
UNIT 3 FEMINISTS AND POST-MODERNISTS APPROACH

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Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the impact of feminist and post-modernist thought's upon the discipline of anthropology;
- identify the key authors and texts that contributed to feminist anthropology and post-modern anthropology;
- discuss the strengths and limitations of the feminist and post-modernist approaches in anthropology; and
- identify major areas of inquiry in which anthropologists are currently engaged.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We begin the unit by discussing the evolution of 'Feminist Anthropology' as a distinct sub-discipline within the field. We then move on to a discussion of the 'post-modern turn' in anthropology and the way in which it redefined the subject matter and methods of understanding of the discipline. Both these perspectives had a key impact upon the manner in which ethnography came to be conducted in contemporary anthropology.

The feminist movement and feminist thought have made an extraordinary impact in social sciences and humanities over the past half a century. Feminism which has its focus the subordination of women by men, has a history of over two centuries; Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering work *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is viewed as a foundational text of 'first wave' or 'suffragette feminism' in Europe in which women for the first time organized themselves politically demanding the right to vote. Feminism has been broadly categorized into 'liberal', 'marxist'

and 'socialist' feminism. While it is not within the scope of this unit to map the trajectories of these various viewpoints, it may be noted that the underlying core of all these approaches is to bring to the centrestage women's experiences in all walks of life; from the secluded, secret 'private' sphere to the more visible 'public' one. While liberal feminism advocates for reforms in the system and the promotion of practices and policies that will promote gender equality, Marxist and Socialist or Radical approaches view the system itself as fundamentally flawed and unequal and therefore advocate radical structural changes and an overhauling of social institutions so that they do not discriminate against women. The so called 'second Wave' of feminism, which began in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S.A. and Europe, saw an intense upsurge in feminist mobilising, activism and writing, including in social sciences. Large number of women entered universities and very soon began to realize that in many areas of social thought history was either assumed to be 'male', with women confined to domestic spaces, or gender issues were simply regarded as unimportant or irrelevant. This 'androcentric' bias was also experienced by students of anthropology, which is itself described as 'the science of Man'! Despite the long-standing interest of anthropologists in kinship and family, the focus was the male and issues related to descent, property, political organisation based on kinship, etc. Lévi-Strauss's 'alliance theory' also views women merely as the conduits (or messages) exchanged by different groups of men. Even though women anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict did a great service to the discipline by popularizing it, their work was viewed very condescendingly and critically by dominant men of the British school of social anthropology who thought that these works were unscientific, impressionistic and frivolous. It was observed by feminist scholars that much of the information and ethnographic accounts on the lives and experiences of women were often, in reality reports of male informants transmitted through male ethnographers. In the 1960s and 1970s therefore, feminists set out to correct the 'male' bias in societies they studied. They argued that the discipline had been dominated by male researchers and was full of male stereotypes and androcentric frameworks for the analysis of cultures.

In the following sections, we map the emergence and growth of feminist theorizing and methodology within anthropology from the early beginnings to the contemporary period. We shall examine some of the crucial methodological and substantive debates that feminism engendered and will elaborate some of the areas of inquiry and research in which feminist anthropologists are currently engaged. It will become clear to you that gender, from being a 'residual' or 'peripheral' category is today regarded as a central, fundamental one, without which all endeavours to understand and analyse society and culture will necessarily be incomplete, inadequate and uni-dimensional. Gender is now recognized as being central to the analysis of structures of power, the organization of social and cultural institutions and mode of ideological control across cultures.

3.2 EARLY INFLUENCES

Mapping the growth and trajectory of feminist anthropology, Ellen Lewin (2006) traces its roots to the work of some brave and pioneering women, many of whom have remained unknown and unrecognized. Prominent amongst them is Elsie Clews Parson (1875-1941), a political radical and outspoken feminist, who made use of her personal wealth to offer financial support to younger scholars in an era before public funding for field research had been institutionalized. Ruth Benedict was one of the beneficiaries of Parson's generosity. Parson completed her doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University in 1899, but moved to anthropology under the influence of scholars like Kroeber, Lowie, Sapir, Boas and others when she was in her 40s. She travelled with male colleagues to the American southwest, thus breaking social barriers against men and women working together. Her best known work is *Pueblo*

Indian Religion (1939), a descriptive and comparative work whose constant theme is culture change.

Lewin (2006) also mentions the contributions of Zora Neale Thurston, an African-American woman who studied at Columbia University under Franz Boas. She experimented with several narrative forms and moved freely between academic and creative writing. Daisy Bates, a little-known fieldworker who for several decades lived near the Australian aborigines, is said to have provided A.R. Radcliffe-Brown with much of the data that he later claimed as his own. Bates never achieved much scholarly recognition, but is chiefly remembered as a woman wronged at the hands of British social anthropology's leading figures (Lewin, 2006:7).

