

UNDOING THE DIMORPHIC PARADIGM: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

S. M. Anwaruddin
Centre for Languages
BRAC University

ABSTRACT

By investigating two aspects of gender studies—the definition of gender and the denial of thirdness in the long-established gender dimorphic paradigms—the paper argues that binary gender categories need to be deconstructed. Section I examines how women have been and are being made subordinate to men. It also shows that belief systems, scientific and intellectual scholarships, and cultural norms are effective instruments for lowering women's status and roles. Section II, with a *reader-response* approach, explores how mainstream cultures have denied thirdness in a heterosexualized sex-gender dimorphism. It further claims that the reason why most cultures are firmly devoted to the binary gender categories is a fear of losing the privileges of heterosexuality. The notion of 'self' and 'other' which helps marginalize women in society fits conveniently into this binary system. Therefore, if the binary gender categories are deconstructed, several gender positions can become available which will eventually undo the dimorphic paradigm.

Introduction

Gender¹ has been an effective instrument to exploit women and those who are neither male nor female. Recent literature has problematized various phenomena related to gender and an inability of mainstream social, political, economic, religious, and linguistic systems to ensure equality for the *non-male* members of the human race. Stereotypes have been developed regarding gender traits and abilities. Sex or the biological differences among people has often been confused with gender roles. Although female and male children are born with very little biological differences, the way they are socialized in their later life creates a world of difference. No child is born with a specific gender. Socio-psychological influences play the most important role in children's physical growth and abilities, and thus assign a gender to each child. For a categorization of gender, there is a long-established dimorphic paradigm which maintains a male-supremacy in most cultures. In this regard, human society is unique because other non-human primates, although biologically similar to humans, have no such hierarchy of male supremacy.

¹ The term gender is used to refer to the social construction of differences between men and women.

Section I: How She Becomes Feminine

Since gender plays very important roles in our social and personal life, it is worthwhile to examine the ways gender is defined and assigned. Gender assignment creates a mental state which encourages individuals to behave in a particular way. Each culture determines specific gender roles for its people. In some societies, e.g., it is a duty of the women to earn a livelihood for the family, and men are supposed to do household work. In other cultures, girls have no or very limited rights to make decision about their life. For example, in traditional Bangladeshi society, parents and relatives choose grooms for girls/women. In most cases, girls have to marry someone they do not even know. If the conjugal life is unhappy, it is generally seen to be the wife's fault. Thus, each culture constructs specific gender roles for its people.

Another very important issue of gender construct is virginity, which is considered the most valuable treasure of a woman's life. However, cultures do not specify anything for men regarding this matter. When it comes to the question of marriage, people hardly think about the sexual life of a man. On the other hand, everyone is concerned with a woman's virginity. Oftentimes men refuse to marry a woman if there is a rumor about her loss of virginity. In some cultures, "loss of chastity is also a ground

which can exclude a wife or daughter from inheritance” (Banerji and Chakraborty 2). The imposed gender identity and roles are so strong and deep-rooted that it is very difficult for girls/women to get rid of them. From their childhood, they are taught all the rules and norms they must follow. Girls and boys generally receive different treatments and advice from their family members. Mothers usually become extra cautious about their daughter’s virginity, but do not really worry about their son’s. Thus, structured gender role orientation and expectations stem from every family and eventually become cultural phenomena. This culturally constructed gender identity deprives women of many fundamental rights as human beings.

In most societies, gender is assigned at the time of birth. Once it is assigned, individuals are bound to follow all the rules and norms the assigned gender incurs. In the West, doctors play the part of assigning gender. A doctor declares, “It has a penis, it’s a boy” or “It doesn’t have a penis, it’s a girl” (Bornstein 22). Thus, gender assignment has become a “medicalized” phenomenon which is all about having a penis and has nothing to do with the vagina. A doctor who pronounces those words is not always aware of the consequences of his gender assignment.

