

MODULE-2
GENDER STUDIES AS A DISCIPLINE
TOPIC- GERDA LERNER

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- Gerda Hedwig Lerner (1920-2013) was one of the pioneers in the establishment of the branch of history called women's history, forerunner of Gender history.
- She developed it into an academic discipline by introducing degree programmes in women's history and developing curricula for it.
- The concrete works she did in Sarah Lawrence college in US where she taught from 1968 to 1979, included the publication of books and anthologies about women.
- It gave a strong foundation for women's history and rendered direction how to look at history from women's point of view

- Her works
 - *Black Women in White America (1972)*
 - *The Female Experience (1976)*,
 - *The Majority Finds Its Past (1979)*.
 - article '*The lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson*' (1969) discussed how women were placed in the society at a particular period of time.
- She was instrumental in conducting a 15 day seminar on women at the Sarah Lawrence College and it turned out to be a big success and inspired others to organize similar platforms of discussion.
- She initiated the first Ph.D programme in women's history in the University of Wisconsin in 1980s.

- Being the educational director of the Organization of American historians she made women's history accessible to teachers and activists alike.
- She brought in the contributions of black women to the purview of the study of history through her edited work "Black women in White America: A documentary History"(1972)
- Her seminal work "*The Creation of Patriarchy The origins of Women's Subordination* "(1986) provided the theoretical framework to the discipline called women's history and helped women historians to dig out women's role from his/story.

- Uma Chakravarti, one of the prominent historians in the field of gender history in India is influenced by the views of Gerda Lerner and applied the same in reclaiming Indian women's role from the past.
- Lerner explains in detail the **historical evolution of patriarchy, the male dominated social structure, in the context of Mesopotamian civilization, Egypt and Assyria.**
- It was an ancient system existed and operational from 2nd millennium BC itself.
- She unequivocally establishes patriarchy is a cultural construct.
- Women were objects of exchange in the society due to their sexuality and reproductive capacity.

- Men acquired women by abduction or through a system of sexual slavery in ancient societies.
- Control on women's sexuality leads to the possession of their offsprings too.
- Men's desire to safeguard the possession must have led to the rise of private property.
- The emergence of agriculture and subsequent formation of kingdoms along with the construction of legal structures perpetuated the interests of men and contributed to a male dominated/centred society.
- Possession and control of women led men to extend his sway over slavery and other modes of production

- Women who had no accessibility to modes of production depended on men based on their sexual ties.
- They were venerated in the ancient societies for their fertility or capacity to reproduce the human species though they had no control on modes of production.
- To make it more clearly, women became economically and sexually under the control of men, still they were continued to be worshipped because of their reproductive capacity.
- Therefore, one could come across women as priests, oracles and shamans in ancient society.

- Lerner observes that women cannot be seen as victims alone or chattels devoid of any role in power.
- Her mediation with power was through sexual ties however limited was her accessibility towards it.
- Her role in religion also indicates that her role in the society was complex and simple to be ignored by historians.
- Women were not able to come out of the world of restriction or limited possibilities as patriarchy tightened its control by systematically excluding them from acquiring all kinds of knowledge.

- Lerner raises certain pertinent questions in the context of her study about women's biological power of procreation.
- It is a fact that women's biology that is her reproductive capacity, worked against her in the ancient societies as they were abducted by men for producing children, there is no need to consider it as a mark of vulnerability of women.
- Their reproductive capacity is always valued irrespective of time, culture or geography.
- Lerner presumably states her opinion that sometimes both men and women in ancient societies must have considered the reproductive role of women integral to the existence of mankind.

- The system must have run with the consent of women too.
- Cultural values assigned to the biological traits are the prime factor behind the degraded position of women in society- a point which scholars of gender history took up as a revelation to delve deep into reclaiming women from oblivion.
- ‘Motherhood as the symbol of true female’, ‘no woman is complete unless she bears children’ and ‘child nurturing is woman’s natural duty’ –these cultural make-shifts on women’s biological/natural gift of reproduction undermines her into second sex.

- Gender history started its toddling to establish itself in the academia.
- The brilliant explanation of the historical evolution of patriarchy left the implication that all those constructed can be demolished.
- Thus patriarchy is proved to be a social construction evolved over years and centuries.
- It is not natural and can be subverted or changed.
- Since it did not give space to female species and inherently discriminatory and exploitative, there is a need to retrieve women's experiences, role and emotions from the past.
- Lerner asserts that it is important to bring women back to the stage of history, by making their lives and experiences, their submerged histories relevant and central to civilization.