

# RECLAMATION OF THE FEMININE GENIUS BEYOND MISOGYNY A Heuristic Reading of Kierkegaard

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**Abstract:** Kierkegaard's contribution to feminist thinking is a much debated issue as his writings depict women both beautifully and spitefully at the same time. On the one hand, a few scholars argue that his views are blatantly misogynic, and on the other, some argue that his views are redeeming. In the view of the latter, Kierkegaardian thoughts surpass the abstract patriarchal ethics to an ethics of relation or ethics of care. I argue that though one may detect many lines of misogyny in his writings, they can be seen compensated through the insightful lines he writes about women. His insights on feminine qualities and her role in human and religious life can only be an outcome of one who loves and admires them. In this paper I examine his transitions from misogyny to reclamation through a heuristic re-reading of Kierkegaardian thinking, and contribute to women's voice for their personal identity and appropriation of feminine genius in society and religion.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Kierkegaard, Misogyny, Postmodern, Prospective Perspective, Reclamation, Religion.

## 1. Introduction

The intriguing congruity of Søren Kierkegaard's thoughts with certain contemporary feminist theories and postmodernity is the setting for the discussion on misogyny and reclamation of the feminine genius in his writings. As in postmodernity, in feminism

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too the patriarchal ideals of selfhood are deconstructed and restructured; and subsequently, from the metaphysical aura of selfhood it turns towards the feminine experience. The entire corpus of Kierkegaard's authorship, because of the anti-metaphysical strand bustling through, may be regarded as the forerunner of the postmodern and feminist thoughts. Moreover, the religious existentialism of Kierkegaard is considered to be one of the major sources of feminist and other liberation theologies, as his texts have opened up a space for them in the philosophical and theological world.<sup>1</sup>

In a superfluous reading Kierkegaard's thoughts on feminism might, however, seem to be more tenuous than his thoughts on postmodernism, because the 'woman question' is presented in a patronizing patriarchal colouring. The concern of this paper is not to discuss the contradictory views of Kierkegaard on women, whether misogynistic or emancipatory. The trajectory of this article is rather limited to shed light on his transition from misogyny to reclamation, and an elaboration of the logic of this transition. As many have observed, Kierkegaard's position is ambiguous as his writings depict women both superbly and spitefully. What could be an appropriate method in reading these texts loaded with irony and satire? How does one justify the misogynistic writings in his corpus? What do they proffer to the readers of the present age? The significance of this study lies in his emphasis on the inherent equality of the sexes before God against the social and political imbalance between men and women. Kierkegaard's personal views expressed through irony and satire hammer the unjust foundations of patriarchal society and they are binding in arguing for social and political equality of the sexes.

The first part of the paper explains the role of irony in his writings and the second part describes the dynamics of a heuristic search, which would enable one to review Kierkegaardian texts from "an unprejudiced prospective perspective."<sup>2</sup> The third part

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<sup>1</sup>Dera Sipe, "Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship," *Concept* 27 (2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup>The phrase, "an unprejudiced prospective perspective" refers to the process of reading a text with a futuristic outlook, so as not to be

will present the widely critiqued misogynistic views on women in Kierkegaardian corpus, and the final part will present a rereading of Kierkegaard’s writings in view of drawing some positive insights on feminine emancipation and reclamation of the feminine genius.

## 2. Kierkegaardian Writings and the Problem of Irony

The corpus of Kierkegaard’s writings is complicated as there are two parallel paths: converging and diverging. This is because his writings are classified into two: i) indirect communication in pseudonymous names,<sup>3</sup> and ii) edifying writings, published in his own name.<sup>4</sup> In the former, Kierkegaard distinguishes himself from the author, so there are two authors, namely, the given author (pseudonymous author) and the author of the given author. Kierkegaard himself enjoins us that the views of the authors in the pseudonymous writings are not his personal views.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he liked to protect his identity as he establishes a distance from his created authors. The difficulty to distinguish between irony and literalness is the problematic of these texts.

Both in the pseudonymous and edifying writings of Kierkegaard, one has enough materials for differentiation and subduing of women, and at the same time arguments for

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influenced by prejudices of the author and the limitations of the context. Subsequently, this perspective would redeem the texts from their contextual, social and cultural limitations.

<sup>3</sup>Sipe calls it the Kierkegaardian “Funhouse,” Sipe, “Kierkegaard and Feminism,” 2. For reasons of practicality the pseudonymous writings are referred to Kierkegaard instead of their pseudonymous authors, as in fact, he himself is the author of these authors. See also, Poul Lübcke, “Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication,” *History of European Ideas* 12, 1 (1990), 31-40.

<sup>4</sup>Jon Stewart, “Kierkegaard and the Rich Field of Kierkegaard Studies,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed., Jon Stewart, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2015, 1.

