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Unit I

Module 4

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Varieties of Feminisms

- Since the 1960s, a variety of feminist perspectives on women's lives has given rise to a number of feminist positions.
- Lesbian feminism warns that compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates women's sexual oppression.
- 1955 – Daughters of Bilitis, San Francisco; group of lesbian activists formed

- In Britain in the late 1970s, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists made the “case against heterosexuality”
- Cultural Feminist believe that women have been separated from each other and convinced of their inferiority. The lesbian is the only woman who can realize her full potential

- Socialist feminism asserts that women are held back by lack of education and social discrimination, and argues that a change in public attitudes is needed so that women can be integrated into all levels of society.
- **A socialist feminist society would demand or ensure:**
- Free, humane, competent medical care

- Peoples' control over their own bodies
- Availability of housing for private and collective use
- Varied, nutritious and abundant diet
- Social respect for the work people do
- Democratic councils
- Scientific improvements geared towards the improvement of human life

- An end of housework as private unpaid labour
- Redefinition of jobs
- Political and civil liberties encouraging participation by all
- Disarming of and community control of police
- Social responsibility for the raising of children
- Free, public quality education

- Freedom to define social and sexual relationships
- A popular culture which enhances self-respect and respect of others
- Support for internal development and self-determination for countries around the world
- Social feminists saw great potential in uniting women into bonds of sisterhood which would allow for a revolutionary seizing of power.

- They developed a tripartite strategy.
- Win real concrete reforms that meet women's needs
- Give women a sense of their own power
- Alter the relations of power

- For Traditional Marxist feminists, the division of labour and lack of support for working mothers defines women by their domestic responsibilities and excludes them from productive labour.
- “We ascribe social factors such as class divisions to women’s oppression”

- Marxist feminists oppose the Women's Liberation Movement's emphasis on achieving goals relevant only to middle-class women
- Frederick Engels *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*

- Radical Feminism sees itself as revolutionary. It maintains that women's emancipation is not enough, and argues that women are still oppressed and exploited.
- The only way to “free” them is by opposing patriarchy and marriage. Radical feminists question every aspect of women's lives.

- “To be a radical feminist involves finding new ways of doing things which were previously accepted as normal/given/standard/acceptable”
- It also entails re-thinking language, which is male-defined and expresses male-dominated values.
- Hence the radicals argue for revising language so that male definitions of the world can be appropriated to reflect women’s experience and participation in it.

- Radical feminists emphasize the need to practice consciousness-raising as a revolutionary tool.
- According to Gail Chester
- “The most fundamental political lesson to be learned as a radical feminist is that I am an important part of the revolution”
- “In so far as I am oppressed, I can struggle to change my life in the company of other women, I am significant”

- Female supremacists believe that women are biologically and morally superior, although men hold power by force of arms
- Human feminists argue that both men and women are being forced into socially-constructed masculine and feminine roles which hinder the development of their authentic selves.

- Ecofeminism encompasses a variety of feminist perspectives. Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term in 1974 and it has since been used to refer to a range of ideas on ecological feminist practices.
- These ideas reflect different understandings of the nature of, and solution to, current environmental problems.

- In spite of their diverse approaches, ecofeminists agree that the destruction of the natural environment is politically analogous to the continued domination of women.
- Psychoanalytic Feminism: 1972, Phyllis Chesler published *Women and Madness*, which detailed her observations of women patients at a mental institution in New York.

- Many critics went on to use or denounce Freud for his theories on femininity and gender socialization, but it wasn't until Juliet Mitchell's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1974) that feminist theorists began to see “psychoanalysis not as a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one”.

- Postfeminism: 1968, in France, the Women's Liberation Movement (known as MLF) split into two factions.
- One group of feminists maintained that achieving equality with men should remain the aim of the movement, while another argued for the importance of maintaining difference between men and women.

- This second branch of the MLF, the postfeminist faction, encompasses psychoanalytic critics such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous

- In the 1970s, a decade which witnessed intense feminist activity on the political sociological levels, feminist academics became actively engaged in challenging the Western literary canon.
- Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977) attempted to establish a literary tradition which reflected the variety of women's experience of the world.

- It also claimed women writers as significant contributors to the corpus of Western literary writing.
- In 1975, Showalter coined the term “gynocriticism” to refer to a form of critical practice whereby the “psychodynamics of female creativity” is explored and recorded. Gynocriticism became associated with Anglo-American feminist literary criticism.

- Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is one of its most influential works. It attempted to establish an Anglo-American literary tradition of women without referring to or incorporating male authors.

- Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow are two feminist critics who used a psychoanalytic framework for analysing the complicated role that women as mothers play in society.
- They focused on the Freudian concept of the pre-Oedipal stage of psychosexual development – during which infant is still attached to its mother – to show how sexuality and gender are constructed to give primacy to men over women.

- Dinnerstein re-interpreted the significance of the pre-Oedipal stage in her analysis of how culture's gender arrangements have influenced women and men's perception of themselves as mermaids and minotaurs.
- “The treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom”

- “The fearsome minotaur, gigantic eternally infantile offspring of a mother’s unnatural lust, male representative of mindless, greedy power, insatiably devours live human flesh”

- The answer lies in the pre-Oedipal stage when the infant boy develops conflicting feeling towards his mother's body, which he sees as the source of pleasure and pain.
- The grown-up man wants to avoid this dependence on the female body by controlling it. For her part, the girl deals with the power of the mother within her by seeking to be controlled by men.

- This results in a mis-shapen set of six gender arrangements which determine all human relations:
- Men are more sexually possessive than women
- Female sexuality is muted and exclusively directed towards satisfying men

- Sexuality and emotion must be tied together for women but not for men
- Women are denied personhood; they are objects (“it”), not agents (“I”)
- Women have an ambivalent relationship with their bodies
- Men belong in the public world and women in the home

- Adrienne Rich made the case for biological motherhood and argued against Firestone and Oakley's positions
- In her book *Of Woman Born* (1976), She noted that women's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering are increasingly controlled by male doctors, who are replacing female midwives.

- “This control over women’s reproduction and their bodies enables the perpetuation of patriarchal principles which dictate to women when to eat, sleep, exercise, have sex, breastfeed, feel pleasure and endure pain”

- Rich concluded that if women reclaimed control over their bodies during pregnancy and were able to perform motherhood without interference from male representatives of the patriarchal establishment, then they would become less alienated from their bodies, their spirits and the institution of motherhood.

- As a feminist who identifies as a lesbian, Rich coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” in 1980s.
- She maintained that patriarchal society dictates that women must choose men as their sexual partners and perpetuates the ideology of the heterosexual romance. Consequently, lesbian sexuality is seen as deviant and transgressive.

- “The emphasis on the primacy of the man-woman relationship precludes the development of any bonds of sisterhood between women”

- Mary Daly was a radical feminist philosopher and theologian. In 1973 she published *God the Father*, in which she maintained that the function of God in all religions is to “act as a legitimating paradigm for the institution of patriarchy”
- In her book, *Gyn/ecology* (1978), she rejected the term “God” altogether.

- She urged women to access the “wild woman” within them who will liberate them from social restrictions of feminine behaviour.
- Daly advocated revising language, which mainly represents men’s experience of the world.
- She published a feminist dictionary, Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (1987)

Thank You