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Essence and Diversity in Gender Research

FREIA

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Essence and Diversity in Gender Research

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Durre Ahmed

**Essence and Diversity in Gender
Research**

"We can no more stand back from the psyche and look at it objectively than we can get away from ourselves. And because the unconscious makes relative every formulation of consciousness by complimenting it with an equally valid position, no psychological statement can have certainty. The **truth remains** uncertain since death, the only certainty, does not reveal its truth" James Hillman

As the preceding quotation suggests, the concepts of essence and diversity are equally valid. Before discussing which, if any, is more analytically/academically valuable, it is best to summarise these perspectives. Since the accent on 'diversity' is currently very popular its central ideas will be considered first.

Deconstructive Postmodernism:

The last decade has seen a veritable torrent of writing flowing into the flood of literature known as Postmodern Deconstruction (or Deconstructive Postmodernism). It draws inspiration from a range of disciplines: Philosophy (Rorty), literary criticism (Said), psychology (Hillman), cultural history (Foucault), postmodern feminism (Kristeva), and linguistics (Derrida). Outside of the academic world, this postmodern 'mood' is evident in art, architecture, literature and the visual arts. Despite numerous international adherents, one can safely say that postmodern deconstructionism is rooted in and profoundly influenced by its French exponents.

Distinguishing itself from the 'modern' perspective, postmodernism is a worldview of extreme relativism, exemplified in the work of Derrida and Foucault. For Derrida, every word is divided into a phonic "signifier" and a mental "signified". Language is a system of difference between these phenomena, not a system of meaningful units. "Meaning" is an illusion, a fallacy, occurring only in a specific context. Thus language, one of the most important elements of human communication, is 'merely' self-referential, a chain of signifiers referring to other signifiers and hence, always indeterminate.

Derrida's theory is rigidly based on language and while it is persuasive in its own context of linguistics, it does not consider entire realms of experience which most of us have had for which language has never been the primary medium of expression. There are situations when we are 'dumbfounded', at a loss for words. Powerful experiences such as orgasm, the spiritual, the artistic process, feelings, emotions, a child's special perception; these are vital domains beyond the grasp of linguistic deconstruction.

In the social sciences, Foucault's notions dominate: assertions of truth are merely "socially produced". All systems operate with an internal logic that cannot be legitimated outside a particular system. Yet again, reality is ephemeral and subjective, that is "socially produced".

Foucault's work is undoubtedly of extreme social, philosophic and political importance. His work on power and its relationship to a society's given notion of "reason" has had a vast and justifiably significant impact. However, his current towering stature raises some interesting questions about modern academic knowledge. The fact is that over the last fifty years, scholars and thinkers in different disciplines have been stating in their own idiom, the principles that Foucault advanced. The insistence on diverse and multiple viewpoints vis a vis self and society has been around for a long time. In psychology, for example, compared to the modern ideas of Freud and his conception of a strong central ego; there was Jung who defined neurosis as "one sidedness in the presence of many". Since the sixties, feminists in the West as well as many non western scholars had been arguing for the legitimacy of analytic perspectives which challenged the dominance of the modern, masculine Euro-centric view point. Ten years ago, as a student at Columbia University, I remember writing in my doctoral dissertation that I was being "forced to make non-sense of my own sense". It seems that only when Paris or Harvard tell us that something is 'real' or 'kosher' that it becomes an acceptable topic for academic discussion. While this anecdote indicates that I myself was partial to the postmodern position, today I am not so sure.

Postmodernism as a Cultural Symptom:

In the recent past, the postmodern initiative has gained considerable momentum through the work of non-western scholars such as Guha, Spivak, Said. While these scholars have indeed made a powerful case for non-western perspectives, the fact remains that their legitimacy has been 'conferred' by West. And within the movement as a whole, it is the work of Derrida, Foucault and other French thinkers such as Kristeva, which forms the philosophical bedrock upon which many third world scholars today rest their case.

