UNIT 4  FEMINISM AND NON-NORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminism has a long and complex history. Several issues have come under the purview of feminism and its struggle for women’s rights over the decades. This unit will look specifically at the response of, and the relationship between, feminist thought and normative and non-normative relationships. We will begin by trying to explain and understand what is meant by the ‘normative’ and then move on to analyze what lies beyond it, and why it is termed the ‘non-normative’. (You have already been introduced to these ideas in Block 3, especially in Unit 1 which focused on “Issues”. It may be helpful for you to review them in the context of our discussion in this unit.) The issue of the ‘non-normative’ is a significant one from the point of view of feminism. This unit will address aspects related to this issue and the responses of feminist theory to the non-normative.
4.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of the ‘normative’ and what constitutes the normative;
- Infer who creates, validates, and perpetrates this category of normative and how;
- Find out if there is a commonly accepted model that is seen as being normative;
- Realize all that fall outside its realm and are accorded the position of the non-normative; and
- Explain how feminist theory has responded to the non-normative.

4.3 CONSTRUCTING THE NORMATIVE

In a patriarchal society, the institution of the family is posited as being the norm. The family sanctions heterosexuality and sexual relations within marriage with the aim of procreation. Consequently, the family is one of the most pivotal structures that control women in myriad ways by upholding a model of feminine behaviour. Feminine normativity carries a certain set of expectations that include being docile, self-sacrificing in the interest of the family and home, devoted to the husband and his needs, being a dedicated mother and other such ideals which create and systematically impose the model of normative sexuality through the feminine ideal. Further, the separation of the private and the public wherein the woman’s position is set firmly in the private sphere of the house, seeks to physically curtail her movements.

Thus, through the model of the family, patriarchy controls women’s desire, agency and body, by seeing it as the property of the man and linking it to family honour and position. Any attempt to deviate from the norm is severely punished. The most obvious example of this is perhaps the ‘honour killings’ that are prevalent in India. In addition, popular discourse surrounding the woman eulogizes the woman’s body and idealizes her as goddess, mother, and nation while simultaneously using these images to enforce control. The woman’s body thus becomes a site for social control where the nation, religion, and medicine control women’s bodies in order to conform to ideas of normativity.

While generating and mobilizing discourse around the ideal woman, the family also systematically demonizes other models of the family that seek to disengage from heteronormativity and/or the norm of sexual union for reproduction. Consequently, any alternative family structure not only faces derision at the hands of society, but also confronts several hurdles when it comes to interacting
with institutions such as the legal and governmental framework. So, for example, families comprising of same-sex couples are allowed to marry only in a few countries and these families often experience severe bias while acquiring a home or while adopting and raising children, and meet several other impediments in their daily lives. Other non-normative relationships such as live-in relationships between heterosexual couples also face questions regarding property rights, child paternity, and rights of the woman, to name a few. What is significant here is that the state becomes an integral part of the machinery that validates the normative family model governed by the rules of heteronormativity.

4.3.1 Relationship between Normative, Race, Caste and Gender

While sexuality has been at the locus of debates regarding the non-normative, it is essential to recognize that several intersecting factors make up the norm. Class, caste, gender, race, religion, age, and health are some of the most obvious determinants. While gender is one of the major markers of identity, it is not the only one, and consequently, any discussion regarding gender normativity must factor in these other determinants as well. The normative then, is deeply embedded in the ways in which we fashion ourselves in our daily existence. To take a simple example, the conflation between beauty and fair skin, especially in India, defines the ideal of a beautiful woman as someone who is fair, slim, tall, etc. Black is not beautiful in the dominant section of society. The desire for fair skin translates into a manic obsession with fairness creams and other beauty products that seek to fulfill one of the many parameters of what constitutes beauty. In terms of class, as with caste, the normative will always be invested in the upper echelons of society. Poverty can never be the norm; neither can those who belong to the lower castes in a caste-ridden society that is prevalent in India.

