# UNIT 5: MARXIST FEMINISM

## UNIT STRUCTURE


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## 5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be able to –

- understand about the interpretation of feminism from Marxist perspective
- know about the women's role in production and reproduction.
- know about alienation with regards to women.
- moreover,understand about marriage and family from Marxist perspective

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION

Feminism has focused on gender because a through revision of gender roles seemed the most effective way of changing the power relations between men and women. Since no one in their right mind will want to give serious power to a person who must be timid, dependent, irrational and self-pitying because she is a woman, the effort to purge the culture of such gendered stereotyping is absolutely crucial. From a Marxist perspective

history is dominated by a struggle between social classes that will only end when a truly classless society has been achieved. Given the fact that throughout history women have been collectively denied important rights, it was almost inevitable that a Marxist feminism would emerge that saw women as constituting a seriously underpriviledged class.In his work *The Origin of Family, Property and the State* (1884) Engel's elaborates on how physical and sexual labor of women has been appropriated for reproductive and care taking functions of private property and family. The subordination and suppression of women are not natural but made to appear so in order to cater to patriarchy. Marxist feminists think class exploitation under capitalism is the root cause of women's oppression. It calls for a revolution and overthrow of capitalist order to achieve freedom of women

## 5.3 PRODUCTION

One of the more important arguments of Marxism is that: human beings make their own lives and they do this through two interlinked material processes and one among them is production. Production comprises all those tasks and activities performed by members of a society to secure their basic needs: food, shelter and clothing.Marxism postulates that every society organizes production in specific ways. Thus the production of food, shelter and clothing in any society follows a certain pattern or mode depending on what is being produced, how it is produced and who produces it. The mode of production is not static. It changes over time. Modes of reproduction are both physiological and cultural: women give birth and thus literally produce children who go on to occupy their appointed roles in the production process. But women play another major role in the mode of production. They sustain relationships, family unity, raise children and socialize them into accepting their roles in the production process. They do this in many different ways. One of the most effective forms of socialization happens through culture and faith, they actually take charge of most of family rituals and observe religious codes faithfully.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q.NO 1** What does production comprise of?

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**Q.NO 2** Is the mode of production static?

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**Q. NO 3** How does one of the most effective forms of socialization happens?

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## 5.4 REPRODUCTION

Reproduction is the second process next to production. Reproduction refers to the specific task of bringing children to this world and raising them up.Production and reproduction are crucially linked because to be able to grow food, or build a house, one needs to survive. Survival needs an enabling context-where one eats, sleeps, is looked after when old or sick, where one finds companionship and love. The sphere of reproduction, the family, efficiently organizes daily living to this end and thereby enables production to go on.

### 5.4.1 RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

There is another concept linked to production and reproduction; that is, relations of production and reproduction. Every act of production, be it hunting, fishing, farming or building requires two things: the actual technical means through which things get done and the human labor which makes this possible. This labor is never free or independent, except when one is working on one's own piece of land or running a small shop. Often labor is hired or enslaved. In olden days, laborers were procured through abduction

and slavery- in wars between early human communities, the losers were enslaved by the victors.

Human societies everywhere came to comprise two distinct groups: those who owned resources and power, and those who had only their skills and labor to offer. The former excercised control over production, but never, except in rare cases, were direct producers. The latter were the actual producers, the workers who made crops bloom, whose skills produced temples and cathedrals, but they had to work for those who could pay them, employ them and ensure their survival. This relationship between those who produce and those who own resources is a production relationship, that is, essentially one of power. Those who control economic resources exercise power and authority over those who do not possess anything but their labor power.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q.NO 4** What does reproduction refer to?

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**Q.NO 5** What are the two things which every act of production require?

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## 5.5 CLASS

Class is the basic concept that distinguishes Marxism from other traditions of social thought. Marx wrote very little on class as a formal concept. Beyond saying that classes have a determinate relationship to production as direct producers or non-producers, people cannot be classified once and for all. Classes are formed out of an antagonistic relationship between different forms of property ownership that characterize a particular mode of production at a definite stage in its historical development. The main forms

of ownership of the capitalistic mode of production are labor-power, capital and land.

