
UNIT 3 ETHNICITY AND GENDER

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Learning Objectives



This unit will help the students to:

- identity construction through ethnicity and gender;
- the intersection of gender and ethnicity primarily through sexuality;
- creation of stereotypes and their representations in aesthetics, art and literature;
- actions such as violence justified through symbolic constructions of the ‘Other’ and
- contestations of identities , protests and movements.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The human species is one in terms of its biology, especially as modern genetics indicates that most humans share a large part of their genetic material with each other. Yet, over the ages, various criteria have been evoked to create differences between one class of humans and others, and also to place such differences into a hierarchical scale. Quite often the differences are justifications for pre-existing or motive driven hierarchies. For example during the period of slave trade the colonies built their economic empires on the basis of indentured and slave labour giving the justification of racial inferiority; what Stolcke (1993:178) refers to as the ideological “naturalisation” of social inequalities.

Both gender and ethnicity are such differences that are often evoked to differentiate between one human and the other and both are legitimised as ‘natural’ or God given. They are what may be called ‘oppositional’ that is always evoked in contrast to an opposed entity, like man to woman or Self to Other. They are also what Yinger(1997:144) calls “additive” rather than substitutive identities; that is a gendered identity which may be superimposed on an ethnic identity and there can be a clear intersection of both to provoke a particular kind of social response.

3.2 ETHNICITY AND GENDER

In the modern world, the term, “ethnicity” has emerged as a substitute or sometimes an additional characterisation of other debatable categories like ‘race’, ‘minority’ and ‘tribe’. The validity of this term has become prominent in the post World-War II era where a large number of distinct communities with their specific lifestyle, culture and even somewhat marked physical features became encompassed within larger entities of the nation-states, which had an overall identity of a dominant majority, that had cultural, political and often numerical superiority over these marginalised entities. The resultant tensions have sometimes remained dormant and sometimes manifested themselves violently leading even to the breakup of the larger geo-political entities like the erstwhile Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. In India we find such identity tensions pulling the nation from all sides like that of the Bodos, the Nagas, the Bhutias, etc.

Although it is now well recognised that ethnicity, like most other social identities is a construct rather than any reality, what is intrinsic to all considerations of ethnicity is their tendency to be accepted and projected as some kind of ‘biological unity’ as well as common history and culture. One of the earliest and most prominent African American writers, W.E.B. Dubois had said about ‘race’ that it was something that signified, “common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses” (Yinger 1997: 17). In the Indian context much debate has centered around whether or not to treat the caste system as equivalent to race and therefore capable of being analysed in a similar manner as an ethnic group or racial group. One may here refer to Berghe (1967: 11) who is of the opinion that both race and caste to some extent depend on ascriptive characters of physical appearance and birth and in both there is both contestation and consent of those who form the dominated strata. Similarly Trautmann (2004) has also discussed at length the incorporation of racial elements into caste theory, especially during the colonial period and Channa (2005) also discusses that in actual operationalisation there is little to distinguish between the two.

It is this fact of common ancestry, real or putative, that intersects ethnicity with gender. In as far as an ethnic group attempts to assert its independence from other ethnic groups, it perceives that it has to protect its own biological boundaries. Although the biological boundary is somewhat shaky as a basis for ethnic group definition, it is seen that throughout history, even cultural, religious and political boundaries are maintained through endogamy, the most basic defining character of any group formation. Thus people, who are physically and even culturally identical, say like the Shias and Sunnis in the Middle East or the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, tend to keep strict demarcations in terms of marriage. In fact the closer the groups are to each other the stricter and enforced are the rules governing marriage, as the dangers of assimilation and consequent loss of identity is greatest. Thus there are stricter avoidance of marriage between Shias and Sunnis in India than between Muslims and Hindus in general. Similarly, in Europe the violent eruption of hostility between the Serbs and the Bosnians would have left most outsiders bewildered, to whom they would perhaps appear to be identical.

