

INDEPENDENT BEING IN A RELATION OR LIVING IN ISOLATION? – SOME REFLECTIONS FROM THE BENGALI FILM ‘BELA SESHE’ IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CARE ETHICS

SANANDA SEN

Abstract: This paper tries to focus upon the relational aspect of the self as proposed by Carol Gilligan with the help of the Bengali film *BelaSeshe*. Such a self is not a curse; relational self helps in being independent as an individual at the same time being related to one another. The paper also tries to see the position of the justice based ethics which is a predecessor of care ethics.

Keywords: care ethics, feminist ethics, justice based ethics, psychology.

Introduction: In a society, the psychological development of an individual holds an immense importance. This is one of the key factors in deciding how the person would be. If we look into the history of the traditional psychology, we would see that they talk about development of an individual which takes place in an unilateral pattern, in the sense that, it does not take care of the various subjective factors like emotions, feelings and so on which have a significant role in one's life. To counter this point, feminist ethics has emerged to show the relevance of emotions/feelings in the development of an individual. To the feminists the very factor named 'emotion' does not make a person weak but strong enough to live his or her life independently. The Bengali film named '*BelaSeshe*' (At the End of the Day) tries to harp on this point which can be very well explained by bringing in the context of care ethics as proposed by Carol Gilligan. The film was released in Bengal in May, 2015 and received an overwhelming response from the audiences.

Film is seen as a form of visual art which tries to replicate the characters with which we meet in our daily life. We find resemblances with the various images in the film to which we often relate in our real life. Can this film evoke the same kind of feelings among those who have watched it? For this we need to be acquainted with the story of the film before dealing with the theoretical underpinnings.

The Film: The film revolves around mainly two characters – BiswanathMajumdar and AartiMajumdar. They are married for the last 49 years and are assumed to be living happily. They have three daughters and one son and they are all married. Biswanath and Aarti live with their son and their daughter-in-law in their ancestral home at Kolkata. They have a family business; a book store in the College Street area which goes pretty well. Economically they are affluent and thus maintain a decent standard of living.

In the film we see that Aarti is busy with doing household chores, looking into the minute details of it, managing her grandson, watching her favorite

serials. Her life revolves around these things and she looks content in the film. She is mainly confined in the private sphere, that is, home. Biswanath, as every man does, is in control of the public sphere – going to the banks, abreast of the amount of interest received from the various banks and reading and watching videos that his friend Patrick shares with him in mails. He is not so bothered of the household matters and relies entirely upon Aarti. This has been the scenario for the last 49 years. The wife complains that the husband is completely oblivious of his household responsibilities; he loves to roam around and their son is also like his father who is coming late every night. With these images in the film many women of our Indian society would be able to relate themselves where they work relentlessly at home and their husbands having no interest in domestic affairs. But the film has something more to say.

The main story begins on the day of Dashami (when Durga Puja ends). Prior to this day Biswanath tells his wife to call all their daughters on this particular day as he wants to announce something. Hearing this, Aarti thinks that her husband is going to read out the will in front of everyone. When the day finally comes and all assembles in one room, Biswanath clearly points out that the decision taken by him is irretrievable and is not influenced by any external factors. He is not answerable to anyone; he won't listen to anyone after saying what he wishes to say. He says in front of all his near and dear ones that he wants to give divorce to his long wedded wife. He has already submitted the petition in the court and that he wants his children to stand by the side of their mother. Not only this, he proposes to help his wife by finding out a suitable lawyer who will fight on behalf of his wife. He has transferred the house where they are living now in the name of Aarti and is leaving behind a substantial amount of money for her so that she can maintain a decent standard of living. After they will get the divorce, Biswanath will shift to their house at Shantiniketan with their servant Gansha. Hearing such words from Biswanath his children are spell bound. They are unable to decipher the reason

behind such a decision. Aarti at first does not realize the seriousness of her husband's words. She goes away from that room and utters that at last she will get relief; that she has 'mukti', that is free. But her daughters understand the gravity of their father's statement specially their second daughter named Malasree. She reacts vehemently and asks her father about the reason behind such a ruthless decision. In reply Biswanath said that like Malasree he has the freedom to express his opinion and should be allowed to live his life freely after performing all his responsibilities towards his children. But he is rebuked by Malasree who believed her father to be a very selfish man. According to her view, all his life he has utilized/taken advantage of her mother and she has unconditionally served her father without showing any sign of tiredness. To Malasree, giving a home to live and some money can neither compensate such humiliation which her mother would face in the society because of her father's decision nor can give any value to such an unconditional service.

