



Semiotics of Gender: The Construction of a Lie

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir very influentially declared one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. Although the multifaceted scholarly research establishing the point is available, the commonsensical position remains that since the biology of a man and a woman is different, therefore they must be assigned different socio-cultural roles and consequently subjected to different treatments. Thus, the current paper seeks to answer the extant gap in understanding the issue. The paper reviews socialistic, feministic, anthropological, and psychoanalytic persuasions, which are currently dominant in analysing the concept of gender and presents a semiotic analysis under which the natural sexual differences get ossified as naturalised cultural differences which are very stubborn to change due to their essential semiotic nature.

Keywords: naturalised sexual differences; semiotic analysis; gender roles; gender myths; motherhood; women and control

1. Introduction

There has been a long-drawn contemplation on the genesis of gender disparities in human civilisation. Although numerous studies have been conducted re-asserting Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement about sex being a natural condition and gender a social construct, a commonsensical understanding of sexual differences rests on the argument that men and women are biologically different and women owing to their biology, are naturally restrained from fully participating in the work lives and, therefore, must depend upon men for their physical survival needs. Gender studies, on the other hand, emphasise that while there are biological differences, they have been constructed to be far more limited by social practices than what they ought to be:

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gender becomes a way of denoting 'cultural constructions'- the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. It is a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body. (Scott 1056)

While all the critical persuasions agree upon the premise that gender disparities are the consequence of naturalised gender roles, they differ significantly in their explanations of the genesis and sustenance of gender roles. The political view held by the socialists considers gender oppression as a part of the larger production relations in a capitalist society. The capitalist economic system, which flourishes on the 'surplus value' realised from labour, benefits from women's housework as it is unpaid and therefore an essential form of 'surplus value'. Thus, in a capitalist society, it becomes important to relegate women to certain productive relationships which are characterised by oppression and immobility to sustain the nature of their work as 'surplus'. This is executed collectively by society through the consensus over the ideology of patriarchy and the cultural practices manifesting gender roles. But the problem with such a view was identified early on as the subordination of women pre-dates capitalism and continues under socialism and the view itself presupposes the ideology of patriarchy. In fact, a careful reading of Engels reveals that both capitalism and gender oppression owe their origin to prior social forms existing in human society based on material relations. He accords equal importance to the production of labour and the production of the family towards the social organisation of a country, "The social organisation under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other." (Engels 48).

Joan Kelly also argues that during the course of human civilisation, economic and gender systems interacted to produce social and historical experiences; that neither system was causal, but both operated "simultaneously to reproduce the socioeconomic and male-dominant structures of [a] particular social order" (Scott 1060; Kelly 216-227). Boserup et al traces the origin of patriarchy and

gender roles in agricultural technology, particularly the differences between the shifting and plough agriculture and the differences tend to persist even when the economy moved out of agriculture, affecting the participation of women in activities performed outside the home, including market employment, entrepreneurship, and politics (4-19). Hartmann also views patriarchy and capitalism as separate but interacting systems, although economic causality is given slight precedence by her (137-169). The sexual point of view, on the other hand, gives primacy to sexual relations over economic relations. Shulamith Firestone rephrases Engels's definition of Historical Materialism and argues that all production relations are the by-product of reproductive relations and that the first division of society into classes is based on the division of human sex:

the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and childcare created by these struggles; in the connected development of other physically-differentiated classes [castes]; and in the first division of labour based on sex which developed into the [economic-cultural] class system. (12)

Scholars with anthropological leanings also support the reproductive aspect of material life. They understand reproductive relations by examination of kinship systems and focus on household and family as the basis for social organisation. But kinship relations, as assumed commonly, do not refer to blood ties but, instead, the social construction of blood ties. In this sense, the anthropologist deals not in the objectively observed facts of nature "but in those structures which the human mind characteristically superimposes on it" (Hawkes 24). Thus, the anthropological approach introduces the semiotic understanding of the sexual organisation of society. Lévi-Strauss (1985) pioneers the systematic exploration of the structure of cultural practices based on the semiotic model offered by Saussure. He analyses the exchange relations of various commodities among the kin under the theory of primitive reciprocity and adds that marriages are the most basic form of gift exchange in which women are the most valued gifts. Thus, he sees the exchange of women as a fundamental principle of kinship wherein kinship systems, by their

definition, comprise and reproduce the socially organised forms of sexuality.

