

Religious and Cultural Influences on Abortion: A Care-ethical Discussion

Dr. Tejasha Kalita*

Abstract

Abortion is a burning issue of the contemporary society. This paper is an attempt to discuss the problem of abortion and the cultural influences on it. Different cultures have played different roles so far as the issue is concerned. However, it is not necessary that these influences are always ethical in nature. Thus, in this paper, some of these issues are studied with the help of some traditional and contemporary ethical theories. As for example, we can take the help of sex-selective abortion. It is very common in some countries like India, China etc. But the main reason behind it is the patriarchal and male dominated set up of the society of these countries. On the otherhand in some Buddhist countries like Japan, a function called Mizoko kuyo is organized, by which the mothers who opt for abortion pray to Jizo, the God of lost travellers and incarnation for forgiveness from those aborted fetuses. One unique system can be seen in the case of the Toda tribe of the Nilgiris in southern India, where the legal father of the child is different from the biological father. Thus, considerably reduces the cases of abortion which occur due to rape. Again in Ireland, catholic domination is so strong that under any condition abortion is not permitted. Therefore, taking such instances into consideration, the present paper will try to focus on the certain significant aspects related to the problem of abortion and the cultural influence on it the in light of care-ethics

Key words: Abortion, Care-ethics, Culture, Religion

1.0 Introduction

Abortion is a very sensitive issue. Irrespective of any country, religion or culture, it is seen that abortion is being practiced everywhere. It has also been observed that laws and rules regarding the problem of abortion in different countries, religions and cultures vary from each other. However, it is also observed that all the traditions and laws regarding abortion of different countries of the world are not ethical in nature. In many cultures, religions and countries of the

* Assistant Professor in Philosophy, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam.

world, the basic rights of women are found to be neglected. When the problem of abortion is studied, it is seen that different cultures have played a significant role in it. The cases of sex-selective abortion or female feticide are there in some societies. The patriarchal set-up of a society and the urge for male child has led to such cases. Thus, in this paper, a different socio-cultural influence on the issue of abortion has been discussed.

As far as religion of any country is concerned, it also plays an important role in the build-up of the culture of that particular region. One important aspect that is noted in the context of abortion is that most of the factors found in the context of abortion are somehow related to the cultural and religious influences. Again the mind set of people towards the issue varies from culture to culture as religious and cultural influences somehow guides the mind of the people to a large extent. This paper will also focus on the point that whether the different cases and instances related to the issue of abortion can be regarded to be either be an ethical one or not. Though, there are various established ethical theories, in this paper an effort has been made to discuss the cases of abortion from the perspective of Care-ethics.

1.1 Methodology

Although the issue of abortion can be studied from different points of view, yet this paper will explore the philosophical side and more specifically the ethical side of the issue. The methodology that will be used in this paper is 'philosophical method' which is mainly an analytical method. It is normative and qualitative in nature. According to C. Sheshadri (1991), philosophical research requires semantic clarity and meaningfulness. It also requires consistency and rigour of thought, consciousness of assumptions and methodological awareness. C. Rai (1980) further defines a philosophical method to be a means or instrument of attaining a philosophical end, i.e., categorical and comprehensive knowledge of fundamental notions. Philosophizing may begin with some simple doubts about accepted beliefs (Rai, 1980). The problem of abortion will be studied in this paper by applying this method. The main theory that will be used in order to analyse the issue in this paper will be 'ethics of care'.

