THIRD WORLD, GENDER, AND FAMILY:
EMPOWERING THROUGH SOCIAL CRITICISM

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Abstract: The paper unpacks the role of social criticism as an active method of change. The paper borrows the concept of third world feminist social criticism and combines it with Habermasian discourse ethics to establish the proposed connection that social criticism from the inside has an important role to play towards empowering women. The role of third world feminist social criticism highlights collective action for social criticism. It provides a platform for informed and uncoerced social decision making where inequalities are perpetuated by social values, practices, and norms. By focussing on the day-to-day problems faced by women and providing them space to present their opinion, the paper argues that the most important aspect is giving voice to the unheard voices. In this regard, the importance of discourse ethics is paramount. Another important aspect that the paper emphasizes is that a passive revolution of women should not occur – as Gramsci points out in other contexts – and the hegemonic tendencies remain checked.

Keywords: discourse ethics, family, feminism, social criticism, third world.

Introduction – A Review of Literarture: Scholars of feminism have had differing views over the roles assisgned to the women in society and they have ranged from liberal to radical; from being accomodative to breaking the structure foundationally. The discussion of various strands remain beyond the scope of the paper. However, put things in perspective, it is important to outline some major arguments thereof.

The liberal feminists have focussed mainly on the issue of equality. For Virginia Held, a liberal feminist, the imporatnt issues remain limited to those of liberalism, rights, power, political change, and 'ethics of care' [1]. She talks of feminists who consider that liberal individualism neglects the social structures within which persons develop. Held says that traditional view of law not intruding in home makes women and children vulnerable to private tyranny. However, it interferes with women's private decisions concerning reproduction, child bearing and family tasks [2].

On the other side of the spectrum, the radical feminists argue that domination of women is inherent in the way male sexuality has developed. For MacKinnon, this domination is institutionalised through rule of law [3]. They demand reformulations of existing schemes of rights since legal rights help bring about the social change. The dominations has evolved Feminists ask for positive enablement to be free and equal. To feminists like Joan Tronto, the ethics of care gives expression to women's experience of emotions and mutual trust which is helpful to morality[4]. Robinson talks of a critical ethic of care capable of dealing with global conflict and other issues[5][6]. Nancy Hartsock has argued for a feminist alternative to the standard conception of power as domination[7]. Feminism seeks to overturn the gender hierarchy which permeates almost all aspects of societies. They seek an ordering of society along cooperative lines, fostering mutual trust and caring.

Another scholar, Reichold, gets into a detailed account of other feminist scholars in order to present her views. She discusses Nussbaum's idea that no theory of justice could probably call itself such if it favours one group on the basis of birth. The disposition to care for others and to think in relationships is the result of the factual oppression and power conditions. Nussbaum argues for a gender-neutral definition of marriage and family. Author talks of Young's view that the institution of marriage is fundamentally unjust and should be abolished. She separates family from sexuality. The gender hierarchy results from linking marriage and family to sexuality and reproduction. Author then talks of Juliet Mitchell who separates gender identity from sexual identity and argues that it is not primarily motherhood in which women learn social relations of care-taking. Social identity is developed in the relation of sisterhood [8].

Grob and Rothman discuss issues of parenthood and construction of Gender in family [9]. They argue that parenting is a social process which reflects and perpetuates the inequalities of our society. Inequality is magnified by differential access to parenthood and devaluing the work of childbearing and childrearing results in further inequities. After children enter the family, the division of household labor generally increases gender inequality and worsens differences along lines of race and class. There is need to take parenting public through organizing new social movements [10].

Scholars have further argued that including questions of reproduction and sexuality into political process will erode the public/private distinction and undermine the current system of representative democracy in favor of a more participatory one [11].

Phillips's 'politics of presence' generates forms of representation recognizing both interests and identities [12]. She proposes active intervention to include members of groups currently under-represented in politics. Young suggests that groups which have suffered oppression need guaranteed representation in order that their distinct voice can be heard. Her vision of group representation is different from interest-group pluralism in that it promotes public discussion and decision-making rather than the pursuit of predefined interests [13]. Chantal Mouffe, sceptical about the deliberative model of democracy, stresses the centrality of the notion of rights complemented by a more active sense of political participation and belonging. She rejects Young's proposals for group representation, objecting to the idea that sexual difference should be a valid distinction in the domain of poltics [14].

Third World and Feminism: While the presented review takes into account the conditions of women in general, it fails to address the specific needs of women of the third world. Brooke Ackerly discusses the role of third world feminist social criticism. She begins with an anecdote of rural Bangladeshi women who demonstrate deliberation and collective action as important forms of social criticism. The feminist method of social criticism guides critics in their evaluation of existing values, practices, and norms and prompts them to be strategic in their inquiry. She discusses three kinds of critics: outsiders, insiders, and those who cross boundaries. Collectively, they promoted incremental social change, challenging the norm of women's constrained mobility while following the convention of men's authority over their wives. According to the philosophy of social criticism proposed by the author, social critics help society promote informed, collective, and uncoerced social decision making in the real world where inequalities are perpetuated by social values, practices, and norms.

