

SESSION I: GENDER AND DIVERSITY

Facilitator: Rebecca Yoshizawa

Notetakers: Sanzida Habib and Parboti Roy⁷

Reema Faris, GSWS PhD Student, Simon Fraser University **“It’s a Fact! Or is it? The Turbulence of Gender”**

Reema Faris’ exploration of the turbulence and debate around gender started when she became a mother. She began her presentation by clarifying its objective, which was to share her perspective and encourage audience participation in a dialogue about the complex issues and meanings around gender. She said she came to realize how much is invested in communicating about gender when she was about to share photos of her child; she thought that because the baby was covered with a blue blanket, people would automatically assume it was a boy. The child was only six months old and had no idea about gender—how it is perceived or understood, and how people establish and react to different gender norms. She became more self-aware by examining and applying the idea of gender as a socially constructed concept to analyze and understand the cultural phenomenon of acting and reacting to others based on our/their biology.

In 2016, Reema began to study the relationships and debates around biology and gender more seriously in a university setting. She quickly became interested in the trend of the celebrity gender-reveal party. Celebrities tend to influence, inform, and set standards for the rest of the world, and how they tackle the issue of gender at the prenatal stage is no exception. Reema started researching what celebrities do when they become pregnant and want to reveal the gender of their baby to the world before giving birth: “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” To help explain the concept further, Reema shared a short YouTube clip with the audience.

The gender reveal can be a special moment of celebration for a woman expecting a child. Also fascinating is the media’s response and role in portraying gender at the prenatal stage. A positive aspect of all these gender-reveal party videos is that the announcements are celebrated equally whether it is a boy or girl, with an equal amount of drama and extravagance. Problematically, however, they also celebrate and normalize the gender binary and heterosexuality, which are in fact social constructions. They continue to reinforce sexist notions of masculinity and femininity—of biology dictating who we are and who we will be—while no affirmed consensus exists among biologists about the role of biology in determining gender roles. Through such essentialist biological and binary constructions of boy and girl, these celebrities also endorse and exacerbate capitalism and consumerism. For example, Jessica Alba promoted her own company and brands via such parties. These celebrities and their parties thus reassert patriarchal social norms and heteronormativity.

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Reema shared her research on gender, which numerous experts have claimed is a socially created binary system. Sterling's work on the different possible combinations of chromosomes alludes to nearly infinite complexities and variations in human sex and gender. Neurologists have examined brain functions to understand people's perception and behavior around gender norms. Gina Rippon has shown that the brain is flexible and changes over time; our brain actually reads life as it is lived. The human brain seems to be capable of adjusting to different situations or norms, and thus there is no clear scientific basis for a biologically determined gender binary. Where, then, do the notions of gender and gender norms come from? Obviously, they come from society; gender is a performance, a power relation, and an ideology. Referring to Susan Griffin's (1982) work "The Way of All Ideology," Reema pointed out that even when we try to break the gender binary, we still are talking about gender. Thus, gender as an ideology is problematic. Julia Serano has argued that gender has multiple meanings. The gender binary creates inequality because it is hierarchical. If a person cannot fit into this or that category, it is not the fault of the person; rather, it is the flawed system. Gender is like a prison where those who do not conform are rendered deviant.

Question & Answer Session

Q: My question is about the issue of naming a child. Should we consider gender-neutral names?

A: I don't think it really works that way. It is okay if you choose particular names that are gender neutral, but if we ask that you must have a gender-neutral name, that doesn't really promote choice or freedom, or even promote gender fluidity, and I'm not sure how we can reach there.

Q: Why the title "The Turbulence of Gender"? Is this a metaphor? If so, could you explain the metaphor a bit more?

A: I just took the word "turbulence" as an English word basically to mean trouble; it can be compared with the turbulence in the plane. But it can be used as a metaphor. If we look at the basic idea of gender, the objective is to categorize. But it's a much more complicated notion. We need categories because there is a lot of uncertainty associated with this concept that lead to confusion. But gender is not that clear-cut category—there is no A or B; it's not that simple and we need to accept the complexity, and it creates turbulence. But we can't control it. Certainty is not possible. Most of the world is out of our control.

