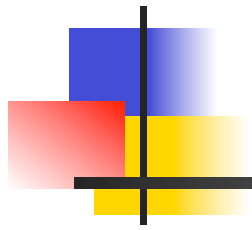




Rethinking Woman's Nature

**Paper presented at the Association for
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Canada**

Aug. 13, 2010



Fundamental Assumptions



Range of theories about women's nature

- essential female / male nature common to all creatures
 - to
- everything about gendered behavior is learned.
 - Evidence of both in the Writings
 - No current academic theories consider spiritual nature of individuals or institutions.



*Why do you suppose...?

- Women fret over being exempt from House of Justice.

but

- Men don't complain Bahá'u'lláh hasn't called them 1st educators, or that women get preference in tuition money.



Dualities



Material & spiritual duality

- long tradition in Western thinking
- also in Writings

"The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven"

- Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 9



Clues of spirit in physical world

- Manifestations taught humans to distinguish left hand from right.

(*Gems* p. 14)

- children learn to differentiate opposites.
-
- making either/or distinctions helps us discern material from spiritual
 - Necessary for mastering material promptings



Taoist principle of Yin Yang

- Yin = receptive female force = slow, soft, yielding, diffuse, cold, wet, or tranquil,
- Yang = active male force = fast, hard, solid, focused, hot, dry, or aggressive.
 - Bahá'u'lláh says universe was created by "active force & that which is its opposite."



Material/Spiritual duality in Writings

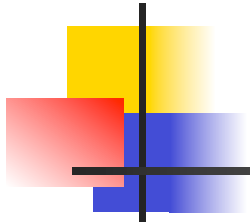
"...the soul is endowed with two wings: should it soar in the atmosphere of love and contentment, then it will be related to the All-Merciful. And should it fly in the atmosphere of self and desire, then it will pertain to the Evil One."

- (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 154)



Opposing social forces

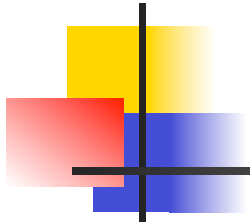
- Civilization rests on twin pillars of reward (mercy) & punishment (justice)
- dualities re: organization of society:
 - One wing is physical power & material civilization; the other is spiritual power & divine civilization
 - Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 12.



Female & Male

“Humanity has two wings, as it were: One is the female; the other is the male. If one wing be defective, the strong perfect wing will not be capable of flight.”

Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 174).



Different spheres

“at home the woman still finds it necessary to create her own space, in the development of what they call a ‘tension line’, ‘which is set up more or less unconsciously between the pair and recognized as a point beyond which each will not be pushed.’ ”

- Kupfermann (1979) pp. 31-32



Marriage prayer

“He hath let loose the two seas that they meet each other: Between them is a barrier which they overpass not.”

(Abdu'l-Bahá' quotes Qu'ran 55:19-2)

- Suggests basic separateness
 - 2 souls never merge, no matter how close they become; or
 - 2 sexes themselves maintain separate identity.



Biological Differences



Female & male experiences throughout cultures

- Sexes perceived as different in all societies
- Men always dominate.
- Diffs bet. men & women aren't as great as diffs. among men & among women.

(Kimmel, 2000)

- Men have defined women physically, legally, politically and socially, in culture & language –
- male preferences = norm; female = exception: e.g., actress, women's studies, women writers



Two theoretical camps

- Biology as irrelevant? (all is learned)

vs.

- Biology as destiny? (essentialists)
 - i.e., men are logical, just, scientific, methodical, and proficient in sciences
 - women are intuitive, compassionate, based in experience & talented in humanities.



Biological differences

- *“Only one sex gives birth to and nurtures children and...this biological “inequality” has major social and cultural consequences. The theme of maternity in general is a key issue in modern feminism”* (Brandt, p. 82).
- Many theorists flatten Male-Female diffs
 - avoid because tied to denial of women’s ability to reason & oppression.
 - Caused men to fear, disdain women, consider them closer to animals, intellectually inferior & unclean.



Other considerations:

- Biology = fundamental to our psychology?
 - Dramatic biological experiences = women have monthly periods & can get pregnant.
 - Even if woman never bears child, her body is built to do so
- Ability to procreate creates diff. attitude towards life – interrupting work to bear and suckle infants, e.g., (MacMillan, 86-88).



Patriarchy



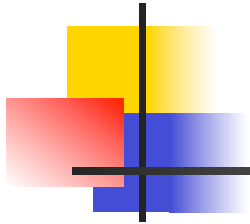
Femininity?

