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## **GENDER DISCRIMINATION TODAY A PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE**

### **1. Introduction**

Gender discrimination is a hotly debated topic in politics, education, the academia and in religious organizations today. Even a moderately well-read person is aware of some of the issues raised by feminism, as well as the advances made by the women's movement. The heat seems to be felt most in organized life - family, work, religious hierarchy, decision-making, power-sharing. Is there anything philosophers need to take into account? Does philosophy have something to say in this area? Does the feminist critique challenge us to rethink philosophy? Is this just another particular issue to which all we need is to apply the general or universal truths valid for all? Or, does it raise questions about this human activity called "philosophizing" (doing philosophy)? Is "feminist philosophy" (if such an expression can be given a definite meaning) a branch (an application) of general philosophy, or a way of seeing life and reality that challenges many of our usual assumptions?

### **2. Gender Discrimination**

Anatomical and physiological differences between women and men are a fact. Beyond the biological, there is hardly any trait that can be called typically feminine or masculine. There are differing perceptions and degrees of sensitivity, but these do not argue for superiority or inferiority. There is ample research evidence (as well as common sense testimony) in support of women's equal intelligence and social skills. If longevity and immunity to disease are taken as marks of health, women are by no means the "weaker sex". Men are more prone to a few illnesses than women (eg. heart disease) and women more likely to suffer from a few other ailments (eg. migraine headaches). But, all in all, given the same nourishment and living conditions, women in most cultures outlive men. (So, there are inhuman causes behind India's low, and still falling, female : male ratio.)

Emotionally, women are not weaker or more frightened or withdrawn – unless brought up to be so. (Compare a young South Indian woman with someone her age in matriarchal Khasi society).

Many of the traits attributed to women in proverbs and religious texts (and hence taken as wise and true sayings) reflect the thinking of the men of a particular culture. It is the men who had access to education and books; it is the men who made the laws (till recently, the right to vote was a male prerogative in most societies). Men wrote the "sacred" texts, men composed the laws – and decided on the punishments and rewards to be meted out. The social pecking order and the salary structure were in the hands of men. Male rulers received the support of male clergy (who received royal patronage). Both spoke of a male supreme deity endowed with power, dominion and supreme kingship, who supposedly legitimized the social pyramid on earth. While philosophers spoke of a formless God, religious symbols represented the supreme being largely as a Sovereign Male. This invisible "Father"/"King"/"Lord"/"Master" seemed to approve of (and demand) the subjugation of women to men. (See, for instance, the reading from St. Paul used at many Christian weddings, which asks wives to be submissive to their husbands.)

Ms. Aranha has referred to a number of ways in which women are oppressed and kept in a subordinate position merely for the fact of being women. She identifies – rightly, to my mind – power – sharing as the key issue. The power to take decisions, for example, in both secular and religious societies, rests largely with men. She speaks further of the fears inculcated in women, and the consequent "need" for protection (by father, husband, son or Divine help). There are references in Ms. Aranha's paper to various types of discrimination against women and to the many open and subtle ways in which a woman is domesticated to become a "pleaser". There is a valid remark, too, about how power consciousness reduces the other to an object. The cases the author quotes to illustrate gender discrimination in the economic, political and socio-cultural fields, are painfully real. No one can deny them.

There is a vast, powerful and steadily growing literature today to buttress feminist claims to equality. Much of this writing would serve as an eye-opener to both women and men. Women readers are often shocked to realise how deeply they have internalised society's prejudices against women. Men come up against the double

standards of our society, the way the dice are loaded in their favour. Scholars in any branch of learning today – Biblical studies, theology, psychology, political science, education, law, anthropology – are seriously challenged by feminist thinking. Let me quote a couple of examples.

*First, religious studies*

Feminist scholarship has exposed the male bias behind so much "religious" writing, in which patriarchal (male-dominated) models of society were allegedly proposed and perpetuated by a male divinity that seemed to legitimise the "sacred" writer's or lawgiver's views (Moses, Manu, Paul, several Fathers of the Church.) How much of what we read is "God's word"? How far is it male prejudiced?<sup>1</sup>

*Case Two: Psychology*

Carol Gilligan's seminal study on human development from a female perspective<sup>2</sup> challenged the definitions of emotional and moral development given by such reputed scholars as Lawrence Kohlberg.<sup>3</sup> The issue at stake is: We don't even seem to notice that it is often a man's definition of maturity that is "scientifically" accepted as the better norm for all.

