

Fighting the Feminine Destiny: Feminist Critique of Freud

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It is somewhat difficult to imagine the existence of infants without caregivers. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the existing bond between the infant-child and the caregiver has a definite sexual undertone to it. Sexuality here is not understood in a literal sense but rather a metaphorical sense of a force that affirms the functions of life. As Sartre and Ponty have observed that the proposition of 'existence' is coextensive with 'sexuality' and can be understood in two different ways- every experience of existence has a sexual significance or every sexual phenomenon has an existential import. (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.70). No factor gets involved in the psychic life without taking on a human significance.

The 'mother' is invariably considered to be the primary caregiver to an infant. If one tries to understand the rationality behind the mother's primal agency, we find a certain pervasiveness about the her 'maternal-ness', which can either be attributed to her birth giving capacity or to the presence of a nourishing breast. Either ways, the explanation has been reduced to the biological anatomy.

The study attempts to fight the feminine destiny by reviewing the establishment of the link between psychoanalysis and feminism in understanding the rigid and asymmetric gender roles.

In an attempt to unravel the 'Intimacies of parenting', the paper highlights the mutuality of psychoanalysis and feminism to help us understand the internalization and persistence of some of the most oppressive societal gender norms. The central concern lies with the 'development of feminine sexuality'. It is integral here to reiterate a psychoanalytic viewpoint that family with parents as its basic constituents play a very significant role in the development of an individual's sexuality.

In feminist discourse the image of Sigmund Freud as a patriarch persists. The charge is that he was unsettled by his discovery of female sexuality that he portrayed as a '**Dark Continent**' - as he once called it (Eagleton, 1983, p.135) reflects the demeaning and prejudiced attitude toward women which had disfigured his works to a great extent.

Beauvoir Revolt to Freud: Un-Silencing the Voice

"Freud never showed much concern with the destiny of women, it is clear that he simply adapted his account from the destiny of man" (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.71). In '*The Second Sex*' Simone de Beauvoir quotes Freud "*The libido is constantly and regularly male in essence whether it appears in man or a woman*" (De Beauvoir, p.71) and argues that Freud declined to regard a female libido as having its own nature. "Woman is female to the extent that she feels herself as such and it is not biological nature that defines a woman but it is she who defines herself by dealing with her nature in her emotional life" (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 69). Although "there are biologically essential features that are real but are not a part of her experienced being like the structure of the egg is not reflected but an organ of no great biological importance like the clitoris plays an important part in the development of sexuality". (Ibid, p.69).

Beauvoir (1949) also criticised Freud for attaching extreme importance to the domain of masculine eroticism, that later feminists termed 'phallogocentric'. She further explains that "in women there are two distinct erotic systems- one is clitoral which develops in the childhood and the other is the vaginal which develops only after puberty which is not entirely explored by Freud". (p.70). She writes in "The Psychoanalytical point of view"-

"when the boy reaches the genital stage, his evolution is considered to be complete though he must pass from an autoerotic inclination to hetero-erotic inclination which the pleasure is bound with the object, normally to a woman through a narcissistic phase. Women's libido also passing through a narcissistic phase will become objective normally towards a man but the process will be much more complex because women must pass from clitoral pleasure to vaginal. There is only one genital stage for man where as two for women and thus the chances for her are more to develop more complexes and greater risk of not reaching her sexual evolution and of remaining at the infantile stage and of developing neurosis". (p.71)

Thus, for Freud, human sexuality rests on the male norm with the feminine cast being a supplementary and derivative of the masculine. The concept of penis envy, she points out entails a comparison and evaluation. She writes:

"The little boy obtains from his penis a living experience that makes him an object of pride to him, but this pride does not imply a corresponding humiliation for the little girls-since they know the masculine organ only in its outward aspect only - this outgrowth and this weak little rod of flesh can in itself inspire them only with indifference or even disgust"(De Beauvoir, p.73).

When the girl leaves the pre-gendered and pre-oedipal infantile universe, she does not immediately enter into the sphere defined by castration. The idea of 'Phallic Illusion' or the fetishism of the phallus as the basic structure of patriarchy is ascribed the Freud. 'Patriarchal Fetishism' is widely prevalent in patriarchal societies and perceived as natural rather than as products of specific, historical, changeable societal conditions. The psychoanalytic theory of femininity attempts to de-fetishize the phallogocentric imagination.

