

**FEMINIST CRITICAL REVIEW ON GENDER AND SOCIAL THEORIES****Tanuja V. Koli***Associate Professor (Department of Sociology)**Chetana's Hazarimal Somani College of Commerce & Economics,**Smt. Kusumtai Chaudhari College of Arts, Bandra, Mumbai- 400 051.***ABSTRACT:**

*This papers aims at understanding how do various social theories explain gender ? More importantly the paper focuses on feminist critical examination about how social world has been studied and understood through social theories. The paper also provides the views about how feminist theory offer explanations about how social world is structured.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Gender, Social Theories , Feminist, and Critical Review*

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The present paper is based on feminist theory to critically understand how gender is seen in theories. The decade of 1970's and 1980's of feminist scholarship lead to the deconstruction of traditional knowledge frameworks that is taken for granted knowledge across several discipline. In contrast to this endeavour, the important challenges to knowledge building were launched in the 1980's and 1990's, which begin with basic foundational question: **What is the nature of social reality?** As Positivism was considered the only model of enquiry based on logic and empiricism. it holds out a specific epistemology of knowing - that truth lies "out there" in the social reality waiting to be discovered, if only the scientist is "objective" and "value free" in the pursuit of knowledge building. Positivism was linked with sociology by its major founders, August Comte, as well as Emile Durkheim. There has been a strong tradition within sociology of contesting positivistic assumptions ( Biber, 2007).

**Feminist theory** (as well as feminist scholarship in general) seeks to describe and explain women's experiences and situations in ways that informs efforts to end their subordination Feminist theory, thus it is the extension of feminism into theoretical or Philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's roles, experiences, interests, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, etc. (Alway, 1995).

**INTRODUCTION**

Theories are formalized public explanations which explain a particular area of empirical reality or type of phenomenon, or they may be abstract general accounts of some aspect of reality. Social theories, are explanations of the social world; they suggest concepts and approaches for studying and understanding that world. Seidman (1991) describes social theories as "broad social narratives" that arise out of and aim to affect social conflicts. Theories of any sort arise from a need to explain something. Thus social theories

along with sociological theories emerge out of a need to explain and understand something in our social experience. While founding sociological theories attempted to explain what this new social order was all about that emerged in a period of massive social transformation and how it might best be studied. Feminist theory developed as changes in women's situations and gave rise to a political movement that challenged prevailing explanations of women's subordinate position in the social world(Alway,1995)

### **How Gender is seen in Social Theories: A feminist view**

In this discussion I draw on and develop the observations of feminist theorists who had addressed the issue : How gender is seen in social theories? . With application of feminist perspective I tried derive explanations about how the social world is structured and critiques of how that world has been understood.

#### **Feminist critiques on Comte and Gender**

I draw on observations by Pedersen (2001) on 'Comte, utopian socialism', and feminism to discuss how gender is perceived in works of August Comte. Pedersen focussed on Comte's two multivolume works : the 'Cours de philosophie positive' which stressed the use of reason to arrive at social scientific solutions to political problems, and the 'Systeme de politique positive'.Comte consistently linked men with thought and women with feeling. He consistently linked his assessments of women's emotional nature to explanations of why women were unfit to participate in public life. Even in the religion of humanity, which revered women for their spiritual insight, women might achieve their greatest honour only if they remained, in Comte's contradictory phrase, "free in the sacred retirement of their homes", which is to say, not entirely free at all. In the later volumes of the Cours, by the year 1838 that would include his opinions on men, women, the family, and society, Comte, responded by stressing that sociology would prove the necessity of traditional families led by rational public men and emotional private women. His publication of the 'Cours de philosophic positive' functioned as a part of his public criticism of the utopian socialists whose audiences he envied, especially when he used it to insist on what he called "the natural subordination of women". Comte asserted that the only kind of family that could serve as the basis for society was "reducible to two orders of relations —namely the subordination of the sexes which institutes the family, and that of the ages, which maintains it". Although he acknowledged that "the ultimate conditions of marriage might change" he insisted that they would always remain hierarchical, "consonant with the fundamental principle of the institution: the natural subordination of the woman, which has reappeared under all forms of marriage, in all ages". In his conclusion Comte says "Sociology will prove that the equality of the sexes is incompatible with all social existence, by showing that each sex has special and permanent functions that it must fulfill in the natural economy of the human family". Comte's naturalization of both sexual difference and sexual inequality suggests that, even when he seemed to be talking about ungendered "individuals", he was actually talking about men (Pedersen 2001).

#### **Feminist critiques on Durkheim and Gender**

Pederson, 2001 in the essay on 'Sexual Politics in Comte and Durkheim : Feminism, History and

the French Sociological Tradition' draws the following views on Durkheim and Gender'. Scholars who focus on questions of gender have pointed out that Durkheim's opposition to divorce by mutual consent marks him as a social conservative on the feminist issues of his day. Durkheim's anxiety over the effects of easy divorce and his consistent opposition to divorce by mutual consent came out of his own sociological study of suicide. Marriage lowered male suicide rates because modern men needed sexual regulation to survive; it raised female suicide rates because women's desires were still naturally self-regulating. Although Durkheim had claimed that the purpose of his study was to show that individual behaviours could be understood only in sociological terms, his treatment of women as biological entities seemed to set them out of the purview of sociology altogether. He defended the social importance of marriage as a way of regulating desire, especially for men; and he warned that facilitating divorce would raise suicide rates.