Within British social anthropology, Phyllis Kaberry, a student of Malinowski, was recognized as a pioneer of anthropological research on women in specific social and political contexts. In 1939, she wrote *Aboriginal Women: Sacred and Profane* which examined the rich but separate ritual experiences of Aboriginal women. *Woman of the Grassfields* (1952) is a significant study on woman's work and economic life in British Cameroons. This work is a precursor to the vast body of interdisciplinary literature on women and development that followed from the 1970s onwards which interrogated the nature of women's work across cultures and the impact of male-centric developmental plans and policies on the lives. Another leading figure in British social anthropology was Audrey Richards. Her work, spanning over 50 years, covered areas like kinship, nutrition, fertility, labour and migration. An Africanist, she conducted fieldwork in the 1930s and 1950s in Uganda and Zambia. Her well known study *Land, Labour and Diet* (1939) examines the manner in which the Bemba community manage scarce resources and the acute problems faced by Bemba women in doing contingency planning during periods of food shortage. Her most famous work *Chisungu* (1956) examines female initiation rites among the Bemba of Zambia; and the various secret rituals and practices that signal their passage into adulthood and responsibility.

Reflection

An interesting source of influential writings identified by Lewin (2006) is the work of the 'unsung heroines' – the wives of anthropologists. Some of these women facilitated the work of their husbands; others created their own genre. Lewin (ibid) cites, among others, Elizabeth Fernea's 1965 work, *Guests of the Sheik* which was the result of her being with her anthropologist husband in the field in Southern Iraq, helping him gather information about women. Similarly, Margery Wolf's classic ethnography, *The House of Lim* (1968) was written because she had accompanied her husband to Northern Taiwan to conduct fieldwork. Some other highly influential use of life histories included Mary F. Swith's, *Baba of Karo* (1954) and Marjorie Shostak's, *Nisa: the life and words of a! Kung woman*.

This section has highlighted the significant contribution of women anthropologists in bringing women's issues to scrutiny. However, barring some notable exceptions, the discipline of anthropology was overwhelmingly dominated by men. Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) and Margaret Mead (1901-78) were two such figures who attracted widespread interest from academic and lay readers alike. Some of their works were indeed the first "best sellers" the discipline produced. Ruth Benedict was an ardent feminist who was also relatively open and frank about her sexual preferences. Margaret Mead was her close friend and shared some of her interests, but did not draw on her personal or political commitments to the same extent in her academic work. Their work drew upon comparisons between the United States and the non-Western world; they made their American readers aware of the vast differences that exist across cultures in "appropriate" male and female behaviour, child rearing practices and attitudes towards sexuality.

Benedict's fieldwork with Native Americans and other groups led her to develop the "configurational approach" to culture wherein culture is viewed as "personality writ large", facilitating and constraining different personality types in different societies. Gender is a crucial dimension of personality and culture and the enactment of gender roles is also culturally conditioned. Mead also examined the influence of culture on human social development. Her landmark work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and later, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) demonstrate how culture is the primary factor in determining masculine and feminine characteristics and behavior. *Coming of Age in Samoa* created a sensation in the USA as it dwelt upon the very different manner in which young men and women in Samoa experienced adolescence and adulthood as a consequence of their "permissive" and relaxed attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy. The works of Benedict and Mead focused upon the so called "soft" areas like child rearing practices and gender socialisation and tended to be highly impressionistic in nature. This did not go down well with the British Social Anthropologists who were immersed in the study of "hard" areas like kinship and political organisation. However, the visibility, popularity and high academic stature attained by Benedict and Mead made it possible for women anthropologists to make their presence felt in the years to come. The next section will discuss the emergence of "feminist anthropology" as a distinctive development within the discipline and highlight some of the key texts and authors that made valuable contributions.

3.3 THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

Feminist anthropology made its tentative beginnings in the radical climate of Western Universities in the 1970s with papers and panels offered by young scholars at conferences. Sally Slocum's (1970) paper, *Woman the Gatherer: The Male Bias in Anthropology* presented at the annual meet of the American Anthropological Association was one such contribution, which critiqued the popular conception of "man- the hunter" and virtually posed a challenge to the male dominated academy for its androcentric and simplistic biases regarding the roles of men and women and the evolutionary history of the species. 1970 also saw the publication of Peggy Golde's edited volume *Women in the Field*. This path-breaking collection of essays by women anthropologists, opened up the question of how being a woman affected the experiences of anthropologists conducting their research in diverse settings and periods.

