



# Psychoanalysis offering Understanding the Process of Becoming Gendered

Ishrat Khan

Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka.

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## ABSTRACT

Psychoanalytic theories of both modern and postmodern dimensions have given us infinitely rich, complex and subtle ways of thinking. In most cases it has crossed the boundaries of speaking about body and sexuality, identity and difference, and also knowledge, language, culture. These theories mostly see gender as fluid suggesting our gendered subjectivity as unstable as it is vulnerable to the subversion of unconscious desire. In particular, psychoanalysis not only suggests the variety of biological drives but also the complicated social construction which arise out of the experiences within our particular historically and culturally situated families. Psychoanalysis still remains central to contemporary work on gender despite imperfections, limitations and omissions even in the light of powerful later developments. It has opened up crucial insights about conceptualizing the construction of identity and their changes by the meanings of language and culture.

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## Introduction

Psychoanalysis refers to Freud's work and research on therapeutic practices which is considered as the basic of psychoanalysis. It contributes to analyze the conscious and unconscious happenings that surround the world we live. Psychoanalysts hold a view that there are inner forces outside our consciousness directing our behavior. So the incidents like slip of pen or slip of tongue which seems very unusual, accident for us, holds totally different meaning for psychoanalysts. Freud sees this unconscious as 'another scene' of our being which is radically split off from the conscious, rational part of who we are with its own symbolic language of condensed and displaced meaning (Alsop: 2002, p. 39). This unconscious dimension of history, culture and the construction of identity have long been debated by feminists' analysis of consciousness and socialization. As psychoanalysis takes more complex view of identity as Freud says, this essay is an attempt to reveal how feminists examine psychoanalytic theory with the question of sex –gender differences and the identity, merely constructed in childhood.

### Freud and the 'Unconscious'

The concept of 'unconscious' is the central of psychoanalytic theory which is radically different from other theories. Freud was the first who gave the wordless, 'unconscious' dimension an identity. Although constructed in early childhood out of our earliest desires and losses; its system of frozen meanings influences everything we do, without being aware of it, is the most distinctive feature about the unconscious, defined Freud (Minsky: 1996). The relation between our childhood experience and adult behavior has mainly functioned this section of mind through repression which is often too painful to remain in consciousness. This process of repression and sublimation is defined as 'laws of transformation'.

Psychoanalytic theories from the very beginning denied the correlation between biology and psychology and emphasized on distinguishing the psychic reality from the anatomical one. Therefore it comes to the point that men and women are not physically or socially made as male and female rather become such.

Freud's perception of sex differences and association of 'masculinity with activity' and 'femininity with passivity' caused a serious opposition in feminists group in early twentieth century Britain. Feminist movement in 1960s and 1970s revolted against Freud's analysis of libido as identical in the two sexes. Rather considering the feminine libido as specific, feminists reasoned this as prime concern of women's oppression. Freud's emphasis on the 'penis envy' on women and 'role of father' were the main target of feminist's argument as opposed to feminist's re-assessment of mother-daughter relationship. Karen Horney and Ernest Jones also opposed Freud and tries to give female sexuality a positive dimension rather linking it with the idea of 'lack of penis'. For Jones, 'femininity's development is linked to instinctual constitution' (Jones in Mitchell, 1974). Freud considered Jones's assertion as another misunderstanding which led her to return to biological reductionism. These issues were addressed further in Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) and its revolutionary understanding, and explanation on women.

### Psychoanalysis and biological determinism

That psychoanalysis considers women as 'inferior' compared to men has been identified by both Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*; 1949) and Betty Friedan (*Feminine Mystique*; 1963). Beauvoir's crucial argument, 'the body is not a thing, it is a situation' (1949; p. 66) came out as a result of rejection of biological determinism. She therefore emphasized the link between body and gender for becoming a woman and

criticized Freud for never showing much concern for women's destiny. As she quotes, "...it is not the body-object described by biologists that actually exist, but the body as lived by the subject. Woman is a female to the extent that she feels herself as such. There are biologically essential features that are not part of her real, experienced situation: thus the structure of the egg is not reflected in it, but on the contrary an organ of no great biological importance, like the clitoris, plays in it a part of the first rank. It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life (Beauvoir, 1949: p.66)."

