

# FEMINISM AND HISTORICAL CHALLENGES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

**Ladan Rahbari**

Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology

University of Mazandaran

Rahbari.ladan@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

*Feminist theory claims that structural limitations have excluded women from the process of knowledge production for a long time. Production process and subjects of knowledge have been considered masculine realms for centuries. This fact has led to prejudices and some sexist viewpoints in many disciplines; but having to do with human relations, the consequences of such ideologies are more apparent in social sciences. Feminism, after fixing its position as an academic discipline in late twentieth century, has made many disciplines including anthropology face ontological, epistemological and methodological challenges which have led to dramatic alteration in their former dominant paradigms in some cases. Three main challenges of such nature that discipline of anthropology has faced are: first, the denial of biological essentialism and emergence of the concept of gender; second, denial of gender differences in brain's physical structure leading to intellectual disabilities based on gender; and third, denial of Harem theory and male sexual dominance in primates. Feminist critics on essentialist ontology, positivist epistemology and individualist methodology have made great changes in anthropological research. Today, a new current in the discipline of anthropology, under the influence of feminist theory, has integrated more than ever the concepts of nature and nurture and has put away both extremist naturalist and constructivist ideas of human identity formation.*

**Field of Research:** Anthropology, epistemology, essentialism, feminism, gender, Knowledge.

---

## 1. Introduction

When in early sixteenth century Copernicus questions earth's stability and placed the Sun, rather than the Earth, at the center of the galaxy (or then universe), his arguments were not consonant with the scientific knowledge of his time and confronted philosophical and religious criticism because of his theory's novelty and apparent opposition to dominant scientific paradigms. Acceptance of Copernicus's theory that caused a vast change in scientific thinking was delayed until one and a half century after its first publication (Chalmers, 2008, p. 85).

Feminist epistemology at the time of its first appearance had the same situations as Copernicus's theory and it has been facing challenges since. Today, after more than one century from introduction of feminist epistemology to scientific inquiry, and after its decades of academic establishment these challenges are still present.

In some countries, women reached or are reaching equal position in science, economy and politics as well as achieving human rights. In most societies, learning and education is every citizen's right

regardless of their gender (Bakker, 2004); however, the historical discrimination has left a long-term impact. Two third of world's illiterate population is still made of women (Andersen, 2006, p. 306). Women's scientific education does not have a long history comparing with men's anywhere around the world. In United States, although some universities opened their doors to women from mid-nineteenth century, universities such as Princeton, New York and Harvard avoided from accepting female doctorate candidates until 1960s (Rossiter, 1995). As De Bouvoire mentions, most of the knowledge produced in history of science is created by men (Bates, et. Al 2005, p. 51).

Asked or ignored questions in a scientific field define the main achievements in that field (Andersen, 2006, p. 305). Scientific inquiry in the field of anthropology ignored women's issues and problems as its subject of study for a long time after the emergence of the field. The unintentional elimination of feminine views and problems has at least had three main consequences in the literature of anthropology. First, half of human capital who could have been trained to work as professionals in the framework of the discipline has been excluded. This exclusion might have delayed or even decreased quality of many scientific achievements. Second, feminine points of view have been overruled from social sciences which are based on human perception and abstraction of socio-cultural realities; as a consequence the field was deprived of the perception of half of human society until the first wave of feminism entered art and literature's realm and the second wave penetrated social science studies as well as anthropology. Third, women have been excluded from scientific processes; this has led to omission of social female issues such as many aspects of violence against women, women's psychological, physical problems, and women's poverty.

Today, feminist current is a powerful scientific method and theory with many branches; regardless of its several branches has a unique theme which is to picture women as a total human being (Bates et al., 2005, p. 43); in the sense that women must be recognized independently and without reducing their role to daughterhood, motherhood or marital partnership. Achieving a similar picture in scientific work, as of women scholars, seems impossible without their presence as actors and subjects of scientific study.

