



Feminist Perspective on Patriarchy: Its Impact on the Construction of Femininity and Masculinity

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Abstract

The concept of patriarchy has traditionally been used to analyze women's oppression, subordination, and subjection in a social order where men are perceived as superior to women. Gender inequality has been the chief area of feminist concern and protest since the first movement of feminism. Subsequently, feminists demanded gender parity and resisted discrimination based on sex, class, caste, race, and sexual orientation. It surfaced that roles ascribed to men and women were an outcome of socialization that had been deeply internalized leading to socially accepted notions of femininity and masculinity. I will explore the concept of patriarchy and discuss how such a social template for men and women becomes an oppressive injunction, that is subscribed to for seeking acceptability and validation. Perspectives of sociologists, such as Max Weber, Sylvia Walby, Alan Johnson, and Anthony Giddens, will be incorporated to explain the concept of Patriarchy, along with the writings of feminists such as Simone De Beauvoir and Judith Butler.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Identity, Masculinity, Femininity, Waves of Feminism, Social Structure.

Introduction

The term 'social structure' was popularly used by the Sociologist Herbert Spencer (1850) in his analysis of society. It had hitherto been widely used in anatomical studies but in Sociology, it refers to an orderly and pattered relationship between elements of society. These constituent elements are the human beings living at a point in time in any culture. Each culture displays specific needs, which could be biological, social, economic, or psychological, and these, in turn, impart an element of universality and acceptability to these structures. Such an organization leads to certain general functions, which can be found in any society regardless of its ethos, history, or cultural variability. (Rao, 2006). The nature of a specific structure may vary; a family, for instance, may be polygamous or monogamous, and the economy may be capitalist or socialist, but the basic need to have a particular structure is pervasive. Such an organized society acquires a specific culture. Rao (2006) cites the definition of culture, given by Edward B. Tylor, as a "complex whole that includes language, belief, art, morals, law, and customs acquired by man as a member of the society" (p. 348). Culture is shared, social, learnt, transmissive, continuous, cumulative, dynamic, and adaptive. It is a system of behaviour shared by the members of society. Within each culture, the primary constituent is the family, the most essential of all social groupings. Family as an institution is pervasive and universal, found in all societies, primitive or civilized, ancient or modern. It has been taken from a Latin word,

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famulus, which means servant. Rao (2006) points out, “In Roman law, the word denoted a group of producers and slaves and other servants, as well as members connected by common descent or marriage. Thus originally, family constituted of a man and woman with child or children and servants.” (p. 349) Its essential functions include reproduction, maintenance, placement, and socialization. This category can further be classified as matriarchal or patriarchal, each having a mother and father respectively as the head of the family, or it could be a nuclear or a joint family. However, each family is invariably characterized by specific roles performed by men and women, which reflect the social structure and is a microcosmic representation of the larger society. Often, the male member holds the predominant position as the provider of resources because of the structuring of the society. Accordingly, the woman takes the subordinate position. For this paper, I will focus on patriarchy as a concept, and its consequential dynamics in gender formation, in developing the notions of femininity and masculinity, and existing gender inequality between men and women.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social construct which endorses the superiority of men over women. It has been defined differently by sociologists and employed extensively by feminists as a tool to analyze gender relations. Weber (1978) defined it as a system of government in which men rule over society as the head of the household and dominate not only women but also men who are younger in their years. Johnson (2005) emphasizes that the word cannot be used as a synonym for men; instead, it refers to a society where men and women participate. He further asserts that “society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centred*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women” (p.5). In such a society, positions of power and authority are wielded by men. Such dominance creates power differences between men and women, and the core cultural idea about what is desirable and acceptable becomes associated with men and masculinity (Johnson, 2005). Walby (1989) offers a candid, forthright definition stating that patriarchy is a “system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (p. 214). The term social structure is significant as it underlines that patriarchy is not about an individual man or woman. However, it is about the society which involves groups of men and women. It is not an outcome of biological determinism, which endows men with superlative power; it is instead, manufactured by society so that men enjoy more privilege than women in the public and private spheres of life. Becker (1999) observes that it is not only women who are in the oppressed section. Instead, it is also men, not only those who are younger, but men of all ages who are ‘different’, who do not display hyper-masculine traits, and are therefore rejected as being ‘sissy’ or ‘feeble’, as being ‘not men enough’. Becker states:

