

# Feminist Perspective On Abortion And Motherhood

Kanika Khari  
Research scholar

Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi

**Abstract:** Feminist movement began in the mid of 1900s in order to bring down the inequality of power in the gender-specific system. This movement has employed abortion as its focus in extending the liberation of women. But by giving so much attention to abortion movement has left some women devalued for making a choice to have children. Recently, motherhood has been seen as an important aspect of the feminist theory. Therefore, it has become necessary to re-look at the abortion debate in consideration of the intrinsic value of motherhood.

**Keywords:** Abortion, feminism, motherhood, pro-choice feminist.

## I. Introduction

The memorable judgment of The United State's Supreme Court on January 22, 1973, in **Roe v. Wade case**<sup>1</sup>, in the sight of many modern feminists has resulted into a major change in the enhancement of women's right. For the first time, the court considered the right to abortion as an individual's right to privacy. This judgment provided women authorities in their reproductive choices; and was considered equivalent to men rather than second sex no matter whether they are a housewife, a single mother or a mother in poverty on account of pregnancy.

Now the question arises, whether this decision was really a step forward for women or was it a step backward? The abortion debate has disunited women into two groups as Pro-Choice and Pro-Life. Advocates of both the groups have given their every ounce in order to defend the authenticity of their perspective on the issue of abortion. Neither set of proponents justified their titles completely. The diplomacy of Pro-abortionists as not considering themselves as Anti-life even though they do not see the fetus as a person. Similarly, the proponents of pro-choice do not consider themselves as a pro-abortionist. Nor is the anti-abortion really are anti-choice. Though women have the right to give preference to their own body the issue of abortion revolves around two lives those of the mother and of the unborn child. Those who oppose abortion argues that mother's choices should not be considered as superior to that of the unborn child's life. As a result, the debate over abortion between these two groups leads to a destructive division between women, one that is determined to the advancement of women's right. Here the question raised is that, How can we as women fight for our rights as women if we are so divided? The best way of bringing these two apparently incompatible sides of the abortion debate is to see abortion from a feminist perspective. This paper will discuss some feminist perspective on abortion and will try to re-evaluate this debate in the light of the value of motherhood.

## II. Feminist Perspective on Abortion

Within the ethics of feminist, the debate over abortion does not depend on the morality of abortion or the nobility of people who are in favor or against abortion; it is all about adaptation of abortion into our culture and how women's choice to undergo or not undergo an abortion affects the status of women within our culture. Abortion has become a double-edged sword expressing for and against issues of rights like by barring women from abortion will bind her into their role as a mother but on the other side by giving them an opportunity to choose abortion will surpass the greater issue of monarchy. Such as the lack of support for women as mothers within our society. It has now become important to emphasize women's standing in today's society, that these two sides on the abortion debate become united through feminism.

Feminism is the advocacy of the rights of women focusing on the equality of sexes. It is based on the idea that women have intrinsic value, unchallengeable rights, and valuable ideas and has the capability to contribute to society. Feminists fight for equality in every dimension of society, for both equal rights with men and equal respect. Thus, feminist theory has achieved a special place in society as the voice for women's issues that have historically been hidden or over-ruled.

Pro-Choice Feminist considers abortion as an essential option for all women, though most may never need it. Without abortion, women would unjustly be coerced into motherhood. Susan Sherwin<sup>2</sup> also argues in her paper that pregnancy leads to serious health issues that can sometimes make women sick that they would not be able to continue with their jobs, school or everyday jobs. "Not every woman is able to put her job, career and studies on hold" women who cannot continue with their relationship for long, may concede that they will not able to care properly for a child at this time (Sherwin 1991, p.345). A child may intervene in the life plans and this has consequences for the woman's whole life.

There are cases when women do not have the facilities available to care for a child. As this point, to have a child would plainly add to the "oppressed" state in which she already finds herself. Therefore, enforcing her to stand this responsibility is

<sup>1</sup> Abortion: Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), Doe v. Bolton, 410 U.S.179 (1973). "Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, Vol.64, No.4, 1974: 393-398

<sup>2</sup> Sherwin, Susan. (1991). Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens. In Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.), Women and Values (pp. 344-354). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

only going to worsen the social and economic pressure which is burdened on her by the virtue of her sex and may force her to “become dependent on men” possibly for the rest of her life (Sherwin 1991, pp.345). Depending on men economically, socially and sexually is another way women are subjugated due to their gender. In order to set women free, liberty from sexual responsibilities as well as from the obligation of conceiving should be given to her. “We need to re-interpret the idea of nature which underlies such patriarchal imperatives because only then is real adoration is possible. A relationship should not be of submissive nature or bound to reproduction” (Irigaray 1993, pp.418-19). Therefore, Pro-Choice feminist asserts that for a woman to have full liberty to continue with her education, career, control over her own life and a loving relationship, then she must be given a right to abortion and be in-charge of her own sexuality and reproduction.

