

The matriarchy debate and its negation

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Abstract: The interest in the matriarchy discourse can be traced as early as from the mid-19th century and still engages the minds of the scholars of anthropology, history, gender studies, kinship studies, and others. Later in the early 1970s the debate on matriarchy received a fresh impetus especially in the studies undertaken by feminist scholarship. This increasing interest in the area of matriarchal studies emerged as a result of a struggle within the mind of the feminist scholarships regarding the question of universal subordination of women. One of the reasons of this churning has been due to the belief that women's achievements or contributions had never been recorded due to a male bias which was always prevalent in almost all disciplines. The emerging subject of modern matriarchal societies is also the investigation and presentation of societies which are non – patriarchal. It gave rise to an exploration of the past societies and also searches for alternative social structures or power dynamics which were not oppressive or exclusionary. This interest in non – oppressive social structures became even more relevant since feminist scholars were unhappy with the present structures of society which are violent and increasingly biased against women. In these and related contexts, the study of matriarchy assumes its significance today. Negation in this context refers to denying the existence of an idea or a concept or a system or tradition. An idea or a concept is negated when it is considered to be against the established norms. It can also be said that if a particular idea of practice is considered to be a threat to an existing order or as an alternative to that existing system, then it is negated. 'Matriarchy' as a social order has been negated from various quarters and for various reasons. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the debate surrounding the idea of matriarchy as available in the contemporary kinship studies, gender studies, and others. This paper also examines how the concept of matriarchy has been negated from various quarters.

Index terms: Matriarchy, Patriarchy, Gender studies, Negation

The interest in the matriarchy discourse can be traced as early as from the mid-19th century and still engages the minds of the scholars of anthropology, history, gender studies, kinship studies, and others. Later in the early 1970s the debate on matriarchy received a fresh impetus especially in the studies undertaken by feminist scholarship. This increasing interest in the area of matriarchal studies emerged as a result of a struggle within the mind of the feminist scholarships regarding the question of universal subordination of women. One of the reasons of this churning has been due to the belief that women's achievements or contributions had never been recorded due to a male bias which was always prevalent in almost all disciplines. As Peggy Reeves Sanday observes, "Their rhetoric recreated matriarchy as the

female equivalent of patriarchy. If patriarchy, which feminists were working against, was male rule, then matriarchy was female rule and had to be reinstated.”¹

The emerging subject of modern matriarchal societies is also the investigation and presentation of societies which are non – patriarchal. It gave rise to an exploration of the past societies and also searches for alternative social structures or power dynamics which were not oppressive or exclusionary. This interest in non – oppressive social structures became even more relevant since feminist scholars were unhappy with the present structures of society which are violent and increasingly biased against women. The renewed interest in matriarchy in recent times is also due to the fact that almost extinct non – patriarchal or egalitarian societies such as the Khasis² are under pressure from being usurped by patriarchy/patriliny. Threatened by such attempts, there is also an increased focus to ‘preserve’ and restore its traditional social structure. In these and related contexts, the study of matriarchy assumes its significance today. Negation in this context refers to denying the existence of an idea or a concept or a system or tradition. An idea or a concept is negated when it is considered to be against the established norms. It can also be said that if a particular idea of practice is considered to be a threat to an existing order or as an alternative to that existing system, then it is negated. ‘Matriarchy’ as a social order has been negated from various quarters and for various reasons. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the debate surrounding the idea of matriarchy as available in the contemporary kinship studies, gender studies, and others. This paper also examines how the concept of matriarchy has been negated from various quarters.

Over the years, scholars of kinship studies, gender studies, and others have used various terms such as matriliney, matrifocal, “matrix societies”, and sometimes ‘matriarchy’ to address/define non – patriarchal or women – centered societies. Matriarchy as an idea has evoked considerable amount of interest as well as contestation among scholars over the years. Various interpretations and definitions of matriarchy have been explored by scholars across many disciplines. If we consider the historical origin of the word matriarchy, it evolved from the words ‘matriarch’ and ‘patriarch’, which were used to denote the female or male head of the family or tribe. These terms were also used to describe the older women or men who occupied powerful position within the family or a community. Gradually in the nineteenth century the word matriarchy came to mean governance by women over family and state in the early human society³.

