

Feminism: Concepts and Theories
Dr. Mathangi Krishnamurthy
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

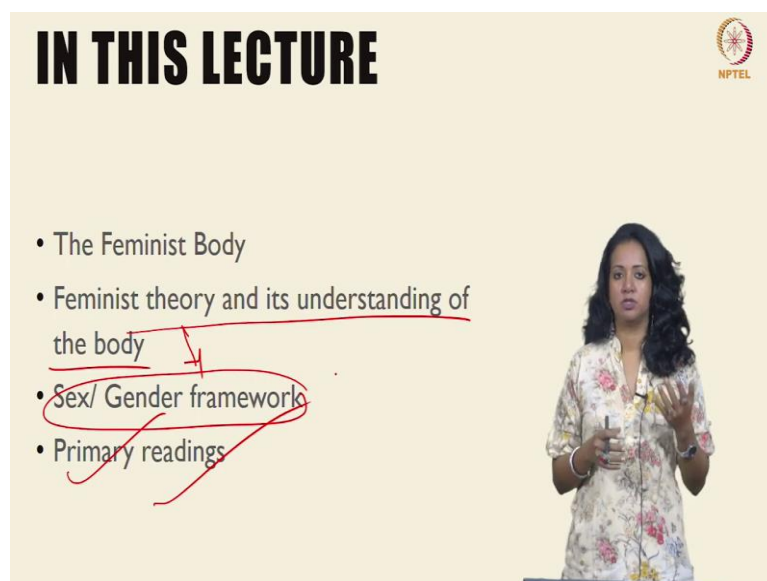
The Feminist Body – Part I

Welcome back to Feminism, Concepts and Theories, we are now in week six. As we progress onwards from concepts, theories, the various waves of feminism, we are now coming to an exciting juncture in this course. This week onwards as we take up various kinds of, ways in which feminist theory takes up objects of analysis, we will now go back and forth between theory and praxis as we understand it, which is theory in practice.

And I find this to be exciting for a variety of reasons. Because finally, we can now start looking at the inner workings of theory, which does not mean that we are only going to be looking at practicalities or events on the ground, or what is otherwise called, what is the use of feminist theory? How do we apply this?


So, when I say praxis, it is not about application knowledge, but about a form of practicing theory. How is it that theory now becomes a lens for us to understand the world as we see it today, and the ways in which we understand gender to be a force in this world? So today, without further ado, let us begin with the feminist body.


(Refer Slide Time: 1:28)



IN THIS LECTURE

- The Feminist Body
- Feminist theory and its understanding of the body
- Sex/ Gender framework
- Primary readings





So what is it that we are covering today in the feminist body? First, feminist theory is very understanding of the body. Why is the body an object of analysis? Why does it matter to feminist theorists? What are the ways in which we can break down this body in feminist understanding? What are the various kinds of bodies?

If you remember, we had begun in week one with one of the bases of feminist theory, which is then later on critiqued, of course, but which works as a kind of ..mmm...preliminary understanding of the ways in which biological sex and cultural gender form a dialectic with one another. So we are going to return to that in relation to feminist theory. And as ever, like we did last week, we are also going to go through a whole set of primary readings to give you an understanding of feel and texture for theory in life, so to speak.

Some of these readings are from academic journals, some of them are from popular articles. So as you can see, theory is not merely the realm then just of academic hallowed halls and ivory towers, but you can find instantiation of it in everyday life in the newspapers, journals, and everyday structures, and encounters, and experiences that all of us have.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:57)

WHY BODY?

- The body in Western philosophy
 - Descartes and the body-mind dichotomy
 - An instrument to be directed
 - Does one have a body or is one a body?
- In such a binary system, what is the status of a woman's body?
- Within the discursive binary of male-female, woman is considered closer to body than mind