The notion of femininity develops while a child grows up as a girl. As Simone de Beauvoir says, “There is no difference in the attitudes of girls and boys during the first three or four years; ...boys are as desirous as their sisters” (304). After that age begins the separation between boys and girls. Girls can no longer enjoy the same freedom with their brothers. The expectations of their parents, family, and society dramatically change. They expect certain behaviours from girls, e.g., girls should not laugh loudly, etc. By practicing these behaviors, a girl eventually becomes a woman whose gender is ‘feminine.’ Nowadays in many societies girls are encouraged to go to school and participate in sports, and their failure in these fields is generally overlooked, but “success is made harder by the demands made upon her for another kind of accomplishment: at any rate she must be *also* a woman, she must not *lose* her femininity” (Beauvoir 318). Her failure is pardoned because she is a girl/woman, but her success is hardly appreciated. Society always sends her a message that she is physically and emotionally weak. de Beauvoir rightly said, “One is not born, but rather

becomes, a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine” (301). This process defines masculine as rational, active, and dominating, and feminine as its opposite, i.e., irrational, passive, and emotional.

Culturally constructed gender roles become widely acceptable when supported with intellectual scholarships. Throughout the ages, male scholars have tried to establish male supremacy. Henry Fielding is, for example, one of the authors who define sexual “normalcy” from a masculine perspective. At the beginning of *The Female Husband*, Fielding imposes his own beliefs on his readers that sexual attraction for the same sex is “unnatural.” Fielding uses such words as “monstrous,” “unnatural,” and “brutal” to define attraction for the same sex. However, his definition of naturalness may not be similar to that of another person whose way of *natural satisfaction* is different. Furthermore, Fielding refers to “virtue and religion” (29) to describe the so-called loose “carnal appetite.” As a matter of fact, virtue and religion are completely human phenomena, not natural. Men like Fielding write about women to establish men’s attitudes and beliefs, but the women’s voice is hardly heard. Many women who write about such issues as gender roles are sometimes overpowered by the patriarchal superstitions and cultural constructs. For example, there were women psychologists among the post-Freudians who furthered Freud’s beliefs and teachings. Freud thought that men were naturally superior. Biology had made men superior to women, and it was women’s duty to accept men’s supremacy and dominance. The post-Freudians tried to prove and preach the wrong conceptions of Freud. They viewed women as deformed men who had lost their penis. Helene Deutsch, a post-Freudian psychologist, thought along the same line and believed that women should reject themselves and adapt to men. In this way, they could attain a fulfillment of their life. Marie Bonaparte, another post-Freudian, thought that women must submit to men. Those who did not do so were unnatural and devia (Azad, 170-72).

Apparently, there are some biological differences between men and women. But does ‘different’ mean ‘unequal’? According to the research of Fausto-Sterling men are usually taller and stronger than women. On the other hand, Marini says that “Males are more vulnerable to illness and disease...and display higher mortality rates than

females of comparable age” (99). Then, who is biologically superior? This argument will never yield a conclusion. One thing, however, should be clear that male dominance and supremacy are not biologically inherited. Although it is difficult to draw an analogy between human and non-human primates, some research sheds eye-opening light on this issue. There is no universal dominance hierarchy among the primates. Despite the biological similarity with humans, non-human primates do not have a male supremacy and hierarchy of dominance. The reason can be that they are “not exposed to the same social influences [of human society]” (Marini 101).

Not only subjective literature including various disciplines of social sciences in which personal attitudes are dominant but also natural sciences help create biased definitions of naturalness which eventually cause the wrong construction of gender roles. People consider natural science a value-free discipline dealing only with truths and facts from objective perspectives. However, Spanier in “‘Lessons’ from ‘Nature’” explains how scientists, particularly biologists, try to establish their subjective assumptions about nature. This endeavour leads people to a total misconception about nature because they believe that “The assumptions underlying most scientific articles are that the data represent objective knowledge, limited only by the techniques and accuracy of measurement” (Spanier 339). Spanier further argues that science successfully creates ‘gender polarity’ in our society because it has a great power of scientific objectivity. She also shows how scientists create male superiority, for example, naming “the largest bee in the hive as the King bee, and undervalu[ing] female lions as hunters” (330). All these happen because scientists, while examining nature, cannot go beyond their sociopolitical beliefs about what is natural. In short, not only art, literature, and social sciences but natural sciences, e.g., biology, also help create male superiority with biased definitions of naturalness and normalcy.

