
UNIT 1 MYTH, RELIGION AND THE BODY

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Myths, religion and women's bodies are tied together intricately and loosely, depending on the socio-political, historical and cultural contexts. Some religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam claim historical evidence for their existence, and therefore don't give much importance to myth, while other traditions like the Hindu traditions, sometimes conflate myth and history. However, both kinds of religious traditions consist of explanations and practices that define gender roles or codify their customs according to gender. In this unit, we will study the relationship between organised religious practices and gender roles in many ways: how religious prescription impacts the lives of women; the ways in which religious concepts inherently inform gender rituals and practices as well as review certain moments when freedom of religion has fought for primacy with gender equality. While religious traditions are fairly consistent in the way they determine gender roles and expectations, myths present us with more complex situations.

While we can treat myths as stories from which we can take away morals, more often than not, that is not their function, or only function. Different cultures use, weave, record and retell myths in different ways. As a result

it is difficult to assign a moralistic function to myths, unless the myth itself proclaims that it is a moral tale. This does not make the function of myths any less important. They are important because they often structure our thoughts, emotions, and responses to the world, sometimes even without our knowing. Briefly consider the case of Sita in the myth *Ramayana* - Popular portrayals as well as scholarly studies have debated the portrayal of Sita in the story. In India, essential connections are being made between Sita and the construction of womanhood. According to Herman (2011), Sita and Sati as goddesses continue to influence the construction of Hindu women while reflecting the duties of a *pativrata*. Here, *pativrata* can be described as a model of power which can be achieved by women who perform her duties towards her husband. While Sita has been venerated for being a devout wife, her story is also used to reflect on the oppression of women confined by structures of patriarchy. More recently the roles of characters, such as Surpanakha, Tataka and Mandodari have been interpreted as examples of caste-based women's oppression. Also, different forms of representations offer insights into the multiple aspects and careers of a myth. Keeping the same case in mind we could study the story of Sita through the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, its film versions, a performance by a local drama or dance group and the way the story is told by different people. Every articulation of a myth is often different from the previous articulation and each interpretations of an articulation can be various.

This unit is divided into two sections. **Section 1** provides an overview of some of the ways in which religious traditions define gender roles in their belief and practice as well as some of the main debates about these gender roles and traditional practices from a Women's Studies perspective. **Section 2** offers the readers a variety of myths from across the world and some important themes that recur in the stories of women in these myths.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Locate the representation of gender bodies differently in religion and myth;
- Discuss feminists question pertaining to the women's definition of body and role in religion; and
- Critically analyse the relation between gender and myth.

1.3 RELIGION: PRESCRIPTION AND PRACTICE

This section presents an overview of some of the major themes that relate to women and religion - feminist theology, gender roles assigned by religion, issues concerning ceremonial restrictions of nudity and veiling as well as

woman-centred religious practices. Questions about who prescribes the texts for whom, and who interprets them, have also been raised by feminist theologians.

1.3.1 Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is a name commonly given to feminist critiques of theologies in traditional Abrahamic religions - Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Feminist theologians use the term 'theology' to signify a reflection on the divine from a feminist perspective. They have established that the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran were written within cultures that were systemically patriarchal. 'Patriarchal' here not only refers to male domination and sex-gender inequalities but also racism, colonialism and classism. Some of the systemic forms of oppression written into the texts and interpreted later include the use of male-centred language which has the ability to make women secondary as well as make sacred the experience of man while making invisible, and thus excluding, other "powerless" people such as women, people of non-White races and people belonging to lower socio-economic background. It is designed to secure patriarchal interests such as property, wealth and control over economic situations. Thus, feminist theologians have subverted patriarchal biblical interpretations by employing historical reinterpretation and by uncovering a range of religious works written by women. The underlying aim of feminist theology is to show that since the meaning of texts is produced according to socio-religious location of individuals, there should be multiple and competing definitions of social reality which include a variety of authentic truths and divine revelations. The pursuit of truth is thus seen as a spiritual journey and not one that uncovers a single epistemological truth (Grove, 2009).

Islamic feminists, for instance, promote reinterpreting traditions in relation to social, cultural and historical circumstances. For instance **Taheri** and **Parker** believe that the Qur'an's 'universal and egalitarian verses' have been overlooked so as to enforce institutionalised power structures that favour men (Taheri & Parker, 2009). Scholars writing about Islamic feminist movements the world over, reflect on the ways in which freedom of religious expression and the need for gender equity have come into conflict. Islamic feminism refers to a kind of mobilization for gender equity that pays close attention to women's interpretation of the Qur'an and their practices in accordance with these interpretations. In Section 1.2.5, under the title 'Ceremonial Nudity and Ceremonial Veiling', we will learn more about the relationship between the interpretations of Qur'anic texts and its emancipatory impact on women's lives in terms of political agency.

1.3.2 Religion and Gender Roles

This section will focus on the question: How does religion interact with gender to shape the public and private experiences of the lives of women and men? It is commonly assumed that religion often prescribes certain roles for men and women and these prescriptions lead to different life experiences for them in different religious contexts. Let us examine gender roles in the context of Mormonism, a Christian religious denomination also known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Mormonism was established in New York in 1830. The church was organised according to the patriarchal order called “the priesthood” which is the authority to act in the name of God. The priesthood is established as an exclusively male right and responsibility. About a decade after the Latter Day Saints (LDS) church was established and their priesthood, the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo was organised to provide women official roles in the patriarchal organization. Mormon women as a result were able to participate in politics, economic activities and social life through the rest of the 1800s. However, as the church grew in size, it became increasingly bureaucratic and the functioning of the Relief Society was curtailed and overpowered by the priesthood authority. Under these circumstances Mormon women became subordinated and more feminised.

As a result, women’s roles in Mormon society became restricted to daily labour that would support and strengthen men’s leadership roles at the head of the church. The family became a space where women’s roles were clearly defined in terms of marital relations. While both husband and wife had the responsibility of child care, the wife’s role was circumscribed within the house, while the husband was to provide resources for the upkeep of the family. The changing economic and social environment in the United States, however, drew Low Development Society’s (LDS) women into the workforce and in time the church’s view of women’s roles also underwent changes. Nevertheless, the ideological norm of the LDS church holds that women will perform roles that maintain the household and children while men perform roles that supply material resources for the same. (Kane, 2009)

Within Roman Catholicism, women cannot be priests and in the context of Islam, women cannot be Muslim *imams* or religious leaders. In Hindu traditions, women cannot take the role of the *Shankara-acharya*, that of a leader and ritual specialist. Gender is demarcated spatially in some places of worship. Women and men sit apart in Orthodox Jewish synagogues and some mosques the world over. In most mosques, however, entrance is denied to women. At the *Ayappa* temple in Kerala only pre-pubescent girls and post-menopausal women are allowed entry. These spatial distinctions, one must remember, reflect different obligations for women and men in these religions and traditions. These restrictions are valued and weighed

differently in each traditional context. More recently, some synagogues have stopped separating women and men and have supported women's ordination as rabbis. Leading roles in many Protestant Christian denominations are now open to women. Within the Buddhist tradition, while male monks are invested with high status, women have become nuns and teachers.

1.3.3 Bhakti Traditions and the Feminine Devotee

While there are religious traditions that assign specific roles to women and men, certain religious concepts such as that of 'devotion' may be regarded as intrinsically gendered in nature and its practice. Consider the case that in case of devotion, the relationship is between a god and a devotee, where the former could be said to be male by virtue of it having the more powerful position in the relationship and the latter, female, by virtue of the devotee being in service to god. In the context of the Bhakti tradition in India, the role of the devotee is consistently female, even if the devotee is in fact a man. Kumkum Sangari (1990), an established scholar, examines the role of the devotee in *Bhakti* traditions as inherently feminine, evident within various threads of worship, most obvious in the tone that Kabir (a Bhakti poet renowned for his couplets) assumes in relation to his god.

Tracing the history of the devotional voice and the 'feminine' relation to god, Kumkum Sangari (1990) avows that this voice is present through *saguna* (a tradition that extols the attributes or qualities of god) and *nirguna* (a tradition that extols god beyond form or qualities) bhakti traditions, the *advaita* (non-duality) and *dvaita* (duality or twoness) theology as well as *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism*. While a sense of 'lowliness' of women is implied in characterizing the devotee as feminine, this aspect is rendered differently across the many traditions. For instance the 7th century Alvar saints characterise *Goda Andal* in her *madhuryabhakti* for Krishna as mingling erotic elements of *shringara* (act that leads to clean and beautiful appearance) with spiritual desire. So also, the Nayanars too (in Sambhanday, 7th century AD) describe divine union in terms of conjugal love where the bhakta is a love-sick woman whose heart has been stolen by god, the thief. Other instances include the Vaisnavite Tamil saint Nammalvar (c 600-800 AD) who thought of himself as a woman, and Akka Mahadevi (c1100) who betrothed herself to Siva, singing "I saw the haughty Master/ for whom men, all men,/ are but women, wives" (Moon, 2010, P. 27). Sangari suggests that there is a loosening of boundaries between the feminine and the masculine that occurs in the adoption of female roles by male bhaktas, as in the case of the voice that Kabir (c 1450-1575) adopts in his dohas. However, it cannot be refuted that woman and *maya* (illusion) are combined together as hindrances to true devotion and renunciation in the songs of Surdas and Kabir. In opposition to these forms of *bhakti*, Mira's bhakti is rendered as a struggle; it has a radical protesting nature as well as a compensatory mindset. Mira's *bhakti* attempts to challenge brahmanical

hegemony and feudal relations in medieval Rajasthan as her practice of *bhakti* does not differentiate between spiritual renunciation and social critique. Practising one entails the other (Sangari, 1990).

In the case of Bhakti, maleness and femaleness are roles assumed by those in the position of god and devotee respectively, thereby allowing male devotees to perform female roles. Now, let us proceed to review examples of women in religious traditions, where it is necessary for all participants in the ritual to be female, which means possessing a female body and not just perform the role of femininity.

1.3.4 Wicca: A Women-only Religious Practice

While *bhakti* traditions are instances of worship practices that are inherently gendered, **Wicca** can be considered as a **women-only religious** practice. Wicca is known as an 'earth-based or neo-pagan religious movement' (O'Brien & Alumni and Friends Memorial Book Fund, 2009) focused on nature and worship of goddesses. Its presence has been prominent in Europe and North America since the twentieth century, while its main influences are pre-Christian Indo-European religions among others. Wicca is also referred to as witchcraft or just 'the Craft' and the practitioners call themselves 'Wiccan' or 'Witch'. The meaning of 'Wicca' according to its practitioners is 'to bend' or 'to shape', thereby implying the ability of magic to bend natural laws. While some Wiccans believe that their religion dates to paleolithic times when a great goddess ruled the universe, more modern Wiccans have opposed monotheistic patriarchal religious institutions which they believe to be sexist. Wicca provides women an alternative to patriarchal religion that chiefly view women's bodies as sinful or impure. In Wicca, women are regarded as having special power and wisdom because of the distinctive connection between women's menstrual cycles and the moon's cycles. The Wiccan worldview offers women the opportunity to celebrate their bodies as invested with the goddess's power (Letendre, 2009).

However, the history of witchcraft practitioners or Wiccans in Europe is a complex one. Depending on the cultural context, a witch is considered good or evil. A witch is someone known to possess supernatural powers, an intermediary between gods or goddesses and humans. In most post-Christian societies witches are considered evil, while in others they are thought of as having divine powers. The rise of Christianity also led to devaluing feminine deities and evil acts of witches were punished by fining and banishing or imprisoning before the Middle Ages, by burning in 11th century when the church stopped being lenient towards witchcraft and pagan beliefs. In 15th century Europe if a woman was accused of being a witch, it was considered reason enough to brand her as one and burn her alive at the stake. In 1486, a book titled *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches"), first published in Germany by Dominican inquisitors served as a guidebook

for witch-hunting. The book strongly suggested that women's faith was wavering, that they were unable to control their carnal lust, that they were weaker in mind and body than men, thus furthering a gendered notion of witchcraft. In the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and America, witchcraft became an excuse to put to death women who were considered independent by towns people or to deprive women who stood to inherit property in the absence of brothers. Similar expressions you can find in the tribal areas of Jarkhand, Bihar, North-East and Rajasthan, where single unmarried women and widow are considered to be witches; hence subjected to the social practice of witch killing. Women's sexual and economic freedom was feared and many witch trials (especially the New England trials in America conducted by the Puritans in the 17th and 18th centuries) were motivated by such threats (*Encyclopaedia of Gender and Society*, entry 'Witches').

