

Everyday Social Relation: A Feminist Reading

Jhuma Chakraborty and Sritama Basu

The relations, even in a middleclass urban educated nuclear family, can be complex when all the members of a three-member family have strong and unique agencies, and have different perceptions of life. All three, absolutely reasonable caring human beings, live with a sense of alienation, with a perpetual grudge that the other two do not understand him/her. None of them are happy. The three-dimensional relationship, apparently simple, yet, deep down, is very complex. The complexity of relations disturbs the three members because they truly love one another. This paper endeavours to provide a possible solution to this problem from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Family relations, complexity of relations, alienation, feminist perspective, gender stereotypes, ethics of social relations.

Introduction

Anjana, Arka's mother yelled 'Arka wake up fast, you will be late for school. You will be missing your school bus.'

Arka jumped out of bed. After school Arka has more than one tutorials and a special class for the science group. Anjana thinks that Arka must be on his toes for she has seen her younger brother getting carried away in spite of being very bright. In the present world of competition, she has no other alternative left but to keep a constant vigilance regarding Arka's activities. She is lonely and distanced from Animesh. Her only important identity is that she is Arka's mother.

Arka's father Animesh being a doctor can hardly spare any quality time for his son. Animesh is a renowned doctor in his town and there are very few dedicated doctors in this pocket of the city. He feels obliged to care for each patient. He feels that he can lead a meaningful life through caring and working at every relationship whether personal or professional. But probably he is not being able to create a balance between his personal and professional

life. He feels that both Anjana and Arka are suffering because of his romanticism or idealism regarding his profession.

Anjana was a good dancer and wanted to pursue her carrier as a dancer. Everything was fine but the birth of Arka and the sudden demise of Animesh's mother changed the scenario in the home front. Animesh feels that he has little to say about Anjana's decisions regarding Arka.

Arka is 10 years old. He doesn't have any close friend in school. He can hardly recall a Sunday he woke up late. A few months back he was caught reading one from the Feluda series on a Saturday afternoon; from the next Saturday, the private tutor started coming. His self-made multi-coloured bookmark is still there in between the last read page of his story book. Arka has no dreams in his eyes; he is just like the clock on the wall tireless and mechanical. Deep inside his mind Arka has the suppressed desire to laugh out loud, to run on to the field, to embrace the wind with his hands, to make new friends, to draw, to read story books. Actually, Arka wants to be an artist or probably he wants to be a bus driver... he is not very sure about his desires....it keeps changing.

Rabindranath Tagore in his poem "BAUL" has portrayed the innocent desires of a child just like Arka,

nebe amae sathe

Esob panditeri hate...Amae keno sobai maro,

...Bhulie die pora... amae sekhao sure gora,

Tomar tala bhangar path

ar Kichhuna chai...jeno akash khana pai,

Ar hariye jawar math.

[My mind wants to vanish

And sing the words you speak

Could I unlearn all this forever?

Will you take me with you?

All these men of learning

Why do they make me suffer?
Make me forget my lessons
And teach me the song
That unlocks all doors,
I want nothing too precious
But an azure blue sky
And endless fields and no more.]

This is a very familiar story with marginal exceptions. These days' parents are too worried about the career of their children. Their concept of a successful future means becoming a doctor or an engineer or a scientist or a lawyer or choosing a profession of social prestige. The unemployment problem, the values of the society influences the priorities of the family. There is a vicious circle here. Family being the most important unit of the society, the influence is vice -versa.

In the above-mentioned story, none of the members are wrong; they have their own commitments and they have the right to look at the world from their perspective.

But all of them are alienated in one sense. None of them are happy. The three-dimensional complex relationship is apparently very simple but if we probe deep into it the relationship shared by the three and also in one to one form, has shades and complexities; for example, in the above-mentioned story the relationship between Anjana and Animesh is different from the relationship between the dedicated doctor and his 10-year-old loving imaginative son. This scenario is common which is badly affecting our well-being. Probably no one is at fault but we all are alienated from each other.

This paper endeavours to provide a possible solution to this problem from a feminist perspective.

Feminism introduced

It must be noted in this connection that feminism or Feminist philosophy is an umbrella term that accommodates innumerable

feminist perspectives. The common agenda is to question a patriarchal position which is characterised by top down power structure where women are necessarily marginalised. In the minimalist sense Patriarchy designates male domination that controls the reproductive and productive rights of women.

The biological distinction between a boy and a girl is not problematic. But the story of distinction is inseparably tied up with the story of discrimination from time immemorial. This discrimination is universal without any exception and is manifested either in overt or covert form. Sociologists might argue that there are a good number of exceptions, since there are many small pockets in which the discrimination does not exist; for example, in the north-eastern regions of India and in some pockets of Nepal there are tribes which are matriarchal; e.g. Naga, Khasi, Garo etc. But these are actually matrilineal tribes where the power is centralised and the male members take all the major decisions though the properties etc. are apparently in the hands of women. What is interesting about gender discrimination story is unlike other forms of domination there is a love relation between the male and the female. This makes this hierarchical relation more complex. This feature is not present in any other top-down power relation e.g. between white and black or between Brahmin and the Sudras or in the Bourgeoisie, proletariat relation.