#### **Transformation of difference, desire and identity...**

Lacan's development of Freud's work – difference, desire and identity, is transformed into language. In describing the unconscious construction of patriarchal ideology, Freud makes dramatic link between sexuality and culture, where language can no longer be seen as neutral and objective. Because, gendered desiring identity becomes gendered eroticized language and knowledge out of which our gendered subjectivity is constructed, says Lacan (in Minsky, 1996: p.3).

Lacan's work raises more questions about the nature of the baby's earliest experiences of sexuality and relation to the mother, pursued in the French feminist writings of Helen Cixious, Irigaray, Kristeva. Lacan points out the distinction between penis and phallus is fundamental to Freud's differentiation between biological and psychic reality. The phallus exists outside anatomical reality and is the signifier of the mother's desire. The central question of the Oedipal crisis thus becomes "to be or not to be the phallus" that is, to be or not to be the object of mothers desire. The role of the father also becomes symbolic representing the impossibility of being the object of mother's desire. The phallus, unlike penis is possessed by nobody and represents the combination of both sexes.

#### **The unconscious and female sexuality...**

Freud's discovery of the unconscious has a central link to the female sexuality. Feminist movement tended to equate what Freud said about female patients and hysterics as prescriptions for patriarchal domination of women rather than understanding his writings as an analysis of women's position in patriarchal societies, says Juliet Mitchell (1974).

Initially, Freud assumed symmetry in the development of what he called the Oedipal Crises. It was only in an essay written in 1925 that Freud distinguishes between the psychosexual history of boys and girls and recognized the importance of pre-oedipal phase in which boys and girls love the mother and both have to relinquish her in favor of the father. The girl has to move from loving her mother to love her father whereas the boy gives up his mother with an understanding that he will later have a woman of his own. In this model, boys identify with their fathers as their masculine identity with her mother while at the same time abandoning her as a love object and turning to her father instead. For Freud, this turning away from the mother is based on frustration and disappointment that she cannot satisfy her mother, and is accompanied by hostility.

#### **Psychoanalysis: reproducing patriarchal inequalities?**

American feminists have perceived psychoanalysis as reproducing patriarchal inequalities. **Nancy Chodorow**, a well-known writer in USA emphasized on relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism. She mentions what Freud argues, psychic development precedes and is determined by biologically scheduled unfolding stages of

infantile sexuality. Sexuality here is expressed by innate libidinal drives that seek gratification or tension release according to the "pleasure principle (Chodorow, 1978: p.46)."

Chorzow's '**The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender**' considers the development of the self in relation to others, stressing the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and child. She views the function of mothering as creating an asymmetrical relationship between boys and girls. The girl has more permeable boundaries in the relationship with the others because of having been mothered by someone of the same gender. Girls are themselves therefore more committed to mothering. Boys in contrast, develop a sense self in opposition to the mother and establish more rigid boundaries. The masculine sense of self is more separate. Chodorow suggests this view radically breaks with an essentialist view of gender and move towards a view that perceives masculinity and femininity in both men and women.

#### **Psychoanalysis: unable to analyze its own unconscious fantasies?**

For many French writers the body is the locus of femininity. Luce Irigaray perceives psychoanalysis as unaware of the historical and philosophical determinants of its own discourse and unable to analyze its own unconscious fantasies. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray critiques Freudian and Lacanian theories about identity formation in female subjects, which are predicated on masculine norms of development. Although the text subverts the typical patriarchal representations of women, Irigaray does not "privilege" the cultural significance of her "lips" metaphor with respect to female identity formation, as Freud and Lacan do with their "phallus" metaphor.

Furthermore, she critiqued the psychoanalysis being product of the patriarchal society failed to analyze what it owes to the mother. She consistently puts forward the view that women in patriarchy have no identity as women, emphasizing the relationship of the little girl to the mother's body. The girl, says Irigaray (1985), 'has the mother in some sense, in her skin, in the humidity of the mucous membranes, in the intimacy of her most intimate parts, in the mystery of her relation to gestation, birth and to her sexual identity'.

