**Kinship an Gender**

**INTRODUCTION**

Anthropological studies on kinship have carried a gender bias through their reliance on primarily male informants as sources of information in their role as interpreters of their cultural tradition. For instance, in India where successful imposition of restrictions on women’s mobility, visibility and voice is seen as a testimony of status and honour, the women’s perspective is inaccessible to the researcher. Thus, although kinship plays out in the domestic realm, which is propagated as the domain of women, several kinship accounts remain one-sided because they only account for the male perspective. Since social codes do not allow easy access to women, the views of men are assumed to represent whole of society. Women’s desires, roles and status are open to male interpretation and control. The women’s own view on kinship ties remains largely unexplored in classical anthropological studies.

It was only with the coming of feminist anthropologist that gender and kinship came to be bound together due to the realisation among both anthropologists and feminists that theorising kinship by discounting women as a contributing category would make kinship accounts incomplete and biased in favour of men. In this unit, we will examine the gender, bias, feminist contribution that led to the re-examination of kinship.

**CLASSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND QUESTION OF GENDER**

Most of the early monographs in anthropology were grounded in perspectives determined by the interests of largely male ethnographers.There was an absence of any documentation on women’s involvement in households and domestic arrangements, trade, exchange, labour, religion, and economic life.The difference between men and women was assumed as natural and difference determined economic and political structures.

In classical anthropology, the study of kinship was usually centred on males and this is evident in the following:

1. Evolutionary models explain the origin and development of human society by giving weight to the male role of hunting without much consideration of female gathering

2. Descent approach where the starting point of kinship relation is the male ego

3. Alliance theories where marriage system was analysed in terms of the exchanges men make using women to weave their networks.

Since most anthropologists were men themselves, access to ethnographic field sites largely occurred through male community members who would then serve as the experts of their social milieu?It was naively assumed that the male cultural perspective was equally representative of the female one. This oversight also stemmed from a surprising unwillingness to ask about matters of sexuality or investigate the gendered dimensions of power and prestige in traditional communities.There was an unwillingness to ask about matters of sexuality or investigate the gendered dimensions of power and prestige in traditional communities.

**10.2.1 The Male-Centric View within Kinship and Patriarchal Hold on Kinship Roles**

Gender inequality emerges from the fact that men exercise their domination and control within the domestic sphere through the practice of patriarchy.“Patriarchy rests on defined notions of masculine and feminine, is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men’s choices, desires and interests over and above those of women in their lives and is sustained by social relationships and cultural practices that celebrate heterosexuality, female fertility and motherhood and valorise female subordination to masculine authority” (V. Geetha, 2007: 8)

Patriarchy, operating in both the public and private sphere of society, empowers men to make rules and use their access to the public arena to make norms that are disadvantageous to women while proving advantageous to men. Following this, kinship rules are based on the male perceptions of kinship roles and responsibilities. Ideal womanhood is represented by what men defined as acceptable and expected of women. Thus, women’s position within the family is exalted through domestic roles of mother, sister, daughter and wife with emphasis on responsibilities towards care and nurture of the family and household.

Women’s experience of being considered secondary to men is seen in numerous forms--- disempowering childhood socialisation, limited mobility, lack of access to education, healthcare, nutrition, property and inheritance rights and representation in law, politics and the workplace. According to Bina Agarwal, the household and family, far from its function as equaliser, supporter and insurer of justice, becomes the focal point of disturbingly unequal gender relations by placing men contribution in production over women’s role in reproduction (V.Geetha, 2007:74). Even women who do contribute to production are seen as adding almost secondary, negligible value.

According to Rajni Palriwala (1999), who studied the role of patriliny in influencing women’s access to property and residence in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, the reason behind women’s compliance to unequal gender codes is their economic dependence on men, caused either by complete absence or minimalistic and unacknowledged income generating opportunities. It is thus expected that women would be submissive, unaware and unassertive in their social existence.