Section II: One of the Two

Mainstream cultures have long believed in the notion that there are only two sexes. Their languages and literatures have also failed to challenge the binary concept of gender. The make-believe in sex-gender dichotomy is an example of how ideologies can hide the truth for ages. The

hide-and-seek of sex/gender issue surely calls for some scrutiny. Contemporary literature of Women and Gender Studies and Literary Studies has problematized the gender system dominant in most cultures: heterosexualized sex-gender dimorphism. The focus has been on a ‘third-ness’—figures and phenomena, queerness, cross-dressing, transgender, transsexuality, intersexuality—that bridges the divide between female/ feminine and male/ masculine. The remainder of the paper takes a *reader-response* approach to the dominant dimorphic paradigm of gender/sex issue. Excerpts are taken from writers who profoundly think or can be thought of in terms of sex-gender dichotomy prevalent in mainstream social, cultural, and ideological domains.

The *Either-Or* Dilemma

When scientists look to nature, they usually bring with them their sociopolitical beliefs about what is natural... Within the ubiquitous paradigm of binary gender and male superiority, scientists have, for example, used the male designation to name any species, misidentified the largest bee in the hive as the King Bee, and undervalued female lions as hunters. Thus, in what is considered scientifically objective biology, the male is clearly held up as the normative sex, with the female as a deviation from the norm. (Spanier 330)

Other examples of the acceptance of more than two sexes have long been described among Native Americans, especially the Navajos and Zumis, where a person can be nadle, or berdache (as it was called by the French colonizers), in which case they have a special status and function as neither male nor female. It is not clear to what extent berdache have been biological hermaphrodites or transvestites and cross-dressers. The point is that either way they are accepted as a third sex. This is true also of the hijras in India, who are considered neither men nor women in their sex or gender identity and are able to function as a third group. (Hubbard 160)

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 “They do not conceive ‘in-between’ and ‘otherwise,’” thus ends Karen Grimm’s essay “Bent Status Symbol” (9). The essay very clearly portrays a real but harsh picture of European ideology, and how the Europeans were successful in creating new ideologies for their own interests. (By *they*, I mean the male Europeans who held the power to create values and ideologies.) We have

seen how Henry Fielding was irritated by a female husband who tried to bridge the divide between the masculine and feminine. Fielding belonged to those who made the society patriarchal by defining everything in their own way. In *The Female Husband*, Fielding imposes his own ideology on his readers that sexual attraction for the same sex is “unnatural”. In this way, throughout the ages, many authors have established their own interpretations of various phenomena.

Two excerpts I have added here complement Grimm’s essay by showing a scientific bias and a different way of looking at intersexual people. The first excerpt explains how scientists, especially biologists, are gender-biased. Adopting a position of objectivity, biologists have established a notion of male supremacy as ‘natural’ in the field of biology. The second excerpt, in addition, shows how some Native Americans and *hijras* of India, unlike European hermaphrodites, have an identity as a third sex. This goes back to Grimm’s essay that the Europeans recognize only dichotomy but no ‘in-between and otherwise.’ It should be noted that Grimm’s claim is not limited to Europeans only; it is generalizable to many other cultures.

**A Sexy Mother!**

*The long-established preference for a son over a daughter does affect the self-esteem of girls. Girls are socialized to think, feel, and act in according with their future role as housewives, and they hardly think of any other role for themselves. Boys see themselves in activities and occupations outside the home. A girl is expected to begin learning proper decorum for a female before the end of childhood, so she can play the part well once puberty sets in.... A girl's sexuality through childhood and youth is characterized by progressive socially enforced renunciation, so in motherhood a woman's erotic impulses are often highly restrained and confined. But this may not inhibit actual sexual and reproductive performance. Some burdens are put on women by the culture, such as feeling of pollution from menstrual blood and childbirth. It gives rise to the symbolic importance of a woman's purity in maintaining the social status of a family. (Aziz 1)*

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 Josh Hinz, in his essay “The Image of ‘Mother,’” raises a crucial question: “Can mothers still draw men’s sexual desire in a way comparable to non-mothers?” (3). The most probable right answer to

this question is ‘no.’ The excerpt I have added focuses on a similar idea from a perspective different from the West both geographically and culturally. In Bangladeshi society, most parents prefer boys to girls. In this way, they send a message to their girl children that boys are more wanted and important. Preference for a son has a negative impact on girls’ self-esteem because they feel that they are inferior to their brothers.