#### **Identity construction through 'erotogenic' stages**

Hovering between natural and human science, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, sees identity in terms of the unconscious negotiation of painful feelings of loss and desire in relation to a complicated web of social or cultural constraints but never solely determined by them. In his theory the silent world of hidden meanings never displaces the ordinary human suffering which gives rise to them (Minsky: 1996. p.4).

Through different erotogenic stages of human life, all human being tend to satisfy their biological needs for food, shelter and warmth which is both practical and a source of pleasure but referred as 'sexual' by Freud. He claims, it is the pre-oedipal stage, where the first pleasure of sexuality is awakened in an infant while sucking at its mother's breast, discovering an erotogenic zone. Through this intimate interaction with the mother, upon whom the child is dependent, a sexual drive emerges and also it achieves relative autonomy while the drive separates from its original function. The oral stage, associated with the drive to "incorporate" objects through the mouth, is followed by the anal stage during which the anus becomes an erotogenic zone as the child takes pleasure in defecation. This pleasure is characterized by Freud as "sadistic" because the child is

understood to be taking delight in expulsion and destruction with a desire for possessive control. The child enters into the phallic stage, when the sexual drive is focused on the genitals.

What is happening in this process is a gradual organization of the libidinal drives, centering the child's own body in which it has no centre of identity and the boundaries between itself and the external world are indeterminate. It can be defined as 'auto eroticism', within which Freud sometimes includes the whole of infantile sexuality: the child takes erotic delight in its own body, but without as yet being able to view its body as a complete object. Auto-eroticism must thus be distinguished from what Freud calls 'narcissism', a state in which one's body or ego as a whole is 'cathected', or taken as an object of desire (Eagleton, 1983: p. 153-154).

The child in this state as described by Freud as 'anarchic, sadistic, aggressive, self-involved and pleasure seeking' - within the grip of the pleasure principle, is ungendered. Even though it is riddled with sexual drives, it draws no distinction between the gender categories but allows us to begin to imagine how we create and live out our gendered identities as 'masculine' and 'feminine' men and women in culture to a greater or lesser extent divided within ourselves, as a result of these experiences. The unconscious part of who we are (referred to as id) together with the part of us which can be expressed within language or consciousness (the ego) are always embedded together within the contingencies of history and place (Minsky, 1998: p.23). This does not exclude the possibility that some elements of the unconscious dimension may well be universal human phenomena because almost all of us had our earliest experience of intimacy, love, separation with our mother or substitute mother who was a female.

#### **The Oedipal crisis: debates over Gendering the Subject**

Freud mainly focused on what we make imaginatively of bodily drives and sensations rather than on relationships. He rather argued that the unconscious, sexuality and the body are intrinsically interwoven, which achieved the vital conjunction of these different dimensions of our identity in the oedipal crisis, between three and five years of a child. This is the age when we emerge from our fantasies around the body of the mother into fully fledged human beings. And before this time, we shared a 'fused identity' with the mother with particular areas of our bodies like mouth, anus and penis, clitoris (Minsky, 1996: p. 31-3).

According to Freud, a boy's close relation to his mother, as the primary love-object, leads to a desire for complete union with her. A girl, on the other hand, who is similarly attached to the mother and thus caught up in a 'homosexual' desire, directs her libido (love, sexual energy broadly construed) toward her father (for reasons which we'll consider shortly). This produces a triadic relationship regardless of one's sex, with the parent of the same sex cast in the role of a rival for the affections of the parent of the opposite sex (Wright, 1992). Thus, the boy gradually represses his incestuous desire to his mother, adjusts to the reality principle out of a fear being castrated by father, and waits for the day when he will be the patriarch. In this way the boy identifies with his father and the symbolic role of manhood.