Shaktism or Shakta, a tradition that includes the worship of the goddess, is another example of female-centred religious practice prevalent in parts of South Asia. The Shakti tradition is drawn from puranic texts such as the *Devi Mahatmya* which relates the birth of the goddess and her battle with the Buffalo Demon. The goddess takes the powerful incarnation of Kali to overcome the army of demons. The Tantra tradition is one of the forms that Shakti practice takes. Tantra practices depend on ritual and meditation to establish a spiritual connection with the goddess. Ritual is practiced with the guidance of tantrikas so as to create and maintain relationships with the goddess. Such practices cause the manifestation of powers such as that of extrasensory perception and also possession by the goddess (Marion, 2009). This section helps us understand that gender roles constitute religious practices as much as religious conventions constitute and stratify gender roles. We learn that in both Wicca and Shaktism, being a woman is essential to participation in the customs and practices, thus investing greater significance the bodies of women rather than in the performance of womanly roles.

1.3.5 Ceremonial Nudity and Ceremonial Veiling

The previous section has allowed us to understand the ways in which religious customs play a significant role in gendering society. In this section we will examine one such instance, the relationship between women's clothing and religion. The covering of women's bodies has been at the heart of several religious debates the world over. In this section we will study a few instances of religious prescription of women's clothing and examine the different kinds of debates on the subject. The image of a nun dressed in a full-length black habit is familiar to many of us as a symbol of a religious woman. Such a habit covers all but the hands and face, concealing any evidence of the sex of the person and allowing the nun to be gender-free, enabling the nun to transcend traditional 'woman' roles. It has been suggested that this space allowed women to perform roles in society, especially that of charitable

work, that would otherwise have been seen as unfit for a woman. The cloister of the religious space facilitates a life beyond the setting of the traditional home, where a nun can work with other women in different parts of the world. The emphasis however is on a personal relationship with God.

Let us then consider the practice of ‘veiling’ of women’s bodies adopted within religions like Christianity and Islam and the reactions of Womens’ Studies and Gender Studies scholars to this. According to the teachings of Islam, parts of the body that should be covered for men, lie between the navel and the knee; for women, the rules depend on the company they are in. There are many concepts in Islam that relate to veiling - *purdah* or ‘curtain’ consists of physical segregation of the sexes and the covering of the body, *hijab* or ‘covering’ has implications of modesty and moral privacy for both sexes, *libas* or ‘dress’ connotes a sense of shelter and protection. Contemporary meanings of these terms are caught in debates of modernization, secularization and globalization. Feminists identify certain trends in the way these debates are polarised (Taheri & Parker, 2009). While the custom of ‘purdah’ may be considered to be a limitation on the mobility of outdoor activities of women, within the Islamic feminist discourse it has been thought of as an expression of choice and an exercise of freedom of religious choice. According to the Islamic feminists, when we consider the issue of ‘veiling’ as an issue related to the objectification of women’s bodies, we make the mistake of seeing the custom through lenses that are framed by a male or patriarchal gaze. It is also important not to assume that women who adopt the ceremonial veil are not political agents or women’s rights activists.

Let us now study the question of ceremonial nudity or the issue of religious ceremonies where women perform certain rituals in the nude. Consider the following incident that occurred in 1986 in a town in Karnataka called **Chandragutti** where devotees at the temple of goddess Renuka practiced *bettale seve* or nude worship. According to newspaper reports, during *bettale seve* that year, the devotees attacked police personnel, media persons, social workers and activists gathered there to protest this form of worship. One of the organizations protesting the worship practice was the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, (DSS) which aimed to inform the worshippers that they were being exploited by vested interests by being forced to parade in the nude. The leader of the DSS hoped to redress his village of caste and economic inequality; the protest was organised with a reformist view.

Linda J. Epp (2003), in her analysis of the incident, argues that it brings together a confrontation of ‘the religious’, ‘the sexual’ and ‘the feminine’. According to her the reformist standpoint on such forms of institutionalised nudity challenges certain insulting feudal traditions. Implicit in this standpoint is the belief that nudity is barbaric and such practitioners must be civilised.

This perspective may be used to show that upper caste men, landlords and temple authorities deliberately tie Dalits in superstition so the former groups can maintain their superior positions. On the other hand, the positions taken in the debate on ceremonial nudity show that male ascetic nudity and female *bhakti* nudity in the forms of Jaina Digambara and nude devotees are treated differently. While one is thought of as morally acceptable, the other is morally condemned. With regard to 'the feminine', the reform of the feminine has been a constant focus of reform movements that were directed towards the consolidation of India as a nation. In other words, reforming women and civilizing the feminine role is seen as part of what it means to be a modern nation (Epp, 2003).

Check Your Progress:

Is nudity viewed differently in different cultural and religious contexts? Look in the library and on the internet for debates on a female character called Bathsheba in the bible. Does every representation of her body in text, painting and film objectify her body from the point of view of a male gaze?

1.4 GENDER AND MYTH

This section provides a selection of myths from different cultures and the representation and characterization of the women figures in them. Every cultural context has its own way of organizing and instituting gender roles and norms. This makes it impossible to think that the 'female' and the 'male' are universally gendered in the same ways. We study myths to understand how people of one culture conceptualise the world around them. As a result, such a study can tell us something about the symbols that were used in the past, within a specific context and how they can be interpreted for contemporary use. For instance, feminists have interpreted and appropriated classical myths. In this context, appropriation refers to offering an account of the myth that strongly emphasises its ideological commitments. Every time a myth is narrated or represented in literature or art it offers us new ways of understanding the plot and characters of that myth. In this section myths from around the world are classified under some common themes that appear to cut across different contexts.

1.4.1 Violation of Women's Bodies and Political Change

The Roman myth concerning the rape of Lucretia has been used in western literature over the centuries, and each literary rendition has examined different aspects and angles of the story. According to the story supplied

by a Roman Historian, Livy (59 BC - AD 17), King Tarquin started a war against Ardea. At the time of the siege of Ardea, one night the princes (King Tarquin's sons) and Collatinus, their kinsman had a debate about who had the best wife. They decided to ride back to Rome to find an answer. They wanted to catch their wives unawares just to find out what they were doing in their absence. They found that the wives of the princes were enjoying dinner parties with friends in the absence of their husbands. They then rode to Collatinus's house, Collatia, where they found his wife Lucretia busy at home doing housework with her slaves. Thus Collatinus had won the argument about the best wife. However, one of the princes, Sextus Tarquin, during the visit had become attracted to Lucretia.

Some nights later he went as a guest to Collatia, entered Lucretia's bedroom, woke her and declared his love for her. When she did not accept his pleas or threats he told her that he would kill her and one of the male slaves and leave their bodies together so that it would look like she had been killed when caught in an act of adultery. Unable to bear this thought, Lucretia submits and is raped by Sextus Tarquin. Lucretia, distressed, sends messages to her husband in Ardea and her father in Rome saying that something terrible has happened. Both her father and husband come with a trusted companion each. When her husband, Colatinus asks her how she is, she replies that she is not well because no woman can be well when she has been dishonoured. She tells him that her body may be greatly soiled but her heart is pure and gives an account of what occurred. The men promise to find Tarquin and punish him and try to appease her sorrow. However, Lucretia says that while she absolves herself of blame, she cannot stop from punishing herself. Taking a knife she had hidden in her robe she kills herself amid the cries of her husband and father.

Brutus, who had come with Colatinus, picks up the bloody knife and swears that he will end the rule of Tarquin. Lucretia's father, Colatinus and Brutus take her body to the streets and Brutus makes a speech in a public place called Forum. Brutus' speech enrages the people against the Tarquins resulting in a revolution. The revolution is also the beginning of the Roman Republic (Gardner, 2010).

Box 1.4.1: What are the different ways in which we can analyse Lucretia's story?

- Several poets and writers in Europe have written about this story in different ways., English and French dramatists in the sixteenth century wrote plays that paid attention to the overthrow of the monarchy. Their plays did not focus on the fate of Lucretia. Shakespear's play focuses on the confusion and internal debates that both Tarquin and Lucretia go through. The times that these plays are written in are influenced by Christianity and the stories

therefore emphasise Christian ideas of sin and guilt. Saint Augustine in *The City of God* discusses Lucretia's story in detail. However, his discussion leads to a greater dilemma: If Lucretia's mind submitted to being raped then she is to be considered 'adulterous' and her death is the execution of justice; if her mind was innocent then her death must be considered as suicide which is also sinful. Further there is also the question: If she is made an adultress, why is she praised? (Gardner, 2010)

- Another way of analysing the story would be to dwell on the political aspect of the story from the Roman point of view, where the story of Lucretia is an incident in larger narratives that are political and belong to the world of men (Matthes, 2000).
- All the above readings are predominantly male in perspective. Must we regard Lucretia's rape and death as a sacrifice for a 'greater common good'? Or condemn it as an act of violence that particularly subjugates women and silences them in a world of men? From a Women's Studies perspective it may also be worthwhile to comment on the moment when Lucretia's body is paraded publicly to incite the crowds to take political action. Scholars have pointed out that the moment in the myth can be judged as a violation as her thinly robed body also becomes a sexual object when paraded before the largely male crowds.

Check Your Progress:

Read the story of Draupadi in Mahabharata and analyse it in terms of the questions raised above. Draupadi is shamed in a public place, gambled away in a game of 'chaukabara' and disrobed violently. Her public dishonouring also leads to certain political changes within the context of the myth.

Now read Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' and write a paragraph of about 500 words discussing the differences and similarities between the myth and the story.

1.4.2 Beauty and Deformity

Many Greek myths emphasise the stories and lives of beautiful women. Stories of Athena, Helen, Aphrodite and Medusa tell us how beautiful these women. One of the most famous stories is of the 'apple of discord'. There was a big feast at the wedding of Thetis, a beautiful sea nymph and

Peleus, a mortal. All the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus were invited to the wedding except for Eris (also known as the 'goddess of strife'). Eris, in anger, bursts in on the wedding scene and throws an apple among the guests. On the apple are inscribed the words 'for the fairest'. Three goddesses present at the wedding, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite claimed the apple, contesting that they were the fairest. Zeus, the god of the gods said that the decision would be made by Paris, the heir to the throne of Troy, son of Priam and Hecuba. Paris lived on Mount Ida as a herdsman because he had been abandoned as a baby, due to a bad dream that his mother had.

Athena, Aphrodite and Hera went to meet Paris who was minding his sheep and each of them offered him a reward if he chose her as the winner of the apple. Hera offered him wealth and power, Athena offered him military strength and wisdom while Aphrodite offered him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris finds Aphrodite's offer most attractive and judges her as the most beautiful woman. Athena and Hera, furious with Paris, became the avowed enemies of Troy till the end of their lives.

Paris, much later, becomes enamoured by Helen who was considered the most beautiful woman in the world, daughter of Zeus and Leda. Helen was married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Paris came to visit Helen and Menelaus and was welcomed warmly by the couple. In return for their hospitality, the story goes that he abducted Helen and took her back to Troy with him. (Remember that he had been promised the love of the most beautiful woman in the world by Aphrodite.) All the kings and supporters of Menelaus helped in launching a war against Troy for ten long years. Once again, the abduction of a woman results in a battle for political power, similar to the Roman story about Lucretia (Burn, 2010).

Now let us consider the case of Medusa: Medusa, also an important figure in Greek myths, was extremely beautiful and one of three sisters, the others being Sthenno and Euryale. Medusa the only mortal of the three lived in a place in the north where the sun did not shine. She requested Goddess Athena for permission to visit the south as she was curious to know what the sun was like. When she was denied permission, Medusa became wrathful believing that this denial was a sign of Athena being jealous of her beauty. Athena, a goddess, more powerful than Medusa, turned her hair into snakes and made her face repulsive and fearful. She also cursed Medusa so that anyone who looked at her would turn into stone. Thus the most beautiful woman turned into a deformed being, that feared by anyone who saw her. However, it may be worthwhile to consider 'beauty' as an important value within the Greek historic-cultural context. If we consider the Narcissus myth, there is reason to believe that beauty was prioritised in general; it was a way of evaluating bodies of men as well as women.