Ethnicity is also a most loosely conceived and defined concept that may encompass a macro identity like that of a nation, for example, the French or may involve a small entity like a subdivision of a tribe or a community; like the Bhutias of Darjeeling, who do not want to be identified with anyone else; not the

Nepali, not the Tibetan and nor the other groups commonly put under the generic category of Bhotiys (Haimendorf). Even racial identities are extremely difficult and fluid and one has to read Barack Obama's autobiography to really understand how, even to find one's so-called racial identity can be a very difficult task indeed. The young Obama, son of a pure white mother from Kansas, USA and a pure black father from Kenya, brought up as a white boy by white grandparents, faces a tough task to locate his identity and has to go through much tension and heartbreak, before finally settling for a black ethnicity and accepting his African kin as his own.

An ethnic identity is also many layered and shifting. Thus since identities are usually constructed in opposition to the 'Other'; the nature of identity may change with respect to the spatial situation of a person. For example one can be South Asian, Indian, Bengali, a Bengali Brahmin, a Brahmin of a particular category and so on, depending upon who one is opposed to and what meaning the particular identity has in a particular situation. However the most painful identities are those that are not clearly defined, where a person is left on the borders or shadows of multiple identities to whom he or she may or may not relate. While on one hand such a situation may increase the scope of choice that a person has, at the same time it may also exclude him or her from a definitive claim to a particular identity. People on borders of any identity that are well accepted in society at large are at a disadvantage; for example people of mixed blood and ambiguous sexual identity like homosexuals and transsexuals. The fear of mixing pervades all societies. For example, as Gilman writes, referring to colonial Europe, "Miscegenation was a fear (and a word) from the late nineteenth century vocabulary of sexuality. It was a fear not merely of inter-racial sexuality but of its results, the decline of the population". (1985:256)

Thus ethnicity intersects gender exactly at this juncture, the fear and abhorrence of mixing, that puts the clarity of identities in jeopardy. It is for this reason that the "Other" is usually constructed in a negative light, to create a culturally produced revulsion that would prevent intermixture.

3.3 STEREOTYPING AND THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY

The process of what is called as stereotyping is best described by Gilman (1985: 223) who says, "representations of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. These classes in turn are characterised by the use of a model which synthesises our perception of the uniformity of the group into a convincingly homogenous image". Such homogenisation or stereotyping is always done for those groups to which one does not belong and the nature of the image is usually negative. Since gender itself is a construct, the construction of the masculinities and femininities of the 'others' is usually done so that they are culturally repugnant. The most recurring pattern that is seen in all such constructs is to create an image of the 'other female' as unaesthetic, undesirable except for the most base of sexual practices such as rape and certainly unfit for proper marriage. While negative constructs are created for the men also, they are of the opposite kind, where the men of the opposing ethnic group are either seen as too 'sexual' and therefore dangerous to the 'good women' or totally emasculated. Such were the stereotypes created by

the upper castes for the lower castes in India, by the white masters for the black slaves in the plantations of the USA and about the Irish by the British, about the Japanese by the Chinese and so on. But while such stereotyping prevents production of legitimate offspring through marriage, it does not curb sexual violence, rather encourages it.

Thus in the slave plantations, the white men jealously guarded their women while brutally and sexually abusing the black women. Since the blacks were not even categorised as human, the progeny of the black women were also treated as black and 'animal like' even though in real terms they were often fathered by white men.

Yet in some other situations like in Brazil and in India the progeny of white men and local women were sometimes passed off as white and as in India, created a new ethnic group of the Anglo-Indians. The latter were treated as inferior by both the British and the caste Hindus, yet the British gave them some privileges. And interestingly enough in post-colonial India this particular category has merged itself into the Indian mainstream, as there is no longer any advantage to them to be Anglo. However in all similar situations the *white women* were not really granted the same privilege and if at all they chose to marry the non-white men, their progeny was seen as 'coloured' and not white.