**2.2 Descent and Gender**

Descent groups form the entry point into accessing jural authority and geneology. These become the basis of political organisation. Where patrilineal descent is followed, men exercise authority within the household and over property because descent is traced in the male line. The position of women tends to be low.

Even in societies following matrilineal descent, where descent is traced through the female, her brother has control over property is vested in the hands of the eldest brother. So here too, women’s position is lower to a man in terms of enjoying authority. However, variation can exist within different regions following matrilineal descent. In matrilineal societies, property is passed down the female line, household organisation and family rituals centre on female relatives, making women more autonomous. According to TiplutNongbri, among the Khasis in Meghalaya, lack of bias towards women in inheritance rights may not always be advantageous because resentful men may always contest this right. On the other hand, Leela Dube points out that in the Lakshadweep Islands, matriliny is welcomed by men as they feel their interests are also taken care of in this system (V.Geetha, 2007).

**10.2.3 The Universality of the Public/Private Domains**

In terms of the gendered dichotomy of the public/private domains, men’s status depends upon their identification with the public sphere of production resulting in their exalted identification within the family as breadwinners. Women’s accomplishments are weighed in the private or domestic sphere of reproduction as mothers and nurturers and thus kept their access to work, politics minimum if not altogether absent.

The assumption that there exist two distinct domains where women and men operate according to their socially designated separate roles and responsibilities is problematic. It ignores the diversity of societies that refute these dichotomies in the face of female headed households, absentee fathers, stay-at-home fathers, poverty; making double incomes mandatory and thus not affording women the ‘luxury’ of the domestic domain alone.

**10.2.4 Conflicting Identities of Women within Kinship**

New studies in anthropology give women a chance to share the experiences of their lived reality and thus provide competing images to women’s assumed subordinate nature. One such aspect of women’s lives has to do with the assumed complex character of their fertility and sexuality brought together under the purview of societal norms.

Motherhood is associated with emphasis on women’s fertility. However, acknowledgement of female sexuality remains rare due to its association with shame. The varied connotations that are subsumed in the image of the ideal woman in India covers a wide spectrum---from their association with procreation to their image as keepers of male honour. While the former carries the expectation of active sexual interest necessary for attainment of motherhood, the latter emphasises maintenance of chastity and purity, especially. This split image of women is considered conflicting and unreasonably demanding of women, believed to keep them in a constant state of flux with regard to fulfilment of kin role expectations. For instance, based on whether they are in the marital or natal home, women enjoy differing privileges and constraints as wives and sisters. Women’s contrasting roles within the kinship system of status are based on the divergent natal and marital relationships, that is, daughters and sisters on the one hand and wives and son’s wives on the other. This shows the idea of conflict between women’s sexuality and fertility.

This is well explained in the case of many societies where women’s kin roles prioritise fertility, since motherhood is the primary duty of a married woman. However, overt sexual desire must never be expressed by women. Thus, women’s voices remain marginalised in addressing behaviour imposed by kinship norms. Kinship rules remain male oriented. The demand to remain ritually chaste only applies to women, not men. **10.3 RE-EXAMINING KINSHIP FROM GENDER LENS**

Anthropologists keen on elaborating undermined realms of kinship found gender to be an unexplored dimension within kinship studies. This quest gained popularity in recent years with Schneider’s efforts to draw attention to the specific ways in which variant cultures at a given point of time and the same culture at different points of time defines kinship. **Feminists**began their quest to understand the social construction of gender by examining ethnographies for information on the position of women. Most of what they found regarding women’s lives was contained in chapters on kinship, marriage and family.Thus, it was understood that kinship was an ideal starting point for understanding women’s place in society. The way to make kinship studies holistic in gender terms required placing women at the centre, as subjects of inquiry and as active agents in the gathering of knowledge (Strathern, 1987:277).

