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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER: HASLANGER AND MIKKOLA

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Abstract

The term “gender” and “sex” is synonymously used and understood to mean one and the same. Feminist have questioned this kind of usage of terms. Gender and sex have different meaning and origin. Sex is biological term whereas gender is socially constructed. Due to this synonymous use of sex and gender, women positions have been influenced to a large extent. Women’s role in society is defined on the basis of their gender, which renders them in a subordinate position to that of men. It creates a social hierarchy in which women’s boundaries are well defined. This conflation of sex and gender, has been rigorously criticised by various feminist thinkers. I will focus on the work of Sally Haslanger and with the help of her theory bring out the issues that women face due to this social construction of gender. I will make an attempt to bring out a solution to this issue in this paper. Further, I will point out the discrepancies in the work of Haslanger which has been raised by Mari Mikkola.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Commonality Problem, Normativity Problem, Social Construction.

Introduction

The claim about the social construction of Gender is very important for feminist studies. This question of social construction of Gender has been raised by many feminist thinkers like Sally Haslanger, Mari Mikkola, Linda Alcoff and many more. We often tend to confuse what is social with natural, which in turn leads to many complexities in our lives. Once there is a realisation that what was assumed to be real is actually a social construction, it leads us to the view that reality is not independent but mind dependent only. Even Simone de Beauvoir claimed that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman”, her concern was that just by possessing female bodily features one does not become a woman, but it is the societal factors which makes those retaining female characteristics a woman. These social factors create a social hierarchy which places women in subordination to men.

This paper aims to unfold various arguments regarding, what is social construction and more specifically the social construction of gender? How it has essentialised the nature of women? How can these problems be dealt with from the perspective of Sally Haslanger? Further, I will also discuss what Mari Mikkola has to say regarding the views of Haslanger.

Research Methods or Methodology

1. **Critical Analysis:** I will critically analyse the domain of knowledge which is largely androcentric and has come from the masculine standpoint. I will bring forth the compulsive exclusion of women from the category of knower and the critically view the ground for that exclusion.
2. **Feminist method:** In the proposed work I will analyse the injustices done against women on the ground that they lack cognitive competence. This view has its root in the patriarchal framework of society which makes it unacceptable from a feminist perspective.
3. **Phenomenological:** The gendered oppressions result from the lived experiences of the women, hence it is necessary to study the phenomenology of women’s life.

What is Social Construction?

According to Sally Haslanger, “Something is a social construction in the generic sense just in case it is an intended or unintended product of a social practice.”¹ She says categories such as a professor or wife and other such kinds are social constructions because social relations are the very prerequisite for the inclusion in such categories. One can’t be a professor in isolation, one has to be a part of a social group that provides for an institution of education. Further Haslanger has discussed different kinds of social construction like

¹ Sally, Haslanger. “Ontology and Social Construction”, in Resisting Reality Social Construction and Social Critique. p.97



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causal construction², constitutive construction, discursive construction³, pragmatic construction⁴. This paper focuses on the social construction of gender and for Haslanger gender is a constitutive construct. “Something is Constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make reference to social factors”⁵. Social hierarchies have been created on the basis of the construction of gender which has led to a patriarchal setup. The study of social construction becomes decisive when we begin to conflate what is social with natural. It is this constitutive construction of gender that Haslanger wants to discuss. Therefore, it is important to understand what is meant by gender for her and how it is constructed.

What is Gender?

The question “what is gender” is very often answered by many feminists with the slogan “gender is the social meaning of sex”⁶. When we try to provide a universal account of women, we are faced by two major problems which Sally Haslanger identifies as, the normativity problem and the commonality problem. The commonality problem raises the question, do all women of various culture, religion, times and place have anything in common other than their bodily features? If we consider this, it is very dubious that we will ever find females from different cultures, times and places having anything in common except for their biological features (that too with variations). The Normativity problem points out that any attempt to give any definition of ‘what woman is’ will promote gender norms while marginalising few females and privileging others. Therefore, there cannot be any definite description of ‘gender’. Gender has been constitutively constructed, i.e., to define it one always has to refer to the social components that constitute it and also to the prejudiced or biased positions that it assigns to individuals.