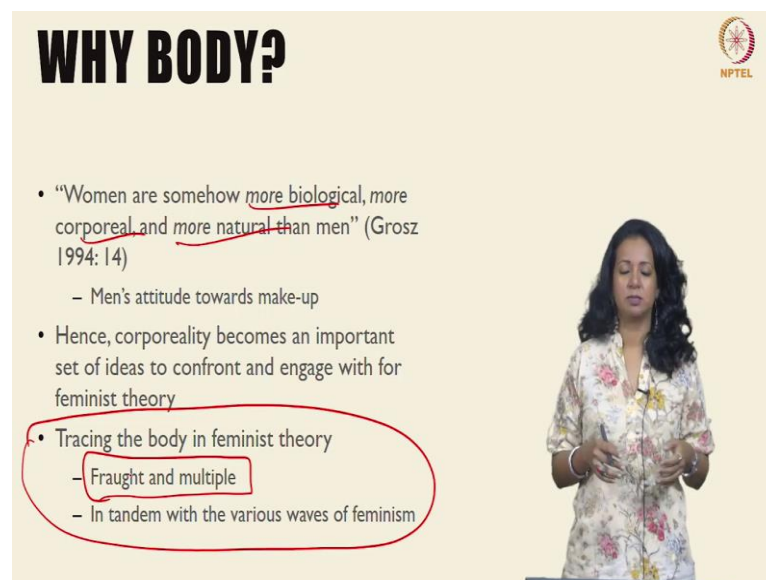
Let us start then with the very basic question, why body? And, it might be fairly obvious to you we start feminism with this understanding of woman, how is woman to be distinguished, unless of course you are taking into account the body. So therefore, we are interested in the body, in feminist theory in relation to Western philosophies, understanding of the body itself, and how that then maps on to the category of woman. In Western philosophy since Descartes, we now work with what is common sensically understood as the body-mind dichotomy. One has a mind through which one controls the body. The body, in such an understanding is an

instrument to be directed. You remember the fairly popular saying, “I think, therefore I am,” which begs the question, does one have a body? I think therefore, I am. Therefore I am thinking about myself as having a body, or, am I a body? Do I have an embodied understanding of self? Do I move through the world as if body and mind are one? And in such a binary system, what is the status of a woman's body?

Are there differences in this sort of formulation of I think, therefore, I am in relation to quote unquote, “woman's thinking” or “woman's body.” Also recall the binaries that we discussed in relation to discourse analysis or discursive formations of the woman within which man-woman work as a dyad. And in such a dyad, woman is considered to be closer to body than mind, which is the realm of man.

Man is always the thinking animal, the one that has conquered nature, whereas woman, whereas women's bodies are considered to be equal to nature. So full circle. In Western philosophy itself, you find the construction of a seemingly universal thinking mind - feeling body that then maps on to thinking man and feeling woman. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that feminist theory deal with the question of the body.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:16)



WHY BODY?

- “Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (Grosz 1994: 14)
 - Men's attitude towards make-up
- Hence, corporeality becomes an important set of ideas to confront and engage with for feminist theory
- Tracing the body in feminist theory
 - Fraught and multiple
 - In tandem with the various waves of feminism

The slide features a video inset on the right showing a woman with dark hair wearing a floral patterned shirt, speaking. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Red annotations highlight the quote and the 'Tracing the body in feminist theory' section.

Elizabeth Grosz says, for example, women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men. Think, for example, about men's attitude towards make-up and women, where a large number of men will always say, well, you know, it just looks artificial, you look so much better without make-up. As if in many ways, the closer you are to your natural self, the more authentic you are to this unspoiled idea of nature that can be enjoyed by man. So more biological, more corporeal, more natural than men. Hence, corporeality or the

act of having a body becomes an important set of ideas to confront and engage with, for feminist theory. And, we are therefore going to trace some parts of this body in feminist history, feminist theory, remembering throughout the process, that this process itself is fraught and multiple.

You are aware of some of this, right? We already went through these questions with different waves of feminist theory, whereas in every wave we will see splinter feminisms. You see one set of ideas, but they are not necessarily coherent, they are not necessarily homogenous, there are ways in which there are internal struggles in relation to other things happening in the world. Similarly, the ways in which theorization about the body moves through these waves of feminism will also be fraught and multiple.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:48)

OUR GOALS

- When and where does the body appear and disappear in feminist theory?
– Tracing the body in the history of feminist theory
- What kind of body?
– A modest typology
- What are the implications of particular kinds of bodily knowledge for feminist theory?
– Where do we go from here?

