

CRITICISM OF CARE ETHICS AS A 'HETEROSEXUAL MODEL' FOLLOWING JUDITH BUTLER AND MONIQUE WITTIG

SANANDA SEN

Abstract: This paper focuses upon the critique of feminist ethics more specifically of care ethics as proposed by Carol Gilligan. Care ethics can be seen as an extension of feminist ethics, a tool of emancipation for women which provides a platform to articulate their own concerns. In spite of this, care ethics is not free from defects. The endeavor of this paper will be to criticize care ethics mainly from two point of view, one is from the heterosexual aspect and second is its inattentiveness towards the category of 'woman'. To explain the two, I would like to bring in two theorists, mainly, Judith Butler and Monique Wittig. The critical writings of both would help us to understand the theoretical shortcomings of care ethics.

Keywords: care ethics, critique, heterosexuality, women.

Introduction: Carol Gilligan is an American psychologist who has written a famous book *In a Different Voice*. This book is quite well known in the field of psychology as well as in the field of feminism. In this book, care ethics which can also be called as 'situated ethics' tries to evade doing abstractions, where context has no role to play. It focuses more on the aspect of 'particularity'. This ethics talks about the significance of relationship among people and also addresses the moral dilemmas by emphasizing on the present context.

Gilligan's moral reasoning involves the active role of emotion. She talks about two kinds of moral orientations - one is justice based and another one is care based and both are interrelated. Men and women have different ways of making moral decisions and Gilligan accounts for overlapping of both the above mentioned orientations (justice and care) in their decision-making.

Gilligan's theory of moral development is successful in incorporating the omitted theory of women's moral development as well as the 'missing voice' of women within the dominant traditional psychological theories. Such a development is looked down by the traditionalists. To them, women's development is weak and confused in nature as they fail to adhere to any strict rules or principles. This adherence is necessary to become a matured individual. Men, generally, apply such universal principles while solving any moral conflict. Gilligan provides an alternative theory of women's moral development where they solve the moral dilemmas by acknowledging the emotions of the other. Within the patriarchal framework, Gilligan's theory is surely an eye opener to many theorists. Irrespective of Gilligan's contribution in the field of psychology, her theory faces certain limitations. Let us discuss them.

From the Heterosexual Point of View: The concept of heterosexuality can be defined as a system where men choose only women. It is a way of men dominating women. Gilligan in her account of care

ethics has over emphasized the relational aspect of women. She opines that women are by nature caring. According to many feminists, this view fortifies the heterosexual system which defines women in a typical way - women as natural care givers and nurtures. Gilligan has valorized the role of caring but she misses to see that this essentializing of women as 'caring' or 'nurturer' is detrimental as it again locks down women to the age old system of patriarchy. And patriarchy is a system which supports heterosexuality. The aim should be to bring reform to the contemporary concepts rather than to abide by it blindly. Gilligan has not ruled out the stereotypes where both men and women are expected to carry out certain roles in a society. She has emphasized the emotional aspect of women but fails to take into account that all women may not be necessarily emotional in nature. On the contrary, a man may show all the signs of being emotional. Here comes the need to critically re-interrogate the category of 'woman' which must be a compulsory exercise for every feminists. For Gilligan, the heterosexual system appears to be fixed and hence the concept of 'woman' remains unaltered. The system of heterosexuality has kept such a concept intact. So if one does not pose challenge to the system, then only working within the pre-given patriarchal concepts will not bring any liberation in the society which feminists dream of.

Thus, the concept of 'woman' becomes open for questioning and re-questioning. Many renowned feminists have seriously dealt with this issue in their work. In this context, I have chosen the name of two theorists cum activists who are Judith Butler and Monique Wittig. Butler needs no introduction as she has worked profusely in the field of gender. Wittig is a lesbian activist who has denied the very binary of sex/gender as well as 'woman' as a category. Let us now explore these activists.

Judith Butler: One of the most influential scholars in the field of theorizing gender, Judith Butler's groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble: feminism and*

the subversion of identity sees gender as an effect produced regularly by repeated speech and behavior. For her, it is the identity per se which is performative and discursive, particularly when it comes to gender (Butler, 1993).

She talks against the “notion of a generally shared conception of women” (Butler, p.7) with which many feminists tend to work. This is found in the thought system of Gilligan too. While constituting one’s identity, it is important to conceptualize the concept of ‘feminine’ within the socio-political framework as well as we must be aware of the various socio-cultural factors like race, class, ethnicity and so on. Butler says that “by confronting to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a *stable subject*, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation” (Butler, p.8). So, she feels a necessity to critique the patriarchal ‘categories’ which we have deeply internalized. This internalization has blocked our thinking to a great extent and feminists too are not an exception.

Butler believes in destabilizing the category of ‘women’ which would be possible when one contests the system of ‘heterosexuality’. She points out that no one can be or should be assumed as a ‘woman’. Within the matrix of heterosexuality women as a concept achieves its prominence as well as its stability. So we need to destabilize the system as well as all those concepts with which we are at ease and thus, to come out from the comfortable zone.

While Butler problematizes the category of ‘women’ as a fixed entity, she expresses her view that “... the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of “women” are constructed” (Butler, p.20). This is a grave problem which needs to be considered seriously.

