

## **Feminism and Ethical Polity: Engaging with Jean Bethke Elshtain**

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### **Abstract**

The article engages with Jean Bethke Elshtain discourse on feminism and ethical polity and attempt to understand how Elshtian tries to bring to polity the 'womanly values' that claims to motivate peaceful approach to conflict and injustice. Seeing ethical polity in different frames, the paper take two cases – 'Mothers of Disappeared' in Argentina and the 'Naga Mothers Association' and explore how the role of women can bring about justice and peace politics without instrumentality of violence, or, without resorting to any alternative that can have serious fallouts.

**Keywords:** Feminism, ethical polity, Naga Mothers Association, conflict resolution

Feminism is a move, to divest current society from sexist approach, which predominantly works against women. So to consider it anti-male will account to ignore its “anti-sexist and social interaction ethic which is not necessarily anti male”<sup>i</sup>. Though the underlying objectives of feminism is to advocate women rights on the ground of the equality of sexes, there are points of divergence among groups of feminists in approaching the issues of rights, liberty, equality and justice in gendered power relationships. Against the various strands of feminism like Marxist feminism, Liberal feminism, and Post-modern feminism, I prefer to take the views of Conservative feminism in this study.

The rationale for choosing conservative Feminism is the fact that, Conservative Feminist like Jean Bethke Elshtain against many feminists of her time tries to bring to polity the 'Feminine Values’<sup>ii</sup> that were by what she calls as 'Politics of Rage'. Betty Friedan and Elshtain

criticize feminists for an attack on family with the contention that 'instead of throwing the water, feminists have thrown baby along with water'. Both therefore, call for a politics that preserves women's traditional sphere of home vis-à-vis the necessary changes within that sphere in order to realize the dream of egalitarian society. In this respect, significant attention will be given to concept of “Ethical Polity” as expounded by Elshtain. Further exploration will be made on the relationship between “Feminine Values” or “Womanly values” and women's peaceful approach to politics and how these so called maternal values motivates peaceful approach to politics and injustice and ultimately realizing an “ Ethical Polity”.

### **Elshtain Concept of Ethical Polity**

The notion of ethical polity is one based on imagery of a 'unifying myth of a body politic, the coming together of separate elements in order to give birth to as social world that links

past and present and makes history possible'(Elshtain 1982, 58-59). The conception of ethical polity will be motivated by justice-care dialectic in which both men and women will act together. They will debate and re-articulate the ends of public life. Instead of being of a particular sex, each person in his/her capacity will be 'a reflective human being with capacity for self-reflection as to the ends and means of public and private action' (Elshtain 1981, 352). Elshtain favours the practice of 'doing political theory' instead of proceeding with mere abstraction, so that women's situation is reflected upon properly in both public and private spheres. She thus asserts that theorizing must start from real life experiences of women<sup>iii</sup>. For this, Political theorists (feminists) need to 'explore female speech and language along the public and private vectors' (Elshtain 1981, 352).

One of the main problems with the mainstream feminist theory has been political silencing of woman that is theorised upon. To avoid such problem 'Woman' as subject of political theory need to be taken as active agent of life world of intense personalization and immediacy. There is need of sharing theory with the subjects so as to locate convergence of shared points. This can be called as 'dialectical relationship with subject' – an approach, according to Elshtain, reflected in better way by psychoanalyst discourse. In addition to this, process of probing and hearing women will help feminists to allay fears of those women who are not aware of the social forces of domination lying at the base of their confusion.

An important step towards realizing the ideal dream of ethical polity is to put private sphere on the track of feminist theorization. This is because feminists, particularly liberal feminism have been obsessed with notions of

'abstract personhood' which ignores the private sphere. The private sphere which has its own values and imperatives is a theatre of intimate relations and everyday concrete meaning, therefore evaluating the power relations within the private realm is significant. However, Elshtain mentions that family is a basic institution of human life, and changes within it should be allowed only to such a level that its structure remains unchanged as any alternative to family will nothing short of new state of nature. Accordingly, one important option that is visible in her model is distinct moral language of women that need to be preserved. She identifies that feminist mode of public discourse imbedded with values of what Sara Ruddick calls 'Maternal Thinking'<sup>iv</sup>.