Check Your Progress:

Make a note of the different ways in which the ‘beauty’ of the woman is given prominence in a single story. Now, consider the following discussion questions:

- *Is beauty equated with power with regard to women?*
- *Is deformity in a person a curse in all cultures?*
- *The next time you are browsing the internet look up the phrase ‘The Ugly Laws’ and make a short note on the historical conditions and cultural context in which they emerged.*

1.4.3 Fertility: Female Body as Creative Force

Almost every culture has a creation myth, that is, a myth that explains how the world was created. The biological ability of women to give birth is variously adopted in stories of how the world began, including the union of male and female elements in the production of new life. In Greek mythology, Gaia or mother earth is considered the beginning of creation. She emerged out of chaos or void along with Eros, or uncontrollable desire. The feminine was recognised as the creation of the world. She was maiden, mother and crone as well as the different phases of nature, of the moon and of agriculture. She is considered as the giver of maternal affection as well as the bringer of death and destruction. Devi or Shakti and Kali are iconic female figures in the Hindu traditions. Devi is known through many incarnations and her powers include life-giving as well as destructive ones. For instance as Amba she is the iconic mother, as Jagaddharti, the sustainer of the world, as Annapurna, the deity of food, the fearsome warrior goddess as Durga mounted on a lion and as Kali the one who personifies destruction, degeneration and death. Devi’s main activities consist of the preservation and protection of creation from the onslaught of destructive forces.

Let us consider the **Sumerian myth of Innana** and reflect on some aspect of creation as well as fertility myths that centrally focus on feminine procreative abilities. The story of Innana’s descent: Innana (also known as Ishtar), the goddess of life, light and love as well as the queen of heaven, decides to descend to the underworld in order to free her husband Tammuz (also known as Damuzi). She prepares for her journey by gathering together all her divine powers, her royal robes and jewels. The queen of the underworld is her sister, Ereshkigal, who is the goddess of death and darkness. Innana, aware of her sister’s powers, instructs her messenger Ninshubur

that he must wait for three days and if she has not returned from the underworld even after that he must raise a hue and cry in heaven where the gods assemble and plead with the god Enlil to save Innana. In case Enlil refuses, he should go to Ur and plead before the Sumerian moon-god, Nanna. If Nanna also refuses to help, Ninshubur should approach Enki, the 'god of wisdom', in the city of Eridu.

Innana descends to the underworld and meets the gate keeper who asks her why she has come there. She gives him an excuse and he lets her enter. As she passes through the seven gates of the nether world, parts of her robes and jewels are removed despite her protest. After she has passed the last gate she is taken in naked and on bended knees before Ereshkigal and the seven dreaded judges of the underworld. They subject her to the 'look of death' and transform her into a corpse and hang her.

Ninshubur, waits for three days and three nights and approaches Enlil of Nipur who refuses to help. He then appeals to Nanna of Eridu who also refuses. In the end, Enki, the god of wisdom fashions kurgarru and kalaturru, two sexless creatures, and empowers them with the 'food of life' and the 'water of life'. They are to enter the nether world and sprinkle the food and water sixty times on Innana's hanging corpse. Thus Innana is revived, but as she leaves the underworld she is accompanied by the ghosts and the shadows of dead people who live there. With these ghosts and shadows she wanders from city to city through Sumer (Doty, 2005).

The story of **Innana** depicts her as maiden, mother and crone and her encounter with **Ereshkigal** is considered as the meeting of creator and destroyer. Innana who has been regarded as powerful woman figure undergoes an immense transformation from a powerful queen to one who learns to accept that the cycle of life consists of sacrifice and death and birth. The Egyptian myth of Isis is similar to that of Innana. Isis is a strong woman figure who avenges the death of her husband Osiris and schemes to place her son Horus on the throne of Egypt. Within artistic representations of one mythical sequence, Isis is seen transforming from an old crone, then to a young girl and finally to a bird of prey. All these myths in different ways manifest a variety of creative abilities the woman's body represents in different cultural contexts.

Mother goddesses as symbols of fertility are widely prevalent across cultures. The archaeological remains in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (now in Pakistan) of the Indus valley civilization consist of artefacts that depict images of the worship of a mother goddess in a tree, probably a symbol of fertility and creation. The mother goddess depicted on the seal is said to resemble those found on seals excavated in Neolithic Europe. Other prominent Mother Goddesses are Astarte in Syria, Ceres in Rome, Cybele in Phrygia and Demeter in Greece.

Activity:

- *Innana and Gaia are only two examples of creation myths. Compare and contrast these myths with the biblical story of the 'genesis' or the Christian story of creation where the creator is assumed to be male.*
- *Do you know of any fertility traditions? Talk to family members, friends and neighbours to see if they know of practices adopted when a woman cannot bear a child. Look up (on the internet, in the library) stories about Shah Daula's shrine or 'Shah Daula's chuhas' (the rat-children of Shah Daula).*
- *Discussion question: Are there any religious traditions or rituals for men who are impotent?*

1.4.4 Man to Woman; Half-man Half-woman

Myths have the special ability to offer us figures who don't match notions of reality and stereotypes of gender. Let's take the story of *Mahashasta* who is said to be the child of Vishnu and Shiva, both male gods in the Hindu pantheon. The story goes that Vishnu assumed the guise of an attractive woman, Mohini, and captivated Shiva. Shiva pursued Mohini and finally caught her. The lustful embrace that followed resulted in the birth of Mahashasta. Mahashasta, according to Wendy Donniger is identified severally as Skanda, Hanuman, Aiyanar and Hariharaputra (Doniger, 1999). Ayyappa, of the famous temple in Kerala by the same name, is also regarded as Mahashasta.

Ardhanarishvara, about whom you will read in the last unit of this block is thought to be an incarnation of Shiva (a male god) whose left half is the goddess Parvati or Shakti. Sculptures of this incarnation show a breast with a sari draped over it. According to one story Brahma the creator, made several attempts to create human beings who were capable of procreation. The created beings would become ascetic and not reproduce. He asked Shiva to separate out his female goddess feature in order that procreation could occur. Shiva does so. The female figure that stood before Brahma, at his request gave him the feminine energy that would allow him to create the human line. The depiction of Ardhanarishvara is to stand as a reminder of this story (Jones & Ryan, 2007).

Check Your Progress:

Look for other myths that depict the transformation of men to women or women to men. Here is a clue: Find out who the swan is, in the story of Leda and the swan, from Greek mythology.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Myth and religion have different relationships in different cultural contexts. In some cultural contexts myth and religion are deeply connected, whereas in religious traditions that contain a strong sense of history, the role of myth is limited. Religions in different parts of the world organise notions of male and female variously. There are some religious traditions that are women centric - Wicca and Tantra serve as two examples. Religious traditions in some cases have specific prescriptions about women's clothing and nudity. Gender roles stipulated by religious institutions or leaders undergo changes in relation to the changing socio-economic and political conditions of locality or region.

Many of the myths discussed in this unit reflect the aspects of gender that are seminal to that culture or society. The myths discussed in this unit offer us insights into how different cultures and traditions think of differences between women and men. Different interpretations and uses of myths also inform us of the purpose and functions of myths. For instance, in the next unit you will read about the uses of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Bhakti Tradition : The term “bhakti”, translated as devotion, is the name give to a large group of worship traditions, that consist of Hindu aspects, where the devotees express in their songs and poetry, the experience of a personal relationship with the divine. Bhakti traditions are also often called movements because they were considered to be just as interested in social as well as political reform as they were in devotion to a particular deity. It has also been said that the devotion of the Bhakti exponents was, in many cases, to causes that they espoused, rather than to individual gods. Many classifications of the Bhakti tradition include exponents as diverse as Râmânuja and Úrî Vaishnavism, Vallabha and the Pu??i Mârga, Caitanya and Gau??ya Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism, nirgu?a (aniconic) bhakti, Sants, Sikhs, and Sufis.

Innana Myth : The Innana myth is also known as a Babylonian myth. Sumer is an ancient region of South West Asia, in present-day Iraq, comprising of the southern part of Mesopotamia.

Dominican : Dominicans is the name given to the followers of a Christian order that was founded by the Spanish priest St. Dominic in the 13th century.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the inter-relationship between gender, myth, and religion.
- 2) Critically analyse the representation of male and female bodies in the religion and myth.
- 3) How does women body get depicted in the myth. Substantiate the answer with suitable examples citing from myths in Indian context.
- 4) Analyse different myths in Indian culture or in any other culture, which depict the transformation of men to women and women to men.

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UNIT 2 THE BODY IN FRENCH FEMINIST THEORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Anu Aneja

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 French Feminist Theorists: Approaches to the Maternal Body
 - 2.3.1 A Materialist Approach to the Body: Monique Wittig
 - 2.3.2 The Semiotic and the Maternal Body: Julia Kristeva
- 2.4 Destabilizing the Sexual and Gendered Body: Judith Butler
 - 2.4.1 Butler's Critique of Monique Wittig
 - 2.4.2 Butler's Critique of Julia Kristeva
- 2.5 The Feminine and the Female Body: Luce Irigaray
- 2.6 Writing the Body: Hélène Cixous
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Unit End Questions
- 2.9 References
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the course on “Theories of Women’s & Gender Studies,” you were introduced to some basic concepts in Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis (please refer to Course 1, block V, unit 2). In particular, you read about Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex and its implications for future feminist critiques and analyses. You also saw how feminist theorists disagreed with certain aspects of these theories and attempted to construct a feminist theory of psychoanalysis. The work of certain French feminists was also briefly touched upon in block IV, unit 3 of the same course. Many of these feminist theorists and writers have examined and interrogated how the female body gets represented in psychoanalysis. In this unit, we will move further into the interrogation of conventional constructions of femininity, and the female body, in feminist theory and psychoanalysis, in the works of some well-known French theorists and writers.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the contributions of certain French feminist theorists within the framework of the cultural and psychoanalytical constructions of the female body;

- Describe the reasons for the critique of the representations and constructions of the female body by French feminist theorists;
- Discuss the theories of Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in relation to the representations of the female body;
- Analyse Judith Butler's analysis of some of the limitations of French feminist theories about the body;
- Correlate the relationships between the "feminine" and the female body; and
- Examine what this implies about femininity and the representations of the body within psychoanalytical and cultural contexts.

2.3 FRENCH FEMINIST THEORISTS: APPROACHES TO THE MATERNAL BODY

The contributions of certain French feminist theorists and writers were briefly discussed in Course 001, Block 4, Unit 3. In this section, we will look more closely at their positions, especially in terms of what they tell us about the cultural and psychoanalytical representations of the female body. We will begin by examining the work of **Monique Wittig**, a Marxist feminist, who has contributed to the ongoing debate about the distinctions between 'sex' and 'gender'. In recent years, feminist theorists have moved beyond Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, while still employing some of their ideas to develop feminist counter-theories of psychoanalysis. Besides the discussion of these theorists in the course on 'Theories of Women's & Gender Studies' you have also read about some related ideas in the unit on 'Culture and the Maternal Body' in the previous block of this course. It would be useful for you to read those sections once again in the light of this unit. Here, we will present a brief overview of the perspectives of French post-Lacanian feminist theorists specifically in reference to issues of the body. We will examine the contributions of **Julia Kristeva**, who revises Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective. **Judith Butler** presents an interesting critique of some of the gaps in the works of both of Wittig and Kristeva. A critique of the body politics in Wittig and Kristeva from Butler's perspective will help in understanding their limitations. Following this, we will examine the main ideas of two other well-known French feminist theorists, **Luce Irigaray** and **Hélène Cixous** who have presented novel and intriguing ways of imagining the female body in, and despite, western psychoanalytical theory.

2.3.1 A Materialistic Approach to the Body: Monique Wittig

In her widely read and anthologised essay 'One is not born a woman', Marxist feminist **Monique Wittig** (1993) questions the naturalness of the categories of 'sex' and 'gender'. Although Wittig adopts a materialist

approach in re-defining these categories, rather than a psychoanalytic one, it may be useful to look at her work as a prelude to, and in relation with, similar conclusions drawn by feminist theorists who use psychoanalytical theory.

Monique Wittig uses a Marxist-feminist lens to interrogate the categories of women and men. The division between men and women, which we normally accept as 'natural', is actually, according to her, a political division. Women have been ideologically trained and manipulated to conform and correspond to the idea of 'woman' which itself is culturally constructed. Wittig feels that both our bodies and minds are a product of this manipulation. In her words, "We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call 'natural,' what is supposed to exist as such before oppression" (Wittig, 1993, p. 103). Wittig rejects the search for an explanation of differences between women and men based on biological factors; instead, she urges us to see these apparent sexual differences as a result of social and cultural factors. Thus, motherhood and the capacity to give birth are seen by her as aspects of 'forced production' where women's bodies are programmed to produce children, within a larger patriarchal and heterosexual framework which determines the definition and role of woman. Wittig therefore finds inspiration in **Simone de Beauvoir's** famous statement that 'one is not born, but becomes a woman'. Pushing de Beauvoir's argument further, Wittig thus explodes the myth that 'women' are in any sense a natural group (Wittig, 1993).

