

Feminist Philosophy

Course Code: M23PH05DE

Discipline Specific Elective Course

Postgraduate Programme in Philosophy

Self Learning Material



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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Feminist Philosophy
Course Code: M23PH05DE
Semester - IV

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Self Learning Material
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



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Semester- IV

Discipline Specific Elective Course
Postgraduate Programme in Philosophy

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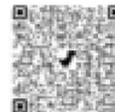
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MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

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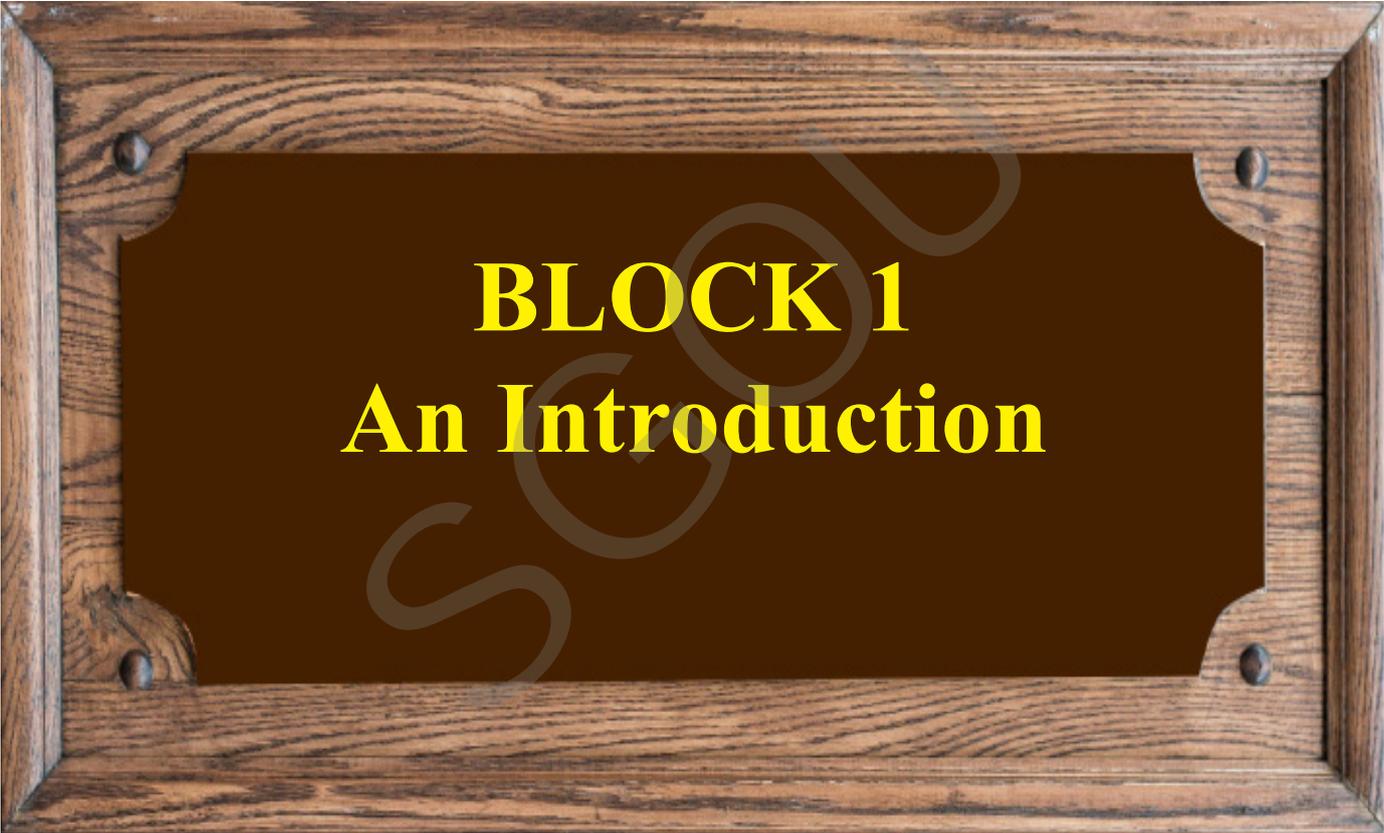


Warm regards.
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-09-2025

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BLOCK 1

An Introduction



UNIT 1

Sex and Gender

Learning Outcomes

Upon Completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the historical development of feminism
- analyse the core concepts in feminist philosophy
- evaluate the three waves of feminist movement
- critically evaluate feminist classifications and theories
- evaluate the broader goals of feminism

Background

The term “feminism” was first used in France in the 1830s by the French socialist Charles Fourier who coined the term “*feminisme*”. But the ideas which led to its origin prevailed much before the 1800s. Feminism is not a single concept which can be defined in a single idea; it is a complex notion that emerges from the culmination of various interpretations by people from different generations with diverse cultures, sexual orientations, ethnicity and so on. Neither is it a static concept allowing one to give an exhaustive definition of it. It is a dynamic concept which evolves over time with changing worldviews of those who attempt to engage with it. Nevertheless, one may generally say that it is a movement which emerged to end the oppression and exploitation against women.

Keywords

Patriarchy, Sex, Gender, Essentialism, Intersectionality

Discussion

1.1.1 Feminism in the Medieval Period

Even though historians failed to emphasise the role played by women in the medieval period to fight against the oppression levelled against them, their voices and attempts to raise themselves to a platform equal to that of the opposite dominant gender has greatly influenced the feminist movements which emerged later. Some such instances are the voices raised by writers like Gerda Lerner who in her book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* questioned some of the doctrinal practices in Christian theology wherein women were considered as cursed and hence inferior to men. Similarly, the French writer Christine De Pizan in her book *The Book of the City of Ladies* fought against the prejudice of intellectual inequality between men and women. None of these voices received the attention they demanded because Medieval period in Europe was largely taken over by religious authoritarianism and so every ideology that emerged during this period had a religious colour which was in support of patriarchy. The religious doctrines which it prophesied were considered unchallengeable and hence it was next to impossible to fight against them and overrule them by a small group of women who were already suppressed.

1.1.2 Feminism in the 17th Century - Modern Period

Modern Europe marked a shift from religious authoritarianism to reasoning and critical thinking, giving way to a new revolution which was instrumental in the rise of feminist political thought. The inspiration behind this new turn of events can be attributed to the French philosopher and thinker Rene Descartes. This is because the rationalist philosophy endorsed by him asserted that all knowledge arises from reason and this faculty of ratiocination is commonly possessed by all human beings. Thus, his rationalist philosophy can be seen as a blow to the ancient classics which ascribed an inferior status to women. With Descartes emerged the realisation that women are at par with men in terms of rationality and so any attempt to suppress them or exclude them from the privileges that men enjoy, is unjustified. They also underscore the logical fallacy involved in identifying one's rational capacity as a criterion to exclude her from social privileges. The seventeenth century,

- Reason is common



which was largely known for its rationalist feminist approaches had many feminist writers including the male writer Francois Poulaine de la Barre who emphasised the “sexlessness of mind.” According to him, sex is a biological condition that has nothing to do with the definition of mind. Along this line of argument, it would be illogical to consider women as inferior to men just because they are sexually different from men.

Another major feminist voice of the 17th century was the British feminist thinker Mary Astell. Though her work is considered as a treatise on feminist political philosophy, most of her ideas were accessed through secondary sources like that of Bryson and Fergusson. According to them, Astell’s contribution to feminism can be summarised as follows:

- a. Both men and women should have equal access to education as both are equally capable of reasoning.
- b. It would be against the will of God to forbid them from using their intelligence, considering that God has given “intelligent souls” to both men and women equally.
- c. Women’s duty towards her husband or other family members does not make her subordinate to them. She even goes to the extent of saying that women should choose to reject the domestic slavery involved in marriage and should even reject marriage which endorses her subordination to men.
- d. Women should focus more on developing their minds rather than their external beauty.

One can clearly see from this snippet of Astell’s ideas that her philosophy closely aligns with ideas of present day radical feminism which encourages women to liberate themselves from the predatory and tyrannical men in their lives. Most feminists in this era prioritised rationality, which led them to question all authorities that wielded power over them. But this trend took a drastic shift with the Enlightenment period.

- Mary Astell’s contribution to feminism

1.1.3 Feminism in the Enlightenment Period

With the onward march of rationality and knowledge in the bygone century, the 18th century or the period of enlightenment, saw arguments in defence of human rights as well. As a consequence of this reasoning, human rights were regarded as

- Rise of feminism through enlightenment

a natural necessity of human beings. However, from a feminist perspective, the theory of human rights, though conceived as ‘rights for all,’ ultimately proved to be ‘rights for men’. Women were by nature considered as emotional beings rather than rational beings and hence these rights were denied to women. Some of the writings which reflect such a mentality are those of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and others who in fact regarded women as care givers alone.

- Fight for basic rights in the West

Such anti-feminist writings were strongly challenged by feminists of this period like Mary Wollstonecraft, Condorcet, Catherine Macaulay and many others who fought for women’s rights. All of them urged that the benefits of enlightenment should pave way for women upliftment as well. Rather than focusing on what each feminist thinker spoke on the issue of liberation of women, it will be more convenient if we identify the issues that they addressed and the social scenario that prompted them towards such movements. A closer look reveals that most of these thinkers shared certain common goals which they executed, considering the historical and social structure of their land. For instance, feminist movements were more pronounced in Europe and America; it was prominent in Europe in the 17th century and in America in the 19th century. Europe, with its power politics and colonial rule stood tall in international politics and so feminist movements were also strong over there during that period, whereas in America feminist movements took shape along with their struggle against slavery and racism. Based on these events in America and Europe in the nineteenth century, the historical development of feminism can be classified under three waves.

- Feminist wave model ignores pre-19th century efforts

1.1.4 Three Waves of Modern Feminism

The history of feminism is often described in three temporal waves. According to an Irish activist Frances Power Cobbe, feminist movements “resemble the tides of the ocean, where each wave obeys one more uniform impetus, and carries the waters onward and upward along the shore” (cited in Hewitt, 2010, p.2). Viewing feminism through the metaphor of a wave carries with it the challenge of reductionism where every new movement overlaps the older one, thus disregarding the contributions of women prior to say the 19th century. The three waves that history talks about is a description of feminist movements since the 19th century alone.

1.1.4.1 The First Wave

The first wave occurred during the 19th and early 20th century in Europe and the United States. Though lived in late 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote the book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is considered the precursor of the first wave of feminism. The first wave feminists like Elizabeth Candy Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Susan B. Anthony and others fought for rights that we take for granted today, such as the right to vote (suffrage), to own property and capital, to borrow money, to inherit, to keep the money earned, to initiate a divorce, to retain custody of children, to go to college, to become a professional physician, to argue cases in court or serve in a jury. It was the denial of these rights in the 17th centuries that led to the first wave of feminism later. The story was not very different in other parts of the world as well; girl children in Africa got access to education only in the late 19th century. Though the first wave of feminist movement is presented as the events that took place in Europe and America, we cannot nullify its existence in other continents as well.

1.1.4.2 The Second Wave

The second wave began with the publication of Simon de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* in France in 1949; but it took an organised form only in the 1960s and 1990s. This wave was different from the first as it drew women of different colour and belonging from developing nations as well. It is called equality feminism and it fought for the equal status for women in parity with men in the social domain. This movement claimed a sense of sisterhood and it was considered as a class struggle. The second wave added to the feminist struggle issues like the discrimination of women based on race, tribe, nationality, religion and class. It also saw the emergence of certain issues such as multi - racial and multi - ethnic feminism, feminist studies of men, constructionist theories of feminism, post-modernism, queer theories, questions bordering on the duality and oppositeness of female and male, sexual orientation such as lesbianism, homosexuality, heterosexuality, assumptions and value judgements on sex, gender and social order.

• Movement challenging gender, race and social norms

1.1.4.3 The Third Wave

The third wave began in 1990s and continues to the present day. This movement is taken forward by the younger feminists who grew up in a less gender segregated society. They an-

- Intersectional, inclusive and anti - essentialist movement

chored the problem of gender inequality on larger forms of oppression like race. They rejected the radical feminist idea that women are oppressed only by men and also accuse women of fostering women's oppression by hiding under the umbrella of race, colour, class, status etc. Largely informed by postcolonial and postmodern thinking, the feminists of this wave broke the constraining boundaries of gender which were earlier regarded as essentialist boundaries leading to discrimination.

1.1.5 Major Concepts in Feminist Thought

1.1.5.1 Sex / Gender and Masculinity / Femininity

The distinction between sex and gender has been fundamental to feminist thought since the 1960s. Sex, as we know, is biological and most people are considered as either male or female. Gender, on the other hand, is social and it involves:

- a. Social expectations about the behaviours and traits that are appropriate for male and female individuals. For example, females are considered to be more caring than males.
- b. Psychological traits that individuals develop based on the expectations that society places upon them. For example, females are considered more tender than their male counterparts.

Masculinity and femininity are in turn dependent on this gender role that society ascribes to individuals. If a male satisfies the social expectations that the society considers appropriate for him, he is considered as masculine and the same goes with females as well. Her femininity depends on how well she fits into the expectations that the society throws upon her. Interestingly, this division is based on the higher order expectation that males should always express masculine traits and females should express feminine traits respectively.

- Gender roles as socially constructed

- Patriarchy affects gender roles

The distinction between sex and gender emerged only in the 1960s and gender was assigned based on biological determinism. What is biological determinism? As pointed out, it was believed that the biology of men and women causes them to have a particular social position and status that they hold. As sex cannot be altered, so is their social position. This notion is called biological determinism. But the feminist thinkers strongly criticised this position. They held that social positions are determined by the social expectations that the society bestow upon males and females and it has nothing to do with their biological sex. To quote an instance, in certain



communities, females perform those tasks which the Western society ascribes to males alone. If sex is what determines one's social position, this cannot vary across societies. Every society should uphold the same social status for males and females, which is not the case in reality.

- Cultural influence overrides biological determinism

Another commonly cited reason for the superiority of males over females is the patriarchal nature of society. All societies are patriarchal and they unilaterally agree that men are superior to women and they should enjoy more privileges than the latter. But the question is, "does this have anything to do with sex?" The answer is no. If sex had determined gender roles in a patriarchal society, again there should have been a uniformity in gender descriptions ascribed to men and women, which is not the case. The concrete forms that patriarchal ideas take and the concrete ways in which societies implement patriarchal expectations vary. Hence it proves that biology / sex has no role in assigning gender.

- Sex and gender are culturally and politically distinct

Another piece of evidence to support the claim that sex does not determine gender is that certain group of people like male transsexuals who identify themselves as feminine and act in feminine ways are biologically born as men. If one's biological sex had the potential to determine his gender, this would not have been possible. Such a conflict between sex and gender would be impossible if the former premise was right. In fact, this sex- gender distinction has opened avenues to understand the cultural character of gender which arises from the interference of society and the cultural situatedness of the individual. This being the case, it follows that it is an irony that women are always in a disadvantageous position despite there being opportunities to lift them to heights. With the progress in society, this sex - gender dichotomy has begun to vanish and today we see gender being used intermittently with sex. This is to avoid the use of the term sex which indicates sexual activity. Feminist thinkers themselves have not reached a conclusion as to what exactly means by gender. Its political and conceptual ramifications are such that a few feminists have called for a redefinition of these terms. Some others have even demanded the use of different terms altogether.

1.1.5.2 Self / Subject as Masculine

The idea of the self or subject as masculine refers to how individuals in society are shaped by social and cultural ideas that give importance to masculine traits. From early childhood,

- Masculine traits define the ideal self

boys and girls are taught different roles based on what society expects from men and women. Boys are usually encouraged to be strong, rational and independent. These qualities become part of what is considered the proper identity or self. In contrast, qualities like care, emotion and gentleness often linked to girls are not equally valued in the public world. When such masculine traits are seen as the ideal, society begins to understand the human self in a way that centres on male or masculine ways of being. Philosophical and cultural traditions have often reinforced this idea by presenting the rational subject as someone who is active, strong and logical, traits that are associated with men. As a result, the formation of the self, especially in public spaces like schools, politics, religion and media, has been modelled on masculine norms. This framework creates a gender hierarchy where the masculine becomes the standard and other forms of identity, including feminine traits or non - binary expressions, are marginalised. These structures do not arise from nature but are shaped by society, family, media and institutions, which guide people into accepting gender specific roles.

- Gendered socialisation builds a masculine ideal subject

In social structures like family, education and media, the idea of masculinity is not only defined but also enforced through what is known as gendered socialisation. Boys are usually told not to cry, to be aggressive and to show strength in conflict. These practices are meant to build a masculine identity based on dominance, control and physical or emotional strength. Such traits then become closely tied to how society defines a successful or complete person, especially in leadership roles or decision making spaces. Girls, on the other hand, are trained to be soft spoken, caring and submissive. These traits are often treated as secondary or private and are not seen as useful for public leadership. This division creates a power imbalance and helps build a subject who fits into the masculine model. Men are seen as protectors, providers and decision makers and these roles are celebrated. Even women in positions of power may feel the need to adopt masculine styles of leadership to be accepted. In this way, the ideal subject is often based on masculine behaviour, regardless of gender. This also means that men who do not fit the expected masculine behaviour such as being gentle or emotional are looked down upon or ridiculed.

The connection between masculinity and identity has larger effects on social power and inequality. The masculine subject is usually placed at the top of the social hierarchy,



- Masculine identity dominates social power and norms

supported by patriarchal values that control both women and less dominant men. Masculinity, in this context, is not just about being male but about exercising control, authority and power in relationships. The media plays a strong role in promoting this kind of masculine subject. Movies, advertisements and television shows repeatedly present male characters who are physically strong, emotionally detached and controlling. These images create a fixed idea of what it means to be a real man, and link it closely with being a true self or ideal subject. At the same time, men who face poverty, caste discrimination or belong to LGBTQ+ communities often struggle more because their forms of masculinity do not match the dominant one. This shows that there is not one single way to be masculine, but many forms; some dominant and others marginalised. Recognising this helps in questioning why one version of masculinity is treated as the ideal. A more equal society is possible only when we understand that being a subject or a self is not about fitting into a masculine model but about allowing space for all gender identities and expressions to exist freely.

1.1.5.3 Sexuality

- Sexuality is socially constructed and politically shaped
Some

In feminist philosophy, sexuality is not understood merely as a biological or personal matter but as a deeply social and political phenomenon, shaped by cultural norms and power structures. Unlike traditional philosophical approaches that treat sexuality as a natural instinct or private identity, feminist thinkers explore how sexuality is constructed, regulated and linked to broader systems of domination, particularly patriarchy and male power.

- Feminism embraces diversity

feminist perspectives, for instance, argue that women's sexuality has historically been defined and controlled by male-centered norms. From this standpoint, heterosexual intercourse and pornography are often interpreted as mechanisms of male dominance. As some feminists provocatively claim, "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice," suggesting a continuity between cultural representations of sex and real-world gendered violence. In such views, sexuality is not neutral but is structured by gendered power relations, which dictate whose desires are validated and whose bodies are objectified or controlled. Moreover, feminist philosophy introduces a conceptual separation between sex, gender and sexuality. While sex refers to biological categories and gender to social expectations, sexuality involves patterns of desire, identity and expression. Feminist thinkers argue that these domains

do not neatly align. For example, being biologically male does not necessitate masculine behaviour or heterosexual attraction. This non-alignment challenges heteronormativity, the assumption that heterosexuality is natural or default.

Sexuality also intersects with other axes of identity and oppression, such as race, class and disability, leading to a diversity of sexual experiences and expressions. Black feminists and queer theorists have emphasised that feminist accounts must go beyond white, heterosexual, middle class norms. The feminist redefinition of sexuality thus opens space for marginalised voices and lived realities, including lesbian, bisexual, queer and asexual identities. To conclude, feminist philosophy treats sexuality as a site where individual agency and social regulation meet. It calls for critical interrogation of how desires are formed, how sexual norms are maintained and how they might be reimaged in more egalitarian and liberating ways.

1.1.5.4 Sexual Difference

Sexual difference is a foundational concept in feminist philosophy that explores how distinctions between the sexes - male and female - are not merely biological but are also deeply embedded in cultural, linguistic and symbolic systems. Rather than viewing sex as a natural and unchanging category, the idea of sexual difference acknowledges that being male or female acquires specific meanings within particular social contexts. These meanings are conveyed through language, social practices and power relations and they profoundly shape how individuals experience their own bodies and identities.

Unlike the traditional sex / gender distinction which treats sex as biological and gender as socially constructed, Judith Butler's discussions of sexual difference emphasise that even our understanding of biological sex is culturally mediated. Recent poststructuralist feminist philosophers, such as Luce Irigaray, stand for difference feminism. Opposing the equality feminism that reduces women to masculine parameters, she insists that women are fundamentally different from men and she should be able to affirm her feminine specificity. She argues that Western philosophy has historically privileged a male - centred worldview, systematically excluding or devaluing female experiences and embodiment. Sexual difference, in this context, is not simply about acknowledging that men and women are different, but speaks about the need for women to recognise and assert their difference.

- Sexual difference as historically constructed

- Sex is culturally shaped; affirming female difference matters



- Sexual difference questions fixed gender identities

Sexual difference theory serves as a critical tool to analyse how gendered power dynamics are sustained through language, symbolism and institutional norms. It challenges essentialist views that assume fixed traits for all women or all men and instead prompts an inquiry into how sexed identities are formed and given meaning within specific cultural frameworks. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for reimagining gender and subjectivity beyond binary oppositions and towards more inclusive, pluralistic understandings of identity and embodiment.

1.1.5.5 Essentialism

Essentialism, in feminist philosophy, refers to the belief that all members of a group particularly women, share a fixed set of characteristics or an underlying essence that defines who they are. This concept has sparked significant debate within feminist theory, especially because it often underpins the assumption that there is something all women have in common simply by virtue of being women.

- Embracing diversity and intersectionality over essentialism

Feminist critiques of essentialism challenge the idea that womanhood cannot be defined by a single, universal trait or experience. They argue that this perspective ignores the vast diversity among women across lines of race, class, sexuality, culture and historical context. For example, while some feminist theorists have attempted to ground political solidarity in shared experiences of oppression, others especially Black feminists and postcolonial thinkers have pointed out that such essentialist approaches often reflect the experiences of white, middle class women and overlook the voices of marginalised groups. The problem of essentialism also arises in attempts to define key feminist concepts such as gender, sexuality and identity. If feminists reject the notion that biology alone determines gender roles, they must also question whether it is possible or desirable to define woman in a way that applies to all women. This leads to a central philosophical question: if women are too diverse to be defined by any one trait, what makes them members of the category women at all? Rather than assuming an essence of womanhood, many feminist philosophers advocate a more pluralistic, intersectional approach. This view sees identity as shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of power and meaning including race, class, gender and sexuality rather than by a single defining feature.

- Essentialism oversimplifies; feminism values diverse women's experiences

Essentialism poses a challenge to feminist theory because it risks simplifying and universalising women's experiences. Feminist philosophy, therefore, critically examines essentialist thinking and instead seeks to understand the complexities and differences that shape women's lives, offering more inclusive and context sensitive models of identity and solidarity.

1.1.5.6 Sexism and Patriarchy

- Sexism acts as a mechanism through which patriarchal norms are justified

Sexism refers to the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex, typically men, over another and the social practices, attitudes and institutional structures that reinforce and perpetuate this belief. At its core, sexism functions as a system of discrimination and power that privileges men while systematically disadvantaging women and gender minorities. In feminist philosophy, sexism is not seen merely as a matter of individual prejudice or overt hostility towards women; it is understood as a deeply rooted structural and cultural phenomenon. It manifests in a range of ways from unequal pay and under representation in leadership roles to cultural stereotypes that portray women as emotional, irrational or naturally suited for domestic roles. These patterns are often upheld by traditions, language, laws and philosophical assumptions that have historically marginalised women's experiences and contributions.

- Sexism sustains patriarchy and needs intersectional analysis

Sexism is also closely tied to the concepts of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Many feminist theorists argue that modern societies are patriarchal in nature, meaning that they are organised around male dominance and female subordination. Sexism, in this context, becomes the mechanism through which patriarchal norms are maintained and justified often by appealing to ideas of biological determinism or essential gender differences. Moreover, feminist philosophers have pointed out that sexism is not a uniform experience; it intersects with other systems of oppression such as racism, classism and heteronormativity. For instance, Black and working class women may experience sexism differently from white, middle class women, revealing the need for an intersectional analysis. Addressing sexism, then, is not only about challenging individual attitudes but also about critically examining and transforming the broader cultural and institutional frameworks that sustain gender based inequality. Feminist philosophy plays a crucial role in this effort by exposing the hidden biases in philosophical thought and by developing new concepts and theories that affirm the dignity, agency and diversity of all individuals, regardless of gender.

1.1.6 Classification of Feminism

Feminism has been classified into diverse themes by different authors and feminist thinkers. They classified gender theories into different strands based on multiple criteria. For instance, Judith Agassi, Lorber and Pearson have made attempts to classify and explain the various strands of feminism.

1.1.6.1 Agassi's Classification of Feminism

Judith Agassi suggests that one straightforward method of categorising feminism is by dividing theories of gender inequality into five areas: biological, psychological, anthropological, sociological and economic. Another common classification approach, which groups feminist theories under socialist, liberal and radical categories has also been suggested by Agassi. However, she finds this second method problematic, as the thinkers within each of these strands often hold differing views. Instead, she proposes a more effective approach: organising gender theories based on central thematic concerns such as production and property relations, family and household structures and social roles, particularly in the context of occupational labour and sexuality.

- Agassi classifies feminism by key thematic concerns

i. Production and Property Relations

According to this view, the sexist marginalisation of women is directly related to the increasing gap between men and women with respect to the possession of private property and access to work and employment. Agassi observes that Marxism has rightly studied the origin of such gender inequality and both Karl Marx and Engels have blamed capitalism as its root cause. According to Agassi, Engels maintained that capitalism led to the division between reproductive labour (carried out within the family and household) and productive labour (performed in the workforce). This division, wherever it occurs, results in women being burdened with the primary responsibility for domestic tasks, creating the impression that reproductive and productive work are incompatible.

- Capitalism as the root cause of gender inequality

ii. Family Structure and Household

Feminist theorists criticise the conventional family setting for the limited autonomy that women enjoy in the society. They are burdened with domestic and child care tasks and are denied wages for the same. This leads to their dependence on men for their financial needs, further deteriorating the position that they

- Traditional family structure as a cause for reinforcing women's dependence and inequality

hold. Feminists who consider family structure as a cause for their lower status in the society demand that marriages should be in such a way that women empowerment is taken care of. There should be division of labour with respect to household chores so that the traditional patriarchal bias can be overcome.

iii. Occupational Social Roles

Women are generally seen to be assigned with certain stereotyped gender roles which make them appear to be handicapped when it comes to demanding tasks at office. Such an androcentric justification is often levelled to disengage women from high paying jobs. According to Agassi, liberal feminist theories will work only if such preconceived stereotypical jobs assigned to women are abolished and household responsibilities are shared equally between men and women.

- Role of gender stereotypes in limiting women's power

iv. Sexuality

As already discussed, biological gender and sexuality need not always overlap. There might be situations where someone who appears to be a heterosexual can be homosexual and vice versa. While our society allows men to strongly announce their sexuality, this privilege is unavailable to women in most of the societies. What is further detrimental to women's freedom and equality is that they are silenced when it comes to choosing their partner or even their marriage age. Even today in many families, it is considered an ill omen to have women to be unmarried after a certain age. It is to satisfy the society that a woman is made to marry someone and sometimes without even asking for her consent. Her sexual orientations are not even considered. Some kind of an obligatory heterosexuality prevails in the case of women.

- Gender inequality affects sexual autonomy

1.1.6.2 Lorber's Classification of Feminism

Judith Lorber classifies feminism according to their theories of gender inequality. In other words, her categorisation is based on the reasons for women suffering a subordinate position to men despite sharing similar education or social status as them. These categories include: gender reform feminism, gender resistance feminism and gender rebellion feminism.

i. Gender Reform Feminism

Lorber includes liberal, Marxist, socialist, postcolonialist and Asian feminism under gender reform feminism. According to this position, gender inequality is rooted in the structure of



- Gender inequality is rooted in the structure of society

society itself; say, in its institutions and systems. These feminists aim to reform society so that men and women enjoy equal rights and privileges. Some of the key concerns of this group include work place inequality, unequal economic resources, low wage employment, burden of domestic work and limited access to resources, among others. Their strategy is to eliminate these inequalities through legal and constitutional reforms.

ii. Gender Resistance Feminism

- Challenging the structural basis of inequality

Lorber includes radical, lesbian and psychoanalytic feminists under this category. Gender resistant feminists challenge and resist the patriarchal systems and the deeply rooted cultural, religious and social ideas that uphold male dominance and female subordination. Their concerns vary from the previous group as their focus is on challenging the structural basis of inequality; for instance, on the very definition of womanhood which is patriarchal in nature, on the religious justifications for inequality, on biological determinism, on the objectification of women, legal bias etc.

Their major aim is to reshape the society by making it more women - centred by creating spaces for them in areas which were considered male dominated like politics, religion etc., along with preserving their traditional roles like nurturing and caring and also give due importance to such roles that they hold.

iii. Gender Rebellion Feminism

- Non gendered society as a major goal

This category includes multicultural and multi ethnic feminism, postmodern and third wave feminists. The goal of gender rebellion feminists is to create a non - gendered social order.

1.1.6.3 Pearson's Classification of Feminism

Pearson classified feminism into various branches based on what it stands for. These branches include:

i. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism, also known as egalitarian or mainstream feminism, is considered the most moderate branch of feminist thought. It is grounded in the belief that all human beings, regardless of sex, are inherently equal and deserve equal access to civil and political rights. Rooted in Enlightenment ideals such as rationality, education and natural rights, liberal feminism argues against discrimination based on gender. Philosopher

- Advocates gender equality through reforms within existing structures

John Stuart Mill is recognised as an early advocate, particularly through his work *The Subjection of Women*, a book co-authored by him with his life partner, Harriet Taylor Mill, in which he criticised the idea that women's nature was biologically fixed, claiming instead that it was shaped by cultural oppression. Liberal feminists believe that systemic change is not necessary for achieving gender equality; rather, reforms within existing legal and political structures are sufficient. They emphasise the importance of education, professional advancement and individual empowerment, a view often supported by middle class, educated women who already have the means to compete socially and economically.

- Gender differences vary across cultures

ii. Cultural Feminism

Often considered a part of liberal feminism, this branch is concerned with the degree of gender difference or similarity across socio cultural settings.

