

FEMINISM: CONFRONTING A CONTRADICTION

**SANJITCHAKRABORTY

Abstract:

The contemporary debate centering round the circumference of feminist discourse has of late been very potent in addressing the issues of certain prejudiced notions in our existing patriarchal structure. This paper is an attempt to show the ongoing paradox existing in the world of feminism which has thoroughly critiqued the patriarchal culture and has naturalized sexual identities, thereby glorifying man's supremacy and dominion. The patriarchal culture lionized the ideals of brevity, courageousness, and intellect and thought of these as the only special possessions of man in society. The qualities of being submissive, kind and caring in nature is considered to be "ideal" and exclusive qualities of a woman. Even though these qualities are "ideal" to women, they are discarded from being considered as universal in nature and are thought of as insignificant in the mainstream societal structure. These qualities are treated as inferior, and exclusively womanly and hence cannot make their stand in the conventional patriarchal social order. For this reason a dilemmatic situation arises here. My effort is to show that this dilemma cannot be exposed in the sense of gender specific human qualities.

Key words: Feminism, Patriarchal, Care, Equality, Paradox.

The paper is an attempt to show the ongoing paradox (or it would be better to say a contradiction) existing in the world of feminism which has thoroughly critiqued the patriarchal culture and has naturalized sexual identities. This patriarchal culture has always glorified the supremacy of man rather than women in society. This has given rise to an attitude of domination among men. The feminists disparage the dominant mode of production, which privileges man over women and provides justification for all rational qualities as exclusively possessed by men of which women are deprived of. History reveals that women are treated as objects to be used and consumed by others; they are also exploited for cheap labor, paid low wages and are discriminated throughout. The patriarchal culture which promoted exploitation, slavery and discriminatory attitudes against women at large, contributed to treat women merely as a 'second sex'¹. In the tune of Carol Gilligan (Gilligan,

¹The term 'second sex' is first theoretically used by Simone de Beauvoir. In her magnificent work *The Second Sex*, she very well portrayed the history of feminist structures and the evolution of the coming into being of the feminist thought. See, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, London: Vintage, 1953.

1993), we can say women's voice as different that gets suppressed due to the roar of patriarchy. Hence, the central concern of feminism is the unequal power hierarchy which governs our society due to the gender divisions. And this hierarchy in power relations has given rise to a paradoxical phenomenon in the world of feminism.

Traditional patriarchal society has strictly reserved or categorized gender qualities, by which an individual is called either a man or a woman. Men are considered to possess the traits of reason, intellect, bravery, courageousness, dominancy and so on. These traits essentially belong to the human class. On the contrary, womanly qualities include being kind, emotional, sympathetic, caring, gentle and submissive. Women possessing these traits are regarded as ideal in our traditional societal structure. But these trademark qualities which are leveled for the whole of women class are not regarded as "ideal qualities" in the mainstream domain of human culture. Feminine qualities for which a woman becomes a genuine woman are not thought as worthy enough to stand at par with masculine qualities. Mainstream patriarchal society has always underestimated and regarded such feminine traits as essentially secondary, negligible and inferior. Therefore, an obvious question arises, "Are feminine qualities (possessed by women) non-masculine in nature?" I attend the question later.

I

We get a picture of the existence of patriarchal culture even in literary works. In the "Seven Ages of Man" (Shakespeare, 1964, 266) Shakespeare wonderfully portrays the world as a stage in which all men and women are mere players. There he describes the different stages of an individual's life in the line of a man's stages, where a woman's role remains only as a lover, for whom a man sings ballads of love. On the contrary, a man's role in different stages of life is seen as a brave and courageous agent who is able to make rationally wise and just decisions. This sort of hierarchy between men and women envisages in the every part of human society. Beauvoir claims:

Society enslaves Nature; but Nature dominates it. The Spirit flames out beyond Life; but it ceases to burn when life no longer supports it. Women is justified by this equivocation in finding more variety in a garden than in a city, in a malady than in an idea, in a birth than in a revolution; she endeavors to reestablish that reason of the earth, of the Mother, dreamed by Bachofen, in order to become again the essential in phase of the inessential. But as she, also, is an existent having transcendence, she can

give value to that domain where she is confined only by transfiguring it: she lends it a transcendent dimension... instead of taking up her existence: she contemplates in the clouds the pure Idea of her destiny; instead of acting she sets up her own image in the realm of imagination: that is, instead of reasoning, she dreams. (Beauvoir, 1953, 630)

