

# Gender: A Learning Process

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## Abstract

*Everywhere Man is in the cage, consciously and unconsciously knitted by himself/herself. Gender, for instance, is such a process that imprisons every individual by differentiating between two opposed set of characteristics, social positions and personality traits, masculine and feminine. Indeed, it is almost impossible to remember the first instance when and how an individual knows her/him as a girl or a boy. It is so ubiquitous and unnoticeable that every individual since the cradle to the grave becomes a voracious learner by carrying the burden of gender division. Undoubtedly, gender determines and confines who we are, the roles we play, the way we look, and the thinking pattern of most of us in collaboration with society. For every society is a scandalmonger of gender on the basis of its inherited cultural imagination. And it is perpetually retained through the generations to come. The analysis reveals that it is necessary to uproot and reconstruct the earlier biased mechanism of society that divided humans in two different segments. This research adopts an interpretive critical literary analysis methodology based on the qualitative framework to explore the multi-layered meaning of gender. It contributes to the organizations working in gender issues, policy makers, teaching-learning and for the awareness in the society that gender is systematic learning and construction of the society that requires the course correction.*

## Introduction: A Journey from Sex to Gender

The society is the first agent, which sees the delivery of the child and offers the categories like gender. Those who do not fit to the imaginative frame of the society are condemned. Even Socrates, Greek philosopher, was condemned to drink hemlock performing a dramatic manner of death. It reveals that society creates a discourse, which engulfs every individual. In Greek, Aristotle declared that the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities (Duthel, 2018). St. Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an imperfect man (Newton, 2017). Thus, gender contains its long and deep-rooted history associated with early human civilization. By and by, such patriarchal principles further strengthened and penetrated by hatching a biased view between sperm and ovum, i.e., male and female respectively.

Moreover, gender is not the matter of rationality but of belief. It is something that is taught to us. We happen to believe in such teaching or system.

The world is already gendered because of its various techniques. Normally, it is more difficult to change than to inter into it. It is primary category of our identity. Our achievements are related to Gender. Sex is biological reality but when it is associated with cultural conventions and desires, it becomes gender. So, it is culturally nurtured phenomenon. Whole organizations, wages and all other activities are differentiated on the basis of Gender (Acker, 2006). Even universe is gendered like sun as male and earth as female and many more symbolic representations alike (López Silva, 2023). Females have dependent social roles while males have dominant social roles (Clutton-Brock & Huchard, 2013; van Wijk et al., 1995). We are so much accustomed to the system that we pretend we cannot live without it. Hence, gender is only belief but not a rational one.

Likewise, gender is not only our display to others but also the performance. We mold ourselves by the internalized normative patterns of gender system. We use the patterns taught by society and try to judge every individual on the basis of that. All the roles, desires and success are the formula that are not only used but also checked ourselves based on them. Due to repetitions cave, pond, sea, earth, East and Africa have been feminine symbols whereas Europe a masculine and rational. Gender is also paradoxical and arbitrary. Paradoxical in the sense that gender is so much near us and at the same time, it is no more concrete phenomenon. It is illusive so we cannot capture concretely. We have only become the obedient servant of society. Hence, gender is performance and display as well.

Additionally, patriarchy is not always a privilege for men rather both (male and female) are in trap of gender. When babies come out from the mother world to the external world, the genitalia is the prime concern. Child having female genitalia is gradually inclined for nurturance, housecleaning and sentimentality whereas child having male genitalia toward physical activities, leadership and power tools (Greaves, 1996). Thus, in the sexual division of labor privileged values are given to male. Masculine works continued to be deposited and used in the days ahead but not of females. Females as the legal property of men inferior, incomplete and damaged human beings remained historically tied for centuries forming gender stereotypes. The paradoxical images as the creative muse and satanic forces continued perpetually. Such definitive codes of patriarchy not only narrowed the world of female but also trapped the status of masculinity by allocating the different functions of the world on the basis of male and female. After all, gender is not natural subject rather a social construction. Hence, historically tied gender binaries of yesteryears are gradually rupturing today. Feminism as a social movement has challenged the constructed social roles, occupations and familial responsibilities (Farre et. al, 2004). In result, the rapid overlapping of gender identities has made the binaries less rigid than ever.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts an interpretive critical literary analysis methodology based on the qualitative framework that focuses on the subjective and contextual reading of the texts to explore the multi-layered meaning of gender. Grounded in the interpretive paradigm, this approach aligns with epistemological principles that views knowledge as construction of dialogues through socio-eco-cultural matrix. In the interpretation, it tries to align with the marginalized voices in the selected texts.

