

BOOK REVIEW - IV

Benhabib, Seyla : *Situating the Self : Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Polity Press, 1992.

The Modus Vivendi :

The most common way of characterising postmodernism is given by the Lyotardian injunction about the 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Likewise, feminism is against the trait of being called a feminine, and possibly its cognates (e.g. the male principle). Obviously, there is a common front against the universalising paradigms. In recent years, however, there is a growing corpus of literary output, which explores exactly this relation between postmodernism and feminism in the West. Some of them at least tend to question the *modus vivendi* as described in many different ways, by posing a dilemma. Such a dilemma, is well articulated by Seyla Benhabib, in the book under review. If they are alleys of postmodernism, the theoretical back-up must be sacrificed, or if they are not, the relationship will become questionable. Reconciling feminist theory with an emancipatory ideal thus poses a question as to on what grounds they theorise except the goal of emancipation of women.

Sabina Loviband drew ire from many critics for her realism, which combines both of the above strains, so as to foist an emancipatory metanarrative. Characterising this as self-contradictory, Richard Rorty (1998) pursues a strong practising ironist path, which rejects any hegemonic theory of discourse including philosophy in favour of small narratives. Nevertheless much as he is inclined to trace the subtext of ironism back to Hegel, he turned out to be *aufgeho*bonist (Kanthamani, *Ms.*). For Benhabib, to pursue a different approach, the glory that is Rorty consists in the civility of conversation, which not only allows conversation to go on, but also fulfils the ideal of embedded self with other in

interactivity. This is exactly the narrativist episteme that feminists require. For an anti-Kantian like Rorty, what underlies the above reconciliation is the acceptance of appearance-reality distinction and hence it stands for a total rejection. Within his outlook, not only philosophy, but also an analytical strain survives: his mininarrative is only a metanarrative in civil dress (*Ibid.*). *Contra* Loviband, Rorty starts assuming that pragmatism has all the dialectical advantages of postmodernism minus the self-contradictory assumptions of post-modernism. In perfect tune with this, Rorty's way of overcoming this impasse is to marry feminism with a Deweyan type of post-pragmatism. The message Rorty wants to deliver is that first linguistify Deweyan ethics so as to explain how to make new beings out of it. Rorty's answer is given in terms of what he calls new uses of language ('don't call me feminine') or what he calls 'creative misuses of language'.

Even granting that it is not reasonable to expect that Benhabib's appropriation must go the whole hog with Rorty's recent reflections, her minimal ideals are questionable. Apparently, Benhabib does not nourish Deweyan hopes, but she is considerate towards Mead. Neither found favour with Habermas's postmetaphysical account of dialogical interactivity, which rejects Dewey for its functionalist traits and expands on Mead's ethological credentials. Just as for Rorty what we need from Habermas is 'less dryness', for Benhabib, what we need from Habermas is the agonal features which will befit feminism. Neither of these is feasible from her point of view. Invariably, Rorty gives the impression of being strongly post-modern (no reality deep down), but for him, this does not amount to appropriating postmodernism in any way, but rather look at it as providing another metanarrativist trap. Contrary to expectations, many feminists overlook Rorty's proclaimed animus against *episteme* and tend to fuse feminism with a Rortian theorising about conversation. Benhabib is one of the foremost among such feminists, who successfully combines them in a bid to develop what Rorty calls a post-Enlightenment interactive universalism. The ethics she develops takes the form of post-conventional Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (good life), which meets Rorty only half way.