Now the question is how women as a class is being oppressed. In this context we can refer to Engel's *"Origin of the family, private property and the State"* where he stated that the shift from feudalism to private ownership of land has had a huge effect on the status of women. In a private ownership system, individuals who do not own land or other means of production are in a situation that Engels(1884) compares to enslavement- They must work for the owners of the land in order to be able to live within the system of private ownership. He argues that a women's subordination is not as a result of her biological disposition but of social relations and that men's effort to achieve their demands for control of women's labor and sexual faculties have gradually become institutionalized in the nuclear family. Through a Marxist historical perspective, Engels(1884) analyzed the widespread social phenomena associated with female sexual morality, such as fixation on virginity and sexual purity etc. The contribution of capitalism, in separating the family household from the commodity production further solidified the control of men over women when the latter became economic dependent of the former, in the male breadwinner- female housewife nuclear family form. Importantly capitalism also creates the possibility of women's liberation from family-based patriarchy by creating possibilities for women to work in wage labor. However Engels stresses that because of the problems of unpaid housework, full women's liberation can only be achieved with the development of socialism and the socialisation of housework and childrearing in social services provided by the state.

Gender incorporating oppression is closely related to class oppression, so the oppression of women is similar to that of the relation between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Though women play a major role in production and reproduction process their role is hardly being recognized.

In the 20$^{th}$ century also Women as a class is oppressed everywhere. Even in the workplace women are seen being oppressed and injustice is done to them in every aspect.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q.NO 6** What distinguishes Marxism from other traditions of social thought?

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**Q.NO 7** What further solidified the control of men over women according to Engel's?

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## 5.6 ALIENATION

The word 'alienation' implies a hostile force or impersonal environment against which we feel separated from or resentful towards. However Marx's concept of alienation is not primarily a psychological one about personal feelings or cognitive dissonance. It is more concerned with workings of unseen social forces that diminish what is to be truly human.

Alienation for Marx refers to the separation of human capacities from their original source. A sustained capacity for practical problem-solving, is intrinsic to what it is to be truly human. Marx's concept of 'human-nature' is not a fixed or essential nature but one that changes as the world around it changes. In some respects this separation of human powers has always accompanied the activity of human beings. All human societies must produce the basic preconditions for their own survival and reproduction, like shelter and food. It only becomes 'alienation' when both the object produced and the means of labor, the final product and the means of production, are systematically separated from the direct producer. This forcible separation of the products and the means of labor fully emerges only with the development of capitalism as a mode of production.Here we will examine how women are alienated from the production process.

Human devaluation has four intertwined aspects. They are

- Human became alienated from the product of their labor
- Human become alienated from their own work activity.
- Humans become alienated from their own life activity
- Humans become alienated from each other.

Marx notes that under the capitalist system which produces alienation, 'labor always appears as repulsive, always as external forced labor and not labor, by contrast as 'freedom and happiness'. The oppression of married women is not strictly a form of alienation which is characteristic only of relations under capitalism; domestic work is instead a non capitalistic anomaly. Mary Wollstencraft and Margaret Fuller have insisted that women's domestic labor is actually external and forced. They have argued that women are encouraged to think of their labor for the family as 'freedom and happiness'. Thus feminists have extended the logic of alienation into marriage and specifically into what Marx terms reproduction: refreshing the existing workers by providing food and comforts and replenishing the future supply of laborers through child bearing and child rearing. Women's domestic and reproductive labor is not properly regarded as alienation by Marx. It is said to produce no use value and to add no surplus value. Just as work in the home cannot be alienated labor because it lies outside capitalism so it is also seen in classical Marxism as lying outside production altogether, as belonging to the realm of the 'merely' natural or reproduction. However a new category may be added to conventional Marxism, 'domestic relation of production'. The effect of this is to highlight the injustice which occurs when women receive no share in the domestic products which they create including the products of conception and pregnancy. By contrast, in conventional Marxism work which does not produce surplus value such as cooking for the family is actually regarded as consumption not as production at all. To call women's domestic labor consumption or reproduction rather than a form of production, we can assert the question of why women's labor is not seen as adding value, even when the products women produce and the services they provide would have to be purchased in the market if women did not make them. Conventional Marxists presuppose that there is something natural and

inherently non-exploitative about the division of labor within the family by assuming that reproduction simply is women's domain.

