CHAPTER - VI

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In this research work we have undertaken an attempt to show what problems are obvious with Ethics based on gender distinctions. Our core question was this: can we ever speak of any universally valid Ethics based on gender distinctions? Through Feminists' intervention it becomes obvious that ethics can recognise gender distinctions without leaning upon any a priori premise of male superiority. In the introductory chapter we elaborated the justification of raising 'women question' in Ethical Philosophy. In the second chapter we tried to show how traditional morality assumed a male biased character since it was modelled after practices that had been traditionally male-dominated. In the third chapter we formulated a comparative estimate of different feminist ethical trends. As is known, Feminism by taking women as its starting point, seeks to explore and uncover patriarchal social dynamics and relationships from the perspective of women. Feminism is also a commitment to social change, arising from the actions of women to refuse the patriarchal social structure as it stands in favour of a more egalitarian society. Different feminist ethical trends address the power of imbalances between women and men. Feminist Ethics has opened up a plethora of issues, like that of sexuality, the bodily self, moral connectedness, care, justice, friendship, emotion and also many others which were never paid with any serious attention by general Ethics. Each of the
Feminist perspectives have made important contributions to improving women's status, remaining within its own confines. There are continuities and convergences, as well as sharp debates, among the different feminisms. All of the feminist perspectives have insight into the problems of gender inequality. In the fourth chapter we have reflected upon Feminists’ remaking of women's moral subjectivity and referred to the modalities of construction of selves. In the fifth chapter we have focused upon the issue to what extent gender distinctions and gender neutrality can go at par and assessed the necessity of adopting gender egalitarian approaches. We wanted to posit that there are ways in which one can significantly talk of gender distinctions in Ethics without being biased by any specific gender concerns.

In the light of the entire discussion held in previous chapters we find it relevant to state that feminist ethics has substantially and reasonably contributed to our understanding of ethical theory and normative situations. Feminist ethics draws its justification from various feminist positions. It is a critical reflection on morality which is informed by feminist theory and the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. It has developed a sharp critique of traditional ethical theories in a male-dominated and androcentric culture. However, feminist philosophers have also developed constructive ethical models that constitute serious alternatives to traditional moral discourse. Feminism is about challenging gender inequalities in the social world. If feminism is committed to inclusiveness, one might reasonably infer that everyone concerned about ending the subordination of women is eligible to participate in global feminist discourse.

Like any other ethical theory, feminist ethics also has to face serious objections brought by its critics. Some critics, especially non-feminist critics, focus upon the relationship between justice and care, considered as two gender-neutral ethical perspectives. These critics assert that even if care is an ethical virtue and not simply pleasing psychological trait that human beings can cultivate, care is a less
essential ethical virtue than the virtue of justice. For example, it would be better to act out of a general ethical principle than out of a particular caring feeling in response to need. Furthermore, when justice and care conflict, impartiality must triumph partiality because no one’s fundamental rights and basic needs are neither more nor less important than any other else’s. So it is better not to make any line of distinction between ethical principles. Instead one should proceed for egalitarian approaches.

In addition to the above mentioned objection, because feminist ethics focuses upon power and how power is used to oppress women in particular, non-feminist critics assert that these approaches are “female-biased.” For centuries, traditional Western ethics has proceeded from the assumption that its values and principles must apply to all persons equally. From this perspective, it is a misguided venture and, an injustice to deliberately construct an ethical program that focuses upon a specific group of people and, in turn, to generalize that program to all people for all times and in all places. Isn’t that exactly the assumption feminist ethics is constructed upon, namely, to talk about women’s experiences as a monolith? These types of criticisms bring serious allegations against the adoption of any Feminist Perspective in Ethics at all.

Feminist and non-feminist critics suggest that the continual emphasis on women’s issues throughout the evolution of the movement has resulted in gynocentric ideology. It is claimed by these critics that some feminists are biased by the lens that filters their world views and they would like to see a gender-neutral term such as “gender egalitarianism” replace “feminism” when used in reference to the belief in basic equal rights and opportunities for both sexes.