For Benhabib, the only way this could chime with Rorty's own rejection of enlightenment ideals is to read it as containing the seeds of the 'post-

metaphysical' attitude (5). In what sense, this would mean literally toeing the line of Rorty's appropriation of postmodernism is not clear. However, Benhabib wants to derive home the conclusion that feminism is an alley of Rortian type of small narrativist *episteme*. It is strongly supported by the latest studies in gender-oriented psychology of cognitive-moral development. Supported by another latest Rortian trick, it is equally poised to display a much pronounced *aufgehoben* (sublating) intention of overcoming the two opposing ethical orientations, namely, the orientation of justice (John Rawls) of the public sphere and the orientation of care (Okin's critique of Rawls) of the private sphere. The former view is contractarian and it is vulnerable to communitarian onslaught for the difference principle, which invalidates the disembodied self and the latter is not sufficient enough to generate the required public sphere. Rorty's ideal helps to steer a middle course between a strongly deontological ethics of communication theorists which posits self with others in dialogical communication, and the weak deontological ethics of communitarianism, which posits self with others in a community with self minus femininity. In sum, if she is a Rortian, then she is not going beyond and if she is going beyond, she is not a Rortian.

Within Benhabib's essentially integrated approach, the concrete identity of others, called as the otherness of others, is sought to be restored to a point of reciprocity of sympathy, empathy and care. The communitarians practice only a *via negativa* and the communicationists like Habermas is modernist in their version of discourse ethics, and hence Benhabib is locked in a dialectical battle with both of them. On Benhabib's reading, Habermas is a modernist metanarrativist and a radical proceduralist in ethics. In sharp contrast to Habermas's brand of postmetaphysical thinking, which takes the Hegelian identity of the non-identity as accessible in every day communication, *sans* the Hegelian metaphysical trappings, where the identity of non-identity is not to be paradoxically taken as a sublating non-identity, and thus recovering either the complementary reciprocity or ordinary reciprocity *simpliciter* ('I have a right to be X, you have a right to be X'), Benhabib might require a sublating clause ('I have a right to be X, you have a right to be Y, let us exchange X for Y'). It is only on these two aspects, namely the otherness of others and complementary reciprocity just mentioned above, that Benhabib's defence of feminism rests. Its

major shortcomings are to be located exactly at the spot where the above thesis is defended. While communitarians like Charles Taylor thrive on the generalised others, Benhabib thinks that she needs a hard and fast distinction between the above categories. Generalised others is substitutionist in that it substitutes one for the other whereas Benhabib wants to take the interactivity of the concrete others. So, her first thesis is raised on a certain distinction between generalised and concrete others, which seems to be *ad hoc* thus making the complementary reciprocity highly ambiguous or even making it patently contradictory, from a Habermasian point of view. So, there is a double-failure in the project of socially situating the self: on the one hand it is afflicted by the narrowness of the Rortian model, and secondly the question about the otherness of others seems to require the Hegelian trappings and the conflation of *episteme* and morality.

So, in tune with Rorty's recontextualisation of Dewey's pragmatism, Benhabib pursues a line of thinking advocated by sociologist Mead according to which the socially situating self ('Me') must provide the necessary rallying point. This sharply contrasts the way Habermas recovers the 'I' (from 'Me'), which is rather fragmented. But seen from the viewpoint of Hegelian critique of Kant, the former may still require an *aufgehobonist* stance. Further, Benhabib can hardly accept Dewey's ethological (cognitive agent is in relation to his species-specific environment) and this was rejected by Mead taking this as no other than the discredited egological view. Can Benhabib succeed to reconcile such disparate tendencies into a coherent account of feminism without making her account to sharply contrast with Habermas's (1992) more interesting recovery of Mead's account, through a third personal account, in the linguistic way, within his account of ethics and politics. This is the contrast that I want to highlight in my criticism of the above model in this Review.

On Benhabib's view, the way feminists take postmodernism as a 'conceptual and political' (228) or 'theoretical' alley (225) suggests that there is more than 'elective affinity' (213) so much so that the term, used by Fraser and Nicholson, namely 'postmodernist feminist theory' (220) no longer seems to be a term of art, however much their arguments for social criticism without philosophy may receive support from Lyotard's postmodern criticism without philosophy' (24). Fraser and Nicholson (1990), on the other hand, want to develop

a strong and robust criticism without philosophy as against the weak and inadequate conception of social criticism by Lyotard (34) which they found to be ambiguous (24) in that it rules out general categories like gender, race, and class (*Ibid.*). For example, the way Lyotard writes like a disillusioned marxist is discouraging for developing a marxian feminist critique.

