UNIT 2 FEMINIST DEBATES ON FAMILY

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2.1 Introduction

There is a considerable body of research regarding the origin, growth, structure and functions of the family as an institution. Early theories that attempted to explain the various forms of the family were evolutionary in nature, while later theories can be subsumed under the term ‘structural-functionalism’ (Queen et. al, 1985, p.2-3). These grand theories were further challenged by researchers and many new theories were formulated. Modernization theory, Neo-Marxist theory and Feminist theory are some examples. Beginning with structural-functionalism, this unit discusses the different strands of feminist theorization of the family and their criticism of mainstream explanations.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

• Familiarize with the western and Indian mainstream theories on family;
• Understand the feminist analysis of family as a form of social institution; and
• Examine the subordination of women within the structure of the family.

2.3 MAINSTREAM WESTERN THEORIES ON FAMILY

You may have read about family in the course MWG-002, Unit 1: Family and Marriage, in which the unit described family as a social institution and further explained various types and functions of this institution. Therefore, in this section, we will primarily focus on the understanding of this social institution from divergent theoretical perspective including; evolutionism, functionalism, and structural-functionalism.

2.3.1 Evolutionism

A number of nineteenth century social scientists, called Social Darwinists, combined their earlier ideas about cultural change into an evolutionary model. They were inspired by Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory explaining growth and evolution of living organisms. Social Darwinists believed that all civilizations, societies and social institutions like the family pass through the same stages of development as the biological organism -- in the same order, moving from simple to complex, from primitive to civilized (Queen, 1985). Towards the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century new research contested the propositions of the evolutionary theorists. These studies indicated that the belief that every society develops along a continuum of evolution is simply wrong. There are many evolutionary tracks that societies can follow.

It is during this time, especially starting from the early twentieth century that research on the family took a new turn. Social scientists, concerned about the effects of urbanization and industrialization, began to view the perceptible decline in the significance of kinship and the changes in the structure of the family as more important areas of investigation than the study of evolutionary transformation of the family. Structural functionalism was one of the important theoretical explanations that emerged during this period.

2.3.2 Functionalism

Functionalism further states that family forms the basic social institution of every society and is universal in nature. Through its various functions, the
family meets the functional prerequisites of the society and helps maintain its equilibrium (Gordon, 1978; Queen, 1985, p.5).

Functionalists believe that functions within the family are and should be performed on the basis of a sexual division of labour (Covington, 1995; Gordon, 1978). This theory is based on the understanding that the biological imperatives of motherhood predispose women for indoor work, whereas the greater physical strength of men leads them naturally into the provider role (Winton, 1995). Functionalism proposes that the family is functional not only for other institutions of society but also for its individual members (Bell and Vogel, 1968; Parsons, 1955, 1975).

For functionalists, the nuclear family forms the most basic and universal type of family organization. They argued that the four distinct and basic functions of the nuclear family are sexual, reproductive, economic and educational (Murdock, 1965; Ingoldsby et al., 2004). Regarding the sexual function, functionalists proposed that marriage legitimates sexual relations between a man and a woman and forbids or limits the extent to which sexual relations can take place outside it. Sexual function, for the functionalists, provides sexual gratification to the spouses, strengthens the family by uniting the husband and wife through the strong emotion that accompanies sexual intimacy and also helps stabilize society by restraining sexual impulses to marriage. Similarly, they point out that the economic function is carried out cooperatively by adherence to the natural division of labour based on the sex of the husband and wife. The husband performs the role of the provider and the wife works as the caretaker of the family (Murdock, 1965; Ingoldsby et al., 2004).

According to the functionalists this cooperation is not only beneficial to society but also further binds the spouses together. Sexual cohabitation leads inevitably to the birth of offspring who needs to be nursed and reared. The most basic relationship within the family is that of a mother and child based on the physiological facts of pregnancy and lactation. Therefore the mother is primarily responsible for rearing and nurturing the child, whereas the father plays an indirect role. Socialization of children is carried out with love and nurturance so that they integrate with the society (Lee, 1977, p.71). According to George Murdock (1968), ‘the father must participate fully as the mother because, owing to the division of labour by sex, he alone is capable of training the sons in the activities and disciplines of adult males’ (p.43). In functionalist analysis of the family there is no existence of conflict, as the husband and wife fall into their respective roles voluntarily (Ingoldsby et al., 2004).

Functionalists propose that the wife is required to give direct help to the husband in his work. She is expected to adjust and assist the husband in meeting the various demands his occupation places on him. She should
absorb his frustration and manage tensions at home and not let troubles of the family affect the husband's occupational work. For functionalists, the worker who gets caught up with family troubles finds the returns of his labour limited (Bell and Vogel, 1968).

2.3.3 Structural-Functionalism

Sociological research on the changes in the family in the twentieth century merged with the concerns of the Chicago school on family and developed into a school of thought that has come to be described as structural-functionalism. The basic idea of structural-functionalism is that every society can be viewed as a system made up of subsystems, also called ‘institutions’. Every part of a society affects every other part, so that change in one institution, invariably causes changes in others. Change occurs in this fashion because society is an organism that strives to maintain its equilibrium.

Talcott Parsons is the most prominent proponent of functionalist theory and his ideas find an elaboration in his most famous work - Social System (1951). According to Parsons, the family is the basic agent of socialization and every member of society derives their role and status from their position in the family. He based his theory on the study of nuclear families in America’s industrialized society. Emphasizing on the importance of family, he writes “it is because the human personality is not “born” but must be “made” through the socialization process that in the first instance families are necessary. They are factories which produce human personalities” (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p.16). Further, Parsons is of the view that marriage relationship brings about a stabilization of the adult personality. According to him, couples derive emotional security from each other and through the process of socialization of their children, act out the childish elements in their personalities. The family therefore provides the space in which the husband and wife can express their childish whims, give and receive emotional support, recharge their batteries and so stabilize their personalities (Parsons, 1951).

