CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

MUSING

Caring for an Aged Mother: Unsettling of Ethics

Sharada Nair 🆔

Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, New Delhi 110024, India
Corresponding author. Email: sharada.nair@gmail.com

Finding myself having to look after a mother grown old and infirm, the dilemmas in the practice of care as a moral value have been sharply foregrounded—for this is a mother with whom I have clashed my entire life. Though typically taken for granted at the time, there is no denying the enduring effect of the care provided by a dedicated mother. But, over the years, this has become fissured by an acute sense of dismay, with the gradual realization that her solicitude formed part of an earnestly held, conservative, moralized gender position, which I grew to reject. Her dependence on and recognition of me as a daughter arouse intense emotions, but equally intense are the anger and resentment arising out of her stubborn refusal to even consider the difference between her and my conceptions of woman. Though agitated and alienated by this obstinacy, I find myself, nevertheless, bound to this unfreedom of geriatric care.

Catering to the needs of this mother, I am living, with disturbingly acute awareness, the "vector of temporalities" (Butler 2001, 26) we all share: the ineluctable course of human frailty and mortality that elicits a fearful compassion, and at the same time, a social continuum that identifies me unavoidably as daughter and as woman. The social temporality is fractured further with colliding perspectives all too familiar: one looking for change with time, and another obdurate in preserving a sameness unaffected over time. Amid these vexing crosscurrents, the definition of care emerges as problematic, calling for considered reflection. As I venture on this exploration, I recall Kathryn Morgan's observation that "feminist theorists begin ethical theorizing with embodied, gendered subjects, who have particular histories" (quoted in Held 1990, 332). Though unique, this embodiment and particularity, as a product of social formations, reveals cultural universals that, aside from common temporalities, enable recognition of these speculations.

Many feminists have studied the distinctive nature of the mother–daughter kinship, and the maternal dominance in this relationship in a normative, heterosexual family. Though published in the late 70s in the US, *The Reproduction of Mothering* by Nancy Chodorow, which straddles psychoanalysis and sociology, outlines issues pertinent, even today, to many middle-class women in urban India.[1] Chodorow notes the way women ensure the continuity of their "structural location in the domestic sphere" (Chodorow 1978, 208), as she finds that they "reproduce themselves as mothers, emotionally and psychologically, in the next generation" (209). Problems begin, however, when some daughters interrupt this smooth perpetuation of "social roles and position in the hierarchy of gender" (209) and contest this form of reproduction, turning this early site of subject-formation fractious.

Using psychoanalysis to describe mothers' influence on the development of their daughters, Chodorow contends that, from "the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves" with "more flexible or permeable ego boundaries" (170). My mother's indefatigable effort, in spite of my vociferous protests, to make me follow what she stood for has definitely played a part in constituting my indecisive and fraught subjectivity, although I am hesitant to invest in a retrojection of pre-oedipal attachments for explanatory purposes. A compelling narrator, she kept me captivated with a stream of stories from Hindu mythology, a litany of well-worn proverbs, along with continuous gossip about various members of the family, friends, and acquaintances. All these, in her versions, acclaimed the dutiful wife and mother and condemned the aberrant ones. This dynamic medley, cautionary and exemplary, worked as an infinitely available testimony to the rightness of gender roles in place apparently from time immemorial. But gradually, aesthetic allure notwithstanding, a complete inability to participate in her reverence for masculinity, apparently to be served and elevated above household preoccupations, estranged me. A bureaucrat father chose to uneasily sidestep the issue. He never acted as though he subscribed to my mother's belief in a hierarchical order. On the other hand, his veneration of education unlocked a broader world full of new possibilities. Thus, more unwittingly than by design, he provided me concrete avenues, an agency, to achieve a "social personhood" (Held 1990, 335), distinctly different from the one presented by my mother.[2] This constructively channeled my inchoate search for some degree of independence, without necessarily abjuring relationships.

