

## **Social Relationships Through Feminist Lens**

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**Abstract:** *This paper endeavours to discuss two real life relationships from the perspective of two philosophers- Carol Gilligan, a renowned psychologist and philosopher and Simone de Beauvoir an existentialist philosopher. I will show how the readings of these relations become difficult from the perspectives of two philosophies. Both of them have critiqued the patriarchal top down structure like any other feminist and have explored and interpreted human relations from novel perspectives. Gilligan maintains that human beings are essentially related. Gilligan suggests that the entire relational network of a society can be sustained through care and empathetic listening of the voices of the 'Other'. Beauvoir is an existentialist philosopher who maintains that human existence creates his/her being through freedom. One should go beyond the constraints of our contingent existence and give meaning to everyday relations through a never-ending venture of taking new projects.*

**Keywords:** Relational self, voice, empathetic listening, freedom, facticity.

### ***Introduction***

My paper focuses on two stories and their interpretation from feminist perspective. I am concerned with the ethical aspect of the two happenings. I want to discuss them from feminist perspective simply because patriarchal values will not appreciate the moral dilemma involved in these two stories. These are real life stories and are not a product of my imagination. The names of the characters are the only changes that I have made and the rest has been a description of what actually occurred.

My paper will have four sections. In the first section, I will discuss two traditionally accepted main stream theories in brief. In the second section I will narrate the stories. In the third section I will sketch the structure of the two feminist theories in brief; one by existentialist thinker Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and another by Carrol Gilligan (1936-), a very prominent feminist ethical theorist of our time. Gilligan is a very important

turning point in the history of ethical theories. In the fourth section I will look at the events through the lens of the above-mentioned feminist theories and will highlight the predicaments and moral dilemmas involved in these relational networks.

### *The conceptual frame*

Gilligan has proposed a care theory which can be treated as an alternative to traditional mainstream ethical theories. The feminist ethical theories question the God's eye view of the mainstream ethics where the latter ignores the importance of context, conventions, the situatedness of particular actions and also the lived experiences of the actors.

Let us consider an example of mainstream ethical theory in brief. The famous German theorist Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) proposes that an action is right only when it can be universalised. It is the categorical imperative in us, the unconditional command of our conscience that decides the moral worth of an action. The moral worth of actions is not to be decided on the basis of their consequences. His most important dictum is 'Act as if the maxim of our action were to become by our will a universal law of nature' (*Critique of Practical Reason* p.139.) According to this theory one can lie only when one can will that everyone else can lie. One cannot break a promise because breaking promise cannot be universalised.

Another most significant ethical theory has been proposed by famous English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Mill's Utilitarianism is the principal foundation of modern liberalism that dictates the global economic scenario. Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness, Mill refers to pleasure and absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the absence of pleasure. It would be a misunderstanding to think that Mill was unconcerned about the well-being of collective good. Mill's altruism dreams of collective happiness and thus insists on the principle of 'Greatest happiness of the Greatest number'. Mill's theory is considered to be ideal form of utilitarianism where he introduced the notion of qualitative measure of pleasure.

All these theories propose a priori principles based on reason totally marginalising the emotive aspect of a particular action. Moreover, the God's eye view of these theories ignores the importance of contexts, conventions, situatedness of particular actions as has been mentioned. The feminists critique this approach.

I am focussing on two feminist theories - one popularised by Carol Gilligan and another by Simone de Beauvoir the French feminist of the early twentieth century and the other is by Carol Gilligan(1936-). I have chosen these theories considering their importance in the postmodern era and also with a view to show how some relations put us in a moral dilemma regarding the decision of the moral worth of these actions.

Let me first narrate relationships as I have perceived them before I get into the feminist ethical theories.

### *The first case study*

The first story is that of Kakoli, a widow who feels that the quality of her life has improved after the demise of her husband though she had a very good relation with her husband. Kakoli is 61 years old, 11 years younger to her husband. Her husband Sudipto has passed away at the age of 72. She has two sons and a daughter happily married and settled in life. She stays alone in her flat at Narendrapur, Kolkata. She was a very efficient home maker and a caring mother. She could never imagine a life without her husband. Initially she was in deep depression after the sudden demise of her husband but gradually she could face the world overcoming the intense pain through which she was going.

After almost a year she started realising that her quality of life is much better in comparison to her previous life. She realised that she could never address her desires after her marriage. Sudipto was considerate and kind but Kakoli had a huge family with two unmarried sisters-in-law, one brother-in-law, her father and mother-in-law. She could sing very well and was good in her studies but had to discontinue when her mother-in-law fell ill. Everyone wanted her to pursue her studies but she herself decided to discontinue in order to take care of her family. Eventually she had two sons and a daughter. She had a heavy load of work, a never-ending multitasking like any other homemaker. Her daughters and her son are happily settled.