Amidst this tension, Aarti thinks that whatever her husband had said to their children is some kind of a joke; that he is playing a trick with them so that everyone could assemble during Puja and have fun together. But she is shattered when Biswanath makes her understand the veracity of his decision, that is, to divorce her.

Both husband and wife appear in the court and the judge also tries to understand the problem which the couple is facing at the verge of their married life. Biswanath declares in the court that his wife's life revolves only around doing the household work, looking into the well being of her family members. She is selfless and does not look into her own interest; has no life of her own. In the court, Aarti says that throughout her life she has done what her husband wanted her to do and his happiness is her primary concern. The court advises them to spend fifteen days together exclusively. But Aarti defies the court orders as she wants all her children to go and spend time together.

All of them went to Shantiniketan and they had a great time. Free from the hustle of the city life, Aarti and Biswanath get to know each other more closely. Many misunderstandings were sorted out and unspoken words were told by both of them. Leaving Biswanath there at Shantiniketan, all the members came back to Kolkata.

During their stay at Shantiniketan, the secret of divorce gets unveiled to Aarti. The husband opines that the wife is so much engrossed in the household affairs that she has no time to know and has no knowledge of what is going on in the outside world. The husband complains about the fact that the wife is not acquainted with the fact of how much money

they have in the banks, the investments they have made. Neither she is familiar with the kinds of fixed deposits possessed by them nor has she ever drawn any amount of money from any bank. Biswanath wants his wife to be self-sufficient as well as self-dependent. He does not want his wife Aarti to be unaware of the outside world. He thinks that if he stays with her then she would take no interest in the worldly matters apart from the household stuffs. Her heart lies in the home, among her family members. He has rebuked her many times but she did not pay any heed to his words. Every time Aarti has ignored his words as she has the belief that she would manage the home and that her husband would manage the outside world – as if a kind of invisible pact exists which is mutually agreed by both. But the husband has no belief in this kind of agreement which has forced his wife to remain confined in house. He has the urge to explore the world and also he wants Aarti to do the same. He wishes that Aarti must do a job for which he brought a form. But Aarti is so busy managing the daily needs of her family that she has no time to fill it up or has no desire to work outside. She knows somewhere that if she goes out to work then her family would not be able to function smoothly in her absence. She happily chooses the life of a simple housewife who always finds meaning of her life by loving others or serving others unreservedly.

When Aarti becomes aware of her husband's intention she was hurt but she did not express it. She abided by the wish of her husband which in an Indian society is a mark of a good housewife. Biswanath wants to see Aarti to do things in her own way and not what he wants to do for her or others. That is the reason why he is determined to leave her alone in order to explore the unknown.

To Biswanath and many others the concept of independence lies in living in isolation. It is not amidst your loved ones that help to evolve one as an independent being. The very emotions make a person weak and thus incapable to show the marks of maturity. On the other hand, women like Aarti find strength in being related to one another. She is matured enough to handle herself as well as others. At the end of the film, Biswanath comes back to Kolkata, to Aarti. Aarti was silently doing her work and when asked whether she was happy to see Biswanath, she said no. She asked the reason of his coming back. The husband was forced to accept the fact that though he thought himself to be independent enough, he was not. He did not have enough ability to look after himself properly or take care of his own needs. He admitted the fact to his wife that she is more self dependent than him, independent enough to care of herself as well as

others. Biswanath was forced to change his view regarding the concept of relationships.

Being related is seen as a mark of immaturity. Being dependent upon others is viewed as a sign of immaturity. This is what the traditional psychologists like Sigmund Freud believes to be. Biswanath shows the traits of a traditional psychologist who considers relationships to be the creators of hindrance in the path of a matured progress of an individual. Unlike the traditionalists, Biswanath finally comprehends that amidst relationships lie the strength or gives one the voice where he/she can speak out his/her mind. This is what exactly care ethics tries to point out. But before going into the care ethics, let us see how the traditional psychologists deal with the developmental pattern of human beings.

The Traditional View: Here I would like to discuss the Freudian model of development as provided by Sigmund Freud. He divides the development of a child into various stages like oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital stage. It is the phallic stage which leads to the development of the moral psyche of an individual. In this stage both male and the female child experience a kind of sexual attraction whereby they have an unconscious desire to possess the opposite sexed parent. For the boys it is the mother. Freud terms this as Oedipus complex. Boys experience a sexual love for their mothers. For this kind of sexual love, father becomes a rival as he stands in the way to get the mother. As a result, the boy has a feeling of aggression towards his father but at the same time he has this fear that his father will strike back at him. Hence the boy develops a castration complex and to solve such a complex, the boy makes his mother the 'other' and identifies with his father. Now why does the boy relate with his father? The reason is the boy child identifies his father to be at the centre of power. To possess that power, the boy child represses the desire to own his mother and endeavors to become like his father. As far as boys are concerned, Freud gives a clear cut solution of handling the Oedipus complex. Such a resolution characterizes the self of an individual (boys) as separate, independent, isolated and abstract in nature.