Although stereotyping is meant mostly to protect the privileges of the dominating group, it is not necessarily confined to them alone; the lower strata also create its own stereotypes, often as a form of protest. Historically in most societies, it has been the control of the women's womb that has been most often stringently applied rather than any curb on the sexuality of men, especially of the upper strata. As Stolcke (2003: 31) points out, the concept of purity of blood among the medieval Christians of Europe was introduced to protect the Christians from mingling with the non-Christians such as Muslims and Jews (these being in their immediate vicinity) and the fact that it was believed that it is the mother's blood that feeds the child in the womb and then as milk, nurtures the child. Thus the primary substance of a child was provided by the mother and therefore a Christian was only one who was born of the womb of a Christian mother. Similar rules of marriage were applicable in caste society where again mixing of blood of any kind was not favoured but the upper caste men had legitimate access to the bodies of lower caste women while the other way round was severely punished.; the most lowly form of marriage giving rise to the most base of progeny was when a Brahmin woman married a Shudra man. However within the confines of caste society just as in racially segregated societies, most people, men and women prefer to marry their own kind.

In an ideal pattern of constructed gender images, women of one's own group are represented as having the ideal qualities of being mother and wife while the women of the 'other' group are always promiscuous and prostitute like. Gilman (1985) has shown in his essay on representations of black and white bodies and their medicalisation in nineteenth century Europe, that how science was used to show the inferior and primitive sexual characters of the black woman and how art and literature followed these stereotypes to create images of women, who if portrayed as 'sexual' were always tinted with the dark image. He shows how the anatomy and physiology of the Hottentot women were also projected onto that of the prostitute and both were criminalised as well as projected as 'primitive' and uncivilised.

The complicity of the medical profession in such ethnic and gendered stereotyping has also been pointed out by Wheeler (1995) where she shows in Britain, mental health professionals held different standards for men and women. “Healthy women differed from healthy men by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more excitable in minor crises, more emotional, more easily hurt, less competitive, less aggressive, more concerned with their appearance and less objective” (1995:44). In other words we find here that ‘healthy’ corresponds to what is constructed as ‘ideal’ model of femininity by a masculine society. Further Wheeler mentions the work of an Asian psychiatrist, Sashidharan, who has demonstrated that the reportedly higher incidence of mental illness among the black population is more a bias in method than a reflection of truth. She writes that Shashidharan, in an article written by him, ‘Schizophrenia or Just Black’ shows how more people of ethnic minorities are labeled as mentally ill not because they actually are, but the manner in which they are interpreted by the white medical professionals. It goes without saying that such ‘labeling’ also has the effect of deterring the women of the dominant ethnic group from forming alliances with the marginalised communities. Further deliberate attempts are also made to curtail the reproductive capacity of the women of the ethnic minorities, sometimes by simply declaring that they are unfit to be mothers.

Under the widely practiced philosophy of Eugenics that was first introduced in England by Francis Galton, it was believed that humanity could be improved by ‘selective breeding’. In America, the movement was led by Charles Benedict Davenport (1866-1944). Shanklin (1975:83) writes how he persuaded the civic authorities to allow ‘compulsory sterilisation’ of the so-called people of ‘inferior blood’. Also the idea spread quickly and “by World War II thirty out of forty – eight states had compulsory sterilisation laws on the books. As of 1992, twenty-two American states still have these laws on their books”. An examination of the practice of eugenics indicates that not only women have been primarily targeted for sterilisation, there is disproportionate representation of ethnic groups. “A 1973 study of New York voluntary and state hospitals revealed a disproportionate number of Spanish speaking women being sterilised, almost three times greater than Black women and six times as great as White women. “(Fleming 1980:19. c.f. Shanklin 1975:89)

A Majority of Americans even today harbour the greatest prejudice towards the immigrant Hispanic or Spanish speaking populations, even more than against the Native Americans and the Black to whom they grudgingly accord indigenous status.

3.4 EXPERIENCING GENDER AT THE CROSS ROADS OF ETHNICITY

Contemporary feminists have gone beyond the concept of patriarchy that presupposes the universal subordination of women or at least their subordination where the structures of patriarchy exist; towards an analysis of the internal differentiation of the category of being a woman, as women of particular disadvantages and disabilities. Thus as already mentioned, ethnicity and gender add up, they are not substitutes for one another. In other words women placed in different situations experience patriarchy in different ways where their class, ethnicity and social disabilities determine the specific nature of their experience.

