with feminine gender identity leads women either to be feminine but irrational or to be like men; be rational, but unfeminine. Here, the real and the rational is so closely linked that, the experiences of women are completely invisible. Related to this is the issue of the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Politics is considered as the highest realm of rationality and so those qualities which are feminine cannot be reflected in the realm of politics, and women are not supposed to participate in the public realm.¹³

Another view which is a part of the debate on the rational and irrational dichotomy, is the liberal feminist critique which links the ideal of 'truth', 'goodness' and morality with reason. The ideal of truth which is explained as 'goodness', is identified with male rationality. Gender identity and personhood are linked through language and thus language too is linked with rationality and goodness. This idea of a fully human person excludes women.¹⁴ For the liberalists, the concept of the Man of Reason has moral connotations. The dichotomy between reason which is associated

¹³ For further reading see, Susan Mollat Okin, Women in Western Political Thought, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1979; Jean Bethke Elstain, Public Man and Private Woman, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1981; Arlene Saxonhouse, Women in the History of Political Thought, Ancient Greece to Machiavelli, New York, Praeger, 1985.

¹⁴ Lloyd, n.12.

with the scientific world and feeling, and emotion which is linked with irrationality results in a constricting and exclusive association of reason with morality.¹⁵

The views of different schools vary according to their epistemological viewpoints. For some, a mere redefinition of the concept of rationality suffices.¹⁶ For others, the dichotomy is acceptable, as it reflects the 'true nature' of men and women. According to this view, the problem of hierarchy may be eliminated by revolutionising the 'feminine' side - the irrational side of the dichotomy.¹⁷ For another school, the problem with the western conception of rationality can be explained by relating it to the sex, gender distinction, as western philosophy considered sex to be interchangeable with gender as determinants in the distribution of rationality. For this school, the possibility of changing given conceptions of rationality through corrective redefinition does not exist. Instead they reject what they see as its distortions

¹⁵ See Carol McMillan, Women, Reason and Nature, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), p.21.

¹⁶ Supporters of the view are socialist Marxist-feminists like Alison Jaggar, Heidi Haetman etc.

¹⁷ Supporters of this view are the radical feminists such as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Carol McMillan etc.

completely.¹⁸ Following this view, the post-modernist feminists emerge with a new language and discourse which does not have gendered connotations.¹⁹

Nature and Culture

Modern Science characterises nature as a feminine force which must be subordinated to dominant mankind. It is through culture, the product of human consciousness, that humanity asserts its control over nature. The dichotomy between nature and culture parallels and reinforces the dichotomy of man and woman. There are important connections between the oppression and domination of women and the exploitation of nature. These have a major role in the construction of gender identities. Debates on this dichotomy within feminist theory explain it as something which is complexed and there is unanimity that it is in no way advantageous for women.

Sherry Ortner, equates culture with “the notion of human consciousness (in systems of thought and technology), by means of

¹⁸ Sadra Harding: “Is Gender a variable in conceptions of rationality”, in Carol C. Gould (ed.), Beyond Domination (Totowa, N.J. Rowman and Allanheld 1984), pp.43-63.

¹⁹ Post-modern thinkers like Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray etc.

which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.”²⁰ Thus culture is understood in terms of its superiority to control and transform nature. Women were considered as closer to nature than men and are supposed to be controlled and dominated by men, the ‘makers’ of culture.

It is necessary to clarify why women were linked with nature. Fundamental arguments centre around women’s body and the capacity for the reproduction of life. Ortner says, “woman creates naturally from within her own being, whereas man is free to, or forced to, create artificially, that is through cultural means and in such a way as to sustain culture”.²¹ Thus bodily functions are linked to their gender identities, social roles and to their psychic structure.

For Ortner, everywhere, in every culture, women are considered to some degree inferior to men. To her there are three factors which constitute evidence for the fact that a particular culture considers women inferior:

- (1) elements of cultural ideology and informants statements that explicitly devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products and their social milieu

²⁰ Sherry. B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture” in M Rosaldo and L.Lamphere (eds.), Women, Culture and Society (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974), p.72.

²¹ Ibid., p.75-77.

less prestige than are accorded men and male correlates (2) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as implicitly making a statement of inferior valuation and (3) Social structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in, or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside".²² These factors can be interrelated.