Q: Oftentimes, in certain cultures, naming a child is actually part of an ideology; not a gender ideology, but some other ideologies. Do you have any thoughts on that?

A: Yes, it is. There are many cultural practices and cultural connotations of particular names. It is inscribed into our culture more deeply in the society. A lot of thought goes into giving a meaningful name. A lot of expectations and characteristics are imposed on the child. It is a complicated one.

Q: Celebration of a sex revealing party is a problematic one. But in the case of the conflation of sexes, how do you think the tension is expressed for an intersex child? How does the existence of intersex people fit the idea of the gender binary, or does it complicate the gender reveal?

A: The book by Gina refers to the gender conflation. Conflation happens all the time. Intersex- transgender issues exist, but the gender binary is so strong that the idea of

intersex becomes a fallacy for the gender reveal party. I don't know why people emphasize this. This strong ideology does not open up any space for questions related to the gender binary.

Q: Transgender people have raised the issue of gender rights. Transgender perspectives have also problematized the concept of the gender binary. Trans people can stay in the middle of the gender binary framework. Have you raised the issue of transgender identity in your work?

A: There is a term called "reactionary." There's always some revolution; a stream of change is happening, and people advocate change, then people try to stop those changes. My work is not really reflecting this issue. In the sex/gender-reveal party, the biology of a child is revealed. Why don't the celebrities pose the question, take the time to think? The fascinating fact is that criticizing these celebrities can have a huge effect, and the effect is amplified. Why don't they take a position to promote the idea of fairness, to tell people that it is complicated to reveal the [baby's] gender? Why don't they support people to become who they are instead of fitting the binary? Questioning of the embedded notions is very important. I support LGBTQ+ people and their cause. The idea of fairness is important in this regard. However, they are complicit in maintaining binaries.

Q: When did the celebrity gender-reveal party start? Do you have any idea?

A: I'm not very sure, but probably in recent times with the advent and advancement of technology and media as well. It's supposed to have a relation with the wide use of ultrasonography.

**June Scudeler, FNST/GSWS Assistant Professor, Simon Fraser University
"Gender and Sexuality: Indigenous Ways of Knowing"**

June Scudeler welcomed everyone including the delegates from China in Meitei language. She thanked the organizers and acknowledged the event's presence on Indigenous land. She also mentioned that her maternal ancestors came from Italy. As a research scholar, she promotes "Indigenous ways of knowing," Indigenous literary texts, Indigenous sovereignty, and Meitei ways of encompassing epistemologies, histories, and culture instead of using Western epistemology. She mentioned that the Trans-Mountain pipeline will be dangerous and will impact the life of peoples, especially Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people, as well as Simon Fraser University.

June pointed out that "Two-Spirit" is an Indigenous term. This term was created by Indigenous peoples to describe those special individuals who do not adhere to or fit into the gender binary. It is different from the Western notion of LGBTQ+ and the way Westerners tend to define those terms. There are many terms used by distinctive Indigenous nations in North America to describe being "Two-Spirit." Different nations have different and very specific terms to denote all aspects of different gender identities. For Indigenous peoples, it is often not about "coming out" but rather coming "in" to the community.

June mentioned that Alex Wilson, a member of Swampy Cree Nation and a professor at the University of Saskatchewan, has written about Two-Spirit people and their body sovereignty and self-determination. She also highly recommended a book by Joshua

Whitehead, who coined the term 'Indiqueer' (formerly Indigiqueer), and who says his sexual identity is a braiding of two worlds: sexuality and community. It is a more radical approach for Indiqueer people, and a very urban-based Indigenous term. It also values the ethics and principle of non-interference. People can identify themselves as who they want to be as long as they do not harm others in the community.

