

## Gender is naturalized: Looking through the Prism of Reproduction

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### 1. Introduction

One of the strong currents of late twentieth century feminism is corporeality feminism that contains debates like sex and gender, mind and body, nature and culture and so on. These divisions derived from denying the notion of biological essentialism which means women's spirit is defined in terms of biological capacity i.e. reproduction and nurturance. Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) or Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (1949) contained similar types of proponents and rejected confining women to feminine body. Undoubtedly, feminists of second wave of feminism discovered the politics of female's close attachment to nature. Our lives are organized around two different realms, i.e. a private realm where women are in evidence and where "natural" functions like sex and bodily functions take place and a public realm where men are in evidence, where culture is produced and work is done. These dichotomies came into being during industrialization (Martin 1992: 16). These ambiguous dichotomies i.e. male/female, and nature/culture give further notions like town/country, matter/spirit, mind/body, public/private, capitalist/ worker and so on (Jordanova 1989: 21).

The history and culture of science, as well as social practices played important roles to subordinate women and stereotyped them as emotional and natural being in contrast to man's image as rational and cultural being. According to Sherry Ortner, female

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body and its function were identified as “different” imposing different psychological states and social roles on her (Ortner 1972 in Humm 1992: 253).

However, feminists strongly doubted over these types of women’s close alignment to nature and men’s association with science. This article aims to examine how gender is naturalized in a number of ways, how far this controversial female secondary natural position is true in contrast to the male’s cultural ones and how biological determinism is responsible for constructing such concepts. Explored by Rachel Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon in their article titled “Natural Women and Men” (2000). These research questions will be examined closely through the case of abortion in Queensland, Australia.

## **2. Alsop et al’s Project on Natural Women and Men**

The aim of the chapter “Natural Women and Men” is to identify that sex differences are, to some extent, natural (Alsop et al 2002: 14). To support this cognition they describe John Locke’s (1690) ways to interpret the world as natural and cultural and cite Genevieve Lloyd’s thought regarding western philosophy which contains that males are tied to being a rational and autonomous agent and females as emotional and closely associated to reproductive role (Alsop et al 2002: 15-16). This division fixes the bodily distinctions, sets of associated psychological and behavioral dispositions, which are regarded as constituting masculinity and femininity (ibid: 18).

It is believed that male and female body differences were seen as opposite due to the result of hormonal influences and genes programming. ‘Selfish gene’ hypothesis asserts that men want to spread their seeds into as many fertile wombs as possible whereas women, with fewer eggs, need rather to nurture the fertilized ones. It is genetically programmed (ibid, 21). Again, hormones affect all parts of the body, including the brain. More attention is currently concentrated on the nerve fibers connecting the right and left hemispheres in the belief that the brain fixes different nature of men and woman (ibid: 23-25).



At last, Alsop et al write, "We don't have to deny that our biological bodies may have to play" (Ibid: 37). The following part is a description of how culture of science and society play an important role to giving women as natural position, that is much debatable. Similar evidence comes from Alsop et al's argument as well.

### **3. Science: Working against Women's Interest**

Science and medicine include diverse activities, institutions, social groupings, codes of behavior and theoretical systems (Jordanova 1989: 16). It is said that much scientific knowledge and western philosophy worked against women's interests and reproduced inequalities between genders.

Some feminist theories begin in opposition to Rene Descartes' contention *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) where he writes about mind/body dualism. Cartesian dualism establishes an unbridgeable gap between mind and body. Sometimes mind is rendered equivalent to the masculine and body equivalent to the feminine (Grosz 1994: 6-14).

"Bad science" critiques (especially in understanding of biological sex differences) have come from American theorists Anne Fausto-Sterling and Ruth Bleier and Australian Philosopher Denise Russel (Caine 1998 : 282).

Most of the time, science ignored the active role of women. Later, many things came into view. The contribution of the female apes to the cohesion and survival of the group, and ability to orgasm are now identified (Haraway 1989 in Alsop et al 2002 : 29). There are some myths regarding gender differences, like men are smarter than women (on verbal-spatial thing), gender determines the ability of doing mathematics, men and women differ in their hormonal systems, genes dictate our behavior and diseases, there is a relationship between hormone and aggression and so on.

Anne Fausto-Sterling writes that two issues are important regarding the verbal-spatial thing. Firstly, the size of sex differences is quite small in this regard. Secondly, complex

environmental factors have great influence (Fausto-Sterling 1992: 36). Regarding aggressiveness, it is believed that man is fitted for civil and political employments and women for timid and sedentary works because of their physical weakness. Works from the cross-cultural studies done by anthropologists prove that the development of aggressive behavior depends on roles assigned to boys and girls (ibid :152).

