

CONTESTING PATRIARCHY: FROM DISCIPLINE TO TRANSGRESSION

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ABSTRACT

Patriarchy as an ideology is ubiquitous in manifold ways. From crude and overt manifestation to subtle and covert technique, patriarchy infuses within itself the cogent potentiality to inculcate its ideals into the survival system of human species. From societal mores to cultural beliefs, economic modes to political decision-making, spiritual consciousness to religious precepts, commodity-production to human procreation, patriarchy with its colossus presence induces its invincible spirit into the very psyche of life-existence. Even our thought-process is tailored along the line chalked out by patriarchy. It is an ideology based on power-relations and feeds on binaries – inclusion and exclusion, core and periphery, rational and emotional, nature and culture. Adjunct ideas are established and proliferated by it that further sustain patriarchal modes of reasoning. It is all pervasive. It circulates throughout the social body like capillaries, intensifying its universal aspect of hegemony. From force and coercion to consensual action and manipulation, patriarchy has survived through ages. As an ideology, it has been one of the most tenable yet contested arena of conflict – debate – subversion and narration. This paper aims to understand and re-locate patriarchy within the complex matrix of power-relations navigating through different feminist perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Power, Sex, Gender, Body

Most of the ideologies worldwide, evolved, flourished, underwent transformation, some survived and some eventually died out. Patriarchy, however, survived even after massive onslaught on its doctrinal foundation. Creeping on other ideological tenets, it expanded its parasitic tentacles to survive and suck the kernel of nourishment. This paper aims to unravel the nitty-gritty of patriarchal mode of thoughts, its modus-operandi and survival strategy. Resistance to patriarchal power and mechanism to dismantle its domineering presence through contestations and transgression will be the focal point of discussion.

To trace the origin of patriarchy, is to search a needle in the haystack. Theoreticians, historians and social anthropologists have diverse opinions regarding its origin and evolution. When did women's subordination begin is a question that engrossed the mind of not only academia but female activists as well. Was it since the beginning of human society or was it present in every civilization or it evolved since the origin of private property and agriculture or it can be traced back to the canonical texts like the Bible that explains its birth through divine origin theory? Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, brilliantly summarises the origin of patriarchy through archaeological documentation and argumentative discourse. According to Lerner, difference in biology was the primary ground of sexual division of labour, whereby not only women but 'juniors' in age too were segregated. Men and elders occupied the domineering position in lineage society. She traces the origin of patriarchy to the 8000-3000 BC when agricultural surplus and militarization process emerged to get hold of the surplus.

BIOLOGY IS DESTINY

Differential, contemptible attitude towards women can be detected in Greek philosophical reasoning. Plato, though suggested same kind of education for men and women and believed that women can become guardians, philosophers, rulers provided they prove their worthiness. However, he was not free from essentialist thinking. He compares female guardians with female dogs. Aristotle's essentialist undertone however, was much more pronounced when he, in the fourth century BC declared that "women were women by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Janainati and Groves, 2013:5). Moreover, Aristotle rejected women to participate in public sphere as she lacked deliberative capacitation.

Another philosopher who was the intellectual proponent and inspiration of French Revolution was in no way different in his understanding of women. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) in his work *Emile* states that women are essentially sentimental and flippant. In marital bonding they hold a subordinate position in comparison to their husbands whereas men need to participate in the public sphere and therefore demands a different kind of education, women are required training of a different kind that would foster greater efficiency at home. Her role as a reproductive being was highlighted along with her productive role at domestic sphere. Thus, if man is meant to be in the World, women is supposed to be at home. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) vehemently protested against Rousseau's patriarchal mode of thought and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was a rebuttal of *Emile*. Wollstonecraft called into question the prescribed gender roles and stood for women's

education and participation in public domain. She argued that female education is a pre-requisite for economic independence. According to Wollstonecraft, a perfect marriage is one where there is intellectual companionship and non-discrimination. Wollstonecraft defied the traditional social beliefs and declared that ... the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger (Janainati and Groves, 2013:30).