- Calls for a change in economic systems and gender relations

iii. Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism, also known as Marxist feminism according to Pearson, attributes the oppression of women to the combined forces of capitalism and patriarchy. It argues that the economic system of capitalism, in partnership with traditional family structures, perpetuates gender inequality. Though rooted in Marxist theory, it differs from the latter in that social feminism places greater emphasis on gender and sexuality and not just property and class. It highlights the concern that even within a socialist system, without addressing gender dynamics, inequality may persist, as both men and women carry their gender roles into the restructured society. Thus, socialist feminists call for a transformation of both economic systems and gender relations to achieve true equality.

iv. Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is a branch of feminism that identifies patriarchy and male domination as the root causes of women's oppression. According to Pearson, it emerged when women involved in civil rights and anti-war movements were denied the chance to voice their concerns, leading them to recognise their own marginalisation by the men they worked with. Radical feminists argue that sexism is deeply embedded in all social institutions, especially the family and believe that true gender equality cannot be achieved without dismantling patriarchal systems entirely. Some radical feminists even call for the abolition of traditional family structures and conventional

- Dismantles patriarchy by addressing deep rooted gender oppression

- Address gender along with class, race and other intersecting factors

- Linking women's oppression with environmental degradation

marriages, seeing them as central sites of female oppression. While more extreme views such as blaming men entirely for women's problems or proposing all women institutions are controversial and often criticised as unrealistic or separatist, the core message of radical feminism is the need for a fundamental restructuring of society to eliminate deep seated gender hierarchies. It promotes a radical commitment to gender justice, not necessarily hostility toward men and emphasises raising awareness and resisting all forms of gender based domination.

v. Multicultural / Global feminism

This branch of feminism addresses the issues of gender along with other factors that directly lead to the exploitation of women like class, race etc. Since global feminism looks at the emancipation of women at the global level, it holds that no woman can be considered free until the different conditions that oppress women worldwide are eliminated.

vi. Eco feminism

It is a relatively new branch of feminism that focuses on environmental activism. It connects the degradation of women to the degradation of the ecosystem. One reason for such a relationship between nature and women is that in most of the developing countries women are the ones who are directly involved with nature and benefit from nature. Hence deterioration of nature would directly imply deterioration of women.

Summarized Overview

Feminist philosophy began as a response to the long history of discrimination and inequality faced by women. This unit introduces the development of feminist thought by tracing its roots and showing how it became a platform for questioning gender based injustice. Feminist philosophy is not one single theory but a collection of ideas that examine how societies create and maintain differences between men and women. These ideas may differ from one another, but they are connected through a shared goal of achieving justice and equality for all genders. Feminism has addressed many areas of concern including law, education, family roles, political participation and work place discrimination. Over time, it has moved from focusing only on women's issues to exploring how class, race, caste, disability and sexuality affect people's experiences of gender. The unit shows that feminism is not just a women's issue, but a broader concern for building a fair and inclusive society.

Feminist thought has evolved in waves and continues to develop new methods to understand and correct gender-based injustice. The idea that feminism is against men has been a common misunderstanding. Feminist philosophers have clarified that feminism does not aim for one group to dominate another. Instead, it seeks to remove unfair advantages and disadvantages that are based on gender. Feminism is about creating equal opportunities in education, work, family and public life. It also encourages everyone regardless of gender to think critically about how roles and expectations are formed by culture and history. By promoting equality, feminist philosophy helps to make space for different voices and experiences, aiming to bring justice and dignity to every individual.

Self-Assessment

1. How did feminist thought evolve from the medieval period to the Enlightenment?
2. What is the distinction between sex and gender according to feminist philosophy and how does this distinction challenge traditional patriarchal norms?
3. Compare the key features and goals of the three waves of feminism.
4. How does feminist philosophy differ from a single unified theory?
5. What is the common goal shared by different strands of feminist thought?
6. In what areas of society has feminism raised concerns for justice and equality?
7. How has feminist thought expanded beyond women's issues in recent times?

Assignments

1. Critically evaluate the feminist classifications proposed by Judith Agassi, Judith Lorber and Pearson. How do their frameworks contribute to our understanding of the diversity within feminist thought?
2. Discuss the role of cultural, religious and social institutions in sustaining sexism and patriarchy. How do feminist philosophers propose to dismantle these structures?
3. Discuss how feminist philosophy addresses the misconception that feminism is anti-men. Why is it important to view feminism as a movement for equality rather than supremacy?



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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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UNIT 2

Hierarchical Binary Oppositions of Gender

Learning Outcomes

Upon Completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the social construction of gender binaries
- identify and critique hierarchical structures within binary oppositions
- examine the cultural and colonial reinforcement of gender norms
- explore the role of everyday practices in gender performance
- integrate non-binary and queer perspectives into gender discourse

Background

Binary opposition exists in all discourses that follow metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics always works based on binaries such as truth / false, good / evil, man / woman, appearance / reality, empirical / transcendental, reason / emotion and so on. A statement has to be either true or false. Likewise, an action has to be either good or evil. Metaphysics does not leave any room for thinking about what is in between good and evil. Good and evil, as well as truth and falsehood, are considered hierarchically opposed binaries. Besides the opposition, the positive pole of the pair such as truth, goodness, reason etc. are placed in a higher order, whereas its opposites such as falsity, emotion, evil etc. are placed as the valueless other. Man and woman are such a binary opposite reality. Man is accepted as present, whereas woman is negated as absent and inessential. A strong criticism of binary opposition in thinking comes from the post-structuralism of Derrida, whose roots lie in structuralist thought, particularly in the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's linguistic model emphasised that meaning arises through differences, laying the foundation for structuralism. Lévi-Strauss extended this to anthropology, proposing that the structure of myths and human cultural practices exist in binary pairs: good / evil, life / death, male / female. These oppositions are not neutral but hierarchical, often privileging one term over the other. This binary mode of thinking undergirds Western intellectual tra-

ditions and influences how societies conceptualise differences, including gender. While the waves of feminism have challenged numerous forms of oppression, one structure remains deeply entrenched: the binary opposition of gender.

Keywords

Gender binary, Performativity, Hierarchy, Queer, Patriarchy.

Discussion

1.2.1 Gender as a Binary System

The binary classification of gender as man and woman originated from ancient observations of biological sex. Rooted in biological determinism, it posits fixed, innate differences between sexes. This dualistic view limits self-expression and sustains hierarchical power relations. These are then extended to social roles, behaviours and characteristics. But Feminist philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” asserting that there is no essentiality for any entities or concepts. For her, woman gender is a social construct. Judith Butler (1990) advanced this further with her theory of performativity, explaining gender as something performed repeatedly, not innately possessed. These critiques expose how gender binaries enforce conformity and erase lived realities that fall outside of the binary. Such a dualist and hierarchical thought, particularly in the West, has suppressed non-binary gender expressions that once thrived in diverse cultures. While transgender individuals have gained visibility, the focus has largely remained on those who conform to binary notions of gender.

- Gender binaries are socially constructed

1.2.2 Hierarchisation within Gender Binaries

Binary pairs are typically hierarchical. Masculine traits like rationality, strength and objectivity are valourised, while feminine traits like emotionality, passivity and subjectivity are devalued. This structure upholds patriarchy by justifying male dominance. Feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray critique Western philosophy for being centred around male perspectives, which she calls phallogentric. This means that men and mas-



- Need for a feminine centred symbolic language to challenge patriarchy

culine experiences are treated as the norm, while women are seen as different, lacking or secondary. In this system, women's voices and ways of thinking are often ignored or devalued. Irigaray believes that the way we think and use language has been shaped by this male centred view, making it hard to express what it means to be feminine in a way that is not defined by men. Instead of trying to fit women into this existing system, she suggests creating a new kind of language, one that can fully express women's unique experiences and identities. This language would be more open, emotional and poetic, rather than logical and strict. Through this refiguration, Irigaray envisions the emergence of a symbolic order where the feminine is not merely a negation of the masculine, but is affirmed in its own right as a necessary step toward asserting feminine presence that transcends the binary structures sustaining patriarchal power.

1.2.3 Binary Oppositions Beyond Gender

The binary opposition between male and female does not exist in isolation. It is deeply intertwined with other culturally constructed dichotomies that shape how societies organise knowledge, values and roles. These binary frameworks extend across many aspects of life linking gender to ideas about nature and culture, mind and body and public and private spheres. These associations not only reflect but also reinforce hierarchical power structures, where masculinity is consistently privileged over femininity.

1.2.3.1 Nature vs. Culture

One of the most pervasive binaries is the association of women with nature and men with culture. Women are often seen as closer to nature because of their biological capacity for reproduction and their traditional roles as caregivers. This connection casts women as passive, emotional and instinctual, tied to the rhythms of the body and the natural world. In contrast, men are linked with culture: they are seen as creators of civilisation, laws, technologies and institutions. This view paints men as rational, active and capable of shaping and controlling the environment. For example, in many traditional societies, men are credited with creating religious, political and scientific systems, while women's contributions in domestic and agricultural spheres are overlooked or undervalued. This dichotomy has historically justified excluding women from positions of authority in cultural and intellectual life.

- Women are linked to nature and men to culture

1.2.3.2 Mind vs. Body

Another powerful binary is that of mind versus body. In Western philosophical traditions, especially from thinkers like Plato and Descartes, the mind is considered the source of reason, logic and truth, while the body is viewed as inferior, unpredictable and prone to desires. Men are associated with the mind and thus with intellectual and spiritual pursuits; women, by contrast, are linked to the body and by extension, to emotionality, sensuality and irrationality. This division has been used to argue that men are more suited to leadership, scholarship and public decision making, while women are supposedly more suited to caregiving and emotional support. For instance, the historical exclusion of women from higher education and scientific institutions was often justified by claims that women were too emotional or too focused on bodily concerns to engage in serious intellectual work.

- While men are aligned with reason, women are associated with emotion.

1.2.3.3 Public vs. Private

The binary of public and private space is another area where gendered divisions become deeply embedded. The public sphere comprising politics, economics and civic life has traditionally been associated with men. They are viewed as the ones who participate in governance, earn money and shape public discourse. Women, meanwhile, have been relegated to the private sphere: the home, child rearing and domestic duties. This division is not simply about physical spaces but about symbolic power. The public is seen as the realm of reason, action and history making; the private is the realm of emotion, dependence and invisibility. For example, in many cultures, a man working long hours in an office or as a political leader is seen as fulfilling his social role, while a woman doing unpaid care work at home may be viewed as economically unproductive or even idle, despite the essential nature of her labour.

- Men are aligned to the valued public sphere whereas women to the devalued private sphere.

- Gender stereotypes persist in media and workplaces.

Contemporary examples also show how these binaries persist. For instance, in media, male characters are often portrayed as logical problem solvers or heroic leaders, while female characters are emotional supporters or romantic interests. In the workplace, women are still stereotyped as being too emotional to hold leadership roles, while men are praised for assertiveness that would be labelled aggressive in women. In the fields of science and technology, men are often assumed to be naturally better, despite women's increasing achievements in these areas.



1.2.4 Cultural and Colonial Reinforcement of Gender Binaries

- Gender binaries as culturally and historically created

Gender binaries are not simply natural or biological distinctions; they are continually produced, reinforced and legitimised through cultural and historical processes. Cultural institutions such as literature, film, religion and education play a powerful role in shaping how gender is understood and experienced. These institutions rely heavily on binary logic to categorise people into rigid roles of masculinity and femininity, often elevating one while devaluing the other. In parallel, colonial histories have imposed and globalised Western gender binaries, disrupting and replacing more fluid or diverse gender systems found in many non-Western cultures. Together, cultural production and colonial power have entrenched binary thinking and gender hierarchies across societies.

- Use of binary archetypes in religious and literary narratives.

In religious narratives, particularly in Judeo-Christian traditions, women are often portrayed through binary archetypes: the virtuous, obedient figure (like the Virgin Mary) versus the sinful, dangerous woman (like Eve). These stories establish a moral framework that positions women as either revered or reviled, with little space for complexity or variation. Such binary constructions of womanhood are echoed in literature, where female characters are frequently confined to roles such as the nurturing mother, the tragic heroine or the seductive temptress. These representations not only reduce the scope of female identity but also naturalise gender roles, making them appear timeless and universal.

- Cinema and education perpetuating gender binaries.

Cinema reinforces these symbolisms in visual and narrative forms. As Laura Mulvey (1975) argues in her theory of the “male gaze,” mainstream films often present women as passive objects to be looked at, rather than active subjects with agency. Women are typically depicted either as idealised love interests or as threats to male stability and power. Such portrayals normalise the idea that men are the doers and thinkers in public life, while women are defined by their looks, emotions or relationships to men. Similarly, education systems have historically excluded or minimised the contributions of women, particularly in subjects like science, philosophy and politics. Curricula that focus almost exclusively on male achievements reinforce the idea that intellect and authority are inherently masculine traits. This ignorance towards women’s knowledge and labour perpetuates a cultural hierarchy where the masculine is associated with rationality and dominance and the feminine with emotion and subordination.

These cultural practices intersect with and are amplified by the legacy of colonialism. Colonial powers not only dominated land and resources but also imposed their epistemologies, including rigid gender binaries, onto colonised societies. In many indigenous and non - Western cultures, gender was understood as fluid, diverse and context dependent. For instance, many Native American tribes recognised the identity of Two Spirit people i.e., individuals who embody both masculine and feminine qualities as a respected and integral part of the community. In South Asia, the hijra community has long occupied a distinct third gender category, with social and spiritual significance. However, under colonial rule, such fluid identities were suppressed, pathologised or erased in favour of the European male / female binary. Colonial ideologies also feminised colonised subjects to justify domination. As Anne Mc Clintock (1995) explains, colonial discourse often portrayed Western civilisation as masculine, rational, orderly and powerful while coding colonised peoples as feminine, emotional, chaotic and submissive. This gendered imagery worked in tandem with racial hierarchies to rationalise imperial conquest, positioning the coloniser as the paternal figure bringing civilisation to the childlike, feminised native. Such narratives deeply intertwined gender, race and empire in the production of global hierarchies. Many feminist postcolonial theorists have critiqued this tendency to universalise Western gender frameworks and have emphasised the need to recognise the specificities of local gender systems disrupted by colonialism. They warn against treating women in the Global South as a homogenous group of passive victims; instead, they call for an analysis that takes into account the intersections of gender, race, class and geopolitical history. Their work exposes how binary oppositions such as the coloniser / colonised and man / woman are not only interconnected but also foundational to structures of oppression that persist today.

- Colonialism imposed rigid gender binaries

To conclude, both cultural production and colonial histories have played a central role in constructing and reinforcing hierarchical gender binaries. These systems work together to normalise male dominance and female subordination, often erasing the complexity and diversity of human identities. To challenge these entrenched hierarchies, it is crucial to critique not only the content of cultural representations but also the historical and political frameworks like colonialism that shape how gender is constructed and maintained globally. An irony in this regard is that early feminist strategies too sometimes reinforced gender binaries by celebrating women's nurturing



qualities or emphasising their moral superiority over men. Equality feminism sought to erase differences, while difference feminism celebrated them. Both approaches, however, often failed to challenge the binary structure itself. Postmodern and intersectional feminisms instead call for the embrace of plurality, ambiguity and a redefinition of identity and power that transcends such rigid categories.

1.2.5 Reinforcement of Gender Binaries through Every Day Practices

- Clothing and language reinforce and reshape gender norms.

Beyond religion, literature, education and colonial history, gender binaries are also reinforced through everyday practices of self presentation and communication. Clothing and language are two powerful tools through which individuals re-imagine the norms imposed by binary gender systems. These elements may seem personal or superficial, but they are deeply political, shaping how gender is performed, perceived and regulated within society.

- Clothing as enforcing and resisting gender binaries.

Clothing has long functioned as a visual marker of gender identity, heavily policed to maintain strict divisions between masculinity and femininity. From school uniforms and dress codes to fashion advertising and red carpet events, society continually enforces expectations about how men and women should present themselves. Women wearing trousers were once considered scandalous; men in skirts are still often seen as deviant. These norms reveal how clothing operates as a tool for gender conformity. However, clothing also becomes a potent site of resistance especially for non-binary and gender diverse individuals who challenge the binary model through their choices of style. By mixing traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” elements, embracing androgyny or rejecting gendered fashion altogether, they disrupt the visual codes that enforce binary gender distinctions. For instance, a non-binary person might pair a tailored blazer with a flowing skirt, refusing to be categorised by rigid dress norms. This defiance highlights the performative nature of gender, a key insight in Judith Butler’s work, which argues that gender is not an innate essence but something enacted through repeated behaviours, gestures and appearances. In this context, fashion becomes more than aesthetic; it is an expression of autonomy and a form of political resistance. The moral policing of appearance, whether through school policies banning certain hairstyles or public shaming of gender nonconforming individuals, serves to reinforce patriarchal and binary norms. Feminism, if it is to

truly support liberation, must defend the right of every person to dress and present themselves in ways that reflect their authentic identities. The fight for gender justice must include freedom of expression in clothing, which remains a tangible and symbolic site of emancipation.

- Language plays a major role in reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Just as clothing communicates identity, language shapes our understanding of reality. It encodes social norms, constructs categories and legitimises hierarchies including those based on gender. Traditional language use has been overwhelmingly male centred, with terms like “mankind,” “chairman,” or “he” as the default pronoun in generic contexts. Such linguistic practices subtly normalise the idea that men are the standard and women or other identities are deviations. Feminist linguistic scholars have long challenged this male bias, advocating inclusive language that recognises the existence and dignity of all gender identities. This includes replacing gendered job titles with neutral terms (e.g., firefighter instead of fireman), acknowledging women’s presence in speech and writing and embracing non-binary pronouns such as they / them. The growing visibility of pronoun preferences reflects a broader cultural shift toward recognising gender diversity. Pronoun politics is not merely symbolic; it denotes acts of recognition that affirm people’s identities and challenge the assumption that gender can be easily read or assigned.

- Traditional media also marginalises non-binary identities

Media and literature also play a crucial role in shaping how gender is imagined. Historically, dominant narratives have centred on male protagonists, with women often portrayed as love interests, sidekicks or obstacles. Non-binary characters, if present at all, have been marginalised or misrepresented. However, digital platforms, independent publishers and queer creators have begun to reshape these narratives, offering alternative representations that reflect a broader spectrum of gender experiences.

1.2.6 Non-Binary and Queer Perspectives in Feminism

Queer theory and non-binary experiences offer powerful ways to question and rethink traditional ideas about gender and identity. For a long time, society has treated sex (male / female) and gender (man / woman) as fixed and natural categories. But queer theorists like Michel Foucault (1978) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) have shown that these categories are not set in stone; instead, they are shaped by history, culture and the

- Queer theory and non-binary experiences challenge fixed notions of gender.

way people talk about them. In other words, what we understand as “normal” for men and women has been created over time through language, social expectations and institutions like medicine, religion and education. Non-binary individuals are people whose identities do not fit into the traditional categories of man or woman. Some may identify as both, neither or something in between. Their very existence challenges the idea that there are only two genders. By living outside the gender binary, non-binary people show that gender is not something fixed or based only on biology. Instead, gender can be fluid, flexible and deeply personal. This opens up new ways to think about identity, not as something that must fit a mould, but as something that can be defined by each person for themselves. These ideas are especially important for feminism, which aims to fight against gender based oppression.

- Gender based oppression can be dealt through more inclusive and intersectional approaches.

However, many feminist spaces have historically focused only on the experiences of cisgender women (those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth). This narrow focus can unintentionally exclude or overlook non-binary people, particularly those assigned female at birth (AFAB). AFAB non-binary individuals may be mistaken for gender non-conforming women or told that their struggles are just a version of women’s oppression. This erases their unique experiences and identity, especially when they face both misogyny and misunderstanding of their gender. On the other hand, non-binary people who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) often face different challenges. As they were once seen as male, they may be viewed with suspicion in feminist spaces as if they still carry male privilege. However, AMAB non-binary individuals often experience backlash for rejecting traditional masculinity. They may face ridicule, exclusion or even violence for expressing femininity or softness and they must work hard to prove that they, too, are affected by gender norms and oppression.

- Non-binary perspectives have the capacity to enrich feminism.

Despite these challenges, non-binary individuals bring important insights to feminism. They help us see that the problems caused by patriarchy go beyond just men vs. women. They show how harmful it is to expect people to fit into narrow boxes and how freeing it can be to live outside of them. Their experiences ask feminism to grow: to include all gender identities, to question its own assumptions and to build a world where everyone’s identity is respected. By listening to non-binary and queer voices, feminism can become more inclusive, more compassionate and more powerful. It can move beyond

fighting only for equality between men and women and towards a larger goal, breaking down all systems that limit how people can live, express themselves and be recognised.

Summarized Overview

The unit highlights that the hierarchical binary opposition of gender as man / woman, masculine /feminine is not a reflection of natural differences, but a deeply entrenched social and cultural construct. This binary system has been historically produced and maintained through philosophy, religion, education, colonialism, language and everyday practices. Far from being neutral, it functions as a mechanism of power that assigns value, status and roles unequally, privileging the masculine while rendering the feminine as inferior, passive or invisible. Western metaphysical traditions have long rooted truth, reason and authority in the masculine, casting the feminine as its silent or irrational other. Colonial regimes extended this binary model globally, suppressing indigenous understandings of gender that were more diverse and fluid. Cultural institutions such as religion, literature, film and education have reinforced these binaries, shaping the collective imagination in ways that seem natural and unquestionable. From the rigid division between public and private spheres to the policing of clothing, speech and behaviour, binary gender roles are imposed upon individuals, often from birth, limiting their freedom to express and define themselves.

Feminist and queer theorists have been instrumental in challenging the foundations of this system. They expose how binary thinking is not only exclusionary but also inadequate in capturing the rich diversity of human experience. By questioning the presumed stability of sex and gender and by highlighting how language, performance and power construct our identities, they open up space for alternative ways of being. Non-binary, genderqueer and trans voices in particular have expanded the feminist conversation, demanding that it become more inclusive and responsive to the lived realities of those who exist beyond or between the binary poles.

The task before feminism today is urgent and transformative. It must continue to interrogate the structures that sustain binary hierarchies not only in theory, but in the everyday practices that shape our lives. This means rethinking how we educate, how we speak, how we legislate and how we relate to one another. It means centring the voices of those historically excluded and recognising that the struggle for gender justice is inseparable from the broader fight against racism, colonialism, ableism and class inequality. To fulfil its full emancipatory promise, feminism must move beyond the binary. It must embrace fluidity not as a threat, but as a source of creativity, authenticity and resistance. It must honour the multiplicity of identities and experiences that fall outside conventional categories. And it must imagine a world in which all individuals, regardless of gender, can live with dignity, autonomy and joy. By dismantling the binary logic that underpins oppression, we do not lose coherence, we gain freedom. In its place, we can build more expansive, relational and compassionate understandings of self and



society. This is not just a theoretical shift, but a cultural, political and personal revolution: one that affirms the complexity of human existence and the right of all people to define themselves on their own terms.

Self-Assessment

1. How does the concept of gender performativity challenge traditional views of gender as biologically determined?
2. In what ways have colonial and cultural institutions contributed to the global reinforcement of binary gender norms?
3. Why is it important for contemporary feminism to include non-binary and queer perspectives in its analysis of gender oppression?
4. Why do feminist and queer theorists challenge the stability of sex and gender?
5. How have non-binary, genderqueer and trans voices contributed to expanding feminist thought?

Assignments

1. Critically analyse how the binary oppositions of mind/body and public/private contribute to the marginalisation of women and non-binary individuals.
2. Discuss how feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler propose to deconstruct and reconstruct gender beyond hierarchical binaries.
3. Examine the role of everyday practices like clothing and language in both reinforcing and resisting binary gender norms, using examples from the text.

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SGOU

A rectangular wooden frame with a dark brown interior. The frame is made of light-colored wood with a visible grain. Inside the frame, the text is centered in a bold, yellow, serif font. There are four small, dark, circular fasteners or rivets at the corners of the inner frame.

BLOCK 2
Enlightenment and
Liberal Feminist
Ideals

UNIT 1

Rousseau on Division of Sex-role in Society in the *Émile* and *The Social Contract*

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand Rousseau's philosophical stance on gender
- evaluate the evolution of Rousseau's views on women
- critically assess the gendered assumptions in Rousseau's political theory
- examine feminist critiques of Rousseau's gender ideology
- apply feminist theoretical insights to Enlightenment philosophy

Background

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) remains one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment. While he is celebrated for his radical ideas on liberty, equality, and democratic governance, especially in *The Social Contract* (1762), his writings on gender, particularly in *Émile, or On Education* (1762), have attracted substantial feminist critique. Rousseau envisioned a society rooted in the “general will” and the moral education of the citizen. However, the citizen in Rousseau's ideal polity was implicitly male. His vision of womanhood was constrained by patriarchal ideals that relegated women to domestic roles. This unit will examine how his gender ideology is constructed, defended, and challenged, especially in *Émile* and *The Social Contract*. It will also consider how Rousseau's theory of sex roles has influenced, and has been interrogated by, feminist thought.

Keywords

Social Contract, Sex roles, Gender, Sexual complementarity

Discussion

2.1.1 Rousseau and the Question of Gender

- Rousseau stood by essentialist views on gender

Jean-Jacques Rousseau occupies a foundational place in the canon of Enlightenment thought, known for his influential theories on liberty, education, and political legitimacy. However, Rousseau's treatment of gender, particularly his representations of women, reveals a striking paradox at the heart of his philosophy. While he articulated a compelling critique of inequality and advanced the radical notion of popular sovereignty in *The Social Contract* (1762), his writings on women, most explicitly in *Émile, or On Education* (1762), rest on essentialist and hierarchical conceptions of sexual difference. These views have rendered Rousseau a contested figure within feminist philosophy, as scholars have critically examined the tension between his democratic ideals and his patriarchal assumptions.

- Role of women as subordinate to men

Central to Rousseau's conceptualisation of gender is the belief in fundamental, natural differences between the sexes. He characterises men as rational, autonomous, and suited to public life, while portraying women as emotional, passive, and destined for domesticity. Rousseau states unequivocally that "the whole education of women ought to be relative to men," indicating that women's identity and purpose are derivative rather than self-contained. Their role is not to act as citizens in their own right but to serve as companions and caretakers to the male citizen.

2.1.2 Rousseau's Shifting Views on Gender

- Shift from egalitarian to patriarchal views on gender

Rousseau's views on gender exhibit a significant transformation over the course of his intellectual development, evolving from early egalitarian inclinations to a more rigidly patriarchal stance in his mature works. In his unpublished early writings, particularly those written while working with Madame Louise Dupin, Rousseau appears to challenge the established gender order. He acknowledges that women have historically been denied opportunities for education and public recognition, not because of natural inferiority but due to systemic exclusion. In these early texts, Rousseau even suggests that women could rival men in reason and civic virtue if given equal opportunities. Such reflections imply a nascent awareness of gender injustice and a willingness to consider women as potential equals in intellectual and social life.



- Rousseau's later works confine women to subordination

However, this egalitarian tendency does not persist in his published philosophical works. By the time Rousseau authored *Émile* (1762) and *The Social Contract* (1762), his position had shifted dramatically. In *Émile*, Rousseau codifies a theory of sexual complementarity based on natural difference, presenting a model of female education that is subordinate to male needs. Women, he insists, are made to please, nurture, and obey; their moral and intellectual development is framed entirely in relation to men. Sophie, *Émile's* ideal partner, is constructed not as a citizen or moral agent in her own right, but as a carefully fashioned companion who ensures the well-being and virtue of her husband. This formulation reflects a stark retreat from the more progressive views articulated in Rousseau's earlier work, effectively naturalising women's domestic confinement and dependence. Several factors may have influenced this shift in Rousseau's thinking. One possibility is that Rousseau's personal experiences, particularly his strained relationships with women and rejection of bourgeois culture, shaped a romanticised but restrictive view of femininity. His philosophical commitment to a cohesive social order and moral education led him to assign women a stabilising, though subservient, role within the private sphere. While Rousseau's early writings reveal a capacity for recognising structural gender inequality, his later works demonstrate an increasing reliance on essentialist arguments that justify the exclusion of women from political and intellectual life.

- Belief in male vs female rigidity reinforces sex roles

This evolution in Rousseau's thought has been the subject of significant feminist critique. Scholars have noted the contradiction between his call for universal liberty and his relegation of women to a secondary, supportive status. The progression from critical observer of gender injustice to architect of gendered social roles highlights not only Rousseau's philosophical ambivalence but also the broader tensions within Enlightenment discourse. His shifting views on gender underscore how the promise of equality in Enlightenment thought was often constructed on the exclusion and subordination of women. He believed that men and women are inherently different in their physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities, and therefore suited to fundamentally different social roles. This belief is most clearly articulated in *Émile, or On Education*, and is implicitly reinforced in *The Social Contract*, where the concept of citizenship is built on male rationality and autonomy, excluding women from participation in public and political life.

2.1.3 On Sex Roles in Society in *The Social Contract*

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau lays out a radical theory of political legitimacy and popular sovereignty, famously declaring that “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” His intention is to offer a vision of a just society governed by the general will of its citizens. However, the term “citizen” in Rousseau’s political theory is implicitly male, and the roles assigned to women are strikingly absent from the framework of the social contract. This exclusion is not accidental; it stems from Rousseau’s belief in a natural division of sex roles that delegates women to the private, domestic realm and men to the public, political sphere.

- Citizen as implicitly male

Rousseau’s conception of the social order depends on a strict sexual hierarchy. While *The Social Contract* is concerned with how individuals become free and equal citizens through a collective act of will, Rousseau does not extend this political subjectivity to women. The contract is between men, and it presupposes a social foundation, i.e., the family, that is itself hierarchical and patriarchal. Women, in Rousseau’s view, sustain this foundation not as equal partners, but as supportive figures whose moral and emotional functions are essential to the health of the state, yet who remain structurally excluded from political participation.

- Women as subordinate in a hierarchical family structure

Although Rousseau does not directly elaborate on women’s roles in *The Social Contract*, his views are evident through omission and implication. The ideal citizen, capable of rational deliberation and participation in the general will, is imagined as male. The silence on women in this text becomes all the more significant when considered alongside *Emile*, where Rousseau explicitly states that women’s education and role must be relative to men’s. Women are to be governed by sentiment rather than reason and are tasked with maintaining domestic order, child-rearing, and supporting the moral character of male citizens. Thus, the household becomes a pre-political training ground for male virtue, sustained by female subservience. This gendered division of roles reveals a foundational contradiction in Rousseau’s political thought. While he passionately defends liberty and equality as the basis of legitimate governance, his concept of liberty is gender-exclusive. The social contract, as Rousseau presents it, cannot accommodate the equal citizenship of women without undermining the very structure upon which he believes the polity depends. The public freedom of men, in

- Liberty as gender-exclusive



Rousseau's model, is premised upon the private subordination of women.

- Legitimation of women's exclusion is questioned

Rousseau's silence on women in *The Social Contract* is thus not neutral but deeply ideological, reflecting and reinforcing a conception of sex roles that positions women as essential yet unequal contributors to the social order. This tension continues to be a focal point for feminist critique and remains central to the evaluation of Rousseau's legacy in political theory. Feminist scholars such as Carole Pateman have termed this contradiction the "sexual contract," an unspoken precondition of the social contract in which male freedom is made possible through the institutionalised subordination of women. Pateman and others argue that Rousseau's vision of political society rests on a deeply gendered foundation: a romanticised but forced model of the family in which women's exclusion is naturalised and legitimised. The family, therefore, becomes not just a metaphor but a political mechanism by which gender inequality is reproduced and reinforced.

2.1.4 On Sex Roles in Society in *Emile, or On Education*

- Rousseau justifies different education for men and women

In *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau presents his most comprehensive vision of education as the foundation for a moral and well-ordered society. The text is structured around the upbringing of a fictional male child, Emile, and includes a corresponding model for the ideal woman, Sophie. Through these characters, Rousseau articulates a theory of sex roles in society that is grounded in a belief in natural sexual difference and complementary, yet hierarchical, social functions for men and women. These roles are not merely educational prescriptions but form the basis of Rousseau's ideal social order. He begins by asserting that men and women are inherently different in their physical constitution, emotional disposition, and moral purpose. This belief leads him to argue that their education must be distinct. Emile is educated in isolation from corrupt society, trained in rationality, independence, and moral autonomy. He is prepared for a life of active citizenship and self-governance. In stark contrast, Sophie is educated not for independence or public life, but to complement and serve Emile. Rousseau writes, "The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them..." (*Emile*, Book V). This declaration encapsulates Rousseau's view that a woman's purpose in society is relational, not individual.

