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Module	Module No. 6; Feminist Theories 2: Radical Feminism	-
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Summary	This module delineates the understanding of radical feminism and the various underlying thoughts within the same.	-
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Introduction

A perspective within feminism, radical feminism believes that patriarchy is the overarching structure that oppresses women due to their sex. Unlike those strands of feminism that sought to address gender inequality through reforming the existing socio-political-legal system (liberal feminism), radical feminism believe that a radical restructuring of society through eliminating male supremacy and challenging social norms is the only way to bring about a gender just society. Radical feminists vary in their perspectives on issues related to sex and sexuality, prostitution and pornography, and reproduction and motherhood, amongst other things.

Learning Outcomes:

The students are expected to

- Develop an understanding of the basic tenets of radical feminism
- Understand the difference of perspectives within this strand of thought
- Develop an understanding of the relevance and critique of radical feminist thought

Topic 1. Radical Feminism: A background

During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists belonging to mainstream women's rights groups such as the National Organization for Women believed that gender equality could be achieved by reforming the existing system, and their main aim was to achieve equal rights for women. However, during the same time, there were feminists who did not believe in reforming the system, but radically restructuring it by uprooting patriarchal power structures. These women perceived themselves as revolutionaries and their motivation to improve women's condition emerged in the context of their participation in radical social movements where they found themselves excluded from equal power by the men within these movements (Tong 2009).

Came to be known as radical feminists, they introduced the practice of consciousness raising where women came together to share their experiences as 'women'. Realizing that personal

experiences are not unique to individual women, they proclaimed that 'personal is political' with the notion of universal sisterhood. They believed that men's control over women's sexual and reproductive lives is the most fundamental form of oppression meaning that women are oppressed because they are 'women'. According to Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg, this can have a number of interpretations. Firstly, that historically, women were the first oppressed group. Secondly, women's oppression is existent virtually every know society. Thirdly, it is the hardest form of oppression to eradicate and cannot be addressed for instance, by eradicating the class system. Fourthly, this form of oppression provides a conceptual model to understanding other forms of oppression(Allison Jaggar 1984). However, despite the common understanding that sexism is the root cause of oppression, within the camp of radical feminists, they were divided in their opinion on its nature and how to fight it. Based on their opinions, they were split into radical-libertarian feminists and radical-cultural feminists. The following section discusses their perspectives on issues such as motherhood, sexuality and reproduction.

Topic 2: Perspectives Underlying Radical Feminist Thought

2.1 Androgyny

Claiming that an exclusive feminine gender identity is detrimental to women's development as full human persons, radical libertarian feminists encouraged women to embrace androgyny, i.e, embodying both masculine and feminine characteristics. This claim was challenged by other radical feminists who believed that being androgynous necessarily implied assuming mostly masculine traits, and sometimes the worst of the masculine characteristics. However, they understood that this was an attempt to free women to express and choose their own gender identities. Radical cultural feminists rejected this model of androgyny by suggesting that women should embrace their femininity and celebrate those values that are culturally associated with being women, thus essentializing the 'female nature' that is common to all women, across varied socio-cultural-political contexts(Tong 2009).

2.2 Sex/Gender system

According to radical-libertarian feminist Gayle Rubin, the sex/gender system is a "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human

activity”(Rubin 1975). This means that society (associated with patriarchal norms) takes certain biological characteristics of being male and female and converts that into a system of masculine and feminine identities that create a hierarchical power relation between men and women. Masculine traits (assertiveness, independence, practicality, etc) are associated with being a man and these are more celebrated than feminine traits (submissiveness, interdependence, being emotional) that are looked down upon. These societal constructions are naturalized as biological or inherent to individuals and this limits their freedom to express their gender identities if different from their biological identities. For instance, the phrase, ‘boys don’t cry’ impose restrictions on young individuals to freely express their emotions for fear of being ridiculed.