For Benhabib, on the other hand, the escape route from this gender blindness is suggested by thinkers like Richard Rorty, in his narrativist account of epistemology, and it becomes thus relevant in this context, simply because it takes philosophy as involving an interactive sense of conversation. Benhabib goes so far as to eulogise Rorty saying that his is the clearest articulation of politics of postmodernism (123) within the framework of contextual pragmatism. Accordingly, this view, seen in sharp contrast to the mere political gesture of Lyotard's neoliberalism, and in a much more interesting way than Habermas who scratches where it does not itch, becomes the model. This is questionable once you compare Rorty with Habermas. Thus, it is wrong to accept that both are counter-theoretical and are to be used *in lieu of*, or against, metanarratives. Secondly, it is equally wrong to hold that the 'uneasy alliance' between postmodernism and feminism is better explained by taking it as a narrative in the exact sense in which it is a form of social criticism without the requirement, or addendum of philosophy as an overarching discourse of legitimation. This is the ideal termed as Rortian, in that it draws its inspiration from his critique of *episteme*. For Benhabib, this means that there is yet another additional advantage namely that one need not share the worry about whether philosophical conclusions follow from such a social criticism. I wonder how all these can lend credence to a full-blooded Rortian form of feminist theory in which the *modus vivendi* also operates beyond doubt. From this point of view, Benhabib's critique of Fraser and Nicholson may also require a drastic review.

Against this, Benhabib argues, what we need is a post-postmodern *episteme*, that is, not the one which Lyotard provides, which is performatively self-contradictory, especially when it attempts to reconcile the two domains of philosophy and language, into an agonal philosophy of language. *Contra* Lyotard, which unites agonal character of language with a post-modern *episteme*, in an evocative medium, we must settle for a cognitive medium, which provides

norms for agonal co-ordination. For Benhabib, in such a context, it is agreeable that the rudiments of such a form of critical theory that is provided by Habermas's model of communitarian or discourse ethics. A fusion between them may therefore be called for. However, as she later diagnoses, the two defects of pure communitarian ethics that block such a move are stated as: one, it has overtures towards a hermeneutic monism. Secondly, it will not serve any purpose whatsoever so long as it is not interested in recognising the postconventional or agonal *Sittlichkeit*, rather than mere normative accounts of justice. What exactly the sense of agonality Benhabib requires? So she concludes that this is to be dismissed as an altogether unimportant ingredient in feminist critical theory. Hence, the only option is to Rortianise it so as to evaluate the earlier understanding of postmodernist feminist theory, in the light of the above. We need a social critique with philosophy but not any agonism in philosophy of language, thus using it as a leverage against Lyotard. This forces her first to desert Habermas's dialogical ethics, but finally coming to terms with it. Omitting unwanted details of the above, the prospects of a feminist critical theory is also broadly communitarian and interactive in Habermas's sense, but it should be more in the Rortian sense. But the manner in which this is worked out into a theory by Benhabib requires careful evaluation as this takes Rorty rather than Lyotard or Habermas as her hero.

The Strong versus The Weak:

As a first step to the above, it is necessary to counter Jane Flax (1990), who in her book, characterises postmodernism with the subscription to the strong version of the following three theses :death of Man, History, and Metaphysics, which also characterise postmodernism. Benhabib wants to have a recourse to weaker version of the above. In Flax's feminist terminology, all these traits correspond to death of the male subject, of a metanarrative, and the skepticism towards the claims of transcendent reason. As against this, Benhabib wants to avoid a strong reading of postmodernist in the above way simply because it cannot be reconciled with the kind of feminism she desires and suggests that the weak version of the above can be readily reconciled with feminism. She further explains that such a requirement will sustain the situation of the self, as against the loss of selfhood and autonomy, even while subtending an acceptance of

small narratives, and a consequent version of moral epistemology should subserve feminist critique and also back up the idea of emancipation as well. In Benhabib's articulation, such is the nature of Rortian ideal that comes to: 'social criticism without some form of philosophy is not possible, and without social criticism, the project of a feminist theory which is at once committed to knowledge and to the emancipatory of women is inconceivable'.

