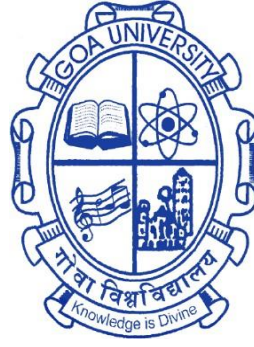


Moral Absolutism, Moral Subjectivism, and Feminism: An Enquiry into the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE
OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN THE SCHOOL OF SANSKRIT, PHILOSOPHY AND INDIC STUDIES
GOA UNIVERSITY



By

Audrick D'Mello
School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies
Goa University
Goa

September 2024

DECLARATION

I, Audrick Agnelo Augusto D'Mello, hereby declare that this thesis represents work which has been carried out by me and that it has not been submitted, either in part or full, to any other University or Institution for the award of any research degree.

Place: Taleigao Plateau.

Date: 17-09-2024

Audrick Agnelo Augusto D'Mello

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that the above Declaration of the candidate, Audrick Agnelo Augusto D'Mello is true and the work was carried out under my supervision.

Dr. Sanjyot D. Pai Vernekar

Professor

School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies

Goa University

Acknowledgement

I am greatly indebted to my guide, Prof. Dr. Sanjyot D. Pai Vernekar, of the School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies, Goa University, for her valuable encouragement, advice, and guidance, without which, this endeavour would never have achieved fruition. I am grateful for her belief and dedication in the field of ethics, which inspired me to do the same with the focus of my research.

I also wish to express my profound gratitude to Prof. Dr. Koshy Tharakan, the Dean of the School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies, Goa University, Prof. Dr. Shaila Desouza, Professor of Women's Studies, of the D.D. Kosambi School of Social Sciences and Behavioural Studies, Goa University, and Dr. Anjali Mohan Rao, Associate Professor at P.E.S. College of Arts & Science, Ponda, Goa, for their constant support and encouragement during my research. I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to my professors at St. Xavier's College, Mapusa, Goa, and at Satya Nilayam, Loyola College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, for instilling and nurturing in me the inquisitive nature that has academically led me to where I am today.

I would also like to thank the Librarian of Goa University, and the office staff of the School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies, Goa University, who were always willing to go the extra mile when helping me out.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their patience, support, and understanding during this academically rigorous period of my research.

“True knowledge exists in knowing
that you know nothing.”

Socrates

Contents

1 Chapter 1: Introduction	4
1.1 Rationale for the Study	4
1.2 Research Methodology	8
1.3 Ethical Considerations	10
1.4 Literature Review	11
2 Chapter 2: Moral Absolutism and the Idea of the Feminine	16
2.1 Historical Overview	18
2.2 Secular Perspectives	20
2.3 Morality and Gender Bias.	21
2.4 Examining the Idea of the Feminine	27
2.5 Intergroup Dynamics	33
2.6 Gendered Labour Division	35
2.7 Religious Prescriptions	38
3 Chapter 3: Moral Relativism, Moral Subjectivism and the Idea of the Feminine	45
3.1 Exploring Moral Relativism and Moral Subjectivism	46
3.2 Moral Relativism and Moral Subjectivism vs Moral Objectivism.....	48
3.3 Contextual Historical Analysis.....	50
3.4 Intersection with Feminism	54
3.5 The Idea of the Feminine through Relativism and Subjectivism	57

3.6	Formal and Informal Institutions Defining the Feminine	60
3.7	Cultural Practices and the Feminine.....	63
3.7.1	Menstrual Taboos.....	63
3.7.2	The Veil	65
3.7.3	Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)	67
3.7.4	Honour Killing.....	68
3.7.5	Sex Determination and Female Foeticide	69
3.8	Justifying the Feminine through Cultural Moralities	70
4	Chapter 4: Feminism, Feminist Ethics and the Idea of the Feminine	79
4.1	Historical Perspectives	81
4.2	Comparing Ethics in Feminism and Traditional Ethics	84
4.3	Relationship between Ethics in Feminism and the Feminine.....	87
4.3.1	Gender Binarism	90
4.3.2	Intersectionality.....	93
4.3.3	Women’s Perspectives and Shared Responsibility	97
4.3.4	The Aspect of Care	98
5	Chapter 5: The Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine	105
5.1	Understanding the Idea of the Feminine and its Expressions	107
5.1.1	Appearance and Behavioural Norms	107
5.1.2	Traditional Roles.....	109
5.1.3	Religious Influences.....	111

5.2	Comparative Perspectives: West and India	113
5.2.1	Ancient Greece: Plato and Aristotle	113
5.2.2	The Indian Context	115
5.3	From Concept to Morality: From Idea to Ethics	118
5.4	The Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine	124
6	Chapter 6: Conclusion	132
6.1	Overview of the Previous Chapters.....	132
6.2	Understanding the Interpretation of the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine.....	136
6.3	Individuality and Freedom within the Idea of Ethics of the Feminine....	139
6.4	The Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine: Natural or Constructed Paradigm?.....	141
6.5	The Feminine Body: Does it Define the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine?.....	143
6.6	The Role of Society and Morality in Shaping the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine	146
7	Appendix: Paper Entitled <i>“Understanding Derridean Deconstruction and Ethics Today</i> <i>in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic”</i> <i>(Ravenshaw Journal of Philosophy, Vol. VIII, November</i> <i>2022, 62-75, ISSN: 2395-3209)</i>	153
8	Bibliography	169

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between morality and gender has existed since before the demarcation of these concepts as categories by human languages. A study of this relationship is critical and relevant whenever we try to comprehend the reality of the human person in present-day society. There may be progressive learning in different fields of human learning and knowledge, but when it comes to morality and gender, we can say that the power dynamics do not make for equitable progress for all. A major reason is due to the existing definitions of what it means to be 'masculine' and 'feminine', which in turn govern the rules and laws that societies impose on their participating members. Understanding at least one aspect of this human condition through an enquiry into the gender-ethics relationship can help immensely in the practical application of long-term solutions. The idea of the feminine and the idea of the ethics of the feminine can be viewed as such attempts on my part as a researcher to have a better understanding of why we humans are the way we are. The attempt to read between the already established systemic lines of patriarchy, while existing as a product of the very same system, lends a more empathetic perspective of comprehension.

1.1. Rationale for the Study

Simply put, ethics or morality is a system of principles that helps us tell right from wrong, good from bad, the choices we make. We constantly face choices that have consequences. Most of us want to do the right thing but internal and external pressures get in the way. Although most people acquire their sense of right and wrong during childhood, moral development continues throughout a person's life. It is difficult to imagine a society with no codes of conduct, rules, values, etc. Being fair, honest, and ethical are basic human needs. There is abundant evidence that human beings have sought to govern their behaviour through laws and principles. And, people have revolted when these laws are deemed cruel or arbitrary. This makes the study of ethics more important than ever. In

movements of social change, ethical arguments fuel their teachings – establishing republics, defending one's society, seeking rights of equality and respect, resistance to imperialism, and so on. Even science cannot be conducted without ethics, without a society that has laws protecting its citizens. Thus, the study of morality is inescapable because morality itself is an inescapable condition of the human experience.

The reach of morality extends to all of human thinking. This includes how we perceive the dynamics of gender, which in turn influences our understanding of how each gender as well as the concept of gender functions. Society has standards and rules for gender identities, with members expected to perform these roles. From the clothes we wear, the spaces we occupy, the jobs we do, to the languages we speak, everything is gendered. This encoding of our daily lives and habits directly impacts our socio-cultural and economic status in society. Our performance of our gender roles is how we act out ourselves and how others act out concerning our interactions with them. These social scripts that we act out propose ideals that though unattainable provide structure and framework for the roles we play. This in turn affects our perception and constant re-definition of what a particular gender is. Many human behaviours and values are socially constructed rather than aspects of fixed human nature. Not everyone has the same opportunities, and people build their identities in a differentiated and intersectional society.

In a world where the rights of gender minorities are gaining increasing commonality and acceptance, we still see women fighting for the respect they rightfully deserve. Feminist knowledge, in particular feminist theory, has been accused of becoming increasingly more abstract and distant from the everyday challenges facing women in the outside world. Even the general idea of the human being in literature of any form is usually imagined as male, rather than encompassing gender. The language may have become inclusive ('man' to 'human') but the underlying idea is still phallocentric. Chauvinism is ingrained in our society that even our philosophising takes place from the purview of the 'masculine'. There are very few male authors who write about women's issues. Philosophical and social satire on gender discrimination is plenty.

In such an environment, the need to study the idea of the ethics of the feminine is felt even more. The areas of study of morality and the idea of the feminine are inescapable and intersectional. The study of one does not exclude the study of the other. I attempt to peek behind the curtain of the intricate relationship between morality and the understanding of the idea of the feminine. The ethics that govern how the feminine is understood in

different cultures is based on the idea of how the feminine is perceived by the dominant group, especially the masculine section. This idea is then permeated onto the entire group, defining everything from how the feminine ought to be dressed to the appropriate behaviours. This work attempts to look at the ethics behind interpreting the idea of the feminine through the lenses of absolutism, subjectivism or relativism, and within the forte of the study of the feminine through feminism. The aim is to observe the relationship, its evolution, growth and constant re-orientation and re-definition as human civilisation moves temporally forward.

A study of this nature is also an attempt at observing how I, through a subjective lens of a masculine nature, view the idea of the feminine and the ethics that surrounds it. It could be seen as an exercise in self-evaluation and growth, as well as an attempt to leave a work for other like-minded individuals who seek to be aware of the bias that may creep in, due to pre-existing ideas and notions on the idea of the feminine. This study tries to systematically see women as normal human beings who ask for the respect that is due to them as fellow human beings. The sentiment guiding the research is *empathy* directed towards the reader. The analysis of the idea of the ethics of the feminine hopes to be from the point of view of a man trying to comprehend the morality imposed on a woman, and critiquing how it came to be the beginning and the end of a woman's identity – the idea and the ethics that constitute the feminine. It is to understand how we as human beings came to pedestalise the idea of the feminine as being a transcendental ideal that trumps intelligence, humour and compassion, and that too, only for women, a 'lopsidedness' of the rules.

The text is divided into chapters that affect a critical understanding of the idea of the ethics of the feminine in different discursive domains of ethics. Chapter 1 is an introduction that outlines the need for this area of enquiry, along with the methodology, ethical concerns, and a review of the main literature that provides a skeleton of the topic.

Chapter 2 is an analysis of how moral absolutism plays with and against the idea of the feminine. It tries to see how these two diametrically opposite ideas are deeply intertwined in making present-day society. It starts with attempting to understand how the need arose for rules to be made absolute, and the influence of the powerful and dominant groups who decided the norms and their implementation in society. It also discusses secular systems

that propound an absolutist way of proceeding, like the ethical system of Immanuel Kant¹ which logically shows how one must be good because it is the rational thing to do. The chapter then delves into how the rules seem to be more in favour of men than women. Restrictions have evolved to centre more on the life of a woman, than that of a man, who is only judged for failing in his duties of protecting the said woman or harming her. Gender favouritism or sexism is a vicious circle wherein men decide who are the sexual minorities that need to be protected and also decide on how to protect them, more often than not, from men themselves. It also talks about how the idea of the feminine has undergone radical change only recently in the last couple of centuries. The dysfunctionality of the male-female dynamic is analysed philosophically to see how one group has subverted morality in its favour and thereby made the fight unequal, especially through the gendered division of labour and religion. The idea is to understand this dichotomy better and see how it affects the real-life dealings women have with society and each other.

Chapter 3 talks about how moral subjectivism or moral relativism aligns itself in the context of the idea of the feminine. Here, moral values are dependent on a human will (basis for moral relativism), and divine will (divine entity or God) while in moral objectivism, moral values are intrinsic, independent of judgements and beliefs, and anything outside of them. While it has ancient origins, it remained dormant before gaining ascendancy in the 19th and 20th centuries with the growth in scientific thought, showing how science is conducted and is deeply tied to privilege, history, and social standing. The relationship between relativism and individuals' rights is based on decisions made by the elite groups who usually impose constraints on the subjugated group. Informal institutions are prevailing norms, culture, customs, traditions, religions, myths, taboos, etc. On the other hand, formal institutions refer to the polity, judiciary, laws, regulations, and implementation of informal conventions and norms like menstrual taboos, the veil, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and Sex Determination Tests. The idea of a woman being feminine is ingrained in the group to the extent that she holds in her body, behaviour, and reputation, the honour of her family, tribe, religion, and society, instilled at a young age.

¹ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

Chapter 4 analyses the idea of the feminine in tandem with feminist ethics, which propounds that morality has traditionally undervalued the contribution of women, and is largely male-dominated. Feminist ethics began in the 1970s through articles and women's studies programmes in universities. Mainstream ethics generally displays an inattentiveness to women's issues. Feminist ethics comprises views by sections whose voices are often not heard. The development of feminist theories of ethics provides a significant challenge to the existing structures of so-called male styles of moral thinking, especially in the areas of gender binarism and intersectionality. It also looks at the woman's perspective and collective responsibility by allowing those in the dominant group to realise discrimination and oppression as a painful experience. Another aspect is the element of 'caring' or 'care', an approach to understanding feminist ethics and the idea of the feminine which reduces the relationship of care to a woman's nature, thereby reinforcing gender-based stereotypes.

Chapter 5 attempts to explore the evolution of femininity into the idea of the ethics of the feminine. It looks at the idea of the feminine and how it manifests itself in society through our perceptions of the appearance and behaviours, the traditional roles and religion associated with the feminine. It also touches upon perspectives from Ancient Greece, particularly Plato and Aristotle, and the Indian context with their respective interpretations of the feminine. It then delves into the feminine and the idea of the ethics of the same, elaborating observations with the background of the different styles of ethics researched in the previous chapters along with newer ideas in the context of morality and the feminine.

1.2. Research Methodology

The act of research deals with the analysis of different phenomena based on our observations and investigations using a variety of techniques. The core of this exercise is not just describing what we observe, but an in-depth analysis and explanation so that others can clearly understand what we are trying to communicate through the work. Every time a new piece of evidence is discovered, the research gets re-evaluated and reworked. No matter how small the claim a piece of knowledge may have, discourse will always have room for it. Qualitative research is based on the disciplines of social sciences like psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The researchers tend to think in terms of trustworthiness as opposed to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external

validity, reliability, and objectivity. Details are not just necessary but vital. The researcher spells out the methodology to make the process as transparent as possible.

The thesis is a work built by use of the qualitative research strategy, through the implementation of the approach called Interpretivism. This is an approach towards research whereby the researcher attempts to collect and collate the relevant information mainly from secondary sources. These sources also tend to be more qualitative. The interpretivist approach works best when the facts being mined are abstract, non-tangible and difficult to make quantification possible. Such facts would come under the economic, social, or cultural categories of human knowledge. To make this research a successful one, I decided to stick to the interpretivist path of research instead of similar approaches in the positivist or pragmatist realms of data collection. The interpretivist approach is most suited because the elements in the research are not easily measurable. Not only that, the relationship between these elements is based on innumerable different and complex connections. The data collected is non-numeric and helps reach carefully analysed conclusions that are holistic as well as nuanced. The research is qualitative with the standard methodology being followed when conducting it. Extensive readings have been done to know what research exists and how other authors have treated a particular topic to determine if additional research is needed. Prior studies provide a foundation, background, and context for new research, and establish a bridge between the proposed research and the extant knowledge base.

There are many sources from which relevant data can be collected and used, making it a less expensive and less time-consuming process. The readings have also been done with a critical eye, to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the article or book chapter, and to look for theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature. Critical thinking requires open-mindedness in examining diverse ideas, persistence in seeking answers to crucial questions, and prudence in making judgements and reaching conclusions. Previous works of research are also taken into account for the depth of experience, expertise and wisdom that comes with years of interaction with similar topics. Necessary precautions to avoid imposing biases on the data have been taken to maintain acceptable standards of scientific inquiry. The research material is garnered from secondary resources, listed in the detailed bibliography. A good amount of objectivity has been aspired to during the research while at the same time using an inferential approach based on the researcher's interpretive ability and judgement.

1.3. Ethical Considerations

This is one of the most important steps in good research work. There is a set of basic principles in research ethics which has to be strictly followed. From an ethical standpoint, risks and concerns are greater in qualitative research due to the close involvement of the researcher with the research process. Qualitative research also offers considerable interpretive latitude to the researcher and the data tends to contain a good amount of subjectivity. Data collection in research is not always first-hand from participants. Secondary sources also contribute a sizeable amount of data, the analysis of which results in new research hypotheses. It must also be noted that the location of the secondary data also influences the style and type to identify any information it may yield. Availability of the data on the Internet, or through books or other avenues of public forums automatically implies the granting of necessary permissions for further use, as long as the collector acknowledges the ownership of the original data. Thus, the evaluation of the data is based on criteria like the methodology used when collecting the data, the accuracy of the data collected, the period of data collection, the content of that data, and the purpose for which it has been collected.

Although data is readily available, credibility evaluation must be performed to understand the authenticity of the information available. A thorough vetting of the sources referred, along with their clear documentation and citation, helps void any possibility of plagiarism. Every ethical standard involved with honest qualitative research is honoured. There were challenges encountered while conducting the research. The creation of the initial database of reading literature took a long time, even before the actual registration for the programme. The COVID-19 pandemic did impede physical travel in the latter half of the research period, which led to more reliance on securing sources via the online mode. In terms of the methodology chosen, the main test was patience and diligence while poring over the literature and collecting the relevant data. Also, the use of Interpretivism in the understanding of the aims and objectives of the research, as well as its type, needs to be kept in mind. An element of bias can be seen coursing through the results of the research because empirical and quantifiable evidence is not the basis for understanding the connections between the different variables. Rather, the researcher through their analytical and judgemental skills makes the relevant connections thereby ‘interpreting’ information from the data collected in the particular academic context in which they work.

1.4. Literature Review

The research is influenced and inspired by the writings and thought processes of important works in the fields of ethics and feminism, interspersed with observations on the intricate relationship involving absolutism, subjectivism, relativism, feminist ethics and the idea of the ethics of the feminine.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*², Simone de Beauvoir says that for the idea of human freedom to have any chance to exist, it is very important that the freedom of others also lives and breathes without oppression. Being free does not imply doing whatever we want to do. Rather, the idea of freedom is a conscious acceptance of the fact that freedom arises from the choices we make, an exercise we engage in constantly without pause. This means that all our actions have value because of our spontaneous ability to make choices, and not because some external institution like the state or religion tells us to. We must engage in this choice-making positively rather than trying to escape it by relying on a static external institution. Thus, our ethical choices are ethical as long as we accept the burden of the choices we make, and the consequent responsibilities brought about by this freedom of choice that we enjoy. However, we don't exist as isolated individuals. We exist as members of a community and as such, are bound to each other in a constant flux of coexistence and co-dependence. Every endeavour a person engages in affects other human beings around them, near or far. For us to understand the impact of the freedom our choices bring we learn it through experiences from childhood. Children are not viewed under the microscope of morality as they are still learning the ideas of freedom and choice, as well as those of oppression and inferiority. They have yet to form their connection to the river of time. There grows the tendency to adhere to an ideology that makes us believe, will bestow power, pleasure and glory, completely bypassing human welfare.

The author espouses that sometimes a situation is imposed on people to prevent them from choosing ways of proceeding for themselves. It becomes a dogmatic principle preventing people from transcending it or even questioning it. The best example is that of oppressed groups of people like slaves or women, on whom religion, laws, customs, etc. are imposed without offering them a choice. Their situation is the result of external power structures and institutions that have been imposed on them against their will without the possibility

² De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (translated by Bernard Frechtman) (Secaucus, Citadel Press, 2000), 7-155

of any real change happening. They cannot transcend their limitations because the external factors exerted upon them make it difficult for them to even know that they can transcend their oppressive power structures. They think that their position in the world is the natural order of how the world is supposed to be. Through myth and mystification, these groups are tricked into believing that their condition is a deserved one, something they have earned. They have been convinced by their oppressors that they deserve to be in their current situation because they are naturally inferior to their oppressors. In this way, the ignorance of the oppressed about their freedom keeps them from revolting and upsetting the status quo which favours the oppressor.

To this day, *The Second Sex*³ by Simone de Beauvoir remains a seminal text in not merely philosophy, but also feminism and gender studies due to the sheer qualitative volume of research along with the depth of perception. The crux of the opus is the idea that the woman exists in relation to the man through abusive and long-standing oppression, which has relegated her to the position of the “Other”, a Hegelian concept she borrows. De Beauvoir accepted Sartre's precept that *existence precedes essence*; hence *one is not born a woman, but becomes one*. The author argues that men have made women the “Other” in society by putting a false aura of “mystery” around them. This stereotyping was always done, in societies, by the group higher in the hierarchy – usually the male. While it is natural for humans to understand themselves in opposition to others, this process is flawed when applied to the genders. In defining the feminine exclusively as the Other, man is effectively denying her humanity. Even though the relationship implies reciprocity, de Beauvoir observes the idea of the feminine continuously and consistently defined as “the Other” The definer is the man who sees himself as the Self. The man sees himself as the Subject and the Absolute with the woman as the inessential, the object, and the deviation. She has value as a sexual partner but not as an independent entity. She completes him, but she is incomplete.

In her work, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing like a Girl” and Other Essays*⁴, Iris Marion Young observes how day-to-day experiences of patriarchy embody the idea of the feminine and manifest themselves in society through norms that define what the female body should look like and how it should behave. She tries to show how society

³ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 23-38, 41-189, 756-772

⁴ Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 12-45

tries to dictate how a woman should occupy her own body, doing so intentionally to her person and in the way she engages with the environment around her. This embodiment of the idea of the feminine is the result of her intentions being repressed leading her to be unable to see her true potential and capacity. She is groomed to the point that she experiences her body as a thing or an object. These experiences are not just the result of her anatomical structure, but also of her situation and position in society. In her essays, she shows how studies highlight how boys and girls throw in different ways. Also, when performing physical tasks, women often fail to use their bodies' physical possibilities. All these rules and ideas on what is appropriate for the female body, or even what is inappropriate, automatically influence the idea of the feminine and its ethics. The feminine body underutilises itself. It fails to achieve its full capacity, be it physical size and strength or intellectual skills and coordination. The author also tries to illustrate how distinct aspects of the female body are embodied through patriarchy, begins to act and behave in distinct ways in everyday life, which then automatically become the embodiment of what it means for a woman to identify as feminine. Her objectified bodily existence is not only the result of the objectifying attitude others look at her with but also the way she sees herself, merely as a body or thing.

*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*⁵, and its author, Judith Butler, delve into the realm of gender by questioning the category 'woman', and examining 'the masculine' and 'the feminine'. Gender is constituted by behaviour in which gendered traits and dispositions are exhibited or acted out, and not an underlying essence or nature. The constant repetition of acts identified by society as the nature of a particular gender creates this illusion. Not only gender but sex itself is performatively constructed – it represents an essentially arbitrary distinction between individuals that are drawn (at or before birth) and later reinforced, through the repeated performance of these distinct behaviours. Conventional notions of gender and sexuality are used to create the idea of the feminine that perpetuates the traditional domination of women and other gendered minority communities by men. Butler questions the validity of feminist political theory, because the subject, i.e., woman as a category achieves stability only in the context of the very patriarchal system that it challenges. The very idea of the feminine and the ethics of that idea stems from the system that is oppressive and needs to be looked at afresh through

⁵ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990), 1-78

conscious attempts that expose the artificiality of the relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality.

Through her work, *Culture and Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory*⁶, the author, Vikki Bell talks about how understanding of the world around us has moved from its textual nature to how it is narrated or ‘performed’. This, in turn, has profound implications for the way we think about ethics, politics and social life itself. The work is the idea of subjectivity and ethics in the cultural setup. This offers a unique approach to the concept of performativity in feminist theory, which in turn contributes to our understanding of the idea of the feminine and the ethical cloud that follows it. The author provides crucial insights into issues in contemporary feminist thought by pushing the boundaries of the understanding of performativity, ethics and politics.

Nivedita Menon tries to use her work, *Seeing Like a Feminist*⁷, as a more impactful way of asking direct questions about the gendered nature of power. She tries to view the world with the gaze of a feminist so that the complex formatting of gender below its supposedly smooth and complete surface can be exposed. She looks at the hierarchical organising of the world around gender used to maintain social order, and how different genders live different realities. She also acknowledges the differences, marginalisation, and powerlessness in these realities against the dominant framework at the centre. She looks at feminism as an attempt to understand ways that produce and insert people into patriarchies in different times and places. She ‘sees’ society and reality from a position of marginality as a gesture of subversion towards power, thereby opening up multiple possibilities. Her focus is feminist politics and ways of observing how gendered modes of power operate. She attempts to understand how different identities get hierarchically listed as dominant or subordinate, and their relevant gendering processes. She tries to sift through the rubble of gender rules and regulations we internalise consciously and unconsciously, leading to the structural inequalities that underlie the existing social order. She highlights that feminism is not a formal organisation and its achievements are those of all humanity, and not just women alone. While she draws and highlights feminist

⁶ Bell, Vikki, *Culture & Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory* (Oxford, Berg, 2007), 11-28, 47-64, 98-120

⁷ Menon, Nivedita, *Seeing Like a Feminist* (New Delhi, Zubaan-Penguin, 2012), 1-146

scholarship and politics in the Indian context, her experiences are part of the global debates and conversations in feminism.

To sum up, the research aims to look at the idea of the feminine from an ethical standpoint by enquiring about the role that morality plays through the different schools of absolutism, subjectivism or relativism, and feminist ethics. Morality is multifaceted when it comes to guiding the human journey towards self-fulfilment. It can be seen as progressive in some regards, but when the idea of the feminine is defined, the reconciliation of differences becomes an even bigger need of the hour. The systems need to be understood on their own as well as through the lens of human understanding and interpretation. The idea of the feminine and the ethics of that idea are intricately intertwined, as observed by studying the three schools of ethics in this research. The particular perspective concerning the ethics of the idea of the feminine is not an individual opinion. It is the product of an emerging conversation with its roots in ethical and feminist theory and practice outlined by thinkers throughout history. It is simultaneously a perspective that may be contrary to some aspects of traditional knowledge and wisdom.

CHAPTER 2

MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND THE IDEA OF THE FEMININE

Laws. Rules. Commandments. Edicts. Decrees. Ethics. The list goes on...

The inevitability of trying to make sense of the chaos around us is an unchanging constant of the human condition. So also, is the understanding that change is the only constant in the universe. The chaos is made bearable and comprehensible by the following guidelines that ensure the smooth running of everything. These may be naturally pre-existing or human in their genesis. In either case, they exist to make our lives on this blue ball easier. Rules and laws extend to all aspects of life. Be it daily endeavours like sports or driving, or scientific exercises like understanding the workings of the universe, these guidelines help us achieve our goals.

One of the ways by which we effectively function in the world today is by our adherence to laws. These could be local, regional, national and even international. For instance, we require, by law, a visa or permit to travel within the borders of another country. Laws may change over time. New laws are brought into force and antiquated ones are done away with. However, the one constant requirement is that, while the law is in place, it has to be obeyed. Breaking the law results in consequential punishment. Laws govern how we behave in a society. They help us act like responsible human beings. The lynchpin in any law is that it helps us understand what is right and what is wrong concerning that specific area for which the law came into force. The same holds for the study of ethics.

The word 'ethics' owes its etymology to the Greek word '*ethikos*'⁸, which essentially means a habit or something that relates to a person's character. Ethics can be seen as the thin line drawn between right and wrong. Meta-ethics, applied ethics, and normative ethics are the three broad categories that make up its study and research. Normative ethics houses the concept of moral absolutism. We need to keep in mind that it is different

⁸ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Ethic noun Word History* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics#word-history>

because the morality of an action is not based on the result it yields. Absolutism refers to the idea that reality, truth, or morality is “absolute” — the same for everybody, everywhere, and at all times, regardless of cultures, situations or contexts. Moral absolutism is the philosophy that humankind is subject to absolute standards of conduct that do not change with circumstance, the intent of the acting agent, or the result of the action. These standards are universal to all humanity irrespective of culture, society or era. They are relevant whether or not an individual or a culture values them. A law based on one of these absolutes is not to be broken. An interesting point to keep in mind is that moral absolutism does not dictate which acts are good or bad. It merely sticks to the unyielding belief that absolute morality exists.

A moral absolutist does not care about the reasons, circumstances or results. Context is not a consideration. Thus, it is *never* okay to lie or steal, irrespective of the context. For them, universal moral truths exist throughout, irrelevant of the context, culture, community, group or society. The basis for these truths can be tenets espoused by law, rationality, basic human nature, or even religion. A dogmatic belief exists in these universal ethical standards, as they are believed to be the answers to all of humanity’s moral dilemmas. They are absolute standards against which morality can be judged. Bad actions are always bad, even if their purpose is to attain a good end. Stealing, for instance, might always be immoral, even if done for the well-being of others, and even if it does in the end promote such a good. Absolutism can be contrasted with Consequentialism where a morally right action is that which leads to a good consequence, regardless of the intentions. The morality of an act depends on the consequences or the context of the act. Thus, the actions are moral or immoral in and of themselves, regardless of the beliefs of the individual or society that engages in them. Morals are derived from the laws of the universe, the nature of humanity, the will of God or some other inherent source. Moral absolutism is different from moral universalism. While universalism believes in the idea of right and wrong being independent irrespective of custom and opinion, it may depend on the context and consequences of the action. Moral universalism is compatible with moral absolutism as well as consequentialism.

2.1. Historical Overview

Historically, moral absolutism is viewed as a more conservative or traditional belief system. It is central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It has been favoured largely because it makes the creation of laws and the upholding of the judicial system much simpler. This is shown by it being core to ancient political systems revolving around antiquated ideas such as the ‘Divine Right of Kings’⁹. It was also an essential tenet for most of science and logic before the 20th Century. However, there has been a rise in the number of challenges to the ideological teachings of absolutism in recent decades.

The ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, were ardent proponents of moral absolutism primarily because it was a school of thought diametrically opposite to the idea of relativism that the Sophists preached. The shaping of societies through history also owes moral absolutism a great debt to the concept of the *Divine Right of Kings*, which bestowed the political and religious right to rule the kingdom on kings and queens as a mandate from God above. This made royalty infallible as they were subject only to divine will, and not to their subjects on earth. Setting up and upholding laws in such a society was easier because the populace had to submit to the theocracy, the deity and the moral system of the ruler and their religion. Gradually, this mentality spilled over to the development of judicial systems and laws even in secular societies across the world. The rule of law was upheld as the supreme truth, unwavering to any exceptions. Even today, Islamic revivalists in some Muslim countries are pushing for the inclusion of *Hudud* punishments, believed to be originally mandated by Allah. Thus, the progenitor and preserver of the law moved back and forth between the Divine itself and the representative of the Divine – the priest or the ruler.

Absolutism can be seen as a natural product of naïve human experience. We are confident in the absolute nature of physical reality. The physical world exists objectively for everybody – mountains, oceans, the moon, the sun, etc. So, it seems only natural for absolutism to be the unquestioned belief system of ancient religions and philosophies. Aristotle, Plato and Socrates were absolutists in the sense that they believed in absolute truths, especially in logic and mathematics, unlike their Sophist counterparts, who were more sympathetic towards relativism.

⁹ Burgess, Glenn, *The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered* (The English Historical Review, vol. 107, no. 425, 1992), 837-861

Ancient Eastern philosophy contradicted absolutism in some ways. The first line of the Buddhist scripture, the *Dhammapada*¹⁰ claims that we make up the world with our thoughts. The Taoist scripture, the *Tao Te Ching*¹¹ states that no words can express absolute truth. However, even these philosophies seem to have absolutist notions about the foundations of reality and absolutes like the ‘Buddha nature’ and the Tao.

In post-Medieval Europe, absolutist religious beliefs became less dominant and rationalism of an absolutist nature became popular. Scientists such as Isaac Newton¹² heralded the most important feature of natural law – it was absolute. The whole point of science for the rationalist was to discover absolute truths. Mathematical descriptions of nature did not leave much scope for relativism. Only with the arrival of Albert Einstein¹³ and quantum mechanics was it turned somewhat upside down. The 20th Century saw anti-absolutist revolutions in every area of human thought. Relativity and quantum physics imply that reality is different for different observers. Anthropology exposed that people in different cultures have radically different assumptions about reality. There was widespread abandonment of traditional religious beliefs. The best source for a majority of examples of absolute morality is religion because the core belief is that the moral system is a gift bestowed on humanity by a divine or supernatural entity. It is the knowledge that has been revealed as a reward for steadfast faith, or knowledge gained through spiritual exercises leading to enlightenment. Therefore, it is true, certain, absolute, perfect and unchangeable. Christian theology espouses a hierarchy of moral absolutes known as graded absolutism. Here, in case of a conflict between two absolutes, the duty to obey God exempts one from the duty to fellow humans. The Divine Command Theory¹⁴ believes that an act is obligatory if (and only if) it is commanded by God.

¹⁰ Buddha, Gautama, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (translated by Acharya Buddhārakkhita) (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 23

¹¹ Tzu, Lao, *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (translated by Ursula K. Le Guin) (Boston, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2011), 15

¹² Smith, George, *Isaac Newton* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 19, 2007, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/newton/#NewWorInf>

¹³ Giovanelli, Marco, and Howard, Don, A., *Einstein's Philosophy of Science* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 11, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/einstein-philsience/>

¹⁴ Austin, Michael, W., *Divine Command Theory* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>

Absolutism has always remained the frontrunner in moral and political philosophies. Kant's Categorical Imperatives¹⁵, Hegel's absolutist model of socio-political history¹⁶, and Marx's absolutist model of society based on economic realities¹⁷ are some examples. The idea of universal human rights is a kind of absolutism, perhaps a wholly positive one.

2.2. Secular Perspectives

On the other hand, some forms of absolutism exist that are not based on religion. Many secular philosophies also take a morally absolutist stance, arguing that absolute laws of morality are inherent like human beings, the nature of life in general, or the universe itself. For example, someone who believes absolutely in nonviolence considers it wrong to use violence even in self-defence.

Immanuel Kant's¹⁸ views on absolutism were based solely on the power of reason without the involvement of religion. He wanted to base moral truth on human rationality and logic, and not some intangible divine authority. Rationality was inherent and universal to all human beings, the material that gave humans their humanity. The only way to be moral was to be as rational as possible. Hence, he put forth the Categorical Imperatives¹⁹. These were essentially duties that human beings had to follow in their practice of morality as rational beings. They were universal through all contexts and applied to all people at all times without exception or contradiction. In sum, these imperatives were absolutist by nature of their very existence. Kant claimed that a person should act only according to a maxim or tenet which they believe should at the same time be a universal law. Simply put, a person should consider if an action or behaviour they are about to engage in was a general rule for everyone, would they still engage in it? They should act in such a way

¹⁵ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#CatHypImp>

¹⁶ Brooks, Thom, *Hegel's Social and Political Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, June 3, 2021, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-social-political/#Mora>

¹⁷ Leopold, David, and Wolff, Jonathan, *Karl Marx* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, August 26, 2003, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/#Mora>

¹⁸ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

¹⁹ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#CatHypImp>

that whatever action they take, they would be comfortable with it being done to them. If doing something could be applied to all people, irrespective of circumstances, and with no contradiction or exception, then that action would be moral.

Kant²⁰ used the simple example of lying to state his case. If lying was universal then the element of trust would no longer exist as no one would ever be able to be taken for their word. This would mean that telling the truth would not exist. This would in turn make lying meaningless, inadvertently leading to a contradiction of itself. Using logic and rationality, Kant was able to come up with a set of principles that he felt would help people lead moral lives, without having to depend on religion, culture, or even emotion. This would be a moral absolutism that was secular. People feel strongly about moral absolutism. The philosophy is deeply rooted in our cultures and psyche. People tend to react strongly when their deepest beliefs are threatened because there is something about the fundamental nature of reality and our belief systems. Some would say that believing in anything depends on absolutism; because without absolutism, no other beliefs can be entirely true (only relatively). Analysing political, social and economic conditions through any type of ethical lens is seen as being detrimental to the understanding of ethics. “Western moral theory has often described moral rationality in ideal or transcendent terms, as if ethical deliberations ought to be independent of material realities, social histories, and human contingencies.”²¹

2.3. Morality and Gender Bias

“Moral philosophy is not simply mistaken in its claims to represent moral life. Rather, moral philosophers have represented, in abstract and idealised theoretical forms, aspects of the *actual* positions and relations of *some* people in a certain kind of social order.”²² This hierarchal social order is the kind that has positions filled based on gender, age, economic status, race, and other factors, which in turn leads to an unequal distribution of power and the recognition that comes along with it. We also need to keep in mind that most of the moral theories that dominate societal moral narratives usually depict

²⁰ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#ForUniLawNat>

²¹ Bailey, Alison, and Cuomo, Chris, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2008), 476-477

²² Walker, Margaret Urban, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 23

themselves, their understanding of the workings behind the individual's choice, moral reasoning, responsibility and accountability from the viewpoint of some people, in some positions, usually higher on the social ladder, and not from every person's perspective. This agency that societies claim to enjoy in the moral sphere and normalised through narratives and portrayals in the relevant cultural and philosophical contexts from the viewpoint of the authorities. This portrayal is then shown to the rest of the group as what represents the real moral system of the entire group or community, as rights they have or will have if they don't challenge the established moral agency. Members of the group who don't fit the mould or refuse to accept the established pecking order are left unrepresented, or shown as problematic and undeserving of whatever benefits that moral point of view may offer them.

Despite this, these moral theories or rather dominant narratives are put forward as a representation of what the group should look for in a moral agent. Their intuition, understanding of justice, wisdom, common sense, choice, and reasoning become the entire group's way of living morally. Academic moral theories both mirror and reinforce publicly authoritative discourses of justice, rights, and obligations in Western countries. In such a context, morality pits one gender against another. Like an older sibling that bosses the younger one(s) in the parent's absence, one gender claims its superiority and acts as the *de facto* boss that eventually turns into a bully. Thus, sexism comes into play. The favourite gender in the moral dynamic gives someone else the power to say what you can and cannot do. It allows another person or persons to determine how free another person's freedom is. It makes the oppressed dependent on the thinking and values of someone (oppressor) who may not even know who the oppressed are. They just fit a superficial category who must be this or that and no more. They have to follow rules set by the group in power. This restricts the intellectual and personal drives of the oppressed. It convinces them that it's not important to them and they can't do it anyway. It is ethically wrong because it makes the subjugated think that others can think for them thereby transferring their individuality to another. This is how the oppressors remain in authority even though they may not be qualified.

Another way of looking at it is through the lens of institutionalised sexism. This occurs when entire social constructs are designed around the fallacy that some are more worthy and capable than others. It makes some feel less than others. Their wishes are not important and their individuality ceases to exist. Allowing it to persist prevents a person from becoming who they want to be as an individual and makes them become what

someone else wants them to be. A simple way to understand this would be to consider the ultimate golden rule espoused by most religions and cultures of doing unto others as you would have it done unto you. The fundamental ethic here is that ‘you’ and ‘others’ are interchangeable, in other words, equal. Sexism automatically is on the wrong side of the ethical track because it is based on the idea that some human beings are less equal than others. This brings to mind the iconic line from George Orwell’s book, *‘Animal Farm’*, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others”²³. The fundamental moral standard is the belief that you are as real and valuable as everybody else. Ergo, sexism violates the most basic of moral understanding.

There exists a debate on whether traditional Islamic clothing, especially the veil promotes sexism or not. Some see it as making a statement of their identity not only as a woman but also as someone who has the choice to cover their entire body or wear a lesser amount of clothing. The idea of liberation and emancipation comes from an understanding of the element of the existence of choice. The oppression is not the clothing that covers or uncovers a person, but the enforcing of a dress code. There is an image on the internet showing a man and a child frolicking in the ocean at the beach, while the lady (wife and mother) stands at the edge of the water, covered head to toe in full hijab. While the Quran requires both men and women to dress modestly and cover themselves up, the interpretation of what ‘modestly’ means, is left to the individual. Thus, the dress code enforced on Muslim women suggests that oppression is meted out by preventing them from interpreting the Quran for themselves. This is a single example in a list that is essentially non-exhaustive.

Research has shown that historical, social, cultural, and scientific knowledge in copious amounts has been lost because of the coloniser's bias of superiority against the colonised which skewed the narrative of culture and knowledge unfairly in the colonisers’ favour. In that same vein, we can draw an intersectional comparison saying that stories, facts, and so on created by women have also been lost to make way for the dominant narrative put forward by men through the stories they told. Yet many professional philosophers are characterised by something other than indifference to feminist philosophy. On several instances where academic philosophers erupt in outright hostility at the mere mention of the term. The world of academia was pretty much barren when it came to stories of women’s lives from almost anywhere. The issue was not the intelligence of the men who

²³ Orwell, George, *Animal Farm* (London, Global Grey Ebooks, 2019), 75

contributed to the growth of that knowledge of humanity that we have before us. The issue was that men could never tell the stories of women's lives, history, traditions and culture. They were not women. They simply don't know what they cannot possibly know as men.

Even in the larger discipline of philosophy, there exists a great amount of epistemic injustice when compiling the ideas and thoughts of philosophers throughout history. Women have been excluded under the misnomer of incompetence only because they are women and considered inadequate to represent the important ideas of the discipline. Their thinking and writings were not thought to be philosophical in method but rather of the mystical or poetic, even intuitive nature. Sometimes, their works would not be considered universal because they chose to speak on philosophy by highlighting the plight of women in society. Male philosophers spoke of what they believed to be the human condition, which was more often than not, the 'man's perspective' under the assumption of it being representative of the condition of men and women. Women were not even afforded the courtesy of being held to the same standard as men in the philosophical disciplines. "Their arguments must be clearer, drier; they must focus on topics that are as removed as possible from anything that marks the writers as particular or gendered. This is no doubt why Anne Conway is so often called for when one needs a woman philosopher: her metaphysical writings are as removed as it is possible to be from what Warnock called "the woman question."²⁴

Take the most traditional literature from most university student reading lists and you will see the gender bias towards men. Academia is usually biased towards men. I am a man trying to understand ethics and feminism. No matter how objective I try to be, the bias will remain. No matter how hard men try to be gender-neutral, they can't possibly be that. Men's stories are still more widely told than those of women. Throughout history, important figures have been men, and not just that, they have been individuals who did not see women as basic human beings, let alone as citizens or even as educated individuals capable of thinking as philosophers. Philosophical discourse in politics and morality on a majority of occasions took place in public spaces not frequented by women. Hence, even if the topics of discourse were associated with women, most thinkers ignored them without discussion. "Ethical and moral questions are fundamental to Western philosophy, and moral rules can be a great tool of oppression..."²⁵ The typical audience of Western

²⁴ Berges, Sandrine, *A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics* (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10-11

²⁵ Bailey, Alison, and Cuomo, Chris, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2008), 463

philosophy was usually privileged, white and bourgeois men, who became the proponents of human ideals on goodness, virtue, and ethical decision-making. They saw traits that in their minds were important, like reason, logic and autonomy, while ignoring important elements of the human condition in the form of emotional complexity and interdependence, which they associated with the unfit mind of the woman. This tendency to envelop their ideas as those of all human beings led them to ignore intimate and private aspects of human nature, and misrepresent being a woman as being irrational or over-emotional.