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1. Here is a small sample:

Isherwood, Lisa and Dorothea McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1993.

Radford Ruether, Rosemary. *Sexism and God-Talk*. London: SCM Press, 1983.

Schussler Florenza, Elizabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. London: SCM Press, 1983.

2. Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Miller, Jean Baker. *Toward a New Psychology of Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1977.

3. Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Psychology of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984.

### Case Three : The Social Sciences

In sociology, anthropology, law and political science, there has been an explosion of feminist literature, challenging male prerogatives, proposing egalitarian concepts, laws and practice. In addition to books by well-established authors,<sup>4</sup> there are journals specialising in women's issues.<sup>5</sup>

4. "Women's Studies" is one of the fastest growing areas in the field of publishing.

To quote but a few titles:

Bishop Sharon and Marjorie Weinzweig (Eds.), *Philosophy and Women*. Belmont-CA: Wordsworth, 1979.

Bumiler, Elizabeth. *May you Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.

Christ, Carol. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers in Spiritual Quest*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1980.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Das, Somen. *Women in India: Problems and Prospects*. Delhi: SPCK, 1989.

Dietrich, Gabriele. *Women's Movement in India: Conceptual and Religious Reflections*. Bangalore: Breakthrough, 1970:

Frieden, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979.

Gamble, Eliza Burt. *The Evaluation of Woman: An Inquiry Into the Dogma of the Inferiority of Women*. First Indian Reprint. New Delhi: Thirup Prakashan, 1986.

Gandhi, Nandita and Nandita Shah. *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Womens' Movement in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991.

Kaushik, Susheela. *Women's Oppression: Patterns and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Shakti Books, 1986.

Lakshmi, C.S. *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature*. Delhi. Vikas, 1984.

Liddle, Joanna and Rama Joshi. *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Class and Caste in India*. New Delhi: Kali for women, 1986.

Mahowald, Mary Briody. *Philosophy of Woman*. Indiana. Hackett Press, 1983.

Pal, B.K. *Problems and Concerns of Indian Women*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1986.

Tellis Nayak, Jessie B. *Indian Womanhood Then and Now. Situation, Efforts, Profiles*. Indore: Satprakashan, 1983.

Wadsa, A.R. *The Ethics of Feminism*. New Delhi: Asian publishing Services, 1977.

*Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues*. Edited by Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma. New Delhi: Sage, 1994.

*Women's Studies in India: A Directory of Research Institutions*. Compiled by Gulnaz A. Khan. Edited by S.N. Ramani Rao. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1993.

*Women's Studies in India: Information, Sources, Services and Programmes*. Compiled by Anju Vyas and Sunita Singh. New Delhi: Sage, 1993.

5. The following journals are available in India: *Asian Women, In God's Image, Manushi, Stree*.

The ferment is evident. The voices are no longer silenced or, at least, they are less muted than earlier. According to a number of social scientists, in fact, the womens' movement is expected to be the most widespread social phenomenon of the next century. After all, it is half of humankind that are involved and they are as intelligent and capable as the other half. What has all this to do with philosophy?

### **3. Philosophy and Gender Discrimination**

What is philosophy? When is a question philosophical? The answer not only depends on one's view of philosophy; the answer itself is an act of philosophising. What do I mean? Let me answer with a contemporary example.

There are British thinkers, especially of the linguistic analysis school, who do not consider continental existentialism a "philosophy". They say, "That's literature, not philosophy". Such a stand reveals one's understanding of philosophy. In this particular view, the description of one's inner turmoil in a novel or play is not philosophy, while clarifying the exact meaning of a term is. The other group would reply that philosophy's task is not to play with words, but to come to grips with the heartrending problems of life. No wonder, then, at the World Conference of Philosophy, the Marxist and Christian philosophers used to find they had more in common than each of them had in common with analytic philosophy.

