

FEMINIST ETHICS: RECONSIDERING ETHICS FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE(S)

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Introduction:

The task of developing a critique of the traditional ethics started forming a major part of the agenda for the feminist movement right from the latter half of the twentieth century. The feminists argue that the matter of omission of perspectives and issues relating to or centring woman (as a moral subject or agent) has provided them with the initial rationale for a serious reconsideration of ethics. Subsequently, over the years they have come forward with several alternative proposals for replacement of the traditional claims and focus of ethics as a discipline. The feminists have gone to the extent of fixing their preferences and priorities of ethics in as many ways as possible. But amidst all the differences the basic commitments or concern of feminism for woman and its agenda for reassigning moral status to her remains nonetheless unquestioned throughout. The crux of the feminist ethical projects gets rightly expressed in words of Alison Jaggar (95) thus:

“Although feminists differ widely on a range of normative and theoretical issues, they do constitute a community in the sense that all share a few common assumptions. These include the view that the subordination of women is morally wrong and the moral experience of women is worthy of respect. Feminist ethics may seek to explain or justify these claims, but it never seriously questions them.”¹

What has been central to the restructuring attempts of the feminist ethicists is their continuous trial for narrowing down the gaps between theory and practice. To each of the spheres where traditional ethics went wrong corrections are proposed by them. Amidst which elimination of the grounds justifying the split between reason and emotion and the private and public spheres is realized to be an utmost requirement. Apart from which discarding of the construal process of human nature from a typical male point of view is also considered urgent enough.

Admittedly, the task of rebuilding ethics becomes a challenging one in case it demands overthrowing of all/some of those central concepts, postulates or norms which have helped the very discipline of ethics to continue with its objective, neutral or universalistic outfit. Since whether denouncing of those concepts/ postulates/norms

¹Jaggar, Alison. “Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, Prospects”, *Feminist Ethics*. Ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991. Print.

etc., in totality as tools, instrumental for the sustenance of the proclaimed universalistic claims of mainstream ethics, will favour the construction of any inclusive frame of ethics is yet not rightfully ascertained. It persists as a grey area deserving thorough consideration. The feminists, however, have to acknowledge that the conflict between the basic requirements of ethics and that of feminism(s) is needed to be adequately sorted out so that the ethics proposed in the new format does not miss a solid foundation. In this paper, an has been made to develop some critical reflections on the feminist projects and proposals for the reconstruction of ethics taking in due cognizance their applied as well as the theoretical dimensions. The content of the paper so stated is, in fact, an outcome of the close reading of the select literature in the field of feminist philosophy and gender cum developmental studies, which will be properly cited and acknowledged in the coming sections.

The Problematic:

Recognition of ‘women’ as moral subjects and theorization of their experiences over broader and inclusive frames marked the distinctness of feminist ethics that emerged as an offshoot of the Second Wave Feminism in West. Following the decades of 1960s feminists started putting forth enough effort in thematic representations of sporadic reflections on ethical issues, spread over a considerable period, right from the days of Mary Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill. Side by side they also started expressing their keenness on the methodical treatment of those issues As a result of which in the prospective frameworks for feminist ethics, apart from the practical ethical issues (like discriminations, violence, abortion etc.) the concern for the abstract ethical ones (like values, perspectives, character, responsibility, etc.) also started to surface at the manifest level. Worthy to be noted, their point of departure from traditional ethics is justified by the feminists on the ground of its exclusion (of the woman) and pseudo claims for objectivity, neutrality and universality. The incompatibility between the argued universalism on the one hand and the latent exclusivism on the other, obvious in the traditionally structured ethics, provides the justificatory grounds for floating of particularist agenda in feminist ethics. The feminists have come to notice flaws in the so-called notions of impartiality and justice too which run parallel to the conventional universalism.

Adoption of any wide, inclusive or accommodative frame for ethics capable of addressing situational differences among individuals is undoubtedly a commendable proposal. But what is even more important to enquire in this regard is how does this inclusion of the ‘excluded others’ take place. Implications seem to differ a lot if women are proposed to be included as ‘women’ only in any ethical scheme or are done so primarily as human beings. To what extent the charge of exclusion against universalistic ethics can suitably be met with the replacement of the former by overtly localised, particularistic or partial fame of ethics requires to be thoroughly examined. There are two options for the feminist ethicists to choose. They may either proceed to develop theories specially designed to address localised concerns only or justify afresh the foundational base for ethics and endeavour to develop it either on deontological, teleological or virtue ethical lines. In the latter case, they will, of course, require to bring necessary corrections in the methodical approaches as admissible on feminist grounds. It has been realized by a good number of feminists that doing away with the universalistic norms may not be helpful in the long run in pursuing the agenda for inclusion. Arguing in the line Susan Moller Okin (274) opines that feminist ethics if not self-defeating must take an account of the differences among persons and social groups and yet to be “universal, principled and founded on good reasons that all can accept”².