Most well-known theories in most fields of scientific research were created by men. Most of the research was conducted by men using a majority of male subjects. The theories then formed were claimed to apply both to men and women. The findings that developed into his theory on moral development were also applied to the moral behaviour of girls. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that this practice was brought under intense scrutiny. Women researchers increased in number and more women also began to be considered as research subjects to have a more complete understanding of the human mind. Research by researchers of both genders using subjects of both genders also began to increase. This led to more universities developing departments, programmes and academic disciplines under the umbrella of gender studies.

This is similar to the situation where some of my classmates in college asked our professor of Psychology why he taught them American theories on behaviour when there were clear-cut differences in the behavioural characteristics of Indian children, who were the ultimate subjects of study (and this was in early 2006). Gender bias in developing countries has its roots in the traditions, cultural practices and relevant norms. Numerous societies in Africa demarcate distinct roles for men and women. Male members are looked to by the community for labour and security. The Masai Moran²⁶ in Kenya considers the male teenager who hits puberty as a man to show his strength through tasks requiring physical strength and bravery. The women in African societies are considered the bringers of life, which they do by bearing children, ensuring that the future of the community grows and flourishes. They are also seen as the ones who nurture and sustain the life that they bring into the world. Their existence and assigned role include catering to the needs of their community at large. Any attempt to step out of one's assigned gender role in the

²⁶ Maasai Association, *Maasai Ceremonies and Rituals* (Maasai Association, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://maasai-association.org/ceremonies.html>

community would bring out gender bias. The difference and demarcation are depicted in Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka's play, *'The Lion and the Jewel'*²⁷.

Feminists have also been challenging the perceptions of feminine beauty that have been normalised as the gold standard for women to aspire to for more than two centuries now. They have demanded change in the propagation of such artificial imagery on beauty by arguing that boundaries laid down by their gender need to cease. Women should no longer be confined to thinking of what they should and should not do based on what society tells them. "However, this division between 'pink-for-girls' and 'blue-for-boys' still exists. In fact, it is becoming more exaggerated than ever in this generation. They have become narrower and more powerful than ever."²⁸

One of the very obvious examples is how girls are expected to play with dolls. Not only that, they are encouraged to aspire to a life based on activities they do with their dolls, like playing house or applying makeup, and so on. This gradually translates into similar aspirations for them as young women were, the dolls being childhood grooming substitutes. The *Barbie doll* becomes a model not just on how to act, but also on how to look. Movies like romantic comedies, celebrities in fashion, and social media influencers, reinforce ideas of exaggerated femininity via extreme regimens in dieting, exercise or even cosmetic surgery. The image of the perfect female gets more defined by hinting at sexual allure as an aspiration to be an all-round beauty. The natural human desire for sexual attraction is not being denied, merely the warped view of female sexuality celebrated through music, television, films and other media. This hypersexual culture emphasizes female success on sexual allure instead of agency and the potential of women as capable human beings able to achieve what they wish.

The more one becomes aware of the dichotomy, one also begins to understand that it is an invisible one. People don't want to acknowledge it, or talk about it – men and women. They will brush it aside as women getting worked up about nothing, being oversensitive, or simply looking for problems where there weren't any. This probably explains why sometimes the ones standing in the way of women realising their full potential, are women themselves. "Women become so accustomed to experiencing gender-based prejudice that they almost fail to even register it anymore, and the fact that men dominate political and economic spheres and a fifth of women suffer some form of sexual assault."²⁹ There is

²⁷ Soyinka, Wole, *The Lion and the Jewel* (London, Oxford University Press, 1963), 1-64

²⁸ Walter, Natasha, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London, Hachette Digital, 2010), 2

²⁹ Bates, Laura, *Everyday Sexism* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2014), 12

also the surprising resurgence of the idea that traditional femininity is biologically rather than socially constructed. A new interest in biological determinism now runs throughout our society. Indeed, the association between little girls and everything pink and glittery is being explained in many places not as a cultural phenomenon, which could therefore be challenged, but as an inescapable result of biology, which is assumed to be resistant to change.

2.4. Examining the Idea of the Feminine

“Early feminist assumptions of the idea of the feminine were an obscure psychological distinction between gender (self-conception and behaviour) and sex (anatomy and physiology). These distinctions were theoretically and politically productive.”³⁰ Having a clear-cut point of distinction between sex and gender questioned whether the need to have a distinction between nature and culture was necessary. People also began to wonder if the inner identity of a person corresponded to having a stable gender identity. Gender began to be seen as nothing more than a role that members of a society performed as they had been taught and by imitation of certain identifying external markers. These broad rules based on what society deemed fit to belong to a certain gender were responsible for people’s comprehension of the idea of the feminine. These in turn produced the performances that had been assigned by society to the respective genders, which also included the sexing of the bodies. As women began to exert more influence in the public sphere and take advantage of wider opportunities in all fields, feminist thought also began to progress and expand its understanding of capacities, dispositions, behaviour, temperament, etc. A clear distinction began to emerge between sex and gender, and the biological and the social or cultural respectively.

Feminists believed that men and women differed in physique and reproductive function. However, they asserted that these differences did not have any relevance for the opportunities members of the sexes should have or the activities that they should engage in. Such gender rules and expectations are socially constituted and socially changeable. The malleability of these structures was what much of early second-wave feminist theorising invoked – the ideal of equality for women that envisioned an end to gender. Feminist theory saw turning points in the 1970s and 1980s concerning the understanding

³⁰ Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 14-15

of specific social and psychological traits associated with a feminine identity, which influenced gender roles and the social perspectives by which they were viewed. While researchers did agree that biological distinctions between men and women could not be fully explained by them, they did agree that the gender distinction in society was responsible for profound social divisions, dispositions and experiences impacting how men and women lived their lives and interacted with one another. However, the lived female individual is a unified idea of a physical body acting in a specific socio-cultural context.

In existentialist theory, the person's situation is responsible for the production of facts and freedom. The woman sees her body in her given environment through certain material facts, be it her organs feeling and functioning in a certain determinate way, or her age and size, along with health and training helping her interact with her environment in a specific way. Her capabilities, strengths, and movements in her specific environment, as well as her skin tone, determinate facial features, and hair colour and texture, serve their specific aesthetic purpose. Her existence is her specific material body in a specific environmental context. She has interactions with specific cultural and social processes that make specific demands for interaction. Concrete material relations in a physical and social environment make up her factual existence, and she has the freedom to construct her identity as she wishes. She can choose to express herself, accomplish things, leave her mark and transform her life and the lives of others. Her relationships with others, as she expresses her identity with her facts and context, is what creates her situation.

In a normalised society, the woman's life is one of culture imprinted on her. From an early age, she is made aware of her gendered role. She is given markers for these like clothes, nationality, and occupation, along with the expectations from society and culture. She is trained to exhibit certain habits based on her body and context which she then uses for her interactions with others for business or pleasure. What she says and how she interacts define her position on the societal ladder and further establish expectations for her embodied being. She becomes a person who experiences her being, and the idea of the feminine only in certain ways, depending on her specific physical features and her experiences and interactions with others. Thus, the definition of gender can be seen as the idea of the feminine in a body that exists materially, forming bodily habits, and interacting and experiencing existence with others in a context.

Keeping faith with the existentialist assertion that “existence precedes essence”³¹, de Beauvoir reminds readers that when she uses the words *woman* or *feminine*, we must understand the phrase in the present state of education and custom. We may wonder if the idea of the feminine still exists, and will continue to exist. This question does not have a straightforward answer. Adapting the philosophy of Hegel and Sartre, de Beauvoir holds that the *Other*³² is as primordial as consciousness itself. Man as the Subject can only exist in opposition to the woman, who he sees as the Object; the inessential to him as the essential. This ‘other’ opposition is intensified because the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. The puzzle remains as to why the relations between women and men have been in the oppositional stance and why the woman has been lumped as the Other, the inessential, the object.

De Beauvoir is widely thought to be the mother of the sex-gender distinction, that is, the distinction that allows one to separate nature from nurture by way of positing women’s biological nature, or their sex, on one hand, and women’s socially constructed identity, or their gender, on the other. It is not a woman or women that de Beauvoir identifies with gender categories throughout *The Second Sex*³³, but, rather, femininity, that is, those ways of behaving, those typical traits and values that conventionally mark women off from men. De Beauvoir notes that the typical qualities included dependence, passivity, weakness, docility, inferiority, and timidity to name a few. She makes it clear that her criticism is not against the woman or the female body, but against these gendered and misogynist qualities attached to the idea of what it means to be feminine in general and as an individual woman. These attributes get associated with the woman and the female body thereby depriving women of opportunities to exercise their authentic selves in an ethical and social context.

The oppression is clear as the woman is confined to the opposite end of human identity. The man is seen as a positive conception while the woman is denied actual and symbolic access to equal standing in identity as a free human being. Also, if women are provided with the opportunities to free themselves but fail to do so then they become complicit and morally culpable in their oppression. The idea of becoming a woman, the idea of the feminine, is ethically an inescapable process, dynamic and constantly moving against a normalised opposition that has not only stopped evolving but regressed. This idea of the

³¹ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 319

³² Idem, 80

³³ Idem, 23-38, 41-189, 756-772

feminine that is created and propagated under oppressive conditions should be challenged and abandoned. Till human beings are viewed as equal irrespective of gender the conflict between genders will continue to rage. An example of this exists in psychoanalysis where accepting gender categories as currently defined by society is responsible for bias against women when dealing with issues of mental health. Not allowing or acknowledging people's human capacity for choice warps not only the idea of the woman but also the idea of the feminine, denying equitable opportunity.

Sometimes this is also not enough. If a woman does base her identity on a plane of equality she gets compared to or as identifying with a man, interpreted as a kind of protest. Her interest in activities like sports, politics, and intellect, or a higher sex drive is seen as trying to be 'like a man'. Her aims, aspirations and attempts to transcend herself as a human being are not only not acknowledged but are also seen as something inauthentic or unnatural to how she is perceived in general in society. De Beauvoir elaborates that the common misunderstanding with this line of thinking is that a female wanting to be feminine or a woman is seen by society as something natural, and what she aspires to. Her views on being feminine also mean that when she sees herself as a modern woman, she also accepts masculine values. "This is to say that where men have audaciously occupied both the masculine pole and the neutral, human, middle ground, it is right that women should wrest back those values that express activity and transcendence as values that are appropriate to them also."³⁴

Judith Butler³⁵ theorised a difference between the woman and the body. She noted that the process by which women became women was defined more by social values and their interpretation than by the anatomy or biology of the female individual. She observed that being a woman is understood from essentially one dominant cultural interpretation of what it means to be female. If that interpretation cannot define being a woman in a very definite sense, then associating the term 'woman' with the 'female body' becomes nothing more than an arbitrary association between the two sets. Butler's attempt at making the idea of the feminine relative in the human experience somehow does not reach fruition when spread across the spectrum of actual human reality. The idea of the feminine is seen as an absolute, but not in itself. It is complemented by the idea of the masculine. Under the garb of integration, the feminine is seen as a subset of the masculine, a subordinate

³⁴ Card, Claudia, (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Simone De Beauvoir* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 278

³⁵ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990), 1-34

position. Even if there are attempts by the feminine to assert itself, it is still within the masculine universe. This is where the paradox of women's situation comes in. They belong both to the male world and to a sphere in which this world is challenged; enclosed in this sphere, involved in the male world, they cannot peacefully establish themselves anywhere. To put it in an Orwellian way, the rules of morality are strict for all humans but stricter for women.

In her paper, *Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman*³⁶, researcher Natalie Stoljar created an understanding of what a woman is through an ingenious term of 'cluster concept'. She believed that a large part of the issues stem from how the idea of the feminine is interpreted. The cluster concept is a theory that encompasses the idea of the feminine or the woman as a whole. It is based on Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances. He put forth the idea that certain things in the world may resemble one another to be designated with a common title even though they were not identical. For Stoljar, the idea of a woman interpreted through this cluster concept comprises four general qualities:

1. The concept of 'woman-ness'. This is based on the sex of the human female through the xx chromosome, anatomy and morphology along with other physical manifestations like voice and style of walk.
2. Phenomenological features associated with what it feels to be feminine or a woman that are typically associated with women, like menstrual cramps, physical feelings of sexual arousal, etc.
3. External markers like the 'female' dress code, or roles based on one's sex that led to oppression.
4. Calling oneself a woman as well as being called a woman by others.

Stoljar believed that her theory has the following advantages:

1. While her understanding of a woman saw female biology as a crucial aspect, the individual woman needed to satisfy enough of the anatomical elements, if not all.
2. The idea of a woman was more of a matter of degree on a scale than a definite distinction.
3. The idea of the feminine was the idea of a woman combining her social relations and interactions with her biological differences and physical body.

³⁶ Stoljar, Natalie, *Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman* (Philosophical Topics, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall, 1995)), 261-288

4. It allowed women from different contexts to identify with each other due to similarities they felt with each other while accepting divisive factors like class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. at the same time.
5. The idea of the woman is essentially people with similar characteristics identifying as a common category or class, but it still was a dynamic concept that was constructed and reversible.

Stoljar tries to innovatively interpret de Beauvoir more productively by giving due attention to the context and situation in which women exist. This helps understand the idea of the feminine or the woman better while being inclusive of the various situations in which women strive to be free of oppression. She does include biological differences but chooses to make them inclusive and not reductive in the understanding of the idea of the feminine.

We need to keep in mind that research and critique in feminism are the result of continuous discourse and the evolution of theories. Any attempt to make it the sole representation of what it means to be a woman leads to trouble. Feminist theories depict some aspects of what it means to be a woman. This overflows into other related aspects of the idea of the feminine, most notably the ethics of it. “If the credibility of claims to represent is saved by admitting that what is depicted is representative of rather little of the moral lives of most of us, then these views lose their authority as representative of “our” (much less “human”) moral life.”³⁷ The pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides’³⁸ thought is characterised by the notion of identity. Parmenides claims that all things that exist do so by being one and self-identical. What he deduces from this is that, ideally speaking, there is no such thing as plurality or difference, indeed, there is no such thing as change, which implies in turn that there is no such thing as becoming or death. According to Parmenides, these phenomena are attributable to a mistaken grasp of the world. The logic could be applied to the ethical double standards that exist for men and women. Humanity has evolved. Both genders are virtually equal under the law. They are two parts to one whole. Even more so, they are the same.

³⁷ Walker, Margaret Urban, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 23

³⁸ Palmer, John, *Parmenides* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 8, 2008, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/>

2.5. Intergroup Dynamics

The woman's condition has remained the same throughout, minus a few superficial changes, and has been defined as her character. She is seen as immanent, argumentative, cautious, petty, selfish, liar, and manipulator. She does not have a proper compass concerning truth, accuracy, and even morality. The behaviour denounced in women is not dictated by her hormones or predestined in her brain's compartments: they are suggested in negative form by her situation – her economic, social, and historical conditioning as a whole. The idea of the feminine is coloured within these lines and deviance from this norm is not tolerated.

The woman herself is groomed to recognise the universe she inhabits as a masculine creation. Men have been its progenitors, shapers and rulers, and they continue to dominate it even today. She is not expected to be responsible for any of those functions unless delegated by the man. She is considered to be inferior, dependent, non-violent, or a natural leader of others in a group to even matter as a subject. She occupies her physically fleshed-out body, which situates itself in the privacy of the home. She views herself as a passive, obsequious opposite to the men who set goals and create standards. Her thinking is seen as wishful, nothing more than a dream, as she lacks efficacy and has no sense of truth and self-worth. “She is taught to accept masculine authority without criticising, examining, and judging for herself. The morality of men becomes the absolute ethical system for her. “Men make gods,” says Frazer, “and women worship them”. ”³⁹ The respect women grant to heroes and the masculine world's laws stems from their powerlessness and ignorance. They acknowledge these laws through the act of faith. The foundation of the belief in an absolute moral system is that we have faith in the dogma that decides what is wrong and what is right. Faith is not knowledge. What it puts forth is done unconditionally, against reason, against history, against all refutation.

This stubborn reverence can take two forms depending on circumstances: sometimes it is the content of the law and sometimes the empty form alone that the woman passionately abides by. “Among the Southerners during the Civil War, no one was as passionately in favour of slavery as the women; in England during the Boer War, and in France against the Commune, it was the women who were the most enraged...”⁴⁰ If we wonder how such

³⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 727

⁴⁰ Idem, 728

internalisation happens, it is this faith that makes people follow the law in letter and not in spirit. Metaphorically, we could see the blindfold of faith in moral absolutes being a double blindfold when it comes to imposing the same on women. One of the ways to impose this *en masse* is resignation. This resignation engenders the patience often admired in women. They withstand physical suffering much better than men. Women are distinguished by the calm tenacity of their passive resistance; they deal with crises, misery, and misfortune more energetically than their husbands; respectful of duration that no haste can conquer, they do not measure their time; when they apply their calm stubbornness to any undertaking, they are sometimes brilliantly successful. She accepts everything; she condemns no one because she thinks that neither people nor things can be different from what they are. A proud woman can make a lofty virtue of it. “In particular, married women should be good wives and utilise their virtue to accept without complaint the bad treatment they may get from their husbands if they are so unlucky as to have married a violent or treacherous man.”⁴¹

More often than not, it is women keeping, fixing, or arranging things instead of destroying and rebuilding from scratch. This became an issue when women began to voice themselves and demand rights as workers in the 19th Century. The self-doubt that a lack of confidence instilled in them as being incapable of standing up for themselves and their peers made them afraid of emancipatory actions such as strikes, picketing, risking unemployment, etc. They feared social ostracism, and misery, and began to wonder if their call to revolt was a grievous mistake. After being constantly goaded into a life of submission, their preference for routine, security and happiness with their current state in the home rather than on the streets was understandable. Choosing to fight for their rights would mean risking the loss of everything they had going for them at the time, no matter how little. This was the clichéd plot of every motion picture that was based on an underdog story. The woman’s path to self-discovery was overcoming all odds, not only by her oppressors, but also by her own women companions, who had blindly internalised the normalisation meted out by the system they inhabited and trusted.

However, she refuses to resign to being resigned. Despite going through what she is going through, she is aware of it. While she may hesitate to revolt and submit against her will she will use the mode of complaint to express her dissatisfaction with her current state of affairs. She will complain of her plight to her friends, who will also share their turmoil

⁴¹ Berges, Sandrine, *A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics* (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 60

with her, about their travails in the community and the world, and complain about the oppressive hierarchy benefitting their male counterparts. De Beauvoir likened it to servants complaining about their masters in the kitchen or their quarters. The woman lives her life in the form of a revolt that has no power, a passive aggression of sorts. Instead of thinking that the truth is what men preach, she concludes that there is no truth. Her plight through her biology, history, economic, social, and symbolic context, as well as the man seeing himself as the Subject, have ended up making her the other, and she has let it happen. She no longer believes that truth is whatever yarn men spin, cloaked in honeyed positivity. She realises that there is nothing fixed about truth. “It is at the heart of the masculine world itself; it is in herself as belonging to this world that she comes upon the ambiguity of all principle, of all value, of everything that exists. The idea of the feminine rights exists as one of necessary incompleteness.”⁴²

2.6. Gendered Labour Division

“The structuring of work and occupations by gender is a basic aspect of all modern societies (and many premodern societies), with far-reaching consequences for the lives of individuals and the constraints and opportunities they face.”⁴³ The persistence of gendering in the division of labour continues even to this day. The collective mindset of people is not in favour of the organisation and funding of public services as they require collective responsibility. No matter how radical or significant the changes in today’s societies concerning gender ideologies, very little of that attitude has translated into a worthwhile change in basic division of labour. Some economic policies may have even retrenched this division in areas it may have loosened. For the last two decades or more, feminist theory has brought out more than enough research in the social and political fields on how the division of labour based on gender limits opportunities of people who engage in unpaid or informal work, mainly women. This leads to exploitation in the form of longer work hours, dependence on others for their basic needs, and vulnerability to poverty and abuse. These basic gender structures and ideologies underlie occupational divisions even in the public sector and paid work. A common observation is occupations relating to care are immediately classified as female-oriented and gendered accordingly.

⁴² De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 738-739

⁴³ Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 23

Women are seen in the public sphere as having a work-life in tandem with their nurturing and caring responsibilities in the private space of the home. This opens very few employment opportunities and also advancement and promotion, thereby keeping wages and attrition low. The public and private sectors are both structured to cater to gendered hierarchies, depriving women of status, power, and economic advancement and reward, which makes them even more dependent on others.

We need to keep in mind that when we talk about a structure of gendered division of labour, it is not the same across different societies but varied. The question posed by feminists is not to what degree this division exists, but why this framework exists at all. Challenging this setup means checking to see if certain occupations are usually assigned to members of one gender group, if it is seen as appropriate to encourage members of a particular gender to choose certain careers, or whether the social and cultural factors of society also move in similar directions. The general answer to any of these questions is usually yes. There are variations like which occupations are gender-associated, the ideologies behind those divisions, and how they affect the distribution of resources, status, and opportunities for advancement in the community.

A gendered occupational division of labour may strongly code certain occupations as female and others as male, and such coding may have far-reaching implications for the power, prestige, and material reward incumbents of each group enjoy. Structures of a gendered hierarchy of power differentiate men from one another according to social roles and dispositions. The most important thing about the analysis is to understand how the rules, relations, and their material consequences produce privileges for some people that underlie an interest in their maintenance at the same time that they limit the options of others, cause relative deprivations in their lives, or render them vulnerable to domination and exploitation. The man's relations with other men are based on certain values. But with the woman, a different set of values comes into play. We have seen the hypocrisy of men decreeing abortion to be criminal when women are put by men into a situation where they have to abort. The most flagrant example of this duplicity is a man's attitude to prostitution: it is his demand that creates the offer. He considers girls who make a living with their bodies perverse and debauched, but not the men who use them. In many cases, the man can commit acts with a woman's complicity that degrade her without tarnishing his lofty image.

Structuring through these includes the form and implications of many legal institutions, many rules and policies of private organisations in allocating positions and benefits, the structuring of schooling and mainstream media to accord with these institutions, as well as the assumptions many people make in their everyday interactions with others. Together such social facts make structures with differential consequences on the lives of different men and women, and which sometimes produce serious suffering or wrongful limitations on freedom. The system constrains the lives of men and women, with all their varying sexual and desiring inclinations. It motivates some to adjust their lives in ways they believe will bring them material reward and acceptance. It compels others to carve out lives in the interstices of social relations where their desires and projects do not fit. For the rest, it pushes them to rebel.

One of the more serious issues is the internalisation of attitudes towards gendered division of labour by the political, economic and social institutions themselves. There is an automatic favouring of occupations associated with male members of the group who are valued more than others. This not only conditions the power hierarchy in the community but also makes the beneficiaries extremely reluctant and resistant to change of any kind. State institutions, corporations, and the bureaucracy in general are structured in the form of hierarchies where the power of decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a select few. These figures of authority who enjoy privileges are usually men. Not only do they reap the benefits of the power they wield, but they also have the power to limit and subordinate others, usually women and other intersectional minorities. The heady cocktail of power resulting from the intersection of gendered hierarchy, division of labour and normative heterosexuality creates a strong sense of entitlement in these men in power. They begin to associate the service “owed” to them by women with force and toxic heterosexual masculinity.

Due to such attitudes and structures, women in the workforce face numerous challenges only on account of their gender. Due to differences in the nature and kinds of jobs done, women face different health challenges than men in the workplace. They are more prone to health issues like carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, and respiratory diseases, not to mention anxiety and stress. Due to such complications, more physically demanding occupations are given a miss, either by potential employers or women workers themselves. In addition, social, economic, and cultural factors also play a role in women being more prone to injury and illness. For example, women are more likely than men to do contingent work part-time, temporary, or contract work. Workers in traditional job arrangements

have comparatively more incomes and benefits than contingent workers. Sexist treatment and gender discrimination in the workplace can affect a woman's physical and mental health. With advancements in technology, while life has certainly become easier and more convenient, so has sexism in the online realm. Cyberbullying and harassment of women have increased along with offline behaviour and go largely unreported. Online misogyny becomes an extension of what happens offline in the workplace. Its reach extends into the home and private space of the woman's life, and is no longer limited to the office space. It has evolved and is now even being seen as acceptable, and with it, the physical and mental trauma also invades the woman's private space.

2.7. Religious Prescriptions

There has always been an innate need for human beings to understand the mysteries that plague us. Why am I here? How was the universe created? What happens after death? While some of these answers seem to be on the verge of discovery, most of human history has not had the technology or knowledge to look behind the veil on these topics. Without understanding, there is fear and fear needs to be quashed. We have a drive to know things beyond our tangible selves. For many people, religion and morality are intertwined, one cannot exist without the other. Even when discoursing in fields that are relatively secular like law, medicine, or even ethics, it is implied that faith and religious beliefs heavily fund moral guidance. Religious authorities influence the formation of moral attitudes of the faithful towards accepting or rejecting the use and benefits of technological advancements in biomedical research, medical procedures and any other new technology that influences the improvement of the human condition from a scientific point of view.

If we even look at studying faith and religion, Western theology in its long and incredible historical journey has seen a majority of male theologians. It was considered a de facto approach to theology. Male theologians study a male anthropomorphised God as a representative of human understanding of the divine. Men were usually seen as being in a position to study and reflect on religious tradition and knowledge. The tragedy of the situation was that it was seen as perfectly natural for a male theologian to be capable of interpreting insights on faith for all genders. The women's movement has done a lot to foster awareness of women's experiences in the realm of faith and theology that has been negated throughout the histories of most religions. The simplest challenge to male dominance in theology has been whether it has led to a distorted understanding of tradition

and human experience in the realm of faith since it is a specifically male experience being marketed under the guise of the human understanding and study of the divine, a one-sided picture of the human religious experience. “To pretend otherwise is to blind ourselves to the destructive personal, political, and theological effects such theological one-sidedness can have. It is also to lose the opportunity to humanise theology through the deliberate incorporation of women’s experience.”⁴⁴

Religious authority is usually observed as being in the hands of a select few, who have been chosen through revelation from the divine that is then interpreted by an individual or a group, usually men. The task of these religious elites is to understand religious texts and experiences and put them into practice so that the community can have meaning and structure as it lives a moral life. It does become difficult to figure out if this instruction enhances their power and status gives spiritual direction to the community at large, or both. Using religion, men of power realised they could set the moral standards for what is wrong and right and then interpret the religion to entice people to fall in line. Accepting the teachings meant eternal life after death while rejecting the teachings meant eternal damnation for the soul. In essence, morality was enforced by fear.

Additionally, in the Elizabethan age, not only was it a threat to your soul to fail to go to church, but laws demanded it. Moral absolutism is a set of intangible ideals. Following them can seem a bit shaky unless examples are made that would act as deterrents to those who break the rules. In such a situation, three examples are made using the weaker members of the group – the poor, the powerless, and the women. The powerful group usually acts as the interpreter of the rules in the ethical system. Members of this group are usually rich, powerful, men – the exact opposite of the ‘examples’ to be made. Thus, while the rules are for everyone, they are made especially harder for those who will inevitably end up breaking them one way or another. This keeps the status quo intact and prevents inquiring about the legitimacy of the rules to be followed.

Today, religion has a lesser impact on the modern world concerning forced morality. But religion has likely influenced our morality through thousands of years of conditioning. Our modern leaders no longer work with the church to manipulate people’s beliefs. There is no doubt, however, that religion is still at the heart of many wars and deaths around the world. Some leaders, religious and otherwise are responsible for using religion to spur

⁴⁴ Plaskow, Judith (edited with Berman, Donna), *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2005), 48

them on. When deciding on the morality or immorality of an issue, we can focus on the consequences of our decision or on the means we use to arrive at the decision. Whichever point of focus we choose to analyse a specific situation will also influence the decision made. “The complexity only increases when one takes into account whether the outcome was bad for some individuals but good for others, or whether the principles used to decide how to respond to a situation were ethical or not.”⁴⁵ This makes us wonder if we even need religion to be ethical human beings. Spiritual beliefs do not help maintain ethical principles, as we can know right from wrong without instructions from a deity. The swing vote in religion’s favour is usually that it offers the guidance, support and structure to be a better moral person. While there is research to show some ethical benefits of religious practices, there are also numerous examples of religion causing harm to others, sometimes in the guise of doing good. For example, religious leaders were prosecuted and convicted as sexual predators, embezzling donations and funds, as well as lynch mobs killing minorities in the name of their respective religion.

While the concepts of Christian love and Buddhist compassion exist as moral values that can be associated with specific religions, these qualities can also exist among those who do not share the religious beliefs, and sometimes, even be better adherents of said virtues. Religion is not required to influence morality. Morality is also influenced by society, culture, family environments and personal views. One of the easy targets is the woman. The man requires her to be the *Other*. She is human but seen as the main recipient of the rules that need to be implemented. He remains the *Subject*. He demands that she surrender this thing to him freely. She must recognise his superiority and his strengths. Her faults are amplified to the extent that she will not try to combat them but, on the contrary, make an ornament of them. There is no better way to make sure of such obedience than through the justification of divine retribution or divine compensation, depending on how the person’s moral pendulum swings.

The one thing that society has always been bent on dispensing to women is **religion**. “There must be religion for women as for the people, for exactly the same reasons: when a sex or a class is condemned to immanence, the mirage of transcendence must be offered to it.”⁴⁶ Having a god that can be used as a justification for the creation of moral codes works to man’s advantage. This can be used to exercise sovereign authority over women

⁴⁵ Kille, Kent, J. (ed.), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2007), 253.

⁴⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 746-747

and other minorities, and it can be justified as an authority bestowed by the divine. In the Abrahamic religions⁴⁷, man is believed to have dominion over all given to him by God. Even the slightest inclination of revolt against his power can be quashed by reminding the oppressed of the divine will and retribution. Thus, the woman has to respect and have faith in a masculine universe, because refusal to do so would ostracise her and leave her without access to the religion and morality of which she believes she is in profound need.

In modern civilisation, where freedom plays an important role—even for the woman—religion becomes less of an instrument of constraint than of mystification. The woman is manipulated into not only accepting her inferiority as part of a divine plan but is also encouraged to believe and be grateful that she is even considered as an equal (even though she is not) in a world dominated by the man. The temptation to revolt is negated by the illusion of justice and equality of genders. A sincere faith helps the girl avoid all inferiority complexes: she is neither male nor female, but God's creature. This is why we find a virile steadfastness in the great female saints: Saint Bridget⁴⁸ and Saint Catherine of Siena⁴⁹ arrogantly tried to rule the world; they recognised no male authority. Joan of Arc⁵⁰ and Saint Teresa⁵¹ followed their paths with an intrepidity surpassed by no man. The Church sees to it that God never authorises women to escape from male guardianship; it has put these powerful weapons in masculine hands only.

Nevertheless, even when subjected by God's will to men's laws, the woman finds a solid recourse against them through him. Masculine logic is refuted by mysteries; males' pride becomes a sin; their agitation is not only absurd but culpable: Why remodel this world created by God himself? The passivity to which woman is doomed is sanctified. There is no need to *do* anything to save her soul, it is enough to *live* without disobeying. With the complicity of the heavenly Father, a woman can claim the glory of her femininity against man. Not only does God thus re-establish the dignity of the feminine sex in general, but every woman will find special support in the celestial absence. As soon as she acts in the name of divine inspiration, her desires become sacred. The devotee camouflages her

⁴⁷ Cohen, Charles, L., *The Abrahamic Religions A Very Short Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020), 1-60

⁴⁸ Catholic Online, *St. Bridget of Sweden* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=264

⁴⁹ Catholic Online, *St. Catherine of Siena* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=9

⁵⁰ Catholic Online, *St. Joan of Arc* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=295

⁵¹ Catholic Online, *St. Teresa of Avila* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208

authority in humble obedience; raising her children, governing a convent, or organising a charity, she is but a docile tool in supernatural hands. One cannot disobey her without offending God himself. The woman invokes divine will to justify her authority absolutely in the eyes of those who are naturally subordinated to her, and to justify it in her own eyes. Whether she has chosen asceticism or sensuality, pride or humility, the concern she has for her salvation encourages her to give in to this pleasure that she prefers over all others. But especially, it confirms the world order; it justifies resignation by bringing hope for a better future in an asexual heaven. This is why today women are still a powerful asset in the hands of the Church; it is why the Church is so hostile to any measure that might facilitate their emancipation. Women must have religion; there must be women, “real women,” to perpetuate religion.

In fact, in the upper classes, women are willing accomplices because they stand to profit from the benefits they are guaranteed. They do not hesitate to radically sacrifice their autonomy, and stifle all thinking and critical judgement. They identify with the ideal imposed on them by the male code. The housewife regains independence in her work, and in caring for the children. She draws a limited but concrete experience from it. We need to keep in mind that liberation can only be collective through the accomplishment of the economic evolution of the feminine condition. Attaining individual salvation within the oppression is still something that women continue to aspire to, as have other women in the past. The common justification is that suffering is a great humbler, and an enabler of spiritual currency, which helps us transcend our mortal shackles into immortal and divine freedom. It does sound ridiculous, and maybe even a little pathetic that the oppressed woman converts her cage into a golden one, claiming her oppression as a portal to sovereign freedom. This is a common trope internalised by the feminine mystic or even a woman in a toxic and abusive relationship.

To sum up, moral absolutism and the idea of the feminine are unwilling compatriots in the journey of ethics. When rules and laws begin to stifle freedom and self-expression, there arise the freedom fighters. Any system that gets rigid and stuck in its ways will automatically be challenged and forced to analyse itself to figure out if it has rules just for the sake of rules. We see this systemic rigidity not only in simple diktats such as telling women what to do and what to wear, but also in the basic division of labour. The work that women do is also presumed based on the warped idea of the feminine that has been

created through millennia of oppression. While all these ideas may be seen as antiquated in the postmodern setup, we need to keep in mind that the major idea of the feminine is influenced by the ideologies and cultural situations of Western thinkers. However, we need to keep in mind that the ideas propagated by these thinkers can be adapted to the respective culture of the challenger. The beauty of the idea of the feminine is that it is fluid. “Feminism can be very helpful in getting past the easy opposition of divine revelation and individual subjectivity – not because it has solved the problem of authority, but because it has had to confront it head on.”⁵² The area of understanding the concept of authority is still among the larger and more complicated dilemmas that modernity poses to feminist thought and application. Elizabeth Cady Stanton came out with *The Woman’s Bible*⁵³ in the 19th Century as a feminist commentary which radically questioned the authoritarian nature of religion in the Bible paving the way for future critics to also do the same concerning questioning religion without fear. The progressive uptick in religion due to feminist movements has helped in breaking down power and prestige enjoyed by traditional authority figures and structures.

Feminism has evolved and with it the understanding of what a woman is and what she wants for herself. In fact, in some situations, the rights of the woman are now well on their way and the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community are in their nascence. For every rigid idea of an absolute nature, there is the opposing one that embraces the diversity of the human element – race, gender, culture, economics, etc. We also notice a decline in the influence of religion. While it may rule the roost in terms of faith and post-death consequences, people have relatively begun to ignore its preaching in terms of what to eat and what to wear. They may practice certain aspects when at home, but imposing it on their acquaintances is not very high on their ‘to-do’ list. The bigoted aspects of religion are like a racist elder in the family – we ignore them as being a person of a different generation and mindset until they get too annoying and need to be told to shut up. Bigots do exist in all societies. But there exist more individuals who see religion as a quiet tool for one’s spiritual reflection – open to personal interpretation and not dependant on the priest or the ‘appointed’ guardian. The confusion is alleviated when we realise that the rules of religion are mere guiding lights that help us on our spiritual paths.

⁵² Plaskow, Judith (edited with Berman, Donna), *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2005), 140

⁵³ Cady Stanton, Elizabeth, *The Woman’s Bible* (New York, European Publishing Company, 1898)

There is a general abhorrence and even disdain for any moral system that proclaims an absolute way of life. There is a fine line between exclusivity and oppression, and people seem to be clever in figuring out when that line is crossed. When that happens, protests, debates, discussions, and in extreme cases, violence sound the bugle letting the system know that it has lost the inner meaning of the rules it espouses. A point to note, probably on the grounds of compassion, is that an absolute rule probably started as an epiphany or even a suggestion that gradually snowballed into the rigid edict of consequence that it is today. The system was fluid in its infancy and accepting of new ideas, till it reached a point where stability was needed and flexibility ended up being sacrificed at the altar of good practices to accommodate it. There is a tiny possibility that the idea of the feminine may end up in the same way. However, the fact that philosophers constantly challenge and re-orient themselves, and the numerous developments on what it is to be feminine or even a woman, gives us hope that such fear has best been allayed. Rules and laws help us make sense of the chaos around us and as our knowledge of this chaos grows into order, so does the interpretation of these rules. Change is the only constant – some systems change faster than others.

CHAPTER 3

MORAL RELATIVISM, MORAL SUBJECTIVISM AND THE IDEA OF THE FEMININE

“There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do.”

John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath⁵⁴

Most people throughout history hold the view that asking moral questions should ordinarily garner objectively correct responses to be then translated into action. Some moral truths are as obvious as general trivia about the world around us. These statements remain undisputed and are viewed through obvious and objective lenses. Debates and discussions, or even basic conversations on morality can get touchy or intense, but discussions on moral relativism and subjectivism can end up being downright daunting. The views of people and society on moral issues from a subjective or relative point of view can change with time, going back and forth on opinions held, leading to pretty heated arguments. Philosophy in general and its various sub-disciplines are fashioned by the influence of relativism, be it ethics, epistemology, science, religion, political theory, ontology, or even logic. Relativism and subjectivism can take discussions to the questioning of the very nature and method of philosophical thought, dividing the analytic and the continental camps. It is interesting to note that despite a long historical road dating back to the times of Plato, paved with a large body of writing, philosophers have yet to come up with an ascertained definition of what relativism is, and what significance it has on philosophical thinking.

Moral subjectivism or moral relativism is both the most influential and the most reviled method of philosophical thought. Those who support it consider it as a great equaliser that

⁵⁴ Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, The Viking Press, Inc. 1939), 22

is inclusive, tolerant, open-minded, and anti-authoritarian, while those who oppose it claim it to be an undermining factor in ethics by encouraging confusion instead of healthy scepticism and a justification for moral depravity in extreme cases. Moral relativism and subjectivism put forth the position of the absence of moral facts or moral truths that are objective. Any moral judgement is true or false, but not objectively or universally. It is seen as being relative to a standpoint that may be particular to a culture or a historical event. No ethical standpoint can therefore be seen as being uniquely privileged over others. Moral facts or statements are the result of certain ‘attitudes’ that people have concerning particular issues in the ethical realm. There exists a close relationship between morality and the person’s opinions. It also shows the approval and the disapproval that may go along with the making of moral statements. It enables people to disagree over whether an issue is right or wrong to see that the real argument is more about their preferences instead of the objective truth. It may also make people realise that they are not arguing about objective truth, but rather trying to impose their point of view on the other. Thus, relativism or subjectivism are labels used to denote a varying degree of intellectual positions in contemporary philosophy where a consensus cannot be reached on an absolute or universal definition.

However, moral relativism or moral subjectivism may be interpreted as implying that moral statements are less substantial than what most people usually consider them to be since they give only information about what we feel or think about moral issues. Most people find this form of moral decision-making unhelpful, believing that most people do not talk about moral issues in this manner. If a person says something is wrong, we most probably think that they are not merely telling us about their feelings. Also, if we steadfastly believe that there is no objectivity in the truth of moral statements, then we cannot blame people for behaving in a way that another group of people would consider ‘wrong’ from a moral standpoint. We could base our justification from the point of view of how the majority of people feel about the particular issue.

3.1. Exploring Moral Relativism and Moral Subjectivism

Like most positions held in relativism, moral relativism varies in form and strength, which are the result of different conclusions that have been arrived at after observing reality in action and philosophically deliberating on it. Usually, based on observation of empirical

data, moral relativism proposes that deep moral disagreements are widespread on a lot of issues. The absolute truth that may be claimed by moral judgements is dependent more on the ethical standards set by a person or a group at a particular time and/ or place. Morality expresses itself through holding different positions on different ethical issues. These differences span across different cultures, regions, religions, and even individuals. Hence, the concepts of different intellectual movements under the relativism umbrella cannot be treated as absolutism. They are shaped by social customs and beliefs. They are not set in stone. It is usually seen as a direct opposite of moral idealism, which sees ethics in terms of certain ideas that are considered absolute and ideal. Any other thinking that goes against these ideals is seen as irrational. The best example here would be the ethics advocated by Immanuel Kant⁵⁵ and other ideas from the Age of Enlightenment. Moral relativism has been debated for millennia in a variety of contexts, from ancient India and Greece to the present day, not only in ethics but also in art, religion, and science.

People may disagree about moral issues and even the terms associated with ethics, such as “good”, “bad”, “right” and “wrong”. The idea is that they are relative to the traditions or practices of an individual or group. American anthropologist, William Graham Sumner⁵⁶ believed that there cannot be higher moral standards than those ascribed by the morals of the respective cultures people belonged to. Moral relativists argue that one cannot resolve moral disagreements through an objective evaluation standard. The closest one can come to something independent is from the point of view of what the majority feels it should be. Normative relativists would even go to the extreme that we *ought* to tolerate the behaviour of others even when it runs counter to our personal or cultural moral standards. Thus, universally valid moral principles that bind all people all the time do not exist because they are relative to culture.