Thus gender is not simply a character; it is also a social location that determines the phenomenological experience of what it means to be not just a woman, but a *certain kind of woman*. And as pointed out by Maynard (1995:9) to such differences as race, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality, one needs to also consider their location in historical context and geographical location. For example slavery was practiced in many tribal societies, yet the slavery that was practiced in the plantation economies of the colonial world was of entirely a different kind.

Moreover, the social differentiations are essentialised to an extent that experiences of being 'white' may be opposed to the experience of being 'black' in a simplistic manner although none of these categories are essentially homogenous. Thus the East Europeans experience a different kind of ethnic discrimination than the Africans, but they do experience it none the less. Also there is an essential divergence as well as convergence between individual biography and collective social location. Brah (1992:14) makes a distinction between "everyday of lived experience and experience as a social relation". Thus every person has an individual biography and may experience life in particular way that is totally unique to that person, yet, one's individual experience is located within one's social identity. Thus it is impossible for a person of colour, say, to experience the world as a 'white' person, although each person's experiences may differ.

Kumkum Bhavnani (1995:34) writes about her mixed experience as an educated woman of colour interviewing white young men in Britain whose class and education positions were less than her own but who as *men* and as *white* were superior to her. "—while interviewing young white men, the frequently encountered imbalance of power between white men and black women was potentially both inverted and reproduced in the interviews. My role as student researcher, my age, my assumed class affiliation may have been taken as sources of political domination. However my racialised and gendered ascription suggested the opposite".

But in one way or the other, the ethnic identity, like a gendered identity can be negotiated and contested and even changed, but each person can experience the world only from the vantage point of location of some kind of such an identity. At this point it is pertinent to mention that identities need not be agreed upon between the person concerned and those who form the larger group. In other words there can be discrepancy between how a person views herself and how she is viewed by others, and at the level of the collective how a group locates itself and how it is located by others. For example in my own work among the Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi (Channa n.d.) I found that while the community of Bhotiyas identified themselves as similar to the people of Garhwal and also as Hindus; most of the people who came up from the plains identified them as Tibetans, an identity that they themselves abhorred. Similarly while members of a dominating group may create stereotypes about the women and men of a certain dominated group, the men and women in question may not at all agree with the manner in which they are represented. In fact the first activity that members of any group engage in as soon as they have the means to express themselves, is to produce literature and representations of themselves like art and music that counters the stereotypes created *about them* by others.

3.5 ETHNICITY OR GENDER

Another very important aspect to be considered is which of the two main identities that people possess, the ethnic and the gendered is evoked at any particular point of time and in a particular context. In other words when do people speak in a voice that belongs to their ethnic/racial identity and when do they speak in a voice that specifically refers to their gendered identity. For example when feminists talk about 'universal sisterhood of women' they are cutting across all ethnic boundaries. Yet at other points of historical time, groups and individual men and women behave like their other social identities, like being black or white, or Irish or French. And they may be also seen as members of an ethnic group rather than as men or women.

Angela Davis writes in her well known book, 'Women, Race and Class' that the plantation labour was hardly regarded as gendered because they were not regarded as human at all. Gender and attributes such as motherhood was seen as valid only for white women and not for the black women, who were simply seen as, "breeders" –animals, whose monetary value could be properly calculated in terms of their ability to multiply themselves" (2011, reprint: 7). It was because they were seen as merely chattel, they were not given any recognition as women or men. "Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labour units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slave holder was concerned" (ibid:5). Thus while normal (meaning white women) were seen as incapable of some kind of tasks, the black women were made to do all kinds of hard labour and with the same intensity as the men. Even pregnant women and mothers of small infants were shown no difference in treatment. This indicates that at some level of ethnic discrimination gender ceases to be operative. Similarly in India we see lower class women, often from low caste or tribal stock, doing the kind of hard labour that elite women are never expected to do. In fact in most of South Asia the segregation of upper class women is reflected in their withdrawal from any kind of physical work.

