

Feminism through the lens of Existentialism

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Abstract

Feminist history in different centuries have confirmed the fact that women under the patriarchal social system have faced existential crisis. I wish to study and analyse the ways through which mental make-up of women has been influenced and determined by different factors. Their lives are saturated with bad faith. I aim to explain the concept of bad faith as envisaged by Jean- Paul- Sartre in the context of feminist thinking. Society dictates that a girl ought to develop a particular perception and outlook of herself. The counter perception and opposite way of thinking are to be forsaken. She has to surrender some of her interests and ambitions for the sake of the family at large. The individual and social lives of women are perpetrated by a sense of pretension. The one who is rebellious has to struggle hard to fulfil her goals in life. She is destined to live in bad faith in a patriarchal society. However, the existentialists contend that human being is free and he strives continuously to transcend his state (normally an unhappy one) to reach a better end in view. The history of feminist revolutionaries has revealed in different times how they have tried to identify the feminist issues, grievances and sorrows and seek out their solutions. They are the harbingers of an ideal society based on liberty, equality and justice that is free from sexist bias and irrational discrimination. They look forward towards the emancipation of women who will transcend their facticity and claim their lost rights.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Freedom, facticity, Bad faith, transcendence

Feminism through the lens of existentialism

Human existence and freedom are indistinguishable according to Existentialism where a man is conceived as a being who stands out by virtue of his existence. The term “existence” has been derived from the Latin word “existere” that means to ‘to stand forth’ or ‘to arise’. A human being is a combination of facticity and transcendence. He is never satisfied with his present state of affair; he always

seeks to reach a higher end in life through transcendence. In existential terminology, this is called the authentic existence of man that expresses his freedom of choice and responsibility.

In this paper, I wish to discuss the condition of women in a patriarchal society, how does social infrastructure create a hindrance for her in the flowering of her potentialities and force her to live inauthentically. When we study the social status and position of women in different phases of history, we find that the overall picture is not quite satisfactory from the existential point of view. No doubt, owing to the consistent and continuous struggle of the feminists' thinkers who fight for the rights of women there has been significant changes in the outlook and attitude of society at large towards women. However, the strong foundation of patriarchy that has laid out its deep roots in the social structure, an invisible gender bias and discrimination still pervades the different spheres of it leading to deprivation and suffering of womenfolk in general. The qualities of compassion, sympathy, endurance and resilience are regarded as the praiseworthy female qualities in a society. However, the male members of the patriarchal society praise these female virtues only to maintain the patriarchal infrastructure.

Patriarchy

Judith Bennett in the book "History Matters, Patriarchy and the Challenges of Feminism" has articulated three main meanings of the term "Patriarchy" in modern English. In the first instance, it indicates the ecclesiastical power of men recognized as Christian leaders, specifically within the Greek Orthodox tradition. Therefore, the Archbishop of Constantinople is known as the patriarch of that church. In the second place, it signifies the legal powers of a husband/father over his wife, children and those who depend upon him. This meaning is mostly limited to domestic, familial contexts and expressed by such words as patriarchalism or paternalism. The third meaning of patriarchy concentrates on feminist critiques of male power. Adrienne Rich has defined patriarchy as a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men determine the female roles in society through force or direct pressure enforced through customs, rituals, traditions and laws. Allan Johnson has defined patriarchal society as male-dominated, male-centred and male-privileged.

Kate Millet in her book "Sexual Politics" introduces us to a pertinent question, can the relationship between the sexes be viewed in a political light at all? The term "politics" refers to power-structured relationships and arrangements by which one group of persons controls another group. It works through different dimensions like ideological, biological, sociological and others and perpetrate a machine of oppression and exploitation of women.

Hannah Arendt observed that government is upheld by power supported either through consent or violence. Sexual politics obtains consent through the

“socialization” of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role and status. Temperament signifies the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category (“masculine and feminine”) founded on the requirements of the dominant group. Men are ascribed the qualities of intelligence, rationality, aggression, force and vitality whereas the qualities of ignorance, passivity and meekness adorn the female.

A second factor complements it which is sex role. It ordains an elaborate code of conduct for each sex. Women are assigned domestic service like cooking, rearing children, attending to the elders of the family whereas ambition, interest and other areas of human achievement are kept for the male. The field of one’s activity is somehow dictated by an invisible authority. The tyranny of sexual roles binds a woman to contoured and harsh boundaries. Crossing the threshold is dangerous because it may lead to ostracization. Status can be considered as a political component, role as the sociological and temperament as the psychological. They are interdependent and form a chain. From the biological perspective, Millet has conceived patriarchy as endemic in human social life on the grounds of human physiology. Family is the chief institution of patriarchy from the sociological point of view. It serves as the agent of the larger society. The seniormost male member is considered as its supreme head who expects all other members to obey and conform to his orders.