Two of the most significant volumes published during the 1970s which virtually defined the field of feminist anthropology were *Women, Culture and Society* (1974) edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Lousie Lamphere and *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (1975) edited by Rayna Reiter (later known as Rayna Rapp).

Rosaldo and Lamphere's volume was based upon the premise that relations between men and women were assymetrical across cultures and societies. They write: "Everywhere we find that women are excluded from certain economic or political activities, that their roles of wives and mothers are associated with fewer powers and prerogatives than are the roles of men. It seems fair to say then that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is a universal fact of human social life" (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974:1).

A key observation was that women tend to be subordinated because of their confinement to the domestic or private domain. Men, on the other hand, dominate in the public domain and thus have greater access and control over economic, political and social resources.

Sherry Ortner's highly influential piece *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* looked at symbolic constructions of women as the key to understanding their secondary status. Because women are connected with 'natural' functions like pregnancy, lactation and child rearing they are seen on a lower plane than men who control the 'cultural' realm; culture is always viewed as superior to nature.

Rayna Reiter's volume was also inspired by the emerging feminist movement and was a response to the movement's questions to anthropologists about women's inequality. Answers to these questions, Reiter hoped, would help feminist struggle to attain equality in its society. In her introduction, Reiter outlines the problem of male bias in anthropology; however, she challenges the concept of universal sexual asymmetry and cautions against the use of the anthropologist's own culture categories and dichotomies to generalize about other cultures. One of the most celebrated papers in the volume is Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex". Rubin uses the work of theorists like Marx, Engels, Freud, Lévi-Strauss to explicate what she terms the "sex/gender system" in which the biological category, 'female' is transformed into the socio-cultural category 'woman'. While 'sex' is a biological or physiological given, 'gender' emerges when bodily characteristics are given cultural meanings and significance. It is thus socially constructed and constituted.

The publication of these two volumes signaled a virtual explosion in the field. There was a renewed interest in the work of Karl Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels. Engel's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) was recognized by feminists as a foundational work. 'Socialist' feminists analysed the struggles of impoverished women across the world. The situation of women in western capitalist societies was compared to that of women in societies with simpler economic and political systems and more egalitarian social structures.

By placing women at the centre of analysis, feminist anthropologists were able to arrive at very different results from those of traditional male-centred studies. Annette Wiener's famous re-study of the Trobriand Islands, for example, in which she revisited the site of Malinowski's classic work and actually incorporated women's voices in her ethnography, showed us a different picture of the Trobrianders than the one painted by him.

To sum up, the period of the 1970s and 1980s saw the proliferation of debates over domestic/public and nature/culture dichotomies, assuming universal sexual asymmetry and "women" as a universal category. The political goal of uniting women across nations and cultures under an overarching "sisterhood" was the hallmark of the feminist movement. Women, it was believed should strive together to fight the common experience of discrimination. However, scholars also argued that these conceptions were "western" ones; rooted in European and American history and culture, in other words, they were shaped and structured by specific socio-cultural contexts. Could these concepts be used uncritically in other cultural contexts without distorting the understanding of gender relations in other cultures? Would these concepts misrepresent different experiences and realities?

This brings us to the dialectical or contradictory relationship between the discipline of anthropology and feminism. It has been described as an "awkward relationship" by the British anthropologist Margaret Strathern. Henrietta Moore also raises the question of the ethnocentric bias of western feminism which does not adequately account for the local or folk conceptions of other cultures. The goals of anthropology are the study of other cultures and understanding local conceptions and world views from the point of view of the members of that culture. However, feminism specifies the commonly experienced discrimination and devaluation faced by women all over the world. Thus, while the disciplinary orientation of anthropology emphasizes differences, variety and diversity of human experiences, cultural meanings and

social structures, the orientation of feminism is to bring all women together under a single umbrella.

It is this “essentialising” and “totalizing” tendency in feminism that was critiqued and questioned by several scholars. They argued that the category of “woman” that was discussed by feminists, actually referred to White, Western/middle class women and failed to account for the diversities of race, ethnicity, caste, class, etc. Non-western social scientists have strongly criticised the ethnographic bias of western feminist scholars in their studies and interpretations of other cultures. Some have also raised the issue of unequal structures of power which continue to dictate the research activities even in feminist anthropology; those who are studied are mostly from other cultures and those who study and write are mostly Western women (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Even in the case of ‘native’ anthropologists studying their own culture, the western-centric concepts and theories of academic social science creates a hierarchy of knowledge between the scholar/researcher and the subjects of study.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s anthropologists of gender broadened their concerns from women’s experiences per se to the ways in which gender and other analytical categories (race, caste, class, ethnicity etc.) meet and interact under varying material and cultural conditions. For example, in the Indian context, we can see quite clearly how difficult it is to separate gender, caste and class; women’s experiences and degree of marginalisation as they are structured by the intersection of these categories. Thus we can speak of Dalit women as being “thrice marginalized” on account of their position in caste, class and gender hierarchies.