To choose that which is not the norm, is to be forever relegated, through a series of intertwined symbiotic structures. Kate Bornstein, commenting on gender and oppression says:

> It is like a caste structure— it includes many facets and many aspects of a person’s life. The perfect gender is not just male, it is white, it is tall and of slim build, it has money and political power, sexual choice, it is fertile but has control of that fertility, and it is probably American and called Bill Clinton. (Whittle, 2006, p.202)

Simply put, being a part of the norm is to occupy a position of power.
4.3.2 Normative Sexuality: Heteronormativity

Over the years, the problematization of gender relations and sexual identity has led to sexuality being seen as a complex site that is shaped by social and personal experience. As opposed to the earlier conflation of the terms ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’, theorists began to recognize the differences between the biologically constructed identity and a socially constructed one. So, ‘sex’ is seen as a biological identity — male or female, and ‘sexuality’ takes into account an individual’s sexual orientation, behaviour and preference; and ‘gender’ is a part of the process of social construction.

Heteronormativity is based on the binary oppositions of gender where it presumes that there are only two sexes and that it is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ for people of different sexes to be attracted to one another. Both these sexes are represented in their ideal characteristics and social institutions such as marriage and the family are organized around heterosexual relations. It is also heteronormativity that defines the propriety and impropriety of any sexual behaviour. Celia Kitzinger offers a definition, saying, “Heteronormativity refers, in sum, to the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger, 2005, p.478). For example, according to the traditional Hindu ideal, heterosexual relations within marriage, leading to procreation, would constitute a normative model of sexuality. Thus, same-sex couples comprise the non-normative deviants and alternative to the ideal heterosexual couple.

Check Your Progress: What do you understand by the term “normative”? Can you think of any examples to explain the role played by this notion in our everyday lives? Examine these examples critically.

4.4 THE NON-NORMATIVE

In order to understand the vectors that define as well as disseminate the non-normative, we will first look at issues of sexuality while trying to understand non-normative sexuality and its relation to feminism. Secondly, we will discuss the non-normative with respect to the issue of caste in the Indian context.

Thirdly, we will attempt to look at the non-normative as it defines the body. Traditional ideals of beauty and the increasingly invasive power of the medical profession, especially as they impinge on women and govern their functioning, are some of the issues discussed in this section. And in the other sections of this unit, we will learn all these debates in a detailed manner too.
4.4.1 Homosexuality

It is interesting to note that the term ‘heterosexual’ comes into being only after the term ‘homosexual’, when 19th century sexologists began to construct theories that explored ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sexualities. Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study* (1886) pathologized homosexuality in his work, seeing it and other ‘perversions’ like it as a sign of individual illness of a larger depraved society. It was in the 1892 translation of Krafft-Ebing’s work that the term ‘homosexuality’ came into general usage. Sexuality, as seen by these sexologists was constructed in terms of the binaries of hererosexuality and homosexuality, where one was seen as inherently positive, normal and desirable; while the other, homosexuality, was only defined in terms of negativity.

Discussing the emergence of the category of homosexuality, Michel Foucault in his book, *The History of Sexuality* says:

> Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault, 1976, p.43)

For Foucault, the sexual classification of individuals is the result of the development of a regime of power. According to Foucault, power structures operate through classification and categorization. The sexual classification of individuals, become possible by relying on the medicalization of the sexually peculiar. This implies that those who are seen as sexually normative are treated as a separate category from those who are seen as sexually peculiar. Rather than just a description of behaviours, these categories and labels become attached to individuals in order to define and classify them, so that they can be controlled.

Sexuality then, as it was being labeled and classified with peculiar names by sexologists, was also increasingly seen as something that was characteristic of individuals and needed to be detected. But, while being oppressive, these sexual categories, especially those of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, also became new and empowering ways for individuals to identify themselves. It made possible what Foucault calls, “a ‘reverse’ discourse”, wherein, “homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1976, p.101).
4.4.2 Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Communities

Forging the links between the emergence of a specifically homosexual identity in the latter part of the 19th century with the new patterns of social organization that were being formed at the time, John D’Emilio in his path-breaking essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity”, explores the ways in which capitalism facilitated the articulation of such an identity. According to him, the reorganization of the family structure, propelled by capitalism’s spread of wage labour and capital, allows for the conditions that foster the separation of sexuality from what he calls, “the ‘imperative’ to procreate” (D’Emilio, 2009, p.104). This, in turn, made possible the rise of urban communities of lesbians and gay men. Thus, by the time of the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, which sparked off the Gay Liberation Movement, huge crowds of lesbians and gay men could be mobilized.

D’Emilio recognizes that while it became significantly easier at the time for men and women to construct a personal life away from the constraints of the family, it was nonetheless more difficult for women, as they were still economically dependent on men. This recognition gestures towards a nuanced understanding of the lesbian movement, wherein instead of it being willy-nilly brought under the general rubric of the Gay Liberation Movement, it is acknowledged in terms of its own politics and struggle.

