What do terms mean? Looking into the Vocabulary of 'Second Wave Feminism'

Pritha Kundu

Assistant Professor in English

Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women

Dakshineswar, Kolkata

One of the key contributions of Second-wave feminist theory is the making of a distinction between "sex" and "gender", a distinction that has subsequently been developed differently by different strands of feminist thought—scientific, political, historical, philosophical and the like. For science studies in Feminist terms, the initial move—as taken by de Beauvoir in the section called "The Data of Biology" in *The Second Sex* -- was to use the term sex to refer to the biological differences between men and women while gender indicated the vast range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference[1]. In the eye of science, therefore, biological determinism has been one of the most important legitimising mechanism of women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is therefore, crucial for feminist politics, with implications of a scientific understanding. However, the specific question – how far the sex/gender distinction can be compared to the traditional binary between nature and science,-- has not received much attention until the seventies and eighties, since when feminist science began to emerge as a discipline worthy of critical consideration. As long as the goal of science was seen as the unequivocal mirroring of nature, there was only one standard for measurement, which was chiefly male-dominated . As E. F. Keller writes, "it was only with the introduction of an alternative view of science--one admitting of a multiplicity of goals and standards-that the conditions arose for some feminists, in the late 1970's and early 80's, to begin to argue for the inclusion of difference-in experience, perceptions, and values-- as intrinsically valuable to the production of science"(40). It is this situation which led to such questions in Feminist science as: 'Is sex to gender is as nature to science?' which becomes the title of Keller's 1987 article published in *Hypatia*. However, prior to going into the question, the earlier moves regarding sex, gender, nature and science as developed by several schools of Feminism, deserves a brief historical survey.

The distinction between "sex" and "gender", accepted by most of the feminists for a long time, began with the initial understanding that "sex" is related to nature while "gender" is related to culture has been reworked considerably. Broadly, four major approaches are discernable, till the late twentieth century, in regarding this sex/gender distinction, which Nivedita Menon has comprehensibly summarized in her book *Seeing like a Feminist*[2]*:*

> i)Scholars like Alison Jaggar argue that "sex" and "gender" are dialectically and inseparably related, and that the conceptual distinction that earlier feminists established between the two is not sustainable beyond a point[3]. In this understanding, human biology is constituted by a complex interaction between the human body, the physical environment and the state of development of technology and society. The two processes are involved: human intervention changes the external environment and simultaneously, changes in the external environment shape and change the human body.

If we accept that biology and culture are interrelated, to the sex/gender distinct ion, the relevant implication is that women's bodies have been shaped by social restrictions and by norms of beauty. That is, the "body" has been formed as much by "culture" as by "nature". And to understand this, we need Feminist science along with feminist politics and philosophy. For instance, Feminist anthropologists have pointed out that in some ethnic groups there is little physical differentiation between men and women. In short, we must consider that there are two equally powerful factors at work - one, there is a range of interrelated ways in which society produces sex differences and two, sex differences structure society in particular ways. "Sex", in this view, is not an unchanging base upon which society constructs "gender" meanings, rather , sex itself has been affected by various factors external to it - there is no clear and unchanging line between nature and culture.

.

ii)Another approach to sex/gender has come from radical feminism which argues that feminists should not underplay the biological difference between the sexes and attribute all difference to "culture" alone. To do so is to accept male civilisation's devaluing of the female reproductive role. Radical feminists such as Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin, for example, believe that women's reproductive biology, the process of gestation and the experience of mothering, fundamentally affects their relationship to the external world. Thus, by the scientific fact of their biological quality, women are naturally closer to nature. Menon includes Eco-feminists in this group .

iii)Judith Butler departs from the radical feminists' overemphasis on the biological body. She argues that if "gender" is the cultural meanings that the sexed body takes on, then gender cannot be said to follow from "sex" in any one way. She rather views gender as a way of thinking and as a concept, which produces the category of biological sex. Butler thus suggests a "radical discontinuity" between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Her theory of 'performative gender' comes from an understanding that looking beyond the 'heterosexual matrix'(fixation of identities as either male or female) imposed by society, practices and institutions will enable us to see that sexuality and human bodies can be fluid and it is not necessary for them to have any fixed and unchangeable identity(Butler 1990, chapters 2 and 3). Though much more open and receptive of multiple realities of nature, sex and gender, this approach is also not very clear about the language in which such differences can be expressed.

iv) This problem of language has been one of the focal points for the emerging discipline of 'Feminist science' in the '80s. Evelyn Fox Keller and Ruth Bleier have offered a critique of the prevailing bio-medical language of determining sex and gender indentities[4]. Sex defined as anatomical, hormonal or chromosomal -- as something to be studied by the bio-medical sciences while gender as a social or cultural construct is to be studied by the social sciences. Such an understanding takes for granted that while cultural notions of gender may change, the body remains as an unchanging biological reality. feminist scientists argue that on the contrary, our perceptions and interpretations of the body are mediated through language, and the bio-medical sciences function as a major provider of this language. The primary resource for this paper is Keller's 1987 essay, at the end of which she turns to this problem of language.