Many writers have thus shown that this 'shared oppression' by men and women at the lower end of social hierarchy often reverses the relations of patriarchy, leading to a greater degree of equality *within the familial situation*. Very similar accounts come from Dalit ethnographies that indicate that women who are labourers, farm workers and engage in traditional occupations, often are not only equal to men but also share with the men the actions directed towards emancipation. Vasant Moon, a Dalit writer from Maharashtra, had written in his autobiography about the key role played by women in the Dalit movement initiated by Ambedkar. The Black feminists, have often countered the feminist movement in the West as being too 'white and middle class'. According to them, it is the white women's experiences that have taken the centre stage in defining the women's movement. For example rather than pressing for sexual freedom they say that they want to be liberated from their sexualised image. Rather than being liberated from men, they would rather have the freedom to *live with their men*; a freedom often denied to them in view of the high rate of incarceration of young black men in the USA. Davis (2011:19) raises the issue when she says that, "women often defended their men from the slave system's attempts to demean them". Thus many Third world women feel that their struggle is not against *men* but against the *system*.

Similar apprehensions have been raised by Indian feminists about the women's liberation movements that began during the colonial period when most of the women's issues raised were not only raised by upper class/caste men, but were also those that concerned women only of the elite group such as child marriage, widow remarriage and 'sati'; all of which only happened to elite women.

Also in foregrounding the ethnic issues women's specific issues have been sidelined as have sometimes been felt by women participating in larger social movements, like the Dalit movement. Dalit women for example have complained that their rights and specific issues *as women* have been often overlooked in the larger movement against the upper castes. Even as pointed out by Davis, the white women who took active part in the movement against slavery were not sensitive to the plight of black women in general. It was a black woman Sojourner Truth, who by raising the now famous slogan, "Ain't I a woman?" conflated feminism with anti-slavery. She put forward the truth that although she was Black and a former slave, she was still a woman and had a right to be heard *as a woman*, not simply as a black. "And as a black woman, her claim to equal rights was not less legitimate than that of white, middle class women" (Davis 2011:64).

However there is also evidence that on many occasions the gender identity overrides that of ethnicity especially for women, who have a more critical approach to society being always at the bottom of social hierarchy irrespective of their ethnic position. Davis gives accounts of white women who entered the Anti-Slavery movement and found that to do so; they also had to fight the patriarchy inherent in their own lives. Thus white women's struggles to free and emancipate their black sisters and brothers were compounded with a struggle *against their own men*. Thus the period around the early nineteenth century, was when white women were faced with the possibility of forging a "powerful alliance between the established struggle for Black liberation and the embryonic battle for women's rights."

3.6 VIOLENCE: PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC

It is a fact that in all situations of conflict and oppression of one group by the other, it is the body of women that becomes a site for establishing a power hierarchy. Susan Brownmiller's, now classic work, *Against Our Will*, documents the violence that has been used against women in various historical times and space. She specifically describes the atrocities committed on the bodies of Vietnamese women, as a deliberate war strategy sanctioned by the US war department. Similarly the rape of black women on the plantations and of Dalit women in the fields of India are not a matter of sexuality, they are a way in which men of a superior group indicate that they are superior, not to women (that is taken for granted) but to the *men* of the marginal group. At all historical time periods each war has been followed by the rape of women of the 'Other' group, as violation of the bodies of women is an established practice by men to show that they are 'superior'. Even when there is no war, the strategy of rape to subjugate the dominated group, is a powerful tool both physical and psychological. By rape the men try to prevent the reproduction of the ethnic category, whether defined by religion, race or caste, as the wombs of the women have been invaded and it is believed that a next generation of 'mixed' progeny will arise. This is the reason why after a period of colonisation or subjugation, there is a huge amount of miscegenation.

In the USA and elsewhere, it is always men of the minority ethnic categories who are often made victims just like the women of the rape laws, which are mostly enforced to protect women of the upper strata. In the USA black men were hanged for as much as whistling at a white women and leveling of rape charges was a sure way to eliminate any black man. Also men of the marginal ethnic category are psychologically emasculated when they are made to feel that they have less access to the bodies of their own women than others.

At the same time the stereotypes create a demonised vision of the 'Other' men as criminals, rapists and dangerous. Even today in India such views are held about men of religious minorities and even indigenous people. When I went to do fieldwork in a Bhotiya village I was told by the upper caste men in the adjoining villages that I must not stay there in the evenings as the men all get drunk and behave like animals and that it was no place for a 'respectable' woman to be in.