- Women's societal influence is limited to indirect roles

The sex roles Rousseau prescribes are deeply embedded in a vision of natural hierarchy. While he claims to follow nature in assigning different duties to men and women, this so-called naturalism serves to justify traditional gender roles. Men are active, strong, and rational; women are passive, modest, and emotional. The domestic sphere is designated as the rightful domain of women, who are tasked with maintaining family life and ensuring the moral development of their husbands and children. Public life, reasoned judgment, and civic participation are reserved for men. Women, in Rousseau's view, may influence society, but only indirectly, through their roles as wives and mothers.

- Ideal woman as modest and obedient

Sophie, the ideal woman in *Emile*, embodies the values Rousseau deems necessary for societal harmony. She is trained in obedience, modesty, and self-restraint. Her education suppresses her autonomy in favour of cultivating traits that will render her desirable and supportive to her husband. Although Rousseau acknowledges that women are responsible for educating the young, he paradoxically denies them full access to reason and independent judgment. This contradiction, involved in assigning women a crucial moral function while simultaneously deeming them incapable of reason, has been a focal point of feminist critique.

- Reinforces male autonomy through female submission

By situating women outside the sphere of rational citizenship, Rousseau effectively denies them full membership in the moral and political community. His construction of sex roles in *Emile* reflects a broader Enlightenment pattern of defining universal human attributes through a male lens while excluding women from the full realisation of those ideals. The rigid gender roles he outlines serve to stabilise the social order but at the cost of institutionalising female subordination. Thus, *Emile* offers a vision of social harmony that is deeply gendered. Rousseau's model of education reinforces a division of sex roles wherein male autonomy is dependent on female submission. His philosophy upholds a complementary model of the sexes, but one that is far from equal. Rousseau's theory of sex roles in *Emile* thus stands as a key example of how Enlightenment ideals of freedom and moral development were circumscribed by patriarchal assumptions about gender.



2.1.5 Feminist Critiques of Rousseau's Concept of Sex Roles

- Feminists critique Rousseau's gendered exclusion from equality

Rousseau's concept of sex roles has been the subject of sustained critique by feminist theorists who argue that his views institutionalise gender inequality under the guise of natural difference. While Rousseau is often hailed as a champion of liberty and democratic ideals, his exclusion of women from education, citizenship, and rational autonomy reveals a contradiction in his political thought. Feminist scholars have interrogated both the theoretical foundations and practical implications of Rousseau's gender ideology, exposing how his supposedly universal concepts of freedom and equality are, in fact, structured around the subordination of women.

- Wollstonecraft criticises the theory of sexual complementarity

One of the earliest and most influential feminist responses came from Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) directly targets Rousseau's arguments in *Emile*. Wollstonecraft challenges the idea that women are naturally suited to modesty, dependence, and emotional subservience. She criticises Rousseau's paradoxical claim that women must be uneducated and irrational, yet are expected to shape the moral character of future citizens through child-rearing. Wollstonecraft writes with biting irony about Rousseau's idealisation of female ignorance, arguing that it serves to justify male dominance and sentimentalises female submission. Her critique lays bare the logical and moral inconsistencies in Rousseau's theory of sexual complementarity.

- Pateman criticises the social contract as a sexual contract

Building on Wollstonecraft's insights, Carole Pateman presents a more structural critique in her seminal work *The Sexual Contract* (1988). Pateman argues that Rousseau's social contract, which appears to liberate men from arbitrary power, simultaneously relies on a prior sexual contract that institutionalises patriarchal authority within the private sphere. According to Pateman, Rousseau's ideal of political fraternity is made possible by women's subordination in the household, a realm that remains outside the reach of public reason and democratic accountability. Thus, Rousseau's political community of free and equal men is predicated on the invisible, unfree labour of women, who are denied entrance into the civic sphere altogether.

Similarly, Susan Moller Okin, in her book *Women in Western Political Thought* (1979), scrutinises Rousseau's political philosophy for its exclusion of women from the rights

- Gendered dualism is criticised by Okin

and responsibilities of citizenship. She highlights the gendered dualism in *Emile*, where Emile is shaped into an autonomous moral agent while Sophie is constructed to be passive, obedient, and deferential. Okin points out that this model of gender socialisation is fundamentally incompatible with Rousseau's larger project of forming independent, rational citizens. By excluding half the population from reason and autonomy, Rousseau's civic vision becomes internally incoherent.

- Rousseau naturalises gender roles to preserve social order

These critiques also expose how Rousseau naturalises gender roles to secure social order. By claiming that men and women have different "natures" and, thus, different destinies, Rousseau avoids addressing the political dimensions of gender inequality. Feminist scholars argue that this move serves to mask the social construction of gender hierarchies and legitimise women's exclusion from education, politics, and public discourse. As a result, Rousseau's ideal of moral and political harmony is achieved only through the systemic silencing of women's voices. Contemporary feminist interpretations of Rousseau often adopt a more nuanced stance. Some scholars acknowledge the contradictions and complexities within his texts, especially the tension between his early, more egalitarian writings and the later patriarchal prescriptions in *Emile*. Others have noted that Rousseau's critique of modernity, artificiality, and the corrupting influence of civilisation contains resources for feminist reflection, particularly in his concern for emotional development and moral authenticity. However, these potential openings do not negate the overarching structure of exclusion that characterises Rousseau's treatment of women.

- Rousseau's freedom excludes women

By exposing the patriarchal underpinnings of Rousseau's concept of sex roles, feminist thinkers have demonstrated how even the most celebrated visions of freedom and equality can be compromised by deeply embedded assumptions about gender. Their work continues to shape the ongoing project of recovering and expanding the democratic ideals that Rousseau helped to initiate but did not extend to all.



Summarized Overview

Rousseau's theory of sex roles is grounded in the belief that men and women are naturally different in their physical and psychological capacities and, therefore, should occupy distinct social roles. He argues that men are rational, active, and suited for public life and citizenship, while women are emotional, passive, and naturally destined for domestic duties such as child-rearing and supporting their husbands. Rousseau maintains that these sex roles are not only natural but necessary for social harmony. Women's subordination is framed as a complement to male authority, and their virtue lies in maintaining moral order within the family. This theory has been widely criticised by feminist thinkers for naturalising gender inequality and excluding women from education, rational development, and political participation. Rousseau's concept of sex roles, while influential, reveals a deep contradiction between his universal claims to equality and his gendered prescriptions for society.

Self-Assessment

1. How does Rousseau's theory of sex roles in *Emile* and *The Social Contract* reflect a contradiction between his political ideals and his views on gender?
2. What were Rousseau's early egalitarian ideas about women, and how did they change in his later works?
3. How have feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Carole Pateman, and Susan Moller Okin critiqued Rousseau's concept of sex roles?

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of the family as a political institution in Rousseau's philosophy and its implications for modern debates on gender equality.
2. Evaluate the relevance of Rousseau's ideas on natural difference between the sexes in light of contemporary feminist and sociological theories.

Reference

1. Botting, E. H. (2019). *Rousseau and Feminism*. In C. Kelly & E. Grace (Eds.), *The Rousseauian Mind* (pp. 463–473). Routledge.
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Suggested Reading

1. Rousseau, J.-J. (1979). *Emile, or on Education*. Edited and translated by Bloom, A. New York: Basic Books.
2. Rousseau, J.-J. (2009). *Rousseau on Women, Love, and Family*. Edited by Kelly, C. and Grace, E. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



SGOU

UNIT 2

Liberal Feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the historical and intellectual context of Wollstonecraft's feminist philosophy
- analyse her critique of Rousseau's gender theory and essentialist roles
- identify key themes like freedom, reason, education, and equality in her thought
- evaluate the reception, criticism, and legacy of her work over time
- assess her lasting impact on liberal feminism and gender equality debates

Background

The late 18th century was a period of intellectual transformation marked by the rise of Enlightenment ideals such as liberty, equality, and rationality. Thinkers like Rousseau, Locke, and Kant advocated for human rights, yet these rights were largely imagined in exclusively male terms. It was within this context of progressive but gender-exclusive liberalism that Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) emerged as a pioneering voice in feminist political thought. Her most influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was a direct response to the gender biases embedded in Enlightenment philosophy, particularly those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Wollstonecraft is often considered the founding figure of liberal feminism, a tradition that emphasises women's access to education, individual autonomy, and civil rights within the framework of liberal political theory. Liberal feminism, in this context, does not seek to overthrow the liberal order but to extend its principles of individual freedom, rationality, and equality to women. Wollstonecraft's arguments are situated within both the liberal and classical republican traditions, and her vision of freedom centres on independence from arbitrary power, whether that power is exercised by monarchs or by men within the household. Her work is essential not only for its feminist insight but also for how it critiques and reconstructs foundational concepts in moral and political theory.



Keywords

Enlightenment, Liberal Feminism, Gender Equality, Rational Education

Discussion

2.2.1 The Intellectual Context of Mary Wollstonecraft

- Enlightenment ideals excluded women from equal rights

To understand Wollstonecraft's contributions, it is important to situate her within the broader currents of 18th-century political thought. Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant argued for individual autonomy, human dignity, and natural rights. However, these values were largely applied to men alone. Women were often portrayed as irrational, emotionally driven, and suited only for domestic roles. Rousseau, for example, explicitly argued in *Emile* that women's education should focus on pleasing and serving men.

- Wollstonecraft's critical engagement with Enlightenment ideals

Wollstonecraft was deeply influenced by Enlightenment rationalism but also critically engaged with its gendered assumptions. She drew on the works of Locke and others in her arguments for reason and moral agency, but directly confronted Rousseau's hierarchical view of the sexes. Her philosophical project was to expose the inconsistency between Enlightenment values and the social reality of women and to propose a model of society that included women as full moral and political subjects. Emerging from a background of social instability and personal hardship, Wollstonecraft developed her intellectual voice during a time of political upheaval and philosophical ferment. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on individual rights, rationality, and democratic governance, provided the ideological scaffolding for her feminist arguments. However, she did not passively adopt the liberal ideals of her contemporaries. Instead, she subjected them to critical analysis, revealing the contradictions at their core, most notably the failure to extend the Enlightenment's promise of freedom and equality to women. She thus stands at the crossroads of Enlightenment political thought and the dawn of feminist philosophy, and her liberal feminism offers a foundational critique of gendered dependence and a bold call for women's inclusion as full and rational members of society.

2.2.2 Critique of Rousseau's Gender Theory

Mary Wollstonecraft's engagement with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas, particularly as articulated in *Émile* (1762), represents one of the most significant philosophical confrontations in early feminist thought. In *Émile*, Rousseau presented his educational blueprint for the ideal man and woman, the latter embodied in the character of Sophie. Rousseau envisioned Sophie as naturally suited to please, serve, and complement man, with her education directed toward charm, modesty, and obedience rather than intellectual or civic development. For him, gender roles were rooted in an essentialist view of human nature, where men were associated with reason, strength, and public action, while women were linked to emotion, delicacy, and domesticity. This formulation crystallised the "separate spheres" ideology that would dominate Western gender norms for over a century. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) directly challenges this framework. She argues that Rousseau's vision of Sophie not only perpetuates female subordination but also undermines the moral and intellectual capacities of half the human race. By denying women the same rational education as men, Rousseau effectively consigns them to a life of dependency and superficiality. Wollstonecraft contends that virtue, morality, and reason are universal human qualities, not gender-specific traits, and therefore require equal cultivation in both sexes. In her view, education should aim to produce autonomous moral agents, not decorative companions for men.

- Advocated equal rational education for both sexes

In rejecting Rousseau's "separate spheres" ideology, Wollstonecraft dismantles the notion that biological differences dictate fixed social roles. While she acknowledges physical differences between the sexes, she insists these do not translate into inherent intellectual or moral inferiority. Instead, the apparent disparities in ability and character between men and women are, she argues, the product of social conditioning and deficient educational opportunities for women. This insight shifts the debate from biological determinism to structural inequality, laying a foundation for modern feminist critiques of gender essentialism. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on shared human nature over essentialist gender differences represents a radical departure from her time. By affirming that men and women are equally capable of rational thought and moral judgment, she redefines the basis for equality as something grounded in human dignity rather than in functional or complementary roles. This egalitarian perspective not only challenges Rousseau's

- Shift from biological determinism to structural inequality



romanticised vision of femininity but also anticipates later liberal feminist arguments for equal citizenship, legal rights, and access to public life. In doing so, Wollstonecraft positions herself as both a critic of Enlightenment patriarchy and an inheritor of its most universalist principles.

2.2.3 Central Themes in Wollstonecraft's Philosophy

Some of the central themes in Wollstonecraft's philosophy are discussed below:

- Insisted that women should be free from the domination of all kinds

Freedom as Independence from Arbitrary Power: A central theme in Wollstonecraft's philosophy is the idea of freedom as independence. Drawing on classical republicanism, she defines freedom not simply as non-interference but as freedom from domination and arbitrary control. This notion is particularly important for her feminist critique of marriage, education, and economic dependency. In Wollstonecraft's view, women in her society lived under conditions analogous to slavery, not through explicit violence but through structural dependence on men. Wollstonecraft argues that dependence erodes moral character. Women who rely on male approval and financial support are unable to develop rational autonomy or cultivate virtue. In this sense, her liberal feminism is not merely about equal rights but about the conditions necessary for moral agency and human flourishing. Her insistence that women must be free from domination anticipates later developments in feminist and republican theory.

- Reason as the basis of moral and political equality

The Role of Reason and Rational Education: Wollstonecraft places strong emphasis on reason as the basis of moral and political equality. In contrast to thinkers who viewed women as naturally irrational, she asserts that all human beings possess the faculty of reason and that the apparent inferiority of women is the result of social conditioning and educational neglect. Without education, women are forced to depend on beauty, charm, or subservience to gain status and security. She advocates for a national system of co-educational schools that would teach both boys and girls the same moral and intellectual subjects. Education, in her view, is not merely instrumental for gaining employment or social standing; it is essential for developing rational autonomy, which is the core of moral responsibility. Through education, women could become better citizens, better mothers, and better partners, not in a subordinate role but as equals who share in the responsibilities of civic life.

- Marriage propagates inequality

Critique of Marriage and Domestic Subjugation: Wollstonecraft's critique of marriage is one of the most radical aspects of her thought. In her novels and philosophical writings, she portrays marriage as an institution that entrenches inequality and fosters moral corruption. Women, lacking economic independence and social recognition, are often forced into marriages based on necessity rather than mutual respect. In such arrangements, women lose their legal and moral identity, becoming dependent on their husbands in a way that stunts their moral growth. She advocates for a reimagined model of marriage based on companionship and mutual respect, rather than domination and obedience. For Wollstonecraft, the personal is deeply political. Private relationships, such as marriage, are not outside the scope of political critique, especially when they reinforce systems of dependence and inequality. Her views prefigure later feminist arguments about the political dimensions of domestic life and gender roles.

- Virtue is not gender specific

Virtue, Citizenship, and Moral Equality: A recurring theme in Wollstonecraft's work is the relationship between virtue and independence. She challenges the 18th-century ideal of gendered virtue, which emphasised strength, rationality, and public virtue in men, and modesty, emotion, and submissiveness in women. According to Wollstonecraft, virtue is not gender-specific. Moral excellence requires the same qualities in men and women: the capacity to reason, the ability to act autonomously, and the willingness to take responsibility for one's actions. She extends this argument to citizenship. Although she does not explicitly demand the right to vote, Wollstonecraft insists that women are capable of participating in public life and should be granted the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Her feminism is thus not merely domestic or educational; it is civic and political, rooted in the belief that women must be active participants in shaping the moral and legal order of society.

- Need for a cultural transformation

Social and Cultural Reform: Wollstonecraft recognised that legal reform alone would not bring about gender equality. She called for a broader cultural transformation, viz., a "revolution in female manners" that would challenge the social norms, habits, and expectations that sustained women's subordination. She believed that women themselves must participate in this revolution by refusing to conform to ideals of beauty, vanity, and emotional dependence, and instead cultivating reason, independence, and moral courage. At the same time, she acknowledged the structural constraints women faced, including a lack of property rights, limited access to



education, and social prejudice. Her strategy combined moral critique, educational reform, and social analysis, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of how institutions and ideologies shape personal identity and social relations.

2.2.4 Reception and Criticism

The reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's work during her lifetime was complex, marked by both admiration and hostility. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was praised in progressive circles for its bold defence of women's education and rational equality, aligning with broader Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals of liberty. Reformers and intellectuals sympathetic to democratic reform saw her arguments as an extension of the rights discourse that had emerged from the American and French Revolutions. However, in more conservative quarters, her ideas were met with sharp criticism, viewed as an attack on the natural order and on traditional family structures.

- Wollstonecraft's work drew both praise and criticism

In the decades following her death, Wollstonecraft's reputation entered a period of decline, particularly in Victorian Britain, where strict moral codes and domestic ideals for women dominated public life. While her works were not entirely forgotten, they were largely sidelined in favour of more moderate or domestic visions of womanhood. The radical nature of her challenge to patriarchal structures was deemed unsuitable for polite society, and she was often remembered more for the scandals surrounding her biography than for her philosophical contributions. This neglect persisted well into the 19th century, with her influence largely indirect, filtered through later feminist writers who sometimes avoided invoking her name explicitly due to its controversial associations.

- Decline in Wollstonecraft's reputation in the 19th century

The 20th century saw a significant revival of interest in Wollstonecraft, particularly from the 1960s onward, as second-wave feminists rediscovered her work and reclaimed her as a foundational figure in feminist political thought. Scholars and activists highlighted the enduring relevance of her arguments for education, equality, and autonomy, framing her as a precursor to liberal and egalitarian strands of feminism. Academic studies began to situate her not only as a polemicist but also as a serious philosopher engaging with Enlightenment political theory, thereby restoring her intellectual credibility and historical importance.

- Wollstonecraft as a precursor to liberal and egalitarian strands of feminism

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's ideas have also been subjected to critical scrutiny from various feminist perspectives.

- The liberal feminist vision of Wollstonecraft was criticised from various spheres

Socialist feminists have argued that her focus on individual rights and education, while progressive, primarily reflects the concerns of the middle classes and does not adequately address the economic structures or class inequalities that shape women's oppression. Radical feminists have critiqued her for insufficiently challenging the patriarchal family as a social institution, noting that her vision still presupposed the heterosexual nuclear family as the norm. Postmodern and intersectional feminists have further highlighted the limitations of her work, pointing out that her arguments centre on the experiences of white, educated, European women, with little attention to differences of race, colonial status, or cultural context. These critiques do not diminish her historical significance but rather situate her within the evolving and contested terrain of feminist theory, underscoring both the achievements and the boundaries of her liberal feminist vision.

2.2.5 Legacy and Influence

- Wollstonecraft's legacy marks an intellectual foundation for many later thinkers

Mary Wollstonecraft's writings left an enduring imprint on the trajectory of feminist thought, even during periods when her name was not openly celebrated. Her arguments for women's education, legal equality, and moral autonomy provided an intellectual foundation that would resonate throughout the 19th century, particularly in the burgeoning suffrage movements. While many early suffragists did not explicitly cite Wollstonecraft, partly due to the lingering moral stigma attached to her personal life, her core ideas were unmistakably present in their demands for equal citizenship, access to professions, and reform of marriage laws. The belief that women's intellectual and civic capacities were equal to men's became a central premise of campaigns for the vote, employment rights, and educational reform, reflecting Wollstonecraft's long-term influence on the liberal feminist agenda.

- Wollstonecraft's ideas shaped 19th-century liberal feminism

Her thought also served as a source of inspiration for later liberal philosophers and reformers, notably John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) shares Wollstonecraft's commitment to rational equality and its grounding in liberal political theory, while Taylor's writings on women's economic independence parallel Wollstonecraft's emphasis on autonomy and self-reliance. Though Mill and Taylor rarely acknowledged direct influence, their arguments often echoed Wollstonecraft's vision of dismantling legal and social barriers to women's full participation in public life. This intellectual continuity helped secure liberal feminism's place as a key strand of 19th-century political thought.



- Wollstonecraft's legacy guides and challenges modern feminism

In contemporary feminist discourse, Wollstonecraft's work continues to be a touchstone, both as a historical landmark and as a source of enduring principles. Her insistence on rationality, education, and equal moral consideration remains relevant in ongoing struggles for gender justice worldwide, including debates on access to education, reproductive rights, workplace equality, and political representation. At the same time, modern feminist scholars approach her legacy with critical nuance, recognising both her pioneering role and the limitations of her perspective, particularly its lack of engagement with intersectional issues of race, class, and global inequality. In this way, Wollstonecraft occupies a dual position: as a visionary who helped articulate the philosophical basis for women's rights, and as a figure whose work invites continual reinterpretation and expansion in light of contemporary feminist concerns.

Summarized Overview

Mary Wollstonecraft's contribution to liberal feminist thought lies in her bold integration of Enlightenment principles of reason, liberty, and equality into a systematic argument for women's rights. At a time when women's intellectual and civic capacities were widely dismissed, she advanced the radical proposition that women are, by nature, rational beings entitled to the same educational opportunities, moral development, and civil freedoms as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft challenged not only the legal and social subordination of women but also the cultural norms and pedagogical practices that perpetuated their dependency. Her critique of influential male philosophers, particularly Rousseau, demonstrates her willingness to confront the gender biases embedded in Enlightenment thought, reimagining its ideals through an inclusive lens. By shifting the basis of women's equality from functional roles to inherent human dignity, she laid the groundwork for liberal feminist theory as a political and philosophical tradition.

The enduring value of Wollstonecraft's advocacy lies in the universality and adaptability of her core principles. Her insistence on rational equality remains a powerful moral argument in contemporary struggles for gender justice, whether in the realm of education, employment, political representation, or bodily autonomy. Although her work reflects the limitations of her historical context, focusing primarily on the concerns of white, middle-class women, its central call for structural reform through education, legal change, and cultural transformation continues to inspire feminist activism worldwide. In recognising both her achievements and her constraints, modern feminist thought treats Wollstonecraft not merely as a historical figure but as an ongoing interlocutor in the dialogue on equality, justice, and human rights. Her legacy affirms that the pursuit of gender equality is not a temporary reform movement but a fundamental reordering of society based on the shared capacities and moral worth of all human beings.

Self-Assessment

1. What were Wollstonecraft's main criticisms of Rousseau's views on women's education?
2. How did Wollstonecraft define freedom in the context of women's rights?
3. In what ways has Wollstonecraft's work influenced later feminist thought?

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of Enlightenment ideals in shaping Wollstonecraft's feminist philosophy.
2. Examine the relevance of Wollstonecraft's ideas in contemporary gender equality movements.

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UNIT 3

Liberal Feminism of J. S. Mill and Harriet Taylor

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand how J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor presented a coherent feminist philosophy
- engage with the individual contributions of Mill and Taylor towards liberal feminism
- compare the convergences and divergences of their viewpoints
- evaluate their enduring influence on liberal feminism
- identify the limitations in their theories

Background

The liberal feminism of the nineteenth century found one of its most articulate philosophical expressions in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill. Their shared vision challenged the entrenched patriarchal structures of Victorian society, demanding the recognition of women's rights within a framework of liberty, equality, and rational progress. While John Stuart Mill is often the name associated with *The Subjection of Women* (1869), the intellectual partnership and influence of Harriet Taylor Mill were decisive in shaping the ideas presented in this work. Together, they advanced a version of feminism rooted in liberal individualism and utilitarian ethics, arguing that women's emancipation was not merely a moral imperative but a precondition for social advancement.

John Stuart Mill's advocacy for women's rights emerged in the context of his lifelong commitment to liberalism and social reform. His early exposure to utilitarian philosophy through his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham provided a framework for his belief in the moral necessity of equality. His relationship with Harriet Taylor, beginning in the early 1830s and continuing until her death in 1858, was transformative. Harriet brought



to the partnership a deeply held conviction in the injustice of women's subordination, already evident in her early writings such as *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851). Their intellectual and emotional collaboration shaped Mill's parliamentary work, including his 1867 proposal to replace the word "man" with "person" in the Reform Bill, effectively advocating for women's suffrage. Harriet's influence ensured that Mill's feminism was not an occasional theme but a central component of his political philosophy.

Keywords

Liberal Feminism, Utilitarianism, Gender Equality, Women's Suffrage, Economic Independence

Discussion

2.3.1 Philosophical Foundations

The liberal feminism of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill was grounded in a philosophical framework that combined the principles of liberal individualism and utilitarianism. At its core, their thought began with the liberal conviction that every human being, irrespective of gender, possesses the right to self-determination. For them, liberty was not a privilege granted by society but an inherent moral entitlement. In this view, any limitation on a person's ability to develop their faculties and pursue their own conception of the good life required compelling justification. Gender-based restrictions, whether legal, social, or cultural, were thus seen as deeply illegitimate because they denied women the same opportunities for self-cultivation and moral agency that men were afforded.

- Combined liberal feminism and utilitarianism

- Gender equality is a rational strategy to maximise social utility

Alongside this commitment to individual liberty, Mill and Taylor's feminism was shaped by the utilitarian ethic, which held that the legitimacy of any social arrangement depended on its ability to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. They argued that the systematic exclusion of women from political, economic, and intellectual life was not only a moral injustice but also a practical waste of human potential. By depriving half the population of the opportunity to contribute fully to public life, society undermined its own progress, innovation, and collective well-being. In their view, gender equality was therefore not merely an abstract moral demand but also a rational strategy for maximising social utility. This fusion

of liberal rights-based reasoning and utilitarian social analysis gave their feminism a distinctive dual force. It enabled them to appeal both to moral principles of justice and to pragmatic considerations of societal advancement. In this sense, they reframed women's emancipation as a cause that was not only ethically necessary but also essential to the effective functioning and moral legitimacy of a free and progressive society.

2.3.2 Harriet Taylor Mill's Contribution

Harriet Taylor Mill's feminist vision was formed through her own intellectual development and public engagement, well before her collaboration with John Stuart Mill. In her influential essay *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), she presented a clear and forceful argument that the exclusion of women from political participation was incompatible with the very foundations of democratic society. For Taylor, democracy rested on the principles of equal citizenship and universal rights, and any system that denied these to women was inherently self-contradictory. She emphasised that the political subordination of women was not a natural state but the product of entrenched custom and patriarchal law, both of which had to be confronted directly.

- Subordination of women was considered the product of patriarchal law

A central theme in Taylor's thought was the demand for equal access to education, professional opportunities, and property ownership. She saw these not as mere privileges, but as essential rights that would enable women to achieve economic independence, a precondition for genuine personal autonomy. In her view, without control over their own livelihoods, women would remain dependent on men, making true equality impossible. This conviction placed her at odds with contemporary reformers who sought only partial or gradual change. Taylor's approach was morally uncompromising. She dismissed the gradualist strategy, arguing that postponing equality in the name of social stability merely entrenched injustice. Instead, she called for the immediate and complete removal of all legal, political, and social barriers to women's participation in public life. This impatience with incrementalism reflected her belief that justice delayed was justice denied.

- She demanded women's rights in an uncompromising fashion

One of Taylor's most radical positions concerned the institution of marriage. She viewed marriage, as historically constituted, as an arrangement that functioned less as a partnership and more as a system of female dependency. In her reimagining, marriage should be reconstructed as an equal



- Marriage was viewed as female dependency rather than partnership

contractual partnership between two autonomous individuals, bound not by economic necessity or legal subordination but by mutual respect and voluntary commitment. By reframing marriage as a union of equals, Taylor challenged one of the most deeply entrenched social structures of her time, positioning her feminist philosophy as both politically progressive and socially transformative.

2.3.3 John Stuart Mill's Development of Feminist Ideas

- Women's supposed inferiority is socially constructed

In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill offered one of the most comprehensive and philosophically rigorous arguments for gender equality in nineteenth-century political thought. Building upon, and often explicitly acknowledging, Harriet Taylor Mill's earlier work, Mill sought to dismantle the intellectual, moral, and legal justifications for women's subordination. He approached the question of women's rights not as a matter of sentiment or charity, but as an issue of fundamental justice and rational principle. One of Mill's most striking assertions was that there is no empirical evidence of women's natural inferiority to men. He argued that prevailing notions of female incapacity were not the result of innate differences, but rather the outcome of systematic social conditioning, educational deprivation, and the exclusion of women from professional and civic life. In his view, it was illogical to claim women's inherent inferiority when their abilities had never been tested under conditions of genuine equality. From this premise, Mill advanced a bold methodological proposal: the only legitimate way to assess women's true capacities was to grant them full and equal rights, allowing their talents to develop freely, and then to observe the results. He described this as a kind of social experiment, in which the principles of justice and empirical inquiry worked hand in hand. This framing was intended to disarm critics by presenting equality not as an untested ideal, but as an evidence-based reform consistent with liberal rationalism.

- Marriage was viewed as domestic despotism

Mill was also sharply critical of the legal structure of marriage in his time, describing it as a form of "domestic despotism" in which husbands exercised legal power over their wives akin to a master's authority over a servant. This arrangement, he argued, was fundamentally incompatible with the liberal ideal of voluntary association, in which partnerships, whether personal, professional, or political, should rest on mutual consent and equality, not on coercion or legal subordination. Economic independence too occupied

a central place in Mill's feminist programme. He insisted that women should have equal access to professions, education, and property rights, not merely as a matter of fairness, but as a requirement for societal advancement. By excluding women from the workforce and public life, society was, in his view, wasting half of its intellectual and moral resources. Equality was thus not only a demand of justice but also a pragmatic necessity for human progress.

- Mill linked gender equality to liberal values

Mill's rhetorical strategy was carefully crafted to appeal to a Victorian audience steeped in liberal political values. He framed his feminist arguments in the language of justice, liberty, and merit, principles already central to the liberal tradition. By doing so, he sought to persuade even those who were not naturally sympathetic to feminist causes, positioning gender equality as a logical extension of the very values his contemporaries professed to uphold.

2.3.4 Convergence and Divergence in Their Feminism

While John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill shared a unified commitment to dismantling gender-based legal and social barriers, their feminist approaches exhibited important differences in tone, emphasis, and strategy. These distinctions, far from creating conflict, allowed their joint intellectual project to combine moral force with political pragmatism. Harriet's writings, most notably *Enfranchisement of Women*, display a moral urgency that left no room for compromise with patriarchal structures. She argued that any delay in granting women full political, legal, and economic rights was a continuation of injustice, akin to knowingly tolerating slavery or the political disenfranchisement of entire classes. Her style was confrontational towards the norms of her day, dismissing claims that women's "nature" made them unsuited for public life. For example, when critics claimed that political participation would undermine women's "delicacy," Harriet countered that such delicacy was an artificial product of enforced dependence, not a natural characteristic. Her rhetoric positioned women as fully autonomous agents whose potential was being actively suppressed, and she refused to frame domesticity as an inherently desirable or inevitable role for women. Mill, by contrast, in *The Subjection of Women*, adopted a style more calculated to persuade skeptical audiences within Parliament and the wider public. While he fully endorsed Harriet's principles,

- Harriet's style was confrontational while Mill's was persuasive



he often presented them within the idiom of mid-Victorian liberalism, drawing analogies to other accepted causes of reform. For example, he compared women’s legal subordination to the outdated remnants of aristocratic privilege, thereby appealing to middle-class liberal sensibilities. Mill’s readiness to speak of domestic life as a possible choice for women, provided it was freely chosen and accompanied by equal rights, was not a retreat from equality but a strategic framing designed to avoid alienating moderate reformers.