<sup>5</sup>Celine Leon and Sylvia Walsh, eds., *Feminist Interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1997, 2.

emancipation of women and equality with men.<sup>6</sup> As Sylvia Walsh writes, "On no other themes in Kierkegaard one finds such an ambiguity and ambivalence, agreement and disagreement, consistence and contradiction in the authorship."<sup>7</sup> Due to this paradoxical nature of the narrative, right interpretation is required for right understanding. This is all the more true when it is about a writer who employs irony as his figure of speech. Generally, there are two types of irony: i) verbal irony: in saying something the opposite is intended. For example, ridiculing a foolish idea one might say, "what a fantastic idea!" ii) situational irony: here one speaks of someone's misfortune, when in fact the speaker himself/herself is affected by the same misfortune. For example, one may say, "today I have uploaded a video on WhatsApp about how boring and useless WhatsApp is!"

In Kierkegaard, one would find these two types of irony in play. Verbal irony is widely employed in the narrative, and there are also instances of situational irony in the texts, namely, what is satirically narrated seems to have happened in the life of Kierkegaard himself.<sup>8</sup> As Birgit Bertung observes, "unlike other philosophical authors, he [Kierkegaard] is to be neither read nor

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<sup>6</sup>For a detailed study on the topic, see Leon and Walsh, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard*.

<sup>7</sup>Sylvia Walsh, "Issues That Divide: Interpreting Kierkegaard on Woman and Gender," in *Kierkegaard Revisited*, ed., Jon Stewart Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1997, 192.

<sup>8</sup>In *The Seducer's Diary*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, Kierkegaard presents the nature of a seducer, but soon he finds himself in such a state in abandoning Regina after the engagement. Furthermore, Kierkegaard writes a lot about the existential problems of despair, melancholy, dread, etc., a state in which he finds himself when he learned about the engagement of Regina with Fritz Schlegel. See Donald D. Palmer, *Kierkegaard for Beginners*, New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996, 9-11. For Kierkegaard's views on melancholy see Vincent A. McCarthy, "'Melancholy' and 'Religious Melancholy' in Kierkegaard," *Kierkegaardiana* 10 (1977), 151-165. If explained from an exclusive situational irony, it may be argued that misogyny in Kierkegaard's writing results from a "sour-grape syndrome."

argued with directly, or at least one does so at one's own risk."<sup>9</sup> According to her, though theoretically the text speaks something, the reality is altered through an aesthetic or a comic element added to it.<sup>10</sup> About the method (indirect communication) in

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<sup>9</sup>Birgit Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist," in *Feminist Interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard*, 52. For a brief explanation about the role of comic in Kierkegaard, see Andrew J. Burgess, "A Word-Experiment on the Category of the Comic," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed., Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990, 119.

<sup>10</sup>Kierkegaard himself speaks about this: "The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction, but *the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction.*" *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vol. 1, trans., Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 514. Elsewhere he speaks about existential realities which can be concomitantly recognised as comic and tragic. For example: "The individual is tragic because of his passion and comic because of staking it on an approximation." See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 1, 43. A typical example of comic and irony may be: "History throughout the ages shows that woman's great abilities have at least in part been recognized. Hardly was man created before we find Eve already as audience at the snake's philosophical lectures, and we see that she mastered them with such ease that at once she could utilize the results of the same in her domestic practice. This talent for speculation and the allied craving for deeper knowledge already manifest here, [...] As speaker, woman has so great a talent that she has made history with her own special line: the so-called bed-hangings sermons, curtain lectures, etc., and Xanthippe is still remembered as a pattern of feminine eloquence and as founder of a school that has lasted to this very day, whereas Socrates' school has long since disappeared. Although Christianity was certainly hard on women by forbidding them to speak at meetings, it still allowed them an arena for their eloquence inside the home. And when the rabbis forbade them to put in their word, it was solely because they were afraid that the women would outshine them or expose their folly. In the Middle Ages, the countless witch trials sufficiently showed the deep insight woman had into the secrets of nature." Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings 1. Early Polemical Writings*, trans., Julia Watkin, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 3.

Kierkegaard's writing Bertung says that it "is the only way he can make people react, and that is the whole aim of all his works, to get one to act for oneself, even if he has to trick the reader cunningly into the truth."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, reading Kierkegaard is not an easy task. Discernment and distinction-making are the two heuristic categories that should play a major role in understanding Kierkegaard. This paper attempts to show a certain consistent line of thought irrespective of the ambiguity and ambivalence of which it does not close possibilities. It is the claim of this paper that the method of heuristics is the best in understanding texts that contain irony and satire. For this purpose, we take recourse to the method known as heuristics.

### 3. Dynamics of a Heuristic Search

Heuristics is a method in hermeneutics, i.e., in interpreting narratives and events. It is inherently related to the concept of wonder.<sup>12</sup> The term heuristic derives from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which means to find out or to discover. Hence, a heuristic method is just like a seek-and-find dynamics of empirical search. In general, every reflection is heuristic in nature. In literature, heuristics is a continuous search with the syntax of the text to find the intended meaning of the author. According to Sallie McFague, a heuristic search is that which will not accept an argument or position solely on authority, rather it will search for convincing reasons.<sup>13</sup> Of course, heuristic search is open for possibilities and differences, but with a challenging fashion and

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<sup>11</sup>Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist," 53-54.