The resultant ethnographic work, undertaken on gender, recast and remodelled notions about both gender and kinship. The effort that had started with an attempt to simply ensure inclusion and representation of women in anthropological accounts opened up an entirely new realm of knowledge based on examination of women’s perception of their own lives. Through increased attention to women within the purview of kinship, several stereotypes were broken and realities were made known.

**10.3.1 Challenges to Existing Knowledge**

Recent studies following on the cultural approach examined the link between kinship and gender. These studies have afforded valuable insights into the working of gender and its influence of kinship like descent, property rights, residence, expectation of assistance from kin during crisis situations etc. however, several notions about gender norms and roles have also been challenged. Clarifications were required to dispel misleading accounts of kinship.

Assumptions regarding uniformity of gender organisation in kinship systems around the world, universality of meanings of masculinity, femininity and the third gender, acceptance of western equation between biological sex and culturally constituted gender roles rather than indigenous insights of a particular culture, the prominence and extent of patriarchy---all need to be re-examined to incorporate indigenous interpretations from societies studied before drawing conclusions regarding relationship between gender and kinship.The meaning of ‘power’ needs to be clarified before making claims to gender asymmetry. Historical changes that depicted the lack of isolation and stagnation of the social structure of a society due to interaction with external forces could be an important source of additional knowledge on kinship and gender (Tsing and Yanagisako, 1983:511).

**10.3.2 1970s Feminist on Kinship**

It was only by 1970s that feminist anthropology was formally recognized as a sub-discipline of anthropology. Feminist questioned some of the core assumptions in anthropology:

 Universal subordination of women

 Domestic vs public domain

 Universal binaries of nature vs culture

 Kinship centred around heterosexual relations and reproduction

 Father-son relations as reference point for conceptualising kinship

Universal subordination of women is often cited as one of the true cross - cultural universals, a pan cultural fact. Engels called it the “world historical defeat of women” even so the particulars of women’s roles, statuses, power, and value differ tremendously by culture. Gender differences and gender role assignment not universal but culturally specific. The dichotomy between the two spheres has been very durable in anthropology.It is present in the descent theory, alliance theory and studies of marriage transactions.It was through ethnographic information, as the domestic and politico-jural domains of Fortes’, suggested why women’s association with the ‘domestic’ might make them and their activities seem universally less valued than the activities and attributes of ‘public’ men. At the heart of kinship theory lies an analytic dichotomy between ‘domestic’ and ‘political-jural’ domains. This dichotomy used by Morgan and Fortes remained influential in anthropology and related discipline.

At the base of kinship theories lay a dichotomy and a separation between the domestic domain and the public/politico-jural domain. It is assumed that the domestic domain is largely marked by the mother-child bond and the basic constitution of this domain is ‘natural’ as compared to the public domain which is constituted of politico-jural facts.Again, it is assumed that the domestic domain is largely involved in fulfilling sexual and child-bearing roles and the public domain is related with authority, power, legal rules etc.

The domestic domain is therefore primarily associated with women and the public domain with men. Feminist anthropologists have shown that it is no longer adequate to view the two domain as separate.They question the view which associates women as bringing to kinship primarily a capacity for bearing children, while men bring primarily a capacity for participation in public life.Difference between men and women socially constructed to assign unequal position and role in society.

**10.4 FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING IN EARLY ANTHROPOLOGY**

The early feminist anthropologist produced a number of important works documenting the lives of women in areas which had previously been omitted from ethnographic accounts. Women’s involvement in households and domestic arrangements, trade, exchange, labour, religion, and economic life was interpreted in detail, making the gaps in previous cross-cultural studies all too visible. In this, we will look at the contribution of four anthropologist whose works provide the foundation for understanding the relation between kinship and gender.

**10.4.1Fredrich Engels- *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884)**

Engels argued that the traditional monogamous household was in fact a recent construct, closely bound up with capitalist societies. In primitive communism- there was no private property of land or materials and this meant that human relationships were based on egalitarian principles. Engels shows how the state machinery develops as classes arise, with the needs of one group (the ruling class) to protect its interests and its wealth.