This study investigates in the history of anthropological inquiry to point out some sexist ideologies and presumptions which once dominated over the discipline and were questioned after emergence of feminist scholarship. Three major epistemological challenges in anthropological literature have been recognized and discussed.

## **2. Feminist Perspective**

With the second wave of feminism movement, the first feminist philosophical studies appeared. Feminists working in the framework of human sciences had realized that the preexisting theoretical frameworks could not satisfy their needs and in order to find an analytical solution they started to investigate epistemological bases of knowledge. Code's (1981) article 'Is the Sex of the knower Epistemologically Significant?' was one of the first published feminist epistemological works pointing out the significance of sex in the production of knowledge. Epistemological feminism grew in the margins of scientific work until 1990s when many articles and books appeared in social science literature and the approach became more popular. During 1990s the feminist approach developed strongly and valuable outcomes were achieved in public and academic arena. From early 1990s feminist epistemological research had reached a point to study gender not as a single working factor but within an intricate combination of other socio-cultural factors (Alcoff and Potter, 1993).

Feminist epistemologists illustrate how scientific activities have influenced and sometimes shaped women's lives; how gender relations have formed the epistemological works and how they have produced a normative knowledge while holding truth claims. Feminist scholars' critical approach to the historical knowledge production process was shortly explained by De Bouvoire when she said that representation of world, just like the world itself was historically produced by men; men have described the world from their own viewpoint and then confused their description with reality in the process (1989, p. 143).

Anderson (1995) defines feminist epistemology as a branch of social epistemology that points out the impact of socially constructed perceptions and norms and gendered interests and experiences on the processes of knowledge production. Feminist epistemology provides a normative or ethical criticism of knowledge and by doing so slightly separates its approach from the sociology of science which puts emphasis on subjectivity (Fuller, 1988); not only it analyzes the current activities of knowledge production, but also brings up discussions about how to make the knowledge a more equalitarian and justly one. Adopting a normative approach has not been witnessed in all feminist studies and is not exclusively a feminist trend; many other scientific methods and approaches have adopted normative inquiry. Feminism like every other theoretical approach has its ontological, epistemological and methodological bases.

### **2.1. Feminist Approach: Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology**

Feminist ontology is against sexually essentialist viewpoints. Essentialism was the most dominant ontology before mid-twentieth century. Sexual essentialism refers to the existence of a unique nature and essence in each of the two sexes which fully separated one from the other. Essentialism itself had some sub-branches; such as metaphysical essentialism that believed in an ultra-physical and ultra-natural essence and physical essentialism and pointed to the biological differences to prove its claims of sexual duality (Witt, 1995). Although these trends lost their vigor in late twentieth century, even today, they have left impact on the popular culture.

Feminist ontology considers that femininity and masculinity are not merely physical or psychological concepts; despite having psycho-biological aspects, anthropological literature shows that gender is also made up of acquisitive socio-cultural traits and socialization processes and nurture play a big role in shaping human beings' sexuality. Femininity consists of traits related to both sex and gender. This approach is against essentialist viewpoint which thinks of femininity (or masculinity) as a biological reality and by attributing validity to the sexual dimension considers it the same as muliebrity (Gharakhani, 2007, p. 75). Borgata and Montgomery (2000) represent femininity as a concept influenced by social-cultural factors. Feminist epistemology defends a more existentialist viewpoint (Mohammadpour, 2011, p. 294). As De Bouvoire puts it, women are not born; they are made (Mohammadpour, Boostani, Sadeghi and Rezaei, 2009, p. 162).

Epistemology aims to discuss about nature, origins and limitations of knowledge (Carmichael, 2005). Feminist epistemology is both political and revisionist and tries to answer this question that 'who has made the current knowledge?' (Code, 2003). Feminist epistemology questions western knowledge integral validity by claiming that the whole body of knowledge was produced solely by men; thus in order to make a complete body of knowledge women's insights and views must be added to it (Beasley, 2006, p. 26).