• While Harriet’s feminism was rights-based, Mill’s was utilitarian-based

Another divergence lay in the philosophical grounding of their arguments. Harriet’s feminism was rooted primarily in a rights-based moral framework: the simple fact that women are rational beings endowed them with an inalienable claim to liberty, education, and self-determination. Mill, while endorsing this rights-based position, supplemented it with utilitarian reasoning: society could not afford to waste half of its intellectual and moral talent by confining women to narrow domestic roles. This meant that Mill could appeal both to moral justice and to pragmatic considerations, arguing that women’s equality was not only the right thing to do but also the most efficient means of maximising social progress.

Together, their differences created a dynamic partnership. Harriet’s radical clarity ensured that the core principles of equality remained uncompromised, while Mill’s more measured tone and political connections helped introduce feminist arguments into mainstream liberal debate. In effect, Harriet acted as the uncompromising theorist and Mill as the skilled diplomat, both essential roles in advancing the cause of liberal feminism in a society resistant to change. The above ideas may be represented as given below:

Table 2.3.1 Convergence and Divergence in Their Feminism

Aspect	Harriet Taylor Mill	John Stuart Mill	Convergence/ Divergence
Tone and Radicalism	Direct, uncompromising, and openly critical of patriarchal norms; often rejected gradualism in women’s emancipation.	More measured in tone, aiming to persuade a wider, often conservative, audience by appealing to shared liberal values.	Shared commitment to equality, but Harriet’s rhetoric was bolder; Mill adopted a more strategic, incremental style.
Scope of Equality	Advocated for complete removal of legal, economic, and social distinctions between men and women.	Advocated for full legal equality, but sometimes left space for traditional domestic roles as personal choice.	Both sought legal equality; Harriet was more explicit in rejecting domestic role expectations.

Political Rights	Strong insistence on immediate political enfranchisement for women as a democratic necessity (*Enfranchisement of Women*).	Advocated suffrage in Parliament and in *The Subjection of Women*, framing it as a logical extension of liberal principles.	Agreement in goal; Harriet framed it as urgent and morally necessary, Mill often used pragmatic justifications.
Marriage Reform	Viewed marriage as historically oppressive; demanded an equal contractual partnership without any vestige of male authority.	Critiqued marriage laws as “domestic despotism” but framed reform in terms of mutual benefit and companionship.	Shared vision of equality in marriage; Harriet’s critique was more severe and systemic.
Economic Independence	Saw women’s economic dependence as the root of subordination; called for equal access to professions and control over property.	Supported women’s economic independence through legal reforms and opening professions.	Converged strongly; Harriet’s language often highlighted systemic injustice more sharply.
Philosophical Grounding	Strong moral and rights-based argumentation, with less emphasis on empirical or utilitarian justification.	Combined moral argument with utilitarian reasoning — women’s equality as both just and socially beneficial.	Shared liberal moral framework; Mill added a utilitarian dimension to broaden appeal.

2.3.5 Legacy and Influence

The collaborative intellectual efforts of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill represent a cornerstone in the evolution of liberal feminism and have left an enduring legacy in the broader women’s rights movement. Their writings provided not only a moral and philosophical foundation for gender equality but also practical arguments that empowered activists and reformers well beyond their own era. By articulating a coherent and principled justification for women’s suffrage, legal equality, and access to education, they equipped subsequent generations of feminists with a framework that could be deployed in political and social struggles across Britain, Europe, and the United States. Their impact was particularly significant because they succeeded in embedding feminist demands within the dominant liberal tradition of their time. By doing so, Mill and Taylor effectively reframed women’s emancipation as an issue not of fringe or radical politics, but as a fundamental expression of liberal ideals, namely, liberty, equality, and justice for all citizens. This reframing was crucial in making feminist claims harder to dismiss as extreme or subversive. Instead, they became inseparable from the broader political discourse on democracy, rights, and social reform.

- They provided a moral and philosophical foundation for gender equality

- Their enduring legacy paved the way for many suffrage movements

Moreover, their emphasis on women's education and economic independence paved the way for later campaigns that targeted barriers to women's participation in public and professional life. The principle that women should be free to cultivate their talents and contribute fully to society challenged centuries-old traditions and legal codes, stimulating reforms in educational institutions, property laws, and labour markets. Their legacy is evident in the vigorous suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where activists often explicitly drew upon Mill's *The Subjection of Women* as a foundational text. The philosophical rigor and moral clarity of their arguments lent credibility and urgency to the cause, helping to galvanise public opinion and influence legislators. Importantly, their integration of feminist thought into liberalism also established a template for later feminist theories, particularly those that emphasise individual rights, legal reform, and gradual social progress. While later feminist critiques have expanded and challenged aspects of their approach, especially around intersectionality and structural inequality, Mill and Taylor's work remains a pivotal reference point in feminist political philosophy.

In sum, the combined work of Mill and Taylor not only advanced the immediate cause of nineteenth-century women's rights but also shaped the ideological contours of feminism well into the modern era. Their vision of gender equality as both a moral imperative and a prerequisite for social progress endures as a powerful and inspiring call for justice.

2.3.6 Contemporary Critique

- They were criticised for their neglect of intersectionality and structural barriers to equality

Modern feminist scholarship has highlighted both the strengths and the limitations of Mill and Taylor's liberal feminism. Critics argue that their focus on formal legal equality underestimated the persistence of structural and cultural barriers to women's full participation in society. Their framework was also largely inattentive to the intersecting roles of class, race, and other forms of marginalisation. Moreover, Mill's occasional acceptance of traditional domestic arrangements sits uneasily with his commitment to full equality. Nonetheless, their work remains a foundational reference in feminist political theory, offering tools for critiquing laws and customs that limit freedom while also revealing the need for more intersectional and structural approaches.

Summarized Overview

The liberal feminism of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill combined the principles of liberal individualism and utilitarianism. They argued that liberty is a natural right belonging to all human beings, regardless of gender, and that any restriction on women's freedom to develop their capacities was unjust. Gender-based barriers in education, property, professions, and politics were therefore illegitimate. At the same time, they used utilitarian reasoning to show that excluding women was not only morally wrong but also harmful to society, since it wasted half of its talent and resources. For them, gender equality was both a demand of justice and a rational strategy for promoting social progress and collective well-being.

Harriet Taylor Mill insisted on immediate and uncompromising reforms, emphasizing women's right to education, economic independence, and equal citizenship. She criticised marriage as a system of dependency and reimagined it as a partnership of equals. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), built on her ideas, rejecting claims of women's natural inferiority and calling for equality as a necessary "social experiment." He framed his arguments in the familiar liberal language of justice and liberty to persuade a sceptical Victorian audience. Together, their partnership combined moral clarity with political pragmatism, and their writings became foundational for the women's rights movement. While later critics pointed out their neglect of deeper structural and cultural barriers, their work remains central in feminist thought, providing both moral and philosophical support for the struggle for equality.

Self-Assessment

1. How did Mill and Taylor's liberal feminism combine moral principles with utilitarian reasoning to argue for gender equality?
2. In what ways did their work influence later feminist movements and legal reforms?
3. What are the main contemporary feminist critiques of their approach, particularly regarding intersectionality and structural inequality?



Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the feminist approaches of Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill, focusing on differences in tone, emphasis, and philosophical grounding.
2. Evaluate the relevance of *The Subjection of Women* in addressing present-day debates on gender equality and social justice.

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Suggested Reading

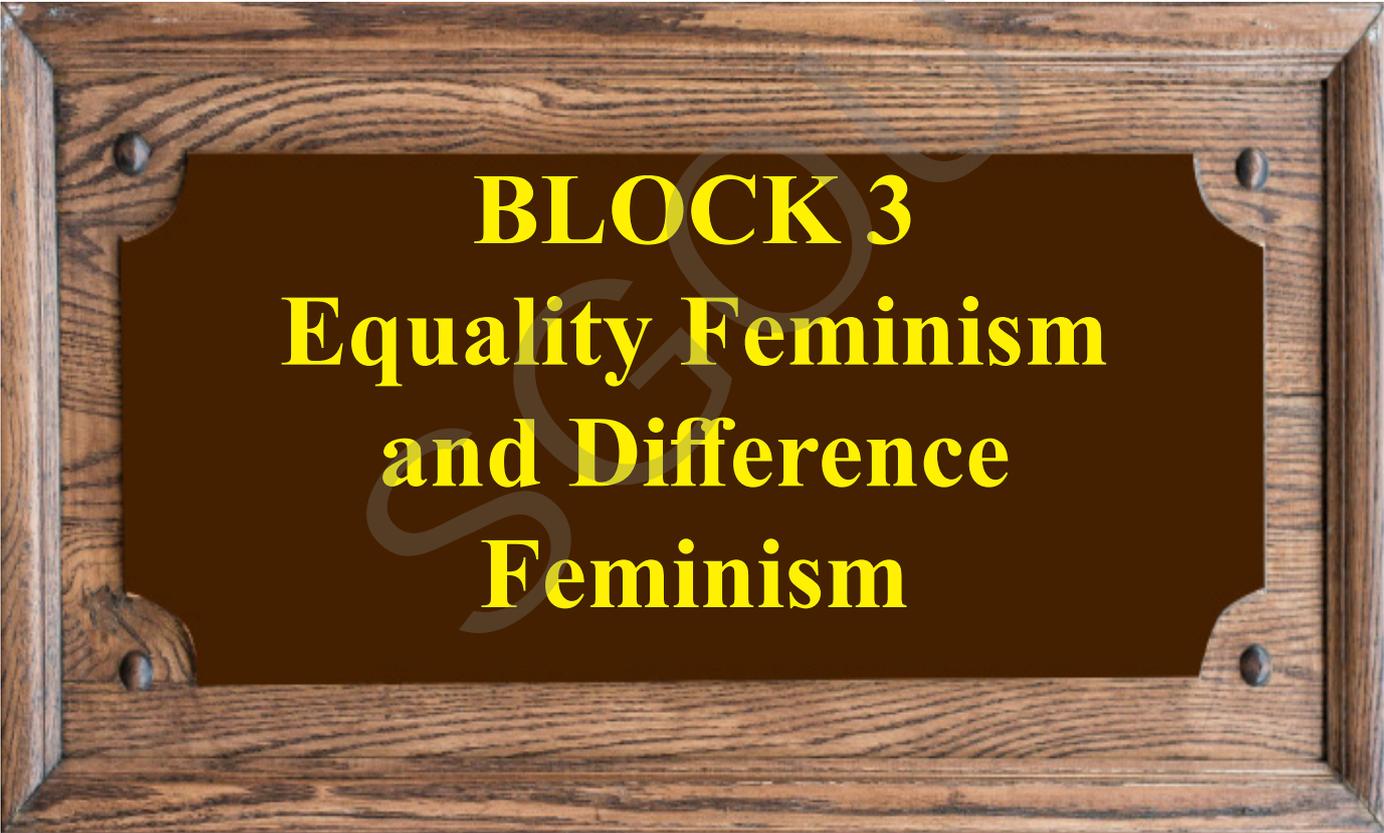
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A wooden frame with a dark brown interior and a lighter brown, textured exterior. The frame is rectangular with rounded corners and four small, dark, circular fasteners at the corners. The text is centered within the dark interior of the frame.

BLOCK 3
Equality Feminism
and Difference
Feminism

UNIT 1

Existential Feminism of Simone de Beauvoir

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the social construction of “woman” as the “Other” within patriarchal structures
- trace the intellectual influences on Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy
- analyse Beauvoir’s central concept of “ambiguity” as the fundamental human condition
- evaluate the interconnectedness of individual freedom and collective responsibility in Beauvoir’s ethical framework
- Articulate the ethical implications of “bad faith” and “mystification” in the context of both individual denial of freedom and systemic oppression

Background

Published in 1949, in the aftermath of World War II, *The Second Sex* emerged at a time when women had recently secured voting rights in France but continued to face significant disparities. This seminal work became a foundational text of second wave feminism, drawing upon Beauvoir’s Existentialist Philosophy and critique of patriarchal structures. By positing that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” Beauvoir’s work challenged the social constructs surrounding gender and the historical designation of women as the “other” in relation to men. Influenced by her intellectual partnership with Jean-Paul Sartre and her engagement with Phenomenology and Marxism, *The Second Sex* sparked the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s by shedding light on the systemic inequalities and oppression faced by women.



Keywords

Second Wave Feminism, Existentialism, The Second Sex, Woman as the other, The Ethics of Ambiguity, Freedom, Responsibility.

Discussion

3.1.1 Beauvoir: The Making of a Feminist Philosopher

- Simone de Beauvoir was a pioneering philosopher.

Simone de Beauvoir, born in Paris in 1908, was an exceptionally brilliant intellectual from a young age. In 1929, she achieved the remarkable feat of becoming one of the youngest individuals to pass the agrégation in Philosophy, ranking second only to Jean-Paul Sartre. This accomplishment not only launched her lifelong intellectual journey, but also liberated her from the traditional expectations of her affluent family. Beauvoir went on to teach Philosophy and emerged as a prominent figure in the existentialist movement, collaborating with Sartre on influential projects. Her diverse career spanned Philosophy, novels and essays, including the acclaimed novel *The Mandarins* (1957), cementing her status as a leading thinker of her generation until her passing in 1986.

- Social Context of *The Second Sex*.

In 1946, at 38 years and newly empowered by her growing recognition, Simone de Beauvoir embarked on an autobiographical exploration that led her to question her own identity as a woman. This introspection evolved into her seminal work, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. The book's release coincided with a time when French women, despite having gained the right to vote, still faced significant legal and social barriers. Restrictions on birth control and abortion persisted and women in leadership positions were a globally rare phenomenon. Beauvoir's work was a groundbreaking act of rebellion, challenging the *status quo* and paving the way for future generations of women to assert their rights to autonomy, work and self-determination. While it is impossible to attribute the entirety of the subsequent advancements in women's rights to Beauvoir, her influential ideas undoubtedly laid the groundwork for millions of women to demand their entitlement to freedom, pleasure and self expression.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a comprehensive exploration of womanhood, asserting that one becomes a woman through

- The Core Arguments of *The Second Sex*.

social constructs rather than birth. This central idea posits that gender roles and expectations are shaped by culture and patriarchy. Beauvoir notes how women have historically been defined as the other in relation to men, who are considered as the universal subject. Her analysis draws on existentialist concepts, Phenomenology and Marxist thought to understand the social and economic structures contributing to women's oppression. Despite later critiques of her views, Beauvoir's work articulated the problem of women's existence as a product of social norms and patriarchal structures, mobilising a collective consciousness that fuelled the women's movement.

- The Legacy and Impact of *The Second Sex*.

The impact of *The Second Sex* was immediate and profound. Beauvoir's ability to synthesise vast amounts of information from history, religion, literature and economics to expose numerous ways women have been objectified was incredible. This is even remarkable considering she researched and wrote much of the 800 page work in just 14 months. Beauvoir's personal experiences, including witnessing racism and antisemitism, further clarified her understanding of how various groups are objectified as the other. *The Second Sex* remains a foundational text of feminist thought, inviting readers to engage in a deep and urgent personal meditation on the goal of becoming one's own woman. Its ideas equipped activists with rigorous arguments against traditional gender roles, fuelling demands for reproductive rights, workplace equality and critical re-evaluations of family structures. Its influence remains vital, shaping contemporary discussions on gender identity, intersectionality and the global pursuit of genuine equality. It undeniably marks a crucial moment in history where a new enlightenment regarding gender equality began.

- Existentialist-feminist analysis of women's oppression.

3.1.2 The Second Sex

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex*, offers an existentialist feminist analysis of women's oppression. Drawing insights from both historical context and individual lived experience, Beauvoir carefully dissects how society constructs the category of woman as the Other in relation to the male "Self," effectively denying women their full subjecthood and limiting their freedom.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that "One is not born, but becomes, a woman." This statement highlights her central idea that being a woman is not just about biological sex; it is shaped by society. While a person may be born female, society assigns meaning to what woman entails through various



- The social construction of Woman.

influences. Beauvoir suggests that social customs, education, religious beliefs, media portrayals and laws all contribute to defining what a woman should or should not do. These factors dictate the roles women are expected to play and how they are treated throughout their lives. For instance, girls are often raised with different expectations from boys - a girl might be encouraged to play with dolls and help indoors, while a boy is pushed towards outdoor play and leadership. These subtle, everyday experiences gradually construct an image of womanhood that an individual internalises, leading them to adopt a role society has already outlined. Beauvoir employs the philosophical approach of existential phenomenology to explain this process. This method examines how individuals experience the world and construct their identity in relation to others. She also critiques the “myth of the eternal feminine,” a prevalent cultural narrative that imposes idealised and often restrictive, attributes on women. Beauvoir argues that this myth, often stemming from male anxieties about maternity, defines women primarily through these idealised traits, thereby hindering their pursuit of independent ambitions and keeping them confined within social boundaries.

- Women as the Other.

At the core of Beauvoir’s argument is the concept of the Other, which assumes that human society is built on a gender binary. In this framework, men are seen as the Absolute Subject, the positive, neutral and essential standard. Women, conversely, are downgraded to the position of the negative, the inessential Other. From an early age, women are taught to perceive themselves not as autonomous individuals, but through the lens of how men view them. This phenomenon is known as the “male gaze.” Consequently, many women construct their identities based on male judgment rather than cultivating an independent sense of self. This unequal structure limits women’s freedom to act. Beauvoir highlights a contrast in how men and women are encouraged to live. Men are pushed toward transcendence - to move beyond themselves, embrace challenges and shape meaning through their actions. Women, however, are frequently confined to immanence, expected to remain in predetermined, repetitive roles such as childcare, household management or supporting others. These roles often lack opportunities for creativity or personal freedom. For example, consider a woman with aspirations of becoming a film maker. After marriage, she is expected to stay home, caring for her in-laws and children. Despite her talent and ambition, she is trapped in a daily routine, denied the time or support to pursue her dream. Her world shrinks to domestic

tasks. This scenario vividly illustrates how the perception of women as the Other restricts their freedom and prevents them from living as fully realised human beings. Beauvoir's analysis ultimately asserts that genuine equality can only be achieved when women are no longer treated as the Other and are granted the autonomy to act and choose for themselves.

- Conditioning and Subordination: Escaping Freedom through Inauthentic Roles.

Beauvoir here argues that, women are systematically trained from a young age to embrace passivity, dependence and a focus on their inner world rather than outward action. Every aspect of society, from how girls are raised to prevailing cultural expectations, works to strip them of their subjectivity, effectively turning them into objects for other's perceptions, instead of being independent individuals. This persistent conditioning often leads women to internalise their subordinate status, accepting roles that ultimately result in feelings of frustration and incompleteness. These include the narcissist, the woman in love and the mystic. The Narcissist: A woman in this role becomes overly preoccupied with her own image, appearance and how she is perceived by others. Her self worth is entirely tied to external validation. Think of a social media influencer whose entire day revolves around curating perfect photos and videos, constantly checking likes and comments. Their sense of self worth is entirely derived from how others react to their projected image, rather than from internal accomplishments or meaningful actions.

- Through inauthentic role, women divert their energy and potential away from developing their independent selves

The Woman in Love: In this role, a woman completely dedicates herself to her lover, making him the centre of her universe. Her identity becomes entangled with his and her happiness and purpose are entirely dependent on the relationship. A real life example would be a woman who gives up her career ambitions, her friendships and her hobbies to fully support her partner's dreams. Her conversations always revolve around him and she finds her greatest joy in his successes, often neglecting her own aspirations. If the relationship ends, she feels completely lost because her identity was so deeply intertwined with his. Finally, The Mystic: This role involves a woman immersing her selfhood in a spiritual or religious devotion, often seeking a transcendent experience with God or a higher power as a way to escape the challenges and responsibilities of independent existence. Consider a woman who dedicates her entire life to a religious order, not necessarily out of a genuine spiritual calling to serve others, but to avoid making difficult choices, taking responsibility for her own life or confronting social expectations outside the structured religious environment.



Her focus is entirely on an external, divine entity as a source of meaning, rather than finding meaning through her own actions in the world. In each of these “inauthentic” roles, women divert their energy and potential away from developing their own independent selves and pursuing projects that would truly liberate them. Instead, they find a kind of illusory freedom or purpose by attaching themselves to an external object, whether it is their own reflection, a romantic partner or a divine being.

- Challenging Reproductive Constraints.

Beauvoir’s work also critically examines the historical division between production (creating goods and services for society) and reproduction (childbearing and domestic labour). She argues that women’s biological capacity for reproduction has been utilised by patriarchal societies to confine them to a secondary, subservient role, associating them primarily with nature and thereby limiting their participation in the public, productive sphere. For women to achieve genuine equality, Beauvoir argues that society must fundamentally reform the traditional nuclear family structure and eliminate social prejudices against reproductive choices like birth control and abortion. This would grant women crucial autonomy over their bodies and lives, allowing them to pursue ambitions beyond just childbearing. This analysis extends to the often overlooked trauma of old age for women. When women lose their reproductive capacity, especially in cultures that primarily define their worth through youth and their ability to bear children, they frequently experience a loss of identity and purpose. This social emphasis on a woman’s reproductive function leaves many feeling lost and without value in their later years, highlighting the restrictive and often cruel definitions of worth imposed upon them.

- Beauvoir on Women’s Autonomy and Liberation.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir asserts that economic independence is key to women’s freedom. When women can financially support themselves, they escape the traditional, subservient roles of marriage and home life that keep them as the Other. Beauvoir imagines a future where women rise above their confined domestic existence (immanence) to achieve true equality with men. For this to happen, women must acknowledge their shared oppression and work together to break down the social barriers that marginalise them. This collective effort will allow them to embrace their liberty, pursue their own ambitions and find genuine equality.

3.1.3 The Ethics of Ambiguity

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* argues that being human is fundamentally “ambiguous” - a constant tension

between our freedom and our facticity. Freedom is our ability to choose, to imagine a different future and to shape who we become, transcending our current situation. It is the feeling that I can choose to be more than what I am right now. This could be understood through this example; a student dreams of becoming a doctor. They have the freedom to choose this path, study hard, apply to medical school and work towards that future, even if it is difficult. They can transcend their current status as just a student. The same way, an artist feels free to create whatever they imagine, pushing boundaries and expressing their unique vision. Their canvas is limitless in possibility. Facticity however, includes many limitations. In the case of the medical student, they might come from a low-income family and struggle to afford tuition, they might not have performed well in science classes in the past or they might have a learning disability. In the case of the artist, their art is often deeply influenced by their life experiences; a traumatic childhood, a specific cultural background or a physical disability that affects how they create.

- Ambiguity as the very essence of our existence.

These are concrete realities that shape their journey and make achieving their dream more challenging. The ambiguity lies in simultaneously being a self determining subject (someone who makes choices) and an object in the world (someone who is defined and limited by external factors and how others see them). Beauvoir believes true ethical living starts by accepting this complex, dual nature, instead of trying to simplify it or deny parts of it. The inherent ambiguity of the human condition lies in simultaneously navigating our boundless freedom to pursue dreams and the undeniable facticity of our limitations. An ethical life means embracing this tension: acknowledging the very real obstacles imposed by our past, body and circumstances, without letting them entirely extinguish our aspirations. Just as an artist's most authentic creations arise from the interplay between their unbridled imagination and the specific life experiences and physical realities that have shaped them, we too must integrate our given circumstances into our self determined pursuit of meaning.

- The ambiguity of the human condition lies between boundless freedom and undeniable facility

Building on her understanding of ambiguity, Beauvoir establishes freedom as the cornerstone of all ethical values. She asserts that without the capacity for choice and self determination, morality itself would be meaningless. This freedom, however, is not static but a dynamic, ongoing process of “freeing” or “liberation.” To live ethically, one must actively assume this original freedom, transforming it into a “moral freedom” by consciously recognising and acting



- Freedom as the cornerstone of all ethical values.

upon it. Crucially, this recognition extends beyond oneself; it necessitates acknowledging and willing the freedom of others. Failure to embrace one's own freedom, is a concept Beauvoir shares with Sartre, is termed "bad faith," which is a state of self deception where individuals deny their agency and responsibility. It is where individuals refuse to accept their fundamental freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. It is a deliberate act of pretending that one lacks choices, often by embracing pre-assigned roles or attributing blame externally, solely to evade the anxiety of absolute liberty. Ultimately, this denial of personal agency leads to an inauthentic mode of existence. Beauvoir believes that individual freedom and collective responsibility are deeply intertwined. She asserts that one's freedom is fully realised only when it actively promotes the freedom of others, making collective liberation a moral duty. Therefore, individuals have a responsibility to resist oppression that limits anyone's freedom, recognising that their own autonomy is diminished when others are denied theirs.

- Beauvoir's ethical frame work.

Beauvoir then applies this ethical framework to the concept of oppression, defining it as the denial of another's freedom and consequently, their ambiguity. Oppressors seek to objectify the oppressed, preventing them from participating in their own future and reducing them to mere instruments or things. This often leads to a state of mystification among the oppressed, where they become so entrapped that they fail to recognise their own inherent freedom, believing their condition to be an unchangeable destiny. Beauvoir argues that while humans are often tempted to escape the burden of their freedom by becoming objects, oppressors exploit this vulnerability. A real life example would be in a factory, the owner's oppression involves "objectifying" workers by denying their freedom through low wages, long working hours and restrictive conditions. Workers are reduced to interchangeable "objects," stripped of their individuality and future aspirations. This leads to mystification, where exhausted workers internalise their powerlessness, believing their harsh situation is an unchangeable fate ("I was born poor, I will always be a factory worker") rather than a challengeable injustice. Beauvoir extends Marxist ideas of alienation and reification to women's experience. She argues that society's objectification of women, treating woman as a fixed, instrumental "thing," mirrors the worker's reification. This constant reduction to an object can lead to mystification, where women internalise their subordinate status and lose sight of their own freedom,

accepting their limited roles as unchangeable, much like an oppressed working class. The ethical frame of Beauvoir's concept helps to confront oppression, which may even justify resistance, including violence, when all other avenues for liberation have been exhausted. The ultimate aim is, therefore, a society where the freedom and ambiguity of all individuals are universally recognised and affirmed.

Summarized Overview

Throughout her life and work, Simone de Beauvoir challenged social norms. Her landmark 1949 work, *The Second Sex*, argued that women are not born, but become women through social conditioning, defined as “the other” in relation to men. Drawing on existentialist, phenomenological and Marxist thought, Beauvoir exposed the systemic oppression of women, advocating autonomy, economic independence and bodily control. Her ideas influenced the second wave feminist movement, inspiring demands for freedom and self expression. Additionally, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir explored the core contradiction of human existence, “absolute freedom amidst uncertainty,” and argued that authentic living involves embracing ambiguity and working towards universal liberation, providing a moral foundation for feminism and other freedom movements.

Self-Assessment

1. How did Simone de Beauvoir's personal introspection contribute to the formation of *The Second Sex*? What was the broader social context for French women at the time of the book's publication in 1949?
2. Explain Beauvoir's central assertion that “one is not born, but becomes, a woman.” How does this concept challenge traditional views of gender?
3. According to Beauvoir, how are women defined as the Other in relation to men? What philosophical concepts did she draw upon to analyse this social structure of oppression?
4. Differentiate between Beauvoir's concepts of “immanence” and “transcendence” as they apply to gender roles. How do traditional female roles contribute to immanence?
5. Explain how Beauvoir connects individual freedom to the liberation of all people in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. How does this provide a moral basis for movements like feminism?



Assignments

1. How does Beauvoir's concept of the Other from *The Second Sex*, combined with her ethical framework, illuminate the "othering" of a specific contemporary social group and in what ways might "fleeing freedom" manifest within this context?
2. Identify a contemporary media example that perpetuates Beauvoir's "myth of the eternal feminine" or traditional gender roles and discuss how it reinforces "conditioning and subordination."
3. Compare women's economic independence and reproductive rights in two distinct global regions. Analyse how these realities align with or diverge from Beauvoir's paths to transcendence.
4. Reflect on a personal or group experience where a choice involving embracing ambiguity or challenging oppression was faced. How do Beauvoir's concepts (e.g., bad faith, willing freedom) illuminate this experience?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



SGOU

UNIT 2

Radical Feminism of Mary Daly

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- evaluate how Mary Daly's early and later works challenge patriarchal influence in religion and society
- trace Daly's intellectual journey from Catholic reformist to radical, post-Christian feminist
- explore Daly's central argument regarding the role of language in perpetuating or dismantling patriarchal dominance
- discuss the significant impact of Daly's seminal works on feminist and theological discourse
- examine the core intellectual influences underpinning Mary Daly's feminist philosophy

Background

Mary Daly's Radical feminism originated from her Irish Catholic background and extensive theological training, prompting her critical examination of the patriarchal systems within the Church, as demonstrated in her seminal work, *The Church and the Second Sex*. As Second wave feminism gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s, her intellectual trajectory shifted, leading her to explicitly reject patriarchal religious frameworks. This evolution is clearly articulated in later works such as *Beyond God the Father* and *Gyn / Ecology*, which championed a post-Christian, female centric spirituality. Daly's distinctive contribution, influenced by thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and the philosophy of Existentialism, involved a revision of language. She argued that patriarchal language inherently served as an instrument of oppression, necessitating that women create new ways of expression and comprehension to achieve liberation. Her transformation from an academic theologian to a foundational radical feminist philosopher mirrors



the significant social changes and intellectual awakening of an era that demanded shifts in gender power structures.

Keywords

Radical Feminism, Feminist Theology, The Church and *the Second Sex*, Gyn / Ecology, Metaethics, Post- Christian.

Discussion

3.2.1 Radical Thinker: The Life and Philosophy of Mary Daly

Mary Daly (1928 - 2010), is a prominent American philosopher, theologian and academic, identified as a “radical lesbian feminist.” By 1968, when Mary Daly anticipated the rise of feminist critiques against Catholicism, she was a rare figure: one of the few Roman Catholic women holding a doctorate in theology. She completed her initial Ph. D. at St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, notable as the first U.S. doctoral programme in religion, specifically for women. Daly then pursued and earned two more doctorates; one in Theology and another in Philosophy from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Soon after finishing her studies and beginning her faculty position in the Theology department of Boston College in 1967, her first book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, was published. However, just five years later, Daly declared Christianity inherently patriarchal, abandoning the optimistic Catholic feminist stance she had initially presented in her ground breaking work. For over three decades, she taught at Boston College, a Jesuit institution, where her challenging perspectives on gender and religion earned significant attention. Daly’s tenure concluded controversially in 1999 when she retired after her decision to exclude male students from advanced women’s studies classes, while still permitting them in introductory courses and offering private tutoring for higher level study, sparked debate. Her extensive body of work continues to stimulate critical thought and dialogue within feminist and theological discourse.

- Mary Daly critiqued patriarchy in Christianity.

Mary Daly’s radical feminist philosophy was rooted in her personal history and the broader socio- cultural landscape of the mid-20th century. Born into a working class Irish Catholic family, Daly pursued higher education with notable determination,

- The Journey of Radical Feminism of Mary Daly.

earning multiple doctorates in theology and philosophy during an era when such academic pursuits presented considerable obstacles for women. Her initial critical engagement with religious institutions is evident in *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968). This foundational text, published as the modern women's liberation movement emerged, carefully dissected the Catholic Church's deeply rooted misogyny and its role in constraining women's development through the propagation of myths like the Eternal Feminine. Her personal confrontation with the patriarchal establishment at Boston College, where she was briefly dismissed before being reinstated due to student protests, further solidified her commitment to feminist principles, which she viewed as a reflection of women's deep rooted oppression in male dominated societies. Daly's intellectual journey coincided directly with the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. This period was marked by widespread social upheaval, including anti-war protests and a growing women's rights movement advocating comprehensive equality. Within this dynamic environment, radical feminism emerged as a significant force, positing that patriarchy constituted the fundamental cause of all forms of oppression and demanding urgent social transformation rather than gradual reforms. Daly's evolving thought resonated deeply with this radical stance. She progressively transitioned from advocating reform within the Church to explicitly calling for a complete dismantling of patriarchal structures across society.

