

THE PLIGHT OF MAN

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Abstract : Standardization and stereotyping, as mechanisms of social oppression, hurt not only the marginalized but also those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of such social mechanism. This paper studies the gender norms prevalent in the traditional Hindu societies in the backdrop of Manusmṛti, one of the most important Hindu law books, to show how gender norms act as detrimental to the interest of men and women alike and also act as a hindrance to the freedom of men as well.

A general feeling that the feminists are man-hater is so susceptible in the common parlance that people even raise such doubt as to how a man can possibly be a feminist. For me it pertains more to a deep rooted sense of insecurity and an identity crisis of the person raising this question, rather than a genuine theoretical question. I don't know how much truth there is in this supposition and I don't have either the time or the energy to provide arguments against it.

Being a researcher of gender studies, I never felt alienated from the feminists of the fairer sex. However, the question remains even if the feminist is not a man-hater can a man really be a feminist? Apparently, he cannot, if what some of the radical members of this group have said were true. It was claimed that women, or the members of some identifiable sub-group of them, have a unique perspective generated by the context that defines membership of that group.¹ On this view, women have a unique standpoint produced by the marginality of the position they share among themselves, which is not accessible to the members of the opposite gender. If this were true then it would in principle be impossible for a man to get into the 'women's perspective and to understand the problems faced by them (the women). This leads us to a 'gender closure' that, I think, defeats the very purpose of gender politics, which aims at eradicating gender inequality

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¹Collins, Patricia Hill, 1996, 'The Social construction of Black Feminist Thought' in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, 2nd Edn., New York and London, Routledge.

marked by patriarchy, androcentrism and male-chauvinism.

Eradication of such inequality depends on the possibility of an effective dialogue between the genders. Any form of gender closure precludes such a possibility and creates a total incommensurability between the perspectives. Hence, in spite of being quite radical in support of some brands of gender studies such a view is politically impotent. This, however, does not solve the theoretical issue related to the claim that women have a unique perspective not sharable by men.

In this paper I will discuss some of the arguments why I think even a man can be a feminist, or to be more precise, why a man, who is sensitive to gender discrimination, should feel compelled to be a feminist. This also gives the reason I agree with the thinkers, who are engaged in Men's Liberation and Masculinity Studies, in that I do also think 'that 'sex roles' hurt both women and men.'² The purpose of this paper is to cast some new light from a gender perspective on *Manusmṛti*, one of the most important law books of India, a law book which guides the social and the familial life of most Hindus even today. Gender being a social construct, every society endorses a set of norms, written or unwritten, that shape gender identity of individuals living within the society.

Gender is the result of *standardization*,³ by which term I mean a social mechanism that involves a selection, not necessarily conscious, of certain non-essential properties,⁴ which promotes a particular goal or a number of

²Beasley, Chris, 2005, *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*, Sage Publications, London, New Delhi, p. 179.

³For further discussion on this topic see my 'Caste: Discrimination and Standardization', *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3, 2006.

⁴This should not imply that I am accepting essentialism about something or anything at all. One may wonder as to how one can provide a definition of standardization in terms of certain non-essential properties that are turned into essential properties for the members of a group for belonging to a preferred sub-group. One way how this can be done is by claiming that all properties of that group are non-essential, though a selective few of them are only *claimed to be* essential for the members of that preferred sub-group. This does not subscribe the present author to the distinction between the essential and the non-essential properties, nor does it imply the view that all-properties are non-essential. It is neutral on this issue, and hence, the present author is free to remain non-committal on it, at least in the context of the present paper. What the definition implies is merely the fact that it is the

related goals of a privileged sub-group, from an array of properties randomly present in a heterogeneous group of people by making those properties essential for its members for belonging to that group.

Heterogeneity is the mark of all human endeavor. The society along with its institutions and customs being a human affair is also susceptible to diversity. But human understanding and interest seek uniformity among plurality and multiplicity of things for comprehension and control. The uniformity that is natural, like water flowing downhill, or a proper combination of hydrogen with oxygen making water, helps us discover the natural laws for a better understanding and control of the nature.

Though subject to human control, nature is not amenable to human command. But human beings often are, so are human societies and social institutions. They operate through a lot of stereotyping and standardization, the former being an expectation about the homogeneity of a group and the latter a coercive compulsion imposed on a targeted group. The caste system of India is a paradigm case of standardization. It devoted too much energy towards producing and sustaining privileges in favour of the upper castes, especially the *brāhmaṇa*-s. The caste of a person, after it was standardized, was defined in terms of certain non-essential properties he or she possesses, like being born of a noble blood, religiously maintaining untouchability, etc.

