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Gender, Sex and Literary Theory

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Abstract

Gender is a social and cultural construct, often falsely considered synonymous to sex. But actually sex is a biological make up and the values and meaning associated with male and female body are socially constructed. And this system of values and meaning associated to male and female body is known as gender. 'Male' and 'Female' are the biological features of a man and woman whereas 'Feminine' and 'Masculine' are social and cultural aspects. The present paper attempts to highlight the concept of gender and the misconception surrounding it. This paper also highlights the views of different critics of literature regarding gender and sex.

Keywords

Femininity; Masculinity; Performativity; Ecriture Feminine; Gender; Mary Wollstonecraft; Virginia Woolf; Sigmund Freud; Simone de Beauvoir; Michael Foucault; Helene Cixous; Judith Butler.



Introduction:

Gender is a socially projected component of human sexuality. Perhaps the best way to understand gender is to understand it as a process of social presentation. Because gender roles are generally delineated by behavioral expectations and norms, the individual can adopt behaviors that project the gender they wish to portray. Adopting the behaviors and norms of a gender leads to the perception that someone belongs to that gender category. Gender roles are, unlike sex, mutable, meaning they can change. Gender is not, however, as simple as just choosing a role to play but is also influenced by parents, peers, culture, and society. (Verma v)

Concept of Gender:

The term *gender* comes from the Middle English term *gendre*, a loanword from Norman-conquest-era Old French. This, in turn, came from Latin *genus*. Both words mean "kind", "type", or "sort". Thus gender is, basically, the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity.

In a society which is full of gender biases and stereotyped gender ideas, children start to learn to adopt gender roles which are not always considered to be fair to both the sexes. As children move through childhood and into adolescence, they come to face many factors which influence their ideas, attitudes and behaviors regarding gender roles. Children learn these attitudes and behaviors firstly at their homes and then from their peers, school experiences, and media. However, the family setting seems to be the strongest influence which affect the gender role development because parents pass on , both overtly and covertly, to their children their own beliefs about gender. This over all idea of parental influence on gender role development gives us the suggestion that an androgynous gender role orientation may be more beneficial to children than strict adherence to tradition gender roles.

In order to study gender, social science has a separate branch of study namely Gender Studies. Gender study is a field of interdisciplinary nature

devoted to gender identity and gender representation as central category of analysis. Under this field of study we analyze women's studies (concerning women, feminism, gender and politics), men's studies and LGBT studies. Sometimes, gender study is offered together with study of human sexuality. These disciplines study gender and sexuality in the field of literature, language, history, sociology, cinema, media study, law, medicine, etc. It also tries to focus on race, ethnicity, location, nationality, and disability.

History and Development of Gender Study:

Gender is a young and expanding discipline. This field of study has undergone several metamorphoses despite of having a short historical background. Its concepts, methods and research subjects are still considered controversial and to give the definition of it which is valid for all gender studies seems to be very difficult.

In 1970s feminist criticism of gender inequality, provided the impetus for gender studies. In academe, moreover, it was initially a critical response to the lack of knowledge and interest that was shown in half of humanity. Women's studies, as the subject came to be called, started to complement the knowledge base of various disciplines. It was considered necessary to add knowledge about women's lives and conditions in order to ensure that the knowledge base was not biased and that ignorance about the situation of women did not lead to injustice. It was considered necessary to study the situation and fill knowledge gaps.

Basic Assumptions:

One of the most important assumptions regarding gender is that it is not a fixed or stable across the world. It has been argued that far from being a set of fixed and stable values and roles assigned by society, gender is a performance or role enacted by individuals. This performance of gender is, of course, social in the sense that it is enacted, validated and accepted by the society, but what is important is that the role is also open to negotiation and alteration, to conflict and contest. By the argument that gender is performance, it has been suggested

that gender is not fixed: its meaning depends on the location, time, cultural frame-works within which it is performed. In other words, gender is a continuous performance whose meaning can never be fixed for all time or as universal. This 'performance' is the repeated citation-iteration- of the role in particular contexts. With each citation the signifier/role acquires a meaning depending on the context in which the citation occurs. Thus gender and its meaning are constructed through repeated performances ('behaving as a woman' or 'as a man')(Nayar 91). As Judith Butler also puts it: "Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (24-25).