2.0 Care Ethics

The ethics of care can be regarded to be one of the kinds of virtue ethics. Care ethics lays much emphasis on the moral importance on the relationship in

human life. Care ethics is more often known as the ‘practice of value’ rather than the theory. The ethics of care has been developed on the basis of understanding of the individual as an interdependent, relational being. It also emphasises the importance of human relationships and emotion based virtues such as benevolence, mercy, care, friendship, reconciliation, and sensitivity (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). Care ethics can also be regarded to be feminist ethics. In the context of care ethics, Milton Mayeroff’ (1990)s small book *On Caring* can be said to be the most original work from which this concept has finally emerged. But, the psychologist Carol Gilligan has finally shaped it as a distinguished moral theory. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) have for the first time, mentioned about care ethics. It is generally believed in the society that women are less rational in comparison to men. That is why a woman is considered to be emotionally weak and to think from the caring point of view and this concept of caring has been devalued in the society. On the contrary, care-focused feminists have regarded this caring attitude to be a strength. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) have said that ‘care’ is an element that should be possessed by both men and women.

According to Noddings, ethical caring has the potential to be a more concrete evaluative model of moral dilemma, than an ethic of justice (Noddings N., 1984). Annette Baier, Virginia Held, Eva Feder Kittay, Sara Ruddick, and Joan Tronto are some of the most important names that can be mentioned in regard to care ethics. Maureen Sander-Staudt (n.d.) says, “Although care ethics is not synonymous with feminist ethics, much has been written about care ethics as a feminine and feminist ethic, in relation to motherhood, international relations, and political theory. Care ethics is widely applied to a number of moral issues and ethical fields, including caring for animals and the environment, bioethics, and more recently public policy. Originally conceived as most appropriate to the private and intimate spheres of life, care ethics has branched out as a political theory and social movement aimed at broader understanding of, and public support for, care-giving activities in their breadth and variety.” (Maureen, n.d.). So far as the problem of abortion is concerned, it is also a topic of bioethics. This issue is deeply related to mother and her foetus and also with society. Care ethics is thus, a theory which can be applied to a timely ethical debate like abortion. Feminine care ethics looks for real guidance in an actual situation of trouble rather than a fusing on the abstract domain of rules and principles. So by using care ethics, all

the above mentioned issues that have been raised because of the influence of the various cultures on the issue of abortion will be discussed.

3.0 Sex-selective Abortion in India

India is one such a country, which houses almost all the major religions of the world, viz., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism etc. Again it is a country with different traditions, cultures, languages and religions. Hindus of different regions of India like north, south, east and north-east represent different cultural zones and variations. Interestingly, even membership to one religion does not guarantee consensus on some major life decisions to abort etc. We can illustrate here taking different instances from different parts of India in order to analyse and understand the problem of abortion. If the socio-cultural effects on abortion are to be taken into consideration, then some of the factors must have to be given importance. Some of them are discussed below:

In most of the societies, motherhood was a value in itself as fertility and barren hood or infertility were treated as positive and negative virtues respectively. Status of barren women was less in the primitive societies. A woman who had male children, occupied central position in some culture in comparison to a woman having only female children. However, a child was regarded to be a gift of God, so the question of abortion did not arise in the early societies. But, there are some socio-cultural factors, which make the preference for the male child more prominent in the society. Girl foetuses have been often aborted mainly for financial reasons. Men are usually the main income-earners, either because they are more employable or earn higher wages for the same work, or because they are able to do more agricultural work in subsistence economies. Since male babies have a greater income potential, they are less likely to be aborted. In many Indian societies, parents expect their children to look after them in their old age. In most of these cultures, a girl gets married and leaves her father's family and joins her husband's family. Therefore, it is the general thinking of many people that boys are real assets and so thus, the preference for the boy child is much more than the girl child. Some parents, especially the poor parents, thus, find it more reasonable to abort the female foetus (Kalita, 2013).