Engles provided a historical evolutionary perspective by women were seen as shifting from free and equal productive members of society to subordinate and dependent wife and ward. The two main factors responsible for this change were firstly the growth of private property and secondly the emergence of family as institution for appropriation and exploitation.For Engels economic need is principal for defining the institution of family. Engels concluded that the absence of private property made men’s productive work and women’s household work of equal significance.

Karan Sack questions the way in which women are worse of in non-class societies. Also the argument that women became subordinate as a result of male private property (women are not the complete equals of men in non-class societies lacking private property).Capitalism has further extended class based inequality in gender relation by relegating women to the bottom of a social hierarchy.Sacks suggestion for solution for social equality-private family work must become public work.

**10.4.2 Margaret Mead**

Margaret Mead was one of the earliest feminist anthropology to have clearly differentiated between sex and gender as categories of anthropological thought. In her anthropological work, she separated the biological factors from the cultural factors that control human behavior and personality development. She analysed the pervasive sexual asymmetry that fit well with their reading of the ethnographic literature.

Her work. *'Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935) & Male and Female*(1949*)* was one of the first to critique a universal assumption of biologically determined male or female traits or roles.She argued that the relation between men and women were neither “natural” nor culturally universal rather femininity and masculinity were culturally specific.Temperamental differences between the sexes were culturally determined rather than innate biological. Different patterns of male and female behaviour in each of the cultures she studied.

**Three societies studied by Margret Mead**

***Arapesh-*** child-rearing responsibilities evenly divided among men and women

***Mundugumor***-a natural hostility exists between all members of the same sex”.

 ***Tchambuli***-While men were preoccupied with art the women had the real power, controlling fishing and manufacturing.

**Box 1 Three societies studied by Margret Mead**

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**10.5 FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGIST (1980S ONWARDS)**

Throughout the 20th century and the rise of sociocultural anthropology, the meaning and significance of gender to the discipline has shifted. In early ethnographic studies, gender was often synonymous with kinship or family, and a monograph might include just a single chapter on women or family issues.Feminist challenged the simple “add women and stir” model of ethnography and sought to bring attention to structural inequalities, the role of economic disparities, global dimensions to gender politics, the role of language, sexuality and masculinity studies, and health and human rights.

Feminist anthropologists turned to kinship studies for tools to understand women’s place in society and possibilities of change. Feminist anthropologists challenged the classical interpretations of gender and culture by situating women’s work at the centre of anthropological study. Feminist anthropology emerged in response to the recognition that across the sub-disciplines, anthropology operated within androcentric paradigms. Early questions ranged from identifying women in the anthropological record to explaining universal female subordination.

**10.5.1 Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako**

In 1987 Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Junko Yanagisako described their goal as putting gender "at the theoretical core of anthropology" by "calling into question the boundary between [the] two fields" of gender and kinship.Collier and Yanagisako questioned the degree to which discussions of women's lives were relegated to considerations of the domestic sphere and to reproductive function. They repudiated assumptions (explicit or implicit) that the maternal-child relation is invariant across time and space, and they cast suspicion on the tendency to see historical change as a factor relevant only to political and economic systems in the public domain, while familial life was presumed to be constant and unchanging. Finally, they discerned in structural-functionalist writings an erroneous presumption that all societies have institutional functions that are comparable, even when the forms of their institutions differ.

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**10.5.2 Marilyn Strathern**

She explores kinship relations after the coming of the new age reproductive technologies.This work is based on the late-twentieth century English culture, the consumer and their choice of procreation using new technologies. Herein, Strathern argues that the new technologies have brought a new meaning ‘nature’ which was earlier taken for granted. Technological developments have opened up avenues which were earlier not available to the consumer resulting in destabilisation of earlier notion of nature. She explores kinship relations after the coming of the new age reproductive technologies. This work is based on the late-twentieth century English culture, the consumer and their choice of procreation using new technologies. Herein, Strathern argues that the new technologies have brought a new meaning ‘nature’ which was earlier taken for granted. Technological developments have opened up avenues which were earlier not available to the consumer resulting in destabilisation of earlier notion of nature.