<sup>12</sup>For Plato θαμάρζειν (to be surprised) was the beginning of philosophy. In *Theaetetus* he writes, "[f]or this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy." Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans., Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 123, London, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1961, § 155d.

<sup>13</sup>Sallie McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God's Body," in *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, eds., Marilyn J. Legge, Marie Giblin, Curt Cadorette, and Mary H. Snyder, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, 273.

specific purpose. The prospective perspective of heurism is helpful in redeeming the narratives from their contextual limitations and temporal framework.

Many branches of research employ heuristic search in resolving and problem solving. To draw the trajectory of this problem solving process through heuristics, we will focus on the heuristic model developed by Allen Newell and Herbert A. Simon.<sup>14</sup> Their work was originally designed for describing artificial intelligence, the psychology of human cognition and list processing. According to them, human thinking can be studied along similar pattern as an information processing system. We draw a few important features of this finding in developing what we call a heuristic search, namely ‘goal-directedness,’ ‘interruptibility and sub-goaling,’ and ‘problem space.’

In understanding Kierkegaard heuristically these three features are employed so that we can have a constructive reading which is more akin to Kierkegaardian thinking. As in computer information processing where the goals are previously set; in reading Kierkegaard such a ‘goal-directedness’ is helpful in understanding his pseudonymous writings.<sup>15</sup> The feature of ‘interruptibility and sub-goaling’ is the possibility of pausing the process of a goal-directed activity in view of the pathway goals that would guide one in the process. In revisiting Kierkegaard, we have found that each text has its own sub-goals which may seem interrupting, but indicative of the goal. Thirdly, the ‘problem space’ is the existential concern of the context that regulates the task environment, which influences goal achievement and the proper understanding of Kierkegaardian texts. For example, in his first work “Another Defense of Women’s Great Abilities” Kierkegaard presents an image of woman in the grip of submissive femininity. These lines, if read in view of his ‘goal-

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<sup>14</sup>Allen Newell and Herbert A. Simon, *Human Problem Solving*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

<sup>15</sup>This in no way affect our promise of unprejudiced prospective perspective as irony and comic in his writings are taken as existential categories rather than aesthetic categories. Thus, heurism invites the readers to move beyond the aesthetic to the existential.

directedness,' namely, the reclamation of the feminine genius from patriarchal subjugation, will sound emancipatory.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, in employing the method of heuristics, one needs to pay attention to what Imre Lakatos speaks as a distinction between a negative and a positive heuristic.<sup>17</sup> Describing it Jacques Haers says, "the negative heuristics of this research programme [...] point to the untouchable core [...] while its positive heuristics [...] suggests a renewed exploration and articulation of the inalienable core of the research programme."<sup>18</sup> In other words, negative heuristics refers to the inner-core of reality, that cannot be changed, whereas positive heuristics refers to those structures, which can be reconstructed and rearticulated. In a patriarchal set-up, 'the role,' 'the position of women,' etc., are prescribed as part of negative heuristics with a feature of inflexibility. But Kierkegaard through the use of irony shakes the basis of such an assumption. A critical and heuristic appraisal of Kierkegaard would demand a restructuring of the hard-core patriarchal understanding. Accordingly, gender-divide is not part of the negative heuristics rather they are part of the view which does not act heuristically.

Many admire Kierkegaard, not because of his existential thoughts, but for his fascination for the unconditional, which we consider the key for a heuristic reading of his texts. It may be this fascination for the unconditional that prompted Kierkegaard to write ironically in view of redeeming women from the sociological bindings. Hence we propose a re-reading of

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<sup>16</sup>It was Kierkegaard's first writing published as a newspaper article in *Kjøbenhavnsflyvende Post, Interimsblad*, 34, on December 17, 1834. See *Early Polemical Writings*1, 3-5.

<sup>17</sup>Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. and Musgrave Imre Lakatos, Alan, London: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 132.

<sup>18</sup>Jacques Haers, "*Defensor Vinculi Et Conversationis: Connectedness and Conversation as a Challenge to Theology*," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed., Jacques Haers and Peter De Mey, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003, 2.



Kierkegaard in this line, as a heuristic activity. The question of misogyny and reclamation of feminine genius is a heuristic category that is confusing in a surface reading, but insightful to heuristic readers.

#### 4. Misogynistic Texts in Kierkegaard’s Corpus

There are both beautiful and spiteful descriptions of women in the Kierkegaardian canon. But unfortunately, many have highlighted the offensive remarks about women in his texts over above the beautiful lines he wrote about them. Taking such offensive comments as Kierkegaard’s view on women, Deal Hudson in his book *An American Conversation* speaks about his distaste for Kierkegaard because “he [Kierkegaard] did not like woman.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Alice von Hildebrand claims that Kierkegaard seemed to derive “an impish pleasure from putting us (women) off track.”<sup>20</sup> For instance, the very first publication of Kierkegaard, “Another Defense of Woman’s Great Abilities,” is a satirical piece that contains opposing ideas regarding the emancipation of women. A superfluous reading of Kierkegaard presents only a blatantly misogynist as embodied through his writings; a heuristic reading, however, would redeem one from such prejudices. In the following, we describe a few instances of Kierkegaardian texts that is coloured in misogynistic light.