Another Indigenous artist, Swampy Cree painter Kent Monkman, introduced Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, his alter ego, in his painting "The Daddies" (2016). He portrayed this figure posing nude in front of the "Fathers of Confederation," a remake of the Robert Harris painting. The original Fathers of Confederation portrays 63 men including Mr. Macdonald, representing Canada—it is a colonial picture boasting white supremacy. In his own version, Monkman created a parody of the original scene, ridiculing those white colonizers by presenting a nude Miss Chief Eagle (representing a gay subculture) in front of them. However, he left the final interpretation to the viewers. He has a website: kentmonkman.com.

Question & Answer Session

Q: The fluidity of gender is very clear from the previous to the current presentation. Considering the feature of non-interference in the term "Indiqueer," how did colonization impact this?

A: The Cree language and also other Indigenous languages do not have a gender—there's no he or she. My mind just exploded. The colonizers came with this idea of gender binaries. It is not just a representation or metaphor; it's real actions that change and impact people's life. Colonization has horrendous impacts and interference on Indigenous peoples.

Q: Gender and sex identity is complicated. In China, people often confuse between gender and sex. It is also cultural. I often ask my male colleagues, "What's your thought about the impact of gender on men," but they seem to get offended and avoid such discussion. How do you reveal the difference between gender and sex?

A: It is very difficult to pull apart gender from sex. People also mix up gender with sex and sexuality. For Indigenous peoples, it's very different—who you have sex with is very different from what your gender or sex is. It's the role you are playing. Who you feel you are. It's an Indigenous way of knowing. I like the principle of non-interference. I used Cree ways of knowing in my dissertation. Gender, sex, and sexuality—all are social constructions.

Q: I am from Kenya. I speak Swahili, and there is no he or she in my language either. That's why I mix up he and she a lot while speaking in English. Colonization changed a lot of things. So, the Two-Spirited people—is it only welcomed in Cree nation or is it common across all Indigenous nations?

A: In Cree, Anishinaabe, Ojibwe...Cree and Ojibwe are just two sides of a coin; both have Two-Spirit people. I'm not sure if all other nations have it. There's a Two-Spirited dancer—in Powwow culture, men are allowed to dance as women and vice versa. But because of the impact of colonization, I am not sure how much has remained.

Q: Is there any tension between Indigenous and Indiqueer movements? Has it been reflected in Indigenous or Indiqueer folks' literature?

A: Please read the books by Joshua Whitehead—*Jonny Appleseed* and *Full Metal Indigiqueer*.

Asma Sayed, Faculty, Kwantlen Polytechnic University
“Understanding Gender Justice through the Lens of Cinema”

Asma Sayed began her presentation with an acknowledgement of her presence on Indigenous land. Her research examines the representation of women in cinema and social justice in film (both commercial and documentary), especially in India. She has studied if and how film and other popular culture texts reflect society; the role of popular culture in perpetrating misogyny, masculinity, and rape culture in society; and the role of documentary films in raising awareness about women’s rights.

In India, women have held positions as President of a political party and Prime Minister of the country. Yet it remains one of the most dangerous places to be a woman. Rape and violence against women are a regular part of popular culture, including films. Women’s rights are a complex issue in India. The women’s movement has been led by feminists like Arundhati Roy and Kavita Krishnan. However, one of the most concerning issues is female feticide. A 2011 study published in the *British Journal of Medicine* found an alarming rate of female feticides in India. Women are considered a liability and represented as a commodity to be consumed. Asma is concerned about how the issue of female feticides is related to popular culture’s representation of women.

The Indian film industry is huge when measured simply by the sheer volume of films produced by the industry every year. Bollywood also has a tremendous cultural impact on people in India; a huge number of followers and fans worship the film stars. Most films reproduce the objectification and negative stereotyping of women—from “Eve teasing” to hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity. Popular films portray male aggression and violence against women and continue to proliferate rape culture while promoting virginity and chastity for women. Teenage boys’ understanding of masculinity has been heavily influenced by popular cinema. It also shapes the views of society and acceptance of rape culture.

