
DO WE NEED TO CHALLENGE OR CHANGE THE PERSPECTIVE?: A RE-READING OF THE FEMINIST METAPHYSICS

Baiju P. Anthony

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

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Abstract: Presentation of feminism from the perspectives of philosophical branches brings variety and vitality to feministic reflections. Often the feminist thinkers challenge the existing metaphysical ideas in order to present the feminist metaphysics. However, it is also possible to present feminist metaphysics without challenging the definitions of metaphysics. In doing that it helps us to see the interconnections with other branches of philosophy.

Keywords: Feminist Metaphysics, Critical Theory, Epistemology, Reality.

Introduction: In her article, “Feminism and Metaphysics: Unmasking Hidden Ontologies”, Sally Haslanger presents us with the pleasure and pain in promoting feminism from a metaphysical perspective. She suggests for questioning the metaphysical presuppositions in order to present alternative world views. In this paper, I would like to present a way to provide alternative world views without questioning the definitions of metaphysics. In order to do that, I would like to dwell on three notions of metaphysics presented by Le Robin. The three notions are: a) metaphysics as the study of reality, b) metaphysics as a philosophical science interested by what it is to be real and c) metaphysics as a philosophical discipline concerned not just what is but also the way that is¹. Holding on to these three definitions on metaphysics, I believe, it is possible to bring alternative feminist world views without questioning the definitions of metaphysics. This perspective will indeed bring in larger implications in the feminist literature and philosophy.

Metaphysics as A Study of Reality: Metaphysics is described as study of reality and reality is perceived by the philosophers invariably. For the purpose of the term paper I would like to follow the idea of reality by Sally Haslanger. According to her, reality is a product of social construction. There are different agencies that assist the process of social construction in the life of an individual. One’s own parents are teachers are instrumental in one’s life to attain the meaning of any concept and idea². Those ideas and concepts that are inherited from one’s own parents and educators can be later on affirmed or denied with the help of social, cultural or scientific powers that exist in the society. It means, an individual’s idea or concept of reality could be affirmed or denied with the other tools that are offered by the society. Society is the giver or affirmer of the reality.

¹ Le Robin, “What is Metaphysics?”, pp. xviii-xxii.

²Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Constructions,” 156.

If reality is a product of social construction, the dominant group will have a major role to play in the construction of reality. History offers abundant examples on how dominant groups managed to present the reality suiting to their needs.³

If reality is a social construction, it points to the context in which the reality was built up.⁴ There will be changes in the perspective of reality according to the cultural and historical context.⁵ Every side of the reality comes from “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others.” Such a shared world experience contributes to the reality.

These three notions that are associated with the reality could be exemplified by bringing in the recent uproar in the State of Kerala on the entrance of woman aged between 10-50 to the Sabarimala temple. There we have a group in the society of Kerala that present the idea that woman aged between 10-50 are prohibited to enter into the locus around the sanctuary of Sabarimala. This particular notion is propagated by the dominant royal and priestly groups. They affirm it holding on to the traditions and they want to uphold the same by practices of prayer and protests. This particular reality exists only in the context of Kerala and in Kerala only the context of Sabarimala temple.

Considering metaphysics from the point of view of reality has its impact on feminist metaphysics. One can easily identify the reality behind the subjugation and oppression suffered by women as the results of ideas that are constructed by the society. Concepts conceived by the dominant groups of the society and concepts consist in certain contexts of the society play a role in presenting the reality.⁶ It goes well along with the Heideggerian analysis of Western metaphysics. According to him, in Western metaphysics, there is the domination of subjective consciousness which limits the viewpoint on the world and its meaning.⁷ A pursuit after the reality will unveil the dominating elements.

Secondly, consideration of metaphysics from the perspective of reality as socially constructed paves the way for new materialism⁸ that challenges the ideas that construct reality. The new materialism⁹ looks for reflecting on the material practices and inquiring into the material processes and

³ According to Foucault, body is the identity one acquires as an effect of discourse and power and freedom consists not in realizing a natural self but in resisting all kinds of identity. Bevir, “A Kind of Radicality,” 135.