Any standardization produces certain privileges for a group of people in the society in which such standardization takes place. It would not be wrong even to say that standardization aims at producing a privileged class within a heterogeneous society. Some groups are eulogized. The process of standardization by means of which certain groups are eulogized may be regarded as *positive* standardization. Any standardization produces an *other* group. This new class is discriminated against and in whose reference the target group succeeds in eulogizing itself as well as enjoying the privileges it has. The process that produces the 'other' may be regarded as a form of *negative* standardization. The *varṇa* system of India standardizes the *brāhmaṇa*-s positively, as they are the people who are eulogized by and within the system, which also produces the 'other' with reference to which the *Brāhmaṇa*-s define their superiority. The

people who indulge in standardization claim that there is indeed such a distinction between these two types of properties. Also see my 'Caste: Standardization and Discrimination' in the *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3, 2006.

śūdra-s, and the numerous outcastes, like the *sūta*-s, the *vaideha*-s, the *chandāla*-s, the *māgadha*-s, the *kṣattā*-s, the *āyogava*-s, among others comprise the ‘other’ of the *dvija*-s (the twice-born, i.e. the first three *varṇa*-s) in general and the *brāhmaṇa*-s in particular.

Standardization is a way of constructing one’s identity. Identity politics of any society is shaped to a great extent by some process that involves standardization, which covertly or overtly works through an elaborate system of narratives. These narratives valorize the chosen few and debases the others with reference to whom the chosen succeed in claiming their superiority. If we look at the caste system of India we will see how such an oppressive system was sustained; so much energy was spent to support the oppressive social hierarchy that sustained it. An elaborate system of narratives was developed in India by the writers of *Smṛti* literature, including Bhṛgu, the author of the *Manu Smṛti*, to sustain the caste system. This type of mechanism also helped in sustaining the gender discrimination in India. It is not clear whether, and to what extent, the gender construction was influenced and got the shape it had due to the narratives produced by the *Smṛti* writers.

The Indian systems of caste and gender were among the most elaborate systems that attempt at justifying this discrimination on rational ground. The Indian seers did not take it upon themselves to justify these systems on their own. They could not believe that their finite power could sustain it for long. It needed a solid foundation provided by God himself. The narrative of *Manu Smṛti* begins with the wise seers going to Vaivasvata Manu; praying that He teach them duties of human beings.

In the subsequent aphorisms the author elaborates in detail what the different sects of the society ought to do depending on their sex, gender, caste, class, and age. The success of the oppressive system lies in how powerful the narratives are, and how successful they are in exploiting the sentiment of the people they try to manipulate. The narratives, where they are successful, are so powerful and are internalized by the masses in such a way that they leave a deep impact even on the people who are the worst sufferers of the system such that it is not only supported and sustained by the beneficiaries of it but also the by those who are the worst sufferers of it.

Both in India and the West women have been depicted to constitute the

inferior sex—rationally, physically, and morally. Genevieve Lloyd (1984)⁵ shows how reason is valorized and is associated with masculinity throughout the history of Western philosophy, as it is denied of women. Emotion, on the other hand, is associated with femininity and is denigrated. Women lack rationality, and consequently, also lack decision-making power. Hence, women are supposed to lack a number of rights that were traditionally associated with masculinity.

In many countries the right to vote was originally denied to women on the pretext that they lacked the power of decision-making. Back in India, Manu advocates a duty-based morality as well as a duty-based legal procedure, rather than a right based one. Right came only as a corollary of the duties assigned to a moral agent. The duty of one is, however, the right of others. Furthermore, assigning duty to one presupposes a particular characterization of human nature. If you are assigned the duty not to steal, then it implies that you were likely to steal given adequate opportunity and sufficient temptation. It is surprising to know how much duty has been assigned to men towards the women around them. We will return to this point in a short while. Before that we will take a quick look at the way character of women in general has been depicted by Manu.

The woman does not deserve to be independent—*na strī svātantryamrhati*.⁶ The reason why she does not deserve to be free appears to be similar to those given by the western philosophers—the woman does not have rationality, nor does she have morality or independence of mind required to enjoy freedom. It has been said that she is not in a position to have control over her sexual desire, as she is by nature promiscuous (*pumścālī*), fickle-minded (*calacitta*), and affectionless (*niḥsneha*).⁷ She does not consider looks, nor does she consider age, as soon as she comes across a man, she gets involved into sexual activity with him.⁸

Interestingly, the characterization of women in Manu's works can be put into stark contrast with the Anglo-European feminists in that in the former they have been depicted as lacking in affection, whereas so much of the Anglo-European feminists' works, their ethics, their epistemology and their metaphysics derive a

⁵Lloyd, Genevieve, 1984, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

⁶*Manusmṛti*—3/9.

⁷*Manusmṛti*—*Pauṁścālyāccalacittācca naiḥsnehyācca svabhāvataḥ*//15/9/.