Historically, lesbians have occupied a somewhat uneasy position in social movements that organized protests on issues of gender and sexuality. The international women’s and gay and lesbian movements were instrumental in raising awareness about concerns regarding the inequality of the sexes and the sidelining of gay issues. Both the women’s movement and the gay rights movement questioned and sought to defy traditional beliefs regarding sexuality in order to destabilize the hegemony of heterosexuality. However, as Nitza Berkovitch and Sara Helman point out, “challenging heterosexuality did not inevitably lead to a critique of patriarchy” (Berkovitch & Helman, 2005, p.271). The gay movement largely privileged male sexuality and there were very few exceptions to this sort of gender hierarchy. Lesbian feminists argued for the specificity of the lesbian experience as an experience specific to women and criticized the assumption that lesbians and gay men share characteristics simply by virtue of being same-sex relationships. The shared rejection of heterosexuality alone was not enough to keep the community of gays and lesbians together.

On the other hand, feminists, in their questioning of societal roles and the inequality of the sexes did not question the idea of a ‘natural’ preference or that of heterosexuality as the norm. Thus, feeling estranged from both these
movements, lesbians felt the need to create a distinctively feminist lesbian politics, one that denaturalized heterosexuality and interrogated the creation of heterosexuality as the normative model of sexuality. Lesbianism then, was seen as being more than a sexual preference, it was a political choice. It defied the power equation that always existed between men and women, and in doing so, lesbianism posed the most radical challenge to the established order. Thus, significantly, it is from the standpoint of lesbian and gay theory that a critique of normative heterosexuality is usually undertaken in feminism.

4.4.3 Critique of Heteronormativity

Several lesbian feminist theorists questioned the ways in which the ideology of heteronormativity is ingrained into the collective psyche of women. They examined the ways in which society assails women with images of heterosexual romance from an early age itself, so that to desire anyone other than the member of the opposite sex is immediately deemed as ‘unnatural’. Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), marks an important moment as it urged a feminist reorientation to sexuality by studying oppression based on sexuality. She explores the enforcement and perpetration of heteronormativity by engaging with the work of Kathleen Barry. According to Barry, female indoctrination towards compulsory heterosexuality takes place primarily through the positing of ‘love’ as an emotion which centers on the primacy of male sexual desire. It is through this, she argues, that girls learn that, “the locus of sexual power is male” (Rich, 2009, p.189). This, in turn, becomes the basis for the assertion of the male sex-right to women. It is this right that, according to her, creates and defends sexual slavery:

In the mystique of the overpowering, all-conquering male sex-drive, the penis-with-a-life-of-its-own, is rooted the law of male sex-right to women, which justifies prostitution as a universal cultural assumption on the one hand, while defending sexual slavery within the family on the basis of “family privacy and cultural uniqueness” on the other. (Rich, 2009, p.189-190)

Thus compulsory heterosexuality functions as a regulatory mechanism that systematically disallows any thoughts regarding alternative gender roles while constantly legitimizing and reinforcing sexual slavery. As Barry points out:

The huge number of men engaged in these practices should be cause for declaration of an international emergency, a crisis in sexual violence. But what could be cause for alarm is instead accepted as normal sexual intercourse. (Rich, 2009, p.191)
Taking this critique further, Rich sees compulsory heterosexuality as being a lie, one that denies the reality and articulation of women’s passion for women. She says:

The lie of compulsory female heterosexuality today afflicts not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers. It creates, specifically, a profound falseness, hypocrisy, and hysteria in the heterosexual dialogue, for every heterosexual relationship is lived in the queasy strobe light of that lie. However we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labelled, it flickers across and distorts our lives. (Rich, 2009, p.199)

Rich proposes the empowering categories of ‘lesbian experience’ and ‘lesbian continuum’ as a response to the overarching hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality. ‘Lesbian experience’ signifies the historical presence of lesbians and the way in which the meaning of that existence is being continually created, and ‘lesbian continuum’ is seen as ‘woman-identified experience’, which includes a sort of sisterhood of women, that foregrounds the shared bonding against oppressive patriarchy amongst other experiences. Both these categories create an alternative bond that lies outside of norms of heterosexual behaviour.