Parsons also describes that a nuclear family is the best form of the family for an industrialized world. According to him, in an industrialized world, ascribed status is given more importance. In nuclear families the wives are mainly responsible for raising children and not expected to hunt for ascribed status and the children are not yet grown up for competition. Therefore, due to the above arrangement, the authority and ascribed status of the husband is not threatened, thereby maintaining the stability of the family and society. Parsons believed in the separation of sex roles to prevent competition and maintenance of the family and social stability (Parsons, 1971, p. 56). According to him, the husband performs an instrumental role whereas the wife caters to the expressive roles. As the husband is the one who provides for the family, his abilities should be focused on meeting the
physical needs of the members in terms of food, shelter, clothing, education and income. The wife on the other hand should meet the emotional needs of the family members by being nurturing and ironing out problems in relationships, absorbing tensions and socializing the children (Ingoldsby, 2004), thus keeping the family united. Functionalists believed and emphasized that gender roles are essential to societies and need to be maintained for the stability of families and therefore societies.

2.4 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Mainstream studies have described the family as an indispensable social institution based on cooperation, harmony, common interests and equality. To a large extent they have also taken ‘man’ within the family as the basic unit of their study and have neglected the woman’s experiences. Feminism challenged this vision of the family as a cooperative, harmonious and egalitarian realm. “If previously, family studies had focused on family structures, the historical development of the nuclear and extended family and the importance of kinship ties, feminism succeeded in directing attention inside families to examine the experiences of women in the domestic sphere” (Giddens, 2006, p.239). They have sought to show that rather than being a mutually beneficial institution maintained on equal contribution of all members, the family functions largely with the exploitation of the woman’s labour. Feminists criticize mainstream theories for not recognizing existing unequal power relations within the family that help maintain patriarchy at the cost of the woman’s life and rights. Feminism itself is not a monolithic stream of thought. Within feminism different feminists have studied the family and the woman’s position within it from different perspectives and at different times.

In terms of addressing the ‘family’ some feminists argue that feminists should not reject the family and demand for its total abolition as women themselves may choose to identify the family with happiness (Friedan, 1981). Some other feminists argue with an opposite viewpoint that the family is one of the primary sites of a woman’s oppression and should be abolished (Firestone, 1972). Still others recognize that though the family is a site of subordination, not always is a woman helplessly trapped within it, but may willingly enter it as she sees it as a site of support and resistance against other forms of exploitation (Ferree, 1990). There are a number of themes under which the wealth of feminist thought on the family can be situated. In this chapter, liberal, socialist, radical feminist thought as well as queer critique of family studies is discussed.
2.4.1 Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism argued that women and men are different not due to their biology but due to the process of sex-role socialization. They recognized that through sex-role socialization women were taught to be primarily housewives and thus were prevented from realizing their full potential. This relegated women to the so-called private sphere of the family, made them dependent on their husbands which led to their subordination. They demanded equal opportunity for women in all spheres, as they believed that women are capable of achieving anything men can. They argued that this equality can be achieved by bringing women out of the domestic sphere through equal opportunity for jobs that can be brought about by legislation and social reforms. They looked at bringing about equality without altering the existing structures (Altbach, 1971; Banks, 1986). Betty Friedan, Ann Oakly and Susan Okin Moller are among the many liberal feminists who studied the family and the woman’s position within it.

Liberal feminists brought forth, in their studies, the unequal position of the woman in the family and society as housewives. They elaborated on how femininity was mystified, manipulated and socialized into women through institutions like the media, religion, schools and even the family. The ideal of the perfect housewife was inculcated as the ultimate form of satisfaction for women. Women were seen in terms of their sexual roles. These role expectations kept women from realizing their full potential and encouraged women to ignore the question of their identity (Friedan, 1963, p.11-72).

Liberal feminists criticized social-science studies on the family, especially functionalism for conducting gender-biased studies and actively reinforcing notions that contributed to gender inequality. They argued that rather than destroying old prejudices, which restricted women’s lives, the social sciences bestowed new authority on them. Instead of being weapons to free women, the social sciences trapped women within the family and femininity (Friedan, 1963, p.116). Of functionalism Friedan wrote, ‘[I]n practice functionalism was less a scientific movement than a scientific word game. “The function is” was often translated into “the function should be”; ...’ (Friedan, p.118). Functionalism could not think of an alternative for women except for the role of housewife (Friedan, p.121).

Liberal feminists opine that the primary concern of Parsons and other functionalists was to maintain the social structure and therefore they described sexual segregation of labour as “functional” despite it being unequal. They wrote that functionalists knew that true equality between men and women would not be ‘functional’ as the wife and mother would no longer remain exclusively homemaker and thus dependent. Dependency of a wife is basic to maintenance of patriarchal social structure especially the family and therefore was not questioned by functionalists.
Liberal feminists argued that this does not mean women should divorce their husband, abandon their children, and give up their homes. According to them women do not have to choose between marriage and career. Women first have to see housework for what it is and not as a career. Second they have to see marriage as it really is rather than glorifying it. They stressed on the importance of education in breaking this ‘feminine mystique’ (Friedan, 1963) and help women lead a happy life by balancing both career and family.

It can be said that though liberal feminists challenged the assigned gender roles for women, they did not wholly reject the institution of family and women’s role as mother and wife within it.

