

Gender and Culture

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Abstract:

The relationships between Gender and Culture have played a significant role in the evolution of human civilization. Culture defined the gender relations in society. Gender provides meaning to what we represent. In every society, certain beliefs and practices that are stereotypes gender and patriarchal in nature, that embedded in culture are gets naturalized when it passed from one generation to another generation. The paper also explores the question of identity and how certain cultural practices reinforce the stereotypes gender and patriarchal practices, to continued domination of men over women. Two case studies are examined to reinforce the finding: female genital mutilation and foot-binding culture in China.

Keywords:

Gender; Culture; Identity; Bizarre cultural practices; female genital mutilation; foot-binding culture.

Introduction

Culture can be defined as “composed of values, belief, norms and assumptions: that is, mental products” in a society (Pye 1968: 218). Culture played an important role in defining the gender relations in a society. Gender is a way of giving meaning that shapes how we represent ourselves as male and female (Jill 1998: 92). In this paper I am

trying to explore how certain beliefs and practices that are stereotypes gender and patriarchal in nature, that embedded in culture are gets naturalized when it passed from one generation to another generation. Such beliefs and practices became an integrated part of the culture. The paper also explores the question of identity and how certain cultural practices reinforce the stereotypes gender and patriarchal practices, to continued domination of men over women. The role of the state in facilitating our identities would also focus upon. The state plays an important role in delivering “social resources” (Appiah 2001: 239) and rights to the marginalized, especially in complex societies.

The paper aims to focus on bizarre cultural practices and its impact on women and how such practices over time became an integrated part of the customs and tradition of some culture. There are many instances where both men and women have been subjected to bizarre or cruel cultural practices, which often sanctions bodily mutilation. But, I have chosen to focus on women in particular. As most often many cultural practices are devised exclusively for women often aiming at maintaining social control over them, which will be illustrated

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through the reference of the two case studies. It is important to understand the function of these practices in a culture, as these practices have tremendous impact on the life experiences of these women and most importantly their perceptions about themselves. It also shapes the nature of social relations and a certain pattern of hierarchical, gendered society. To be able to elaborate my arguments I have settled on two case studies. The first case study is on the practice of female genital mutilation amongst the women while my second study constitutes foot-binding culture in China.

The reasons for choosing these two case studies are as follows:

1. Both these case studies reflect a perfect instance of how the body is used as a space to inscribe meanings. The body is not a passive space or natural foundation where meanings are inscribed. It is rather used as a mechanism for social control and as a site of exercising power in which the body emerges as the point where social regulation and practices of the self meet, where discipline is inscribed on the self (Fournier 2002: 56).
2. These cases exemplify the ways in which the ideal beauty is used as a social currency to exercise male power (Reischer & Koo 2004: 301). The notions of 'body ideal' and 'body beautiful' have serious implications on how the female body is perceived as unsatisfactory.

CASE STUDIES

Female Genital Mutilation

"Female Genital Mutilation is the procedures involving partial or total removal of the external genitalia whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons" (Momoh: 2005). Almost in all the known civilization of the world, female genital mutilation existed in one form or the other and not confined to a particular culture. This practice of female genital mutilation was found mostly in patriarchal social structures. The belief in the practice of female genital mutilation was that it cures certain weaknesses of female like nymphomania, insanity, masturbation and disorders associated with female, and transcends all religion, racial and social boundaries (Momoh 2005: 8).

There are four types of female genital mutilations:

1. Excision of the prepuce.
2. Excision of the clitoris.
3. Pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris.
4. Excision of the external genitalia and stitching of the vaginal opening

The traditional wisdom and religious belief was the main reason for the continued practices of female genital mutilation, and it was not the man that defended the practices but by its survivors (Klein 1994). The following are the few beliefs that made such practices much more alive until the close of the 20th century:

1. A woman is sexually more pleasing to her husband if she is circumcised.
2. Only the prostitutes leave her daughter uncircumcised and so

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unclean. An unclean woman would not get any man to married.

3. The practice protects the health of a woman and prevents her from many illnesses.
4. In some culture, it was believed that clitoris to be a male parts and the removal of the clitoris makes a woman more feminine (Ashenafi 2003: 5).
5. In some culture, it was a good tradition and the requirement of the religion, and particularly the Islam religion.

However, the main reason behind the practice of female genital mutilation lies in the embedded patriarchal nature of society. The society needs to control the sexuality of woman and such practice on women decreases her tendency to be more sexually oriented towards men. Virginity is to be maintained at the time of marriage. The need of the sexual control, morality and honor along with social control was the main reason for such practice (Ashenafi 2003: 4). The practice of female genital mutilation precedes Islam and Christianity, but at some point of time in history, it floated to such religion and over a period, it became the custom and tradition of such religion. Once it became an integrated part of the religion, the questioning of such practices became impossible and it was and has always been defended in the name of the religion.

Foot-Binding Culture

Foot Binding is the custom practice in Imperial China for nearly 1000 years. It is the practice of tight binding of female feet to prevent its growth. In the process, the four

toes of female's child were bent under the foot and forcing the heel towards the front of the sole. This practice was usually performed at about six to eight years female child. Extremely painful in the first six to ten years of formative treatment, perhaps 10 percent of girls did not survive the treatment (Fairbank: 1992). The small feet are known as "Golden Lotus" (Beverly 1998).