In her article, Keller speaks of three kinds of parallels between feminist studies and science studies : historical, epistemological, and political. Historically, since de Beauvoir's seminal statement—"One is not born but becomes a woman" , modern feminist studies began to consider that women are made rather than born—and here comes the notion of a distinction between sex and gender. Keller argues that in a similar way, contemporary studies of science came to recognise a difference between science and nature—"with the realization that science not only is not now, but can never be, a 'mirror of nature'."Both approaches, either in studying a social construction of gender or of science, show a "dynamic instability"' inherent in the basic categories. For the feminists and scientists, the necessity of maintaining this distinction between sex and gender on the one hand, and between science and nature on the other are creates an epistemological problem. Discussions of gender tend resort either to biological determinism, or to infinite plasticity, which Keller calls "a kind of genderic anarchy". Likewise discussions of science tend to fall into polarisation-- either towards objectivism, or towards relativism. Using this epistemological parallel, one may see how both gender and science exhibit a tendency to return to a pre-modern and pre-feminist consciousness in which gender could have been collapsed back onto sex, and science, back onto nature. To counter this approach is equally polarised: it takes us into a post-modernist, post-feminist (and post-scientific) utopia in which the binaries are assumed to be invalid, but that is not a proper solution as well. Attempts to occupy a "middle ground"-either with respect to gender or to science--- become therefore politically charged strategies.

Having established the parallels, Keller raises a series of questions: " Is gender, as an analytical category, different from, perhaps even prior to, categories of race, class, etc.? ...The parallel question is, of course: is science substantively different from other social structures or "interest groups?"; i.e., are scientific claims to knowledge any better than other (non-scientific) claims to knowledge?"(38) Such questions make one look at the recent convergence of feminist studies and sciences, and the scholars who have become mostly burdened with this interdisciplinary intersection, are of course, feminist scientists. The meaning of 'feminist science' is subject to variable interpretations but, in practically it is very often confused with "feminine" science.

Keller then brings in the issue of Barbara McClintock's being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1983, which Feminists attempted to project as long-waited recognition and vindication of a new and alternative "feminist" science

manifested in McClintock's "feeling for the organism," apparently restoring "feminine values to science". On the other hand, the mainstream establishment, including male scientists like Stephen Jay Gould began to claim that they had little disagreements with McClintock, and her work actually had nothing new in it, rather it was already a part of their school. Keller participated in this debate: in her book , *A Feeling for the Organism* she consciously left out the questions on gender and science that she had already been working on, and treated McClintock's life and work, as related to the history of modern biology, in their own terms. She was respectful of McClintock's own refusal to be looked at as a 'feminist', and her resistance to be classified at all. This stance of commitment to a gender-free and general science, is also problematic, for it leaves readers to draw any conclusion they like, from the McClintock story.

A brief discussion of Keller book on McClintock may be helpful to explore her later views regarding the given question. As Elaine Ognibene points out in her review of the book, the biography is "an analysis of the rhetoric of science, the social construction of scientific knowledge, and the value context in which scientific discoveries are made" (392). Keller does not treat McClintock's personal life and work as specifically feminist, as she has done consciously. She does, however, point to the difference in McClintock's technique which many might term a "feminine" stand. McClintock's subject of research was the maize plant. While the mainstream scientific community was interested in phage and bacteria, she labored in the field, literally and metaphorically in close proximity of nature, harvesting a minimum of two crops a year and examining each kernel . In her interviews with Keller, McClintock continually emphasized how organic and passionate her relationship was with the corn.

Feeling that the question of gender and science is not discussed properly in *A Feeling for the Organism,* Keller tried to do so in her next work, *Reflections on Gender and Science(1985). Here she* is not merely looking at men and women in science , but also the discipline of science and the constructs that have left it as a predominantly male-oriented field. She begins with the assumption that all three variables--men, women, and science--are socially created phenomena and that delving into the manner in which men and women are "made" in society will shed light on the making of science. Building on her early work, she concludes that men and women are made not born as is the discipline of science. Science must exist in a context, as Kuhn's work makes clear, but Keller again raises the caution of not allowing these contexts to degenerate into relativism. Science should be recognized as the search for "truth" or value in Nature, but, as with all human endeavours, cannot be infallible because it is performed by humanity.