Therefore, let me briefly state for common understanding our goals for this week's set of discussions on the feminist body:

One, we are going to try and see where and when is it that the body appears and disappears? In other words, feminist theory does not have a mandate to say, body, let us talk about it. The body comes and goes as part of the larger understanding of what it means at particular times and places to be a woman in the world. Therefore, I am speaking about appearing and disappearing, at what times is it more important, at what times is it less important? And these things are also clues into trying to figure out how women are navigating this power binary between man and woman.

After this, we are going to try and draw a very modest typology, which is, what kinds of bodies are we talking about or what kind of body? Are there particular ways in which we can divide up the form of body that we are analysing, just for analytical ease, more than for saying this is the only kind of body worth studying. That is why I am emphasizing that this is a modest typology, I am not going to cover all the kinds of bodies there are, I am only offering kinds of bodies as forms of analysis to give you an idea of how to do this. So it is more methodological than anything else.

And this last question, which we may or may not fully answer in these sets of sessions, which is, what happens now? What are the implications of particular kinds of bodily knowledge for feminist theory? Where do we go from here? And this is as much an open question as an experimental one. It is an invitation to look at the kinds of material around us to imagine possibilities for the body in feminist theory, and otherwise. So, without further ado, let us dive right in.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:55)

THE BODY FOR FIRST-WAVE FEMINISTS

- Treated with suspicion
- Disavowal of notions that treated the body as mere enticement for men
- To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory) The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles ... artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action. (Mary Wollstonecraft 1792 [1988: 55])
- The Beautiful Body versus The Thinking Mind

The slide features a video inset of a woman in a floral dress speaking. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Red annotations highlight the quote and the title.

Let us start at a sort of beginning, not the very beginning, but kind of. What is the body for first-wave feminists? Now remember, first-wave feminism with its goals of equality, and what kind of equality? Equality like men, for instance, or equality as women, with women's values also being valuable in the public sphere. So we are looking at either something that says women should have equal voting rights because they are as intelligent as men. So in the equality paradigm, women being equal to men, just like men, with men being the standard, or women should get voting rights in order that they can raise good children, in which case, we are still looking at the disavowal of the notion by these very feminist that women are merely

decorative items in society or meant to entice men in order that marriage can secure for them future security and prosperity.

And therefore, all kinds of feminists wanted to move away from the notion of having embodiment itself of being womanly in a particular mode that is best identified with the body. Therefore, we see efforts to continually disengage the beautiful body from the thinking mind. Women wanted to be thinking women in order to be taken seriously. See, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft, speaking about the ways in which beauty binds women to particular kinds of practices, “to preserve personal beauty, woman's glory. The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles. Artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action.” Look at the kind of picture that Wollstonecraft is drawing that sedentary life for women, makes them slow, makes them not capable and therefore, this woman's glory of personal beauty, cramps their faculties worse than Chinese bands.

So leave alone the orientalism in this statement, also pay attention to the fact that she is speaking about particular kinds of privileged, mostly white women, and not African-American slaves. So here is an early example of the disavowal of body with first-wave feminism. And by disavowal, I do not mean that there is a hatred or a self-loathing, but there is an urgency to present oneself as mind rather than body as equality in the paradigms that we have already studied. It is also very exciting for me to see everything that we have studied before coming together in multiple ways in what we are going to study henceforth.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:02)

NINETEENTH CENTURY


- Contagious Diseases Act (Jordan 2001)
 - This act permitted women to be forcibly examined for venereal disease
 - campaign led by Josephine Butler
 - Victims of male and medical appropriation of their bodies
- The Sexual, Reproductive Body

In the 19th century, there is also the kind of focus, however, by feminists on ways in which the state tries to control women. This is also got to do with the kind of interest prevalent in society in demographics. The idea of population control, the idea of disease, the idea of making sure that populations can be governed in a fashion which keeps them safe, that controls for rates of mortality in relation to the spread of disease in relation to public health.

So, for example, the Contagious Diseases Act “permitted women to be forcibly examined for venereal diseases,” and the campaign led by Josephine Butler militated against this and argued that women were victims of male and medical appropriation of their bodies, thereby leading feminist attention to the sexual reproductive body. Victims of this kind of action were often lower class, working class women who might also be sex workers.


