



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue 1.,2016 (Jan-Mar.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE INFLUENCE OF PATRIARCHY ON GENDER ROLES

ARCHANA VERMA SINGH

Assistant Professor

DAV College, Sector-10, Chandigarh



ABSTRACT

Patriarchy represents the domination of the females by the males. It literally means, the rule of the father. The man in a patriarchal set up is considered central and the woman peripheral. The identity of a woman revolved around her father, brother and husband. The researcher aims to study the origin of patriarchy and its prevalence in our society. Are women born submissive, weak, tolerant and passive or are they conditioned to be so? Does society encourage these gender specific roles? Feminism was a movement which began in the 1960's and it questioned stringent patriarchal norms which discriminated against women. It aimed for an egalitarian society where men and women could be considered equal.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender roles, Masculine, Feminine and Feminism

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Social interactions are essential for human survival. To aid in these interactions, human beings have developed certain norms or codes of behavior which are considered socially acceptable. These dictate the interactions between and within groups and are also passed down through generations. Individuals are expected to behave in consonance with these well-defined codes of conduct. The infant is exposed to the culture he or she is born in and unconsciously assimilates the traditions and mores of society. Families consist of male and female members and society has well defined roles for each. In patriarchy, virtues associated with the masculine are elevated in comparison to those associated with the feminine.

Patriarchy is believed to have originated in the earliest times as a result of the biological constraints which did not allow women to hunt as they were involved with the maternal activities of procreation, child birth and nurturing. Men, on the other hand became the meat providers and hunting wild animals also developed qualities of aggression and power in them. Men were catapulted in the dominant roles and women remained passive. Later, too men took on the outside world and became the focus of economic and political life, whereas women were almost completely excluded from these domains. Men therefore became central and women became peripheral. The power center was with the males and grandfathers, fathers, husbands and brothers controlled and made choices for the females in the household. Patriarchy literally means 'the rule of the father'. It symbolizes male domination. Matriarchy provides superior status to the women. Matrilineal societies are prevalent in India too, where the ancestral property is handed down to the females of the family. Kate Millett said "our civilization, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy"(Millett,25).

Rigid gender roles which have been thrust on women from times immemorial are difficult to set aside. This may be due to the fact that humans receive gender education right from birth and this gender role socialization continues throughout life. According to Robert J Stoller, "gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations"(Stoller,7). Sociologists believe that more than even biological traits, conditioning is responsible for gender specific behavior. The acquisition of gender specific behavior is an integral part of who we are, how others respond to us and we in turn respond to them. It is one of the most important aspect of the socialization process. Interestingly, the sexes are called 'opposite'. Parents play an important part in this process of gender awareness. Right from infancy, boys and girls are taught gender specific behavior. Girls are taught to be obedient, submissive, tolerant and generous. Whereas boys are taught to be aggressive, dominating, adventurous and outspoken. Boys are taught to hide their emotions as it is considered unmanly to cry in public. The tag line of a powerful television advertisement sums it up-'Boys don't cry'. Parental influence is the primary source of gender related awareness. Usually, different traits are emphasized for girls and boys. Girls are encouraged to play with dolls as this prepares them for their future role as the nurturer and care giver of the household. Whereas boys are channelized towards games and toys which are more aggressive and also more action packed. Even television programmes, cartoons and children's books perpetuated gender differences. Adventure stories were the prerogative of male protagonists and girls only provided the background. Thus, the upbringing was related to the gender roles that boys and girls would take up as adults. Boys were trained for roles outside the home and girls for those inside. The belief that a woman acquires her true identity only when she is married was propagated. The rule of the father changed to one of the husband.

Mythology too perpetuates this gender divide. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve fell from heaven because Eve disobeyed Adam. Eve was created from Adam and thus the woman is believed to have been created for and from man. She is regarded as the other, the second sex. Helen Cixous lists two sets of binary opposites-'activity/passivity; sun/moon; culture/nature; day/night; father/mother; head/emotions; intelligible/sensible'. These can be viewed as corresponding to the man-woman binary, where the feminine is seen as negative.

However, the world wars drastically changed society. The male members were required to participate in the wars, leaving behind the women to take on responsibilities never before given to them. The women realized that they were capable of much more than they were ever allowed. The post war scenario was one of tension between the genders as men expected the women to go back to the roles previously assigned to them. Women were no longer content with sitting in the back seat. Feminism was becoming popular in the 60's and for the first time, women were finding a collective voice to express their discontent. The rigid gender roles imposed by the patriarchal society gradually began to change. Legislation was passed which enabled women, for the first time, to vote, to have a share in property and even to get a divorce.

Feminism not only provided a platform to question unfair norms but more importantly, it provided an alternative to the rigid patriarchal thoughts and structures. Feminism believed that women were also human beings and deserved to be considered equal to men. It aims to replace the patriarchal ways with more egalitarian ones. It also aimed to shatter the belief that femininity was natural to women. According to feminist thought, women were conditioned to be 'womanly', as it served male interests. The concept of women's identity being only as a mother, daughter or wife is therefore encouraged in patriarchy.

Feminism questioned the superiority and hegemonic control of males over females. Patriarchal norms were regarded to be unjust and oppressive by them. They also believe that these gender biased roles have perpetuated and continued over prolonged periods because it suited the dominant males. Marilyn French says that "aggressive qualities are associated with manliness. To be a man in patriarchal society means to appear to be in control"(French, 56). Qualities associated with men and women became completely divergent. The woman is linked to virtues of submission, passivity, sacrifice, compromise, tolerance and devotion. But, a woman is not born with these, but is conditioned to assimilate these qualities. Centuries of social conditioning has typecast the woman into certain gender specific roles. Feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de

Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf voiced their concerns about the victimization and powerlessness of women. Radical feminists like Kate Millett have elaborated on the subjugation and oppression of women. She regards the family as the basic unit of patriarchy where sexually differentiated roles are reinforced. According to Millett, the family encourages and perpetuates this in order to ensure the subordination of women. Marxist feminism linked woman's oppression to modes of production. The Psychoanalytic theory of feminism describes how the child is initiated into a specific culture and acquires femininity or masculinity. Juliet Mitchell one of the most famous psychoanalytic critics relates patriarchal culture to Freud's theory of the unconscious. Mary Daly speaks of how "the mothers and daughters life blood has been sucked away by the patriarchal system"(46).

Feminism did not propound any readymade answers or dogmas, but it offered a new vision of humanity where the gender divide would not exist. It successfully offered generations of women an alternative to stringent patriarchal mores. An attempt was made to create an identity outside of the home, outside of the traditional roles of a mother, daughter and wife. Women were striving to be people in their own right. But, the journey was fraught with many roadblocks. Sometimes the discrepancy between their chosen roles and the roles acceptable by society created an identity crisis. Not only women, but men too are victims of strict patriarchal divisions and gender roles in our society. Patriarchy imposes limitations on both men and women. Feminism aims for equality and harmony for both the sexes. Women encounter resistance in their attempt to carve out a niche for themselves independent of the traditional gender specific roles. Feminism has been labeled as anti-men by some but in fact it strives for a utopian and humane society where both men and women would have the freedom to develop and grow as they choose.

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