So the dilemma of feminists, namely that: if they accept, postmodernism, they cannot accept emancipation, is resolved by taking it by the horns. It means that a theory of emancipation must be reconciled with a small narrative, in Rorty's sense. One only hopes that an extension of this thesis embodies the idea that such a reconciliation can capture both the theory and practice of postmodernism as well as feminism. The problem is how to reconcile a small narrative with women's aspiration for emancipation. The initial answer given in this context recommends what is called a situated criticism, which stipulates that such and such culture requires such and such ways of tackling women's problems. Even while granting that all criticism is *au fond* situated criticism, immanent or situated criticism cannot subserve social criticism as they tend to assume a monolithic tapestry of meaning or what is called a hermeneutic monism which enjoins that there is universal consensus of meaning. But this will defeat the very purpose of the requirement of philosophy. Social criticism needs philosophy precisely because the narratives of our cultures are 'so conflictual and irreconcilable'. Secondly, cultures are not so neatly reified as to embody a frozen set of assumptions. It follows therefore, Philosophy itself cannot provide transcendental standpoint for social criticism. Incidentally, it may also be noted that the marxian feminist theory, along with neo-conservatists, commits a fallacy because it accepts theoretical framework of Marxian critique, which is itself a metanarrative. Lyotard was consistently against any of these forms of critical theory.

Both Frederic Jameson (1990) as well as T. Adorno are not altogether acceptable to her and hence they came in for criticism. The former ignores Lyotard's philosophical break with marxism (in an effort to be a post-Marxist), and the latter does not fulfil the epistemic function, while valorising aesthetics. Both are flawed for their seeking the otherness of the other under the guise of

logic of the identity of non-identity and the non-identity of the identity (euphemistically called the logic of identity and non-identity) in the realm of aesthetics and politics. Benhabib needs a notion of identity, which is completely reversible in order to make coherent the distinction between you and me, as required by Rorty's sense of conversation. It is this theoretical accomplishment that I want to question: while the framework advanced by Habermas has all the potency of this, the Hegelian trappings of Benhabib's Rortian project do not reach up to expectations for the simple reason that Rorty's social theory is a theory without philosophy. One is left to wonder what is purported to be achieved by terming it as *episteme* in Rorty's sense. I shall not discuss the fallout for the sound theoretical base for feminism.

The Paradigm of Interactive Universalism:

So Benhabib's Rortian paradigm is to be called interactive universalism, which is at once a small narrative as well as a pragmatic social criticism which is backed up by a narrative of epistemology, without falling into the trap of the Lyotardian gay science. The paradigm of interactive universalism within democratic societies, offered as a corrective to the idealisations of both Rawls and Habermas, will not have a recourse to proceduralist reform *a la* Rawls. The reason is that at least recent Rawls is an anti - metaphysicist, and has no sympathy for a metaphysical account of person. On Benhabib's view, Rawls's definition of identity behind the veil of ignorance can hardly guarantee the human plurality, and besides, this has bad consequences for the criteria of reversibility. Secondly, Rawls definition of veil of ignorance without the framework of ideal observer theory ignores its own identity by making it disappear behind the veil. Thus, it also does not recognise the otherness of others or the concrete others. In other words, the way others are different from us is made to disappear within such a scheme. In a sense, Rawls's original position does not confront the otherness of others, except by modulating it as putting oneself in the place of others, or what is called reversibility of roles. So, thirdly and finally, such a definitional identity is only sufficient for an incomplete reversibility, in contradistinction to postconventional accounts of Kohlberg, which posit a perfect reversibility, which is, again, nothing but another idealisation. This is the ambiguity I spoke earlier that sharply contrasts with Habermas.

