

The Caring Touch and Psychological Well-Being



Psychology

KEYWORDS :

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ABSTRACT

The present paper intends reading how care and its allied virtues of empathy sympathy etc are prescribed as feminine virtues and women are expected to adhere them. The endeavour would be to probe how this prescription becomes detrimental when it is not reciprocal.

Care, nurturance, tolerance, selflessness and empathy promote zest in life more than anything else. These positive qualities expand our capacity to experience joy and happiness. But within the patriarchal culture and family these virtues are encouraged to be imbibed by the females and the masculine and feminine traits are not only different but are valued differently. These virtues have come to be acknowledged as feminine virtues. Though these virtues are essential for the enhancement of the humanity, society places little value and few rewards on these. We hold mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, Buddha and other philanthropists in great reverence for they are the emblems of care. Their compassion extended to a large part of humanity and they gave their lives for the cause. The same feelings of care, nurturance, empathy endowed in women are undervalued in society, which in turn nourishes it. Women throughout the history have lived as a devalued group. The practice of these virtues lead to subservience and mental and physical suffering. The society imposes these virtues epitomising the 'ideal womanhood.' Any woman daring to step out of the given identity is threatened by severe ostracization.

In a patriarchal set up the traits associated with femininity like empathy, care, nurturance, tolerance, sensitivity to the needs of the others and self-sacrifice are not only considered inferior to the so called masculine traits of autonomy, individuation, success, power and careerism, but are devalued. The intrinsic goodness of women is not only overlooked but is also not given the due worth. These strengths are not rewarded but become tools of exploitation. A woman, who has long been apprenticed in the gender role, internalises the feminine virtues and does not find it easy to relinquish the mantle of traditional feminine which leads to subservient affiliations and is the root cause of number of psychological problems which may manifest in different ways. Why women feel bad internally when they impart such fulfilling exercise like caring selflessly? Instead of feeling contentment and pleasure why most of the women find rendering care suffocating? These are the questions I choose to answer in the following paragraphs.

In the Indian culture the segregation of sexes is considered normal. The masculine and feminine codes of behaviour prescribed in the religious texts are literally revered and to liberate the minds from the shackles of these accepted prejudices is not easy for it is deeply fabricated in the Indian ethos. Our culture idealizes the female martyrdom and self-denying women are extolled in the various myths, which constitute a part of the Indian cultural legacy. There is a separate religion and caste for women i.e. the 'stridharma' and the 'strijati'. Through the examples of timeless feminine symbols of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri who were ideal wives and sought fulfilment through selfless service of their husbands, women are conditioned and brought up.

From the very childhood a girl child undergoes a long apprenticeship in gender role construction and as a self-sacrificing,

caring and nurturing person she is bound to the confines of home. She learns to make and maintain relationships. It is due to this that their sense of self is deeply entwined with their ability to create and nourish relations and a loss of disruption of a relationship may mean a total loss of self. They embrace a different approach of living, which values relations more than self-enhancement. Women seeing themselves in relation to others merge and organize their selves in the service of home, husband and children, resting their sense of identity and value on it. They literally donate their lives for the others. Just because they bear children the responsibility of hearth and home falls on them. This blocks their way to self-enhancement. Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* focuses on the problem of why women in nearly all societies, rather than men, are the primary caretakers of the children. To assume that because "women mother" or procreate therefore they are responsible for nurturing and rearing children is not convincing. She questions the presumption of the naturalness of the women's capacity to rear children, which is based on the fact that biologically women 'mother.' The role of a mother matched with virtues of care, nurturance, tolerance, empathy, self-denial, deferral to others needs are idealized and enforced by the society. This has a profound effect on their lives, which converts them in to the role of "nurturant supporters".