In pre-state societies, kinship is often the idiom of social interaction, organising economic, political, and ceremonial, as well as sexual activity. One's duties, responsibilities, and privileges vis-à-vis others are defined in terms of mutual kinship or lack thereof. The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony all take place within the organisational structure of kinship. The ubiquity and adaptive effectiveness of kinship have led many anthropologists to consider its invention, along with the invention of language, to have been the developments that decisively marked the discontinuity between semi-human hominids and human beings. (Rubin 55; Levi-Strauss 62). Further, the psychoanalytic studies observe explicit connections between gender discourses and power and offer plausible formulations analysing the enculturation of the biological sexuality of individuals, primarily under Anglo-American object-relations and French poststructuralist approaches. While the proponents of the object-relations approach view the construction of the subject in relation to the actual experience of the child during the developmental years, the adherents of post-structuralism emphasise the centrality of language in communicating, interpreting, and representing gender. In light of the extant debate on the question of the genesis and perpetuation of gender, Joan Scott, in her study, raised some very pertinent questions which remain unanswered to date,

How can we account within this theory for persistent associations of masculinity with power, for the higher value placed on manhood than on womanhood, for the way children seem to learn these associations and evaluations even when they live outside nuclear households or in households where parenting is equally divided between husband and wife? (Scott 1063)

The current paper seeks to answer these withstanding questions surrounding the issue of gender and explore its semiotics by focussing on the role of human conception of sexual differences in the form of gender.

2. Discussion

When the society initially began, in the hunter-gatherer communities, resources were scarce, wars frequent, and the numbers determined the strength of a community. In this sense, reproducing, surviving, and guarding the community from external threats were the primary functions. So, life at the time centred on physical survival and the roles between men and women were divided based on these functions; while women were primarily responsible for reproducing and caring for the young, men would fetch food and guard the territories. Both thus dealt with life in its most elemental form. One sex produced life while the other sustained it with food and security of the colony. But women, owing to the power of giving birth, play essentially a more substantial role in the biology of mankind. Women's reproductive roles make them deal with the matter in its most basic form, i.e. human body and involve tangible material activities of nurturance both in their womb and through breastfeeding. Men, on the other hand, are naturally subordinate in their biological roles. Their role in the nurturance of the human species is at the most secondary to that of women, and they carry the innate desire to transcend their alienation from the means of reproduction of the species.

2.1 Matter *versus* Discourses

But in the history of human civilisation, with the evolution in the modes of production and the emergence of stable patterns of social living, the nature of occupations also changed. The power of a community was no longer based on the transaction of physical commodities but diversified from the need to deal with merely producing food or guarding the territory to symbolic wares like religion and education, along with all their derivative forms. Their origin lay in the semiotic process of signification, as understood in the Saussurean paradigm, and could be sustained by social discourses. Life became more settled, and fixed patterns of living emerged, which narrated the code of social living and came to be termed 'culture', a common and familiar term but extremely complex in its structure and nature. But cultural practices, which originally

began as a set of common habits acquired by a community to adapt to one's environment as motivated by necessity, over time turned into a matter of convention sustained by the process of social signification, thus acquiring an arbitrariness of character. The non-tangible forms of culture, like language, literature, science, values, belief system, rules, laws, morals, norms, customs, social institutions, etc. got distinguished from the tangible evidence of culture like food, clothes and shelter due to higher arbitrariness in the nature of the former. The significance of these semiotic systems lies in the ease and efficiency with which they can be transacted.

Thus, slowly as the world got more civilised, social discourses acquired more and more control over the material reality and processes due to the convenience attached to trading them. This is akin to the quintessential significance attached to token money in modern times, although it is just a symbol, not substance. But the cultural practices themselves need to be sustained through ideologies, where ideologies are defined as “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.” (Hall 344). But interestingly, this change of occupations was more for the roles which were conducted by men while women, on the other hand, continued doing their material chores of cooking, cleaning, nursing, and reproducing. In the course of human history, men changed their social roles, but women did not, as women were constrained by their biological roles, which were essential to human survival and could not be replaced with symbolic gratification. There was no alternative for it, but men could proceed on to a sociological alternative for their primitive roles, and these sociological roles also offered them symbolic power as an answer to the biological power endowed in women. So, while women were naturally the bearers of biological matter, men took it upon themselves to be the bearers of the social discourses, and, in other words, while women were *the guardians of the physical life*, men emerged as *the guardians of the discursive life*.