Gender, as a category, is also problematic. Butler points out that there is no ontology of gender which can explain the meaning of being a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’. To do so would be to treat gender as a natural category and this would be an utterly wrong step. It is important to think deeply the possibilities to undo ‘pre-given’ sexual identities, accompanied with an alternative understanding. Therefore, our general tendency of ‘assigning’ masculine traits to male body and the feminine traits to female body needs to be questioned. Butler claims that gender acts as a mirror to sex and this mirroring needs to be stopped. She also feels the necessity of theorizing gender independently of sex. Butler expresses her grave concern about the present situation because it restricts the possibility to include ‘others’. This ‘other’ can be anyone who denies to be coined as ‘heterosexual’; they are non-heterosexuals. This approach of Butler is definitely radical.

We can end this discussion on Butler by quoting her where she states that to “... think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender on its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity” (Butler, p.44).

From the quote Butler’s intention is very clear; she is against any kind of determinism which is operative at both the theoretical level as well as at the existential level and thus skeptical of the view to ‘follow’ gender blindly and promotes for diverse sexual identities.

Monique Wittig: Monique Wittig says that there is no sex; it is the result of oppression and does not exist a priori. Sex is a social construction used for domination of women by men. Her view is similar to that of Butler since both opine that sex is not a natural category. To Wittig, the division of humans into men and women caters to the institutions of reproductive sexuality. Sex/gender division is naturalized but not ‘natural’. Wittig conceives sex as a political category and to her, society always acts as heterosexual. Sex is always associated with women and as a concept predominates everywhere - in minds, bodies, acts or in gestures of human beings. It seems to be omnipresent in nature. Wittig claims that ‘sex’ brings no liberation in the life of women but only drudgery. Sex appears to be both imaginary (as it does not exist in reality) and real (because it is felt in the actions of people).

Wittig, like Butler, challenges the heterosexual model. She states that even though heterosexuality is a non-existent object, it acts like an ideology and influences our framework of thought, thereby affecting every sphere of our lives. Individuals appear to be more prominent as sexual beings rather than as social beings.

Wittig views gender as “the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are no two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the “masculine” not being a gender”. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (Wittig, p.60). Masculine is universal and exist as a priori notion unlike women. There is only one sex and that is the feminine (women). Men does not need to be sexed (as they are universal). The process of universalization is offensive in nature since it excludes women from the domain of concepts, philosophy, and politics.

Within society, women are always sexed and sex is feminine. Being produced discursively, sex oppresses women. Sex gives meaning to the ‘bodies’ which is a process of signification. Wittig opposes this as it

erases one's entity as an individual. Thus, women are reduced to mere sex objects with no sexual freedom. So, it is imperative to overthrow the entire political discourse of sex. Wittig tries to show us that the category of sex is not something innate (already in the mind). It can be viewed as an adventitious one which comes to us from outside and we accept it as something 'real'. It is more of a kind of an imposition to many feminists. What Wittig wants us to do is to revisit the terrain of the 'bodies' and 'sexualities' without recourse to sex. Thus, she sees the category of sex as a reified one, which limits gender and in a way violates the possibilities of other 'sexualities'. Sex reduces bodies into two types- male and female and Wittig is against all kinds of closure, fragmentation and dominance. By evading the sex/gender system, Wittig states that there can be a 'full invocation of 'I''. Thus, Wittig challenges both the sex/gender classification and the system of patriarchy. Her philosophy is based on the de-centering of the dominant systems of modern thought. She is abreast of the fact that any kind of binary is contingent in nature. Her mission is to make the category of sex obsolete from all the spheres of thought, theorization and language. Within the framework of sexuality, she points out that one is either 'straight' or one is not. Any kind of exception or deviation from this arrangement has no place within such frame. And Wittig is against this kind of framework. She refuses to be defined in terms of heterosexuality and overthrows 'sex' as a principle of unification because it becomes the deciding factor of a body.

Besides sex, Wittig also considers language to play an important role in the oppression of women. Language fixes the 'subject' which is invariably masculine. The

subject is always universal and is not relative or interested in nature (women). In the prevailing discourse, "a relative subject is inconceivable; a relative subject could not speak at all" (Wittig, p.6). This relative subject is without any doubt women. Power lies explicit within the domain of language. Still language has its importance as a tool of visibility. To make oneself both audible and visible, one must have the access to language. This becomes difficult for women because of the reification of the sex/gender system. Wittig sees language as playing an 'exclusionary role' where only few persons (women) are allowed to speak.

Her approach is also radical like Butler, where she talks about a far-reaching revolution to uproot heterosexuality from the society. Struggle is important to create movement of resistance within the dominant ideology as well as to bring changes within the position of women. Wittig also questions the reproductive role of women and also problematizes the 'naturalized process of becoming' into men and women. In Wittig's view, our primary objective is to have a sexless society. She deals with the class concept and has a strong desire to evade this notion.

Conclusion: It is clear that Gilligan's care ethics is not free from flaws. Though one cannot deny its importance among feminist activists, the oppressive system of heterosexuality or the category of 'woman' did not seem to bother the psychologist too much. Thus, at this juncture there arises the need to step in and critique the particular set of fixed concepts critically so that women do not remain as a slave within the heterosexual system.

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Sananda Sen

33/A, Southern Avenue/Senior Research Fellow/Jadavpur University.