Human beings, whether men, women, or children, do not flourish when hyper-masculinity is glorified and traditional feminine qualities... are denigrated. Nor do human beings flourish when all males are pressured to adopt hyper-masculine attributes and repress feminine ones, and all females are pressured to adopt traditionally feminine attributes and press masculine ones. (p. 22)

Patriarchy has been employed in feminist studies and in sociology and anthropology as a category through which the social structure involving the relationship between men and women could be understood and analyzed. Across cultures, men have enjoyed a superior status, further reinforced through religious practices, rituals, narratives, myths, and mythology. It has become deeply internalized and ingrained in human consciousness. Even in the present times, in our country, it is not uncommon to see the premium that is given to the institution of

marriage, which is ‘arranged’ by the family, in which the girl is ‘shown’ to the prospective groom. The decision to select or reject rests with the prospective groom or his family members. The ritual of ‘kanyadaan’ is an integral part of Hindu marriages, which suggests giving away the daughter to the groom. Similarly, men are evaluated based on their masculine traits, earning capacity, and societal position. The idea of femininity and masculinity, and the respective roles attributed to each, is predefined and unquestioningly subscribed to by most of the men and women.

In *Gender Knot*, Johnson (2005) maintains that “control and domination” are the core principles of Patriarchy. He observes:

Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control; to fear other men's ability to control and harm them; and to identify being in control as their best defence against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire. In this sense, although we usually think of Patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what happens *among men*. The oppression of women is undoubtedly an essential part of Patriarchy, but paradoxically, it may not be the *point* of Patriarchy. (p. 28)

Women, as well as men, bear the brunt of the patriarchal order. The image of a poor male farmer, a labourer, or a man in a subordinate position in an office setting being bullied by his superior is familiar enough in films and social media. Power dynamics are at play here; the social structure that invests authority in a hierarchal order invariably evinces exploitation of those with lesser agency and control. Attributes of maleness, like “competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as vulnerability)” (Johnson, 2005, p. 7), are acquired through socialization. Johnson continues to assert that, “In contrast, qualities such as cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued and culturally associated with femininity and femaleness” (p. 7). Identities are not an outcome of biological determinism. Some men do not subscribe to such formulations of gendered identity, while others pattern themselves after the socially constructed notions of gender. Johnson (2005) elaborates on the same idea:

Note that male dominance does not mean that all men are powerful. Most men in patriarchies are not influential individuals and spend their days doing what other men tell them to do, whether they want to or not. Male dominance does mean that where there is a concentration of power, men are the ones most likely to have it—they are the default. (p. 6)

Patriarchy has an impact on the behaviour of both men and women, it shapes and constructs their identities, which in most cases is also detrimental to their wellbeing as a person.

The Four Waves of Feminism

Feminist studies generally include the trajectory of the women’s movement since the first wave of feminism. The ‘wave’ metaphor is generally used to identify the phases of the feminist movement and helps offer a framework of periodization. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 in New York, when hundreds of men and women rallied for women’s equality, is marked as the beginning of the first wave. Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the *Declaration of Rights and*

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Sentiments (1848), for which she used Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* as a model and employed language like that of colonial revolutionaries. She demanded why the treatment of women was at variance from that outlined in the official manifesto of the *Declaration of Independence*. The primary demand outlined in the manifesto was to win electoral rights so that women could have representation in the halls of justice. Marriage implied the man had irrefutable rights over his wife's property and wages. Divorce laws, too, were in the favour of men. Women had little access to education, and all other 'avenues to wealth and distinction' were also curtailed. Stanton puts down the demand for women in *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (1848) as:

We are told these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal: that their creator endows them with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that governments are instituted deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed to secure these rights. (par. 2)