What is my own position? I see myself above all as a human being. Among my several conscious activities, I find thinking, reading, laughing, eating, washing, talking, moving about, hugging, playing, . . . I am not anyone of these activities, though I am present in each of them. I never find myself a pure philosopher. I always think, feel and act in a concrete setting. How far my thoughts and beliefs are influenced by my setting (people, events, conditions, . . .) I do not know. It is quite likely that given another setting and other influences, I would have lived, acted and thought quite differently from what I do today. When I do reflect, I can only reflect on that microscopic fraction of reality that forms my experience. (This includes, of course, others and my views on reality as a whole, but I should not forget that what I grasp is not reality, but just a few

ideas on it). I do not know God, but only my ideas about the ultimate mystery beyond all words. I do not know even one person fully. My life span is too short and my capacities too limited to master even a subdivision of a topic adequately.

So, I have no problem in admitting that my philosophy (both my preferred ways of thinking, as well as a few conclusions I hold about human life, God, knowledge, ethics or the world) is deeply conditioned by who I am, where I have grown up, which teachers or books influenced me. I probably do not even notice the gaping holes in my knowledge, the vast area of darkness where all knowledge is only the flicker of a candle.

One such conditioning is my being a male, and having been exposed to the thought of mostly other males, since books and teachers in most cultures came from men. Women have had, and continue to have, fewer opportunities to study, do research and publish.

We have seen other turning points in the history of thought when new questions led to new ways of looking at our answers and at our mode of thinking. To give a couple of examples: Feuerbach raised questions on how far our statements about God are projections of our mental states. Marx helped us to see how influenced our thinking is by the socio-economic realities of our life and how the powerful tend to propose their views as the truth; Freud challenged our comfortable beliefs about reason and free choice by positing drives beyond our conscious control. In India, "Indian Philosophy" used to mean Sanskrit (largely Brahminic) literature. "Indianization" (in the liturgy or in nomenclature) meant the adoption of Sanskrit phrases, saffron and Brahminic slokas. Today, with the Dalit awakening and a more competent study of folk culture, such definitions of "Indian" or "Hindu" have been seriously challenged.

At each of these stages, we either resisted the eruption of the new, or agreed to listen and re-draw our maps. The earlier maps proved inadequate.

Feminism is a strong invitation – a very convincing one – to develop new maps to understand our common human territory. It is not just one more topic to cover in a philosophical curriculum.

#### 4. Feminism's Contribution towards a New Philosophy

In every case of group oppression (whites and blacks, caste Hindus and dalits, colonizers and the colonized), a key issue is: *who defines who we are?* As long as I internalise a definition given to me by someone holding disproportionate power over me, I am not myself. I need to see and articulate who I am. We have this happening in the case of African Americans, Dalits or people from former colonies.

Women have as much right - and as much capacity - as men to tell all of us what it means to be human. But they have to struggle against millennia of prejudice and unequal opportunities. Just as the Bible can be read differently by women, or our legal system criticized from a woman's point of view, so too, the human enterprise we call philosophy will be enriched by "Womens' ways of Knowing"<sup>6</sup>.

If relationality is as much a trait of the mature person as autonomy (to quote one point of difference between female and male understandings of mature behaviour), would our attributes of God have stressed God's relatedness as much as God's aseity, if the leading thinkers had been women? Would insight (and the study of it) have been promoted and understood better? (Right now, discursive reason is the main tool of professional philosophers.) Would we have had an ethic starting from the concrete rather than from general principles - or a combination of both? Would our spirituality have been more incarnational and less other-worldly? More relational and less based on withdrawal from people?<sup>7</sup>

(I am going by feminist studies showing the different perspectives of women and men. Women seem to be more sensitive to the concrete, to the relational, to the here and now, than men).

6. *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) by Mary Field Belenky and others is explicitly on this theme. The impact of feminist categories on religious thinking is explored by Isherwood and McEwan (see above, note 1).
7. In addition to the two books quoted in note 6, see:  
 Jean Grimshaw. "The Idea of a Female Ethic", *Philosophy East and West*, XLII, 2 (April 1992), pp. 221-238;  
 N.S. Yulina, "The Feminist Revision of Philosophy. Potentials and Prospects", *Ibid.*, pp. 249-262.