Liberal feminists also took up analyses of women’s work as housewife within the family (Oakley, 1974). They brought forth the dimensions within which women are exploited and subordinated due to their relegation to the status of housewife. They argued that women’s unpaid domestic labour is a chief contributor to the overall economy; yet, the work of women within the domestic sphere has received very little sociological or historical attention. Sexual division of labour reinforces inequality within the family structure and spills over to the wage-work space. According to liberal feminists the axis of the modern family’s structure is the gender differentiation of roles between men and women (Oakley, 1974).

Family, liberal feminists write, is generally perceived as the private refuge from an increasingly impersonal public world. Public laws are not obliged to interfere in family affairs thus ignoring domestic neglect and violence. Physical isolation of housework ensures that women’s work is totally self defined. There are no social organization to regulate house work; defend the interests of women and represent them on issues and areas that affect their performance of housework. Women are expected to strive on their own for perfection in their roles as wives and mothers.

Liberal feminists thus state that ‘the family defines people’s identities. It is not merely actual - female and male living together with their children - but ideological’ (Oakley, 1974, p. 65). This familial ideology they say should be rejected. Women according to them can come out of this subordination brought by domesticity by uncompromisingly rejecting any attempt to stereotype them as housewives. They can also teach their daughters how not to be housewives. And finally they themselves must change by being conscious of gendered ideology and rejecting it.

Therefore, while some liberal feminists like Betty Friedan stopped with the critic of feminine mystique and urged women not to be only housewives, but to balance between career and homemaking; others like Ann Oakley went a step further by urging women to reject the familial ideology and the ideal of housewife.
There were some other liberal feminists who analyzed the family in terms of the concepts of liberal justice. Even while glorifying the ideal of liberal justice they criticized liberalism for ignoring the experiences of women within the family and for not extending this ideal to women in the name of public/private divide. Susan Okin Moller is one such liberal feminist who, though a liberal herself, challenges liberals to extend justice — the first virtue of political institutions, to family life (Macedo, 1992). In her writing she challenges the traditional liberal idea of separation of spheres into public and private. She rejects the idea that family is a private institution and demands that the state cannot choose to stay out of family, as family itself is created by politics. It is through this challenge of separate spheres that she brings forth the ways in which this separation perpetuates, what she calls, the “cycle of vulnerability” on women both within the family and at the workplace.

According to Okin Moller, the root causes of gender inequality are found in the family and these extend to the workplace. The inequalities she sees in one sphere of life are bound to have consequences in other spheres (Macedo, 1992). The structured gender division of labour in the family conditions the lives of women. Girls and young women are encouraged to invest their time and resources in ways that prepare them for homemaking rather than careers. So by the time women begin to think critically about their lives they find themselves already at a disadvantage (Okin, 1989, pp. 142-160). The cycle of vulnerability thus follows this trajectory - due to their socialization women choose traditional family life and housework as their primary duty and they will find that their earning potential and skills very low. This makes them more dependent on their husbands who participate in full-time wage work with more earning capacity. This economic dependence makes them more vulnerable by reducing their capacity for “voice” and “exit” in the family. And they in turn further get enmeshed in the patriarchal structure, reproducing the gendered division of labour into their children through socialization (Okin, 1989, pp. 47-169). She appeals to policy makers to take note of gender and bring policies to remove vulnerability of women and children. Her agenda for reform included better day care, mandatory family leaves for both spouses, more equitable levels of child support and much tougher enforcement of paternity payments (Okin, pp. 523-524).

To summarize, the liberal feminists in their studies on the family criticized the functional aspects of the gendered division of labour put forward by the mainstream theories. They also critiqued the omission of women’s experiences within the family by the mainstream theorists and opened up various ways of looking at the family. Liberal feminists criticized the public-private divide and urged for women to come out of their confinement and participate in the public world also. They demanded changes without actually altering the social structures (Gough, 1971).
2.4.2 Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminists contested mainstream Marxist ideas that the family is beneficial only to the bourgeoisie and pointed out ways in which even the working-class male benefits from the family. They pointed at the ways in which the structure of the family in capitalism affects and appropriates women’s labour and renders them unequal both within the family and extends to wage relations (Benhabib and Cornell, 1983; Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, Cockburn, 1981). Socialist feminists critique the left for deliberately avoiding a critique of the family structure.

‘The left’, according to Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter (1978) “have not only failed to adequately critique the family as an institution but also has always tried to cover this negligence of theirs in the name of working class requirement” (p.10). Gordon and Hunter question this stand of the left, pointing out that this neglect of issues of family is at the cost of women’s rights. Annette Kuhn (1978) focuses her argument on the way the family is constantly resorted to as an explanation of women’s subordination. According to her, the existing sociological theories including Marxist theory tends to be functionalist in so far as the form of family and therefore women’s subordination is viewed as determined by the existing social system. She argues that these theories do not allow any degree of autonomy for the family and the subjects inside it. They see the family as a non-contradictory site of socially necessary activities which merely maintain and reproduce existing social and production relations. She further adds that Marx in his book Das Kapital emphasizes the necessity of reproduction of labour to capital but not as the site where it is reproduced i.e. the proletarian family. She also points out that despite the tendency of capital to use women as cheap alternative labour, Marx assumes a proletarian family unit in which the wife and children do not perform wage work.