By showing that the oppression of women is not biological but political and historical, Wittig forcefully argues that women are oppressed as a class not because of any innate anatomical characteristics but because history and the unequal division of power have played a role in allowing one category of people - 'men' - to accumulate more wealth and power and to become the dominant group. In her view, the category of 'woman' is an oppressed category, and the oppression of women can be seen in Marxist terms as an effect of capitalism (where women constitute a 'class' that is oppressed by another class of privileged men who obtain their power over women through the impact of patriarchy and unequal distribution of wealth and resources between these two classes). If we equate 'women' with a class in this sense, we can conclude that 'one is not born a woman'; rather, one becomes a 'woman' - that is, we inherit, internalise and play out our destinies as a gendered category because of the class system of sexuality that patriarchy imposes on us. She compares the category of 'sex' to 'race' and concludes that both are 'imaginary' in the sense that they cannot be taken as 'givens'. For Wittig, the term 'feminist' implies fighting for women as a class (due to the historical oppression of women as a class), but also, in keeping with

Marxist ideology, fighting for the ultimate disappearance of this class (that is, the disappearance of the economic, political and social inequalities between men and women).

Therefore, **Monique Wittig** rejects the efforts of those feminists who struggle to defend and uphold the category of women based on some chosen positive, naturalised traits. She believes that such efforts would only serve to reinforce the 'myth' of 'woman' as a natural category, located in permanent opposition to the category of 'man' within a heterosexual framework. Wittig is thus extremely critical of those feminists who applaud 'feminine' traits in taking up any kind of feminist position. For instance, certain French writers like Hélène Cixous have valorised and affirmed positive traits usually assigned to the 'feminine', such as the ability for loving and giving, pluralistic, playful and non-linear, non-teleological structures, fluidity and openness, and acceptance of difference and pleasure among others, in their writing. While Cixous' writing clearly is an attempt to undo the phallogocentric structures of traditional discourse which have kept women from speaking in their own voice, Wittig, and others like her, however, tend to be extremely skeptical of the valorization of such attributes in the search for a 'feminine' discourse. A defense of femininity, according to her, is a dangerous move which will lead to women becoming trapped in essential definitions of femininity from which it will be difficult to escape. Rather, she upholds the category of 'lesbian' since for her, the 'lesbian' is someone who refuses class oppression as a 'woman' and does not conform to either of these two problematic categories ('women' and 'men') which are part of the normative heterosexual structure. By envisioning 'women' and 'men' as political and economic categories, rather than as biological entities, Wittig offers us a fresh and interesting perspective on women's sexual oppression as a class.

Check Your Progress:

Using an argument similar to Wittig's, critique the position, which claims that the division between women and men as natural.

2.3.2 The Semiotic and the Maternal Body: Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian born French feminist philosopher, uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to go beyond conventional theories of psychoanalysis and create an alternate discourse of feminist psychoanalysis. As you have seen in the unit on Freud and Lacan (MWG-001, Block 5, Unit 2), these psychoanalyst theorists describe the **mirror stage** as a sort of break in the phases of infantile sexual development. In Freudian theory, the

mirror stage represents the break between the pre-oedipal symbiotic stage of plenitude in which the mother and child are perceived as one, by the infant, and the subsequent post-oedipal stage where the infant must reconcile to the existence of the third figure of the father. As you saw earlier, Lacan re-writes this Freudian notion as the break between a pre-oedipal (pre-linguistic) stage of the 'imaginary' and the entry into the 'symbolic order' which the infant must accomplish as he or she reconciles to the existence of the third figure, or the phallic signifier. In order to re-familiarise yourself with these theoretical premises that have already been covered, it would be useful for you to re-read the earlier relevant sections at this point, before moving ahead.

In her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva (1984) introduces various terms and notions based on which she constructs a theoretical framework within which she describes a novel way of looking at the relationships between the subject, language and the gendered body. Let us begin by looking at the term 'castration' once again, which has earlier appeared in Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis. As you may recall, in Freud's and in Lacan's work, castration represents a sense of loss or lack (experienced initially as the loss of the mother's breast, and later as the anxiety related to the fear of the loss of the male genital organ). According to Kristeva, castration thus completes the process of separation from the mother's body in that the infant, having undergone the sense of loss, learns to no longer see him/herself as fused with the mother. Desire for the mother's body is now a desire for an 'other', a body separate from the subject, or the self. The subject, who has now identified and posited him/herself as a separate self, enters the world of language, or symbolic discourse, in order to represent desire for the m/other. Whether the signs used by the infant are in the form of gestures, vocal sounds, or words, they are all 'signifiers' because through them the infant attempts to represent that which is desired. As you have seen in the earlier unit, signs encompass the duality between an object which is being represented, and a signifier which represents that object. Thus, the **mirror stage**, or the entry into the world of language, or symbolic discourse, marks the infant's entry into a world where the separation between subject and object is first recognised. In Kristeva's work, this phase which delineates the rupture between the earlier sense of oneness with the mother, and the realm of signification where difference is seen as essential to identity, is called the '**thetic phase**'. All enunciation, because it presupposes a separation between the subject and the object, is 'thetic' in this sense.

The earlier sense of plenitude referred to by Freud was called the 'imaginary' by Lacan. It represents, in their theories, a notion of pre-oedipal fullness prior to the mirror stage and prior to the recognition of difference between self and image, self and other. In Kristeva's revisioning of psychoanalytical

theory, this stage of plenitude is seen as the realm of the ‘**semiotic**’ - a pre-oedipal realm prior to the mirror stage in which the infant exists in a pre-linguistic stage. **Kristeva** argues that the semiotic, even though it is prior to the symbolic phase of language, is yet made up of pre-linguistic **pulsions** or **drives** (the “**chora**”). Although these drives or pulsions do not correspond to the ‘symbolic’ realm of language as they do not possess ‘meaning’ in the sense of linguistic meaning, they do nonetheless represent the fluid, inside margins of language. They refer to a kind of rhythm, sound patterns, or map of vibrations, which harken back to the pre-oedipal stage of plenitude where the infant’s body is linked to the mother’s body in a symbiotic relationship. The **semiotic chora** is in this way, a pre-condition of the “thetic” phase because it already presupposes a certain order of communication. According to Kristeva, when we go through the break and enter the phase represented by the mirror stage, we move into the realm of the symbolic but carry with us in our unconscious, the remnant memories of these semiotic drives or pulsions. While we learn to repress these memories, the repression is not total or complete as some of the residue is carried forwards as we enter the world of language. Because the semiotic is intimately connected to the **mother’s body**, (since it refers to the stage where the infant senses a oneness with the body of the mother), it is distinctly “**feminine**” in that sense. Kristeva thus refers to the chora as “**maternal chora**” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 51). Described in its direct relationship to the mother’s body and maternal desire, the maternal chora thus enables Kristeva to re-write psychoanalytical theory from the perspective of the repressed aspects of femininity previously ignored in Freudian and Lacanian theories. It also foregrounds the role of the female body, especially the role played by the body of the mother, in determining the outer limits of symbolic language, and the capacity of the semiotic in undermining the repressive effects of symbolic discourse.

As it does not completely disappear, the semiotic *chora* can be seen as the **disruptive, revolutionary** pressure that attempts to force itself from within the codes of language which represent phallic Law. Even though it is seen as ‘feminine’ in this sense, that does not imply that the semiotic is somehow an alternate language available only to women, although women may seem to have an easier access to it to the extent that their attachment to the mother is not as completely severed as it is in the case of the male child who undergoes the almost complete abolition of the Oedipus complex due to the threat of castration. Nonetheless, the semiotic could be seen as the feminine part of our repressed unconscious which both women and men can delve into. Moreover, Kristeva sees the manifestation of the semiotic more visibly in the work of poets and artists since art more easily allows certain repressed rhythms from the unconscious to surface into otherwise structured content. She discerns the presence of the semiotic, for instance, even in the works of many male writers and artists such as **Joyce** and **Mallarme**,

where the deliberate rupture of common grammatical structures, meanings, play on words, use of certain sound patterns, etc, bring to the fore repressed drives which work on the language of the text from within. The recognizable semiotic drives and dispositions which can be seen at the level of the ‘energy’ of a literary text, or of poetry, form an underlying structure which Kristeva calls the ‘**genotext**’. These structures are not linguistic but pre-linguistic and can be discerned at the level of unconsciously placed rhythms or sound patterns in poetry. They are thus at the very foundation of the linguistic structures meant for apparent communication of meaning, or the ‘**phenotext**’. It is therefore by burrowing under the surface level of the phenotext that we can begin to discern the unconscious pleasures of embedded energies and drives. This pleasure, or *jouissance*, revives and brings to the fore the original pleasure of plenitude in relationship to the mother’s body. “Art,” therefore, according to Julia Kristeva, is the “semiotization of the symbolic” and “represents the flow of jouissance into language” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 79). The semiotic drives, as revealed in artistic practices, can be seen as that which threatens and even destroys the law of the symbolic because it constantly works from within to disturb the regulatory structures of the symbolic.

The work of **Julia Kristeva** moves beyond Freudian and Lacanian “phallogentric” discourse in that she diverts us away from the conventional importance of the phallus in the work of male psychoanalysts and asks us to pay attention to the **revolutionary potential** of an alternate ‘feminine’ creative force within language. Some critics of Kristeva’s work have pointed out the inherent dangers of using an ‘essentialist’ vocabulary of feminine and masculine which may return us to the prison house of sexist stereotypes. However, it is important to note that Kristeva is not equating the ‘feminine’ with ‘women’ but rather with a storehouse of alternate semiotic energies available to both women and men.

2.4 DESTABILIZING THE SEXUAL AND GENDERED BODY: JUDITH BUTLER

Gender Trouble, published by **Judith Butler** in 1999, was a work which would chart out a unique and different trajectory in the field of post-Lacanian feminism and queer theory. Butler not only interrogates both Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, but she also strikes at the roots of both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as ‘natural’ categories. While ‘gender’ is more commonly associated with a set of cultural attributes that women and men learn, emulate, internalise and perform, Butler also asks similar questions of the otherwise ‘natural’ category of ‘sex’. Using ‘**performance**’ as a central and pervasive metaphor in her book, she tells us that gender is a performance of sorts, and that it has a **theatricality** associated with it. Women and men thus follow and adapt their personalities and behaviour

patterns to conform to the cultural demands made of their 'gender'. In this sense, we are all playing out roles that have been assigned to us and improvising within the broad limitations of our gendered roles.

Biology, for Judith Butler, is not innocent of this kind of cultural imposition so that even the category of 'sex' (as in male and female) is gendered and determined by culture. In this way, Butler destabilises '**biology**' as a fixed foundational idea by showing how culture intervenes to construct 'sex' and 'sexuality' at the level of biology itself. Just as we 'perform' gendered roles which are culturally determined, we also imitate images of sexuality offered by media which itself reflects cultural influences. The lived realities of heterosexual, homosexual or transsexual identities can thus be seen as **stylised performances**, even caricatures dependent on the cultural codes within which we are embedded and framed. While Butler uses exaggerated images of imitation, display and performance to put forth a crucial idea which seeks to destabilise sexuality and gender, she has been criticised for paying inadequate attention to questions of power operative within cultural contexts. In defence of Butler's arguments, however, we could say that her discourse about performance is intimately related to questions of power since all performance is carried out within cultural contexts, and is not a matter of free choice.

2.4.1 Butler's Critique of Monique Wittig

In the chapter on "Subversive Bodily Acts," in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler examines and critiques aspects of the work of French feminists, Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig. Let us begin by examining Butler's analysis and critique of Monique Wittig's position, as we outlined it in section 3.4 above. As you saw in the discussion of Wittig's arguments, Wittig offers recourse to the term 'lesbian' as a way out of the conundrum of compulsory conformity to the myth of the category 'woman' which remains trapped in hierarchical heteronormative structures of family, kinship and so on. According to Wittig, as soon as we ascribe to the category 'woman', we must do so by adhering to all of the arbitrary attributes associated with women within patriarchal societies. Thus, 'woman' cuts off any possible escape from such attributes and collapses gender with sex as the attributes are seen to be rooted in biology. Butler summarises Wittig's argument by saying that for Wittig, "there is no distinction between sex and gender" (Butler, p. 143). 'Sex' itself is a gendered category since it is 'naturalised' into submission to heterosexual definitions and expectations. Therefore, Wittig extends the category "lesbian" as someone who refuses heterosexuality, and refuses the normative opposition between woman and man, thereby belonging to neither group. In this way, the category 'lesbian' seems to represent a third category, neither female nor male, neither man nor woman. Moreover, the categories of sex and gender constructed within heterosexual paradigms are intrinsically connected to language as it is through language, and repetition of names

and acts, that reality gets affected and effects get entrenched. Butler concludes from this that Wittig accords an immense power to the ability of language to shape reality. Butler however, questions Wittig's insistence that women must speak themselves out of their gender (and thus their oppression). Butler argues that this would amount to a usurpation of authoritarian positions earlier occupied by heterosexual subjectivities. If heterosexuality is based on universalizing tendencies in its construction of the myths of man as universal and woman as particular, then forcefully taking over linguistic positions of power to claim lesbianism as the only viable option would only replicate similar power structures, according to Butler: "In a self-consciously defiant imperialist strategy, Wittig argues that only by taking up the universal and absolute point of view, effectively lesbianizing the entire world, can the compulsory order of heterosexuality be destroyed" (Butler, 1999, p.153).

