

Autonomy or Relationality? A Critical Review of Feminist Theories of Marriage and Motherhood in Western and East Asian Contexts

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Abstract. This paper offers a critical review of feminist theories of marriage and motherhood, examining their conceptual foundations and cultural applicability across Western and East Asian contexts. Western liberal feminist frameworks have largely evaluated marriage and motherhood through the lens of individual autonomy, equality, and self-realization, highlighting structural constraints such as the gendered division of labor, the motherhood wage penalty, and the privatization of care. These autonomy-centered approaches have been instrumental in exposing systemic gender inequalities. However, their underlying assumptions about individual subjectivity generate theoretical tensions when applied beyond Western societies. In many East Asian contexts shaped by Confucian ethics and family-centered moral orders, marriage and motherhood are embedded within relational obligations and interdependent kinship structures. Rather than prioritizing individual autonomy, feminist scholarship in these settings emphasizes relational subjectivity, internalized gender norms, and culturally embedded forms of governance. By synthesizing key debates on autonomy, maternal subjectivity, affective labor, and relational patriarchy, this review identifies three persistent conceptual tensions: universalism versus cultural specificity, autonomy versus relational subjectivity, and external patriarchy versus internalized governance. The paper argues for the development of culturally situated feminist frameworks that integrate commitments to gender justice with sensitivity to the relational and contextual dimensions of women's lived experiences.

Keywords: feminist theory, marriage and motherhood, autonomy and relational subjectivity, East Asian feminism, gendered power

1. Introduction

Marriage and motherhood have taken the center stage in feminist theory as they are important areas of discussion that allow scrutinizing gendered power, social reproduction, and female subjectivity. The notion of marriage has since been viewed negatively by Western liberal academics as limiting the independence of women and motherhood has been conceptualized as a socially manufactured phenomenon dependent on norms of institutions and cultural standards [1]. Individual choice,

equality in intimate relationships, and self-realization have created a space to criticize patriarchal organization of families and the gendered nature of labour division.

On the other hand, these theories presuppose a type of subjectivity that favors the autonomy and voluntarism of an individual and creates tension to use these theories outside the Western perspective. Although in most East Asian states that have been influenced by Confucian ethics, family-centered moral orders, and relational social organizations, marriage and motherhood are perceived more as relational obligations embedded in a system of interdependent kinship than as individual choice [2]: In these situations, gendered power tends not so much to manifest itself explicitly as men dominating women as rather as internalized gender expectations, emotional work, and hierarchically structured families. Autonomy-based models thus run the risk of ignoring culturally localized versions of gender control.

In response to such distinctions, East Asian feminist thought has grown more skeptical about the generalizability of Western theory and focuses on the role of localization and relationality in shaping subjectivity as informed by family responsibility, ethical responsibility, and collective consciousness. Relational patriarchy, internalized gender regulation, etc. attempt to encompass kinds of power that cannot be readily theorized when considering autonomy based models, and systematic interaction between Western feminist theory and East Asian feminist scholarship is still scarce [3].

In order to make it possible to have such a conversation, this review makes clear the difference between individual autonomy and relational autonomy as two main conceptual tools. Autonomy in Western liberal theory is mostly used to refer to the ability to determine one's own future, create and work towards life plans without being subject to improper disruption and assumes the existence of self-authoring entity. Conversely, relational autonomy focuses on ways of acting which are part of social relationships, norms, and power relations. Identifying these concepts enables more accurate cross-cultural comparison of marriage and motherhood.

The present paper therefore evaluates the feminist discourses on marriage, motherhood, and maternal subjectivity within Western and East-Asian backgrounds critically. The paper aims at making contributions to culturally located feminist theory by putting emphasis on the conflicts between autonomy-based and relationship-based perspectives to encourage a more profound intercultural discussion.

2. Autonomy-centered feminist theories of marriage and motherhood

2.1. Marriage, autonomy, and equality

Marriage and motherhood feminist theories that are essentially grounded in Western liberal tradition have always focused on individual autonomy and equality as central evaluative standards. Looking at it in this way, marriage can be seen not just as a personal agreement, but as a social institution organizing gendered roles and expectations, division of labor, and power relationships.