The postmodern critique of modern thought is relevant here. The modern (Western) philosopher's belief in sameness (i.e., my ideas must be valid for you, too; my culture can define who is cultured or not) is no longer convincing. The other is not just a copy or repetition of who I am. The other is different – and deserves to be respected as such.<sup>8</sup>

Just as a non-Western philosopher or theologian tells the Western counterpart, "Please don't define for me what theology/ philosophy is" or as a Dalit would tell a Brahmin, "Your definitions of who I am are no longer acceptable", we men need to be sensitive to the other half of humankind telling us: "Do not define human nature or knowledge or God or morality without us. Do not impose your definitions on us and tell us what to think. Do not judge the validity of our views by your onesided criteria". This type of dialogue and challenge has begun; it is far from over.

Without a true respect for difference, universality is not only meaningless, it is a threat to the less powerful groups within the larger body. This has been recognised in other areas of study. In anthropology, for instance, there is a diminished tendency to call another group "primitive" or "less civilized" because it does not meet a particular group's criteria of "civilized behaviour". Who is to decide which group provides the more valid model?

In philosophy, greater awareness of cultural richness and limitations has already taken place. Gone are the days when Kant or Marx or Freud would be jettisoned or scorned because they did not fit in with a Christian author's categories. Gone, too, are the days when we thought Western categories were superior and universal. Real life experience taught us the blindness of such views.

And now comes this fresh challenge – from our mothers, sisters, friends, teachers – human beings as intelligent and capable as we (men) are, but who have been severely underrepresented in most areas of scholarly and public life, including academic philosophy.

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8. David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity", *Theology Today*, 51, 1 (April 1994), pp. 104-114.

See also. T.A. Klimenkova, "Feminism and Postmodernism", *Philosophy East and West*, XLII, 2 (April 1992), pp. 277-286.



What impact will the greater presence of women in philosophical circles and the greater sensitivity of both women and men to gender-related issues have on the development of philosophy? No one knows the answer. But if the transformation of theology, psychology, biblical studies, social sciences and legislation under the power of feminist thinking has been remarkable, there is no reason to think that philosophy is an ivory tower unaffected by this powerful social phenomenon.

French philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose writings have influenced thinkers worldwide, wrote years ago that there is nobody so far removed from philosophy as the person who cuts himself off from life to think. For philosophy is about life, and only a person who is deeply involved in life can philosophize.

So, if philosophy is not to become intellectual archeology, or a clever word game with no consequences in real life, then the philosopher has to be "in the market place", listening to the voices of real people as they struggle, respond, try new answers. In life's market place today, one of the most engaging and most influential voices is that of feminism.

Should we indicate areas of philosophy where feminism is making, or can be expected to make, the greatest impact? Let me indicate a few, although a feminist writer with her experience of life and reality may perceive them differently and better.

## **5. A New Consciousness: Some Expressions**

### **1) *Inclusive language* :**

The feminist insistence on inclusive language in secular and religious discourse is not a minor detail. Language expresses and reinforces ways of thinking. Thus, the Universal "man" used for all human beings, is not an indifferent issue. To think or speak of God as "He" has theoretical and practical consequences. "God Created us" is not the same (in feeling and sensitivity) as "He created man". Many men, especially those used to all-male or patriarchal settings, need to become aware of this.

## 2) *Sexuality as a Key Element of Human Identity:*

No human being exists as a neuter human. We exist only as males or females. This most basic point of our identity, this fundamental aspect of human relatedness, needs to be studied, not ignored. Our sexual identity colours all we do, including the way we think or interpret life.

## 3) *Philosophy of Religion:*

Though philosophers say God is spirit, don't we all carry in our heads the image of a male God? Since symbols influence us as much as (or even more than) concepts, we need to be aware of their power and the need to use both female and male symbols when referring to God.

So, too, it is possible – and feminist writing calls attention to this – that the primacy of the transcendence and detached power of God reveals more a male image of power than a feminine sensitivity to relationships.