Other theorists have also critiqued heterosexuality on the basis of the assumptions that it makes of gender binaries. In her book Gender Trouble (1990), Judith Butler illustrates the performative nature of gender identity to mount a critique on the ways in which heterosexuality forces us to conform to heterosexual standards for identity. Gender, for Butler, is a social construct and is, therefore, open to contestation. It is thus the performance of gender that constitutes who we are. Drawing on Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ and Rich’s ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, Butler uses the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ to signify the power of heterosexuality as it defines natural and unnatural behaviour. She uses the term to:

...characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990, p.150)

Thus, through such enquiries about what constitutes gender, lesbian feminists saw heterosexuality as a model that made women define themselves through
men, pushing them ultimately towards maintaining the status quo. As all institutions such as religion, media, state, health, etc. sought to perpetrate heteronormativity, by not partaking in heteronormative practices in any way, lesbians saw themselves as holding the key to liberation from all oppression at the hands of heteronormative societies. Thus, it called for a complete cutting of ties from any form of male privilege—economic, social, and political.

The lesbian movement also urged the women’s movement to address and recognize lesbianism as being more than just a “bedroom issue”. Charlotte Bunch in her essay, “Lesbians in Revolt” points this out and says, “As long as straight women see lesbianism as a bedroom issue, they hold back the development of politics and strategies which would put an end to male supremacy and they give men an excuse for not dealing with their sexism” (Bunch, 1972, pp.8-9). According to many lesbian feminists, the problem with the women’s liberation movement was that while it sought to create a community of women that combated the sexism in society, these women continued to maintain primary relationships with men. This was seen as oppressive for lesbian feminists as heteronormativity was seen as the basis for male supremacy and had to be done away with completely in order for there to be structural changes.

Furthermore, while attacking man and the patriarchal norms that delineated the role of a woman in society, feminists failed to recognize their universalizing stance. Issues such as race and class did not receive much consideration by the women who spoke to a universal sisterhood of women. Most feminist theorists were white and belonged to privileged backgrounds, thus failing to take into account cultural differences.

Despite having points of difference, both feminists and lesbian feminists had certain lacunae in their positions with respect to the acknowledgement of other identity positions. The issue of race, and the failure to sufficiently address it, was an obvious and glaring one. Cherrie Moraga wrote, “In this country, lesbianism is a poverty - as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression” (Cited in Koyama, 2006, p.701). Both feminism and lesbianism were seen as privileging women’s oppression as the sole marker of identity, thus viewing subjugation only in terms of sex. Critics such as bell hooks have drawn attention to the ways in which class plays a vital role in determining social behaviour.

Given the complexity of identity formation, several critics have attempted to question the categories by which we define ourselves. Donna Haraway’s 1991
essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” offers the concept of a cyborg for feminists to deal with new technologies and their impact on our socio-cultural reality. Haraway responds to radical feminists such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich who sought to question patriarchy by examining the origins of the term and its functioning. According to Haraway, any attempt to define oneself by using essentialist categories is flawed as the categories themselves are socially mediated. She uses the metaphor of the cyborg to reject rigid boundaries and suggest that the development of information technology has made us all into cyborgs—human, not natural creations. Any essentialist category of identity—woman, class, race, by virtue of their being human creations, will be incomplete. So, the category of ‘woman’, for example, is implicated in power relations wherein the category itself will be constantly constituted by those in power. Such categories, in themselves, can be oppressive and silencing.

4.4.4 Transsexuals

While discussing non-normative relationships, it is essential to mention non-normative sexualities other than those of lesbians and gay men, such as transsexuals. For a long time, transsexuals were either relegated to the field of abnormal psychology or were seen as fascinating because of their cross-dressing. As part of the advocacy for gender expression, the term ‘transgender’ was coined in the 1980s. It was used by Virginia Prince to refer to individuals whose identities fell between ‘transvestite’ and ‘transsexual’. However, ‘transgender’ as defined by Leslie Feinberg, came to signify a term for all those people who embodied different genders from what was normative and those who were marginalized or oppressed as a result of it. It stood for, “an imagined community encompassing transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys, and anybody else willing to be interpolated by the term, who felt compelled to answer the call to mobilization” (Stryker, 2006, p.4).