And therefore, they were forcibly subjected to medical appropriation and public health campaigns that suggested that they were corrupt and corrupt for society and had to be managed and had to be controlled. Their bodies being overtly sexual were also seen as suspicious bodies capable of bleeding over in their excess into society and corrupting it through disease.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:38)



18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

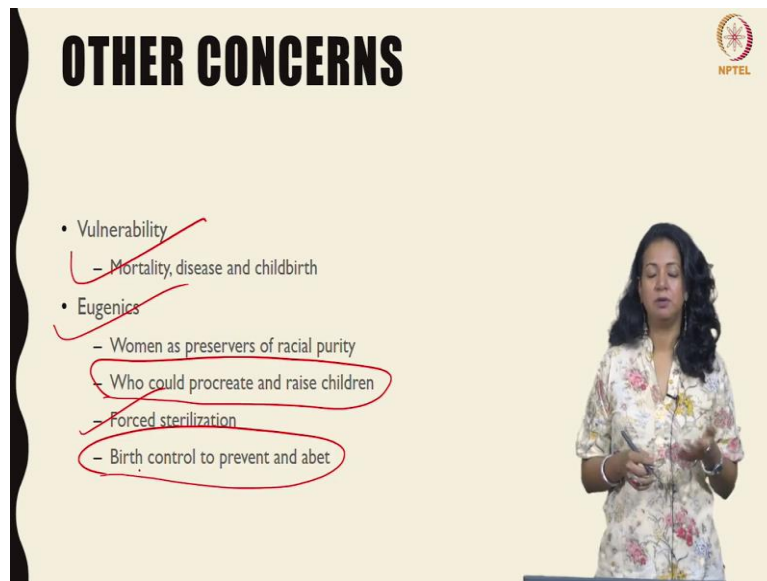
- I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash a well! And ain't I a woman? (Truth 1851 [1881: 116]).
- The prejudice against color, of which we hear so much, is no stronger than that against sex. It is produced by the same cause, and manifested very much in the same way. The negro's skin and the woman's sex are both prima facie evidence that they were intended to be in subjection to the white Saxon man. (Stanton 1860 [1881: 681])
- The Raced and Classed body



In the 18th and 19th century, there are also other references to the raced and classed body. So already you see that there are fine tunings in the ways in which the body is being considered in feminist theory, depending on who is speaking. So for example, this is Sojourner Truth. You have become familiar with her. We did read something like this in relation to her declaration that “Ain’t I a woman,” and she says, “I have as much muscle as any man, can do as much work as any man... ploughed, planted, ... gathered into barns. And ain’t I a woman?” Here she is resolutely insisting on her embodiment that she has a body and to pay attention to the capacities of that body.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in another mode argues, “the prejudice against colour of which we hear so much is no stronger than that against sex.” Here, Cady Stanton is calling attention to the colour of the racialized body in equivalence with the sex of the female body. So colour as visible marked entity, as a bodily entity, is equivalent in her understanding to sex as a marked entity that anybody can see that this is a woman. We will not talk here, of course, about the race blindness of this kind of declaration, but to analyse it for what it is, which is the understanding that femaleness is an embodied trait. Further she goes on to say, “the negro’s skin and the woman’s sex are both prima facie evidence that they were intended to be in subjection to the white Saxon man.”

(Refer Slide Time: 15:22)




The slide features a title 'OTHER CONCERNS' in bold black text at the top left. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The main content is a bulleted list on the left side, with a presenter on the right. The list items are: 'Vulnerability' (with a red checkmark), '- Mortality, disease and childbirth', 'Eugenics' (with a red checkmark), '- Women as preservers of racial purity', '- Who could procreate and raise children', '- Forced sterilization', and '- Birth control to prevent and abet'. The presenter is a woman with dark hair, wearing a floral patterned shirt, standing and gesturing with her hands.

- Vulnerability
 - Mortality, disease and childbirth
- Eugenics
 - Women as preservers of racial purity
 - Who could procreate and raise children
 - Forced sterilization
 - Birth control to prevent and abet

Other concerns during this time for women's bodies were multiple; they included various kinds of vulnerability in relation to mortality rates, disease and childbirth. And in relation to eugenics where a discourse was in circulation that women were preservers of racial purity, and therefore the question of who could procreate and raise children? What were the kinds of appropriate women who would be allowed to have children was very much part of public discourse, very-very problematically.