The wave metaphor was first used on March 10, 1968, when an article by Martha Weinman Lear in *New York Times* came under the headline "The Second Feminist Wave". Lear announced that feminism was still pertinent and used the metaphor 'wave' to refer to the resurgence of women's power after the first wave had ebbed with the glorious victory of the suffragettes. The metaphor caught on and linked the 1960s and 1970s movement with that of the suffragettes in the early twentieth century. It suggested that women's struggle was not about specific individuals but about universal issues, initiating the idea of 'sisterhood'. It moved further towards seeking social equality. The momentum also responded to the contemporary social milieu when representations were being made against the Vietnam War, Black Civil Rights, and Gay and Lesbian rights. It proclaimed the slogan, 'personal is political', and sought to do away with casual sexism in society, harassment at the workplace, discrimination in wages on the grounds of gender, unpaid household work and objectification of women as sexual objects.

Some of the most significant texts associated with the second wave are Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969). Beauvoir's contention that one is not 'born a woman but is made one' implies the role of society and culture in forming women's identity. Friedan dwells on the 'unnamed problem' faced by the suburban American women who enjoyed all facilities of modern society yet were unhappy, as they were restricted from enjoying certain rights over self and body. The second wave brought forth demands over reproductive rights, body issues, and domestic violence and dwelt over the essential nature of women and its associated discourses. It was realized that women's individual experiences were a part of the standard narrative of women. Consciousness-raising activities were organized to address the systemic nature of the discursive construction of women. Objectification of women and stereotyping of social roles were resisted. The second wave also witnessed issues about race, class, and ethnicity. Intersectionality became an integral part as it was realized that the travails of the white upper class could not be seen as homogeneous experiences of all women. The white, middle-class, heterosexual agenda was gradually replaced by a call for giving space to differentiated identity politics based on the intersections of gender, class, race, and sexuality. The second wave witnessed a critique of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the limiting role assigned to women as wives and mothers.

The third wave is usually associated with the 1990s and is deeply influenced by postcolonial and post-structural outlook. The accepted notions of womanhood, heteronormativity, sexuality, body, and gender were destabilized. It was also marked by a

celebration of femininity and the female body. These ‘girls’ came across as empowered agents who rejected victimization by men and defined feminine beauty as subjects and owners of their bodies, not as objects seeking male endorsement. Martha Rampton (2015), in her article *Four Waves of Feminism*, notes:

Most third-wavers refuse to identify as “feminists” and reject the word they find limiting and exclusionary. Grrl-feminism tends to be global and multicultural, and it shuns simple answers or artificial categories of identity, gender, and sexuality. Its transversal politics means that differences such as ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc., are celebrated and recognized as dynamic, situational, and provisional. (par. 12)

The third wave critiques Eurocentric feminism and has a more global approach. It concerns the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on women of colour and third-world countries. It is primarily centred around ways to think about gender and its consequences. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Woolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990), and Hook’s *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000) are significant contributions associated with the third wave, which bring out the ideas about gender performativity, perception of beauty in the capitalist market, and black identity.

The fourth wave of feminism is hugely defined by technology and social media. Kira Cochrane (2013) explains how the new age movement has gone to the streets and the web. In her article in *The Guardian*, she recounts how activists like Laura Bates started a web page, “Everyday sexism project” (par. 2), which had participation from 17 countries worldwide. Bates believes that feminism is defined by “pragmatism, inclusion and humor” (par. 3). Online campaigns are held against sexism, racism and sexist stereotyping, rape, and sexual exploitation. The “me too” movement and the ‘Nirbhaya’ case are examples of such consciousness-raising, which has become possible in the technology-driven world. The term ‘intersectionality’, coined by Kimberle Cranshaw in 1989, was intended to show how multiple oppressions intersect, but “today’s feminists generally seem to see it as an attempt to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized, and a framework for recognizing how class, race, age, ability, sexuality, gender and other issues combine to affect women’s experience of discrimination” (Cochrane, 2013, par. 17)

The discourse around gender identity has been dynamic. While it was subjected to biological determinism in the initial stages of the movement, it gradually acquired multiple meanings, which will be elaborated upon in the following section of the paper.