On the other hand, some films, particularly documentaries, have focused on positive images of women and raised issues of women’s rights in India. One documentary film, *India’s Daughter* by Leslee Udwin, was banned by the Indian government in 2015 after it told the story of how a woman was misled into boarding a private bus and then gang raped on the bus and thrown out on the street. A film by an Indo-Canadian woman, *3 Seconds Divorce*, portrays Muslim women’s fight against state legislation and Islamic Sharia law that allows men to divorce their wives simply by uttering “talaq” or “divorce” three times; women are working to force the Indian government to change this unjust and disempowering law. In short, the Indian film industry is slowly waking up to create social change. The industry is also a part of capitalist culture, so it is hard to raise awareness and social consciousness; still, it is moving toward breaking the mold gradually.

Question & Answer Session

Q: I was wondering if you’ve followed a particular timeline. The films you’ve examined—do they represent any particular time period, or when were those made? I’m asking because I’ve noticed some changes in contemporary cinema.

A: Yes, since the 1970s and onward, the first shift became visible; films were now being made for the diaspora audience. Then in the 1990s, there came another shift and liberalization promoting India as an ideal place for women—women being portrayed as virgin mothers and negative stereotypes of vamp women. Yes, gradually change is happening (films like *Pink*, *Talwar*), but not necessarily in the right direction. For example, *Lipstick Under My Burka*—I doubt if it's based on pro-feminist ideas because although it paves a way for sexual liberation, I have trouble with the representation of Muslim men and women; they are objectified in a very Islamophobic way.

Q: These days, Indian cinema doesn't show senior people in dominant roles. People don't want wisdom in films. Do you know about movies that represent grandparents? What are your thoughts?

A: In commercial or mainstream cinema, there are some seniors if there are any older characters. But, yes, your observation is right. Movies celebrate privilege and target the youth. There is not much focus on the older population, and they objectify women. The focus has shifted from showing underprivileged society. Satyajit Roy did, and he is great, but how long do we hang on to the past? It's time for another Satyajit Roy to come.

Q: I don't know if the caste system and political system in India has anything to do in this regard, in representation of violence in cinema. Is this that the cinema really produces or induces violence, or does it just represent the real scenario of violence in society?

A: Socially, women who are marginalized are victims of violence. In the current context, particularly in the last four years, the new hyper-nationalist government just got re-elected. Their attacks on Dalits and minorities have been multifold. Forty lynchings happened in the Dalit, tribal, and Muslim communities. The international community has paid no attention to this. Women's oppression is linked with the violence in cinema. The youth waste time on movies and take this back to their home and perpetrate violence. It is a cyclical thing.

Q: I always think India is full of contradictions. There was no military ruling, but violence has not declined in India. In fact, female feticides have increased. After the national election, out of 55 there were only 6 or 8 women cabinet ministers. I saw a picture of the new ministers and there were only two women. Is it a representation of hyper-masculinity in India? I would like to request you to focus on this issue in films.

A: Yes, I agree with you.

Q: The Bengali film industry is also promoting wisdom and making movies on the older population. Films like *Lipstick Under My Burka* have some problems with depiction of certain population in certain ways, but they also try to promote breaking boundaries. But why do you think there's this mixed message? And how do you think the market plays out?

A: Regional film industry like Bengali is also popular and some good things are happening at local levels. But who has access to regional films? The Hindi film industry has taken over all the other regional or local business. How do we make this regional cinema available for everyone? We can bring them in our classrooms. And some films have good intentions, but unconscious biases come out. Some of the progressive ideas are very limited in the Indian film industry. *Lipstick Under My Burka* may be positive in some ways, but not necessarily notice the representation of Muslim women. More holistic understanding is required.

Q: Female actors in Indian cinema wear revealing clothes in films, and their family members watch those but ask women in their families to wear conservative clothes. Is there a link between these films and increasing rape?

A: There is no concrete research or absolute information about this. There is a need for more research. I mean, in Hindi cinema, romance is basically stalking! Hypothetically, you can say this, but you cannot say films are solely responsible for perpetrating such violence. There are also multiple aspects and there are larger bases.