2.2 The Construction of Two Myths

But since the social discourses are merely the representations of the material reality-sign systems used to organise and facilitate the material transactions of food, shelter, and sex primarily, the symbolic order suffered from a persistent fear of being overtaken once again by the physical order and therefore it cultivated a despise and angst against everything which was concerned with matter and body. This necessitated, first, to accord lower value to matter and higher to discourses in the process of social signification; secondly, to specifically emphasise and glorify men's contribution in the substantive process of reproduction; and, thirdly, to accomplish these ideologies. Thus, began the process of ascendance of male sexuality over female sexuality, and as a way of sexual propaganda, all forms of matter and material living and the people associated with it were appropriated of lower socio-cultural value by certain myths and certain discourses of purity. As a result, people dealing with nature in its raw form, either for the purpose of production or reproduction, became subjects of perpetual despise, ridicule and control. Or, in still simpler words, in a discursive world, both manual labour and reproductive labour were accorded lower social signification or value.

So, in order to control the sexuality of women, two myths were constructed to denigrate women's reproductive power and to depose women's essential biological nature with the cultivated cultural roles. These two myths are the myth of *the seductress* and the myth of *the mother*. The latter may be called the *good mother* henceforth in order to distinguish it from the biological state of motherhood. While the myth of *a good mother* was accrued with the 'value' of 'rightness,' 'goodness' and 'appropriateness,' that of *seductress* entailed despising. Thus, the cultural norms approbated a woman as honourable only if she fit into the myth of *a good mother*; otherwise, she could be subjected to any form of abuse or violence with or without minor regret. Also, a woman who did not fit into the *good-mother* myth, by default, fell into the *seductress* myth. Motherhood, therefore, remained the only way to beget respect and relevance by women in the new world of discourses. Further, the myth of *a good mother* could hold its symbolic value not only for the biological mother but for any woman who had the mythical discursive

characteristics of a mother, for example, certain age, certain body type, certain dress style and so on. So, women could claim the symbolic power of mothers as they aged. In fact, the younger women were particularly at a disadvantage here because they were less cultivated in the cultural associates of motherhood. Further, the younger women, although they were the 'practising mothers' (in terms of nurturing children), lay in the realm of body, matter, and material and systemically accrued lower social value. This resulted in the cultural practice of labelling younger women as *seductresses*. The narrative of Eve is one such myth practice. Another well-known mythical character Medusa consolidates this myth construction (Bowers 217-235). In the Indian scenario, the *apsaras* (heavenly nymphs meant to seduce mortal human beings) establish the relationship between youth, beauty, and the downfall of men, which they bestow. Despite the consistent efforts of the feminists to deconstruct the myths of the *seductress* and the *good mother*, they have been surviving with resilience. During as recent as the 2016 US Presidential election campaign, Republicans projected Hillary Clinton as Medusa and compared Donald Trump with Perseus, who would decapitate the Medusa once again (Johnston).

For men, these myths were useful instruments to appropriate and control women and decimate their naturally superior biology. Women, on the other hand, complied with these myths because this gave them a chance to secure the discursive power which was unavailable to them due to their unique biology. Moreover, since a *good mother* is an arbitrary cultural concept independent of the sexual nature or biological role of a mother, the older women, who turn into *symbolic mothers* as they are no longer the practising mothers in terms of a biological state, found it particularly favourable to their position. This is the reason that even though patriarchy is often associated with men owing to its linguistic reference to the father, it is not exclusive to them. In fact, any individual, irrespective of their biological sex, who propagates these two basic myths is a proponent of patriarchy. Women, further, by the process of cultural internalisation of patriarchy, go on sustaining it. The *symbolic mothers* come out to be the supporters of this arrangement as *guardians of culture*, along with men as those familiar patriarchal women who carry misogynous attitudes. Such females may be

assumed to be biologically females but socially males and vice versa for men too. The patriarchal women maintain the cultural practice of gender by serving as the guardians of the social norms as much as men and, in turn, exact respect in the socio-cultural regimen, which further serves as an incentive to reinforce their patriarchal orientation. In other words, a very formidable, self-sustaining, circular system of social behaviour and social conduct gets codified.