There are different accounts of the origin of the practice of foot-binding culture in China. It is said that a favorite dancer in Southern T'ang emperor and love poet Li Yu (937-978) invented the foot binding practice in China (Mackie 1996: 1001). Another legend says that concubine of a Chinese prince walked so grace fully that at that time lily footed women or women with bound feet became the model in China. Also another legend surrounding Yao Niang says that she was ordered to bind her feet so that it would look as new moons (Jeanine 2013)

Over several centuries the practice blossom along three dimensions. "First, it spread from the Imperial palace, to court circles, to the larger upper classes, and then to the middle and lower classes, eventually the higher the social status, the smaller the foot and secondly, it became more exaggerated and third it radiated from the Imperial capitals to the rest of the Empire" (Mackie 1996: 1001).

There are many factors, which was responsible for continuity of such a long history of practice in China. One main factor was the male domination of women. An elevated status to her husband and her family was considered achieved if higher was the helplessness of the woman in the

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family, and less likely to be mentally independent. Regardless of the actual social or economic reality of a man, he was considered a successful man if he could afford a helpless wife (Beverly 1998). Another important reason for the continuity of such a painful procedure was that the practices was considered fashion, tradition, sexually attracted and obviously man wanted it. The colorful leggings that were worn as a rule over the binding, above the lotus shoes, were considered sexually stimulating for many men. A man wishing to express sexual interest might simply touch or play with one of the desired woman's legging. No words were necessary to convey the meaning of the actions. However, the key factors that come in history are marriage and tradition (Levy: 2001). The worst things that could happen to a Chinese woman of the past were to be deemed unmarriageable. Man searched for woman with small feet. The smaller is the feet, higher is the demand and status for the woman. Also very small feet meant the girl would endure great pain and would follow orders well.

Controlling Sexuality

The main reason behind foot binding culture in china was that it highly restricted the mobility of the women. The practices made women dependent on their husband and continuance dependence reinforced the superiority of man. It prevented them from mingling and interacting with people outside her household .It made them sexually available to the men easily as their restricted mobility prevented them from running away even if they wanted to. This practice began more than 1000 years ago became an

integrated part of the Chinese culture with passing time. With generation to generation practicing this culture and enforced by societal norms and tradition, the practices of foot binding became neutralized and became considered to be a custom that should be follow by woman of the Chinese society. And more importantly, the practice was reinforced by it survivors and not by opposite sex. That is the reason why a Chinese mother began trying to make her female child feet smaller through the practice of foot binding culture at her very young age, which is extremely painful and dangerous for the child life (Beverly 1998).

The above two cultural practices highlighted how woman body has always been seen as unsatisfactory and in a continuous need of modification. Identities of women are constructs within larger socio cultural context and they are reinforced through the cultural norms and practices. Cultural practices often play an essential role in the construction of the female identity and as a consequence determine her social position. Many cultures contain regressive social practices that often work to the disadvantage of the womenfolk. Controlling the body of the women is an important mechanism of ensuring domination of men over women.

Role of the state and culture

The state is regarded as the custodian of our rights and responsible for our protection. Such a view of the state is often challenged by many feminist scholarships. It challenges the realist view of the state as the rational, purposive actor and asserts that the state is

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patriarchal in nature, hence biased. They believe that the state is responsible for perpetuating structured violence on the marginalized, which sustains a patriarchal hegemony. Such claims debunk the realist notion of the state as a neutral, self-purposive, rational actor.

Appiah argue that the state plays an important role in delivering various social resources, most importantly ‘identities’ (Appiah 2001: 239). Introducing reforms in the society is one of the fundamental tasks of the modern state. In such a context, the state is considered as an important agent of change. It has a significant share in the construction of our identities. Therefore, striking a harmonious balance between the state and the society becomes a crucial mechanism of conferring recognition to the people in complex societies. However, the temptations of global capitalism have become one of the major challenges to the states. Identity is constituted where boundaries of political identity is drawn. Partha Chatterjee says the state consists of populations and citizens (Chatterjee 2001). Meaning that not everybody in a state has the excess to equal rights and it is enjoyed by a few who are therefore the actual “citizens”.

Conclusion

The perceptions on what is ideal and beautiful are culturally determined and hence relative. However, in most cultures the female body has been viewed as in need of continuous alteration and modification

and such practices became a traditions and customs for society that need to be followed. The myth of ‘ideal beauty’ and ‘ideal women’ are the most powerful and commonly employed techniques in most cultures, to continuously focus on the inadequacy of the female body (Erica & Koo, 2004). Culture through its various norms and practices reinforces these values. Hence, we can say that by understanding culture we can also explore the nature of relationships in a society, especially power relations. Hence, the alteration of some of the cultural customs has the potential to change the nature of social relations and the social position of an individual. This draws our attention to the impact and the crucial role affirmative action can play in altering the structure of the society to more just order. In such a context the role of the state in granting constitutional rights to the citizens/marginalized has a significant role to play.

Note: Specially thanks to Junjun Sharma Pathak, M.Phil., CIPOD/SIS (2011-2013) for her suggestion to pick up one of the two particular case studies and providing the structure for analyzing the concept in this paper.

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