A feminist Meillasoux argues women are subject to two kinds of exploitation:

- Exploitation of their labor as they lose claim to their produce, which is handed over to their husbands , who take control of it or pass it on to the elders.
- Exploitation of their reproductive capacities, since filiation is always established through men.

Thus Women are always seen as a part of social reproduction , and their exploitation becomes a part of the relations of production.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.NO 8 Whatdoes the word alienation imply?

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Q. NO 9 Which is the new category whichcan be applied to conventional Marxism in regard to alienation?

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Q.NO 10 Why house work is excluded from market relations?

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## 5.7 MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Marriage is the most persistent and common form of relationship between the individual men and women. Marriage and children constitute a family in a set of relationships. Relationships of reproduction vary from culture to culture. They are also more resilent and stable than relationships of production-in this sense they may straddle different modes of production.

Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx's comrade and a fellow thinker, writes at length on these matters in his famou *"The Origin of the Family, Private*

*Property and the State"*. He suggests that early human societies were egalitarian. There existed a simple and functional division of labor, 'a pure and simple outgrowth of nature', between men and women. Men hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and made the tools necessary to carry out these tasks. Women cared for the house, prepared food, clothing and looked after children.

Each was master in his or her own field of activity: the men in the forest, the women in the house…The household was communistic , comprising several and often many families. Whatever was produced and used in common was common property.

The woman was at the centre of the communistic household, for often she alone knew who the father or fathers of her children were. Sexual relationships within the household were freefer than we know them now. Women could choose their men. They, in fact, controlled the household, the men were mere visitors who could be asked to leave when the women did not want them.

Things changed when human communities settled in one place for a long time. Earlier, human beings lead an essentially nomadic existence, wandering from place to place in search of food and water. Once they started living in a stable environment , they learnt to grow crops and began to raise animals. Now food ceased to be a day to day problem. They could not only meet their everyday food needs, but could also store and use surplus food. As human beings produced more food, learnt to make and use tools and began to practice animal husbandry, they had a range of goods at their disposal. Once the production of these goods accelerated, the communistic nature of society changed. Fights between groups became common, as they fought over resources. Often the victors carried away the losers to work as slaves for them. This created what Engels called the 'first great division of society into classes'': masters and slaves, the exploiters and the exploited.

Gradually as groups accumulated wealth, the relationship between men and women changed, for all the wealth was a result of production, essentially a male activity. Domestic work and the household, where women had wielded authority over men and the group in general, lost its significance.

But when production became more valued than the household, household labor was devalued and women became domestic slaves.

Thus, the division of labour, once a pure and simple outgrowth of nature ceased to be in favour of women. The growing significance of production created a new institution: private property. For men who produced more and more of everything wished to keep all of it for themselves. Private property was not only land, animals or slaves, soon it came to include women as well. Men wanted to own women, so that they could gain control over the children, something which they needed to do, if they had to pass on their wealth to the next generation.

With a women being deemed a single man's property , her control over her children also loosened. Earlier, children inherited through their mother rather than their father, which is predominantly the case now. Inheriting through the mother was known as mother-right. But when women lost their exalted status in the household, mother-right too gradually disappeared. Over a period of time, children learnt to identify their descent and inheritance through the father. By this time, the woman and her household had ceased to be central to the group's life. Now the man and his house and property assumed importance and men became valued group leaders. This is how patriarchy -the rule of the father-came into existence.