Thus there is both a symbolic violence where negative stereotypes are created both for men and for women and actual physical violence often in the form of rape or sexual abuse.

Another form of symbolic violence is the denial of rights in a civil society, such as limiting job opportunities, or de-recognition of talent, or simply blockage of any kind of self improvement on the part of the ethnic minorities. In a small booklet called 'Tenure Denied: Cases of Sex Discrimination in Academia' published by an NGO, a number of tables are given that indicate figures for various academic benchmarks, like doctoral degrees awarded, percentage of Full time faculty and tenured full time Faculty in US universities as differentiated on the basis of race/ethnicity and gender, for the academic years 1980-81 and 2000-2001. The figures show a huge bias in favour of white non-Hispanic men followed by white non-Hispanic women where the men of this category outnumber women by almost fifty percent; that is if 45 % of white men received Doctoral degrees, only 24 % white women received them. The corresponding figures for blacks and ethnic minorities is so very low, like 1.6% of African American men and 1.8 % of African American women and American Indian men and women reporting only 0.1% of the total.

In the American universities there are myths of African American men being only good for playing soccer and basket ball and women for casual sex. The entire academia and professions is dominated by white men. Similarly in China the Han dominate over every other ethnic category and in Japan the ethnic Koreans and Chinese are treated like they were trash. In Brazil, the Afro-Brazilian children are raised in the houses of the Euro-Brazilians as almost slaves. They are referred to in the local language as *cria* which means a "young Negro born and reared in the Big House" (Caldwell 2009:65). Caldwell describes that such children are often doomed to a slave existence as they are given very little opportunities for education and self development. In ethnic discrimination men and women are both denigrated but only in somewhat different ways.

3.7 PROTESTS

The forms that protests take place often also exhibit the tension between gender and ethnicity. There has been a universal projection of the similarity in women's demands in terms of freedom from patriarchal control. But in some historical

instances this can be substituted by larger interests of an ethnic identity, seen very specifically in the present day in the practices adapted by Muslim women, especially those who are ethnic minorities in some countries. As Afshar (1995: 143) points out “In the 1980s many a young Muslim woman found out that she could forge a new Islamic identity, one that conferred dignity on the adoption of some form of veil, and made them part of the great anti-imperialist Islamic movement.” Such feelings have crystallised substantially after the Iraq war and it is the Muslim ethnicity rather than the feminist self that guides the action of young Muslim women in many parts of the western world today.

It is interesting to note that while the favoured majority usually for protests that emphasise individual liberty like a break from the stereotypical hetero-normative model of sexual behavior, the ethnic minorities often move towards greater conformity to tradition, which may even be invented to serve the purpose. What is important is that in each such instance the protesting group always makes it a point to emphasise the superiority of *their culture* over that of the dominant culture.

3.8 SUMMARY

To sum up all that has been said in this lesson is that both ethnicity and gender are not clear cut concepts that make neat compartments where we can insert real human beings. They however are powerful constructs that affect the lives of men and women in significant ways. The citizenship rights, the resources of society, the sexual image that one has, and many other aspects of life may be affected by how one is perceived by society in general. Ethnic and gender stereotyping can both justify domination and subordination and create conditions for their further perpetuation. Situated in the margins and the bottom the persons who suffer are also privileged with a critical insight into the conditions of their own marginalisation. Thus to a large extent black feminist and Third World anthropologists have contributed substantially to the political anthropological contributions to the study and understanding of gender and ethnicity. Deeper understanding of the mystified nature of these constructs will contribute towards efforts to eliminate an unjust system.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Is ethnicity concrete or constructed? Discuss.
- 2) At what point does ethnicity connect to gender. Discuss.
- 3) What role does restrictions on marriage play in reproducing identities?
- 4) What do you understand by stereotyping? What is their role in society?
- 5) Describe a few gender stereotypes about any community that you have heard about.
- 6) Do people have only one ethnic identity? Discuss the variability of ethnic identities, giving examples.
- 7) Describe some ways in which people of marginal ethnic communities' stage protests.
- 8) What are the various forms of violence directed against ethnic minorities? Discuss with examples.
- 9) What are the various ways in which humans differentiate among each other. What are implied by 'Self and Other'.