⁴ Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Constructions,” 158.

⁵ Heideggerian analysis of *Dasein* states that beings are created in the context and have meaning only in the spatio-temporal context. Hargis, “Escape from the Subject,” 57.

⁶ Haslanger points out that the famous slogan of Simon de Beauvoir that she is the other and her *being is becoming* is a slogan that underlines the fact that gender is socially constructed.

⁷ Hargis, “Escape from the Subject,” 56.

⁸ Colebrook, “Materiality: Sex, Gender, and What Lies Beneath,” 194.

⁹ For example, Lacan uses phallus to symbolize desire. Desire is always the desire for what we do not have – desire for the other, desire for what we lack, desire for fullness and completeness. Rushing, “Longing for a Certain Kind of Future,” 235.

structures behind any reality¹⁰. The new materialism is interested in presenting neutral substances in the binary between male and female.¹¹

Metaphysics As Interested By What It Is To Be Real: Metaphysics is interested by what it is to be real. In order to understand what it is to be real, we require a genuine inquiry. When someone proceeds with a desire for genuine exploration, s/he meets with complexities¹² and practices that are associated with reality.¹³

Coming back to the question on the entrance of women aged between 10-50 in the sanctuary of Sabarimala Temple from this perspective, we come to know the various aspects of complexities and diverse practices that are associated with it. People's attempt to know the reality better brought in front of them enlightened discussions on the deity, priestly practices, and royal rights over the temple and the hidden agenda of the political parties in making Sabarimala as the centre of discord.

The genuine inquiry to unveil what it is to be real should be supported with the ideals of objectivity. Humanity has a craze for scientific methods. Objectivity¹⁴ is one of the key notions promoted by the scientific community to promote the supremacy of science. The objectivity program should include the principles of impartiality, symmetry, causality and reflexivity. Such a program of objectivity will be an all inclusive program as it considers all available positions on reality, the positive and negative aspects of reality, the causes behind the reality and the possibility of critiquing one's own view point on the reality.

Feminist metaphysics studied from the consideration of what it is to be real, presents us with a way for exploration in which we understand the complexities and practices associated with the reality, i.e., reality concerning the situation of women with multifaceted viewpoints. Reality looked at from the ideals of objectivity helps feminist metaphysics to come out of the every theory laden principles and present reality in a scientific manner.

Secondly, feminist metaphysics viewed from the point of what is to be real comes in support to evaluate and represent who women are. It recognizes the reality behind gender differences in the society. The attention given to real life situations brings in the methods of consciousness-raising and the use of first person in philosophy.¹⁵ First person narratives on traumatic experiences of oppression and discrimination will indeed create awareness in the society on the sufferings of

¹⁰ However, one can see the presentation of the reality from the aspect of mystery too. In her poem *Phenomenal Women*, Maya Angelou presents her social reality and her materiality from the aspect of mystery.

¹¹ Colebrook, "Materiality: Sex, Gender, and What Lies Beneath," 196.

¹² The theory of Anekantavada of Jainism teaches the multifaceted sides of reality and the complexities associated with it.

¹³ Haslanger, "The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Constructions," 159.

¹⁴ Harding, "Strong Objectivity and Socially Constructed Knowledge," 139-157.

¹⁵ Brison, "Personal Identity and Relational Selves," 222-3.

certain groups. When the self does the narrative, it does it with the components of social elements.¹⁶

Metaphysics As Concerned Not Just What Is But The Way That It Is: Metaphysics is concerned not just what is but also the way that it is. Heidegger explains the way being is through the idea of thrownness into the historical context of meaning that offers a future possibility to the being.

The way the being is as an embodied, socially constructed narrative¹⁷. Other beings have a role in the constitution of the self. The words of others have a role in the self-constitution of the being. In the words of Haslanger, it is the process of categorization in certain way by the society that attributes typical construction upon the being. It is possible that being may go along well with that categorization¹⁸ that is given to it by the society.

