

## **Gender Biasness of Traditional Ethics : A Brief Analysis**

**Dr. Shirtaz Begam Laskar**

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy  
Janata College, Kabuganj, Cachar, Assam, India  
Email: shirtaz02@gmail.com

### **Abstract :**

Traditional ethics has excluded all questions of 'gender' from its purview on the presumption that philosophy as a general discipline should have been concerned with human qua human or with the universal human nature as such. It is argued that the scope of philosophy is not desired to be narrowed down by any limited or partial concern, since its concern has always been a universal one. Questions of one's contingent attributions inclusive of gender would speak of the concrete realities of individual existence, specific to her nature. These would not form a part of the so-called invariably common, abstract and formal essence of humans. Therefore, they should in no way constitute any genuine concern for philosophy. The form of ethics that requires some sort of commitment toward the claims of universal applicability is expected to assume a sex/gender neutral character. But feminists opine that instead of fulfilling its avowed norms the traditional ethics has taken a biased stance in viewing woman's nature all throughout and hence portrayed its corrupt character. They have identified the traditional ethical theories as basically male-centric because those accounts have failed to theorize woman's moral experience and agency. Feminists say that the only possible way to eliminate this gender biasness is to bring gender from the periphery to the centre of disciplinary pursuits. Hence, gender mainstreaming of each and every discipline inclusive of ethics is an urgency.

**Key words :** ethics, sex, gender, feminist philosophy.

### **Introduction**

Discrimination against women, which is a common feature of our today's world, is known to have had a long history. Down the ages women were subjected to discriminatory practices and that too with different degrees of intensity and extent. With slightest variations in kinds the societies of different cultural origin, even today, do exhibit the phenomenon in a considerable degree. Taking the existing scenario in to consideration it can be argued thus that subordination of women is a universal phenomenon. Behind the concept of or the act of discrimination against women workings of several cultural prejudices are visible. Of such, the fundamental

one is the presumption that women are the weaker sex and hence should have the readiness for being used as objects of domination by the stronger kind, that is, men. Among the other prejudices the most common are like that of the projected lack of rationality in women, their emotional bent of minds, sexual vulnerability etc. Such cultural prejudices apart from causing severe damages to women's lives, possibly in every sphere, also have seriously impacted the process of knowledge formation. In almost every discipline of science and humanities the construction of sex or gender biased theorizations has not remained merely a matter of convention only. While on the one hand they have awfully delimited the very scope of the disciplines, on the other, the implications of the theoretic constructions have caused adoption of faulty public policies too, detrimental to the wellbeing of women in general.

Whatever is stated above is true of the discipline of ethics too. On critical examination, the field of traditional ethics also comes to reveal its inherent sex/gender bias due to which its claims for objectivity and universality have to face a serious setback. The use of the contention of women's inferiority or lack in rationality as a presumption in different philosophical and moral accounts has led to the curbing of the potential of women as complete or moral beings within the systems. But what is even more important here is to take note of the fact that this curbing of potential in case of half of the human species scarcely has left the question of universal human nature and agency unaffected. Ethics as a discipline, intending to have universal applications, should have required a fair basis or grounding, free from any bias or fragmented considerations. Exclusion of woman on the ground that her nature falls short of the requirements of the theory is highly contestable. In their critique of sex/gender biased ethics, the feminists like Carol Gilligan have argued that if the construed theories failed to comprehend the existential dynamics of women's lives, the problem lies with the theories and not with woman's nature.<sup>1</sup> The limitation, hence, in fact, is of the theories and not of the uncomprehended or unclassified facets of woman's life and reality. In the philosophical and moral accounts of too many western philosophers we have seen the prejudices centring sex/gender to prevail in one form or the other. The consequence of the adoption of faulty approach in those accounts has been borne by their systemic failure to come up with a fair representation of not only woman's life experiences but also human nature in general.

The present paper will take the effort to show how the exclusion of 'women question' from moral philosophy has thoroughly delimited the scope of ethics as a discipline and helped it to have provisions for biased standards or norms of conduct. The objective of this paper is to focus upon the inherent gender bias of the traditional (mainstream) Western Ethics through a brief survey of the writings of the philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant and others. Behind its apparently neutral and objective face, whether the traditional ethics could at all have pursued its universalistic agenda is proposed to be analysed here.