##### 4.1. Women as “Being-for-Other”

In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard differentiates woman from man.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, woman is “being-for-other,” and man is “being-for-self,” (*EO* 1, 430). In his own words, “I shall attempt to consider

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<sup>19</sup>As quoted in Alice von Hildebrand, “Beautiful Words about Women,” <<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6668>> (5.6.2016). Commenting on Hudson’s remark Hildebrand observes that such a statement might be in view of inviting sympathy from the fair sex.

<sup>20</sup>Hildebrand, “Beautiful Words about Women.”

<sup>21</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Hereafter cited within the text as *EO*.

woman categorically. In which category is she to be placed? In the category of being-for-other [...] She shares this qualification with all nature, with all femininity in general. All nature is only for-other" (EO 1, 430). In other words, she is presented as an object, because only man is capable of 'existence,' and woman is only "being" (EO 1, 445). Woman has no existence of her own, she is simply there as being-for-other. Moreover, only man is truly 'existential subject,' whereas woman is 'existential object.' As she is characterized by beauty and men by intellect (EO 1, 362, 428), Kierkegaard notes that woman is sheer *immanence*, and man is *transcendence*. Likewise, man is "reflection" and woman is "substance;" man is "questioning and women is answer" (EO 1, 430-431). Woman's role is just to provide a "company for man" (EO 1, 340). In general, woman is visible only through her relation with male (EO 1, 431). These various texts present woman as irredeemably subjugated. How would a heuristic reading explain these texts?

In the aesthetic stage woman is presented as a 'being-for-other' but as we move further to the religious stage we find Kierkegaard depicting woman as 'being-for-Other' and as a paradigm of absolute relationship. From a heuristic perspective, it is argued that the purpose of Kierkegaard in these writings was to make the problematic explicit. In other words, he wanted to reprove the denial of human empowerment to women as per the traditional conception of the feminine. As Wanda Warren Berry notes, for Kierkegaard, "women are not ontologically 'for-other' [and] men are not ontologically 'for-self.' Finally, both are equally 'before God.'"<sup>22</sup> Erotic orientation has nothing to do with existential identity. As one moves from aesthetic to the religious stage,<sup>23</sup> as

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<sup>22</sup>Wanda Warren Berry, "The Heterosexual Imagination and Aesthetic Existence in Kierkegaard's *Either/or*, Part 1," in *Feminist Interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard*, 47.

<sup>23</sup>A description of the three stages of Kierkegaard's philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper. For a summary of it, see Valentine Ehichioya Obinyan, "Nature of Human Existence in Kierkegaard's Ethical Philosophy: A Step towards Self-Valuation and Transformation *Journal of Dharma* 41, 3 (July-September 2016)

Kierkegaard notes, it is women who are innately oriented to make this move smooth and definite. For this reason, such texts with misogynic odour should not be evaluated from their literal trajectory alone. The sub-goals of these texts should not be the criterion to evaluate the entire corpus of Kierkegaardian writings. For a heuristic reader woman is presented in these texts not as ‘being for other,’ but as ‘being for *Other*.’ The degradation of the feminine, however, is due to the subordinate understanding of it in the aesthetic stage. Male superiority is then due to the absence of existential relation to the ‘Other’, which, in fact, is detrimental to both feminine and masculine genius. Kierkegaard advocates a transition from the aesthetic to the religious existence that might facilitate a levelling of such imbalance.

#### 4.2. Women as Personified Egoism

Adding more to misogyny in Kierkegaard, in his journal, woman is presented as “personified egoism,”<sup>24</sup> and “a born virtuoso in lying” (*JP IV*, 4998). Furthermore, she is “chatter, trivialities, and ... sexual relations” (*JP IV*, 4999), and therefore “she corrupts all men who get married by finitizing and mediocritizing them” (*JP IV*, 4992). Elsewhere the talk of women is termed as “prattle” and “drivel” (*EO 1*, 276).

These few-remarks which sound totally negative are easily compensated if one reads what Kierkegaard writes about them in other constructive and non-pseudonymous writings. His insights on feminine personality and her role in human and religious life, as we mentioned above, can come only from a heart that admires and loves women. Heuristically, the patriarchal setting in which Kierkegaard is placed must be the problem space, which is the context of the development of such texts. Heurism will help the reader to understand irony and satire in view of the goal-directedness of Kierkegaard’s writings, that is, a move beyond

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in Our Contemporary World,” *International Journal of Philosophy 2* (2014), 1-14.