Socio-Psychoanalytic Feminism: Astart of a Revolt

A conceptual shift from classical psychoanalysis suggests that the child's intimate relationship with the mother is overshadowed by the father. Feminist writers like Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Jacqueline Rose and Jessica Benjamin open up a new psychoanalytic realm tracing how asymmetrical relations of power impact upon sexuality. They have focused their attention on the child/ mother and father triad outlining the subterranean influence of patriarchy upon the child's sexual experiences.

Differences in the psyche of the sexes of children is not merely anatomical but is very much rooted in the constructed sexual ideology with polarized sexual and gender roles which have been internalized under the force of 'masculine fantasy'. Rose writes *"The question of unconscious does bring with it the notion of fantasies and images of sexual differences but it is rarely demonstrated with clarity that how far the effects of the unconscious are tied into the key fantasies operating at the heart of the social institutions"* (Rose, 1986, p.4). Feminism cannot abandon psychoanalysis as it is the only school of thought which helps in understanding the psychic force of the ideological apparatus while avoiding the twin pitfalls of sociological and psychological reductionism (Rose, 1986, p.4) where the former dismisses the psychic investments of social life and the latter asserts the psyche being the determining factor trumping social mechanisms.

Rose writes in 'Femininity and its Discontents' (1983)-

"What distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender is that whereas for the latter, the internalisation of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity. Because there is no continuity of the psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women which is ever simply achieved. " (Rose, 1983, p. 91).

"If psychoanalysis can give an account of how women experience the path to femininity, it also insists through the concept of the unconscious that femininity is neither simply achieved nor is it ever complete" (Rose, 1986). Hence, it becomes essential to question how to situate and understand oneself as a woman and to deal with the social realities of oppressive norms such as adoration to the male, chaos and exclusivity to the female on which the wider culture so centrally runs. (Ibid, p.4).

On similar lines, Juliet Mitchell argued that it is this asymmetry at the level of psychic life what psychoanalysis could be used to explain. Read 'Ideology' as 'Femininity', cultural norms as family and we see that the problems of female identity is the direct reflection of institutionally regulated forms of control. Freud also downgraded the role of the mother where the mother is presented as a figure-object whose role must be resolved under a superior patriarchal law.

The question about female sexuality rests on the interface of these two sets of arguments- of a sexual difference which is anatomically pre-given and considered as part of the human condition forming the bases for gender and secondly, that of social role in terms of established gender norms. What they both have in common is the utter passivity they produce for women.

Institutionalizing Family: The Politics of Intimacy

At this juncture, one cannot ignore the social import of the institutionalized entity of 'Family' in order to understand this 'othering' of 'The Second Sex'. It is through the aspect of *family-social* as an institution that psychoanalysis encounters the political. The problem of female identity is a direct reflection of the institutionally regulated forms of control (Elliot, 2015). Habermas describes the unconscious as the distorted effect of an oppressive social world (Rose, 1986). The Contemporary feminist psychoanalyst have gone far in tracing how asymmetrical relations of power impacts sexuality and as Juliet Mitchell says in 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism' (2000) it is the asymmetry at the level of psychic life is precisely what psychoanalysis could be used to explain.

The Object relational approach in feminist theory accords prime importance to the early mother/child bond that is the pre-oedipal stage unlike Freud's theory where sexual difference and gender identity are formed at the passing of the oedipal stage, object relational theory posits the 'core sense of gender' identity in the pre-oedipal stage (Elliott,2015).Through constant communication with the 'mothering person' the infant begins to discriminate and differentiate and takes its first step to selfhood. Infancy is the foundation for all later psychological experience (Eagleton, 2011).

It is within this dyad of the 'mothering parent' and 'child' that the person first learns to relate to the 'Other' and begins to develop the capacity to relate and becomes a social being. This approach takes into consideration the emotional structure involving fear, anger, envy and aggression in shaping our identity in order to understand the polarized sexual roles which opens the possibilities of restructuring gender relations.

Opening up the Maternal Realm:Exclusive Female Mothering &Fear of Engulfment

The presence of an omnipotent mother evoking fear and loathing of anything female is given a powerful expression in the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein where she examines the psychic impact upon the societal nurturing arrangements in the form of '*exclusive female mothering*'. Female mothering leads us to inevitably fear women- a fear which leads children to betray the 'engulfing mother' by turning to the father in search of emotional security.