According to liberal feminist philosophers, it is possible that even when there are formally equal laws concerning marriage, marriage will still be able to restrict the autonomy of women through the normalization of asymmetrical roles in child-care responsibilities and financial dependence [4]. The feminist critique of marriage is therefore directed at how institutionalized intimacy can deprive women of the ability to make autonomous decisions and ensure their active presence in both social and domestic spheres. In this context, autonomy means having the capability to follow a life plan authored by oneself without being subjected to unfair structural limitations.

Thus it is pointed out that according to the feminist critique of marriage, it is imbued with normative meanings related with femininity, caregiving and domesticity, that particularly impact

negatively on women. Chambers contends that marriage is also a norm-shaping institution that guides women into non-remunerated chores at home and restricts their leverage in the family and in the labor market [4]. These criticisms center on the concept of autonomy as the central normative principle based on which the marital structures are judged.

2.2. Motherhood, social construction, and individual agency

Such issues are also raised within the works of feminists who study motherhood especially when it comes to inequalities in the labor market. The penalty of the motherhood wage, or the systematic pay gap between mothers and childless women, demonstrates that there are limits to women economic autonomy [5]. Meta-analytic data indicate that a typical penalty is 3-4 percent, which varies depending on the policy regime and structure of labor markets [6]. In line with that perspective emphasizing autonomy, these penalties indicate institutional impediments to women autonomy.

The feminist political economy also places marriage and motherhood into larger social reproduction networks. Fraser points out that capitalism in the modern world depends a lot on the unpaid or underpaid labor of women as caregivers and that this has been devalued, which she refers to as a crisis of care [7]. This analysis indicates that marriage and motherhood serve to privatize care responsibilities and mask their potential social value and thus, regenerate gender inequality through cultural values and financial structures.

Feminist thinkers have attempted to theorize a more refined understanding of autonomy by introducing relational autonomy as a way of counteracting excessively individualistic models theoretically. The focus of relational autonomy is on those kinds of socially embedded agency that are formed by means of relations, affective connections and power hierarchies [8]. Taking this viewpoint, marriage and motherhood are not merely limitations of agency, but important constitutive elements as well. Even so, autonomy is still the main evaluative standard, thus it is unclear if and how cultural applicability can be achieved when personhood is given in relational form, which prompts exploring East Asian feminist theories.

3. Motherhood, affective labor, and maternal subjectivity in feminist theory

3.1. Social construction, norms, and moral evaluation

Though the structural inequalities of marriage and labour markets are well understood through autonomism-based feminist critiques, they do not address all aspects of the lived and emotional experience of motherhood. The study of motherhood as a stable social role has accordingly come under scrutiny in the field of feminist research where maternal identity has become a focus of investigation, and the analysis of how being a mother is constructed by norms of moral responsibility, feelings, and social institutions of assessment has now taken place.

To view things this way, motherhood is not determined by biology but by social construction. According to dominant cultural discourses, mothers are supposed to be the main caregivers who take care of children emotionally and developmentally [9]. The norms associated with intensive mothering emphasize the need to be devoted, present all the time and emotionally attuned, which places maternal labor as an obligation, not as a personal option. These norms act as regulatory ideals that are promoted by family, education, medicine, and policy discourses. The effect is that motherhood turns into a moral mission in which women are constantly judged by standards that are frequently unrealistic.

This moral regulation can also be implemented by means of unequal moral assessment. The mothers are usually set a higher standard compared to the fathers and actions like working long hours, delegating childcare, or displaying ambiguity towards maternity tend to trigger social criticism. Conversely, it is possible to commend fathers on a very small participation in childcare [10]. This kind of observation tends to be taken over, and mothers begin to constantly monitor themselves and to adjust their identity to the current standards of the so-called good motherhood.

3.2. Affective and emotional labor

The maternal role also encompasses various forms of emotional labor that include managing emotion and paying attention to other people's emotional needs and building relational links [11]. All of it takes place in the sphere of unpaid care labor, a basis of social reproduction, but is systematically underappreciated in capitalist economies [12]. Emotional labor supports the relations between family members and allows them to engage in employment, but the economic and social worth is mostly unseen.