Harding (1986) provides a three dimensional categorization of feminist epistemology: First, *feminism empiricism* believes that masculine biases exist in the basics of human knowledge and that they

must go under revision but not be dramatically altered. This approach does not question the legitimacy of traditional knowledge but insists that positivism put aside sexist orientations to have a clearer view of the realities (Mohammadpour, Boostani, Sadeghi and Rezaei, 2009, p. 166). Second, *standpoint feminism* is rooted in Marxist idea of proletarian standpoint (Smith, 1999, p. 226). This approach is not only epistemological and holds political and ethical orientations (Hartsock, 1997, p. 372); it claims that women, like proletarian and working class have a clearer view of social realities due to their marginal position in the power distribution hierarchy; they can criticize better and find effective solutions for social problems (Mohammadpour, 2011, p. 167). Third, *postmodern feminism* by denying every definitive reality, suggests that only political activism can change women's position in the society because power defines and controls realities (Harding, 1986). In this approach thinking by dualities, truth claims and ultimate scopes of knowledge are criticized (Haig, 1997, p. 182).

There is not a unique feminist methodology or a methodology exclusively made by feminists (Reinharz, 1992); but there is a philosophy of methodology that gives priority to some emic research approaches and methods including people's participation. Some feminist scholars, such as Yllo (1988) have suggested that Qualitative methods are more appropriate for feminist studies.

### **3. Feminist epistemological Challenges in Anthropology**

Archeology of knowledge shows that socio-political policies have always influenced the subjects and processes of knowledge formation (Anderson, 2006, p. 304). Knowledge is a socio-historical construction and a result of the same system that marginalized women from other social arenas as well as knowledge (ibid, p. 332). The common patriarchal knowledge has experienced paradigm changes as a consequence of historical ideological changes in the knowledge system. This paper discusses three major feminist epistemological challenges that anthropological thinking has encountered. First, challenge in physical essentialism or biological reductionism; second, challenge in over-sexualizing human brain; third, challenge in Harem theory of primate male dominance.

#### **3.1. First Challenge: Denying Physical Essentialism**

Vance (1991) believes that anthropology have followed two trends of thinking. The first trend is *identification of cultural patterns' influence on gender*; this trend, despite focusing on the impact of culture and education on the formation of sexuality, recognizes the existence of firm and static biological bedrocks that cause gender differences. In this trend, biology is the moving force of sexuality.

Seagal (1994, cited in Harding 1998) have introduced three paradigms in the history of western approaches to sexuality: spiritual, biological and social. In the pre-modern era, sex and sexuality were mostly shaped around the spirituality and ethical rules. After the industrial revolution and domination of positivist knowledge, sex became a normative concept and was consigned to physicians and biologists (ibid, p. 73). Biological essentialism was born during this period and claimed that our identities are formed and fixed by an innate and hereditary natural force (Harding, 1998, p. 9) and that women's bodies suffered from a natural pathological condition (Foucault, 2007, p. 121). Essentialist ideology is rooted in Aristotelian philosophy and explains social positions by referring to biological traits. This ideology had a part in the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of sociobiology. Sociobiology at the earliest stages explained women's lower position in society by referring to lower body temperature that shaped their genitals and prevented their mental

development. When Aristotle called *man* a civilized animal, he was not referring to all human beings but to masculine human being (Bates et. Al, 2005, p. 30).

Although Aristotle's explanation was rejected later, the idea of women's inferiority carried on existing. Until nineteenth century, being a woman was considered equal with either of the two following life patterns. First was a fertile and obedient woman who accepted her lower position in society and compensated Iva's sin; second, sexually provocative woman who was so dominated by nature that had no ethical virtues and transformed in to a witch or a prostitute (ibid, pp. 27-29).

In the nineteenth century emerged the first oppositions against essentialism and activists started claiming women's economic and legal rights. The reactions to these calls were severe because the then dominant essentialist discourse believed women's education would cause human white race's extinction (Sterling, 2000, pp. 39-40). There were only a few male scholars, like Stuart Mill who defended sexual equality (Stuart Mill, 2000). Despite some new voices, essentialism was the dominant approach until mid-twentieth century.