In a patriarchal society, it is generally considered that a woman's role is quite different. Women are best considered to take up the role of an agent who cares for others and feels concern for others. The fundamental properties of care are attentiveness and compassion. Actually care is a kind of quality always related to others (especially between two different individuals): the one who is cared and the carer. Here we find a sort of discrimination among the two parties involved. The person who is cared for is unquestionably taken for granted to be a male in our patriarchal society and is, therefore, psychologically thought to be in a hierarchically superior and dominant position. Our patriarchal society has universalized this idea that a man will deservedly receive care from a woman (the carer) and has taken it to be true for all times. On the contrary, the qualities of being attentive and compassionate have become natural and quite biological (as presupposed by the patriarchal society) qualities of women.

We can consider care as a virtue of motive or understanding. If we think deeply, then we will notice that the quality of care, customarily considered to be inferior (Freudian views Freud analyses a woman in his *Psychoanalysis* as a masochistic, deprived, and insincere being) plays a significant role in human relations. For Freud, a girl cannot effortlessly demolish their Oedipus complex, whereas a boy can commit it easily. The conception of super ego between girls and boys are not same. The super ego of women depends on the attachment, fear and dependency. Therefore women believe in universal principle is so shaky and they try to analyze justice from the level of personal relation etc. Freud writes:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men, Their super ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal and so independent of its emotional origins as we require to be in men. (Freud, 1991, 342)

Freud's analysis seems to me more prejudice as it comments on women's life and psyche from a deviant level and aims to show that women's moral voice is sub marginal in complain to men heterosexual standard. However, let me focus on main concern. Care, as an inherent quality in all men and women helps to strengthen and deepen any relational bond. Even we

can consider it as a moral concern that upholds itself to form a unique knot in our society. Virginia Held considers:

The ethics of care builds trust and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and wider social level. Within social relations in which we care enough about each other to respect each other's rights, we may agree for limited purposes to imagine each other as liberal individuals, and to adopt liberal policies to maximize individual benefits. (Held, 2002, 168)

So if we consider care as something inferior and alienated from the masculine qualities, then all our personal relations will lose and our social bondage will be weakened. Therefore, it would be wrong to consider care as a one way relation possessed exclusively by a carer (women) who cares for a man. Any good relations, be it at the personal or societal level, grows and develops only when the quality of care is exchanged among the carer and the cared for. Then, it no longer remains a one way relation; it turns out to be both way relations where the quality is neither suppressed nor treated to be of secondary importance. I believe that there may be difference in between the thoughts and expressions of man and a woman. But this does not entail that there will be a difference in their moral values of the qualities like feminine qualities or masculine qualities etc. Contrast and difference with regards to rank and hierarchy is vividly perceived among gender relations such as male/female and so on. But the moral values have some pragmatic roles which are above all these forms of distinctions. Carol Gilligan thinks:

My research suggest that men and women may speak different languages that they assume are the same, using similar words to encode disparate experiences of self and social relationships. Because these languages share an overlapping moral vocabulary, they contain a propensity for systematic mistranslation, creating misunderstanding which impede communication and limit the potential for cooperation and care in relationships. (Gilligan, 1993, 173)

As we know that language is a social phenomenon, so being a communicative being, humans try to express their thoughts in the realm of social practices. We find that in a patriarchal society, virtues are imposed in a dualistic manner where rationality is a sign of manhood and politeness is a virtue of woman. Because of the situation and social status, women cannot express their bravery and adventurous mood towards the society as it would lead to anti-patriarchal norms. Similarly, a man can possess some qualities such as politeness, gentleness,

love and care, but he will be compelled to suppress all these as these qualities are considered contrary to mannish attitudes. So, both men and women try to express their thoughts which is not their own. Their behavior, attitudes, and expressions of moods are constructed and prescribed by the patriarchal society. They are obligated to suppress their own way of thoughts. And their shared language cannot capture their inner thoughts as these are obstructed by certain patriarchal social norms. As a result, it creates a misunderstanding and a communication gap that leads to the uncooperative relation between men and women. So here, the biological conditions do not stifle the voice of the women or make their character determined by the mainstream society. If we make a survey of women's situation, then we must observe that the feminine characteristics has been totally demoralized by their social, economical conditions, where she is always considered and revealed as "non-sense", "immoral", and "self-centered" being, even whose brain capacities and the sense of accuracy are always lesser than a man's brain. The worlds where feminine genders are exiled always make a contrast with the masculine universe where men have ruling power with organizing capabilities. It is true in the Beauvoirean sense that though women are an integral part of the society, but they never construct an independent society or could never stand with their head high and express their voices without hesitation, just because of being marked as a woman. Even in the mainstream society, if women unite together and claim for their rights, in such cases their unity or solidarity is often characterized as insignificant and trifling. Because of this, even today, women's rights are grouped in minority forum. When patriarchal society offers help, many a times it shows that they help a group who are insignificant and not worthy of living in any sense. Women do not have any personal rights, and it is the high-mindedness of the patriarchal society to offer them some right. The platform or the models on which women frame their rights claim must also be in accord with the interests of the patriarchal society. Juliet Mitchell says:

Women come into the movement from the unspecific frustration of their own private lives, find what they thought was an individual dilemma is a social predicament and hence a political problem. (Mitchell, 1971)

In another sense, it can be said that the structure for feminine revolutions do not in any way express womanly behavior, rather it hints the language of revolution to be in a masculine way, that is always based on so called reason, morality, justice etc. as patriarchal society always ascribe to themselves. So, obedience, loyalty, emotion, politeness all these qualities are not regarded as the voice of revolution. So, these qualities are considered as

inferior that women can instinctively follow. If any case, in a platform where women's organize them in a group and ask for their human right, then it could not be a revolution, as their intrinsic character of care, love and emotion could not achieve the mainstream standard of the conception of revolution that matches with tyranny, bloodshed revolution, war for justice, and sacrifice for country's sake. Mainstream societies taught women over the years that they cannot revolt, having no physical or mental power that can quest for revolution or make sacrifices for their county. They think women can only sacrifice their lives for the patriarchal society, meaning especially for their father, husband or son. They are bound in this lifelong chained process. Beauvoir is absolutely right in saying:

Sometimes the 'feminine world' is contrasted with the masculine universe, but we must insist again that women have never constituted a close and independent society; they form an integral part of the group, which is organized by males and in which they have a subordinate place. They are united only in a mechanical solidarity from the mere fact of their similarity, but they lack that organic solidarity on which every unified community is based; they are always compelled – at the time of the mysterious of Ellusis as today in clubs, saloons, social service institutes – to band together in the order to establish a counter-service, but they always set it half within the frame of the masculine universe. (Beauvoir, 1953,608)

Beauvoir actually hints to a kind of paradox. Sometimes, to an extent we see that patriarchal society offers some place for young women to access some facilities that are enjoyed by young men. However, when they become adult or a wife or a mother, then the society snatches all facilities that they enjoyed earlier just as lover or a darling of someone. A young woman talks about justice or discuss with them in different community circles by providing some beautiful accompaniment to the males in restaurant, clubs etc. All these entertain the masculine gender. So to an extent, the masculine gender offers these sorts of freedom where women for their own sake, seek enjoyment and luxury of their accompanied counterpart but when the same women becomes the wife or mother of a child, then all these rights are snatched from her by provoking them that their only duty is to provide care to their husband, child and to the elders in the family. Here two segments of a women's life are seen contrasted with one another – women as a young girl, and women as a wife or mother. They can lament, or complain over their lives, but cannot revolt against mainstream. All the anxieties, cares, loves, and worries of a woman remain surrounded by their husbands, children and housekeeping. Their life is dedicated to others, especially to their male

counterparts. Women problems are not any individual problem, but a class or gender problem like racism that is victim by the power of the patriarchal society. Actually masculine qualities are neither cohesive nor intrinsic; these are articulated forcibly and men are expectant to express themselves to other as a physical or an adventurous hero. Besides, they underpin their heroism by desexualizing women to the level of eunuch beings and prorogate that women are in nature dependent on the fantasy of men as they are much rational, reasoned based, powerful cum successful moral beings.