However, Wollstonecraft's ideas were opposed from various corners. Surprisingly though, the protests came not just from men but vocal was the female voice. *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* was published in 1798 in England that undermined Wollstonecraft's contribution. Sara Elli's *Women of England*, *The Mothers of England* and *The Daughters of England* challenged Wollstonecraft's ideas. These writings primarily re-instated and induced in readers' mind the cult of domesticity. The period from 1820-80 witnessed overwhelming publications that upheld the stereotypical archetype of women as a domesticated being. "Advice, manuals, literature books and public sermons contributed to the perpetuation of a cult of domesticity which ascribed to women a strictly private function and to men a public role. Any suggestion of crossing gender-typical boundaries was considered a threat to the stability of the social hierarchy" (Janainati and Groves, 2013:30).

The publication of Betty Frieden's (1921-2006) famous book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 opened yet another floodgate of controversial debate round the traditional roles specified for women as mothers and wives. According to Frieden, idealization of traditional roles was a convincing means to keep women in a subjugated position than men. She interrogated the age-old custom and norm of this subjugation based on biology and women's fulfilment in domestic chores only. She also objected to the category of 'housewife'. Germaine Greer in her famous book *The Female Eunuch*, severely criticised the traditional family structure and arrangements of the nuclear family which according to Greer was the source of disempowerment of women. The subjugation of women has been primarily defended on the ground of biological differences between men and women. "the philosophical reasoning which legitimizes various forms of oppression as natural and inescapable, because the oppression that arises supposedly from natural and therefore unchangeable factors, is called biological determinism. Biological determinism has also been one of the most important legitimizing mechanisms of women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is, therefore, crucial for feminist politics" (Menon, 2008:225).

Biology – anatomy, physiology and reproductive function thus become the determining factor behind the difference between man and woman. The question that arises is to what extent biological differences is responsible for difference in socio-cultural life?

Ann Oakley in her book *Sex, Gender and Society* discussed "how the basic ground plan of the human body is a female one, even if at conception the chromosomes may be xy rather than xx. The critical ingredient to the making of a male is the supply of the male hormone or androgen (testosterone) after the first few weeks of pregnancy. Until eight weeks old, every foetal brain looks female. Female is nature's default gender setting. A huge testosterone surge beginning in the eighth week will change the unisex brain by killing off some cells in communication centres" (Krishnaraj, 2008:40). In a book, *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine, a medical doctor reveals that there lies a distinction in the anatomical structure in the constitution of female brain. The female brain consists of those 'circuits' which marks the dominance of affective qualities whereas the male brain is "deficient" and therefore, has a substantial amount of accumulation of the logical and abstract thinking (Krishnaraj, 2008:40).

Biologists do agree to the fact that there exist some differences between the male and female physiology. To be precise, women have proclivity towards affection and nurturing, more attentive towards relationship than their male counterparts. This, however, is not conclusive enough to suggest that biology is destiny. "Nature has the strongest influence in launching sex-specific behaviour, but experience, practice and interaction with other modify neurons and brain wiring" (Krishnaraj, 2008:40-41). Distinct arrangements in brain structures between women and men should not lead one to conclude that women cannot become philosophers and men cannot do nursing. Both the sexes have the potentiality to do both. To stick to essentialist underpinning that women are emotional and men are rational is a political stance that give rise to biological determinism and essentialist thinking.

Biological determinism or essentialism recognized men as capable of thinking in a logical, abstract and analytic manner while women were perceived to be sentimental, emotional and nurturing. This essentialist reasoning endorsed and rationalised women's domesticated arena and differentiated between her private and public domain. In private domain, essentialist tenets expects a woman to be a wife, mother and daughter. Women's participation in public domain however, remains controlled and manipulated by the masculine representative of authority.

With the advent of modernity infused with the twin enlightened genre of Renaissance and Reformation, the entire thought-process underwent an upheaval. The place of divinity was now occupied by man. The Cogito became the all-powerful. God was dead. Human prowess was now worshipped. The entire knowledge system was transformed. Faith was replaced by reason. Science dismissed tradition, rationality was the only logic of epistemological enquiry. Every phenomenon was now examined rigorously through the magnifying glass of criticality and reason. Reason became the crucial parameter to understand

any occurrence or experience. In place of blind faith and superstition, man started relying on himself. Man became the supreme – all powerful being. The rest was the ‘other’. Man was the norm – woman and nature was the deviation.