Within this patriarchal structure, it is accepted that the males are rational, courageous, intelligent, objective and competitive. Women in contrast are emotional, docile, soft, affectionate and motherly. The problem arises because the male traits are considered as superior. Gender stereotypes have always played a very significant role in shaping the behaviour patterns of men and women. It is not a description of the characteristic traits of men and women, it is essentially a prescription supported by the culture, customs, religions and other important institutions of the society to sustain and perpetuate this power imbalance. Patriarchal values are so deep rooted in us, that most of the women support this power play. Women who deviate from traditionally prescribed gender roles are looked down upon. Gender stereotypes have hardly changed in the past fifty years despite the spread of education in all the levels of Indian society. In Indian context, even in the urban educated pockets the parents expect a girl to give preference to

marriage even when the girl is highly educated and holding a very good job. One can hardly imagine that the boy can be less qualified than the girl, or can draw less salary in comparison to his mate.

This power game of domination is critiqued by the feminists. There are two misconceptions that need to be addressed in this context:

1. It is often thought that patriarchy or gender discrimination focuses only on women exploitation. But this is a misunderstanding; patriarchy victimises both male and female, simply because it determines what a male and a female should do, ignoring their individualities. A male might feel very happy with the house hold works and might not be interested in getting a job. But patriarchy will not allow and give space to such choices.

2. Secondly, it is again a misunderstanding to think that feminism supports a bottom up approach of power play which means that feminists would endeavour to hold a power position to dominate men. It must be kept in mind that feminist positions are not homogeneous, there are internal debates within feminism, and some are serious enough to cause chasms within feminism, resulting in different schools. But all of them will critique the power hierarchy that has existed from decades.

In fact, feminism is one major outcome of the Post-modern movement that endeavoured to dethrone Reason that dominated the intellectually enlightened world right from the Greek civilization. The post-modern movement started in Europe from early twentieth century; it questioned the dichotomy between

- ◆ Reason\emotion
- ◆ Man\women
- ◆ Mind\body
- ◆ Man\nature
- ◆ Normal\abnormal
- ◆ Author\reader etc.

The root of this discrimination can be traced in the universal acceptance of the primacy of Reason. This conceptual structure is based on two valued logic, where there is a clear cut

compartmentalisation between “right and wrong”, “truth and falsity” and the former is necessarily superior to the latter.

The post-modernist movement critiqued the overpowering of Reason, the neat compartmentalisation based on two valued logic; It must be noted in this context that post-modernists were mainly critiques, they never proposed any alternative theories; but there are few exceptions where philosophers not only critiqued but also gave us new theories e.g., Jacques Derrida’s work on *Grammatology* (1967) It actually paved the way for pluralism and opened the gate for multiple voices. For example, in the Man\ Nature relationship, we were used to the idea that Man can use nature for its own purpose; but there are at least three major movements that consider nature to be intrinsically valuable. The possibility of other theories is open.

Present scenario

Every human being in our society is suffering in some way or the other. In this age of advanced technology relations are defined and understood in a different way; everyone is sucked into their own make-believe world. Even after staying under the same roof, we are unaware of the whereabouts of our family members; this results in an invisible wall between the partners, siblings and children. Everyone is participating in the rat race to achieve a respectable position in society. This leads to anxiety, stress and depression. Most of us feel that there is something terribly wrong in this life style.

Our grandmothers and great grandmothers had a very different life style. The joint families had many members of different generations supporting each other financially and emotionally and otherwise. Stress, tension were unfamiliar concepts for them. But things are different now. Consumerism, advanced technology has alienated us from nature, family members, and from our own essential nature. We are compromising our values.

In this connection, we would like to focus on the theory propounded by the eminent feminist philosopher Carol Gilligan. Gilligan in her famous book *Ina Different Voice* (1993) questions

the traditional, two-valued, patriarchal ethical systems prescribing same rule for every individual across the board.

Carol Gilligan observes that women's lived experiences show that they tend to see moral life in terms of care, connectivity and responsibility rather than justice, detachment and rights. Gilligan observes that women think, respect for humanity should be the underlying criteria for judging any moral situation. They prefer the care standpoint that responds to common humanity by extending the web to all people. Instead of viewing moral problems from a detached, objective, rule-oriented standpoint, women tend to evaluate the situation through the mode of care and responsibility to others. These differences in conceptualizing a moral problem between women and men tend to reflect deeper differences in their attitude towards resolving a moral dispute.