Besides her questioning of Wittig's unwavering faith in the absolute and radical powers of language to bring about change, Butler also pushes Wittig to make more complex her understanding of both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Wittig, according to Butler, appears to view all participation in heterosexuality as a replication of heterosexual oppression. This drives Wittig to argue for the complete displacement of heterosexuality as it is seen as a totalizing system, not at all touched by homosexuality. Similarly, homosexuality is also purified and presented as an absolute alternative to heterosexual acts and practices. Butler argues for a much more complex understanding of both homosexuality and heterosexuality in which both are seen as intruding upon each other. As stated by her, "there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships" (Butler, 1999, p. 155). If we agree with Butler that both heterosexual and homosexual practices and acts are co-dependent on each other for their very definitions, it becomes difficult to accept Wittig's proffering of lesbianism as a full-scale rejection of heterosexuality. Wittig seems to wish to displace the category 'woman' by the category 'lesbian' and invites women to participate in the wholesale rejection of 'woman'. However, Butler's critique of Wittig's argument asks whether such a refusal of any kind of solidarity between heterosexual and lesbian women is viable or even politically desirable. Further, the radical and oppositional positioning of two sexualities as though they are mutually exclusive of each other is also called into question by Butler. "What," she asks, "is to keep the name of lesbian from becoming an equally compulsory category? What qualifies as a lesbian? Does anyone know?... Can one do the act with a 'straight mind'? Can one understand lesbian sexuality not only as a contestation of the category of 'sex,' of 'women,' of 'natural bodies,' but also of 'lesbian'?" (Butler, 1999, p.162). Thus, instead of presenting a purified and absolute view of lesbianism as an alternate category to be embraced by all women in their universal rejection of oppressive heterosexuality, Butler argues for

a more effective strategy - a thorough redeployment of all categories of identity, and a contestation of multiple identities and sexual categories to make them much more complex and problematic. For readers of Wittig who are not quite convinced by her forceful but absolute arguments for an overwhelming usurpation and displacement of heterosexual categories by homosexual ones, Butler's more sophisticated understanding of sexuality and its relation to bodily acts and representations offers a less counter-intuitive and perhaps more persuasive approach.

2.4.2 Butler's Critique of Julia Kristeva

Let us now turn to Judith Butler's main objections to some aspects of Julia Kristeva's theories. **Butler** (1999) acknowledges that Kristeva rejects Lacan's notion that the primary relationship to the mother's body has to be completely repressed in order for cultural meaning to assume its rightful place. Rather, in Kristeva's work, poetic language is able to recover that repressed relationship by subverting and disrupting the law of the symbolic. However, Butler finds this to be a problematic beginning in Kristeva's theoretical work because, according to Butler, Kristeva seems to assume that the paternal law of the symbolic is always stable and that its privileged position within the hierarchy is unchallenged: "If the semiotic promotes the possibility of the subversion, displacement, or disruption of the paternal law, what meanings can those terms have if the Symbolic always reasserts its hegemony?" (Butler, 1990, p. 102). Further, Butler opines that in Kristeva's theories, the maternal body appears to possess a set of meanings which are prior to culture itself, thus equating maternity with some kind of pre-cultural reality.

Moreover, according to Kristeva, the two main avenues through which the semiotic finds expression are either through the use of poetic language, or through the act of giving birth. While the former allows for the semiotic to disrupt the law of the symbolic through linguistic forces such as rhythm, repetition, sound patterns and rhyme, the act of childbirth allows the woman to temporarily connect back to the body of the mother by experiencing herself as a mother. Butler criticises the first proposition by saying that Kristeva's theory sets up language as a realm where the symbolic is always hegemonic (has greater power), and the semiotic, in being a temporary, disruptive force, can only act upon it but never permanently displace it. Since the semiotic is intimately linked to the maternal body, this body then remains to be viewed only as a pre-cultural entity whose desires may surface occasionally through poetic language. Poetic language, in Kristeva's theories, verges on psychosis in the sense that it signifies the loss of coherent meaning as demanded by the patriarchal law of the symbolic. However, since poetic language is a culturally sanctioned subversion of language, it can be sustained by the symbolic. Butler finds this idea equally problematic since she says that it fails to allow any kind of radical, liberatory

discourse to emerge in relation to women: “Hence, a full-scale refusal of the Symbolic is impossible, and a discourse of ‘emancipation,’ for Kristeva, is out of the question.” (Butler, 1990, p. 109)

The second culturally sanctioned activity which enables a re-identification with the pre-Oedipal and pre-cultural relationship to the mother is childbirth. However, Butler insists that this assumption also only serves to reify motherhood, that is to say, idealises motherhood by coercing us into seeing motherhood as an avenue of subversion and liberation which is sanctioned by culture. Butler argues that instead of seeing motherhood as a privileged site and activity, and the woman’s body as naturally attuned to motherhood, it may be more useful to see motherhood itself as an effect of culture. If we begin to see motherhood and reproduction not as activities which allow women to experience some lost identification with the mother’s body but rather as culturally constructed ideas imposed on women, then the entire basis of positioning these activities in terms of their subversive potential would become suspect. Moreover, Butler says that both poetic language and motherhood appear in Kristeva’s theories as displaced homosexual desires (in the sense that they enable women to experience a lost identification and desire for the mother’s body). However, as displaced desires sanctioned within the larger discourse of heterosexuality, they fail to take into account the constitution of lesbian experience which remains a psychotic alternative, and thus, unintelligible (Butler, 1990, pp. 110-11). Butler urges us, instead to see the “maternal instinct” as a culturally constructed desire. If so, we would end up questioning Kristeva’s assumption that the instinct towards motherhood is somehow pre-Oedipal, and pre-cultural, and therefore ‘natural’ to women. Rather, Butler invites us to ask if such an instinct is not indeed generated by culture itself. In Butler’s words, “the female body that she seeks to express is itself a construct produced by the very law it is supposed to undermine” (Butler, 1990, p. 118). Thus, Butler questions the subversive potential of Kristeva’s theories of the semiotic and the maternal body by attempting to show that the female body, as represented by Kristeva, is still shackled down in the idealizations imposed on it by paternal law. Such a female body seems to Butler to be ‘posing’ as subversive but actually operates in the service of traditional demands made on women by paternal law.

Check Your Progress:

What do you understand by Butler’s argument about ‘destabilizing the biology as a fixed category’? Explain the argument in your words.

2.5 THE FEMININE AND THE FEMALE BODY: LUCE IRIGARAY

Like Kristeva, the French philosopher **Luce Irigaray** takes apart different aspects of Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis, especially in terms of the representation of the Oedipus complex and female sexuality. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (published in French in 1977), and in some of her other essays, such as *Blind Spot* Irigaray interrogates Freud's **phallocentrism**, his definition of sexual desire as "masculine" desire, his apparent hostility towards the "lack of the penis" in the girl, and his (mis)representation of the mother-daughter relationship due to his own phallogentric biases. Irigaray questions, as do many other feminist theorists, the emphasis on the male genital organs, on castration, and on the notion of "penis envy" in Freud's work. Freudian theory, she believes, represents the female body as lack, or absence, and as object of male desire rather than her own desire. She proceeds, on these grounds, to attempt to create a textual space which will open up female sexuality and the female body to women as subjects of their own desires and sexualities.

Agreeing with Lacan to the extent that she also perceives the feminine to be the "excluded" part of language (in Lacanian theory, as you may have noted, the feminine is that which is **not represented** in the symbolic order), Irigaray believes that the feminine cannot be adequately represented in patriarchal discourse. Women, in patriarchy, 'mirror' back to men the reflections that the latter desire to see - that is, women reflect images of themselves constructed by men and so enhance men's sense of their own capacities. This '**specularization**' is detrimental for women because it forces them to submit to a false, make-believe world where they become trapped in the mirror as **reflections**, rather than as subjects. In remaining reflecting surfaces, they thus continue to function as **objects** of masculine desire. Irigaray instead offers to women the metaphor of the '**speculum**' as a tool with which they can explore their own bodies and sexualities and become **subjects** of their own pleasures and destinies. In contrast to the convex mirror which reflects the male gaze back upon itself, Irigaray offers to women the metaphor of the **concave mirror** - an inner cavity which will invite women to look inwards rather than remaining objects of someone else's investigation.

Irigaray's position is much more radical than Lacan's because in her theory, the feminine becomes a **subversive and disruptive force** which challenges the symbolic order and phallic Law from within. As in Kristeva's theory, the feminine will always threaten patriarchal language and discourse in Irigaray's view. Irigaray goes beyond Kristeva in that she proposes a direct link between this subversive force and the **female body**. Like Hélène Cixous and other French feminists who propose a different discourse of female sexuality that

is available for exploration by women, Irigaray also describes feminine sexuality as **fluid, polymorphous and dispersed**. The relationship between mothers and daughters is described by her as one between two desiring subjects. Women, in their unique capacity of being able to access such a relationship, can shatter the mirrors created by a “specular” patriarchal culture, and explore the feminine through their other senses. In her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), she delves further into a critique of western psychoanalytic theory, and ends with a chapter entitled “When our lips speak together.” Here, as in *Speculum*, Irigaray creates an ode to female sexuality based on the privileging and foregrounding of the female body and female (homo) sexuality through a specifically feminine discourse: “How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don’t have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 212).

Because Irigaray describes the feminine in its specific relationship to female sexuality and women’s bodies, her work has been criticised on similar grounds as that of Julia Kristeva’s - that is, for its essentialist undertones. Feminist critics like Toril Moi and Juliet Mitchell, wary of the inherent dangers of an essentialist discourse, try to warn us about the potential hazards of constructing the feminine and masculine as stable categories. While in some of her later works, as in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) and *To Be Two* (1999), Irigaray refines her earlier position by emphasizing the need to be attentive to the other’s difference in the context of ethical practice, she does not completely abandon the notion of the feminine as a different, subversive space more closely connected to women and the female body.

2.6 WRITING THE BODY: HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Hélène Cixous, the Algerian born French writer is most well-known as the exponent of ‘*écriture féminine*’ or ‘*feminine discourse*’. Cixous is the author of several theoretical works and essays, as well as works of fiction and a number of plays. In some of her earlier works, especially in *La Jeune Née* (*The Newly Born Woman*), ‘*La venue à l’écriture*’ (“Coming to Writing”), and ‘*Le Rire de la Meduse*’ (“The Laugh of the Medusa”), Cixous challenges the representation of female sexuality and feminine desire in western psychoanalytic theory. This theory, she feels, has historically represented female sexuality and the female body as ‘**the dark continent**’. In making this allusion to the colonial representation of Africa as the dark continent, she draws our attention to the representation of the female body in phallogentric discourse as a continent which invites exploration, fear, aggression, and colonization by the colonizing male gaze. Instead, like Irigaray, Cixous also asks women to explore their own bodies and sexualities and turn this ‘dark continent’ into a territory of self-exploration. The woman

that Cixous invokes in her early work is a **'newly born woman'** who rejects the negative, passive space assigned to her in western metaphysical and western psychoanalytical discourse and gives birth to a new self by taking charge of her body, her language, her destiny. In her essay, "Coming to Writing" Cixous invites her readers to **'come'** to discourse and find a new pleasure (**'jouissance'**) in creating a language of their own. This new language opens itself up to the **'feminine'** and so is described as much more **fluid, dispersed and open** than conventional phallogentric writing.