The girl child experiences a different situation and the complex they undergo is named as Electra complex. The girl child has a sexual attraction for her father and has the desire to possess her father. Like her mother she does not possess any penis and hence has penis envy. This particular organ is possessed by her father and the organ is perceived to be the symbol of power and assertion. The girl cannot make her mother the 'other' unlike boys. She undergoes a kind of love-hate relationship where she makes her mother responsible for the lack of penis. At the same time she tries to imitate her mother in order to have

the father. The Electra complex in girls has no easy solution. The girl child remains attached to both her father and her mother. The identification with the mother helps in developing her super-ego which is completely different from that of the boys. Freud opines that –

“character traits which critics of every epoch has brought up against women that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility, all these will be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have inferred above” (Freud, p.342).

Keeping aside the criticisms offered by the feminists' one thing is clear from Freud's account that for him women are morally inferior to men and are ethically under-developed. Being embedded in relationships makes one incapable enough to be self-dependent in nature. The mark of progress is being to remain cut off from one another and not to be in association with others. The association with others makes one weak in nature; thus association or bonding is to be avoided. If one is successful in keeping an arm's length distance from one another then only that person will be regarded to be morally superior. Such a person will have the capacity to deliver moral judgments impartially and perform his functions autonomously. Such an individual will be more inclined to use justice based ethics. This kind of ethics favors abstraction and deals moral conflicts by the application of universal rules. Believing in a 'view from nowhere', this ethics proposes a non-embodied self and is believed to be more gender bias in nature (as there is hardly any mention of women). Being androcentric in nature, justice based ethics relegates all emotions to the background and thus claims to be impartial in nature.

Having an idea of what traditional psychology is, now let us have a look at the feminist ethics.

Feminist Ethics: Feminists are not happy from such traditionalist account and feminist ethics emerges as a criticism of the traditional/mainstream ethics. They are aware of the invisibility of women from the mainstream accounts and thus give effort to include women into such accounts. This ethics advocates a relational self as opposed to an autonomous self. Feminist ethics hold that our decisions are often influenced by emotions and the claim to take impartial decisions is problematic. In this ethics, particularities of a situation or a person are stressed upon. Feminist ethics is context sensitive in nature where context of an individual involved influences our judgments or decisions apart from the existence of emotions.

Believing in the situated self, they try to solve moral dilemmas of persons involved. There are so such

beliefs in universal rules; rules are believed to be more contingent in nature. Feminist ethics wages their war against the status quo maintained by the traditional ethics where men enjoy a superior position. Promising to be more inclusive in nature, feminist ethics tries to incorporate the suppressed and untold tales of invisible women.

Care ethics can be viewed as an extension of feminist ethics and has evolved as a criticism of the mainstream psychology of development. Care ethics proposes to do ethics by taking 'to care others' as the paradigm. Often they have no faith in the justice based ethics as it has failed in many cases to deliver justice to women. Feminists are of the view that being autonomous, separated from others and doing abstract reasoning cannot fetch justice in all situations. The self as propounded by the care ethicists believes in connectivity, dependence, attentiveness and compassion towards other.

Here in my paper I would restrict myself to Carol Gilligan as far as care ethics is concerned.

Carol Gilligan's Care Ethics: Gilligan talks about a different construction of selfhood in women which is quite contrary to the traditional model. She critiques his predecessor Lawrence Kohlberg who on the basis of *Heinz dilemma* tried to gauge the moral maturity of girls. The dilemma was that a person named Heinz has a suffering wife and he has no money to buy medicines. The participants were asked how to deal with such a problem faced by Heinz; to steal the drug or not to steal it. While dealing with this dilemma, the boys are found to be more assertive in nature. With the help of their rational faculty and with the belief that it is important to save one's life, the boys reach a conclusion to steal the drug. The girls provide a unique way of seeing into this dilemma. They believed that Heinz must not steal the drug for if he steals then there would be no one to look after his wife. They suggested that he can borrow some money to pay for the drugs and thus can save his wife's life.

The developmental model of Kohlberg put boys into a higher plane of moral maturity where they have easily reached the fifth level (total there were six stages). Whereas for girls, they have reached till level 2. What Kohlberg failed to take into consideration is the fact that values, feelings and beliefs lie implicit within the ethics. The conclusion that the girls are morally immature does not give us the real picture of girls; girls too have a different mode of thinking, different ways of dealing problems and arriving at conclusions.