Gilligan is providing us with an alternative ethical theory where she provides us with an alternative perspective. Her theory revolves round the concepts of care, voice and relation. The traditional models of ethics consider an individual to be atomistic. Gilligan claims that an individual self is essentially relational. The relational nature of the self is the chief pillar of her "care" theory.

To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act. Gilligan wanted the backbenchers to have equal respect with the front one's; that is to give equal importance to all voices heard or unheard.

Voice according to her is a powerful instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds. By voice Gilligan means the voice that comes from the core of the self

Patriarchy according to Gilligan provides us with a conceptual framework that is deeply internalised. Cultural constructs have mechanisms for silencing female voice. This systematic silencing of female voice is the most pervasive form of covert violence. Women internalise the patriarchal values to such an extent that they are mostly unaware of their inner voice; consciously or unconsciously they suppress their voice. Even if there is a desire and possibility to speak, one does not express it probably because no one would listen to it or acknowledge it.

According to Sheila Rowbotham, silence is created and maintained as the oppressed; particularly women are denied access to relate their inner selves to an outer movement of things. They are only allowed to see through the lens men have provided for them through the ages. All theories, all communicative languages, all concepts and ideas, which can make women see themselves in relation to a continuum or as a part of the whole are constructs of patriarchy. Since women have no part in making them, such theories, languages and conceptual frameworks cannot capture the lived experiences of women. In this sense, a language of silence is not created around the real-life stories of the pain and suffering undergone by women, which the patriarchal society neither tries to hear nor feels eager to understand.

Gilligan would insist on listening to our inner voice. After we become aware of our inner voice we must try to share it.

The problem is actually rooted here; we neither speak nor share our own thoughts nor do we listen to others. The self needs to talk in a different voice and express its needs. Such a self asserts its freedom by raising its voice, within the relational structure. Every individual self must strive to maintain relations and fight the oppression that constrains the self from being related.

Caring is an experience of acknowledging and nurturing the interdependence of one another. It is an experience where the more one extends her/ his hands of care, the more she/he is making the world a better place to live. This gesture perpetuates the well-being of the individual who is caring for others.

Gilligan's care ethics gives more importance on the prospect of dialogue and consultation between the caregiver and the person at the other end. It is because this conversational approach in the ethical decision-making procedure can reveal the dynamics of relationships in a better way.

One might argue that in today's world of technology and consumerism, relations are very different. We don't have the time or inclination to listen to others. Gilligan's care ethics would argue that this is the atomistic view of the individual which does not acknowledge our essential relational nature. The non-acknowledgement of our essential nature is the cause of our distress. This alienates us from our essential nature and from other

relations. Once we acknowledge our real nature we can work for overcoming the constraints that prevent us from getting related. Moral decisions judged from the care perspective promise a complete good life. Care is a concern for peace, for survival and for enrichment of all forms of life.

It must also be noted that an individual is not necessarily constrained by conventions and existing power relations. In the midst of the interdependence between individual and frameworks, one can carve out his\her individual space and here lies the scope for a different voice.

In the story narrated, Animesh, Anjana and Arka have never tried to listen to their inner voice; this is probably because they are not aware of such a voice, over and above that they have no time to listen to their inner voice. Their inner voice remains unheard in this busy almost meaningless daily schedule. In other words, none of them have ever endeavoured to understand the demands of their individualities; they are caught up in the midst of role playing web, within a stereotyped conventionally determined family structure. The application of the 'care model' can change the entire scenario.

In the story narrated Animesh the doctor, can give importance and space to Anjana's voice, and can have repeated dialogue to make some arrangement for their well-being. They should also give equal importance to Arka's voice, where Arka's opinion should be considered with equal importance. On the basis of dialogue, it can be decided that Anjana can form a dance school; this decision acknowledges Anjana's potentialities and Animesh can think of spending his Sundays with his family and guide Arka in Physics and Maths. Animesh is actually a good teacher and Arka insisted that his father should teach him.

It has already been mentioned that ethical decisions judged from the care perspective promise a healthy happy life. It is inclusive. Gilligan's care model can be applied to larger institutions as well. It is the most fundamental need in today's world for it ensures peace and well-being.

References

Mukherjee, Bidisha, 2008. 'Autonomy and Relationship in the Ethic of Justice and in the Ethic of care' [Chapt. 4] in *Redefining Ethics As care*. Kolkata: Amalkanti Chatterjee.

Gilligan, Carol, 1993. 'In A Different Voice', in *Psychological theory and women's Development*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<https://animikha.wordpress.com/tag/shishu-bholanath/>

Tagore, Rabindranath, 'Mukti' from *Palataka*

Tagore, Rabindranath, 'Mukti' from *Naibedya*

Tagore, Rabindranath, 'Baul' from *Shishubholanath*