

GENDER ASYMMETRICAL IDENTITIES IN ROMANTIC UNIONS

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Abstract

In romantic relationships lovers form a merged identity that is an addition of the one they hold individually. They claim many benefits from such mergers at the individual and collective level, however, in asymmetric relationships exist the danger for moral wrong toward the lover whose personal identity is underdeveloped. In traditional heterosexual relationships, male enter the relationship with an identity that is

independent, whereas women's identity the identity is relational and dependent. Because of such asymmetrical based identities, there is the risk of doing a moral wrong to women and of jeopardizing the relationship wellbeing.

Introduction

Philosophers have argued that in romantic love, lovers' ultimate desire is to create a new merged identity that is a combination of two lovers. Although lovers gain an additional united identity, the lovers lose at least part of their own identities and the other part is still influenced by the partner. Thus, lovers' individual identities are substantially affected by each other to the point that individual is shaped by the other. There are benefits of being in romantic relationship and forming a common a new identity with the beloved, however, *I argue in this paper that the wellbeing of the joined identity depends on a stable development of the individual identity before the merger.* Specifically, the relationship one has with oneself and the degree of the growth of their identities, both play a role in the success of the romantic relationship. If the self-identity is underdeveloped, there is a danger to form asymmetrical romantic relationship, particularly in heterosexual relationships where gender-based and cultural norms usually negatively affects women's identities. The asymmetry is mainly formed because women usually develop what I call relational-identity, while men an independent - identity. More efforts should be put into the development of the independent-identity as is fundamental to the well-being of each lover and to the overall health of the merged identity.

Self-Awareness and Self-Care Neglected

Personal identity in romantic relationships is not clearly defined by philosophers exploring the topic of love. Friedman in "Romantic Love and Personal Autonomy" while arguing that personal autonomy is important and women in traditional romantic relationship are most likely to lose their autonomy, only briefly touches on personal identity and its connection with autonomy. She defines individual selves as "distinct persons with self-identities, ...and at least sometimes capable of self-understanding without undue self-deception" (Friedman 164). I believe that a person with complete self-identity requires more than "at least sometimes" being aware of self and self-understating. For those with minimum self-understanding, self-deception is a substantial risk that can lead not only to poor choice of romantic partners but also the wellbeing of romantic relationship overall. The importance of a developed personal identity is often overlooked for the wellbeing of an individual and as a building block of a healthy merged

identities. Not to overlook ancient Greek oracle that has advised Socrates to “Know Thyself”. Awareness and knowledge of the self leads one to be aware of one’s own identity as well as of the joined entity formed with the beloved.

I believe that awareness and knowledge of the self, is a form of love toward the self that is often overlooked or even condemned, particularly for women. A healthy relationship with oneself is a form of self-care that only the individual can provide to the self. Friedman defines love as “A strong complex emotion or feeling causing one both to appreciate, delight in, and crave the presence or possession of another and to please or promote the welfare of another” (162). If we substitute the word “another” with the self, we can define love for the self as a strong feeling that causes one to appreciate possession of the self and *to please and promote the welfare of the self*. I do not mean an unhealthy narcissistic self-love wrapped in selfish and self-promoting behavior at the expense of others, but a knowledge and care of the self that promotes one’s discovery of its own individuality and care for one’s well-being. Let’s us return to the fundamental questions of this paper; how can one properly form a joined identity when one does not care for oneself? Before we do that, let’s explore why care of the others (caregiving) is distributed by gender.

Gender-Based Asymmetries Towards Self-Care vs Caregivers

There is gender-based asymmetries that influence in forming women’s relational identity to others more or even at the expense of self-identity. In traditional patriarchal society and heterosexual relationships, with gender-based defined roles, society imposes on women the identity of caregiver, even before she has a family of her own (RDE 32, 44). Thus, her identity is already relationally connected to others while she has not yet stepped into romantic relationship. As assigned -- voluntarily and involuntarily -- the role of a caregiver, she is expected to not only care for the wellbeing of the whole family , but also to feel joy while watching how the loved one’s thrive under caregiver’s loving care (RDE 30). Thus, caring for others and being happy for their success, is considered good and a virtuous trait for women, something that they should aim as a norm for the feminine gender.

