

F E M I N I S M   I S   R E L E V A N T

*Queen's College*

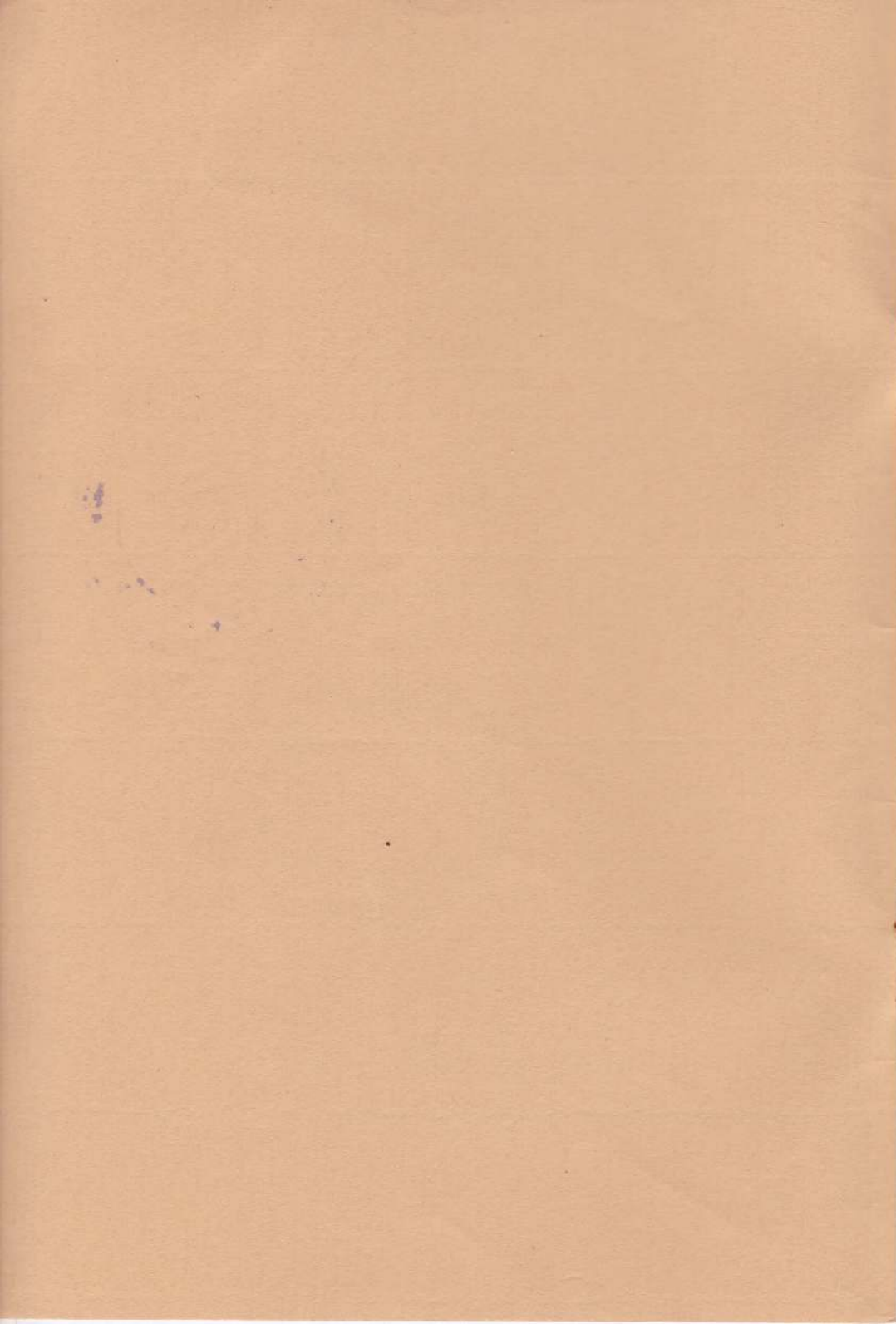
PART I:

History, Politics & Economics



FEMINIST STUDY CIRCLE

6/4 Cambridge Place, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka



1. What is feminism? Is it a recent fad?

The word feminism was first used in the 19th and early 20th centuries: it meant the struggle for democratic rights for women, namely:

- \* the right to education and employment
  - \* the right to own property
  - \* the right to vote
  - \* the right to enter parliament
  - \* the right to birth control
  - \* the right to divorce
- and other such rights.