## 4) *Ethics:*

Gender Discrimination and crimes against women are serious ethical problems. We also need a critique of some ethical codes that perpetuate the subjugation of women (eg. the *Manushastra*).

## 5) *Cultural Stereotypes:*

Even remarkably intelligent persons can be blinded by cultural stereotypes. If I belong to a group in which women's inferior status is taken as normal, I may never see the wrongness of it, nor feel free to question it. If philosophy's task is not only to provide answers, but also to question what is questionable, we need to question cultural stereotypes of women found in our proverbs, stories, jokes, songs, religious texts, etc.<sup>9</sup> Demeaning stereotypes

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9. On cultural stereotypes of women, and on how some white women see their situation as akin to the plight of Blacks in the U.S., See: Sandra Lee Bartley, "On Psychological Oppression", *Philosophy and Women*, edited by Sharon Bishop and Marjorie. Weinzweig (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1979), pp. 33-41. Bartsky links such oppression to class distinctions in capitalistic society. Her conclusion: "Because of the interlocking character of the modes of oppression,

of women have been found in otherwise responsible writers, e.g. Freud.<sup>10</sup> We can quote well-known names to support women's subjugation (Thomas Aquinas and several Fathers of the Church would be examples) or use our experience and concrete evidence to expose the flaws in their argument.

6) *Women as Persons, not as Objects:*

What Susan Brownmiller wrote about pornography is unfortunately true of other male chauvinistic acts, too: "Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access."<sup>11</sup> There are sexist jokes and proverbs which reduce women to objects, with no dignity or feelings of their own. There are organizations in which decisions are taken *for* women rather than *by* them. There can be misguided models of spirituality in which women are presented as temptresses and as rivals to God, and lack of contact with them is praised as a mark of one's nearness to God. One of the several objectionable ways in which women's subjugation is strengthened is to attribute reason and strength to men and fickleness and emotional outbursts to women.

6. Conclusion

Philosophers' claim to think things through and to be reasonable. Philosophers' grapple with reality and mull over questions like, "What is real?" "How to reach the truth?" or "When is an action moral?" Gender Discrimination is an aspect of our human and social reality. Awareness of it helps us to look at reality with less bias and be willing to learn from the equally valid human experience of being female.

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I think it highly unlikely that any form of oppression will disappear entirely until the system of oppression as a whole is overthrown". (p. 41).

10. Sigmund Freud's views on femininity are found in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. For an excerpt, See: Sharon Bishop and Marjorie Weinzwieg (Eds.), *Philosophy and Women*, pp. 47-52.
11. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 394.

As for reasoning and concepts, they are culturally conditioned constructs, enriched and poisoned by all that surrounds us. No one speculates in a vacuum. Part of my attempt at thinking honestly and clearly is to become aware of my conditioning and the limitation of the categories I use. The more nuanced awareness we have today of racial, economic and gender discrimination can help us to think more freely, to see the truth a little less blindly.

If it is unquestioned certainties we are after, any new confrontation with reality will irk and frighten us. We will resist the change of perspective (the intellectual conversion) that is needed. But if philosophy means for us an honest quest for truth in whatever form it may challenge us, then we will explore the new frontiers that show the inadequacy of our old maps. One such invitation – a very basic and comprehensive one – is the women's movement today. Examined with an open mind, understood and integrated, it will help all of us to discover and live our humanity more fully and to marvel at the different and equally valid ways of living (and interpreting) our human experience.

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12. In this paper, I have not explored, or even touched upon, the linkage between feminist thinking and liberative action in other areas. A useful contribution, written with evident commitment, is Gabriele Dietrich's "On Doing Feminist Theology in South Asia" *KristuJyoti* 6, 2 (June 1990), pp. 26-65. Dietrich situates the debate in the Indian context and shows the need to join battle against all structures of oppression and exploitation (p.30).

Another, and by no means marginal, issue is a critique of feminism itself, both from within and from without. Apart from the easily identifiable objections against its Western origin and its apparent middle-to-upper class sensitivity, there are also critical studies on its very coherence and inner logic – as well as its accomplishments and failures. See, for instance, Susan Faludi's 1992 bestseller, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.

An explicit analysis of these subthemes is evidently beyond the scope of this paper.