When it comes to sexuality, girls are placed differently from boys. Their sexuality is highly restrained and confined by socially imposed renunciation. To express their sexual impulses is considered vulgar and condemnable in most cultures. For many girls, sexuality is a hidden chapter of life. This is not something to be talked about. The only period when a woman’s sexuality is seen positively is from her marriage to her being a mother. When a woman gives birth to a child, she is seen to have lost her sexual attractiveness. Hinz describes this situation in the following words: “husbands end up viewing a wife as ‘mother’ rather than a significant other” (4). This is true for most societies. One of the examples of this situation is that when a woman becomes a mother, she is identified as her child’s mother. Her husband as well as other members of community addresses her as the child’s mother. In other words, if a woman’s child’s name is Ali, people call her ‘Ali’s mom.’ Therefore, the image of a mother is also culturally defined. Mothers lose their identity as an independent personality as if their only duty was reproducing children.

To Cut or Not to Cut?

But why should we care if a “woman,” defined as one who has breasts, a vagina, a uterus and ovaries and who menstruates, also has a clitoris large enough to penetrate the vagina of another woman? Why should we care if there are people whose biological equipment enables them to have sex “naturally” with both men and women? The answers seem to lie in a cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes. Society mandates the control of intersexual bodies because they blur and bridge the great divide. Inasmuch as hermaphrodites literally embody both sexes, they challenge traditional beliefs about sexual difference: they possess the irritating ability to live sometimes as one sex and sometimes the other, and they raise the specter of homosexuality. (Fausto-Sterling 24)

Their idea is that if you have somebody who is not a good enough male and you cut off enough parts, whatever's left is female. The former Surgeon General of the United States, Joycelyn Elders, is a pediatric endocrinologist and has this done to her patients. She says, 'I always teach my students you can't make a good male but you can make a pretty good female. Just take everything out and make a pouch.' (Hegerty 125)

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 Becky Nilson (3-5) presents a terrifying portrait of genital mutilation in her essay "Female Genital Mutilation." The excerpts I have added stress her ideas and disclose some reasons behind the practice. Nilson believes that removing enlarged clitoris may be acceptable, but what she considers most terrible is the violation of individuals' freedom of choice. In many societies, children born with enlarged clitoris or other deformed genitals have to go through a surgery in their childhood, and very certainly they do not know anything about it at this point. This happens because of an imaginary fear of the parents. They are afraid because society recognizes only dichotomy: white or black, light or dark, high or low. It does not conceive 'in-between' and 'otherwise.' As a result, their child needs to fit into any one category: either male or female.

The first excerpt shows why mainstream societies do not recognize "people whose biological equipment enables them to have sex 'naturally' with both men and women" (Fausto-Sterling 24). The social systems keep a distinction between sexes as a cultural need because the intersexuals 'blur and bridge the great divide.' They may complicate the binary model of sexuality which serves the interests of heterosexuality. The second excerpt emphasizes Nilson's claim that certain medical practices assume that females are inferior. It also shows how physicians and surgeons think about female body. This picture is best portrayed in the words of Joycelyn Elders, the former Surgeon General of the U.S., who says, "I always teach my students you can't make a good male but you can make a pretty good female. Just take everything out and make a pouch" (Hegerty 125).