### **The Background**

The use of the category of gender in analysis of ethics has started receiving focused attention right from the decades of 1960s onwards in West although in a scattered fashion some of the issues were raised even a century back. The most common allegation brought by the gender theorists against traditional ethics is that it has excluded and is continuing to exclude all questions of 'gender' from its purview on the presumption that philosophy as a general discipline should have been concerned with human qua human or with the universal human nature as such. Considered from such a perspective highlighting the 'particular' and 'applied' social, cultural or political questions and accommodating concrete qualifications of individual, as a matter of fact, seem to be demeaning for the right type of philosophical pursuits. It is argued that the scope of philosophy is not desired to be narrowed down by any limited or partial concern, since its concern has always been a universal one. Questions of one's contingent attributions inclusive of gender would speak of the concrete realities of individual existence, specific to her nature. These would not form a part of the so-called invariably common, abstract and formal essence of humans. Therefore, they should in no way constitute any genuine concern for philosophy if the latter is to continue with its core demands for universality and objectivity.

It is entailed by the previous consideration that the form of ethics that requires some sort of commitment toward the claims of universal applicability is expected to assume a sex/gender neutral character. But the gender theorists and/or the feminists opine that instead of fulfilling its avowed norms the traditional ethics has taken a biased stance in viewing woman's nature all throughout and hence portrayed its corrupt character. They have identified the traditional ethical theories as basically male-centric because those accounts have failed to theorize woman's moral experience and agency. This matter of exclusion has drawn its justification from the very fact that woman's nature does not conform to the standard norms of human (male) nature. According to the feminists this situation is either indicative of the distorted ideology of the philosophers or their passive submission to the sexed or gendered norms already at work in the society.<sup>2</sup> In either of the ways exclusion of women's moral experiences and agency was foundational to their basic philosophical positions. This act of exclusion of women's experiences from moral discourse has given birth to a tradition that emphasizes reason over emotion, impartiality over partiality, autonomy over interdependence or dependence, the abstract over concrete, the universal over particular and justice over caring. Human nature, as construed, is understood as essentially rational and hence reflective of male nature. It is argued by the traditional ethicists that women cannot be as rational as men since nature has restricted them to the world of emotions or passions only and not to reason.

Feminists' critique of the traditional ethics centres round the basic contention that the human

nature that has been construed in traditional ethics is a misnomer. It is so mainly because of two reasons. First, the claim that woman's nature shows a deviation from the standard human nature is unfounded since the standard as such is fixed keeping in front male nature only. Second, apart from rationality there are several other constituting aspects of human nature which play significant role in the exercise of human moral decisions. Exclusion of all those creatively functional elements like emotion, passion, sensibility, caring etc. from moral lives not only takes away the true colours of human existence but also evaporates the uniqueness of human life. The feminists have vehemently objected to this stereotyping of human nature and the glorification of rationality based model of human agency.

### **Reviewing the History**

If we look back in the early history of philosophy we shall see that prefacing rationality as the constituting essence of human nature, while denying the same in case of women, various moral philosophical accounts have been systematically formulated in West. The trend was initiated by the Greek philosopher Aristotle and substantiated and elaborated by the works of the series of modern philosophers like Rousseau, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer and others. The gross mistakes committed by all these philosophers in viewing woman's nature have not only revealed their prejudiced stances but also strictly delimited the scope and applications of their theories of universal human nature impacting rest of their theories and actions.

The tradition of putting overemphasis upon the rational aspect of male human nature in comparison to that of the females started, in fact, not exactly with Aristotle. Before Aristotle, Plato too has largely contributed to the tradition. But Plato's stance regarding women reveals lot of ambivalence too. In Republic Plato is noticeably desirous of assigning equal status to men and women while stating that on receipt of similar training members of both the sexes can equally qualify for the upper class of the guardians.<sup>3</sup>

Quite contrary to his earlier position of Republic, in Timaeus, Plato is seen to ascribe to woman a status that is inferior to man. As he argues :

And he showed that it was necessary that each of them was sowed in to its proper temporal organ, it would grow as the living creature most fearing God; and since human nature is double, the superior (the 'dominant') would be the sex that afterward would be designated 'man'.<sup>4</sup> (Timaeus 41e- 42a)

Plato has maintained an important distinction between soul and body, where the body is taken to be inferior to the soul. The spheres where women are too often found involved are the areas of reproduction and child rearing. Hence for woman to perform her kind of duties a body is a necessity; whereas man's acts are largely spiritual in nature and thus connected more with the

soul. Plato's thinking, once again, turns out to be anomalous when he goes on contending that though men and women have different types of souls yet a female body may not necessarily contain a female soul. He explains this by saying that a soldier who is more concerned with protecting his body than fighting has a more body concerned soul and will return to life as a woman. Conversely, a woman who displays skills of a philosophical nature and cares not for anything of the body will re-enter life as a man.<sup>5</sup> He also argues that whatever woman can do, man can do better, which suggests that men in general have greater reasoning and spiritual element than women.<sup>6</sup>

From the cited passages from Plato's writings one could easily draw the fact that Plato was oscillating between two reverse positions of natural/biological inequality of men and women and the proposed equality that can be cultured.