There were many instances of forced sterilization in case women were purported to be inappropriate carriers of race. And additionally, birth control to prevent and abet reproduction, which was subject to intense debates as to who is it that had access to birth control in the first place. Broadly after sketching these sets of concerns, let us now move forward to look at one of the more seminal texts of the time, 1949, *The Second Sex*.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:27)



THE SECOND SEX

- Simone de Beauvoir
- “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world” (Beauvoir 1949 [1982: 39])
- Relationship between body and self



So we have briefly referred to *Second Sex* as being part of second-wave feminism or being a precursor to second-wave feminism with its attention to the ways in which gender works and circulates through powerful discourses about women. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* was a remarkably influential text during this time, where she argues, “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world.”

Pay attention to what that means, to be present in the world, there is a body through which one is present, but at the same time the body is also a point of view towards the world. One can only see the world in particular fashion, depending on the kind of body one has and the kind of body one has is not merely biological fact, it is also a culturally embodied thing in the world. Therefore, *second sex* calls attention to this relationship between body and self.

So one wonders if then this might be seen as renewing this kind of contract between mind and body I think, therefore, I am, so what do I think of my body? Can I think through it to get to the world? And Simone de Beauvoir does not quite mean exactly that. Let us go on to read a few excerpts from the text and then we will try and work through what are the various kinds of modalities through which she is making her arguments.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:08)



THE SECOND SEX

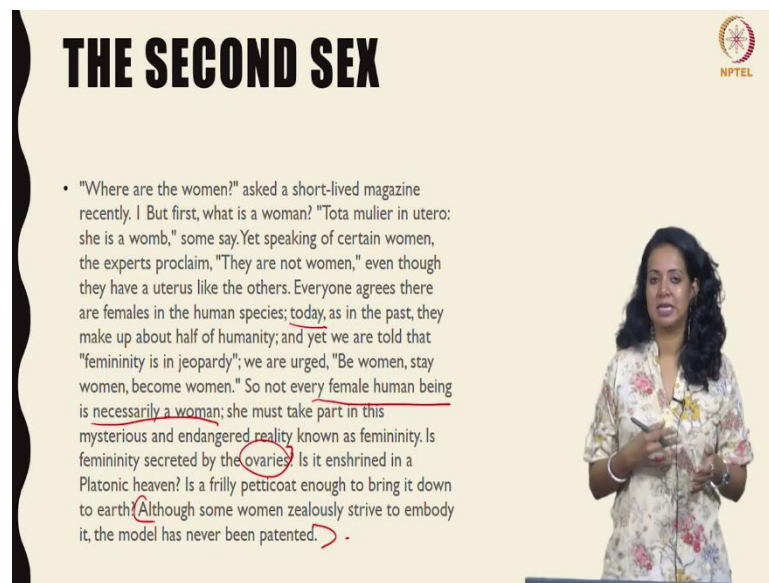
- I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let's not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about. And the volumes of idiocies churned out over this past century do not seem to have clarified the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, "Even in Russia, women are still very much women"; but other well-informed people — and also at times those same ones — lament, "Woman is losing herself, woman is lost." It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold.



In the introduction, she writes, “I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over:...” well, little did she know we are still talking about it. “let’s not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about. And the volumes of idiocies churned out over this past century do not seem to have clarified the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, “Even in Russia, women are still very much women”; but other well informed people, --- and also at times those same ones --- lament, “Woman is losing herself, woman is lost.” It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold.”

I really like this excerpt because I think it captures one of the quandaries of doing this sort of work, which we will broadly call deconstruction for now. Every time we start looking into ideas about how is it that something like womanhood is secured bodily, physiologically, physically, psychically, etc., etc. One also begins to want something solid to hold on to as to what is it that is certain anymore? Simone de Beauvoir is capturing precisely that kind of sentiment in the second-wave.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:53)



THE SECOND SEX

NPTEL

- "Where are the women?" asked a short-lived magazine recently. | But first, what is a woman? "Tota mulier in utero: she is a womb," some say. Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, "They are not women," even though they have a uterus like the others. Everyone agrees there are females in the human species; today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that "femininity is in jeopardy"; we are urged, "Be women, stay women, become women." So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. > .