Transsexuals have a tenuous history with feminism. Several feminists tended to see transsexuality as a “false consciousness” (Janice Raymond in Stryker, 2006), as they were adopting masculine or feminine stereotypes and altering their bodies in order to do so. It questioned some very basic assumptions—how can a person born with male genitalia claim to be a woman, when it defies the biological basis for being a woman? So, the basic belief of feminists, of there being two sexes and two genders, is thrown into question by the presence of transsexuals and propelled them to be seen as, “the visible symptoms of a disturbed gender system” (Raymond in Stryker, 2006, p.4). The idea that transsexuals become neither men nor women through their surgical reconstructions but rather become pastiches embodying imagined masculinities or femininities is one major hurdle in their social acceptance.
Transsexuals beyond the binaries of sex and gender

As you may have noted from the above, what is lacking is an understanding that sex and gender are fundamentally different for transsexuals. Stephen Whittle points out:

The default assumption that underlies any notion of a transgendered existence is that gender is immutable and it is fixed through biological constraints, and social construction merely affects any representation that the biological may take. This is also the default assumption of feminism—biology is destiny, no matter that in the same breath we say that it is not. (Whittle, 2006, p.199-200)

It is thus pertinent for both feminism and lesbianism to recognize the contribution of women of colour, working class women, and women with disabilities in the fight against women’s oppression. Their involvement has provided new direction to a movement that needed to think beyond the binaries of sex and gender. The acknowledgement is fairly recent and there still needs to be an articulation of a commitment to their struggle. Further, feminists and lesbians also need to expand the boundaries of women’s experience in order to include transsexuals. Instead of being threatening entities with their questioning of the body as a primary source of identity, their unique positionality needs to be recognized. As Koyama succinctly puts it, “...it is never feminist when some women are silenced and sacrificed to make room for the more privileged women” (Koyama, 2006, p.703).

4.4.5 Non-Normative within Normative Sexuality

Within normative sexuality, there can be several relationships that are considered to be non-normative. Describing the highly relative nature of what is taken as normative or non-normative by a particular social group, Ofelia Schutte gives the example of noticeable age difference in a heterosexual relationship where it is gender normative for the older person in the relationship to be male and the younger to be female. She says, “The converse of this model is non-normative in part because it questions the normative link between sexuality and reproduction and because it defines the normative, youth-oriented, images of female attractiveness and beauty imposed on us by a masculine-dominant culture” (Schutte, 1997, p.43).

Live-in relationships provide another example. Even though a majority of live-in relationships are heterosexual arrangements, their acceptability in the Indian context is highly problematic. Posing an alternative to the institution of marriage, these relationships are highly subversive as they foreground individual
choice at several levels—from pre-marital to doing away with boundaries of class and caste as the determining factors of union based on mutual consent. Shunned by the protectors and champions of traditional norms and morality, live-in relationships face several problems in their functioning. From finding accommodation to property rights, couples in these relationships are often asked to produce a marriage certificate. Even Hindi cinema’s engagement with live-in relationships is problematic and skewed at best.

The status of live-in relationships has come under scrutiny in recent times. Although such relationships are not seen as being an offence, they are not accorded the same status that married couples are either. So, issues such as domestic violence and property rights for women become highly contested in such relationships. Though there are certain cases where the courts have endorsed the right of a woman to claim maintenance from the man after being in a live-in relationship for several years, this matter is problematic. It is felt by many that relationships that are based solely on individual choice cannot enjoy the same status and rights as the socially sanctified institution of marriage.

Check your Progress: How would you explain the notion of the “non-normative” in terms of sexuality? Discuss this with the help of examples which illustrate some of the issues that you have read about so far.

4.5 ‘THE DOWNTRODDEN AMONG THE DOWNTRODDEN’: A CASTE GENDERED DEBATE

In India, the caste system is the oldest hierarchical system that has systematically relegated people to certain social spaces on the basis of their caste. As mentioned in the introduction, caste is an important marker of identity that fixes the normative with the higher castes. Women, who occupy a secondary status under patriarchy, are doubly oppressed under the caste system. It has been said that the status of dalit women in India is that of being the downtrodden among the downtrodden, the ones who are marginalized at several levels. Being a dalit woman means being subjected to the inequalities that come with belonging to a lower class, facing the hostility that society feels towards the lowest class as well as the patriarchal control that seeks to regulate their movements and their bodies, thus facing the cumulative oppression of their gender, class, and caste.
In her essay 'Dalit Women: The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden' (2008), Ruth Manorama lists four features of caste that have a significant impact on gender. According to her, social division of labour, marriage alliances and the control of sexuality therein, hierarchical relations between caste, and ideas of purity prescribing social interaction, form the features that constrain women within the hierarchy of caste.