**Uncovering the Cover**

*Gallimard: Then we will go very, very slowly.  
 He starts to caress her; her gown begins to open.  
 Song: No...let me... keep my clothes...*

*Gallimard: But...  
 Song: Please...it all frightens me. I'm a modest Chinese girl.  
 Gallimard: My poor little treasure.  
 (Hwang 1.13.40)  
 In our own culture, before sex was medicalized, people who were obviously intermediate in their anatomy or physiological functions had closeted lives whenever possible. If their intermediate status became known, they lived more or less miserable lives because intermediate forms are not accepted in the West. (Hubbard 160)*

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 In her essay "What If We Take Off Our Clothes?," Cayla Skillin-Brachle (2) claims that in addition to keeping us warm and ensuring entrance into public places, clothing functions continually to remind us of what we can and cannot do. Clothing of a person sets a limit of her/his actions and abilities. It can also be interpreted as an indicator of a person's imposed gender roles. For example, the way women of Indian sub-Continent wear saris can be a metaphor of captivity. Wearing a sari, a woman cannot run as fast as a man can. Another feature of women's clothing in most societies is that it does not have a pocket. This can imply women's economic status. It is possible that people did not realize an importance of having a pocket in women's clothing because women did not have money or other valuables to put in their pockets.

Clothing plays other roles as well. The first excerpt shows how clothing is significant in Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*. I argue that Gallimard falls in love not with Song but with her clothing. Her clothing helps Gallimard's imaginations run free. Because the importance of clothing is also ideologically defined, Gallimard finds his 'butterfly' trapped in that particular clothing. When Song, after a long time, comes to Gallimard in different clothing, he [Song²] gets nothing but hatred from Gallimard. The second excerpt tells us how clothing helps the 'intermediate' people hide their identity. As we

² *M. Butterfly* tells a story of René Gallimard, a French diplomat assigned to Beijing in the 1960s. He was infatuated with a Chinese opera performer, Song (Lone). They carried out their relationship for twenty years. In actuality, Song was a male who played theatrical roles of a female. It is debatable whether Gallimard was unaware or willfully ignorant of the fact that only men performed all roles in traditional Chinese opera. Eventually, Gallimard was tried for treason, which forced him to face the unbearable truth about his relationship.

noticed earlier in this paper, most cultures do not recognize any intermediate status in terms of sex/gender. Everyone has to fall into one category: either male or female. However, nature does not work in this way. Nature creates many people who are neither male nor female. Clothing helps those people hide their identity from the cruel eyes of society.

Conclusion

When a girl child is born, she does not have a gender identity. Very soon her gender is assigned by the settled norms of society. As an executor, her family teaches her these norms and rules. Her socialization process is different from her brother's. From a very early age, she is expected to display so-called feminine attitudes and behaviors. Even though her biological differences from her brother are not very significant, socially imposed beliefs about differences between men and women create gender stereotypes such as she is physically weak, intellectually dwarf, and emotionally vulnerable. When she grows up and enters the world outside her family, she sees that it is the men who define everything. When she enters her study, she reads books that portray women as weak, emotional, passive, and subordinate to men. This is how women are made subordinate to men through various forms of discrimination and socio-culturally imposed norms and beliefs.

The sense of identity is formed only by social influences. As Freud argues, during the first months, a "child has no real sense of self; it is unable even to distinguish where it ends and the mother begins, and certainly has no concept of its own gender" (Tolan 334). Based on this widely accepted Freudian view, we can claim that there is no essential self and gender identification. As the child grows up, gender identification is achieved through various social influences. Among these influences is an imposed heterosexuality. For its own survival, the notion of heterosexuality creates two artificial gender constructs: masculine and feminine. It also rejects any other possibilities of gender construct. This either-or model prevents a creation of multiple gender positions. Society's preference for heterosexuality forces everyone to become either a man or a woman. Any exception to this norm may pose a threat to the practice of heterosexuality. One of many examples of this imposed gender position is numerous government and non-government documents which have only

two options for sex/gender identity: male or female.

When the concept of self-and-other is attached to the gender categories of masculine and feminine, men end up viewing themselves as the 'self.' They also hold the power to construct the 'others.' They create ideologies, fictions, and deceiving knowledge about the 'others' in order to establish their own superiority. The binary categories make it easier to contrast the 'self' with the 'other.' However, this notion of self-and-other as a tool for superiority-inferiority spectrum can be abolished by subverting the binary approach to gender categories. As Judith Butler argues in her influential book *Gender Trouble*, a deconstruction of binary gender categories can create a possibility of multiple gender positions. I argue that this multiplicity will snatch the power men hold in society because there will no longer be 'self' and 'other.' Instead, there will be 'self' and 'many,' and it will be impossible for men to win against the 'many'.

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