Marilyn Strathern’s,*'After Nature*', (1992) is one such work which had takenSchneider’s work forward. After Nature explores kinship relations after thecoming of the new age reproductive technologies. This work is based on thelate-twentieth century English culture, the consumer and their choice ofprocreation using new technologies. Herein, Strathern argues that the newtechnologies have brought a new meaning ‘nature’ which was earlier taken forgranted. Technological developments have opened up avenues which were earliernot available to the consumer resulting in destabilisation of earlier notion ofnature. The effects of new technologies such as sperm banks, in vitro fertilisation(IVF) and surrogate motherhood which allow one to choose rather than nature take its course leads to question in kinship relations. Strathern reflects upon the new age technological developments in the reproduction system as significantshift and states that what has been taken as natural has now become a matter ofchoice, nature has been ‘enterprised-up’. The more nature is assisted bytechnology, the more social recognition of parenthood circumscribed bylegislation, the more difficult it becomes to think of nature as independent ofsocial intervention (1992b:30).

**10.5.3 Leela Dube**

Leela Dube’s was Indian anthropologist who examined the gendered dimension of kinship system in India. Her book, *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia* (1997), is one of the pioneering works in this field. Her work is based on the comparativestudy of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India, high caste Parbatiya Hindus and Newars of Nepal, Muslims of Bangladesh and Pakistan, bilateral MalayaMuslims of Peninsular Malaysia, the bilateral Javanese and matrilinealMinangkabau of western Sumatra and their offshoot in Negri Semblian, the Buddhist Thai, and the lowland Christian Filipinos (1997: 2)Dube’s main concern was to find out how gender roles were conceived andenacted, how men and women are viewed and the implications thereof in themaintenance and reproduction of a social system. The major aim was tounderstand the differences in kinship systems and family structures that accountfor the variations in gender roles in different societies.

Dube’s work takes into account the various aspects of kinship i.e., marriage,conjugal relations, implications of residence, rights over space and children, family structures and kin networks, work, female sexuality, and limits set bybodily processes in a comparative study. The study depicted a striking differencein the two regions. South-East Asian women showed extraordinary level ofindependence in economic and social life and social equality between the sexeswas also seen due to the exposure of education. This contrasted majorly with thesituation in South Asia, characterised by strong patrilineal, patrilocal familystructure, women lacks knowledge in terms of their rights, and concerns aboutfemale sexuality. Catholic influences have reflected in constrains on thewomenfolk in Filipino, though in legal matters in Philippines and Thailand, women enjoyed equal rights in terms of inheritance and other resources. The law allowsequitable division of conjugal property and in terms of custody of children; amother’s status is always strong.

Dube draws upon Schneider andGough’s work of 1961 to reflect upon the universal argument that in all societies ‘males’ exercise authority, while in a patrilineal society line of descent andauthority converge. It is basically a conflict among men to wield authority, be ita matrilineal or patrilineal society. Yet again there are instances which statesotherwise, like in Lakshadweep island of Kalpeni it was seen that concentrationof authority was on an elderly woman of the village respected by kinship statusesthat have considerable influence (L. Dube 1991a, b, 1993, 1994).

Thus, Dube’s work portrayed critical differences in South Asia and South-EastAsia and also within each region. Dube has stated that close scrutiny makes onerealise that in both types of unilineal descent system it is necessary to underplaythe role of one parent- that of the father in matriliny and that of the mother inpatriliny. Herein, she cites examples of other works done in this regard of Postel Coster (1987), Prindiville (1981) who have stated that in matrilineal and patrilinealkinship there is less flexibility in formation of groups and in the exercise ofinterpersonal relationships than there is in bilateral kinship. Natural differencesbetween males and females are believed to affect social organisation and rightsand obligations (Women and Kinship: 154).