Initially she felt ashamed of her change of attitude. Her deep rooted patriarchal values did not allow her to feel happier than before. But with time she could identify the reasons of her well-being. For the first time in her life she looked at her own self which she never did before. She was always a wife or a mother or a very caring daughter-in-law but She was never herself. Life appeared so beautiful and different as if she is reborn. She does not have any grudge against anyone. She is no more angry with her sister-in-law and her son. She can understand them better. She has become social, more connected, more concerned about others. She

keeps in touch with her friends and relatives. Her son, some of her relatives resent this change in her behaviour but she is not vulnerable any more. She can ignore their attitude while leading a happy creative life. Only her daughter and daughter-in-law appreciate the change in her.

### *The second case study*

Nilanjana was a friend of mine from class VI. She was very good in Mathematics. She took up science in class XI and started going to a tutorial home where she met Ayush, a quiet introvert boy, sincere in his studies with very few friends. Ayush was good in Physics and other science subjects but was not comfortable with Mathematics. Maths teacher was strict, stricter with the students who were not doing well. Ayush felt like discontinuing his classes but had no other alternative but to continue.

Nilanjana was helpful in nature. She went out of her way to help Ayush. Nilanjana could teach very well and she helped Ayush with his Maths. They started studying jointly. Ayush had problems with her domineering mother who would overpower everyone in her family. Ayush was more comfortable in Nilanjana's home. Nilanjana's mother Sujata was supportive, she loved pampering them with tasty yummy food. Ayush and Nilanjana realised that they became very significant in each other's life.

There was a radical change in Nilanjana after she joined the university. She joined a drama club in the university, loved eating out, busy with her drama competitions. She was in love with Ayush but with less intensity. She was not aware that she did not miss Ayush's phone calls like before.

Things took a different turn in Ayush's life. He used to talk for hours with Sujatamasi, about movies and classical music, in which both were interested. Both were deeply immersed in Tagore. Nilanjana felt alienated in the *adda* where the three of them enjoyed so much before she joined the university.

Sujata was lonely, she missed the company of her workaholic busy husband. There was a shift of attitude in Sujata. She started realising that her feelings towards Ayush were taking a different colour. She was drawn towards Ayush, in fact both of them were drawn towards each other. She became conscious of her feelings but had a lot of difficulty in accepting her mental state. She felt comfortable when Ayush went to Ranchi to complete his

semesters. She started hating herself for her unusual turn of emotions. How could she fall in love with her would be son-in-law?

Ayush was gradually realising that he was no longer in love with Nilanjana. He was in love with the innocent simple helpful Nilanjana. But, this Nilanjana is a different one, obsessed with her looks, her increasing consumerism, her casual indifference towards people around her... Ayush was getting emotionally involved with Sujatamasi in a queer way. He was not aware of the exact nature of his emotions but he realised that Sujatamasi is his best friend. He could share his tensions about the semesters, his plans for his carrier, his detailed critical observation about the films he saw, his love for poems and literature about which both had a strong liking; feelings and emotions that he cannot share with anyone else.

Sujata wanted to be honest. It was very difficult for her to admit the truth. She knew that Nilanjana will misunderstand her but she felt that she should come out with the truth and face the stark reality. Nilanjana accused her mother for Ayush's change of attitude towards her. Sujata remained quiet and asked Ayush not to keep in touch with her. Ayush was depressed, he felt that life would be too difficult for him without his best friend. He strongly felt that there is nothing wrong in being truthful about one's emotion even if it is unacceptable in the society they live in. Relationships must not be inauthentic. He was confident that Sujata's emotions towards Ayush would not be same with time. He repeatedly asked Sujatamasi to change her decision but in vain. Sujata was in deep pain but she stuck to her decision.

### ***Feminism introduced***

Patriarchy is a universal feature of every society without an exception. Patriarchy refers to a system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women; it sets up the values for the society and assign rigid frame for different social relations. We all know that this subordination is not the fate of an unfortunate lot; it is not that some 'vicious' men exploit some women. It is an all-pervasive system.

Gerdalerner, an eminent feminist, describes patriarchy with an analogy.

In this system, men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kind of performers. This stage is conceived, painted and defined by

men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of action (Bhasin 1993: 15).