Female sexuality, deemed as being dangerous and threatening to the social order, attains new dimensions in the context of caste where there is the additional threat of the purity of the bloodline being sullied. Marriage alliances, like elsewhere, become a way of establishing and strengthening social networks.

In the context of caste, however, marriage becomes doubly significant as the most forceful way of maintaining caste ideology. The metaphor of an earthen pot is often used to signify women’s bodies. Just like the pot, a woman becomes a vessel that carries the seed of the next generation and can be easily defiled and broken. Emphasizing the sexual susceptibility, a woman’s body becomes a heavily guarded site that has the potential to ‘pollute’ the caste. Sexual intercourse with a lower caste man can thus destabilize caste hierarchy. Upper caste women, then, are more vulnerable to such defiling than women belonging to the lower castes. As the adage points out, ‘Superior seed can fall on an inferior field but inferior seed cannot fall on a superior field’ (Dube, 2008, p.471). Thus, fearing the danger of such subversion, marriage within the caste is strictly imposed as the norm, and non-normative relationships, culminating in inter-caste marriages, are severely punished. This is why Ambedkar felt that inter-caste marriage was the most effective way of annihilating caste. He observed:

Where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste.

[emphasis in the original]. (Rao, 2003, p.23).

The non-normativity of inter-caste marriages is evident from the fact that even in recent times, there are dire consequences to such an act. In recent times, several killings related to inter-caste marriages have been reported. In fact, the killing of the bride and groom involved is usually done in the most gruesome manner possible to serve as a warning to those inclined to follow their errant ways. Family members, in their desire to salvage the family honour, are often responsible for murdering the miscreants. The extent of the
community outrage can be judged from the fact that communities do not condone these brutal acts; instead they usually deem it necessary.

As always, the imperative to maintain sexual relations within the caste bears down on women much more than on men. By engaging in sexual relations with lower caste women, upper class men are able to bypass caste ideology. Sexual violence and the assertion of power therein is claimed as a right by men of the upper castes. So, control of resources and caste hierarchy become integral factors that underlie sexual exploitation. Historically, this can be seen in the ‘devadasi’ system where religious explanations were given for the systematic sexual exploitation of women from dalit communities.

As has been pointed out in the earlier section, the universalizing stance of feminism came under severe attack in the 1980s and 1990s by black feminists who felt that their voice was being appropriated by privileged white women. In the Indian context, the engagement of women’s movements with the lives and concerns of dalit women has also remained rather cursory. The National Women’s Conference that was started in 1982, took up the dalit women as a sub-theme only in 1994 in its fifth conference. Women’s movements have clubbed dalit women’s issues under the general fight for women’s right to education, employment, property and land ownership, justice, etc. Although many of the concerns overlap, specific issues that arise of the double bind of caste and gender have not found a voice within the movements.

The movement for dalit rights, while articulating the struggle against caste oppression and hierarchy, also subsumed the particularity of the position of dalit women. It claimed that dalit women enjoy more liberty than other women by virtue of their contribution to the family income. The necessity to work due to sheer poverty accorded them the freedom to work alongside men and outside of their home in various occupations. But, despite this, they are denied equal wages and suffer the gender inequality that arises out of patriarchal control. So, while the main impetus in the dalit movement is to fight for entitlement to land or insuring minimum wages, women’s right to own property or issues of equal wages regardless of gender do not take precedence. Raising the dalit women’s question within the movement is then considered as having the potential to dilute the larger cause that may weaken the movement itself, where caste will be sidetracked by gender.

As a response to this glaring lack, several autonomous dalit women’s organizations asserted themselves in the 1990s. In his article, “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, Gopal Guru calls for an understanding of the specificity of dalit women’s subjugation. Dalit women are subject to two distinctly patriarchal structures— one being the brahminical form of patriarchy that oppresses them
on the basis of their caste, and the second being more private forms of control by dalit men who control the sexual and economic labour of women. Addressing the failure of both anti-caste and feminist movements to take cognizance of their particular issues, dalit Bahujan feminists draw attention to the relationship between caste ideology, gender relations, and broader struggles for democracy and social justice.