Fausto-Sterling wrote that a “pure” biological explanation of anything is complex (Ibid, 88). On the one side of nature versus nurture debate, psychologist Dr. John Money and his associates stand and believe that gender identity becomes fixed during the first three years of a child’s life, depending primarily on the sex rearing. On the other hand, physician and researcher Dr. Julianne Imperato-McGuinley and her co-workers assert that gender identity is not unalterably fixed in childhood but is continually evolving and secondly, when the sex of rearing is contrary to the testosterone-mediated biologic sex, the biologic sex prevails (ibid, 86).

The reductive explanations of the socio-biologists are not successful (Rose 1982: 35). The range of feminists’ critiques of science is broad: from experimental high-energy physics to reproductive biology. The works of Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens, Catherine Waldby, Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway are also important in this regard (Caine 1998: 283). Feminists’ theories have critiqued science saying that it produces incomplete views of the world.

#### **4. Science that reads Reproduction like an Agent of Culture**

Reproduction is the biological process through which new individual organisms are produced. According to Arthur C. Guyton, female reproductive functions can be divided into two major phases: firstly preparation of the female body for conception and gestation and secondly, the period of gestation itself (Guyton 1986: 968 in Martin 1992: 44). Menstruation and Menopause are always seen in a negative way, as failed production. When fertilization fails to occur, the endometrium is shed and a new



cycle starts. So it is said, "Menstruation is the uterus crying for a baby" (Martin 1992: 45). Uterus produces the "product", "babies".

There is one kind of power operation in the realm. Emily Martin writes that production concepts have different implications from the machine/mechanic metaphor. It indulges us to think that a doctor is only a mechanic or like a factory supervisor whereas a woman might be a laborer with "machine" (uterus) of "production arena" (Martin 1992: 57). A sex/gender system involves more than the 'relations of procreation, reproduction in the biological sense' (Rubin 1974, in Humm 1992: 258). According to Martin, the sphere of home (private) and the sphere of work (public) are sharply divided. Labor at a factory seems very different to us than housework or a woman's labor in childbirth. This is because, one is paid for in the marketplace and the others are not (Martin 1992: 66).

Martin again explains that biological fertilization is actually loaded with sexist metaphor. In traditional explanation we see that sperm is active to penetrate the egg. In contrast to that egg is described as passive. However, Martin writes that the egg's adhesive surface traps the sperm and sperm and egg interact mutually in a process marked by 'feedback loops' and mutual adaptation" (Keller and Longino 1996: 103 in Alsop 2002: 28).

Again, the amount of the time a woman cervix takes to open from 4 to 8 cm is described as a "good measure of the overall efficiency of the machine". The "machine" referred here to the uterus (Martin 1992: 59). When medical doctors describe the women labor in childbirth, they notice how labor of other kinds is organized in our society and how technology and machinery can be used to control those who labor. "In both cases women lose, in the first by being overlooked and in the second by having a complex process that interrelates physical, emotional and mental experience (Martin 1992:66)."

Societies want "production" from a woman. Societies encourage women to think that "to give birth a child" is natural. Aborting a baby is always discouraged. However, for medical and social

reasons women can go under abortion process. But long history of abortion proves that male's decisions; state laws and religious codes that are treated as cultural control women's reproductive behavior, as abortion is the opposite notion of natural biological reproduction. Women do not have any right to take decisions on her own body. The following section will discuss the cultural, political and social understanding of abortion instead of abortion as a biological discourse. The slogan 'abortion is a woman's right to choose' implies that abortion is an issue in woman's rights as citizens. Abortion, body and reproductive rights, litigation of abortion, the history of abortion as criminality in the eyes of both State Law and religion left an example that reproductive behavior of women is not at all a matter of natural thing rather a cultural one.

### **5. Abortion rights in America, UK and Australia**

Abortion as birth control was considered as moral opposition to 'natural' reproductive function of women. This belief came from medical practitioners. Furthermore, religious leaders see birth control as against the "God's Law". Sometimes there is an ambivalence, which suggests that an unwanted pregnancy or an abortion is a sign of moral irresponsibility or failed rationality (Albury 1999: 80-94). According to Mackinnon, "Men control sexuality. The state supports the interest of men as a group (Mackinnon 1989:188)."