Gilligan tries to overcome the bias prevalent in the Kohlberg model by providing an alternative way of development. In care ethics, development, maturity and autonomy are all relational in nature. This ethics says that women always find themselves connected with others. Coming out of one relationship entails

entering into another. This relational factor of women is not any kind of weakness; one can remain dependent upon another and yet remain autonomous or exercise one's own freedom. Being relational with one does not stand in the way of being an independent person. We can show our assertiveness even when we are related to others. Care ethics enables a person to deliver matured moral decisions, to be competent enough while dealing with others amidst connectivity. Gilligan says that for women relationships triumph over anything. Women believe in sustaining relationships and to come out of it is the last resort to them. They always find them to be connected to one another.

The voice which Gilligan talks about is not only a relational voice but such a voice helps one to assert one's identity. The voice gives women her autonomy which is a relational one. This voice acts as an instrument of empowerment and with the possession of such a voice one can express one's mind without any fear. Also with this voice comes the moral responsibility to listen to others, to value others differences as well as pay respect to the existence of others. Thus, an important feature of care ethics is the act of listening. It takes into account the ambiguities existing among persons inhabiting in this world and seems to be a more tolerant kind of ethics and also gender sensitive in nature.

Conclusion: Much talked about care ethics, it is important to delve into the meaning of the word 'care'. Care can be seen as a feeling, a propensity to look into the well being of others. Care is often associated with self sacrifice. In an act of caring, one is the cared for person and the other is the person who is showering his/her care. We need to perform certain actions for the cared for persons in order to promote his/her well being. To be responsible towards the other, to respect others wish, to look into the well being of the others is what care ethics deals with. This is what exactly Aarti in the film is doing. She has sacrificed all her wishes to bring a smile in everyone's face. And that she has performed not under any pressure; she is happy doing those things. Her husband wants Aarti to look into her self-interest too so that she can be autonomous enough. But Aarti proves her husband incorrect; she has showed to the world and her husband that she is not fragile. On the contrary, she is strong enough and knows the fact that her husband can do nothing without her help. So she has always prayed to God to take away her husband's life first. This may sound rude but she knows somewhere that her husband will return one day for the strength lies in being connected to one another and not in separation from others. Biswananth finally realizes the significance of togetherness, the meaning of relationships and he

planned the trips he always wanted to go but now with his wife Aarti.

References:

1. Blum, Lawrence, "Gilligan and Kohlberg: Implications for moral theory", in an *Ethic of Care*, 1993.
2. Evans, Charles S., "Moral Stage Development and Knowledge of Kohlberg's Theory" in *The Journal of Experimental Education*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Fall, 1982.
3. Freud, Sigmund, *Three Essays on the Theories of Sexuality*, London: Hogarth Press, 1965.
4. Dr. Dasari Kejiya, Ch. Nageswararao, Communication Skills In English Steers To Employment: A Case Study; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 44-49
5. Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
6. Gilligan, Carol, *Mapping the Moral Domain*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
7. Gilligan, Carol and Attanucci, Jane, "Two Moral Orientations: Gender Differences and Similarities", in *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol.34, No.3, 1988.
8. Dr. Baishalee Rajkhowa, Nandini Borah, Developing Communicative Competence Of Engineering Students Through English For Specific Purpose (Esp) ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 50-54
9. Gilligan, Carol and Attanucci, Jane, "Much Ado About... Knowing? Noting? Nothing? A Reply to Vasudev Concerning Sex Differences and Moral Development" in *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, October, 1988.
10. Halimeh Mohammad Mahmoudi, Seyed Hadi Sarvar, Seyedeh Sara Jafari, The Effects Of English Language Environment And Culture On Grammatical Range & Accuracy Of Efl University Students; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 55-60
11. Gilligan, Carol, and Richards, D.A.J., *The Deepening Darkness: Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy's Future*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
12. Held, Virginia, ed., *Justice and Care: Essential Reading in Feminist Ethics*, USA: Westview Press, 1995.
13. Kohlberg, Lawrence, "The Six Stages of Moral Judgment" in *Essays on Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* Volume I: The Philosophy of Moral development, Harper and Row, Sanfrancisco, 1981.
14. D.Vijaya Lakshmi, P. Prasanthi, Reflective Teaching Practice In English Language Classroom; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 61-63
15. Moitra, Shefali, *Naitikata O Naribad* (Bangla), Kolkata: New Age Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003.
16. Mukherjee, Bidisha, *Redefining Ethics as Care*, Kolkata; AmalKantiChatterjee Publishers, 2008.

Sananda Sen
33/A, Southern Avenue, Kolkata/SRF
Jadavpur University