The meaning of the term gender is usually conflated⁷ with what is meant by “sex”: being female is taken to be a sufficient condition to call someone a woman, but according to Haslanger sex is a biological category whereas gender a social category. Although efforts are made to show that gender is a natural/biological construct, Haslanger says that it is better comprehended as a group that holds a particular social position.

Therefore, Haslanger defines gender in the following manner;

“S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction.

S is a man iff S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction.”⁸

The point of concern when we talk about the social construction of gender is that society has found a means to privilege men and put women in a subordinate or inferior position on this sex marked ground and hence exploit their reproductive capacities. This kind of classification of gender leads to gender injustice. For Haslanger, X is called a woman not because X is a female, but because on the basis of sex X is oppressed, and similarly X is called a man not because X is a male, but because on the basis of sex X is given a privileged position.

Gender Solution

The social construction of gender has led to the hierarchical setup of the society where women have to face various problems due to the restrictions that these gender norms place on them, whereas men enjoy a position in the society which is beneficial for them and hence they become the ones to rule and women are the ones who are ruled. Haslanger believes that it is the categorisation of

² “Something is casually constructed iff social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence, or to some substantial extent, in it being the way it is.” Ibid 87

³ “Something is discursively constructed just in case it is the way it is, to some substantial extent, because of what is attributed (and/or self-attributed) to it.” Ibid 88

⁴ “A classificatory apparatus (be it full-blown classification scheme or just a conceptual distinction or descriptive term) is socially constructed just in case its use is determined, at least in part, by social factors.” Ibid 90

⁵ Ibid.98

⁶ Sally Haslanger. “Gender and Race” p.37

⁷ Some feminist thinkers have reservation against the conflation of sex and gender because they consider both to be different from one another. They think of sex as biological and gender as social.

⁸ Sally, Haslanger. *Resisting Reality*. p.231.



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individuals into these genders that lead to their oppression, therefore one should refuse to be gendered. Gender is not a chosen category but one which is constructed, so one can resist the forms that these categories take. There are many types of human bodies, therefore trying to classify them into certain categories on certain basis is not the right thing to do, doing so will undermine those (the inter-sexed people) who do not neatly fall under the classifications which the society makes. She believes that it is very important that we understand the difference between “social kinds” and “social cause”, for instance “We may think that the commonality that the members of the kind share is caused by natural facts and forces, but instead, our social arrangements are (in some important way) causally responsible for the commonality.”⁹ For instance, poverty is socially constructed and did not result because of the stupidity or some laziness of the poor. As per the things presently arranged in the social arena there exist men and women, people of different cultures, class, race and so on. But if there occurs any change in the social conditions there may come a scenario where no men and women exist, nor do any races or even classes of various kinds. But to make something like this possible requires a radical change in our thinking to see the category of gender as a socially constructed one as opposed to a biological one which we generally assume it to be.

For Haslanger gender is a mind dependent category, therefore she says that, “we should refuse to use anatomy as a primary basis for classifying individuals and that any distinctions between kinds of sexual and reproductive bodies are importantly political and open to contest”¹⁰. She believes that we should work in the direction of forming a society which is not gendered, where oppression on sex marked grounds does not exist and this is done while still acknowledging the sexual and reproductive difference that exists, though that difference does not lead to any form of hierarchy. She aims to debunk the view that gender classification depends on the anatomical features. The possession of female characteristics is thought to be a sufficient ground to identify someone as a woman which is opposed by Haslanger. She believes that gender is a mind dependent category and hence the way it is seen can be rectified. Being a woman is tied to one being oppressed hence she holds that “it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women”¹¹. According to her, women by definition are tied to subordination and suppression, so for one to move towards gender justice it is necessary to demolish the social structures which give rise to such oppression. Therefore, the aim of feminists should be to deconstruct the social factors accountable for the categories of gender, i.e., men and women. In this manner she tries to give an account of a just society.