<sup>24</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975, vol. IV, 5000. Hereafter cited in the text as *JP*.

these contexts to the intention of the author. Therefore, from a heuristic perspective, Kierkegaard is successful in making a presentation of the current plight of women in a patriarchal society. In fact, a matter of fact evaluation of the context challenges and questions the lopsided perceptions of patriarchy.

### 4.3. Masculinity as Universal

Masculinity is presented as the universal in the writings of Kierkegaard, whereas femininity is only an appendage to masculinity. Subsequently, woman is also presented through the eyes of man as object of this universal masculinity. She is a seducer, who puts man in trouble and cheats him; and therefore, she is man's destruction.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, we read that "a young girl first becomes interesting in her relation with men. The woman is the weaker sex."<sup>26</sup> *The Seducer's Diary* presents woman as of a low nature, because there is no intellectual reflection in her. In fact, intellect is the absence of womanliness.<sup>27</sup> She is in vegetative state, which can be freed only when she is related to man.<sup>28</sup>

Masculinity has a universal reach in the patriarchal society in which Kierkegaard lived. He wanted to present it along with its prejudiced strands. Such an overarching patriarchal universality according to him, subdues women unjustly, presenting these views as part of the negative heuristics. However, Kierkegaard presents a tension within this questionable universality where woman is presented both as perfect and imperfect. He writes,

If we wish to characterize the most pure and perfect, we say 'a woman', if we wish to characterize the weakest and most fragile, we say 'a woman'; if we want to convey a conception of the spirituality elevated above the sensuous, we say 'a woman'; if we want to convey a conception of the sensuous, we say 'a woman'; if we want to characterize innocence in all its uplifting greatness, we say 'a woman'; if we wish to characterize the

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<sup>25</sup>Sipe, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 8.

<sup>26</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, 55; see also EO 1, 339.

<sup>27</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, 85.

<sup>28</sup>Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, 180-181.

depressing feeling of guilt, we say ‘a woman.’ Thus in a certain sense woman is more perfect than man. (*EO*, 2: 92, 1 Tim 2:14). This would further say that Kierkegaard’s position was not actually to belittle women, but rather to show them their strengths and weaknesses and to caution them not to side with the negative possibilities of such a masculine universality.

## 5. Reclamation of the Feminine Genius

The above mentioned ironical comments of Kierkegaard are only a few to mention by which feminists might label Kierkegaard as a blatantly misogynist. However, rather than attempting to see what do these comments mean, we ask, what they intend for any heuristic reader of Kierkegaard. In other words, can these comments be sheer desperate expressions of an unhappy lover?<sup>29</sup> Should they be taken at face value, as examples of pessimistic attitude towards women in Kierkegaard? Or are they to be evaluated as words of irony from an author whose words mean the opposite or bare negation of what is stated?

While describing the ‘inward dialectics’<sup>30</sup> we have described the gender sub-text of his thought. The earlier pseudonymous writings depict misogyny whereas the latter ones do not share such a colouring, an insight that might help in the struggle to heal the separatist and gender divide. A movement from pseudonym to his own signature presents also a movement from misogyny to reclamation which in my view is the main aim of Kierkegaardian writings. His stress on egalitarianism through an ‘absolute

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<sup>29</sup>Regina Olsen was a Danish woman who was engaged to Kierkegaard from September 1840 to October 1841. It was painful for Kierkegaard and Regina to break the relationship, which had a deep impact in Kierkegaard’s life. For an insightful reading of Kierkegaard and Regina see, Thomas G. Casey, “Kierkegaard the Celibate,” *The Way* 45, 4 (2006), 89-106.

<sup>30</sup>The phrase ‘inward dialectics’ refers to the Kierkegaardian style of writing in irony and satire in two different patterns, namely pseudonymous and edifying writings. An unsystematic presentation of the text, equivocal usage of language, etc., are some of the features of Kierkegaard’s writings, which may be termed as ‘inward dialectics.’

relationship to the absolute' argues that the worldly distinction does not affect the relationship with God. He speaks of levelling all differences before God. In fact, Kierkegaard had profound ideas regarding the greatness of femininity and about the significant part women occupy in human and religious life. We turn to some of these ideas in the following.

### 5.1. Mary as Women Par-excellence

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard speaks of the glory of Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. He writes, "Who was as great in the world as that favoured woman, the mother of God, the Virgin Mary?"<sup>31</sup> He shows the power of Mary in her 'faith in the paradox.' She is presented as a Knight of faith. The narration of Mother Mary clearly depicts that Kierkegaard is not oblivious about the experience of woman, rather he aims at woman empowerment. Here Kierkegaard pictures woman as worthy of admiration eliciting her capacity to have 'faith in the paradox,' one who has given prominence to the existential relationship to God. Accordingly, women are individuals<sup>32</sup> in the religious stage, or rather they have an innate capacity to rise up immediately to that stage unlike men who are to strive hard for that.