““Where are the women?” asked a short-lived magazine recently.” She continues, “But first, what is a woman? “Tota mulier in utero; she is a womb,” some say,” meaning women reproduce. Besides that, nothing else can be known about them. “Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, ““They are not women,” even though they have a uterus like the others.” So clearly, the bodily fact of having a uterus is not enough, you still have to do more. “Everyone agrees there our females in the human species,” yes, and yet, “today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that “femininity is in jeopardy”; we are urged, “Be women, stay women, become women.” So not every female human being is necessarily a woman.” Pay attention. ...female human being is not necessarily a woman. See glimpses of the sex, gender framework already? “She must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it bodily? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented.” Here, she is quite mischievously, gesturing to the fact that somehow everybody seems to keep telling everybody else that one has to be a woman sufficiently enough but nobody knows exactly what this model encompasses.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:43)

NPTEL

- Lévi-Strauss, at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion: 'Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality.' These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society were simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become clear, on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed - he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.

Levi-Strauss at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion. “Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by a man's ability to view biological relations as series of contrasts,” biological relations as a series of contrasts. Remember the duality that we keep invoking, keep that in mind. “[D]uality, alternation, opposition and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality. These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society was simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become clear on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed. He sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.”

This may seem very opaque, but this is very important. Let us try again. So, in order to make her argument, Simone de Beauvoir is reading other philosophers and the anthropologist Levi Strauss, who at the end of a profound work on forms of primitive society says, “Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrast.”

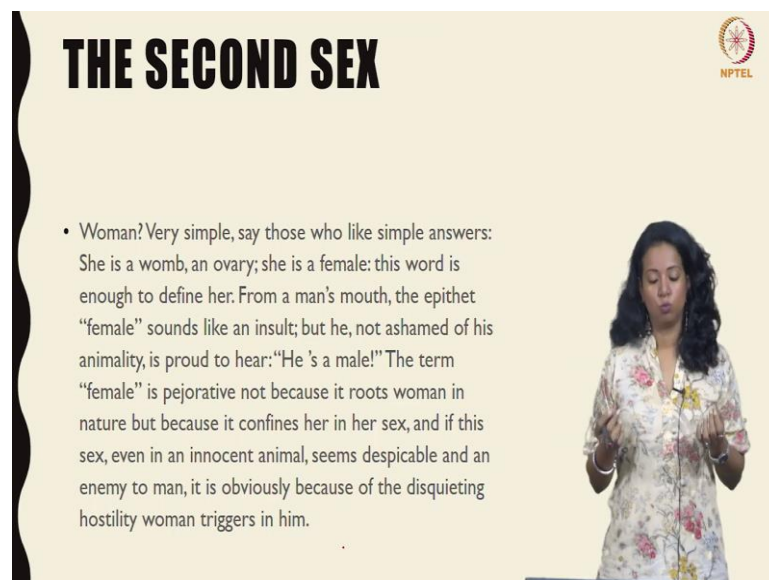
Man is coming to consciousness is marked by this capacity to distinguish oppositions and duality in society. And this Levi Strauss is doing by looking at a variety of texts from around the world. Simone de Beauvoir is additionally adding. She says, well, surely this cannot be explained if we look at these dualities as friendships. I mean, sure, man has a capacity to look

at duality, but is he looking at these dualities as things that can exist together, that are friendly with one another, that have fellowship with one another, so that we can all form this universal pact of love and peace? Surely not.

Things become clear, if following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility, meaning in order to be conscious, you have to embrace a fundamental hostility and hostility over here, read it loosely, read it as the fact of opposing oneself to something else, I am that which that is not and ideally, I have to be better, or I am that which that is not, and if I am not as good as that I need to be better. And this is the driving force of consciousness, according to Simone de Beauvoir, reading Levi Strauss, and Hegel. “The subject can be posed only in being opposed. He sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.” So I am the subject, the human, that, is the object.