The history of abortion in England, America, Canada and Australia proves that women had to struggle lot for having abortion rights. In Britain abortion was not treated as crime until 1861. The medical profession (representative of scientific knowledge) played a paramount role in labeling abortion as a criminal problem. England's 1967 Law Reform Bill became the model for Canada's 1969 legislation, and also for South Australia's 1969 Legislation that was helpful for female reproductive autonomy. In the United States, abortion was widely practiced following the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade*. This was marched by pro-choice activists in 1973. American abortion history sees abortion as medical



problem, 'the problem of the status of the fetus,' feminists' perception of abortion as a right to privacy, public / private dichotomy, the state and political agenda, the interest of the medical professionals about the professional autonomy" (Bacchi 1999: 141-143). Conor Gearty wrote that Ireland and America handled the abortion "problem" by avoiding moral choice (Gearty 1992: 441- 453).

#### **Case Study: Queensland, Australia**

In Australia the practice of abortion had existed before it became legal (formal sense) except in South Australia. The following case study shows us how women fought for their reproductive rights in the 70s and stood against state laws, backyard abortion, male doctors (seemingly these doctors worked against machine/mechanic metaphor but they aborted women secretly by showing respect the law of the state and religion that was harmful to women's health) and overall, patriarchy. It will be evident from the case that some women in Queensland got help from a doctor, named Dr. Bertram Wainer's and some medical practitioners to establish abortion rights. They fought against those male doctors and bureaucrats, who were afraid of doing abortion against State Laws.

#### **Abortion on Demand: Action in Queensland (SBS Television) 6<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

This case study shows how women of the 70s fought for their body rights against the state law of Queensland, Australia. This documentary had been broadcast on SBS TV channel Australia on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2006. The documentary is based on the Dr. Bertram Wainer's struggle for establishing women's body rights against the church, the laws and the doctors. Many women died from backward abortion. In fact this was the second common cause of death of women at that time in Victoria. Later, he wrote a book on abortion in Australia entitled "It Isn't Nice" (1972). In the video recording (Melbourne Victoria 1972), we see that in 1967 a young woman came to Dr Bertram Wainer's at Melbourne

surgery seeking emergency medical treatment after a backyard abortion (most of the time it was done on kitchen table without anesthesia). She was ill but afraid to go to hospital, as State Law did not approve abortion. It was an offence punishable by up to 15 years in jail. We see here that the interest of science and State law worked against women's will and interact each other. This case was the start of a long struggle for Dr. Wainer who wanted to overturn laws regarding abortion. He started reading law books and gradually uncovered a web of corruption involving highly paid doctors (paid gynecologists who aborted women illegally as they had done deliveries), backyard abortionists (sometimes who sexually abused the women), high-ranking police (homicide squad harassed women who had an abortion) and power-broking politicians. He arranged a press conference and admitted that he had aborted a 16 year-old-girl to release her pain. It would lead to attempts against his life. He established the first open fertility control clinic in Melbourne. He fought to make abortions accessible, affordable and safe and proved that patriarchy, as the representative of culture plays an important role against women's reproductive behavior. This case study proves that abortion has been treated as a cultural notion here. So attaching and imposing female's reproductive behavior with nature (nature/culture dichotomy) is not always true.

## 6. Conclusion

The case study of Queensland proves that decisions regarding women's reproductive behavior, especially about abortion are controlled by patriarchy. In the earlier sections we see that biological deterministic views (science) confine women's body to natural position. However, from the above case study we see that representatives of science (some male medical practitioners) establish abortion as cultural concept by interacting with other cultural practices (State Law and religion). So it proves that women's body is a matter of cultural construction.



Bordo shows that women's reproductive behavior is always attached with nature and women bodies are shown as fetal incubators. Furthermore, she shows fetus as a "super-subject" father-rights ideology (Bordo 2003: 71-153). But this type of concept is not natural at all. Rachel Alsop et al agree with many things like reproductive roles of gender seem to be biological, hundreds of years of psychological and behavioral experiences have deep impact on the issue. They wrote that the so-called natural characteristics, imposed on female characteristics, such as sensuality and fecundity, emotional understanding, intuitive knowledge are only for political use (Alsop et al 2002: 31-33). Foucault defined that the body is the marked surface of events (Foucault 1977 cited in Butler 2005: 496-497). History creates values and meanings by a signifying practice that requires the subjection of the body. The corporeal destruction is necessary to produce the subject (Butler 2005: 497).

This article agrees that gender politics is the main cause of imposing natural position on women and believes that anti-biological determinism movement in a culture is necessary for gaining subjectivity of the women.

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