The link between women and nature is not natural or essential for certain feminists, as, such a conception is the product of the patriarchal culture. They argue that women should become part of the dominant masculinist culture. They highlight the genderedness of the dominant culture as an attempt to reverse it.²³ Mary Daly believes that women should have a particular interest in ending the human domination of nature. In Beyond God and the Father, she argues that we must replace the male objectification of nature with a 'covenant' relationship.²⁴ For Caroline Merchant, "we must examine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the

²² Ibid., p.69.

²³ Feminists who support this view, belong to early period from 60's including de Beauvoir and some other Socialist Marxist Feminists.

²⁴ Mary Daly. Beyond God and the Father, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1973), p.177.

domination path of both nature and women. Women have been understood to be more 'natural' than men, tied to the rhythms of *their bodies*, women as guardians of nature".²⁵

Mary Daly and her supporters gave a new dimension to contemporary feminist thought, which later gave rise to the movement called 'eco-feminism'. The critique of the masculinist nature of western science and the call for a radical change in the epistemology of all sciences through a 'feminist science', also originated from this discourse.

Another view is that which states that, rather than women, it was men who were ripped away from their association with nature and home, and forced into the 'unnatural' environment and social relations of the work place. So it is men who need to reclaim their lost identification with a more 'natural' manliness.²⁶

There is evidently a politics which links nature to the construction of identity and community. Reducing women to being guardians of nature is problematic as it compounds the constraints created through gender identity. The imperative that women must

²⁵ Caroline Merchant, The Death of Nature, Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution (Harper and Row:Sanfransico 1990) p.xxi, cited in Val plumwood,n.4.

²⁶ See Robert Bly Iron John, A Book about Men 1990, cited in Val Plumwood, n.4.

have a particular interest in ending human domination over nature is an essentialist one as it endows the 'nature' of women with great conceptual importance.

Femininity and Masculinity

It is difficult to define femininity and masculinity as they are not biological concepts. Though perceived as mutually exclusive or binary opposing categories, they are continuously reconstituted in differing social and cultured backgrounds, so that fixed conceptual distinctions between them become unsustainable.

There were many theoretical attempts to define these concepts through the sex role theory and the socialization theory, termed as 'sex difference' research. This tradition intersected with the new technology of standardized attitudes and personality tests, in attempts to measure masculinity and femininity as psychological traits by analyzing the differences between 'sex roles', 'sex differences' and 'sexual character'.

Freud's works were recognised as a significant theoretical shift in the description of femininity and masculinity as he represented them as desires and identifications in conflict with each other. Beginning with Freud, a number of studies done by social

scientists like Parsons, Chodorow, Reik, Robert May, Mitchell²⁷ focussed on the similarities rather than differences between the sexes. These studies refuted the notion of a unitary sexual character and modified the notion of the sexual character of each sex.

Irene Visser's work in 1980 was especially influential in changing the notion of masculinity and femininity as distinct opposites. In her work, the boundaries of these categories are fuzzy, as, though they have numerous defining features, they overlap within a particular gender identity. She argues, "among the various quotations given by the Oxford English Dictionary on both masculinity and femininity, it says "what the American women lacks is femininity". This is ample proof that these dichotomies have fuzzy boundaries.²⁸

Studies in psychoanalysis show that the acquisition of a sense of one's own identity could happen at a very early age and can be shown to be acquired culturally. Nancy Chodorow calls it, "the

²⁷ For further reading see, T. Parsons: "Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States", American Sociological Review, 1942, pp.604-16; T. Parsons and Bales R.F., Family, Sociological and International Process (London, Routledge, 1956); Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978); T. Reik, Of Love and Lust (New York, Bantam, 1967); Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism (New York, Vintage Books, 1975); Juliet Mitchell, Women's Estate (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971).