2. But we have all these rights now, so what is all this talk about women's liberation today?

Today feminism means going beyond legal reforms which are against discrimination and for emancipation. It includes the struggle against:

- \* women's subordination in the home to the male
- \* the exploitation of women by the family
- \* women's continuing low status at work, in society, and in the culture of the country
- \* women's double burden in production and reproduction.

Thus women have to fight not only for emancipation, but also for liberation from all oppression by the state, by society, by males. Since women are the victims of



exploitation (e.g. unequal pay, low wages),  
subordination (e.g. under male domination),  
oppression (e.g. violence against women),  
they understand the problems facing other women, and  
understand that they are the ones who should organise  
to change their position and change society.

3. But many people say that feminism is a western concept  
which is being uncritically applied to the women of  
Asia? Is this true?

No. Feminism was not artificially imposed on Asian  
women, nor was it a part of 'foreign ideology'. Feminism  
and feminist struggles arose in Asia when a consciousness  
developed about democratic rights and the injustice  
of depriving half the population of its basic rights.  
Thus feminist consciousness arose in Asia during certain  
historic periods of heightened political consciousness,  
especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, during  
struggles against foreign rule and against the local  
despotism of feudal monarchs.

4. Were there debates about women's position in society  
in Asia before colonialism?

Yes, the 'debate on women' is a very early one. For  
example, the issue of whether women could join the order

and become nuns was debated by the Buddha and his followers in the 6th century B.C. There has been a continuing debate on women's right to education in many countries of Europe and Asia. In the 18th century a Chinese scholar, Chen Hung-Mou (1696-1771) wrote on women's education, before the famous Mary Wollstonecraft (but expressing similar ideas). He said:

'There is no one in the world who is not educable; and there is no one whom we can afford not to educate; why be neglectful only in regard to girls? Just after leaving infancy, they are raised and protected deep in the women's quarters. They are not like the boys who go out to follow an outside teacher, who benefit from the encouragement of teachers and friends...when girls grow older, they are taught to embroider to prepare their dowries and that is all.'

5. *But these are examples of male consciousness. Can men be feminists?*

Yes. Many of the earliest agitators for women's emancipation in the East were male reformers. In China, for example, Kang Yu-Wei (1859-1927) attacked foot-binding and women's subordination:

'I have now a task: to cry out the natural grievan-



ces of the incalculable number of women of the past. I now have one great desire: to save eight hundred million women of my own time from drowning in the sea of suffering. I now have a great longing: to bring the incalculable inconceivable numbers of women of the future the happiness of equality and of independence.'

In Egypt Ahmed Fares El Shidyak in 1855 wrote a book ('One Leg Crossed over the Other') supporting women's emancipation, and Kasim Amin (1865-1908) created a sensation with his book 'The New Woman'.

In Iran several male intellectuals of the 1880s and 1890s took up the issue of women's rights, opposing polygamy and the seclusion of women.

In India, from the time of Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833) who agitated against sati and women's enslavement, numerous social and political reformers have raised the issue, including famous names like Vidyasagar, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru.

6. Were there no women activists in Asia during this period?

Yes, there were many, even in the 19th century. Some of the lesser-known early agitators on women's rights were Pandita Ramabhai (1858-1922) of India, who spoke out for women's freedom as early as the 1880s and led an independent life attacking Hindu

religious orthodoxy;

Kartini (1879-1904), pioneer of women's education and emancipation in Indonesia, who defied tradition to start a girls' school;

Qurrat Ul Ayn (1815-51) of Iran, a Babi heretic who abandoned her family, gave up veiled seclusion, preached unveiled in public, and died fighting on the battlefield;

Jiu Jin of China (1875-1907) who left home to study in Tokyo and to involve herself in revolutionary politics and women's issues, but was arrested and executed. It was she who said, 'The revolution will have to start in our homes, by achieving equal rights for women.'