The research design is structured as a text centered analysis of the primary texts. The language, thematic content and narrations are analyzed to justify the claims. This design integrates synchronic and diachronic elements. The Theoretical framework is constructed through feminism. The core insight informs that gender is a product of the society through systematic construction, and it is learned gradually from the prenatal period through bringing up as accustomed to the society.

## **Analysis**

This research argues gender as a learning process in the first part and in the second part, texts are analyzed to support the claim. Thus, the texts like: "In the Waiting Room" by Elizabeth Bishop, "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid, "Barbie Doll" by Marge Piercy, "Cinderella" by Anne Sexton, "The Lesson" by Toni Cade (Bambara, 1999), "X" by Lois Gould, "In the American Society" by Gish Jen and "The Man Who was Almost a Man" by Richard Wright are just a few examples to demonstrate how an individual transfers from sex to gender as a learning. In addition,

how are we taught to believe in and rely on gender? How and what kinds of social practices invite us into gendered understanding of the world? How everyday works of living enhance learning gender? And is it an ongoing process of negotiation? These are the quarries that are tried to answer by the texts analyzed.

### **Gender in “In the Waiting Room”**

“In the waiting room” explores how gender shapes the work roles of the women and how a natural body of a white six years old girl becomes acculturated social category. It demonstrates that gender is a process that shapes an individual. The self-awareness of the girl comes through observation. When her aunt was inside she waited for her in the dentist’s waiting room. The room was full of grown-up people and she wants to remain beyond the classification and categorization where everything is “one”. Neither consciousness and unconsciousness nor language but only imagination gets preference. No sense of lack and absence but only the matter of totality counts. The person as an individual is overall like in the heaven, full of bliss. In Lacanian psycho- analysis, this is termed as “Imaginative Stage.”

Nevertheless, while she is waiting, she starts to observe and read. She starts questioning her aunt. Contradiction, transition, problem and uncertainties arise one after another. She loves her aunt and condemns for being timid and foolish. Therefore, she is torn apart. She starts to learn the structure of the structure of the society. Hence, a sort of inner conflict goes on and on. She is in dilemma that whether to open the ‘Pandora’s Box’ or leave it as it is. She observes various pictures. She starts to know her aunt a foolish, timid women and she associates herself as “without thinking at all I was my foolish aunt”(Bishop, 1999). The rapid construction of her in interaction with others goes perpetually. Relational and constituted identity begins to form within contradiction. No doubt, language media, society and culture play a vital role placing her in the borderland. Thus, the girl in the waiting room can be taken as “mirror stage” in Lacanian term.

In addition, her search for perfection continues. The world comes in front of her. Images become the ‘self’. Comparison and contrast skyrocket and she develops the concept of ‘me’ and ‘other’. The girl feels” sensation of falling off/ the round, turning world/into cold, blue-black space”(Bishop, 1999). Thus, in differentness, sense of despair and the mere void drag her into the turmoil of learning gender. She finds herself in the feminine group. She not only loses her vitality but also senses falling and falling. She recalls “Waiting Room” as dazzling and too hot. All the symbols of the society shattered and castrated her exploiting her vitality. Learning gender and self-inferiorization tussle simultaneously. Her sex is covertly transferred into gender. ‘Pandora’s Box’ has been already opened. She tries to attain certain positions, desires and aspirations but they keep on changing and she always longs to meet for them. Thus, she herself becomes quest and her being is prolonged repeatedly. She learns gender as if it were an inevitable. She happens to be in the society and in gender. Bishop rightly projects this transformation in the very poem as: “I knew that nothing stranger/Had ever happened, that nothing/Stranger could ever happen/Why should I be my aunt, /Or me, or anyone?” (Bishop, 1999). Exactly, her “self” (‘I’) becomes important. She becomes the puppet of the society and lives in the lack ever after. Her transformation from totality to the squeezed world is apparent in her words as “I gave a sidelong glance/- I couldn’t look any higher”(Bishop, 1999). Yes, once she became female by learning gender she could not view the world in totality.