- Key Intellectual influences of Daly's Philosophy.

Daly's distinctive intellectual framework was shaped by a diverse range of influences. Her early major work, *The Church and the Second Sex*, directly engaged with Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*. Daly agreed with Beauvoir's view that women were treated as less important in male dominated societies. However, Daly later disagreed with Beauvoir, especially on the idea that there might have been a time in history when women, not men, held primary power (a "matriarchal stage"). Daly eventually believed in the idea of such a historical matriarchy, while Beauvoir did not. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich also played a significant role in her early theological development. In *Beyond God the Father* (1973), Daly built upon Tillich's ideas to challenge and overcome androcentrism in Western religious thought. Tillich talked about "Being itself" to describe God beyond human forms. Daly took this idea, but argued that even Tillich did not fully address how the male image of God the Father specifically harms women and supports male power. She wanted to free ideas about God from being so male focused. So,



she changed Tillich's abstract Being into an active "Be-ing" (as a verb), pushing women to actively create themselves and their spiritual lives, separate from male dominated religious rules. Furthermore, existentialist philosophy influenced her emphasis on women's becoming and the immediate need for women to define their identities independently of patriarchal constructs. As her ideas matured, Daly increasingly explored ancient pagan religions and goddess cultures. She argued that these female centric spiritualities, which she believed Christianity had displaced in many societies, offered a path to a more authentic and holistic spiritual existence.

- Mary Daly rejected patriarchy in religion and language.

An important development in Mary Daly's thought in the early 1970s was her embrace of an increasingly post-Christian radical feminism. She concluded that patriarchal religions were hopelessly sexist, asserting that the very image of God the Father served to maintain male dominance. For Daly, genuine liberation for women demanded a complete abandonment of these patriarchal religious frameworks. A defining characteristic of her later work was her innovative and often critical approach to language. She powerfully argued that patriarchal language itself functioned as a tool of oppression and consequently, women needed to reclaim and shape new linguistic tools to articulate their experiences and create new realities. This commitment led her to 're-search' (her unique spelling to signify a re-examination) words, crafting new terms and re-interpreting existing ones, such as "crone-ology" for 'chronology' and advocating to "sin big" as a means for women to courageously challenge patriarchal norms.

- Daly's crone-ology recovers erased women's histories.

Daly's concept of "crone-ology" reclaims and redefines women's history, contrasting it with traditional chronology. She argued that patriarchal history deliberately erases and demonises women's wisdom, contributions and power. Traditionally, the word "crone" is a negative term, used to describe an old, ugly and often malicious woman, effectively dismissing and fearing older, wiser women. For Daly, the Crone is not a negative figure, but a symbol of wise, experienced, rebellious and powerful women connected to ancient wisdom and the Earth. "Crone-ology" is thus about discovering and celebrating these suppressed histories, challenging the narratives that have marginalised them. Consider the historical narrative of medicine. Traditional chronology often focuses on male doctors and institutions. However, a crone-ology perspective would highlight the significant roles of midwives, herbalists and folk healers, many of whom were women. It would re-

examine events like the European “Witch Hunts.” Instead of seeing them as simply hunting evil people, she viewed them as a “gynocide,” which is a planned effort to get rid of female healers and their traditional knowledge, which then opened the door for medicine to be controlled by men.

- Rejecting Patriarchy and Reclaiming Language.

Daly’s sin big is a radical feminist redefinition of “sin,” subverting its traditional religious meaning. Patriarchy typically labels actions like female disobedience or pride as sinful, often represented by Eve. However, Daly argued that these very sins are the path to women’s liberation and authentic selfhood. To sin big means actively challenging patriarchal norms, embracing one’s true female power and rejecting goodness that maintains submission. It is about courageously challenging male dominated authorities and the imposed definitions of right and wrong to reclaim autonomy. Consider the social pressure for women to prioritise family needs as the good wife / mother. To sin big could involve a woman pursuing a demanding career or personal passion despite being labelled selfish or unwomanly, thereby challenging the patriarchal expectation of her primary role. Similarly, in a conservative religious setting where women are denied leadership, sinning big might involve a woman publicly questioning doctrines or advocating female control, directly resisting male dominated religious authority to assert her moral agency. These examples demonstrate how sinning big involves women choosing acts deemed transgressive by patriarchal standards, precisely because these acts lead to genuine empowerment.

3.2.2 The Church and the Second Sex

- Mary Daly affirmed Beauvoir’s critique of Catholic sexism.

In 1968, Mary Daly published *The Church and the Second Sex*, establishing herself as a significant critic of Catholic doctrine. Her book, released shortly after she joined Boston College’s faculty, was directly inspired not by internal Church debates, but by the sharp criticisms of Catholic ideology found in the writings of atheist feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, especially her work *The Second Sex*. Witnessing Beauvoir’s vigorous criticism of Catholic ideology and practice, Daly pursued to answer how a Christian, sensitive to women’s concerns, could genuinely respond to Beauvoir’s challenge. Her book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, largely affirmed Beauvoir’s analysis, using historical examples and solid arguments to highlight the widespread issue of sexism within the Catholic Church.



- Five primary critiques.

Daly structured her affirmation of Beauvoir's insights into five primary critiques of church sexism. First, she argued that the Church operates as an "instrument of oppression" subtly pressuring women into passive obedience with promises of heavenly rewards, thereby creating a "delusion of equality," while simultaneously asserting their inherent inferiority. She traced this widespread influence from early Christian texts and Church Fathers who frequently linked the "horror of sex" with the "horror of woman" through medieval thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas, who considered women less human, up to mid-20th-century Papal documents that confined women's dignity primarily to motherhood. Second, Daly argued that the Church "deceives women into passivity" by glorifying submissive feminine ideals. Third, she highlighted how Catholic moral doctrine is "violent to women," often associating them with materiality and sin, effectively reducing them to reproductive instruments. Fourth, Daly asserted that the "exclusion of women from leadership" roles within the Church supported deep seated feelings of inferiority and psychological confusion. Finally, she maintained that the Church ultimately "obstructs women's transcendence," providing religion an unnecessary, and often harmful, barrier to women's genuine self actualisation.

- Daly's early critique shaped Catholic feminist theology.

Daly's book *The Church and the Second Sex* strongly agreed with Beauvoir's criticism of Catholic patriarchy, but also showed some hope for change within the Church. This hope, however, was short lived; within five years, Daly would renounce Christianity as irreparably patriarchal. Nevertheless, her early articulation of religious sexism proved remarkably visionary and influential. Its insights align well with concerns that have driven Catholic feminist theology in the U. S. A. for over fifty years. Daly's foundational analysis proved remarkably far sighted, as later Catholic feminist theologians continued to develop her critiques. Scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Ada María Isasi-Díaz further examined how salvation doctrines demanded "obedience," arguing that this limited women's freedom and spiritual potential. Elizabeth Johnson challenged the "passive ideal of the Virgin Mary," suggesting that it created an unrealistic and restrictive standard for women. Others, including Sandra Schneiders and Cristina Traina, disputed the notion of "women's inherent inferiority" and its impact on moral teachings and roles. Even the psychological effects of Church sexism, initially less explored, have gained renewed scholarly attention, highlighting the lasting relevance of Daly's original insights.

3.2.3 Beyond God the Father

- Daly reimagines spirituality beyond patriarchal religion.

In her work *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), Daly critically examines conventional patriarchal religious frameworks, exploring the potential for a spirituality, free from gender based biases. Through sharp analysis and original perspectives, she encourages readers to conceive of a world where feminine principles flourish, advocating a break from restrictive religious narratives. By re-thinking the divine beyond male focussed representations, Daly enables individuals to pursue a more genuine spiritual connection, ultimately encouraging a refreshed understanding of both self and the cosmos.

- Critique of a Masculine God.

Mary Daly strongly argued that the common image of God the Father is more than just a way to talk about God; it is a powerful symbol that supports male control everywhere, in religion and in everyday life. She believed that thinking of God as only male keeps women from being their true selves and strengthens power structures where men are always at the top. For women to be truly free, Daly said they need to move past this male idea of God. This means challenging the very language and ideas that make God seem exclusively masculine. Imagine a traditional family where the father is always seen as the ultimate authority, the head of the household, and his word is final. This family structure often mirrors the God the Father image in religion, where God is the supreme male authority figure who dictates rules and expects obedience. Thinking of God as solely male can limit a young woman's potential. She might be taught to be submissive, seeing desires for leadership or independence as sinful because they go against a male centred divine order. This can make her believe that power and wisdom are inherently masculine, making it hard to see herself as a spiritual leader or access divine power directly. If she has a strong inner calling to lead or challenge unfairness, only male figures are shown in such roles, she might suppress her true self. Daly argued that for this woman to be truly free, she must move past this God the Father image, perhaps by seeing God as a gender neutral Spirit or even through a goddess representation, to fully embrace her own power.

Daly's *Beyond God the Father* urges women to move past passive roles and actively create their own identities and spiritual paths. Instead of just being defined by men, Daly emphasises "be-ing" as an active process of self creation. She argued that women must reclaim their experiences and language, breaking



- A New Spiritual Vision for Women.

free from male defined words and ideas that have limited how they see themselves and the divine. This means developing entirely new, woman centred ways of understanding and speaking about spirituality. Daly's work also challenges how traditional Christian ideas, like original sin and salvation, have been used to control women. For example, the story of Eve being solely responsible for "original sin" has often been used to paint women as inherently more sinful. Daly calls for a spiritual revolution where women challenge these notions, reclaim their innate goodness and reject the idea that sin is primarily a female failing. Ultimately, *Beyond God the Father* is a powerful call for women to create their own spiritual journeys, free from the constraints of patriarchal religious systems, to achieve true self-fulfilment and collective liberation. This might look like women forming their own spiritual groups outside of traditional churches or reinterpreting Biblical stories from a woman's perspective to find empowering messages.

3.2.4 Gyn / Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism

- Daly urges women to reject patriarchal myths.

Mary Daly's most important work, *Gyn / Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), marks a significant and impactful development in her radical feminist ideas. Building on the core concepts from *Beyond God the Father*, this work deeply explores the global ways patriarchy operates, seeking to reveal the old myths and male centred stories that have suppressed women for many centuries. With strong, clear writing and solid academic research, Daly reveals the widespread harm and psychological limits placed on women. She does not just offer a critique; she presents a powerful call for women to "reclaim female power and independence." Her detailed study suggests a path toward a Post-Christian or Post-patriarchal way of living for women, inviting readers on a journey that questions common beliefs and inspires a new way of thinking about gender, spirituality and one's own identity.

Daly introduced "metaethics" as a deeper way to examine morality. She argued that beneath all our ideas of right and wrong, lie hidden rules and beliefs from patriarchy, designed to keep women down. For Daly, this was not just about what is good or evil in a simple sense, but how these very concepts are twisted by male dominance to serve its own ends. She aimed to expose the "lies and reversals" embedded in patriarchal thinking, showing how they flip reality upside down to maintain

- Daly's Metaethical Foundation: Exposing Patriarchy's Hidden Rules.

women's oppression. Daly's metaethics reveals how traditional ideas of good for women like being quiet or submissive are often patriarchal lies. Traits that truly empower women, such as assertiveness or ambition, are then labelled bad or unfeminine. For instance, a woman with strong leadership skills might be subtly discouraged or called bossy, turning her strength into a perceived flaw. Daly argued this is a "reversal": what genuinely suppresses women (being quiet) is called good, while what liberates them (being assertive) is deemed evil. Her metaethics exposes how moral definitions are shaped by male dominance, like hidden rules in a game designed to ensure men always win, by demonising women's strengths.

- *Gyn / Ecology*: A Path to Female Freedom.

Daly's *Gyn / Ecology*, is structured like a journey through different stages. It starts by showing the harsh realities of harm caused by male dominated systems, then moves towards imagining a free, female focused future. The first part exposes how patriarchy has hurt women, while the later parts focus on women rediscovering and expressing their own power and identity. After criticising patriarchy deeply, Daly then encourages women on a "journey of re-remembering." This means women need to piece back together their lost history, innate knowledge and hidden power. She pushed women to connect with an ancient female wisdom and spiritual strength that male systems have long tried to bury or twist. This involves revisiting old stories and myths centred on women and recognising their deep connection to nature and life itself. Daly also takes words that have been used to insult women and redefines them into powerful symbols of freedom. For example, a spinster is not just an unmarried woman; for Daly, she is a woman actively creating her own ideas, her own life and her own future, free from male expectations. Think of a woman who chooses not to marry or have children, but instead dedicates her life to art, science or social activism – she is a spinster in Daly's powerful sense, spinning new possibilities. Similarly, a Hag or Crone goes beyond the negative image of an ugly old woman. Instead, she becomes a wise, wild and powerful elder who has broken free from traditional female roles and embodies deep knowledge from her experiences. Imagine an older woman who speaks her mind fearlessly, challenges injustice and shares wisdom, not caring about conventional beauty standards – she is Daly's Hag or Crone. Through these redefinitions, Daly encourages women to see strength and liberation in qualities and roles that patriarchy has tried to devalue.



- Exposing Systemic Violence: The Sado-Ritual Syndrome.

Daly's work discusses various historical and global examples of male violence against women, which she calls the "Sado-ritual syndrome." She argues that even though these acts seem different, they all come from the same male dominated desire to systematically break down, degrade and destroy women's spirits. These harmful practices are often made into rituals to keep men in power. Sado-ritual syndrome describes diverse historical and cultural acts of male violence against women, all sharing a common patriarchal goal: to systematically degrade, dismember and destroy female being, often through ritual, to maintain male power. Certain examples are: 1) The European Witch Hunts (14th-18th centuries) saw thousands of independent or wise women accused, tortured and executed. Mary Daly saw this as a "ritualised elimination" of female spiritual power, knowledge (like healing arts) and autonomy, designed to cement male control and "dismember" women's social and spiritual standing, rather than just religious fanaticism. 2) For centuries in China, Chinese Foot Binding deliberately broke and bound young girls' feet, causing painful deformities. This practice, for Daly, was a physical dismemberment that enforced female dependence, limited mobility and degraded women, literally crippling them to fit male defined beauty standards and social roles.

- Sado-ritual practices aim to break women's power and dignity, keeping men in control.

3) Indian Suttee (Widow Immolation) involved widows being expected or forced to self sacrifice on their husband's funeral fire. Mary Daly viewed this, despite claims of devotion, as an extreme, ritualised destruction of female being, reinforcing that a woman's identity and value were solely dependent on her husband, thereby preventing her independence and control over property. 4) Daly critically analysed the male-controlled medical establishment, specifically 'gyn / ecology' (as she spelled it), arguing that it historically disempowered women. She believed that this system, often led by men, treated women's natural bodily processes as illnesses and denied them autonomy. Practices like forced sterilisations or aggressive procedures without full consent demonstrated a subtle dismemberment of women's bodily autonomy, all masked as medical care. Daly argued that these varied practices, from explicit violence like witch hunts to subtle control through medicine, all share the same goal: to break down women's power, dignity and spirit, ensuring that men remain in control. They are "sado-rituals" because they involve cruelty (sadism) and are often carried out in a systematic, ritualistic way to reinforce social power structures.

- Language as a Tool for Liberation and Active Be-ing.

Daly strongly believed that language is incredibly powerful in shaping how we see the world and ourselves. She argued that the language we commonly use, which is mostly shaped by men, hides and twists women's experiences. Because of this, Daly felt it was vital for women to re-search (her unique way of saying research, to emphasise a fresh look) existing words and even create entirely new ways of speaking. This creation of a new language, for Daly, is not just an academic exercise; it is essential for women to truly express who they are and to build a free future. She further develops her idea of "Be-ing" as a verb here. This means that instead of women simply being defined by others or passively existing, they should actively Be-ing, constantly creating themselves, growing and moving beyond the limits set by a male dominated society. Daly argued that patriarchal language limits women, represented by the traditional negative connotations like how spinster refers unmarried women. Daly's re-search encourages flipping this meaning; she proposed that spinster could signify a woman who actively spins her own life and narrative, like a spider creating its web. A woman embracing this redefinition is actively Be-ing, demonstrating self creation and moulding an independent, powerful identity rather than passively accepting male defined labels. In essence, Daly's point is that if language limits how women can think and speak about themselves, they must break free by inventing a new language that truly reflects their active, self creating and liberated existence.

- Advocating Separatist Feminism.

Suggested within *Gyn / Ecology*, is a strong endorsement of "separatist feminism." This involves speaking for women to detach from patriarchal institutions and male influence in order to fully develop their own essence and establish genuinely liberated spaces. Daly's consistent practice, particularly her decision to exclude male students from her advanced feminist courses, subsequently became a significant source of dispute surrounding her academic career and philosophical stance. Daly chose to exclude male students, because she believed their presence hindered women's ability to speak freely and honestly about feminist issues. She argued that mixed classrooms perpetuated patriarchal dynamics, with men often dominating discussions and women feeling inhibited or adopting care giving roles. Daly aimed to create a safe space for women-only discourse, essential for radical feminist exploration. *Gyn / Ecology* represents an ambitious attempt to dissect the global patriarchal system at its deepest roots, to expose its historical and ongoing violence against women and simultaneously to articulate a radical, spiritual pathway. This pathway enables



women to reclaim their power, identity and language, thereby actively spinning a new, female centred reality into existence.

Summarized Overview

Mary Daly (1928-2010) was a pioneering radical feminist philosopher and theologian whose work challenged traditional religious and social norms. Beginning as a rare female doctorate in theology, her early critiques in *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) systematically exposed the Catholic Church's deep seated sexism, drawing heavily on Simone de Beauvoir's insights. This initial reformist idea soon evolved, leading her to renounce Christianity as irreparably patriarchal in *Beyond God the Father* (1973), where she argued for women to move beyond male defined divinity and reclaim their active Be-ing through new language and spiritual paths. Her most controversial work, *Gyn / Ecology* (1978), examined the global Sado-ritual syndrome of patriarchal violence, advocating women's re-memering of gynocentric knowledge and promoting separatist feminism. Daly's consistent emphasis on language as a tool for liberation, her re-definition of female archetypes and her unapologetic radicalism have left an enduring, although debated, legacy in feminist and theological discourse.

Self-Assessment

1. How did Mary Daly's unique academic background and her initial work at Boston College, including *The Church and the Second Sex*, foreshadow her later radical critiques of Christianity?
2. What key catalysts contributed to Mary Daly's swift intellectual transition from a reformist Catholic feminist to a radical, post-Christian stance within five years?
3. How does Mary Daly's concept of Be-ing as a verb, from *Beyond God the Father*, emphasise women's self-creation and challenge male defined identities?
4. How did Mary Daly argue that patriarchal language is oppressive and what new linguistic tools, such as re-search, crone-ology, and sin big, did she advocate for women's liberation?
5. What is Mary Daly's sado-ritual syndrome from *Gyn / Ecology* and how does she use it to connect various forms of male violence against women, providing textual examples?

Assignments

1. How do Mary Daly's critique of God the Father and her concept of Be-ing form the core of her vision for women's liberation, as seen in *Beyond God the Father* and *Gyn / Ecology*?
2. Discuss how a specific intellectual current (e.g., Existentialism, ancient pagan religions) combined with Mary Daly's personal history and second wave feminism shaped the radical nature of her anti-patriarchal critiques.
3. Elaborate on Mary Daly's assertion that patriarchal language is oppressive. How did her revolutionary practice of inventing and reinterpreting words contribute to women's liberation?
4. Reflect on Mary Daly's overall impact on feminist and theological discourse. Discuss potential controversies or critiques arising from her radical stances and methodologies.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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UNIT 3

Difference Feminism of Luce Irigaray

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- define and identify “phallogentrism,” explaining how Western thought centres male perspectives
- discuss the necessity of a “feminine discourse,” comprehending why Irigaray advocates creating a unique language and symbolic system for authentic female expression
- analyse the concept of “sexual difference” of Luce Irigaray to understand how it is shaped by language and culture
- critique dominant philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks, showing how Irigaray uses specific examples to analyse them

Background

Luce Irigaray, a French feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst and linguist, is renowned for her critique of male centered biases in Western thought. Irigaray was a prominent thinker who helped shape the second wave feminism by offering sharp critiques of how male centred ideas influence our society and understanding of gender. Her influential 1974 thesis, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, which challenged Freud and Lacan, led to her expulsion from Lacan’s school. She continues her research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. Irigaray is a prominent thinker because she played an important part in “poststructuralist feminism” and “sexual difference theory.” She believed that Western thinking has often ignored or twisted what it means to be a woman, usually by defining women based on men (like seeing women as missing something or just the other). Irigaray pushed for women to create their own unique sense of self and language, not based on male ideas. Her work has greatly impacted feminist studies in literature, philosophy and culture, stressing that women need to express their experienc-

es and identities beyond male dominated ways of thinking. Irigaray's ideas came about during the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, especially in France. This was a time when people were increasingly challenging old, male dominated rules and systems. She actively questioned major ideas of her time, like psychoanalysis (from Freud and Lacan) and Western philosophy, which she felt kept women excluded. Her goal was to shake up these deep rooted systems. She called for a revolution in how we think and behave to truly value the differences between sexes and build a fairer society where both men and women could fully develop as individuals. Her concepts fit right in with the larger feminist aim of breaking down power structures and rethinking how society and politics work to include women's experiences and voices.

Keywords

Difference feminism, Phallocentrism, Psychoanalysis, Symbolic order, Feminine Discourse, Mimesis, Ethics of Sexual Difference, Female Subjectivity.

Discussion

3.3.1 Luce Irigaray: A Life and Legacy in Feminist Thought

Luce Irigaray, born in Belgium in 1930, is a highly accomplished feminist philosopher, linguist and psychoanalyst. She earned doctorates in both philosophy and linguistics and has held a research directorship at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris since 1964, where she continues her work and private practice. She is famous for her work on language, gender and sexuality, often questioning traditional male dominated ideas. With a background in philosophy and psychoanalysis, Irigaray challenges how male perspectives control philosophy and literature. She pushes for new ways to understand women and their complex identities. Her works, known for their poetic style and deep ideas, have made her a key figure in modern feminism, which explores female identity, desire and how women are portrayed in Western thought. A defining moment in Irigaray's career was her expulsion from Jacques Lacan's Freudian School of Paris after publishing her groundbreaking 1974 thesis, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. This work critiqued the male centred (phallogentric) biases within Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Phallogentricism is a way of thinking that places the male perspective,

- Irigaray challenged male centred thought and language.



specifically symbolised by the phallus (penis as a symbol of power), at the centre of everything. It means that male experiences, values and even language are considered the norm, while female experiences are often seen as secondary, lacking or defined only in relation to men. This creates an imbalance where male dominance is assumed and reinforced in various aspects of society and thought. While *Speculum* brought her significant recognition, it also led to professional setbacks, including losing her teaching position at the University of Vincennes and being shunned by the Lacanian community.

- Irigaray critiques male bias.

Luce Irigaray's ideas are shaped by her deep understanding of philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics. She uses these fields to show how Western culture often ignores or misunderstands genuine differences between sexes. Irigaray believes that the most important issue of our time is sexual difference. While it might seem like just about biology, she, like French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, argues that it is mostly shaped by language. Irigaray, agreeing with Lacan, believes that our sense of self develops in two stages. First, the Imaginary Body: like a baby identifying with its perfect mirror reflection, cultures also project an "imaginary body." For Western culture, this is largely male, causing fields like science and philosophy to favour male perspectives. For instance, Irigaray argues that Freud viewed women as "defective men" due to this bias. Second, the Symbolic Order: here, we gain social identity by entering language and culture, centred around the Phallus (a symbol of power). While Lacan saw the Phallus as separate from biology, Irigaray strongly counters that it is a male projection, reinforcing male centric views in language and culture. Think of it like a default setting in society, being male, making it hard to see or value female experiences outside that norm.

- Irigaray exposes hidden gender bias in philosophy.

Irigaray's work also draws heavily from her vast knowledge of Western philosophy. She explores how traditional thinkers like Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Hegel often left out or minimised the feminine in their ideas. Her books, like *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, show this critical engagement. Irigaray does not simply adopt the ideas of other philosophers; instead, she uses a unique approach where she engages with them critically. One of her key methods is "mimesis." This is like mimicking an idea, but in an exaggerated way, to reveal its hidden problems or biases. It is like a comedian imitating someone to highlight their quirks. While this method resembles Derrida's "deconstruction" (which breaks down ideas to show their underlying assumptions), Irigaray is not

afraid to critique Derrida himself, especially when his work does not fully address women's perspectives. She also aligns with Heidegger's idea that every historical period has a "hidden concept" that shapes everything people believe, even if they do not consciously realise it. For Heidegger, this was "Being" (the fundamental nature of existence). For Irigaray, this hidden concept is "sexual difference" - how society understands and treats men and women. Like Heidegger, she wants to uncover this taken-for-granted concept to show how it truly operates and influences our understanding. However, she sharply criticises Heidegger for overlooking or excluding women in his philosophical discussions.

Irigaray's thoughts on how people should ethically relate to each other remind us of Levinas. Emmanuel Levinas was a philosopher who believed that our main duty is to act ethically towards others. He argued that our responsibility to another person (the Other) is more important than anything else, even our own thoughts or feelings. He said that seeing the "face" of another person (meaning their vulnerable presence, not just their looks) immediately makes us responsible for them, reminding us that we are not the only important beings and must help others. Irigaray builds on this by arguing for an ethics that truly respects the unique difference of women, rather than seeing them just as men's counterparts. When she talks about how society changes, we can connect it with Hegel's "dialectics." Hegel believed that ideas clash and then combine into something new. Hegel's dialectic explains how ideas and history evolve in a three step process: an initial idea (thesis) meets an opposing idea (antithesis) and from their conflict emerges a new, more complete idea (synthesis). This synthesis then acts as a new thesis, continuing the cycle of development. Irigaray uses this idea to argue that true social progress requires acknowledging the distinct experiences of both sexes, not just one dominant male perspective. Finally, her work, particularly in essays like "Women on the Market," has Marxist undertones. Karl Marx analysed how workers and goods are treated as commodities in capitalism. Irigaray applies this to women, suggesting that in patriarchal societies, women are often "exchanged" between men (as in marriage or social networks) almost like valuable goods, rather than as independent individuals with their own worth.

- Irigaray's Major Influences: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Linguistics.

Luce Irigaray's works fundamentally challenge how Western thought has understood gender and identity. *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) is her foundational and most famous work. It is a critical analysis of Western philosophy (from Plato



- Irigaray's Major Works.

to Freud) and psychoanalysis, arguing that these traditions are “phallogentric,” i.e., they define women as a “lack” or “other” in relation to men, rather than recognising a distinct female subjectivity. She uses the metaphor of a speculum (a medical instrument) to “reflect back” the male biases ingrained in these theories. *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977) is a collection of essays which further explores the concept of sexual difference and the difficulties of representing feminine desire and language within male dominated systems. It discusses how female sexuality is seen as “multiple” or “fluid” compared to the singular, unified male sexuality. It also includes “Women on the Market,” which uses Marxist ideas to show how women are treated as commodities exchanged between men in patriarchal societies. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984) is another important work in which Irigaray moves beyond critique to propose a new ethical framework based on truly acknowledging and respecting the irreducible difference between men and women. She argues for a “two sex” ethics that allows reciprocal recognition and a “love of the other” without integration or dominance.

3.3.2 Speculum of the Other Woman

In her key work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray deeply examines female sexuality, arguing against traditional ideas that see women only as reflections of men.

- Understanding the Mystery of Femininity.

Irigaray argues that femininity seems like a puzzle because traditional ways of looking at it are too narrow. For example, we often think that identifying someone as male or female is straightforward, but Irigaray, inspired by Freud, shows that it is more complex; even science suggests that everyone has both male and female traits. Just having certain body parts (anatomy) does not perfectly define someone's gender, as other physical traits vary widely, making simple labels difficult. Consider how someone with traditionally “feminine” features might embody “masculine” traits or *vice versa*. Psychology often tries to connect gender to behaviour, but frequently defaults to biology. If women are seen as passive simply because of reproduction, it ignores all the active roles they play, like leading a company or being an athlete. Furthermore, Irigaray suggests that when society suppresses a woman's natural assertiveness, she might turn that aggression inward, leading to self defeating behaviours or being overly submissive. This highlights the struggle between a woman's true nature and what society expects her to be.

Irigaray believes that the existing ways of defining femininity are unclear and often just repeat male centred ideas, reducing

- Re-evaluating gender roles.

women to their reproductive functions instead of acknowledging their full complexity. By speaking up and refusing to fit into narrow expectations, Irigaray helps to reshape how we understand gender roles. This argues that femininity is complex and should not be simplified or treated like an object. Irigaray believes that traditional definitions of woman often come from male perspectives and outdated biological ideas. This means that they miss the vast and unique experiences and identities of real women. For example, if a woman is always expected to be nurturing and emotional, any woman who is assertive or logical might feel that she does not fit in. This makes us question if these old definitions are even useful and how they impact a woman's sense of who she is. Other thinkers, like Judith Butler, support Irigaray's view. Butler's work *Gender Trouble* argues for a wider understanding of identity that goes beyond just male or female labels. Butler agrees that Irigaray's challenge to these traditional frameworks is vital for recognising and valuing the complete spectrum of what it means to be a woman.

- The Speculum: Reflecting on Philosophy and the Feminine.

The core of this work, the "Speculum" section, contains ten essays where Irigaray examines various historical philosophers and their views or lack thereof, on women and female sexuality. Irigaray's core argument is that Western thinking has largely operated on a "one sex model," where males are the default standard. Women are often seen simply as variations of men or as "lacking" something men possess. Imagine a video game where the only basic character is male and to create a female, you just remove or add a few minor features to that male base; that is how Irigaray feels women have been thought of in philosophy and science. This goes hand-in-hand with a male dominated "imaginary" - the way our culture mentally pictures and understands the world. This male perspective shapes everything, from what we consider valid knowledge to how we conduct science and even how we perceive our own bodies. For instance, traits like rationality and objectivity are often tied to men and seen as crucial for science, while emotions and intuition, often linked to women, are seen as less valuable in serious intellectual discussions. Irigaray especially criticises Freud and Lacan for failing to grasp female desire on its own terms. Freud's idea of "penis envy," for example, suggests that women simply desire what men have, ignoring any unique female sexuality. Similarly, Lacan's concept of the "Phallus" as the central symbol of language is, for Irigaray, another male centric idea that leaves no space for women's expression. As women do not fit into this singular, male defined model, their experiences often become "unrepresentable" or "silent" within



dominant language and thought. Irigaray suggests that female sexuality is actually multiple and spread out, unlike the more unified male sexuality that centres on one organ.

In the last part of *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray takes a fresh look at Plato's well known "Myth of the Cave." She cleverly reinterprets Plato's cave. Plato's Allegory of the Cave describes prisoners chained in a cave, facing a wall where they see only shadows cast by figures passing behind them. They believe these shadows are reality. When one prisoner escapes and sees the true objects and sunlight of the outside world, they realise that the shadows were fake. This allegory illustrates the journey from ignorance to true knowledge and how difficult it can be for those who have seen the truth to convince those still living in illusion. Instead of just seeing it as a place of ignorance, Irigaray views it as a symbol for the womb or the mother's space. In Plato's myth, people leave the cave to find "truth" in the bright light outside. Irigaray suggests that by doing this, philosophy symbolically turned away from its feminine origins and the physical body, choosing instead a detached, more "masculine" way of gaining knowledge.