*7. But these are all non-Sri Lankans. What about Sri Lankan women?*

Sugala (from the Mahavamsa) and Gajaman Nona are two Sri Lankan women who defied the stereotype of feminine passivity and prudery to give expression to their individuality as women. Sugala fought King Parakrama Bahu I in defence of her kingdom, while Gajaman Nona wrote poetry, some of which was considered by men to be too ribald for a woman.

*8. But is this struggle relevant today? After all,*

women have many democratic rights - education, employment, franchise, etc.; and they have a high PLQI (Physical Quality of Life) - among the highest in Asia:

- \* female life expectancy: 67 years (males: 65)

- \* female literacy: 83%

- \* maternal mortality: 1.2 per 1000 live births

- \* infant mortality: 40 per 1000 live births

In addition, is it not true that

- \* we have had the first woman Prime Minister

- \* the first girl entered Medical College in 1893

- \* we have women in many professions, and

- \* women diplomats, doctors, engineers, lawyers, professors.

What, then, is the problem?

Do we need feminism?

Sri Lanka is an example of a country where patriarchy prevails even though women have a better 'quality of life'. Let us take some of the issues separately. First, politics. The figures with regard to women's participation in politics is appalling, given the fact that we boast to all the world that our women are equal partners with men in every sphere of life. Since independence (1948) we have had only 20 women MPs in parliament.



9. But women are an active part of our workforce and have become economically powerful, while continuing to enter the workforce in large numbers.

But what positions of influence do they actually hold?

# EMPLOYED POPULATION (1981 census)

	<u>% of women</u>
Professional and technical	14.1
Administrative and managerial	0.4
Clerical	6.0
Sales workers	3.0
Service workers	4.3
Agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry and fishing	52.1
Production and related workers, transport operators and labourers	16.8
Not stated	2.0
Total % of employed	24.9

In addition, 31.8% of women were unemployed, as compared with 13.2% of men.

10. Surely recent policies have resulted in the liberation of women. The Free Trade Zone, Middle East labour, and tourism have brought women out of the home into

the workforce and have made them economically independent.

We are for women coming out of the home and into the workforce. We are against policies which allow for the exploitation of women's labour - i.e. the payment of low wages, the prevalence of unhealthy working conditions, overwork, arbitrary hiring and firing, denial of freedom of association, sexual exploitation. etc.

11. You may be correct. For example, the Free Trade Zones allow women to work at night, and as a result they tend to become morally loose and unable to attend to family duties.

We oppose nightwork - for both women and men, not for cultural or moral reasons, but because it undermines their health and disrupts their lives, and also because many of the benefits promised such as transport and rest facilities are not given. The image that a working woman is 'morally loose' is a stereotyped image that society must discard: the reality is that women working at night are more likely to be sexually harrassed than to be morally loose.

12. But Sri Lanka is known throughout the world for its social welfare policies. Women enjoy social bene-

*fits that they have never received in some other societies.*

Sri Lankan policy-makers have been very proud of our social welfare benefits. However, with regard to the rights of women, we still remain below internationally accepted standards: e.g.

(a) Maternity leave: According to Article 3 of the International Labour Convention, women workers should be given at least 12 weeks' maternity leave. Most countries, including our neighbours, have accepted this standard, and socialist countries have gone beyond it, giving women fifteen weeks of maternity leave. Women in Sri Lanka, however, are entitled to only six weeks' maternity leave. In addition, the concept of paternity leave has yet to find articulation in our law. Child rearing is recognised as only a female obligation even if both parents are working.

(b) Post-natal care: Unlike in other countries, the state gives no support to a family for the immediate post-natal care of an infant. Though amendments have been added to the Maternity Benefits Ordinance providing for creches and nursing breaks, these provisions have yet to be implemented.



