

the scene with *The Female Eunuch*, shocking men and some women by asserting women's rights as autonomous agents of sexual desire. Since then she has sustained a public role as something of a sexual exhibitionist, giving interviews on her preference in lovers and love-making styles. Now that she has apparently lost interest, it seems to her only right that other women should follow suit. Or, maybe, with "the certainty that sex is at least as good for you as bran has successfully been established," Greer is looking for new ways to shock. Late in her book, inserted as the third item is a subordinate clause, and couched in latinate phraseology, is the assertion that "constant exposure of the cervix uteri to the glans penis represents a health risk for women." "Constant"? Is she making a claim about the dangers of prostitution (not otherwise discussed) or of ordinary sexual relations?

The declared purpose of *The Change* is to dispel the myths surrounding menopause and empower women to see it as a time of new possibility. But you've got to do it her way. "Only when a woman ceases the fretful struggle to be beautiful can she turn her gaze outward, find the beautiful and feed upon it." Perhaps women who have always known they would never be beautiful have experienced life quite differently from Greer. And mightn't it just be that not all of us have had to wait for menopause to enjoy the beauty of the world?

THEORIZING PATRIARCHY

Sylvia Walby. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

by *Kiran Mirchandani*

The term "patriarchy" has been used extensively in Women's Studies literature, but with little uniformity. Walby's attempt to draw together the various

conceptualizations of the term into a single, yet dynamic model, is therefore a commendable one.

Walby defines patriarchy as a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." This definition underlines the importance of viewing patriarchy as a structural phenomenon rather than one perpetuated by the individual exploitative man. Walby discusses what she calls the six "structures" of patriarchy—paid work, housework, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. In terms of their interrelation, Walby argues that each of these structures impact upon one another but are also relatively autonomous. Their interrelationships constitute the different "forms" of patriarchy present in a particular society. Walby further argues that the intensity of oppression on a specific dimension constitutes the "degree" of patriarchy. In this, while she presents a model within which the patriarchal nature of a particular culture can be studied, the exact nature of the "patriarchy" remains local to its setting.

First wave feminism, Walby argues, was the successful organization of women around a variety of issues, and led to a significant shift in the form and degree of patriarchy in the West. The present century has seen a shift away from "private" patriarchy and towards a "public" patriarchy in each of the six structures. While pre-twentieth century patriarchy largely involved the exercise of control of a personal patriarch, such as a husband or father, contemporary patriarchy is much more a public and collective phenomenon.

Perhaps the strongest part of Walby's analysis is the manner in which she explores the dialectic nature of the relationship of women to their patriarchal environment without portraying us as helplessly caught in a structure. Women, Walby writes, are not passive victims of patriarchy but rather act out of rational self-interest. While the family may be an oppressive structure for certain women, it may simultaneously be the least oppressive option for others, who without family support would face poverty. Similarly, the restriction of sexuality to marriage benefits some women while it oppresses others. Such an approach to patriarchy recognizes differences between women

and the local and diverse effects a patriarchal structure has on various women's lives.

While Walby's book represents a milestone attempt to integrate and build upon the work of numerous theorists on patriarchy, it leaves, I feel, some important implications unresolved. Towards the end of her study Walby argues that the movement from private to public patriarchy represents not only a shift in *form* but also a *reduction in the degree* of some specific types of women's oppression. Entry into paid work, for instance, represents both a change in the form of patriarchy and a reduction in its degree. Aside from the controversial argument that today's patriarchy is quantitatively less than that at the beginning of the century, Walby's work raises another set of important questions: Can some of the six structures oppress women more than others? Can societies around the world be compared or even hierarchically arranged in terms of their "levels" of patriarchy? For instance, should one claim that the houses of American suburban housewives are in fact comfortable Nazi concentration camps (Friedan, 1965: 307)? Or that sex-role socializing is a systematic form of crippling people that can be paralleled to Chinese foot binding (Eichler, 1980: 122)?¹ Such comparisons are inaccurate and disguise the numerous discrepancies between women based on sex, race, and economic well being (see Hooks, 1984). In light of this, I argue that while Walby comprehensively analyzes the first part of her definition of patriarchy (on structure), she is less thorough in developing a theory of oppression. In other words, she insists that the two dimensions of patriarchy—form and degree—must be identified separately, but does not sufficiently theorize the "degree" dimension or the interaction between the two.

Walby's book is, however, an important attempt to construct a framework for understanding the various patriarchies in the world, and pertinent in its insistence that strategies for change must be both diverse and local.

¹I recognize that both these authors gave the examples cited over ten years ago and presumably used such extreme comparisons to increase the poignancy of their arguments.