3.4 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

3.4.1 Feminism and Positivism

One of the major challenges posed by feminists to mainstream science and social science (also designated as ‘malestream’ by some writers) has been its critique of positivism. Early social sciences (including sociology and anthropology) were modelled on the ‘positivist’ tenets or principles of value-free objectivity. Positive science aims at the collection of “facts” and “truth”. Research must be replicable and have validity and reliability. This view of science implies a certain hierarchical distance between the researcher (the scientist) and the subjects of research (the laypersons). The researcher is expected to keep a certain objective, analytical distance from the “subjects” so that he/she can objectively see, judge and interpret the life and meanings of the subjects. Even within anthropology, in which researchers “go out into the field”, learn the local language and live in the community for an extended period, they are cautioned not to ‘go native’ or identify themselves so completely with their subjects that they forget the ‘aims and objectives’ of their research.

This positivist paradigm is in sharp contrast to the way in which feminist research has been described: “contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant,complete but not necessarily replicable, inclusive of emotions and events as experienced”. (Nielsen, 1990:6).

Accordingly to Diane Wolf (1996) feminist critiques of positivism have been located in three major areas:

- i) philosophical critiques of positivism and its pretense of value free science;
- ii) moral critiques of objectifications and exploitation of subjects;
- iii) practical critiques of the way positivism opposes the interest of the researcher and the researched.

Feminists (and others) argue that the requirement of ‘objectivity’ and ‘value-neutrality’ is not only impossible, but also undesirable. The hierarchical relationships between researcher and subject reflect male forms of interpersonal dynamics – men are expected to be ‘rational’, unemotional and businesslike in their work. Pat Caplan (1988, c.f. Wolf 1996) suggests that ‘objectivity’ is simply a form of ‘male subjectivity’.

Feminist scholars engaged in qualitative fieldwork traditions (eg. anthropologists and sociologists) have encouraged relationships between the researcher and researched that are based on friendship, trust, intimacy and closeness rather than a cultivated “distance”. This is expected to make it possible for a deeper, richer more nuanced picture of respondents’ lives to emerge. Some feminist anthropologists have experimented with different forms of writing in order to depict women’s experiences in a richer, more meaningful way. Some use the device of ‘auto-ethnography’ and place themselves within the narrative detailing their own experiences and emotions rather than writing ‘outside’ the account. The term “inter-subjectivity” has been used to describe a two-way relationship between researcher and ‘subjects’ wherein the researcher compares her work with her own experiences as a woman and scientist and shares it with her subjects who then add their opinion. This not only challenges the splitting of researcher and researched and of subject and object but also encourages the researcher to put herself into the research and writing as part of the experience (Duelli Klein, 1983:C.F. Wolf, 1996).

3.4.2 Feminists and Fieldwork

Feminists have reflected extensively upon the dynamics of fieldwork. We have earlier made reference to Peggy Golde’s (1970) anthology of fieldwork experiences of women scholars. Other important and frequently cited collections dealing with fieldwork experiences and dilemmas include Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai’s edited volume *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1992), Joyce Nielson’s edited volume *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in Social Science* (1990) Kamala Visweswaran’s, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1974), and Diane Wolf’s edited volume *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (1996). In the Indian context, the classic 1979 volume *The Fieldworker and the Field* edited by M.N. Srinivas, A.M. Shah and E.A. Ramaswamy has chapters dealing with the issue of gender, positionality and fieldwork.

There are several accounts of the difficulties faced by women researchers in alien settings where the freedom of dress, movement and expression is severely curtailed. How feminist researchers have to negotiate and sometimes submit to patriarchal pressures makes for an interesting reading. For instance, while conducting research amongst the Bedouin in Saudi Arabia Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) had to live like a Bedouin daughter and conform more strictly to their gender norms than the other young women of the community. This process of ‘immersion’ enables the researcher to gain a perspective on the culture from ‘within’, and sometimes positions her differently from a more distant ‘participant observer’. Reflecting upon their ‘positionality’, attempting to share and compare their experiences with their respondents and using ethnography as a means to uncover the intimate, day-to-day lived experiences of women across races, ethnicities, case and class are thus the hallmark of feminist research and methodological underpinnings that brought fresh flavour and vigour to anthropological writing.