(c) Head of household: Most social welfare benefits under development schemes, such as, e.g. the Mahaveli, are given to 'the head of household', who under Sri Lankan law is automatically the male. Only in the absence of a husband does a female enjoy the rights. If the husband leaves the household, the benefits also go with him. All social welfare programmes assume that man is the primary breadwinner in the family and that women only play a secondary role. As a result, men are often entitled to benefits which women are not, unless they prove that they are the primary breadwinners - a procedure that most women in Sri Lanka are unaware of. In a society of female-dominated Free Trade Zones, plantations with female labour, female single-parent households and 40% urban female employment, social welfare cannot be predicated on the assumption that women play a secondary economic role in the family.

13. *But surely if we want to develop, we have to tolerate these forms of exploitation for some time. Once we have developed, the negative features will disappear.*

This type of development is based on the capitalist mode of production.

For example, in Europe the home had earlier been the centre of production (food, clothes, soap, candles etc.), and the woman played an important role in this production, as well as in agriculture and animal rearing.

With the Industrial Revolution, however, the role of women changed:

(a) Women of the poor were forced to work in factories and mines (as cheap labour) and reproduce the next generation of workers.

(b) Women of the bourgeoisie were kept in the home as housewives, with no role in production but only a role in reproduction - to produce heirs to inherit property.

(c) Dissenting, independent bourgeois women who refused to conform were ostracised and penalised.

The ideology of exploitation of women of the poor and seclusion of women of the rich was intensified.

14. But of what relevance are developments in 18th century Europe to women in Sri Lanka?

The connecting link is that when Asian countries were colonised, major changes took place in the status of women.

For example, in the pre-colonial societies women had worked solely in agriculture, but with colonialism many changes took place:

- \* women were driven to work on coffee, rubber, tea and other plantations.
- \* women were made to work in factories and mines.
- \* women also continued to work in agriculture.

In contrast, as in Europe, women of the bourgeoisie were kept in the home but were given education and some basic rights.

In all spheres patriarchy was firmly established in the colonies and any traces of a previous matrilineal society were eliminated. The ideology of foreign rulers was adopted in respect of women.

Thus, with the growth and development of capitalism, both in Europe and in the colonies, patriarchal structures were strengthened. Women lost their earlier rights in household production and were confined to the home or exploited in the field and factory. While certain rights were given to bourgeois women, the basic laws were patriarchal, with man as head of the family.



The culture of capitalism also reinforced patriarchy, and both the ruling imperialists and Third World bourgeois men propounded basically patriarchal social values.

15. *Isn't the real reason for inequality in the workplace that women are less productive than men because they are more concerned with home life?*

Capitalism uses the argument based on the view that a man as the head of a household is paid a 'family wage' - i.e. a wage to cover the subsistence of himself his wife and his children. According to this view, women engaged in productive work are merely supplementing the family income and can therefore be paid less than men, even for work of equal value.

The reality is somewhat different. Studies have revealed that in many countries (including Sri Lanka) as many as 25%-40% of all families either live primarily on the earnings of women or are single-parent households headed by women. Most of these women live at poverty level or hold poorly paid jobs, and are discriminated against in the workplace by capitalist patriarchy's assumptions (referred to above).

It is true that in addition to work in the factory, field or plantation, women have to spend many hours

attending to household chores - cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water and firewood, child care, etc. Women therefore experience the double day, double burden, double shift etc. - what are called 'paid work' (as a part of the workforce) and 'unpaid work' (in the home).