Another important issue, which leads a major role in sex-selective abortion is the prevalent problem of dowry. Social issues like dowry entered into the society, which makes the marriage of a girl a big problem for the parents. It reduces the

demand for a girl child to a great extent. In this way the process of infant (girl) killing has started. With the development of modern science and technology, many modern types of machinery have entered the society, which makes determination of the sex of the baby very easy in the mother's womb itself. Therefore, gradually infant killing has been converted to sex-selective abortion. Kalpana Sharma (2007) writes that it is easy for a mother to abort a foetus than to kill an infant. Because killing of the infant gives more physical and emotional pain to the mother. Women have always paid the price through their bodies for dominant social norms, such as the belief that only a son can be the rightful heir to property. This norm is so deeply ingrained that even a liberal education does not seem to alter it. However, as far as pro-abortion decision is concerned, the most important point to be noted here is that the decision is not taken by the pregnant woman individually. In India, the decision to abort the foetus is taken by the family collectively. Infact in many cases, it is found that because of the pressure of the family, a woman has to give consent to abortion despite her reluctance to abort (Kalita, 2013). In contemporary India, with the change of the socio-economic conditions, the status of women has also changed. In the modern society, a woman has to play diverse roles, both personal and professional, and motherhood is not the sole identity of a woman.

The status of woman has changed in the contemporary world. In India too, the status of woman has changed. Today, women are ready to take new challenges and they have almost become successful to acquire a status in the male-dominating society. But as mentioned earlier, the demand for the male child is still there in the society. The role of religion on this issue cannot be ignored. Though Hinduism is a religion which prefers the doctrine of non-violence and Hindu authorities condemn infanticide, son-preference in Hindu cultures is largely based on the fact that men are better providers, and that sons are required for the proper performance of funeral rites. It is believed in Hinduism that the departed soul finds liberation only when the funeral rites of an individual is properly performed by his own son. The example of the preference for boy is also found in the great epic *Mahabharata*, where *Gandhari* is blessed by the sage *Vyasa* to be a mother of hundred sons. In India it is also one strong reason behind the sex-selective abortion (Ganga, 1994).

It is not only the case of the Hinduism. But, in some religions like Sikhism also sex-selective abortion is very much in practice. Sikh authorities condemn

infanticide. Originally, the Sikh religion is one of the most gender-neutral religions as it gives equal respect to both man and woman. This is surprising that the recent censuses in India showed that there are far more male children than female in the Sikh community. In reality there is a great preference for male child. The community appears to give greater respect to the parents of boys, and male members of the society. The Sikh religious organization 'Akal Takht' has re-emphasized on the fact that women are equal to men. It has banned neo-natal sex identification, selective abortion and the killing of female babies. However, in Punjab, people still continue to have a very strong preference for the son.

If the case history of abortion in the northern and western states of India (viz., Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra) are taken into consideration, it can be found that the male child preference is a common trait in almost every state and every religion (whether it is in Hinduism or in Islam or in Sikhism or any other religion) (Mutharyappa et al., 1997). Here, the following example from Haryana can be cited. In Haryana, the number of sex-selective abortion is very high. Because of social, economic, religious reasons, including lack of financial support, discrimination in property inheritance, fear of dowry, old age insecurity etc., abortion tends to be a common practice here.

The invention of ultrasound has made it very easy to determine the sex of the baby. So instead of killing the baby, now days, people first determine the sex of the baby and if they find it to be a girl, they just opt for abortion. That is why, the sex-ratio of male and female child has become imbalanced day-by-day, especially in the northern part of India. If we see the overall sex-ratio of the country, it is very clearly seen that in 1991, against every 1000 males, there are only 927 females. And in 2001, it is 933 against every 1000. The worrisome aspect is that, if the children, who are below seven years of age, are noticed, then it is found that in 1991, 945 girls are there against every 1000 boys and which has decreased all the more to 927 in 2001 (Outlook, 2013). In fact, Census 2011 figures suggest that Haryana has recorded the worst sex ratio in India.