Cixous' texts therefore often defy definition in terms of conventional genre categories. In her fiction, more aptly called **'texts'**, characters often do not have singular, stable names and there is no structured, progressive plot. This writing, with its special connection to the pleasures experienced by the female body, is described as **'feminine discourse'** or **'écriture féminine'**. Since *écriture féminine* draws its energies from, and is linked so closely to the body, Cixous speaks of **'writing the body'** into the text, and of using a **'feminine libidinal economy'** to do so. Such an economy enables women to be in closer contact with their feminine attributes, such as the power of **'le don'** or **'the gift'** - that is, being able to give freely of oneself as opposed to holding back or hoarding one's energies. **Love** and **giving** thus become central metaphors in Cixous' writing, as do images of writing with the ink of the "mother's milk," as opposed to older phallogentric symbols of writing.

Cixous speaks of the feminine and masculine as attributes available to both women and men. According to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical discourse, men and women learn to repress their feminine and masculine attributes respectively, because of the significance of the phallus and phallic law in the context of culture. However, Cixous believes that since the feminine is repressed more forcefully by men in patriarchal cultures, than the masculine is in women, women are capable of being more **'bisexual'** than men (that is, they remain more closely in touch with their feminine as well as their masculine attributes). Consequently, Cixous speaks of women in terms of their **'bisexuality'** - that is, their ability to delve into and explore both feminine and masculine sides of their unconscious. She is critical of Freud and Lacan in that their theories represent women as **'castrated'** and as **'lack'**. In response to these images of castrated women, Cixous offers us the image of the Medusa - the **witch, sorceress and hysteric** who is traditionally associated with the image of a castrating monster but who is transformed in Cixous' work into the laughing Medusa. In her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous invites women to laugh, like the Medusa, in the joy of self-discovery through a writing which is not **'castrated'** from the feminine. In her later works, especially in her plays, she also explores male characters who are not castrated in this sense. For instance, in her play about India's partition from Pakistan (*L'Indiade*

ou l'Inde de leurs rêves), the character of Mahatma Gandhi represents the kind of person who is capable of opening himself up to the feminine, to love and to giving.

Like Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, Cixous' work also betrays a deep faith in the ability of language to bring about a radical transformation in the lives of women. And, like these other French feminists, Cixous too has been criticized for adopting as what some may perceive as an essentializing discourse which tends to idealize and glorify certain select aspects of femininity and motherhood. However, Cixous is careful to point out, at every stage of her work, the historical and political limitations of the very medium - language - within which we are constrained to the effort of re-defining categories. In other words, if language is slippery to begin with, and has already fixed meanings to the signifiers 'feminine' and 'masculine', then we become limited by these very signifiers as we attempt to open them up beyond their conventional meanings. Cixous' effort is to work constantly and untiringly on language, in order to revolutionize it and so that women are able to find pleasure in and through this newly invented discourse. In doing so, Cixous reveals a deep faith in the power and ability of language to bring about real change in the lives of women, a faith which seems to be shared, moreover, by other French writers and theorists.

Many critics of French feminist theory have called into question the essentializing tendencies of a discourse which leans towards the glorification of the female body, feminine attributes and female sexuality. On the other hand, feminist critics from the third world have also interrogated the relevance, from the point of view of non-western women, of a feminist discourse which depends so entirely on a dense textuality, and the power of language to bring about real, material change in the lives and conditions of women. Such objections notwithstanding, French feminist discourse on the body still offers to us a unique and revolutionary way of thinking about a radical transformation in the normative representations of the sexual and gendered female body.

Activity:

Go through any news paper column or documents of your interest. Do you think the language used is gender biased or particularly unfriendly towards women? Is there a specific 'feminine' language which would enable women to feel less distanced from communication? Try to explain/experiment with such a language.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have come across the contributions of some important and well-known French feminist theorists. Whether they use a materialist approach, as in the case of Monique Wittig, or a psychoanalytical one, as in the case of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous, they have all attempted in different ways, to find ways around the historical oppression of women based on culturally determined definitions of the female body. In either embracing certain kinds of new feminist representations of the body, or in refusing older versions of bodily representations, acts, and sexual practices, these feminist theorists all encourage us to think beyond the given, the accepted and the normative, especially when the norms imply the oppression of sexual bodies and categories. In doing so, they invite us to conjure new ways of imagining more equitable gendered and sexual realities and worldviews.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain and discuss the materialist approach of Monique Wittig in her description and rejection of women as a class.
- 2) Why does Monique Wittig agree with Simone de Beauvoir in saying that “one is not born a woman”? Explain what she means by the ‘myth’ of ‘woman’ and her response to this unacceptable myth.
- 3) How does Julia Kristeva revise the theories of Freud and Lacan in constructing her discourse about the semiotic and the symbolic? Try to use and define the following terms in explaining the above: mirror stage, castration, thetic, semiotic, chora, symbolic.
- 4) Explain the main criticisms taken up by Judith Butler in her reading of the works of Monique Wittig and Julia Kristeva. Of the three of these theorists, whose views do you find most convincing and attractive? Try to explain in your own words.
- 5) Briefly describe the contributions of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous to the psychoanalytical discourse about the body and female sexuality. Do you find any similarities in their views? If so, what are they? If you wish, you may refer to the suggested readings given at the end of the unit to support your answer.
- 6) Do you agree or disagree with the statement that the theories of French feminist discourse that you have read in this unit are not at all relevant to the lives of women in India? Try to build an argument by thinking about some of the issues in the context of the lives of Indian women of a particular class/ in your own personal context.

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2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 ANDROGYNY

Himadri Roy

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 The *Hijra* Community in India
- 4.4 Representations of Androgyny in Indian Mythology
- 4.5 Contemporary Scenario
- 4.6 Let us Sum Up
- 4.7 References
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous block you have read about the mother's body and the socio-cultural and philosophical debates relating to it. In this unit we will move beyond the parameters of biological definitions of body which categorise the body into binary opposites, i.e., male and female. The present unit focuses upon a certain type of body that cannot be classified as either 'male' or 'female', i.e. the androgynous body. The androgynous body is one in which the elements of female and male exist together. The 'androgynous body' can be viewed from multiple perspectives such as: bio-medical, psychological and cultural. In this unit, we will focus primarily on the conceptual understanding of the androgynous body in relation to *Hijras* in India in order to understand some of the socio-cultural stereotypes and challenges faced by this community. Further discussion regarding the male/female binary, bio-medical, psychological and cultural meanings of androgyny are dealt with in the annexure which follows the unit. You are encouraged to read the unit and the annexure in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of androgyny.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Understand the meanings of androgyny;
- Explain the concept of the body within the framework of binary opposites;
- Provide some examples from ancient mythology which explain the origin of androgyny; and
- Analyse the socio-cultural stereotypes and other forms of marginalisation of androgynous body in the context of the *hijra* community.

4.3 THE *HIJRA* COMMUNITY IN INDIA

The term androgyny may be used and understood in a variety of ways. The focus here is on understanding the concept of androgyny through the category of the *hijra*. Most of you would be familiar with the term '*hijras*'. These androgynous or transsexual people are very much part of the socio-cultural milieu of our society. In India, films both in the past and present have depicted the cultural constructions of the androgynous body in reference to *hijra* communities. The recent film, **Welcome to Sajapur** has shown the character of a *hijra*, Muni bai, who faces political marginalisation while contesting for the local body election. She expresses her 'feeling of social apathy' in her letter to the collector of the district, and she demands a change of attitude of society towards the *hijra* communities. There are various representations about *hijra* communities in films, religious texts, and culture that explain their limited role in society.

The word *hijra* originated from Urdu, *ezra*, meaning, a wanderer or a nomad, based on the community's lifestyle as nomadic vagabonds. *Hijra* or *ezra* can easily be translated into English terms such as: 'eunuchs' and 'hermaphrodites'. During ancient times, they were considered as *kinnars*, but later on in different states of India, they were called by the local languages like, *khasuaa* or *khasaraa* or *jankha* in Punjab and its neighbouring states, in Bangla they are called *Napungshok*, in Telegu *napunsakudu*, or *kojja*, or *maada*, in Tamil Nadu they are called as *Thiru nangai*, *Ali*, *aravanni*, *aravani*, or *aruvani*, in Gujrati they are called *pavaiyaa*.

Usually, when we think of a body, we conceptualise it in binary categories, ignoring the people who exist on the borderline. **Serena Nanda**, in her book, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, points out that we all have tendencies to comprehend only conventional notions of existence of the body (Nanda, 1993). Conventional heteronormative descriptions of the body justify thinking of the androgynous body as nothing but a "wrong body" and there is always a heteronormative desire to either name the body as woman or man. Theorist, **Sandy Stone**, disagrees with this idea, adding that it is in fact a phenomenon of "sacrificing the complexities and ambiguities" of this body's "lived experience(s)" (Patricia, 2010, 33-59). Thus, we tend to overlook the position of those who embody such complexities in any society. In the average person's understanding, a body such as this suffers from what Butler calls 'gender identity disorder' (Butler, 1990, as cited in Macdonald-labelle, 2011, p.40).

The androgynous body has been viewed as abnormal, unnatural and abhorrent. In India, such bodies are stigmatised and therefore devalued. Due to the social stigma they carry, the *hijra* community lives in fear and hence tends to cluster together in ghettos and move around in groups. A long struggle and grass-root activism have resulted in their recognition as

the “third sex/gender”, for instance the Census of 2011 introduces the column “other category” under gender. This kind of recognition is likely to reduce the stigma and marginalisation of the *hijra* community imposed by a heteronormative social order.

4.4 REPRESENTATIONS OF ANDROGYNY IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

In this section, we will discuss ancient religious beliefs about androgyny to shed some light on the position of the *hijra* community in India. Many creation myths from all over the world conceptualise creation as a union of male and female principles, and creation myths about androgyny can also be found in several cultures (see annexure). Ancient Hindu mythology includes both types of stories. Alka Pande in her book, *Ardhanarishvara: The Androgyne Probing the Gender Within*, points out two myths about androgyny from two different schools of thought that reflect the cultural expression about the origin of human beings from the divine concept of Ardhanarishvara, half man half woman.

According to the Shaiva School of thought:

“The origin of human race is attributed to Brahma, the Creator in the Hindu pantheon, who after creating Prajapatis, the first images created by Brahma, did not know how to proceed further... He lacked the power to create women, until Siva appeared before him in the androgynous form of Ardhanarishvara, ‘the Lord whose half is woman’, the right being the male manifestation. On seeing the Supreme Lord Siva, Brahma realised that Ardhanarishvara held the potential for becoming a couple that could unite sexually and in order to secure this went into tapasya, or penance. Pleased by Brahma’s austerities, Siva, the omnipresent and the embodiment of knowledge, created the goddess Sati, the true, from the left side of his body” (Pande, p. 20).

On the other hand, the Vaishnava school of thought holds that Lord Vishnu is the source of the androgynous body. Pande says:

“Lord Vishnu is known to have taken on the female form of Mohini at the crucial time of the churning of the ocean by the gods and demons. An agreement had been reached that the goods and riches churned up would alternately shared. When amrit, the nectar of eternal life, came up, it was the turn of the demons. However to deprive the demons of the nectar, they create havoc once immortalised, Vishnu took the Mohini form to distract the attention of the asuras (demons)” (Pande, p. 24).

Myths about the origin of androgyny get embedded in cultural consciousness over a period of time, and are often used to explain the existence of the androgynous body. There are several myths regarding the birth of the androgynous body. According to Nanda, there exists another myth with regard to the birth of *hijras*,

'In the time of the Ramayana, Ram fought with the demon Ravana and went to Lanka to bring his wife, Sita, back to India. Before this, his father commanded Ram to leave Ayodhya [his native city] and go into the forest for 14 years. As he went, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Ram came to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, "Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away." But those people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Ram did not ask them to go. They remained there 14 years and when Ram returned from Lanka he found those people there, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Ram' (Nanda, 1993, p. 542).

Nanda also notes that there are similar myths that can be found in other parts of India. In Tamil Nadu, there is a famous festival in which *hijras* who identify themselves with Krishna play the role of widows of the male deity Koothandavar. The story behind this festival goes like this: there were two kingdoms and to escape the fear of defeat, one of the kings made the promise to sacrifice his eldest son to god. However, the king asked for his son's marriage before he gets sacrificed. Lord Krishna then comes to the earth in form of a woman to marry the king's son. Therefore, in this festival, men who promise to the god dress like a woman to marry him. *Hijra* all over India participate in numbers in this festival. They dress in their best clothes and jewellery and reiterate their identification with the androgynous Krishna represented in this story (Nanda, 1990, p. 176).