3.3. Maternal subjectivity and the tension between self and relation

Expanding on these insights, maternal subjectivity is constructed through the conflict between self-autonomy and relational responsibilities. On the one side, motherhood may curtail autonomy by the requirements of care-giving. On the other side, care labor may create certain types of subjectivity not encompassed by purely autonomy-oriented concepts. Theoretical models of relationships perceive subjectivity as resulting in dependence, attachment, reciprocal obligation and care-giving as a situation where agencies occur instead of impeding them. Care obligations are distributed unequally according to gendered norms. Feminism should thus consider how maternal subjectivity is jointly constructed by structural limitation and relational relationship in cultures. This contradiction between autonomy and relationality is also a useful conceptual link to feminist discourse that has been created by East Asian feminist groups.

4. East Asian feminist interventions and culturally situated analyses

4.1. Confucian ethics, family norms and household labor

Although the Western feminist perspectives of marriage and motherhood stress individual autonomy and the equality of men and women, studies conducted in Eastern Asia focus on relational subjectivity, family duties, and gender-specific cultural values. In cultures under the influence of Confucian social values and patriarchal kinship structures, the experience of marriage and motherhood among women needs to be interpreted within the context of intergenerational duties, social role-expectations and inherent domestic work distribution.

East Asian family organization is based on the historical tradition of Confucianism, which emphasizes filial piety, hierarchy, and family harmony instead of individual preference [13]. As part of such frameworks, women are commonly perceived as being obliged to fulfill their marital and maternal tasks in order to preserve continuity within relationships and intergenerationally. The empirical research demonstrates the durability of such expectations. Although there are more educational and employment opportunities available to women in Japan, the roles within the household are still largely gendered, and the majority of the caretaking and domestic work falls on women [14]. Likewise, in China, the shift into parenthood has a significant impact on increasing women domestic work whereas male participation is somewhat low [15]. Such trends demonstrate

the ways in which cultural norms persist in defining gendered expectations, influencing female lives in more complex ways than autonomy-focused theories predict.

4.2. Education, fertility, and maternal choices

Education and fertility research also indicate the role played by sociocultural norms in forming family decisions. The increasing education of women in Japan and China intersects with the continued traditional expectations which cause conflicts in the career aspirations of women and their family obligations [13]. Qualitative evidence in Taiwan suggests that women make their way through clashes between workplace values of equality and home expectations [16]. Autonomy of women in relational restrictions is achieved through negotiation, tactical compliance, delayed marriage, restricted fertility and re-negotiation of domestic labor as indicators pointing more to the exercise of agency within relational arrangements instead of outside them.

4.3. Toward culturally situated feminist theories

All of this implies that feminist theoretical research in East Asia needs to consider relationality, generational debt, and gender-specific traditions. Female agency is frequently co-created by networks of families as well as social expectations, and thus it should be extended and not merely abandoned to autonomy-based models. Simultaneously, the concept of relational subjectivity ought not to be glamorized. Relationality can serve as a source of meaning as well as a disciplining device. The norms of duty, filial piety and family harmony may conceal an uneven distribution of work and legitimate an asymmetrical form of self-sacrifice. Further, institutional policies (such as parental leave, childcare, labour flexibility, and welfare policies) are also important in forming the processes of autonomy and relational obligations in practice. State family policies across China, Japan and South Korea have different extents to which caregiving roles remain privatized within homes. Both institutional and cultural analysis contribute to the overall insight into gendered consequences.

5. Conceptual tensions and cross-cultural reframing

5.1. Universalism and cultural specificity

No matter how much research has been conducted in Western and East Asian contexts, there are still major conceptual contradictions in feminist theorization of marriage and motherhood. There are tensions about the connection between universalism and cultural particularity, autonomy and intersubjectivity, and the connection between structural patriarchy and self-regulation.

One of the common issues in feminist theory is how to make sure that they are universal in their commitment to gender justice and still sensitive to cultural conditions. Although the principles of equality and autonomy are usually defined by Western feminists through liberal political philosophy, these claims pose a danger of neglecting the local histories and cultural meanings.

Khadra's work on Decolonizing Universalism offers a more sophisticated perspective on this discussion. The writer claims that feminist universalism has not been the introduction of Western cultural conventions to the world. It must, however, be committed to countering gender oppression and being sensitive to the historical and cultural specifics [17]. She criticizes what she calls "missionary feminism", where Western paradigms are perceived as moral or universalizable and argues in favor of an ideal-universalism resistant to ethnocentrism-based concepts of liberation and acknowledging the necessity of the contextualization of the feminist practice.