The concept of *gender* in academic arena became popular in the last decades of twentieth century to challenge biological essentialism (Fakouhi, 2005). Feminist anthropological studies of early twentieth century had a great impact on the formation of this challenge. Margaret Mead (1935) was one of the first anthropologists who questioned the validity of essentialist ideas. She showed that femininity and masculinity are not made of generalizable traits (Kotak, 2007, p. 621). Mead's studies in Papua New Guinea communities between 1935 and 1950 demonstrated that female and male attitudes and behaviors vary among different societies and cannot be attributed to sex but to gender (Nercissianse, 2004, p. 32). Anthropometrics and hormone studies also helped reject biological essentialism. Feminist studies questioned some false presumptions such as women's emotionalism; they showed that violence and competence are not sexually determined because girls and boys have the same amount of sexual hormones before puberty but they behave differently in these years (Anderson, 2006, p. 26). Feminists even found evidence showing that socialization can overrule genes (Sterling, 2000). Exploring primitive societies revealed many sexual identities that did not match the dualistic western ideology; American Indian's *Berdache*, African mannish women and Indian *Hijras* were some examples of nurture's dominance over nature (Anderson, 2006, pp. 27-28).

Second wave of feminism discussed that socio-cultural mechanisms produce gender inequality; although having biologically different organs, men and women differ in reproductive functioning, the major psychological and behavioral differences are made due to socially constructed environments. They also show how women's sexuality is influenced by universal sexual dualities in which the female side always bears a less worthy load (Ezazi, 2006).

Feminists also focused on epistemology of medical studies. Duden (1998) for example, has focused on medical books of eighteenth century and illustrates how medicine was unrecognizable from superstitions and popular unscientific beliefs at the time. It seems that economic and political position, ethic values and traditional fears could have been re-written as scientific facts for centuries in history (Foucault, 2007, p. 65). Martin (1987) has done a meta-analysis on medical studies history about sexual differences showing that ideas shaped around women's bodies and sexuality were influenced by judgmental viewpoints; medical studies have spent great amounts of time and money just to prove essential sexual differences. Fausto Sterling (2000) focused on studies of steroid hormones called sex hormones; she points out that the naming of the hormones as *sex hormones* is a bias itself; because they have many important functions other than defining sexual difference such as to help cellular development.

Feminists showed that the physically essentialist discourse, despite being called scientific and having claimed to reflect reality, not even does not reveal the truth but also prevents its production (Foucault, 2007, p. 65). Their effort of course encountered counter-attacks by essentialism advocates, mostly working in the sub-fields of biology or medicine. Since Meads' field work in Papua, many advocate and adverse ideas of her claim have emerged; but today, essentialism has lost its previous vigor and position in the social sciences especially in anthropology. Today, gender is recognized as a historical concept that cannot be covered under biological determinism. Feminist approach does not deny biology's role in the formation of human social life, but rejects an exclusively biological approach to identity formation (Zeimaran, 2002, p. 165).

### **3.2. Second Challenge: Denying sexual differences in Brain and Intelligence**

The relationship between sex and mental ability has occupied humans' mind for centuries. Attributing low intelligence to women has a long tract in the history. The idea of women's inability to fruitfully think has its roots in Aristotelian and Plutonian Philosophy that considered men and women not only different, but also antithetic and complementary beings (DeJardin, 2010, p. 15). Female idleness was considered an evident fact until late nineteenth century. In 1801 a bill was passed in European parliaments to legally ban women's education because it was believed that women's learning to read and write might damage their fertility and endanger human survival (Groult, 2000, p. 127). Many famous scholars of that era have upheld the idea of female mental inability; Kant, Rousseau and other liberal philosophers insisted on a biological basis for female inability of mental activity (DeJardin, 2010, p. 15). Nietzsche even claimed that having high mental ability in women is a sign of dysfunctional reproductive organs (Groult, 2000, p. 85).