In Aristotle's philosophy we see a more forceful pronouncement of women's inferiority in terms of her assigned lack in reasoning capacity. What is contended by Aristotle first is that woman as a lesser being is incapable of drawing any distinction between good and bad and therefore, is obligated to be obedient to achieve virtue.<sup>7</sup> The reason behind Aristotle's contention of woman's inferiority lies in his even more basic belief that woman is defective by nature because she cannot produce semen like man.<sup>8</sup> He maintains that in sexual reproduction, the higher role is played by men because they produce the semen - which constitutes the substance of a human being (the soul i.e., the form), while the women serve mainly as recipient of that and in turn provide the nourishment (the body, the matter). Of the two fundamental principles or the two factors of components in every being, that is, the form and the matter, Aristotle considers the first as the superior one and thus equates men with it. As he says -

And as the proximate motive cause, to which belong the logos and the form, is better and more divine in its nature than the matter, it is better also that the superior one should be separate from the inferior one. That is why wherever possible and so far as possible the male is separate from the female.... The male, however, comes together with the female and mingles with it for the business of generation, because this is something that concerns both of them.<sup>9</sup> (Generation of Animals, I. xx, 732a).

Aristotle adds to formulate the thesis, which in all likelihood formed a part of the pre-philosophical beliefs of the era, that woman as being is the physical opposite to her counterpart, that is, the spiritual male. The female is stated to be deficient in natural heat, hence is unable to produce semen (i.e., seed). Her inability to produce semen is her deficiency. Aristotle thus views woman as an infertile male ---'.....a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort<sup>10</sup>... (Generation of Animals, I.xx, 728a) Aristotle subsequently uses these facts of biology to set the standard of perfection in

male nature and demeans women for the non-possession of the male virtues. Because after having demonstrated that women are physically inferior to men, he would next proceed to claim that their proper place is in the home where they should remain under the control of their husbands.

In Aristotle's philosophical accounts women are treated as of having instrumental value only. Men are of superior intelligence and hence can engage women in their service and that too in benefits of both the sexes. Aristotle compares the relationship between man and woman to that of between human beings and the animals tamed. As we see him to state :

It is the best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and the female is by nature such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the males rule and female ruled.<sup>11</sup> ( *Politica*,ed. Loeb classical library,1254b 10-14)

Aristotle maintains a distinction within the reason too. In his view one part of the soul is reasonable in the sense that it deliberates reason, and draws conclusions - he sometimes calls this the deliberative faculty; another part of the soul is reasonable in the sense that it is persuadable by reasoning (as emotions are). He next proceeds to state that corresponding to the two reasonable parts of the soul there are two sets of virtues, viz., i) intellectual virtues or virtues of the reasoning or deliberative faculty and ii) moral virtues -- virtues of the persuadable part, the part of the soul that is capable of being influenced by reasoning. Courage, for example, is a moral virtue that consists in the responsiveness of one's fear to reasoning. By using this distinction between two realms of virtue Aristotle comes to state that women and the slave can at best practice the virtues of the subservient beings only coming under the second category of virtues.<sup>12</sup>

Commenting on Aristotle's typically gender biased position Cynthia Freeland writes :

Aristotle says that the courage of a man lies in commanding, a woman's lies in obeying; that matter yearns for form, as the female for the male and the ugly for the beautiful, that women have fewer teeth than man, that a female is an incomplete .....or as it were, a deformity which contributes only matter and not form to the generation of off spring; that in general a woman is perhaps an inferior being that female characters in a tragedy will be inappropriate if they are too brave to clever. <sup>13</sup>

Aristotle's biased view of human nature and agency are critiqued by Ferguson as well. By criticising the Aristotelian attempt to make use of the biological distinction as grounds for the sustenance of discriminations against women she states :

Aristotle takes reproductive differences to be essential differences between the sexes,.....his theory of biological reproduction maintains that the principle of life and of individuation is the rational, formal, male principle contributed by the sperm, while the female contributes only the matter of the fetus, composed of her menstrual blood. Clearly here, the male is identified with the rational and with the mental principle of the general type of thing to be produced, while the female is identified with the irrational and with the physical principle of shapeless 'stuff' out of which the fetus is made<sup>14</sup>...