On the other hand, moral subjectivism holds that morality is based on decisions made by the individual. Neither culture nor accepted beliefs define right from wrong. It boils down to individual choice. Morals are subjective to the person and based on their feelings, opinions, and beliefs. If a person thinks stealing or lying is a harmless exercise, then it is. If another sees tax dodging as okay, then it’s their decision. Moral subjectivism is absolute only in its rejection of any absolute moral standard. The benchmark for what is right and

⁵⁵ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant’s Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

⁵⁶ Sumner, William Graham, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Boston, The Atheneum Press, 1906), 1-118

what is wrong is set by the individual, based on what they consider moral for themselves. The same holds for other people, who also decide their moral standards. The individual is essentially the subject that determines their morality. If a proposition about ethics reflects the subject's beliefs, the subject is justified in believing it. According to subjectivists, moral reasoning consists of what a person believes about ethics and is not dependent on society. As long as the person lives by their principles they act morally. Moral judgements are based on the person's moral sensibilities and features. A subjectivist who thinks abortion is wrong would claim that from their standpoint they believe that abortion is wrong. Once they explicitly state their moral position on an ethical issue, the truth of that moral judgement no longer remains relative. Moral relativism is a subset of moral subjectivism where the subject moves from the individual to a group of people and their common beliefs and cultures. The claim focuses on facts about right and wrong dependent on social and cultural background and varying with any changes in the same. Assessing the morality of values will also be relative to the framework, and may even be independent of the cultural or social setting.

Moral subjectivism and moral relativism are very similar, but approach ethics from different perspectives; the former on an individual level, while the latter on the sum of individuals groups, cultures, societies, etc. They are important topics that are widely discussed, even outside the confines of philosophical thinking. Consequentially, there is no self-regulating basis to criticise the ethics of any culture or individual except one's own and oneself respectively. One position of moral thinking is as valid as any other moral viewpoint. Sometimes, it may just be about how to think about or act towards those with whom we have moral disagreements, focussing on tolerance and inclusivity of the views of others along with our own.

3.2. Moral Relativism and Moral Subjectivism vs Moral Objectivism

In moral subjectivism, moral values are dependent on a will. This will can be human or divine. If the will is human, this forms the basis for moral relativism. Humans come together and decide via a majority or complete agreement on what is right and wrong. An example of this would be legislation that is enacted by legislatures of countries whereby what is right and what is wrong is decided from a legal perspective. If the will is divine,

then moral law is seen as a creation of a divine entity, i.e., God. God chooses to reward or punish a person, either directly or through an agent. The violator of these rules is considered a sinner; only God can judge or forgive the sin. We could say that any doctrine that preaches grace or forgiveness displays elements of moral subjectivism based on ‘divine will’.

Christianity, the religious movement based on *avatars* of Vishnu⁵⁷, or Pure Land Buddhism⁵⁸ are some instances of religious movements that came about as a challenge to moral objectivism. They purport doctrines of grace heralded by the concept of a ‘Saviour’⁵⁹, by whose grace the effects of sin are nullified, thereby eliminating the ultimate consequences of life on earth, which is, death, karmic rebirth, eternal damnation, etc. It opened up the possibility that a person could do morally wrong throughout their lives and could still be forgiven for their sins because God willed to do so. In Christianity, this helped explain controversial commands by God, such as commanding Abraham to kill his son, Isaac, or permitting the Devil to make Job’s life miserable as a test of the latter’s faith in God.⁶⁰ God was someone who understood the human condition while being divine. God became accessible to all, whose will could change from person to person, and from situation to situation. This contributed to the visible success of these religious movements. People who were not of the priestly class could not follow the rigid moral rules that monks and priests followed. They realised that the divine will be the way to help them observe moral laws. God became a personal advisor in a person’s path to attaining the meaning of life. These movements liberated all people by positing them as equals before God, despite their differences. They had mass appeal and ended up having a profound social and political impact throughout society.

A common approach to defining relativism and subjectivism is to focus on what these schools usually deny, and then define them negatively. Many Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians still believe in moral objectivism and absolutism. In moral objectivism, moral values are intrinsic, independent from any temporal or geographical limitations

⁵⁷ Tola, Maya, M., *Avatars of Vishnu: Ten Incarnations of the Eastern God* (Daily Art Magazine, June 17, 2024, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/avatars-vishnu/>

⁵⁸ Jingtu, *The Pure Land Charter*, (Pure Land Buddhism, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://purelandbuddhism.org/plb/18/13>

⁵⁹ Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, *Definition of saviour noun* (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/saviour?q=saviour>

⁶⁰ *The Holy Bible – The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition for India* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1990), 17-18, 538-574

concerning judgements and beliefs. They are not dependent on anything outside of them. It is thus an ‘end in itself’, and not a ‘means to an end’. Intrinsic value is found in persons, nature, and works of art. Immanuel Kant⁶¹ states in the second form of the categorical imperative that we ought to always treat people as ends in themselves and never as means to ends. Moral law is uncreated, eternal, and not subject to divine or human will. Moral absolutism is a form of moral objectivism, where the objective nature of morality is taken to the extreme. Here, the idea holds that there are always some truths or values that apply to morality at all times and places, irrespective of social, cultural and historical frameworks and conditions. Thus, God has created eternal, unchanging laws which not even God can change. Those laws are part of God’s divine nature. There is no grace in moral objectivism. To avoid punishment, one must live one’s life as a perfect moral specimen, following the law to the tee. The concepts like the law of karma, death, and rebirth in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, are expressions of this objectivism whereby people seek moral perfection over a series of lifetimes and will keep being reborn till this perfection is achieved. Thus, objectivism emphasises moral principles as valid rules of action. These rules should generally be adhered to. There exists a set of, or even one, basic moral principle that is binding on all of us.

3.3. Contextual Historical Analysis

Though relativism or subjectivism did not become a prominent topic of philosophical discussion in the 20th Century, it has ancient origins. They span the beliefs held by people in different cultures and regions around the world for thousands of years. The ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher, Zhuangzi⁶² or Chuang-Tzu put forth what could be seen as a form of relativism through a non-objectivist view of morality. The principle of *Jaina Anekantavada*⁶³ in Jainism states that truth and reality are perceived differently from diverse points of view, with no single point of view portraying the truth. In ancient Greece, the Protagoras’ maxim alluded to a relativistic understanding when he said that

⁶¹ Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant’s Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#HumFor>

⁶² Chuang-Tzu, *The Book of Chuang-Tzu* (Translated by Martin Palmer with Elizabeth Breuilly, Chang Wai Ming and Jay Ramsay) (London, Penguin Books, 2006), 9-29, 39-57

⁶³ The Pluralism Project, *Anekantavada: The Relativity of Views* (The Pluralism Project (Harvard University), accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://pluralism.org/aneantavada-the-relativity-of-views>

“man is the measure of all things”⁶⁴. The Sophists⁶⁵ could be seen as the proponents of relativism in ancient Western society by their reflections on the diversity that they came across in different societies in the fields of religion, politics, law, etiquette, and even eating habits. They gained more following and popularity by observing and elaborating on the contrast that existed between laws and customs, and physical nature and natural order of reality. Even the Greek historian, Herodotus⁶⁶, wrote about how each society regarded its belief system as superior to that of others. Moral beliefs and practices have an unbreakable bond with customs and conventions, which are different in different societies. These mould the beliefs and practices of the group’s participating members gradually being elevated to the notion that their ways are better than the beliefs of others.

While moral diversity was widely acknowledged and accepted in ancient Greek philosophy, it was moral scepticism, which held that there exists no moral knowledge that was the ascribed view, instead of moral relativism. Even though moral relativism existed at the time, it was not very popular. Plato preached his idea of an objective moral order based on a transcendent reality and Aristotle talked about a morality based on the objectivity of human nature. It was Sextus Empiricus⁶⁷ a few hundred years later who embraced some form of moral relativism based on the existing diversity of laws and conventions. However, this Hellenistic brand of scepticism was booted out by the scholastic philosophy of Christianity. Moral relativism then lay dormant for almost the entirety of Christian hegemony in Europe, as well as for Western philosophy during the medieval period before coming up for air in the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment.

Through the next few centuries that followed, trends of thought in modern philosophy gradually chipped away at the faith in ethical objectivity and propped up relativism as a viable option. In the 17th Century, Thomas Hobbes⁶⁸ proposed the social contract view of morality where moral rules and laws were something a group of people agreed upon to live together in harmony as a community with common goals. Moral tenets about right

⁶⁴ Bonazzi, Mauro, *Protagoras* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, September 8, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/protogoras/#ManMeasThes>

⁶⁵ Lee, Mi-Kyoung, and Taylor, C.C.W., *The Sophists* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, September 30, 2011, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sophists/#Pro>

⁶⁶ Humphreys, Sally, *Law, Custom and Culture in Herodotus* (Arethusa, Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (SPRING and FALL 1987)), 211-220

⁶⁷ Machuca, Diego *Pyrrhonian Relativism* (Elenchos: Rivista di Studi Sul Pensiero Antico 36 (1) (2015)), 89-114

⁶⁸ Friend, Celeste, *Social Contract Theory* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH2a>

and wrong did not depend on instructions from a transcendental or supernatural entity but were the result of pragmatic appraisals of how well they served the common purpose of the community or society that followed them. In the Age of Enlightenment, David Hume⁶⁹ focussed on matters of fact and those of value. For him, moral judgements were matters of value because they were about people's sentiments about moral issues and verifiable facts of reality. While he did believe that some human sentiments were universal, he did not have an objective standard for morality in general, because he felt that the universe remained indifferent to how we felt about things. Hume did make arguments which supported some elements of relativism but was not a relativist. Friedrich Nietzsche⁷⁰ also dealt with morality extensively and influentially. His thinking had a strong relativistic thrust even though scholars cannot come to a consensus on whether or not he was a relativist. He viewed morality by ranking moral values according to whether they manifested strength, weakness, health, sickness, and other such qualities. He believed that our moral values need to be assessed and gauged to see the impact they have on us. Those who were considered 'good' people were usually those who were rich and powerful with proper access to quality education and knowledge. Thus, what was considered good was relative and so the importance placed on good and bad would also be relative. He believed that morals should be constantly evolving, relative to what we as individuals consider good or bad, instead of following moral laws made by those in power. This moral stagnation created feelings of loyalty and obedience which were exploited by those in power, i.e., organised religion, to further their agenda.

With the accomplishment of humanity in the field of science and technology in the 19th and 20th centuries, mainstream philosophy and social sciences became more focused on trying to understand the distinction between facts and values. While science seemed to be describing independent reality from a neutral point of view, moral values were still viewed as emotional attitudes and sentiments that could not be proved factually correct or superior. An increased and growing awareness of moral diversity between Western and non-Western cultures also contributed to moral relativism. While the dominant view among Europeans as colonial powers was that their morality was superior to the moral values of the cultures they subjugated, anthropologists from Europe could not contain their

⁶⁹ Cohon, Rachel, *Hume's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, October 29, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/>

⁷⁰ Leiter, Brian, *Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, August 26, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/#CritMora>

fascination with the diversity of cultures, compiling detailed works and empirical studies of the non-Western cultures. The assumption of Western moral superiority began to be challenged in the 20th Century, most notably by anthropologists who showed how moral judgements could not be passed on the beliefs and practices of different cultures, but these practices could be studied to understand how they helped these cultures achieve common societal goals. In 1947, when the United Nations debated on universal human rights, the American Anthropological Association⁷¹ stated that moral values were relative to different cultures. It was not possible to show the values of one culture better than those of another. This statement was to counter a perceived attempt by the West to impose its own set of particular values on other societies under the garb of universal human rights. Values were seen as relative to individual cultures through which they formed their moral codes and belief systems. Hence, it would be inappropriate to apply a set of moral values of one group to humankind as a whole.

Ruth Benedict⁷² believed that only socially constructed customs exist. She was more explicit about the implications of ethics and advocated that having a relativistic mindset would help us overcome prejudice and be more tolerant. The differences in belief among societies led philosophers to question whether any objective, absolute standards of values could exist. Some posited equal validity for different systems without a standard to judge conflicting beliefs. Philosopher-anthropologist, Edward Westermarck⁷³, was an important bridge between anthropology and philosophy. He was also among the first to put forth a detailed theory of moral relativism which essentially pitched moral ideas as subjective judgements that were a reflection of a person's upbringing. Moral philosophers began paying more and more attention to moral relativism in the latter part of the 20th Century. They based their works on the fruits of anthropology by trying to understand the moralities of different cultures. Some philosophers argue that moral statements are subject to logical rules since one cannot hold contradictory moral judgements. This allows for a proper discourse on moral ideas with common standards. They do not affirm or deny the existence of moral facts. They focus their understanding of human logic applied to moral assertions. This logic can somewhat postulate a more preferred standard of ethics in a very limited sense. This way, moral systems treat certain moral terms alike to some degree,

⁷¹ American Anthropological Association, *AAA History* (American Anthropological Association, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://americananthro.org/about/history/>

⁷² Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture* (New York, Mentor Books, 1960), 17-51, 218-240

⁷³ Westermarck, Edward, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1924), 4-107

thereby meeting some sort of universal understanding. This open-ended understanding of ethics allows people of different beliefs to have meaningful discussions on moral questions while disagreeing about certain facts. We could observe that after about 1960, Europeans massively abandoned many traditional norms rooted in organised religions like Christianity, continuously evolving them with more relative moral rules, concerning sexuality, same-sex relationships, gender, family, procreation, etc.

The past several decades have observed an increase in awareness and consideration for moral relativism as a serious area of study leading to enormous literature on the topic. Discussions in the areas of meta-ethics, human rights, political theory and liberalism, and feminist thought and philosophy, along with socio-historical developments have made the study of moral relativism even more popular. In recent years, moral relativism has been pivotal in debates on how societies ought to deal inclusively with immigration and multiculturalism. This is especially in keeping with frictions that may arise when the practices of one community may be seen as in conflict with the values of another. An example of this is when France passed a law in 2011 banning face veils or head coverings⁷⁴. This came in conflict with the practices of French citizens who are Muslims and Sikhs. Those who supported the ban felt so because it valued what they considered universal, that is sexual equality and freedom of expression (expressive interaction supposedly violated by the veil), while critics described it as an expression of cultural intolerance by the majority community, going against the very thing relativism claims to challenge.

3.4. Intersection with Feminism

Relativism and subjectivism argue that there is no objective way of viewing the world. Even how science is conducted, ideas are framed, topics are studied, or things considered important; all these are deeply tied to privilege, history, and social standing. They also tend to be subtle, with people usually unaware that they operate under these guidelines. Even if we try to be aware of all these unique points, there would still be ways in which our perspective would be skewed. Can morality be justified in inherently subjective frameworks? Feminism implies neither moral relativism nor anything else. It is an

⁷⁴ The Telegraph, *French Senate Approves 'Burka Ban'* (The Telegraph, September 14, 2010, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8002914/French-Senate-approves-Burka-ban.html>

umbrella term under which many theories fall, and those various theories all have various implications. In light of the second and third waves of feminism, it is difficult to talk about the woman's experience from an objective viewpoint. Who are we to speak for other women, especially those who have different social and economic capital than us? While there is a uniform feminist critique of the so-called 'objective' perspectives propagated by men in power, feminists are divided on whether this is because there is no objectivity, or if there is objectivity, then it has just not been done correctly. The discourse on the understanding of the human condition has taken different forms, thereby creating bitter differences among different camps. Does there exist room for a common ground of understanding between relativism, subjectivism, and feminism? There are differences between camps but cooperation on ideas seems the way to go, to help society understand the human condition in its diversity better.

However, we may notice that the basic understanding of what a human being is and how they ought to be treated have been developed by the dominant group, excluding feminists as well as the relativist and subjectivist perspectives. For instance, some moral relativists have posited that what is termed "universal human rights" is more correctly a representation of the needs and aspirations of more dominant cultures and groups in the West. Some even argue that human rights are not compatible with cultures that are not Western. In non-Western cultures, collective or community rights are the focal point, unlike in Western culture where the stress is on the individual's rights. Thus, they advocate human rights by emphasising communal interests rather than individual rights. Feminists have long been campaigning for women to be included in the system that ensures and protects their human rights. They are critical of human rights proponents who look after the vested interests of the dominant male gender through exclusion and oppression of the female gender and other gendered minorities. The UN's 'declaration of human rights' touted as universal has been framed in the language favouring men and reflecting their needs and aspirations.

Women's differences and those of other intersectional oppressed groups need to be considered in a revised and updated version of the existing human rights framework. Women's voices include many different voices that speak from the viewpoint of those marginalised based on class, culture, race, sexual orientation, etc. The existing framework needs to include reproductive rights, sexual autonomy rights and similar other rights. The public arena, especially in politics is viewed as male oriented. The socio-economic sphere which claims to be progressive in terms of women's advancement is also far behind in

terms of equality. Women's oppression takes place in the private sphere and so even this dichotomy between the public and the private spheres needs to be done away with.

The aim of feminists to expand the definition of human rights to include equal rights for women is a fantastic demand. While they do acknowledge cultural differences, they also believe that to give women more inclusive rights under human rights, which can then impact international changes, the similarities that exist among individuals need to be given more precedence than cultural differences. Feminists critique human rights conventions for not using language that mirrors the strong language of the Apartheid Convention⁷⁵, where the terms "oppression," "domination," and "inhumane" treat racial apartheid as unlawful. They argue that gender discrimination should be treated as "gender apartheid". They criticise universal and international laws and conventions for devaluing women's concerns.

Feminists also highlight the subtle forms of gender discrimination that are woven into the fabric of society, in different ways in different moral and cultural setups. Women's status is subordinate and domestically oriented, rooted in the theory of complementary roles for men and women, which are seen as normal practices. They reject the imposed norms and rules that are rooted in inherited gender-discriminating mindsets. Feminists also seek to change the use of "man" and the collective units controlled or dominated by men, such as "family," as the default units of reference. They see it as unjust, contingent, and imposed. Women should have unconditional access to orchestration power (the power to make major decisions for themselves, their families, and their community), equal to men's status and power. Feminists define equality as the eradication of gender hierarchy, not gender differentiation. "It is the *suffering* of women that is appealed to as "the experience of women," because it is verifiable that across cultures, around the world, the situation of women consistently holds multiple and intersecting realities of gender-specific patterns of suffering."⁷⁶ Suffering can be seen as an umbrella term that covers a wide gamut of realities. Feminists are not against religious and traditional societies. They are against the violation of human rights in the name of cultures, religions, or traditions. Differences in cultures and religions that are inclusive and uphold human rights should be respected, welcomed, and even celebrated. Exclusive and discriminating norms and practices under any slogan should be exposed, confronted, and eradicated.

⁷⁵ Dugard, John, *Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid* (Audiovisual Library of International Law, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cspca/cspca.html>

⁷⁶ DeCrane, Susanne M., *Aquinas, Feminism, and the Common Good* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2004), 87

3.5. The Idea of the Feminine through Relativism and Subjectivism

How does the idea of the feminine come to be in relativist and subjective contexts in the moral sphere? We can see that these camps try to incorporate a more ‘inclusive’ understanding of the human condition on their own, as well as in cooperation with one another. But, when they interact with one another specifically, can we see what it is to be a woman through the lenses of moral relativism and moral subjectivism, and does this impact the understanding of the idea of the feminine in general? Human behaviour becomes meaningful in a cultural context. The patterns of behaviour found in different cultures emerge in the context of interactions of the people which are encoded in their various traditions, customs, and cultural artefacts. Thus, the beliefs and values of a community are what their members learnt from their ancestors and that becomes a part of their social consciousness. Moral relativism focuses on the claim that good and evil are relative to personal, social, cultural, and historical situations. Moral frameworks are dependent on the people who have formed, nurtured and now exist in and by them. However, recent years have seen the use of moral relativism as a blanket term to envelop almost anything that can be justified even under the slightest context of relativism. We are then left with more and more brutal practices of exclusion that habitually kill women with no foreseeable recourse.

Religious and social norms often overlap in collectivist societies. Examples include fasting, attending prayer, adhering to dress codes, and behaving according to socially sacred norms and values. These can be explicit (written or spoken), or implicit, where an individual knows when they transgress them. Certain sacred religious norms that reflect patriarchy are imposed and reinforced through formalisation into law. Accordingly, many antiquated practices, in full or in variations, are still applicable. This is on a national scale, but there do exist similar tribal affiliations among cultural groups based on other social and regional dynamics that manifest in the morality of groupthink. When science and religion conflict, such groups hold that religion is always right. The importance of traditions handed down by religion or family from one generation to another is also naturally much higher, highlighting the significant role of collective and inherited culture in people’s beliefs and behaviours. It is here that the way people think moves from group to individual, who bring their unique variations to the fold. For example, in the Arab world, most of the informal norms are rooted in interpretations of sacred norms and Islamic

teaching, especially in the Quran⁷⁷ and Hadith⁷⁸ (the most revered sources of Islamic Law or Shariah). In most Arab countries, except Lebanon, the Islamic Law or Shariah is sanctioned as the main or the only source of legislation and law. The same would apply to heavily religious groups in South Asia (Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etc.), which give utmost importance to the religious texts guiding a strict adherence to rules of purity and caste hierarchy. We could also apply this line of thinking to all other religious groups that interpret religious texts through centuries-old lenses with rules one would not consider relevant in the modern age – Christian denominations or cults, orthodox religious communities, etc.

The relationship between relativism and individuals' rights concerning religious identity is even more complex. In societies where people are not free to violate sacred or religious norms, the deviant members of societies expose themselves to collective punishments, which are integral to the cultural and moral fabric of society. Certain aspects of culture may represent the worldview of the dominant and elite group(s) at the expense of marginalising and sometimes excluding subordinate groups from participating in the formation and practices of such beliefs and customs. Karl Marx⁷⁹ emphasised the role of the dominant ideology that reflects the interests of the ruling elites—for example, the bourgeois in capitalist societies— which makes conventional and socially constructed norms and roles seem natural. Dominant ideology engages a mistaken or distorted view of reality, which allows people to remain content with their miserable lives.

Since such norms are sacred and revered by the majority population or ruling elites, they are accompanied by a well-defined scheme of punishments and rewards. The dominant group's exclusion from or under-representation in the decision-making processes leaves it with power only to implement the decisions of the dominant group. Decisions made by the elite groups usually impose constraints in terms of restricted access to freedom, capabilities, and functions, in the dominated group. Members of these societies are taught to conform and subordinate their needs to collective needs, resulting in forced obedience and collective punishment. In contrast, in individualist societies, people are more independent and are usually not locked into traditionally prescribed social norms and rules. Social norms are shared by other people and are partly enforced by the members of society.

⁷⁷ *The Holy Quran (translated by Maulawi Sher Ali)* (Surrey, Islamic International Publications Ltd., 2021

⁷⁸ Holy Books, *The Complete Hadith – All 9 Volumes in one PDF* (Holy Books, January 8, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.holybooks.com/the-complete-hadith-all-9-volumes-in-one-pdf/>

⁷⁹ Engels, Frederick and Marx, Karl, *The German Ideology* (Paris, Foreign Languages Press, 2022), 2-68

This is in contrast to private norms, which are self-imposed and are not sustained by the approval or disapproval of other individuals.

The influence of public image on behaviour is more robust in these societies, where people are taught and expected to behave in certain ways to preserve such an image. “In such systems with strict hierarchy of identity and roles, each role-image contains the expectation of subordination to higher roles and authority over lower roles.”⁸⁰ Decisions are made by the ruling group or elites, based on the interpretation of religious texts and traditions, which are then transmitted to the rest of the group, who are expected to follow them subserviently. These societies have a stronger tendency to use the threat of violence to gain acceptance and maintain order. The main components of this collective conscience are shared norms and values in society, a high level of conformity, and a low level of tolerance for deviance. There is also a kind of solidarity that is manifested via similar lifestyles and educational and religious training. There is also a low tolerance for deviance, accompanied by harsh punishment. The dominant group uses intellectual and moral leadership garnered from power and privilege to oppress their subordinates often by force which later turns into voluntary subjugation. The purpose of the use of force is the assertion of the dominant group’s supremacy by making it seem to be the consent of the majority.

Judith Butler⁸¹ highlights concepts of true identity and socially assigned identity in this regard. True identity is what the person is by themselves, free from any assigned role or identity, while socially assigned identity is what is enforced on the person by the dominant group and those in the oppressed group who have internalised those identities (women). It is usually the complete opposite of the person’s values as per their true identity. The person’s perception of true and socially assigned identities is formed by power and knowledge, which are inseparable. This power-knowledge combination creates a person’s worldview and establishes what is acceptable, and the identity of the person concerning the group. In gender-discriminating societies, masculinity becomes the main form of cultural capital, forming the nucleus of the power structures. Women are expected to aspire to be as close as possible to this nucleus. This leads them to perpetuate gender discrimination by condoning norms and codes which are discriminatorily masculine. It helps them gain favour with the patriarchal hierarchy, thereby increasing their value in

⁸⁰ Abadeer, Adel, S.Z., *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 96

⁸¹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990), 1-34

terms of cultural capital through this exchange of favours. This explains why certain women condone acts of discrimination against their gender peers. It is the price of exchange of cultural capital of their gender background that helps them ascend the rungs of the patriarchal hierarchy.

Pierre Bourdieu⁸² also highlights that women's inferiority and exclusion are closely related to the principle of division and dissymmetry which treats men and women as subjects and objects, or agents and instruments. In this context, women appear as those whose meaning can only be determined concerning their environment, that is, men. Their function is merely to contribute to the expansion of this symbolic capital men hold in the group. Women's virtue and honour in the form of concepts like virginity and fidelity are pitted against men's positive virtue and honours, like pursuing glory in the public sphere. Male dominance and female submissiveness are also highlighted through the role of family, religion, the educational system, and the state. Bourdieu specifically calls out religion for explicitly inculcating a family or collective-oriented morality that is dominated by patriarchal values while simultaneously preaching the inferiority of women. This is then expanded on by the educational system, and the state, which ratifies patriarchy in the private sphere with patriarchy in the public domain.

3.6. Formal and Informal Institutions Defining the Feminine

Informal institutions can be defined as norms, customs, traditions, myths, taboos, and codes of conduct prevalent in a community or society that make sure its culture continues unchanged. Collectivist societies usually rely heavily on the influence wielded by these institutions. They evolve glacially based on very gradual feedback and adjustment. Informal institutions show us how power structures get formed through the gradual acceptance of discriminatory norms, and the strengthening of conviction in them irrespective of ethical fairness. They play a crucial role in explaining the understanding of the idea of the feminine as well as the status of women in different societies. They help explain the relationships between people and their surrounding physical and social environments. Prevailing informal institutions influence individuals' mental models

⁸² Bourdieu, Pierre, *Masculine Domination (Translated by Richard Nice)* (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2001), 5-54, 113-117

about their shared perceptions, expectations, and interpretations of the world around them. Informal institutions that victimise a certain population group (for example women) not only distort their mental models but also, offer another group, men, the opportunity to gain at the expense of women.

In such societies, the formal norms are complemented by informal norms to stabilise social expectations and structure social life. They provide information about the anticipated behaviour of members of society. Informal norms influence the distribution of social and moral currency among different groups and members in each society. This in turn affects the power distribution and lop-sidedness seen in formal institutions, which can favour certain group members, for example, men in general, at the expense of women in gender-discriminating societies. This may explain how informal norms persist even when efforts are made to change them with formal rules. This also may explain how if the person, family, or community moves to an area with a more progressive outlook towards the women of the community, they continue to function with the norms of their former place in their private sphere, while adjusting to the norms of the new place to some extent. Those placed at an advantage by these informal norms unknowingly benefit from them while others make deliberate use of these norms to exploit others through institutional power structures.

Informal institutions highlight the importance of understanding the presence of embedded norms and traditions that help us understand gender identities as well as perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, and marginalisation. It is visibly entrenched in many collectivist societies, even those with higher standards of living. These may be entire countries with newly acquired wealth and status, or communities in a state or country experiencing similar economic progress. Informal institutions assert the social, political, and economic rights and superiority of men. Women become marginalised and largely excluded from certain activities, transactions, and decision-making processes. They are expected to act according to norms imposed on them, achieved through abuse in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honour killing, *devadasis* (temple prostitutes or dancers in India), *dowry* payments (payment by the bride's parents to the groom's family for marrying the bride in South Asia), *dowry* deaths (the killing of brides by the in-laws for dowry money in some states in India), and *sati* (widows' burning at the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands in India). Such informal traditions also explain why the majority of women in these societies justify domestic violence and spousal rape. These environments play a drastic role in distorting the mental structures of the victims, making

them more likely to accept and internalise these informal discriminating norms, thereby perpetuating their victimisation.

Certain informal norms like religious norms are deeply entrenched in societies and remain so without dispute. Any intervention or attempt to change the status quo tends to be momentary or short-term, which cannot properly challenge the longevity of informal discriminatory institutions, whose foundations were laid well in the past. These norms also emphasise the importance of long-term, ongoing interventions, and commitments to initiate and continue the process of breaking down these discriminating informal norms. Cultural differences play a crucial role in explaining the influence of norms on the state of women in different societies. Governments tend to avoid initiating any policy that may interfere with the functioning of the prevalent discriminating informal institutions. These interventions are usually supposed to have long-term effects. This is impossible because governments lack consistency in structure and duration (they are short-term), while informal institutions have evolved and developed over centuries to their current near-unbreakable structure. Governments may therefore even contribute to such norms and codes continuing their existence by sanctioning their practice with their indifference.

On the other hand, formal institutions refer to the polity, judiciary, laws, regulations, and implementation. These mirror the societal power structure and are designed and enforced to reflect the distribution of power across different levels of government. Formal institutions are also created as a way of stabilising informal conventions and norms. They can be used to structure social interactions that lack a prior institutional framework. External enforcement mechanisms include the state and other forms of collective power, laws, regulations, and the accompanying punishment against non-compliant members of society. Formal laws and regulations that favour certain groups of people, based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, caste, etc., have negative effects on other groups that are overlooked, marginalised, or excluded. Formal rules and laws affirm the strength of social norms and the conventional morality of the society in which they operate. They also work to counteract the 'decay' of such social norms and morality of their society. They take advantage of such formal rules to uphold their gained status and power. In these societies, male members individually as well as collectively occupy superior status. They laud their privilege over inferior members, their wives, daughters and other female relatives, the female members of the group, to extract information and for other transactional gains.

3.7. Cultural Practices and the Feminine

3.7.1. Menstrual Taboos

A large number of countries in Asia and Africa still have communities and groups where menstrual taboos and restrictions are still widely prevalent. “Socio-economic factors, like education levels of the parents are insignificant determinants of the prevalence of the beliefs, taboos, practices and superstitions related with menstruation.”⁸³ The perception of people changes for girls undergoing various sexual developmental changes. The experiences of menarche have a huge impact on the growing adolescent girls. In Thailand, the ‘logic’ behind menstrual taboos is that a menstruating woman is seen as powerful as well as polluting⁸⁴. As a result, they are forbidden from entering certain sacred spaces when menstruating, or they may just be barred because they are women, menstruating or not, depending on the prevalent custom in the community. Certain areas in Thai temples that house relics are also prohibited areas for menstruating women, which begins when they get their first period. Another place where the entry of women may be controlled and regulated is *Muay Thai* rings. Some may forbid menstruating women from entering them, while others may forbid all women. Still others may allow women but control how they enter or where they sit, etc.

In Nepal, *chhaupadi*⁸⁵ is the practice of sequestering menstruating women in makeshift outdoor sheds, cattle barns, or huts beyond the main courtyard in the belief that their monthly blood is offensive and polluting to men and the household deities. Even though the practice was declared illegal by the country’s Supreme Court in 2005, and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare had guidelines in place for its eradication, a survey in 2010 showed that *chhaupadi* was still being practised. While it affected 19% of women in the western region of Nepal, in the mid-western mountainous regions the figure rose to a brazen 52%, and in the far-western hills, it was at 50%. The practice continues because of broader views on ritual participation, domestic spaces, the relationship

⁸³ Chopra, Shruti, & Sharma, Krishan, *The Development of Menstrual-Related Beliefs and Behaviours During Adolescence in a Semi Rural Haryana (India): A Conceptual and Empirical Formulation* (Moravian Museum, Anthropologie (1962-), Vol. 49, No. 2 (2011)), 100

⁸⁴ Von Duuglas-Ittu, Sylvie, *Menstrual Taboos and Cultural Relativism – Being An Ally* (8 Limbs Us, March 17, 2014, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://8limbus.com/muay-thai-thailand/menstrual-taboos-cultural-relativism-ally>

⁸⁵ Khanal, Geha, N., Khatri, Resham, B., Singh, Samikshya, Thakuri, Deependra, S., and Thapa, Roshan, K., *A harmful religio-cultural practice (Chhaupadi) during menstruation among adolescent girls in Nepal: Prevalence and policies for eradication* (PLoS One. 2021; 16(9): e0256968. Published online 2021 Sep 1. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256968), 1-22

between humans and gods and spirits, and the value placed on female labour. Another similar example in Nepal is the Hindu festival of *Rishi Panchami*⁸⁶, which memorialises a woman reborn as a prostitute because she did not follow the mandatory menstrual instructions. Women are given the day off from work so that they may perform the necessary rituals to atone for any sins and bad karma they may have accumulated by violating any menstrual restrictions, and not because of their valuable contribution to the progress of the country.

Prevalent traditions in a lot of communities in India also consider a menstruating girl or woman as impure. The menstrual blood is considered a pollutant and temple visits or even performing rituals before in the area of worship in the house, are forbidden for fear of incurring the wrath of the presiding deity or deities. In the same vein, participation in festivals, and functions related to birth or death are also discouraged. She is not allowed to touch anything considered pure. Keeping fasts is not allowed, as is touching holy books and religious items. Restrictions are also put on diet and activities. Consequently, the majority of women avoid going to places of worship (showing an intersectional regional and cultural angle to religious practice). A fear is inculcated in her mind that she would be committing gross transgressions against God if she broke these taboos.

A common justification in support of these practices that is also seen as a matter of pride in some communities is that being barred from carrying out daily activities during their periods gives the girls or women a compulsory rest. Touching certain foods and plants, entry into the kitchen, and cooking of food are forbidden. She is not allowed to water plants like *tulsi* (*ocimum sanctum*) which is considered auspicious to most Hindus. In some cases, washing or even a haircut is restricted. Depending on the community either one or some or all of the above restrictions may be practised. With the lack of easy access to proper menstrual hygiene products an unfortunate commonality in India, most women use a rag or piece of cloth as a sanitary napkin during menstruation. In many communities, the cloth is also considered inauspicious and a pollutant, to be disposed of outside the house or buried in a pit. When her menstrual cycle ends, she is allowed to resume normal activities but only after she has had a ritual bath and followed it by performing a *puja*, or any other mandatory ritual. The girl or woman is shamed into thinking she is impure and

⁸⁶ The Kathmandu Post, *Rishi Panchami being Observed* (The Kathmandu Post, September 19, 2023, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://kathmandupost.com/visual-stories/2023/09/19/rishi-panchami-being-observed>

her periods are something bad, and because of this, she pollutes anything she touches or is in the presence of when she is menstruating.

3.7.2. The Veil

The Veil is probably the most visible issue that highlights how we interpret the idea of the feminine in terms of moral relativism. It is worn by many Muslim women, some Hindu communities, and even other regional groups in South and Southeast Asian countries to cover their heads and faces. Among Muslim women, the veil is used as the hijab, a scarf over the head that covers the head, the ears and the neck. It is the bone of contention for freedom of expression among women the world over due to its gender-specific nature. Depending on the context, women's movements challenge its appropriateness or inappropriateness. The use of the veil does have its fair share of supporters like the anthropologist, Lila Abu-Lughod⁸⁷, who views it as a cultural and regional symbol, similar to Western formal dress etiquette for specific occasions. She also observes that for many women who live in conservative Islamic communities, the veil is the least of their worries when fighting for their rights. It is seen as a part of being a moral person depending on the cultural group one inhabits and can be adapted or done away with altogether. Another similar example would be the habit of Catholic nuns in India. The process of '*inculturation*'⁸⁸ saw many nuns opting to wear their habit in the form of a saree to identify with being Indian as well, while priests could also opt to dress like *swamis* depending on the cultural context of the place. Thus, in the moral context of India, the saree combined with the nun's religious habit was seen as incorporating the Catholic faith into a more Indian context for women.

Passages in the Quran⁸⁹ refer to the wearing of a veil or hijab as appropriate attire for women or young girls. This means that the onus of preventing men from lusting after women is on the women and not on the potential culprits – men. The debate still rages on in Islamic and non-Islamic circles on what religious texts mean when they say women should 'cover' themselves in appropriate attire. There is always discussion on whether it should be a basic headscarf that lightly covers the head and hair, or a specific one that is religiously approved, controlled and regulated. Some Islamic clerics and theologians in

⁸⁷ Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others* (American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Sep., 2002)),

⁸⁸ Sagayaraj, Antony, *Samy Christianity in India: A Focus on Inculturation* (Research Papers of the Anthropological Institute Vol.1 (2013)), 114-139

⁸⁹ *The Holy Quran* (translated by Maulawi Sher Ali) (Surrey, Islamic International Publications Ltd., 2021)

India have pointed out that the traditional attire for Muslims was essentially oriented to the desert climate as a protection from the sun, and is completely unsuitable to the tropical and humid climate of India. Thus, it is more a choice based on region rather than religion and therefore should be left to the comfort of the person wearing it. Most Muslims will acknowledge that it is their religious duty to at least cover their hair, but somehow, concerning the attire for women, the specificities have come to be interpreted to mean even the entire body. This has gradually grown into a religious ritualistic requirement. Most Muslim women who wear a hijab do so partly or fully as religious observation.

A growing concern about the hijab is that in places where it is commonly used it has come to symbolise a sort of ‘ripening signal’. A girl or child without a veil may be seen as someone who has not yet started menstruating. The use of the veil for a woman in a Muslim community usually begins when she starts menstruating. This can be seen as an automatic symbol in an Islamic patriarchal society that the girl wearing it is mature and potentially ‘available’ in a sexual way, telling the world, specifically men, that she is ready for marriage. It reduces the woman to her sexual allure and does not do anything to protect her modesty (the veil’s original purpose). This also means that any cultural practice forcing pre-pubescent girls to wear the veil, whether for religious or cultural purposes, has the negative effect of sexualising children.

The idea of the feminine or even the morality of it is not defined by the barometer of wearing or not wearing the veil or hijab. Women wearing the hijab fight against the patriarchy and injustice and are well-informed and hugely supportive of women’s rights. For them, what matters is having the freedom to choose whether to wear the veil or not. The veil is a symbol that can be used either way – by its use or its non-use. In France, the movement is for the choice to wear what headgear they wish to, in opposition to the ban on face veils or head coverings in 2011. On the other hand, in Iran where not wearing a hijab is punishable by law, many Iranian women protest against it by regularly wearing their hijabs in such a way as to reveal their hair and head, which shows their disdain for the law and also allows them to pull the veil back to the legally allowed position swiftly. In the extreme scenario, an Iranian Facebook group called ‘My Stealthy Freedom’⁹⁰ allows women to protest the sexist laws imposed on them by posting images of themselves without hijabs.

⁹⁰ Alinejad, Masih, *Masih Alinejad* (My Stealthy Freedom, 2019, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/staff/masih-alinejad/>

3.7.3. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

The practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is another subject that brings out the conflict between the idea of the feminine and the morality imposed by groups or individuals in areas where it is practised. The practice dates back as early as the 2nd Century BCE, when a geographer, Agatharchides of Cnidus⁹¹, wrote about ‘female circumcision (FC)’, as it occurred among tribes in modern-day Egypt and then spread south and west. It was rooted in the Pharaonic belief in the bisexuality of the gods, a trait also reflected in mortals. It was believed that every person had a male as well as a female soul. While the feminine soul for a man was located in his foreskin, the clitoris was the location of the masculine soul for the woman. “For healthy gender development, the female soul had to be excised from the man and the male soul from the woman. Circumcision was thus essential for boys to become men and girls to become women.”⁹²

Today, FGM is a ritual commonly practised in many African countries, as well as many Islamic communities. It is a ritual commonly practised in Muslim cultures. Although it is not a religious obligation in Islam, it is seen as a form of religious purity, motivated by beliefs surrounding appropriate sexual behaviour for women highlighted by the concepts of virginity and fidelity. In these communities, this ritual is seen as a ‘coming of age’ ritual for a girl. Her purity is celebrated and kept intact as it is an important requirement for marriage. The belief is that the practice keeps a woman’s desire for sex in check. This prevents any chance of premarital relations, thereby keeping her ready to be faithful only to her husband. As part of the marriage ritual, the stitching is removed as proof of her virginity. Very few practitioners of FGM are aware of its mythological etymology. The common belief is that a circumcised girl is more feminine and is marriage material, while an uncircumcised girl is more masculine. The lack of the clitoris is seen as an important part of the feminine identity. It is a necessary ritual for parents to prove that they are raising their daughter the right way and preparing her for adulthood and marriage. FGM is associated with moral and cultural ideals of femininity and modesty. Girls are made clean and beautiful by removing body parts that are considered male or unclean. It has become so normalised, so highly recognised, and praised by the adherents, that even young women and girls are happy to be a part of the ritual as it will bring them respect

⁹¹ Billet, Bret, L., *Cultural Relativism in the Face of the West* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19-51

⁹² Danial, Sandra, *Cultural Relativism vs. Universalism: Female Genital Mutilation, Pragmatic Remedies* (Prandium: The Journal of Historical Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2013)), 2-3

and acceptance. Rejecting the practice decreases the likelihood of a girl's chances of getting married, besides bringing shame to the young girl and her family.

Whatever the justification behind FGM and all its variations, it poses serious medical risks to the woman. Not only that, it violates her basic and intrinsic rights as a woman and a human being – the rights to life, dignity, and health. In no way does it promote the emotional and psychological well-being of the person subjected to it. It is essentially a way of controlling women's right to their bodies and their sexuality, reinforcing the regressive notion that women are property and can be treated in whatever way so that she is acceptable in a patriarchal society. Realistically, FGM is a very dangerous practice because the persons performing the procedure are often not medical professionals, using unsterilised equipment, leading to the extreme risk of post-operative complications and infections. The procedure itself of sewing the vaginal lips together leaving a tiny hole for urine and menstrual flow is completely unnatural to the woman's genital state, leading to potential future health risks and infections. Women and girls who have been subjected to the procedure described is a painful and humiliating violation where someone removes an organ while they are fully aware and conscious of what is happening to them. They then have to confine themselves to bed rest for over a month till the wounds heal, while at the same time, menstruating and urinating through the very same affected parts, all so they can be suitable "marriage material".