Femininity and Masculinity

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir challenged the deterministic essentialism attributed to gender based on biological sex. The idea that ‘one is not born a woman but becomes one’ emphasizes the role of the environment in the construction of identity. Sociologist Giddens also underscores the function of society and culture in gender formation. While sex refers to physiological markers of male and female anatomy, “gender is linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity; it is not necessarily a direct product of an individual’s biological sex” (Giddens, 2006, p. 458). He further elaborates on gender socialization which is the “learning of gender roles with the help of social agencies such as the family and the media” (Giddens, 2006, p. 459). Children internalize the norms which correspond with their sex. Gender differences are culturally produced rather than biologically determined and inequalities between men and women are a result of socialization into different roles. Social forces reward or restrain behaviour through positive and negative sanctions. This kind of behaviour formation is propounded by the functionalist approach, which has been

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contradicted by sociologists and feminists who opine that, like gender lacks a fixed essence, sex too is subject to social forces which “shape and alter it in many ways” (Giddens, 2006, p. 461).

While women’s studies and feminists have been interested in femininity and the female identity, sociologists have also been intrigued by the changing notions of masculinity, how male identities are constructed and what impact socially prescribed roles have on men’s behaviour. In *Masculinities* (2005), Cornell integrated the concepts of masculinity and femininity with patriarchy. Giddens (2006) elaborates on the idea of Cornell that patriarchal powers define gender relations; from the individual to the institutional level, masculinity and femininity are all arranged around patriarchy. According to Cornell, labor (both at home and in the capitalist market), power (authority, position), and sexual relations are the three realms within which gender relations are constituted. Giddens (2006) describes how Cornell has identified ‘gender hierarchy’, which comprises ‘hegemonic masculinity’ at the top. It exercises its hegemony not through brute force but through cultural representation, such as through media. It is associated with power, wealth, physical toughness, authority, and heterosexuality and is perceived as the ideal type of masculinity that few men can display. Those men who do not possess it but benefit from it embody ‘complicit masculinity’. Next in the hierarchy are ‘subordinated masculinities and femininities, ‘homosexual masculinity’, ‘emphasized femininity’ and ‘resistant femininity’ (Giddens, 2006, p. 466). Emphasized femininity is oriented to accommodate the interests of men through compliance and nurturance; young women do so through sexual receptivity, and older women through notions of motherhood.

However, Johnson (2005) is at variance with this understanding of gender roles. He maintains that femininity and masculinity are relational and subject to change. A passive wife who is subservient to her husband could be an assertive mother, like an authoritative husband, and a father could be a compliant employee in his workplace. Humans are not self-contained, autonomous personalities but relational beings who respond to the social environment as the moment demands. However, “cultural magic” propagates certain male and female traits through its myths and ideology (p. 87). Johnson (2005) elaborates:

What is culturally valued is associated with masculinity and maleness, and what is devalued is associated with femininity and femaleness, regardless of the reality of men’s and women’s lives. Courage and heroism, for example, are culturally associated with masculinity...Since courage is valued in a patriarchal culture, it is identified with men in expressions such as “having balls.” At the same time, cowardice is routinely associated with being female, as reflected in the practice of insulting a man by calling him a “girl,” a “sissy,” or a “pussy.” There are no equivalent female images for courage— “having ovaries” has yet to catch on, but it is not that unusual to hear brave women described as “having balls.” (p. 89)

It is believed that masculinity and femininity are ‘tools’ used to maintain social control and perpetuate patriarchy. Johnson (2005) further states:

In patriarchal ideology, each gender is assigned an immutable nature fixed in the body and permanently set apart from the other.... The patriarchal vision of men and women as different types of human beings whose differences assume cosmic importance in social life has little to do with the differences themselves. It has a lot to do with perpetuating Patriarchy, its core values, and the consequences they produce. (pp. 96-97)