So essentially, radical libertarian feminists claimed that gender is separable from sex, and naturalized gender roles are attempts on the part of patriarchal society’s to control women through rigid sanctions. Hence, most of them supported the idea of androgyny as it implied women, (and men) can choose to embody the combination of gender identities and traits at will. Four radical feminist writings have been discussed in this section to understand the diversity of opinions within this form of feminism.

Kate Millet, in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), writes that the root of women’s oppression lies in the sex/gender system, and to eliminate oppression, gender has to be eliminated. This is because through elaborate social sanctions of institutions like religion and family, patriarchy justifies male control by imposing naturalized gendered ideals. Though she looks forward to an androgynous world, she warns against embodying undesirable masculine and feminine traits (Millet 1970).

Shulamith Firestone, in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), claims that the root of patriarchal oppression lies in reproductive roles of men and women. In order to emancipate women, they need to be ‘freed’ from these roles by replacing biological reproduction with artificial reproductive techniques, thus breaking down the practice of biological heteronormative families. Even though she too argues for an androgynous future, she sees it as a complete dismantling of the masculine and feminine gender systems, instead of embodying traits of both (Firestone 1970).

Marilyn French on the other hand, attributes male-female differences more to biology than to society, and believed that traditional feminine characteristics are superior to masculine ones. She has speculated that the earliest societies were probably matricentric (mother centered), as they were harmonious with nature. However, with evolution, men sought to control nature, and by extension, women. French believed that in order to eradicate sexism and oppression, one needs to reject the masculine traits and embrace the feminine qualities(French 1985).

In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly rejects androgyny and talks about how all traditional feminine traits, both good and bad, have been constructed by patriarchy, and in order to eradicate oppression, women need to strip themselves of femininity. Only then can they embrace their prepatriarchal female power and beauty(Daly 1978).

2.3 Sexuality

Rosemary Tong has drawn upon Ann Ferguson's work in understanding the difference in perspective of radical libertarian and radical cultural feminists in terms of understanding sexuality, and this is what she has to say(Ferguson 1984):

Radical Libertarians

Heterosexual as well as other sexual practices are characterized by repression. The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority "pure" and under control.

Feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions, or moral judgments that stigmatize sexual minorities and thus restrict the freedom of all.

As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives us pleasure and satisfaction.

.The ideal sexual relationship is between fully

Radical Culturals

Heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification (men as subjects/masters; women as objects/slaves) that supports male sexual violence against women.

Feminists should repudiate any sexual practice that supports or normalizes male sexual violence.

As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by developing a concern with our own sexual priorities, which differ from men's—that is, more concern with intimacy and less with performance.

The ideal sexual relationship is between full

consenting, equal partners who negotiate to maximize one another's sexual pleasure and satisfaction by any means they choose

While most radical libertarian feminists believed that there should not be any judgment towards sexual practices (as being good, healthy, normal as opposed to bad, unhealthy, abnormal), radical cultural feminists believed that the only unambiguously good form of sexuality for women is monogamous lesbianism. They believed that patriarchy as an institution traps women into heterosexual relationships that need to be severed in order to end sexual oppression.

2.4 Pornography

Radical libertarian feminists claimed that pornography need not be necessarily bad or harmful to women as long as it helps women to overcome fears about sex, generate fantasies, and so on. This means that women should have the choice to derive pleasure from pornography even violent portrayals of male female relationships, if they so desire. Contrary to this view, radical cultural feminists claim that any form of sexual objectification or portrayal of the same of women in the bedroom serves patriarchal purposes of dictating feminine gender roles. Hence, according to them, pornography harms women, as it normalizes male power and female subordination, thus paving the way for sexual abuse(Tong 2009).

2.5 Lesbianism

In her essay, 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', Ann Koedt claimed that during heterosexual intercourse, many women mistake the source of their orgasm as the vagina, when in reality it come from the clitoris. Accordingly, men fear that if clitoris replaces the vagina as the source of female sexual pleasure, they will be sexually expendable. Noting this fear, Koedt observes that even if women do not need men for physiological reasons, some women will still choose men for psychological reasons.