Foucault's notions (derived from Nietzsche), that we can trace the genealogy of a body of knowledge through (de)constructing key concepts, can be applied to postmodern deconstruction itself. It too can be seen as being "situated" in a particular context and mode of thinking. The context is the late 20th century and the psychological (and social?) reality of the West: A breakdown in the sense of self and community. A widespread and pervasive sense of alienation as evidenced in the burgeoning psycho pharmaceutical industry and allied "mental health" fields. The extreme emphasis on individualism reflects **deeply ingrained cultural norms of** separateness, autonomy and a peculiar seemingly endless self absorption. "No more world views" is itself a world view, since it dismisses all others and reflects a psychology of fragmentation and breakdown of relationships in the name of individualism and autonomy. The heavy French influence on postmodernism, especially Derrida's work, becomes understandable when considered in the context of France and the stringent control over the French language as exercised by the French Academy. Just last year, this organization tried to constitutionally ban the use of foreign words in public places in France.

More of the Same:

Thanks especially to the feminist movement, the modernist /modernization project was revealed to be a masculine - patriarchal

hegemonic enterprise. To this extent, one welcomed it, and as a woman and third worlder, participated in it. But by blindly following this perspective to "its logical conclusion" one arrives, ironically, at the beginning. It seems we are trapped in Foucault's pendulum: The modernist patriarchal ideal of power/control has given way to the postmodern patriarchal ideal of total autonomy. This attitude leaves no room for common ground and therefore no activist theory or opposition activism is permitted. The prescribed and desirable response is one of a philosophically sophisticated cynicism and passivity. Instead of healing the atomized, alienated sensibility of modernity, the new relativism makes it more intense. Now it is possible to 'prove' that each of us is in fact an island.

Whether from the point of view of psychology (individual) or from the global perspective of ecology (community), the postmodern view is dangerously suicidal. And while I can intellectually justify suicide, I am also a therapist and simply as a human being I cannot morally justify such a stance of passivity, however philosophically "sophisticated" suicide may be as a "statement".

Underlying the postmodern perspective then, is what the Cambridge philosopher Jenny Teichman called the Rooster Factor. That is the seemingly opposing theoretical positions are in fact manifestations of the male need for power and one upmanship -- in this case academic/theoretical. As Teichman states " The cultural history of the West could be viewed as a triumph progression towards the strutting of the existential Lone Cowboy".

Psychologically, some key elements of this history can be viewed as a consolidation of a crucial concern of males which has to do with separation from mother/ woman. Freud for example, sees this separation as crucial to development and the Freudian depiction of the mother in particular and women in general is rather awful in disconnection from one's fellow humans or the natural environment. The quest for total autonomy reveals itself in an attitude of smug,

triumphant satisfaction as it confidently negates every norm of morality and ethics as "merely" socially constructed. Everyone and everything is disempowered. Kristeva's latest book, aptly named 'Maladies of the Soul' points to a new type of patient in the west, symptomatic of the age of mass culture in which mental sickness is linked to an alienated, atomized, fragmented, unconnected sense of self.

Essentialism:

This has been classically defined as a belief in true essence -- that which is most irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing. In more general terms, essence speaks of a sense of unity, as opposed to diversity.

In feminist theory, essentialism articulates itself in a variety of ways and has certain related assumptions. It firstly questions the totalizing symbolic system which oppresses and subjugates women throughout history and culture. This questioning of a totalizing symbolic system is also present in third world scholarship and its challenge to the dominant western view. Essentialism, secondly, appeals to a pure femininity, outside the boundaries of the social and largely patriarchal order. Thus, it stands for female language and autonomy. Interestingly, in the same way that women have contributed to the power of the postmodern perspective, essentialism too has emerged most strongly in feminist discourse, a discourse which presume the unity of its object of enquiry, that is women.

The problems of essentialism are perhaps better known and one could say that presently it is considered a "weak" position to hold in academe. Its main flaw is that one cannot generalize and that there are indeed differences within any given category of concepts. But it can be argued that the anti-generalization response of the social constructionist is also based on an "essentialism". A common practice in the constructionist argument is to shift from the singular to the plural in order to highlight diversity and difference. Thus woman becomes women, history becomes histories, feminism become

feminisms and so on. As Diana Fuss has pointed out, while superficially these can be conceptualized, semantically they are still signalling a collectivity. Socially constructed or not "woman/women" still occupies a linguistic space. Thus, the statement, that "European Women are "X" is no less essentialist than its formulation in the singular "The European woman are "X". The essentialist element is not so much countered as displaced. In sum, one cannot get away from 'essentializing', if one is to communicate with each other.