3.7.4. Honour Killing

Another similar moral practice is that of honour killing, which happens commonly in Arab, Balkan, and South Asian countries. In India, it is not only driven by religious motivations but is also heavily rooted in the casteist nature of Indian society (common in inter-religious and inter-caste romantic relationships). Family members engage in the brutal stoning, stabbing, beating, or shooting of a female family member to kill her for bringing shame and dishonour to the family. The dishonour brought by her can be anything – adultery, being raped, falling in love, dating a man of a different community, asking for a divorce, choosing one's partner, having male friends, coming out as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, etc. Women have been killed this way for merely being suspected of such behaviour and the practice is justified by its proponents through interpretations of religious texts. Honour killings are seen as an appropriate measure to defend the honour of the family, which in all cases is the social status of the men of the victimised woman's family. In cultures that practice honour killings, the moral order is

thought to be disrupted by alleged or actual impropriety, more often than not, of a sexual nature. Any accusation can be used as an excuse without justifiable proof. It is seen as a way of restoring the social equilibrium or ending feuds. Ostracism is seen as too light a punishment. The shame is seen as alleviated and honour restored when the alleged woman's blood is spilt to wash away the dishonour. Even if legal action is taken, the family and community look at it as a matter of pride. Local community meetings chaired by the elders of the village or the community, like *khap panchayats*⁹³ are usually the main transgressors. Local law enforcement avoids getting involved as it sees the practice as a cultural necessity for maintaining the status quo unless the situation escalates and threatens the larger group's safety and peace.

3.7.5. Sex Determination and Female Foeticide

Sex determination tests can be viewed through the lens of moral relativism in connection with the moral framework and cultural context of India. While the common argument for female foeticide in India is the country's cultural and moral background through its preference for the male child, economic factors also play some role in the family's decision when they find the biological sex of the foetus to be female. In India, the use of modern medical technology for amniocentesis is seen as a regressive method. We need to see the use of sex determination tests in India as an example of how different cultures have different practices, and how it makes the condition of the powerless and oppressed group, that is, women even worse. Tradition plays a very important role in the way of life of different communities and groups in India. The common understanding in such communities is that male foetuses are better and hence more preferable to female foetuses. Males are believed to continue the family line. They are seen as economically beneficial to the family, as they can bring in dowry when they get married. Inversely, females are seen as an economic burden and a source of worry for the parents, especially concerning marriage. In addition, the constant regulation of the girl's life to make sure she is marriage material automatically makes parents wish for a boy. The bride's parents are expected to provide a dowry, in the form of money or commodities. If a mother gives birth to more than one female, the expenditure increases exponentially. Even economically affluent states and communities are notorious for practising female foeticide post illegal sex determination tests, thereby showing it is a case of a pervading cultural and social mindset.

⁹³ Bharadwaj, Suraj Bhan, *Myth and Reality of the Khap Panchayats: A Historical Analysis of the Panchayat and Khap Panchayat** (Studies in History, 2012, 28(1)), 43-67

The male-to-female sex ratios in different parts of the country are an accurate indicator of how different groups view the male and the female child, which has been made a reality through aborting female fetuses detected through amniocentesis (illegally). A woman's worth and social status in such communities are culturally conditioned to be valued based on the number of male children she has, even though the Y chromosome comes from the biological father. The adverse sex ratio has impacted not just Indian society in general, but also women in particular. The increase in the number of 'missing women' (women who would have otherwise been naturally born if they had not been aborted only because they were biologically female) has created an imbalance, a socio-cultural perversion of natural or biological requirements. The woman ensures the continuation and survival of the human species through gestation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding after birth. But such societies somehow forget that they socially, culturally, and morally condition women to accept the superiority of the male child and base their worth on being able to bear them. Their choices get mired in fear, powerlessness, and oppression. As such, women's movements in India are faced with tremendous obstacles due to the religious, traditional, and cultural orientation of Indian society.

3.8. Justifying the Feminine through Cultural Moralities

Morality is a very complex term, mainly used to denote a human construct by which adherents determine what is considered right and what is considered wrong based on feelings, beliefs and attitudes. What may be considered immoral in the eyes of universal human rights may not be viewed with the same lenses where these are condoned or even sanctioned. This brings about the need for us to understand how conventional morality differs greatly from critical morality. "Conventional morality is what society, especially the dominant group(s) and elite leadership, believe to be morally correct. Critical morality refers to what is actually morally correct."⁹⁴ However, many customs and traditions in gender-discriminating societies, intentionally or unintentionally, cause some groups to enjoy significant gains at the expense of others. In almost all these groups, the culture of morality is interpreted by the culture of patriarchy. This could be seen as gender apartheid in these societies, where laws and regulations on women's roles in the private and public spheres are such that women's dependence and a separate sphere are justified, protected,

⁹⁴ Abadeer, Adel, S.Z., *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8-9

and perpetuated. These would be in the areas of inheritance, guardianships, space, movement, divorce, employment laws, as well as participation in the social, cultural, and political spheres. Women in these societies do not have rights according to international laws, covenants, and declarations. Instead, they have privileges from sacred sources, from which all rights are derived, as interpreted by a select group of religious scholars, usually men.

The question of women's rights is always looked at from within a religious frame of reference, including their rights as individuals. The idea of the universality of rights is seen as a Western concept, to impose its way on other cultures and societies. Women's demand for their individuality and freedom is read as a lack of morality and modesty by a collectivist society, while obedience to its norms and values that regulate and control their agency is seen as respect, discipline, and modesty. Being secular or free-thinking is associated with being an atheist or a rebel against one's community and culture. Women asking to be free is viewed as them agreeing to use profanity, displaying a lack of morality (as per collective society's standards), and destroying the very fabric of the family and society.

The problem resides in the dichotomy of assigned identities and roles to men and women in such societies. A woman's identity in these groups is constructed to suit the aspirations of the community. Any violation of these communitarian identity-defining attributes can lead to anxiety among the other members of the group, who can then respond through strong and even detrimental or violent actions. Following the behavioural expectations for one's gender affirms one's self-image and identity; violating it evokes anxiety and discomfort in oneself and others. Women are praised for their socially assigned roles as wives and mothers, especially mothers of boys, and for being obedient to their husbands and other male relatives. It is believed they are deficient in mental acuity and faith, and should therefore be dependent on male relatives and husbands. A woman's body must be covered, according to norms rooted in patriarchal interpretations of sacred teachings. Women should be confined to their homes, not leaving the home unless it is necessary and with permission from their husbands or other male guardians. Minor girls are to be protected, guided, supported, and even disciplined by male guardians. They are raised with no knowledge that they can decide within the family, tribe, and even their society. Their access to the freedom to move, travel, work and participate in athletic, artistic, social, cultural, and political activities, and their freedom to be leaders is controlled. Examples of these include Saudi Arabia, where women are prohibited from driving or are required

to cover themselves in full-length gowns (*abaya*). They were also not permitted to vote or run for public office until King Abdulla granted them suffrage, only for municipal elections, in 2015.⁹⁵ In 2020, married women in Botswana finally gained the right to own land.⁹⁶

The idea of a woman being feminine is ingrained in the group to the extent that she holds in her body, behaviour, and reputation the honour of her family, tribe, religion, and society. To sustain their honour, women should lower their exposure to all incidents that may cause their reputation and their honour to be tarnished. Also, certain measures must be applied, generation after generation, in what is considered a sacred norm that should be upheld at any cost. Since women hold the honour in their body and their reputation and sexual fidelity after marriage, measures become integral to the culture in these societies. As a result, they are forced to confine themselves to the private sphere of the house, and minimally interact or have contact with male strangers, so that their honour may remain intact. The man upholds or restores honour by guiding or forcing women to behave according to the collective traditions and expectations. These may include gender-selective foeticide and infanticide, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), underage marriage, monitoring and restricting their behaviour, movement and choices, creating all-female environments for girls and women, and imposing the status of legal minors on girls and women. Covering their bodies with sanctioned clothes such as *hijab*, *niqab*, *burqa*, *pallu*, *chunni*, etc., and avoiding communication with strangers (non-direct blood relatives). Behavioural expectations include bending, stooping, curved and supple postures, docility, directing gaze at one's feet, and not making eye contact.

Such behaviour is instilled at a young age in many societies, with greater prevalence in gender-discriminating collectivist societies. Men also become victims of the dominant representation of honour, leading them to accept certain actions to keep the group's honour intact as necessary and justified, actions that others would view as inconceivable or impossible. The focus moves from the morality and humanity of the individual to the morality of the group, thereby justifying it, no matter how horrific or barbaric it is. Loss of virginity before marriage (sometimes beyond the girl's control) or tarnishing their

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Landmark Elections for Women New Candidacy, Voter Rights – but Old Barriers* (Human Rights Watch, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/11/saudi-arabia-landmark-elections-women>

⁹⁶ Thobega, Keletso, *Botswana opts to Make Land Owners of Wives with New Law* (Thomson Reuters Foundation News, September 17, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://news.trust.org/item/20200917163703-1z7qr>

reputations thereby disgracing the family honour is met with severe punishment, such as strict confinement, forced marriage (in the case of rape), and honour killing.

Gender identity partially explains these detrimental practices. They are linked to the perceived feminine identity of beauty, cleanliness, and fidelity, the community's constructed identity, and value attributes that are forced on the women in society. For example, FGM transforms the girl's physical characteristics creating a physical marker to match a required ideal. In many countries in the Middle East and South Asia, women who wear makeup or violate the societal dress code have acid thrown in their faces – a dark reminder of the lengths a collectivist society can go to to punish any deviance from its accepted practices. Domestic violence, including spousal rape, is condoned in certain societies, as a punishment when a woman deviates from her socially assigned identity of obedience and submission. Honour killing is another extreme example of a society responding to a woman stepping out of the bounds of her imposed social identity as bringing shame and dishonour to her family and community. The level of anxiety about these norms is so high that the community, as a group or as individuals, is expected to defend this constructed identity, even if it means killing a person.

These practices show how women are victimised in the private and public spheres. The gender roles and the rewards or punishments that come with them are designed solely for the protection and sustenance of these collective traditions, which favour the community, essentially men, at the expense of the well-being of women. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁹⁷ makes it explicit that discrimination against women includes any kind of distinction, exclusion or restriction that is made solely based on their gender. It impairs, impedes and nullifies their recognition as women, and their enjoyment and exercise of their basic rights and choices. They are treated to be treated equally as human beings irrespective of their marital, social or economic status. They are equal in terms of human rights and fundamental political, economic, social, cultural, and civil freedom.

Adhering to assigned gender roles and identities is deemed positive for the collective society while women behaving individualistically are viewed as an insult to masculinity and social norms. The individualistic behaviour women display shows their potential for self-reliance and independence which makes the dominant group of men nervous and

⁹⁷ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (United Nations, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>

anxious they are no longer needed by women. Therefore, such behaviour should be confronted accordingly to defend men's identity, reduce social disruptions, and maintain a sense of unity in society. These discriminating norms and practices are prevalent and seemingly accepted by a large percentage of women in these societies. Women usually don't raise their voices in opposition or do not violate existing social norms as they fear retribution. Any attempt to protest or break free gets them declared as deviants, with harsh punishments meted out to deter similar attempts in the future. These dissenters are also constantly reminded of their failed attempts through communal ridicule, ostracism and exclusion. With no power or freedom to make their own choices, they have to depend on those with unconditional agency, the male members, their relatives and guardians. This is just what the dominant group wants and intends to happen. Men supported by the formal institutions in the community form the elite group that makes decisions, and they use this power and privilege to appropriate and exploit the resources and rights belonging to the vulnerable members of the communities, usually women.

Such gender-discriminating societies make women feel even more trapped because they did not choose to join these groups, they were born into them and were groomed to accept what was offered to them in terms of their social standing. Because of this involuntary nature of the membership, any departure by women is seen as the collective failure of the community, mostly the men, to keep their way of life intact. Hence, women are discouraged from leaving and even punished to avoid this feeling of collective shame and dishonour. This is done by not allowing them to even participate in the formulation or evolution of the social norms or rules of the community. They are merely there to follow rules imposed on them by external agents. They cannot even contribute or lead, which facilitates a vicious cycle of norms which discriminate against them through actions, which in turn reiterate the discriminating nature of the norms. Women feel trapped not only because their freedom and capabilities are restricted, but also because they don't see any other viable options.

In such societies, many norms, especially religious ones, are imposed. There is no access to an exit or opt-out of the group. A female member cannot leave her collective unit (family, tribe, or community), since doing so will dishonour the group and invite a harsh collective punishment. The only way forward is to violate the norms and leave the group, thereby risking ostracism and even punishment, or to assimilate and internalise the existing discriminatory structure of norms, and act accordingly, imploding with the pain and dissonance, while maintaining a stoic façade. The only people who can risk leaving

such collectivist societies and voicing their dissent against their discriminating practices tend to be women with some privilege, who come from the more affluent and educated families in the group. The vast majority of women have to accept their collectively assigned identity, internalise discrimination, and adapt to it.

On most occasions, the victimised women don't even recognise that they are marginalised. They are born into their status and have been groomed to accept it so they may not even have any idea that they have been wronged. They are content in their oppression and marginalisation because they don't see it that way, and genuinely believe in the collective norms. This becomes more visible when they act according to these norms even if they physically reside in societies that do not impose them. They have not been exposed to the other side of the story, their side. They either believe that the dominant group's side is their side, or that they don't have a side since they don't need one. This cognitive dissonance is encouraged by the carrot on the stick of reward in the afterlife as a future reward for their current obsequiousness. Thus, they tend to accept the norms and practices of their community ignoring violations of their basic human rights and capabilities. In these societies, anonymity is usually not protected where individual behaviour is common knowledge. This also explains why individual reputations in these societies are seen as very important to avoid potential ostracism and punishment. Thus, the person's moral reputation as defined by the group is their only bankable capital in a collective society. Toeing the group line earns rewards and questioning the group's authority leads to a loss of social and moral status.

Although varying degrees of gender discrimination exists in almost all countries, it is more widespread in collectivist Less Developed Countries (LDCs). Restrictions are imposed on women to deprive them of certain liberties, discriminating against informal norms and traditions that provoke, encourage, and even reward gender discrimination. The ineffective presence of formal laws and regulations that protect women's rights, and their enforcement, invites dominant groups to exploit women's vulnerability. The government's limited resources, skewed priorities, and the prevalence of corruption in many LDCs also play their role. Discrimination against women is considered illegal in almost all countries in which governments have signed international and regional treaties and conventions regarding the protection of human rights including women's rights. Such treaties include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁹⁸ in 1948, the

⁹⁸ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁹⁹ in 1979, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women¹⁰⁰ in 1993, inter alia.

Nonetheless, many governments often deny or obscure the presence of gender-discriminating practices in their countries, or downplay their extent, for fear of losing trade privileges, foreign assistance, foreign investment, or for the sake of preserving national pride. In collectivist societies, researchers usually face an uphill task of obtaining statistics on gender discrimination and violence against women because such claims either go unreported or are obscured or even denied. Among these, the most common form of violence against women is domestic violence (including marital rape) by the husband or male partner. Because it happens behind closed doors, it is considered the private affair of a family or couple, thereby becoming invisible. In most cases, legal systems and cultural norms do not even consider domestic violence as a crime but see it as a normal part of a person's life. Victims have been groomed to think it is their fault and so do not consider it a crime. They are more hesitant to come forward as they feel ashamed, they will be blamed for it, and the reprisal will be much worse.

To sum up, relativism and subjectivism have evolved into numerous forms and types that stem from distinct and sometimes unrelated philosophical motivations. Critics claim that relativists and subjectivists exaggerate the degree of diversity among cultures. They believe any group, culture, or social group has some core universal values that its members unanimously endorse. The common critique is that moral relativism is inconsistent. On the one hand, it claims universal moral norms do not exist, while on the other hand, it preaches a universal norm of tolerance. However, the most serious criticism levelled against moral relativism is that it encourages the justifiability of any oppressive ideology like slavery, sexism, casteism, bigotry, etc. Without a standard to appeal to, critical moral appraisals of one's culture, morality, and tradition become difficult. A non-relativistic foundation for such judgements is not what most moral relativists believe in.

⁹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (United Nations, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>

¹⁰⁰ General Assembly Resolution 48/104, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (United Nations, December 20, 1993, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>

Their focus is on the fact that moral relativism and subjectivism make us more tolerant and open-minded, while also reminding us of the limitations of any set of views.

This can be a thin line that can often get blurry if we are not careful. However, moral relativism and subjectivism offer the least number of rights to women. They endorse existing moral and cultural practices as a reflection of heritage, harmony, and social order. Martha Nussbaum points out how such discriminating notions exist even in social justice. Traditional definitions of social justice denied women fundamental entitlements and treated them as second-class humans and citizens. “Women’s liberties, opportunities, property rights, and political rights have been construed as unequal to men, and this has been taken to be a just state of affairs.”¹⁰¹ Gender-discriminating norms have been rooted and enforced through exploiting the meanings of sacred texts and teachings for millennia, thereby imposing assigned identities and roles on women to suit men. They exist in certain groups and push to gain dominance and power over other groups through favourable collectivist social and political structures. It is these structures that label women as secondary to men and relegate them to the private sphere, excluding them or giving them limited access to the public sphere.

Most importantly, their being feminine is perceived and venerated as them being holders of collective honour through their virginity, sexual reputation, and fidelity. The fear of women’s freedom, especially sexual freedom, explains to a large degree the measures to guard their honour. Their status as minors also prevents them from participating in the collective decision-making processes. Sacred religious norms see being feminine as being economically and financially dependent on male guardianship. Because women in these societies do not have access to make major decisions, they are not free to act independently as individuals. They are constrained to choose only from behaviours endorsed and sanctioned by male guardians of the community, often justified by morality and tradition. Furthermore, informal collective pressures, supported by formal rules, impose great barriers on women to not share or formally report violence against them, since such acts are likely to taint their honour and reputation.

An important point to understand is that these practices have their roots in the larger patriarchal social systems of purity and marriage. These are then disseminated in the local interpretations of how the group views sex, reproduction, and gendered biology. Society at large heavily focuses on communal participation in worship and rituals, domestic and

¹⁰¹ Abadeer, Adel, S.Z., *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 65

not private spaces, relationships between the community and its gods instead of interpersonal relationships, and the importance of unpaid female labour in the guise of collective duty. Any given practice needs to be viewed in the context in which it was formulated. They have to be judged based on the harm they do, the lives they negatively impact, and the oppressive systems they endorse and support. The husbands, fathers, and mothers who ascribe to such norms that result in the death of their wives or daughters can be blamed as a product of the oppressive system. We can blame the culture that perpetuates these collective beliefs and practices. We can blame the indifference of the legal and political systems that allow such practices to continue. But, finding fault cannot be seen as the best way of resolving this oppressive framework. No solution is simple as there are faults at every level.

A belief system exists because of the people who espouse and practice it. The way forward is long-lasting and effective systemic changes from within these societies. These can be affected by demystifying and reinterpreting the moral boundaries and practices to include the dominated groups as well. This is easier said than done! A tilting of group members' thinking from supporting a patriarchal hierarchy to a more dynamic and inclusive membership irrespective of tribes, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and gender identities. Membership needs to be voluntary, with the freedom to enter and exit without any fear of retribution from the group. Repealing gender-discriminating laws rooted in religious texts can also help tilt the balance toward individualism. More weight needs to be given to protocols and conventions that are inclusive and universal and are not based on ideology, faith, or history. It is also important to dig deeper into understanding the idea of the feminine, and the consequent gender-discriminating norms. There is also a strong need to demystify the misinterpretations of the morality advocated by these groups, especially in religious collectivist societies. Modern reformed perspectives on traditions should correspond to the needs of the time. The authenticity, credibility, and appropriateness of such norms to modern life need to be evaluated, offering modern substitutes to fit present-day societal needs and aspirations.

CHAPTER 4

FEMINISM, FEMINIST ETHICS AND THE IDEA OF THE FEMININE

We have looked at the more formal ways of going about the study of ethics. We now delve into a more recent group of approaches towards debating ethical questions. While feminist ethics has essentially been relatively new as a system of moral discourse and practice it has still managed to hold its own and make an indelible mark on philosophical thinking. It focuses on issues of oppression of women as well as other marginalised through theory development and strong action in the field. Its area of expertise is the intertwined relationships between oppression, Solutions based on demanding justice, and the epistemology and phenomenology in defining morality through the feminist lens. Feminist ethics pays more attention to the necessity for inclusivity in the moral discourse by challenging and rejecting the dominant, totalising and hierarchal nature of ethics in its current form. This is done by studying the different ways feminism and feminist theory overlap and shape one another and the society they inhabit. The relationship between ethics and theory in feminism is a very dynamic one focussing on social, political, epistemic, and other insights. Although feminist theory has been the inspiration for different insights that feminist ethics has come up with, no single method or theory can definitively help us define how it sees the idea of the feminine. However, it can attempt to paint a pretty clear picture.

Political scientist, Jean Bethke Elshtain¹⁰² believed that without ethics feminism could not even be conceivable. Without having an ethical standpoint, the political and social nucleus required to agitate for social justice and the improvement of women's lives would not be possible. "However, ethicists only recently have begun to examine the unique contributions that feminism makes to the field of ethics."¹⁰³ Researchers and writers only

¹⁰² Elshtain, Jean Bethke, *Public Man, Private Woman – Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981), 3-18

¹⁰³ Brabeck, Mary M., & Ting, Kathleen, *Feminist Ethics: Lenses for Examining Ethical Psychological Practice (Feminist Ethics in Psychology)* (Division 35 Book Series, Psychology of Women) (Washington, American Psychological Association, 2000), 17

began to focus on feminist ethics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before that, the experiences of women weren't given any importance in moral theories. Feminists pointed out that the position of ethics was usually neutral or universal, even in relativistic approaches, which was usually the version of the upper-class white male. Alison Jaggar¹⁰⁴ showed how conventional morality considered moral issues arising in the private sphere that women were relegated to, like housework and care of children, infirm and elderly, as trivial and not worthy of study. The established moral views were male-oriented and based on male reasoning like rules, rights, universality, and impartiality. These were considered more important than the so-called female-oriented moral reasoning that focussed on relationships, responsibilities, empathy and individual needs. Also, traits that cultures saw as feminine like interdependence, sharing, emotion, etc. were undervalued by traditional male-centred ethics.

Feminist ethics builds on the belief that the moral fabric of society, in general, has traditionally undervalued the contribution of women to the largely male-dominated moral experience. It therefore pushes for an inclusive and dynamic feminist approach that is holistic and evolving. Feminist philosophers critique ethics as focussing on the male perspective while paying scant attention to the female viewpoint. Women were considered immature and shallow when it came to the use of their mental and ethical faculties. Traits like independence, autonomy, intellect, etc. were viewed by traditional ethics as masculine. Qualities like interdependence, connection, sharing, emotion, immanence, dependence, etc. are viewed as feminine. Women embodying traditionally masculine cultural traits are seen as trying to be more like men. Hence, ethics needed to pay more attention to these traditionally undervalued values and perspectives to have a fuller understanding of the human experience, especially in terms of morality. Feminists now turned their attention towards amplifying the voices of women and people belonging to groups oppressed based on their race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and socio-economic position. Focussing on women's lives and experiences, and working towards eliminating the oppression, not just of women, but also of minorities and other marginalised groups was now the way forward. The elimination of oppression would be a more pronounced reality through a gendered approach to the theory and practice of ethics.

¹⁰⁴ Jaggar, Alison, M., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1983), 3-14

4.1. Historical Perspectives

The nascence of feminist ethics as a field of study in academia took place in the 1970s when philosophical journals began turning readers' attention to feminism and sexism in their published articles. In addition to this, universities in North America and Europe saw the creation of women's studies programmes with proper syllabi and curricula. Earlier, at different points in time, philosophers had attempted to understand the role of gender in human morality. However, these were mainly male writers addressing male readers, rarely disrupting the traditional gender status quo. There were authors in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries who tried to explicitly address moral wrongs due to oppression based on gender. By the 20th Century, feminism was beginning to become part of mainstream conversation in Europe and the Americas. So, more writers also began to argue for ending gender discrimination in the way we thought and reasoned about morality and ethics.

As early as the 17th Century, intellectuals had started publishing works in which they argued that women were as equal and rational as men and that unequal access to education was immoral and unjustifiable. Movements like Romanticism¹⁰⁵ also developed a more optimistic outlook on human destiny. The Age of Enlightenment¹⁰⁶ saw more people travelling to far-off places, which in turn created more opportunities for debate and exchange of ideas, as well as the advancement of women's rights. They also explored questions about whether morality is equally possible for different sexes. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*¹⁰⁷, once again brought attention to the lack of access to education for women a century later. She articulated the Enlightenment ideal of equal social and moral rights for women as equal to men. She also criticised social structures surrounding ethical theory, especially about how women had a different set of virtues assigned to them by the male-dominated society based on their perceived feminine duties. In light of universal human rights gaining more prominence, people began to rethink the inadequacies of the educational system. She and like-minded thinkers advocated against ethical double standards, especially against perceptions that women lacked men's capacities for morality, while rationality, which was seen as a prerequisite for morality, was seen as the exclusive birthright of men.

¹⁰⁵ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, *Romanticism* (Encyclopedia Britannica, July 22, 2024, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism>

¹⁰⁶ Duignan, Brian, *Enlightenment* (Encyclopedia Britannica, August 9, 2024, accessed on August 11, 2024) <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>

¹⁰⁷ Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004), 105-113

By the 19th Century, the focus of moral arguments was around material issues. So long as women were dependent on men for their sustenance, they would continue their obsequiousness. The movement was now for women's moral leadership and greater freedoms. There would be an increased focus on demanding access to income and property, rights to their own bodies and sexual freedom, citizenship and voting rights, as well as against militarism, unchecked capitalism, and domestic violence due to abuse of drugs and alcohol. The 19th Century saw philosophical thinkers from a wide variety of backgrounds with greater access to education and printing presses. This led to a plurality of approaches in the study and understanding of the relationship between gender and moral beliefs and practices. Political thinkers began drawing attention to issues about women's political, economic and educational status. Growing awareness of legal and social inequality between men and women also helped them point out issues about morality as perceived by society for women. They argued that the growth of women as citizens and people was hindered because of how the roles and responsibilities of men and women in society were unequal concerning education, social standing and gender.

Attitudes about the reasons for moral goodness differed. Some lauded feminine virtues with views of women being superior because of qualities of gentleness and love. Some thinkers believed domestic virtues shaped their ethics. Others were more radical by challenging privilege due to sex, race, and class. They pushed for communal property and sexual equality and questioned why religion and the state were involved in the institution of marriage. There also existed white and middle-class activists who campaigned against slavery and for the emancipation of women of colour so long as the benefits and privileges they enjoyed in the domestic and private sphere remained untouched by their campaigns. Others, especially activists of colour, focussed on women's moral, social, and political equality through equal protection of the law, economic liberation, and political representation. This First Wave feminism accomplished significant progress in the fields of emancipation and enfranchisement for women in the West.

In the 20th Century, feminist thinkers believed that only fair and rational thinking and debate on moral issues could lead to any progress in humanity's moral and social improvement. The 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s saw women's groups in developed countries dedicate themselves to arguing from a feminist and moral standpoint for access to unrestricted education, the right to vote, and the right to seek employment, as well as for more liberal and progressive policies and laws on contraception, marriage, and divorce, and against militaristic ambition. Thinkers also felt that with the support of a

communitarian social and political framework, women would progress through self-awareness and better understanding to become better moral characters. Different arguments and approaches also came about on understanding women as sexual beings with their moral agency. Conventional morality resulted in women not fully understanding and exploring themselves as sexual beings and therefore the concepts of love and sexuality needed to be discussed and studied more openly and progressively. The issues of educated women who had become housewives in support of their husbands' careers and now no longer had opportunities for personal, intellectual, and moral development also came to light. This was however an issue of white upper-class women in North America and Europe, and not that of women of colour who belonged to the blue-collar working class. Despite these socio-economic differences, there were commonalities among the disparities in women's demand for political and employment rights.

Simone de Beauvoir examined the women and their status in French society. She observed how they were treated as second-class in the social and political spheres because they were biologically different from males. Both her books, *Ethics of Ambiguity*¹⁰⁸ and *The Second Sex*¹⁰⁹, became important works in the field of feminist ethics due to her focus on the real-life experiences and social status of women. She felt that philosophers need to consider obstacles to women's opportunities as being created by the very same culprits who create the oppressive system women have to navigate. The definition of what a woman is has been designed by men on their terms. Any attempt at an ethical theory therefore must prioritise women's social situation and decision-making capacities. De Beauvoir almost single-handedly shaped feminist ethics by making gender and ethics proper study material for philosophical discourse. Her works, along with those of others, spurred the second wave of feminism in Europe and North America. This led to more intense studies of the cultural, political, and moral positions by women thinkers, which led activists to focus their attention on the demand for reproductive rights, equal pay and paid maternity leave, as well as against domestic and sexual violence.

¹⁰⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (translated by Bernard Frechtman) (Secaucus, Citadel Press, 2000), 7-155

¹⁰⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 23-38, 41-189, 756-772

4.2. Comparing Ethics in Feminism and Traditional Ethics

We need to be clear that when we talk about feminist ethics, the logic used differs from when we study other fields of ethics like legal ethics or medical ethics. When studying ethics in the legal or medical fields, not paying particular attention to special issues in these areas may not necessarily be considered a major handicap. However, in the case of feminist ethics, trying to just study the ethical part without giving the study of feminism its due respect and attention is a disadvantage from the start. This is because while we may be able to understand the theories from a normal human perspective, we need to keep in mind and constantly be aware that those theories draw from the experience of one group – men. “In contesting this assumption, “feminist ethics” undertake to be more than just another specialism in an increasingly fragmented world: where ‘medical’ or ‘legal’ modify ‘ethics’, feminism, we think, transforms ethics.”¹¹⁰

At the higher stages of moral development, rules become more significant in people’s lives. Do men and women approach ethics differently? If so, how? Is this difference in approach to ethics natural or culturally constructed? Does a universal way of seeing ethics exist for the genders or do they also vary by culture, region, and society? Many of the questions raised above are still being discussed. The interesting thing to note is that the more recent approaches to studying ethics have nothing much in common with traditional ethical schools of thought. This is an attempt to rethink those parts of traditional ethics in Western philosophy which have excluded and devalued the ethical experiences of women. The attempt is not to do away with the traditional ethical approaches but to update them and make them more inclusive of the moral knowledge and experiences of women and other marginalised groups, giving them long overdue recognition.

A common aim of feminist ethicists of diverse approaches is to provoke the reconsideration of traditional ethics. Philosophers have made the common mistake of presuming that when they speak on behalf of others, especially the marginalised sections, they often do so without paying sufficient attention to their presumptions. Mainstream ethics generally displays an inattentiveness to women’s concerns and issues. Feminist ethicists extend their work to concerns that male thinkers have yet to address, while resoundingly rejecting traditional ethical theories which rely on moral values with which they disagree.

¹¹⁰ Frazer, Elisabeth, Hornsby, Jennifer, & Lovibond, Sabrina (Ed.), *Ethics: A Feminist Reader* (New Jersey, Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 3

Most feminist ethicists highlight existing difficulties with traditional ways of thinking about ethics, which they find highly “masculine” in nature. Alongside this dissatisfaction, feminist ethics also highlight the biological and social differences between men’s and women’s situations in life. The concept of the “universal” ethical human being is more an ideal than a reality. They focus on ethical strategies in one’s private life, ways to overcome the subordination of women and sexual minorities and aim for a more equal set of ethical rules. The neutral language in the traditional ethical dilemma fails to be gender-neutral. Its main focus is the public sphere, an area of the societal contribution that has excluded women traditionally. While it does see people as moral agents, it reflects the typical aspects of the traditional white male.

American researcher, Carol Gilligan, in her book *“In A Different Voice”*¹¹¹, talked about the different ways in which different people approach ethical issues. She theorises the identity that men build for themselves is one built by differentiating themselves from others. Women on the other hand build their identity more inclusively in relationship with other human beings. Men and women thus tend to have different voices and ideas. For men, creating relationships is difficult while for women, differentiating themselves from others is difficult. Add to that their location on the social and economic ladder, and it leads to different perspectives, which in turn, lead to different approaches to ethics. While this line of thinking seems oversimplified and wrought with controversy, it does make one wonder about the differences in people and the impact it has on their grasp of morality.

Different writers who espouse feminist ethics critique traditional approaches to ethics.

- Since women have traditionally been excluded from the public sphere of society, there is little concern for their lives or interests. Areas of the private sphere associated with women, particularly the family, are ignored in ethics.
- The aspect of emotion and feeling in ethical decision-making is ignored. Traditional systems focus on rationality. Reason was given priority while emotion was disregarded. Absolutist and universal principles are prioritised over the material context of care, experience, and relationships. Due to emotion being associated traditionally with women or femininity, its use in morality is not seen as useful. Objectivity purported that rational people could solve moral dilemmas with the same conclusion. The moral respect people gave one another as rational

¹¹¹ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982), 5-63

beings was a universal and non-emotional attitude, regardless of whether or not they were liked by the other person.

- The emphasis is on abstraction and universalisation. Moral decisions are traditionally seen as universal ideals. People in the same situation should do the same thing. This leads to impartiality and prevents favouritism. It pushes for the possibility of detaching oneself from one's perspective, thereby having no personal perspective. Feminist ethicists maintain that an impartial viewpoint cannot exist. Such approaches obscure one's interests. Ethical positions are driven by underlying emotions. Not acknowledging these underlying feelings and claiming to be rational is equal to deceiving oneself. Also, universalising morality making it abstract draws it away from concrete situations. Universal morals and duties are not the best safeguards against the real-life experiences of women and subordinated people. In every ethical context, different individuals with their personal histories are involved, thereby allowing for a more practical approach, which would look at how a moral decision right for one person may cause harm to another. This does not cast us into relativism, because at the heart of the ideal is a universal component.
- Feminist ethicists are concerned that traditional ethical perspectives reflect a very individualistic and isolated worldview. Individuals live and operate in communities, and environments, interacting with one another. Relationships are not an add-on but an essential part of who we are as individuals. By trying to be detached and logical, the human element gets lost in the moral decision-making process.

Thus, we see how morality stresses a more culturally masculine attitude towards moral reasoning while undervaluing and excluding culturally feminine traits. Traditional characteristics associated with men are highlighted more. In such a skewed reality, feminist ethics has developed a more balanced way of seeing morality which focuses on care as well as on justice. The emphasis is on empathy, dependence, and relationships while analysing the context and circumstances when analysing a moral decision. Feminist ethics originally developed as an alternative to the very traditional schools of ethical thinking. The feminist way of thinking about ethics comprises views that are not only divergent from traditional dictats of morality but also views by sections of society whose voices are often not heard. We should ask what specifically makes feminist ethics feminist. The answer would not be that it's been developed by feminists, or that solution through dialogue is something women engage in more than men, but rather because it is a set of

ethics whose distinct aim is a commitment to ending the subordination of women and other oppressed groups.

Also, there is a recognition of the validity of personal experience. Feminist ethics tries to elicit non-judgemental as well as critical but constructive dialogue. It acknowledges differences in ethical perspectives as essential to debate. It promotes women to voice their own opinions as well as a healthy respect for the views of others. There is a constant seeking for common ground to work on, even though there may be areas of disagreement. Consensus agreements are valued. Feminist pedagogy focuses on creating a sense of community and dialogue. People share their own experiences, which in turn allow the others in the exchange to learn and experience newer and different ways of perceiving our surroundings and reality. These exchanges of personal reflections grow to become the collective experience of the group, with the inclusion of diverse perspectives from people of different groups, especially those affected by discrimination, whose voices are rarely heard. Emotions play an important role in feminist morality. Instead of looking at morality as exclusive abstract and logical principles, the focus is put on more human qualities like responsibility, sensitivity, respect, and trust. The focus is to try and understand what other people are saying, with an emphasis on listening as well as speaking.

4.3. Relationship between Ethics in Feminism and the Feminine

“In *Phenomenal Woman*, Christine Battersby distinguishes between the “female” and the “feminine” as a category for envisioning alternative human possibilities...”¹¹² She observed that for feminist theory the category of “female” was more useful than that of “feminine”. She felt that the feminine tended to be more influenced by male hegemonic discourses, while the female had more opportunities for development under the tutelage of feminism. She also observed that even though the categories were markedly different, experience and social structure made them almost indistinguishable. It may be argued: why can’t the fundamental social goals of liberty and equality for women pursued by feminism be articulated perfectly easily from within any of the moral theories found in traditional moral philosophy? Deeper implications of the moral philosophy of the most

¹¹² Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-6

fundamental goods and the character of human life often ignore the distinctively female experience. The development of feminist theories of ethics provides a significant challenge to the existing structures of so-called *male* styles of moral thinking. Traditional categories of moral philosophy are seen as male categories which falsify the moral experience of half of the human race. The focus of feminism and its understanding of ethics is how an act arises out of and contributes to relationships with other human beings.

Feminism aims to alleviate the suffering of women through the rooting out of systemic injustices. “Without an element of ethical disposition, what would inspire feminist endeavours, pull feminism along, and feminists together?”¹¹³ The relationship between feminism and ethics has been a series of challenges to re-imagine the values by which human beings live. Feminism cannot abandon this relationship because the ground of ethics props the architecture for the idea of the feminine to be discussed. In a sense, the consideration of the imagination of feminism has flowed from its attention to ethics. Thus, feminists talk of ethics concerning ‘women’ in the face of the complexities of women’s differences within countries and across the globe. Because feminism expresses itself in the real world through ethical, social and political action, a new approach to philosophical thinking oriented towards it becomes necessary. Women can attain justice in the personal, social and political spheres only when the action is grounded in and guided by a proper feminist philosophy and its study. “Just as full justice for women cannot be created without the working out of distinctly feminist epistemologies, philosophies of science and the like, the same point can be made in relation to moral philosophy.”¹¹⁴ Traditional categories of moral philosophy are oppressive to women and must be modified if women’s emancipation and liberation are to be promoted. If we view society as oppressive and unequal concerning gender, and if we feel that women’s emancipation is essential to us as human beings for our liberation and growth, then it is also extremely important to critique, analyse, challenge, and, if required, replace the traditional categories of ethics and morality with improved and inclusive approaches and outlooks.

Feminist ethics can be viewed as a movement that challenges abstract and universalist ethical theories like utilitarianism and contractarianism, deontology, and even virtue theory, where the ideal moral decisions are those that are rational and made out of a sense

¹¹³ Bell, Vikki, *Culture and Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory* (Oxford/ New York, Berg, 2007), 50

¹¹⁴ Byrne, Peter, *The Philosophical and Theological Foundations of Ethics: An Introduction to Moral theory and its Relation to Religious Belief (Second Edition)* (Hampshire/ New York, Palgrave, 1999), 163-164

of duty. Both men and women are diverse and exhibit behaviours of social identity, ethnicity, and class. Currently, ethicists agree that when it comes to ethical debate, women have a different outlook on things than men. The traditional approach neglects and marginalises women in the current moral debate because it does not consider their physical, social, and psychological dynamics, situations, and experiences. The de facto moral decision-maker is usually an upper-class white man, who can afford to be rational and unfettered in his decision-making because his life experiences aren't as messy and burdened as those of women. The aspects of human life that concern women and other oppressed and marginalised communities are not given enough attention. Thus, women, people of colour, LGBTQIA+ communities, and the economically underprivileged, etc. end up getting axed from the moral debate.

When entire categories of individuals get excluded from any form of philosophical debate, not only do their voices go unheard, but any experiences or outlooks that they may have otherwise been able to contribute to the enrichment of the ethical discourse, are also excluded altogether. When the moral experiences of women and minorities are silenced, the growth of morality in general also gets stunted as reliable narrators can no longer contribute to their experiences. The marginalised primarily suffer the consequences. Even when they do get a chance to participate in moral debate and discourse, their lack of experience in the formal setup of moral and socio-political discourse makes them feel challenged and mortified to express their views, for fear of being shot down or dismissed as uneducated or dumb. The intellectual inquiry also relegates specific women's issues on care, relationships, community, and emotions to the fringes. Feminist ethics seeks to bring these topics to the mainstream discussion, by helping everyone understand women's oppression so that it can be eradicated, and by developing an ethics based on their moral experiences. This becomes possible when the marginalised are provided spaces to share their experiences, by encouraging inclusivity and challenging exclusion in the current moral debate. This can be done by allowing for a variety in the expression and setup of those experiences through different styles, perspectives, and voices of communication and not insisting on a particular format of expression.

For Alison Jaggar¹¹⁵, a strong feminist ethic exposes masculine and other biases in ethical theory. It analyses and observes how individuals act in the context of social practices. It throws light on how the situation is different for women and other oppressed groups. It

¹¹⁵ Jaggar, Alison, M., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1983), 3-14

provides guidance and perspective to people on private, public, and international issues. It encourages women's experiences and also critiques them when required in an atmosphere of healthy respect. It looks at feminist ethics as a grand unifier for all women who have common goals and aspirations and can offer different perspectives to achieving them. It looks at the positives of the biological capacity for motherhood in the growth of compassion, empathy, and kindness. The aim of feminism, especially through its approach to morality is to critique and challenge how gender operates within our moral belief systems. This can be achieved by defying the limited binary view of gender, the privilege traditional ethics accords to men, and the oppressive social order maintained to subordinate women, by controlling and defining their sexuality and gender identity.

The attempt is to better understand the experiences of groups marginalised based on gender. Criticising the binary nature of gender is a much more recent phenomenon. Feminist ethicists argue that upholding the idea that the world is made up of only "biological" men and women is just another way of maintaining gendered oppression. Attention is now being given to the intersectionality of being feminine. This includes distinctions based on race, economics, geography, and disability. These are individuals who are not members of culturally dominant groups. Feminist ethics is not just a branch of study in ethics, it is also a way of life and action, and therefore essentially political in outlook and approach. The point is to improve ethics by offering better approaches to resolving issues concerning gender and a whole retinue of human rights issues. The insights apply to all kinds of moral experiences. The idea is to pay attention to ethical issues in the broad sense as well.