Feminist ethics decidedly ventures into both practical and theoretical domains of ethics with its two-fold proposed objectives. The agenda for feminist ethics in the practical field centres around the task of prescribing morally justifiable ways of resisting actions and practices that perpetuate women subordination and also of devising morally desirable alternatives promoting women’s welfare and well-being. At the theoretical level, it aims at developing philosophical accounts of the nature of morality. It pays special attention to revise the central moral concepts so that they become capable of capturing fully women’s moral experiences critically and respectfully. What is significant in this regard is to take a definite stance in identifying the root cause(s) behind the theoretic failures of the dominant discourses of ethics. The pressing question is whether the systemic failures of the mainstream ethical

²Okin, Susan Moller “Inequalities between the Sexes in Different Cultural Contexts”, *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

accounts can be ascribed to the inherent discrepancies of their approved standards or to how those standards were put to use? A group of feminists' dissatisfaction with virtue ethical or deontological theories of ethics like that of Aristotelian or Kantian, for example, is understandable because of the male bias is obvious in them. But would it be wise enough to discard those theoretic frames altogether simply on that ground? Or, the feminists would try to explore the possibilities of retaining the worth of the theories by making them free from the male bias? Some feminists will agree with Annette Baier in admitting that the traditional theories irrespective of their patriarchal bias can still be of good use for a fresh scheme of ethics.³ Since, "... they also contained the seeds of the challenge, or antidote, to this patriarchal poison." (Baier 26)⁴ What Baier contends is that those theories were not just instruments for excluding some persons. They also did argue for the inclusion of as many beings as possible though of course under the certain favoured category.

A feminist ethical position is expected to exercise its privilege over the mainstream ones in viewing woman's moral agency in terms of her concrete reality of being. Adoption of this stance would surely contain the good potential for enriching our understanding of the variety of situated ethical praxis confronted by a woman. However, it is equally pertinent to ask in this connection whether this sort of understanding of 'ethical' would bear similar implications for understanding universalized human situations too. Contrarily, what justifications could have been there for drawing exclusive categorizations between moral perceptions of woman and man and also categorizations among women along the line of culture, community, class, caste or nation? True to speak, if feminism keeps open too many ways for understanding 'ethical' it may fall prey to any weak version of relativism. But if it admits of only one way to understand 'ethical' (applicable to a generalized single category of the woman) there is the possibility of its getting trapped in the very same chain of too formal and abstract universalism of mainstream ethics. Feminist ethics surely needs to find out the third option in between.

³This is strongly objected by the thinkers like Audre Lorde (110-114) – "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 2007. Print.

⁴Baier, Annette. *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*, USA: Harvard University Press. 1995. Print.

How to Situate Feminist Ethics?

There could be two major ways of looking at feminist ethics. Feminist ethics might be looked as a proclamation for enlargement of ethical concerns to unrecognised spheres/issues. Or else it might be treated as a proposal for focused confinement of ethics to woman's issues. Justifying feminist ethics in either of the ways again seems to be problematic. Because if feminist ethics is a bare proposal for drawing ethics to several unrecognized but relevant spheres, it is a proposal for enlargement or expansion of general ethics having least grounds for bearing a new nomenclature called 'feminist ethics'. If on the other hand, feminist ethics fixes its focus on the woman and reflects upon woman's issues only it would be highly difficult on its part to refute the charge of narrowing down ethical concerns to an extremely limited plane. In the second way, the very purpose of feminist ethics is defeated because the claims for gender equality and justice --- the long pursued goals of feminism draw their justifications from a presumed plane of co-existence of and coordination between genders.

There might be a third way of defence which the feminists could confidently argue about. Feminism may come forward with the distinct proposal for enlargement of ethics but especially on 'feminist' line, arguing for prospective 'feminist' ways of understanding issues. If ethics is to go beyond its structural limits the most suitable pursuit for it would be to work out scheme(s) that would do away with the sharp line of distinctions between man's and woman's issues. To separate woman's issues from man's issues is not at all a feasible proposal. As Jaggar (85-86) has pointed out: "Since men's and women's lives are inextricably intertwined, there are no women's issues that are not also men's issues"⁵ Nevertheless, the very demand for enlargement of ethical concerns to several unrecognised spheres and introduction of fresh perspectives to the already recognised ethical issues will surely call for new sets of moral justifications. Jaggar thinks that feminist ethics will be largely privileged to pursue ethics on a much wider frame than the traditional ones. She declines to take feminist ethics as just an explicitly gendered subset of ethical issues. "On the