And in suggesting this, Simone de Beauvoir wants us to pay attention to how this maps onto the question of man and woman. The ways in which man is set up as mind, woman is set up as nature and man's capacity to be man depends on objectifying and opposing himself to woman who is set up as that which is not as good as man.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:36)

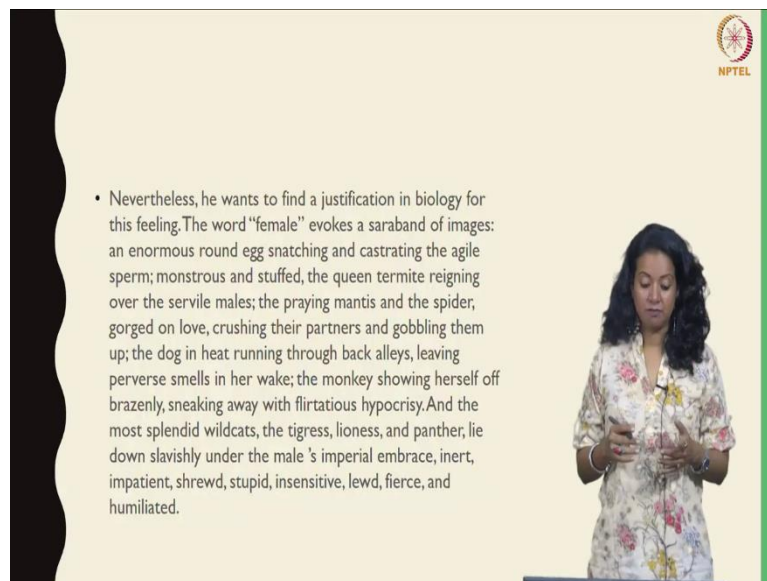
The slide features a title 'THE SECOND SEX' in bold black letters at the top left. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star and the text 'NPTEL'. On the right side, a woman with dark hair, wearing a white floral patterned shirt, is speaking. On the left side, there is a bulleted text block. The text reads: '• Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet "female" sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: "He 's a male!" The term "female" is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him.'

She continues. “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers. She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female. This word is enough to define her,” as if the word itself has meaning prior to itself. “From a man's mouth, the epithet female sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear, he's a male. The term “female” is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even

in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him.”

Pay attention to where is it that the author roots this hostility. She says that it is because man in many ways is closer to culture, and woman to nature. Therefore, woman has sex, she is just a basic sexual being. She has an identity because of her sexuality as a woman, because of her capacity to reproduce, just like everybody else in nature.


(Refer Slide Time: 26:45)



“Nevertheless, he wants to find a justification in biology for this feeling. The word “female” evokes a saraband of images. An enormous round egg snatching and castrating the agile sperm; monstrous and stuffed, the queen termite reigning over the servile males; the praying mantis and the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up; the dog in heat running through back alleys, leaving perverse smells in her wake; the monkey showing herself off brazenly, sneaking away with flirtatious hypocrisy. And the most splendid wildcats, the tigress, lioness, and panther, lie down slavishly under the male’s imperial embrace, inert, impatient, shrewd, stupid, insensitive, lewd, fears and humiliated.”


Now, do not read this as mere evidence. Read it the way the author means it, which is to evoke a set of images that draw this clear distinction between culture and nature. And how is it that females are part of the nature side of the binary, and man part of the culture side? And once that binary becomes clearer, think then also as to how the male side of the spectrum is constantly both drawn to, as well as scared by this nature side of the binary.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:17)



THE SECOND SEX

- Man projects all females at once onto woman. And the fact is that she is a female. But if one wants to stop thinking in commonplaces, two questions arise. What does the female represent in the animal kingdom? And what unique kind of female is realized in woman?
- Males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for the purposes of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of division of the species into two sexes is not clear.



“Man projects all females at once onto woman.” You are just like all other women, or if you have heard the compliment given by some men, you are not like women at all, you just not like any other woman, as if that is a compliment. “And the fact is that she is a female. But if one wants to stop thinking in commonplaces, two questions arise. What does the female represent in the animal kingdom? And what unique kind of female is realized in a woman?”

“Males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for the purposes of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of *division* of the species into two sexes is not clear.”

What is she saying here? She says, man projects all females at once onto woman. However, two related questions. What is it that the female represents in the animal kingdom, if you say that women are close to nature? And secondly, what unique kind of female is realized in woman? How do you make these continuous assertions? And then how do you try and understand the female body within these assertions?

