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“CULTURAL STEREOTYPES DEFINING WHO THE SUPERIOR GENDER IS? A STUDY BASED ON EMILY MARTIN’S ESSAY ON “*THE EGG AND THE SPERM: HOW SCIENCE HAS CONSTRUCTED A ROMANCE BASED ON STEREOTYPICAL MALE-FEMALE ROLES*””

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ABSTRACT

Gender stereotyping is a concept that has prevailed in the society for ages. This stereotyping not only hinders the basic opportunities that should be available to all individuals, but also results in one gender being deemed to be better than the other. This therefore, creates a biased outlook of certain tasks to be performed by one particular gender only hence showcasing a clear discrimination. The extent of gender stereotyping has only grown over the years so much so that it has reached the sacred books of education. This article sheds light on how biased and discriminatory notions of gender has reached the medical textbooks further establishing the how language and culture play an important role in such internalisation of gender biases. Hence, indicating that the fight for gender equality is far from over even in a society that is considered to be as progressive as ours.

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The society, from time immemorial, has specified gender roles in everything in and around the community. Culture and language have played a vital role in keeping these roles intact over the years which has led to the shaping of gender biases within society. Moreover, everything in the community is so gendered that it leads to much stereotyping, which results in deeming a single-gender superior to the others. This bias creates for fewer opportunities for the other genders and therefore, subjects them to subjugation. Emily Martin, in her essay *'The egg and the sperm: how science has constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles'*¹ talks about the gender bias inherent in the language of medical textbooks. The essay talks about how the various stereotypes around the male and female existence in the society influences the method by which the male and female biological processes are described within the medical community. The stereotypes include how only a man can be independent or that they are considered to be the superior gender and are stronger than women or are more capable for higher positions etc. The misogyny present in our society which has gone as far as influencing medical texts which are deemed to be based on pure solid facts; facts of truth, that are now blinded by the existing cultural gendered stereotypes.

Language influences thought and it is evident in the gender biased descriptions of the scientific texts. It is the way by which individuals communicate with one another facilitating the understanding of a particular subject matter by influencing the way it is to be understood. The way things are conveyed, help people get an idea or an understanding of an already established fact or circumstance which further influences their thought and understanding of the subject at hand. This bias that it creates, is carried forward for years and therefore is finally etched in corners of one's brain. For example, if we take a quote from the essay that Emily Martin borrows from a medical text, the egg is also passive, which means it must depend on the sperm for rescue². The above quote indicates that the egg is perceived to be a woman in distress who can be saved only by a man, which complies with existing notion about females in the society. The language used in the above quote points to the fact that the egg is helpless on its own and always needs to be rescued by its counterpart i.e. the sperm. Women in our society are thought to be dependent on men under all circumstances as men are considered to be more authoritative, powerful and in general the superior gender. This bias plays out in all scenarios, irrespective

¹ Martin, E. (1991). The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494680>

² Martin, E. (1991). The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 490. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494680>

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of what the truth is. Further taking another quote from Emily Martin's essay, "it is remarkable how "femininely" the egg behaves and how "masculinely" the sperm. The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not move or journey, but passively "is transported," "is swept," or even "drifts" along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperm are small, "streamlined and invariable active. They "deliver" their genes to the egg, activate the developmental program of the egg, and have a velocity that is often remarked upon.³ It is astonishing how reproductive processes are being gendered and that the male processes are considered to be more significant and more of a marvel when compared to that of a female. The method by which these processes are described conforms with the normative stereotyping present in society and continues to be taken forward with the release of such texts.

The normalising of misogynistic approach in the society is backed by the delivery of knowledge in a gendered manner. The method in which people are exposed to such content influences their thought process, which they then, cultivate in their daily lives. The power that language possesses can be very impactful, but at the same time it can be detrimental. Emily Martin's essay lays emphasis on the fact that even the biological processes in a woman discriminated when compared to men. Misogyny is not far behind in the field of science that's supposed to be based on true concrete facts. The excess of ova produced in the female body, is said to be wasteful even though there is no production of ova after birth of a girl child but millions of sperms produced every day in a male since the time he reaches puberty, is not considered to be a waste, indicates the hypocrisy practised in our society. In a collection of scientific papers, an electron micrograph of an enormous egg and a tiny sperm is titled "A Portrait of the Sperm."⁴ Considering the description of the micrograph, it is very evident how a tiny sperm belonging to the so called 'superior gender' of the society has overshadowed the large egg present in the picture. The mere ignorance of the presence of the egg shows how little value the biological gamete is given since it belongs to the female gender. Both the male and female gametes play a vital role in the reproduction process, then why is one considered to be superior than the other?