The girl's route through the Oedipal stage is far more problematic in Freud's view. Realizing that she is castrated and thus inferior, the girl turns away from her similarly castrated mother and attempts to seduce her father. When this fails, she returns to the mother and identifies with her feminine role. However, she still envies the penis that she will never have; so she unconsciously substitutes a desire to have her father's baby.

Freud's theory shows little insight into femininity and the experience of women. His claim that female sexuality is a "dark continent" says as much.

#### **(Freud's) Penis envy versus (Klein's) discovery of breast**

Psychoanalytic theory and its development with the school of object relations in England led to an emphasis on the mother-child dyad, and on motherhood. Klein's theory carried on Freud's shift in the emphasis from the father to the mother and mother's importance for children of both sexes. For her, the relationship of the child to the mother's body shaped subsequent emotional life. Particularly, the relationship to the breast is crucial in the child's early experience. According to Klein, the little girl believes her mother's body contains everything that is desirable, including the father's penis. As a consequence, she is filled with hatred towards her mother and wishes to attack the inside of her body. It was the discovery of breasts rather the lack of penis (Klein, 1957) that turned the little girl away from her mother towards father, argued, Klein. Her views on this early relationship between mother and baby had an impact on some of the early writings on femininity in British society.

As Maguire (1995) emphasizes, Klein redefining the Oedipal crisis, focuses much more on emotional and intellectual development than on sexual desire. The child's envy and fear is related to the mother's body rather than the fear of castration and the achievement of physical health, including the capacity for self selection and symbolic thought, depends on it being able to recognize that the mother has a life of her own including a sexual relationship with the father (Maguire 1995: 35).

#### **Projection and projective identification: and the defense**

The psychoanalytic concept of projection and projective identification allows us to begin to see the evidence for feelings or fantasies which are unconscious. Racism, class antagonism, sexism and homophobia may be generalized examples of this kind of unconscious behavior, projected or externalized onto others so that these hatred parts of the self are experienced as hostile elements, contained in the external world, explains Freud (Minsky, 1996: p.3).

Although Freud first used the concept of projection, the joint concepts of projection and projective identification are particularly associated with the work of Klein who, on the basis of her analysis of very young children, radically differs from Freud. Klein opposes, the unconscious is structured not between the age of three and five but in the pre-oedipal baby's developing relationship with its mother. In a relationship of projective identification in which the baby projects itself onto the mother and then redefines with her, the baby's self is characterized by Klein as being initially undifferentiated from that of the mother. Because of this total dependence, the baby experiences alternating states of love and hate (Klein in Minsky, 1998: p.40). When it is satisfied by the mother, experiences itself as 'good' and idealizes the mother. When it feels frustrated, it experiences itself as 'bad' and of physical disintegration. To overcome this danger to its fragile sense of self the baby splits off its bad feelings and projects them onto the mother who is then experienced as attacking rather than loving. The baby, like the adult who projects in later life, actually suffers from a paranoid fantasy: it feels itself under attack from its own externalized, feelings of hatred and envy now embodied by the mother, its physical 'other half' (Minsky, 1996: p.7).

**Conclusion**

Psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Lacan in both its modern and post modern dimensions, has given us infinitely rich, complex, subtle ways of thinking, crossing the boundaries of body and speaking about identity, difference, sexuality, knowledge, language and culture. In most the cases, these theories see gender as fluid suggesting our gendered subjectivity as unstable as it is vulnerable to the subversion of unconscious desire. In particular, psychoanalysis suggests not simply that from our earliest childhood we are driven by a variety of biological drives as some have suggested but in a complicated way, how we construct ourselves and culture out of what we unconsciously make of our earliest bodily experiences. Crucially, how the passionate emotional entanglements which arise out of these experiences within our particular historically and culturally situated families. Many of the theoretical developments came after Freud despite their different ways of conceptualizing the construction of identity and their changes in focus and emphasis. Despite imperfections, limitations and omissions, even in the light of powerful later developments, psychoanalysis still remains central to contemporary work on gender as it has opened up crucial insights about how we come both to be and not to be ourselves and, jointly with others, create and be created by the meanings of language and culture.

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