She rejects Engels’ view that women’s subordination is determined by the access to property. She writes “male supremacy continues to exist even in the proletariat family though within capitalism the male proletariat does not possess any property” (Kuhn, 1978, p.56). She explains that the marriage contract, which is followed by both the proletariats and the bourgeoisie, is based on the notion of bourgeois-property relations. So in a proletarian family the wage of the man becomes the property and the wife is entitled to a part of it when she submits her labour power to the husband. Her subordination lies in the bourgeoisie ideology of the marriage contract rather than the actual access to property. The difference, she says, of this contract from other contracts is that the wife in a normal situation is not free to leave her employer and neither is she paid for her labour. She also points out that capitalism through the marriage contract not only appropriates women’s labour within the family but also exploits it when they enter wage work by using them as unskilled or semi-skilled cheap labour. The family is
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the privileged place of the operation of both patriarchal and capitalist ideologies perpetuating women’s oppression with the interplay of class and gender relations (Kuhn, 1978, p.57-66).

Rayna Rapp (1979) begins with the observation that the problem with most of family studies is that, they see family as a ‘natural’ unit separate from the social world. This reinforces the concept of public-private divide, with family (i.e. so-called private) being portrayed as the refuge from the cruel social (i.e. so-called public) world. This conceptualization of the family, thus successfully covers up the violence and inequality that takes place within the family especially with regard to women’s rights and lives.

Rapp is also of the view that it is the commitment to the ideology of family that makes people enter into relations or production and reproduction - they get married, beget children, socialize, work to sustain the family and perform various other activities. In all of these, according to Rapp there is a tendency to gloss over the variety of experiences that different members within the family have, depending on their generation, gender and class. She points out that the meaning of family differs and depends upon the experiences of the family members belonging to different social categories, however, such ‘differences in experience’ are not taken into account in most of the family studies. She rejects this tendency to universalize family experiences. She also points out that different families are conditioned by relations their households hold to processes of production, reproduction and consumption; tensions produced by these processes are absorbed by the belief in the ideology of family. She concludes by reasserting the view that family is an ideological construct and there is a need for family studies to deconstruct the family as natural social unit.

Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982) also supported other socialist feminists’ stand that left theorists consciously evaded criticism of the family. They wrote ‘[I]n the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the labour movement had consistently struggled to protect the most popular of the working class institution i.e. the family even at the expense of the interests of women workers’ (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p.19). They further stated that though some of the ideas of Engels and Lenin are progressive in this regard, but as a whole there has not been a thorough critique of the family in mainstream socialist circles. This, according to Barrett and McIntosh is proved by the fact that the socialists have failed to challenge the construction of femininity and masculinity and have based their construction of the family on romantic notions of heterosexuality (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p.18). They see the family as both a social and economic institution as well as an ideological construct, each reinforcing the other. Like other socialist feminists they also argued that it is the familial ideology which is more dominant then the actual existent of the typical ideal family. Rejecting the theorization of the breakdown of family functions in the industrialized era, they opine that the
family still remains a vigorous agency in creating and transmitting class and gender inequalities (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982 p.34).

Socialist feminists therefore in pointing out the inadequacies of Marxist studies on family largely opined that more than the existence of ideal families in society the familial ideology is more in circulation. Socialist feminists, in particular, saw the present division of labour in the family and the work place as so necessary to capitalism that only the transition to socialism can break it down. It is the limitation of socialist feminism as a theory that lie behind the radical feminists’ attempt to define the problem as one of patriarchy and to see this as a universal, even indeed a historically constant, source of oppression (Gordon, 1978).

2.4.3 Radical Feminism

Radical feminists see sex as a form of oppression independent of social class. Indeed patriarchy, the structural subjugation and oppression of women by men, is seen as not only as predating capitalism, but continuing after capitalism has been superseded. Consequently, man himself becomes the exploiter and women the major oppressed class. For some radical feminists, socialism becomes quite irrelevant, since it will merely succeed in replacing one group of men by another. They emphasized on sexual rather than economic exploitation (Banks, 1986). They linked women’s oppression to their sexual and reproductive role performed basically within the family. They called upon women to reject their biological reproductive role and take the help of technology to subvert male domination (Altbach, 1971; Banks, 1986). Radical feminists addressed the family in terms of notions of sexuality and inequalities brought about by it. They exposed family structure in the context of their studies addressing the relation between the state and the construction of women’s sexualities. Some radical feminists opined that the elimination of all forms of contact with males will end male domination, and would free the world not only of the oppression of the female by the male but of oppression itself (Banks, 1986). Radical feminists allege that marriage is at the very root of woman’s subjection to the man, because through it man controls both her reproduction and her person (Banks, 1986).

Some of the important radical-feminist analyses of the family come from Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, and others, which you have already read in MWG-001 and MWG-004. We will reiterate some of their ideas to critically understand the institution of family from the feminist perspective.

Kate Millet (1971) sees family as patriarchy’s chief institution and the sexual politics played within it as the chief source of women’s subordination. The family in her view mediates between the individual and the social structure and serves as an agent for larger society. Family encourages its
own members to adjust and conform to social norms, inculcating and internalizing in them, patriarchal ideologies and attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status. According to her this is carried out through the process of socialization. “Concepts of femininity and masculinity are transferred from one generation to the other through socialization, ensuring maintenance of sex-role and sexual inequalities based on it. This goes a long way in maintaining inequality both within and outside the family” (p.26).

She further states that the patriarchal family insists upon legitimacy of offspring. It pronounces that the status of both child and mother is chiefly dependent upon the social and economic status of the male. This dependence, especially the economic dependence, renders the female weak. ‘And since it is not only his social status, but even his economic power upon which his dependents generally rely, the position of the masculine figure within the family - as without- is materially, as well as ideologically extremely strong” (Millet, p.35). Thus, women are subordinated and exploited in every sphere, family being no exception.