Miri Rozmarin observes that oppositional agency comes into being when "random and local moments of alienation, revolt, and resistance are gradually consolidated into a new subject position and a sense of self, marking a new political and ethical horizon" (Rozmarin 2013, 479). Although it is true that subject positions are produced in a complex social matrix through gradual accretions, a similar accretion of resistant articulations does not result effortlessly in a "new subject position." Revolts are many, but a cohesion of those into a steady and strong stance does not hold. The "hegemonic discourses and practices of femininity" (480) that one is reacting against, ever present through my mother's narratives, repeatedly disperse the painstaking efforts at developing a firm alternate consolidation. "Flexible" and "permeable ego boundaries," resulting from a strong "interpersonal relationship with . . . mothers" (Chodorow 1978, 177) can be disabling.

Women holding up the existing structures and values do so actively. Many of them indefatigably work to preserve this order and defend it vigorously, especially when they sense a threat to it. Agency surfaces to *combat* change, just as strongly as it does to argue *for* change! Innumerable women believe that we are born with maternal instincts and are naturally drawn to domesticity. They are therefore unable to perceive any bias in the existing system that allocates those roles to them. My mother often termed my resistance as unnatural and masculine, that is, shockingly transgressive. The fact that so many of one's own generation, and much younger, continue to hold fast to such views makes it difficult to ignore these as scattered survivals from an earlier generation, or from an obsolete social formation. In the past several decades, changes in attitudes to women, in tandem with those in the socioeconomic milieu, have provided educational and career opportunities seized by a large number. But the older norms and expectations continue so overwhelmingly into the present that even men like my father, who watched his daughter's professional progress with pride, were handicapped by an imaginative inadequacy to visualize or articulate any clear social alternative to them.

In human acculturation in general, a radical revision that needs to be worked on is the idealization of motherhood itself, where the natural, imagined as powerful and beneficent, is deployed incessantly. This near beatific exaltation of a biological fact has a long history. Quasi moral diktats work through sentimental rhetoric—to become a mother, albeit within the conventions of marriage, and to be a "good" mother. Liberating women from these is no easy task. Chodorow remarks that a "seeming inevitability comes . . . from language that refers to primary parenting activities as 'mothering'" (217). Even as she insists that we have "to separate the care children need from the question of who performs it" (217), she astutely points out that the "resistance to changes in the sex-gender system is often strongest around women's maternal functions" (219). This testifies to the reluctance, or inability, widely prevalent, to see the management of a home and the upbringing of children as a sociopolitical activity, not gender-specific, that need not be dependent on or wholly centered within a particular model of a family.

The cultural labor expended in producing the repertoire of a woman's avowedly innate nurturing attributes takes innumerable forms. At a commonplace, apparently innocuous, level we have the ubiquitous nostalgic evocations of various culinary delights, lovingly and incomparably prepared by grandmother, mother, wife, sister, aunt, and so on, all actual or potential mothers. Such paeans, with their sensory-emotional allure, exert a subliminal force more potent than homilies or exhortations. What is discomfiting is that even pioneering care theorists like Nel Noddings go so far as to suggest that for "many women, motherhood is the single greatest source of strength for the maintenance of the ethical ideal" (Noddings 2013, 97).

Widowed early, my mother was shattered by the loss of what she perceived as the only way to live, that is, within a domestic fold. Understanding her sense of bewildered helplessness, I absorbed her into my family. The emotional spontaneity of this gesture, like the unquestioning acceptance of my role as principal caregiver in her infirmity, had been legislated over decades. Jane Flax observes aptly that an emotion is "not simply a raw feel. It is a feel mediated through a history of others' naming, interpreting, and responding to it somatically and psychically" (Flax 2004, 914). Feelingly narrated instances about various neglected/well-cared-for parents had formed part of my mother's unremitting, emotive moral pedagogy. Her presence in my house undoubtedly eased the practical aspects of my life, as it made professional commitments less difficult. However, she never failed to make it clear that my career, for her, was just an extra income for the house, and my duties as wife and mother, as the essential manifestations of womanhood, had to override all other involvements.