- Plato's Hystera: Tracing the Roots of Exclusion.

For instance, imagine someone who thinks that only abstract mathematical formulas hold true knowledge, completely ignoring the practical wisdom learned from hands on work or understanding human feelings. Irigaray argues that philosophy has done something similar by moving away from these bodily, maternal beginnings. This philosophical move, according to Irigaray, has historically led to women being left out of intellectual and public discussions. Women were essentially confined to the "cave," meaning they were associated with the body and emotions. Meanwhile, men were seen as the ones capable of reaching true knowledge in the world outside the cave. The title "Plato's Hystera" for the final part of *Speculum of the Other Woman* is a clever play on words. The Greek word hystera means womb and it is also the root of the word hysteria. In history, women who expressed strong emotions or independent thoughts were often called "hysterical," suggesting that they were irrational or overly emotional. Irigaray links this idea to how Western philosophy has often ignored or dismissed the womb and the role of the mother. Philosophers have focused mostly on the mind and reason, giving little value to the female body and women's experiences. By connecting the womb with hysteria, Irigaray shows how the female body was misunderstood and how women were treated as lesser or lacking. This reflects a deep bias in Western thought against the feminine.

- Women were confined to the cave, tied to body and emotions.

3.3.3 This Sex Which Is Not One

Like Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* is a groundbreaking collection of essays that further develops the critiques from *Speculum of the Other Woman*, going deeper into how Western culture, language and thought have suppressed and misrepresented female identity and sexuality. Irigaray powerfully critiques Western society's "one-sex model," where male is the universal standard, making female identity merely a flawed or inverted version. This phallogentrism means that male experiences dominate, leaving no distinct space for women's voices. She challenges Freud's "penis envy," reinterpreting it as envy of male power and autonomy, not the organ itself. Irigaray also strongly disagrees with Lacan's "Phallus" as the central organising principle of language and symbolic order, arguing that it remains too tied to male anatomy and power, thus excluding truly distinct female expression. This leads to a linguistic and social system that inherently limits how femininity can be understood and expressed, much like a society's rules favouring only one perspective.

- Irigaray critiques male centred models of identity.

Irigaray believes that alongside changing broader cultural norms, it is crucial to heal problematic individual relationships between women, especially mothers and daughters. She uses the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone to show how men traditionally break apart these bonds. In this myth, Zeus and Hades conspire to abduct Persephone, highlighting how men treat women as possessions to be exchanged, despite the deep love between mother and daughter. Irigaray argues that such myths reveal how male power historically controls women's fates and breaks these vital female connections. Therefore, she stresses the importance of mothers and daughters actively strengthening their relationships and for mothers to present themselves and their daughters as independent individuals (subjects). This change, she suggests, begins at a personal level and requires new ways of speaking about these relationships.

- Critiquing Male Centred Systems.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray introduces a radical idea: female sexuality is not a single, simple thing like male sexuality. Instead, she argues that it is "plural, diffuse and autoerotic," meaning it is diverse, spread out and can generate its own pleasure. She uses the image of "two lips" that are always touching, to symbolise a continuous, self sufficient kind of pleasure that does not always need an outside partner or a single, focused act. Think of it this way: while male sexuality is often understood as a straight line leading to one

- Exploring Female Subjectivity and Desire.



peak, Irigaray suggests female pleasure is more like a whole landscape, with many different hills and valleys of sensation, not just one single destination. As our main language and ways of thinking are male centred, women's unique experiences and desires often remain "silent" or are hard to express. There are simply not enough words or concepts to describe them without forcing them into male defined categories. For example, trying to describe the complex emotional and physical experience of childbirth or deep, multifaceted female friendships often feels inadequate in everyday language, often resorting to clichés or terms that do not fully capture their depth. This is because the available language was not built to fully articulate these uniquely feminine experiences.

- Irigaray shows women are treated as commodities.

In her famous essay, "Women on the Market," Irigaray uses ideas from Karl Marx to explain how women are treated like "commodities" (things to be bought or traded) in societies where men hold most of the power. She argues that women are often exchanged between men as in marriages or social arrangements not because of their individual worth, but to strengthen relationships and power among men. This prevents women from being seen as independent people. A clear historical example is the practice of marriages in which woman was not asked whom she wanted to marry; instead, her family would arrange her marriage to a man from another family to gain wealth, land or social status. Here, the woman's feelings or desires were secondary to the family's strategic gains, essentially treating her as an asset to be exchanged for male benefit.

- Irigaray seeks to create a Feminine discourse.

Irigaray's core aim is not about women taking over from men; it is about fundamentally changing how we use language and create meaning. She strives to develop a "feminine discourse," which is more than just women talking. It is about building a way of speaking, thinking and relating that truly respects and values the differences between sexes. For Irigaray, the problem is that our current language system or "symbolic order," has been shaped by a male perspective. This means it is set up in a way that makes it hard to express unique female experiences, desires and ways of being without them being misunderstood or devalued. Irigaray argues that a "feminine discourse" would involve:

1. **Challenging existing structures:** It would question the very grammar, logic and metaphors that unconsciously reinforce male dominance. For example, moving beyond a focus on singular, unified meanings to embrace multiplicity and fluidity.

- Language and Representation.

2. **Embracing the Unrepresentable:** It would find ways to articulate experiences that are currently silent or unrepresentable in a male dominated language. This could involve exploring different rhythms, connections and forms of expression.
3. **Creating New Meanings:** It means developing new symbols, metaphors and ways of relating that stem from female experience and desire, allowing women to define themselves rather than being defined by existing male frameworks. This “feminine language” is part of a larger ethical vision where both men and women can be seen as equally valuable and distinct individuals, truly recognising each other’s unique ways of being without one trying to control or define the other.

- ‘Mimesis’ as a feminist strategy.

Irigaray uses a powerful technique called “mimesis” (or mimicry) in her work. She applies this to analyse both philosophical ideas and psychoanalytic theories. Mimesis involves deliberately re-enacting common, stereotypical views of women, but in a way that is unfaithful to the original stereotype. The goal is not to confirm these negative views, but to challenge them directly and show how ridiculous or flawed they are. It is a clever feminist tactics for challenging harmful views about women. Instead of directly fighting stereotypes, women strategically mimic or act out these very ideas, but in an exaggerated or ironic way. The idea here is to make the stereotype look so ridiculous that it loses its power. This method helps bring repressed, negative views into the open to be dealt with. It is like holding up a mirror to the stereotype, distorting it until it breaks. Ultimately, mimesis aims to create space for a truly authentic female identity, one not defined by male perspectives. It is a playful yet powerful way to change how the world sees women.

3.3.4 An Ethics of Sexual Difference

Lucy Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984) marks a significant shift in her work. While her earlier works, like *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, largely focused on critiquing how Western thought has failed to understand or represent the feminine, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* moves towards proposing a new way forward. She aims to articulate an ethical framework based on genuinely recognising and valuing the difference between the sexes. Here, Irigaray looks closely at Plato’s *Symposium*, especially a part called “Diotima’s Speech,” which talks about love and the path



- Irigaray calls for valuing real sexual difference.

to true beauty and knowledge. Plato suggests that love moves from physical beauty to beautiful souls, then beautiful ideas and finally to the “Form of Beauty itself” (a perfect, unchanging idea). Irigaray argues that this journey, in its pursuit of universal truth and abstract ideas, actually leaves behind the messy, embodied reality of human relationships, particularly those between men and women. It focuses on an impersonal, unchanging truth that does not account for the unique, changing experiences of two different sexes. She points out that in seeking this universal, philosophy moves away from the actual, living “other” in a relationship, especially the female “other,” whose specific desires and experiences are overlooked in favour of a higher, seemingly neutral truth.

- Difference - Challenging Traditional Views.

Next, Irigaray analyses Aristotle’s ideas about “place” and “interval” (the space between things) from his *Physics*. Aristotle saw place as a fixed container that holds objects and interval as just the void between them. Irigaray reinterprets these concepts to show how they reflect a way of thinking that struggles to conceive of genuine sexual difference as a positive, dynamic space. She suggests that if place is always defined by what it contains and the interval is just emptiness, there is no conceptual space for two distinct beings to exist together, side by side, in their own right, without one defining or containing the other. Instead, she argues for an interval that itself is a meaningful connection, a bridge that allows interaction while respecting separate identities. This critique highlights how philosophical frameworks often lack the tools to properly think about true difference, instead defaulting to models where one thing defines or absorbs the other.

In this section, Irigaray continues her critical engagement with Western philosophy, focusing on how ideas about the individual self and God have shaped our understanding of human relationships, particularly across sexes. Irigaray revisits René Descartes’s work on emotions, specifically his concept of “wonder.” Descartes saw wonder as the first passion, a kind of astonishment at something new or unfamiliar. For Irigaray, this wonder is crucial because it represents a moment of openness to the Other – someone or something fundamentally different from oneself. She argues that genuine ethical relationships, especially between men and women, should begin with this sense of wonder and respect for the other’s distinctness, rather than immediately trying to categorise, control or reduce them to something already known. If we do not start with wonder, we risk imposing our own ideas onto the other, rather than truly

- Love of Self - Re-examining the Individual and the Divine.

encountering them as they are. Irigaray then turns to Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, particularly his ideas about God and the universe. Spinoza believed that God (or Nature) is a single, all encompassing substance and everything exists within this unified whole. Irigaray uses the concept of an "envelope" to critique this unified, totalising view. She argues that if everything is part of one single envelope (God / Nature), there is no real space for genuine, irreducible difference between two distinct individuals, especially male and female. When everything is absorbed into one grand system, the unique bodies, desires and subjectivities of men and women can get lost or become indistinct. She advocates a different understanding, one that allows distinct envelopes (or beings) to exist side by side, truly separate yet connected, rather than being merged into a single, undifferentiated whole.

- Irigaray urges love that respects sexual difference.

In the final section of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray develops her idea of a new ethical relationship between the sexes, moving beyond a simple "love of the same." She argues that traditional love often means loving what reflects us or what we easily understand, which ends up making the other person just a version of ourselves. Instead, Irigaray calls for a "love of the other," where we truly embrace and value the unique, irreducible difference of the other sex. This is not about ignoring differences or trying to make everyone identical; it is about seeing and respecting the other in their distinct being, acknowledging their fundamentally different way of experiencing the world. This requires an ethical shift where neither sex tries to absorb, define or dominate the other.

- Love of Same, Love of Other: Engaging with Difference.

To explore this further, Irigaray engages with other philosophers: first, Irigaray looks at Merleau-Ponty's idea of how our bodies perceive and are perceived - the "intertwining" or "chiasm" (a cross over). Merleau-Ponty suggested that the perceiver and the perceived are deeply connected, almost blurring into one another. Irigaray builds on this but insists that even in this deep connection, the fundamental difference of two distinct, embodied subjects (male and female) must remain visible and respected. She argues that if the intertwining becomes too complete, the unique flesh or bodily experience of the feminine can become invisible again, absorbed into a seemingly neutral, but still implicitly male, understanding of embodiment. For instance, in a dance, two partners move together fluidly, but each retains their individual body and unique way of moving, rather than merging into one indistinguishable



form. Irigaray argues that philosophical ideas about connection should not erase this distinct bodily existence. Irigaray also turns to Levinas's ideas about the "Other" and the "caress." Levinas argued that the "face" of the "Other" calls us to an infinite ethical responsibility. Irigaray focuses on the caress not just as a physical touch, but as a symbolic act of reaching out towards the Other that acknowledges their separateness and mystery. Unlike a grasp or possession, a caress seeks what it cannot fully grasp or define. For Irigaray, this act represents a way of engaging with sexual difference that respects the infinite newness and unknowability of the other, without trying to reduce them to our own understanding. This "productiveness" (fruitfulness) lies in the potential for endless discovery and newness that arises from genuinely engaging with an Other who remains distinct and beyond our full comprehension.

Summarized Overview

Luce Irigaray, a Belgian-born feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst and linguist, critiques how Western thought has traditionally ignored or misrepresented women. Through works like *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she exposes phallogentrism a male centred bias in philosophy and psychoanalysis, arguing it treats women as a lack or other and renders their unique experiences silent. Irigaray emphasises that female sexuality is multiple and spread out, not singular like male sexuality. Her later work, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, moves beyond critique to propose a new ethical framework, advocating a love of the other that genuinely respects and values the irreducible differences between sexes, fostering a feminine discourse where women can define their own identities.

Self-Assessment

1. Discuss Irigaray's critique of phallogentrism in Western thought, drawing on her analysis of Freud and Lacan from *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
2. Explain Irigaray's concept of sexual difference and how she argues that it is shaped by language and culture, rather than being purely biological?
3. Outline the primary arguments Irigaray makes in "Plato's Hystera" regarding the historical exclusion of women from philosophical discourse.
4. Describe Irigaray's vision for a feminine discourse. What are its key character-

istics and why does she believe it is necessary?

5. What is the central argument of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*? Explain Irigaray's call for a love of the other and how it differs from traditional notions of love or equality.

Assignments

1. How might Irigaray's critique of the one-sex model be applied to contemporary issues in gender identity or debates around gender neutral language and spaces?
2. Compare and contrast Irigaray's concept of the Imaginary Body and Symbolic Order with Lacan's original ideas. How does her feminist reinterpretation challenge or extend Lacan's framework, particularly regarding the Phallus?
3. Analyse how Irigaray's method of mimesis functions as a critical tool in her engagement with classical philosophers.
4. Discuss how Irigaray's essay "Women on the Market" uses a Marxist inspired analysis to critique the social positioning of women.

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Suggested Reading

1. Siebers, T. (2018). "The Ethics of Criticism." *In The Ethics of Criticism*. Cornell University Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.58012>
2. Burke, C., & Schor, N. (Eds.). (1991). *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and its Critics*. Indiana University Press.
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU





BLOCK 4
Psychoanalytic
Feminism

UNIT 1

Freud's Thought on Sex Formation and Juliet Mitchell's Criticism

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the basic goals and methods of Freud's psychoanalysis
- describe Freud's concept of psychosexual development and identify its five stages
- explain the significance of the Oedipus and Electra complexes in shaping emotional and gender identity
- discuss Juliet Mitchell's feminist reinterpretation of Freud's theories, especially her views on patriarchy and the unconscious
- analyse the interaction between biology, family relationships, and cultural forces in identity development

Background

Sigmund Freud, a doctor trained in neurology, began his career studying how the brain and body work together. However, his attention gradually shifted from physical illness to mental distress. He was particularly interested in conditions where people exhibited symptoms like paralysis, memory loss, or speech problems, despite there being no damage to their nervous system. These unusual cases led Freud to ask a different question: could the mind cause problems in the body? To explore this idea, Freud travelled to Paris in 1885, where he studied under Jean-Martin Charcot, a renowned doctor who used hypnosis to treat what was then called hysteria. Charcot demonstrated that people's symptoms could be altered through suggestion, which made Freud consider that these symptoms might originate from emotional or mental processes, rather than solely from the body. When Freud returned to Vienna, he worked with another physician, Josef Breuer. Breuer was treating a patient named Anna O who presented strange and troubling symptoms. She found comfort when encouraged to talk freely about her painful



past. Freud termed this method the ‘talking cure’ and employed it as the foundation of what later became psychoanalysis. He observed that the emotions and experiences people were not fully aware of, or had even forgotten, still profoundly affected them. He developed the idea that these hidden experiences reside in the unconscious mind, which plays a significant role in shaping our thoughts, behaviours, and identities. These early insights helped Freud construct a new theory of the mind—one that encompassed not just reason and awareness, but also hidden fears, desires, and memories.

Keywords

Libido, Unconscious, Oral stage, Anal stage, Phallic stage, Latency stage, Genital stage, Fixation, Castration anxiety, Oedipus complex, Electra complex

Discussion

4.1.1 Introduction

Freud developed psychoanalysis as a means to understand and treat emotional problems. His goal was to help patients explore their hidden thoughts and memories, enabling them to gain insight into the causes of their suffering. Freud noticed that patients often felt better when encouraged to talk freely about whatever came to mind. This technique, known as ‘free association,’ helped him discover that many symptoms were linked to past experiences involving strong emotions, particularly those related to sexuality and early family life. Freud also began to study dreams, perceiving them as a special way for the unconscious mind to express itself. His book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, illustrated how dreams could contain hidden desires. One of his main discoveries was that many of our feelings and actions are not random but have deep emotional causes, often rooted in childhood. He suggested that the early bond between a child and their parents shapes not only the child’s emotions but also their identity as male or female.

- Psychoanalysis links emotions, childhood, and identity

- Mitchell expands Freud with feminist critique

Freud’s views on sex formation and the development of gender identity were groundbreaking but also widely debated. One important thinker who examined and criticised Freud’s ideas was Juliet Mitchell, a British psychoanalyst and feminist theorist. Mitchell agreed with Freud on some points but contended that he did not fully understand the role of society and culture in shaping gender. She explored how broader social

forces, such as patriarchy, cultural norms, and language, also play a major role. Mitchell believed that Freud's theory should not be entirely rejected but rather expanded. She worked to integrate Freudian psychoanalysis with feminist thought. Mitchell pointed out that Freud demonstrated how women's experiences were shaped by deep psychological forces, but he did not inquire into how these forces were influenced by social power and inequality.

4.1.2 Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development and Gender Identity

According to Freud, a child's sense of being male or female develops through the stages of psychosexual development, particularly during the phallic stage. He argued that sexuality is not confined to physical acts or adult relationships; rather, it begins in early childhood and continues throughout life. Freud proposed that this development follows a fixed sequence of stages—oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital—each associated with a specific part of the body that becomes the primary source of pleasure during that time. He introduced the concept of libido, the psychic energy behind sexual and emotional drives. This energy motivates the individual's desire to seek pleasure and avoid discomfort, beginning at birth. Freud emphasised that the development of gender identity and sexuality is shaped by early bodily experiences and psychological responses to them. Although modern theories recognise the interplay between biological and cultural factors, Freud's focus was predominantly on how early bodily differences and psychological conflicts, such as the Oedipus complex during the phallic stage, contribute to the formation of gender identity and personality.

- Freud linked gender identity to psychosexual stages

4.1.2.1 The Concept of Psychosexual Development

Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development explains how human personality and identity are formed through various stages during childhood. According to Freud, these stages are closely linked to the search for pleasure and the development of the child's body and mind. He believed that from birth, children experience pleasure through different parts of the body, referred to as erogenous zones. As children grow, the focus of this pleasure shifts from one part of the body to another. These changes are not merely physical; they are also deeply connected to how children begin to think, feel, and re-

- Personality develops through psychosexual stages



late to others. Freud identified five main stages in this developmental process: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Each stage presents its own challenges, and the manner in which a child navigates each stage can influence their adult personality. For Freud, if a child's needs are not adequately met or are excessively satisfied at any stage, the child may become stuck or fixated, leading to certain behaviours or habits in adulthood. These fixations may manifest as psychological traits like stubbornness, dependence, or difficulties in relationships. Freud's theory is one of the earliest attempts to illustrate that personality is not formed all at once but is the result of a prolonged process involving the body, emotions, family, and culture. Understanding these stages helps us see how Freud linked biology and psychology to explain identity and sexual development.

- Oral stage shapes trust and dependence

The first stage in Freud's model is called the oral stage, which begins at birth and lasts until about one and a half years of age. During this period, a baby derives most of its pleasure and comfort through the mouth. Activities such as sucking, feeding, biting, or even placing objects in the mouth provide a sense of satisfaction. This stage is not solely about feeding; it represents the baby's initial connection with the outside world, particularly with the mother or caregiver. When a baby sucks milk, it not only satisfies hunger but also fosters a sense of trust, security, and love. Freud believed that how the baby is cared for during this stage has a lasting impact. If the baby is well-fed, comforted, and nurtured, they are likely to develop a sense of trust and attachment. However, if their needs are not properly addressed, it may lead to what Freud termed 'oral fixation.' An adult with oral fixation might develop habits such as overeating, smoking, nail-biting, or excessive dependence on others. These behaviours are seen as indicators that the person's needs were not adequately resolved during the oral stage. Thus, the oral stage plays a crucial role in forming basic emotional patterns related to trust, comfort, and dependence. It illustrates how an early part of life, which may seem simple, actually contributes to emotional development.

After the oral stage, the child enters the anal stage, which lasts from about one and a half to three years of age. During this period, the child's focus of pleasure shifts from the mouth to the control of bowel movements. This is usually the time when parents begin toilet training, which becomes a major event in the child's life. Freud believed that this stage is not just about learning when and where to go to the toilet; it is also about learning control, order, and independence. The child

- Anal stage shapes control and responsibility

learns to respond to social expectations, such as cleanliness and discipline. How parents deal with toilet training can influence the child's personality. If parents are patient and supportive, the child may develop a healthy attitude toward responsibility and organisation. However, if parents are too strict or too lenient, the child may become either overly rigid and controlling (anal-retentive) or careless and messy (anal-expulsive). For example, an adult who is extremely neat, enjoys routines, and dislikes disorder might be displaying traits associated with the anal-retentive type. In contrast, someone who is disorganised or rebellious may reflect an anal-expulsive personality. The anal stage teaches us that early lessons about control and independence are not just about physical behaviour but are connected to how a person later deals with order, rules, and responsibility.

- Phallic stage shapes gender and identity

The third stage is the phallic stage, which typically occurs between the ages of three and six. This is a key stage in Freud's theory of sex formation. During this period, children begin to focus their attention on their genitals and become aware of the physical differences between boys and girls. In this stage, children also develop special feelings for their immediate caretaker, who, in most cases, happens to be the child's mother, which Freud described through the Oedipus complex. At this stage, there is no fixed gender for the child. Gender formation is not biological but cultural, which happens only when the child grows up and enters the symbolic order, following the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Freud posited that all children in early life are boys, irrespective of their biological sex differences. The Oedipus complex is the feeling of affection on the part of the child for their mother, while viewing their father as a rival. It is due to the investment of libido by the child in their mother's body that causes love for the mother. These feelings are unconscious, and children are usually not aware of them. Freud believed that resolving these feelings is crucial for developing a clear sexual identity. As time passes, children begin to identify with the same-sex parent. A boy may try to become more like his father, while a girl may feel a connection to her mother. This process helps the child learn gender roles and prepare for future relationships. If the child is unable to resolve these feelings, it may lead to confusion in adult relationships or identity. Freud saw the phallic stage as central to understanding how the body, emotions, and family all come together to shape the sense of being male or female.



- Latency stage focuses on learning and growth

After the emotional challenges of the phallic stage, children enter the latency stage, which begins around age six and continues until puberty. This stage is marked by a quiet period in sexual development. The child's sexual energy, or libido, is not active in the same way as before. Instead, energy is directed towards learning, schoolwork, hobbies, and friendships. During this time, children usually form same-sex friendships, develop new skills, and follow rules in school and society. Freud believed that the experiences of earlier stages are not lost during latency; they are simply hidden or repressed. The child continues to grow emotionally and socially, but the focus is not on bodily pleasure. This stage allows the child to build the skills and confidence needed for later stages of life. It is also a time when the child begins to develop values, interests, and self-discipline. Some children may continue to show signs of unresolved issues from earlier stages, such as being overly dependent (oral fixation) or overly rigid (anal fixation). Freud saw the latency period as a time of preparation. The child is not struggling with new emotional challenges but is putting earlier lessons into practice. Healthy development during this stage can lead to a more successful transition into adolescence and adulthood. The latency stage is important because it provides space for the child to grow without the strong emotional tensions that characterised the earlier stages.

4.1.2.2 Freud's Focus on Early Sexual Awareness

- Sexual identity begins with body awareness

Freud believed that a child's understanding of their body and sexual identity begins in the early years of life. He described this as part of what he called the phallic stage, which occurs between the ages of three and six. In this stage, children begin to notice the physical differences between boys and girls. Freud observed that this discovery influences how they begin to form ideas about being male or female. For boys, their awareness of the sexual organ becomes a central part of their identity. Freud introduced the idea of castration anxiety, a fear in boys that they too could lose their penis, arising when they notice that girls do not have one. A boy mistakes the absence of a penis in girls as the outcome of castration performed by the father for indulging in a love relationship with the mother. On the part of the girl children, they may feel a sense of loss or lack when they notice this difference. Girls also desire a penis like the boys have. Freud described this feeling as 'penis envy'. Although modern psychology does not fully agree with these ideas, they highlight Freud's early attempt to explain how children form a sense of

sexual identity by connecting physical awareness to emotional experience.

- Oedipus complex shapes male gender identity

The Oedipus complex is one of Freud's most well-known ideas. Emerging during the same phallic stage, the Oedipus complex describes the emotional and psychological conflicts a young boy faces due to his attachment to his mother and rivalry with his father. According to Freud, a young boy feels a strong emotional attachment to his mother. At the same time, he begins to see his father as a rival for her affection. This mixture of desire and rivalry creates inner conflict. The boy wants to be close to his mother but fears that his father, being stronger and more powerful, will punish him. This fear takes the form of castration anxiety. Freud believed that resolving the Oedipus complex is an important part of healthy development. As the boy lets go of his desire for his mother and begins to identify with his father, he forms a stable sense of being male. He begins to accept his father's authority and tries to become like him. This process helps the child develop a clear gender identity and prepares him for future relationships. For Freud, the resolution of the Oedipus complex was key to forming a strong sense of self and a proper understanding of social roles.

- Freud described female development through Electra complex

Freud's explanation of female development was less detailed than his account of male development. While he suggested a similar emotional process for girls, he did not name it in the same way. Later, psychoanalysts referred to it as the 'Electra complex'. According to this idea, girls also go through a stage of emotional attachment to the parent of the opposite sex; in this case, the father. Freud believed that girls start by identifying with their mother but shift their emotional focus toward their father when they become aware that they do not have a penis. This leads to penis envy, a sense of lacking something important. Freud argued that girls blame their mother for this absence and turn their affection toward their father, hoping to receive a baby as a symbolic replacement for the penis. Eventually, the girl gives up her desire for the father and begins to identify again with her mother. This identification helps her develop a sense of being female. However, Freud described this process as more passive compared to the boy's development, which he saw as more active and straightforward.

- Freud viewed female identity as lacking

Freud saw male identity as complete and more active, while female identity was described in terms of lack or absence. For example, penis envy suggests that girls feel incomplete because they do not have a penis. Freud believed that this sense of lack



influences how girls develop their roles in society. He saw women as identifying with others, especially their mothers, and not forming identity through action or power. Because of this, he described female sexuality as more passive.

- Identification with same-sex parent forms identity

According to Freud, resolving the Oedipus complex depends on the child's ability to shift emotional focus from desire to identification. In other words, the child must give up romantic feelings toward the mother and instead begin to identify with the same-sex parent. A boy identifies with his father, and a girl with her mother. Through this process, the child begins to understand what it means to be male or female within their culture. Freud saw this as the basis for developing a gendered identity and the foundation for future relationships. This process also helps the child adjust to social expectations. By identifying with the same-sex parent, the child learns the norms and values of their gender group and prepares to function within a society that expects certain roles from men and women.

4.1.2.3 Libido as the Mental Energy of Desire and Attachment

- Libido as emotional and sexual energy

Freud introduced the concept of 'libido' to describe the mental energy that powers the sexual instinct. He compared it to hunger, which is the energy behind the instinct for nutrition. Libido is not just about sexual acts but refers to a broader psychological force that drives human beings to seek pleasure, connection, and emotional satisfaction. It is part of the sexual instinct, but Freud did not limit its role to adulthood or reproduction. He explained that libido is active from childhood and influences thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Freud distinguished between libido and other mental energies by saying that libido is a special kind of energy with its own chemistry. He observed that sexual energy is not limited to the sexual organs; it can arise from all parts of the body. Libido is distributed throughout the body like water is stored in a reservoir. It can be sent out to outer objects of its choice and form a union with them. Through psychoanalysis, Freud noticed that libido can become focused on particular people or things, a process he called cathexis, or the investment of emotional energy. This occurs in the early stages of a child's life in its relationship with the mother. Through close physical contact with the mother, the child's libido becomes invested in the mother's body, creating a love relationship with her. At the same time, since the child is also an object of love for the mother, libidinal investment occurs in both directions. In

this way, the mother and child form a kind of monad, a fusion through love. This union is later disrupted by the father or by society during the stage of the Oedipus complex, through the threat of castration. At this point, the libido is withdrawn from the mother's body and redirected toward the child's own body. When libido is directed outward toward another person, love for the other arises; when it is redirected inward toward oneself, it results in self-love or narcissism. This helps to explain how people form strong emotional attachments and how desires influence personality development.

- Libido shifts from self to others over time

Freud described libido as undergoing various changes throughout life. In childhood, libido is usually directed toward close caregivers, such as parents. As the child grows, this energy shifts toward other objects outside the family. This process of attaching libido to different people or things is called 'object-choice'. Freud distinguished between libido focused on oneself and libido focused on others. In early childhood, libido is often self-directed, a stage Freud called 'narcissism'. This narcissistic libido acts as a reservoir from which object-love develops later. If the libido is withdrawn from others, it can return to the self, leading to conditions where emotional energy is no longer invested in people or relationships. Freud explained that healthy development involves a balance between these two kinds of libido. He warned that if libido remains fixated on early objects or earlier stages of development, it may lead to emotional or psychological problems in adulthood. For example, someone who remains overly self-focused may have difficulty in forming strong emotional connections with others. In this way, Freud used the concept of libido to explain not just sexuality but emotional development and social behaviour as well.

- Libido as emotional energy shaping human connection

Freud also expanded the meaning of libido beyond sexual activity. He believed libido included all emotional energy that seeks pleasure, connection, and fulfilment. This wider definition allowed him to explain how love, creativity, art, and even ambition are shaped by the same inner force. Freud's idea of sexuality was broader than the common understanding. He argued that libido could be seen in non-sexual behaviours such as caring for a friend, being attached to a teacher, or showing admiration for a public figure. These expressions of libido are not necessarily sexual but still involve emotional investment. Freud responded to critics who accused psychoanalysis of 'pan-sexualism' by stating that his theory was not about explaining everything through sex but about understanding how one deep



psychological energy can take many forms. In later work, especially in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud linked libido with what he called 'Eros'—a life force that connects people and builds relationships. He believed libido could be a force for social bonding and personal growth, not just physical desire. This showed that Freud saw libido as essential to human development, not just to sexuality.

- Early emotional bonds shape adult relationships

Freud's concept of libido also helps explain how early emotional experiences shape adult relationships. The emotional bonds children form with their parents often become the model for future love relationships. Freud observed that many people are drawn in adulthood to partners who resemble their early caregivers. He called this pattern 'the after-effect of infantile object-choice'. Sometimes, people unconsciously seek partners who remind them of a parent. If childhood attachments were healthy, the person may form stable relationships. But if early relationships were troubled, these difficulties may reappear in adult love. Freud believed that jealousy, romantic patterns, and even conflicts in marriage could often be traced back to unresolved early libidinal relations with parents. By studying how libido moves, attaches, and withdraws, Freud offered a way to understand emotional life and relationship patterns in depth.