Shulamith Firestone in her book The Dialectic of Sex (1972) opines that the material basis for the inequality between men and women is produced within the biological family. The family requires that women are dependent on men, and children on adults, for their survival. This pattern of dependence according to her gives rise to a ‘psychological pattern of dominance-submission’ (1972, p.45). She further states that as technology advanced, making women’s economic independence possible, there developed ideologies in relation to love, sexuality, motherhood, and childhood, designed to keep women unaware of their subordinate status. The isolation of each nuclear family brought about by industrialization and these accompanying ideologies made it difficult for women to see that their position was determined socially rather than individually or psychologically. Inequalities according to her were perpetuated by males, to the benefit of males (Burton, 1985: p.35).

Firestone states that it is the exclusion of women and children from the public arena within the so-called public/private divide that contributes to their exploitation and subordination. She argues that through their access to the public world that men control ideological production as well as the economic and technological resources of society leave women with nothing. Through these resources men control the construction of social reality, formulating ideologies for their benefit and devise the ways of maintaining women in subordination.

In Firestone’s view, equality can come about only by “women seizing control of the means of reproduction” (1972, p.19). She states that the ‘natural’ inequality can only be overcome when there is a complete separation of
reproduction from women’s lives, so that women and men are made equal through technological innovation - the development of artificial reproduction outside women’s bodies must take place” (1972, p. 206). She hoped that as the cultural division between male and female is also based on biological reproduction, artificial reproduction would allow such distinctions also to be broken down (Firestone, 1972, p. 229). This would help women achieve both economic and sexual freedom. According to her, this would also enable the family as we know to disappear. Unlike some later feminists, Firestone did not propose that men and women should no longer live together.

The above discussions of feminist thoughts on family show that liberal feminists recognized the difference in power relation between men and women within and out of the family structure. They called for equal sharing of power among men and women. This they believed can be brought by greater role sharing and by minimizing sex role socialization within the family and the school. The socialist feminists explained family structure from an economic angle. They replaced the conceptual framework of Marxism, that the elimination of capitalism would lead to women’s liberation, with the need to eliminate both capitalism and patriarchy. The radical feminists, on the other hand, do not trust men to share power, and reject this solution as unworkable. They called for an elimination of the family itself.

Mainstream feminist theories on family are critiqued by various scholars for largely basing their arguments on white middle class, western and heterosexual families. It is argued that, feminist theories on family like feminist theorization in other areas saw gender, as a unitary category independent of other factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and others. Black feminists for instance introduced the concept of intersectionality, and argued that not all women experience family on similar lines. Their race, class, ethnicity and others negotiate their family relationships and the power play within it (Collins, 1990). According to Black feminists, African-American women experience family in different forms as compared to the white middle class nuclear family. They also emphasized on the unique challenges they faced based on their multiple identities (Davis, 1981). On similar lines third world feminists critiqued mainstream feminist understandings as western centric and not taking into account the experiences of women from ‘third world’. According to them the processes of colonization, decolonization, globalization and others determine the experiences of women in many ‘third world’ nations.

2.4.4 Queer Challenge to Family Studies

Queer theories criticize feminist theorists for largely accepting the dominant heterosexual family form of father, mother, and their children as the norm. According to Queer theorists, feminists almost always, in their questioning
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of family based on gender assumed heterosexuality as the normal and the natural. Chrys Ingraham (2010) argues that in most conceptualizations of gender heteronormativity' is assumed (P. 367). As a matter of fact the relation of gender to the institution of heterosexuality remains unaddressed (Ingraham, 2010). Feminist theorists are thereby accused of not integrating the role sexuality played in determining family form and distribution of power within families.

As per queer theorisation, much of feminist work has presumed that all men and women are heterosexual, therefore their short-sightedness in understanding and questioning the family (Oswal et. al., 2005). Queer theory puts forth the argument that gender, sexuality, and family are interdependent binaries. Family studies, therefore, need to begin with, interrogating the role all the three play in intersections with each other, in determining the status and position of individuals within family. Queer theory resists hetero-normativity and demands re-examination of the family through the prism of sexuality in intersection with gender, race, class, ethnicity and other categories (Oswal et.al, 2009). They question the assumption of hetero-normativity as the norm within family studies. According to queer studies scholars, hetero-normativity has very real material consequences for those situated differently in the matrix of domination. Queer scholarship questions how institutionalized heterosexuality ensures that some people have more power, privilege, status, and resources than others (Ingraham, 1994). Queer scholars bring forth the ways in which hetero-normativity shapes the experiences, identities, and discourses of family members.

Hetero-normativity, queer theorists argue “is an ideological code that promotes rigidly defined conventional gender norms, heterosexuality, and traditional family values” (Oswald et. al. 2009, p. 43). It is through social norms, performances, experiences, as well as through active social control such as sanctions and violence that hetero-normative values are perpetuated in family forms and otherwise (Crawley and Broad, 2008). According to queer theorists, the heterosexual family myth perpetuates the falsehood that heterosexual relationships, marriage, and parenting are the only paths to happiness (Herdt and Koff, 2001). Queer analysis denaturalizes heterosexuality and unpacks its meaning-making processes (Ingraham, 1994). Through lesbian/gay studies on family to queer studies, various forms of family not based on heterosexual man-woman relations and various dynamics within families are brought to the fore. Such knowledge arising from experiences of the marginalized posed challenges to the mainstream family studies and its hegemonic discourse on family type and structure. It gave an impetus to family studies discourse to reorient its method and question the dominant heterosexual family forms thereby helping family studies to be more inclusive in nature.
2.5 MAINSTREAM STUDIES ON FAMILY IN INDIA

The family received a great deal of academic interest during the first few decades of the emergence of sociology and social anthropology in India. The sociological study on family shifted from book view to field view. The Indological approach or the book view based its findings on the ancient Hindu sacred texts. This phase was followed by the field based approach which rejected the text based approach of Indological studies. The field based approach emphasized on empirical studies on family. It brought forth two major debates into family studies in India. They are ‘family versus household debate’ and ‘joint versus nuclear debate’. One major topic of deliberation within the sociology of family in India was “Is the joint family disintegrating”? Among all these deliberations within family studies in India the experiences of women within the family were neglected. Their presence and role within the family was taken for granted by most studies. It is in the late 1970’s and early 1980s with the surging women’s movement in India that feminists questioned and addressed women’s issues within the family breaking the myth of family as a ‘heaven’.