In her empirical work as a psychologist, Carol Gilligan observes that where men focus on autonomy, women give importance to relationships and the care elicited by them. She initiates a revised approach to the evaluation of this difference of women's voices, preferring to read the distinction as "two modes of thought" (Gilligan 2003, 2), and one that does not warrant an elevated classification of men as more mature. But she cautions against viewing the dissimilarity as "absolute" or a "generalization about either sex" (2). Choosing a sociopolitical approach, she elaborates that "these differences arise in a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experience of males and females" (2). Thus there is no essentializing of either gender position or experience, or an underlying assumption that the existing arrangement is unalterable. The absence of such a perspective leads to debatable assertions. Even though Noddings changed the title of her book, choosing to designate care as a "relational" rather than a "feminine" approach to "morals and

ethics," she retains the view that "the roots of caring are in women's experience" (Noddings 2013, 9), that is, confined to interactions within a household. Even more disconcerting is her unmodified conviction that "women have . . . more direct access to caring through biological facilitative factors" (98). A social value made to originate from biology, and an ethical character given to experience imposed by the gendered economic structure of society, is difficult to countenance. It has been widely recognized that the coalescence of an altruistic idea of care and admired female gender roles works politically. The more "the carer attends to the needs of others at the expense of her own, the better mother, wife, or daughter she will be in the eyes of others and possibly herself" (Pettersen 2012, 368). Surely, such self-abnegation cannot be glorified and presented as a desirable relational good.

As I acquiesced to providing care for my mother without reservation, I was startled by the tensions that erupted between the affective, the ethical, and the political. My presumed "direct access to caring through biological facilitative factors" proved unavailable. The distressingly visible depredations of age, memories of her ministrations, or my own for my children, often remain inadequate to transform caring for her into a moral ideal feelingly committed to. A refusal to surrender completely to looking after her, of desiring not *merely* to be an exemplary daughter, of still struggling for that heuristic feminist ideal of a self-definition separate from relationships, absorption in worlds other than the domestic remains unacceptable. For her, it only compounds what she had castigated relentlessly: the already demonstrated resistance to total immersion in the roles of wife and mother. As I outsource much of the caregiving work, there is noticeable animosity. Tove Pettersen points out how traditional concepts of care, "as an act of unconditional giving" and "self-sacrifice," fuse with "cultural conceptions of what it means to be a woman" (Jarymowicz 2016, 121), and stresses that this is "not a feminist concept of care, but a patriarchal" one (121). Even in her infirmity, my mother remains staunchly patriarchal.

Imbalances of power take various forms. Dependence, physical and emotional, is the crucial factor in a mother caring for a child and an adult caring for a debilitated parent. In both cases, an emotional-moral commitment generated by society operates, but the discordance between socialized adults is inescapable as two discretely articulated worlds come into contentious play. When Noddings sets aside her naturalized, feminized approach to care, she is unexceptionable. She acknowledges that "ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring" (Noddings 2013, 67). Unlike the latter, possible in more harmonious relationships, ethical caring calls for the "development of an ideal self," an "ideal developed in congruence with one's best remembrance of caring and being cared for" (76), something, she appropriately claims, that comes from "our *universal* accessibility to caring and memories of caring" (98, italics mine). She fully recognizes the onerousness of holding onto the ideal in exacting situations as she declares that "[a]n ethic of caring is a tough ethic" (79), as the "ethical self does not live partitioned off from the rest of the person" (80). She emphasizes that as a relational ethic, it requires the maintenance of both the one caring and the one cared for. But the "one" in these terms, especially the resistant one, as highlighted earlier, is unable to maintain a unified, stable subjectivity.