2.3 The 'Value' of Masculinity over Femininity

In order to promote the cause of ascendancy of male sexuality over that of females, men's obligations to the family, clan, tribe, state, nation, and community are given exaggerated prominence. This "principle of generational continuity (Brown 207-208) restores the primacy of paternity and obscures the real labour and the social reality of women's work in childbirth" (Scott 1058; O'Brien 191). And thus, male sexuality becomes much more desirable in the social setup. Sigmund Freud famously said that little girls, when they realise the sexual lack they have in the form of the absence of a penis, become envious of men who possess it. Here it must be argued that a man's penis is not a mere biological organ for performing bodily functions of reproduction and micturition. It has culturally constructed symbolic 'value' which entitle him to valuable privileges in the society like power, dignity and worth. While progressing from the prelinguistic to linguistic phase, little girls are increasingly aware of the power and privilege associated with male sexuality and yearn after all those entitlements which are associated with the discourses constructed around the penis. Thus, in addition to being a biological organ, the penis carries the socio-cultural construction of masculinity, therefore, is more appropriately termed the phallus. "It is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon certain men. The track which it leaves includes gender identity and the division of the sexes." (Rubin 66).

So, penis envy may, in fact, be called phallic envy. Thus, suffering from the *phallic envy*, women develop a sense of lack and inadequacy early on and try to compensate for the inadequacy by means of two reciprocal ways of compensation — the *masculine compensation* and the *feminine compensation*. A woman adopting

patriarchal values and working in partnership with men towards the subjugation of other women, particularly observed in older women, may be termed as *masculine compensation*. The alternative approach to this is *feminine compensation*, which is more common in younger women where they look at themselves through the gaze of men and constantly try to be more desirable for them. This entails the ideals associated with femininity. Both *masculine compensation* and *feminine compensation* ultimately legitimise the ideals of patriarchy and maintain the ascendancy of men over women. Critical of this latter kind of female position, Mary Daly compared such women with birds decked up to please the keeper, as “women who permit ‘Daddy’ to deck them out in splendour, to ‘cosmetise’ and perfume them, to girdle and corset them are like the birds who are painted by the keeper. They are whom Daddy dispatches to destroy the real, natural women” (Daly 336; Tong 61).

2.4 The Coordinates of Control

Thus, the very concept of the femininity of a female is given by patriarchy. With the conception of femininity comes the privilege of being ‘desirable’ and two concomitants of *honour* and *shame*. The concept of honour exists at counter poles with freedom. Honour is a special social value assigned to a woman’s social conduct with the most subtle but serious outcomes. The fundamental ground for this construct lies in the patriarchal imagination of women’s bodies. While women’s bodies are real, the appropriateness of the bodies is imaginary. But the imaginary is constructed to control the real. The clothes serve as the most effective hegemonic discourse to accomplish this. But the arbitrary nature of these discourses can be observed in the fact that different clothes hold different values in different cultures. For example, while in Western cultures, a knee-length skirt is culturally accepted and considered a very respectable formal attire for a woman of position and guarantees her to be taken seriously and professionally, in India and other South Asian countries, it may be considered a severe misconduct as was seen in case of Priyanka Chopra, the famous actor when she was widely trolled for her dress choice during her meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Bawa). The penalty for defying the norms of honour is a shame. Women are considered honourable in lieu of guarding the patriarchal social norms and cultural values which the women with

feministic consciousness often seek to give up; for example, during the slut walks, women consciously give up honour and embrace shame.

Further, since gender roles are generally considered to be mere extensions of the reproductive roles of women, the experience of motherhood, which is actually the capacity to give birth, is viewed as the need to give birth in order to get socially validated in the world and thus gets distinguished as an institution of motherhood. Motherhood, thus, viewed as an institution, becomes a cultural instrument for producing a gendered society. "Since motherhood stands at one end of this mutual engendering process, setting up the gender lens on representation of motherhood involves the not-enviable task of prizing it open from layers of patriarchal possession." (Bagchi 34). Further, it is not only women's bodies that are controlled by means of cultural discourses; their physical environment is also controlled. Women are constrained by denying them the right over their physical space. The physical body and the safety net around it, like room, home, cabin, carriage, coupe etc., are various words for physical space. Traditionally, none of them was owned by women. Further, women are constrained in their physical space as it is expected of good women not to go out because it is unsafe and dishonourable there. Good women stay at home and stay safe. But then, the primary myth of human culture is the quest myth. Narrative and folktales reveal that the journey is important for 'arriving.' Every hero must undertake a journey to seek himself (hardly any examples of 'herself') as there are many dishonourable men moving around there who may defile them or corrupt them. Like when Red Riding Hood went out to fulfil an errand, the wolf devoured her. The quintessential (feminist) question still remains was the child to be caged or the wolf. Similarly, a woman is not supposed to use her time according to her needs. Work is the means to access social respect and dignity, but multitasking often hinders a woman from focusing and excellence, and thus women fail to achieve a sense of accomplishment in their work. Either they are denied access to professional work (i.e., paid work) or their work is not assigned sufficient cultural value even when it is professional. Their primary duties remain family nurturance and reproduction, and their work is relegated to secondary importance. Thus, men's clubs and bars are an