Chodorow rightly argues that the reproduction of mothering i.e. the reproduction of the ability to care and nurture is cyclical, for, women, as mothers produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. Women as mothers and men as not-mothers produce sons whose nurturing capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. Being raised as daughters according to the patriarchal culture make women see themselves as inferior. Within the family the child perceives and takes cues from the way males are treated. Mother's attendance to their spouses and other male members of the families lead the girls to an awareness that they have to prepare themselves to take care of the others needs whereas boys come to know very early that their needs would be taken care of. In the process of acquisition of a gendered masculine self a boy comes to deny identification with his mother and rejects the feminine world. He learns to repress these qualities which he takes to be feminine in the social world. Thus due to conditioning girls and boys come to inhabit different emotional environments. Stress is laid on girls imbibing the so called feminine virtues whereas for boys to perform the activities these people are doing is a risk being thought of as a woman and poses a major threat to masculine identity. Thus, the part assigned to women has been devalued and treated unimportant. This devaluation generates within women a sense of inferiority and dejection.

The 'true womanhood' on which the identity of women stands, defines women as nurturers and caretakers who help in the development of the others. As a result without an equal opportunity and right to develop themselves, women find this

situation oppressive, creating a feeling of discontent. This gives rise to conflict. Some mask it under the facade of tolerance and some openly express it. If they wage conflict, refusing to adopt the existing value system of male dominance, they are labelled as misfits, 'femme fatales,' sadists who are on the way to diminish the masculinity of the men around. Risk of abandonment and condemnation do not let women seek their goals. It initiates a strong negative reaction from the other side. Their discontent or conflict with their lives is seen as 'unfeminine' for they are supposed to accommodate, mediate, adapt and soothe. Conflict becomes a taboo for women. Women's pursuit for development and initiation to bring about change to meet their requirements causes the people to think of it as abandonment of responsibility. Often they are labelled selfish and destructive. Most fail to realise that the development of women like that of men would seem to promote the general good of humanity. How can the women's pursuits to realize their self, which is a basic human right, be destructive to the others? Most probably the reason lies in the feeling that if women concentrate on other than organizing their lives around giving and caring, the needs of men and children would be affected. Women who have built a sense of self-worth on activities that they can manage to define as taking care of and giving to others see conflict as something bad for it reflects their difficulty in adjustment and adaptation, which are the keys to ideal womanhood. But this does not mark the absence of conflict in their lives. Being a suppressed, powerless, dependent group they do not verbalize their conflict or show it in any manner. Some in their pursuit of self-definition show overt conflict. They are accused of making unjust, invalid, exaggerated demands and are hardly heard because the dominants find them trivial. The compatibility and non-compatibility of women to the traditional bias of ideal womanhood in both cases is hurtful. If they keep mum to the injustice, they smoulder silently and if they rebel they are threatened by separation or condemnation. Carol Gilligan in her groundbreaking book, *In a Different Voice*, rightly states that the notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women's development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. It is considered a duty for women to not to attempt a thing that hurts others, and be responsible for the growth and well being of her people.

It is very saddening that women's innate strength is hardly given any recognition and men devalue their virtues in favour of success, power and careerism. This devaluation of this marvellous feminine virtue of care and its sister virtues of tolerance, sympathy, selflessness is an example of how their practice lead to one's enslavement and degradation. To validate one's claim to societal membership women adhere the chalked path, spending their lives caring for and nurturing others, suffering the atrocities mutely. In the absence of reciprocal care their lives become a bout of affliction. They become victims of overburdening care. These qualities are those which have helped in the advancement of humanity. Caring for the old and the children who are dependent is necessary but enforced caring which is typically done for the male others should not be extracted otherwise caring which is the most fructifying of all human experience will destroy the very basis of love if it is not voluntary.

One cannot close one's eyes to the value of care as an essential trait in human character. Care, nurturance and empathy are the forerunners of joy. Women cater to care and nurturance and in turn demand emotional response. In the absence of reciprocal care many suffer silently the gross psychological and physical repercussions while some protest. They give up care and assert their selves refusing to toe the line. Forbidding the extension of care can be fatal to the humanity and repercussions will be profound and far-reaching. It would diminish the happiness of the human beings. Morality of care centred on the maxim of not hurting the other should be universal and not restricted only to women otherwise they would rebel and negate it, which in turn would evoke a cold and unsympathetic world. This problem can be tackled only in conjunction with men. They should be redistribution of responsibility where femaleness and maleness is not given the meaning we presently give and serving others like women is not a threat to maleness which is culturally imposed. We should all join hands to create a way of life that includes serving others without being subservient and envision a society based on the foundation of these virtues included by both males and females to make the world heavenly abode.

REFERENCE

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