Similarly, there are other related myths with regard to the third gender category and alternative sexual practices. Nanda cites a myth from Odisha:

Krishna's son, Samba, was very notorious for his homosexuality and often dresses as a female, especially a pregnant woman, and took the name of Sambali. In this regard, there is a ritual performed at the Jagannatha temple in which Balabhadra, the elder brother of Lord Jagannatha, is identified with Shiva and is homosexually seduced by a young man dressed in a female temple dancer form (Marglin, 1985, p. 53, cited in Nanda, 1990, p. 177). This myth reflects the presence of alternative sexual practices within Hindu myths.

Although there are several myths regarding the emergence of *hijras* since time immemorial, their existence today has acquired a historical presence,

and respect through religious belief. In fact the derogatory term, *chakka*, also has a religious history behind it. It is thought that hijras come out on the streets for their survival and livelihood and beg only on the sixth day of the week, because the Lord Shanimahadeva has cursed them. So, to impress the Lord, one *Hijra* is mythologically supposed to beg for 1008 sixth days of one entire life, after which the *hijra* derives enlightenment.

In several Hindu myths, sexually ambiguous figures have been accorded a privileged position and symbolise powerful deities. According to Nanda, ancient Hinduism has identified the category of the third sex which is further divided into four categories. Despite this, the social stigma attached to the third sex over the centuries has not abated. As we have seen above, religion and mythology have been able to provide a powerful model to understand the *hijra* community while specifying their position and role in ritual performances. In some sense, these myths have contributed toward the consolidation of the *hijra* community as a significant social group and gendered category in Indian society. In the Annexure to this unit, you will be able to read about ancient Greek and Roman myths of androgyny, and the similar role played by such myths in Western culture.

4.5 CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

In this section, we will focus on *hijras* in the contemporary context. You might be familiar with their existence in society, especially at traffic signals in big cities or at busy intersections or market places. With the phobia surrounding AIDS during the late 1980s in this country, their existence became prominently noticeable, because the existence of *hijras* was recognised as an integral part of the society. Soon, it took a different colouring under the jurisprudence of different political parties. Some tried to overrule their presence while some ignored them, and some did count them but not as a threat. Political agendas thus often dictated the manner of their representations within the discourse of nation-building. Although their presence was considered pivotal, giving them legality was far beyond the comprehension of the heteronormative society and no regulatory procedures were taken to give them the social and political space that they deserve.

As you have seen in the previous section, the history and cultural constructions of *hijras* in India can be traced from ancient Hinduism in which the role of eunuchs has been manifested through various myths. The ritual presence and participation of *hijras* in birth ceremonies owes its origin to ancient Hindu beliefs and practices. In contemporary times, the political participation and representation of *hijras* has started gaining ground. For instance, Shabnam Mausi became Member of Parliament from Sohagpur in Madhya Pradesh in 2000, and Kamla Jaan was elected Mayor of Katni in

Madhya Pradesh in 2000. In recent years, several NGOs of the country have come together to fight for the social space and recognition of the *hijras*. Their efforts bore fruits with the inclusion of *hijras* in the 2011 Census and recognition by the High court of Chennai.

Activity

Collect information about Hijra community from the news paper and analyze some of the current challenges faced by them in India.

4.5.1 Ethical Issues: Discrimination and Marginalization of Hijras

The stigma attached to the non-normative, androgynous body have led to medical and surgical modifications in an effort to make such bodies conform to normative, gendered categories. Although legal interventions can be used to prevent unethical practices, one wonders if in a democratic country like India, it is possible to make the law stringent enough to avoid the surgical modification of the androgynous body. The answer would be no, because the constitution gives the right to all individuals to have the freedom over their bodily existence. If someone desires to change his or her sex through surgical modification, the law cannot prohibit him or her from doing so.

At a philosophical level, the existential approach to understanding the androgynous body would argue that the androgynous body is more or less viewed as a defunct structure from the point of view of heteronormative culture. Existential philosophy describes the presence of an entity through its objectification and subjectification. In the case of *hijras*, one can see how they are objectified as unnatural bodies since the androgynous body lies outside the parameters, of the 'normative' male or female body. About the subjectivity of the androgynous body, it can be concluded that their presence doesn't matter to any heteronormative society since their subjectivity is easily ignored. In the case of arts and media, you have already seen how in cinema, theatre, architecture, painting, and sculpture, they may be differently represented. For instance, the *Ardhanarishvara* statue of white sandstone from Kannauj, or the 700-750 A.D. from Jhalawar, or the seventh century Pratihara style statue of *Ardhanarishvara* from Abhaneri, Rajasthan, or the painting from Mandi, Himachal Pradesh (Pande, 72, 78 & 90) and many more are evidence of a contrary conceptualisation and subjectification of the androgynous body in India.

Beyond philosophical and ethical questions, remains the very real issue of the marginalisation of the *hijra* body through casteism. As you have read so far, *hijras* didn't get any position except in the limited domains of specific religious rites and rituals. These constructions over a period of time have built a symbiotic relationship between the body and its accepted roles. Such representations in the everyday life and popular culture have institutionalised the marginalisation and discrimination of *hijras* in the society. Because of their marginal status, majority of *hijars* in India remain uneducated and illiterate. This also has serious implications for their employability. Social and psychological barriers also have an impact on their ability to live normal lives and earn a livelihood.

Activity

Watch some of old and new movies. Compare the representation of Hijra community in the films of old vis-à-vis new and analyse the changes which have come over time with regard to their representation.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Androgyny encompasses a complex array of concepts which can be examined from multiple perspectives, including cultural, sociological, historical, psychological and bio-medical. This unit has focussed primarily on cultural representations of *Hijras* in India, and the discrimination and social stigmas faced by this community. This has been done in order to examine one aspect of androgyny that we can all relate to. The Annexure, which follows this unit, will provide you with a brief overview of other possible ways of looking at androgyny. You are encouraged to read the annexure along with the unit in order to be able to place what you have read here, in the context of a broader understanding of androgyny.

4.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Read the examples of myth about androgyny given in this unit and in the Annexure which follows. Compare and contrast Indian and Western representations of the androgynous body based on your readings.
- 2) Discuss the discrimination and marginalisation of the hijra community in India in contemporary times. Explain the reasons for this marginalisation. What according to you, would be some ways to reduce the discrimination against this community and integrate them into mainstream society?

- 3) Read the article by Nanda, Serena, 'Hijras as Neither Man nor Woman' given in the references. Analyse the cultural representations of the Hijra community in India.
- 4) Why have some women writers found the idea of androgyny to be attractive from the perspective of creativity? Discuss with the help of examples provided in the Annexure to this unit and in relation to any other authors that you have read.
- 5) Read any case analysis about biomedical sexual reconstruction of gender. Does the case study show that individuals are placed into fixed categories (female/male) based on social expectations and norms? Discuss with the help of Part B of the Annexure provided at the end of this unit.

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INTRODUCTION

As you read in the introduction to the previous unit, there are various perspectives from which we can examine the concept of androgyny, the physically transgendered body being just one of them. In fact, the idea of the androgynous body and mind has captured the human imagination across cultures, and over the centuries. Androgyny has been represented in ancient times through mythology, art and religion. In more recent times, the idea of the androgynous body has been examined in literature, in psychoanalysis, as well as in science besides other areas. In order to obtain a general overview of these multiple perspectives let us look at some examples of the discussions on androgyny under two broad headings- Cultural Representations and Biomedical Constructions.

PART A: CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ANDROGYNY

Myth, Psychology, Literature

Ancient myths and religions from different parts of the world reveal a fascination with the concept of gods and humans who can straddle the male-female gender binary. Throughout the ages, philosophers, writers and poets have explored the idea of a more ‘complete’ human mind at the level of a ‘bisexual’ literary imagination. With the advent of the discipline of psychology in modern times, ‘bisexuality’ came to be explored by Sigmund Freud and many of his contemporaries. In recent times, women writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous have explored the idea of bisexuality as an unrestricted space which can offer women the freedom to escape from rigid and stereotypical definitions of gendered imaginations and writing styles.

Presented below are a few examples from mythology, psychology and literature which will give you an idea of the vast scope of cultural representations of androgyny across the world, and through different time periods. Since a complete overview of such cultural representations would require a much more detailed study, these examples are meant to be seen as representative of specific cultural beliefs and literary representations. However, they do help us in seeing the extent to which the idea of androgyny has been embedded in cultural discourses throughout the ages.

Hindu Mythology: The *Ardhanarishvara*

As you have already seen in the unit on the previous unit on Androgyny, Shiva’s manifestation as the *ardhanarishvara*, or the “half-woman god” in ancient Hindu mythology is a famous one. In this image, Shiva, otherwise a phallic god representing the immense power of the *lingam*, is seen as encompassing both male and female attributes and principles. Endowed

with female and male anatomical parts, Shiva combines the energy of the female *yonī* with the power of the male *lingam*, thus revealing that in fact, Shakti, most often manifested separately in the form of Shiva's consort in the form of Devi or Parvati, is an integral part of the nature of godliness:

"The union of Siva and Sakti is their basic reality. This is symbolized in the Hermaphrodite (Ardhanarisvara), half-male, half-female, whose nature is pure lust." (Danielou, 1991, p. 203)

Greek Myth of Aristophanes (Plato's *Symposium*)

One of the most famous stories about androgyny is the creation myth found in the *Symposium*, a classic text by the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. The *Symposium* brings together various speeches by famous orators and thinkers of the time, as conceived and narrated by Plato. In one such speech, Plato attributes the following creation myth to the philosopher Aristophanes. The myth has become known for throwing light on ancient Greek cultural beliefs about the origins of genders, and has been cited extensively in many literary, cultural and philosophical works throughout the ages.

According to this myth, Aristophanes claims that Zeus (the reigning Greek god) first created three genders. All human beings possessed four arms and four legs, two faces looking in opposite directions, and two sets of genital organs. Those with two sets of male genitals were sprung from the sun, those with two sets of female genitals from the earth, and the third, which possessed one set of male and one set of female genital organs, originated from the moon. These round-shaped and complete humans lacked for nothing and thus became proud and arrogant over time, causing concern to the gods. Not wanting to destroy the human race completely, Zeus comes up with a plan - he then decides to split each human body into two in order to cut down their strength by virtue of which they have become insolent. Those with all male physical attributes then give rise to the male sex, those with female parts give rise to the female sex, and those with one of each are turned into one male and one female body. With Apollo's help, the faces of these humans and the genital organs are then turned around to the front of the body, in order to facilitate reproduction between males and females. According to Plato's conceptualization of Eros, or love, each split person continues to experience a sense of incompleteness and searches for his or her lost half in a desire to join with the missing other and become complete again. Thus, those who were both male and female continue to desire their opposites, leading to heterosexual love and reproduction. Those who were completely male or completely female, will desire someone of the same sex, not with the aim of reproduction, but rather, for satisfaction of a deep-rooted desire on the basis of which homosexual love is explained. Plato is thus able to offer culturally acceptable explanations of both

Speech of Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium

"The sexes were three in number and of such a kind for these reasons; originally the male was sprung from the sun, the female from the earth, and the third, partaking of both male and female, from the moon, because the moon partakes of both the sun and the earth; and indeed because they were just like their parents, their shape was spherical and their movement circular." ...

"After painful deliberation Zeus declared that he had a plan. "I think that I have a way," he said, "whereby mortals may continue to exist but will cease from their insolence by being made weaker. For I shall cut each of them in two, and they will be at the same time both weaker and more useful to us because of their greater numbers, and they will walk upright on two legs." ...

"And so when their original nature had been split in two, each longed for his other half, and when they encountered it they threw their arms about one another and embraced in their desire to grow together again and they died through hunger and neglect of the other necessities of life because of their wish to do nothing separated from each other."

(Morford & Lenardon, 2003, p.187-88)

The Myth of Hermaphroditus (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*):

Another equally famous story explaining the origin of the physically androgynous body is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin work from around the 7th century AD. In this tale, Hermaphroditus is a handsome youth of fifteen, and the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Salmacis, a young and beautiful nymph falls in love with him while she is admiring her reflection in a pool of water and finds him wandering nearby. Salmacis tries her best to seduce Hermaphroditus but he spurns her and tries to escape her advances. Undeterred, Salmacis jumps into the pool while he is swimming and grasps him in a tight embrace. She then begs the gods to join him with her permanently and make them into one being. The gods grant her desire and their two bodies are united together so that Hermaphroditus forever becomes androgynous and 'enfeebled'.