- What's intrinsically female about feminine? male in masculine?
- Male-dominated definitions.
 - Characteristics not valued or preferred by men projected onto women.
 - Women = weaker, more emotional, less logical, less intelligent than men, biological functions are annoying, shameful, of low value.
 - US view = emotional, catty, dramatic, competitive with each other, shoe-crazy, shoppers who are nurturing, collaborative, and sympathetic.



Male-defined world = standard

- women measure against it
- men criticize women for being weak, emotional, soft
 - women react by trying to prove men wrong, not embrace those qualities
- 1960s-1970s women identified patriarchy
 - =ideological means of keeping women in their place,
 - at home or in low status jobs



Male worldview needs female wing

- We view through male-defined social lens
 - political & cultural org. of world via centuries of male preferences.
- *values membership on world legislative body more than childrearing.
- Stronger feminine world would balance
 - absent in patriarchal masculine world.
 - *what comprises feminine?



Man & superiority

"...the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, as if her attainment to equality was creationally impossible; woman's aspiration toward advancement will be checked by it, and she will gradually become hopeless."

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 76-77).*



1970s housewives' strike, e.g.

- in Italy housewives won pensions
 - took holiday from cooking
 - protested grocery prices by filling carts & leaving in aisles
- Similar efforts in US squelched, ridiculed.



War, e.g.

- many women embrace institution of war as legitimate means to resolve conflict
 - seek equality for women in military
 - *accept male-defined world of int'l diplomacy that has systematically excluded female voice



Public sphere hostile to women

- Women hold 19.1% seats in decision-making bodies worldwide
- 28 countries hit 30% target set in 1995
- only 15 heads of state are women.
 - barriers to women's participation = negative stereotypes and
 - Violence &
 - Intimidation against women in public office
 - UNWomen Facts & Figures on Women Worldwide, 2010).



Public sphere examples

- U.S. presidential campaign in 2008, candidate Hillary Clinton was criticized based on her sex
 - not strong enough leader,
 - a bitch, etc.
- Secretary of State Madelyn Albright =her appearance not her performance on the world stage made headlines.
 - “equality means equal qualification”
 - Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 1982, pp 76-77).



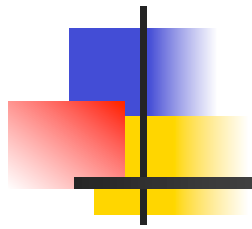
*What's woman's true nature?

- As women can't see selves clearly through undistorted lens, can't pinpoint meaning of being created female
 - When women see selves as objects, can't see their true nature.



Men must support women

- ... we must declare that her capacity is equal, even greater than man's. This will inspire her with hope and ambition, and her susceptibilities for advancement will continually increase. She must not be told & taught that she is weaker & inferior in capacity and qualification.
 - *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 76-77)



Gender Differences



Gender roles

- Women complicit in perpetuating gender role stereotypes
 - media images.
- Can't assume "feminine" = universal inherent traits
- *Women must shake imposed gender definitions & values
 - Is aggression desirable? ("Action chicks")
 - Is gentleness = weakness?



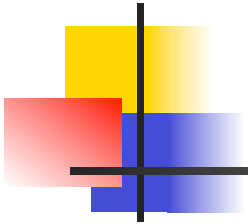
Understand womanhood from Writings

- Abdu'l-Bahá says diffs. bet. women & men are slight.
- “Whatever the ‘real’ diffs bet. sexes, we are not likely to know them until the sexes are treated differently, that is alike.” Kate Millet in C. MacMillan, p. 59).
 - *Gender equality examined at micro-level of individual & macro-level of social institutions.



Coping strategies to deal w/ oppression

- Some female behavior may be *"...those qualities which make for a good adjustment to the biological female reproductive role. By these criterion many women exhibiting the so-called masculine qualities of courage, endurance, fearlessness and non-passivity, qualify, and indeed as studies show, make a far better adjustment to 'the biological female role' than the traditionally passive, dependent, etc. woman."* (Breen quoted in Kupferman, p. 30).



"But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. ... women are exempt from military engagements... it is the duty of men to organize and execute such defensive measures and not the women—because their hearts are tender and they cannot endure the sight of the horror of carnage, even if it is for the sake of defense. From such and similar undertakings the women are exempt. "

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Wom_23.2)



2 wings

- Mothers' role as 1st educators of infants = nurture, encourage, provide warmth and comfort.
 - *Is this the wing that balances justice?