According to him, woman paves the way to God, and through her comes salvation; for this reason, Kierkegaard highlights the role of Mother Mary. She is presented as woman par excellence and role model for all woman to be authentic. Furthermore, *The Woman Who Was a Sinner*<sup>33</sup> is an excellent eulogy about woman; here Kierkegaard reclaims the feminine genius to its best possible

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<sup>31</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, ed., Edna Hong and Howard Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, 64-65.

<sup>32</sup>Here the term 'individual' means that one is capable of behaving as an existential being, and not to be subjugated by the society. In the patriarchal society woman is presented as an object having no individuality. Relation and love are regarded as bondage for woman's autonomy and freedom.

<sup>33</sup>It was published in 1849 in a collection, *Three Discourses at the Communion of Fridays*, trans. Sylvia Walsh, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

apex. The woman is presented as a 'picture' and a 'prototype' of godliness. She is depicted as a role model and Knight of faith. Openness before God, reliance on God's grace and mercy, etc., are presented as qualities of religious existence, of which women are adorned with.<sup>34</sup> In Kierkegaard's view, woman is particularly gifted to retain an existential relation to God, a theme which he further develops as ethics of relation.

## 5.2. Ethics of Relation

Kierkegaard's emphasis on "the self and the universal," discarding the themes of 'individual rights' and 'universal duties' of classical ethics, provide much to contemporary feministic thought pattern, i.e., one's own 'experience' to 'individual others'. Kierkegaard rejects the universalizing tendency of one's thought as normative on others. His heuristic maieutic project thus out rightly denies the solipsistic reflection of Descartes and the didactic systematization of Hegel, which helps the feminist thinkers to move beyond the traditional pattern of reflection. Basing on this emphasis on experience, Kierkegaard opted for "an ethics of relation or an ethics of care" instead of "an abstract rational justice" (Kantian patriarchal ethics).<sup>35</sup> This revolutionary move contributed greatly for the conception of non-patriarchal feminine ethics.

Kierkegaard speaks of two types of relationships: i) body-soul relationship, and ii) existential relationship (with God). Here, he explains the relation of the self in relation to itself and to the Being (Eternal Self). According to him, the ontological relation to God can only be understood in terms of existential relation. However, sometimes human beings have the tendency to limit his/her relationship in the realm of human relationships depriving them

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<sup>34</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 141-149.

<sup>35</sup>See, William McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>> (4.5.2016). See also, Gavin Rae, "Kierkegaard, the Self, Authenticity and the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Critical Horizons* 11, 1 (2010), 75-97. Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist."

from an existential relation to God. Women in her depiction as a 'being-for-other,' seems to have been tied to these relations in the aesthetic stage.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, he warns women not to fall prey to such a problem of forgetting the existential relationship to God for the relationship to one's husband or any other human beings.<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard emphasizes woman's innate capability to relate to God, which makes her a paradigm for existential commitment.

Truth, according to him, is subjectivity. Subjectivity does not mean sheer emotional feeling; for him true subjectivity is authentic selfhood qualified by decision, commitment, etc. Committing oneself for the sake of others is self-defeating, because as Kierkegaard describes one can become oneself only in relation to God. In narrating the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard claims that the single individual is higher than the universal. Describing the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard speaks of the suspension of the ethical. As an individual Abraham acts, higher than the universal in fulfilling the will of God, which Kierkegaard terms as faith in the paradox. It is this ethics of relation, an existential relation to God, which enabled him to move beyond the universal, and to aim outside the trajectory of the ethical.<sup>38</sup> Definitely, the God of Kierkegaard castoffs the rational universal for an ethic of relation, which further becomes the logic for the feminine demand for relationality, which challenges the patriarchal politicization of the individual autonomy at the cost of existential relations. Thus, the ethics of relation takes individual experiences seriously, which from a feminist perspective is highly challenging in view of restructuring the ethics of patriarchy.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944, 76. See also, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, Garden City: Doubleday, 1954, 39-79, 162.

<sup>37</sup>Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist," 64.

<sup>38</sup>Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 83-98.

<sup>39</sup>In recent scholarship, feminists have argued for a relational ethics which insists on taking women's experience seriously, and using it as foundation for developing a more inclusive ethics and public policy. See Cynthia Willet, Ellie Anderson and Diana Meyers, "Feminist



### 5.3. Heterosexual Imagery

It has been observed that some interpreters of Kierkegaard had labelled him a ‘bitterly misogynistic’ thinker as one would find sexist or heterosexist passages in his writings. Most of the philosophical tradition is silent about issues of sexual difference, but Kierkegaard becomes an exception through his works which deal with these questions. Kierkegaard proffers an instance of heuristic *Eureka* to the feminist thinkers of our time, to delve deeper into their philosophical and theological insights. In *Works of Love* he writes,

What abominations has the world not seen in the relationship between man and woman – that she, almost like an animal, was a despised creature compared to the male, a creature of another species! What battles there have been to establish women on equal terms with men in the secular world! But Christianity makes only the transformation of infinity and does it, therefore, in all stillness. Outwardly, in a way the old remains – for the man shall be the woman’s master and she shall be submissive to him, but in inwardness everything is transformed, transformed with the aid of this little question to the woman, whether she has deliberated with her conscience about having this man – for a master, for otherwise she does not get him. Yet the question of conscience about a matter of conscience makes her in inwardness before God absolutely equal with the man.<sup>40</sup>

He insists on equality of the sexes before God<sup>41</sup> and even argues for the greater perfection of woman and presents her as the paradigm for religious existence. His stress on egalitarianism

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Perspectives on the Self,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/#Aca>> (20.4.2015).