Mikkola on Haslanger’s view of Gender

Mikkola puts forth that “Haslanger’s account of gender has conventionalist and abolitionist implications”¹². Conventionalist in the sense that Haslanger believes the existence of men and women is mind dependent, i.e., it depends on human social practices and conventions which leads to the oppression of women and hence she feels that our aim should be to eradicate it. But in doing so Mikkola thinks that Haslanger ignores the common sensical understanding that we have of gender, i.e., how it is interpreted in ordinary day to day language. Mikkola puts forth that, gender is not entirely a social term because if we take the ordinary usage of the word “women” in account, we find that it does not entail that it is thought of just as a social category. Hence, we can say that gender is not mind dependent but independent and one cannot cease to be a man or a woman just by modifying or reforming the social environment. Mikkola gives the following example to support her claim: (A) “After seeing John’s body I realised that John is a woman”. (B) “After seeing John’s body, I realised that John is a US senator”. In this example woman is not used as a purely social category but is used as a biological term and Mikkola says that it does make sense. Whereas when woman is replaced with US senator, the sentence does not make sense anymore as it is not possible to know if one is a senator just by looking at his/her body. Hence with the help of this example Mikkola tries to show that “woman” is not a purely social term but is used as a biological category as well.

The ordinary view of gender conflates the meaning of sex and gender, and they do not see gender as a totally negative category. Therefore, Mikkola doubts that it is possible for us to eradicate gender. She says that to put men and women in a purely social category is erroneous. Henceforth, instead of trying to locate the social factors which are responsible for the manifestation of gender, feminists should attempt to understand that our actions have shaped women and men in the way they are and those actions are the ones which should be scrutinised.

Mikkola says that Haslanger’s view is Abolitionist because it strives to abolish gender as it results from oppressive social forces. But this view is again not in alliance with thoughts of common people. Mikkola explains this view by drawing a contrast between abolitionist strategy and what she calls a re-evaluative strategy. She says that both these strategies begin with the same objective of ending the oppression that women face because they are women. Abolitionist account takes women to be chained with oppression by

⁹ Sally, Haslanger. “Social Construction: Gender and other Social Categories”. p.13

¹⁰ Sally, Haslanger. “Gender and Race” in Resisting Reality Social Construction and Social Critique. p243.

¹¹ Sally, Haslanger. “Gender and Race”. p.46.

¹² Mari, Mikkola. “Ontological Commitments, Sex and Gender” in The Feminist p.70



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the very definition itself, i.e., if one is a woman, there doesn't exist a possibility for her to not be oppressed. So, to remove this unjust hierarchical setup, one must do away with gender itself. Whereas the Re-evaluative account does not tie women and oppression together by definition. It holds that women hold a disadvantaged or subordinated position in the society because of the social circumstances, i.e., by compulsorily associating them with certain norms and hence putting them in vulnerable position. Mikkola holds that by reforming the way women are seen and treated, it is plausible to be a woman and yet not be oppressed or ill-treated.

Mikkola believes that Haslanger's abolitionist strategy will run into trouble because it does not fall in consensus with the ordinary perspective of gender. Therefore, it will be a huge task for her to convince the common people and bring change in their prevalent conception of self which does not see gender as an entirely negative category. Haslanger, according to Mikkola, in her abolitionist strategy will be asking people to give-up something which they do not want to abandon. Henceforth, Mikkola gives her own model which is the Trait/Norm Covariance Model as a substitute for the problem.

Trait/Norm Covariance Model

Mikkola in her trait/norm covariance model does not consider gender to be an entirely social category. She tries to keep her notion of gender in alliance with the common understanding of the term. She states that "woman is not a purely gender term for them, but (bluntly put) a mixture of sex and gender"¹³. In this model, Mikkola divides the traits associated with sex and gender into descriptive and evaluative traits and renounces the division which mark that sex and gender denote those traits. Descriptive traits in this model include features which are "the fact of the matter"¹⁴, for instance it is no doubt that if one has ovaries, one is a woman. Evaluative traits are the ones which make the judgment if one acts or appears to be in a feminine or masculine way. Mikkola says that,

The classification scheme of feminine/masculine/neutral is a mere social construction. Furthermore, this scheme tends to be hierarchal in grading traits; this is evident from the devaluing of many activities and features with which femininity covaries (like the devaluing of caretaking work).¹⁵

She gives an example that people in the UK drive on the left side of the road and this is something mind dependent because the government has made such a rule and can decide the very next to change it. But, to bring such a change would not be easy. The point she tries to explain is that, the conventions are followed by us and hence when we follow it, we do so mind-independently. Similarly, wearing makeup is mind dependent as it has come from certain social conventions. It can be demolished, but the very fact that Jane wears makeup is mind-independent. For Mikkola, the relation between Jane wearing making and behaving in a feminine manner is mind-dependent. She puts forth, "That femininity covaries with wearing make-up is mind-dependent obtaining due to productive human activities—because of us"¹⁶. By this she wants to show that having certain traits does not result in one's association with particular norms, it happens so due to human activities.