Certain trends in patriarchal society promote a “feminine sense of self”, also defined as: self-in-relationship, a soluble, and a giving self” as a moral value for women ((VMND 59). This comes as an opposite view of what ancient Greeks would consider to be valuable. Aristotle viewed dependency workers (caregivers) and providers in a moral hierarchy: the

former being morally inferior to the latter. Those who care for others, had a diminished autonomy and flawed character traits characteristic to women and slaves, whereas the free male controlled the economic resources and was considered a “fully realized moral agent” (RDE 47). Although Aristotle’s belief is part of ancient society, how much things have really change in the modern world? We can deduce that the role of dependency worker was historically considered inferior from those of providers, nevertheless, the patriarchal society persuaded certain women to believe that giving care to be a moral value, though they missed autonomy. A women’s need to develop a self-identity is at conflict with what is considered a valuable trait to care for others. Put it differently, caring for her needs above others could be perceived as a morally wrong, a feeling that can influence her to suppress her need for self-care to maintain a moral status.

The concept of self-care, self-identity, autonomy, and freedom to pursue one’s interest is not a promoted virtue for women. That poses a question of how can a woman learn to care for developing her own identity as individual and be autonomous when she is influenced by her family and society to see her self- identity as an aspect of relationships, a caregiver and a dependent? Her identity is contained within the merged identities and what’s more disturbing, is that most likely is that she doesn’t know that the self can exist separately from the relational – self (a self only present in relationship to others). Yet, paradoxically, she is expected, to be autonomous and nonsubservient in romantic relationships in order to form successful mergers of identities (Nozick 1991). In other words, raised to be dependent and subservient to others’ needs, she is expected to *know how to be the opposite* in romantic relationships. To no surprise, women get submerged in romantic love, while men emerge in them (Friedman 173)

Simone De Beauvoir notes that in traditional societies, a woman in love is unaware of herself, with a “profound self-abandonment” and with “an abolished ego” (Beauvoir 216). She is only capable to search for herself when her lover leaves and she is forced to ground herself. But how difficult is to look for something that one doesn’t know it exists? Beauvoir’s women in love exist only through male’s identity, thus she is doomed to exist through a beloved male, faceless and dependent.

As much as modern society tries to move away from traditional gender assigned roles, women still find themselves in dependent and carrying positions while men are encouraged to be independent and pursue a career. Women tend to see themselves as the “wife of an independent, strong man”, ... and remain “infantilized and then to be defined as passive

within a marriage” (Ehrlich 453). A women’s identity is shaped by the society to have a relational-self even before she forms a love union, whereas men’s identity is more autonomous and independent. As a result, a woman that was not encouraged to discover her identity and become autonomous before the romantic relationship, will most likely not find it while in the relationship, unless she is encouraged by her lover.

Autonomy and Identity

I would argue that personal autonomy is not only a good, but also a fundamental necessity for developing one’s identity. Autonomy is one’s ability to make decisions regarding one’s choices, desires, actions independent of other’s influence (Friedman 168). As Friedman rightly stated, one must be socialized to see herself as separate individual from other selves and have capacity for “reflectively considering her identity” (169). In romantic relationships, the identity of the lovers inevitable changes, however, it might not change equally. While the autonomy of one lover can increase, that of the other can decrease. In societies with strong gender identities, in particular in heterosexual relationship the autonomy of a women is usually compromised more than that of the male. That results in women’s adopting more of the identity of her beloved, taking actions in his interest, and promoting his well-being, while her interest and needs are compromised (170).

In societies where women are socialized to adopt a relational-self identity and men an independent-self, love unions easily adopt asymmetric structure. I argue that even if women believe that they exercise autonomy and take individual decision seemingly separate from the lovers, their identity is conditioned to be relational. That is because women perceive their own distinct self - identity but a dual entangled identity with that of her lover. Thus, although she might believe that ordering pizza is what she wants for dinner, she is not aware that she wants the pizza because her beloved also likes pizza, or at least has nothing against it. What’s more, she might choose to eat pizza because her lover likes it, justifying that seeing him happy eating pizza brings her joy. The asymmetrical gender identity extends to other areas of life where the lover who sees her identity merged with the lover, loses her autonomy while the beloved who sees himself separately from the merger benefits from the care of the lover and strengthens his autonomy.

Friedman lists different ways in which asymmetrical mergers can affect lover’s autonomy and identity differently (170). I argue that women’s relational-self tends to include the identity of the beloved more

than the male's individual self because women's identity if is not linked to the identity of the beloved then is submerged. For instance, the lover with a relational-self:

(1) may put the *needs and interest* of the beloved above her own, thus tilting her self-identity toward the identity of the bellowed even further.