This discussion when applied to theories of marriage and motherhood demonstrates the danger that autonomy-focused systems can misconstrue those behaviors which are motivated by filial responsibility and relational ethics unless the cultural significances are considered closely. The resolution of this conflict would thus be the adaptation of context rather than the abandonment of theory.

5.2. Autonomy, relational subjectivity, and internal governance

The other conflict is that regarding autonomy and the constitution of agency. Autonomy in Western liberal terms is seen as self-determined without any form of constraint but its critics say agency is formed in the context of social interactions and normative settings. The relational notions on autonomy focus on the fact that individual agency can also be viewed as socially constructed and not isolated. It has its place in a larger feminist discourse which involves reconceptualising the self as relational instead of simply individualistic.

On the other hand, relational models can also be prone to supporting social norms that restrict women options, particularly in times of less than ideal circumstances. The outstanding issue thus becomes what would be a way to develop a theory of self-determination but not at the cost of forgetting social embeddedness or endorsing repressive expectations.

The tension also relates to differences between external patriarchy and internalized management. Western research has concentrated on legal and labor market formal inequality, but even when formal prejudice is reduced, inner governance, the behavior of women based on their own moral standards, can support gender-based structures. In situations of relational duty, respect of filial piety and family honour, observance of marital and maternity principles might be not as much imposed by force than instilled in people as a norm of being a good wife or mother. The feminist theory should then examine the manner in which structural and internalized versions of power connect and interact.

5.3. Cross-cultural theoretical co-construction

Feminist theory could also explore how the concepts are moving, translatable and shifting in other domains rather than seeing Western and East Asian frameworks as either parallel or mutually exclusive. The experience in East Asia does not conform to the idea that autonomy is the only metric of gender justice, it demonstrates that the act of agency can be practiced against relational duties. At the same time, Western approaches to unpaid care work and structural disparity provide theoretical models that are applicable to various situations.

A cross-cultural perspective is therefore a conceptualization of autonomy and relationality as interdependent aspects of subjectivity that are formed through variations in historical and institutional contexts. This kind of approach transcends inflexible dichotomies, and allows bridging the gap between gender justice principles based on normative commitments, and cultural specifics of the lived-experience perspective.

6. Conclusion and future directions

This review has taken a look at feminist theories of marriage and motherhood in Western and East Asian settings and pointed out their positive aspects and drawbacks. The Western liberal framework imagines the concepts of marriage and motherhood mainly as being about individual freedom, freedom, and equality in the home. Such methods shed light on structural as well normative

limitations. Nevertheless, they have only minor cross-cultural applicability. As evidenced by East Asia, women experience is strongly relational: It is influenced by family obligations, cultural, and intergenerational duties. Socialization needs to be explored within such relational arrangements.

However, universalist paradigms can be too prone to neglecting the cultural particularities of power, whereas excessively situated readings can dissect the feminist discourse. This tension has to be addressed by revising the notion of autonomy as relational subjectivity in order to acknowledge the fact that patriarchal power functions via external organizations as well as internalized rules. Observance of gender-based roles can perpetuate inequality in the absence of explicit discrimination.

It also leads to certain methodological problems. Cross-cultural feminist critique has the risk of either generalizing Western categories or exoticizing East Asian distinctiveness. A reflexive comparative methodology thus implies sensitivity to the particularity of history and to the cultural location of theoretical concepts, but not reductive dichotomies like the individualist West and relational East. Theoretically, this review offers a framework of cross-cultural co-construction as a theoretical project that re-thinks autonomy by dialoguing with relational subjectivity and institutional context. Instead of giving up on autonomy, or idealizing relationality, feminism needs to theoretically conceptualize them as historically and culturally informed aspects of the self.

Moreover, this review has a number of constraints that need to be mentioned as well. It makes selective reference to more recent literature and uses restricted literature in local languages. More attention to East Asian feminist writings could enrich intercultural discourse even more. Further studies ought to focus on the cultural-specific feminist theory development, as well as comparative research designs that will explore marriage and motherhood experiences in different settings. Combining longitudinal and intersectional strategies involving class, socioeconomic status, and policy climates will add a layer of detail to the feminist analysis of gender, family, and social life.

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