In this deliberation on the harrowing affects that prevail in a conflictual mother–daughter dyad, it is useful to transpose Butler's reflections from a philosophical and psychoanalytic ethical frame to a more socio-ethical one. She notes that "our incoherence is ineradicable and nontotalizable, and . . . it establishes the way in which we are implicated, beholden, derived, constituted by what is beyond us and before us"

(Butler 2001, 35). Though in a state of consternation at the disruptions by her own daughter, of the world of beliefs that she had inherited, and that had constituted her, my mother carries on grimly. The disruption of my attempted redefinitions, by many of these very beliefs I find myself implicated in, keeps me anxious and uncertain. The acrimony that results from the clash of these antithetical, incoherent selves festers on, and care as an ethical value often flounders.

Initiated by the Indian Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act came into effect in 2007. Though applicable to society in general, it was clearly directed toward the family. Failure to look after the elderly was made a punishable criminal offense. The fact that the Indian state chose to enact such a stringent law testifies to the breakdown of the sanguine assumption of an unquestionable existence of duty to care in familial structures. The schooling of benign dispositions to maintain supportive relationships is taken up as an important cultural undertaking in families. Social creeds are indistinguishably blended into ethical values and channeled into emotions. Instilled strongly is the moral necessity of deferring to elders, and feeling love toward children, parents, or siblings. So deeply is the affective interwoven with the moral in this political economy that decisions not in conformity with established tenets come to be seen as not just unfeeling, but unethical. To my mother, a daughter questioning her convictions of a socially ordained way of life appeared not just disrespectful and hard-hearted, but morally reprehensible.

Customary observances form an integral part of the affective ethical regimen. In a Hindu household, for example, one respectfully bows down and touches the feet of the elders to seek their blessings before taking any important step. It is assumed that longer social experience gives them an ability to assess one's decision and intervene, if needed. This ritualized obeisance is an acknowledgment of that right. Tales of members who failed to heed their advice, and lived to regret it, form part of admonitory family lore. In their intolerance of change, close bonds often function coercively for the preservation of power relations inherent in existing mores.[3] Eva Kittay points out that our relations are "*involuntary* and *asymmetric*" (quoted in Whitney 2011, 558). Hence, iterated admonitions prove necessary as multiple differences and hierarchies based varyingly on age, gender, economic status, and above all, ideological positions generate even more asymmetries and antagonisms. Inside homes, in tense relationships, any notion of "*mutual* autonomy" (Held 2006, 55) conducive to the practice of care comes under duress. Further, when dependencies and vulnerabilities keep oscillating from one side to the other, as for instance when domineering elders become frail elders, it takes an effort to maintain the feelings necessary for true care. Memories of injustice are not easily erasable, and when frailty brings no modification in attitudes, rancor persists. Virginia Held states that there has been "little justice within the family in almost all societies but much care; so we know we can have care without justice" (Held 2006, 71–72). Surely this is to reduce care as a value to mere care-taking. This does not enhance the moral quality of the individual, family, or society.

The law passed by the Indian state significantly expands the role of the family, viewing it as, to use Althusser's formulation, one of the most influential of ideological *state* (italics mine) apparatuses (Althusser 1971). It is gender-neutral and breaches the untenable separation of public from private. The justice system thus recognizes care as a value crucial to maintain the ethical and civilizational quality of the polity. The understanding of our dependencies prompts societies to evolve a humane subjectivity in general through a circulation of emotive discourses that exhort us to help the weak and

defenseless. The visible ineffectuality of these discourses necessitates the framing of laws to enforce humane praxis. But, although one can legislate the palpable and the material, the question that arises is how moral values such as care can be systemically administered. Whether they can be disentangled from the welter of feelings within complicated relationships, and adjudicated dispassionately using set directives, is a moot point. A move away from a "theoretical-juridical model" to an alternative conception of ethics, one that adopts an "expressive-collaborative" process, is suggested by Margaret Urban Walker. She explicates that we should use a "medium of moral negotiation," which relies on "shared moral vocabularies, common exemplars, familiar intuitions, and those deliberative styles recognized in some community" (Walker 1992, 32). In short, it is the socially specific, nuanced, always already we are born into that should be kept in mind when translating moral values into practice, or evaluating them. Even with this openness to collaboration within a cultural medium, problems arise. Dissonances are pervasive in social frameworks producing multiple ideological positions, many at odds with each other. These unavoidably inflect interpretations of categories and values.