2.5.1 Feminist Understanding of Family in India

Feminist scholarship began by pointing to the wide gap between the everyday experience of women within family and anthropological-sociological knowledge available. Therefore, the immediate task that they undertook was to underline the invisibility of women in the existing studies (Rege, 2001, p.14).

Over the decades with increased research on family by feminist scholars a new set of questions and political issues, with special attention to the household as the site of production and reproduction, and also of the primary socialization of children was brought into focus. Much feminist work has targeted the family in terms of the structure of marriage alliances and the nature of conjugal relations, unequal distribution of resources between men and women, gender division of labour, discrimination in access to health, education, food and clothing, property rights, son preferences within family and kinship structures, practices of oppressive personal laws, domestic violence and many other such issues occurring within the family structure due to gendered familial ideology (Agarwal, 1994; Das, 1995, 1996; Dube, 2001; Palriwala and Risseeuw, 1996; Patel, 2005; Uberoi, 1993, 2001).

2.5.2 Critique of Mainstream Research

Feminists pointed out that early Indian sociologists for all purposes assumed the Hindu joint family of classical, sanskrit usage as the representative Indian family. It excluded the family structures and kinship ideals and
practices of non-Hindus, that of south and north-east India, lower castes, of non patrilineal communities and others. They thus ignored the various ways in which different kinship patterns in different regions and communities affected the lives of its members, especially that of women differently (Uberoi, 1993, p.39). It was only the work of Irawati Karve in which she undertook a comparative study on kinship and marriage in north and south Indian families that some light has been thrown on differential pattern of kinship and its effects on its members especially that of women. Karve has argued that given the not so strict patrilocal nature of families whereby marriage among cousins was prevalent, women in south enjoyed a comparatively better status than that of north (Karve, 1993). With this work of hers, Karve has contributed immensely to the understanding of women’s life within the institutions of family, kinship and marriage in India.

Except a few exceptions like Karve, mainstream studies on family largely assumed one standard pan Indian structure of family and made it their unit of analysis. These studies focused more on kinship norms rather than on pathology, deviance and breakdown, thereby failing to take note of the various ways in which different members experience family life. Thus mainstream studies, feminists argued failed to inform or confront practical challenges related to the institution of family in India and wrongly portrayed it as an egalitarian and harmonious institution benefitting all (Uberoi, 2001). Feminists also pointed out that in all these studies of joint family and glorification of its unity, the price women paid for maintaining the unity; and women’s varying often difficult experience within it was neglected (Patel, 2003; Uberoi, 1993, 2006). They argued that the notion of bargaining power and negotiability is important in the context of kinship and family. Most women living within the patrilineal, patri-virilocal kinship, have limited rights over resources and virtually no inheritance rights. They are dependent, secluded and segregated and their sexuality is managed by men. Women within these patrilineal families therefore hardly had choices and bargaining power (Dube, 2001, p.7). Patrilineal descent thus tends to be unusually harsh on women severing them from the natal group and leaving them to struggle through the process of becoming insiders in the husband’s group. The material dependence of women and a strong ideology of gender contribute to their struggle (Dube, p.35). These facts were not given importance by mainstream studies of the kinship and family structures, which feminists tried to bring to light in their studies.

2.5.3 Familial Ideology and Women’s Subordination

Feminist works further pointed to the ways in which notions of family and kinship honour burdened women with upholding family sanctity, thus restricting their life chances, perpetuating violence against them, and ultimately rooting them in subordinated positions within family. Scholars focussed on the violence perpetrated on women in the name of family
Family honour and showed how the rationality of the family honour subordinates women and grants men the power to exercise control on women’s self and sexuality (Das, 1996).

In this context feminist studies discussed the intersection of caste ideology with that of familial ideology and how it operates together to exercise control over women. Family honour and purity of caste is believed to be dependent upon control over and purity of female sexuality. Caste system entails boundary maintenance for keeping up the purity of the caste structure. The onus of this boundary maintenance falls on women because of their role in biological reproduction. Family, according to feminists, plays an important role in maintaining this purity through socializing its members especially women to control their sexuality. Girls are expected to be feminine and not attract male gaze to remain pure. Restrictions on mobility, maintaining parda, stress on virginity, chastity and fidelity, stigma of illegitimacy, importance on early marriage of girls are all mechanisms through which the family actively contributes in maintaining caste boundaries and protects its purity and honour. The responsibility for protection of family and caste honour that family confers its male members gives men the right to exercise power over the females in their charge and often to dictate every facet of their behaviour. Such ideology forms the basis of violence against women within and outside the family.

Veena Das (1995) highlights the violence that women were subjected to during the partition of India in 1947 not only within the discourse of family, but also within the tie up of kinship, community and state. She rejects the claim of family and kinship as separate from state, and argues that the state and the family are in a tactical alliance. The state and family alliance was also brought to light during the anti dowry campaign and domestic violence which refuted the public/private dichotomy. Feminists argued that the state ruled women’s lives and actively restricted them from enjoying equal status within family through marriage, divorce, child custody, property and other such laws. Yet, in matters of women’s resistance against gendered norms of the patriarchal family including violence against them the state in the name of family privacy claimed non interference (Agnes 1992, Karlekar, 1998; Rajan, 2003). This, feminists argued, is the nexus between family and state to keep women subordinated which was never addressed by mainstream studies on family in India who largely found the separation of family from state as normal, natural and functional.