This essay was interpreted very differently by radical libertarian and radical cultural feminists. The former interpreted this essay as justifying women's participation in non-compulsory heterosexuality, meaning that by not needing a male body for sexual pleasure, women will engage in heterosexual sex only if they want to. On the contrary, radical cultural feminists

interpreted this as there being no justifiable 'feminist' psychological reason to choose heterosexuality since women did not need men for pleasure. In other words, women who 'choose' to be with men are not 'true' feminists, and in order to be a true feminist, one needs to be a lesbian (Tong 2009). Though radical libertarian feminists agreed with radical cultural feminists that heterosexuality as an institution has harmed many women, they argued that it would still be unjust to impose lesbianism the same way patriarchy has imposed heterosexuality. They also argued that more than individual men, patriarchal system was the main enemy. So instead of separatism from men, women need to confront individual men about their patriarchal values and privilege.

2.6 Reproduction

Radical libertarian feminists believed that since reproductive roles and female bodies are the sites of women's oppression, artificial modes of reproduction should substitute biological reproduction, freeing women to pursue other activities. In contrast, radical cultural feminists believed that the ability to procreate is a source of women's power, and to take that away from her will be playing directly into patriarchy's hands by removing men's dependence on women to create life. They claimed that artificial reproduction would take the power away from women and invert it by placing control in the hand of men which makes women dispensable (Tong 2009).

Radical cultural feminists claim that women's biology is not the cause of oppression, rather men's jealousy of women's reproductive abilities is. This has led to men striving for control over women's bodies because they (men) have been feeling alienated from the process of natural reproduction. By taking the process of reproduction in their hands, male doctors (replacing female midwives) have effectively been telling women the 'correct' way to be pregnant, often ignoring their (women's) own intuitions about their own bodies. So artificial reproduction, in effect guarantees that women's experience of reproduction is as alienating as it is for men (Tong 2009).

Topic 3. Critique of Radical Feminism

Both radical libertarian and radical cultural feminism have been heavily critiqued by each other as well as non radical feminists. Radical libertarian feminism has been criticized for its overemphasis on 'choice'. Critiques argue that while the idea of women's freedom to choose is empowering, in reality, their ability to do so is seriously constrained in a patriarchal context. Patriarchy coerces women into upholding patriarchal norms by constraining the range of choices available to them, and creating the illusion of 'free choice', when in reality women are conditioned to act a certain way due to patriarchal social conditioning. On the other hand, radical cultural feminists have been criticized because of essentializing masculine and feminine traits as being universal. Essentialism has been previously used to justify many forms of oppression (racism, colonialism, slavery), and by trapping women into rigid roles, radical cultural feminism falls into the danger of doing the same (Tong 2009). Generalizing every man as the oppressor and every woman as the victim is oversimplifying the way patriarchy works- through elaborate system of social sanctions and institutions. Further, this also rejects the nuanced relationship that sexism has with other forms of oppression, such as racism or classism or casteism, in the case of India. In other words, the power hierarchies become unstable when one or more of these axes of oppression are thrown into the equation. For instance, the direction of oppression between a white woman and a black man, or between an upper caste woman and a lower caste man cannot be analyzed as simplistically as saying 'all men are oppressors'. By proclaiming universal sisterhood through similar experiences, radical feminism negates the unique socio-cultural contexts that different women come from, thus being in danger of being representative of only one type of feminism, that of a white, western feminism. It is precisely in this context of essentialism and being perceived as primarily a feminism of white, middle class women, other forms of feminisms such as feminism of colour, postcolonial and third world feminism emerged.

Summing Up

Radical feminist thought thus analyzes women's oppression primarily from the understanding of patriarchal control over women's sexuality and reproductive labour. Radical feminism not only attempts to understand women's oppression and victimhood but also focuses on celebrating womanhood and sisterhood and consciousness raising to negotiate with patriarchal and structural inequities.