Engels characterizes the transformation of women into property and the disappearance of mother-right as the 'world-historical defeat of the female sex'. With women becoming the property of men, sexual love ceased to be free and of advantage to women. A women was now bound to a single man and gradually, monogamous marriage became the norm. This meant that a woman had to be chaste and loyal to her husband, but he did not have to be likewise. Since he had economic power and sexual authority, he could choose to have several mistresses and wives. Engels argues that as communistic households slowly dissolved under pressure from private property, their internal relationships also deteriorated. Spontaneous sex love and promiscuity gave way to degrading and oppressive relationships. Therefore sexual regulation and control, became a norm when monogamy emerged.

In Engel's view the historic defeat of the female sex and the emergence of patriarchy led to a devaluing of female tasks, roles and responsibilities and a consequent valorization of male roles and functions. This also led to sexual hypocrisy in marriage and a chauvinist sexual ethic . Men wanted wives and families, and at the same time claimed their right to older sexual freedoms, in the form of extramarital relationships. Women on the other hand were enjoined to remain chaste and loyal to the idea of monogamy.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q NO.11** How wSere the early human societies according to Engels?

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**Q NO.12** When did household labor become devalued and women became domestic slaves?

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## 5.8 LET US SUM UP

- From this unit we have learned about Marxist feminism
- We have learned the role of women in the production and reproduction process from a Marxist feminist lens
- Then with connection with production and reproduction we have learned about the relations of production
- We have learned women as a class and how it gets oppressed by the male counterpart in the capitalist system and also analyzed Fredrich Engel's view on it.
- We have seen how women gets alienated in the production and reproduction process
- We have analyzed at length Women's role in marriage and family and again analyzed it from Marxist feminist perspective.



## 5.9 FURTHER READINGS

1) Vogel, Lise. *Marxism and the oppression of Women*.USA: Rutgers University Press,1983.

2) Water, Mary-Alice. *Feminism and the Marxist Movement*. London: Pathfinder Press, 1972.

## 5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans Q.NO 1** Production comprises of all those tasks and activities performed by members of a society to secure their basic needs: food, clothing and shelter.

**Ans Q.NO 2** No, the mode of production is not static. It changes over time.

**Ans Q.NO 3** One of the most effective forms of socialization happens through culture and faith, they actually take charge of most of family rituals and observe religious codes faithfully.

**Ans Q.NO 4** Reproduction refers to the specific task of bringing children to this world and raising them up.

**Ans Q.NO 5** The two things which every act of production require are:

a) The actual technical means through which things get done

b) The human labor which makes this possible.

**Ans Q.NO 6** The concept of class distinguishes Marxism from other traditions of social thought.

**Ans Q.NO 7** The rise of Capitalism, in separating the family household from the commodity production further solidified the control of men over women.

**Ans Q.NO 8** The word 'alienation' implies a hostile force or impersonal environment against which we feel separated from or resentful towards.

**Ans Q.NO 9** 'Domestic relation of production' is the new category which may be applied to conventional Marxism in regard to alienation.

**Ans. Q.NO 10** House work is excluded from market relations because it is done by women and not because it is inherently not a source of market value or because it could not be exchanged for money.

**Ans Q.NO 11** The early human societies according to Engel's were egalitarian. There existed a simple and functional division of labor, ' a pure and simple outgrowth of nature', between men and women.

**Ans Q.NO 12** The historic defeat of female sex and evolution of patriarchy made household labor become devalued and women became domestic slaves.



## 5.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Short questions** (Answer within 150 words)

**Q NO.1** What were the views of the Marxist feminists?

**Q NO. 2** What is relation of production?

**Q NO. 3** Why according to Marx and Engels oppression of married women cannot be considered a form of alienation?

**Long Questions** (Answer within 300-500 words)

**Q NO. 1** How is woman as a class being oppressed?

**Q NO. 2** ''World historical defeat of the female sex". What did Engel meant by it?.