In Patriarchy women exploitation shows its face in three forms. Phallocentrism, patriarchy and sexism. Patriarchy is actually the institutional form of women subordination where sexism is its explicit manifestation. Any visible act or speech, attitude or theory that treats women as inferior to men can be labelled as sexism. Many eminent thinkers such as Aristotle (384BC-322BC), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Freud (1856-1939) have explicitly depicted women as inferior to men. The root of sexism is androcentrism or phallocentrism that discriminate women at the level of thought or at the conceptual level. Phallocentrism is actually the basis of both sexism and patriarchy.

In the postmodern era Feminism is a strong voice against women's marginalisation. It began with women activism starting from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and then subsequently by American and British movements where it was chiefly confined to the demand for certain rights; for example, right to education, right to vote etc. The conceptual or the philosophical basis of these demands against marginalisation was developed in the seventies of twentieth century.

As far feminism is concerned there are some misconceptions that must be clarified before we start discussing the theories which we want to discuss in this paper.

First, in last forty years we have witnessed quite a good number of feminist theories differing radically from one another. What is exactly common among them that puts them under the umbrella term 'feminism'? In fact, there are feminisms and not feminism. Though they differ from one another in many respects all of them focus on women empowerment in some form or other.

Second, patriarchy not only victimises women it victimises men as well by assigning them fixed roles. It is objectionable because both men and women have to act according to the rigid norms laid down by patriarchy, which emphasizes on homogeneity and convergences. Pluralism or variation is never encouraged. Moreover, it divides the entire society into men and women as if there is no place for the transgenders. The entire system is based on two valued logic, where one is either a male or female, right or wrong, rational or emotional. There is no third alternative. Any exception is completely overlooked.

Third, it would be a mistake to think that only women raise their voices against this discrimination. It was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) the British philosopher who first raised his voice after Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1787) and wrote *The Subjection of Women* in 1869 demanding women empowerment. There were a good number of Indian thinkers who protested against women exploitation in India. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (820-1891), Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) and many more.

### *Carol Gilligan*

Feminist theories are generally divided into liberal and radical camps. The theory propounded by Beauvoir represents the liberal model and the one popularised by Gilligan can be taken as a radical one. Liberal models of feminist philosophy usually modify an established philosophical or a psychological theory and endeavours to make it Gender sensitive. On the other hand, radical theories totally discard the traditionally accepted systems. Radical feminist theories would propose a new model, radically different from the conventional ones with a different metaphysics, logic, epistemology and ethics.

Carol Gilligan in her book *In a Different Voice* (1993) has drawn our attention to the hidden voice of women which remains unexpressed due to the patriarchal power structure. According to Gilligan, patriarchy builds up cultural constructs that have mechanisms for silencing the female voice. This systematic silencing of the female voice is the most pervasive form of violence towards women.

Patriarchy is responsible for the conceptual framework that is deeply internalised by all the members of a society. Our fixed set of beliefs, together with the existing customs, forms our conceptual structure which lays down some fixed laws for both men and women. These laws are never questioned. Anything that deviates from this existing pattern is unacceptable.

Gilligan maintains that in our present state of existence we have realised that healthy relations are the most significant key to healthy social life. Healthy relation is ensured in an egalitarian society based on freedom and mutual respect. Primacy of reason or rational universal principles endorsed by the classical moral theories proposed by Mill (1806-1873), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Rawls (1921-2002) etc. ignore emotion. Feminists

points out that underestimating the importance of emotion is not congenial for healthy social relations.

Gilligan emphasizes that all of us have an inner voice and it is very important to listen to it. Voice for Gilligan is an important tool that bridges up the gap between external and internal (psychological) world. The inner voice comes out from one's lived experience, beliefs, feelings and thoughts and thus each individual voice is unique, no voice is identical with another voice. Some women are conscious of their internal voice but others are not at all aware of any implicit voice due to the internalisation of patriarchal values.

Most of the women experience a split inside, a conflict of two voices within; one is the internalised voice of patriarchy and another deeper internal voice which is denied any importance. Women who compromise with discrimination speak in an artificial voice and silence her inner voice simply because she feels it is neither feasible nor desirable to bring it up. Moreover, they feel that authenticity will disturb their relationship with near and dear ones. Since most women give prime importance to relationships they strangle their inner voice. Virginia Woolf states that a woman needs to strangle the angel from her own self so that she can silence the false feminine voice. Gilligan observed that the endeavour of expressing the inner voice had already started.