At the same time, there have been several critiques both from outside and within the feminist movement which have made practitioners constantly question and reflect upon their ideas and practices. The issue of the inherent power relationship that characterizes the fieldwork experience is one such issue. Friendship, intimacy, sharing between researcher and researched can also be exploitative and bring up unequal power equations. Kum Kum Bhavnani (1988, c.f Wolf 1996) argues that

these power relations are hidden because the researcher's power is often transparent and unspoken. Yet, she makes decisions right from conceptualization to writing about the 'subjects' and eventually withdraws from the field back into her 'own' world of prestige and privilege. Judith Stacey's (1991) classic piece *Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?* makes the point that the closeness and intimacy feminist researchers seek may actually be more harmful than 'objectivity'. The tragedies and crises in the lives of subjects often end up being 'data' for the researcher leading to a sense of betrayal for the subject and guilt for the researcher. For example, a researcher may learn many intimate family secrets by cultivating friendships with respondents. If she uses the information to further her own research agenda, she may cause great psychological (and sometimes even physical harm) to the subjects. Feminists have contributed to the literature on research ethics, human rights, informed consent and privacy issues through critical examinations of their own practices. Daphne Patai (1991) asks the important question: Is it possible to write about the oppressed without becoming one of the oppressors? (cf. Wolf 1996:21). The question is still open to debate. In the next section, we will briefly review some of the current and emerging areas that have attracted the attention and engagement of feminist anthropologists. We draw upon Ellen Lewin's (2006) review of feminist anthropology for this purpose.

3.4.3 Contemporary Issues and Concerns

As feminist anthropology has expanded and developed over the years, it has maintained some of its fundamental tenets but also changed enormously. Much of this has been due to the continued introspection and self-reflection of its practitioners as described above. It has also made a place for itself in academic institutions of the discipline and has been absorbed into the 'mainstream'. 'Gender' is considered an important, significant area of research and specialization and all important academic journals and publications- both national and international- publish papers and articles with gender as their major analytic focus. Large number of books are published and it has become a very difficult task to keep updated with all the latest publications and researches in the area. Some of the current areas of research and engagement have been briefly summarized below.

3.4.4 Development and Social Change

Feminist anthropologists are studying the ways in which gender inflects economic development, migration, nationalisms, and the roles and priorities of contemporary nation states in influencing the lives of women and men. The transnational circulation of people and information and the resultant impact on gender patterns; multinational commerce and the gendered movement of workers into global marketplaces; changing political and economic realities and their impact upon social and cultural institutions; the gendered assumptions underlying international developmental projects and their outcomes for both men and women are some of the themes that have been explored from a gender lens.

3.4.4.1 Motherhood and the Body

How the body particularly the female body is acted upon by cultural, medical, economic and other forces – has become a central theme in anthropological thought. Health and illness, pain, spirit possession, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS and the uses made of women's bodies by family members, nations and enemies have been analysed. Violence perpetuated on the female body during communal and ethnic riots is a very important theme on which scholars like Veena Das, Rowena Robinson, and others have written.

Reproductive technologies, diagnostic techniques like amniocentesis and ultrasound for the purpose of sex selection, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) including surrogacy, 'renting a womb', adoption (both national and international) have wide implications for gender relations. In the context of developing countries

like India where technologies are readily available but cultural values are still steeped in traditional patriarchy, feminist anthropologists can contribute greatly to our understanding of these complex cultural processes.

The experience of motherhood cross-culturally has always been a focus of interest in feminist anthropology. This has been taken further by scholars like Rayna Rapp, Faye Ginsburg and Nancy Scheper-Hyghes. The physical, mental and emotional 'reproductive labour' that women engage in to bear and raise their children has been explored in detail. An important contribution is the acknowledgement of how inequality between races, classes, ethnicities and castes shapes the experience of motherhood.

Reflection

Leela Dube: An Indian Pioneer

Leela Dube is one of the pioneering women anthropologists in India who has produced extremely detailed and insightful work on gender, family and kinship in India. She was also one of the core members of the Committee on the Status of Women that produced the landmark report "Towards Equality" (1974) that squarely brought out the glaring discriminations and inequalities faced by Indian women quarter of a century after the country's independence. She was born in 1923 in an upper middle-class Maharashtrian family which valued and promoted education for girls yet still believed that marriage was their ultimate destination. She broke with tradition and had chosen her spouse outside her community when she married the noted anthropologist Shyama Charan Dube. S.C. Dube inducted his wife into the discipline of anthropology and continued to be a source of guidance throughout their life together. Leela Dube's anthropological work began with her doctoral study of the Gond community in Central India, with a particular focus on Gond women. This was the beginning of a life long engagement with issues of gender, caste, kinship. Her detailed ethnographic work brought alive the world of interpersonal and familiar relationships and the 'lived realities' of women's experiences. She also wrote reflexively about her positionality as a scholar, wife of a distinguished anthropologist and a 'dutiful' housewife, daughter-in-law and mother and how it impacted her anthropological work. She actively engaged with the emerging literature feminist anthropology bringing these perspectives to bear in her own detailed examinations of structure, culture and agency.