The concept of ethical is motivated by Christian social gospel. This ethical polity will be a moral and political community. Women will come to it with immediate concerns and will transform political community. The terms of equality related to all sections of society will be guaranteed by their humanness. In case of breaking any law that seems contradictory, moral law should be kept in consideration. Non-violence seems to be an important part of such polity. Since human world is characterized by diverse human practices, so ethical polity will be one in which such diversity will prevail. Private sphere will come to bear its own dignity and purpose. Public life will sustain and nurture as set of ethical imperatives including;

*'a commitment to preserve, protect, and defend human life in their capacities as private persons, and to allow women alike to partake in the good of public sphere on an equal basis of participatory dignity and equality. Rather than an ideal of citizenship and civic virtue that features a citizenry grimly going about their*

*collective duty, or an elite band of citizens in their "public space" cut off from a world that includes most of the rest of us, within ethical polity, an active citizen would be one who had affirmed as a part of what it meant to be fully human, a devotion to public, moral responsibilities and ends,*<sup>v</sup>

The important aspect of ethical polity will be that individual will be restored to his self-reflexivity – in which individual persons will decide ends of public and private actions. Human beings will come to recognise that conflict will never end in such a polity because some of them are inevitable and will therefore tolerate the ineradicable tension between public and private imperatives, thought and action, aesthetic standards and ethical principles. The citizenry will decide as to what duties and obligations need to be inculcated in such life. Ethical polity will emphasize civic virtues and all those beliefs, habits and qualities which are integral to civic order (Elshtain 1981, 356). Consequently, ethical polity will be sort of polity that reconciles human needs with the practical realities of political life deriving from the basic human qualities of moral equality of all human beings.

### **Contextualising Ethical Polity across States**

Purpose of any theory is not specificity but universal applications under well-defined conditions. Elshtain enriches the conception of ethical polity by showing how motherly quality of women can transform the public life. The thread of mothering runs across the nations and that is how Elshtain's concept sources its relevance. Ethical polity seems to be a strong concept in modern day state, where day to day violence of the state seems to be rationalised by the authority that people in the control of political institutions inherit. Against such rationalised violence, the womanly values of

peaceful approach, care and issues concerning citizens can go a long way in addressing the injustices pervading the society today.

Elshtain claims that women's domestic and maternal responsibilities not only supported private households but also served as a source of resistance to the state's illegitimate demands (Ackelsberg et al. 2015, 571). She inquired as to how the virtues of nurturing, life-giving and preservation that a woman can cultivate in the family or household could be taken into the 'public arena'. In 'Antigone's Daughters'<sup>vi</sup>, Elshtain expressed the contradictions between the family claim and the social claim. Antigone represents a woman who dares to question public authority by speaking up for family and social imperatives and responsibilities. Women today must be guardians of familial values in the same way that women in the past were, but without the quietism and subordination that came with that position (Ackelsberg et al. 2015:572).

Elshtain observed this interplay in the actual activities of 'The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' in Argentina. She was strongly moved when she met these mothers whose children had been 'disappeared' during the years of 'dirty war' (1974-1983) of Argentina (Ackelsberg et al. 2015, 572). Mentioning the case of Argentina, Elshtain brings up role of mothers of disappeared children in bringing Junta regime to accountability, through national and international pressure in which mothers played a pivotal role. These mothers organised themselves into collective "We" on the basis of shared experiences and opposed junta regime. Through their language and maternal suffering, these mothers aroused the rights talk across the world through media and as a result had immense effect in shaping the politics of Argentina.

Elshtain saw the Madres as modern day Antigone daughters who were willing to sacrifice anything to openly oppose the military junta that had taken control of the country. The Madres demanded not only the return of their loved ones and an explanation of what had happened to them but also that the perpetrators be held accountable. To her, these mothers politicized their private grief, drawing on the power of family and community, to give them the strength to question a terrifying authoritarian and oppressive military regime. These women, according to Elshtain, were an even more powerful model for modern women than Antigone because they behaved collectively, as women, in a situation where political action was considered impossible (Ackelsberg et al. 2015, 573). As a result, the situation of 'the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' is an exceptional example of 'Maternal politics'.

Driving example home, one can see that Naga Mothers Association (NMA) comes close as to change the local politics in Nagaland. The NMA was established on February 14, 1984, in response to Naga women's concerns about the growing problems in Naga Society. Its preamble states that 'Naga mothers of Nagaland shall express the need of conscientizing citizens toward more responsible living and human development through the voluntary organisation of the Naga Mothers Association'<sup>vii</sup>. The membership of the organization is open to any adult Naga women irrespective of their marital status and members will become members of the organization through their own women's tribal organization. The NMA seeks to protect women's rights, human dignity, and human values. It promotes human development through education, aims to eliminate social problems and economic exploitation and works to achieve

peace and progress in Naga society (Banerjee et al.2012, 16). Since its inception, the NMA has been actively engaged in efforts to achieve peace. Initially, the organization focuses on combating the widespread drug addiction and alcoholism that afflicted Naga society at that time yet, gradually started to mediate between opposing parties in a number of cases, and has been active in reaching an amicable agreement.