In 2011, in Haryana against 1000 male there were only 879 females (Firstpost, 2013). Thus, it can be observed that the situation is becoming worse day-by-day. The situation is worsened by the easy availability of the modern machinery. An ultrasound may cost hardly 500 rupees to 1000 rupees, which is relatively affordable than the large sum they will have to pay for dowry. In the whole world, almost 35

million abortions take place annually. More than half of them are held illegally. They are performed by some untrained and unskilled persons and done under highly unhygienic conditions. In this context, Pujari et al. (2007) has argued that in Haryana sex selective abortion is a very common issue. Because of many social evils like dowry, lack of financial support for women, discrimination in property inheritance etc, along with the large scale preference for male child in society, the cases sex-selective abortion in their tradition is always higher in Haryana. In the data, there is phenomenal rise in the number of spontaneous abortion. In the illegitimate practice of abortion or in many cases of the induced abortion, the cases are often projected as the cases of spontaneous one or it is the choice of the mother. In Haryana, the use of an ultrasound in the sample population is one out of eight women, out of which more than one third had sex selective abortion. But in most of the cases, it is shown as a spontaneous abortion.

4.0 Sex-selective Abortion in India and Care-Ethics

Sex-selective abortion is totally an inhuman act. Only because the foetus is a female one, many people choose to abort the child. The reason behind sex-selective abortion has been discussed earlier too. Sex-selective abortion is not acceptable under any conditions particularly, from care ethical perspective. It is also seen that in many cases, a woman does not want to do the sex-selective abortion, but owing to family pressure, she has to surrender. Care ethical thinkers believe that in these kinds of cases, a woman should be protected and one should only take her decision for granted. Again, when we discuss about care ethics, another important point may be noted down. Care ethics lays importance on feminine qualities like love, emotion, tenderness etc. However, it is not the case that those qualities will be possessed by a female only. The basic feminine qualities are actually basic human qualities which make a man a man in the real sense. Care ethics actually urges all the human beings, irrespective of male and female to stand against of the sex-selective abortion as it is totally against of the humanity. A culture or civilisation is made for the wellbeing of human being. Therefore, if in the name of a religion or culture some inhuman acts like sex-selective abortion is done, care ethics regards it to be totally inhuman.

5.0 Cultural Dimensions of Abortion in India and Care-Ethics: Select Cases

Toda Tribes of Nilgiri and Abortion: One unique system can be seen in the case of Toda tribe of Nilgiris in southern India. Within Todas a father of child is that person, who has last given the ceremonial bow to the mother of the child in the ritual performance of a ceremony called *pmswt*. That is why in the case of Todas, physical paternity has nothing to do with legal purposes. This provision of Todas has minimised the cases of abortion, which was to occur in the case of rape victim. Before the birth of the child of a rape victim or any such illegitimate case of child birth, the authority of the child is given to a man, who is identified to be the adopted father figure for the child as per the above mentioned ritual performance of the *pmswt* ceremony. Thus, the society and its tradition of this particular tribe has its own unique way to finding out a father substitute who could be made the legal husband of the mother of the child. Thus, in this case too, the attribution of the caring tendency towards the baby and the mother can be seen in absence of which many unfortunate mothers might have ended with aborting the baby (Emeneu, 1937).

Pmswt ceremony of Toda Tribes and the Ethics of Care: It is found that almost in all the societies, a rape victim has been treated very insensitively. If a woman is found to be pregnant following the violence of rape, then her condition becomes terrible. In such instances, most of the woman prefers to take the help of abortion, as the child does not find acceptance in the society and a legal father of a child will not be there. However, if we look into the social systems of Toda tribes then this particular problem shall not arise. Thus, from care ethical point of view, this system can be taken to be a system, which will be respectful and sensitive towards a rape victim and her child. And she and her child will no longer be an unwanted in society. Though this system cannot be taken to be an acceptable system for most of the society, but at least it can be said that culture of the Toda tribe respects for a rape victim and her child.