When contrary viewpoints deploy the same "shared moral vocabularies" and "intuitions," an ethical impasse, often an unresolvable incommensurability, comes up. For example, looking for recognition as professionals, women like me tend to contemptuously deride those who are unable to consider identity as a blend of changeable ideas and practices that need not just be repeated unthinkingly. The stand against the unjust violence of norming is thus accompanied by an indictment of women content with it. On the other hand, the unintelligibility of anything that disturbs established ways leads people like my mother to harsh judgments of those trying to unsettle it. Similarly, protectionist arguments are used feelingly as a manifestation of care from a conformist standpoint to restrict the freedom of women or the young. To those sustaining the inherited system, opposition feels ungrateful and uncaring, whereas to those sought to be restrained, care that constricts feels harsh. In such situations, both sides labor under a feeling of injustice *and* a betrayal of care.

"[C]entral to an ethic of care," according to Gilligan, is the ability to see actors caught in a dilemma "not as opponents in a contest of rights but as members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend" (Gilligan 2003, 30). She sees this ability exemplified in young women rather than in men. But the neat binaries of gender or of rights/relationships do not work. In fact, the closeness of the "network of relationships" makes even the definitions of rights, or of care, open to dispute, and with a common moral orientation in disarray, one confronts an aporia. The ideological frame shifts the substance of political terms such as rights and understandings of care and justice. Even the definitions of identity, of woman, man, or child, are destabilized. Examining the relationship between justice and care, Held argues that when "justice is the guiding value, it requires that individual rights be respected. But when we are concerned with the relatedness that . . . is needed to hold it together, we should look . . . to care" (Held 2006, 40–41). One must counter that it is simply not possible, in practice, to have such a clean separation, or such neatly alternating standpoints, of care or justice. The two emerge as confusingly intertwined.

Widening the field of care, Pettersen observes pertinently that "care reasoning was associated with decisions made by women in the private sphere. . . . Over the last two decades, however, proponents have demonstrated the ideal of care to be capable of guiding not only private conduct, but human interaction in general" (Pettersen 2011, 51). Though apparently autonomous, individuals or groups asserting their rights

are irremediably nested in relationships. Such rights, in fact, arise as a passionate demand by them for care, from within a social formation, which has neglected, marginalized, or oppressed them on some basis or the other. A subtext of the language of justice and rights is the call for care, the moral element of human bonds, the acceptance of the need to arrive at flexible, equitable systems, keeping in mind physiological differences, differential placement in social structures, and disparate viewpoints.

In this uneasy perusal of my efforts to realize and hold onto an ethical feminist position, I am all too aware of the wry observation by Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman that "it is only possible for a woman who does not feel highly vulnerable with respect to other parts of her identity, e.g. race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual alliance, etc., to conceive of her voice simply or essentially as a 'woman's voice'" (quoted in Keller 2010, 835). It is an undeniable fact that it is because I belong to a social cross section—nuclear, urban, middle-class Hindu family—less beleaguered in terms of caste, class, or religion, situated on the privileged side of these social markers, as it were, that I can speak only as a woman, but as a woman recognized as such in this particular intersection of class and culture.[4]