### **Learning Gender in “Girl”**

Likewise, “Girl” further clarifies the gender as a learning process. It is a rich mine of rules which family members and society teach to every individuals. Social approval is based on likes and dislikes. Some of us find a certain comfort in gender because we are very much accustomed to it. And despite its ideology, we perform our activities as if it were a natural process to be learnt. “Girl” is the organized list of commands to a female child by her mother to aware her about the coming roles to be a woman. Mother is not only pregnant of social taboos but also tries to transmit such traditional values as the agent of the society. The imperative sentences like “wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap...[And] don’t squat down to play marbles-you are not a boy...”(Kincaid, 1999) are just two instances of the poem, out of innumerable rest, which teach gender. Remaining herself in the cage of gender, mother wants to embrace her daughter asserting the choices of lady and

slut. She warns to be a slut and instructs to be a lady as demanded by the normative pattern of the society. Mother wants her to be a complete docile one. She instructs “this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely...”(Kincaid, 1999). Thus, gender is construction and illusion. Moreover, as mother instructs her daughter regularly, this regularity constructs the identity. The frequent use of “every day” phrase in the poem is the crucial morphological example of the perpetual Inheritance of gender. An individual transfers this because he must follow parents as first teachers, teachers on formal courses, society and media desperately. Otherwise, the ideological complex network of the society questions his survival. Hence, Judith Butler also rightly pointed out the performativity nature of gender identity and seeks to trouble it because it is real only to the extent that it is perpetually performed as the “Girl” is written in a single sentence without pause.

### **Social Construction of Gender Roles in “Barbie Doll”**

Again, “Barbie Doll” remains the next drop of ghee on burning fire of gender that further enhances the discussion of learning gender. It is a story about a girl who succumbs to the society being docile than resisting gender. She was born usual i.e.; neither feminine nor masculine. Gender is unusual because it is not natural. She grows gradually by learning gender. First, she is provided ‘dolls’ stoves and irons. And as she grows up she is healthy, intelligent, masculine and the person of abundant sexual drive. But “everyone saw a fat nose on thick leg”(Piercy, 1999). After such comment “she cut off her nose and her legs/and offered them up”(Piercy, 1999). Yes, she has become the victim of the society. She is not less than the commodity and in the name of social demand she underwent operation. “She killed her natural parts and she was herself constructed with “putty nose” and heavy cosmetics. Thus, “Barbie Doll” is also the archetypal image of beauty propagating by the capitalist consumerist corporate culture. She turns to be very fragile so the ending is ironically given as “a happy ending”(Piercy, 1999) for every women. Exacting and normalizing of the body according to the demand of the society and uprooting male domination are going on simultaneously. The gender oppression is apparent when Barbies goes under surgery.

### **Indoctrination of Gender Values in “Cinderella”**

In the same vein, “Cinderella” is another example about how stories were and are used to indoctrinate gender value. In the past, old parents and grandparents narrated the stories to their younger children and inculcated the gender value. In modern time the agents have been changed so different types of media and programs are indoctrinating the gender value. Since long stepfather is not presented as bad as step, mother. Rather the positive nature of stepfather is projected. Cinderella is intensely willing to take part in the dance but stepmother says,” you have no clothes and cannot dance [and] that’s the way with stepmother”(Sexton, 1999). Cinderella cries at the grave of her mother and pleads to send her to the prince’s ball. The bird drops a golden dress and little gold slippers. Masculine value bird is projected as the provider and the sole aim of Cinderella is to succumb to the prince. Cinderella obeys power of the society and she is also loyal to it because she has learnt it. Cinderella is bathed from the masculine ideology of the society. Small feat are considered good. They are the symbol of dependency and that is what the society wants to see females. Moreover, females by hook and crook try to remain within the frame of patriarchy. For instance, “the other sister cut off her hell/but the blood will”(Sexton, 1999). Yes, shoe does not fit to Cinderella’s sister but she tries to make it fit even for the impossible. When her body does not fit to the patriarchy norms then she its described as an ugly one but the case is just opposite with Cinderella because when prince was in his eleventh hour of search “this time Cinderella fit into the shoe/like a love letter into its envelope”(Sexton, 1999). So, she is described almost like an angel. Hence likes and dislikes are gender appropriate and social constructions.