6.0 Buddhism and Abortion

Buddhism is a religion, which is a great supporter of non-violence. But so far, as the issue of abortion is concerned, the act of violence is always found to be associated with it. According to most of the western and Japanese Buddhists,

the act of abortion is a permissible act. On the otherhand, according to many other Buddhists it is equal to murder. In Buddhists countries like Japan, China and Thailand, abortion is very common. In fact, in Japan and China it is considered to be legal. In China, abortion is used as easy means for population control (Wikipedia, 2018). Another important aspect about Thailand is that, here prostitution is regarded as an acceptable profession (Seth, 2010). Many poor girls have taken this profession as their livelihood in order to take care of their family. Therefore, if a girl becomes pregnant in that case, she is compelled to resort to the means of abortion. Because of this, it is found that in Thailand, abortion often takes place illegally. Thus, contraceptives are made easily available in Thailand. However, there is probability for the girls to become pregnant sometimes but they cannot deliver the child as it may harm their figure and lower their demand in the field. That is why many times they have to go for abortion. In most of the time they are to take the help of illegal means.

In 2010, in a Buddhist temple, a shocking incident had happened. The discovery of more than 2,000 fetuses stored at a Bangkok temple has made front-page news across Thailand. As most abortion is illegal in Thailand, the case had revealed a massive backstreet industry and sparked national debate on the country's current abortion laws, which dates from the 1950s. With abortion routinely recognised as a "sin" in Theravada Buddhism, religion has played a significant social and political role in this debate (Seth, 2010). Though various discussions on this issue have been made, but the main question raised here is that of the need for abortion related legal reform in Thailand. However, the most significant point which is found in these countries is the ritual which is used to be celebrated, especially in Japan. In Japan, many women who have had an abortion, offer prayers to Jizo, the God of lost travellers and children. They believe that Jizo will steward the child until it is reborn in another incarnation. In this respect, they organize a function called *mizoko kuyō*, a memorable service for the aborted child. The ritual includes elements of folk religion and Shinto (the ancient indigenous religion characterised by veneration of nature spirits and of ancestors) and Bodhisattvas (Brooks, 1981).

In this context, *William R. Lafleur (1990)* writes:

[...within the Japanese Buddhist community the discussion of abortion is now limited largely to criticisms of those temples and temple-like organizations which employ the notion of 'foetal retribution' to coerce the

“parents” of an aborted foetus into performing rituals that memorialise the foetus, remove its ‘grudges,’ and facilitate its rebirth or its Buddhahood. Many Buddhists find repugnant such types of manipulation of parental guilt – especially when expressed in the notion that a foetus in limbo will wreak vengeance (*tatari*) on parents who neglect to memorialize it.] (Lafleur, 1990).

7.0 Care Ethical Analysis of Abortion in Buddhism

If we analyse the entire system in the banner of care ethics, it can be said that it is true that some women had to take the help of abortion because of certain reasons or circumstances or situations. But, the feeling of love, emotion, compassion or the feeling of motherhood is still there in their mind. Care ethics does not justify the act of foetus killing or abortion. But, sometimes situations demand that. It may be the case that a woman’s health does not allow her to take the foetus to the term. Again, sometimes it also happens that the foetus itself is a defective one. In both cases, a woman has to take the decision of abortion. Actually in these kinds of cases, abortion is a decision, which arises out of care. But still they have the feeling of motherhood in their mind. Therefore, it is seen that *Mizoko Kuyo* itself is a festival, which has been aroused out of care.

Thus, it is seen that so far as the problem of abortion is concerned, Buddhism is a religion, which becomes liberal in its attitude. Again, it is also seen that so far as Japanese Buddhism is concerned, they give importance to both utilitarian, as well as, virtue approaches to the morality. The most significant point which is found in Buddhism is that though abortion is permissible and acceptable in most of the modern Buddhist countries, but the feeling of motherhood is always given respect. That is why they celebrate rituals like *mizoko kuyo*. Though because of the various socio-cultural and biological factors, abortion is accepted, but with it the care and love for the child, is also kept intact in some form of ritual performance like the one mentioned above there. Because of these pragmatic approaches, Buddhism has become one of the most liberal and popular religions of the contemporary world.