### Feminist critiques on **World System Theory and Gender**

The theories of World system provide a structural context for the operations of the global economy and the world in which we live and produce. However gender is seen missing as a central construct in most of these perspectives. The reason being Modernization theory assumes, but ignores, two propositions: (1) With adoption modern values, women participate in development efforts, and (2) women from developing countries follow the path of women in the developed countries as they enter into the formal labour force via service and clerical positions (traditionally women's occupations). Also as highlighted by Fernandez-Kelly 1989, that many theorists perceive the labour of women in housework as subsistence labour or production for use value. They relegate this labour to pre capitalist relations or ignore it because it is not seen as production but merely as reproduction of the capitalist labour force through procreation and nurturing those household workers who work for pay. The world system theorists and others in international political economy perspectives exclude the role of women in the global economy: First, Excluding the vast and growing literature on the effects of so-called development on women's status relative to men's and on the centrality of women's labour to the operation of the world system. For example, with the introduction of cash crops and the decline of local industries as signs of incorporation, it fails to note the voluminous literature indicating that women in West Africa and Asia who were negatively affected by this form of incorporation. Second, world system theorists assume that women are only incorporated as members of households. The World System theory fail to acknowledge gender differences in formal and informal sector participation. They impose male definitions of work on women's socioeconomic participation. As a result, such researchers dismiss women's household and informal sector participation as non- productive labour. Finally, they overlook women's active roles and resistance to the processes of incorporation and women's resulting marginalization or exclusion from paid labor and inclusion on the margins of economic activity. Even when gender is considered by some of the world system theorists, they most commonly pursue a strategy of studying households in the world economy rather than putting gender at the centre of analyses. Further, the emphasis on exchange

production has led to male biases in how work and households are defined in their theories. It has also led researchers to ignore increases in male dominance in women's everyday lives that are exacerbated by underdevelopment. In this way, important facets of the operations of the global economy are obscured (Ward, 1993).

#### Feminist critiques on **Rational-Choice Theory and Gender**

The principal aim of rational-choice theory is an attempt to explain the emergence of social outcomes by the action of purposive agents who are subject to a host of constraints, both external, those derived from institutional constraints and opportunity costs; and internal, those derived from preferences. The rational-choice theory has been criticized by feminist: First, because of its assumptions, rational choice is a theory that excludes women from consideration, and even when it does take women into account, they almost always fail to behave as rational-choice theory predicts. The second criticism, shows that rational-choice theorists if ever do address issues of gender inequality, they do so in a wholly inadequate manner. (Friedman and Diem, 1993).

#### Feminist critiques on **Functionalism and Gender**

Functionalism which is mainly associated with Talcott Parsons, whose theory of social action employed a functionalist model was criticized by feminists of trying to justify male dominance by describing an instrumental (occupational) role for men and an expressive (domestic) role for women as a division of labour that was functional for family solidarity, and for implying that the nuclear family ideal of the 1950s was a fixed and desirable reality. Feminist, have further criticized Parsons's failure to see the power husbands have over wives and men have over women. They have also argued that the terms he used to describe a division of labour, such as instrumental and expressive, and the term role itself, appeared to be value neutral and thereby masked unequal power while legitimating the gender status quo (Johnson 1993).

#### Feminist critiques on **Psychoanalytic Theory and Gender**

The writings of Sigmund Freud in the 1960s, was condemned for holding misogynist beliefs, and his writings were blamed for perpetuating women's oppression in society. As Williams, explains, it was Freud who argued that all girls are overcome with "penis envy" the instant they first see a naked male because they immediately recognize the inherent inferiority of their female genitals. Even though penis envy and other misogynist ideas in the theory have long been discredited, Freud's notorious sexism understandably has led many feminist social scientists to reject the theory (Williams, 1993)

#### Feminist critiques on **Marxism and Gender**

Analysis of how gender is seen in Marxism, shows that since Marx's concept of class relies on the narrow translation of "production" and "economic", that is, it includes only those activities concerned with making food and objects, thereby the criterion which Marx employs to demarcate class position, "relations to the means of production", is understood as relation to the means of producing food and objects. His concept of class eliminates from consideration the historical conflicts over other socially

necessary activities such as child-bearing and child-rearing. Further, the theory thus eliminates from consideration changes in organisation of such activities, which have historically been at least one important component in gender relations. Also Marx's lack of consideration of reproductive activities enables him to ignore, the component of socialisation in human history. (Nicholson , 1986).

### CONCLUSION:

In response to this epistemological critique, some feminists have advocated that all research and particularly studies of women should reject a priori constructs in favour of privileging the subjectivity of women. Thus, feminists, particularly black feminists, have emphasized that the concepts and explanations of ordinary people can also be valid bases on which to develop our social analyses ( England, 1993)

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