If we consider the Aristotelian theory of hylomorphism we shall see a tied up connection in-built in between 'form' and being male, and 'matter' and being female. That is to say, we see how Aristotle's metaphysics is getting vitiated by the pre-conceived gendered categorizations of two scales of reality. The unequal status of the 'form' and the 'matter', as presumed has led him to treat form as superior to matter in all respects. Feminists are of the opinion that Aristotle's theory of sex difference has variously affected all the other views upheld by him in other concerned domains of his theoretical and practical philosophy and science like that of the philosophy of mind, biology and literary theory etc. In 'Women Is Not a Rational Animal' Lynda Lange thus observes :

Aristotle's theory of sex difference is implicative in every piece of Aristotle's metaphysical jargon.<sup>15</sup>

And she concludes by saying that :

...it is not at all clear that it (Aristotle's theory of sex difference) can simply be cut away without any reflection on the status of the rest of the philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Pointing toward the Aristotelian attempt for legitimization of a political theory of domination by a biased metaphysics, Susan Moller Okin writes :

Aristotle's functionalist theory of form was devised by Aristotle in order to legitimate the political status quo in Athens, including slavery and the inequality of women.<sup>17</sup>

Like Aristotle, for whom women exhibit a lack in rationality as compared to man, Kant too contends that women 'lack civil personality' and should not be involved in public life.<sup>18</sup> His theory on the Categorical Imperative holds that our moral obligations or duties are different from the hypothetical 'ought'. While the latter is based on desires, the categorical 'ought' is derived from a universal human nature that follows the principle of reason. Every rational being by virtue of being so should remain necessarily bound to it, since rationality constitutes the essence of human character. But quite surprisingly Kant fails to perceive the functioning of any such rational faculty in women which according to Kant is vital in dealing with civil

matters. Furthermore, on a closer inspection, many of Kant's particular conclusions about women seem to straightforwardly contradict the views he has nurtured about the rights and duties of all human beings. On the one hand Kant has strongly pleaded for treating every human as an end only and not as means yet he also has argued that a marriage can make the husband the master of his wife (he the party to direct, she to obey). So while admitting the rationality as the core essence of humans Kant seems to contradict himself in excluding women both from active citizenship and from the kingdom of autonomous and independent moral beings. Kant claims that the philosophy of women is not to reason, but to feel<sup>19</sup> that the fair sex is hardly capable of principles.<sup>20</sup> Moral actions must be based on principle not on sentiment. Women cannot be moral agents since they cannot act on principles. He advocates that "women" is a fragile beauty and it is this beauty that attracts men, such as bees are attracted to flowers. This beauty ensures human reproduction but beyond this beauty "women" has no intrinsic value. Several feminist philosophers have criticized Kant's comments about the body sexuality and especially about women and women's place in the family and in the society. Barbara Herman describes Kant as 'the modern moral philosopher feminists find most objectionable'.<sup>21</sup>

Kant has laid down the principle of universality for establishing his Kingdom of Ends. He maintains the following view in *The Fundamental Principles of Metaphysics of Morals* :

This is practically good, however which determines the will by means of the conceptions of reason.....on principles which are valid for every rational being as such. It is distinguished from the pleasant as that which influences the will only by means of sensation from merely subjective causes, valid only for the sense of this or that one and not as a principle of reason which holds for everyone.<sup>22</sup>

But in an early work *In Observation on the Feeling of Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant has opined that women lack humanly essential characteristics and most clearly they lack the sort of moral agency which is characteristic of human (qua rational). Thus Kant writes :

women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but only because it is ugly.... Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation .... They do something only because it pleases them ... I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles.<sup>23</sup>

Rather,

Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense.<sup>24</sup>

It is obvious that Kant's gendered ontology, like that of Aristotle has come to restrict the universal applicability of his moral account too.

The citations of relevant passages from the writings of Fichte, Rousseau and Schopenhauer



will equally demonstrate the biased thinking of them. In her essay on Women Question,<sup>25</sup> Gould has developed a detail analysis of few such accounts in addition to Kant which shows that how the prejudices of the thinkers do not leave their general philosophical stance unaffected.

Fichte in his writings *The vocation of Man* categorically states :

I must be free ; for what which constitutes our true worth is not the mere mechanical act, but the free determination of free will for the sake of duty<sup>26</sup>...

But while speaking on women contradicting his earlier position he states in *The Science of Rights* :

(she) is subjected through her own necessary wish - a wish which is the condition of her morality - to be so subjected<sup>27</sup>...