The author draws out the difference in the approach in how female and male biological cycles are described. For example, "medical texts describe menstruation as the debris of the uterine

³ Martin, E. (1991). The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 489. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494680>

⁴ Martin, E. (1991). The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 491. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494680>

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lining, the result of necrosis or death of tissue. The descriptions imply that a system has gone awry, making products of no use, unsalable, wasted, scarp. Further it is described to be chaotic disintegration of form, complementing the many texts that describe it as ceasing, dying, losing, denuding, expelling.”⁵ On the other hand, the maturation of a sperm is described to be a process as, “the mechanisms which guide remarkable cellular transformation from spermatid to mature sperm remain uncertain ... Perhaps the most amazing characteristic of spermatogenesis is its sheer magnitude: the normal human male may manufacture several hundred million sperm per day”⁶. On this account, these several hundred million sperm that are generated on a daily basis are not looked as to be a “waste” whereas the female menstrual cycle is looked at to be a debris and a wasteful process even though she would shed only a single gamete each month. The sheer difference in approach in explaining the processes is the evidence of how societal constructs of gender triumph once again; anything a man does is “better” than what a woman would do. Another example for the same is the description provided for an ovary in one of the texts, “When you look through a laparoscope ... at an ovary that has been through hundreds of cycles, even in superbly healthy American female, you see a scarred, battered organ.”⁷

It is evident that language plays a vital role in how these descriptions are written in addition to the influence of the gendered stereotypes.

In addition, the ideology of Social Darwinism which emerged from the biological concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest were applied to sociology, economics and politics also proves that gendered types exist. Essentially, it is a scenario wherein one with a stronger position in the society will see their wealth and power increase whereas ones in a weaker position will see their wealth and power decrease. It can be inferred that Social Darwinism is a theory that human race is subject to the same laws as that of natural selection of biology. Popularly, Darwin’s theory is understood to be survival of the fittest which if tried to be understood with respect to the topic at hand, the individual with most means to get by in a society dominated and unfortunately run by men, will be the only ones to survive. In various instances it has often been mentioned that a woman needs to work ten times harder than a man on the same level to earn the same amount of respect and money. Even in the world of pop culture, female artists have always mentioned that if they were a man, success to them would

⁵ Arthur C. Guyton, *Physiology of the Human Body*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: Saunders College Publishing, 1948), 624.

⁶ Arthur J. Vander, James H. Sherman, and Dorothy S. Luciano, *Human Physiology: The Mechanisms of Body Function*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), 483-84.

⁷ Melvin Konner, “Childbearing and Age”, *New York Times Magazine* (December 27, 1987), 22-23, esp. 22.

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have come much easier and they wouldn't be criticised for their every move. Whereas as a female artist, it is essential for them to work infinity times harder for them to be simply respected and be valued for their talent.

Language and cultural are socially intertwined with one another within the society. The patriarchal culture that persists in our community influences the day-to-day activities. Since the male has always been looked upon as the superior gender in the Indian value system, it has become a normative practise to inculcate the same in every field be it education, work or the mere existence in society. It can be seen in school textbooks that the images of a person holding a high and qualifying post like that of a doctor, lawyer, manager, professor or chef and so on, is usually depicted by a male figure. Children are made accustomed to such a representation from a very young age and thus follow the same gender bias as they grow up. In rural India, most of the female children are not allowed to get an education whereas the male child no matter irresponsible he may be, is provided an education under the pretence that only the male child can earn and support the family. The girl child is made to stay at home and perform all the household chores. They are always taught to be an 'ideal woman' who is obedient to her husband, never asks him any questions, does as he says, stands by him at all times and provides him with everything he needs. This includes the woman bearing all harsh extremities that the husband showers upon her quietly as well. In contrast if we take urban India, the situation is still the same. A woman earning a high salary is looked at to be an arrogant woman who thinks of no one but herself. Even though the above narrative may not be true, it is the success of a woman that cannot be digested especially if she is more successful compared to her husband. "Images of woman as dangerous and aggressive, the femme fatale who victimises men, are wide-spread in Western literature and culture."⁸ The fact that men are given more importance in the society can also be seen in premier work places where a woman doing the same job as a man, has a lower pay scale when compared to a him. Various movies and Tv shows are being made to showcase this toxic culture present even in today's time. "Four more shots Please" is one of those shows which highlights the toxic masculinity in today's work culture in its second season and portrays various instances where women are victimized by this gender bias.

⁸ Martin, E. (1991). The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494680>

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Gender bias not only hinders them from going after what they want but also does not allow them to perform to their full potential. Women are restricted from availing any kind of opportunities and are subject to constant public humiliation since all eyes are on her. If one voices out their opinions and stands up for themselves suddenly the whole society seems to think of it to be an unwomanly thing to do. The misogynistic approach has influenced all kinds of objects in the social community. This approach hampers the idea of equality among the genders present in society and makes for a very biased culture. Language and culture are hand in glove for carrying forward such an approach. Until representation of culture is bettered and pre conceived biases are not adhered to, the situation of gendered discrimination in all fields will continue.

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