In this context, Gilligan writes:

I wrote *In a Different Voice* to bring women's voices into psychological theory and to reframe the conversation between women and men. It has been astonishing for me to discover, in the time since this book was published, how my experiences resonate with the experiences of other women and also in different ways with the experiences of men (1993: xxvi). So that now the themes of voice and relationship, and the concerns about connection at the cost of detachment, which seemed so new in the 1970s, have become part of growing conversation (Gilligan 1993: xxvi).

The different voice criticises the justification of psychological processes which go in the name of love. It must be noted that the different voice has a positive impact on relationships. This theory highlights the essential nature of human self, a self which is essentially relational. Gilligan maintains that a different voice is relational voice which insists in staying in connection with others. The psychological separation, which has long been justified in

the name of autonomy, selfhood and freedom, is no longer favourable for human development.

Gilligan thus proposed an alternative ethics based on voice. To understand the difference between artificial voice and real voice we need to be empathetic. This alternative theory is a theory of care, co-feeling and responsiveness.

To quote Gilligan in this context:

Moral problems are problems of human relations, and in tracing the development of an ethic of care, I explore the psychological grounds for non-violent human relations. This relational ethic transcends the age-old opposition between selfishness and selflessness, which have been the staples of moral discourse. The search on the part of many people for a voice which transcends these false dichotomies represents an attempt to turn the tide of moral discussion from questions of how to achieve objectivity and detachment to how to engage responsively and with care (Gilligan 1982: xix).

The journey of women from an invisible, unheard and marginalised state to a state where her voice can be heard, visibly understood as well as recognised as significant and powerful, is a journey towards empowerment. Her inner voice can reach others only when there is a responsive listener, who listens, understands and gives proper response thereby reinforcing her voice. Connectivity is largely dependent on empathetic listeners who will take initiative to understand the voice.

In her recent work *Joining the Resistance* (2011) Gilligan states that the different voice is identified not by gender but by theme. It is a difference that arises from associating reason with emotion, self with relationships. This voice articulates democratic norms rejecting patriarchal splits and hierarchies.

### ***Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)***

The two world wars impacted the philosophical world that started questioning the importance of theories without practice. Simone de Beauvoir is an existentialist philosopher who claims that she is only developing Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. But feminists find Simone to be original, with a distinctive view, a view that is not a resonance of Sartre's existentialism.

Simone's theory revolves round the concept of freedom. It emphasizes on the free will. According to this theory the crucial difference that separates a conscious being from the causal deterministic order of things is the freedom of human being. The objects of the world are causally determined, they exist as things in themselves without consciousness; but human beings are different, they are essentially free. The view developed by Simone can be seen as a passionate defence of freedom as the most essential characteristic of human beings not bound by the fixed structure of the world; men and women are free to negate, to say no, to doubt, to imagine various possibilities.

This can be explained with the example of a gambler who resolved that he will stop gambling. He makes a choice, not determined by his past actions or events. Again, one can choose to be a writer. His future actions will remain unpredictable not necessarily determined by the project of becoming a writer. At every moment an individual can exercise a choice and take up a new project.

Another very crucial concept of Simone's theory is facticity. Facticity refers to the contingent circumstances or facts of one's life which may be biological, psychological, social and economical and these are constraints which human beings cannot change. For example, the fact that one Sujon is born in an economically poor family, he is Hindu by birth, has three sisters and brother. Basically, these are facts which one must accept, he or she cannot change it according to one's will. We are not free to make changes in the facts where we belong but we are free in giving them meaning, in interpreting them. I am alone giving meaning to my own world, constantly constructing and reconstructing it's meaning and in this manner, one is transcending the facticity. One is negotiating with the existing situation. For example, an alcoholic is giving meaning to his world. He lives in the world of his own where he has chosen to be an alcoholic; he could have decided to be an artist or a doctor. Simone would insist that we are free to construct our own situation.

It must be noted, in this connection, that my endeavour to construct my own world makes me responsible for all the projects that I choose and the consequences that follow thereby. As a conscious being I thus determine my essence only by temporary transient choices of what I would like to become. This is indeed the meaning of the existential principle that existence precedes essence. One is totally responsible for the choices one makes, in giving meaning to one's world, without any support from God or any other foundation of truth and value.

The freedom of the individual does not give him peace for he experiences a constant anguish, anguish for the consequence of enjoying total freedom which again implies total responsibility. Simone maintains that at times we try to escape this dreadful freedom associated with total responsibility. But the tendency to escape this responsibility is considered derogatory according to this view; it is referred as bad faith.