### **Gender from Family to Society in “The Youngest Daughter”**

Likewise, “The Youngest Daughter” is about mother- daughter bond and gender learning. It shows gender as perpetual learning process and the female world a dark one. Woman is paradoxically taken as source of life and ‘the play’. The old mother expresses a sour taste in a humorous joke as “Six children and an old man have sucked from these brown nipples”(Song, 1999). The eldest daughter and mother feel them in “sunless room” which connotes to

the merciless patriarchal domain of the society. Mother very well knows that her daughter should plan the escape even then she is regularly preparing the “ritual of tea and rice/garnished with a shred of gingered fish...”(Song, 1999). This shows the domestic confinement of women because the mother is continuously preparing the food and care of the children who “eat in the familiar silence”(Song, 1999). Mother’s identity is defined through what it is not. Similar to Judith Butler’s view mother’s identity categories tend to be instruments of ‘regulatory regimes’. Further, it reveals that the regular similar performance like of mother has established gendered categories in a specific way. It is perpetually transferred through generations to generations. Therefore, it should be clear that gender is a continuous learning process of the effect of perpetual repetitions as Judith Butter asserts.

### **The Neutral Gender Representation in “X”**

Thus, the above examples tear that gender is already constructed through the complex network of Society and various kinds of institutions. It is a thorough learning process as educationists define learning as the process from birth to death. Gender is exactly like this. It is rooted in such a way that it demands it demands heightened understanding to reverse it. Gould’ “X” is one of such experiment in which the Jones couple rears an ungendered baby named X. through the name is not contaminated, various difficulties to maintain the neutral show the ubiquitous nature of gender. The experiment is worthwhile in two levels. First, due to ungendered activities of ‘X’, people cannot figure out the gender and it creates the problem for people in every relation with ‘X’. People have difficulties to interact, to play with, to address and to share the emotions. No one knows the gender of X but parents show the pervasive nature of gender and difficulty to eradicate it. Secondly it proves that though the child has sex, the transformation from sex to gender can be broken. Hence, gender is tightly embedded in every performance existence since the early civilization. So-called identities of our lives are thus the effect of discourses. Such identities do not come from real world but from the perpetual performances of daily activities. The exploration also reveals that the gender narrows the world by segregations. However, the blurring of gender identities heralds a completely noble and vast world to every individual.

Additionally, “The Lesson” is about a trip to a toy store that serves as the pretext for exploring how gender shapes the work role of woman in their neighborhood. It also whispers that how economic differences among people are mapped in the landscape of society. The toys are selected but nobody can buy them. They suppress the desire. Miss Moor asks such racially marginalized kids’ experiences. Children cannot buy the toy though they were extremely tempted to that. Hence, the learning is to suppress the desire. It means to make “ego” from the tripartite division of human mind. Is a balancing agency by which they learn to calculate? The motto” I shop therefore I am” has corrupted the people. Capitalist system has inculcated the vogue for unquenchable desires to purchase things. How to get maximum benefits from the minimum resources is the lesson they learn. Such learning to calculate makes themselves to think very-very wise. Moreover, every culture in which we live demands the order of the things. Desires germinate within this boundary. No desires are innate, for learning creates them. There are also systematic restrictions that we do not realized because they are quite accustomed to the desires through learning. Desires are produced through desire machine, capitalism.

Moreover, the race is inter- twined with economy. The toys denote to the world commodities and to learn capitalism is to be aware to suppress the desires. The purchasing capability determines the status of an individual. The crucial point to discuss is Miss Moor accuses white capitalists for stealing her “pie” and that should be returned back. She represents all the working class people who should fight to return back their snatched “pie”. After all, gender is important to break because it is the overall component of the culture.