16. *Despite all this, surely with modernisation women will be given their due place in society - their domestic chores will diminish and they will go out and become economically independent.*

Evidence has shown that the male biases inherent in the conception and implementation of modernisation programmes has marginalised women and has in fact, in some cases, removed them from the workforce. For example, in the Punjab, the 'green revolution' with increased mechanisation has deprived women of many of their traditional agricultural jobs, and since technical skills are imparted primarily or solely to men, they are forced into unemployment. Further, the increasing wealth generated by such enterprises has made it possible for wealthy peasant men to confine the women of their families to their homes as a status symbol. In Sri Lanka the Mahaveli scheme has resulted in certain similar problems, with very little land



being allotted to independent women farmers. Consequently, they are deprived of credit, skills etc. They are thus forced into the low-paid unskilled jobs or back into the home, thereby being deprived of any attempts towards economic independence.

17. What is all this agitation about violence against women? Though women's rights extremists are shouting for changes in the rape law, the Sri Lankan law is actually quite fair, balancing the interests of the accused with the rights of the victim. It has been the law for centuries.

The Sri Lankan law on rape has not changed since 1883. As a result, it has not incorporated any of the changes which have swept most other common law jurisdictions - the U.S., U.K., India, Australia etc. Only Sri Lankan lawyers argue that the law that the British gave us a hundred years ago adequately protects the rights of women, even though the British themselves have changed their rape laws.

In Sri Lanka today, an allegation of rape by a woman must be corroborated. Though the laws of evidence do not state this clearly, by practice and precedent this remains a reality. Rape is a private crime rarely committed in public. Unlike murder or burglary, it is committed on the person of a woman, leaving only



evidence of sexual intercourse. To require corroboration is therefore to place an already frightened victim at a handicap. In other countries, unlike in Sri Lanka, lack of corroboration does not throw the case out of court. Juries/judges are allowed to make their decision on the facts before them: the criminal law anyway requires that a person be found guilty beyond reasonable doubt, with or without corroboration.

Secondly, in Sri Lanka women victims have the onus of proving an absence of consent. This places these victims in a terrible dilemma. The police and doctors often advise women not to resist violently, because this increases the likelihood of a rape/murder. The courts, on the other hand, have held that if a woman does not resist, it is tantamount to consent. So the Sri Lanka law gives women the choice of risking death if they wish to have men punished for the crime of rape. In other countries, either the burdens have been shifted - i.e. the defence must prove consent - or lack of resistance is not proof of consent.

In Sri Lanka, a woman's past sexual life (i.e. whether she is a virgin, whether she has committed adultery) can be brought into evidence, even if it has no bearing on the case at hand. Her private life of yesteryear can be laid bare in court to show that she is 'morally

loose' and therefore asked for it. In most other countries today, the laws do not allow this type of mudslinging and effectively prevent the defence from humiliating the rape victim.

In actuality, there are very few cases of rape filed in our courts though social scientists have written that rape is reaching epidemic proportions in certain areas. Given the fact that most of our women come from traditional homes, the formidable obstacle of our own rape law effectively prevents justice from being done. It is so obviously written to protect the male rapist even in a society where fear of social ostracism would prevent women from filing a case of rape even under the most liberal conditions.

18. *I don't know - on the one hand you talk about violence. On the other, women extremists want to legalise abortion in this country. We must prevent this. Every foetus has the right to life. We must not legalise murder of infants.*

Under Article 303 of the Penal Code of 1883, abortion remains illegal in Sri Lanka. Despite over-population and a desperate desire to control births, abortion is illegal because it is felt that from the moment of conception, a foetus has a spirit and life of its own and that the woman's body is only a vehicle for



its birth. In other words, from the moment of conception, a woman's womb becomes a social product, she loses control of her body and the state receives the right to regulate her actions.

This point of view can be challenged both scientifically and from the standpoint of practical reality. Scientists advising the U.S. Supreme Court have shown e.g., that a foetus does not have 'life' (i.e. it cannot survive as a viable entity) until the third month. For this reason, the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed abortions until the third month, arguing that until that time, the child is only a part of the woman's womb and the woman retains control over her body. From a practical point of view, as recent articles in the papers show, abortion is actually on the increase in Sri Lanka. Rich women have the means to buy their way out of an unwanted pregnancy - either by hiring a doctor or by taking a trip to a country which permits abortion. Poor women, on the other hand, either go to medical/ayurvedic hacks or try and abort themselves. Many of them die or mutilate themselves in the process. The actual choices before society from a practical point of view are either to save the life and limb of a woman, or to claim to save the life of an unborn, unwanted foetus, attached to the womb of a woman, which is in reality likely to



die anyway, mutilated by potent ayurvedic potions or by wounds the mother has inflicted on herself. To escape this type of primitivism, we must legalise abortion and subject it to medical and sanitary regulation.