Here, while we once again see the desire to come to terms with androgyny through mythical explanations, Ovid's version of the hermaphrodite as a more feeble version of the male body seems to be at odds with Plato's much more affirmative view of multiple genders and sexualities. Both myths, however, clearly show the prevalent cultural acceptance of the androgynous body, as well as of alternate sexual identities and desires, in ancient Greek

and Roman culture. Below is an excerpt from the famous story of Hermaphroditus, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

**OVID'S METAMORPHOSES:
TALE OF THE HERMAPHRODITE, 7 AD**

One day while he was wandering through the land of Lycia, now modern-day Turkey, he came across "a pool of water crystal clear to the very bottom." Hidden from his sight, gathering flowers at the edge of the pool, was Salmacis, a young naiad of Diana, goddess of the hunt. ... On this day instead of herself she saw Hermaphroditus and "longed to possess him." When she approached him full of her desire, the "boy blushed rosy red; for he knew not what love is." ...

Enflamed by the sight of his naked body in the water, Salmacis could control herself no longer. "Casting off all her garments," she dove in after him, grasping Hermaphroditus to her against his will. ...

While holding him in this violent embrace Salmacis called out to the gods to make her and Hermaphroditus into one being. The gods acquiesced, making the two bodies "knit in close embrace: they were no longer two, nor such as to be called, one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither, and yet both." After this sudden transformation, when Hermaphroditus felt that he had become "but half-man" and "enfeebled," he cried out to his powerful parents Hermes and Aphrodite to curse these waters, ... His parents granted his wish, and cursed the pool, known from then on as the dangerous uncanny waters of Salmacis, that would turn each man who swam or drank there into a hermaphrodite.

<http://www.lttr.org/journal/4/mesh-the-tale-of-the-hermaphrodite>

Psychoanalysis: Bisexuality in Freud's Theory of Infantile Sexuality

Sigmund Freud's theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex are well-known, and have been recognized as some of the most influential in the development of the disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis during the twentieth century. Freud's theories of infantile sexuality, and the differentiation between male and female sexual development during puberty, also reveal his deepening interest in the aspect of both anatomical and psychical bisexuality, which he was to touch upon in his earlier works and develop in greater detail in his later ones. About anatomical androgyny, or 'hermaphroditism' as Freud refers to it, he claims that to a limited extent, this has occurred normally over the course of human evolution, and that the bodies of both men and women clearly show the presence of some physical aspects belonging to the opposite sex.

What remains much more puzzling for Freud was the parallel aspect of psychic bisexuality and its relationship to homosexuality. While he attempted to draw connections between the two, he was not entirely convinced that there was a straight one-to-one relationship between them. However, he was certainly convinced of the important role that psychic bisexuality plays in the sexual desires and roles of men and women. The excerpts below give us an idea of Freud's observations, interest and even bewilderment in the face of what he clearly recognizes as the androgynous aspect of all humans and their psychical behaviour.

Freud's Views on Bisexuality

"For it appears that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally. In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex. These either persist without function as rudimentary organs or become modified and take on other functions.

These long-familiar facts of anatomy lead us to suppose that an originally bisexual physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one, leaving behind only a few traces of the sex that has become atrophied.

It was tempting to extend this hypothesis to the mental sphere and to explain inversion in all its varieties as the expression of a psychical hermaphroditism...."

"But this expectation was disappointed. It is impossible to demonstrate so close a connection between the hypothetical psychical hermaphroditism and the established anatomical one." (Freud, 1962, p. 7-8)

"Since I have become acquainted with the notion of bisexuality, I have regarded it as the decisive factor, and without taking bisexuality into account I think it would scarcely be possible to arrive at an understanding of the sexual manifestations that are actually to be observed in men and women." (Freud, 1962, p. 86)

Literature: Androgyny and Creativity

The idea of the androgynous mind as being more open to creative impulses has drawn the attention and imagination of philosophers, writers and artists alike. From Samuel Coleridge to Virginia Woolf, this aspect of a psychical bisexuality as a rich and fertile terrain of creativity has been expressed in various ways. Women writers, especially, have been drawn to the idea of bisexuality since it appears to offer a larger space for creative freedom than the constraints of 'femininity' which women artists have often been

expected to adhere to, and represent. We find, for instance, in Virginia Woolf's work *A Room of One's Own*, a deep musing about this question in relation to the creative life of the writer. More recently, French feminist writers like Hélène Cixous, have delved into the notion of bisexuality as an inherent capacity of writers, especially women writers, to explore their plural sexualities at the level of writing. Excerpts from the works of these two writers are provided below:

Virginia Woolf

Excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*

“The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her... Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, ... (Woolf, 1929, p.102)

It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. ...

Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace.” (Woolf, 1929, p.108)

You have previously read about the works of Hélène Cixous in the context of psychoanalysis, *écriture féminine* and the notion of writing the body. Cixous invites women to write themselves out of the limitations of a stereotypical femininity, imposed by patriarchal norms. In one of her earlier works, *La Jeune Née* (*The Newly Born Woman*), she opens up a discussion on the notion of bisexuality at the level of the psyche. Convinced that both women and men are capable of feminine and masculine attributes, Cixous, like Woolf, explores the possibility of accessing both sides of the psyche in order to liberate aesthetic creative impulses. Cixous believes that, due to historical and cultural conditioning, men learn to suppress their feminine side much more rigorously than women repress their masculine side. As a result, women end up being much more capable of being more fully ‘bisexual’. Cixous also distinguishes between two kinds of bisexuality - one that merely conjoins the male and the female, and conceals sexual difference, as represented in the ancient Greek myths, and the other, which is a recognition and acceptance of sexual difference within the individual. It is this latter bisexuality that she encourages women writers to explore, in order to explode the myths of a repressive and pre-determined

feminine. The excerpt below is taken from Hélène Cixous' well-known essay "Sorties" which appeared in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Helen Cixous: Excerpts from "Sorties"

"She is bisexual:

What I propose here leads directly to a reconsideration of bisexuality. To reassert the value of bisexuality; hence to snatch it from the fate classically reserved for it in which it is conceptualized as 'neuter' because, as such, it would aim at warding off castration. Therefore, I shall distinguish between two bisexualities,...

- 1) Bisexuality as a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference...
- 2) To this bisexuality that melts together and effaces, wishing to avert castration, I oppose the *other bisexuality*, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogentric Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality, that is to say, the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes,...

For historical reasons, at the present time it is woman who benefits from and opens up within this bisexuality beside itself, which does not annihilate differences but cheers them on, pursues them, adds more: in a certain way, *woman is bisexual* - man having been trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality.

...

I will say: today, writing is woman's. That is not a provocation, it means that woman admits there is an other. In her becoming-woman, she has not erased the bisexuality latent in the girl as in the boy. Femininity and bisexuality go together, in a combination that varies according to the individual,... It is much harder for man to let the other come through him."

(Cixous, 1986, p. 84-85)

Besides such representations and analysis in myths, psychoanalysis and literature, androgyny has also been the subject of serious scientific scrutiny and investigation. In part B, we will briefly discuss the notion of the biomedical vis-à-vis social construction of the androgynous body with the help of case studies.

PART B: Biomedical Construction and the Androgynous Body

Only recently, understanding of the body has emerged as a specific field within sociology and gender studies (Turner, 1984, cited in Holmes, 2007). To many feminist scholars, the concept of the body plays a significant role

in seeing how gender is lived through different kinds of bodies. Hence, the discussion on androgynous body attracts critical analysis and multiple interpretations in understanding the gender socialization process. The two-sex biomedical model that emerged during the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century has increasingly looked at the body through the principle of binary opposites. This approach not only describes the body as a machine but also started to differentiate between the normal vis a vis abnormal body. This biomedical approach expanded the idea that the body can be seen as a tool to define femininity, masculinity, and other gendered identities in the society. For instance, the infant possessing either a penis or a vagina became the fundamental indicator for sexual difference. To quote **Mary Holmes**, “what you can see on the outside does not always match up with the other indicators of sex and there is a lot more biological variation than the simple categories ‘male’ or ‘female’ describe” (2007, p. 22). To understand the gender socialization process behind the androgynous body, it is important to discuss/examine the scientific construction of sex.

There are several research studies which show the inter-linkages between the androgynous body, homosexuality, and biology. However, these linkages have been interpreted differently. According to Hird (2004), the scientific discoveries about sex sometimes were sometimes influenced by specific socio-cultural assumptions held by the scientists. The androgynous body is an amalgamation of both female and male sex characteristics, which shows that some individuals may have a genetic sex which is opposite to their hormonal sex. For instance, a child might be genetically female (having two X chromosomes and no Y chromosome) but having male anatomy. Studies have shown that about 1 in 2000 babies and 17 in 1000 infants are born in the category of intersex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000b, Hird, 2004, cited in Holmes). This scientific construction of the category of intersex does not disqualify this body from being considered in the biologically determined natural category. It is just that society is institutionalized to view sexual difference either in female or male form, therefore a sense of ambiguity is attached to individuals who possess a combination of male and female characteristics. Since, bodies are seen as fundamentals in forming someone's gender identities, in the case of the androgynous body, the gender identities and socializations are far more complex. Any person who does not fit into the fixed category of female or male is more or less considered as ‘wrong turning’. In bio-medical terms, these persons are perceived to be having ‘sexual abnormalities’ which can be cured with medical intervention (Holmes, 2007, p. 26). Holmes cites the experience of Melissa who was born with intersex condition.

Melissa was born with XX chromosomes as female and having a womb and an ovary. However, she was having ambiguous genitalia as either an enlarged clitoris or a small penis. She was ignorant about her condition, but was aware that something was wrong. Her mother had cautioned her to keep it secret and only doctors were permitted to touch her. Individuals born with this condition of intersex often come under some form of bio-medical surveillance as a curative strategy to correct their bodies. Melissa and others like her are subjected to medical surgery to acquire the gender identities within the so called 'appropriate' and 'fixed categories'.

In cases such as the above, often, the individual is unaware about her/his situation about sex change operation and the associated risks. The medical community has the firm belief that such individuals may encounter social and cultural complications if their sexual ambiguities are not corrected or normalized. Therefore, as soon as a baby is born with ambiguous sexual identity, the doctors become concerned about labeling the newborn with a clear sexual identity (Toomey, 2001, p. 40, cited in Holmes, p. 26). Hence, it can be described that the androgynous body is often viewed as abnormal, and an unclear body, for which a sexual identification is imposed upon the individual. The category of sex itself is socially constructed because giving an appropriate sexual identity to an androgynous body is determined by a community of people or the society. Hence, sex is always imposed upon the person and the process of imposition is not carried out in isolation of society.

In a similar way, in France, materialist feminists during the latter part of the twentieth century critiqued the naturalistic approach of accepting the sexual difference between female and male as natural and innate. They denied the understanding of 'women' or 'men' without relating it to the social context. Thus, we can see that the medical explanation of sexual difference is not free from social interpretation.

Social Construction of Gender: Case of Agnes

Grafinkel's case study about Agnes, a transgendered boy who adopted a female identity in his later life is a classic example, which offers an understanding about the social construction of gender. West and Zimmerman (2002) analysed the case of Agnes in the context of doing gender. They argued that gender is a learned behaviour and individuals acquire appropriate physical behaviour through interaction. Let us look at the case of Agnes.

Agnes thought of herself as a female with a male genital, which a woman doesn't possess. She adopted the female identity at the age of seventeen after carrying out a sex reassignment operation. She had learnt practical strategies both prior and after her surgery to display appropriate behaviour as per her physical body. According to West and Zimmerman (2002), "she had the practical task of managing the facts that she possessed male genitalia and that she lacked the social resources a girl's biography would presumably provide in everyday interaction" (p.43). She had to plan her behaviour within a particular social situation which complied with her new identity as a female.

As we can see from the above case, an individual's genitalia is hidden from public scrutiny. It is only everyday interaction and behaviour that confirms an individual's sex categorization. According to Garfinkel, Kessler and McKenna, categories of female and male are cultural in nature and result of the gender attribution process (cited in West and Zimmerman, 2002). The Agnes case shows that the world follows a two-sexed model and any individual's placement into such fixed categories of female or male is socially expected and enforced. Therefore, the experiences of a person possessing an androgynous identity are more complex and varied as they often encounter stereotypes/biases about the notion of an appropriate body.

CONCLUSION

While the examples and analyses that you have read above are scattered across time periods and areas of study, it would be evident by now that the concept of androgyny has fascinated the human mind over the ages. The multiple perspectives which have been used to understand, represent and examine androgyny, both at the physical and the mental levels, reveal the cultural significance and social imagination of androgyny in the societies all over the world.

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