4.1.3 Feminist Criticism of Freud's Theory

- Feminists criticised Freud's theory as male-biased

Feminists have criticised Freud's theory for the way it presents women in relation to men. According to Freud, women are described as "castrated," which places them in an inferior position compared to men. This idea has been linked to the way women have often been kept in lower positions within social and cultural structures. Another major point of criticism is Freud's claim that women, as a gender, experience "penis envy," suggesting that women feel incomplete or lacking because of their biological difference from men. Feminists argue that such views are not only biased but also reinforce unequal power relations between men and women. However, later feminist thinkers who drew upon psychoanalytical theory responded to these issues. They reinterpreted Freud's ideas in a way that highlighted the role of social structures, culture, and power in shaping gender differences. By doing so, they used psychoanalysis to challenge the very inequalities that Freud's original theories seemed to support.

4.1.3.1 Juliet Mitchell's Feminist Reinterpretation of Freud's Psychoanalysis

Juliet Mitchell's work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* present a complex, critical, yet respectful engagement with Sigmund Freud's theory of sex formation. She insists that Freud was not suggesting how men and women ought to behave, but rather offering a way to understand how identity, including sexual identity, is formed within a particular cultural and social structure. Mitchell argues that Freud's insights into the unconscious and infantile sexuality reveal how patriarchal values and gender roles are internalised from an early age. Far from reinforcing sexism, his work offers tools to understand how sexism operates at a psychological level.

- Mitchell uses Freud to analyse patriarchy

According to Mitchell, critics like Kate Millett and Simone de Beauvoir often misunderstood Freud's project by ignoring its foundation in the unconscious. By rejecting the very concepts of unconscious motivation and infantile desire, these critics, she argues, overlook the depth of Freud's theory and reduce it to simplistic biological determinism. Mitchell suggests that Freud was trying to show how culture, family structures, and internal conflicts work together to shape individual psychology, especially in relation to sex and gender. His concept of the Oedipus complex, for example, reveals how children's desires, fears, and identifications are formed not just biologically but in relation to the symbolic and emotional structure of the family.

- Mitchell defends Freud's depth and complexity

Mitchell's important contribution lies in showing how psychoanalysis can be used as a tool for feminist analysis rather than dismissed as anti-feminist. She emphasises that Freud's theory is not about validating male dominance but about understanding how identity, including gender identity, is constructed. Psychoanalysis reveals how the social order, including patriarchy, gets written into the unconscious minds of individuals through early family experiences. For example, Mitchell highlights how children learn to accept gender roles based on their identification with parents and internalised expectations. These processes are unconscious and shaped not simply by biology but by cultural and ideological forces. By studying how desire and repression work, psychoanalysis helps us understand how ideas about masculinity and femininity are passed down. For Mitchell, feminism must recognise the power of these unconscious processes if it wants to change the structures of inequality. She criticises feminist thinkers who want to replace Freud with simple social or political

- Mitchell applies psychoanalysis to feminist critique



explanations. Instead, she calls for a deeper engagement with Freud's work, seeing psychoanalysis not as a finished system but as a critical method that can expose the hidden ways patriarchy is reproduced.

- Mitchell links family to gender inequality

Another major aspect of Mitchell's analysis is her focus on the role of the family in maintaining gender inequality. She draws on Freud's insight that early family relations, especially the roles of mother, father, and child, are central to the development of identity. However, she also goes beyond Freud, arguing that the family is not just a site of individual development but a key institution through which social structures like patriarchy are reproduced. In this view, the family transmits cultural norms and gender roles from one generation to the next. Even as family structures change over time, they often carry with them conservative ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman. Mitchell explains that this conservatism is not just external, but internalised through unconscious processes. Women, in particular, are often positioned as the keepers of tradition within the family, which limits their ability to challenge existing power structures. Feminism, she argues, must confront not only external inequalities but also the deep psychological and emotional roots of those inequalities. Psychoanalysis, by revealing how individuals unconsciously reproduce social norms, offers a powerful tool for feminist critique. For Mitchell, the key to feminist change lies not only in political action but also in understanding and transforming the unconscious structures that shape our sense of self and others.

Summarized Overview

Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalysis as a method to explore unconscious thoughts, emotional conflicts, and past experiences, especially those related to early family life and sexuality. He believed that a person's psychological development begins in early childhood and follows a series of stages linked to bodily pleasure, which he called psycho-sexual stages. These stages include the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Each stage involves a particular focus on a specific part of the body and reflects both physical and emotional growth. Freud argued that unresolved issues or excessive satisfaction during any stage could result in fixations that affect adult personality and behaviour. Central to Freud's theory is the role of early emotional bonds, especially between the child and parents. He believed that sexual identity begins to form during the phallic stage, when children become aware of anatomical differences and develop feelings towards the opposite-sex parent, leading to the Oedipus complex (in boys) and later, what came to be

called the Electra complex (in girls). The resolution of these emotional conflicts through identification with the same-sex parent was considered vital for healthy gender identity and personality development. Freud's ideas connected bodily awareness with emotional experiences and shaped early psychological theories of identity and sexuality.

Freud's characterisation of women as experiencing penis envy was the main point of accusation against him by mainstream feminists. For Freud, male identity is shaped by the possession of the penis and the associated fear of losing it (castration anxiety), while female identity emerges from the recognition of its absence (penis envy). He saw male development as direct and active, whereas female development was viewed as indirect and formed around a sense of lack. These ideas have been widely criticised for promoting a male-centred view of identity and portraying women as secondary or incomplete. Juliet Mitchell, a feminist psychoanalyst, responded to these criticisms by reinterpreting Freud's theory through a feminist lens. She argued that Freud's insights were often misunderstood by his critics, who ignored the role of unconscious psychological processes. Mitchell accepted that Freud highlighted important psychological dynamics but insisted that his theories needed to be expanded by considering how culture, language, and patriarchy shape these processes.

Juliet Mitchell's major contribution lies in bridging Freudian psychoanalysis with feminist theory. She emphasised that Freud's work could be used to understand how patriarchy and gender roles are embedded not only in society but also in the unconscious mind. Mitchell maintained that Freud's concept of the unconscious helps explain how children internalise social norms related to gender. She argued that early family experiences transmit roles and values that shape how children learn to be male or female. Unlike some feminist critics who dismissed Freud as reinforcing patriarchy, Mitchell believed his theories could expose how patriarchy operates at a deeper psychological level. Mitchell also explored the role of the family as a key institution in preserving traditional gender roles. While Freud focused on the individual's psychological development, Mitchell broadened this view to show how family structures and cultural norms are transmitted from one generation to another. For Mitchell, the key to feminist change lies not only in political action but also in understanding and transforming the unconscious structures that shape our sense of self and others.

Self-Assessment

1. Name the five psycho-sexual stages proposed by Freud and explain the main focus of each.
2. How does Freud explain the role of the phallic stage in the development of gender identity?
3. What is the Oedipus complex, and why is its resolution important in Freud's theory?



4. How does Freud explain 'penis envy' and 'castration anxiety'?
5. What did Freud mean by the term 'libido', and how is it different from the common understanding of sexuality?
6. How does Juliet Mitchell critique and reinterpret Freud's theory from a feminist perspective?

Assignments

1. Explain Freud's theory of psycho-sexual development and discuss how each stage contributes to personality formation.
2. Discuss Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex and its role in the development of gender identity.
3. Explain how Freud's concept of libido helps us understand the connection between early emotional experiences and adult relationships.
4. How does Juliet Mitchell use psychoanalysis to explain the role of family in shaping gender norms?
5. Critically evaluate Freud's explanation of female psychological development with reference to feminist responses.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



SGOU

UNIT 2

Lacanian Thought on Sexual Difference

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's theories on sexuality and identity
- explain the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis.
- describe Lacan's theory of sexual difference beyond biological categorisation
- analyse how Lacan connects language and unconscious desire to identity formation
- evaluate the phrase "Woman does not exist" in Lacan's thought

Background

Human beings often wonder about their identity. They ask questions like: Who am I? Why do I feel or behave in certain ways? What makes me the person I am today? These are not just personal questions; the answers are often influenced by the language we speak, the culture we belong to, and the relationships in which we grow up. Sigmund Freud believed that many of our actions, thoughts, and emotions are shaped by early life experiences and desires of which we may not be fully aware. These unconscious elements, especially from childhood, influence our adult lives in powerful ways. Later, another thinker named Jacques Lacan developed Freud's ideas in a new direction. While Freud focused more on the inner workings of the mind and early family experiences, Lacan emphasised the role of language and culture. He believed that we do not form our identities solely from biology or physical development. Instead, our sense of who we are is also created through language and the social world around us. For Lacan, the words we use, the stories we hear, and the roles society assigns us all shape how we understand ourselves.



In today's world, many people question fixed ideas of being male or female. Some feel that they do not fully fit into traditional roles, while others believe that identity is not just something we are born with, but also something we become. Lacan's theories provide tools to think about these issues. He teaches us that what we say, how we relate to others, and even how we love are shaped by deeper forces such as language and culture. These forces begin shaping us from childhood through symbols, images, and words. Lacan's explanation of gender formation is also based on these forces. His work may seem difficult at first, but it helps us ask important questions: How do we become who we are? Why do we desire what we desire? Why do people suffer when they cannot express their true feelings? The following discussion will explore these questions by understanding Lacan's ideas and how they contribute to discussions on sexual difference and gender identity.

Keywords

Symbolic Order, Imaginary, The Real, Mirror Stage, Phallus, Signifier, Desire, Jouissance, Phallic Jouissance, Other Jouissance, Alienation

Discussion

4.2.1 Introduction

Jacques Lacan was a major thinker in psychoanalysis after Sigmund Freud. He developed his own ideas while remaining close to Freud's theories. Lacan was trained as a psychiatrist in France and later became one of the most influential figures in psychoanalytic theory. His influence spread not only in France but also across Europe, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Lacan believed that traditional psychoanalysis had become outdated by the middle of the 20th century. Instead of updating therapy with modern medicine or simplified methods, he sought to renew it through a deeper understanding of language, philosophy, and science. Lacan thought that psychoanalysis should not be reduced to biological or psychological approaches. He emphasised that language plays a central role in shaping our thoughts and identity. According to Lacan, the unconscious is not just a hidden part of the mind filled with desires, but a structure made up of words and symbols; what he called the 'discourse of the Other.' This means that our experiences and even our symptoms arise from how we use and understand language.

- Language shapes identity

- Lacan linked mind, body, and language

Lacan was both a psychiatrist and a philosopher, which gave him a unique position to rethink psychoanalysis. His early clinical experience with patients allowed him to study mental illness deeply. He also read widely in philosophy, literature, anthropology, and linguistics. This combination helped him develop new ideas. Lacan argued that the human mind cannot be fully understood without considering language and culture. One of his main insights was that the body and the mind are connected through language. This idea led to what is called the 'linguistic turn' in psychoanalysis. He was against turning psychoanalysis into a simple psychological method, as he felt this would miss its real purpose. Lacan borrowed ideas from linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure and created his own models using graphs and symbols to explain his concepts. He also advocated for a new way of training psychoanalysts, focusing more on education in history, literature, and philosophy rather than solely medicine. Lacan stated that symptoms are like monuments, stories, or records of our past that are shaped by language. His methods led him to break from mainstream psychoanalytic organisations and start his own school.

- Lacan connects the unconscious with language and culture

Lacan's theories are often seen as difficult due to his complex language, changing ideas, and numerous references to other thinkers. His writings include jokes, metaphors, and deep references to literature, philosophy, and religion. Terms like 'desire,' 'jouissance,' or 'the Other' carry different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. In recent years, scholars and writers have employed his ideas to understand literature, film, politics, and culture. Thinkers like Slavoj Žižek have used Lacan's ideas to discuss global issues such as racism and political change. Lacan always insisted that psychoanalysis deals with people who speak, suffer, and desire. Although challenging, Lacan's work continues to influence psychology, philosophy, and the study of culture. His key message is that the unconscious is not just inside the brain, but is shaped by the language and culture we are born into.

- Lacan links sexuality with language and culture

4.2.2 Understanding Identity Beyond Biology

Jacques Lacan developed a theory of sexuality that moves away from the biological and medical explanations common in early psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Traditional models often focused on the physical differences between male and female bodies, treating sexuality as something determined mainly by hormones, organs, or medical conditions. Lacan, however, argued that sexuality is not only shaped by the body but also by



language and culture. He introduced a new approach using three central concepts: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

4.2.2.1 Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real

- Identity begins through images and lacks

Lacan developed a model of the human mind based on three interconnected concepts: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary in Lacan's theory refers to the stage of human development where identity begins through images. This starts with what Lacan calls the mirror stage. Around six to eighteen months of age, a child sees its reflection in a mirror and begins to identify with it. This reflection, or specular image, appears whole and perfect, unlike the child's actual experience of its body, which feels scattered and uncoordinated. The child feels a gap between the complete image it sees and the incomplete feeling it has. This creates a sense of something missing within itself - a sense of lack. The child starts to see itself as something separate from others, and this marks the beginning of a personal identity. It tries to become like the image in the mirror - strong, beautiful, or admired. This image becomes an ego-ideal, or a mental picture of what the child wants to be. However, this ideal is based on appearances, not facts. From this moment, the child depends on images to define itself and begins to form relationships by identifying with others based on how they look or act. As the child grows, these identifications become stronger and shape what Lacan calls the ego. The ego is made up of many images the child has seen and admired in others, such as parents, siblings, or people on television. It often perceives the world in ways that protect this admired self-image.

- Entry into language defines human subjectivity

Lacan's concept of the Symbolic refers to the stage in human development when a child enters the world of language. For Lacan, language is not only a means of communication but also a powerful structure that shapes how we think and live. It creates a system of meanings and rules that we must follow in order to be part of society. Once the child begins to speak and understand words, they enter a social order where everything must be named and explained using language. This means we can only express ourselves through the words and ideas that already exist in our culture. We are no longer simply acting on our feelings; rather, we must fit our feelings into the language system. Lacan connects this stage with the Name-of-the-Father, a symbolic figure that represents law, authority, and boundaries. The father, in this sense, is not just a parent but stands for the rule that separates the child from the intense bond

with the mother. This symbolic rule tells the child that it cannot have everything, especially not complete access to the mother's care and attention. This break or interruption helps the child to form its own identity and learn that the world has rules and limitations. Lacan calls this shift the paternal metaphor, where the child moves from direct emotional connection to symbolic understanding through language.

- Symbolic castration means giving up personal enjoyment

A central idea in the Symbolic is what Lacan calls symbolic castration. This concept does not refer to losing something physically, but rather to giving up certain early pleasures, which Lacan terms *jouissance*, so that the child can become part of language and society. *Jouissance* is not ordinary pleasure; it is a powerful, overwhelming kind of enjoyment that can go beyond comfort and even lead to discomfort or pain. When the child accepts the rules and language of society, it must let go of some of this private enjoyment. This act of relinquishing is what Lacan names castration. It is important to understand that this symbolic castration happens to everyone, regardless of gender. It marks the point at which a person agrees to live within the limits of language, culture, and law. These limits allow us to relate to others in society but also mean that we lose something personal. We give up complete freedom and must adjust to how things are spoken and shared. In this way, symbolic castration is necessary for becoming a subject who can coexist with others.

- *Jouissance* becomes social through language and culture

Lacan also explains that the enjoyment or *jouissance* we give up is not lost completely. It is passed on to what he calls the Other, which refers to the larger system of language and culture that exists outside any one person. The Other includes everything from society's rules to books, traditions, art, and public conversations. When a person creates a poem, a joke, or a story, they are taking their private feelings and turning them into something that others can understand. In this process, personal enjoyment is transformed into something shared. For example, a writer may give up their own pleasures to shape words into a novel, but those words then bring enjoyment to many readers. This illustrates how the Symbolic, especially language, becomes a space where human enjoyment continues to exist but in a different form - no longer personal, but social. This process of giving up and sharing through language is part of how we become fully human subjects within society.

The Real is the most difficult of Lacan's three orders. It does not mean "real" in the sense of ordinary life. Instead, the Real refers to what cannot be imagined or expressed in language.



- The Real escapes language, meaning, and control

It encompasses everything that remains outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Real reveals itself when our symbolic and imaginary systems fail. For instance, when a person faces a traumatic experience that cannot be fully explained, expressed, or processed, they are confronted with the Real. It is not something we can understand or control. The Real is characterised by gaps, absences, and disruptions. It may appear suddenly and create discomfort, confusion, or anxiety. In this way, the Real challenges the notion that language and images can explain everything about life. Lacan often describes the Real as something that recurs in various forms, particularly when it has been avoided or ignored. For example, in dreams, slips of the tongue, or emotional breakdowns, the Real may break through the surface of normal life. The Real reminds us that human experience always contains a part that escapes meaning and order. It cannot be avoided forever, but it also cannot be fully grasped.

- Human identity forms across three symbolic orders

Together, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real form the foundation of Lacan's theory of the subject. Each person's life involves movement across these three orders. The Imaginary provides a first sense of self through images. The Symbolic integrates us into society and language, shaping how we relate to others and to ourselves. The Real remains outside both, marking the limits of what we can express or understand. Lacan believed that many personal difficulties, such as anxiety, confusion, or conflict, arise when these orders do not function together smoothly. For example, someone might be trapped in imaginary fantasies that do not align with the rules of the symbolic world. Alternatively, a person might encounter the Real in moments of loss, fear, or silence, where no words seem to suffice. Lacan's theory helps explain how people form identities, how they relate to others, and how they cope with things that cannot be articulated.

- Entering language means losing original self

4.2.2.2 Lacan's Concept of Alienation and Separation

Lacan's concept of alienation refers to the moment when a child first enters the world of language. When a child is born, it does not yet have a separate identity or sense of self. Its thoughts, feelings, and expressions are all intertwined with those of the people around it, particularly its parents. According to Lacan, the "Other" which refers to the world of language and culture that already exists before the child is born plays a key role in shaping the child's identity. To become part of society,

the child must accept and utilise the words, signs, and meanings that belong to the symbolic world. This process requires the child to relinquish a part of its original experience. In other words, when a child starts speaking and using language, it also loses something: its direct, unfiltered sense of being. This loss is termed 'alienation.' Lacan compares it to a choice between two things, like being asked by a robber, 'Your money or your life.' In alienation, the child must give up pure experience in exchange for a place in the symbolic world.

- Child forms identity through unfulfilled maternal desire

Once the child is alienated and enters the symbolic world, a second important process begins -what Lacan calls separation. If alienation is about becoming a subject through language, separation is about understanding the desire of the Other. The Other here refers to the parent, usually the mother, whose attention and care the child depends on. The child begins to notice that the mother is not always present or focused on it. This experience is significant. The child realises that the mother has her own desires, interests, and thoughts. The child cannot fully satisfy or control the mother's desires. This creates a space of distance, or separation. The child tries to understand what the mother wants and begins to wonder, 'What does she desire?' This marks the beginning of the child's own desire. The child longs to be the centre of the mother's world, to fill whatever is missing in her life. However, since the mother's desire is always shifting and unclear, the child cannot fully succeed. This failure helps the child understand that it cannot be everything to the mother. It must find its own identity and its own desires. Thus, separation is not merely about physical distance; it involves the emotional and psychological realisation that one cannot completely satisfy the Other. It is a key moment in becoming an independent subject.

- Desire continues through imagined lost unity

As the child separates from the mother and begins to understand that her desire is complex and unknowable, something important is formed in the child's mind. This is what Lacan calls 'object a', which stands for the cause of desire. It is not a real object, such as a toy or a person, but rather the mysterious something that the child feels is missing. The child believes that this missing part might help it feel complete again. In reality, there is no way to return to the early, complete bond with the mother, but the child can imagine it through fantasy. These fantasies help the child feel whole, even if just for a moment. The *object a* becomes the centre of the child's desire. It is a way of holding onto the illusion of unity with the mother, even after separation. As people grow up, this idea continues.



Adults also have their own *object a*—things or people they believe will complete them. These objects change over time, but they still serve the same role: providing the person with a sense of purpose and desire. Lacan shows that fantasy is not merely imagination; it shapes how people perceive the world, how they love, and how they suffer. Object *a* explains why people are always searching for something more, something that seems to be missing, even if they cannot name it.

4.2.2.3 *Phallic jouissance and Other jouissance*

- Jouissance is intense enjoyment beyond ordinary pleasure

In Lacan's theory, the term *jouissance* refers to a special kind of enjoyment that goes beyond ordinary pleasure. It is a deeper experience related to desire, identity, and the way people interact with language and the world. Lacan discusses two types of *jouissance* - phallic *jouissance* and Other *jouissance* - to illustrate how human beings experience enjoyment differently depending on their relationship with language and desire.

- Phallic *jouissance* follows the rules of language

Phallic *jouissance* is the kind of enjoyment that is shaped and limited by language, culture, and social rules. It is termed 'phallic' not because it is connected to a body part, but because it follows the logic of the phallus as a symbol in Lacan's theory. The phallus, in this context, is a signifier that stands for something people desire but can never fully attain. Therefore, people seek satisfaction through various means such as relationships, success, material goods, or recognition but they never bring complete fulfilment. This type of enjoyment is always organised by the symbolic order, that is, the system of language and meaning. It keeps individuals within a structure of rules and expectations, and their desires go in circles without ever reaching a final goal. Most people live with this kind of *jouissance* because they are deeply shaped by language and culture.

- Other *jouissance* exceeds language, structure, and reason

On the other hand, Other *jouissance* is a kind of enjoyment that does not adhere to the rules of language and culture. It is not based on what society allows or expects. It transcends the symbolic order and cannot be easily articulated using words. Lacan relates this to the feminine experience, not because it belongs solely to biological women, but because it represents a different way of relating to desire and enjoyment. Men can also experience Other *jouissance*. Lacan's position vindicates the notion that identities such as man and woman are arbitrary and constructed by society and culture. Biological masculinity and femininity do not indicate one's psychological character. People can

be psychically men or women, or both. Lacan further explains Other jouissance as a bodily experience that lacks a clear direction or goal and resists the limits of language. He even compares it to mystical experiences, such as those described by saints, who speak of intense and overwhelming feelings that cannot be fully explained. In this sense, Other jouissance moves beyond both the conscious mind and social structures, existing as an experience that lies outside the conventional boundaries of meaning.

4.2.2.4 Understanding Sexual Difference in Lacan's Psychoanalysis

According to Lacan, the difference between being a man or a woman is not simply based on biology or physical characteristics, but on how individuals relate to language, desire, and the symbolic structures of society. Lacan refers to this network of language, rules, and meanings as the symbolic order, represented by the signifier phallus. It is through this symbolic order that people begin to form their thoughts, express their desires, and understand their place in the world. Lacan believed that this symbolic order plays a key role in shaping identity, asserting that people are not born with a fixed sense of being male or female. Instead, they grow into these positions as they are structured by language and cultural rules. One of Lacan's main ideas is that the symbolic order is organised around the notion of lack - something that cannot be fully reached or possessed. This sense of lack drives the child to use language. If the child received every comfort and attention immediately, there would be no need to speak. However, due to unmet desires, the child feels this gap and begins using words to express needs.

- Gender is shaped by language, not biology

Lacan employs the idea of the phallus as a signifier to explain this process. The phallus, in his theory, is not a biological organ but a symbol that represents certain experiences. The phallus is what gratifies a person. For a child at the imaginary stage, the mother is the satisfying object, thus representing the phallus. For a mother, her child is the object of gratification, also representing the phallus. In the socio-symbolic order, power, position, and money are highly sought-after objects for the gratification of adults. Thus, the symbolic order, represented by language, is the phallus. Men occupy this symbolic order and deny women entry to it, citing her inferior position caused by castration as the reason. Here, men associate the phallus with their biological sexual organ (the penis). However, this

- The phallus is a symbolic signifier, not a biological organ



is merely a claim made by men. In reality, no human being possesses a phallus, as they all lose it through castration during childhood when society separates them from the love of their mother/the imaginary realm/plenitude. Therefore, there cannot be any differences between men and women; all are castrated, and no one possesses any superior power.

- Language internalisation creates a universal masculine structure

A masculine structure develops in a person due to the internalisation of language and culture as soon as they enter the symbolic order following castration. Language, existing in all modern societies as a patriarchal structure, is thus masculine. When individuals internalise it into the unconscious layers of the psyche, they acquire a masculine structure. Both men and women internalise language to survive in social life. Therefore, all people possess a certain degree of masculine nature. This is why Lacan asserts that women do not exist in the symbolic order.

- The phallus is a symbol of desire and identity

Thus, the phallus symbolises what is missing or what the child or any person desires but cannot fully obtain. It is through this awareness of lack that people begin to form a sense of who they are. For Lacan, the moment when the child realises that its needs are not always met marks the starting point of identity and meaning. The phallus signifies this point of separation between the child and its surroundings. In response, the child enters the symbolic world, where they start using language and adhering to the rules of society. This process does not occur uniformly for everyone. Lacan posits that men and women relate to this symbolic world differently. The male position, in his theory, is entirely shaped by the phallic function. This means that men are fully drawn into the symbolic order, guided by its rules, limits, and boundaries. Their desires, thoughts, and actions are all influenced by the structures of language that surround them.

- Women experience both phallic and Other jouissance

Although women also internalise language, they are not wholly shaped by the phallic function. This does not mean they exist outside language, but rather that their relationship to it is different. Women also enter the symbolic order, but they are not completely controlled by it. There is something additional in their experience of desire and enjoyment. Lacan termed this *Other* jouissance. While men are limited to *phallic* jouissance, the kind of enjoyment shaped by rules and language, women can experience both that and another kind that transcends language. This 'Other jouissance' is not easily articulated because it does not follow the conventional logic of speech or reason. It is something mysterious and often difficult to express.

Lacan noted that not all women experience it, but the possibility exists. This idea demonstrates that the feminine experience is not merely a reflection of the masculine; it possesses its own structure and potential.

- Gender identity is shaped by structure, not biology

Lacan's theory also helps explain why not everyone fits neatly into the categories of male or female based solely on biology. A person born biologically male may be shaped by what Lacan describes as a feminine structure. This means their way of relating to language, desire, and enjoyment is more akin to what Lacan describes for women. Conversely, a biologically female person may exhibit a masculine structure. This distinction is not about appearance or behaviour, but rather about how their unconscious mind relates to the symbolic order. Lacan believed that we should not make assumptions about someone's inner world based on their biology. Instead, each person's relationship to desire and language should be understood individually. This approach allows for a more flexible and open view of human identity.

- Lacan views gender as a language-shaped identity

Because many people do not fit clearly into the traditional categories of 'male' or 'female,' psychologists and psychiatrists sometimes use the label 'borderline' to describe them. However, Lacan did not endorse this label. He believed it was more constructive to understand people based on their unique relation to language and desire. His approach illustrates that human identity is complex and cannot be reduced to simple biological facts. In modern society, this insight encourages us to think more carefully about gender and identity. People today discuss more openly about how gender is not fixed, and Lacan's ideas provide one way of engaging with these issues. He helps us understand that being male or female is not merely an innate characteristic, but also something shaped by how we speak, think, and desire.

- There is no such thing as a sexual relationship

Lacan's way of defining the difference between the sexes helps us understand one of his most famous ideas: "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship." What he meant was that men and women do not perfectly match or complete each other. Their desires are shaped differently, and their ways of relating are not fully aligned. This does not mean people cannot love each other or form bonds, but it means that love and desire are always influenced by deeper structures of language, loss, and the symbolic order. Lacan's theory challenges the idea that men and women are natural complements. Instead, it suggests that each person is unique, shaped by how they experience lack, language, and the desire for something beyond themselves.



4.2.2.5 “Woman Does Not Exist”

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the statement “Woman does not exist” does not mean that women are not real or present in the world. Instead, it means that there is no single, fixed meaning or symbol in language that fully captures what it means to be a woman. Lacan believed that men and women relate differently to the symbolic order, which is the system of language, rules, and meanings that shapes how we understand ourselves and the world. The symbolic order uses signifiers to represent things. According to Lacan, the phallus is a key signifier that organises this system and is tied to the idea of masculine identity. However, there is no equivalent signifier that fully represents womanhood. Because of this absence, Lacan says ‘Woman’ must be written under erasure, meaning we can only talk about ‘woman’ through signs that never fully capture what she is. This idea challenges the traditional belief that men and women have clear, opposite identities. Instead, Lacan shows that women are not fully defined by language in the way men are, which gives their position in the symbolic order a different and complex structure.

- Femininity exceeds language and the symbolic order

Lacan explains that men are fully caught in the symbolic order. They are shaped and limited by language and culture through what he calls the ‘phallic function.’ This means that male identity is closely tied to a system of signs, rules, and limits, and men are subject to a master signifier that shapes how they think and desire. In contrast, women are not fully subjected to this master signifier. Their relation to language and meaning is different. For Lacan, womanhood is not a simple or fixed category. It involves multiple experiences and ways of being that are not fully captured by language or traditional social roles.

- Men are fully shaped by the symbolic order

Even though Lacan says “Woman does not exist,” this does not mean that women are not subjects or that they lack power. In fact, Lacan’s idea opens up the possibility for a different kind of subjectivity - a feminine subjectivity that is not completely defined by existing cultural structures. In Lacanian terms, becoming a subject means being able to represent your experience, express desires, and take a position in the symbolic order. Feminists have tried to give voice to experiences that were never before expressed or recognised in language. These efforts can be seen as attempts to symbolise a certain kind of real experience, one that may relate to what Lacan calls the ‘Other jouissance.’ This is a type of enjoyment or experience that is not

- Other jouissance opens space for female subjectivity

shaped by rules or symbols and is beyond what language can fully explain.

Summarized Overview

Jacques Lacan's theory of sexual difference builds on the ideas of Sigmund Freud but moves beyond biological definitions of male and female identity. For Lacan, the human mind and identity are not shaped only by biology or early family experiences. Instead, they are constructed through language, images, and culture. He introduces three major concepts: The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real to explain how we come to know ourselves and others. In the Imaginary stage, a child begins to form an identity by recognising its reflection in the mirror and imagining an ideal self. This image becomes the starting point of the ego and personal identity. In the Symbolic stage, the child enters the world of language and rules. Language not only allows communication but also forces individuals to give up some of their *jouissance* in exchange for social belonging. This shift is marked by symbolic castration, a necessary process that allows one to function in society. The Real, however, stands outside both language and images. It represents what cannot be said or fully known, often showing itself in trauma or intense emotional moments that resist explanation. Together, these three stages help Lacan explain how our identities are formed, not just through our bodies, but through how we speak, what we desire, and how we relate to others.

Lacan also challenges traditional understandings of sexual difference. He argues that being a man or woman is not fixed by biological sex but shaped by how one enters the symbolic order and relates to desire and language. For instance, male identity is closely tied to the symbolic phallus, which is not a physical organ but a signifier that represents what is missing or desired. Men operate within the boundaries of this structure, and their desires revolve around it. In contrast, women are not fully defined by the phallus in Lacan's theory, which places them in a different relation to language and desire. This leads to Lacan's controversial claim that "Woman does not exist," not to deny the reality of women, but to highlight that language cannot fully capture the complex experience of femininity. Women may access a different form of enjoyment, called *Other jouissance*, which goes beyond what language can express. Lacan's approach shows that gender is not just a natural or biological fact but a structure shaped by language and cultural roles. This framework allows for a more flexible view of identity, helping us understand why people may not fit neatly into male or female categories. Lacan's theories have been widely used in literature, film, and cultural studies to explore how people construct meaning, suffer, and relate to one another in society.



Self-Assessment

1. What is the symbolic order in Lacanian theory?
2. Explain the idea of the mirror stage and how it shapes identity.
3. How does Lacan explain the concept of 'jouissance'?
4. What does Lacan mean when he says 'Woman does not exist'?
5. How do language and culture shape our sense of self according to Lacan?
6. How does Lacan's theory challenge traditional ideas of male and female identity?