Renaissance, on the one hand opened the floodgates of reason and abstraction, logic and cognition. And on the other it created binaries: in action, perception, belief and knowledge-creation. Man being the only rational being became the ‘creator’, framed disciplinary technique of thinking, restructured ideology, ethics and moral tenets by which he can establish his domineering power over not only women but over those on whom controlled manifestations can be exercised for examples ‘shudras’ in India. The whole process of these fabrications and disposition are operationalized to establish only one system of rule – the rule of the patriarch which would manipulate all other ideologies that in turn would navigate to confirm the rule of patriarchy in all coming ages.

Dichotomies like male-female, rational-emotional are the artifices of western intellectual traditions. These dual categories are segregated and they exist with such impunity that there lies rare chance of any overlap. Consequently, these binaries are accorded with qualitative dichotomous mark: if one is good the other ought to be bad, one is good by virtue of the fact that the other is bad, thus, one’s “badness” confers “goodness” on the other. In this way, an uninterrupted chain of belief system is created, manipulated and handed down through ages. Therefore, in patriarchy, if man is the rational being, invariably his ‘other’ ought to be the irrational or emotional. Renaissance assigned primacy to rationality. Thus, man, as the rational being became the primary being – all other being are his appendages or mere derivation. Rationality, in modern era is worshipped and therefore emotional is denigrated. “In patriarchy the male/female binary is evaluated by ascribing greater value to the male-centred characteristics and less value to the female-centred ones” (Bagchi, 2012:12).

Segmentation between ‘male’ and ‘female’, ‘mind’ and ‘body’ ‘intellectual’ and the ‘crude’ results in loss of ‘personhood’, loss of control and autonomy over their bodies, leading to the eradication of bodily integrity (Mathur, 2008). Female body as the carrier of ‘inferiority’ becomes the focus of male gaze. Every aspect of female body is controlled and maimed according to patriarchal temperament. Women became an entity to rule over, whose bodies belong to their rational masters whom Mackinnon says ‘enforce women’s definition, encircle her body, circumlocute her speech’ and describe her life (Mackinnon, 1983).

TRANSGRESSION

If Renaissance reformulated thought-process along the line of rationality, and created man’s supremacy, it also induced in female brain the power to interrogate. Reason was not the only prerogative of men. Women came out of the domesticated

frame smashing the wall of patriarchy, re-examined anatomical configuration and reformulated the entire epistemological formulation based on patriarchal edifice. “The idea that anatomy is destiny...remained unquestioned by male canonical theorists – was at the center of the second-wave feminist critique”. Private activities were redefined as political in the sense that they were no longer ascribed on the basis of membership in a naturalised sex class, but were subject to collective debate and change. The sex-gender distinction employed by many feminists of the second-wave was crucially important for questioning the biological basis of social activities and for loosening the sense of social necessity or destiny that attached, in the canonical texts, to sexed being (Zerilli, 2020:110).

Patriarchy as an ideology feeds on unequal ‘relation’-based on domination, subjugation, relegating the other to the periphery – into the world of insignificance. Anatomical difference is thus repeatedly highlighted by patriarchal motive to maintain its supremacy. Any deviation from patriarchal norm is thus punished and humiliated. Covert technique of ‘disciplining the self’ though is the most effective ways to entrench patriarchal rule. Individuals are shaped and shape the social institutions and culture which override whatever be the biological base (Krishnaraj, 2008:40). From the outset, children become aware of their bodies and anatomy. But sexual identities are initiated by different forms of dresses, language, signs, myths, stories, culture. Socialization starts from the very family, neighbourhood, community and schools. Gradually, well-defined beliefs, perceptions, values and norms are erected along the line of sexes. “so by the time women and men reach adulthood each has a gendered eye (I)” (Krishnaraj, 2008:44).