Since men’s and women’s lives are inextricably intertwined, there are no “women’s issues” that are not also men’s issues; for instance, the availability or nonavailability of child care and abortion has significant consequences for the lives
of men as well as women. It would be a mistake to identify feminist ethics with attention to some explicitly gendered subset of ethical issues. On the contrary, rather than being limited to a restricted ethical domain, feminist ethics has enlarged the traditional concerns of ethics, both through identifying previously unrecognized ethical issues and by introducing fresh perspectives on issues already acknowledged as having an ethical dimension. Feminist ethics certainly is being developed by feminists, most of whom are women, but this does not imply, of course, that any woman, or even any feminist, should be regarded as a moral expert whose moral authority is beyond question. There are also serious difficulties with thinking of feminist ethics as the substitution of female or feminine for male or masculine values. These difficulties include problems with establishing that any values are male or female in the sense of being generally held by men or women, when both women’s and men’s values vary so much, both within cultures as well as across them. Similar problems confront attempts to establish that certain values are masculine or feminine in the sense of being considered socially appropriate for individuals of one gender or the other. Again, norms of masculinity and femininity vary not only between societies but even within the same society. Feminist ethics can never begin by assuming that women and men are similarly situated—although it may discover that some women are situated similarly with some men in specific respects or contexts. Ultimately feminism’s concern for all women means that feminist ethics must address not only “local” issues but also such global issues as environmental destruction, war, and access to world resources. In order to develop guides to action that will tend to subvert rather than reinforce the systematic subordination of women, feminist approaches to ethics must understand individual actions in the context of broader social practices. In response to their recognition that mainstream, especially modern, Western ethics has defined the moral domain in such a way as to exclude many issues of special concern to women, contemporary feminists have sought to expand the ethical arena. In some cases, their questions have generated whole new bodies of research, such as feminist environmentalism.
and feminist bioethics. Issues that feminists have identified as morally problematic include: abortion; sexuality, including compulsory heterosexuality, sexual harassment, and rape; representations of masculinity and femininity, including those produced by the Mass Media and pornography; the domestic division of labour; self-presentation, including body image and fashion; and the role of language in reinforcing as well as reflecting women's subordination. Although these issues received little attention from mainstream ethics until recent years, all have significant implications for women's lives. Feminists have frequently responded to Western philosophy's disparagement of what it has constructed as feminine by insisting that the feminine should be revalued. The first articulations of the ethics of care represented it as an expression of women's characteristic experience of nurturing or mothering particular others, but later studies had difficulty in confirming a clear empirical link between women and caring. When subjects were matched for education and occupation, women often achieved almost identical scores with men on justice-oriented tests of moral development, leaving women who worked in the home as the main representatives of the care perspective. Moreover, some men as well as women were found to employ care thinking. Recent advocates of an ethics of care acknowledge not only that some women think in terms of justice and some men in terms of care, but also that most people of each sex are able to adopt either perspective. Many philosophers are continuing to draw on care's "feminine" insights and values to develop alternative and more feminist approaches to democratic theory, to social and economic policy, and to international relations. Rather than dismissing the claims of justice, such approaches typically seek to reinterpret them within a framework of care. Their goal is to reconceptualize social and even global institutions so that they will enable and reinforce caring relations among people.

But our identity is interwoven with the identity of the ecosystem. Since ecological identification is based on a different worldview, one who takes the web of interconnectedness as given in order to define the self, such identification also
requires an understanding of the sacredness of life, broadly construed, and enrichment of the self. A related issue concerns our relationships with natures. We would need to ask how we will assimilate the moral universe beyond humanity. Furthermore, recognizing the sanctity of life and the sacred relationship of other and self would also involve an acknowledgment of our humbleness. The global movement for women's human rights provides a final illustration of the trajectory followed by much feminist ethics; beginning by criticizing the exclusion of women and discrimination against feminist ethics. The scope of this Ethics is wide open for future expansion and newer explorations both in the domains of activity and research.