⁸*Manusmṛti*—*Naitām rūpaṁ parīkṣante nāsāmvyasi saṁsthitih*//*Surūpaṁ vā virūpaṁ vā pumānityeva bhujate*//14/9.

lot from the purportedly affectionate and caring nature of women. However I do not take up this issue here. I think it would be more judicious to leave this issue up to the psychologist, who would be a better judge for adjudicating such issues.

The characterization of women as in Manu, also has implication on the duty of men. Since women do not have any control over their sexual desires, it is the duty of the male members of the family to control their (the female members') activities, so that the latter do not get involved into any act of infidelity. It is further incumbent upon them to ensure that the female members of the family never get autonomy and remain under their (the male members') control.

The duty of the male members of the family is not to let the females enjoy freedom either during the day or in the night. They are also advised to keep the females under their control by keeping them (the females) busy in activities which are not censured (by the Hindu Law Books).⁹ In the same vein Manu further says, no man can protect (and also control) women merely by force; women can, however, be guarded by keeping them busy in the day-to-day works of the household such as, keeping the financial account of collection and expenses, taking care of their own cleanliness, performing religious rituals, cooking food, and taking care of the household furniture.¹⁰

Perhaps, nowhere else in the world there is such a clear codified statement about the duties of women as domestic laborers who are to prepare food for the survival of men's bodies and also to take care of the places where those bodies exist. The woman is conceived as providing the field (*kṣetra*) and man providing the seed (*bīja*)¹¹ for having an offspring. That is why the former is to be guarded by her father during virginity, the husband during her youth, and the sons during

⁹ *Manusmṛti—Asvatantrāḥ striyaḥ kāryāḥ puruṣaiḥ svairdivānīśam//Viṣayeṣu ca sajjantyaḥ saṁsthāpyā ātmano vaśe//2/9.*

¹⁰ *Manusmṛti—Na kaścidyoṣitaḥ śaktaḥ prasahya parirakṣitum//Etairūpāyayogaistu śakyāstāḥ parirakṣitum//10/9//Arthasya saṁgrāhe cainām vyāye caiva niyojayet//Śauce dherme'nnapaktyānca pāriṇāhyasya vekṣaṇe//11/9//*

¹¹ *Manusmṛti—Kṣetrabhūtā smṛtā nārī bījabhūtaḥ smṛtaḥ pumān//33/9/*Conspicuously, this seed and land metaphor is also present in the *Quran*, 2.223. It has also been claimed in the *Quran* that men have authority over women, and it is the holy duty of women to be obedient to men 4.34. However, I have no contention to claim that these two texts depict women in the same way in all respects.

her old age, she is never fit for independence.¹² As we have seen, this type of injunction depends on a particular construct of femininity. It also inadvertently sheds light on the underlying standardized concepts of masculinity.

Married women, however, seem to have been held in high esteem by Manu. Man is incomplete without his wife. In the performance of rituals and in propagating his progeny by producing sons, he needs the help of his wife. Thus, his wife is a part of his being. This contentious reading of Manu will however appear to be unacceptable if we read the text more closely.

We should not take Manu's remark of the wife being a part of the husband to imply that in Manu's system the woman enjoys the same status as that of the man. She is just an object—a valued *possession* which can be gifted just like the cattle of the farmer. At marriage she is gifted to the husband (through *kanyadāna*). After that the father no longer has any authority over her. It has been mentioned the father can give away the girl-child as a gift only once —just as any other thing given as “gift”.¹³ Now she becomes the ‘field’ of the husband where he will sow his seed to propagate his blood. She is as important to her husband as a pacemaker to a heart-patient. She should remain close to the heart of the husband for whom life is incomplete, even impossible, without her. Thus, in the life of her husband she has the utmost value, though it is only an instrumental, proprietary one. It is repeatedly mentioned that she is important because she serves his purpose not only of this life, but also of the life after death.

We have already mentioned that masculinity has always been constructed in contrast with femininity. The properties that women possess, the activities they generally get involved into are belittled, and the properties and activities generally associated with men are valorized. It is sometimes claimed that gender is ubiquitous. No sphere of life is free from gender-related discrimination. Even academic disciplines and professions have gender identity.

Science and technology are construed as masculine and the humanities as feminine. For a girl it is most appropriate to opt for a course in literature instead of a course in mathematics or technology. On the other hand, a boy will be looked down upon, at least in India, if he chooses a course in humanities instead of a course in science, technology, or commerce. The job of a stenographer or that of a

¹²*Manusmṛti—Pitā rakṣati kaumāre bharttā rakṣati yauvane//Rakṣanti sthavire putrā na strī svātantryamarhati//3/9//*

¹³*Manusmṛti—47/9.*

nurse is meant for a woman, whereas the job of a surgeon is typically a masculine one. Since, these are the consequences of stereotyping, the perceptions associated therewith often vary from time to time, and society to society.