Therefore, while mainstream “...family studies have tended to highlight the harmonious and functional aspects of family... In contrast, feminist studies have brought out the conflictual, oppressive relations within family and its differing consequences for men and women” (Ganesh, 1998, p.12).
Another such aspect of oppressive family structure that was neglected by mainstream studies was the process of gender socialization which forms one of the basic functions of family. Feminists argued that mainstream studies did not critique the gendered nature of the process of socialization because mainstream scholars agreed with patriarchal ideology and saw nothing wrong in its reproduction.

Feminists argue that the process of gender socialization in India primarily takes place through rituals and ceremonies, the use of language, and practices within and in relation to the family. Gender division of labour is ingrained in children very early in childhood. Little girls are expected to help in domestic work such as cooking, looking after infants and other such things. Boys on the other hand are reprimanded if they show any interest in these activities. They are expected to accompany their male elders to the work site outside the home. Girls, feminist studies show, are expected to learn to bear pain and deprivation, eat anything that is given to them, and acquire the quality of self denial. This is a part of the training for the reality that they are likely to confront in the house of the mother-in-law. The notions of tolerance and self restraint are also rooted in a consciously cultivated feminine role which is embedded in cultural and familial ideology. Indian women thus are socialized into subordination which affects all aspects of their life (Dube, 2001).

Feminists also point out that given the fact that son preference is ingrained in Indian families which are largely patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal in nature, girls grow up with the notion of temporary and secondary membership within the natal home. Rituals, lullabies and folk songs send the message from childhood to women about the inevitability of marriage. The rituals and ceremonies associated with marriage socialize the girl to play a subordinate role to the husband and his family. In marriage the woman is expected to discard all her loyalties to her natal family whereas her identity as an outsider is not easily forgotten within the affinal family (Dube, 2001). Women acquire membership and authority within affinal families by reproducing patrilineal ideology. They go through a period of dual membership. During this period the existing structural conditions are exploited by both the natal and affinal families of women (Ganesh, 1998). This temporary status and acceptance of such status through socialization keeps women away from exercising any real power and makes them subordinated.

Related to the questioning of gender socialization is the questioning of the gender division of labour prevalent within family. Feminist scholarship on family in India brought to light the gendered division of labour as it existed within family, explained how it contributed to women’s subordination and challenged such division. Rajni Palkhiwala (1990) addressed the household within the context of women’s work. She argues that ‘household is not only
Family

a unit of co-residence, consumption and reproduction but often is an economic unit as well, within which, women perform the majority of their daily tasks in a gendered manner’ (Palriwala, 1990, p.16). She argues that such division of labour kept women away from the market oriented income generating productive work thus making women economically dependent on men. This kept them out of decision making and gaining any kind of actual power. Palriwala argued that there is an inherent connection between women’s life conditions, kinship organization and economy.

It is to be noted that in the context of discussions within feminist analysis of family and kinship, there is a position which puts forward the theory that family and kin are important sources of support and potential security. Some feminists argue that even within these oppressive structures women are not just passive, unquestioning victims. Within these limits also ‘women question their situation, express resentment, use manipulative strategies, utilize their skills, turn deprivation and self denial into sources of power, and attempt to carve out a living space’ (Dube, 2001, p.113). These scholars emphasize that women are not mere spectators of the kinship organization but also create agency within it and exercise some limited autonomy and power which is not available to them outside the family structures (Palriwala, 1990, pp. 42-43).

Feminists have carried in-depth studies on the economic, cultural, religious and socialization aspects of different families in India pointing to the structure of family as an instrument of gender exploitation. They have described the ways in which family economics through sexual division of labour have pushed women to dependence and further exploitation. They have also shown how gender based socialization practices have relegated women to the domestic sphere and placed them lower in the family hierarchy. Rejecting mainstream studies notion of a harmonious and egalitarian family structure feminists have pointed out the ways in which the family structure perpetuates and supports discrimination and violence against women.

Yet, there is a criticism from certain scholars like Mary John and Patricia Uberoi that feminist critiques of mainstream family theories and also of family structures as oppressive to women has never actually challenged the utility and existence of family itself as a social institution. They see a politics in not critiquing the structure of family itself and only critiquing the processes within it. However, they acknowledge that there are interesting leads found in feminist studies in this direction.

Two such critiques of the family come from the dalit feminist thought and queer feminist thought.
2.6 DALIT FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Mainstream feminism in India assumed the universality of the concept of Indian women. The experiences of Hindu upper caste, middle class, urban women were assumed to be the experiences of all women. The category of their analysis of oppression was based on gender thereby neglecting other markers of a woman’s identity such as caste, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and others.

Dalit-Bahujan critique took Indian feminists to task for the seeming invisibility of caste inequality and emphasized on the ‘politics of difference’ (Guru, 1995). Dalit Bahujan feminists argued that “this ‘difference’ was essential for understanding the specificity of dalit women’s subjugation, characterised by their experience of two distinct, if over-lapping, patriarchal structures: a brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatised dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of ‘their’ women” (Rao, 2005, p. 717). Their questioning was twofold: questioning the upper caste hegemony within feminist discourse in India; as well as the patriarchal domination within the dalit bahujan communities (Rao, 2005). “Dalit-bahujan feminists critiqued both anti-caste and feminist movements for their particular forms of exclusion” (Rao, P. 717).