4.3.1. Gender Binarism

Ordinarily, most people tend to think of sex and gender as correlated and interchangeable terms. They identify men as human males and women as human females. The sex and gender distinction are a raging historical debate among feminists themselves. In theory, sex is used to denote and identify humans into male and female depending on chromosomes, genitalia, hormones and other such physical and biological indicators. Gender on the other hand is used to identify humans in men and women based on behaviour, dress code, identity, social roles and position, and other social and psychological factors. The use of the term gender was appropriated in the study of feminism so that the biological differences in humans could be distinguished from the social and psychological characteristics. The use of gender in terminology when talking

about sex and gender differences was first used by psychologists researching and documenting transsexuality.

An important area of study is to try and comprehend meaningful differences in the concepts of feminine and masculine, and how these, in turn, see issues of justice, the interdependence of relationships, care, etc. These debates are of special concern when the gender binary of seeing women as a category is aroused. Gender binarism is the view that male and female are the only two categories into which gender can be divided. It also helped clearly define the so-called 'gender roles', which constrain people's life experiences and impact aspects of self-expression, influenced by the media, religion, education, and political, cultural, and social systems. These aspects may include expectations regarding dressing, behaviour, sexual orientation, pronouns, preferred restroom, etc.

The terms sex roles and gender traits are usually used to highlight different behaviour patterns which the sexes are encouraged or coerced into internalising. These include personalities and interests, and even professions and careers deemed appropriate because of their sex. Boys are taught to be masculine and girls are taught to be feminine based on prevailing racial, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic factors and the resultant stereotypes. Even psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists tend to look at sex and gender through these pre-existing goggles. For example, in the middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant United States, being masculine would mean being rational, ambitious, and independent, while being emotional, nurturing and dependent would be appropriate feminine qualities. There would exist overlaps and exceptions with some biological males showing feminine gender traits, and vice versa. But these are not seen as the norm. Irrespective of the group of people, stereotyping based on gender stereotypes hinders an individual's potential to develop a well-rounded idea of self, identity and personality. "The woman who displays characteristics her social group regards as masculine will be viewed as less than a *real* woman; the man who shows so-called feminine traits will be considered less than a *real* man."¹¹⁶

The above understanding was common among most feminist ethicists of the 1970s and 1980s. They looked at gender as being the result of social, behavioural and psychological factors and experiences rather than biological causes. Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim

¹¹⁶ Tong, Rosemarie, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Westview Press, 2014), 36

about a woman becoming one rather than being born as one stemmed from this belief. The moral and intellectual effects and behaviours that appear to be part of her feminine nature are the result of internalised social and gendered discrimination. The traits commonly observed in human behaviour that then get categorised as male and female are culturally learned and acquired and not caused because of their anatomy or chromosomes. This also means that these differences in men and women are not permanent and can be changed if required. This also means that men and women do not have different moralities, thereby nullifying the need to express different sets of ethics. Some feminist ethicists argued that even though women were traditionally seen as incapable of rationality, impartiality, and morality throughout history, they ought to value and focus on their capacities and emotionality as distinguishing and identifying qualities of womanhood, thereby also embracing some of the qualities that male-dominated society ascribed to her. They focussed on valuing women's capacities and emotionality. Still others argue for women's separation from men as it allows a setting in which an alternative set of ethics can bloom, instead of mere responses to traditional male-dominated ethics. It also fosters more interconnectedness amongst women themselves and prioritises access to women. In sharp contrast, other philosophers argue against separatism. They believe in creating a more androgynous setup that incorporates the values of both worlds, which cannot be achieved through sexual separation.

Gayle Rubin¹¹⁷ looked at the whole system of sex and gender as a way to describe a system made by the combination of the human biological components of sex and procreation in the context of human intervention in the social setting. She elaborated that this understanding of what it meant to be a woman or feminine put the focus of the oppression of women on the social understanding of sex and gender, thereby making it a socially imposed division of the sexes. She thought that a person's perceived social and behavioural differences result from oppressive social interventions telling men and women how to behave. Women therefore get oppressed not only because of their unchangeable biological characteristics but also because of their behavioural differences that they have to manifest by having to act as women. She also felt that the social nature of gender made it alterable through political and social reforms of the systems it inhabits ending women's subordination. She believed the aim of feminism to be the creation of a genderless, non-sexless society, where a person's anatomy did not define who they are,

¹¹⁷ Rubin, Gayle, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex* (In Rayna R. Reiter (ed.)) (Toward an Anthropology of Women, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157--210.

what they do, or whom they love. Gender is a superimposition of the biological sex of a person by their society or culture, based on the conceptions imposed on how each gender is expected to appropriately behave. This is how differences come about in gender, and how sexed bodies get controlled and regulated as male or female. The sex is fixed, but the sexed bodies are interpreted and projected differently, creating society's feminine and masculine identities.

Similar humanist approaches to feminist ethics are more prevalent in the 21st Century. However, this approach can end up marginalising people who don't conform to current gender demarcations, like the LGBTQIA+ community. History shows that traditional ethics is deeply rooted in religious ethics to the point of almost having no differences. The supposed normalcy of binarism forces gender minorities to seek acceptance by reducing themselves either as masculine or feminine and be subjected to those ethical differences, even if they want to be identified by their preferred gender, or even no gender. The presumption of gender being binary is another case of dominant groups dictating things while subtly displaying gender privilege. The concept of gender needs to be understood in a more inclusive manner taking into consideration the experiences of all these communities. The different variables of race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. can lower or raise one's perceived power, further creating institutionalised power structures stemming from societal expectations of gender. A binary system of gender is seen as a means of protecting patriarchal norms and puts into question society's role in constructing gender.

4.3.2. Intersectionality

The experience of being in a marginalised group includes the experience of having one's culture devalued, and of being pressured to assimilate the dominant culture. However, it also is an opportunity to claim one's unique heritage and proudly oppose cultural hegemony when it presents itself. Feminism has only just recently managed to capture the unique experiences of oppression and patriarchy of women in different contexts. Mainstream feminism, particularly first and second waves, failed to take the experiences of women from different cultures, and their contribution to the idea of the feminine seriously, by operating as if every woman's experience is the same as that of those women who have benefited from birth till date from their privilege. Many feminist theorists, to prove that women are men's equals, espoused women's sameness, and not contextual differences, to one another as well as that to men.

Philosophers also observed that if a woman had to believe that the concept of the woman within every woman was the same, then she also would have to assume that there were no ethnic, racial, cultural or socio-economic differences among women, thereby making all women fundamentally the same. “In other words, the womanness underneath [the skin of the woman of color] is a white woman’s [womanness].”¹¹⁸ When we try to understand the idea of the feminine through its intersection with other aspects of the human experience, we notice the female experience is constituted by its encounter with patriarchy as well as by its encounter with racial, economic, and cultural oppression. While black women differ from white women, members of both racial groups are also different from one another. They may differ in terms of nationality and ethnicity, socio-economic position and class, and even sexual orientation. The issues faced by wealthy white women may completely differ from working-class white women, and the issues faced by rich and educated black women may also be different based on their situations.

The concept of intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw¹¹⁹. It was a product of her reflections on how the identities of black women formed and developed not just within the hierarchical power structures of gender, but also those of race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, etc. The traditional way of looking at the oppression of women is unidirectional because it views and treats women’s experiences based on gender and those based on race as two mutually exclusive categories. When this happens, the framework gives more preference to the experiences and perspectives of the members of oppressed groups who have the most privilege. In cases of race discrimination, people of colour who are privileged concerning class or sex are paid attention to more. In the case of sex discrimination, the perspectives of women who are racially or socio-economically more privileged would get more attention.

These examples show how even among marginalised groups, there will be members who simultaneously face multiple layers of oppression and intersecting forms of subordination, and whose experiences get distorted. These intersectional dimensions factor into the lives of the marginalised within the oppressed group in multiple ways that cannot be gauged completely when we try to analyse them separately and exclusively from one another. The more identities and intersections that people have, the higher the chance of them being further marginalised. This understanding of people in general, and women in particular,

¹¹⁸ Tong, Rosemarie, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Westview Press, 2014), 214

¹¹⁹ Crenshaw, Kimberlé, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (Stanford Law Review, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991)), 1241-1299

being of multiple aspects of identity simultaneously, has led to the recognition that people are complex. These overlapping social identities can be empowering on some levels and oppressing others. Hence, these intersecting dynamics need to be recognised and identified among individual women and social groups.

In such a multiplicity of contexts and scenarios, intersectionality tries to create and develop the framework by which all aspects and areas of oppression, sexism, racism, casteism, classism, etc. are encompassed and analysed in their complex interconnection. It is a concept that deals with the particular forms of oppression like those based on race, gender, sexuality and nation that intersect in an oppressed individual's reality. These intersectional paradigms are stark reminders there does not exist one fundamental type of oppression, but numerous types that together produce injustice in the oppressed group. Another problem with mainstream feminist thought is that when it attempts to include the experiences of all groups of women, it tends to lump them all together as if the world of women were divided between the official group and all of the rest. It tends to gloss over the unique experiences and viewpoints of different groups of feminists from Africa, South America, Asia, and even indigenous groups, thereby losing the message of each of these sections in the process.

One way to resolve this confusion is to bring intersectional approaches to question whenever the idea of the feminine is discussed. In a white male-dominated worldview of philosophical thinking, intersectionality pushes beyond gender binarism. There does not exist a universal definition for femininity, or a category to describe what a woman is that applies to all women. By defining white femininity, cisgender, and temporarily able-bodied, specific moral experiences not only of women but also of other gender minorities also get ignored. Intersectionality is, in its simplest form, the way of comprehending how different systems of oppression are responsible for the creation of our multiple identities based on power and privilege, and their absence thereof. Intersectional feminism is a product of black feminism which follows in the long tradition of the examination of interconnections between racism and sexism, heavily rooted in the activism of black feminists of the 19th Century.

An analysis of intersectionality highlights how oppressive practices occur due to the intersections of different aspects of women's identities, and have been largely ignored by traditional philosophical thinking. The experiences and discrimination prove that oppression does not occur only along one axis of identity. Intersectionality attempts to

expand the understanding of differences and the experiences of people oppressed in these systems. The intersectional approach demonstrates problems with essentialism concerning women's natures. It opposes systems that treat each oppressive factor in isolation. For example, the discrimination against black women is different from the discrimination against black men and the discrimination against white women. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together by the intersectional systems of race, gender, economics, etc., in a multi-level segregation.

Though intersectionality began with the study of race and gender interplay, other identities and oppressions were gradually taken into its fold. Black, Latinx and Asian writers began contributing as to how their experience as women interacts with their race, gender, and socio-economic status. The impact of patriarchy and traditional assumptions about gender and families are evident in the lives of women in China, South Korea, India, Ukraine, and a host of other societies all around the globe. They are heterogeneous entities whose oppression is influenced by their geography, history, and culture. Feminists in these countries have worked to revise the Western idea of intersectionality that assumes all women experience the same type of gender and racial oppression. Doing so has been extremely important as it has helped bring several critical issues of the private realm into the public arena. Some of these include the rights of children, and internally displaced people, as well as violence, discrimination, and gender relations in areas affected by war and armed conflict, etc., which would otherwise not be deemed relevant to appear in mainstream ethical discourse on the international stage.

These ethical dialogues are only a shadow in the male-dominated paradigms of ethics in the public realm. Intersectionality has now bloomed into a multidimensional and global intersection of religion, sexuality, ethnicities, etc. Since the concept of intersectionality was first introduced, the revolutionary idea and the framework it created have influenced women's studies, as well as gender studies and studies on human sexuality. It has been called the most important contribution that made to the field of women's studies so far. However, while intersectionality is integral to the study of feminism and feminist theory and philosophy, its influence in the mainstream discipline of philosophy is yet to be felt. As a philosophical theme, it is largely ignored. This needs to be addressed as intersectionality needs to be studied and applied at a systemic and macro level.

4.3.3. Women's Perspectives and Shared Responsibility

The assumption that people have identical needs and identically interpret reality counters the notion that the moral debate presupposes the study of different perspectives. While some thinkers have mainly viewed the ability to empathise as an obstacle to rational decision-making, it can be seen as the ability to experience the needs of others, and their differences and individuality. Individuals are no longer atomistic units with a predetermined identity, but entities who engage in morality, in specific cultural and historical contexts. This also redefines moral autonomy. It is no longer abstract rationality. An autonomous moral self is thus not based on the presupposition of uniform rationality, but rather based on treating others in a non-stereotypical way. Thus, everyone, including women, is granted access to the moral order as members without the stereotypical doubts about their capability for moral reasoning.

A contribution to feminist ethics in its understanding of the feminine better is the notion of taking another's perspective. Putting oneself in another's shoes allows those in the dominant group to realise discrimination and oppression as a painful experience, and take steps to improve both themselves and others. Feminists have tried to create awareness of the different ways the privileged might see things through the eyes of the non-privileged. The latter lived in a society that constantly made them view reality through the lens of the privileged and dominant group. This negates their experience and oppression. This attempt at eye-opening aims to help the privileged see their privilege and grow independent from it. They not only see things from the viewpoint of the oppressed but they also get to see how the oppressed themselves view them and the privilege they have. Some thinkers may look at it differently because they feel the privileged enjoy the benefits of an oppressive society, they have a different social and emotional makeup than the oppressed group. This causes them to see and experience their reality differently, making empathy with the oppressed and their condition a difficult endeavour. Thus, it is not merely important for the privileged to empathise with the oppression of those subordinated, but they also need to listen and understand when the oppressed narrate their experiences. That's when empathy truly has its effect.

A more recent notion that some feminists have been talking about is collective responsibility. Women's oppression, or even certain aspects of it, is the result of the systems and structures perpetuated by men as a collective group. Patriarchy in society works towards the common interests of all men who also end up enjoying the benefits of

its actions. This means that in some way they are partially responsible for the subordination and oppression women are subjected to as a group. Their gender privilege impacts the progress of women and other minority groups without destroying the systemic institution of patriarchy. When men tout the phrase: “Not all men!” in self-defence, they forget women’s issues such as sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancy, rape, abortion, domestic violence, etc. They all benefit from these because women have no agency to defend themselves in these cases from the perpetrators who are men. The onus for stopping these crimes against women is put on women, instead of educating men as a group and making them own up to the part they play, in part or sum, in the perpetuation of such oppression. Men have to share responsibility for harm done to women by other men, even if they were not involved. Men who enjoy the benefits of their gender privilege automatically contribute to even the smallest acts of oppression against women, because their indifference makes them gender accomplices for the harmful behaviour. This attitude of collective responsibility is an attempt by feminist philosophers to make the privileged and dominant groups realise how personal it can get. By taking even the smallest bit of responsibility they can begin to look at things from the perspective of those in the subordinate group when they talk of their experiences as victims of a sexist act.

4.3.4. The Aspect of Care

Most current moral theories are incomplete. A more holistic understanding of ethics should envelop ethical theories taking into account male insights, and complement them by including female insights, usually ignored by male philosophers. There is an even stronger tendency today to reinforce the ideas of traditional societal roles for men and women by continuing to relegate women’s ethical concerns to the private sphere, and men’s focus on ethical issues in the public sphere. In such a scenario, the element of ‘caring’ or ‘care’ has been an approach to understanding feminist ethics and the idea of the feminine. Caring is not necessarily a moral issue. Social expectations of how we interpret the concept of caring or care may be based on class, race, and gender. The question arises whether we ought to care for someone in a particular situation, as well as how we should go about the practice of caring. Caring may be something we have to do, not something we choose to do. Even then, there are choices about how we should care, even in conflicting situations. The idea of care in ethics finds traditional ethics, steeped in patriarchy, as deficient in appreciating the different ways in which women love, think, work, and write. Feminist ethics cares about the vulnerabilities and needs of the individuals with whom they work.

All feminist ethicists have studied and researched the positive and negative aspects of women's caregiving behaviour. They have also focussed on how such behaviour causes and affects their subordination to men. However, feminist ethicists who specifically focus on the element of care emphasise and pay attention to ethical issues that affect relationships in the private sphere. This is an even more vulnerable area of interaction for the oppressed, as the true selves of family members and friends tend to be revealed with much ease. This can make the subordination even more brazen. Care-oriented feminists believe that these culturally feminine ways of looking at moral issues in the private sphere are equally demanding and nuanced compared to culturally masculine ones. "A masculine style of moral reasoning that appeals to principles, rules, laws, universality, impartiality, justice, and fairness is, in itself, no better (or worse) than a feminine style of moral reasoning that stresses the importance of maintaining personal relationships, recognises the special needs and interests of particular individuals, and accepts the vulnerability of human beings."¹²⁰ The focus of care-oriented feminist ethicists is on developing a moral approach where people understand that their obligations to one another depend largely on basic needs necessitated by human needs for food, pleasure, avoidance of pain, and fear of mortality.

Unfortunately, the idea of care has traditionally and historically come to be understood as a symbolically feminine trait and perspective. It is even more unfortunate that many women have also been groomed into agreeing to this notion and belief, thereby perpetuating its existence. Feminist ethics and feminist care ethics differ in the focus of what the area of inquiry needs to be. The latter believes there to be a strong relationship between the practical and symbolic elements concerning women and care, which is further entrenched in the power structures of patriarchy. Thinkers like Carol Gilligan¹²¹ observed that qualities like independence, autonomy, need for rights, and disconnect from others are typical in the development of masculinity, and forming lasting relationships with others are hurdles to those values. Women expressed the above traits but also valued intimacy, responsibility, relationships, and caring for others, which in turn influenced their view towards morality.

However, this was met with strong objections. The most powerful one was that this line of thinking reduced the relationship of care to a woman's nature, thereby reinforcing

¹²⁰ Callahan, Dan, Chadwick, Ruth, & Singer, Peter, (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (Cambridge, Academic Press-Elsevier Inc., 2012), 295

¹²¹ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982), 5-105

gender-based stereotypes. This meant that even if women were somehow better at giving care than men, it was not ethically and politically prudent to generalise it since it nullified the demand to be treated equally because they were human beings like men. It promoted the view that women's automatic nature of caring demands that they should care, irrespective of the physical or psychological cost. It would lend justification to the claim of how women found fulfilment and meaning in their lives through caring for husbands, children, parents, etc., even at times when it was extremely difficult for them to do so, as it was their obligation and duty. Instead of lending value and esteem to women for performing this role in a man's world, this disempowered them by blurring the distinction between their actual feelings, and those that were expected of them out of obligation, not to mention the stereotyping of career opportunities, and the resultant economic and material oppression.

This line of thinking arose out of the questioning of women's roles in society. Although criticised, it developed into an important theoretical tool for ethical thinking, especially a position from which to begin our moral reasoning. Feminist ethics in the area of care ethics has copious amounts of research and its applications concerning issues concerning motherhood, bioethics, caring for the environment, international relations, political theory, and public policy. It has branched out to have a broader understanding of caregiving activities in their breadth and variety. It contributed to the ethical debate by identifying that people are necessarily interconnected beings. Morality and personal development are influenced by ethical theories that incorporate the relationships and the intersections between various approaches. People are individuals who have social interactions with other people and form an interconnected network of relationships, each of which has varying degrees of dependence and interdependence, unlike in traditional ethics, where people are viewed as being essentially independent. Hence, for those who are vulnerable, their interests need to be promoted and safeguarded even more.

The element of care helps interpret the idea of the feminine even better because interpersonal and social group dynamics are an important feature of ethics. This makes such connections morally valuable in the sense that autonomy is measured in terms of the interconnectedness of social relationships. We begin as dependent infants and develop into autonomous adults with learning skills and abilities. But we still depend on others when we fall ill or grow older. Thus, autonomy becomes more of a matter of degree, varying with different stages of life. This, in turn, influences the formation of the individual's identity, and the idea of the feminine, with other people and the systems

around them. A person's identity is formed by their relationships, varying in degree and interdependence. Public and private interactions also structure self-perceptions and an understanding of the real world.

Feminist ethics came into existence by recognising that the ethical issues of women and other oppressed groups have been ignored by mainstream ethics. The nature of interdependence that human beings have with one another is not only a necessary feature for life to continue but also an important aspect of understanding the concept of caring. Feminist ethicists have revised their understanding of moral concepts of autonomy, identity, and relations in ethical thinking. They do express anxiety about how the concept of caring has been gendered to be a feminine trait. A closer look reveals how it is not so much an intrinsic value in women, but a survival mechanism to deal with their oppressive situation. Feminist theory and ethics look at it from a much broader viewpoint that involves challenging the social and political structures that ensure that it be seen as a glorified act of service that is a requirement to be considered feminine. Caring thus gets convoluted as a combination of emotion, disposition, and practice for women, but not for all humans. When we try to overcome the injustices meted out to women under the garb of care being their moral duty, it can be difficult to look at it objectively because the concept blurs the lines between thinking and feeling, egoism and altruism, and theoretical and practical reasoning. All relationships in the public and private spheres can be looked at through similar lenses of equality or attachment. In either case, the ethics of care can bring about moral concern. A positive way of looking at it is to have a moral vision for justice, and one for care, thereby overcoming oppression and abandonment.

To sum up, ethics is commonly viewed as the systematic and formal academic study of morality in philosophy. Morality is seen as the more practical application of concrete norms, rules and principles by people in day-to-day life. When working within the confines of morality, we also need to be aware and responsible about how we interact with, feel about, and judge others through interpersonal relations. Ethics looks at the larger aspects of morality, by studying norms and their intrinsic motivations. It observes the actual behaviour of members of a community concerning moral issues to understand why they do what they do, which in turn helps develop a more critical analysis and reflection of morality in the larger human context. Philosophers in general, and feminist philosophers in particular, are constantly challenging the status quo of society on various

issues, by rethinking and reorienting their understanding of fundamental concepts of moral knowledge and its responsibility to the progress of humanity. Ethics in philosophy is therefore tasked with trying to comprehend how moral norms influence behaviour in both individuals and society, while at the same time being aware of how they become reconfigured in different periods of transition that society and individuals constantly undergo. “When one views morality as the practices that guide people’s lives, one widens the discussion of morality...”¹²²

A woman’s life is that of subjection to the power, authority, and force of men, in general. What men see women’s situation to be, is usually men’s view of it. It is men’s estimate of women’s situation that is appealed to. How women’s own testimonies count is not taken into consideration. The numerous ways in which what they say goes unheard or is easily discredited. Many times, multiple attempts by women to rebel against existing power structures are not even noted or considered. Thus, having a voice when rising against patriarchy means not just women telling their side of the story, but also them being heard loud and clear. This is possible only when we acknowledge the relevance of the dynamics between power and resistance, how systems and situations need to be responded to, and above all, giving all groups the recognition that they deserve. This also includes being aware of the unequal authority some have over others by which they mute the voice of those they subordinate and taking the necessary course of action to rectify the situation. “These are facts about who gets to do what to whom, and who gets to talk about what gets done and is taken seriously by those with the power of authoritative judgement.”¹²³

Feminism is a global movement that aims to end the oppression of women as a whole. However, there are challenges before feminists in trying to understand women as a category. Debates within feminism exist on numerous issues regarding the identity of women as women. These include the non-uniformity in gender construction, the distinction between biological sex and social gender, and the perceived cultural traits and roles ascribed to women as what is expected of them as women, to name a few. Feminists also acknowledge that these discourses cannot either individually or jointly give satisfactory answers to the experience of womanhood. They also need to be aware of cultural and social differences in gender and be genuinely inclusive of these, so that the specific issues women in specific contexts face do not get overlooked by the issues faced

¹²² Schott, Robin May, *Discovering Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Ethics, Politics* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 89

¹²³ Walker, Margaret Urban, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), 176

by women in general because they are women. This has led to a more evolved understanding of the plurality of movements against women's oppression catering to specific women's issues and contexts, all operating under the giant umbrella of feminist thought and action. Feminists focus on the social and political demands for women while at the same time looking at the category of women as an inclusive and intersectional one, binding women together with their differences. At the same time, they constantly evolve their understanding of what it means to be a woman in the specific context of specific issues, and the general sense of their existence in human society.

Feminist ethicists challenge the separation between moral and social practices by trying to focus on concrete issues of oppression within the context of gender, race, and class relations. They aim at strategies and policies to eliminate discrimination in any form against not just women, but also any marginalised group of people who suffer at the hands of the dominant group's subordination. By showing how moral philosophy by its very inception and nature is essentially male-centric, the individual and institutional practices of patriarchy deny women access to education and employment thereby suppressing and devaluing them. The issue for many feminist thinkers and writers is that when we try to understand what a woman is how she ought to be defined or what her identity is, we dig into sources that have been developed within a patriarchal society. Any attempt at trying to properly understand women is bound to reek of male insights, experiences and beliefs based on stereotypes created by men. These gendered expectations also get specific as we observe across cultures which define women in the context of age, race, ethnicity and social class, categories under which gender biases comfortably operate. "To rectify errors in constructing and understanding the "nature of woman," feminists argue that we must begin experientially with the particulars of women's lives. In so doing, they have developed the field of feminist ethics."¹²⁴

The cruel ways a dominant group engages in human oppression can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, nationality, health, and so forth. However, gender oppression has an element of being more universal than other forms of oppression. Women everywhere have less power, authority, voice, rights, autonomy, and agency than men do. "That this state of affairs persists is... a situation that must be remedied by major changes

¹²⁴ Brabeck, Mary M., & Ting, Kathleen, *Feminist Ethics: Lenses for Examining Ethical Psychological Practice (Feminist Ethics in Psychology) (Division 35 Book Series, Psychology of Women)* (Washington, American Psychological Association, 2000), 19

in political structures, economic policies, social norms, and cultural attitudes.”¹²⁵ The enthusiasm, encouragement and expectations for women in the public sphere need to be on the same level as those for men. Patriarchy is the main source of women’s oppression because it is a system that subordinates them through power and dominance, strict hierarchy, and a lack of healthy objective competition. We can say that women’s liberation and emancipation have been achieved when women feel comfortable, safe and encouraged to occupy spaces in all spheres of daily life. Conflict and self-contradiction are cornerstones for women as they evolve to better understand their own identity and self on their terms. While women as a whole are subjected to subordination, some women can be more free, financially comfortable, and powerful than others because they have the advantage of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, age, religion, education, profession, marital status, health, and so forth. Thus, they need to understand that they have their struggles in the external structures of political, economic, and legal systems that oppress them, as well as the internal struggles coming from the negative self-conception of their intersectional peers, and even themselves.

Feminist ethics responds to epistemic, moral, and socio-political exclusion and oppression. This contributes to a lopsided understanding of the idea of the feminine. Overcoming the limits of male-centred ethics is a primary objective of feminist ethics. This is achieved by rethinking and rewriting moral theories which highlight women’s concrete life experiences as moral agents. In doing so, feminist philosophers aim to broaden and deepen the rich tapestry of moral philosophy. The success feminist ethics has had in this regard is due to its openness to discourse and debate, and its flexibility towards accepting newer understandings of moral discourse. The morally rich experiences of the marginalised offer an opportunity for the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, as well as confronting and challenging the oppressions of women and other minorities. Today’s society is less accepting of violence against and subordination of women and other marginalised groups. Hence, societies need to transform into places where the aims and ideals of feminist ethics are made a reality.

¹²⁵ Callahan, Dan, Chadwick, Ruth, & Singer, Peter, (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (Cambridge, Academic Press-Elsevier Inc., 2012), 295-296

CHAPTER 5

THE IDEA OF THE ETHICS OF THE FEMININE

Gender is a concept that is dynamic and constantly evolving. It tries to understand the differential treatment meted out to women or men and other gender minorities in society. The purpose is not to create conflict but to draw attention to the different issues resulting from gender disparities between women and men. In doing so, the issues can be addressed, and steps to reduce that inequality can be taken. The very concept of gender and the roles ascribed to people based on their gender have resulted from social interactions by individuals among themselves, with their communities, and their surroundings. These roles are not as connected to the biological markers that get people categorised into male and female but are learnt by them as part of their indoctrination and socialisation into their groups, communities and society. In this day and age, women are challenging values and identities while being treated by society as objects of desire, fear, and envy; being oppressed, exploited, abused, and excluded. The idea of the feminine is no longer associated with the determined anatomical and cultural reality of the feminine being. The development of women's studies, and its consequent expansion to gender studies and queer theory, has contributed to the understanding that the division between masculine and feminine as markers of gender identity is performative – 'gender' and 'the sexes' are two different topics. Thus, the idea of the feminine is no longer predicated solely on the anatomy. The feminine has meaning to the extent that it constantly questions and redefines female identity through deconstruction and openness to new ideas on the same. Gender as a societally perpetuated construct questions the idea of it as binary. A multiplicity of these gender identities can be designated as masculine and feminine at the same time, irrespective of the person's original anatomical or social information.

Femininity as a set of attributes, behaviours, and roles is generally associated with women and girls. The extent to which femininity is biologically or socially influenced is subject to debate. The so-called masculine and feminine traits are visible across the spectrum of gender. The traits traditionally associated with femininity vary across societies and

cultures, thereby rendering the concept of varying meanings. The modern notion of femininity in English-speaking society began in the 14th Century with women being referred to by their traditional societal roles of maiden, wife, or widow. The 20th Century saw Simone de Beauvoir¹²⁶ fiercely advocate the idea of how a woman was not born as a woman, but rather became or was made into one. Later thinkers developed this idea further and hypothesised gender as a combination of personality traits and practices that were defined and sanctioned by the society the person inhabited. In this setup, the person would grow to become what society had labelled as feminine or masculine. These gender identifications were the result of people repeatedly performing the socially approved behaviours associated with the gender. These gender performances defined the traditional categories of sex and gender and affected a person's behaviour and gender identity from a young age. Modern conceptualisations of femininity also rely on the individualised choices made by women. These relatively arbitrary choices are mediated by cultural norms and traditions.

Of course, sexism would make female-specific attributes exhaustively and implausibly significant in determining women's lives. "Denise Riley... argues that "women" is an indeterminate, unstable category for semantic and historical as well as political reasons."¹²⁷ This indeterminacy does not imply anything about women or what they wish to be identified as. The only unwavering point in the understanding of women as a concept and category is their expansive development throughout history. However, the idea of the feminine is not in any sense neutral because it is not an exclusive designation of the feminine being. It encompasses an ethical dimension that can be shared by all subjects. The idea of the feminine can be extended to include all approaches of existing as a being and not an exclusive characteristic of a gender or a type of being. This pops up a few questions. Why does the idea of the feminine not get attached to the feminine being more than to the masculine? If it can include transsexuality and transgender, and not only heterosexuality, why keep the idea and not transcend it? The simple answer is that the idea of the feminine owes something to women. The ethics of the feminine is in itself an ethical choice of the idea intended to end the long notorious tradition of excluding and subordinating women, not just in the physical sense, but also from the scope of ethical theory and ontology.

¹²⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 23-38, 41-189, 756-772

¹²⁷ Alcoff, Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 165

5.1. Understanding the Idea of the Feminine and its Expressions

Many contemporary feminist theorists take issue with the concept of woman because they believe that the term itself is steeped in undertones of male supremacy. It is seen as a term that owes its origins to the man, right down to the way it is spelt. It highlights the limitations and definitions for women that are not their reflections per se, but rather those of men seeing them as the *Other* and forming a culture by controlling and regulating them. Feminism has also learnt from its own mistakes. It used to presuppose it was the expert on knowing what women are and speaking on their behalf. It then realised the foolhardiness of that assumption because every source of knowledge that it tried to refer to about women was contaminated with misogyny and sexism. History, philosophy, social sciences, literature, human rights, and even daily life needed a hard reboot under a different set of eyes, ones not dominated by misogynist discourse.

5.1.1. Appearance and Behavioural Norms

The idea of the feminine in any society depends essentially on how that society defines what it means to be a human being. The benchmark for that definition is usually biological markers and anatomical differences to clearly distinguish between those the society perceives and identifies as men and women. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are based on preconceived notions of maleness and femaleness. These get identified when the biological sex is determined at birth by looking at the individual's reproductive organs and categorising them as male or female. As they grow into adults those gender markers are used to socially assign roles and normative behaviours appropriate to the given gender. The idea of the feminine could have arisen from early human sexual encounters due to male and female anatomical differences. While biological differences between females and males could be perceived as innate, the ideas of feminine and masculine were culturally constructed, with traits such as nurturance, sensitivity, passivity, modesty, empathy, etc. often cited as stereotypically feminine, and aggression and intelligence as masculine. Women were trained to present themselves as fragile, delicate, and unsuited for anything requiring physical exertion. They were taught to project shyness, reserve, fear, and incompetence. This socialisation was further cemented through the influence of toys, games, television, and education that conformed to these feminine values. The relationship between this idea of the feminine and conventional heterosexual relationships

has been studied extensively by scholars, from the point of view of sexual objectification with sexual passiveness being considered feminine while sexual assertiveness being considered masculine.

Men tend to view women who are more feminine-looking as warm, trustworthy, and cooperative. They also are seen as more attractive sexual partners in a heterosexual context compared to women with more masculine features. The development of a heavily muscular physique continues to be discouraged among girls but encouraged in boys. This also determines what sports girls are encouraged to participate in or how those sports are perceived by society. On the other hand, leaner or slimmer physiques are more encouraged in girls and activities that help maintain that. Society has preconceived notions about how the average male and female should look based on differences in height, weight, facial features, muscle-to-fat ratio, etc. This gender dimorphism can be different in different cultures but has similar categories of distinction. The ideal feminine appearance usually includes features like long hair, clear skin, no facial or body hair, and a narrow waistline.

The colour pink has usually been designated to depict femininity, even though pink was associated with boys and blue with girls in the early 20th Century. The modern societal expectation of thinness as a feminine ideal is responsible for the prevalence of anorexia and other eating disorders. In many countries and cultures, women are required to cover their heads and/ or faces with a veil as a symbol of feminine modesty and morality. Body alteration is another way used to induce perceived feminine characteristics in women. In Imperial China, and even as recent as the 20th Century, smaller feet were considered more aristocratic and feminine in women, as evidenced by the gruesome and excruciating practice of foot binding¹²⁸. In Africa and Asia, some communities have women wear neck rings to elongate the neck because a long neck is considered beautiful¹²⁹.

To add to this, men who display qualities considered feminine are often stigmatised and viewed as weak. Their behaviour and mannerisms are often portrayed as stereotypes of homosexuality. The ideal male is portrayed as being masculine and heterosexual, and a

¹²⁸ Chao, Yuan-Ling, *Poetry and Foot binding: Teaching Women and Gender Relations in Traditional China* (World History Connected, June 2, 2009, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiillinois.edu/6.2/chao.html>

¹²⁹ Ajayi, Anna, *How the women of Kayan Lahwi tribe got their long necks* (Pulse Nigeria, August 18, 2023, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/how-the-women-of-kayan-lahwi-tribe-got-their-long-necks/2pccp4x>

man being effeminate is seen as a tell-tale sign that he should be assumed to be gay, which limits how one expresses one's gender and sexuality. It is interesting to note that girls and women who tend to be masculine face far less social disapproval than boys and men who tend to be and act effeminate. This is because being a man is seen as the gold standard. Women being like men conforms to the idea of maleness being the zenith of perfection in contemporary culture. However, men who are willing to change and give up these preconceived notions of masculinity and express their feminine side are seen as a threat to patriarchal superiority. It also pushes for the idea that men and women should be opposites. There is far greater disdain for men who cross-dress than that faced by women who dress in masculine clothes. Parents are more likely to respond negatively to sons who play with dolls or wear nail polish than if daughters exhibit masculine behaviour. This form of social construction of femininity contributes to women's subjugation. Many feminists rejected these constricting standards of female beauty which they believed were created for the subordination and objectification of women. Others argued that such symbols of feminine identity such as makeup, perfume, footwear, etc. could be seen as valid and empowering personal choices, and did not devalue feminine culture and identity.

5.1.2. Traditional Roles

Some of the most divisive issues in academic disciplines and discourse are issues concerning gender roles in society. Gender roles are societally constructed and are associated with a particular biological sex. However, biology is more of an initial marker compared to how cultural norms forge gender identities and corresponding roles. "An alternative view is that gender bears the stamp of past selective pressures and has been shaped by natural selection."¹³⁰ Contemporary culture can be viewed as sexist as it imagines the idea of the feminine through the cis-male heterosexual lens. Gender stereotypes influence and determine occupations and careers seen traditionally as feminine. Women who break these socially approved gender roles have to deal with stereotypes that include women having a caring nature, being skilled at household chores, having greater physical agility than men, and being more physically attractive. With such markers, they are impressed to choose from occupational roles that include ones like that of the midwife, teacher, cashier, receptionist, housekeeper, cook, maid, social worker, nurse, etc.

¹³⁰ Dixon, Barnaby, J.W., *Masculinity and Femininity (Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science)* (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1

Such segregation maintains gender inequality that manifests itself economically in the unequal gender pay gap. Women are perceived less favourably for potential leadership roles. Even if they are chosen to lead, their styles tend to be bracketed as feminine which focuses on help and cooperation. Externally, if they employ a leadership style akin to their male counterparts, they are seen as being masculine in their role. However, the media often tries to highlight the stereotypical feminine traits such as compassion and emotion, when describing the leadership styles of female leaders, as if having such qualities is what defines women, or having empathy is somewhat a liability and not a strength. The most recent examples would be the deft handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by countries led by female leaders like New Zealand, Taiwan, and Germany, and the media coverage of their respective leaders' attributes¹³¹.

The common justification for the historical division of labour based on gender or sex is women's ability to bear children which interrupts the continuity of their employment and career growth. This deters female interest in higher education and employment training, especially in developing countries. The resultant gender stereotypes evolved to perpetuate this division and limited employment options for women. This mode of thinking may not hold water today since so-called feminine roles, like those of administrative assistants, also have high education and job experience requirements. Initially, Communism too depicted the ideal woman as muscular, plainly dressed, and strong, engaging in hard labour, using guns, and shunning conventional norms of feminine beauty. In revolutionary China in the 1950s, Chinese women dressed in overalls or shirts and pants, without makeup or nail polish. Poland under communism also saw women moving from high heels to worker's boots as the symbolic change by women to socialism. Communist ideology rejected aspects of traditional femininity like external beauty, shyness, etc., as bourgeois and consumerist.

However, later portrayals began to include the more traditional notions of gentleness, care, modesty, and moral virtue. As Communist countries began to liberalise, the conventional understanding of what being feminine began to be propagated on official media in their representation. Perfumes, cosmetics, and haute couture available to ordinary women became symbols of progress and modernity under socialism that kept up with the times. Economic liberation in China in the 1980s also saw the rise of gender stereotypes and

¹³¹ Bingham-Byrne, Rebecca Michelle, Ozdenerol, Esra, & Seboly, Jacob, *Female Leadership during COVID-19: The Effectiveness of Diverse Approaches towards Mitigation Management during a Pandemic* (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2023 Nov 6;20(21):7023), 1-25

sexualisation of women and a thrust for women to express their femininity by conventional standards. Communist women were expected to be superheroes working at jobs not traditionally regarded as feminine, while also being poster girls for stereotypical feminine traits.

5.1.3. Religious Influences

The worship of the feminine has been the most ancient form of worship on the planet. Shamanism is believed to predate all organised religions. The earliest known shamans were female as per archaeological findings. Most mythologies in their origin stories of the human race usually have the concept of an eternal male and an eternal female, either as two separate beings or two sides of a single entity being the fount of creation. Greek mythology has the ‘Mother-Earth’¹³² and the ‘Father-Sky’¹³³, which is also seen with regional variations in the eastern traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. They are seen as a manifestation of the human psyche. The remaining gods in the pantheons of these mythologies are the product of combinations of the eternal male and eternal female. The Judeo-Christian God is typically seen as a masculine father figure, although many theologians argue that this does not indicate the gender of God. Recent writers have explored the idea of God as a mother attributing feminine qualities to God. The concept of Wisdom is seen as feminine in this tradition. In Hebrew (*Chokhmah*)¹³⁴, Arabic (*Hikmah*)¹³⁵, Greek (*Sophia*)¹³⁶, and Latin (*Sapientia*)¹³⁷, the Wisdom of God is described and experienced as the feminine. In the Jewish Kabbalah, *Chokhmah* designates God’s creative process, the masculine that brought forth the universe, while *Binah*¹³⁸ is seen as the feminine, the energy that receives and gives everything its form.

¹³² Atsma, Aaron, J., *Gaia* (Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Gaia.html>

¹³³ Atsma, Aaron, J., *Uranus (Ouranos)* (Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Ouranos.html>

¹³⁴ Samuel, Gabriella, *The Kabbalah Handbook: A Concise Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts in Jewish Mysticism* (London, Penguin Publishing Group, 2007), 42-44

¹³⁵ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Meaning and Role of “Philosophy” in Islam* (Studia Islamica, No. 37 (1973)), 57-80

¹³⁶ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Sophia noun Definition* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Sophia>

¹³⁷ Latin is Simple, *Sapientia* (Latin is Simple, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.latin-is-simple.com/en/vocabulary/noun/367/?h=Sapientia>

¹³⁸ Samuel, Gabriella, *The Kabbalah Handbook: A Concise Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts in Jewish Mysticism* (London, Penguin Publishing Group, 2007), 32-33

In Hindu traditions, the *devi*¹³⁹ is the female aspect of the divine and *shakti*¹⁴⁰ is the divine feminine creative force that is an agent of change throughout the entire universe. Without her, the male aspect or *Purusha*¹⁴¹ remains void. The divine in her female manifestation is called *Prakriti*¹⁴². She is the cause behind the universe's existence and functioning. This manifestation has a similar version of this universal force in Hinduism called *yon*¹⁴³ which is also feminine, probably in keeping with the feminine function of giving birth. The Universe is thus a combination of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, without the balanced union of whom, the universe could not exist. The *Ardhanarisvara*¹⁴⁴ form of the Hindu god, *Shiva* most often expresses the female and male aspects of the divine. This form has been in existence as an image and symbol for over 2,000 years, showing that man and woman are perfectly equal and complementary to each other. The Aryan invaders did not do away with the goddess-worshipping tradition of the pre-Aryan society and merged the pre-Aryan mother goddess with their concept of *Prakriti*. Siva, the masculine god conjoins with the feminine thereby challenging the constructs of gender.

