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Understanding patriarchy in feminist debate

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Abstract

Patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the “patriarch”. However, patriarchy is a problematic word as it has a narrow, traditional meaning – not necessarily the one feminists give it. In its narrow meaning patriarchy refers to the system, historically derived from Greek and Roman law, in which the male head of the household had absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female and male family members. People using the term in this sense often imply a restricted historicity for it. Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. The important tools in the practice of male oppression are the ideologies at work in masculine definitions of gender and sexuality, a hegemonic process facilitated by the fact that social, economic and political institutions are in male hands.

Keywords: Patriarchy, sexual politics, feminism, discrimination, oppression

Introduction

Kate Millett is generally recognized as the first feminist thinker to introduce the term “patriarchy” into contemporary feminist debate. A radical feminist, Millett sought to emphasize the overt and often hidden “sexual politics” that men exercise to maintain their established hegemony over women. According to Millett, the important tools in this practice of male oppression are the ideologies at work in masculine definitions of gender and sexuality, a hegemonic process facilitated by the fact that social, economic and political institutions are in male hands:

... our society, like all historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance – in short: every avenue of power within society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands ^[1].

Millett’s analysis of patriarchy was one that tried to understand how women become conditioned into colluding in their own oppression. She answers this question that women were forced to accept inequality by the social denouncement of those women who “sought to escape the confines of socially correct ‘feminine’ behaviour ^[2].”

Patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the “patriarch”. However, patriarchy is a problematic word as it has a narrow, traditional meaning – not necessarily the one feminists give it. In its narrow meaning patriarchy refers to the system, historically derived from Greek and Roman law, in which the male head of the household had absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female and male family members. People using the term in this sense often imply a restricted historicity for it. Patriarchy started in classical antiquity and ended in the 19th century with the granting of civil rights to women and married women in particular.

This usage is problematic because it deforms historical reality. The patriarchal dominance of male family heads over the other members is much older than classical antiquity; it starts in the third millennium B.C. and is firmly established at the time when Hebrew Bible was written. Further, it can be argued that in the 19th century male dominance in the family simply adopts new forms and is not ended. Thus, the limited definition of the term “patriarchy” tends to foreclose accurate definition and analysis of its continued presence in today’s world.

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Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men control power in all the important institutions of society and that women are divested of access to such power. It does *not* mean that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources. One of the most difficult tasks of women's history is to trace with accuracy the different forms and modes in which patriarchy appears historically, the shifts and changes in its structure and function, and the adaptations it makes to female pressure and demands.

The subordination that women experience in patriarchal system takes different forms – discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence – within the family, at the place of work, in society. The details may be different, but the theme is the same. Juliet Mitchell, a feminist psychologist, uses the word patriarchy to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women, and to the symbolic power that fathers exercise within these systems. It is this power that creates the “inferiorised” psychology of women. Sylvia Walby in her book, *Theorising Patriarchy* calls it “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women [3].” It is important to understand patriarchy as a system because this helps in rejecting the notion of biological determination. Kate Millett presents a far-reaching analysis of patriarchy, traced across cultures and history as the primary political intuition, the expression of the distribution of political power based on an original sexual division of labour. Patriarchy is thus seen as the hierarchical institutionalization of the unequal roles and status given to the two biological genders – “the birthright priority whereby male rules females [4].” Patriarchal ideology ensures the socialization of individuals according to already given and thus “stereotyped lines of sex category [5].”

Patriarchy manifests its control in almost all the spheres of society. Men control women's productivity both within the household and outside, in paid work. Within the household women provide all kinds of free service to their children, husbands, and other members of the family, throughout their lives. In what Sylvia Walby calls the “patriarchal mode of production” [6], women's labour is expropriated by their husbands and others living there. According to a UN statistics women do more than 60% of the hours of work done in the world, but they get 10% of the world income and possess only 1% of the world's property [7]. Women's reproductive power is also under control. In many societies women are not allowed to decide how many children they want, when to have them, whether they can use contraception or go for an abortion, etc. Apart from individual male control, male dominated institutions like the Church or State (i.e. religion and politics) also make rules concerning women's reproductive capacity. This is institutionalized control. For instance, in the Catholic Church the male religious hierarchy decides whether men and women can use birth control methods, which methods are allowed, whether women can terminate an unwanted pregnancy, and so on. In almost every country, women have been continuously demanding the freedom to decide when, whether and how many children to have. It shows how strong this control is and how reluctant men are to surrender it.

The patriarchal state also tries to control women's reproduction through various family planning programmes. It is the state that decides the size of the country's population and accordingly, actively encourages or discourages women to have children. In India there has been an aggressive birth control programme to curtail family sizes to a great extent. In Malaysia, on the other hand, women have been encouraged to have several children, in order to develop a sizeable domestic market for the country's industrial products. The famous Baby Boom of the 1950s in the U.S. is an apt example of the state's intervention in the family planning and of the state's implicit endorsement of the ideology of motherhood.

This ideology of motherhood is one of the main issues of the radical feminist analysis of women's situation. They say that women are subjugated primarily because the responsibility of mothering and nurturing is forced on them, by patriarchal society. Furthermore, it also decides the conditions of their motherhood. It is this ideology that creates feminine and masculine character types which strengthen patriarchy; it creates and widens the gap between private and public, it limits women's mobility and growth and reproduces male dominance.

Another very important area of women's subordination is the control over their sexuality. Women are forced to provide sexual services to their men according to their needs and desires. A whole body of moral and legal rules exist to suppress the expression of women's sexuality within and outside marriage in every society, whereas male promiscuity is simply ignored. Men can also force their wives, daughters and other women in their control into prostitution, i.e. trading their sexuality. Rape and the threat of rape is another way of controlling women's sexuality through an invocation of “shame” and “honour”.

A radical feminist analysis points out that women under patriarchy are not only mothers but also sexual slaves, and patriarchal ideology typically opposes women as sexual beings to women as mothers. With the partial exception of mothers, the patriarchal culture defines women as sexual objects for the pleasure of men. The analysis says that rape may not have existed in every society, but it is a defining feature of patriarchy. It views rape as an effective political device, a political act of oppression exercised by members of a powerful class on members of the same class. Radical feminists also concentrate their attention on institutionalized prostitution, pornography and compulsory heterosexuality as other examples of control over women's sexuality under patriarchy.

References

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, Virago, London, 1970, p. 25.
2. *ibid.*, p. 6.
3. Sylvia Walby. *Theorising Patriarchy*, as quoted by Kamla Bhasin, in *What is Patriarchy?* Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, p. 3.
4. Kate Millett, *op.cit.*, p. 25.
5. *ibid.*, p. 26.
6. Sylvia Walby, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
7. U.N. Statistics as quoted by Kamla Bhasin, *op.cit.*, p. 9.