Essence, Identity and the Female Body:

In the animal world (of which we are a part) essence has a function related to differentiation and identity. Each body has an olfactory essence which identifies one species to another. In the human world 'essence' has always had feminine connotations in its relationship to perfume. Today of course, the situation is different, not only with regard to the widespread use of perfumes/cosmetics by both men and women, but also with regard to modern attitudes towards the body and its natural functions. Thus there are huge 'de-odorizing' industries which urge consumers to obliterate his/her essence - and replace it with an artificial one.

Irrespective of what kind of "Social production" shape gender within a culture, the physicality of the female body remains a reality: To grow individuals of either sex from within one's flesh, to transform food into milk, to bleed according to a rhythm frequently in conjunction with the moon -- these are elemental and profound realities to which culture can only respond in a variety of ways. In its rejection of the concept/reality of essence the Postmodern Deconstructionist project rejects the female body.

The point is that social constructionists do not definitively escape the pull of essentialism and in fact the two are interconnected. The exemplary problem which separates the two positions is the question of "the body". For the essentialist it is real, accessible. For constructio-

nists it is a network of effect continually subject to sociopolitical determination.

But this position is not built on the demise of essentialism or in academic term it has not been 'discredited'. Rather, it works its power by strategically deferring the encounter with essence, displacing it, into the concept of sociality. To say that the body is always deeply embedded in the social is not to preclude essentialism. Essentialism is embedded in the idea of social. Postmodern Deconstruction just assumes that the category of the social automatically escapes essentialism. But there is no compelling reason to assume that the natural is, in essence, essentialist and that the social is, in essence, constructionist.

To get beyond the present impasse, it might be useful to question the constructionist assumption that nature and fixity go together naturally just as sociality and change go together(naturally). That is, one can ask whether constructions can be normative and whether essences can change?

Towards a Synthesis:

The underlying problem in the context of the present debate is more cultural epistemological rather than substantive. It lies not so much within the concepts of 'essence' and 'diversity' than in the western approach to knowledge and philosophy which insists on setting up an "either/or" of adversarial positions from which one must choose. Even though, as science tells us, especially physics, that the truth is paradoxical. Such an academically contrived dualism makes for a phony 'debate' in which 'positions' have to be chosen and then 'defended' or 'discredited'. Put in either/or terms the essence/diversity question is automatically shewed in favour of the Deconstruction position and its retreat from engagement.

The other key element missing in the epistemological structure underlying the debate is the idea of time-process. As stated earlier, a decade ago, I myself was an enthusiastic exponent of postmodernism.

At that time, the main task was to bring forward alternative worldviews and conceptualizations which challenged the western hegemonic project. However, dramatic developments in the real world are posing questions which must be answered in a creative way. The environmental crisis is just one example. Of course the postmodern view would reject even the attempt at answers as futile and "situated" in some specificity, and it is this rejection and retreat from engagement that makes me suspect the intention of the postmodern project. The end result is total disempowerment of everyone -- even while the world is being engulfed in violence and the environment steadily destroyed. In the sense that the political status quo remains, macho modernity has been replaced by the postmodern macho autonomy.

Seen from an environmental/ecological perspective, the fact is that whether we want to or not, we are interconnected. The environmental crisis is a good example of Cartesian dualism taken to its 'logical' conclusion. In the same way that 'mind' (the head) rules over matter, human beings have tried to rule, 'tame', nature. The scientific project is an outer oriented one, focused on manipulating the material-natural world. The emphasis is on action, doing. To my understanding, knowledge has as much to do with action as it does with simply contemplating the connections among elements. It is in this sense that the female body, as an essential concept, is exceedingly significant. Its various and unique processes, serve as a crucial symbolic reminder of realities which have been lost under the onslaught of firstly, science/technology and more recently, the postmodern worldview. The realities, as evident from ecology, have to do with inter connections, rhythms and the cyclical nature of life within an overall context of process-time. The female body is also a metaphor of the idea of contemplation of receptivity (to ideas) rather than a single minded emphasis on outward action-doing. That is, it is also a symbol of a psychological capacity that is more inner oriented, teaching the knower about him or herself in relation to the outer world.