⁵Jaggar, Alison. "Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, Prospects", *Feminist Ethics*. Ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991.

contrary, rather than being limited to a restricted ethical domain, feminist ethics has enlarged the traditional concerns of ethics.” (86)⁶

The feminists’ cause of rebuilding ethics is likely to be considered as a justified one provided their pledge is taken as a pledge for a sharp departure from the male-biased perceptions of morality. The adoption of new perspectives in addressing several age-old issues and a good number of newly identified ones (arising out of the perspectival changes) is sure to enrich ethics as a discipline. Particularly in this sense, the question of adopting a wide, comprehensive perspective that provides due coverage to the issues of the woman (as a human) and rest of the human folk, in general, becomes pertinent. It seems that purely feminine, maternal, lesbian or radical approaches to ethics through having relevance for particular sections of women, would contain less potential for taking ethics beyond the localised concerns (of issues). Contrary to the former position, there are quite a good number of feminists who like Virginia Held (321-344) refuse to treat feminist ethics as “mere additional insights which can be incorporated into traditional theory”.⁷ This new trend necessitated ethics to evolve through an explicitly feminine line. The works of Gilligan⁸, Noddings⁹, Ruddick¹⁰, Held¹¹ and a few others contributed toward the formulation of specialised ethical concerns to a considerable extent. These two counteracting positions of the feminist ethicists have been succinctly outlined in Samantha Brennan’s writings (516):

⁶Jaggar, Alison. “Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, Prospects”, *Feminist Ethics*. Ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991.

⁷Held, Virginia. “Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.50, Supplement, Published by International Phenomenological Society., 1990. Print.

⁸Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982. Print.

⁹Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral education*. Berkeley: University of CA Press, 1982. Print.

¹⁰Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. New York:NY: Balentine Books, 1989. Print.

¹¹Held, Virginia. “Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.50, Supplement, Published by International Phenomenological Society., 1990. Print.

----- *The Ethics of Care*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 2006. Print.

While some feminists think the problem with traditional ethics has been the range of problems, others think that the problem runs much deeper and that the problem is not with the application of the concepts and tools of moral theory, traditionally conceived; the tool and concepts themselves are flawed. On this view, we need to revise traditional moral concepts in light of relational insights.¹²

Looking for ‘Feminist’ Way(s) of Understanding:

Could there be a central focus in the ‘feminist’ ways of understanding ethical issues? Consideration of gender as a category for ethical analysis helps feminists revealing the discriminations women were or are subjected to. Over the years, the said consideration has proved fruitful enough because implicit gender bias hidden behind the gender-neutral claims of the mainstream ethics is laid bare in the process. Because of their initial aversion for too formal and abstract universalism, working with only universal ‘situational frame’ (relevant for all humans) was highly inconceivable at the beginning point of the feminists’ journey. But at a later date, many of them felt compelled to admit that to operate with any strictly localised existential frame is found to be equally preposterous running the risk of excluding many others.

Given a second-order reflection on the entire issue under consideration it would become eventually obvious that the question of dispensing with all universalism in ethics is based more on a misconception (that goes to argue that the universalistic and objective discourses are always prone to take an exclusivist colour). Nonetheless, it makes sense to say that the task of formulating a standardized version of a generalized category of being (woman as a uniform category) devoid of concrete existential dimensions is sure to take being in abstraction. But corresponding to each individual’s, individual group’s situational variations formulation of secluded and fragmented views of ethics bearing no implications for the extended others is neither feasible nor worth-seeking. Because of the global concern, developed of late, for humankind in general to what extent cultivation of thoroughly localised or fragmented ethics beyond certain limit would be beneficial even for the concerned sections is becoming difficult to ascertain. Therefore, looking for an option in between ‘hardcore essentialism’ and ‘too fragile relativism’ is felt urgent by considerable sections of feminists, social scientists and development ethicists (like

¹²Brennan, Samantha. “Feminist Ethics”, *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*. Ed. John Skorupsky. 2013. Print.

Martha Nussbaum, Onora O'Neill, Susan Moller Okin, Ruth Anna Putnam, Seyla Benhabib etc.,) who work also beyond their localised spheres and are exercising influences in the policy decisions at the national and international levels.

There is no denying to the fact that the issues relating to gender deserve to be treated as a significant one in the assessment of individual positioning along with the issues of race, caste, class, etc. Accordingly, studying the interfaces between gender and class, gender and caste, gender and race or gender and ethnicity etc., at par with the interacting frames of gender and culture or gender and religion, is an utmost necessity in a multi-cultural society. The prevalence of gender disparity in any of these operational frames would surely reveal severe cases of gross injustice. It puts to question the very normative structure based on which the state laws or rules are framed. Hence, injustices rendered to women offer a justified call for the reconstruction of ethics and also re-construal of the basic concepts on which the principles of gender justice or egalitarian ethics would rest.