The dalit feminist standpoint needs to be included by non-dalit feminists so as to incorporate the experience of the marginalized within non-dalit feminist theory. The issue of inter-caste marriage also needs to be addressed to do away with the compartmentalized and divisive way of looking at society. The specificities of caste, class, and culture need to be factored in by women’s movements to reach out to those who remain the downtrodden of the downtrodden in society.

### 4.6 ‘THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL’

One of the main concerns of feminism has been the woman’s right over her body. The woman’s body, throughout history, has been socially constructed, moulded, and regulated by both patriarchy and capitalism. From childhood, girls are taught to be conscious of their bodies and bodily functions. They are encouraged to learn feminine traits and behave in culturally normative ways. Further, within reproductive heteronormativity, a woman’s primary role is seen as being that of a mother, a role that validates her identity as a woman. Women who are unable to bear children consequently face ostracism by society and are labeled as not being ‘normal’.

The second wave of feminism addressed the concerns of a woman’s right over her body and raised questions about beauty in order to protest against the way in which women are objectified and judged primarily on appearance. What makes one beautiful or what is seen as being beautiful is highly subjective and is dependent on a culture’s notions of beauty. Yet, historically, strict norms of beauty have been laid out for women to conform. In fact, the parameters of beauty weigh down upon women in severely oppressive ways. This is most evident when it comes to the marriage market. The term ‘marriage market’ is used here very consciously as the institution of marriage is the most obvious and deeply ingrained way in which the norms of beauty circulate. Matrimonial advertisements across the country lay down the picture of the sought after bride as being fair, slim, beautiful, and homely. It is pertinent to note that standards of beauty do not apply to men in such a systematic fashion. The only pressing consideration while opting for a suitable groom is a financial one. Matrimonial advertisements ask the man to be financially stable and
thus, reaffirm their place in the public sphere. Thus, gender roles remain firmly entrenched in the binary opposition wherein the woman is expected to fulfill the role of a housekeeper and the man, that of the breadwinner.

In her article, “Women, Embodiment and Personhood” (2010), Maithreyi Krishnaraj looks at the way in which cultural notions of beauty are embedded in the psyche of women and how women are made to go to extreme lengths to conform to the prescribed body. Recalling an exhibition displaying the history of women conforming to oppressive standards of beauty, she says:

...from foot binding in China, to whale bone corsets in England to make the waist narrow, to wearing heavy earrings to lengthen the ear lobes among tribals within India, to copper rings around the neck to lengthen the necks in sub-Saharan Africa...the story is endless. (Krishnaraj, 2010, p. 41)

Resisting such labels and expectations, the women’s movement fought for women’s right for self-determination. Seeing the ideal of beauty as a patriarchal construct of what men desire in women, feminists challenged the ideal itself.

**Feminist Critique**

In the West, the feminist critique of make-up and other beauty practices was a part of the movement in the 1960s. In America, women protested against beauty pageants, as they were seen as pandering to feminine normativity with respect to the body. In 1968 and then in the following year, protesters gathered to demonstrate against the Miss America pageant, held at Atlantic City. For them, beauty contests epitomized the ways in which women are objectified and judged primarily on the basis of their appearance. This propelled feminists to take up the slogan ‘All women are beautiful’. This position was however challenged in the 1980s and 1990s when liberal feminists saw the realm of the private as an arena where women could exercise their agency and choice. Thus, for example, choosing to buy make-up was seen as an affirmative practice as it emphasized the choice that women could exercise over their lives. Further, if gender is socially constructed and performative, as suggested by postmodern theorists such as Butler, then some argued that if beauty practices were adopted in disruptive ways, then it held the potential of becoming transgressive.

Such a distinction between the public and the private sphere has been contested aggressively by feminists across the world. While liberal feminists saw the private as a domain that was free from politics and therefore a sphere where women could exercise their choice, radical feminists felt that such a distinction
facilitates patriarchy as it keeps the politics of male power hidden under the guise of it being a private realm. As a result, fundamental issues such as marital rape and domestic violence are not dealt with under the pretext that it is a ‘personal matter’. The slogan, ‘the personal is political’, enabled women to recognize that the ways in which male dominance was deeply embedded in the ways in which women looked at and constructed themselves. Sheila Jeffreys in her book *Beauty and Misogyny* elaborates:

The concept that the personal is political enabled feminists to understand the ways in which the workings of male dominance penetrated into their relationships with men. They could recognize how the power dynamics of male dominance made heterosexuality into a political institution, constructed male and female sexuality, and the ways in which women felt about their bodies and themselves. (Jeffreys, 2005, p.11)

According to Jeffreys, the feminist critique of beauty has been undermined by postmodern ideas that have led to a disregard for the materiality of power relations. The effect of such beliefs has been that women are now seen as having the power to ‘play’ with beauty practices. Within this framework, fashion magazines and popular culture are seen as inspiring creative choices rather than being integral in disseminating dominant ideology.