Even Rousseau fails to make his view of women free from the prejudices irrespective of his pioneering contribution in the shaping of the ideals of the French enlightenment. It is, in fact, his thought and ideas that have tremendously influenced the moral discourses of Western Philosophy through Kant. For him there are natural differences in the bodies of men and women and all differences between men and women in other spheres of their lives stem from this difference in biology. As he says :

The male is only a male now and again, the female is always a female, or at least at her youth; everything reminds her of her sex.<sup>28</sup>

Rousseau thinks that men and women are expected to serve specific purposes in the society and, therefore, the differences should not be obliterated. Men should be 'active and strong' and women should be 'passive and week'. He adds :

They must be trained to bear the yoke from the first, so that they may not feel it, to master their own caprices and to submit themselves to the will of others.<sup>29</sup>

Schopenhauer also has upheld a similar view like Rousseau and Kant. Woman, to him, lacks the essential human properties and she is by nature meant to obey. The fundamental defect of the female character is a lack of her 'sense of justice'. Schopenhauer goes to the extent of saying that since women are lacking in rationality and capacity for reflection as the weaker sex, they are by nature driven to rely not on force but on cunning. Women are by nature dishonest and telling lies is an ineradicable tendency in them.<sup>30</sup> He further says :

A completely truthful woman who does not practice dissimulation is perhaps impossibility, which is why women see through dissimulation of others so easily it is inadvisable to attempt it with them.<sup>31</sup>

Subscribing to the view of the inherent dishonesty in women, Schopenhauer passes on to state that Fundamentally women exist solely for the propagation of the race and find in this their entire vocation<sup>32</sup>...

From the above cited passages one could easily visualise and asses the representation of women nature in the western philosophical tradition. Traditional ethicists hold that rationality is the dominant and essential human characteristic of male while beauty or aesthetic sensibility as a subordinate characteristic to reason is of female. Throughout the course of history rationality played a dominant role in social life and because of which it became identified not only as the essential human trait but also by association as a male trait. Aesthetic sensitivity and intuition, on the other hand, are treated as feminine characteristic only since those were not required much in the public fields. Women are assigned to play subordinate role in social, political and moral life. The moral priority assigned to men's interests was often justified by denying that women could ever be as full or perfect human as men. Almost all the philosophers, right from Plato down to Rousseau, Kant, Schopenhauer or Fichte etc., have put forth sex/gender biased view of woman's nature. The common contention is simply this --- women should serve and please men because they are incompetent or deficient to act on reason. They are inferior to men because they fail to exhibit male traits.

### **Situating Gender in Ethics**

Developing alternative proposals for ethics by the elimination of its sex/gender biased schemes is set in as the major aim of feminist ethics. This conforms to the general philosophical positions of the feminists of all groups and variety. Feminist philosophy aims at uncovering and correcting those male biases which are prevalent in the mainstream philosophical traditions. Introducing 'gender' as a perspective, that is, as a category of analysis is mandatory for the cause. The purpose is to make ethics free from its andocentric or misogynist bias. So, feminist philosophers challenge the ways in which western traditions have so long been participating in subordination of women or in rationalizing their subordination. By questioning the gender insensitivity of ethics and philosophy, feminism attempts to explore and expose various forms of subjugation of women in operation through laws, institutions, customs, social theories and cultural values. They aim at coming up with a better design for society, based on a thorough review and rethinking of gendered issues. The feminist philosophers have challenged the mainstream philosophical/ethical traditions for different reasons and from different angles.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist philosophy starts from the contention that the subordination of women is morally wrong and that women's moral experience is as worthy of respect as that of men. The aims of the feminist philosophers are to articulate moral critique of actions and practices that sustain women's subordination and to prescribe morally justifiable ways of resisting such actions and

practices and to envision morally desirable alternatives that will promote women's emancipation. Feminist philosophers suggest several ways to work out a bias free ethics that aims at the elimination of gender discriminations and the liberation of women from all subjugations. But amidst the varieties of gender sensitive ethical alternatives formulated by the feminists and the development ethicists what remains common is the conviction that restoration of human dignity for men and women in a like manner is possible only when a gender egalitarian perspective is in use. With the adoption of gender perspective the Feminist thinkers have criticised both the historical exclusion of women from the mainstream philosophical tradition and the negative characterization of women and feminine in it. The use of the analytic category of gender assists to develop critical reflections on the morality that is informed by feminist theory and the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. A gender sensitive ethics thus tries to develop unbiased ethical reflections and put forth the claims for gender equal approaches.

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