<sup>40</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writing, XVI: Works of Love*, trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 139.

<sup>41</sup>Berry, "The Heterosexual Imagination," 46. Berry argues that this equality before God in today's context has to be widely described as an equality "not only for women and men, but also for homosexuals and heterosexuals," Berry, "The Heterosexual Imagination," 46.

through an 'absolute relationship to the absolute' argues that the worldly distinction does not affect the relationship with God. He speaks of levelling all differences before God. In this way, Kierkegaard liberates himself from the label of misogyny by detaching himself from an unjust and unequal division of the sexes.<sup>42</sup> From a heuristic perspective it might be said that Kierkegaard puts upside down the economic and patriarchal hegemony of the male through the emphasis of the heterosexual imagery and equality before God.

The heterosexual imagery has its culmination where Kierkegaard makes a passing remark about 'the kiss': accordingly, a "perfect kiss" is possible only between "a girl and a man," because he says "a man to man kiss is in bad taste" (EO 1: 416). Thus, an aversion towards the same sex relations is explicit in Kierkegaard's thinking. He criticizes the seducer's attitude in the aesthetic stage where the seducer does not think of the concerns of the other, which lets Kierkegaard to move further to the next levels of ethical and religious. Indicating the moral issues of the aesthetic stage Kierkegaard highlights the role of heterosexual relation in human life.

Berry argues that though one might find a "masculine point of view" in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* it is more inclusive so as to term it as "the heterosexual imagination."<sup>43</sup> For Berry the very term heterosexual points to the role of the "otherness" as a dialectical partner in the discussion of gender. Heterosexual imagery, as Berry sees it, neither oppresses nor subjugates of any gender. In fact, it is central to many of the segments of *Either/Or* such as "The Seducer's Diary," "The Immediate Erotic Stages," "Silhouettes," etc.

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<sup>42</sup>A few critiques of Kierkegaard claim that Kierkegaard offers only a qualified and potential equality which simply pertains to the religious stage alone, often far from actuality of the socio-political constructions. See Yaroslav Senyshyn, *The Artist in Crisis: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of the Aesthetic Stage of Existence and Live Musical Performance*, Vancouver: Platon Promotions Publishers, 2011, 169.

<sup>43</sup>Berry, "The Heterosexual Imagination," 46.

By the contrast between women and men Kierkegaard tries to show the difference between men as seducers and women who "loves only once" (EO 1, 377). The inconsistency and lack of commitment in relationship from the part of men is depicted so satirically in this work. Kierkegaard presents an ideal girl as one who "*stands alone in the world and thereby be assigned to herself*" (EO 1, 340, emphasis is added). Through the demand for 'stand-alone' Kierkegaard advocates women not to subjugate themselves to the other. A heuristic reading thus proffers a demand for existential authenticity, especially from women so that they may not get confined to the status of mere "company for the man" (EO 1, 340). The ideal of heterosexual relation, when read together with Kierkegaard's emphasis on "equality before God," presents his vision of complementary nature of male and female. He writes, "woman but is the corrector of man; for woman is the conscience of man . . . His proud wrath is quelled by the fact that he turns back constantly to her. Her weakness is made strong by the fact that she leans upon him."<sup>44</sup> However, the heterosexual imagination in the society sometimes turns to be a distorted entity often controlling the society, against which Kierkegaard throws a note of caution.

#### 5.4. Invitation for Introspection

Why was Kierkegaard so negative about women? As Julia Watkin claims "Kierkegaard's misogyny is rather a 'misogamy' or attack on marriage in which both male and female roles are sharply criticized."<sup>45</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard wanted to invite his audience for an introspection, especially women as the victims of the patriarchal absolutism. According to Bertung,

the people who seemed to Kierkegaard to be the most oppressed, the most subjugated in the actual society of the time were, very understandably, women. At all society levels their personalities were in general dominated by their husbands, and therefore he spends

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<sup>44</sup>As quoted in Hildebrand, "Beautiful Words About Women." See EO 1, 340.