The vital point she makes here is the child's 'turn to the father' because of the fear of engulfment. She writes "*It is as we leave infancy that the possibility of transferring dependent, submissive feeling to the second parent- whose gender carries the promise of a new deal - entices us into the trap of male domination*"(Dinnerstein,1976, p. 67). In other words, for her, patriarchy is the outcome of a denial of emotional ambivalence with an idealization of paternal authority.

Situating her analysis within a Klienian framework, Dinnerstein contends that socially predominant ideologies of gender are marked by a failure to work through anxieties about women especially in women's role as a mother. Instead of gaining a sense of mother as an independent agent, fantasies about women as all powerful makes them 'objects of fear'. The way forward to transformation of gender according to her is through '**Shared parenting**' – demanding an equal emotional involvement of the father.

The notion of engulfing mother resonates with SudhirKakar's analysis of the idea of 'Maternal enthrallment' which he employs to uncover the psyche of Indian male child. Kakar calls it a 'paradox' in which the son's desire to get away from the mother causes the fear of separation which coexists with the longing for a mother he hates because of her assertive female sexuality(Kakar,2008,p.43).The son remains torn between the push for independence and autonomous functioning and an equally strong pull towards surrender and re-immersion in the enveloping maternal fusion.

Although her critique of gender is limited by several major flaws- firstly, in her assumption that avoidance of psychic pain in early life connects with the devaluation of women in a universal way, she overlooks that motherhood is also situated in a social, political and economic context - a highly patriarchal context which distorts the social organization of parenting and child rearing. Her perspective remains incomplete to accommodate the impact of ideology- the complex political forms through which the society influences the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of individuals and secondly, how the theory of gender discriminates between the lived experience of males and females does not find an adequate explanation.

The latter concern gets addressed in the approach taken by Nancy Chodorow. Also interested in the ramifications of exclusive female mothering which produces asymmetrical gender roles, she argues that the mothers love is profoundly different for sons and daughters - a difference that leads to socially structuring of psychological processes of gender power. (Chodorow as cited in Elliott ,1978,p.129)

Desire for Autonomy: A Radical Interpretation

In the 'The Reproduction of Mothering' (1978), she argues that mothers experience daughters as doubles of themselves, process being a *narcissistic* projection of sameness - an extension of her own life and not as an independent person which leads to a sense of continuity and sameness with the daughters. Because daughters are perceived as the same self as the mother, she explains that the differentiation of the self is beset with emotional difficulties. "*Locked with maternal narcissism, the female child finds it difficult to disengage with mothers love and to establish a sense of independent agency and identity*" (ibid, p. 129).

From this perspective, she reinterprets Freud's concept of penis envy not as biologically pre-given but as a sign of daughter's desire for autonomy. The daughter then turns to her father in hope of achieving a sense of independence from her mother. And because fathers are perennially emotionally distant or absent, an observation even pointed out bySudhirKakar in his book 'The Portrait of Indians' regarding the process of identification of girls with their fathers, daughters are unable and unsuccessful in breaking off with the power and authority of pre-oedipal mother.

For Chodorow, masculine identity is also forged against the backdrop of primary identification with the mother for boys must repudiate in order to forge a masculine sense of selfhood . Boys deny their bond to female eroticism repressing their own femininity into the unconsciousness. (Chodorow,1994).Hence, The gendered self therefore is constructed relationally.

She further argues that both sons and daughters seek to escape from the 'engulfing mother' by turning to parental authority but the feelings which are produced during this outbreak from the mother is handled differently by the sexes. Sons are better placed here as they are already differentiated.

An Escape from the Mother: Simone De Beauvoir (1949) carefully points out that "*children also want to escape beyond family ties- child always seeks what is different. Woman, as mothers, tries to set up a universe of permanence and continuity.*" (p. 475). "In her daughter, the mother does not hail a member of superior caste, in her she seeks a double. She projects in her all the ambiguity of her relation with herself and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels betrayed."(Ibid,p.532). The intoxicating, never good enough mother, always controlling and abandoning indicates the mother as a regressive haven.