In Taoism and Chinese philosophy, the universe is symbolised through the Ultimate Principle visually expressed as a circle containing two equal portions, each having an element of the other. The understanding behind its visualisation is that Creation is in harmony and interaction because of how these two energies compose it and hold it together. The energy of the *Yang*¹⁴⁵ is masculine by nature. It is light and dry, logical, focused, action-oriented, and has direction. The energy of the *Yin*¹⁴⁶ is feminine. It is dark and moist, vague, intuitive, and receptive. Women in Buddhism were characterised based on their ability to achieve enlightenment. In Early Buddhism, a woman who achieved enlightenment was seen as a master of Buddhism. Later schools preached that the masters were limited to men. Women were denied the possibility of enlightenment in their current

¹³⁹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Devi noun Word History* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/devi>

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, Jean, *Shakti: The Power of the Feminine* (Asia Society, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://asiasociety.org/education/shakti-power-feminine>

¹⁴¹ Clark, Bernie, *Purusha & Prakriti* (Yin Yoga, 2006, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://yinyoga.com/yinsights/purusha-prakriti/>

¹⁴² Ibidem (Accessed on July 28, 2024)

¹⁴³ Hridaya Yoga, *Yoni & Lingam Sacred Symbols of the Feminine and Masculine* (Hridaya Yoga, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://hridaya-yoga.com/yonisacred-source/>

¹⁴⁴ Daljeet, and Jain, P.C., *Ardhanarishvara in Art and Philosophy* (Exotic India Art, June, 2005, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.exoticindiaart.com/article/ardhanarishvara/>

¹⁴⁵ Cartwright, Mark, *Yin and Yang* (World History Encyclopedia, May 16, 2018, accessed on July 28, 2024) https://www.worldhistory.org/Yin_and_Yang/

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem (Accessed on July 28, 2024)

lifetime. They would have to be reborn as men in future life. The Digamabara¹⁴⁷ school of Jainism also espouses similar beliefs about female followers.

5.2. Comparative Perspectives: West and India

5.2.1. Ancient Greece: Plato and Aristotle

The principal difference between Plato's and Aristotle's views concerning women was in their understanding of the concept of the soul. They both agreed that social roles were assigned according to nature. Plato saw no natural differences in the natures of males and females because he believed their natures were essentially sexless souls in sexed bodies. However, Aristotle held the soul to be the form of the body, thus rendering female psychology different from that of males. In the *Republic*¹⁴⁸, Plato argues that women (at least those in the upper classes) must be assigned social roles in the ideal state equal to those of men. Later, Aristotle, in his *Politics*¹⁴⁹, puts women back in their traditional roles of being subservient to men. However, there is something common to Plato's and Aristotle's views. Both apply the same principle – justice – that can be achieved only when social roles are assigned in strict accordance with nature.

Their divergent social prescriptions concerning women stem from their conceptions of the idea of the feminine. If nature were to provide a difference between males and females relevant to social roles, both would discriminate based on gender or sex. Plato sees no difference, while Aristotle does. Plato believed that the individual nature of human beings determined the only job for which they would be suited, irrespective of gender. He believed that the only natural differences between males and females were physical strength and reproduction in females. While Plato and Aristotle had similar views concerning slaves, barbarians, children, artisans, etc., concerning women their beliefs were incompatible. Unlike Plato, Aristotle considered women to have the deliberative part of the soul, with less of the ability to be sovereign than men. He felt this to be the case because of women's susceptibility to being easily governed by the emotional part of the soul, thereby requiring the 'steadier rule of men'. Since nature makes different things for

¹⁴⁷ Balbir, Nalini, *Digambara* (Jainpedia, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://jainpedia.org/themes/principles/sects/digambara/>

¹⁴⁸ Plato, *The Republic* (Translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford) (London, Oxford University Press, 1941), 144-154

¹⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* (Translated by Benjamin Jowett) (Kitchener, Batoche Books, 1999), 4, 20-21, 58, 176-178

different purposes, these differences meant that women had different functions too. Also, since virtue was relative to function for Aristotle, a woman's virtue was different from that of a man.

Aristotle declared that there did exist a biological basis for inferiority and superiority. He lived in an ancient Athenian society with a preference for male offspring and the belief that women who obeyed their father's and husband's wishes, avoided participation in public life, and dutifully occupied the women's quarter of their house were ideal women. His understanding of the idea of the feminine could be seen as self-supporting and anti-feminist to the core. He considered them inadequate in mind and body compared to men. He did not view women as potential voting and ruling citizens, or as equals in the family dynamic of husband and wife. Throughout his works, he alleged deficiencies in women and used them to contrastingly enlarge the capacities of men.

Compared to the legal and political rights and privileges women in the Greek city-states enjoyed, which were next to none, Plato's views and proposals were downright revolutionary. He believed that women would be able to devote themselves to a military career, or any other role traditionally seen as suited to males, which was considered scandalous. Women were considered to be weaker than men, and the war was a quality that defined men, as the primary citizens. The excellence of the soul and the propensity for courage mattered more for Plato, not the body endowed with the female sex that made a difference. This was supposed to be the ideal that he espoused inspired by the teachings of his teacher, Socrates. Socrates¹⁵⁰ believed that men and women were the same by nature. Even though there were physical differences, it was not necessarily the case that one was better than the other. Plato believed that leaders of the ideal republic had to be chosen irrespective of sex or gender, based on their ability for higher self-edification. Thus, women could become philosophers and heads of state, a surprising trend for the time. Each citizen was expected to develop their abilities and civic virtues as far as possible. Women were to participate fully and equally in all aspects of public life.

Plato was way ahead of his time, maybe even ahead of some contemporary societies and cultures, in his understanding of social and political rights. However, his thinking takes a complicated route with the general question of sexuality, as he reveals himself to be very conservative. He sees the only purpose of women as reproduction and perpetuation of the

¹⁵⁰ Collette, Annica, *Women and Misogyny in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Women in Antiquity, November 27, 2018, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://womeninantity.wordpress.com/2018/11/27/women-and-misogyny-in-ancient-greek-philosophy/>

human species, without taking into account the aspects of desire and pleasure. He also ignored the important aspect of sexual identity. He even condemns masculine and feminine homosexuality on the sole condition that it does not ensure the perpetuation of the human race. However, he views gender from an exclusively sexual level, having no issues with an individual choosing a gender that does not correspond to their biologically assigned sex. Thus, his complicated understanding of and expectations of human sexuality tend to complicate his expectations for the ideal republic.

5.2.2. The Indian Context

Goddess worship is one of the longest-standing religious traditions in India in which the worship of the feminine has endured. There existed the freedom to create goddesses according to specific local requirements. In every village in South India, one can find an *Amman*¹⁵¹ or goddess temple even today. The theme of *Shakti* grew out of a mixture of the pre-Aryan matriarchal society and the male-dominated society of the Aryans. The Earth Mother continues to be worshipped in India as the power of basic reverence of an agricultural people. Mother Goddesses were worshipped at all times in India. There are enduring goddess traditions all over India, especially in West Bengal and South India. Goddesses symbolising various aspects of power very often predominate in village culture. However, this has led society to label women either as saints or sinners, with little room in between. They are expected to exhibit forgiveness, compassion, and tolerance. If they conform, society accepts them. If they exhibit independence and assertiveness, they are considered as disrupting family and societal structures.

The popular image of an Indian woman in the eyes of Western Feminists has been that of a veiled and enslaved woman. In India, the knowledge of the past has been promoted with the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood in the Vedic period. This image focussed on the upper caste women, leaving the Vedic women servants or *dasis*¹⁵² open to exploitation and exclusion. The various discourses on Indian history leaned heavily towards imperialism in which male discourse concerned the prospect of reforming the situation of the Indian women. India witnessed invasions constantly, through which settlers from other places added to the rich cultural tapestry of the existing society. The

¹⁵¹ Storytrails, *Mariamman: The Village Goddess Who Travelled* (Storytrails, December 12, 2022, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://storytrails.in/culture/mariamman-the-village-goddess-who-travelled/>

¹⁵² New World Encyclopedia, *Dasa* (New World Encyclopedia, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dasa>

Delhi Sultanate and Mughals brought in a new religion and a new way of organising power relations but did not alter the social fabric of the society.

With the coming of the British, the Victorian colonial culture imposed its rigid and dichotomous ideologies of gender. Social reform movements in India, pioneered by men, did not see women as individuals capable of human reason and rationality, but rather as caged in traditions and practices that marginalised them. Women were either victims or heroines, and they became the topic on which tradition was debated and reformulated. Religion was not so much a factor, as were several socio-economic and political factors. The idea of the feminine in Indian society was women being modern enough to pass the basic benchmark of Western modernity but entrenched in the cultural Indian value systems, a sort of controlled emancipation. The encouragement for female education by reformers was propagated to present a view that Indian society could no longer be characterised as backward. Social reformers tried to change the decadent and oppressed status of Indian women while maintaining their warped notions of the idea of the feminine.

The Indian freedom struggle separated the external and the internal domains. The home represented the internal sphere of Indian daily life, and women were its representatives. This became an example of social roles differentiated by gender between the home and the outside world. The home was the principal site of the national culture and women were responsible for its protection. They did so as martyrs, sacrificial lambs, devoted religious and tolerant mothers, and dutiful and docile daughters. The call by the nationalists to save the motherland also grew, not so much for women to join the political movement but rather to link the idea of womanhood with the idea of nationalism. This feminised the idea of India in the tradition of the worship of a variety of female cults and mother goddesses. Women did participate for the first time in the freedom struggle in large numbers. This shaped the movement for women's rights with women's associations, like the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)¹⁵³, mushrooming all over India. They argued for the right to vote but they were careful to ground their arguments on Indian culture, tradition, and the special qualities of Indian people. The idea of the feminine was seen as a participant in the freedom struggle, a slight step behind her masculine counterparts. The focus was attacking colonialism. This nationalist discourse distinguished itself by being the bedrock for the growing Indian middle class, representing

¹⁵³ All India Women's Conference, *History* (All India Women's Conference, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.aiwc.org.in/history.html>

the middle upper-caste Hindu women, excluding the lower class, Dalits, and minority women.

Opposing views on what the idea of the feminine entailed existed during this time, showing different cultural and political influences in pre-independence Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi's¹⁵⁴ understanding of the idea of the feminine was seen as that of an urban, middle-class, upper-class, and male-oriented view of women. He believed that women were inherently non-violent via qualities like suffering and silence. The image of women for Gandhi was that of a docile, submissive, entrapped, and helpless soul. E.V. Ramasamy Periyar¹⁵⁵, on the other hand, argued that anger, pride, courage, etc. were emotions expressed by both men and women. Accepted notions of femininity like beauty, chastity, and motherhood were convenient lies that convinced women to be subordinate to men, and welcome that subordination. He was critical of sexual standards which celebrated male promiscuity and condemned women to servile monogamy. He believed that the traditional notion of marriage in India was meant to control women's familial and reproductive labour, empowering patriarchy. Only by refusing to play these expected roles would women be free of oppression. He advocated reforms in marriage laws, women's rights, education, and employment.

After independence, the Constitution of India¹⁵⁶ accepted the principle of equality of gender. Article 14 assured equality before the law as a fundamental right. Articles 15 and 16 forbade discrimination on the grounds of sex in access to public places and public employment. Article 15 allowed the state to make special provisions for women and children. Granting rights within the purview of minorities' rights became difficult. The issues raised from this time on were wide-ranging – from land rights and political representation to divorce laws and child custody to sexual harassment at work, dowry, and rape. The women's movement interrogated the existing laws, with their questions becoming central in public discourse. However, the understanding of what a woman is or what being feminine is has not kept up with the legal changes. The questions of prestige, honour of the family, community, caste, and religion dominate and influence behaviour and expectations.

¹⁵⁴ Singh, Katyayani, *Re-reading Gandhi: Why The Mahatma Cannot Be Called A Feminist* (Feminism in India, March 18, 2021, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/03/18/re-reading-gandhi-why-the-mahatma-cannot-be-called-a-feminist/>

¹⁵⁵ Geetha, V., *Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship* (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 33, No. 17 (Apr. 25 - May 1, 1998)), 9-15

¹⁵⁶ Ambedkar, B. R., *The Constitution of India* (Jaipur, Buddham Publishers, 2019), 6

The majority of the country lives in a hotchpotch of *Sanskritisation*¹⁵⁷ and Westernisation, all groups spilling over in their understanding of the idea of the feminine. There remains a lot of work to be done with re-educating the Indian mindset on what the idea of the feminine entails. Some encouraging trends include increasing economic liberty among women allowing them to fight stereotypes, and gradual improvement in economic, social, and sexual rights. Women are negotiating harder to expand the public sphere accorded to them through partnership and collaboration with men as equitable partners, through the internet and information revolution. The idea of the feminine sees itself as multicultural in the Indian context, asserting itself in multiple ways to break free from oppressive social norms.

5.3. From Concept to Morality: From Idea to Ethics

“Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured—understood, explained, and diagnosed—to a level of determination never accorded to man himself, who is conceived as a rational animal with free will.”¹⁵⁸ The behaviour of men is not regulated. They are free to build their path and set their own goals based on their rational abilities. Women’s behaviour, intellectual potential, and even how she has emotional reactions to anything are regulated and determined by society, and get chalked up to being in her nature. The image of the woman is always construed to be larger than life in people’s minds. She is seen as someone who is inescapably at the man’s beck and call while also being seen as a mystical figure beyond comprehension. Some men see her as immoral and irrational, while others look at her as the fount of benevolence and kindness. No matter how many ways she gets characterised, she is always seen as the Object, never the Subject. Unlike the rational man, she is a melting pot of attitudes that requires control and regulation like other natural phenomena, incapable of being free-willed and self-aware.

The idea of the feminine defies the phallogocentric focus of knowledge by promoting what has always been trampled on. This idea is seen as an integral part of a human being’s inner life, a cardinal point on its horizon. We also need to keep in mind that the term ‘woman’ is heavily dependent on the defining factor of biological sex. The idea of the

¹⁵⁷ Barnabas, A. P., *Sanskritisation* (The Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 13, Issue No. 15, 15 Apr, 1961), 613-618

¹⁵⁸ Alcoff, Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 134

ethics also acknowledges the biological markers of the body, sexual and reproductive organs, and general morphology, as well as recognising the woman's secondary social nature. The idea and its ethics are well entrenched in the social hierarchy of values, though never taking the place of the idea and ethics of the masculine. This status quo is achieved through the traditional androcentric designation of characteristics to the feminine like privacy, interiority, domesticity, etc. Women fail to recognise their femininity as their own within the terms of the phallic economy, thereby producing the same exclusion. Although the talk about the idea of the feminine takes us back to discussing traditional divisions, it is something worthy of analysis. How can feminism exist if we wipe out the idea of the feminine, the very point of origin? Gender and the idea of the feminine have ample space for evolution and growth, as well as for others to understand them better beyond what is traditionally encompassed and taught by philosophy, ethics, and anthropology.

Almost every discussion on the notion of femininity turns into a debate where the definition of true womanhood is associated with qualities like piety, purity, and submissiveness. For the millennia that ethics has existed as a concept of human civilisation, the feminine has been viewed, not as a *subject*, but more as an *object*. The idea of the feminine seems to be targeted for the benefit of masculine domination and tempered by the socio-political disruptions the feminine condition has to face daily. The feminine is transformative; its vivacity either diversifies or succumbs to socio-historical reality. The feminine that women embody is not just ideological, but also participatory. It is something that is initially thrust upon them by society, which they later imbibe, make their own, and are now transcending in all spheres of human life. Research today has broken down the walls of this exclusion of the feminine by way of refocussing on ethics and morality, to better question them.

"The idea that morality is gender-based (i.e., there are different virtues for males and females) emerges in the ethical thinking of many philosophers... there have been passionate debates about the idea of a "female ethic" and whether there are specifically female virtues."¹⁵⁹ Women and men socially construct the idea of the feminine and its ethics in significantly different ways based on their gender, thereby playing their part in creating different gender characteristics. Throughout human history, these differences were thought of as being so obvious that they were seen as part and parcel of normal

¹⁵⁹ Ham, MaryAnna, Hauser, Rick, & Wilczenski, Felicia L., *Culturally Relevant Ethical Decision-Making in Counseling* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 39

human nature and did not need change. Things were accepted as being copacetic. Whenever any issue challenged traditional male hegemony and adherence to gender roles, patriarchal society would calmly claim that since things had been running smoothly for centuries there was no need for change of what was seen as normalcy. The idea of the feminine was refurbished to patriarchy's advantage in making women even more dependent and subordinate to men. The use of a warped male-oriented idea of femininity was always used as a double standard to control and subjugate women in the name of protecting their 'femininity' in keeping with the dominant social perspective. "The idea that virtue is in some way gendered, that the standards and criteria of morality are different for women and men, is one that has been central to the ethical thinking..."¹⁶⁰

The ethical discourse was male-dominated and focused on predominantly masculine perspectives until the rise of women's movements in the 1960s challenged the neglect of women and their depreciation in ethical thinking. These progressive perspectives of looking at ethics were gradually applied to the emancipation of other misrepresented and oppressed minorities as well. Historically, most views of the difference in male and female virtues have assumed that women should be subordinate to men. Also, the virtues of which women are capable are considered inferior to those of men. Thus, even if a female virtue is idealised, women are still regarded as lesser beings than men. A classic example is the virtue of 'selflessness'. Consideration for the needs of others has been distorted such that merely asserting that women have needs of their own is seen as them being selfish; those needs don't exist within the context of caring for men and children.

Women themselves have constantly tended to be devalued at the same time as being idealised. This devaluation-idealisation mix has been of women's nature, abilities, and the activities in which they engage. Thus, while their role in societally approved activities has been praised, it is also seen as a mere background for the more important roles awarded to men. A common assumption of thinkers for a long time is that there are differences in the ways women and men think or reason about morality. It is also argued social practices associated with mothering, care, and nurture, are seen as ethical priorities held by women, as compared to the more destructive values held by men. This plays up the virtues of selflessness and relationship-oriented thinking in females as compared to

¹⁶⁰ Grimshaw, Jean, *The Idea of a Female Ethic* (Philosophy East and West, Apr., 1992, Vol. 42, No. 2, Moscow Regional East West Philosophers' Conference on Feminist Issues East and West (Apr., 1992)), 221

the virtue of selfishness in males. They are anchored in the view that there are systematic differences between masculine and feminine psyches.

Ethical setups that have emerged from a social system in which women have so often been subordinate to men must be looked at with suspicion. These so-called “female” values are misconceived understandings of the idea of the feminine. They depend on the polarisation between the masculine and the feminine through shaping the rules of how feminine culture should be expressed. Critics of women’s movements wonder why women are agitating for an identity when they already have one. However, feminist movements and research are ambivalent about what is the ideal definition of femininity and womanliness. The current definitions are being created to overcome the contamination by the traditional discourse which favours masculinity. They know they are the Other against whom men base their definition of manliness as being representative of what it means to be human.

The feminist definition of the idea of the feminine does not seek to be loyal to women instead of men but rather find a better and more inclusive meaning to being a woman than what conventional thinking preaches. Loyalty in any form to any gender can lead to partial or distorted inferences about the idea of the feminine. But such impartiality should not forget to argue on behalf of how the status of women and other marginalised groups has been devalued by patriarchy. It is interesting to note that while trying to dismantle and rebuild the idea of the feminine for the better, feminist thought must also continue to speak up on behalf of the same idea it criticises as part of that rebuilding process. Thus, there is both a challenge and an opportunity in this supposedly contradictory situation. “Thus, research processes that problematise how gender practices shape behaviour and belief—that interrogate and criticise both masculinity and femininity—stand a better chance of avoiding such biasing gender loyalties.”¹⁶¹ Asking questions about the existing gender social order that is not only tolerated but, in many respects, even valued is extremely important and necessary.

The ideology of sexism is predicated on a claim of causality between physical features and intellectual, moral, and emotional attributes. But these bodily differences are not sufficient to explain the beliefs about gender, which vary considerably across cultures, in contexts of power and cultural dynamics. The binary distinction between sex and gender in terms of masculinity and femininity is their hierarchical character. One term is

¹⁶¹ Alcoff, Linda & Potter, Elisabeth, (Ed.), *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York, Routledge, 1993), 60

considered superior to the other and politicised as such. Social relations through arbitrary and enforced practices attach symbolic meaning to body parts leading to the constitution of racial, ethnic and sexual or gender identities. These identity concepts try to force aspects of human reality and existence like desire and sexuality that are inherently fluid, dynamic and even unstable.

Trying to demarcate human identities and conceptualise and categorise them based on some rudimentary preapproved features can lead to exploitative cultural systems which create identity crises instead of resolving them, especially for those groups that do not fit the narrative espoused by those belonging to the dominant groups. Gender identities in some variations seem to be historically pervasive, hardly recent, and based on a set of biological features with more morphological substance. Researchers have tended to underemphasise situations which manifest the idea of the feminine. It may be trivialised to a conception of female identity based on visible feminine attributes. They tried to achieve an idea that is concrete and static, not taking the changeable nature of human characteristics and political contexts, to offer significance in the development of the feminine identity. We should avoid definitions that define women in terms of intrinsic internal characteristics, but at the same time, not fly above the entire context of the idea of the feminine by looking at it as a complete outsider.

There is an overabundance of content to define women as a category, a non-issue. The problem is that the content is inconsistent, owing to different oppressive situations in which women find themselves in various cultures and contexts. The idea of the feminine does not entail that there is no way of defining it, but rather caution when universally declaring all women and marginalised groups face the same kind of oppression or have the same political and social goals. It is inclusive of dynamic and contingent definitions in the way de Beauvoir describes the “body-in-situation”. We remain aware of the biologically oriented concept of sex and the culturally and contextually developed concept of gender. The latter has been solidified through history. The idea of the feminine may be seen as difficult to define but when it is combined with the physical body of the woman based on biological markers, and put in a cultural context, its behaviour can be controlled and regulated. This makes the idea of the feminine a very limited concept that is compelled to live with a historical and cultural shell as its essence. Gender in itself has no objective ideal or essence to express or aspire to. The various acts of gender done under the guise of a category that society has created and labelled as gender leads to the idea of the masculine and feminine and the corresponding ethics that give the power dynamics

and hierarchy. It is just a societal collective agreement that exists to perform and sustain genders.

The reason people fail to see beyond gender as just a cultural fiction is because over time society has become dependent on gender dynamics for its functioning. It has become accepted as the de facto way of proceeding and is seen as necessary and natural for the survival of the human race. “The historical possibilities materialised through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress.”¹⁶² Gender is not a stable identity, but one that is gradually built over time. The body embodies the cultural and historical contexts of its surroundings. Thus, explaining the concept of gender requires an expansion of and understanding of its conventional meaning to include the actions by which gender is constituted. Researchers today study the anatomical dimensions of the body from a more objective point of view, without viewing it as an indicator which gives meaning to the idea of the feminine. This contributes to its ethics as well.

Feminist theory and action aim to understand how systemic political and cultural structures are created through individual practices, and how analysing the impacts of such specific gender situations in different cultures and contexts helps in understanding gender and reshaping it in a broader context of general society. The false definition of what a man is universally has been presupposed as part of human understanding. But now, the narrative is shifting with the focus on the specific understanding of what the idea of the feminine and being a woman is, thereby attempting to rewrite history, culture, philosophy and even ethics. This hopes to be done by acknowledging the idea of the feminine through its presence, influence, and most importantly, oppression. All these aspects make up for a more inclusive and realistic definition. Women exist as a body that undergoes involuntary and oppressive construction through culture and history. Male-dominated society sanctions and prescribes how to act their bodies and perform roles that are culturally perceived as appropriate and ethical. A gradual sedimentation of gender norms leads to numerous interpretations and cultural peculiarities and practices. But no matter how much mutation happens in this regard, the bottom line remains that the idea of the feminine and its ethics exist in an unequal dynamic that is oppressive, marginalising and very much binary.

¹⁶² Butler, Judith, *Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory (Theatre Journal)* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 522

5.4. The Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine

One of the key problems that attend both academic and public discussions about ethics or morality is the assumption of a commonality of problems. The interesting question is the kinds of subjectivities, hierarchies, inequalities, etc. it has produced, and the conceptions of justice and freedom it has enabled. There is a large, complicated, ever-mutating set of discourses that sometimes speak to each other and sometimes don't. Morality is something that human beings do, that functions in human reality. Even if what we're talking about is sought to be universally applied, we can't access it universally. We can't appreciate the universal if we don't appreciate the particularities. These contextual differences have required years and years of practised and conflictual engagement across the discourse of sexuality, race, ethnicity, and gender, and at the same time through the negotiation of ethics itself. Ethics is used in ways that dominate, and oppress, but for some people offers scope for empowerment, and what they understand by empowerment.

Cultures are governed by conventions that regulate and guarantee how their members act amongst themselves and with other members, along with taboos and punishments, through a system of checks and balances. Gendered identities and sexualities are controlled in this way through the cultivation of behaviour, mannerisms, and actions that correspond with the individual's respective appearance and disposition. There may be variations in gender norms within the individual or the family. But even these specify pre-existing societal rules. Gender has a script that gets expressed with slight differences by the particular actors who make use of it. Its actions are repeated from a set of already established norms and rules. Although individuals are acting these behaviours out, they adhere to their expected gendered roles, thereby making these actions public as well. In doing so, it makes these social laws explicit. The gendered body acts its part in this culturally approved space with some minor interpretations and improvisations, while at the same time, respecting the confines of already existing directives. It is forced to exist in a reality that is regulated and polarised and complies with a framework of truth and falsity that is controlled by the dominant narrative. The body is thus built into a pretended reality that is socially approved, and behaving in an unapproved way gender-wise begets punishment.

Gender is a kind of social unity, infused with cultural values, and usually presented as a category of two. The idea of the feminine can be seen as androcentric as it tends to draw on characteristically masculine experiences. However, when we try to apply the same

metric to the idea of this ethics, we see that anything permitted the masculine, is checked and re-checked by the societal setup before deeming it fit or unfit to be applied to the feminine of the group, both individuals and behaviours. This sets up norms or stereotypes for how women and men should be, marginalising some or even most women. This differential relationship becomes the cause of different types of social segregation.

Morality and all that it implies never functions in a social, historical, or cultural vacuum. It emerges in culture and is a reflection of culture. The frameworks from which we try to see the world are not innocent. They act themselves out in a social, historical, and cultural context, and they interact in different ways. It could be said that we are in a kind of dance between a form of absolutism and a form of relativism. There are multiple folds of dynamism under the umbrella of absolutist goals. The underlying idea that takes shape is that there exists right and wrong. Every system has a set of dos and don'ts. Men were traditionally considered stronger than women in society. The woman had to take care of the children, and the man was the authority in all important decisions in the public sphere. There may be a need for morality to fight from within its precincts to affirm the rights of women.

A sexist society is a physical handicap to women's empowerment as their very definition and existence are assigned by patriarchal culture through physical inhibition, confinement, and objectification. "As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections."¹⁶³ Patriarchy is flexible as a phenomenon in so far as it adapts itself to maintain its grip on gender power, hierarchy and order while keeping its essential identity rigid and intact. The aspects of flexibility depend on factors like culture and religion that it manipulates to implement and safeguard its interests in these societies. It uses tools such as movies, television, politics, and economics to tout its gender propaganda. It defines how we look at the feminine and make the rules to control that status quo. In a patriarchal system, men make all decisions regarding power and authority through perceived mental and physical superiority over women.

Patriarchal societies, like those in India, work towards safeguarding the interests of the patriarch, granting power and authority to men in the public and the private spheres while subjecting women to social, political, and economic constraints in the same spheres.

¹⁶³ Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 42-43

Without access, economic dependence becomes a given. Traditional beliefs and gender roles in Indian societies deprive the female child of access to education, leading to male-female inequality and disparity, especially in rural areas. This further recycles and perpetuates the myth of education being useless to women and keeping them trapped in the domestic sphere. The woman's indispensable role as a wife and a mother is heralded as innate qualities contributing to the idea of the feminine, further reinforced by the understanding that she lives as an object and a mere body. She exists for the fulfilment of potentialities of a subject's intentions and manipulations, and not her living manifestation of potential and action. This gradually leads her to internalise this objectified bodily existence and see herself as nothing more than an object and a mere body.

The ethics of the feminine are amplified to include the expectations about the aptitudes, characteristics, and behaviours that correlate with femininity. The feminine is seen as a lived reality, related to every step of life, a quality of female existence, and not just a mere characteristic or trait. Humans create the concept of gender through social interactions with one another and the environment, while still relying to some extent upon biological differences between males and females. Differences based on sex can lead to individual traits and values varying across societies and cultures and at times even different sub-groups of the same society. The ethics becomes a set of structures that conditions how we understand the definition of what a woman is in particular contexts and the typical way by which women themselves live out this understanding. The idea of the feminine can be seen as a box to define these characteristics, and ethics can be seen as the lines of that box, within which members are expected to colour without error. As more information is consumed, the majoritarian group weighs the pros and cons keeping in mind how it can benefit the most. If something is seen as beneficial, it may be accepted outright or with fewer or more modifications. This leads to the box expanding or shrinking. The healthier the acceptance of the information for the benefit of the group or society as a whole and not just some select group, the more comfortably the mentality grows. All this then leads to the ethics of the feminine undergoing consequent modifications, for better or for worse.

The identities that we use to define ourselves cannot be unchangeable scripts we are forced to act out. We cannot be constrained, restricted or held captive by them. Our identities, experiences, histories and cultures are mere proof of the fact that we exist in the world. They are ways of representing the connections we have to one another, and history, social structures and culture. They are just horizons and changeable guidelines based on which we negotiate life in general and our contexts in particular. "They are

largely unchosen (just as our bodies are unchosen), but just as in the case of bodies, our identities can be reshaped, and they absolutely require interpretation.”¹⁶⁴ In a broad attempt at simplification, we could claim that all the systems of morality that have been inquired into – absolutism, relativism, and feminist ethics – are but the different lines that are used to demarcate the idea of the feminine to make it more comprehensible as we negotiate our daily lives. Each of these systems can be seen as one of the many attempts to make the human mind comprehend the idea of the feminine, which they believe to be the best explanation there is. The presence of the myriad ways of understanding morality in itself proves how complex the identity of the human experience is.

When we look at a person and in less than a tenth of a second identify them as male or female, we engage in such categorisation as our mind has been trained to do so based on our context. That differentiation is almost immediately followed by associated sub-categorisation. When we identify the idea of the feminine, our mind snowballs into the norms and rules to further distinguish them. We may do this consciously or unconsciously. But we do engage in the process. Depending on our context we also employ an absolutist, relativist, or feminist idea of ethics, sometimes a combination of different systems. The beauty of it is that since we are constantly consuming new information, our mind orients and reorients itself and acts accordingly. So, when we look at it, our reading of what it is to be feminine and how the feminine ought to act is more about who we are as individuals and groups, rather than what that person is. The person we are identifying as feminine may perceive themselves as someone entirely different from our perception of them, with their idea of ethics for them. Not only that, they look at us the same way as we look at them, perceiving us from their context and relevant categorisations, probably forming a different idea of us from what we perceive ourselves.

Gendered identity is more fundamental than it is believed to be, but not as much of a determining factor as made out to be by its historical portrayal. It is however relational as it heavily depends on where it stands in other existing social and political structures, while at the same time being stable across cultural variations. Our worth as human beings arises from our freedom to exercise moral behaviour. Ordinary morality is supported by our intuitions, judging our lives as morally acceptable as long as we meet its demands. Overall interests can conflict with the promotion of the good since our natural tendency might be to favour our interests. This is normal for us human beings as we tend to stick to what we

¹⁶⁴ Alcoff, Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 288

know and what we feel comfortable with. Intellectual conversations may be philosophically rather than morally satisfying.

In such situations, it is not surprising that someone who is trying to formulate and give moral justification for a revolutionary idea should find it difficult to liberate themselves from traditional views, and at times, even lapse back into conventional attitudes. This back and forth can be seen as a dilemma between following already established societal structures and judging the new information gathered through one's attempt to learn and be progressive. A simple example would be the growing acceptance of women in all spheres of public life. While it is seen as a matter-of-fact occurrence in some societies, it is celebrated as a step forward in others, and still a matter for people's movements in still others. The idea of the feminine is viewed in different degrees in each of these groups, thereby resulting in progressive or regressive rules respectively. All these are also cloaked in an underlying layer of understanding of the idea of the feminine that is universal in its approach. This stems from the unconscious bias built up over millennia. In such situations, slip-ups can occur. They can happen even when we unknowingly use a term that may be derogatory to a certain group. Once we are apprised of our mistake, we reorient ourselves.

The use of the ethics of the feminine as a disciplining rod leads to "... the devaluation of femininities and reinforces the cultural failure to develop alternative genders and un- or less gendered identities that are not validated on the old masculine model."¹⁶⁵ These terms have essentially been produced and developed in these gender regimes, so changing the narrative and redefining them in more inclusive and progressive ways needs to be the new way of proceeding, far removed from the original intentions. Overcoming the experience of violation involves a change of the definitions that ethically justify such oppression. We need to understand how gender is viewed and identified under contemporary gender social structures. We need to see what works about the system and what does not, as well as whose power and status benefits from keeping things the same. The idea of the feminine, of the masculine, and how ethics defines and becomes an intrinsic part of the experience are dynamic and constantly changing, and they need to be moving in the direction of benefiting those being oppressed and marginalised. "They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a

¹⁶⁵ Gardiner, Judith Kegan, *Female Masculinity and Phallic Women— Unruly Concepts (Feminist Studies)* (Maryland, Feminist Studies, Inc., 2012), 620

norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.”¹⁶⁶

The idea of gender may have begun with early humans as a way of identification, but at some point, it grew to be less of a means of identification and more of a means of differentiation. From there, it further fragmented itself based on social, economic, and historical factors. The idea of the feminine became one such marker for one group to differentiate from another. The ethics then gradually developed as a way of making sure the feminine toed the already established line. It may have been justified as being for the group’s protection and enforced by a set of dos and don’ts. A common way of maintaining that all members of the group followed the rules is to envelop it in the cloak of religion or any such absolute system. The incentive of eternal reward or fear of eternal punishment or infinite cycle of reincarnation compelled the ethics to be implemented rigorously. Modifications and variations occurred depending on the social, geographical, regional, economic, and historical contexts of the group, but the universal goal of maintaining the status quo of the idea remained. Gradual self-awareness of the unfair nature of the interpretation of the idea in favour of one group that benefitted from the differences led to a reorientation of the idea of the feminine, and also the rules that implemented the idea. The idea of the ethics of the feminine emerged to have a more inclusive understanding of the idea. The process could be seen as an example of Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’¹⁶⁷ in many regards. However, it is a self-evolving organism that has all these moving parts that make it what it is – a manifestation of the complexity of human nature and understanding.

To sum up, the enquiry into the idea of the ethics of the feminine is a process that is still evolving. Gender itself is still a live issue. The jury is still out on what the best definition of gender is. The idea of the feminine can be seen as a ‘master category’ which is open to interpretation and growth, and possibly even a precursor to a more evolved category with even more evolved ethics. This would be possible through respect for the existing differences as a positive, followed self-evolution. The idea of the feminine has not had access to develop its subjectivity as the masculine as a master category has been used to create and control the feminine through ethics. Women are claiming their own space

¹⁶⁶ Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York, Routledge, 1993), 123-127

¹⁶⁷ Plato, *The Republic* (Translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford) (London, Oxford University Press, 1941), 227-234

where they can build their own identity or identities that are of them, by them, and for them. Women must become full subjects and participants, with due recognition given to them, as to all groups on the gender spectrum.

The differences in gender in terms of the gendered division of labour, political rights for men and the denial of the same to women, the division between public and private realms of society, etc. manifest a kind of bipolar gender regime in society in general. We may notice that when the significance of basic biological distinctions reduces, those of gender tend to increase. Research done by science is exerting tremendous influence over our understanding, including biological theories about sex and what is considered the natural development of men and women in society. However, though scientists might want to believe otherwise, it seems quite impossible to separate purely “scientific” and purely “biological” characteristics. They are invariably entangled and embedded in social ideas, from which our notions of gender come about.

There is no tangible way to measure this combination in terms of percentage to see how it works. There are no clear answers here. This would be observed in the case of categorising intersex individuals or those whose external genitalia don’t match the corresponding male or female chromosomes. Scientists as far back as the 18th Century tried to “normalise” indeterminate sexes as much as possible to maintain the clarity of distinction between two sexes. Today, however, we see scientists more open to guidance by social norms rather than only pure science. It would be erroneous to believe only biological and social characteristics determine sex and gender differences in human beings. The natural world itself is far more complex than we know at this point. The sex-gender distinction can be seen more as a starting point towards a more open attitude to the variations in our identities as human beings, as manifested by the growing acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ movement.

Identities become alibis for oppression, unequal treatment, segregation, and exploitation. They get used to inaccurately represent, characterise, and even justify oppression as a necessity. They are not viewed as mistakes. We therefore need to look at how to change and transform current understandings and interpretations of identities and not just altogether overcome them. Gender does not get pushed onto us passively as a script, or through nature, language, or symbols, but an active attempt by patriarchy. It is what is forced on us consistently every day while we live under its constraint in anxiety or pleasure, and are told that it is the right thing to do. Gender experiences and perspectives

are harder to identify than those demarcated by race or class. We cannot know what moral and social priorities might result from the elimination of the oppression from which women suffer in ways. But, in a world where the idea of the feminine and the subsequent ethics were seen differently, the feminine would be given equal status, and moral and social priorities would be very different from those of the world in which we live now. The *Other* would just be another *Subject*. Men and women would both have a place for themselves that would not be subsumable by the other. Simone de Beauvoir¹⁶⁸ believes that for human freedom to exist as a reality freedom of others also needs to be an actuality. Philosophical thinking can be ethical only when it values freedom as a concept through the freedom of every existing individual. Only an authentic moral attitude would understand that the freedom of others automatically leads to oneself becoming free, and acting only in self-interest is not ethical freedom.

¹⁶⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009), 23-38, 41-189, 756-772

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

“That woman who makes people exclaim:

‘She’s made of steel!’

She is simply ‘made of woman’.”

Colette, *La Vagabonde*¹⁶⁹

6.1. Overview of the Previous Chapters

Chapter 1 lays down the groundwork of some basics on which to begin this search for this complex interaction between ethical theory and the creation of the feminine. The research will expose a critical analysis of the way morality is perceived through the various lenses of absolutism, subjectivism, and relativism—coupled with feminist ethics—influences the understanding and representation of the feminine. Morality is just such a variable; a complex force that channels human ambition towards self-realisation through the synthesis of disparate views. The chapter will draw on an exploration of these philosophical lenses to demonstrate just how necessary understanding these systems of thought is in isolation as well as through the collective view of human interpretation and understanding. The nuanced approach helps disentangle all the intricate entanglements that concern the notion of the feminine and all ethical considerations tied to it.

Apart from the significance of the issue at hand, the study is located within the dynamics of the historical setting and grounded in the theoretical levels of both ethical and feminist areas. It thus not only comprises a critique of traditional views but also furthers the very transformative dialogue that challenges and develops the existing paradigms, suggesting

¹⁶⁹ Colette, *The Vagabond* (Translated by Stanley Appelbaum (New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 2010), 23

indeed that ethical topics about the notion of the feminine are not static nor universally agreed upon; they form a dynamic and developing discourse.

The rather complex and problematic association between moral absolutism and the very conceptualisation of the feminine in ethical discourse is what Chapter 2 details. This points towards knowledge of how moral absolutism has a hard, overbearing way of forcing life, which could strangle dynamics to foster personal freedom and personal expression. Examples of this rigidity include statements like the restrictions placed over women and societal norms that exist about dictating women's roles and outfits, emanating from oppressive tales told over time. Although they are no longer welcomed in the postmodern world, these notions are still under the influence of Western ideologies, which force upon them a cultural translation whenever they are criticised. Indeed, the feminine is fluid in itself and acquires its strength from such qualities, opening up a mode of discourse on authority that feminism has powerfully marked and through which it accelerated the demand to unmask religious dictatorships. Thus, the growth of feminism has pushed the conception of women's desires and rights to a level that paves the way for further development in gender variety, including LGBTQIA+ rights.

As societies mature into more discriminating entities, the formerly dominant religious prescriptions regarding lifestyle choices are increasingly cast aside; religion becomes a personal spiritual mentor rather than a prescriptive social doctrine, bearing the reason for its existence as a warning from experience and history to avoid extremism. The new battleground thus encompasses the growth in the preference of society towards plurality and personal interpretation, rather than dogmatic absolutism. These absolutes are known to clash with the evolving perspectives and bring about protests and dialogues. It is then that systems pause to reflect and sometimes even rediscover their original foundational intention. Rigid systems could have begun as flexible suggestions which with time evolved into dogmatic decrees. However, the continuous probing at the hands of philosophers and feminist re-evaluation reassures against the ossification of the feminine ideal. As much as our understanding of a society in chaos changes to one in order, so does our interpretation of these rules, proving that change is one of the most important constants in the landscape of ethics.

Chapter 3 discusses the nuanced evolution of relativism and subjectivism and their implications in appreciating cultural norms and feminine identity. The philosophical

frameworks, which have come under criticism for overestimating cultural diversity and being non-coherent, are argued to have greatly facilitated a dangerously uncritical acceptance of such ideologies as sexism and bigotry. If there is no universal moral standard, then it is hard to critique cultural practices that entail inequality, especially towards women. The paradigms generally provide for heritage and social order to be put ahead of the individual's rights, which then restricts many of the freedoms of women and preserves traditional patterns of gender relationships. These are very discriminatory norms, very deeply rooted in misinterpretations of religious texts and caught by patriarchal structures that confine women to private spheres, with restricted roles for them in public decision-making. Women's perceived role as the carriers of collective honour, particularly when it comes to their sexuality, then further limits their autonomy and underlines the pervasive fear of it.

The chapter insists that all these practices are deeply rooted in a patriarchal conceptualisation of purity and marriage, compounded by communal values that put collective duty above individual expression. Such systems are held in place by informal pressures and formal rules that discourage the reporting of violence against women. The salience of such systems of oppression becomes more appreciated when noted that blaming individuals or cultures will neither be effective nor befitting for a significant change to be appreciated. Effective changes require a reinterpretation of moral boundaries that cut across groups, challenging the hierarchical systems entrenched in society and patriarchy, and voluntarily associating removed from retribution. This involves the repealing of all laws discriminatory on grounds of gender that are anchored in scriptures and the upholding of protocols that go beyond ideological, faith-inspired, or historical restrictions to retune customary norms with modern social needs and align reforms with contemporary values and aspirations. This way, there is a promise for a more dynamic social system that holds out a beacon sparkling with inclusivity and fairness in moral and cultural practices.