The question then is not which concept among 'essence' and 'diversity' is the correct one, but rather how to draw a balance (which is yet another principle of nature) between these equally necessary perspectives. If only the essentialist position were to prevail no new information representing natural social diversity can be gauged. If only the post modern position dominates then, logically speaking, there is no need for dialogue, conferences, research. More alarmingly, such a self-consciousness, in which there is nothing but multiple selves/identities, poses a basic question: What of sincerity? How do I know that you mean what you say to me? (and I to you?) One way out of the impasse is to see these concepts as providing two separate perspectives in the same way that visual perception functions. That is, the optic nerves converge to form one image/information.

Based on the preceding ideas here are some tentative propositions:

- i) Essence is an inner, experiential concept. Diversity is outer, descriptive.
- ii) Diversity provides a fundamental human perceptual requirement, namely contrast. In strictly neuro-sensory terms, the human species cannot function without contrast. The human sensorium, the five senses, function on this principle. Thus, there can be no information/knowledge without contrast. The question that arises in the context of academic (or personal) knowledge is: Who is the knower? To my understanding, given the history of knowledge as it stands today, the 'knower' is the West(erner). Thus, the post-modern emphasis on diversity is fruitful only when this diversity is contrasted with its social, political, economic, and psychological, western counterpart. In sum, the western focus on diversity is useful to the extent that it may teach the west something about itself. Otherwise it becomes an endless, meaningless exercise.
- iii) The general lack of psychological interiority seems to prevent this processing of contrasting information. It is in this sense

that modern and postmodern consciousness continues to reflect the masculine mindset with its predisposition towards violence, outer control and a general lack of insight into its own (im)moral assumptions about self and other.

- iv) The denial of insight into oneself can also be related to the fear of the female body and the even deeper fear of death. Above all, the body teaches us about mortality and holds the potential of making us realise our insignificance on this planet. The western attitude to death is largely of denial. This is evident at the socio-medical level and also in the rituals associated with the body. Indeed, the language of medicine with its 'wars' and 'conquests' of disease reflect the larger attitude towards 'taming' and 'controlling' Nature.

- v) The essence versus diversity debate reflects the west's own struggles as it stands today in terms of an underlying philosophy and an emergent consciousness vis a vis its place on earth. Any synthesis or answers in this debate must address itself first to the West(erner). That is, what has the intellectual history of the west taught it about itself. Put another way, what does diversity teach each of us about oneself? Unless this essential question is addressed, one will remain trapped in the tedious swing of the academic pendulum whose main purpose would then reveal itself to be simple selfperpetuation (of academia) rather than knowledge. For the non westerner, this monotonous pendulum simply suggests the continuation of the status quo. The illusion created by such intellectual doing and undoing is that human knowledge is 'advancing'. Even though it is globally evident that we are moving towards an individual, social and environmental crisis.

This doing and undoing, while the status quo remains, is not limited to the abstractions of western intellectual academia. The equation underlying the swing of the pendulum, of macho dominance and

macho autonomy, is evident at the micro and macro levels. Two examples should suffice. The history of female sexuality shows that fifty years ago women had problems "achieving" orgasm and vast numbers were labelled 'frigid' and 'dysfunctional'. The basis of this diagnosis was the Freudian notion of 'mature' (vaginal) versus 'immature' (clitoral) orgasm. Today, scientists are telling women that it is normal and natural to have 'multiple' orgasms. In both instances, women are seen to be functioning below some ideal (masculine) threshold.

Similarly, international (e.g. western) institutions such as the World Bank, have been 'guiding' countries towards modern ideals of 'development'. With increasing evidence coming in that such development is in fact highly destructive of the social and natural environment, the same institutions are now deciding the best ways of "sustaining" the environment. The status quo remains.

While I may have been critical of the West, I remain convinced that the answers - whether philosophical or political - will nevertheless emerge from the West. They have to, if the planet and its species is to survive. This responsibility (the ability to respond) is a consequence of history and the power which the West presently possesses. As the scientific and postmodern deconstructionists alert western consciousness to the fact of diversity of life and its interpretations, the West is at a crossroads. It can simply continue focusing on difference and the nature of the universe is such that this an endless exercise. Or, having grasped the function of diversity, it can re-discover its own essence/identity. An important aspect of such an insight would be the recognition that despite differences, there are many principles which unite us in our humanity: Justice, for example, or the obvious sense of moral outrage in the face of numerous genocides. But these questions will become relevant only when we are prepared to look inward.

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