**10.5.4 Raheja and Gold**

Raheja and Gold explore women’s oral tradition in North India as a form of agency and resistance. Focusing on marriage and birth songs, stories and narratives, the authors demonstrate how the women in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, through multiply positioned voices, recreate their identities through sexualised lyrics. The authors highlight the women’s critical perspectives on gender subordinating kinship systems. There is a series of chapters analysing women's songs and stories which are performed at various life-cycle rituals and other festivals in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

This fundamental theme is encapsulated in the symbolism of the heron of the book's title. In predominantly male performance genres, the heron symbolises predatory hypocrisy and the dichotomous split between purity and corruption. In women's texts, however, 'Herons act as narrators, inviting listeners to consider tales of illicit encounters, resistance to dominating power, or both' (p. xi). The heron thus introduces us to alternative views of gender, sexuality and kinship, which are 'shaped by women but are sometimes shared by men'.

Through her study, Ann Gold poses important insights into women’s views on fertility and sexuality that cast kinship in a new light. Taking on over 21 months of fieldwork on oral traditions, Gold analysed the meanings of lyrics of songs sung by women in Ghatiyali, a Rajasthan village. After studying the themes that the songs covered, from adultery, to desire to explicit references to sexual relations to attainment of motherhood, Gold admits that she no longer believes in the absolute compliance of women to uphold the pious, chaste cultural image of Hindu women. This image is a stereotype about Hindu women in rural North India. Since most kinship norms are a depiction of men’s expectations of women’s ideal behaviour, women did not outright forfeit these norms, but neither do they remain mute, compliant, passive participants in carrying out society’s expectations. According to Gold, for the women she interacted with, the lyrics of the songs became ways to portray their displeasure, anger and frustration at the often confining rules they are forced to comply with.

**10.6 CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST DEBATES**

Many of the concerns that fuelled the emergence of feminist anthropology has changed yet the underlying questions related to power continues to influence them. Gradually the most recent works in gender and anthropology came to encompass a wide range of perspectives that challenge Western or monolithic assumptions about women and the experience of gender. For example, non-Western writing on gender illustrates how varied the experience of feminism can be in contemporary contexts where religious beliefs, development experiences, and the very role of language can influence understandings of gender. The study of women, men, and the intersections of gender across cultures has become a key aspect of any holistic study or methodological approach in anthropology today.

Contemporary feministsare no longer interest in the issue of gender asymmetry because it does not provide a holistic understanding of society.Now they are more focused in finding answer to question of intersectionality, that is the inter relation between gender, kinship, raceand, ethnicity. Rather than being restricted to the difference between men and women, the concern is with the differences existing among women themselves from different race, religion and having multiple identities. Power remains the core concern of feminist anthropology analysis, since it constructs and is constructed by identity. Studies now include areas of production and work, reproduction and sexuality, and gender and the state.

**10.7LET US SUM UP**

Examination of gender portrayed through folk songs gives alternative portrait of south Asian womanhood.Contrary to the western stereotypical notions of Asian women being invisible, undervalued and voiceless, the songs depict the easy balance that women maintain within their kinship role in the domestic sphere. Their contribution is valued rather than ignored, as is seen in the celebration of women’s sexuality and procreative abilities. Women have found ways to subvert their oppression and assert their rights and desires within the patriarchal set-up, although in a subtle form through mockery in songs in place of direct confrontation. Folklore gives images of female nature as sexuality understood as not rampantly destructive but rather seeking mutuality with males. Women’s songs portray desire as procreative, stressing communal fertility i.e.,sexual and maternal aspects seem fused rather than split, generative rather than destructive.The songs construct female sexuality as unified, auspicious and creative rather than destructive. They combine the sexual and maternal aspects of female nature. Exploration of women’s views about the kinship structure they are part of, the ways in which they manage their existence within these kinship boundaries and the extent to which they can break out of these pre-given norms that define kinship depicts how essential gender is in recasting understanding of kinship.

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