Basing their arguments on the writings of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar which you have already read in your first semester course MWG 001, dalit feminists brought forth the interrelationships between, caste, marriage and family. According to them the ideology of endogamy perpetuates both caste hierarchy as well as patriarchal domination through constitution of the dominant Hindu family form. The unequal status traditionally conferred to offspring from inter caste marriages especially marriages between a lower caste man and upper caste woman is not just reflection of caste hierarchy but also of patriarchal gender bias. Such unequal status and denial of property rights to offspring of certain forms of exogamous marriages acted as tools to bring conformity to endogamous marriages.

Upper caste practices of sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, prevalence of girl child marriage, honour killings also emphasize the intersections of caste, marriage and family. Through control over women’s sexuality caste boundaries were maintained. Brahminal patriarchy, dalit feminists argue, through its emphasis on purity of marriage and family perpetuated both women’s subordination as well as lower caste subordination. Caste values and norms regulate women’s sexuality, thereby regulating and defining family and kinship ties. Further, through norms of possession and tradition such as: devadasi system and others, upper caste men controlled, exploited and violated dalit women’s sexuality and bodily rights. Marriage to an
untouchable caste was prohibited and stigmatized, but on the other hand sexual alliances and sexual assaults with and on the same group of women was/is given ritual and legal sanctions. Dalit women’s lives continue to be marked by double burden within Brahminical patriarchy. At the same time they also suffer multiple patriarchies within caste society (Rao, 2003; Rege, 2013). Feminist family studies by placing dalit feminist arguments at its centre can bring to the fore the multiple ways in which family and kinship ties marginalized women. This perspective explains women’s subordination within family and community that have hitherto remained hidden.

### 2.7 QUEER FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Queer critique questioned Indian feminists’ negligence of the role sexuality played in determining family form, and the unequal distribution of power within. They criticized feminists for not questioning heteronormativity. According to queer critiques, feminists questioned gender roles, subordination of women, violence against women, unequal rights to property and decision making within the family. However, all these questions took shape within continued acceptance of the heterosexual family form as the norm. The exclusive importance given to families based on blood and marriage continued. The issues feminists raised were expected to be addressed without changing the family form or within the fold of heterosexual marital families.

In this context, Rinchin (2005) writes “within the family, violence is seen as a serious concern but never as a threat to the validity, relevance and existence of the institution itself. So while we mistrust what we do not understand (different lifestyles and choices), there is little interrogation of that which we trust because of its familiarity and apparent inevitability” (p.719).

Queer theorists detail how by accepting the heterosexual family based on marriage, feminists actively contributed to the devaluing of same sex families as well as families based on non sexual relationships. The idea that non-sexual relationships are somehow inferior to sexual ones remained unquestioned. According to queer critiques, the reality is that there exists different type of families with a wider range of relationships than those just based on only biological or marital relationships (Hensman, 2005).

One important queer critique of feminist understanding on family comes from Rinchin (2005), in her essay titled *Querying Marriage and Family*. Critiquing the overemphasis on family and marriage, she argues, ‘the institution of family and marriage restricts, and denies all other forms of existence, thereby actively suppressing true exploration of any other relationships (Rinchin, 2005, p.718). Therefore, members within the family are enforced with the task of reproducing the its structure. All the members are bound by principles of loyalty, blood and inheritance that oblige members
to place it above the individual interest. All other relationships are seen as feeding into the family, but lesser somehow. Families are also not open for any and every one as the gates for entry are birth and marriage. The use of force and violence for submission and compliance is not unknown. There is documented evidence of forced marriages, unlawful confinement, excommunication, desperate suicides and killings of many who have gone against the prevalent norms of caste, class and sexuality, including lesbian suicides (Rinchin, 2005). She further argues that the definitions of mother, father, husband and wife in the relationship, restrict individual lives.

Rinchin (2005) also argues against the “binary in relationships with clearly demarcated roles of the sexual and non-sexual. These sexual liaisons are valued over others... Non-sexual relationships are looked at as pure, but not potent or fruitful... Therefore, friends, siblings or others sharing home and life together will always be seen as living in limbo, waiting for the real important relationship to happen. The importance of these people, and the role they play in each other’s lives, and over each other’s possessions are never recognised. Even the census does not give such units recognition as households or families. Their place in each other’s biological families is always that of an outsider... On the other hand, relationships based on sex outside of marriage are seen as highly sexualised, passionate and consuming, without care and responsibility and, above all, indulgent. Therefore, they become the target of revulsion and disgust. The violations of rights of people in such relationships are unquestioned and violence is seen as the natural outcome of such a lifestyle” (p. 719). According to her there is an urgent need to expand the whole concept of family by interrogating the institution and dismantling structure of marriage or by perceiving it to one way of living rather than accepting as the single/only institution of living in the society.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

The unit began with a discussion of the structural functionalist understanding of family. It described how structural functionalism emphasized that family is the basic unit of all societies and is functional to the maintenance and progress of society.

Functionalist notions of the hierarchies present in the family and their argument that gender division of labour is a natural characteristic of family, which all members follow without any resistance is discussed. A discussion on feminist rejection of such understanding on family and their efforts in bringing out the discrimination present within family is also taken up. Mainstream Indian theoretical understanding regarding the structure of family and the preoccupation with issues of nuclear and joint households is discussed. Finally, Indian feminist studies on family and their attempt to
 unfold the important role family and familial ideology played in subordination of women is discussed. This unit concludes with a discussion of alternative perspectives on understanding and interrogating the family as an institution.

2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss feminist critiques of mainstream theories on family.

2) Discuss how family perpetuates women’s subordination. Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.

3) Discuss Indian feminist contributions to understanding family in India.

2.10 REFERENCES


2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