Quite naturally, the new ethics to evolve must issue a call for a fresh revision of the concepts of justice, impartiality, care, empathy and the like and initiate steps for elimination of the grounds for which or on which women were/are discriminated. The problem is not that easy to be instantly resolved with. There remains enough scope for debates and controversies. One most disputed contention in this regard is that of justice, for example. Questions are raised whether a feminist theory of justice would be a theory with better potential to cope with the situation? Or, the potential contained in any humanist theory would be a better option? Like this justice question, addressing the questions of gender inequality, moral interdependence, defining the range of human capabilities and vulnerabilities in a multi-cultural society and the like become crucial for any inclusive ethics. The requirement for consideration of the issues, as stated above, has been duly acknowledged by a considerable number of feminists cum development ethicists. The studies conducted in the respective fields got documented in the book *Women, Culture and Development* (edited by Nussbaum and Glover, 1995, reprint 2001). The book has dealt elaborately with various persistent controversies and come to throw sufficient light upon the prospects of their resolutions too.

In our view, the core of the considerations undertaken in determining the prospects of inclusive feminist ethics in various circles ultimately centres around drawing a baseline distinction between the two approaches: (i) consideration of woman as woman and (ii) consideration of woman as human. The traditional reductionist approach that narrows down the meaning of human to man only runs a severe risk of exclusion. But the risk factor does not seem to disappear completely in case any fixed essence of womanhood is superimposed on women in general. (We should not be oblivious of the fact that the crypto gender-biased humanist discourses of traditional ethics used the same logic - 'consideration of woman as woman' for excluding women from the moral domain). How to comply with the universal frame of ethics which pays equal heed to the multiplicity of voices of distress is the most demanding issue now. Ethics, as well as justice bereft of universality, can scarcely be shown to be well-founded. Cases could be taken as exceptions on justified grounds provided those grounds were claiming something more than mere preferential causes.

What could have been a suitable moral position? What could have been a more acceptable version of Ethics? The prospective discourses which attempt to answer these questions, leaning towards universalistic frames, are associated with the names of Susan Moller Okin (274-297)¹³, Ruth Anna Putnam (298-331)¹⁴, Seyla Benhabib (235-255)¹⁵, Onora O'Neill (140-152)¹⁶, Martha Nussbaum (61-104)¹⁷, Amartya Sen (259-273; 1-21)¹⁸ and quite a few more. The common thread that runs

¹³Okin, Susan Moller "Inequalities between the Sexes in Different Cultural Contexts", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁴Putnam, Ruth Anna. "Why Not a Feminist Theory of Justice?", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁵Benhabib, Seyla. "Cultural Complexity, Moral Interdependence, and the Global Dialogical Community", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁶O'Neill, Onora. "Justice, Capabilities and Vulnerabilities", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁷Nussbaum, Martha. "Human Capabilities; Female Human Beings", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁸Sen, Amartya. "Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice", *Women, Culture and Development, A Study of Human Capabilities*. Ed. M. Nussbaum & J. Glover. Oxford:

through the universalistic frames of ethics is the desire for developing a humanist frame - a frame which treats all human beings as equal from the moral point of view. This, however, does not entail that for consideration of a being as a human that being should be taken in abstraction with the denial of her distinctive features. While none of the thinkers referred above disagreed at this point, nonetheless they did have subscribed to divergent ethical positions. For example, while Putnam is proposing to work on the Rawlsian frame, Nussbaum's preference is for Aristotelian. Sen's approach traverses through the critique of both Rawlsian and utilitarian frames finally taking a beyond utilitarianist stance. While O'Neill's proposed working frame sticks to Kantian liberalism, Benhabib would like to replace Rortyan "communities of conversation" by "communities of planetary interdependence" and would finally plead for a global dialogical moral community. What is noticeable in the stated attempts for the reconstruction of ethics is that none of these thinkers is ready to compromise with the universal human understanding of a moral situation, while not showing impatience for understanding other's positions. Promising models for moral justifications may be made available to feminism in one or the other way as mentioned.

Amidst the cultural diversities and the situational differences, the search for generalised theoretic frames is quite obvious in the different schemes so proposed. A common concept of humanity is also argued upon for without which the difficulty of addressing women's issues at par with men's issues could not be duly sorted out. In the newly proposed models humanity instead of being used as a given or fixed essence is understood to function as a regulative ideal defining a vision of human solidarity and community.

Clarendon Press, 1995. Print. See also Sen, Amartya and Bernard Williams. "Introduction: Utilitarianism and Beyond", *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Print.