age-old phenomenon. Women, in response, formed 'kitty parties' but then there is an enormous number of negative stereotypes associated with kitty-going women in media and films. Similar stereotypes do not exist for men's clubs. Thus, a man has spatio-temporal choices while a woman has none.

In fact, there are different professional ethics set for a man and a woman. It is common to see that women are supposed to choose either profession or family while there is no similar pressure on men. Whenever duty calls, a man must choose duty over love, but women have their love, their profession, and their social lives all centred on their husband (and his family case of South Asian cultures), the man in her life. This makes the life of a woman a gamble based on the man she gets married to such that if she is fortunate enough to get a man who is able to fulfil her emotional, professional, and social aspirations, then her life is sorted, otherwise, she is left with absolutely no scope. The man, on the other hand, if fails on the emotional front, can overcompensate in the professional field or can find peace and solace in his social life. A woman who fails her husband or fails in her sexual obligations is a 'fallen woman' and no good for anything whatsoever. Similar fallout is not present for a man who falters in marital or sexual responsibilities. He can still be a good son or accomplish his social or professional duties.

3. Conclusion

Therefore, in this sense, it is derived that human culture is a consequence of sex wherein the male-female binary retains the central place while other gender positions — the trans positions, since they did not participate in the process of reproduction — have been pushed towards the periphery. And conclusively, it must be said that the deconstruction of the lie called gender rests in the analysis of the structure of gender as an abstract, symbolic, representational, and associative construct which sets up certain normative heterosexual social and personal attributes and gender-specific social roles. In the context of employing new perspectives of seeing women and their gender identities and roles; and accommodating that in the existing social setup, Mary Beard writes, “You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure” (87). This approach of reviewing gender leads to the

second aspect, which is non-practising gender. The propositions offered by Judith Butler, particularly the notion of *performativity*, which involves the possibility of un-doing gender as much as doing it, are particularly significant. Butler argues that gender roles do not lie in *being* like a woman; rather, they are accomplished by *doing* like a woman (198-200). Gender, in this sense, is viewed as a verb-something which you do in interaction rather than something like an attribute which you possess. "Gender, therefore, is a practice which is accomplished through repetition of the gendered acts and varies according to the context" (Mills 118). It is, thus, considered a malleable practice which, if done in one way, confirms certain cultural beliefs and, if done in a different way, has the potential to subvert them. Thus, while conservative texts act as ideological apparatuses to foster patriarchal attitudes and accomplish gender roles, a feminist text has the potential to use signs, symbols, metaphors, and motifs to expose gender politics. Thirdly, gender as a cultural construct has assumed its current form due to changes in the modes of production without any corresponding change in reproduction. But as of now, both modes of production and reproduction are constantly changing. If community living has changed humans from material beings into discursive beings, then technology can change (and is already changing) the very nature of discourses and cultural practices.

Technology is a human instrumentation used to better people's lives, and despite all the reservations felt, it is already manufacturing changes by making reproductive choices regarding sexuality and motherhood. The idea of surrogacy, which was as remote at a time as if it was from a science fiction novel, is the lived reality of many now. Firestone, along with other radical feminists, sees technology as the opener of new possibilities for women, liberating them of their reproductive limitations. Family control choices were the first revolutionary change in this direction. Even the mode of production no longer depends on heavy physical labour the way it did in the past, and women no longer need to be restrained by their bodies designed for reproduction. And, finally, women's labour, comprising both the reproductive duties and the household chores, being unpaid, lures the capitalist society with its 'surplus value'. If women's reproductive and familial work is acknowledged as work and compensated like other

forms of labour, it has the potential to change not only the productive but also the reproductive relations of society.

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