By performance, Butler means that bodies functioning (behaving) in particular ways send out a message, i.e. this is the way this particular body behaves, and, therefore, it is a woman's body. Clothing mannerisms, speech and language are all signs that bodies use to declare their gender to the world. To put it differently: men and women use language and clothing as signs of their being men and women. This is performance, where wearing a particular kind of clothing is the use of a language (where objects constitute a kind of language) to declare one's gender. Gender is the repeated citation of a sign, the repeated enactment of a language. Gender is like the meaning of signs: for a sign to retain meaning it must be repeated in different contexts and be recognized as being the same(a sign like 'cat' will mean the same when it is used and understood despite variation in the contexts of its articulations, its typesetting font or size). A woman becomes a woman, or possesses a woman's identity because she plays the role of a woman repeatedly (Nayar 91-92).

Regarding gender it has been argued that gender is like a 'text'. A text is a system of signs. The meaning of a text is neither fixed nor final and that's why it is open ended. The sign must be repeated endlessly and the meaning of the text emerges in the context of the reading. In this way in the act of reading the text is performed, engaged with and negotiated. Gender is considered as a text because it has to be performed and performance should be context specific. Gender has to be repeated in order to be recognized (as in the case of texts where

the word 'Tree' must be identifiable every time it is written, no matter what the font, type, size). And just like a text, gender also has no stable meaning because it is performed.

The postmodern views of gender are also anti essentialist. Critics like Butler do not believe that there is (or can be) an 'essential' woman or man because 'woman' and 'man' are meanings that emerge in performances related to each other. This theory of gender also rejects notions of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity (Nayar 91-92). Thus it is believed that gender and its meaning depend on location. Since gender demands and depends on repeated performance, it cannot be fixed. One cannot step outside the performance to be objective.

Sometimes sex and gender are assumed to be the same but actually they are not. Sex is biological, and includes anatomy and physiology. It is a biological difference between male and female human animals, while gender is the social difference between males and females role or men's and women's personalities (Connell 33). The reproductive system of men and women are biological, but they are invested with particular meaning through a social process. Let's take a simple biological fact: women have biological capacity to bear the children. There is no dispute about it. But there are some values associated with child bearing. Now let's take the values associated with the biological act of child-bearing: Motherhood becomes a symbol of the true 'female'; child bearing becomes the central role for women to perform; and nurturing a child is the women's natural job.

Here we observe that none of these values are biological rather they are social values attributed to biological acts. This means that the women's biology and biological functions are evaluated, determined and governed not merely as biology but from the social values attributed to them. This attribution of values is what constitutes gender.

Gender as Feminine and Masculine Personality:

Nancy Chodorow has criticized social learning theory as too simplistic to explain gender differences. She holds that gender is a matter of having feminine and masculine personalities that develop in early infancy as responses to prevalent parenting practices. She says that gender personalities develop because women tend to be the primary caretaker of small children. Mother (or other prominent female) tends to care for infants; infant male and female psychic development differs. The mother-daughter relationship differs from the mother-son relationship because mothers are more likely to identify with their daughters than their sons. This unconsciously prompts the mother to encourage her son to psychologically individuate himself from her thereby prompting him to develop well defined and rigid ego boundaries. However, the mother unconsciously discourages the daughter from individuating herself thereby prompting her to develop flexible and blurry ego boundaries, finally producing feminine and masculine persons (202-06). This perspective has its root in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, although Chodorow's approach differs in many ways from Freud's.

Chodorow thinks that these gender differences should and can be changed. Feminine and masculine personalities play a crucial role in women's oppression since they make females overtly attentive to the need of others and males emotionally deficient. In order to correct the situation, both male and female parents should be equally involved in parenting (214).