3.4.4.2 Knowledge and Representation

In the earlier section on feminist methodology, we examined some of the critical questions raised on issues of research, positionality and power relations. Feminist anthropologists have raised the issue of 'insider' research, contending that insightful and valuable research can and should be done by those who belong to the community/group that they wish to study. At the same time as anthropologists like Clifford and Marcus (1984) and Geertz (1988) wrote about the nature of culture and ethnographic representations, feminist anthropologies raised the issue of 'positionality'.

3.4.4.3 New and Emerging Issues

In recent years, different dimensions of gender experience have been explored by anthropologists. The study of men and masculinities has become an important area of inquiry. How is male dominance constructed and enacted? How is masculine identity acquired? These inquiries challenge entrenched assumptions about gender stratification.

A recent trend is the emergence of 'lesbian and gay' or 'queer' anthropology which directly drew inspiration from feminist anthropology. Studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender phenomena depend upon understandings about sex, gender, embodiment and identity which are at the core of the feminist anthropological inquiry.

3.5 POST-MODERNISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The earlier sections of this Unit familiarised you with the interventions made by feminist enquiry to anthropological understanding and the manner in which ethnography is undertaken. In this section, we shall discuss the impact of ‘post-modernism’ upon ethnography. Post-modern anthropology may be described as the culmination of a series of internal critiques that emerged in anthropology in the 1970s; notably feminism and Marxism. However, none of these critiques challenged the very *raison d’être* of the discipline. Anthropology’s affiliation to the ‘Enlightenment’ project marked by science, rationalism and universalism, stood in marked contrast to the multiplicity of voices and constituencies represented in the ethnographic record.

It is important to situate ‘post-modernism’ in the history of ideas. As the term suggests, it refers to a critique emerging in the period after modernity. ‘Modernity’, which came into being with the Renaissance in Europe, epitomises a phase in human history whose watchwords are reason, progress, scientific temper and the progressive economic and administrative rationalisation and differentiation of the social world. Post-modernism means ‘after modernity’. It challenges the certitudes of modernity, what Lyotard (1984) describes as ‘meta-narratives’ or grand theories that offer all-encompassing accounts of culture. It recognises the tensions emerging from the processes of globalisation, the circulation of people, the increasingly intense cross-cultural interactions and the merging and mixing of local and global knowledge. The movement spanned the disciplines of literature, art, architecture and philosophy, and also had an impact on anthropology.

When applied to anthropology, post-modernism shifts the focus to the very nature of ethnography; it holds that there is no such thing as ‘objectivity’ in ethnography; anthropological writings are themselves second and third order interpretations of the world, rather than ‘empirical facts’ or ‘truths’. According to Melford Spiro (1996), the post-modernist critique denies that anthropology can be a ‘science’ because of the subjectivity of the human object. It is hence incapable of discovering objective truth. And since objectivity itself is merely an illusion, science ends up subverting the voices of oppressed groups, women, ethnic minorities, etc. We all interpret the world around us in our own way, according to our language, personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Anthropologists can therefore never be ‘unbiased’ observers of other cultures, according to post-modernist understanding.

Post-modern ethnography is associated with the “Rice Circle”; a group of anthropologists at Rice University, Texas, U.S.A. These include Stephen Tyler, George Marcus, Michael Fischer and a number of American anthropologists who have written innovative or ‘experimental’ ethnographies, including Paul Rabinow, Vincent Crapanzano, James Clifford and others. One of the major figures that influenced this thinking was the French philosopher and critical social theorist, Michael Foucault. Even though Foucault never regarded himself as ‘post-modernist’, his works deal with issues like power, the body, the conditions of knowledge, deviance (insanity, criminality and sexuality in Europe) and show how taken-for-granted frameworks for understanding the world change historically. He used the term ‘discourse’ to refer to these frameworks. By ‘discourse’ Foucault meant “a public exchange of ideas, in which certain questions, agendas and definitions – so-called ‘discursive objects’- evolved as the result of power struggles between the participants in the discourse, and imposed themselves on the sensual human body”. (Eriksen and Nielsen, 2008: 141).