Assignments

1. Discuss the three registers in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.
2. How does Lacan reinterpret Freud's theory of sexual difference?
3. Describe the role of language in the formation of identity in Lacan's theory.
4. Explain Lacan's concept of symbolic castration with suitable examples.
5. Analyse the significance of the phallus as a signifier in the symbolic order.
6. What is 'Other jouissance,' and how is it different from 'phallic jouissance'?

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Suggested Reading

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SGOU

UNIT 3

Julia Kristeva's Thought on Semanalysis

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain how Julia Kristeva's background influenced her ideas on language and identity
- understand the difference between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'
- explain the concept of 'semanalysis' and how Kristeva combines psychoanalysis and semiotics to study language and meaning
- discuss how early emotional experiences, especially the child's bond with the mother, play a role in language development and identity in Kristeva's theory
- examine how art, poetry, and creative expression reflect the influence of the semiotic and challenge the fixed meanings of the symbolic order

Background

Sometimes we use language without thinking much about it. We speak, write, and listen every day. But language is more than just words; it shapes how we think, how we feel, and how we relate to the world. Behind every sentence we speak, there are thoughts, emotions, and even memories. This simple act of using language has deep roots in who we are. For centuries, philosophers, writers, and scientists have tried to understand how language works. Some focused on the rules of grammar, while others looked at how we learn to speak. Some thinkers started asking new kinds of questions that reveal the connection between language and our inner life. They asked how words connect with the body, the mind, and the self. These thinkers were not just trying to understand language as a tool, but as a part of human existence. Julia Kristeva is one of these thinkers. She began her journey in a new country, with a new language, and entered into debates that questioned many accepted ideas. She did not simply follow others but chose to ask different questions. She was interested in how meaning is formed, but also



in how language breaks down, changes, or carries emotions. To understand her work, it helps to first see her as someone who stands at the meeting point of many fields, such as language, psychology, philosophy, and literature. Her writings speak to those who are willing to explore not only how we speak but also what language hides.

Keywords

Semiotic, Symbolic, Semanalysis, Subjectivity, Identity, Maternal, Imaginary Father

Discussion

4.3.1 Introduction

Julia Kristeva is an important figure in modern French thought, contributing to the fields of semiotics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory. She was born in Bulgaria and later moved to France at the age of twenty-five, where she wrote in French and became an influential intellectual. Her outsider status had a major influence on her thinking. Kristeva believed that exile and distance from one's original culture were helpful for creative thinking and writing. Her personal experience of migration shaped her ideas, especially her interest in language, identity, and the feeling of not belonging. Although she is often grouped with French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, Kristeva did not fully identify with the feminist label. She questioned the idea that 'woman' could be defined as a fixed identity. Instead, she saw the term as something that goes beyond representation. For Kristeva, this undefined status of woman gave it a special power to challenge and question cultural norms.

- Kristeva links exile, identity, and language

- Semiotic and symbolic shape identity and language

Kristeva's early work was influenced by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, two major psychoanalytic thinkers. Unlike some other feminist theorists, she did not reject their ideas completely. Instead, she accepted some of their basic concepts, such as Lacan's idea of the symbolic order. This is the world of language, social rules, and culture that shapes how people think and communicate. Kristeva agreed that entering this symbolic world is necessary for developing identity. She was influenced by the work of Melanie Klein, who studied how infants communicate through sounds and physical gestures before learning language. Kristeva called these early expressions the

‘semiotic.’ They are emotional and bodily signals that later get pushed aside when the child starts using structured language. Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic became central in her book ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’. She pointed out that poetic language has the power to bring back the repressed connection to the mother. However, this connection cannot replace the symbolic world entirely. We still need language to communicate and participate in society. Kristeva argued that even though we must separate from the mother to enter the symbolic, we never fully lose that bond. The semiotic continues to influence our use of language in subtle ways. This ongoing presence of the mother in language creates tension but also opens up space for creativity and resistance.

- Depression reflects early loss and failed language

In her later work, especially in ‘*Black Sun*’ (1987), Kristeva studied depression and melancholia. These are deep emotional states that arise when a person cannot accept the necessary separation (with the resolution of the Oedipus complex) from the mother. According to Kristeva, identity in the symbolic world depends on this early loss. When a child cannot fully process this loss, it may lead to feelings of emptiness and withdrawal. Language is supposed to help bridge the gap left by the separation, but for some people, words do not provide enough comfort. They may feel that language fails to express their inner pain. Kristeva linked these feelings to an early emotional wound related to the mother. This shows how psychological issues in adulthood can be connected to very early experiences. *Black Sun* explores how depression is not just a mental condition but also a sign of a broken relationship with language and meaning.

- Exile reveals deep links between language and loss

Kristeva continued to explore the idea of separation through her writings on exile. In ‘*Strangers to Ourselves*’ (1988), she compared the emotional experience of leaving one’s country to the early separation from the mother. Both situations involve a loss of something deeply familiar. The exile, like the melancholic, feels disconnected from their past and struggles to find comfort in their new environment. This condition is not just personal but also shaped by culture. When people move to a new country, they often feel that they do not belong. Their new language may not express their inner thoughts as clearly as their original one. This makes them feel alienated, both from others and from themselves. Kristeva believed that this feeling of exile reflects a deeper human condition. Everyone, in some way, experiences separation and loss. Her analysis of exile becomes a way to understand how language and identity are shaped by disconnection.



4.3.2 Kristeva on Language and Subjectivity

- Semiotic expresses pre-linguistic drives shaping meaning

Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic and the symbolic provides a framework for understanding how language, identity, and culture are shaped. These two modes of signification, which she calls modalities, describe different aspects of how meaning is created. Kristeva borrows from Lacan's psychoanalysis and structural semiotics but adds her own contributions, especially in how she brings attention to the mother-child relationship and the early pre-linguistic stages of human development. The semiotic has its origin in pre-Oedipal bodily drives and feelings that exist before the child can speak or understand language. It is connected to rhythms, tones, movements, and impulses that come from the body and the early bond with the mother. The term 'semiotic' here does not mean signs in the usual sense but rather something more basic, like sounds, sensations, or energies that cannot be pinned down in words. Kristeva describes this space as the 'chora,' following Plato, where these early experiences take place. The eruption of the semiotic chora of the body in the form of poetry and works of art, claims Kristeva, has the power and potential to rupture the patriarchal symbolic order constituted in language. The semiotic is unstable and full of potential. It can disrupt and challenge the masculine, orderly world of language and rules. It is considered the foundation or raw material of all future signification, even though it must later be shaped by rules for people to live together in society.

- Symbolic order shapes self

In contrast to the semiotic, Kristeva describes the symbolic as the system of language, social rules, and structured meaning. The symbolic is what allows people to communicate clearly and follow shared norms. This system is associated with the father's role in psychoanalysis, known as the Law of the Father. It is where the child learns to use words properly, recognise boundaries, and behave according to social expectations. The symbolic makes it possible for people to become subjects who can speak, act, and relate in an ordered society. Self-formation in children occurs as they adopt or internalise the symbolic structure of language into their psyche. Through this process, all subjects develop a masculine structure to some extent. For Kristeva, the feminine refers to the world of pre-Oedipal libidinal drives, which remain submerged within the body after subject formation through castration. Retrieving these pre-Oedipal libidinal drives from the unconscious forms the core of Kristeva's feminist project, which she hopes can disrupt the masculine symbolic order.

- Symbolic organises meaning; semiotic disrupts and returns

For Kristeva, the symbolic is necessary for meaning to be stable and understandable. It transforms the chaotic drives of the semiotic into organised thoughts and expressions. Without the symbolic, people would not be able to express themselves in meaningful ways or be recognised by others in society. However, the symbolic represses the semiotic. This means that the bodily drives and early impulses must be pushed down or controlled so that the symbolic can function. The symbolic can never fully erase the semiotic. Instead, the semiotic continues to exist beneath the surface and can return in unexpected ways. It can reappear in art, music, poetry, or even strange feelings and disruptions in speech. This tension between the semiotic and the symbolic is at the heart of Kristeva's theory.

- Semiotic disrupts norms and reshapes symbolic meaning

Kristeva sees the semiotic as a force that can challenge and even subvert the symbolic order. It is especially visible in certain forms of creative expression, like avant-garde literature, experimental music, and modern visual art. These works often break traditional rules of grammar, logic, or structure and instead rely on rhythm, tone, and feeling. They do not follow the usual path of meaning-making but instead allow the return of the semiotic in new and sometimes unsettling forms. For her, these forms of expression are powerful because they bring back what is normally hidden or repressed. They give voice to parts of experience that do not fit into standard language or logic. In this way, the semiotic becomes both a source of disruption and a reminder of something deeply human. However, Kristeva also emphasises that the semiotic cannot exist on its own for long. Eventually, its energy must be absorbed into a new symbolic structure. This ongoing process creates a dialectical relationship, where the symbolic and the semiotic constantly interact, reshape each other, and evolve over time.

- Semiotic-symbolic tension shapes meaning and identity

Kristeva argues that the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic shapes every text, every subject, and every cultural system. The symbolic tries to maintain control and order, while the semiotic introduces change, emotion, and movement. This dynamic tension makes meaning both possible and unstable. In moments of personal or cultural crisis, the symbolic may weaken, and the semiotic may become more visible. Kristeva identifies poetry, madness, and religious experiences as times when this shift occurs. These moments allow something previously unspeakable to enter language, creating a new awareness or understanding. But this process is not simple or easy. The semiotic can be overwhelming and may even threaten the subject's sense of self. Kristeva describes



this as a return to the maternal space, which can be comforting but also frightening because it involves losing the boundaries of identity. The symbolic tries to prevent this collapse by creating order, but it can never fully succeed. The semiotic always remains as an underlying force that cannot be entirely controlled or erased. Kristeva's theory shows how cultural change, personal growth, and even moments of artistic creation depend on this delicate balance.

- We are constantly shaped by the interplay between bodily drives and social rules

Kristeva's understanding of the semiotic and symbolic offers a way to think about identity, language, and culture that goes beyond simple definitions. She shows that meaning is never fixed, and identity is not something we are simply born with. Instead, we are constantly shaped by the interplay between bodily drives and social rules. Her theory helps to explain why people may feel torn between different parts of themselves, or why certain experiences are hard to put into words. It also offers insight into why some art or literature feels powerful even if it does not follow logical rules. Kristeva's work is especially important for thinking about how we become subjects who can speak, feel, and relate to others within the structures of society. Her focus on the semiotic gives value to what is often ignored: the sounds, emotions, and physical experiences that do not easily fit into structured language. At the same time, she recognises the importance of the symbolic in making communication and social life possible. By holding these two modes together, Kristeva offers a rich and complex view of how humans create and live through meaning.

4.3.3 Kristeva on Semanalysis

- Semanalysis explores hidden meaning in language

Julia Kristeva introduced the idea of 'semanalysis' to study how meaning is produced in language, especially in poetry and creative expression. The word semanalysis combines 'semiotics' (the study of signs) and 'analysis' (a method of examining something deeply). Kristeva wanted to go beyond the traditional view of language as a system of fixed rules and meanings. She believed that language is more than a tool for communication; it is a living process that involves both the body and emotions. According to her, poetic language has the power to challenge the usual structure of communication. It does not just tell something clearly but makes the reader feel, imagine, and experience things in new ways. Kristeva called this deep, shifting process of making meaning 'signifiante'. It is not just about what words say, but how they work with rhythm, sound, and images to touch the reader at different levels. This is where se-

manalysis becomes important. It tries to explore what is hidden beneath the surface of language. It looks at how unconscious drives, desires, and social structures all come together in the act of writing and reading. Kristeva argued that in modern literature, especially in experimental or poetic writing, this hidden layer of meaning becomes more visible. She saw semanalysis as a new way to understand both the individual mind and society by focusing on how language is used creatively.

- Semanalysis shows how poetic language reveals hidden emotions

In the beginning of this unit, we discussed Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic dimensions of language. As a follow-up, it is important to see how semanalysis explores the interaction between these two dimensions, especially in poetic and non-standard forms of expression. While the symbolic side represents structure and grammar, the semiotic side brings in emotion, rhythm, and bodily expression. Kristeva observed that in poetry and artistic language, the semiotic becomes more active. It disturbs the usual flow of structured language and opens up a space for hidden meanings and emotions to emerge. Semanalysis helps us understand how poetic language brings out this semiotic energy. For example, a poet may use repetition, sound patterns, or emotional tones that do not follow strict grammar but still produce meaning. These elements are often dismissed in ordinary language use but are central in poetic communication. Kristeva showed that such elements are not just decorative; they are signs of the deep psychological and bodily processes that shape our relationship with language. Through semanalysis, she encouraged readers to pay attention not just to what language says but also to how it moves, sounds, and feels. This approach reveals how poetic language expresses what structured language often hides, such as desires, feelings, and personal struggles.

- Subject-in-process links semiotic to feminine signification

Kristeva's idea of semanalysis is also connected to how she understood the human subject. She introduced the idea of the subject-in-process, meaning that the individual who speaks or writes is never fixed but always changing. This subject is shaped by both society and inner experiences. Such a subject in process disrupts the predominant male subject that exists in symbolic language. Thus, semiotic expressions are considered feminine signification processes.

According to Kristeva, language is not only a tool for communication but also a space where the subject expresses personal emotions, memories, and desires. Drawing from psychoanalysis, she argued that even before children learn to



- Semanalysis connects language to body and subjectivity

speak, they express themselves through sounds, gestures, and rhythms. These early experiences form what she called the chora, a pre-linguistic space of emotional and bodily expression. Although the chora is not part of structured language, it remains active in how we use language later in life. Through semanalysis, Kristeva sought to trace the presence of the chora in poetic writing. She believed that poets often return to this bodily and emotional layer of experience. In doing so, they disturb the normal flow of meaning and introduce new ways of speaking and feeling. This demonstrates that language is not just a product of the mind but is also shaped by the body and the unconscious.

- Poetic language challenges social order through semanalysis

Kristeva viewed semanalysis as a useful method for understanding society. She believed that society depends on stable, structured language to maintain order. The symbolic part of language supports this order by providing shared meanings and rules. However, the semiotic part, linked to rhythm, tone, and emotion, can interrupt this order. Poets, artists, and experimental writers often use the semiotic to challenge fixed ways of thinking. In times of social change or personal crisis, such language becomes even more powerful. Kristeva believed that poetic language could give voice to experiences that are normally hidden or excluded, such as trauma, desire, or emotional pain. This makes poetic language revolutionary. It can question dominant values and offer space for new ideas and feelings.

- Kristeva links language, identity, and sociohistorical forces

Building on this understanding of the semiotic, Kristeva expands her theory by engaging critically with Lacan's ideas. While she draws from his notion of the symbolic order, she moves beyond his framework by integrating the semiotic into her analysis of language, identity, and culture. For instance, she criticises Lacan for largely ignoring the historical and political context in which subjects and texts are formed. Kristeva argues that individual identity and the production of meaning cannot be understood without examining the social structures and historical forces that shape them. Language, for her, is not only a symbolic system governed by abstract rules; it is also a field of struggle influenced by power, ideology, and cultural norms. Her analysis includes the sensory and emotional dimensions of human experience (what she calls the semiotic), which she believes play an important role in how meaning is formed. She incorporates elements like sound, touch, and rhythm to explain how the infant relates to the mother before the acquisition of language. These sensory experiences leave a lasting impression

on the subject and continue to influence how language and meaning are experienced later in life.

- Imaginary father bridges maternal and social realms

Another important area where Kristeva departs from Lacan is in her understanding of the imaginary and symbolic orders. Lacan views the transition from the imaginary (centred on images and identification) to the symbolic (governed by language and law) as a clear break, marked by the castration complex. Kristeva, however, proposes more continuity between these stages. She introduces the concept of 'primal repression,' occurring even before the mirror stage, suggesting that unconscious processes shape the child's identity earlier than Lacan allows. She even suggests a 'symbolic imaginary' structure that precedes the Oedipal phase, challenging Lacan's strict separation between the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal stages. Kristeva also introduces the idea of the 'imaginary father,' a figure not strongly developed in Lacanian theory. While Lacan focuses on the symbolic father as the enforcer of the law, Kristeva describes the imaginary father as a nurturing figure who introduces the child to a world of love and social connection. This imaginary father is essential for helping the child move from the maternal world into a broader social realm. In doing so, Kristeva emphasises the emotional and affective dimensions of early development, areas often underexplored in Lacanian theory.

- Early mother-child bond shapes subject and meaning

Kristeva also builds on the work of psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott to explore early mother-child relations and bodily experiences. She believes these early experiences are crucial for understanding later developments in language and identity. Concepts like abjection, the maternal chora, and the semiotic help her describe how pre-Oedipal experiences continue to affect the speaking subject. Abjection, for example, refers to the psychological process of separating from the mother and establishing boundaries between self and other. This process is filled with fear, loss, and desire, and it marks the beginning of subjectivity. Kristeva sees language and culture as attempts to manage these early conflicts, though they can never completely erase them. Literature, art, and psychoanalysis are valuable because they reveal the traces of these early experiences and allow individuals to confront and rework them. Kristeva uses the idea of 'semanalysis' to study how texts and cultural products reveal the tensions between the symbolic and semiotic, between structure and disruption. In doing so, she offers a way to understand human subjectivity that includes both order and chaos, reason and emotion, culture and the body. Her work remains influential because it



challenges simple models of identity and meaning, insisting on the complexity and depth of human experience.

4.3.4 The Maternal Body and the Origins of Meaning

- The semiotic begins in early maternal experiences

According to Julia Kristeva, the semiotic is rooted in maternity. This semiotic space exists before we learn about male and female, before we become part of a system of symbols, and even before we form our identities. It is the earliest mental and bodily world of a child, dominated by the mother's body, care, and voice. In this early time, the infant experiences a bond with the mother that is full of rhythms, touch, and sounds not yet shaped by words or rules. Kristeva sees this phase as 'feminine,' but it is not tied to female biology. Instead, it is an experience of being before words, shaped by bodily rhythms and drives. Soon, the child begins to separate from this space in order to enter the symbolic world of language and culture. But the semiotic never goes away; it remains buried within and can emerge at times when meanings break down, such as in poetry, art, or moments of extreme feeling. The child sacrifices this semiotic world in order to become a speaking subject, but the energy and rhythm of that world continue to nourish creativity and language from below.

- Symbolic entry needs detachment from maternal bond

Kristeva differs from earlier thinkers by asserting that the relationship a child builds with the mother is not simply a step toward language. In her view, a third party must mediate between mother and child. This third figure is a kind of imaginary father - an internal idea, not necessarily a real person. This imaginary figure allows the child to see that the mother loves someone else too, not just the child. That realisation shifts the child out of the exclusive mother-child bond into a larger social world. Kristeva believes that this internal third term is essential. It helps the child detach and take up a role in the symbolic order. In Kristeva's model, femininity and maternity exist as processes or spaces rather than identities restricted to women. Motherhood becomes a threshold space, not a role or a decision. The child's movement into speech and identity requires leaving behind a zone of undivided maternal care. The child's psychic growth depends on being placed within this complex triangle: the maternal chora (semiotic), the imaginary internal father, and the emerging symbolic world of language.

Kristeva insists that motherhood and femininity are not fixed roles tied to women alone. Pregnancy and childbirth, in

- Chora is pre-symbolic, unspeakable, unowned space

her view, are experiences in which the woman's subjectivity dissolves into something else. During pregnancy, the woman carries another being within her. She ceases to occupy her own stable identity. That bodily experience defies clear identity or control. In Kristeva's terms, growing another person inside the body creates a space without a defined subject. The woman becomes a container, a threshold between natural and cultural order. This space, called the chora, is nameless and operates in silence. It is not a position from which a woman can speak or fully understand. Kristeva rejects identifying all women with motherhood because the semiotic or maternal realm exists beneath and beyond symbolic identity. Women are not automatically its representatives. Rather, the chora is a pre-symbolic register that conditions every person's entry into language but remains unspeakable and unowned.

- Men express semiotic energy due to symbolic access

Kristeva sees experimental and innovative artists, poets, and writers as those who can bring this maternal, semiotic energy into language. The symbolic order is based on authority, social roles, and the ability to speak with legitimacy. In her view, men are more likely to occupy this space because they are seen as phallic subjects in psychoanalytic terms, meaning they are more easily accepted as full participants in language, law, and culture. Women, on the other hand, are often positioned as closer to the semiotic, but without secure access to the symbolic. This makes it harder for them to use the symbolic system to express what lies beneath it. As a result, the semiotic energy that comes from the feminine or maternal realm is often represented by male artists, not because it belongs to men, but because they are the ones granted symbolic authority. Kristeva's model thus explains why many experimental traditions in art and literature have been shaped by men, even though the energy they express may come from a feminine, semiotic source.

Summarized Overview

Julia Kristeva is a major thinker who contributed to fields like psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory. Born in Bulgaria and later based in France, her ideas were shaped by her personal experience of exile and cultural displacement. This led her to think deeply about identity, language, and the feeling of not belonging. Kristeva is often linked to feminist thinkers, but she questioned fixed ideas of what it means to be a woman. Instead, she explored how a woman's identity is formed through language, culture, and early emotional experiences. Central to her theory is the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic refers to the emotional and bodily energies from



early infancy, especially the bond with the mother before language is learned. These early experiences are rhythmic and non-verbal. The symbolic, in contrast, is the world of language, rules, and meanings that shapes how we communicate and relate to others. While the symbolic brings order, the semiotic represents the deep, often repressed forces of emotion and instinct. Kristeva believed that the tension between these two creates meaning and creativity. Her work shows how poetry, art, and even emotional disturbances can reveal hidden aspects of the semiotic beneath structured language. By bringing together emotion, language, and psychoanalysis, Kristeva provided a new understanding of how identity is shaped.

Kristeva's later work focused on how psychological states like depression are connected to early emotional loss, especially the child's separation from the mother. She argued that when this early loss is not processed properly, it can result in deep feelings of emptiness. Her study of exile compares the experience of losing one's country to the loss of the mother, showing how language and identity are affected by separation. A major part of her theory is called *semanalysis*, a method that combines psychoanalysis and semiotics. It looks at how meaning is not only created by structured language but also challenged by emotional breaks and disruptions. Kristeva believed that language always carries traces of the semiotic, such as bodily rhythms, emotions, and early experiences that continue to influence us. She expanded her theory by criticising earlier thinkers like Lacan for not considering social and emotional dimensions enough. She introduced ideas like the *imaginary father*, a nurturing presence that helps the child move from the maternal bond into social life. Kristeva also explored how motherhood is not a fixed identity but a process that affects both men and women. She showed that while men often have more access to the symbolic world of culture and authority, it is often feminine energy from the semiotic that fuels creative and poetic expression. Her work offers a rich and complex view of identity, language, and meaning in human life.

Self-Assessment

1. Who is Julia Kristeva and how did her background influence her thinking?
2. What does Kristeva mean by the semiotic and how is it different from the symbolic?
3. How is the mother-child relationship important in Kristeva's theory?
4. Why does Kristeva say the semiotic cannot be fully expressed in language?
5. What role does the imaginary father play in the development of the child, according to Kristeva?
6. What is the function of *semanalysis* in Kristeva's theory?
7. Why does Kristeva believe that men often represent feminine semiotic energy in literature and art?

Assignments

1. Explain Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic and the symbolic and how they influence language and identity formation.
2. Discuss the importance of the maternal body in Kristeva's theory of meaning and subjectivity.
3. What is semanalysis? Explain how Kristeva uses it to connect language, identity, and culture.
4. Examine Kristeva's views on how experimental art and literature express semiotic energy. Why are male artists often more visible in this expression?
5. Compare and contrast Kristeva's critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis with her own contributions, especially in terms of early emotional development and cultural context.

Reference

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5. Grosz, E. (1990). *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Suggested Reading

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MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS





SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

Model Question Paper (SET A)

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

FURTH SEMESTER MA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE ELECTIVE

M23PH05DE - FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

(CBCS - PG)

(2023-24 - Admission Onwards)

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Objective Types Questions; Answer any Ten

(10x1=10)

1. Who authored the book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?
2. What is the famous feminist dictum about gender?
3. What is meant by the essentialist stand on gender?
4. Name the author of the book *The Second Sex*
5. Rousseau's conception of the social order depends on a strict sexual hierarchy. Is this true or false?
6. Which feminist perspective draws parallels between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature?
7. What does Lacan mean by the statement "woman does not exist" in his psychoanalysis?
8. Name one existentialist feminist philosopher.
9. Who developed psychoanalysis as a means to understand and treat emotional problems?
10. Who introduced the idea of 'semanalysis' to study how meaning is produced in language, especially in poetry and creative expression?
11. Who said that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman"?



12. Who is considered “the Other” in Beauvoir’s theory?
13. Who is the founder of psychoanalysis?
14. Who is the author of the essay “Women on market”?
15. Which feminist approach critiques mainstream feminism for overlooking race, culture, and colonial differences?

SECTION B

Very Short Answer Questions; Answer any Five

(5x2=10)

16. Write a short note on liberal feminism.
17. How does Luce Irigaray reinterpret Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to comment on the exclusion of women from philosophy? Explain
18. Write two major ideas of eco feminism.
19. What is the concept of *libido* in Freud?
20. Explain essentialism in feminist philosophy.
21. What is the central argument of Irigaray’s essay “Women on the Market”?
22. Describe ‘Mimesis’ as a feminist strategy.
23. Men express semiotic energy due to symbolic access. Explain
24. Explain the concepts of Self and Other in Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy.
25. How does Julia Kristeva link the maternal body to the origins of meaning?

SECTION C

Short Answer Questions; Answer any Five

(5x4=20)

26. Differentiate between Beauvoir’s concepts of “immanence” and “transcendence” as they apply to gender roles. How do traditional female roles contribute to immanence?
27. Write an essay on the three waves of modern feminism, highlighting the unique focus and contributions of each wave.
28. Compare and contrast Judith Agassi’s and Judith Lorber’s classifications of feminism. How do their frameworks reflect different understandings of the roots of gender inequality and the strategies for achieving women’s emancipation?
29. Elaborate the key ideas and arguments of intersectional feminism.



30. According to Beauvoir, how are women defined as the Other in relation to men? What philosophical concepts did she draw upon to analyse this social structure of oppression?
31. What is the distinction between sex and gender according to feminist philosophy and how does this distinction challenge traditional patriarchal norms?
32. How has feminist thought expanded beyond women's issues in recent times? Comment.
33. How does Simone de Beauvoir explain the concept of human "ambiguity" in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In what ways does the tension between freedom and facticity define the human condition?

SECTION D

Long Answer Questions; Answer any Three

(3x10=30)

34. Elaborate on the different forms of feminism, liberal feminism, cultural feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism. Compare and contrast their core arguments.
35. Do you agree with the idea "gender is socially constructed"? Expand your agreements and disagreements with this view.
36. "The Self or Subject is Masculine." Elaborate on this statement with reference to the perspectives of various feminist thinkers.
37. Explain Beauvoir's central assertion that "one is not born, but becomes, a woman." How does this concept challenge traditional views of gender?
38. How does Rousseau's theory of sex roles in *Emile* and *The Social Contract* reflect a contradiction between his political ideals and his views on gender? Elaborate.
39. "Feminism is not merely about women, but about questioning the structures of power that define what counts as knowledge and who counts as human." Critically examine this statement in the light of feminist philosophical thought.



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

Model Question Paper (SET B)

QP CODE:

Reg. No:

Name:

FURTH SEMESTER MA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE ELECTIVE

M23PH05DE - FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

(CBCS - PG)

(2023-24 - Admission Onwards)

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Objective Types Questions; Answer any Ten

(10x1=10)

1. Who is the author of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*?
2. Who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?
3. What is the well-known feminist dictum regarding gender?
4. Which feminist approach criticizes mainstream feminism for ignoring differences of race, culture, and colonial context?
5. Who is the author of the work *Gender Trouble*?
6. Name the author of the book *The Second Sex*
7. Socialist feminism is also known as ...?
8. The statement “personality develops through psychosexual stages” is attributed to ...?
9. Who propounded the performative theory of gender?
10. Who said that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”?
11. Who is considered “the Other” in Beauvoir’s theory?
12. Who is the founder of psychoanalysis?
13. Name one feminist work authored by Simone de Beauvoir.



14. What is meant by sexism?
15. Name the philosophical sub-stream which states that women's oppression arises from the combined forces of capitalism and patriarchy.

SECTION B

Very Short Answer Questions; Answer any Five

(5x2=10)

16. Write a short note on socialist feminism.
17. What is *the central argument in Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Ethics of Ambiguity'*? Write in one or two sentences
18. What was the main focus of the first wave of feminism?
19. What is meant by the essentialist understanding of gender?
20. Write the fundamental argument of socialist feminism.
21. What is the central argument in Butler's work *Gender Trouble*?
22. Gender roles are socially constructed. Explain
23. What is meant by the idea that sex does not determine gender?
24. What is meant by the hierarchization within gender binaries?
25. Self / Subject is Masculine. Explain

SECTION C

Short Answer Questions; Answer any Five

(5x4=20)

26. According to Beauvoir, how are women defined as the Other in relation to men? What philosophical concepts did she draw upon to analyse this social structure of oppression?
27. How does Judith Agassi relate the concepts of private property and production to the emergence and persistence of gender inequality in capitalist societies?
28. Elaborate the key features and goals of the three waves of feminism.
29. How does Juliet Mitchell reinterpret Freud's psychoanalysis to defend it against feminist criticisms. In what ways does she use Freud's ideas to explain the internalisation and reproduction of patriarchy within the family structure?
30. How do the binary oppositions of nature/culture, mind/body, and public/private reinforce hierarchical gender roles in society?

31. Give contemporary examples of how traditional gender binaries continue to persist in media, workplaces, and fields like science and technology.
32. How does Simone de Beauvoir connect oppression with gender in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In what ways does she explain women's oppression as a denial of their freedom and human ambiguity?
33. Differentiate between Beauvoir's concepts of "immanence" and "transcendence" as they apply to gender roles. How do traditional female roles contribute to immanence?

SECTION D

Long Answer Questions; Answer any Three

(3x10=30)

34. Elaborate cultural and colonial reinforcement of gender binaries.
35. Explain the central argument of Freud's concept of *libido*. How does Freud use the idea of libido to account for human emotional development, attachment, and the formation of relationships from childhood to adulthood?
36. Explain the central argument of Luce Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. How does Irigaray critique the treatment of sexual difference in western philosophical tradition and what kind of ethical and relational framework does she propose in its place? Discuss with reference to her reinterpretations of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas.
37. Discuss how Luce Irigaray, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, reinterprets Plato's Allegory of the Cave to critique the historical exclusion of women from philosophy. How does she connect the cave, the womb, and the concept of hysteria to highlight the marginalization of the feminine in Western thought?
38. Julia Kristeva's theory of language and subjectivity redefines the relationship between the body, meaning, and identity by introducing concepts such as the **semiotic**, the **symbolic**, and **semanalysis**. Discuss how Kristeva's ideas challenge traditional understandings of language, subject formation, and femininity.
39. How does Simone de Beauvoir explain woman's position as the "Other" through the concept of *immanence*. What does she mean by women being confined to immanent roles in contrast to men's transcendence? Elaborate using examples from daily life.



സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുതിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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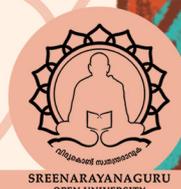
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**DON'T LET IT
BE TOO LATE**

SAY NO TO DRUGS

**LOVE YOURSELF
AND ALWAYS BE
HEALTHY**



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Feminist Philosophy

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