²⁸ Irene Visser, "The Prototypicality of Gender", Women's Studies International Forum, vol.19, No.6, 1996, p.590.

cognitive sense of gendered self - which is acquired independently of, and in exceptional cases, in opposition to, the anatomical facts". It is produced psychologically and socially rather than physiologically.²⁹

When they interpreted gender behaviour, the social scientists were in fact reconstructing its dichotomous relationship. Each concept was defined in terms of the particular prototypes included in it. "The prototypes, domains and frames of the masculine and feminine categories may be regarded as embodying "deeply held beliefs", they are configurations of culture based on conventionalized knowledge".³⁰

The general trend visible in the studies done on sexual behaviour shows women's passivity to be 'normal' and an active nature to be normal for men. It explains the normal behaviour of men in terms of 'instrumental traits', as tenacious, aggressive, curious, ambitious, responsible, original and competitive. Women had 'expressive traits', affectionate, obedient, responsive to sympathy and approval, cheerful, kind and friendly. The study says that it is

²⁹Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, Relation and Difference", p.12 cited in Contemporary Feminist Thought, Hester Eisenstein, (Unwin Paperbacks Press, UK, 1981) p.7.

³⁰ John. R. Taylor, Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic theory. (Oxford 1989, p.89) cited in Irene Visser, n.28, p.591.

social pressure which confirms the individual in these particular roles.³¹

R.W. Connell has done substantial work in this area. He defines these concepts in terms of 'Hegemonic Masculinity' and 'Emphasized Femininity'. He defines masculinity in the following words :

The master defines himself by exclusion, against the other.

For the master, the formation of identity by this means, leads to a need to maintain hierarchies to define identity. His identity requires constant reassurance of superiority and hence constant reassertion of hierarchy. This is a major factor establishing certain types of masculinity.³²

For him, the forms of femininity and masculinity and their interpretation are centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women. This provides the basis for relationships among men that establishes a hegemonic form of masculinity in the society as a whole. 'Hegemonic Masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. A patriarchal social order works

³¹ R.W. Connell, Gender and Power (Polity Press, Basil Blackwell, UK, 1987) p.168.

³² Ibid., p.183.

through the interplay between these different forms of masculinity. A dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men and there is no femininity which is hegemonic.

The global subordination of women is oriented to accommodate the interest and desires of men. The forms of femininity which are defined around subordination can be called 'emphasized femininity'. The interplay among these, results in dynamic changes in the 'gender order' in society.³³

According to him, femininity is organized as an adaptation to men's power, emphasizing compliance, nurturance and empathy as womanly virtues. The emphasized femininity itself is not in a state to establish hegemony over other kinds of femininity.³⁴

At present, feminist politics questions all kinds of essentialist positions and its attempt is to dismantle distinct categorizations and conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity. But unfortunately, the whole discourse on feminism both in theory and practice, simultaneously and consistently focuses on these concepts and categories which ofcourse can be considered as a necessity for feminist politics. In this way all feminist politics and practice can be

³³ Ibid., pp.183-184

³⁴ Ibid., p.188.

negative in the long term.

Feminist theorists have divergent arguments concerning the scope for a feminist knowledge. There are three models offered within feminist theory for a feminist epistemology: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-modernism. Mary Hawkesworth explains the basic tenets of the three models in the following words:

Feminist empiricism incorporates the tenets of philosophical realism (which posits the existence of the world independent of the human knower) and empiricist assumptions about the primacy of the senses as the source of all knowledge about the world. Feminist empiricists consider sexism and androcentrism to be identifiable biases of individual knowers that can be eliminated by stricter application of existing methodological norms of scientific and philosophical inquiry. In this view the appropriate method for apprehending the truth about the world involves a process of systematic observation in which the subjectivity of the observer is controlled by rigid adherence to neutral procedures designed to produce identical measurements of the real properties of knowledge.³⁵

³⁵ M.E. Hawkesworth, Beyond Oppression, Feminist Theory and Political Strategy. (New York: Continuum, 1990), p.131.

Drawing upon historical materialism's insight that social being determines consciousness, feminist standpoint theories reject the notion of an 'unmediated truth' arguing that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an *individual's* particular position in a determinate socio-political formation at a specific point in history.... They do not reject the notion of truth altogether. But they argue that while certain positions (the oppressor's) produce distorted ideological views of reality, other social positions (the oppressed's) can pierce ideological obfuscations and attain a correct and comprehensive understanding of the world.³⁶

Thus feminist analysis grounded upon the privileged perspective that emerges from women's oppression can constitute the core of a new theory of knowledge.