Major Critics:**Mary Wollstonecraft:**

In an age where labor of women is dominated by the labor of men, Wollstonecraft has given the first major theoretical exploration of gender inequality. Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) has rejected the established notion that men are superior to women and women are naturally weaker to men. She is of the view that because of the lack of education which keeps women in a secondary position is the main reason of unequal nature of gender relation. She holds that women must be treated as equals because they

play a very important role in the society namely bringing up children. Women should not restrict themselves merely becoming wives to their husbands but they should also try to become a companion to their husbands.

She is one of the first theorists to propound the idea that gender roles are social, not natural. Thus the love for ornaments, romance or beauty in women is not natural. Women are socialized and trained to believe that these things are the things which make them actually feminine. This transformed idea that 'femininity is not natural rather it is social' is Wollstonecraft's main contribution. She is thus one of the theorists who moved away from a biological notion of gender to a social one where she perceives social norms, values, laws, and cultural practices as demanding, imposing and recommending particular forms of behaviour from women.

Virginia Woolf:

Virginia Woolf explores gender relation in her works like *A Room of one's own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). She proposed that the patriarchal education system and reading practices restrict women readers from reading as women. They have been trained to read the things from men's point of view. Male critics often reject women's texts because they consider it to be minor and domestic.

Woolf proposed that authorship itself is gender based. The language which is offered to women is patriarchal and inherently sexist. And the women writers are forced to use this sexist language, the language which does not express women's experiences, because they do not have other language at their command. The literary models- diction, realism, linearity, order etc. which is considered as true aesthetics, are all male- generated. And those works that do not consist these qualities are often rejected by male authors.

Sigmund Freud:

Freud believes that a person develops through their sexuality. And for Freud the male is the centre of all discussion, and the female is only an adjunct. Freud anticipated this charge by arguing that psychoanalysis cannot deal with

anything other than phallogocentric because its analysis is of a human society that is male-centered. The mother child relationship or the development of sexuality cannot be seen without the figure of the father, and hence the significance of the phallus.

Freud was notoriously uninterested in women's sexuality. In his work on the *Oedipus Complex* he proposed that as children, the little boy and girl, initially share the same sexual history: the desire for the mother. With time, they recognize the phallus is what distinguishes the father. Here the boy acquires the castration complex-that unless he gives up his love for phallusless mother his father might castrate him- and strive to represent the phallus himself. The girl is furious with the mother for lacking the phallus, transfer her love to the father – object, and strives to have the phallus. The girl, therefore, goes through life suffering from a penis-envy and organ-inferiority (Nayar 69-70). He also claims that- “Women are mutilated and must learn to accept their lack of a penis (deformity)” (Horney 19).

Simone de Beauvoir:

In her most famous book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir argues that men are able to mystify women. The mystification and stereotyping was instrumental in creating patriarchy. She argues that women, in turn, accepted this stereotype, and are thus instruments of their own oppression. She is of the view that Man is the Subject and the Women the Other. Women are always the negative of the men, where man is the ideal, the norm and the woman the deviant or the Other, who tries to seek perfection by trying to be as much like the man as possible. Women were measured by the standard of men and found 'inferior'. Man is the Subject and the Women the Other (Nayar 80).

De Beauvoir's major thought is that there is no 'essence' of a woman; a woman is constructed as such by men and society. As she puts it: 'One is not born a woman but becomes one' (276). Her main idea is that biological sex and social gender are not accidental: patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain an inequality between men and women. Patriarchy says that women

are unequal to men-an argument that naturalizes inequality as a pre-ordained condition of biology itself. De Beauvoir says that while sexual difference is real and unalterable, it cannot be the grounds for injustice and inequality. She proposes that women must take charge of their own choice. Instead of being the negative, inferior Other, they must try to become Subjects. They need not to restrict themselves by the rules of patriarchy. (Nayar 80).

Michael Foucault:

Foucault's treatment of power and its relation to the body and sexuality has provided feminist social and political theorists with some useful conceptual tools for the analysis of the social construction of gender and sexuality and contributed to the critique of essentialism within feminism. Foucault's identification of the body as the principle target of power has been used by feminists to analyze contemporary forms of social control over women's bodies and mind.