"Mothers also may find femininity as an absolute curse, such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self recognition and at the same time may feel guilty for having brought her into this world." (Beauvoir,1949, p.533)Perhaps this explains the reference for the mother's wish to kill her daughter at birth. Real conflict arises when the daughter grows older, when she wishes assert her own will and independence from her mother. "That comes as a hateful ingratitude for the mother." (Ibid,p.533).

This section is indicative of how girl- child/ daughters are socialized with a psyche of 'control and restriction.' by their parents. At this point I would like to close this section by sharing the some insightful ideas what AudreLorde writes in '*Uses of the erotic :Eroctic as power*' (1981) to instil a sensibility of erotic from a larger psychic capacity. For women, she argues, "there has been a suppression of the erotic as it is a considered source of power and information within our lives." (Lorde, 1981, p.6).Lorde speaks of erotic as "an assertion of the 'life force' of women, of that pervasive creative energy being recognised and empowered. Woman have been socialised and taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused and devalued ". (Lorde,1981, p.6).

One common assertion is clear that 'exclusive female mothering' produces an ideology of male domination. The absence of any primary attachment to men in pre-oedipal childhood leads to an idealization of men and devaluation of women. Thus, it appears that masculine identity is built on a denial of primary maternal identification resulting in a fragile sense of self.

Even though she offers a psychoanalytic explanation as to why shared parenting would eradicate male domination or transform gender power, the theory does not consider the structural, symbolic forms of gender hierarchy and the theory reduces the social to a familial ideology(Elliott,2015, p.130)

Benjamin: Identification & Problem of Desire

Jessica Benjamin's work '*The Bonds of Love:Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*' (1988) raises the issue of symbolic form of gender constitution and has turned attention to the emotional world of the infant with the structural positioning of the mother, father and complexities of contemporary gender relations. (Elliot, 2015, p. 134). She refuses to view the psychic world of the infant as simply mirroring asymmetry in gender roles but shifts the focus to the '**problem of desire**'that is the identifications and cross identification through which the infant establishes the basic difference between itself and the other people (Ibid, 135).

In her other book '*Shadow of the Other*' (1998), she explores the range of multiple identifications that women and men forge through sexual object choice as well as negotiation of personal identity (Elliott,2015, p. 135). Her work instead focuses on emotional identifications with both mother and father stressing throughout that interpersonal relationships and fantasy always coexist. What seems interesting here is her stress on bisexual or *polymorphous identifications* at the most primitive stage of psychosexual development.

In a way, one can argue that feminists approach mark a paradigm shift from the Freudian subject-centred analysis in favour of a more interpersonal approach where self-identity gets constituted within inter-subjective relations. Their problematic remains well placed within the contemporary sexual divisions in the family which reinforces asymmetrical power relations.

Conclusion:

To conclude, within the history of the psychoanalytic movement, Melanie Klein's & the work of various feminist French thinkers marks an important turn which is not just a shift from interest in Freudian theory to but from the oedipal to pre-oedipal, from 'Lack' to 'Plentitude'. This approach traces the development of fantasies, of images, desire, conceived of as the primitive matter of psychological experience. (Forrester,1990, p.290).

To conclude, the intervention of the feminists marked and initiated a return and recognition of the mother &and a retreat to the maternal realm.In light of psychoanalysis, during infancy, the infant lives in a

psychological state which has been termed as 'undifferentiated' or 'un-integrated'- which means that there is no clear and absolute distinction between conscious and unconscious, ego and id, soma and psyche or inside and outside.(Kakar, 2003). Only through constant exchange with the mothering person that the infant begins to discriminate and differentiate these dualities and takes its first step to selfhood. (Eagleton,1996).

Infancy is indeed regarded as the foundation for all later psychological experience. Moreover, the nature of an individual's first relationship profoundly influences the quality and dynamics of social relation throughout his life. Although Freud mentioned its importance in 1895 in one of his earliest papers but by 1938, he described the mother's importance to the infant as 'unique', without paralleled established for the whole life as the first and strongest love-object and as the prototype of all the later love relations. (Kakar,2003).

It is within this 'dyad' of mother and child that the person first learns to relate to the 'other' and begins to develop his capacity to love. It is here that the individual originates as a first social being. Also, the relation with parents, especially the mother takes on a new libidinal dimension. (Eagleton,2011).

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