In fact, the rise of individualism triggered the first-wave of feminist movement. Thus, Mary Astell commented – if all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves? Mary Wollstonecraft on the other hand criticised the male bias inherent in the very idea of rationality and demanded equal participation in economy and personal autonomy for women. The first-wave feminism mainly struggled for reform of women’s social and legal inequalities in the nineteenth century. First-wave feminism was about women as women, it recognized the division of labour based on sexes. Based on these criterion, demands for women’s suffrage was formulated.

The Second-wave feminism was about women as persons celebrating personhood. It called for the breaking down of the division of labour between the sexes, which was perceived to be the reason for women’s oppression (Ramaswamy, 2017:6). The Second-wave feminism’s major contribution was its demand that women should play an equal part in the world of paid work and that men should play an equal part at the domestic sphere. While the First wave feminism’s focus was on equality based on the idea of sameness between two sexes, Second-wave feminism’s emphasis was on equality based on differences

between women and men. Second-wave feminism most popularly came to be known as Radical feminism.

According to them, feminists should not undervalue the biological differentiation between the sexes and ascribe all differences to 'culture' alone. Patriarchal beliefs have disparaged 'feminine' qualities and now it is the duty of feminism to retrieve these qualities and highlight the differences between men and women as important. The Radical feminists hold that differences exist between men and women which is because of biological reproductive roles and that makes women more sensitive, instinctive and closer to nature (Menon, 2008:228). Both Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin are of the view that female reproductive biology, the mechanism of gestation and the mothering experience invariably affects women's relationship in the public domain. Women are according to this understanding, closer to nature and share in nature's qualities of fecundity, nurturing and instinct. These qualities have been rejected by patriarchal society but feminists should accept and revalue these qualities (Menon, 2008:229). According to Carol Gilligan, the fundamental categorization of Western moral philosophy – rationality, autonomy and justice – are derived from and indicates male experience of the reality. Female experience is pathetically absent here. To negate difference is to accept patriarchal notion of considering femininity as worthless (Menon, 2008:230).

Radical feminism placed the root cause of women's oppression in patriarchy. It represented female rage against male power. Most of the Radical feminists were vocal about their standpoint of radical transformation of societal configuration and outrightly took stand on issues of abortion, rape, lesbianism, orgasms, imperialism and welfare. Kate Millet brought in the idea of "Sexual politics". Even in private sphere which was till now kept out of the shadow of politics came to the fore as a subject which is very much political as women's lives in the personal sphere is affected by the politics of the state and patriarchy. "The sexual domination of men over women was the most pervasive ideology, and the most fundamental power structure in society" (Ramaswamy, 2017). The sexual domination of men over women was the most immanent ideology and the most basic power structure in society. Patriarchy operated through two-fold mechanism – Male domination over female and Older men's domination over the young. And Sexual politics is the politics of patriarchy. All historical civilizations were based on the ideology of patriarchy – covertly or overtly embedded in male supremacy.

It was the Second wave feminism that stood for radical reconfiguration of society based on equity, demolishing all kinds of patriarchal mores, system, ideology and practice. It directly

attacked the power-matrix that operated within the structure of the belief-system of the society, embedded in patriarchal modes of thought. However, Second-wave feminism primarily was a movement of the upper-middle class- white women. It utterly ignored the peripheral and the local. Third wave feminism stood for the blacks, third world women who were silenced in the whole process of feminist upheaval. Here silence was yet another form of oppression. It was through Third-wave feminism's particularly black feminists' endeavour and most prominently bell hook's contribution that feminism moved beyond the confines of white middle class women (Ramaswamy, 2022:6). Feminism, both as a movement and as an academic subject is still evolving. Patriarchal system operates through male-oriented and male-acclimatized definition, rules and policies. Patriarchal ideology is present in every institutions that range from the family to community, market as well as the state. The way each of these intervenes to erect and endorse socio-economic and political inequalities between women and men need to be deciphered and tactics need to be structured founded on the possibilities for transforming these institutions to make them more equitable and unprejudiced (Sridharan, 2004). However, to attain a society of humankind based on humanity is still definitely not a cinch.

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