The issues faced in the attempt to hold onto the "ethical responsibility of the one-caring" (Noddings 2013, 80), even while laboring under a deep sense of injustice inflicted by the one cared for, have preoccupied this musing. Trying to remain a considerate daughter of an uncompromisingly traditional mother, without losing my allegiance to a refashioning of gender norms, to accommodate *both* our needs and rights, has been, and continues to be, a disquieting experience. As I "look clear-eyed at what is happening to . . . [my] ideal" of care (80), all too often, the closeness of the break from the moral, from what had hitherto appeared to be socially stabilizing if not transcendental moorings becomes all too apparent. The struggle to avert a dangerous slide from the socio-ethical is not trivial, and it requires a willed effort not to stray into a hinterland—asocial, amoral, non-human. With arrival at an anchorable set of codes ever deferred, one finds oneself a troubled bricoleur, improvising tentatively, from situation to situation, as exigency dictates. A foundational ethical or political stance, unshaded, pristine, remains ever elusive.

Notes

1 The situation is similar across classes and locations in many parts of the country, even though the place that the family occupies in caste, class, and religious formations plays a significant part in the socialization.
2 Distinguishing human mothering from animal nurture, Virginia Held points out that "[h]uman culture surrounds and characterizes the activity of nursing as it does the activities of eating, or governing, or writing, or thinking," for it forms "social personhood" (Held 1990, 335).
3 In an article appropriately titled "When the Abstract Destroys the Physical Being," Tabish Khair observes how, ironically, in extreme cases, the family becomes an ideal that can be preserved only by ostracizing, or even eliminating, recalcitrant members (Khair 2019).
4 However, it is also necessary to affirm that a collective agreement on the specific content of rights, taken up under the common identity "woman," has often effectively marginalized divisions based on other identity components, set aside semantic instabilities, and proved successful in addressing biases both structural and cultural. Landmark judgments against domestic violence, harassment over dowry, property rights, discriminatory labor contracts, and so on, have been passed, though their implementation leaves much to be desired.

References

Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatus: Notes towards an investigation. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: The Gresham Press.

Butler, Judith. 2001. Giving an account of oneself. *Diacritics* 31 (4): 22–40.

Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Flax, Jane. 2004. What is the subject? Review essay on psychoanalysis and feminism in postcolonial time. *Signs* 29 (3): 905–23.

Gilligan, Carol. 2003. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Held, Virginia. 1990. Transformations of moral theory. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, Supplement: 321–44.

Held, Virginia. 2006. *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jarymowicz, Tomasz. 2016. On reconciling care and justice: An interview with Tove Pettersen. Etikk I Praksis - Nordic *Journal of Applied Ethics* 2 (2): 119–26. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2e8c/4127efda1ad357bdd c6be3e3b8add81fd5ff.pdf.

Keller, Jean. 2010. Rethinking Ruddick and the ethnocentrism critique of "maternal thinking." *Hypatia* 25 (4): 834–51.

Khair, Tabish. 2019. When the abstract destroys the physical being. *The Hindu*, October 26.

Noddings, Nel. 2013. *Caring: A relational approach to morals and ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pettersen, Tove. 2011. The ethics of care: Normative structures and empirical implications. *Health Care Analysis* 19: 51–64. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10728-010-0163-7.

Pettersen, Tove. 2012. Conceptions of care: Altruism, feminism, and mature care. *Hypatia* 27 (2): 366–89.

Rozmarin, Miri. 2013. Living politically: An Irigarayan notion of agency as a way of life. *Hypatia* 28 (3): 469–82.

Walker, Margaret Urban. 1992. Feminism, ethics, and the question of theory. *Hypatia* 7 (3): 23–38.

Whitney, Shiloh Y. 2011. Dependency relations: Corporeal vulnerability and norms of personhood in Hobbes and Kittay. *Hypatia* 26 (3): 554–74.

Sharada Nair joined the English Department at Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi after receiving her PhD from UCLA. Her dissertation was on Wallace Stevens. She has taught poetry of the British Romantics and the Modernists, and most of the sections of the theory course in the B.A. Honors syllabus. Her engagement with feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism directs her critical perspectives. She has published in *Jouvert*, *Textual Practice*, and *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Now retired from teaching, she continues her academic work.