Any standardization involves a paradox that problematizes it and makes it vulnerable from within. It creates an *other* class, and by the same procedure it selects the chosen few by conforming a heterogeneous group. It sets in a standard for itself, a standard that is to be followed by the privileged ones if they want to remain privileged. It creates a conflict from within—a never-ending identity crisis that makes the privileged vulnerable to themselves. It is the fear of failing to attain a self-imposed standard. Associated with it remains the fear of being *fallen* from the privileged position. Freud's claim of the castration anxiety in the boy-child is a typical case of it. It may be recalled that standardization is a non-natural process that tends to homogenize a group by arbitrarily selecting some properties indiscriminately present in its members. Hence, the fear of losing the intended property is always there. This may be regarded as the *paradox of standardization*. It is the paradox of making the privileged vulnerable to the oppressive system that was originally developed to support their interest by making the *other*, i.e. the marginalized, vulnerable.

The gender construct found in the *Smṛti* literature was primarily meant for prioritizing the masculine gender and also to secure survival of the pedigree of man. However, it puts the pressure upon the Indian male to possess the “masculine virtues” of having the power of supporting and protecting—economically, socially, as well as physically—the female members under his control. In contrast, women seem to be fortunate in this regard because they do not have the burden upon themselves of providing economic support to their counterparts nor the sacred duty of protecting them physically. This makes men vulnerable. In a society where job opportunities are scarce it is often difficult, even impossible, for the male members of the family to provide economic support to the women of the family. Sometimes, the women are financially more successful than their male counterparts. I do not intend to say that women do not take financial responsibility, or that they do not want to.

What I am pointing out is that unlike men women do not have to bear the social pressure of providing financial support, or the demand of protecting the bodies of men they are associated with. The privileged being the privileged has to bear certain *marks* to remain visibly distinguishable from the *other*. Standardization produces a non-natural divide among a heterogeneous group and

without such marks the privileged may become indistinguishable from the rest of the group. It is, therefore, often absolutely necessary for the privileged to bear the *mark of being the privileged*. Likewise, it is also required that the other should also bear the *mark of being the other*. It may be a sacred thread, a turf of hair, or the mark of vermilion on the forehead, or an iron bangle on the wrist, which could serve as the mark.

A mark of standardization has always associated with it a cluster of social sanctions. If a person fails to bear the mark of the group she belongs to she faces a social or religious sanction. Manus makes an elaborate discussion of the injunctions that are passed to prevent such violation. Sometimes, certain character-traits or ways of life are made marks of standardization. It is expected that all members of the intended group should possess them. Since, stereotyping is the root of such expectations they represent the expectation of the members of the society on the members of that group. In this sense they are social construct. Certain purported character traits and certain projected gender roles are made to serve as the marks of the standardized form of masculinity and femininity. It puts the pressure on to the women to remain always alert so that they do not lose the properties 'ideally' attributed to them. In the Indian societies, they are expected to remain docile, submissive, soft-spoken, introvert, and so on.

The privileged are doubly hurt by such demands of standardization, which compel them to construe their identity within the purview of the predefined gender norms, and which, at the same time casts upon them the shadow of the fear of losing their privileged position. Besides meeting the standard set and bearing the marks intended for them, they are to remain alert that they never bear any mark that signifies the other. For, the privileged does always occupy a position higher than that of the *other*. Hence, he always runs the *risk of being fallen*, an anxiety not shared by the *other*. Just consider a girl wearing a garment generally worn by men and compare it with a man going outdoors in a skirt, excepting places like Scotland, where men often wear kilts.

This is just an example of a quite varied range of things that are identified as "marks" of standardization. The way you walk, the way you talk, the things you like, the food you prefer—all bear a gender mark. If you want to remain a "man", you cannot afford to be a 'defiant.' Any act of defiance is considered as an act of deviance and is checked with fitting penalties, ranging from censuring the act to outright infliction of physical pain. Hence, you must comply with those standardized norms which compel you to bear the marks of masculinity.

If the arguments presented above are sound, then they show how standardized gender-construction makes men vulnerable in the hands of this social mechanism. It denies freedom also to men by imposing upon him a preconceived notion of gender identity, which he can hardly refuse to bear even if he feels quite uncomfortable with it. This shows the predicament men are in, and it also shows the relationship masculinity studies have with feminist research.¹⁴

¹⁴An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Indian National Conference on ‘Towards Reaching the Unreached: Philosophy of Equality and Development’ at B. K. Girls’ College, Howrah in April, 2007. I am thankful to the participants who raised questions and made comments on this paper. I also express my sincere thanks to Professor Shefali Moitra for her comments on that earlier version of this paper.