My point is that we should consider all moral qualities as human qualities instead of categorizing these into the masculine and feminine qualities. Care can be considered as a human quality, a quality that can be possessed either by a male or by a female. A person, in the process of caring the other, expects a similar form of care from his/her partner. Such a kind of simultaneous exchange of moral value checks a relation from being instrumental and mechanical. Therefore, it will be impractical to treat care only as a womanly quality. It needs to be treated as a moral duty of humans. If we consider care just as a feminine quality, then it will contradict Kantian Dictum that says, "Every action is right if it or its maxim allows each person's freedom of choice to coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law." (Kant, 1959, 230-31) Again, care as an element of mutual exchange among two individuals can be fully realized only when the component of self care is recognized by the individual members. An individual can care for others if and only if he/she cares about himself/herself. In this context, we can make a note of Maurice Hamington who identifies the notion of self care. Hamington says that self care is necessary as it helps in the development of personal and social morality, leading to the growth of individual relationships and at the same time recognizing one's interdependence and interconnectedness with the other. Hamington writes:

Care denotes an approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to context, relationships, and affective knowledge in a manner that can only be fully understood if care's embodied dimension is recognized. Care is committed to flourishing and growth of individuals, yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence. (Hamington, 2004, 3)

Care, as a quality can develop from dual relationships to multiple relationships among different individuals, which can help in bringing about harmony and integration in the broader framework of society. I agree that the categorical framework and experiences of men and women are different in our day to day life cum works. Because, their life and thoughts

are occasionally sensitive to the society and they have to face different situations according to their gender. But it does not imply that a man's thought will be rational and more practical than a woman. A man and woman should respect one's feelings. Though we accept that there is a division of labor portrayed by patriarchal society, considering the biological and psychological instincts of a man and women, yet it would be unjustified to claim that the moral values of a woman's work are considered inferior than men. As we know that patriarchal societies prescribes some qualities like politeness, care, loving, patience, and emotion are ideal woman qualities, but these qualities are not considered suitable for a man. We should first clear the conception of paradox here. A paradox is a statement that apparently contradicts itself, but it might be considered as true. Here the paradox lies in the conception of the qualities of a woman prescribed by men. The patriarchal society does not accept woman qualities as valuable like that of men's qualities. So we saw that the parameters are not the same which are leveled for an ideal male being. But if we call women as less a human being, then it would lead to a fallacy of narrowness of the definition of human. So there is no way to deny the conception that women are also human beings. So their qualities would also be called human quality like their emotions are human emotions. Similarly, if we consider man as a human being, then they should also accept these qualities (which are traditionally considered to be possessed by women) as human qualities. Otherwise, men would be treated as a less human creature which they are not. So now we can claim that care ethics is not only an ethics for women, but an ethics for all moral concerned beings, as in a good relation, care should be asymmetric. It means that a woman must care about a man and a man should appreciate the care received by them. Similarly, a man should care for a woman and a woman must appreciate the care of man. It is not what care both gives to each other and who wins, but that both should appreciate each other's care with love and gratitude. Nel Noddings considers that care is equivalent with potentially reciprocal relationships between man and women. Eco-feminism ensures that both women and nature are to be treated for the sake of the other. They need to feel concern for other members of the society. So they become much more attentive and compassionate. The integral part of women in our society submerges on the motivational appeal of care for others. Patriarchal society snatches away the moral maturity of women and compels them to follow blindly certain rules to serve their male counterparts. The mainstream society forget that we cannot attain a universal moral principle in terms of a set of rules, but there needs a cluster of human feelings like emotion, love, care that vindicates sustainable development in our global ethics and social life too.

If rationality is considered to be the only parameter of being a human, then we can well affirm that man does not have this as an innate quality (a priori). Except some distinctive biological features, there is no quality (from the sense of moral values) that is given to human beings in particular. All qualities (moral and behavioral qualities) are socially constructed, and these qualities are dependent upon experiences and moral practices. In this world of globalization, feminist ethics motivate women to think about their rationality and gender equality. Feminism does not give importance only to the normative standards of women in saying that care is specially a higher value that is possessed by women. Rather, the feminists try to fit moral and normative qualities in global standards, where human beings, animals, nature – all are included in this realm. Qualities such as care, love, emotion (which are submersed by patriarchy) are in the same boat with rationality, justice, passion, etc. If we like to live peacefully, we must ensure all these qualities as highest moral qualities that would be gender neutral. Men and women need not to assert themselves from the gender bias identification; they should uplift themselves to the full-fledged human beings, so that as an individual they can hold their own destiny into their own hands.

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* ***This paper is dedicated to all of my feminist and anti-feminist friends!***

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Author's bio:

***SanjitChakraborty is a Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University. He extensively works on the diversified areas like Philosophy of Mind, Language, Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, Continental philosophy and Indian Philosophy. He has published several articles in the renowned journals like *Philosophia* (Springer), *Indian Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, *Philosophy and Progress*, *Philosophy Pathways* and so on. Of late, he has published a book entitled *Understanding Meaning and World* (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).**

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