Chapter 4 considers the intricate relationship between the forces of ethics, morality, and feminist philosophy to give a close look at how this field examines and attempts to revegetate the situation of names in contemporary life and thought. Ethics, customarily envisioned to be the intellectual study of morality, concerns itself with understanding how norms of morality relate to different societies' behaviours and take cognisance of the changes the society passes through. Feminist philosophers have often criticised and questioned the prescriptions of social life, in particular patriarchal structures that have for

long formed and defined women's roles and identities, marginalising their experiences and testimonies, and calling for a normative analysis that affirms them. Feminism as a global movement faces the encumbrance of the problem of discerning women as a category, for it often tries to establish the many experiences women might have for their gendered/sexed subject heading, as forming part of a broad analysis of cultural background, social stratification, and economic status.

This perspective extends the reach of feminist ethics to include the fight for liberation for many other groups of marginalised people. Feminist ethicists also take issue with the macho bias embedded in the dominant tradition of moral philosophy. A patriarchal society causes and supports women's being denied access to education and the professions while leading to systemic oppression. There is also an exploration of the universal character of gender oppression—how women everywhere have less power and autonomy than men. Besides, a few women have their privileges for, race, or economic reasons; the general online nature of the male-power structure argues for significant political, economic, and cultural transformation if women are to be genuinely liberated. Feminist ethics aim to correct these imbalances by reconfiguring general moral theories to integrate women's experiences, thereby from then on resulting in a more enriched and variegated moral philosophy.

Chapter 5 explores the present building of an ethics of the feminine and declares, in one voice, that it is an ongoing and dynamic process. Neither does the ambiguous and contested status of the term become relevant in that nobody can produce a singular, universally accepted definition of its meaning at present, given the debate about it. The feminine arrives as an already matured ethic that values differences as strengths and not as divisions. Ethical standards, historically managed by males, create a subjectivity of the feminine at times; this hinders the full growth of women into subjectivity. Women now are asserting their autonomy and trying to create spaces for them to form identities that are genuinely representative of their selves and their aspirations. Including a broader recognition of diverse gender identities along the spectrum, thus allowing a more expansive, inclusive participation in societal roles. The structural arrangements within the chapter find fault with the bipolar gender regime established by society, where there are noted distinctions in the methods of labour division, rights to political actions, and social spaces that reveal evident inequalities in the systems.

The multiplicity of the interactions that arise between the scientific studies and the social expectations, either knowingly or unknowingly, helped in reaffirming the gender differences, sometimes as a result of biological determinism. However, the expressions of the natural world and human identities are too complex to accept the traditionally clear-cut binary perspectives that contemporary culture includes the emergences and acceptance of the broad and diversifying concept of gender outside the confines of the two-dimensional classification. The consequences of doing away with gender subordination thus strongly shift moral and social perceptions and the entire world would soon become equal, the feminine would be equally respected, and everyone recognised as subjects in their own right. It opens up ways of thinking for recasting relations between genders in cooperative and egalitarian terms, in a society wherein diverse identities coexist without hierarchic subsummation.

6.2. Understanding the Interpretation of the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine

If we were to look at the idea of the feminine as a circle, could we look at the idea of the ethics of the feminine as a circle within it or as a circle encompassing it? It is a valid question when we try to picture how the feminine gets described in the human context. What is this idea? How does it get ethically defined? Did the systemic nature of patriarchy use an already existing understanding of ethics to define how the idea of the feminine should behave, or did the idea of the feminine cause patriarchy to react and form an ethics for it? How does this idea of the ethics of the feminine come about as it is viewed in the world today? These questions can burn a hole in the brain like a kid with a magnifying glass out in the sun. The fact of the matter is that the ethics that act as a guide to understanding the notion of the feminine do exist, and it has not been created by women. So is the idea of the feminine. The unfortunate situation of the dynamics of gender makes it clear that whatever the idea or the ethics associated with what it means for a person to be feminine, it has not been defined by the person who identifies as feminine. The categorisation feels like an external marker with which they get branded for life. However, this interpretation is gradually being changed by people interpreting the feminine as they see it for themselves. They are also making the definition of the feminine clear and known, and if ethics can guide its behaviour, or if ethics even matters to it at all.

This brings into perspective a lot of interpretations based on the ethical know-how that we may be exposed to as individuals and as groups. This also brings forth how we look at the idea of what it is to be feminine in our context. While there may exist variations in the understanding of the idea of the ethics of the feminine, a consensus shows that all of us by and large look at the ethics and the idea in a similar fashion. There are ideas based on how we have been raised, ideas that we have internalised and accepted as normal to explain these concepts. While these were initially looked upon as ways mainly distinguishing to make life easier, they gradually grew to be discriminations that could not be violated. Doing so incurred censure or ostracism of the family, group and even society. We have been conditioned to understand the feminine as defined by attributes that are psychological or biological, these mechanisms are only a small part of the process. It must also be seen as a concept formed through socio-cultural processes.

A more modern approach towards understanding gender views it as a concept that cannot be generalised. Anthropologists, sociologists, feminists and other experts in the social sciences look at the idea of the feminine as rooted in intricate and multiple socio-cultural contexts, and not just defined based on the presence or absence of certain anatomical appendages, or biological functions like giving birth and breastfeeding. Unfortunately, these biological functions have over millennia become coated in a veneer of cultural norms, which have also then defined the dos and don'ts for those seen as feminine. The idea of the ethics of the feminine has become a package of roles and responsibilities that are based on the idea of the feminine, which is heavily affected by the biologically assigned and defined sex. What a person is supposed to do or how they are expected to behave based on how they are perceived by society in terms of gender, has led to that becoming their identity and who they are. This has led to the feminine and women being seen as people unable to live on their own, and relying on the 'stronger' gender to support them, thereby giving more value to masculinity and men. These affect the formation of the person's identity, sense of belonging, sexuality, and eventually, ethics.

If we look at the idea of the ethics of the feminine with simplistic lenses, we can say that the idea of the feminine is how the feminine is defined and perceived: visually, mentally, and through pre-sanctioned behaviour. This ethics would be how the definition and perception of the feminine are categorised through what is seen as appropriate or inappropriate as per a pre-existing societal ethical standard. The feminine is expected to behave in a particular way that is seen as 'right' for them mainly because of their gender. This then defines what roles

in the workforce and what relations are also ethically appropriate. Thus, the ideas of masculine and feminine are described based on the qualities ascribed to them respectively. Traditional associations look at gender as heavily binary, an antiquated notion that is slowly becoming more open to the identifications of gender minorities and their designations. Whether gender is seen as binary or a spectrum, it is very hierarchical and unequally inclined, with one being considered 'better' than the others. Critics have challenged how the masculine is seen as dominant while the feminine and other genders are seen as the weaker categories. This happens when there is a blurring of the categories and the qualities ascribed to the idea of the feminine become naturalised into what the idea of the feminine is. This then leads to a dangerous game of 'the chicken or the egg' whereby it becomes difficult to distinguish if the idea is responsible for the ethics or vice versa. The qualities used to identify the idea become the idea. The idea then dictates the qualities that define it. And the vicious circle continues.

A large chunk of this identification of the idea of the ethics of the feminine could be understood because the traditional study of knowledge in any discipline, for a very long time, focussed almost completely on men or the masculine as the encompassing ideal for what it meant to be a human being. Men were the object of analysis in almost all studies. Even when thinkers started paying attention to the feminine or women, they were studied and identified through the eyes of thinkers and researchers who were men or masculine. Thus, the idea of the feminine as defined by the feminine themselves is a very recent phenomenon in human history. This also means that the ethics that defines the idea is also one that has been defined by the masculine, in keeping with a status quo that favours men or the masculine ideal.

The growth of queer theory and the study of other categories on the gender spectrum, along with intersectionality showed how traditional human knowledge has mostly been about the heterosexual, Christian, white, upper-class male, marginalising all other sections, including women and the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as non-white and non-upper-class groups. These can vary depending on the country or region, like in India, caste and religion would be a dimension that would get added to the intersection of society. The important thing to note is that men and the masculine cannot be studied in the same way as women and the feminine. While the idea of the masculine is seen as the norm, the nucleus from which everything else on the gender spectrum is looked at, the idea of the feminine is associated with the position of the marginalised.

6.3. Individuality and Freedom within the Idea of Ethics of the Feminine

The problem with the categorisation of anything is that it tends to generalise individual components based on some common qualities shared while ignoring the unique attributes at the same time. If we look closely at the idea of the ethics of the feminine, we would also notice something similar in play. Even when the category looks at its members it tends to follow a majoritarian approach. The qualities shared by the majority of the group's members, irrespective of how that majority came to achieve those qualities, become the attributes of the group as a whole. The ethics of the idea is also guided by similar ideas. Categorisation becomes arbitrary and politicised. The category itself becomes one pushed on a group by a more dominant outside force, compelling the group to accept that this is who they are, not because they think it is, but because somebody else decided it for them. Thus, if we even look at the ethics of the idea, we will see that it is also the work of vested interests.

The idea of the ethics of the feminine and the idea of the feminine itself exist as concepts that have been defined from the outside. The individual is not seen as an absolute value in and of themselves and believed to be capable of existing on their own. Once this is recognised, the next stage of discovering a person's identity begins. The individual exists in relationship to the world and to other individuals. This is a fact of reality. This means that the person has to live in harmony with others and the world. While we may consider this impossible, it can be achieved. A person can be free and enjoy the benefits they wish to enjoy when they understand that others wish to do the same as well. This is an internal human feeling that is universal to all human beings. The self-awareness of this freedom also comes with the added knowledge that focusing only on one person's freedom and not on the others as well can lead to conflict. Thus, a person's freedom can only be achieved through the freedom of others. The root of conflicts, oppression and subjugation on every level stems from people paying attention solely to their freedom while forgetting that others have the same aspirations towards their freedom. This internal realisation also leads to harmony externally.

It is important to note that this is not an invitation to throw a tantrum on personal freedom. We are free, but our freedom also includes the freedom of others. Our identity is our own and also includes the understanding of the identities of others. The way to keep the peace and avoid a descent into anarchy is to understand that this internal freedom is the fount of

everything. The idea of the ethics of the feminine and the idea of the feminine itself can be concepts that matter only when they come from the people who are the most affected by the way they are defined. We need to keep in mind that a person ought to choose to identify as feminine and act as per how they feel is appropriate for them, and not just accept the concept as a definition of who they are by an external influencer, no matter how strongly they claim to have the interest of the feminine in mind. Thus, we see how feminism moved from basic women's rights to a redefining of what a woman or even what feminine means. Intersectionality is a good example of this quest for a more sound and realistic identity of what the idea of the feminine is. The freedom from the individual to the community, to the society and so on is based on this freedom. Ethical systems and laws also find their basis in this understanding of an individual's freedom and their relationship with others and the world. It is based on an acceptance of this freedom of self and others, and a rejection of anything that violates it, either oppression of self or others.

This understanding of oneself and others can immediately be transferred to the understanding of the idea of the feminine and the ethics of that idea. The women's movements that have led to all the progress in terms of a relook and a redefinition of what it means to be feminine are proof of this self-actualisation that women and the feminine are aspiring for and working towards in all aspects of reality. Another point that this progress also makes very clear is that the idea of the feminine and the ethics of that idea are ever-changing concepts. The constant variable is the understanding of freedom. The dynamism of the process is its fight against its oppression and subjugation and against that of others. It is a constant struggle without respite which can even result in death. But doesn't this make the entire process futile? Isn't the struggle for the feminine to constantly identify itself and its ethics on its terms, an illusion? Not necessarily. As long as the feminine does not feel satisfied with who it has been identified as and how it is expected to behave, it stays true to its understanding of being free. Its ethics is experienced in that truth and freedom, which then becomes its enlightenment and salvation. Realising that freedom of self and others is the first step, taking the necessary steps to achieve it is the next step.

6.4. The Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine: Natural or Constructed Paradigm?

The idea of the ethics of the feminine and the idea of the feminine as well are on the precipice of the global women's rights movements. The gender dynamics is a conflict between an old identity and the new one, fighting and struggling for individuality, freedom and respect as human beings and not some gendered other. We need to keep in mind that gender as a concept in itself is re-evolving and redefining itself. This also means that the ideas of the masculine and the feminine are also constantly changing. But, is this something that is supposed to be the way it's supposed to be? Or is it just a phase of transition to a utopian gendered society? Humanity is in flux, a historical becoming, and a reality whose basis is moving forward in time towards a better reality. In this reality, the idea of the ethics of the feminine can be taken for granted. The internalisation of what it is to be feminine makes it seem like a normal thing. Any attempt at redefining the feminine is seen as an assault on society. The rebels engaged in that assault will look at how the current scenario benefits only a select few and argue about how a change in the status quo with equality and equitability would only be beneficial to all of humanity.

Currently, the situation is such that oppressive sections of humanity define the idea of the ethics of the feminine and contribute to keeping it that way, to benefit the masculine, under the guise of it being necessary for the common good. The idea of the feminine is not something that the feminine came up with on her own. It was imposed on her. That is what she fights against – an identity that is not a creation of her own volition, an unnatural reality. Rather than a role-reversal form of retribution, she just asks to be given what is long overdue for her as a human being. She legitimately demands to be treated as a peer, as an equal contributor to society and humanity. The demand is salvation from subjugation and sovereignty to figure out the idea of the feminine on her own. The aim is to move beyond the Subject-Object dichotomy and redefine the gender relationship as one of equality between peers.

The current situation is one where the masculine holds the reins of defining the idea of the ethics of the feminine. While in certain cases and communities, these reins have been handed over, we can still say that it is still largely a man's world. The fear of letting go is also because of the masculine fears that without having control over the idea of the feminine he will have to reinvent himself, by himself, on his own. He has always identified himself as

the better opposite of the feminine, but that idea no longer holds water in today's society. He therefore fears his liberation as well. The status quo is cosy, change is uncomfortable and the unknown is scary, more so when it's a situation that benefits the oppressor. This causes him to bear down even further on his oppression. What helps is also the fact that the idea of the feminine has been groomed to seek its identity through the masculine. Every aspect of the idea of the feminine is based on a definition that benefits the masculine, and none is more beneficial to the masculine than the idea of the ethics of the feminine. The grooming by the male oppressor has created allies among the feminine oppressed. Why would any oppressor give up their power?

Making sure that the situation gets viewed as natural only enhances the status quo. Any attempt at creating a new natural situation that works on collaboration and cooperation instead of oppression goes against the basic plan of the oppressor: holding on to power and influence. The mythicisation and pedestalisation of the feminine create a larger-than-life idea of the feminine that gets glorified, fogging up the ground reality. The feminine is encouraged to consume a steady diet of such gender propaganda to the extent that she loses sight of who she is, and begins believing that her oppression is for her good, and is not an oppression. The idea of the feminine gets stunted to never assume the necessity of its existence but depend on the protection, love, help, and guidance of others. When that illusion shatters, she sees how the idea of the feminine and the ethics of that idea are her responsibility alone. Her current situation is one of "equality in inequality", and not one of actual equality. She realises that every benefit that is offered to her without her asking is merely a pacifier or a safety valve to keep her from realising her true potential.

Nothing is natural within the realms of collective human knowledge and reality. The idea of the feminine, and the ethics of that idea, all are products developed by civilisation. Even the redefinition of the idea of the feminine by the feminine herself will also be a creation. The only difference here is that she can claim proper legitimacy for it, as something that is created of the feminine, by the feminine and for the feminine, something that is on her terms and not on that of anybody else. The idea of the ethics of the feminine will not be defined based on her hormones, 'mysterious' instincts, her body or how she is perceived to relate to the world. This is an identity that stems from a collective change based on individual self-awareness. The other genders become friends, allies and partners, and not saviours. The idea of the ethics of the feminine looks at going beyond the contingencies and miseries of the human condition. It is not the consequence of a mysterious fate or some otherworldly idea.

The idea and the ethics both demand their own space in the human context, to thrive on their own in collaboration with others actively, and not as passive observers. It may sound utopian, but freedom breaks the circle of oppression.

With each stage of freedom from oppression, the success encourages the former oppressed towards equality, leading to an inner metamorphosis, leading to a redefining of their identity from within. The idea of the ethics of the feminine and the idea of the feminine exist as ideas focussing on a reorganisation of relationships and reciprocities within the gender and human contexts. The relation of the genders is the most natural relation among human beings as it reveals how human behaviour and human essence come naturally to human beings. The aim is to have camaraderie beyond any natural differentiations through identities that are self-defined through collaboration and cooperation.

6.5. The Feminine Body: Does it Define the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine?

When we look at a person our sense of sight is the first way, we form an idea of who they are. Seeing them, we make associations with the prior knowledge we have about the world and people and try to fit them into the relevant categories we have learnt over the years. The same sense of sight is what we use to identify someone as feminine. Even when solidifying the concept of the idea of the feminine, society or the dominant deciding groups have used visual markers and identifiers as the go-to method of identifying someone as feminine. These visual identifiers are those that are usually seen or not seen on the body. We base our understanding of what the idea of the feminine is based on the markers that society has taught us to look for.

Society, in turn, has come up with that knowledge and categorisation through observation of similar biological and physical characteristics in people and associated them with a category created as early as human civilisation began listing things and people into categories. This may have changed or evolved with the addition of new information, but the idea of the feminine has by and large stayed the same throughout the evolution of human society, to suit the social or political motivations and narrative of the dominant sections of society, i.e., the masculine. This has given rise to all the traditional knowledge we have about

gender in terms of the physical body, which has then been used to define sex and sexuality, sexual and gender differences, and the power relations among the genders.

The body becomes the basis by which a person defines their identity and social constitution. However, this identification is thrust on them at birth by society when they are categorised binarily into male and female because that's the way it has been traditionally done, thereby choosing the path for social conditioning of the child into the gender associated with the identification at birth. In all of this, the person has no choice of their own and accepts what is given to them by society. The ideas of the masculine and the feminine are ingrained in them early. They not only learn about who they are in this binarism but also learn how to identify other people they encounter using the same parameters. Anyone not fitting into the mould that they have been taught to use when screening for a person's gender is seen as either an aberration or as belonging to a third category of people who don't fit into the other two genders physically attribute-wise. This physical identification has contributed to the idea of the feminine, which then has initiated the person into the ethics of that idea. The same holds for the masculine. The idea of the feminine is a generalising category of something unique and subjective to the individual. The ethics of the idea can also be seen similarly as traditional knowledge leans heavily into making gender essentialist and dependent on physical characteristics. Not only that, it makes it a closed category with very little wiggle room for newer understandings and interpretations of gender in general, and the feminine in particular.

This leads to an oppressive experience for the feminine in the growth of its ethics that stems from how it is perceived in terms of looks, shape, manner of movement, and the space it occupies. Its ethics is different from that of the idea of the masculine and is manifested in observable and ordinary ways in society. The idea of the ethics of the feminine expects a conforming to the idea of the feminine as created and propagated by society based on bodily differences and the consequent expectations and behaviour. This ethics is the product of the historical, cultural, social, and economic advances of society, and is explained as being an intrinsic part of the idea of the feminine, from the point of view of a patriarchal and essentialist assumption. Certain physical actions which may otherwise not be seen as gender-based get associated with genders very early on, and become norms by which the person to whom the gender and the action have been attributed should live. Actions like throwing a ball, or opening a jar become associated with anatomical or biological limitations, which they are not.

They are ways of proceeding taught as part of nurturing the ethics and the idea of the feminine in the social, political and aesthetic context of how they ought to use their body. These rules are defined as a necessary part of what the feminine has to do to be feminine and can even include how they walk, sit or even carry things. The space created for the feminine to exist in becomes “baby-proofed” in a patriarchal mindset, with the ethics as the padding considered necessary for their safety. The control of the body leads to control of the mind and will. The idea of the feminine conditions the ethics of that idea which in turn conditions the ethics further, an unbreakable loop of sexist oppression passed as natural human development for the feminine.

Just as we gain the idea of a person by visually perceiving them, freedom from this restrictive idea of the ethics of the feminine has to be manifest through the freedom of the person – not just the mind and will, but also the body. The body is the physical manifestation of the freedom a person enjoys and the dominant group uses the idea of the ethics of the feminine to control that. This even contributes to the male gaze and a lack of privacy and personal space to develop as the feminine wishes on its own. A redefining of that ethics and idea means redefining how the feminine moves physically and occupies space around on its terms. It is about realising the differences taught as part of imbibing the idea and its ethics. The ethics is seen as a particular physical and social way of living based on a pre-existing idea of what it means to be feminine. It is viewed as a quality of existence for the idea of the feminine. Once they realise this, they realise that performing physical tasks successfully is not dependent on the body they have been told they have, but on their own redefined understanding of how their body is capable of doing anything they put their mind to.

This leads to freedom of movement in ways they never realised they could before. The restrictive ethics of traditional patriarchal society no longer define their idea of the feminine. She is more aware of what the physical body, freed by the mind and will can do. She realises that the idea of the ethics of the feminine is the creation and result of a patriarchal and sexist society. The same ethics teaches an idea from a young age that the feminine has limited capability and spatiality, which sticks with people into adulthood. This leads to an acceptance of an inability to do more than what is physically expected in a limited sense. This further entrenches a discontinuity between what the ethics and the idea are capable of, and what is expected of them by society. This creates a lack of self-confidence and self-awareness leading to further oppression and subjugation, further stacking the idea of the

ethics of the feminine against the idea. This leads to the feminine still being viewed as the Other, and constrained by gender-specific roles that further highlight the lack of freedom.

6.6. The Role of Society and Morality in Shaping the Idea of the Ethics of the Feminine

At some point in the timeline of human evolution, a connection was made between the biological and genital characteristics of humans and the presence or absence of physical and mental abilities necessary for functioning and contributing to human society. This propaganda was most likely floated by the dominant group to further their agenda to keep power which they had managed to secure through external force. They also claimed themselves naturally selected to lead and work in the public sphere by the fact that one-half of the population had to temporarily discontinue contributing to the workforce to give birth and nurture the next generation of humans. To make this half feel like they mattered their contributions were most definitely spun as being important to the growth of society, but differently, in a more private sphere. This gradually solidified the idea of the genders as the masculine, the feminine, and the others. The ethics grew, making these ideas even more impervious to change. This contributed even further to the demarcation of behaviours, divisions of labour, and even language and fashion considered appropriate to the idea of the gender that a person got branded with when they were born, based on their anatomy.

These external indicators became the benchmarks for an internalised identity that defined a person at birth and continued to influence them throughout their life. This process applied to all the gender categories and even the very understanding of gender. However, the power dynamics initiated by the dominant group made sure that they had a better and bigger share. The other groups were kept in check through ethics associated with their identity which had rules and norms to control every aspect of their life. Millennia's internalisation of that ethics contributed to the idea as it is today, and in the case of the idea of the ethics of the feminine, the subjugation and oppression used to keep the feminine in check became normalised. The dominant group became the rule-maker and moderator, pushing their agenda as the will of society in general.

In today's society, the theories of looking at the idea of gender and its categories are more inclined towards a performative perspective, debunking myths on gender differences

perpetrated by the essentialist narrative. The already existing traditional study of ethics and morality with its diverse schools in absolutism, relativism and subjectivism has been interacting with the more recent ethical schools in feminism and gender studies. This melting pot has brought more theoretical interests and perspectives to an already crowded intellectual terrain. While we may look at it as a complication of certainties that existed for millennia and centuries, it could also be seen as a necessary wake-up call, a sort of ethical intervention. What it does indeed prove is that the concept of gender, and by that logic, the idea of the feminine, are a journey of the general concepts and of the intersection with the individual's context within which it is ensconced.

We can also extend this influence to the idea of the ethics of the feminine when we realise that everything we read and study here is the product of the human ability to give value to concepts. They can do so in the absolute and universal sense through moral absolutism, or the contexts of morality seen as relative and subjective. They have even realised the importance of the intersectionality of the human experience, especially of those who were previously unheard, oppressed, and on the fringes. The basic need for self-expression pushes the individual to make sure their voice and experience have their day in the sun. Anything claiming to exist on its own as an absolute, like morality and gender, can be and has been critically challenged and re-inscribed to become more relevant and relational to the theory of the day and age. It also shows how there exist similarities and commonalities across contexts and societies concerning certain aspects of concepts considered universal.

The recent revamp in the understanding of the idea of the feminine and even its ethics is not arbitrary. It is in keeping with the tone of giving a voice to previously overlooked perspectives. Gender has for most of human existence been pigeon-holed into something based on the biological and sexual characteristics of a person decided at birth. Human knowledge today asks whether that is a justified criterion for classifying gender, or just a political tactic at keeping the status quo favourable to the dominant group and its narrative. The fact the idea of gender today allows the identity of the person exposed to it to choose and reject what was given to them at birth, shows how diverse, complex and varied it is. A person can choose to re-identify themselves with a gender category not in the traditional list, or even reject the concept of gender as an identifying feature for themselves altogether.

This makes the idea of the ethics of the feminine even more fluid and dynamic. It is not completely arbitrary, but rather a negotiation with the reality it lives in, a negotiation with

no clear-cut answer, just a new level in the hope of perfection. The key to navigating this veritable unknown is a humility that is as efficacious as it is necessary. The fear and apprehension we may feel are normal and justified in terms of how society and ethics grow and progress. They influence how we move forward in trying to understand the idea of the ethics of the feminine. Having an agenda with a utopian end goal is what helps the idea get fleshed out. But vigilance is necessary to make sure that political processes do not overpower the quest for utopia at the cost of the innocent and marginalised. That is where the idea of the ethics of the feminine differs. While advocating for a new and more inclusive normal, the crux is that the voice and experience of the neglected, unaccounted, and unchosen – the Other – bears witness.

To sum up, the idea of the ethics of the feminine reveals a strenuous and complex format that exists below the surface of what may otherwise look like a smooth functioning gender dynamic. The elements of absolutism, relativism, subjectivism, and even feminist ethics show how human knowledge continues to evolve and grow with new experiences. The world organised around a gender hierarchy is seen as important to maintaining social order. The ethics and the ideas of the masculine, the feminine, and other identities on or off the gender spectrum are realised into different realities. The idea of the ethics of the feminine, as well as the other gender minorities, occupy a relatively powerless position with reference to the dominant ethics of the idea of the masculine at the centre. The ethics and the idea of the feminine vary based on the patriarchies it inhabits in time and place. The ethics helps in the gendering of the idea and identity through ethical grooming, aimed at creating ‘proper’ men and women through rules and regulations, enforced subconsciously and even violently.

Identifying the idea of the feminine and its ethics cannot come from an external source. It is an identity that has to come from within, and it has to come from within the person who identifies as feminine. It is how they see and understand the concepts for themselves. They may use the starting point based on the understanding of the idea and ethics that were given to them by people who defined it for them but they now redefine and reinvent the meaning and understanding of those terms how they see them. This idea and ethics cannot be defined by someone masculine or non-feminine because they can never have that lived experience of what the feminine goes through in all aspects of existence. The oppressor can never comprehend what the oppressed go through. They have not faced that situation. Even if we

put an intersectional spin on this by saying that an oppressor in one context can be the oppressed in another context, the oppressor may have some idea of what oppression is, but they will never be able to see themselves as an oppressor in their scenario. The experience of the oppressed is their unique experience which they rebel and fight against. Allies from other contexts can show their support and offer help but the intimate understanding of the oppression faced is a seminal experience that only the oppressed realises as being their subjugation.

The visual and physical markers that define the idea of the ethics of the feminine are not decided or set by the feminine based on how they see themselves. The example of the veil used in all its forms of covering a woman's face, head or even the entire body comes to mind as a symbol. That is an identifier that has come to be associated with and imposed by the dominant gender group on the feminine. They see these as integral to the qualities of modesty, honour and femininity that they believe define how the feminine ethically behaves in the public sphere. It becomes a symbol of oppression and hence in some cultures its use is forced, whereas in other cultures its non-usage is forced. As early as childhood this idea is ingrained in children of all gender categories when clothes and uniforms of females get policed in educational institutions, whether it is wearing skirts of a certain length, or not wearing sleeveless clothing. Among women, the terms of 'Ms.', 'Miss', or 'Mrs.' become markers to indicate their availability for men. In the Indian context, jewellery like the *mangalsutra*¹⁷⁰, toe rings, nose rings, and the *sindoor*¹⁷¹ also become identifiers of an ethical idea of the feminine. Here, the oppression that takes place is one in which somebody other than the feminine is defining what it means to be feminine, and how the feminine ought to morally behave. This is somebody else's visualisation of the idea and its ethics. Thus, we see that the idea and its ethics have similarities when they are defined in the broader context of human society, but they also have their unique attributes in keeping with their specific contexts.

The idea of the ethics of the feminine is a series of overlapping structures assembled through a variety of interventions. Every member in that 'ecosystem', no matter how marginalised ends up being involved in keeping it all together. It is continuous and simultaneous in

¹⁷⁰ Sharma, Shreya, *How Do Marital Adornments Impact Women's Lives?* (Feminism in India, April 20, 2021, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/04/20/how-do-marital-adornments-impact-womens-lives/>

¹⁷¹ Ibidem (Accessed on July 28, 2024)

different areas thereby evolving into heterogeneous layers, with each member participating consciously or unconsciously. While the entire concept may appear to be sorted and functioning effortlessly, it is porous and open to ideas that may sneak in and end up changing its very fabric and structure. The ethics and the idea of the feminine are also subject to transformation and evolution. The dominant group tries to define the baseline for the ethics and the idea, and the subjugated group constantly challenges it. That is the essence of the struggle and growth. It is a re-looking at a heritage given to them and redefining it on their terms, even if it means disowning that heritage entirely. The ethical systems that envelope the idea are just stages in the constant journey of evolution and self-identification, for an ideal to perfection, funded by forward-thinking progress.

RAVENSHAW JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

**Volume VIII
November 2022**

Editor : Ram Chandra Majhi
Executive Editors : Patitapaban Das
Himansu Sekhar Samal
Associate Editor : Ashoka Kumar Tarai

Department of Philosophy
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack-753003, Odisha, India

Contents

LAXMINARAYAN LENKA AND B. ANAND SAGAR	
<i>Descrates, Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty and Scepticism</i>	5
BHASKARJIT NEOG	
<i>Environment and Individual Moral Responsibility</i>	22
ANIRBAN BHATTACHARJEE	
<i>Language, Meaning and Truth : A Study of Svavarchalā-Shvetaketu Sambad in the Mohābhārata</i>	37
SHUBHRA JYOTI DAS	
<i>Sankara's Treatment of Karmayoga in the Bhagavadgītābhāṣya: An Examination in the Light of Tagore's Thoughts</i>	48
AUDRICK D'MELLO AND SANJYOT D. PAI VERNEKAR	
<i>Understanding Derridean Deconstruction and Ethics Today in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic</i>	62
C. ANJANEYULU	
<i>The Role of Personal Pronouns and Proper Names in Hume's Theory of Self : A critical Study</i>	76
NGAINEILAM HAOKIP	
<i>Personal Indentity in Relation to Value Theory and Moral Responsibility</i>	85
PRASANTA BARMAN	
<i>Sabda and Kala : The Grammarian Perspective</i>	101
RAGESH A V	
<i>Moral Concerns in the Pandamic Crisis : Evaluating the Scope and Relevance of Virtue Ethics</i>	113
ZABIN LAISHRAM	
<i>Revisiting Ganndhi's Thoughts an Education for Tomorrow's World</i>	127
GOPAL SAHU	
<i>Depth Epistemology — An Apprraisal</i>	145

Appendix:

Paper Entitled “Understanding Derridean Deconstruction and Ethics Today in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic”

“Amid increasing awareness of the malaise of rapid modernization and suspicion toward the prevalent forms of radicalism, postmodernism draws an audience seeking a new form of human emancipation and a new theoretical ground for social criticism...”ⁱ Every aspect of today’s society has seen a radical change: economic growth and industrialisation, urbanisation, democratisation, social disintegration, cultural transformation, etc. This has given rise to a situation in which tradition, modernity, and postmodernity have intertwined themselves in a unique hybrid amalgamation which in turn has led to the uncertainty of us having a common human aim and direction. The appeal of deconstruction in such a scenario can be seen even more, as an elegant way of diagnosing the current pulse of society while charting a worthy course for the future. Postmodernism is a double-edged sword leading to both hope and despair while postmodern ethics is based on the scepticism of the traditional narratives about morality, rules, and a general ethical way of proceeding. This negates any possibility of a positive formulation of ethical principles in contemporary ethical discourse, opening the way to look at the *Other* from a completely different perspective. This other has always been marginalised and suppressed both in thought and practice. How does this come about? It comes from the assumption that idea and reality are inseparable. When we deny existence and reality to the other through our thinking, it automatically makes the jump to its marginalisation and suppression, often through violence in the real world.

In this regard, none cuts a more unique figure on the philosophical horizon than Jacques Derrida. He was one of the most famous, controversial, but also wise figures in not only recent French intellectual life, but also in philosophy of the 20th Century. He distanced the various philosophical movements frolicking in the fertile ground of French philosophical

thought of the time, like phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism. He suffered greatly from the antisemitism of Algeria's majority Muslim population and was deeply marked by the experience of having been in an inferior position at the nexus of three different religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all claiming to speak the Truth without knowing how to treat the others with particular respect. He was a brilliant student, but in an odd position; highly privileged in terms of education, but utterly at the margins in Metropolitan France in his status as an Algerian Jew. It was from the late 1960s onwards that Derrida began to develop the ideas that made his name, through his abstruse and subtle writing style. Behind the high-flown vocabulary, he laid down some crucially important ideas.

Deconstruction – Derrida's Weapon of Choice

Derrida argues that Western philosophical tradition has focussed so much on meaning that it has worked extremely to appropriate and master the other by essentially reducing its plurality to some semblance of sameness. Deconstruction aims to look at the other from an outside perspective, a different way of looking at it that cannot be reduced to a kind of logocentric, philosophical conceptual singularity. Derrida makes it clear that he is not calling for philosophical irrationalism or relativism in the interpretation of philosophical discourse. He rejects the thinking that deconstruction tries to go against the grain of truth or stability of thought. We cannot just reject something and directly look at its opposite without analysing it with precision and rigor. We have to interrogate not just the idea under contention, but also the essence of reason. This is not reducible to technique or science and requires the type of thinking that goes beyond mere setting of goals, rational thought, technology, or even metaphysics.

Derrida founded deconstruction, probably the most famous of his terms, as a way of critiquing, literary and philosophical texts, and political institutions of the day, essentially of the Western philosophical tradition. He used it to describe the way he went about thinking, though when other people started using this term, he quite often felt they had misunderstood what he meant by it. Essentially, deconstruction means pulling apart any kind of excessive loyalty to a particular idea and working to see aspects of the truth that might be buried in its opposite. While deconstruction happens at both the literary and philosophical levels, the latter aspect concerned Derrida more. Philosophical thinking created an element of dualism,

which in turn created a dichotomy, where one term of the dichotomy was usually given more importance than the other.

The most common way that deconstruction happens is via analyses of texts. The word ‘text’ here is anything that carries meaning. It can be an article, a book, a movie, a song, etc. This starts with looking at the literal meaning of a text, followed by its hidden meaning, and diving even further into alternative meanings. For Derrida, a deconstructive reading works best through comparison such that there is a clash of visions. This helps us with finding out different ways in which the texts are speaking to us. When we throw texts through this intellectual wormhole, they inadvertently end up doling out meaning in some form. This happens at once and also separately. Since Derrida held that ideas and reality are inseparable, and the other exists both conceptually and in reality, the goal of deconstruction is to find this point of *otherness*. Deconstruction does not exist in some sort of vacuum or nothingness; it is about an openness to the other. Also, the meaning of a text is not something that is constant, static, or stable. Unlike traditional philosophical thought, deconstruction does not lead to some sort of ultimate truth. It is merely a starting point for further interpretation, which then calls for more discussion, analysis and interpretation, and so on. The opening of the text to that search allows for more analysis, or else everything would be fixed and frozen. “A responsible reading should not be confined by the goal of unearthing the supposed intention of the authorial subject, but should instead take it as its responsibility to open up the otherness of the text. Reading is thus proposed as the locus where/in which the reading subject explores a relation to the other...”ⁱⁱ

Deconstruction seeks out the similarities and the differences. At first glance, we try to look at what the text says to us through its obvious themes. At the same time, we also try to keep an eye out for alternative and subtly hidden meanings, essentially what the text does not tell us directly. Derrida makes it clear that for this to happen, we need to go beyond the constraints of the syntaxes that conventional language makes us follow. We need to think outside the box, colour outside the lines a little, to get into the marrow of the text. We need to engage in the dualities of the text creatively, successfully swinging between what the text conveys to us directly, and what it does indirectly. Derrida’s interpretations of texts make it difficult to pinpoint a clear demarcation between the obvious meaning and the deconstruction. Derrida believed that deconstruction merely highlights what was already revealed in the text itself. The meaning is already there. We just have to discover it under syntactical and semantic debris.

Thus, it goes without saying that for Derrida the context becomes extremely important. We cannot abandon it even if we wanted to. Once we identify and analyse the context, we can get an idea of a sign that can be further interpreted and delved into. Derrida does stress that no context is entirely determinable, but he also says that this does not mean that it is absolutely indeterminable. But we must remember that even though deconstruction cannot be permanently fixed within a particular context, it is still absolutely responsible for that context. It takes the context's singularity into account and therefore cannot abandon its duty to the context's meaning. "Deconstruction, then, is not only constantly transformed as it becomes different in and through multiple and heterogeneous contexts, but it is also transformed in and by the same context."ⁱⁱⁱ

Deconstruction contends that the process of writing is a fluid and dynamic one. The meaning of key terms is always changing depending upon the deconstructive process. This even applies to any attempts at trying to define deconstruction itself. It becomes a paradox ignoring even what Derrida himself believed deconstruction to be. The texts dole out meanings through patterns, proto myths, symbols, etc., enough for them to be open to interpretation. The context of the culture, society, group, and other parameters also aid the deconstructive process in its quest for meaning, as the text itself may not have the meaning outright. This, in turn, helps us investigate which things, in particular, were not said overtly in the text and why they were not said. The process tries to shed light on the hidden assumptions, what is the text not saying, why the context is the context in that regard, who it serves, etc. In other words, we not only read the lines but also read between them.

To deconstruct an idea is to show that it is confused and riddled with logical defects. We must keep this messiness constantly in mind. Derrida was criticising our tendency to imagine that behind every problem lies somewhere a good and neat solution. For him, being confused and uncertain about such concepts is not a sign of weakness, but an essential marker of a person's maturity. Confusion and doubt and not embarrassing dead ends in a Derridean worldview. They're simply evidence of the adulthood of the mind. Like many philosophers, Derrida can be valued as a person who opened our eyes to certain extreme attitudes of the time, through his fervent commitment to reason and precision of thought. Derrida didn't want to remove all hierarchies. He knew it was right that kindness should be privileged over cruelty, wit over dullness, and generosity over meanness. But he also understood how often we unwittingly dismiss things, people, and ideas when their opposites bask in what might be considered an arbitrary status. In the highest sense, Derrida can be seen as a voice of

modesty and patience, making us aware of the value in ideas we may easily overlook. He urges us to imagine what it might feel like to be, even if only for a little while, on the other side of any debate. For Derrida, deconstruction exemplifies our thinking so that the appropriation of thought by socio-economic political forces does not take place. Deconstruction is a means of subverting any group's claims to legitimacy because traditional thought is riddled with dominant institutions or practices based on unjustifiable assumptions set up as a gold standard by the power group of that community. Derrida's underlying claim for deconstruction is that history can no longer be given only from the perspective of the victor. There needs to be a healthy respect for the other. His conception of ethics focusses on opening a way for the victimised and marginalised to tell their side of history to us.

Derrida's Ethics – Ambiguous, Contradictory, and Subjective

Whether we believe it or not Derrida is, when all is said and done, an ethical thinker trying to push ethics to reflect on itself and others at a higher level. Funnily enough, he refused to be compartmentalised by the term "ethical" in the traditional sense, while still working to understand the ethical relations of his texts. This stance creates a sort of impasse confronting our need to seek understanding through analysing the dichotomy of reality. Using Derrida's trajectory as a compass, ethical relations can be analysed from a non-ethical viewpoint, which is not necessarily anti-ethical. His ethics are established through the duality of his deconstructive process, and so are usually not presented in a very systematic manner. His philosophy emerges from a discussion of texts by others, an interpretative approach. His style is to keep the original meaning and context on one side, and the ambiguities and contradictions on the other. The themes in Derrida's ethics are always shown to be impossibilities; his ethical thought posits that an absolute ethical position is not possible. Trying to put forth an absolute ethical position destroys the responsibility towards the other individual, and basing our ethics on our response to a particular individual renders the absolute position moot. He also believed that ethics can never not be present. A self will always exist in relation to an 'other'. Dualism will always be there. As long as the other exists, the self's relationship with it will exist, thereby confirming the existence of the self as well. The self cannot claim itself to be absolute because even when defining the self, it would mean recognising a primary relationship with something other than the self. Thus, as much as a contradiction is unavoidable, so is an infinite destructive ethical loop.

One of the most basic requirements in ethical thought is that we must be free and responsible for our actions and decisions. Derrida jumps right in by trying to understand what freedom is. On the one hand, freedom is following the rule. But occasions arise when in our quest for justice we have to rise above following rules. Following the law would be right, not just. In law, there is the letter of the law and the interpretation of it. For any judgement to provide justice, the judge has to interpret the letter of the law in the context of the judgement. In simple terms, the punishment should not just fit the crime, but also take into account the perpetrator and the victim. The law is both conserved and destroyed simultaneously, because each decision is different, requiring a unique interpretation for which a precedent may or may not exist. For Derrida, this simultaneous upholding and destroying (reinterpretation) of the law is seen as a violent rebellion against already instituted laws, thereby making justice impossible.

Juxtaposed to any ethical decision, we must experience the uniqueness and singularity of each ethical decision we make, understanding that it does not fit the established rules. Therefore, a decision is impossible but still has to be made. We are not just oscillating between two oppositions. We are obligated to make the impossible decision while taking into account the general principles involved. That's what makes a decision prove its mettle. For Derrida, the decision has to go through this ordeal to be a free decision, but not necessarily just. If we follow the rules, we are not taking the context into account making the decision unjust. If we do not follow the rules, we are not using the proper foundation that general ethical principles provide. Derrida also puts forth another issue in making a decision. Since ethical decisions need to be made in a timely fashion, we would not be making an informed decision. We have access to only a limited amount of context and knowledge. The decision is made in a moment of non-knowledge and non-rule. Thus, we can never fully make a just decision, as we are constantly grappling with the deconstructive nature of the decision.