In nineteenth century, anthropology and biology used anthropometry to prove women's mental disabilities. First studies measured brain's volume and size, ignoring their proportions in the body; they obviously confirmed that men had better mental skills due to a higher mass of brain (Sterling, 2000). Later in twentieth century, the proportion problem was resolved and studies found that there were no significant sexual differences in the brain mass while measuring brain volume in relation with the overall body volume (Ankney, 1992, p. 329). This was a turning point in brain studies because exported scholars into the brain structure. Again some scholars claimed that sexual differences were found inside the brain but at the early twentieth century brain structure studies had methodology issues; studies were conducted on corpses instead of living people. Corpses were not abundant and there were some alterations in the size and texture of the brain after death that made definitive conclusions hard to make. These methodological problems were resolved in mid-twentieth century when anthropologists and biologists became able to study live human brain.

Studies on Corpus Callosum (CC) started in 1982 when Science magazine claimed that some parts of CC were bigger in women than men. CC is a septum of white tissue with the thickness of one centimeter and length of 8 centimeter and one of the four connectors of the two hemispheres of the brain (Nazeri, 2003, p. 51). The report on Science Magazine that was the result of a laboratory study on 14 people (9 men and 5 women). Despite having been conducted on a very small number of samples, the report became popular and its results gained acceptance very quickly in scientific councils and lasted until 1990s when feminist researches actively started studying sexual differences. Fausto Sterling (2000) analyzed the works of 34 scholars who worked on CC between 1982 until 1997; she shows that despite using the most recent and modernist methodologies, these scholars did not come in to any final common result indicating sexual differences in CC to confirm the first claim.

In the last decade, anthropometry and biology have made a lot of progress in studying brain thanks to the new advanced medical technologies. The new technologies helped find some differences in the volume of the skull after all; and even some other sexual differences (Cosgrove, 2007; Kosciak, 2009). Cosgrove has made meta-analysis on the investigations on CC since the very beginning of the investigations until 2007; he reports the most common results as follows:

- The skull volume is slightly bigger in men;
- The brain volume is the same in men and women;
- The proportion of gray matter is higher than white matter in women. Gray matter is involved in muscle control, sensory perception, memory, emotions and speech;
- The proportion of white matter is higher than gray matter in men. White matter is responsible for connecting different areas of gray matter;
- Blood flow is faster in women's brain than men's brain (Cosgrove, 2007, p. 847-849).

Although prejudice is still existent in social science studies, it seems that feminist studies have successfully questioned the mental dominance of one sex over another. Anthropological studies investigate the different attitudes and viewpoints and sometimes psychological responses that have been spotted in sexes, by referring to socio-cultural factors; Fisher (2009), for example, investigates gender differences in behaviors from a psychological perspective; claiming that sexual attitudes are the result of thousands of years of sexually defined roles. Wood and Eagly (2002) pointed out the importance of the influence of maternal roles and socio-economic status on women's attitudes.

### **3.3. Third Challenge: Rejecting Male Primate Domination**

Harem Theory refers to the domination of male primate in a group (Reed, 2005, p. 46). The word *harem* is an Arabic word meaning *sacred* which is referred to wives of a man in polygamous societies. The theory advocates such as anthropologists Linton and Carpenter claim that due to having a bigger and stronger body and small number, males have dominance over females in primate groups just like polygamous men do in human communities. It is a fact that sexual dimorphism is mostly obvious in many primates but it is not generalizable; dimorphism is more visible in Macaques and Gorillas while it is slightly recognizable in Siamangs, Chimpanzees and Gibbons.

Linton (1976) emphasized on sexual dimorphism to illustrate the naturalness of male dominance over female. He argued that in primate groups, the small number of males is comparable with patriarchal polygamist societies in which the powerful male has a *harem* containing many women (Reed, 2005, p. 46).