19. *I still think this question of violence is sensationalism. What is it you are really talking about?*

Violence directed at women by men knows no boundaries - neither of age, caste, class nor ethnicity. It is probably the means most sanctioned by patriarchal society for maintaining a social control over women. Women are extremely vulnerable, placed as they are on the rim of the coin whose two faces read 'male-protector' and 'male-predator'.

Violence against women has many facets. The most commonly known in the Third World are genital mutilation, woman-battering and rape. Genital mutilation of young girls is most common in some Middle Eastern and African countries, and like most types of anti-woman aggression is directed at controlling women's sexuality. The control and suppression of women's sexuality is directly linked with the need to maintain the patrilinear mechanisms for inheriting property - i.e. to ensure that the offspring who inherit a man's property are

his. So a woman's body is mutilated to secure man's property rights.

The dispensability of women's lives is best highlighted in the much publicised dowry deaths of north India. Here, young married women are either driven to suicide or murdered by their husbands and in-laws dissatisfied with the quantity/quality of the dowry the young woman has brought into the marriage. At one level, woman shares the status of the material goods she brings into the marriage institution, at another she is the instrument through which such materials may be secured and passed on to posterity.

20. *But that is in other parts of the world. What about Sri Lanka?*

In Sri Lanka many Muslim women are circumcised and suffer from genital mutilation. There is also widespread woman-battering. Woman-battering is deemed socially permissible and acceptable. Among the types of violence directed at women, this is the least discussed as it is supposed to be enacted within the precincts of the family, the sacrosanct cornerstone of the patriarchal power structure. An 'erring' woman, irrespective of the reasons she might have, can be battered by her husband, male lover or male guardian with impunity. Because of the manner of her socialisa-

tion (she is socialised into passivity and into believing that the battering is due to some wrong she has done rather than the inadequacies and fears of the batterer himself) and the macro-social reality that is often weighted heavily against her, she is caught in what seems to her an inescapable trap. Battering is now increasingly addressed by Third World women's groups across class, caste and ethnic boundaries. In certain cultures and social contexts it is also acceptable to kill a woman if her sexuality has been directed towards unacceptable ends such as pre-marital or extra-marital relationships.

*21. What other kinds of violence do women fear?*

The nature of violence itself is often sexual in nature. The interchangeable roles of protector and predator that men play are in direct relationship to women's sexuality. The honour and status a man acquires among his peers is dependent on whether he can 'protect' the sexuality of his women chattel from falling into the possession of other men.

The rape of women has been a major motive force in social history, one seldom acknowledged by male chroniclers of the past. Systematised rape carried out en masse has been used to intimidate opposing women, and through them the men. Pakistan's invasion of Ban-



gladesh, the American presence in Vietnam, the Lebanese civil war, and even our own ethnic conflict, are vivid examples from the inter-communal/international context. Sexual violence against women has also been used in the caste and class contexts. For example, the organised struggle of peasants and landless labourers against the unjust appropriation of land by powers with vested interests has been undermined by the gang rape of militant women protestors or women spectators by hired thugs of the landlords. Such acts are intended to intimidate the women and highlight to the men their powerlessness to defend the sexuality of their women. In such contexts, rape against women of lower classes and castes is a particularly effective weapon wielded by the powerful. Since patriarchal society demands that men display the ability to control and manipulate others, sexual control of women is the only mode of socially acceptable control available to poor men, and the sexual violence directed at their women leaves them entirely impotent.

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Await Part II: Biology, Family and Culture.



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## About Part II: Biology, Society and Culture.