Earlier matriarchy was considered to be a primitive stage of evolution from where the society moved to a more advanced male rule. This understanding was however questioned in the 20th century when there were further studies on the roles played by the two sexes in different societies. Following the social evolutionary theory, the idea of ‘matriarchy’ was looked at with apprehension since it was assumed to represent an exclusive female rule and was assumed to represent an exclusive female rule and was hence rejected. The objections to the use of the term matriarchy was based on the argument that, societies where ‘exclusive’ female rule was not there but they were being labelled as ‘matriarchy’⁴. ‘Matriarchy’ or exclusive female rule in this context, as it has been pointed out, was looked at with suspicion since it was

considered to be a mirror image of patriarchy – which is exclusive male rule and is hence oppressive, dominating and had undercurrents of violence in it.

In the early years of anthropology, the prevailing view of anthropologists and other scholars was that culture generally develops or evolves in a uniform and progressive manner. Building from Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection, the evolutionists wanted to analyse the development of culture through time. Just as species were thought to evolve from simple to complex stages, so too were cultures thought to progress from simple to complex stages. It was thought that most societies pass through the same series of stages and ultimately all of them arrive at a common end. It was also the belief that any change is internally determined which means that change originates from within the culture. Development, too, was therefore thought to be internally determined from within the culture⁵. The purpose of cultural evolution was to explain the diversity among the people of the world. Cultural evolutionists did not place much importance on genetic factors but on non – genetic factors such as culture through which species adapted to their social and biological environment⁶. An individual can adapt to the society not only through the biological processes which are genetically determined but also through cultural processes which are socially determined. Through this process a society gradually evolves from a primitive stage which is considered barbaric to an advanced stage which is considered to be the norm of development. Matriarchy was considered to be a part of this primitive rule from which the society gradually evolved to patriarchy which was an advanced stage of human civilization.

A scholar who analysed matriarchy in the light of cultural evolution was Johann Jakob Bachofen⁷. Bachofen considers the study of mother – right to be a territory not explored earlier, since anthropologists did not undertake any study on this issue. Bachofen used the term *gynaecocracy* (mother – right) in his work. Among the societies which Bachofen considers were the Lycians of Turkey who had the practice of naming their daughters after their mothers. The daughters in that society possessed the exclusive right to inherit property. This stage of cultural evolution preceded the stage of patriarchy according to Bachofen and had women in positions of power and prestige. When the paternal stage started to develop that was the end of the maternal primacy. However, Bachofen does not associate the principle of mother – right with any particular people but considers it to be a cultural stage in the evolutionary process of human society. This stage started to decline when the paternal stage started to develop. Women during this stage reportedly enjoyed a great deal of prestige and elevated status⁸.

Bachofen lauded the matriarchal principle and culture based on the bond between the mother and the child which was considered to be the primary and basic bond. The matriarchal principle manifested itself through the concepts of universal freedom and equality among all human beings. There was a spirit of fellow – feeling and kinship which cut across all divisions in the society. This fellow – feeling and kinship protected the society from internal conflict or dissensions and united the people. Bachofen lauds women in their power which had left a deep imprint on religion of those times. Power here was not confined to physical power alone. Interestingly, Bachofen accepts that men were physically superior to

women and at the same time wonders that there must be some other powers inherent in women which gave rise to the establishment of matriarchies⁹. These powers surpass physical strength and go much beyond that. Gradually over the years however, these powers of women were taken away by men. Women in matriarchal states had to first give up their power to go to wars which was taken over by men, and later on, their political powers or their domination over family was also restricted.

John F. McLennan echoed Bachofen when he said that the ancient systems of kinship were kinship through females only. Since it often could not be said with certainty who was the father of the child, therefore there was no question or even acknowledgement of kinship through males¹⁰. McLennan establishes a relation between kinship through females and exogamy. Exogamy and a system of *capturing of wives* was one of the major influences of kinship through females. With the advance of civilization, kinship through females gave way to kinship through males only¹¹. Kinship through males arose mainly with the growth of property when the sons and not daughters were considered to be direct heirs in whose names property was to be transmitted.

Similarly, Lewis. H. Morgan was of the view that all the races of ancient society descended from the mothers¹². Morgan talks about gens, a term he uses to refer to kins in ancient society. Gens descend from one common ancestor and are tied together by blood relationships among them. There is a gentile name for each kin which distinguishes them from other kins. In the ancient or archaic period as Morgan calls it, gens or kins are composed of female ancestors and their children. Gens were the basis of the family, governmental system and society in ancient times. Since these gens were based on ancestry through females, therefore it can be derived that family, governmental system and the society as a whole was governed by the system of according primacy to females.