### **Gender Culture and “In the American Society”**

Once again, “In the American Society” explores the stereotypes that males cannot adopt the new culture easily while the women have the propensity to transfer to the new culture. It is about the Chinese emigrant family in America. Among the parents and two daughters, father is presented as retrospective. They have owned a hotel and prospered well. Father is nostalgic. His grandfather used to rule in Chinese village and used to give money to the people in every New Year days. This sense hierarchical pattern of society inculcated his visions. He is different

from his wife and daughters because he has learnt to be different. His emotions and performances are still uniquely Chinese. Therefore, he fires the employees of his restaurant by his feudal mind. Deliberate mistakes of the other workers not only degrade the prosperity of the restaurant but also cause the scarcity of workers. Moreover, when the police catch the illegal Chinese Americans he tries to assert his identity, prestige and intense public concern as a male. He succeeds to make them free in exchange with a huge amount of money. Nevertheless, no sooner the boys are free they leave restaurant leaving a letter about their dissatisfaction. The husband in deep down remains happy because he thinks he has done something. He rarely attends party. Once in his rare visit, he quarrels with a white American, Jeremy. Father throws the clothes in the pool but daughter becomes happy. It shows that females have learnt to see the male and arrogant and jerky than kind and liberal. Unlike the husband, daughter and mother are regarded as introspective. They are American acculturated. Mother comments her husband with her daughter, as “your father doesn’t believe in joining American Society. So, go to dinner without him”(Jen, 1999). Likewise, daughter tilted towards their Mother. Their concern about father is “who cares what he thinks”(Jen, 1999). As a female, they are all encompassing and as a male arrogant and strict are the stereotypes they construct. Moreover, the women in association with pleasure and male with public concern too are constructions. Thus, gender formation is not natural rather it is constructed.

### **Gender Identity in “The Man Who was Almost a Man”**

Similarly, “The Man Who was Almost a Man” not only depicts the racial injustice but also the scenarios of the interrelation of race and gender. Undoubtedly, gender is also connected to race, ethnicity and class. Robyn Wiegman and Elena Glasberg write “the main character’s awareness of stakes of adult masculinity cannot be separated from the social circum-stances of being an African American in the 1940s rural south”(4). Gender and race have gone together in organizing the white’s response to non- whites people and in establishing and exclusively white identity with the stereotyping of blacks. The proper femininity is clearly set within the cultural milieu. Dave’s Mother, as female, is projected very docile. She is loyal, weak and a powerless servant. On the other hand, through Dave is not fully-grown up; he had an itch to fire a gun. He thinks “[A] hm ol enough to hava gun”(Wright, 1999). Gun is an associated with masculinity. The story is about the transformation of Dave from Childhood to the adult. Gun is the symbol of power. Male’s fascination has been depicted as “blooom! He smiled, Blooom! Blooom! Click, Click. If anybody could shoot a gun, he could”(Wright, 1999). Dave has the passion and he is gender conscious. It is apparent in his words “I know Dave Saunders is a man” (Wright, 1999). Dave is explicitly affected by the contemporary social-eco-cultural milieu. The focus is on fragmentation, difference and absence, rather than on the sameness. The contemporary discourse has included the sense of manhood to the seventeen years of Dave, unlike his mother’s femininity.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, since the human civilization began with learning, the positive and negative formations continued. The previous ideas and ideals become outdated when the noble and more powerful ideas emerged. Knowingly and unknowingly, human beings commit mistakes. Undoubtedly, gender is one of such mistakes and its time has come to correct it. So, the historical binaries and stereotypes of gender should immediately be broken at any cost. It is because we have realized it at present as the belief rather than rational formation, construction rather than natural, result of perpetual repetitions rather than reality and it confines as a barrier to approach the world in totality. Hence, it is upon us to define who we are either with the categories like gender, race class sexuality and culture or on the basis of the world devoid of categories where every corporeal body enjoys the world equality having the same culture imagination.

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