8.0 Roman Catholic and Abortion

Regarding the cultural influence on abortion, another instance can be cited in which religion and culture might instruct a particular course of action, i.e. to

give birth to the baby under all circumstances without keeping provision for what alternate nurturing provisions could be provided for an otherwise unwanted child, provided abortion be considered as wrong under all circumstances. Foetus from the very moment of conception is an actual person. Thus, abortion or foetus-killing can be considered the same as a murder. That is why according Roman Catholic, whatever may be the situation, the path of abortion cannot be taken. Ireland very strictly accepts and follows this view and even they have very strict law regarding abortion. According to Ireland, law abortion is illegal under all circumstances. Even if a woman uses to suffer from some serious problems due to her pregnancy, even then she cannot take the help of abortion. In this respect, one of the very recent cases of Ireland can be mentioned in order to re-visit the problem of abortion, where Savita Halappanavar, the Indian dentist who practiced in Ireland had to give her life because of the rigid law of Ireland regarding abortion. Savita had found some complicacy in her pregnancy, because of which she was to do abortion. But abortion is illegal in Ireland, which is a predominantly Catholic country. So ultimately, Savita had to give her life on 28th October 2012 (BBC News India, 2012).

9.0 Care Ethical Analysis of Abortion in Roman Catholic: The Case of Ireland

Ireland is a Catholic dominated country. It is already been mentioned that according to Roman Catholic, abortion is a non-religious and unethical act. Because of this rigid law, many women had to give their lives in Ireland. In this regard, the case of an India dentist named Savita Halappanavar can be mentioned. As already mentioned above, Sabita had suffered from some serious problem in her pregnancy and medically she was undergo abortion. But, because of the Irish law on abortion, she was not allowed the same and as a result, she was to give her life. Now, the point of this paper is 'how care ethics will justify this case?' Care ethics demands love and care not only for the baby or the foetus but also for the mother. Mother is an independent person. She has the full right to live in this world. When a woman suffers from something, then it is the duty of the other fellow to help her to get rid of this suffering. Sometimes, pregnancy becomes critical for her body. Thus, in order to save her life, the help of abortion is to be taken. This step can only be regarded to be ethical in this regard. But the Irish laws and the catholic belief has sometimes become violent and dangerous for the life of the woman.

Therefore, it is totally unethical from the care ethical perspective as the feeling of care, love and tenderness is totally missing in these cases. This case has been followed by many countries of the world. The pro-choice medical practitioners have further argued from a bioethical point of view regarding the right to live of a mother as a person. Finally in July 2013, the Irish Government has finally introduced the 'Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013' (Wikipedia, 2013).

10.0 Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that different cultures have played a very significant role, so far as the issue of abortion is concerned. In fact, the laws on abortion have also been made by taking into consideration of the cultural and religious views of the places. That is why different countries of the world have different laws regarding abortion. However, this paper lays emphasis on care ethics and urges the world to see this issue from the care ethical perspective. Care ethics emphasises on the foetus as a life in itself and a potential person, but it also gives equal emphasis to the woman. It leads women to think emotionally and rethink any decision of abortion, also inspiring them towards self-care or self-love. That is why it totally opposes both sex-selective abortion and Irish Law on abortion. But it respects the Japanese festival called *Mijoko Kuyo* and Toda's festival *Pwswtt* as they respect emotions of the woman. Thus, from the care ethical point of view, it can finally be regarded that as socio-cultural and religious influences are found to be very strong in the society, therefore, everyone should be clear about that fact that cultures should be such that are guided by the ethics and not by some biased and rigid laws. All the cultures are mainly man-made. That is why they should be changed with time for the overall wellbeing of the entire society. Abortion laws should therefore be implemented with time and the mind-set of the people should also change. Only then an ethical and unbiased decision regarding abortion can be taken properly.

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