Mikkola's model tries to show that the very existence of men and women is not mind-dependent and also not problematic, it is the very association of certain traits and norms which is mind-dependent and create problems. Therefore, she aims to get rid of the troublesome trait/norms pairing associated with gender. For example, child rearing and caring is associated with femininity only, but if that is changed and it is made a gender-neutral activity resulting in both women as well as men equally contributing to it will remove the constraints that women face during motherhood. She feels that these are the associations which create difficulties for women, so removing those association will solve the issue at hand and result in gender justice while still being in alliance with the ordinary thinking.

Conclusion

Haslanger calls gender a social construct and hence mind-dependent, so she aims to alter gender itself to solve the problem of oppression faced by women. She finds the association of being female with women problematic while Mikkola accepts this misconception of conflating sex with gender in the name of ordinary thinking. I believe that Mikkola in trying to keep her idea of gender justice in consonance with the ordinary thinking commits a huge mistake. She forgot that ordinary thinking which does not take gender to be an entirely social term is also the result of those social factors and if one does not try to come out of that sphere and think with an open mind, it is not possible to solve the problem and attain gender justice. Mikkola bases her critique of Hasalanger on the basis that it does not take in to account the common understanding of gender, but I feel that it is the common or ordinary interpretation of gender which is the root of the problem.

¹³ibid 76

¹⁴ ibid 77

¹⁵ ibid 78

¹⁶ ibid 79



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Even the example of John as a woman and US senator is full of errors. If one is identifying someone as a woman after seeing the body shows that gender is taken to mean the same as sex which is the point of objection raised by Haslanger. As long as this conflation of sex and gender will exist, it will be tough for women to come out of the oppression they face. Also trying to compare it with US senator to prove the point (that gender is not purely social) does not make sense, for US senator is not just a social but a political term as well, the creation of the post of US senator is a result of political conventions though it is also affected by the social forces, whereas gender came into existence purely because of the social conventions. So, the comparison that Mikkola makes is not completely satisfactory. Mikkola says that Haslanger's idea of gender justice is problematic because it can't convince the ordinary thinking that gender is not in any sense a positive term and hence should be eradicated. But Mikkola's trait/norm covariance model also needs convincing because even to change the norms associated with one's gender, she would have to come up with the reasoning of what is problematic with those associations (as the ordinary thinking does not see any problem with the trait/norm pairing).

Mikkola's whole trait/norm covariance model is based on the idea that any change that we want to bring to solve the sex/gender problem should be able to fall in line with the ordinary thinking. I believe that the very basis of her whole argument is flawed, because to solve any issue one always has to come out of the box and analyse the problem which Haslanger does. Haslanger questions the very factors which results in one being a woman and then tied to oppression systematically on the basis of belonging to a particular sex. Woman is a social category, and all those termed as women do not share the same characteristics. Therefore, there cannot be any common ground for their oppression. They are oppressed just because they are women, hence the very categorisation of gender as men and women is troublesome.

Haslanger's classification of gender as a mind-dependent category makes way for the feminist to alter it, because it is not possible to make changes in something which is mind-independent. Also, the classification of individual into the category of man and woman on the basis of sex ignores the very existence of the inter-sexed people. They do not fall in either of the categories, and hence if one's identification is associated to the gender they belong to, it becomes problematic because it will deprive them of having an identity of their own. Therefore, Haslanger's account of gender justice is more feasible than Mikkola's, her account is a better alternative not only for women but inter-sexed people as well. It is very important that one's inclusion in a gender does not define the kind of life one lives and restricts their functioning on that ground. I believe that the very structure of gender categorisation is troublesome, flawed and complicated. Therefore, our attempts to make improvements in the structure (like Mikkola) to end the troubles of women will not bear fruits, it is necessary that we challenge the whole structure (like Haslanger) which is the root of the problem.

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