Bad faith is the attitude where one pretends that human affairs are unavoidable and necessary which cannot be escaped. It is pretending that we are causally determined as inanimate things of the world where we are not responsible for the happenings of our life. It is pretending that we are not responsible for what we do. It is self-deception, it is a lie that we tell ourselves, a lie to the soul. For example, a doctor who wanted to be a writer blames his parents for forcing him to become a doctor. Again, when a homosexual declares that 'I am a homosexual', as if nature has made him homosexual. This man is trying to escape from his freedom and his responsibility for choosing what he is and what he does. It is an alienation with one's self. It must be noted that inauthenticity or 'bad faith' is one of the core concepts of Simone's moral philosophy.

Simone criticises the serious man who with a spirit of seriousness accepts the conventional moral norms without questioning it, as if they are absolute, unchangeable necessary truths. We must remember that conventional morality is contingent, relative, a morality that is associated with a particular time and place.

Thus, to live is to transcend facticity by giving meaning to a situation, leading an authentic life not following the existing norms like a serious man without questioning them. To live a life of authenticity she/he will have to go against the accepted norms of morality, the age-old conventions that has never been questioned. One has to exercise his freedom by taking up new projects. He creates his own being from mere existence. He becomes responsible for his actions and psychologically in a state of angst which is associated with his freedom and responsibility.

### ***Situating the case studies in perspective***

We have sketched two prominent feminist theories simply because we want to see how unconventional emotional relationships are interpreted from the feminist perspectives. We have first discussed Gilligan's theory of

care followed by Simone's views; here we will first consider the stories through Simone's lens.

If we consider the first story about the widow Kakoli through the lens of Simone we can see that Kakoli has given a new meaning to her present situation. She has transcended the facticity (for instance being alone) by taking up a new project where she can nurture her creativity through her music classes, treating her friends with interesting yummy food on which she is experimenting constantly, her gardening, her story writings and her social relations. She is more connected than before with her relatives and friends. She is no longer under the shadow of her husband or anyone else. She is enjoying every moment of her independence. Kakoli is leading an authentic meaningful life according to Simone's theory where she has given new meaning to his present existence and she is willing to take responsibilities associated with her decisions.

In the second story, Sujata, Nilanjanas mother, is in direct conflict with patriarchal values which will not allow any member of the society to deviate from the roles assigned to him or her. It will condemn any emotional relation between Sujata and Ayush.

It is to be noted that Simone's theory is prone to questioning the conventional social roles. It revolves round the concept of freedom and authenticity. Sujata has exercised her freedom. She has not suppressed her feelings, she has not lied to her soul and her closest one's. In Simone's language she is not acting in accordance with bad faith. She has exercised her agency and has taken up the project of not to be in touch with Ayus. Simone's framework will treat Sujata and Ayush as two adult individuals who could have opted for a serious relationship. One can argue that Sujata is denying her desire to get close to Ayush and thus acting according to bad faith. We must acknowledge that this is a complex problem where it is difficult to decide whether Sujata is silencing her desire to be with Ayush. The situation itself is ambiguous and we cannot expect black and white solutions of these complex issues.

Gilligan's theory revolves round the concept of care which implies respect for self and the other. In other words, it means carving out one's own space and letting other to do the same. In Gilligan's framework, it is important to give equal emphasis on the needs of both the individuals within the relationship. This ethical theory is about proper communication between two individuals. Kakoli was always caring for others but not towards her own self. This story is totally in tune with Gilligan for here she focuses on

her own needs and needs of others as well. Her relationship with her relatives has improved. She feels fulfilled and all her grudges get dissolved in her constructive happy life. Her silent voice has been expressed and heard by some of her close relatives and friends.

Gilligan's care theory will be difficult to apply in Sujata's case. The emotional situation does not allow Sujata to care for herself and her daughter simultaneously. In this story, Gilligan's care model gets crippled and thus inapplicable in any triangular relationship. A theory can ideally chalk out a diagram of neat relationship between two individuals. But real-life situations are complex, where it is very difficult to decide the distribution of care among the partners involved.

Many of us will argue that the feminist theories are not always helping us in preserving social relationships. They will insist that patriarchal values should not be discarded without consideration. It works in different forms in different cultures and in many cases, it is effective in preserving and sustaining social relationships.

If we give more emphasis on freedom and agency then there is a high probability that peaceful, comfortable emotional zones will be affected. Many feminists will value freedom and agency at the cost of giving up the desires of comfortable emotional ties. Again, care model cannot help us understanding a triangular relationship or in other complex emotional structures.

There is no criterion on the basis of which we can prefer one model over others. Since care ethics believes in showing equal respect to different perspectives we can argue that it is suitable for social wellbeing. Collective harmony can be an acid test for preferring one theory. But care has its limitation as has already been shown.

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