Some reviews of Keller's book on McClintock were critical of her 'indifference' to the significance of feminist science in McClintock's work. For others, however, McClintock's Nobel Prize was a recognition of the validity of 'difference' or the alternative within the established canon of scientific "truth". This is claiming a larger , richer and multifaceted canon rather than a different one. For them, difference should not be reduced to duality. Now, admitting that science is not monolithic and has room for difference, the meaning of 'science' should be derived from the shared endeavour of different scientists pursuing a maximally reliable representation of nature, with another shared assumption that, however elusive, there is only one nature. Science cannot mirror nature, or reality "as it is,", but if we believe that separate realities exist (a notion often associated with arguments for a "feminine science")this would be antithetical to any meaning of scientific endeavor . If women scientists have to accept that a different science(as of their own)will represent a different reality, it would be, for them, giving up their identity as scientists, just as traditional science demands them to give up their identity as women. At the same time, there is an undermining flaw embedded in trying to avoid duality by ignoring gender altogether . It makes us blind to the significant ways in which gender has been operating in science. Referring to her 1985 work, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Keller turns the discussion to knowledge and power, arguing how with the rise of modern science, knowledge came to be understood as the power to dominate nature, and how this power led to the exclusion of the feminine from science. This has constituted traditional definition of science which is also patriarchal-- objective, universal, impersonal and masculine.

By the fact of exclusion—of the 'feminine' from the sphere of epistemic authority, women scientists are driven to a special risk. Once dissociated from gender, the feminists' emphasis on difference itself ironically resorts to the same ends as the denial of difference--- as Keller writes, "it can serve once again to render women themselves superfluous". She suggests a new stance for the feminists – that they can counter the indefinite proliferation of difference with reference to the constraints imposed by the recalcitrance of sex. She claims it as truth that beyond theory both nature and sex persist as humbling reminders of human mortality. According to her, awareness of the bi-polar and dialectical influences of both nature and culture on the categories of gender and science, finally depends on the adequacy of analyzing the forces antagonistic to that very awareness. Keller also argues that As long as power is defined in the

prevailing unitary terms, struggles for power will continue to undermine the relation of science with nature, and gender with sex. The same will work for the repudiation of nature and/or sex as well. This would maintain the very instability in the concepts of gender and science, rather than enabling a utopian flight to a debate-free absolute world of epistemic and gendered values.

Finally Keller brings in the issue of language, one of the major concerns of Feminist analyses of science. What lies at the core of transforming the multi-dimensional terrains of nature, of culture, and of power into contests with a singular dimension, one dimensional contests, is the interpenetration of the language of gender and that of science . If so, argues Keller, "the effective defusing of these contests would require a different kind of language, reflecting a higher dimensionality in our landscape-- neither homogeneous nor divided, spacious enough to enable multiplicity to survive without degenerating into opposition"(48). She thus claims the need for a language that enables both feminists and scientist to negotiate, both in conceptual and perceptual terms, the way between similarity and difference, a language which makes it possible to recognise affinity in difference and difference within affinity. Here it is also important to note that assuming an easy parallel between the sex/gender system and the nature/science one is not possible, for sexual difference, however varied, is limited in a specific species, whereas nature in its known and unknown vistas of variety, entails a difference which often exhausts the capacity of language itself. In reading the two sets of categories—sex/gender and nature/science, it is better to keep the question alive which entails diversity of approaches and openness, rather than attempting to find an absolute answer.

Notes and References:

1.Simone de Beauvoir*, The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. Picador, 1988. Part I, pp 35-91

2.See Nivedita Menon, *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin: Zubaan, 2012.

3. See Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Harvester Press, 1983. pp. 98-99, 106-113, 125-33.

4.E. F. Keller refers to the work of her fellow scientist Ruth Bleier regarding science and gender in her article "Gender and Science: Origin, History and Politics". Accesssed from <*ists.news.yorku.ca/files/2010/09/Keller-paper.pdf*>, on 19.11.2013.

Works Cited:

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*, chapters 2 and 3. New York: Routledge. 1990.

Keller, Evelyn Fox. "The Gender/Science System: Or, Is Sex to Gender as Nature Is to Science?" *Hypatia*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Feminism & Science, 1 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 37-49. Accessed from
< http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810121> on 11/11/2013

Keller, Evelyn Fox. *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.Cited in Natasha Whitton, "Evelyn Fox Keller: Historical, Psychological and Philosophical Intersections
in the Study of Gender and Science", accessed on 20. 11.2013, from
<*www.womenwriters.net/archives/whittoned1.htm*>

Ognibene, Elaine. "A Feeling for the Organism, Book Review." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. August 1985: 392-394. Cited in Natasha Whitton, *ibid.*