The concept of an evolutionary progression from maternal to paternal social forms can also be found in the work of Frederick Engels¹³. Engels was deeply influenced by Bachofen, Morgan and McLennan and it is reflected in his works. Engels described three epochs of social evolution namely: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. In the stage of savagery, humans lived almost like animals and hunting and gathering was their main occupation. In the phase of barbarism, there was development of agriculture, though gathering and hunting continued. There was development of new tools and the society progressed to a higher stage. As there was a rise in domestication of animals and stock breeding, wealth began to be accumulated which led to new social relations and consequently new gender relations. It was at this stage that women were also considered to be a part of the property of men. However on his discussion of family, Engels emphasizes on the supremacy of women within the family organization. The cause of this supremacy, according to Engels, is that the women belonged to the same gens while husbands came from different gens¹⁴.

Engels further explains in details the transition of society from maternal to paternal principles. As the family advanced from primeval to advanced stage, the division of labour arose in the society. The society began to be divided into the 'public' and 'private' spheres whereby the public sphere included the work of obtaining tools and food while the private sphere comprised of all the household chores. The public sphere was dominated by men and the private sphere was considered to be the domain of women. According to the social custom of those days, man was the owner of cattle or the labour power as slaves, but all his property which he owned could not be passed on to his children. Children could not be inheritors of property according to the maternal law of those days. If a man died his children did not belong to his gens but to their mother's gens. Therefore they could not inherit the property of their father. As man's property increased, his position in the family too increased compared to that of a women. He wanted to use his new found supremacy to overthrow the traditional laws of inheritance and wanted inheritance to be along male lines. Engels terms this shift as a 'revolution' which was a characteristic feature of prehistoric age. Engels sums up the downfall of the maternal principle as "the historic defeat of the female sex. The men seized the reins also in the house; the women were stripped of their dignity, enslaved tools of men's lust and mere machines for the generation of children"¹⁵.

Following Engels, Kamla Bhasin argued that men wanted to retain power and property and pass it on to their children. To ensure this inheritance, mother – right was overthrown. In order to establish the right of the father, women had to be domesticated and confined and their sexuality regulated and controlled¹⁶. The analysis of Engels was based on the materialistic hypothesis of Marx which wanted to prove that economic factors determine the basis of the society. Rise of private property was synonymous with the subjugation of women, and hence the end of 'matriarchy', and the rise of patriarchy. This arrival of patriarchy was the bourgeois epoch in which the wife was reduced to the position of the proletariat, and hence subjugated and dominated over.

The theory of the mother goddess and the exploration of societies where goddess worship was prevalent, forms an important part of the discourse on matriarchy. It was given importance in the pre – historic era to locate the source of power among women. The source of life and power was concentrated in women which assumed a symbolic representation in the form of the goddess. Marija Gimbutas is a leading advocate of the theory of mother goddess¹⁷. She challenged the established norms which gave importance to the Father God by emphasizing on female power and female centered societies which gave primacy to the mother goddess. Women, whether in reality or as deified in the goddess were almost always associated with fertility and motherhood. The goddess was the locus of this motherhood which resulted in the worship of the goddess as the progenitor of the fertility cult. However, the goddess was associated not only with motherly qualities of love, nurture, and care but also with protecting, guarding, and preserving the people along with multiplying the clan. People sought to consider the goddess as a source of strength as well as nurture. Joan Marler identifies the methodology applied by Gimbutas as "archaeomythology"¹⁸, which incorporated scholarship from ethnology, mythology, linguistics, anthropology of religion, historical documents and many other areas.