Against all these, Benhabib wants a species of reciprocity, which is complementary, which requires that we must individuate others as well. This is what is called the otherness of others. Such an individuation is called alterity. It is not that we must put ourselves into the shoes of others, but we must see everything from the point of every body. This is what ensures a symmetry within the above. There are two criticisms about the conceptual flaws: one is that Benhabib's distinction between reciprocity and complementary reciprocity does not work as this is nothing more than a formal and informal equity. One does not explain the other and hence it is circular. Secondly, the otherness of others, based on the distinction between generalised others and concrete others does not go any more further than the gender specific trait, and hence this too does not work in any particularly interesting way, and un-Rortian. Since the whole project rests on this distinction, a distinction which is contradicted by saying that one reaches the generalised other *via* concrete others (If so, what is the antagonism she speaks of in the beginning.), it does not seem to get off the ground. Moreover, situating the self without language looks pernicious, as the very act of interaction requires language. Rorty recognises this in what is termed as the creative misuses of language while Benhabib does not.

As she argues, a correctly balanced account of reversibility requires a recognition of gender as a relational category, which is quite opposed to postmodernism (160-2; 197), along with an identity and autonomy of self. This is far-fetching and confused. Benhabib is, therefore, engaged in an immanent critique of both Kohlberg and Rawls, while accepting a Gilligan-Habermas framework for a moral epistemology, under the Rortian guise. This is a framework, which integrates ethics of justice with an ethics of care. This is exactly where the shoe pinches. If so, the question arises as to how Benhabib is going to reconcile her paradigm with that of the procedural model of social justice. Nevertheless, on closer examination, it is revealed that the reconciliation is not favoured, as this is not what is needed. What about a communicative ethics *a la* Habermas? On Benhabib's view, this is also ruled out as a postconventional *Sittlichkeit* is not favoured by it. So her solution of interactive universalism is supposed to correct the defects of substitutional universalism of both of the above. Does she succeed in her endeavour, with her Rortian axe?

I want to argue that her project is flawed to the core, and hence the divergence between theory and practice become once more than apparent, in spite of the Herculean efforts to reconcile theory and practice by adopting a collapse of theory into practice. This is what is identified as the core axiom in her theory, which is bluntly asserted by holding that: practical rationality must also involve epistemic rationality as well (169). In fact, Benhabib makes an appeal to the widened base of this conflation without falling into any fallacy. She remarks that epistemic restrictions must be placed upon moral reasoning and moral disputation. It is exactly here that her theory overshoots the mark. For, it is not clear whether she argues for a primacy of theory over practice or else she wants to collapse one into another, theory into practice or *vice versa*, in accordance with the Rortian dictates.

What I want to argue here is that divergence is an additional one, that it is additional to the divergence caused by the dilemma that feminists face: that is, they cannot accommodate emancipation; if they ever do so, they are not alleys of postmodernists. Just as there is theory and practice within postmodernism, within feminism also, there is theory and practice. If co-ordination between them is to be sought anywhere, it is here that one must seek. Contrariwise, one may choose to argue that there is a certain discrepancy between theory and practice within feminism, just because there is a similar break between theory and practice within postmodernism. Thus, one can try to prove that the defect of one is traceable to the other. A critique of feminist theory unfolds as the critique of postmodernism proceeds or *vice versa*. This is resolved by adopting a Rortian imago within the project Benhabib has in mind as evidenced in the way she pleads for a certain co-ordination between theory and practice for feminists in her latest book. Quoting from various feminist theorists, she wants to argue that feminists need not give up the practice of emancipation of woman just because they have lost their gender identity, consequent upon the postmodernists' declaration of the 'death of man'. They can do this only if they are ready to abandon the stronger version of postmodernism (literal death of man and woman) and ready to follow a weaker version, which entails that self of woman has a certain autonomy. That is what that can ensure what she calls feminism as situational criticism in which a woman situates her self in the practice

of intersubjectivity.