One of the essential features of patriarchy is economic hold of the male over the female members. It is mostly the case, particularly in lower-income groups of a society that financial assistance is provided and controlled by the male members. Women’s household labour has been unpaid and cannot claim the same status of a man who mostly has to go outside of the house to earn his daily bread. Women face various occupational hazards and sometimes they are barred from choosing few occupations scrupulously.

The patriarchal framework has a significant impact upon the psychologies of both the sexes. The interiorization of patriarchal ideology, status, temperament and role are value systems with different psychological underpinnings for each sex. These are enforced by cultural and religious norms that are taken as incorrigible in nature and beyond revision. Discrimination in the spheres of behaviour, employment and education make the women feel as marginal citizens. The social structure that deprives people of his basic needs has been termed as “structural violence” by a famous Norwegian philosopher, Johan Galtung. Women in a patriarchal system that promotes inequality between the sexes are victims of structural violence. In the words of the Noble Laureate Amartya Sen, the deprivation faced by women in patriarchy is a kind of “unfreedom”.

Norms and expectations

Our ideas of male and female natures derive less from empirical facts and observations and more from norms and expectations that govern our lives. Norms that set standards of typical and ideal male and female behaviour favour different roles and responsibilities for men and women. These norms usually have to do with patterns of work, modes of feeling and relating, style of clothing, system of learning and communication, and most significantly, access to resources and power. Norms and expectations exist in almost all societies; they are not uniform and consistent. Norm is powerful and influential, not because everyone adheres to it but because it is made to seem universal, though it works well only in certain contexts. Being a good wife and mother, which is a middle- and upper-class ideal is generalised enough for all women to want to adhere to it. Social pressure and stigma condemn a woman to live within specific boundaries with the assurance of safety. The social and psychological taboos supported by the society compel a girl to think in a particular way, to make herself confident of the fact that a specific kind of lifestyle is best for her. She develops to think and feel in a particular pattern and in a conventional way that guarantees her security. Herein comes the concept of bad faith that pervades a female psychological make-up in her daily chores of life discretely.

Role play

Men and women play different roles because society expects them to act in particular ways and rewards them if they play the specific roles. Noncompliance with the principles begets punishment and social ostracization. Assigned social roles perpetrate emotions and produce psychological justification in support of these roles. It is assumed that men are rational while women are emotional. There is an embedded play of power structure plying in the society, modes of inclusion and exclusion, approval and disapproval, reward and punishment

Social expectations are expressed and enforced through different practices and institutions. The family acquaints the child with the earliest knowledge about its destined role in the family. Boys and girls dress differently and abide by different codes of behaviour. Children accept these roles and they are scolded if they are non-conformists. Particularly the girl children are mocked and teased by others if they do not fulfil the social expectations. These expectations are reinforced by schools. Thus, at different stages of growth and development, an individual is reminded that it is natural and inevitable for men and women to follow their destined paths of behaviour.

Ideas of masculine and feminine virtues are not fictional but real. They affect men and women differently. The ideas are patterned and structured in different contexts of our lives. Further, they are not static but moulded and re-worked through various life situations. The division of human beings is so pervasive that

the categorization is instilled in the mind at the time of birth. Categorization continues and discriminatory attitude is noticed by a girl child gradually as she matures. Scientific learning and research have been denied rigidly at some point of time to girls who were thought to have lesser minds and deficient in mental power to acquire scientific knowledge.

Alison Jaggar observed that traditional Western ethical philosophy disregards women's attitudes, feelings and outlooks. Aristotle and Kant have formulated that rationality is the salient feature of man and he is a detached emotion-free person. The feminist philosophers have discovered that the root cause of disrespect towards women is the fact that the private sphere of the family is natural and it does not come into the purview of morality. Traditional moral philosophy supports a form of reasoning that upholds rules and universality despising the female perspective ingrained in particularity, intuition, context and personal relationships.

In this context, I wish to mention the ideas of one of the famous philosophers in recent times, A. Raghuramaraju who teaches philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology, Tirupati. The observations appeared in the "The Telegraph" on Monday, 9th October, 2023. He mentions the significant contribution of feminist philosopher, Susan Moller Okin. She has shown how Immanuel Kant has based morality on rationality and deviated from the contemporary metaphysical beliefs and presuppositions. He has tried to exclude the non-rational aspects like feeling and emotion from the sphere of morality. However, we can find glimpses of gender discrimination in few of his writings. The issue arises when he associates male with rationality and women with the non-rational aspects of human psyche, namely, emotions and feelings exclusively. Some of the quotes of Kant in his book "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" imply a degraded status of women under domination of men, as explored by Okin. She comments that it is a radical approach to base morality on reason but quite problematic to dissociate women from rationality.