Feminist anthropological studies at the end of twentieth century started doubting harem theory in primates. They showed that among primate without sexual dimorphism in size and body volume, sexual dominance is not reported. Calvin (1986) has shown that *Rhesus Macaque*, one of the species of the old world monkeys is matriarchal. There are other evidences of matriarchal species in which the matrilineal family members always stay together (Nercissians, 2004, p. 31). In these groups male primates are rare and their residence in one group must be confirmed otherwise they are violently banished from the group.

In primate species having sexual dimorphism, behavioral differences between male and females are reported. Fadigan and Baxter (1984) have studied new world monkey and point out that males are more socially active and tend to have social interaction in same-sex groups; while females spend more time with their children rather than other female or male adults; males are also more violent

against the other-sex, but no sign of polygamy or sexual domination has been detected. Slater, Shafner and Aureli (2009) studied *Ateles Geoffroyi Yucatanensis*, specie of new world monkeys, and confirmed that despite sexual differences in behaviors, there is no significant evidence to claim sexual dominance.

It seems that harem theory is a simplistic interpretation of physical realities among primates. There is evidence showing that in primate groups with sexual dimorphism, females are in a greater number and are more socially organized; witnessing unacceptable male behavior results in punishment by the female group (Reed, 2005, p. 46). Hemelrijk (2008) discusses that increase in the number of male makes the female group more organized.

Feminist anthropologist Evelyn Reed (2005) believes that what others call male dominance is nothing but the power competition between male primates to win the acceptance of the female group; because decision about mating is made by the females and male survival is related to gaining acceptance in a female group.

Despite some exceptions, human beings have sexual dimorphism indicated by body size and mass, bones and teeth (Frayer and wilpoff, 1985, p. 429). In this trait human beings stand by the primates with the lowest sexual dimorphism which do not show any sign of sexual dominance. The findings of feminist anthropologists about primates' social lives have marginalized harem theory in the field.

#### 4. Discussion

Following the course of feminist studies in the last two centuries shows that they have influenced many scientific disputes. They have shown how femininity is constructed through discourses, policies and social practices and how prejudice and discrimination have limited the production of real knowledge. Feminism itself has struggled to prove it produces objective knowledge; as Derida puts it, claim of objectivity might be inaccessible for feminism as well as other approaches (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 44).

In this paper three major feminist challenges of anthropological thinking were discussed. First, feminists separated sex and gender as descriptive categories; previously they had been used interchangeably. Sex refers to fixed physical traits determined by biology, while gender is socio-culturally defined. Feminist showed that anthropological studies had androcentric and Eurocentric biases and concepts of *woman* and *femininity* can be categorized under *gender* by showing that in many cultures they follow a pattern which does not fit the western feminine/masculine dichotomy. Second, they contributed in studies of brain structure, rejecting sexual differences as an indication of sexually determined intelligence. Third, feminist archeologists and primatologists challenged previous ideas about male dominance in primate groups.

Feminist anthropology has contributed a diverse set of voices to the field of anthropology from the researchers' viewpoint and from the viewpoints of many women in several cultures. Feminist anthropology, as a part of the broad feminist movement has contributed in the promotion of women's voices and interests, insisting that women's voices and calls must be heard. Feminist scholars have also been very influential in the fight for women's rights for voting, payment equity, and work in the public or private sphere and have control over their rights; they have stressed out that women are independent beings and have the right to choose their own life style. Of course these issues are not necessarily issues for all women around the world; women have achieved their rightful position in some societies while in others they are still struggling to gain their most basic

rights. Feminist anthropology is still trying to bring to light their concerns and to find ways to cause structural changes in which these women can be empowered to effect change.

Feminist critics on essentialist ontology, biological determinism and prejudice have made possible great changes in anthropological research. Today, there are new currents in the discipline of anthropology, under the influence of several branches of feminist theory which have successfully integrated more than ever the concepts of nature and nurture and have put away both naturalist and constructivist ideas of human identity formation. These currents illustrate how gender was formed in the history (Zeimaran, 2002, p. 14) and that femininity should not be universally perceived as a common category.