Derrida shows particular interest in the theme of *responsibility to 'the other'*. This other person could be God or a person toward whom we have a responsibility in terms of a set of general principles and behaviour. While being responsible for the other person, we are also always responsible towards others in a very general sense, based on the similarities we share with them. Derrida believes that this accountability and responsibility in all aspects of life are often taken for granted. The difficulties involved in being responsible are much more complex than merely behaving dutifully. The common understanding of responsibility is

that we behave according to a set of principles considered rational and valid by society, community, group, etc. Derrida believes that instead of the ethical demand for responsibility by society, the demands of the individual other should drive our sense of responsibility. Ethics tend to depend on general rules and norms binding on a group or community. This attitude is sacrificed constantly in an unconscious manner by us as a whole. We cannot have an attachment to anybody and equal compassion for everybody at the same time. We cannot look at our duties to others from a general principle of humanity that does not exclude anyone. We are always prioritising who the beneficiary of our responsibility will be in everything we do. So, the only way we can be responsible to any one person that needs our help is by failing in our general principle of responsibility to all others as a whole. Thus, we can only be responsible to any particular individual by being irresponsible to other people. We have to make peace with the fact that we may not be able to help everyone because we just cannot do so.

Deconstruction works from a paradoxical angle. This paradox challenges the binary choice and decision-making ability of ethics while not rejecting it at the same time. Derrida calls this '*irresponsible*'; this constitutes the paradox of ethics. However, this general ethical paradox is brought to the foreground by illustrating it in individual cases of the paradox. The deconstructionist has a responsibility to illustrate these individual paradoxes called the '*absolute responsibility*', which is something inconceivable and unthinkable, involving the other, and making substitution and repetition an impossibility. When Derrida talks of singularity he means the uniqueness of the other. This does not mean a simple difference between the subject and the other, or between others. It is not something secret or private which can be known but is hidden. The uniqueness that Derrida refers to is that which is irreducible, unrepeatable, heterogeneous, and idiosyncratic. The '*general responsibility*', on the other hand, is that which we have to the universal nature of ethics and law. This requires substitution and repetition for it to apply to others, and for them to be accountable for it. In other words, to be responsible to an individual other, we have to be irresponsible to the ethics in general applied as a blanket system. But this irresponsibility is not in opposition to ethics or even responsibility. It is very much a part of the binary of responsibility and irresponsibility. This paradox is not about the rejection of the system of universal ethics. "Rather what Derrida demonstrates is that the two equal and imperative duties to which we are required to respond, produce a tension: a paradox... not resolved by a simple decision or choice between the two... that exposes the... inherent violence of, every choice or

decision.”^{iv} Thus, the moral is about morality itself. Morality and ethics are paradoxically constituted by the irresponsible, which is our absolute responsibility, and entails an inevitable and unjustifiable sacrifice. We must be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible.

While Derrida believes that ethical principles are transcendental, he also recognises the violence of this transcendence and the need to challenge it from an empirical standpoint. His focus is on a system of ethics of good as opposed to one of evil. Derrida is a tad ambiguous about how his system of ethics balances the Kantian ethical absolute and the infinite number of empirical variations based on the context of the ethical situations. Deconstruction is not some kind of alternative ethical system or theory. Derrida holds firm that the deconstructive experience is a responsibility in and of itself. The deconstructionist is able to question ethics, politics, and any other generalising and universalising system of thought, thereby showing not only a responsibility in itself but also making it possible to derive a more renewed understanding of ethics. Thus, we cannot posit deconstruction to be right or wrong from an ethical standpoint. What it does do however is questions the need, desire, and belief in a permanent truth, be it God, or any ethical system that can be believed in and followed from a perspective of general rules and codes of conduct. There is a very real and plausible need for moral decisions followed by concrete action. But we have to agree and accept that deconstruction can only come about when we believe in the ultimate purity of moral standards, and the need to make such decisions and actions a reality in daily life, and then move on from there.

Derridean Relevance in Today's World

Derrida questions the very essence of morality. What is the ethical nature of ethics itself? What is its responsibility? What is the very question that we are questioning in the case of ethics? While these questions are urgent, they remain unanswered without a general response, other than one which is linked specifically to the answer that is being adhered to at that particular time by the system. What governs Derrida's writings and thoughts on this whole dichotomy of responsibility and irresponsibility is that an ethical relationship is unique and singular each time. We should not simply conform to the diktats of duty. We should be making these decisions uniquely in each singular instance.

For most postmodernists, ethics is viewed as doomed because they look at it as a branch of philosophy that inevitably focuses on logic, metaphysics, ontology, rules, categories, foundations, etc. These are all concepts that they want to deconstruct. But Derrida believes that understanding ethics and morality is essential to any deconstructive reading. Western philosophical tradition has usually been ontological in nature, which consists of reducing, and at times suppressing all forms of otherness so that they can be subsumed into a universal and general concept that is the same for all. This resistance of the other is conceived to be of an ethical nature as the other looks to keep its own unique identity. Postmodernist thinkers believe it to be ethical to resist the defining of the ethical in terms of an idealised system of norms, rules, and laws. There are no theoretical justifications for why these general ethical rules exist. Ethical decisions should be made without the articulation of pre-established criteria. The goal of ethical discourse is to help us understand our social reality as it exists around us, and plan for its future positively. Derrida argues that deconstruction is a quest for openness to the other, from the standpoint of the other as victims of history, in the realms of both social realities and thought.

Thus, when looking at the paradox of general responsibility and absolute responsibility, we have to decide the side we choose. Also, choosing either side will lead to violence against the other, no matter how uncertain or ambiguous the decision is. Derrida believes that we all function and operate in a kind of economy of this violence stemming from the choices guided by responsibility. What does this mean? It means that there can never be a non-violent ethics or responsibility. Choosing one means we have to tear down the other, either in thought or action. Our decision and response cannot be calculated in advance. This leads to prefabrication, which is how the prescriptive and universalised systems gain applicability over time and across all contexts. Making unique ethical decisions means being accountable, and being absolutely responsible for our responses, something that generalised ethical systems cannot do. Thus, deconstruction is positive. This is its absolute responsibility. It is an ethical relationship with a difference.

Derridean ethics demands that we have something that is outside of us, within us. In this spirit, self-affirmation cannot happen without the affirmation of the other. Ethics cannot be absolute because when we move to that extreme, the hedonism undermines itself by adopting abstract principles. Ethics can function only if it allows the other to be distinct and different from the subject. This happens in a spirit of generosity. The other cannot thrive in an ethical relationship of indebtedness. The ethical act, the absolute responsibility, and the sacrifice

does not require an equivalent in return. We have to follow concrete relations with the actual other in ethics. A mere theory does not make it right. Complete fulfilment is not possible without positivity toward the other through hospitality and friendship. Separation of the individuals for Derrida is the end of humanity because ethics is everywhere and moving forward is impossible without acknowledging that responsibility in both thought and action.

An important element to keep in mind when reading Derridean ethics is that his focus isn't on the rules. It isn't about a system of ethics. Derrida takes everyday concepts that affect human life like responsibility, justice, hospitality, friendship, forgiveness, etc., and analyses them through the rose-tinted glasses of deconstruction. The main focus is the relationship with the other. That relationship is studied and dissected through the myriad way in which we interact with our fellow humans, starting from a basic empathetic responsibility towards another person to the concept of mourning the death of a loved one. What is studied is whether or not an ethical relationship is possible. The very act of Derrida's deconstruction is done in the context of themes and aporias, that is, in relationship with the other. Rather than espousing another theory about the nature of the world, deconstruction distorts already existing narratives to reveal the underlying hierarchies and dichotomies. Derrida's entire premise for deconstruction is based on the principle that dualisms are dualisms and dichotomies are undoubtedly present in the works of various philosophers and writers. On its own, it does not stand alone. It always functions in the context of something else. The foundation is not a single unified self but one that is divisible between oneself and oneself as 'the Other'.

The relevance of the Derridean way of looking at things continues even to this day. His work, in its broadest context, pervades our understanding of our present intellectual, cultural, and political situations. It is rigorous and provocative, exact, and experimental. He is relevant to this movement because his work can be read in a way that supports any central idea to be studied. It is very difficult to read Derrida in the same way his work was read at the height of his popularity. However, his work cannot be reduced to the postmodern relativism for which it has been taken in the past. It has in some way transcended the Husserlian way of looking at things. People have started to read him more and more carefully. His rigorous grounding in the French phenomenological tradition makes him an excellent candidate to teach us about the conflict between transcendentalism and historicism that is visible today, along with the widespread reading of his works through the eyes of relativism today.

Derrida endorses the interpretation of knowledge and understanding in the 21st Century from the viewpoint of the other, the subaltern way of looking at things. His “context” of philosophical and scientific knowledge lay emphasis on the history of human civilisation, without which we cannot exist. His writings have reshaped how many people think and see the world. Today’s ‘*woke*’ culture is very much an expression of the Derridean style of thinking. Derrida in the modern-day context could be seen as the conscience keeper of society in general. He is like the student in class who keeps asking questions that baffle even the most knowledgeable of teachers. His method of deconstruction can be viewed as a modern-day take on the Socratic Method. While Socrates aimed to get to the absolute truth by dissecting a topic, Derrida focuses on the person and the method. He looks at the answer as a by-product of his process. The aim of engaging in the Derridean style of philosophy is to peel back the way we look at things subjectively. With our lives in disarray from the pandemic, we are looking for answers. Derrida does not provide them, he merely supplies a method that reminds us that rather than looking within for the answer, we can find it by looking within ourselves, in relationship with the other. Our attempt at finding answers is like thinking out loud, or making a list of pros and cons when deciding on something.

Derrida’s deconstruction becomes more focused depending on the topic being dissected. When we look at morality or ethics through his process, we could posit that for him the bigger picture could be achieved by focussing on the smaller one. A lot of the Derridean talk on ethics is focussed on the simultaneity and paradox of themes and not the system of ethics itself. We could claim that by being singular in our focus on doing the right thing concerning a single other, the positive effect of our action increases exponentially with regard to society in general. It is like that attitude of doing something good for a stranger in need, from a completely altruistic point of view, and then asking them to do the same to another person in need, and so forth. By denying that an absolute is possible, Derrida paves the way for it to naturally happen in small ways, having a greater impact. Thus, large absolute concepts like justice, equality, freedom, peace, etc., are never fully attainable. They are attainable when we look at them as singulars in the context of the other person. Each of these singular actions, via their success, leads to a plurality that then gets categorised. The same holds for ethics and morality. Thus, we are building and destroying ethics at the same time, a task that will never be fully completed on a grand scale but is being achieved in individual cases. None present themselves as to particulars that would essentially communicate with the

universal. Each can only be resolved by ignoring the example or the exemplarity of the example. It is a question of the ethics of that particular example, and not of ethics in general.

Derrida and the COVID-19 Pandemic

As we experience the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been going on for over a year, we can deconstruct Derrida's ideas on a wide variety of topics. The management of the pandemic has seen tremendous success among groups, communities, and societies that have understood the context of responsibility of hospitality, law, and justice to the other. It is common in many Asian countries for people to wear masks when they are ill, especially when they have a common cold. So, people did not need to be coaxed or forced to wear masks or follow the protocols to slow the spread of the pandemic. Most Asians complied readily, early, and widely. Taiwan provided close monetary support to patients with Covid-19 and people with whom they had come into contact, making sure health recommendations were being followed. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Arden exemplified empathetic and clear communication, which greatly increased the people's willingness to cooperate with the authorities thereby helping the country bring the pandemic under control very early. The Danish government made sure employees in private companies continued to be employed by compensating a large chunk of their salaries from its coffers. Finland focussed on its strong media literate policies to counter fake news, by partnering with social media influencers and using their reach to pass on important information. South Africa also introduced an alert public messaging system to help the government communicate effectively during lockdowns. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel also focussed on effective communication thereby showing patience and discipline in efficiently handling the pandemic.

However, the pandemic has also undermined the distinctions between individuals and the collective. The lines between walls, borders, limits, and individual autonomy have blurred. This can be a problem because these boundaries demarcate our personal responsibilities and freedoms. This crisis also becomes an excuse for the ideological and political discourses to carry out harmful activities such as vilifying certain groups as responsible for the pandemic or even clamping down on freedoms through laws passed without proper procedure, police brutality of vulnerable communities, etc. There appears to be a threat to what we thought we knew about our moral responsibilities to other people. This is not the same in every country.

Those with a deeper social welfare ethos have weathered the pandemic better. But we can detect unconscious demand for freedom along with our responsibility towards the other. Our dependence on others can be highlighted by the fact that our individual actions can make other people sick. The same individual actions can also help save lives, especially with regard to following the protocols put in place and taking the vaccine. Thus, there is all the more need to defend the insistence that we are each not only responsible to ourselves and autonomous but also obligated to do what is potentially good and life-saving for the other. Thus, deconstruction is exactly the analytical tool needed. For Derrida, the onus is on us to be absolutely responsible. We have to be careful by taking into account without relativism the unique, singular historical situation in which we find ourselves. It is at this moment that we can go beyond the interpretation of freedom, or lack thereof, as it is seen during this pandemic as defined by governments. The pandemic opens the door to a different interpretation of freedom, showing us a more plausible and real view of the world around us. Our responsibility is to decide how to strategically orient the deconstruction of the issues we are facing. This analysis makes us aspire to change things insofar as it exposes the excluded other. It also shows us how the interpretation has been naturalized, leaving the rest up to us.

The greater ideal of democracy and the concept of people as a unit has been deconstructed into decentralised units, with a focus on the local and individual contexts. This leads to a better understanding and handling of the situation in real time. Each person has been recognised as the individual unit that needs attention and focus, different from the other. While the laws and resolutions have been passed as generalisations, the implementation is left to interpretation based on the context of the situation. An oversimplification is that the person's need is prioritised and attended to, on a case-by-case basis, which gradually amounts to successful management of the situation as a whole. The same could be applied to any ethico-political movement at any given time at any given place, be it about climate change, people's right to protest, police brutality, draconian laws, etc. From Greta Thunberg's sit-out outside her country's parliament building to raise awareness on climate change, to the wall of shoes built by a Turkish artist to protest the rise in domestic violence deaths in Turkey, to the "A Rapist in Your Path" song, or pink pussy hats or *The Handmaid's Tale*-style scarlet cloaks to protest systemic violence against women – each of these is a context-based issue that is dealt with in an inherent Derridean style of questioning the

absolute while building up to the tempo of a mass viral and global movement of gigantic proportion.

“A philosopher is always someone for whom philosophy is not given, someone who in essence must question the self about the essence and destination of philosophy. And who reinvents it.”^v In a similar vein, Derrida attempts to show us how ambiguous ethics and morality are. He views deconstruction which is essentially an interrogation of philosophical texts and re-reading them to understand them more uniquely to be ethical in nature. His works have been constantly challenged in their ability to explain the significance of ethical thought. This makes us wonder if Derrida’s discourse on deconstruction possesses any ethical value. If it does, then in his own language, we can even appraise deconstruction itself from an ethical standpoint. Derrida’s main apprehension about ethics has been a collective fervour and generalisation of the theme of ethics. This leads to the danger of ethics becoming a totalising system, an absolute, that vehemently demands adherence and fealty that turns something that is supposed to be a set of flexible guidelines for living our lives into dogma. This dogmatic approach forces all forms of ethical discourse to conform to the language of those in power, marginalising the other. Derrida’s work is still misunderstood, misinterpreted, accused, critiqued, and reviled. It is also defended and revered. The beauty of his work is that it branches out into topics as diverse as law, architecture, painting, language, and literature apart from philosophy and ethics. In keeping with the political temper of the age, it is frequently used to support legitimate ideologies that cater to the needs of the oppressed against subversion by political and ideological agendas of both the left and right. “Jacques Derrida is not an “ethical” philosopher. Which is to say, he does not expound a theory of ethics with respect to articulating a “philosophy of action” or a way of being-in-the-world. And yet, Derrida has always been concerned with ethics as the responsibility we bear to recognize the difference of the other.”^{vi}

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Anderson, Nicole, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).

Colebrook, Claire, (Ed.), *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts* (London; New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015).

Derrida, Jacques, & Trifonas, Peter Pericles (Translated and Edited), *Ethics, institutions and the Right to Philosophy* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002).

Derrida, Jacques, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992).

Evans, J. Claude, *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the Myth of the Voice* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Gutting, Gary, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Haddad, Samir, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013).

Powell, Jason, *Derrida: A Biography* (London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

Journal Articles

Chang, Briankle G., Feng, Xuefeng, Gong, Yuan, Lankala, Srinivas, and Lu, Li, *Forum: COVID-19 Dispatches (Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies, Vol. 21(1))* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2020).

Fuh, Shyh-jen, *Derrida and the Problem of Ethics (Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics, 29.1)* (Taipei, National Taiwan Normal University, 2003).

Gaon, Stella, *Lies in the Time of COVID (Derrida Today 13.2)* (<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/drt.2020.0231>).

Harris, Verne, and Westoby, Peter, *Community development 'yet-to-come' during and post the COVID-19 pandemic: from Derrida to Zuboff* (*Community Development Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4) (Oxford, Oxford University Press and Community Development Journal, 2020).

Ryu, Honglim, *Ethics of Ambiguity and Irony: Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty* (*Human Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2, *Intertexts: Philosophy, Literature and the Human Sciences in Korea*) (New York, Springer, 2001).

Online Sources

<https://iep.utm.edu/derrida/> (Accessed on 10/04/2021)

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/> (Accessed on 10/04/2021)

<https://www.eurozine.com/contradiction-transcendence-and-subjectivity-in-derridas-ethics/> (Accessed on 10/04/2021)

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/which-countries-have-responded-best-to-covid-19-11609516800> (Accessed on 10/04/2021)

ⁱ Ryu, Honglim, *Ethics of Ambiguity and Irony: Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty* (*Human Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2, *Intertexts: Philosophy, Literature and the Human Sciences in Korea*) (New York, Springer, 2001), 5

ⁱⁱ Fuh, Shyh-jen, *Derrida and the Problem of Ethics (Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics, 29.1)* (Taipei, National Taiwan Normal University, 2003), 14

ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson, Nicole, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (London; New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 9

^{iv} Colebrook, Claire, (Ed.), *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts* (London; New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 56

^v Derrida, Jacques, & Trifonas, Peter Pericles (Translated and Edited), *Ethics, institutions and the Right to Philosophy* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), 4

^{vi} Ibid., ix

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Abadeer, Adel, S.Z., *Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Adkins, Lisa, & Dever, Maryanne, (Ed.), *The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract: Working and Living in Contingency* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Adkins, Lisa, & Holland, Janet, (Ed.), *Sex, Sensibility and the Gendered Body* (London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996).

Adkins, Lisa, & Leonard, Diana, (Ed.), *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (London, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1996).

Adkins, Lisa, & Merchant, Vicki, (Ed.), *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

Alcoff, Linda & Potter, Elisabeth, (Ed.), *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York, Routledge, 1993).

Alcoff, Linda Martin, & Caputo, John, D., (Ed.), *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011).

Alcoff, Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006).

Ambedkar, B. R., *The Constitution of India* (Jaipur, Buddham Publishers, 2019).

Amico, Eleanor B., (Ed.), *Reader's Guide to Women's Studies* (Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998).

Aneschi, Luca, Camilleri, Joseph Anthony, Palapathwala, Ruwan & Wicking, Andrew (Ed.), *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World: Conflict, Dialogue, and Transformation* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

- Anscombe, G. E. M., *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein (The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe (Volume One))* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1981).
- Anthony, Kathryn H., *Defined by Design: The Surprising Power of Hidden Gender, Age, and Body Bias in Everyday Products and Places* (New York, Prometheus Books, 2017).
- Aristotle, *Politics (Translated by Benjamin Jowett)* (Kitchener, Batoche Books, 1999).
- Bailey, Alison, and Cuomo, Chris, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2008).
- Bates, Laura, *Everyday Sexism* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2014).
- Baum, Gregory, *Nationalism, Religion, and Ethics* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
- Beaney, Michael (Ed.), *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* (New York, Routledge, 2007).
- Bell, Vikki, *Culture & Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory* (Oxford, Berg, 2007).
- Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture* (New York, Mentor Books, 1960).
- Benedict, Ruth, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Cleveland, Meridien Books, 1967).
- Berges, Sandrine, *A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- Billet, Bret, L., *Cultural Relativism in the Face of the West* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Masculine Domination (Translated by Richard Nice)* (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2001).
- Buddha, Gautama, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom (translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita)* (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1985).

- Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, Routledge, 1993).
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990).
- Byrne, Peter, *The Philosophical and Theological Foundations of Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Theory and its Relation to Religious Belief (Second Edition)* (Hampshire/ New York, Palgrave, 1999).
- Cady Stanton, Elizabeth, *The Woman's Bible* (New York, European Publishing Company, 1898).
- Callahan, Dan, Chadwick, Ruth, & Singer, Peter, (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (Cambridge, Academic Press-Elsevier Inc., 2012).
- Card, Claudia, (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Simone De Beauvoir* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Card, Claudia, (Ed.), *Feminist Ethics* (Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1991).
- Chuang-Tzu, *The Book of Chuang-Tzu (Translated by Martin Palmer with Elizabeth Breuilly, Chang Wai Ming and Jay Ramsay)* (London, Penguin Books, 2006).
- Cohen, Charles, L., *The Abrahamic Religions A Very Short Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020).
- Cole, Kirsti, & Hassel, Holly, (Ed.), *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership* (New York, Routledge, 2017).
- Colette, *The Vagabond (Translated by Stanley Appelbaum* (New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 2010).
- Cover, J.A. and Curd, Martin, *Philosophy of Science The Central Issues* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York, The New Press, 2019).
- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (translated by Bernard Frechtman) (Secaucus, Citadel Press, 2000).
- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier) (New York, Vintage Books, 2009).
- Dean, Carolyn, J., *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992).
- DeCrane, Susanne M., *Aquinas, Feminism, and the Common Good* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2004).
- Delston, Jill, B., & May, Larry, (Ed.), *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach* (New York, Routledge, 2016).
- Dietrich, Gabriele, *Reflections on the Women's Movement in India: Religion, Ecology, Development* (New Delhi, Horizon India Books, 1992).
- Dobrin, Arthur, (Ed.), *Religious Ethics: A Sourcebook* (New York, Arthur Dobrin, 2002).
- Egginton, William and Sandbothe, Mike (Ed.), *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004).
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke, *Public Man, Private Woman – Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981).
- Engels, Frederick and Marx, Karl, *The German Ideology* (Paris, Foreign Languages Press, 2022).
- Evans, Mary, *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Maryland, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997).

- Faure, Bernard, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003).
- Fernandes, Leela, *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, and Power* (New York, New York University Press, 2013).
- Fielding, Helen, Hiltmann, Gabrielle, Olkowski, Dorothea, & Reichold, Anne, (Ed.), *The Other: Feminist Reflections in Ethics* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970).
- Fisk, Milton, Galston, William, A., Gould, Carol, C., Jaggar, Alison, M., Machan, Tibor, R., Solomon, Robert, C., & Sterba, James, P., *Morality and Social Justice* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995).
- Franceschi, Paul, *An Introduction to Analytic Philosophy: Paradoxes, Arguments and Contemporary Problems* (Paul Franceschi, 2013).
- Frazer, Elisabeth, Hornsby, Jennifer, & Lovibond, Sabrina, (Ed.), *Ethics: A Feminist Reader* (New Jersey, Blackwell Publishers, 1992).
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* (New Haven, Yale Studies in Hermeneutics, 1999).
- Ghadially, Rehana, (Ed.), *Women in Indian Society: A reader* (New Delhi, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1988).
- Gilbert, Lucia Albino, Langlois, Judith H., & Swann Jr., William B., (Ed.) *Sexism and Stereotypes in Modern Society* (Washington, American Psychological Association, 1998).
- Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982).
- Godfrey-Smith, Peter, *Theory and Reality An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- Grey, Mary, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2000).
- Hakim, Catherine, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* (New York, Basic Books, 2011).
- Hakim, Catherine, *The New Rules: Internet Dating, Playfairs and Erotic Power* (London, Gibson Square Books, 2010).
- Ham, MaryAnna, Hauser, Rick, & Wilczenski, Felicia L., *Culturally Relevant Ethical Decision-Making in Counseling* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, Inc., 2006).
- Hinds, Hilary, Phoenix, Ann, and Stacey, Jackie, (Ed.), *Working Out: New Directions for Women's Studies* (London, The Falmer Press, 1992).
- Jaggar, Alison, M., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1983).
- Jaggar, Alison, M., *Living with Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boulder, Westview Press Inc., 1994).
- Jose, Claramma, *Feminisms: An Introduction* (Chennai, Dr. Claramma Jose, 2005).
- Kaiser, Alan, *Archaeology, Sexism, and Scandal: The Long Suppressed Story of One Woman's Discoveries and the Man Who Stole Credit for Them* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
- Kearney, Richard (Ed.), *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy (Routledge History of Philosophy Volume VIII)* (New York, Routledge, 2005) First published in 1994.
- Keinert-Kisin, Christina, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Discrimination: Gender Bias in Personnel Selection* (Switzerland, Springer International Publishing, 2016).
- Kemp, Sandra and Squires, Judith, (Ed.), *Feminisms* (New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 1997).

- Kille, Kent, J. (Ed.), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2007).
- Krishnaraj, Maithreyi, (Ed.), *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* (New Delhi, Routledge, 2010).
- Ladyman, James, *Understanding Philosophy of Science* (New York, Routledge, 2002).
- Maitra-Sinha, Anjana, *Women in a Changing Society* (New Delhi, Ashish Publishing House, 1993).
- McCann, Carole R. and Kim, Seung-kyung, (Ed.), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives (Second Edition)* (New York, Routledge, 2010).
- Mendus, Susan, *Feminism and Emotion: Readings in Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 2000).
- Menon, Nivedita, *Seeing Like A Feminist* (New Delhi, Zubaan-Penguin, 2012).
- Mills, Sara, *Language and Sexism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Moller, Vigdis Songe, *Philosophy Without Women: The Birth of Sexism in Western Thought* (Oslo, Cappelen Akademisk Forlag, 1999) (Translated by Peter Cripps (London, Continuum, 2002)).
- Okasha, Samir, *Philosophy of Science A Very Short Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Orwell, George, *Animal Farm* (London, Global Grey Ebooks, 2019).
- Pande, Alka, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi, Rupa & Co., 2004).
- Paoletti, Jo, B., *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012).
- Parsons, Susan Frank, *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

- Pfeifer, Jessica and Sarkar, Sahotra (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Science An Encyclopedia* (New York, Routledge, 2006).
- Pipatti, Otto, *Morality Made Visible Edward Westermarck's Moral and Social Theory* (New York, Routledge, 2019).
- Plaskow, Judith (edited with Berman, Donna), *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2005).
- Plato, *The Republic* (Translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford) (London, Oxford University Press, 1941).
- Prado, C. G. (Ed.), *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (New York, Humanity Books, 2003).
- Romero, Mary (Ed.), *Research Handbook on Intersectionality* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023).
- Rosenberg, Alex, *Philosophy of Science A Contemporary Introduction (Second Edition)* (New York, Routledge, 2005). First published in 2000.
- Samuel, Gabriella, *The Kabbalah Handbook: A Concise Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts in Jewish Mysticism* (London, Penguin Publishing Group, 2007).
- Schott, Robin May, *Discovering Feminist Philosophy: Knowledge, Ethics, Politics* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).
- Schweiker, William (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- Sharma, Arvind, (Ed.), *Women in Indian Religions* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Sharp, Frank Chapman, *Custom and the Moral Judgment* (The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, Vol. 5, No. 24 (Nov.19, 1908)).
- Slote, Michael, *The Impossibility of Perfection: Aristotle, Feminism, and the Complexities of Ethics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

- Soames, Scott, *Analytic Philosophy in America and Other Historical and Contemporary Essays* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2014).
- Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, The Viking Press, Inc. 1939).
- Sumner, William Graham, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Boston, The Atheneum Press, 1906).
- Taylor, Lisa K., & Zine Jasmin, *Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism and the Ethics of Pedagogy: Contested Imaginaries in Post-9/11 Cultural Practice* (New York, Routledge, 2014).
- The Holy Bible – The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition for India* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1990).
- The Holy Quran (translated by Maulawi Sher Ali)* (Surrey, Islamic International Publications Ltd., 2021).
- Tong, Rosemarie, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Westview Press, 2014).
- Tzu, Lao, *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way (translated by Ursula K. Le Guin)* (Boston, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2011).
- Walker, Margaret Urban, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Walter, Natasha, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London, Hachette Digital, 2010).
- Westermarck, Edward, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1924).
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).
- Young, Iris Marion, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005).

Ziarek, Ewa Plonowska, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).

Journal Articles

Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others* (American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Sep., 2002)).

Afshari, Reza, *An Essay on Islamic Cultural Relativism in the Discourse of Human Rights* (Human Rights Quarterly, May, 1994, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May, 1994)).

Allen, Christine Garside, *Plato on Women* (Feminist Studies, 1975, Vol. 2, No. 2/3 (1975)).

Barnabas, A. P., *Sanskritisation* (The Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 13, Issue No. 15, 15 Apr, 1961).

Bharadwaj, Suraj Bhan, *Myth and Reality of the Khap Panchayats: A Historical Analysis of the Panchayat and Khap Panchayat** (Studies in History, 2012, 28(1)).

Bingham-Byrne, Rebecca Michelle, Ozdenerol, Esra, & Seboly, Jacob, *Female Leadership during COVID-19: The Effectiveness of Diverse Approaches towards Mitigation Management during a Pandemic* (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2023 Nov 6;20(21):7023).

Brabeck, Mary M., & Ting, Kathleen, *Feminist Ethics: Lenses for Examining Ethical Psychological Practice (Feminist Ethics in Psychology) (Division 35 Book Series, Psychology of Women)* (Washington, American Psychological Association, 2000).

Brennan, Samantha, *Feminist Ethics and Everyday Inequalities* (Hypatia, Winter, 2009, Vol. 24, No. 1, Oppression and Moral Agency: Essays in Honor of Claudia Card (Winter, 2009)).

- Burgess, Glenn, *The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered* (The English Historical Review, vol. 107, no. 425, 1992).
- Butler, Judith, *Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (Theatre Journal, Dec., 1988, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988)).
- Calvert, Brian, *Plato and the Equality of Women* (Phoenix, Autumn, 1975, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1975)).
- Cassman, Rachelle, *Fighting to Make the Cut: Female Genital Cutting Studied within the Context of Cultural Relativism* (Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights, Vol. 6, Issue 1 (2008)).
- Chopra, Shruti, & Sharma, Krishan, *The Development of Menstrual-Related Beliefs and Behaviours During Adolescence in a Semi Rural Haryana (India): A Conceptual and Empirical Formulation* (Moravian Museum, Anthropologie (1962-), Vol. 49, No. 2 (2011)).
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (Stanford Law Review, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991)).
- Csordas, Thomas, J., *Morality as a Cultural System?* (Current Anthropology, Vol. 54, No. 5 (October 2013)).
- Danial, Sandra, *Cultural Relativism vs. Universalism: Female Genital Mutilation, Pragmatic Remedies* (Prandium: The Journal of Historical Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2013)).
- Dixson, Barnaby, J.W., *Masculinity and Femininity* (Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science, Springer International Publishing, 2016).
- Earp, Brian, D., *Between Moral Relativism and Moral Hypocrisy: Reframing the Debate on "FGM"* (Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal, July 2016).
- Edlund, Lena, & Korn, Evelyn, *A Theory of Prostitution* (Journal of Political Economy, Vol. 110, No. 1 (February 2002)).

- Ellis, Havelock, *Sexual Education and Nakedness* (The American Journal of Psychology, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Jul., 1909)).
- Foster, William Trufant, *Agencies, Methods, Materials, and Ideals of Sex Education* (The School Review, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Apr., 1914)).
- Gardiner, Judith Kegan, *Female Masculinity and Phallic Women— Unruly Concepts* (Feminist Studies, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Fall 2012)).
- Geetha, V., *Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship* (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 33, No. 17 (Apr. 25 - May 1, 1998)).
- Grimshaw, Jean, *The Idea of a Female Ethic* (Philosophy East and West, Apr., 1992, Vol. 42, No. 2, Moscow Regional East West Philosophers' Conference on Feminist Issues East and West (Apr., 1992)).
- Gundersen, Aleksander, B., & Kunst, Jonas, R., *Feminist ≠ Feminine? Feminist Women are Visually Masculinized whereas Feminist Men are Feminized* (Springer Science and Business Media, LLC, 21 May 2018).
- Guusje, Jol, & Wyke, Stommel, *Ethical considerations of secondary data use: What about informed consent?* (Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics, December 2016).
- Henry, Alice, *The Special Moral Training of Girls* (International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Oct., 1903)).
- Horowitz, Maryanne Cline, *Aristotle and Woman* (Journal of the History of Biology, Autumn, 1976, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn, 1976)).
- Humphreys, Sally, *Law, Custom and Culture in Herodotus* (Arethusa, Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (SPRING and FALL 1987)).
- Inge, W. R., *Some Presuppositions for a History of Moral Progress in the First Three Centuries, A.D.* (International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Jan., 1898)).
- Khanal, Geha, N., Khatri, Resham, B., Singh, Samikshya, Thakuri, Deependra, S., and Thapa, Roshan, K., *A harmful religio-cultural practice (Chhaupadi) during menstruation*

- among adolescent girls in Nepal: Prevalence and policies for eradication* (PLoS One. 2021; 16(9): e0256968. Published online 2021 Sep 1. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256968).
- Machuca, Diego *Pyrrhonian Relativism* (Elenchos: Rivista di Studi Sul Pensiero Antico 36 (1):89-114 (2015)).
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Meaning and Role of "Philosophy" in Islam* (Studia Islamica, No. 37 (1973)).
- Natarajan, Kanchana, *Gendering of Early Indian Philosophy: A Study of "Samkhyakarika"* (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 17 (Apr. 28 – May 4, 2001)).
- Oliphant, James, *The Relations of the Sexes* (International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Apr., 1899)).
- Parsons, Elsie Clews, *The Religious Dedication of Women* (American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 11, No. 5 (Mar., 1906)).
- Priest, Robert, J., *Missionary Positions Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist* (Current Anthropology, Vol. 42, No. 1 (February 2001)).
- Robinson, M. E., *The Sex Problem* (International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Apr., 1911)).
- Rubin, Gayle, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex* (In Rayna R. Reiter (ed.)) (Toward an Anthropology of Women, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975).
- Sagayaraj, Antonysamy *Christianity in India: A Focus on Inculturation* (Research Papers of the Anthropological Institute Vol.1 (2013)).
- Sevenhuijsen, Selma, L., *The Morality of Feminism* (Hypatia, Summer, 1991, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer, 1991)).
- Smith, Nicholas, D., *Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women* (Journal of the History of Philosophy, January 1983).

Soyinka, Wole, *The Lion and the Jewel* (London, Oxford University Press, 1963).

Stoljar, Natalie, *Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman* (Philosophical Topics, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall, 1995)).

Williams, C. M., *A Phase of Modern Epicureanism* (International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Oct., 1893)).

Online Sources

Ajayi, Anna, *How the women of Kayan Lahwi tribe got their long necks* (Pulse Nigeria, August 18, 2023, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/how-the-women-of-kayan-lahwi-tribe-got-their-long-necks/2pccp4x>.

Alinejad, Masih, *Masih Alinejad* (My Stealthy Freedom, 2019, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/staff/masih-alinejad/>.

All India Women's Conference, *History* (All India Women's Conference, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.aiwc.org.in/history.html>.

American Anthropological Association, *AAA History* (American Anthropological Association, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://americananthro.org/about/history/>.

Atsma, Aaron, J., *Gaia* (Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Gaia.html>.

Atsma, Aaron, J., *Uranus (Ouranos)* (Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Ouranos.html>.

Austin, Michael, W., *Divine Command Theory* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>.

Balbir, Nalini, *Digambara* (Jainpedia, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://jainpedia.org/themes/principles/sects/digambara/>.

- Bonazzi, Mauro, *Protagoras* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, September 8, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/protogoras/#ManMeasThes>.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, *Romanticism* (Encyclopedia Britannica, July 22, 2024, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism>.
- Brooks, Thom, *Hegel's Social and Political Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, June 3, 2021, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-social-political/#Mora>.
- Cartwright, Mark, *Yin and Yang* (World History Encyclopedia, May 16, 2018, accessed on July 28, 2024) https://www.worldhistory.org/Yin_and_Yang/.
- Catholic Online, *St. Bridget of Sweden* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=264.
- Catholic Online, *St. Catherine of Siena* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=9.
- Catholic Online, *St. Joan of Arc* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=295.
- Catholic Online, *St. Teresa of Avila* (Catholic Online, accessed on July 14, 2024) https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=208.
- Chao, Yuan-Ling, *Poetry and Footbinding: Teaching Women and Gender Relations in Traditional China* (World History Connected, June 2, 2009, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiillinois.edu/6.2/chao.html>.
- Clark, Bernie, *Purusha & Prakriti* (Yin Yoga, 2006, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://yinyoga.com/yinsights/purusha-prakriti/>.
- Cohon, Rachel, *Hume's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, October 29, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/>.

- Collette, Annica, *Women and Misogyny in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Women in Antiquity, November 27, 2018, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://womeninantiquity.wordpress.com/2018/11/27/women-and-misogyny-in-ancient-greek-philosophy/>.
- Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14 and July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>.
- Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#CatHypImp>.
- Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#ForUniLawNat>.
- Cureton, Adam, and Johnson, Robert, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 23, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#HumFor>.
- Daljeet, and Jain, P.C., *Ardhanarishvara in Art and Philosophy* (Exotic India Art, June, 2005, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.exoticindiaart.com/article/ardhanarishvara/>.
- Dugard, John, *Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid* (Audiovisual Library of International Law, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cspca/cspca.html>.
- Duignan, Brian, *Enlightenment* (Encyclopedia Britannica, August 9, 2024, accessed on August 11, 2024) <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>.
- Friend, Celeste, *Social Contract Theory* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH2a>.
- General Assembly Resolution 48/104, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (United Nations, December 20, 1993, accessed on July 21, 2024)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>.

Giovanelli, Marco, and Howard, Don, A., *Einstein's Philosophy of Science* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 11, 2004, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/einstein-philscience/>.

Holy Books, *The Complete Hadith – All 9 Volumes in one PDF* (Holy Books, January 8, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.holybooks.com/the-complete-hadith-all-9-volumes-in-one-pdf/>.

Hridaya Yoga, *Yoni & Lingam Sacred Symbols of the Feminine and Masculine* (Hridaya Yoga, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://hridaya-yoga.com/yonisacredsource/>.

Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Landmark Elections for Women New Candidacy, Voter Rights – but Old Barriers* (Human Rights Watch, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/11/saudi-arabia-landmark-elections-women>.

Jingtu, *The Pure Land Charter*, (Pure Land Buddhism, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://purelandbuddhism.org/plb/18/13>.

Johnson, Jean, *Shakti: The Power of the Feminine* (Asia Society, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://asiasociety.org/education/shakti-power-feminine>.

Latin is Simple, *Sapientia* (Latin is Simple, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.latin-is-simple.com/en/vocabulary/noun/367/?h=Sapientia>.

Lee, Mi-Kyoung, and Taylor, C.C.W., *The Sophists* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, September 30, 2011, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sophists/#Pro>.

Leiter, Brian, *Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy* (The Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy, August 26, 2004, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/#CritMora>.

Leopold, David, and Wolff, Jonathan, *Karl Marx* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, August 26, 2003, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/Entries/marx/#Mora>.

Leopold, David, and Wolff, Jonathan, *Karl Marx* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, August 26, 2003, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archIves/sum2020/entries/marx/#5>.

Maasai Association, *Maasai Ceremonies and Rituals* (Maasai Association, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://maasai-association.org/ceremonies.html>.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Devi noun Word History* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/devi>.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Ethic noun Word History* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics#word-history>.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *Sophia noun Definition* (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Sophia>.

New World Encyclopedia, *Dasa* (New World Encyclopedia, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dasa>.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, *Definition of saviour noun* (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/saviour?q=saviour>.

Palmer, John, *Parmenides* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 8, 2008, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/>.

Sharma, Shreya, *How Do Marital Adornments Impact Women's Lives?* (Feminism in India, April 20, 2021, accessed on July 28, 2024)

<https://feminisminindia.com/2021/04/20/how-do-marital-adornments-impact-womens-lives/>.

Singh, Katyayani, *Re-reading Gandhi: Why The Mahatma Cannot Be Called A Feminist* (Feminism in India, March 18, 2021, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/03/18/re-reading-gandhi-why-the-mahatma-cannot-be-called-a-feminist/>.

Smith, George, *Isaac Newton* (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 19, 2007, accessed on July 14, 2024) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/newton/#NewWorInf>.

Storytrails, *Mariamman: The Village Goddess Who Travelled* (Storytrails, December 12, 2022, accessed on July 28, 2024) <https://storytrails.in/culture/mariamman-the-village-goddess-who-travelled/>.

The Kathmandu Post, *Rishi Panchami being Observed* (The Kathmandu Post, September 19, 2023, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://kathmandupost.com/visual-stories/2023/09/19/rishi-panchami-being-observed>.

The Pluralism Project, *Anekantavada: The Relativity of Views* (The Pluralism Project (Harvard University), accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://pluralism.org/aneantavada-the-relativity-of-views>.

The Telegraph, *French Senate Approves 'Burka Ban'* (The Telegraph, September 14, 2010, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8002914/French-Senate-approves-Burka-ban.html>.

Thobega, Keletso, *Botswana opts to Make Land Owners of Wives with New Law* (Thomson Reuters Foundation News, September 17, 2020, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://news.trust.org/item/20200917163703-1z7qr>.

Tola, Maya, M., *Avatars of Vishnu: Ten Incarnations of the Eastern God* (Daily Art Magazine, June 17, 2024, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/avatars-vishnu/>.

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (United Nations, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>.

United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

Von Duuglas-Ittu, Sylvie, *Menstrual Taboos and Cultural Relativism – Being An Ally* (8 Limbs Us, March 17, 2014, accessed on July 21, 2024) <https://8limbsus.com/muay-thai-thailand/menstrual-taboos-cultural-relativism-ally>.