Okin does not attempt to establish that women too are rational; she claims that non-rational values like love and sympathy have moral content too. So, they should not be banished from the moral kingdom. She further goes to emphasise that family has an important role to play in this regard to inculcate in the child the values of love and reciprocity instead of domination and dependence. Rationality is the emblem of modernity no doubt but it should not be used as an instrument to jeopardize the status and position of women.

The ethics of care has a significant role to play in this regard. We have observed that the patriarchal framework of the society has implicitly or sometimes explicitly determined the politics, economics, ethics of the society. The Care ethics opposes the traditional moral view that neglects women experiences. Alison Jaggar observed that the traditional western ethics disregard the

perspectives of women. Philosophers like Kant and Aristotle have eulogized the rational quality of man. The emotional, personal relationships thriving in various contexts in social life are looked down upon as secondary and unimportant by them. The female qualities that are boasted of are scrupulously utilized to denigrate her social status.

The Concept of Bad faith

A person who shows signs of bad faith lies to himself. The significance of lie is that the liar is in complete possession of the truth that he hides. It is a negative attitude that does not bear on consciousness itself, rather it aims at the transcendent. The liar is not ignorant of the truth. He is completely knowledgeable about the truth that he is hiding. The lie is considered as a normal phenomenon of what Heidegger calls the "Mit-sein". The liar possesses a complete comprehension of the lie and of the truth that he is altering. In bad faith too, a person has full knowledge of the truth that he is hiding. The difference between lying and bad faith consists in the fact that whereas in the former, the persons hide the truth from other people, in the latter he hides it from his own self. It is almost like wearing a mask that conceals one's self-identity. It is a way to make oneself deny his true nature and project a false image of oneself to the public quite convincingly.

From the existential perspective, most women in a patriarchal system can be perceived as living in bad faith. Since childhood, a girl is brought up to abide by certain fixed principles that she is bound to accept as true and final. These social principles demand absolute conformity and she anticipates punishment for non-conformity. In other words, a woman has an inauthentic existence in a patriarchal system. Her freedom and choice are limited; she cannot cross the threshold of the strict and prescribed boundary of communication and action, cunningly built up and maintained by the patriarchal authority.

In this connection, I would like to point out the fact that while bad faith is of an individual nature and self-directed, patriarchy has cultural, social, political and economic aspects and is more other-directed. The different gender roles prevalent in the patriarchal society have not only instigated discrimination between men and women, but they have disadvantaged women. Discrimination is initiated by placing men in the core and women in the periphery. Consequently, women are marginalized, silenced and made invisible; their experiences are either ignored or monitored by the core. Patriarchy thrives upon the institutional and social support that legitimize male supremacy and domination that are never questioned. Unbridled use of power continues to promote various kinds of oppression over women who are sometimes totally helpless and succumb to their unfortunate conditions. In other words, bad faith is the outcome of deep psychological stress and anxiety suffered by women that originate from patriarchal machinery of power-politics.

Heidegger and Sartre Re-visited

In this context, we are reminded of Heidegger, the great existential philosopher who said that human existence is characterised by “thrownness”, he is thrown into a situation. This condition has been described by Sartre as “abandonment”. Man cannot but accept the situation surrounding him that in a certain manner, poses limit to his growth and development. These obstacles in life constitute the “facticity” of his existence. In a way these limitations glorify a man and act as an incentive to transcend them. He has to apply his faculties of choice and interpretation to mould the present intolerable condition. Freedom is not absence of obstacles in life; in the continuous striving to surpass various life-constraints lies human freedom. For Sartre, freedom is both a fact and a value. As a creative being, man aspires to reach an end by transcending his present state, although it may not be attained actually. What is important is his life is adorned with newer and newer possibilities that he chooses to achieve freely and responsibly

Human existence and freedom are indistinguishable according to Sartre. A human being is potentially free and he has to realise his freedom by choice. He has to choose between the alternative options that appear before him. The existential thinkers do not conceive of freedom as a static concept: it is to be achieved at every moment of life through continuous effort. One should nihilate the existing state in order to reach his goal which can be termed as a “present nothingness”. Following Sartre, the case of a worker can be considered who is in a stressful condition under the tyrannical and exploitative attitude of the bourgeois masters. He always tries to negate the existing deplorable state of affair by choice to realise a state free from oppression.

We can interpret the existential concepts and their practical orientation in the case of a woman living in a patriarchal society. She has the constant urge to surpass her facticity and transcend her unhappy state to realize her true identity. She is not satisfied with what she is but aspires to realize what she is not. From the existential point of view, we can trace the constant fight of a woman to transcend her limitations by striving ceaselessly to discover her true nature. In the different corners of the world, the struggle goes on....

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