The very notions of femininity and masculinity have little to do with our identity as human beings and the meaning we invest in our lives. Instead, it is a mechanism to disseminate and propagate the patriarchal social order.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1969) is a path breaking work on the concept of gender construction and gender identity. She problematizes the essentialism attributed to biological sex. While Beauvoir stated that gender is socially formed, Butler asserts that even sex is not a fixed category. She rejects the universalism and the essentialism attached to gender and maintains that identities are fluid and that spatial and temporal factors determine the notions of masculinity and femininity. Butler employs post-structural and post-modernist ideas in her approach as she develops the ideas of 'performativity'. Gender, she asserts, is a cultural process that involves the production and reproduction of identities—she 'troubles' the accepted ideas about gender formation by deconstructing the normative representation of the concept. An individual responds to specific codes that are embedded in the society, in the form of politics, economy, religion, race, and language, that is, to the culture, which is an asymmetric entanglement between abstraction (a discursive design that is operational) and materiality (body as a site, language etc.). Butler elaborates on the politics of representation and believes that dominant gender production merges seamlessly with construction through cultural codes, which are so naturalized that they become deeply ingrained in human consciousness. She gives the example of heteronormativity, which presents heterosexuality as normative and any other form as deviant. She even questions the essential nature of womanhood:

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis of feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of Patriarchy or masculine domination. (p. 5)

The idea of universal patriarchy has been criticized for its inability to account for the workings of gender oppression in concrete cultural contexts. She also rejects her idea of the gender/sex binary because such an analysis retains the gender/sex mimetic relation, which establishes that gender is determined by biological sex alone.

Butler (1969) presents gender construction as being independent of sex, thereby making it a free-flowing artifice. The notion of a male body embodying masculinity and a female body embodying femininity is rejected by her, as she maintains that masculinity and femininity are behavioural codes that are cultivated and developed by culture. This brings in the idea of gender performativity. She defines gender as:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture of time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to normative telos of deferential closure. (p. 22)

Gender is an outcome of specific codes in the culture; it is at play and is fluid and performative. She rejects essentializing tendencies towards womanhood and manhood. Butler argues that identity categories of sex, gender, sexuality, desire, and body are structured by the external environment and are products of heterosexuality and are phallogocentric. Identity categories are 'fictional' and are products of the discursive regime of power/knowledge. These categories are 'performative' as they produce the identity that is represented to be considered as "intelligible genders" (Butler, 1969, p. 22). Jagger (2008) explains the concept as:

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Performance of gender produces the illusion of such a core or essence. As we shall see, this becomes a cultural effect, a product of particular signifying practices. She also argues that this performance has a temporal aspect as it involves the 'ritualized repetition of conventions', which are also 'shaped and compelled by compulsory heterosexuality'. (p. 21)

Gender, masculinity, and femininity are impersonations of an ideal self, which no one inhabits, and these concepts, too, are not stable but are fluid and dynamic. Performativity entails the repetition of oppressive, naturalized gender norms of socially established meanings. This 'performativity', or enactment of gender is thus, socially approved and politically regulated rather than being dictated by some internal 'self'. Not being stable, gender is constituted in time through this 'stylized' repetition of acts. This repetition merely creates an illusion of identity as a stable category. Butler (1969) further argues:

Because there is neither an 'essence,' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender. Without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (p. 140)

Through this repeated act, one becomes unbecomes and rebecomes, i.e., the identity keeps transforming under social regulation emphasizing gender coherence. In this manner, Butler disrupts the grand narratives of phallogocentrism, heteronormativity, patriarchy and its associated notions of gender, masculinity, and femininity.

Conclusion

From the above arguments, drawn from sociology, feminist writings, and cultural studies, it can be concluded that patriarchy is an organizing structure in a society which imparts primacy to men over women, leading to gender inequality, disparity, exploitation, and oppression of women. It is at the same time also detrimental to the well being of men, who are adversely judged for not displaying hegemonic masculine traits. Initially gender was thought of as being essentialist, a direct manifestation of biological sex. However, in the post-modern, post-structuralist understanding, it is presented as not being stable; as not having a quintessential form that can be replicated, but as being subjected to the notions of a meta-narrative that encourages compliance and adherence to normative behaviour. This normativity is codified in language, religion, and cultural practices, but is not a monolith and is liable to undergo constant transformation through diverse permutations and combinations. Masculinity and femininity are thus 'performative' acts through which men and women establish their identities. However, such an expression of oneself is restrictive, conformist and culturally enforced that propels the heterosexual project. It is disempowering as it does not allow conscious choice, lacks voluntarism, and is oppressive – both to men and women.

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Bio-note

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