The cult of the Mother Goddess which was prevalent during the Neolithic period was often considered to be a reflection of matriarchal society which might have existed during the prehistoric times. In the period from 6000 to 7000 B.C the early Neolithic village community of Catal Huyuk in South Central Turkey was considered to be a matriarchal culture since there were many figurines of mother goddess which were discovered during excavations. Since the goddess was often seen as a figurine sitting on a high throne, the popular view was that the society was women – centered. Mother goddess was equated with mother earth as a source of nurture, nourishment and protection¹⁹. One interpretation of the cult of the mother goddess was that people of Neolithic age were dependent on the earth and animals for their food, shelter etc. They, therefore, considered the earth to be their mother who provided for all these basic amenities of human life. These societies were mother centered where female deities were given importance. According to this interpretation, a matriarchy or matriarchal society of such an era was a society that was considered to be harmonious and peaceful. It was not warlike and was not aggressive. Matriarchies here were celebrated because they were associated with life and nurture. They were symbolic of fertility cult which was associated with women. The mother was the epitome of fertility and also the protector of the clan. Therefore, matriarchy was defined in terms of the mother goddess²⁰. The proponents of the cult of the mother goddess contend that women had power and freedom during the pre – historic times as a result of which they were deified. Women in Libya went to wars and formed armies to invade other lands. Women of Egypt had economic freedom. Since the lineage was through women and they were also in charge of property and inheritance, they were in control of their lives.

Matriarchy as a social order has been negated from various quarters and for various reasons. The study of matriarchy was negated from patriarchal quarters since patriarchy did not accept the existence of any social system which challenged its universality. Later, in the modern era, it was negated by some feminist scholars because they considered such an idea to be dangerous for the feminist movement. Matriarchy was also negated by the Marxists. Although their materialistic position critiques/rejects class hierarchy, Marxist position left untouched the subordinate position of women in their ideal classless social structure. And by negating independent status to women in the social/family structure, Marxist scholars negate the possibilities of matriarchy or female – centered society.

Negation from Patriarchal Quarters

As is well known, patriarchy is the absolute rule of the patriarch or the father or the eldest male member of the family over all other male and female members. Patriarchy refers to male power which is synonymous with male dominance. That dominance is not really only over women but also over economically and socially weak men. Descent and lineage is through the father in a patriarchal society. Besides this, all the rules, norms of a community and society are dictated by male elders of the society which however, later, percolates to all males of the society thereby making patriarchy a rule of men over women. In this sense, patriarchy is considered to be natural and universal²¹. The concept of patriarchy is governed by a belief that women are inferior to men in all aspects and therefore must be controlled by

men. Women cannot have any individual views or opinions of their own and are always considered 'in relation' to men. Hence, women are revered as wives, mothers, and sisters but never as 'women' in their own right. In contrast to the above view, matriarchy has been described as societies or social systems arranged with women as the head of the family and in charge of the social and religious order. Since patriarchy was considered to be natural and universal, all forms of female centeredness has to be negated in order to establish the dominance of patriarchy. Therefore, matriarchy was sometimes considered to be a 'primitive stage' in the stages of social development, and sometimes it was considered to be a myth and hence non – existent or denied.

The standards and norms of social life set by the dominant patriarchal society are considered to be 'natural'. Any deviation from this 'natural' scheme of things is not tolerated. Patriarchy divides the society in binaries of man/woman, right/wrong, patriarchy/matriarchy, and there is no scope for the existence of any idea to be in between these binaries²². Social groups or individuals who do not conform to the standards and binaries set by patriarchy are negated by it. Negation of matriarchy is a way of establishing the domination of patriarchy over the society and also for establishing its universality. Patriarchy negates matriarchy because matriarchy was synonymous with societies which were female – centered. Any acceptance or discussion about theories or societies which give primacy to women is a threat to the patriarchal social order. Therefore, from its very inception, patriarchy has tried to establish its dominance in every field by totally undermining or disowning and completely negating any theory which accords primacy to women.

Patriarchy also negated matriarchy by denying the influence or presence of women as a part of creation of knowledge. There was always a heavy male bias in the study of history or analysis of the various pre – historic societies. This male bias refused to accept any information or idea which pointed otherwise. Though in many religions the Goddess is accredited with giving the people the gifts necessary for leading a civilized life, those Goddesses were not acknowledged by a patriarchal social structure for their contribution in society. For instance, Goddess Saraswati in India and Goddess Brigit in Celtic Ireland have been associated with the creation of knowledge. However they were not accepted as reflective of the contribution of women to social development. Raine Eisler rightly says, "Religion supports and perpetuates the social organization it reflects"²³.

Patriarchy also negates matriarchy by legitimizing war. Patriarchy legitimizes war, because without war, the subjugated sections of the society can easily liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchy. The subjugated section in this case refers to women. Through war, patriarchy establishes a social system which not only legitimizes its rule but ensures the hierarchical domination of men over those women who were the centre of a pre – patriarchal social system. Those women were responsible for the protection and nurture of egalitarian principles which patriarchy systematically destroys. War is considered to be a natural part of patriarchy and therefore is accepted as inevitable, and even, desirable. Whenever war is glorified, it implies that there is glorification of death and consequently, life, or the event of birth is

neglected. Human intelligence is therefore diverted towards the destructive aspects of life envisaged through the 'father right' and subjugation of the constructive aspects evident in the 'mother – right'²⁴.