The Gender Trouble :

A completion of the above reflection requires Benhabib to unsuccessfully address herself to the question about gender-oriented moral epistemology. Can we develop such a theory, and if so, what would be the contour of such a theory? It is in this connection, Benhabib engages in a critique of the view, which has its focus on what it calls gender trouble. According to this, gender is different from sex because it is culturally acquired, and hence it should be located within the narrative code of signification. Thus, the problem of individual consciousness is transformed into one about language (second order discourse). Benhabib's strategy of expressing a strong disagreement against such a dualism is essentially Rortian in its appeal in that it is against changing one metanarrative into another. Obviously, it inherits all the flaws of the Rortian model, including the *aufgehoben* motif, which is characteristically, American (Richard Bernstein has finally dropped this, if my understanding is correct; see Kanthamani, 1997). This is actually the point against Habermas as well since language sustains his paradigm too. The argument against Lyotard's agonial motif also shares a similar feature and this, together with the removal of general criticism against philosophy, her claim about social criticism with philosophy (theory) becomes the first casualty. This is what is seen in the following comments.

But Benhabib says more: she brings to the fore an important fissure between feminism and postmodernism. For Benhabib, therefore, neither the role of gender nor the role of sex is lost. Reacting against such a dualism, she says that in fact one cannot put them in different categories. She cannot agree that gender identity is performative in the sense that it should only be located in the vortices of discourses. Consequently, one must reject any thinking, which dichotomises between sexual identity and gender identity. Cutting across the boundaries, as she argues, one should go beyond this to a level of sublimation. Self is not to be conceived as a masquerading performer (215). What the above argument in effect does is that it takes the sexed body as a metanarrative to be thrown away. Benhabib opines that it is not an *episteme* that has to be rejected

in favour of gender, which is a cultural category. Dualism enjoins that gendered identity is a cultural category whereas sexual identity is a natural category. Such a dichotomous reasoning does not find favour with Benhabib. She intends to attack the consequent fallout by saying that it undermines the normative vision of feminist politics and theory.

The point of convergence is not to be traced by calling attention to what is called the gender trouble by Judith Butler (1990). Butler's point is that gender trouble is a trouble because it is localisable at the system of signification. At that level of second order discourse, philosophy of language mobilises this authorial position, and hence a Rortian counter to this form of the theory should reject this according to Benhabib. That is, it is countered by holding that, or rather one should take seriously that for a woman, I is therefore not merely a narrative code sanctioned by culture, but it has a normative content which defines selfhood. The question is, therefore, how to recover it, and its autonomy.

The issue between Butler and Benhabib boils down to this : whereas Butler argues against holding that one should have recourse to the I which is conceived to be pre-existing but it should be culturally constructed. Even if it is granted, it is so constructed, still one cannot guarantee that it remains intact. So culture cannot fully constitute the subject but to argue in this way rests on two false premises; that is, agency can be established only through the pre-existing I; and second, constituting it but not determined by it, since it forecloses the possibility of agency. For Butler, it is, therefore, not determined by it. Benhabib holds that what is not determined by discourse can very well be determined by the social dynamics, that is, the way individual self becomes a socialised self. Against the first premise, it can be argued that agency need not be established in the above way. No recourse, therefore, to the pre-existing I. Because it cannot be so determined. Against the second premise, it is argued that, there is no need to sacrifice the autonomy of the self. Its dynamism is taken care of the way in which philosophy interacts with other disciplines, causing new integration of other disciplines. Philosophy as such is the defaulter. Does it mean that philosophy should lose its autonomy for capturing the autonomy of the self. This looks counterintuitive. One may criticise this by saying that the sense of philosophy is not yet made clear except in the Rortian way. One way of clearing

it is by grafting it on the kind of discourse ethics that Habermas advances. Her criticism notwithstanding, it is not clear why this cannot be preferred over that of Rawls's, which is, according to her, defective. The advantages are obvious; it has no Hegelian metaphysical trappings (postmetaphysical); secondly, the relation between theory and practice is resolved in favour of the primacy of practice; and finally, the dialectic of modernism and postmodernism has a more sanguine appearance. All these features do not augur for a Rortian ideal, which is the only she favours. To what extent this specific Rortian account of solidarity would serve as a theoretical base for feminist practice any more than this remains, therefore, an open question.

A. KANTHMANI

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