How to ‘do’ and ‘write’ ethnography becomes a critical question in the post-modern critique. The well known collection *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus is one of the foundational texts inaugurating the ‘new ethnography’, or post-modern ethnography.

Earlier in the same year, George Marcus and Michael Fischer published *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. The essence of the new ethnography, according to Mutman (2006) is “a tendency towards dialogue or communication with the ‘anthropological other’, a desire to bring this ‘other’ into the text and articulate his/her voice in a more plural way. In other words “post-modern ethnography promises *difference* and *otherness* through and beyond a modern form of knowledge-anthropology which, we must note, is itself established on a sense of culture as always belonging to an ‘other’ ” (2006:154-55).

In his introduction to ‘Writing Culture’, Clifford (1986) opens his argument by drawing attention to the textual aspect of ethnographic representation, in other words, *ethno-graphy* as ‘writing culture’. He criticises the notion that anthropological writing is about ‘keeping good field notes’ (1986:2). However, writing is not an innocent or apolitical act; it is about how we construct the other, what we include and exclude from our writing. As we have discussed earlier, feminism also made a similar point about how culture and history was written about as a male enterprise with women’s activities and subjectivities being written out of the narrative. Mutman (2006:157) writes: “All ethnographic texts are constructions, fictions, ‘economies of truth’ through which ‘power and history work’. The mapping of non-western cultures positions the western knowing subject as cultural and political authority. After arguing that ethnography has its own political economy of truth, Clifford reaches the conclusion that ‘ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete’ (1986a:7)”.

Marcus (1986) notes that the change in the world political and economic order after the World War II and the profound transitions and dislocations that it brought about, found its intellectual reflection in a widespread retreat from theoretically and organised fields of knowledge such as history, the social sciences, literature, art and architecture. A spirit of experimentation set in, which attempted to explore the fragmentation and diversity in social life. Ethnography in anthropology he claims, is one such vehicle for experimentation. How can the writer ‘experiment’ with writing ethnography? According to Marcus (1986:191) “The essayist can mystify the world, leave his subjects’ actions open-ended as to their global implications, from a rhetorical posture of profound half-understanding, half-bewilderment with the world in which the ethnographic subject and the ethnographer live. This is thus a form well suited to a time such as the present, when paradigms are in disarray, problems intractable and phenomena only partly understood”. In other words, Marcus calls for an open-ended text which does not claim to present a neat, well-ordered vision of the world, but rather reflects its chaos and disorder, which cannot be captured in any totalizing discourses.

An important technique associated with post-modernism is ‘deconstruction’. Jacques Derrida, a student of Foucault and a leading figure of the post-modern movement launched a critique on Western philosophy. He developed a method for analysing texts in order to expose the hierarchical assumptions inherent in them. He referred to this method as ‘deconstruction’.

According to Eriksen and Nielsen (2008), to deconstruct a text, we need to locate the centre of power in it and then look for the unnoticed, marginal expressions which escape power, and allow the reader to interpret the text in new ways. When applied to anthropology, it effectively means the end of ethnographic authority. No one can ‘make statements’ and claim that they are true. Every concept is ‘slippery’ and can be contested or challenged. As you have read elsewhere, this is not a new critique of ethnography and the ‘constructed’ nature of social reality is an idea that has a long history in social sciences, including anthropology. However, Derrida’s deconstruction took it to an extreme level, as it did not accept any position or standpoint as a ‘fixed’ frame of reference from which a text could be judged or evaluated. Thus, there would be ‘deconstructions of deconstructions’.

3.5.1 Some Important Texts

The “new ethnography” influenced by post-modernism has resulted in cultural and historical accounts that reveal a degree of reflexivity not usually seen in traditional ethnographic writing. They highlight how a researcher’s cultural identity affects his/her interpretation of other cultures. Some important texts include Paul Rabinow’s *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977); Paul Friedrich’s *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method* (1986) in which the author gives an extensive description of his own personal history and the reasons why he uses certain stylistic devices to convey a sense of the complexity of Naranjan life.

Ethnographies highlighting cultural differences by highlighting intersubjective interactions with people from other cultures include Marjorie Shostak’s, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981) and Vincent Crapanzano’s, *Tuhami: Portrait of Moroccan* (1980). Shostak’s work has become somewhat of a classic in feminist as well as new ethnography and maps various incidents in the life of her informant Nisa ‘in her own words’, albeit in translation. Crapanzano’s dialogue with Tuhami also brings out the manner in which the life stories of both the anthropologist and the ‘informant’ mutually construct each other. Michelle Rosaldo’s, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (1980) employs new writing techniques to make the voices of Ilongot headhunters more accessible to her readers. Ethnographies that undertake a close scrutiny of the global systems of domination and their manifestations in symbolic terms in the lives of individuals include Michael Taussig’s, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980) and Gananath Obeyesekere’s, *Medusa’s Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experiences* (1981).