<sup>45</sup>Julia Watkin, "The Logic of Søren Kierkegaard's Misogyny 1854-1855," in *The Feminist Interpretations*, 78.

such a large proportion of his writings in being ironical about marriage and women – in depicting them as completely ludicrous – partly to show that women themselves had the decisive blame for this. It is just as great a sin to allow oneself to be subjugated; one has a duty to exist properly and not. Spiritually, to perish in a merely immediate routine life. This sin was most widespread among women, and therefore Kierkegaard speaks so vehemently to them.”<sup>46</sup>

As Bertung has rightly described, by presenting the plight of women, subjugated by the patriarchal mind, Kierkegaard wanted to challenge them to break open this trajectory. Commenting on this Berry notes that “Kierkegaard has constructed an essay that represents the problematics of women’s studies within patriarchal history and culture.”<sup>47</sup> This would indicate that a women study at the very outset has to be freed from such patriarchal confinements if true liberation is to happen. The comment that “women’s life” is “her love” indicates that betrayal of this love cannot be forgiven (*EO* 1, 172, 307). The victimization of woman is presented through the feminine characters of the narrative (*EO* 1, 309-10, 212, 180, 183, 213, 313, etc.). Their basic characteristic of love seems to be the weakness as portrayed in these characters. Hence, the exercise of this love is cautioned and called for evaluation (*EO* 1, 213, 313). Thus, the narrative invites both men and women for introspection.

### 5. 5. Redeeming Self-Blaming Soliloquy

Kierkegaard’s concept of ‘self-transcendence’ is one of the finest contributions to feminist thinking. It proffers feminists to rise above the conventional conformity to the ‘crowd-culture.’ A deeper reflection of the maieutic of Kierkegaard’s writings demands from every woman to achieve personal identity and thus to re-appropriate the feminine genius. ‘Self-blaming soliloquy’ is one of the most dangerous situation from which women require urgent redemption. The following passage from Kierkegaard aptly presents the danger of self-blame in which many women end up in moments of rejection of their love.

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<sup>46</sup>Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist," 65.

<sup>47</sup>Berry, "The Heterosexual Imagination," 33.

He was no deceiver; he had no idea of what a woman can suffer. If he had had that, he never would have forsaken me. He was a man who was to himself enough. ... Why, then, do I complain because a man is like a woman. ... Did he deceive me? No! Did he promise me anything? No! ... He did not ask my hand in marriage; he stretched out his hand, and I grasped it ... he opened his arms, I belonged to him. I clung to him ... I rested my head on his breast and gazed into that all-powerful countenance, with which he ruled the world ... Can I demand more? Was I not his? (EO 1, 203).

The author is pointing to the core of the issue, that is, the danger of such a soliloquy, and wants to redeem women from such oppressive thinking. Thus, *Either/Or* presents “women who are victims of patriarchally conditioned stereotyped heterosexuality.”<sup>48</sup> Such soliloquy arises from a stereotyped heterosexuality, in which women identifies her nature as drawn by the patriarchal society. Here the coinage of womanhood is done as a “being-for-other.” Her thoughts are even controlled by this patriarchal heterosexual imagination. The idea of the feminine is built into a patriarchal mind-set, which keeps women in a state which is irredeemable. The self-blaming soliloquy therefore is the result of such static structure of patriarchal construct.

## 6. Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir once said, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”<sup>49</sup> This is true as woman still is not redeemed from the stereotyped process of social construction. It was an insight for Kierkegaard that the plain use of language may be ineffective, to break open this stereotyped patriarchal social construct. For this reason, he envisaged an effective mode through indirect communication, which not only shakes the depth of such a societal set up but also challenges women to reconstruct their identity. Kierkegaard therefore is to be read dialectically not

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<sup>48</sup>Berry, “The Heterosexual Imagination,” 37.

<sup>49</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York: Vintage Books, 1949, 330.

literally.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard's writings are emancipatory as they redirect the feminists to think of self-transcendence. They instigate the readers for a constructive action. As Sipe comments the aim of Kierkegaard's writings is "to goad women towards existential action."<sup>51</sup>

To the question, is Kierkegaard a misogynist, I will describe the following. Kierkegaard's love for Regina is something no one can deny, because he describes it so openly and unambiguously. From this very fact, it may be claimed that one who has experienced and described the love between man and woman so charmingly cannot be a misogynist. Moreover, we argue that misogyny is a negative maieutic, which Kierkegaard employed with two major thrusts: i) to withdraw himself from Regina, and ii) to challenge women to get out of the circle of patriarchal despotism. What fascinates a heuristic reader is that the female characters in the writings of Kierkegaard has a double construction: first, as constructed by the male characters of the play; and secondly, of those males who themselves is a construction of the thinking of Kierkegaard. Hence a deconstruction of these two layers through a heuristic search, can only give the reader a clear picture of Kierkegaard's position and views on woman. The heuristic perspective with which the texts were analysed has been fruitful as it helped in reading these texts from a prospective perspective. Therefore, reclamation of the feminine genius will be complete only if this prospective perspective is employed in our approach. Moreover, this rereading can be effective only if it helps in redeeming women from the structural, cultural and religious subjugations.

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<sup>50</sup>Bertung, "Yes, a Woman Can Exist," 52.

<sup>51</sup>Sipe, "Kierkegaard and Feminism," 15.