### III. Feminist Perspective on motherhood

Modern feminist theory affirms that equality among sex-gender does not mean alikeness. Women have an individual voice, equal but distinct from that of men because of their femininity. In spite of emphasizing the individual perspective of women, the thrust for equality has allowed society to undervalue a woman who made the choice to be mother. She now cannot take charge of her domestic responsibilities, continue with her career and cannot travel as she once could, because of this she was considered unequal to men. To perforate the subjugation of women existing since the history, feminist advocates have understood the inherent value of motherhood is equivalent to the academic/career success. Every woman has other personal preferences/roles, which are as important as being mother. As Sara Ruddick<sup>3</sup> points out in her paper that “maternal practices” results into a specific kind of thoughts and supports a righteous refusal to violence. Ruddick defines a mother as a person who place herself in a vulnerable position and takes responsibility for children’s lives and therefore; she seeks to protect the child and allows him or her to grow up into a being that is acceptable to society. In response to an apparently forbidding life, “a mother advances to a metaphysical attitude, governed by the priority of keeping over acquiring of conserving the fragile of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary for child’s life... therefore, recognizes humility and resilient cheerfulness as virtues of its practices” (Ruddick 1980, pp.112). At this time Ruddick points out that the value of becoming a mother can be unnoticed by society including those women who are not yet mothers themselves. The virtuousness of modesty and cheeriness has been given a subordinate definition throughout history, but this is a result of domination that has been so evident in the past. Perhaps, women cannot see the true form of motherhood, which is worthy and achievable. Thus, liberating motherhood entails a “disciplined perseverance in the unnecessarily beautiful artifacts which have been created by mothers in our culture” (Ruddick 1980, 113). On this perspective, we can say that the intrinsic value of motherhood cannot be achieved anywhere else. Perhaps forcing a woman to abort a child due the educational or career restraints is like depriving her of those values. Thus, it is necessary for feminism to involve society by helping women in raising their children and motivating men to care for the baby they have produced together, specially those who believe that taking care of the child is only up to the mother. As Ruddick<sup>4</sup> also stresses in her paper that fathers have a relationship with the mother and the child and leaving the responsibility of parenting completely to the mother is unjust. Thus excusing men from maternal practices is like “encouraging them to separate...the privilege of parenthood from its cares” (Ruddick 1980, pp.118). The awareness of the fact that there is a support system available to help in raising the child is important for every woman who sees the worth of motherhood. It appears that the decision of abortion takes away one of the pleasing roles of women which helps her in understanding the value of standing out as women. The positive involvement of society plays a vital role in the lives of both mothers and children by allowing women to pursue with her educational and career objectives that are important to them without depriving them of the ability to be a mother (Luker 1984).

### IV. Conclusion

The abortion issue is not actually about abortion but is about the value of women in our society. Women have been considered as less important to men but this unequal behavior has to be stopped in order to bring a change in society. Instead of fighting against each other, women have to fight together to make abortion issue actually about abortion within feminist thought. Asking for the right to choice is not the only solution; the value of motherhood is to be considered equal in the society. Abortion and motherhood go hand in hand with two faces of coin expressing two aspects of womanhood. On this perspective, we can say that feminism is pro-woman rather than pro-or anti-abortion. This is where pro-life and pro-choice groups begin to relate to one another.

### V. Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my family for encouraging me in writing this paper and my supervisor Dr. Sujata Roy Abhijat for her guidance.

### References

- [1] Edgington, Callie, "Reflections on Feminist Views of Abortion and Motherhood" (2002). Cedar Ethics Online. 40. [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=cedar\\_ethics\\_online](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=cedar_ethics_online)
- [2] Pro-Life Feminism Website. <http://members.tripod.com/~SLV80/> accessed on 11/20/04
- [3] Ruddick, Sara. (1980). Maternal Thinking. In Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.), Women and Values (pp. 110-120). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- [4] Sherwin, Susan. (1991). Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens. In Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.), Women and Values (pp. 344-354). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

<sup>3</sup> Ruddick, Sara. (1980). Maternal Thinking. In Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.), Women and Values (pp. 110-120). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

<sup>4</sup> Ruddick, Sara. (1980). Maternal Thinking. In Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.), Women and Values (pp. 110-120). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