At fundamental level, a notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women because biological differences between the sexes are the foundation that has served to ground and legitimize gender inequality. By means of an appeal to historical biological characteristics, the idea that women are inferior to men is naturalized and legitimized. This involves two related conceptual moves. Firstly, women's body is judged inferior with reference to norms and ideals based on men's physical capacities and secondly biological functions are collapsed into social characteristics. While traditionally men have been thought to be capable of transcending the level of the biological through the use of their rational faculties. Women have tended to be defined entirely in terms of their physical capacities for reproduction and motherhood.

Helene Cixous:

Hélène Cixous is a French feminist critic who has already left an indelible mark on feminist literary theory. To give an overall summary of what she has offered in the field of feminist theory, it can be said that she puts forth the idea that there is a male-centered (or what she calls "phallogentric") discourse, which

feminist theory challenges and ultimately surpasses in its critique. Cixous is most widely known for her concept of “écriture féminine.” She first coined *écriture féminine* in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), where she asserts that Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” because their sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression.

The idea that we can have a “feminine” writing suggests that there can also be a “masculine” writing, and Cixous was concerned with challenging what she found to be a Western tendency toward a male-centered understanding of identity and the world. She suggests that just as female sexuality can challenge the phallogentric male sexuality; there is a feminine kind of writing that can liberate from the oppressive, male-centered discourse that has characterized Western philosophy. For Cixous, “écriture féminine” presents the possibility of a new kind of limitlessness and an alternative discourse to its precursors.

Similarly, a well-known feminist Julia Kristiva also focuses her attention on language and analyzes the ways in which meaning is produced. She adds that language as we commonly think of it is a decidedly male realm, which therefore only represents a world from the male point of view.

Judith Butler:

It is considered that being feminine and desiring men are assumed to be expressions of one’s gender as a woman. Butler denies this and holds that gender is really performative. It is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is...instituted...through a *stylized repetition of [habitual] acts*” (179): through wearing certain gender-coded clothing, walking and sitting in certain gender-coded ways, styling one's hair in gender-coded manner and so on. Gender is not something one is, it is something one does; it is a sequence of acts, a doing rather than a being. She also argues that repeatedly engaging in ‘feminising’ and ‘masculinising’ acts congeals gender thereby making people falsely think of gender as something they naturally are. Gender only comes into being through these gendering acts.

In this way Butler by analyzing gender proposes that gender cannot be treated as an essence, but must be taken as a 'performative construct'. She writes in her best known work, *Gender Trouble*: 'there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result' (25). And later 'the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality' (136).

By reading Simone de Beauvoir's claim 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman', Butler argues that woman is a process, a becoming, rather than a fixed identity. This ongoing process is constituted by discourse. Gender is a series of acts within specific discourse of law, medicine, religion, family, sexuality that a body performs, which in turn identifies her as a woman. One cannot, Butler suggests, act or acquire an identity outside this system of discourse.

Using Foucault, Butler proposes that critique must focus on the way power structures 'produce' women. She writes that identities are the effects of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffused points of origin. Like Foucault. She produces that gender is not a fact or natural, but the effect of discourses that are controlled by power structure. Central to this discourse and performative construction is language. Butler argues that there is no gender identity prior to or outside of language because identity is the effect of discourse.

Conclusion:

On the basis of the foregoing discussion it is evident that the scholars are still trying to find out the best, the most useful, or even the correct definition of gender. However, it may be concluded at some point by saying that gender is basically the culturally and socially constructed role, responsibility, privilege, relation, and expectations of women and men. Since it is not an inborn phenomenon rather socially constructed quality of men and women, it is not fixed; it can be changed. It is clear that feminine and masculine personalities develop in early infancy due to parenting practices. Sometimes gender and sex

are considered synonymous to each other but actually they are not. Sex is a biological make up of a male or a female. It is something everyone is born with and does not change over time whereas gender is constructed and can be changed over time. For example- a woman can be masculine and a man can be feminine in quality but their biological pattern cannot be changed. This is the basic difference between gender and sex. Thus, the concept of gender and sexuality has been variedly discoursed in different disciplines including art and literature with an emancipating approach towards men, women and LGBT.

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