Feminist post-modernism rejects the very possibility of a truth about reality. Feminist post-modernists use the 'situatedness' of each finite observer in a particular socio-political historical context to challenge the plausibility of claims that any perspective on the world could escape partiality... As an alternative to the futile quest for an

³⁶ Ibid., pp.131-132.

authoritative truth to ground feminist theory, feminist post-modernists advocate a profound skepticism regarding universal claims about the existence, nature and powers of reason.... they urge instead the development of a commitment to plurality, multivocality and the play of difference.³⁷

Even though post-modern feminists oppose the idea of a feminist knowledge as rooted in an essentialist position, feminist politics, in practice, stands for some kind of objectivism which could be referred to as 'feminist objectivism', which is implicit in feminist standpoint theory.³⁸

Feminist views on dualism have developed and changed through different stages of their theoretical development. The feminist critique of the gendered nature of dualism problematises the phallogocentric character of knowledge. The possibility of a feminist knowledge is put forward by feminist thinkers as an alternative to the phallogocentric objectivism of knowledge. The feminist search for an end to hierarchisation and subordination,

³⁷ Ibid., p.132.

³⁸ Margareta Halberg, "Feminist Epistemology an impossible Project?", Radical Philosophy, no.52, Autumn 1989, pp.3-6, cited in Stuart Hall, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), Modernity, and its Futures, the Enlightenment Project Revisited, p.373.

through power relations based on gender identity formation, cannot stand for such an essentialist position. An analysis through the concept of gender could lend a new dimension to the problem which could change the focus from the concept of the female, which is an essentialist one, to the structure of the dichotomous categorization itself. Thus an analysis of the philosophy of knowledge through the concept of gender is of great relevance to feminist theory. We may conclude by suggesting that the concept of gender and its reinterpretation of knowledge contributes to both feminist theory and the conventional theory of knowledge which should hopefully leads to the transformation of both.

Conclusion

One assumption that seems to be shared by different groups of contemporary feminist theorists, despite their considerable differences, is that gender is a social construction. The post-modernist feminist interpretation of the body, sex and sexuality as social constructions, led to insightful debates challenging gender dichotomy and the dominance of a particular gender, through a critique of the anthropocentric nature of enlightenment principles.

Through the conceptualisation of gender, feminist theory attempts to destroy hierarchically structured gender identities and gender categorisation itself. R.W. Connell explains the intersection of gender and power in terms of 'gender regime' and 'gender order'. In his work, gender relations are interpreted as being fundamental to all power relations, necessitating a reworking of political programmes so as to intervene in all spheres of politics.

Feminist theorists cannot ignore the aspect of domination in power relations on which their critique of androcentric theories on power fundamentally rests. An alternative way of looking at power as energy, capacity, potential or action is valid, yet there must be an attempt to analyse and explain the notion of domination which is the basis of gender

hierarchy. The feminist agenda of reinterpreting the theory of knowledge reflects certain complicated and contradictory positions. The reconceptualisation of gender through the identification of particular gender identities, their characteristics, attributes and contingency on socio-economic and political structures is the feminist programme. But feminist discourse with its consistent references to particular genders too often reinforces and perpetuates the use of essentialist categories and concepts related to gender identities. This could eventually develop into a situation where the anti-essentialist conceptualisation of gender and its reinterpretation of theories of knowledge contradicts feminist politics, because theoretical explanations of gender would be useful to feminist theory, but feminist politics in general and its practice could not be implemented completely avoiding an essentialist stand.

A post-modernist view, which poses certain fundamental questions, related to the constitution of the individual self and identity implicitly interrogates the usage of distinct gender identities so often dear to feminist politics. The refusal on the part of post-modernists to accommodate any essentialist notions of identity could distance their discourse on gender from that shared by other feminist theorists and feminist political practice.

This demands the removal of a gender perspective in its totality from feminist theory.

Interpretations of the failures and drawbacks of existing theories of knowledge could be possible through a gender analysis. But for feminist theory and politics, a deeper analysis through a conceptualisation of gender, may lead to certain dilemmas where, as in the post-modern discourse, it would not give space to certain woman-specific questions in its agenda. This suggests that the schools of post-modernism and feminism (including that contradiction in terms, post-modern feminism) are mutually opposed. A post-modernist conceptualisation of gender can only be useful for feminist theory but not for a feminist politics.

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