One of the NMA's many notable achievements is the creation of Peace Team in October 1994 to address the worsening political situation in the state. Under the slogan "Shed no more blood" members of the peace team began a peace process with the Government of India and various Naga armed groups to end conflict and bloodshed. They also held public peace marches in collaboration with churches to call for peace. The NMA's peace initiative did not concentrate only on army killing but also on militant killings. On May 25<sup>th</sup> 1995, it issued a pamphlet stating that "the way our society is being managed, whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, has actually become intolerable" (Banerjee 2000, 139). They further appealed all parties indulging in the violent conflict to stop killing, as the:

*"Assassinated man may be a husband, a father, a son or a brother. His whole family is shattered by his violent liquidation no matter what reasons his liquidators choose to give for snuffing out of his life"*<sup>viii</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, NMA took up the issue of violence that ripped Nagaland apart; atrocities by the Indian armed forces against Naga armed groups and civilians followed by years of fratricidal killings between different Naga armed factions. When tensions rose, they drove into the jungles of Nagaland and neighbouring states on barely-there roads to

persuade faction's leaders to reconcile (Shrinivasan, Times of India, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013).

The NMA facilitated a truce between the Indian government and the NSCN (IM) in 1997 and has been actively involved in talks even after ceasefire had been initiated. It has reinvented itself as frontline 'peace keepers' and a stakeholder in the Naga peace process, participating in significant civil society initiatives such as the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) and Global Naga Forum (Manchanda et al. 2017, 118-19). They have consistently demonstrated their commitment to peace by engaging in a numerous community dialogues on the subject both within and outside the region. They also participated in the United Nations discussions on peace and are now regarded as one of the region's most legitimate women's peace group (Banerjee et al. 2012, 17).

One areas of concern of the NMA which deserves significant attention is the shifting agendas of the organisation from motherhood politics to Women's rights assertion. The NMA initially focus on social issues like drug abuse, alcoholism and providing care for HIV inflicted patients. Gradually, the organisation became increasingly engaged in conflict resolutions and peace process and at present shifted its attention to women's rights assertion. As Manchanda and Kakran (2017) pointed out, the NMA is demonstrating its ability to transform its local influence into formal public authority. The shift in the organizational agenda represents its transformational journey. In the recent years, the Naga educated middle class women started to challenge the unequal gendered power relations in the Naga society. The NMA as the state's most powerful women's organization has been leading the new generation of tribal women's campaign by confronting and questioning

women's exclusion from decision-making (Manchanda et al. 2017, 137). The state government introduced a 33 percent quota for women in urban local bodies in 2006, but after the NMA persuaded it to hold elections with quotas, the government stated to waver (Deka, India Today, Feb 16, 2017). As a result of this, the NMA was forced to take the case to court. Despite the NMA's efforts, the Naga Tribal Hohos strongly opposed the 33 percent quota for women claiming that it violated Naga customary laws and traditions, which are covered under Article 371(A) of the Indian constitution.

### **Conclusion**

As seen in both the case of 'The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' and the 'Naga Mothers Association', Women and mothers through their language of maternal suffering organised themselves and challenged the repressive power of the state. What is considered as private such as grief and suffering was politicised by these mothers. Elshtain goes on to call this language of mothers as human rights language. One of the aspects of these mothers' group is the basis that they laid for the anti-repressive politics in which moral supremacy and passionate feeling can have an unending effect in shaping the general public life. Another important aspect of the NMA is their strong support for inclusive politics whereby they fight for inclusion of Naga women in decision-making. Consequently, women's peaceful approach to politics motivated by maternal values and their commitment to inclusive politics constitute prominent principles of Ethical polity. Thus, we can say that Jean Bethke Elshtain's concept of Ethical polity has lots to serve, when individuals – both men and women – comes to politics with values and virtues that are mutually reconcilable and take into consideration the needs of all.

## Endnotes

- i. Hooks 2000, vii.
- ii. The values here are love, care, concern, or what Carol Gilligan calls Women's Associational quality in which women always think their benefit in association with other people. Women are more concerned about questions of care and responsibility rather than individual rights and rules.
- iii. Much of Elshtain writings is an experience of her own. Eg. *Public Man, Private Woman, Woman and War* and *Jane Addams*.
- iv. Ruddick 1995, 64.
- v. Elshtain 1981, 352.
- vi. 'Antigone Daughters' is an ancient Greek play of Sophocles. Antigone is a woman in the play who dares to challenge and went against the order of the king Creon of Thebes.
- vii. Banerjee et al. 2012.16.
- viii. Banerjee 2000, 139.

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