"God is not pleased that so important an instrument as woman should suffer from want of training in order to attain the perfections desirable and necessary for her great life's work! Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 161).



1st Educators & peace

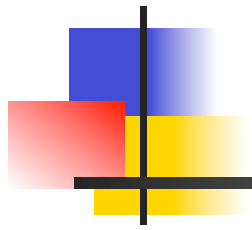
“Woman rears the child and educates the youth to maturity. She will refuse to give her sons for sacrifice upon the field of battle. In truth, she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare among mankind...

- Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 108)



Mothers & Justices

- not all women become mothers
- not all men become justices.
 - House members elected every 5 years,
 - any man's eligibility for election in adult lifetime = 50 years
 - at most 90 men could be elected out of the entire Bahá'í male population
- woman will become mother >
man will become justice.



Creating a New Paradigm



What's Bahá'í View on equality?

- Abdu'l-Bahá = Females & Males are spiritually equal
 - Each has different social function.
 - *Is Bahá'u'lláh's differential treatment of women & men based on reproductive roles?
- Social inequality bet. sexes comes from education or lack thereof
- Men eligible for election to House of Justice
 - Men = justice / women = mercy?
 - Extends essentialist notion (men strong in logic / women in intuition).
- Women designated 1st educators.



Institution of motherhood

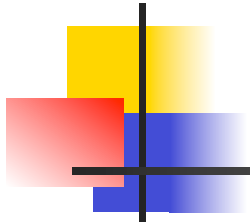
- *"Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance"*
 - (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 125).
 - Rather than demolish, strengthen role
 - what Bahá'u'lláh did
- **Dedication of female body = act of service.



Woman's education more important

"If the mother be ignorant, even if the father have great knowledge, the child's education will be at fault, for education begins with the milk."

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 86).



“Work ye for the guidance of the women in that land, teach the young girls and the children, so that the mothers may educate their little ones from their earliest days, thoroughly train them, rear them to have a goodly character and good morals, guide them to all the virtues of humankind.”

- *Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections, p. 124*



Position of 1st educator

- Attributes needed as 1st educator = patience, compassion, and devotion.
- Requires so much spiritual discipline & sacrifice that it can give women chance to perfect spiritual qualities as few other occupations can.
 - "...all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity"
 - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* pp. 176-177



Bahá'u'lláh's worldview

“Peace may be realized for the simple reason that womankind in general will never favor warfare. Women will not be willing to allow those whom they have so tenderly cared for to go to the battlefield. When they shall have a vote, they will oppose any cause of warfare.”

- Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.



*Creating a New Paradigm

- Sex equality is not about equal power,
 - = equal opportunities to be of service.
 - Bahá'í institutions not arenas of power for institutions or individuals
- *"The spirit of man is essential &, therefore, eternal. It is a divine bounty. It is the effulgence of the Sun of Reality &, therefore, of greater importance than the physical body."*
 - Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 60



Old patriarchal paradigm

- Position in governmental institutions bestows personal power
 - House membership associated w/ultimate power
 - privilege
 - positions of authority are valuable = bestow individual power.



*Service (heart) not power (head)

- New paradigm= House Membership = ultimate service.
 - Servive = love
 - based on spirit
- *bec. Of their service as 1st educatros, women are exempt, not barred from, certain activities (being exempt = privilege)
 - also warfare
 - In this paradigm, head and heart serve ea. other



If women were also on House of Justice...?

- *If women are exalted bec. of role as 1st educators bec. of role as mothers,
 - where would that leave men?
 - might they feel subordinate to women?
 - excluded from building of civilization?
- *Service on House, like pregnancy & childbirth, requires relinquishing autonomy & personal desires to serve community.



*Conclusion

- As physical world mirrors spiritual world, differs between.
 - * Females & Males reflect divine truth.
- Bahá'u'lláh says woman & man created for each other
 - Complementary, like right & left hands
- *Different gender roles make us see ourselves in particular way
 - commonality among members of each sex & difference between 2 sexes.
- society = individuals acting in groups
 - each group has prerogatives, rights & duties.



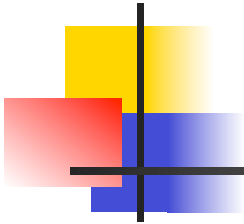
*Conclusion

- Other evidence = family duties & prerogatives
 - each member has role.
- we mostly stress unity side of unity in diversity
 - *diversity is fundamental on most basic levels, i.e., family
 - *In coordinated society, cooperation is imperative.



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