More recently, the works of Lila Abu-Lughod, Akhil Gupta and Nancy Scheper-Hughes are regarded as representative of post-modernism in anthropology. Nancy Scheper-Hughes is a medical anthropologist working at the University of California, Berkeley, and has written widely on the anthropology of the body, hunger, psychiatry, social, suffering, violence and genocide. Her important works are *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (1979); *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday life in Brazil* (1993) and her recent investigation in 2009 on an international ring of criminals trading in human organs operating in the U.S.A and Israel. *Death without Weeping* explores child deaths in Brazil and the way in which mothers come to terms with them. It is regarded as a contemporary classic. In her important article *The Primacy of the Ethical* (1995) she advocates strongly for an anthropology that engages in critical reflection and strives for human liberation and argues that anthropologists should be held to account for not using the discipline as a critical tool at crucial historical moments. With this kind of a perspective, the positivist, neutral stance that early anthropology adopted has been utterly abandoned.

Post-modern critiques thus made an important contribution to anthropological theory and method. It signaled the decline of meta-narratives which proved inadequate to grapple with the changes that resulted from globalisation, the spread of information technology, the interpenetration of cultures and mingling of peoples. Plurality, hybridity and fragmentation of experience resulted. ‘Culture’ as an integrated whole was no longer a meaningful concept; it was ‘pastiche’ or patchwork rather than a smooth, seamless fabric. Post-modernism signalled a decisive breach with the project of ‘modernity’ marked by science, progress and rationality. It challenged the authority of the ethnographer and called for new, innovative ways about writing about ourselves and ‘others’.

3.6 SUMMARY

This unit has attempted to bring out the impact of feminism and post-modernism upon the discipline of anthropology. The relationship between feminism and anthropology

has been described as an “awkward relationship” by Margaret Strathern as the goals of feminism and anthropology appear to be divergent. Feminism aimed at forging a global solidarity amongst all women across the world, believing that the common experience of ‘womanhood’ transcended other divisions. Anthropology on the other hand is concerned with studying ‘other cultures’ in their own terms and with their specificities and uniqueness. The idea of ‘cultural relativism’ enjoins upon us the responsibility to avoid judging or evaluating cultures in terms of our own value orientations and ideological positions.

However, feminists pointed out an important deficiency in the discipline, namely, the androcentric bias and male-centred ethos that had marked much of its history. While a number of outstanding women anthropologists including Benedict, Mead, Richards and Kaberry did make their mark on the discipline, it was not until the Second Wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s that large numbers of enthusiastic feminist scholars made inroads into the discipline and changed it forever. ‘Feminist Anthropology’ emerged as an important subfield within the discipline. The early formulations of universal sexual asymmetry and the underlying unity of feminine experiences came to be challenged by women of colour and third-world anthropologists. They argued that gender intersects with other bases of stratification and that women’s experiences and needs varied dramatically across cultures. At the same time, feminist methodology which rejected positivism and celebrated friendship, sharing of experience and breaking down the hierarchy of research relationships also came under attack as being exploitative and unequal. These interventions in matters of theory and methodology made the field stronger and more rigorous.

Feminist anthropology moved from the margins of the discipline to achieve a respectable status as the centre of the discipline. Other developments such as the interrogations of culture, ethnography and representation (described as the ‘reflexive turn’) and were influenced by feminist anthropology.

The current areas of engagement and inquiry include development, health, the body and motherhood, reproductive technologies, nationalism, violence and political movements and new areas like masculinity studies and queer studies.

Post-modernism provided an even more radical critique by questioning the very authority of the ethnographer to ‘represent’ the voice of the other, particularly when the world around us is becoming increasingly more fragmented and chaotic and any attempt to impose an artificial ‘order’ through grand theories and ‘meta-narratives’ is likely to have very little explanatory value. Unlike feminism, which has its distinct theoretical stance and ‘narrative’, post-modernism proposes a radical deconstruction of texts and calls upon ethnographers to engage with new innovative and experimental ways of ‘giving voice’ to the ‘other’ while at the same time emphasizing the contextuality and ‘situatedness’ of knowledge. Both these critiques contributed in important ways to the manner in which ethnography is ‘done’ by anthropologists.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the emergence of feminist anthropology.
- 2) Discuss the contemporary issues and concerns in feminist anthropology.
- 3) Describe post-modernism and anthropology.