It is interesting to note that the cosmetics industry gained massive popularity in the United States in the 1920s and 30s, as this was the time when women were entering the public workspace. This correlation is interesting as it gestures towards the idea that women were accepted from the relegated position of the private to the public, but only if they ascribed to normative, masculine ideals of beauty.

From the pursuit of fashion fuelled by images of waif-like models to surgically enhanced body parts and the increasingly commonplace disorders like bulimia and anorexia, the pursuit of beauty places huge demands on women to conform to masculine aesthetics. The role of media is significant as it bombards people with tantalizing images of perfect women with perfect bodies. Furthermore, this normative prescribed body is central to the ways in which patriarchy, capitalism and the state exercise control over the woman’s body.

Aside from beauty practices, the normative feminine ideal also imposes itself through the function of reproduction. Marriage and child-bearing are identified as being the trajectory that every woman’s life must ‘normally’ follow. In fact, the inability to produce a child can even become grounds for the breaking up of a marriage wherein the onus of the blame is put on the woman.
Historically, the anxiety over women’s bodies has led to an increased medicalization of women’s diseases and ailments. Seen as mysterious sites that needed to be clinically mapped and understood, the woman’s body becomes a site for medical intervention and control. Hysteria, for example, was seen as being an exclusively female disease and various disorders were seen as emanating from this disease in women. In the late 19th century, women were believed to be prone to certain nervous disorders that were seriously aggravated by the use of their mental and creative faculties.

Modern medicine, in collusion with capitalist enterprise, has made the woman’s body the site for experimentation and business. While the pressure to look a certain way has led to beauty practices adopted by women becoming more invasive and brutal, the necessity to produce children has led to a boom in business for fertility clinics that promise results by subjecting women’s bodies to a series of interventions. In their article, ‘Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging’, Sabala and Gopal discuss the engagement of the women’s movement with the role of the state in its attempt to control women’s bodies:

The women’s health movement in its critique of the state’s targeted population control has campaigned against reduction of women’s roles to being just mothers, while also reducing women’s bodies as sites of “deceasing the nation’s numbers.” (Sabala, 2010, p.47)

### 4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we learnt that while the privileging of heterosexuality in patriarchal societies is evident, the recognition that normative sexuality and heterosexuality are not interchangeable terms is crucial. The way forward perhaps lies in critically engaging with issues of non-normative sexuality instead of sweeping them under the carpet or demonizing them. Feminist thought, in its turn, needs to engage with categories of gender and sexuality and rethink the easy binaries that are no longer possible. This will allow both men and women to forge bonds that will ultimately enable alternative family structures and community living. This will, in many ways, lead to the ideal of most feminists - that of equitable gender relations in a society ridden by differences of caste, class and gender.

### 4.8 GLOSSARY

**Normative**: It refers to prescribing or establishing the norms.
**Feminism and Non-Normative Relationships**

**Heteronormativity**: It explores the privileging of sexual discourse of opposite-sex relationship by attributing bias towards the sexual discourse of same-sex relationship.

**Object**: It refers to the object of one’s sexual desire. For instance, Freud refers to mother as the object-choice. It is the earliest association.

**Perversion**: It refers to the search for “abnormal” sexual objects in the absence of repression. It denotes the difference of individuals from what society has constituted as ‘normal’.

**Transexual**: A person who crosses over from one sex into the other. They undergo sex surgery to change the sex organs. Thus, they become fully part of the new and changed sex role or identity.

### 4.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Explain and discuss the categories of the ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ by locating your discussion within the general debate surrounding these categories?

2) Based on your understanding, summarize the major theoretical contributions to feminist and non-normative discourse?

3) How can you relate what you discussed in Q. 2 above to caste-gendered discourse in India?

4) How does patriarchy determine the way in which women look at their bodies?

5) Why are dalit women seen as being ‘the downtrodden among the downtrodden’? Discuss.

### 4.10 REFERENCES


### 4.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