Negation from Feminist Quarters

Cynthia Eller (among other feminists) emphatically negated the idea and the existence of matriarchy²⁵. They considered the advancement of the idea of a matriarchal society to be dangerous for the feminist movement. Such scholars considered matriarchy as a myth which had no existence in reality. Many anthropologists, including feminist anthropologists unanimously dismiss the idea of a matriarchy on the ground that there are no evidences to prove that there was ever a matriarchal society. These scholars also contend that societies and cultures which are claimed to be women – centered, have numerous examples of violence against women or domination of women by men. Women therefore do not have any powers in these societies which are actually ruled by men. Their argument is that, fascination with female figurines or the cult of the mother goddess in societies considered to be matriarchal does not automatically guarantee or prove the power of women according to these scholars.

Some feminists also negate matriarchy by arguing that if we believe that women had prominent and central position in so called matriarchal cultures, then it is also true that they lost that prominent position due to their *incompetence*. This incompetence according to them is evident from the myths which show how power was taken over from women by men because men were naturally superior and hence could defeat women in war and take away power from them²⁶. However, this rejection of the idea of matriarchy by feminists appears to stem from the deep rooted mindset and patriarchal conditioning which negates the possibility of any alternative to patriarchy. The male academia and male bias in anthropological or sociological studies had always rejected and negated any idea of a women – centered society. Women, including feminist scholarship too are influenced by such thought processes. Also, the feminist claim of universal female subordination contradicts with the very idea of 'centrality' of women in some societies. In addition, archaeological evidences of women – centered societies, from the works of Marija Gimbutas and others, have not been highlighted enough²⁷.

Feminist scholars also negated matriarchy because they always considered matriarchy to be a mirror image of patriarchy. They were under the influence of a patriarchal mindset which divided societies and social relationships into binaries and therefore could not admit that there might be other forms of societies and gender relations which was different from the ones based on binarism and male hierarchy. This reluctance on the part of the feminist scholarship to look beyond the conventional definition of patriarchy led them to reject women – centered societies in any form²⁸.

Negation from Marxist position

Marxist theory does not directly reject matriarchy. However, it indirectly negates matriarchy by reinforcing the gender hierarchy and women's subordinate position in it. Marxist scholars believe that the oppression of women is linked to the oppressive economic framework of capitalism. Therefore the oppression of women will end eventually with the end of capitalism. Although their materialist position critiques and rejects class hierarchy, Marxist position left untouched the subordinate position of women in their ideal classless social structure. The women's question is considered only as a part of the larger capitalist question and not as an independent issue²⁹. Marxism defines patriarchy as a social system which is based on economics and a hierarchical social structure, which inevitably leads to domination by men over women. Since men control the labour power of women, this leads to the subjugation of women because they are placed at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. This control cannot be complete if women are allowed access to the means of production and distribution³⁰.

Marxism has been criticized for marginalising women in both theoretical and political perspectives. Marxist theories have always assumed that women's movements or struggles are only a part of the larger struggle against capitalism. The claim of the Marxists that oppression of women will end automatically with the end of the capitalist social order and establishment of socialism has however proved to be wrong³¹. The materialistic view failed to question the subordinate status given to women in the family which was synonymous with their subordinate status in the social structure. Since men controlled the relations of production, therefore the relations of reproduction were negated³².

Conclusion

Matriarchy and matriarchy's conceptual framework as discussed in this paper is complex and ambiguous. It is observed that matriarchy is seldom understood on its own terms and often seen as a mirror image of patriarchy. As a result, the complexities of a matriarchal lived experience are not adequately understood. In order to understand matriarchal lived experiences meaningfully, it has to be studied on its own terms and not from the frameworks of any Eurocentric, patriarchal and feudal traditions. Johann Jakob Bachofen, has rightly cautioned that the matriarchal culture or its failures should be studied or observed independently and not in comparison with patriarchal or any other form of culture³³. This is significant because any form of imposition will result in the denial of the 'different' system of matriarchy as it will not be properly understood and appreciated.

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