Ackerly is critical of Gutmann and Thompson's view of deliberation to resolve moral disagreements [15]. Those who are silent due to inequalities cannot join democratic deliberations. With the existing inequalities, it would be merely wishful to expect that the deliberations would occur without the social baggae. She questions Walzer in that how can anyone see and interpret wishes that are not written or spoken [16].

Without prior social criticism, the silent cannot participate in legal institutions or even in social movements. Third World feminist social critics make the silent heard. They promote inquiry, deliberative opportunities, and institutional change. Social criticism is distinguished from complaint. It is not just a matter of complaining about the problems; social criticism assigns agency to the women to take

us the task of changing the existing social order. Third World feminist social criticism shows how the views of the less powerful can be heard and can influence social decision making despite power inequalities.

The role played by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, India is important in this regard. SEWA organizers have created an atmosphere where deliberation can freely occur among the self-employed women on topics of importance to the self-employed women [17]. Institutional means are provided by SEWA cooperatives and trade unions to make their social criticisms heard and to change their lives. The cooperatives and unions got further strengthened by taking up the issues of child care, cooperative banking, milk production, home-based production, land development and water harvesting, regional development, health, child care, housing, etc.

Studies have shown that SEWA members have considerably "improved their economic condition by increasing or stabilizing employment, gaining access to regular supply of raw materials, owning their own tools, finding adequate work space, expanding markets, and diversifying into other work activities" [18]. SEWA has even contributed towards new social understandings. This has led to changes in the society's values, practices, and norms [19].

While the Ackerly is critical of deliberative democracy, the paper argues that combinig deliberations based on discourse ethics will enrich the idea social criticism. The major aspect of discourse ethics is that principles and ideas must be validated through a mode of dialogue, wherein the effort is to reach an agreement. The notion of 'social learning' proceeds by creating a distinction between 'technical-instrumental learning' and 'moral-practical learning' [20]. While the former focuses on increasing power of human beings over nature, the latter is concerned with the creation of more 'consensual social relations' that would transcend the strategic considerations of power. Ultimately, by virtue of discourse ethics, actors reflect on whether their actions have any universal acceptance or not. This is the 'post-conventional morality' – the highest form of morality and forms the basis of discourse ethics. Participants agree to be guided by nothing apart from the force of the better argument. In such a scenario, norms cannot be valid unless they 'command the consent of everyone' who can be affected by it. Thus the final objective is to attain 'unconstrained communication' in order to overcome weaknesses of 'monologic reasoning' [21].

Furthermore, by focusing on emancipation from within, the paper argues that hegemony, as domination by consent, needs to be checked. The Gramscian theory defines hegemony as a

combination of coercion and consent, which is not merely exercised by the state, but by civil society as well [22]. It is this ideational hegemony that plays a profound role in shaping the decision of the state. This further reinforces the idea that it is not only states that ought to be considered as political units. Being hegemonic here implies that a particular morality is preferred over any other. The basic rights of human beings, including the right to life and basic liberty, gets undermined when a certain worldview relegates other worldviews to the margins. It is this tendency that needs to be taken care of when social criticism is sought.

Evaluation: Most of the works regarding justice and family focus on the private/public dichotomy and call for re-ordering of society in a more egalitarian way. Seeking to overturn the gender hierarchy, they seek an ordering of society along cooperative lines, fostering mutual trust and caring. Power relation is also a prime focus. It is a pre-requisite to have positive enablement to be free and equal. The idea of 'ethics of care' emphasizing the importance of relationships does appear attractive alternative not only in terms of bettering the condition of women but also for the society and world as a whole. It has the potential of being based on the truly universal experience of care. Understanding the values involved in care, and how its standards reject violence and domination, are possible with the ethics of care.

However, they lack specific concern towards making the marginalized voices heard. The work by Brooke Ackerly has a very distinct essence in this regard. The role of third world feminist social criticism highlighting collective action for social criticism and providing platform for informed and uncoerced social decision making where inequalities are perpetuated by social values, practices, and norms is a revolutionary approach insofar that it is focussing on the day-to-day problems faced by women. The most important part is giving voice to the unheard voice. In this regard, the suspicion towards deliberation needs to be checked too. If the voices are to be made heard, it is important that the same comes from within and does not end up being yet another case of hegemonizing the discourse.

The possibility of discourses being shaped in a hegemonic way is evident in case of such groups that claim to foster empowerment through organized self-help groups. The problem of some sections overshadowing the interest of others remains a probability. In this regard, it is urgent to proceed in a way that does not end up being hegemonic. At the level of providing institutional access, leadership is important. However, it is to be considered in a critical way that such a role does not deny the possibility of alternative voices being heard. It is thus suggested that by having a critical theoretical bent, the proposed idea of empowerment through social criticism will provide better results.

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