The reality of being includes subjective and objective factors¹⁹. The human body is not only a material reality but also a basic way of relating to the material world. The human mind is not only a pure spirit but also a power related to others.²⁰ Body-mind union tells us that sensations and emotions are integral part of one's life in the world with others.²¹

The way being is, is with subjectivity and subject position.²² The structure of subjectivity brings in one's sense of self as I am where as subject position comes through one's position in the social and historical context. Existentialist thinkers present it with notions of transcendence and immanence attached with the subject. Being that is thrown into the world has the capacity and possibility of transcendence. If the being goes along with affirming the immanence aspect of existence, it shuts the door of the future possibilities.

Feminist metaphysics of this perspective will help to uncover the categorizations given to the feminine being by the society throughout the centuries. It will prompt the female being to bring forward the repository of her experiences that are integral to her existence and moving along the line of possibilities that are in front of her.

Secondly, it will promote the philosophic writings from the viewpoint of first person narratives and in the feminist literature it will unveil the agonizing experiences women have been undergoing in

¹⁶A careful linguistic analysis of self-narrative will bring to light how other people use words in order to make our self-narratives. Ibid, 227.

¹⁷Ibid, 226.

¹⁸ Rushing states that the Idea of Imaginary Domain by Cornell as a projection of a sense of self-identity from the bondage of personal categorization. Rushing, 248.

¹⁹Descartes presents the mind-body relation in different manners. Body and mind is conceived as two distinct substances with the attributes of extension and thinking and it points to the independent existence of both. He also presents a unitary notion of body-mind relation using the similes of navigation and plotting. By bringing in the example of Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, Descartes presents mind as pure thinking, body as extended matter and body-mind union.

²⁰Heinamaa, "Embodiment and Feminist Philosophy," 186.

²¹Heinamaa, "Embodiment and Feminist Philosophy," 182.

²²Oliver, "Psychoanalysis Subjectivity and Feminism," 232.

various historical and cultural contexts²³. Descartes narratives present human persons from a thinking level of whereas feminist narratives include her own realities based on her experience of the society.

Conclusion: The three definitions of metaphysics help us to look at feminist metaphysics without pausing a challenge to the already established notions on metaphysics. All the three notions of metaphysics seen from the feminist perspective underline the role of society in constructing reality. It then helps the feminist thinkers to make their point clear that the existential situation of women is made up of social forces and social conditions. If so a paradigm shift to bring in new and different social practice is not impossibility. It also will help the feminist metaphysician to look into the character of woman in the context of her entire situation. It will bring to light different factors that have conspired to make woman as it is now. If social construction has a role in the making up of woman, it also affirms that woman is never finality and she cannot be reduced into some of her functions.

According to Code Lorraine, while doing feminist epistemology, one has to take consider different aspects: the nature of the inquirers, the interests in the inquiry, the emotional involvement of the enquirers, the background assumptions of the inquirers and the historical and cultural situation of the enquirer²⁴. The presence of these epistemological considerations is embedded in the idea that reality is socially constructed.

Feminist metaphysics adopts many of the propositions of the critical theory. Along with critical theorists it argues against the value neutrality of science and affirms that science has to be embedded in the historical and cultural realities of the human person. Together with the critical theorists, they uphold the necessity of viewing philosophy not from the aspect of intellectualizing exercise but with view on effecting a change in the society. Like the critical theorists, the feminist thinkers hold on to the view that one has to question the traditional theories that give priority to status quo and domination in order to bring change in society.

When the realization that reality as social construction haunts the philosopher, if s/he adopts the Nietzschean virtue of *Redlichkeit*, it will be beneficial to philosophic community. This particular virtue if possessed by a person s/he speaks openly about the whole content of what they perceive with all its untruthful elements and lies.²⁵ Honest acknowledgements of inconvenient and unpleasant aspects of reality associated with women will shed light into feminist philosophy.

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²³In her poem *Breaking-Out*, Marge Piercy uses the first person narrative in order to present the way she grow up suffering ill-treatment from her parents and necessity to break out the outdated things that lags the society from the view point of girl child.

²⁴Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," 26.

²⁵Lane, "Honesty as the Best Policy," 31.

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