Then she is making the very interesting argument that male and female are two types of individuals who can only be defined in relation to one another, in relation to each of their reproductive functions, none of which makes sense without the other. But to begin with, the division of the species into two sexes itself is not very clear. She is in fact gesturing to the arbitrariness of this kind of division.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:06)



THE SECOND SEX


- It does not occur universally in nature. In one-celled animals, infusorians, amoebas, bacilli, and so on, multiplication is fundamentally distinct from sexuality, with cells dividing and subdividing individually. For some metazoans, reproduction occurs by schizogenesis, that is dividing the individual whose origin is also asexual, or by blastogenesis, that is dividing the individual itself produced by a sexual phenomenon: the phenomena of budding or segmentation observed in freshwater hydras, coelenterates, sponges, worms, and tunicates are well-known examples. In parthenogenesis, the virgin egg develops in embryonic form without male intervention.



“It does not occur universally in nature.” For anybody who keeps saying that male and female, these are natural biological divisions, pay attention. “In one-celled animals, infusorians, amoebas, bacilli, and so on, multiplication is fundamentally distinct from sexuality, with cells dividing and subdividing individually. For some metazoans, reproduction occurs by schizogenesis, that is dividing the individual whose origin is also asexual, or by blastogenesis, that is dividing the individual itself produced by a sexual phenomenon. The phenomenon of budding or segmentation observed in freshwater hydras, coelenterates, sponges, worms, and tunicates are well-known examples. In parthenogenesis, the virgin egg develops in embryonic form without male intervention.” Lest you think you walked into the wrong class, this is not biology.


But Simone de Beauvoir is bringing together all these forms of evidence to suggest that what we understand about sexuality itself as a given, as a natural processes, as always defined by male and female, are all a large set of discursive myths. And by myth, we are not saying false, we are saying that these are arrangements that are arbitrary, they do not necessarily mean as much as you think they do.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:37)



THE SECOND SEX


- Opinions about the respective roles of the two sexes have varied greatly; they were initially devoid of any scientific basis and only reflected social myths. It was thought for a long time, and is still thought in some primitive societies based on matrilineal filiation, that the father has no part in the child's conception: ancestral larvae were supposed to infiltrate the womb in the form of living germs. With the advent of patriarchy, the male resolutely claimed his posterity; the mother had to be granted a role in procreation even though she merely carried and fattened the living seed: the father alone was the creator. Aristotle imagined that the fetus was produced by the meeting of the sperm and the menses: in this symbiosis, woman just provided passive material, while the male principle is strength, activity, movement, and life.



“Opinions about the respective roles of the two sexes have varied greatly; they were initially devoid of any scientific basis and only reflected social myths. It was thought for a long time, and is still thought in some primitive societies based on matrilineal filiation, that the father has no part in the child's conception: ancestral larvae were supposed to infiltrate the womb in the form of living germs. With the advent of patriarchy, the male resolutely claimed his posterity; the mother had to be granted a role in procreation even though she merely carried and fattened the living seed: the father alone was the creator. Aristotle imagined that the fetus was produced by the meeting of the sperm and the menses: in this symbiosis, woman just provided passive material, while the male principle is strength, activity, movement, and life.”

Look how beautifully she gathers different kinds of material to make this argument not just of arbitrariness but to show that in the process of arbitrary assignment how is it that power accrues to the male and passivity to the female, thereby bringing us back full circle to what we began with in the first lecture.


(Refer Slide Time: 32:53)



SEX/ GENDER SYSTEM

- Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relation between the sexes. The term gender is used to designate psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness, although even biological sex as a natural kind is now questioned by many theorists.

– Nancy Potter, “Key Concepts: Feminism”
Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, Volume 8, Number 1, March 2001, pp. 61-71



“Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relation between the sexes.” It “is used to designate psychological, social and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness...” and this is where Simone de Beauvoir also comes in... “although even biological sex as a natural kind is now questioned by many theorists.” Nancy Potter is writing in 2001. 1949, Simone de Beauvoir is not making an argument for biological sex being natural. In fact, she is suggesting that the very fact of naming biological sex itself as male and female is tremendously arbitrary and already shot through with patriarchal power. This would be a good moment to take a break, now that we have gone through the history of the feminist body in western feminist theory and taken you through a short reading of Simone de Beauvoir. Take a quick break and come back to the second part of the series of discussions where we will speak about body and beauty.