(2) *care and protect* the needs and interest of her beloveds as her own, since her identity is directly linked to the beloved.

(3) *develop deep mutual familiarity* toward the psychological and physical cues of the beloved, which allows her to understand him more and accommodate his needs.

(4) be particularly *attentive* to beloved because his wellbeing is equally and sometimes more important to hers.

(5) take *decision* slower and have less confidence due to the relational-self that is more complex than the individual self that can make decisions faster.

(6) might carry more of the domestic *workload* and *emotional bonding* which is seen as less valuable than the beloved work as a provider in the free world.

(7) have more *mutual awareness and consideration* toward the beloved, having his perspective in her view and further absorbing his identity.

(8) poorly *evaluate perspectives* by adopting a "moral" lean toward the direction of the bellowed, thus not able to have her individual moral perspective of things.

Identity is not a skill or trait that can be developed in short time: one might spend a lifetime discovering and building oneself. Autonomy plays a major role by allowing a person to freely employ critical thinking, imagine alternatives, and make her own decisions and with that build her identity, but in traditional societies identity type is distributed by gender are raised to see themselves as caretakes whose main role in life is to nourish and promote the wellbeing of others while her needs often remain unmet and her identity minimized or even erased. Men on the other side, are socialized to be independent, resourceful, emotionally closed, and less relational. This is a moral wrong to women. If we can eliminate gender-identity and allow women to develop the traits that each individual need for a good life, then women would live a more satisfying life either in romantic relationships or not.

Potential Criticism from Allison Weir

A potential criticism can come from Allison Weir who argues for a "conception of identity as relational because it is constituted through both

relations of power and relations of mutuality and love” (Weir 12). By engaging with others and connecting to others, a person is able to connect and divide herself from others and the knowledge gained from those interactions leads to form “stronger, more aware and deeper connections”. At the same time, the person creates a “stronger, more connected, more open and knowledgeable identity”.

Love, Weir argues, is what motivates people to connect to others, thus gain knowledge about oneself. While I agree that love and mergers of identity does give information about oneself that can lead to a stronger identity, I (1) question how many are lucky to find such love early in life, and (2) and how to navigate asymmetric mergers of identity. If in order to gain an understating of one’s own identity, one must be romantically in love, then we must promote early romantic relationships from an early age. I strongly disagree that to gain knowledge about oneself and build an identity, must be depended on romantic relationship from early age. Instead, children can be raised in a way that promotes self-love and self-care first, so they can build an identity and choose the right partner to whom one can give the love and care.

The danger to know oneself first through romantic relationships, is that the individual with the unformed identity most likely is not autonomous, which can lead to an asymmetrical merger of identity. Weir reflects on the writings of Minnie Bruce Pratt who found herself in a loveless heterosexual relationship, with asymmetric power dynamics. After she felt in love for another women, she formed her identity and gained autonomy, but it came at a cost of losing access to her children which the husband and the juridical system had control over. Pratt risked the connection with her children, left her comfortable traditional identity assigned to women in her community, and choose a path of self-love and self-care—the path of authenticity and self-creation yet uncomfortable and painful. Pratt life might have been different if she was encouraged from early age to develop her own identity, practice self-love and care in a non-judgmental and supportive manner.

If building self-identity was not an option through the early formative years, is it still possible to do so while in relation with others at the same time introspecting on the self, with care and love towards oneself. One must however, as Pratt metaphorically states, learn to live between one’s fear and the outside, be aware of her own feelings, and risk connections in order to develop a true identity and promote self-care.

Although I don’t completely share Weir’s opinion that true identity can only be formed through relations of love and care for the other, I agree

that we discover ourselves in part through interaction with others. One form is communication. Communicating with others sincerely, on meaningful topics, and even on uncomfortable topics, helps us understand ourselves and form our identity. Not only that we hear out loud our conscious and subconscious ideas, but we receive feedback which is equally valuable. The Socratic dialogue is a good example of a method of acquiring self-knowledge. Such type of conversations are usually performed in romantic relationships, but there is a danger of touching on sensitive subjects that can lead to conflicts. Nevertheless, we can dialogue with friends, relatives, or professional therapist to help us understand and shape ourselves.

Potential Criticism From Alan Soble

Soble might disagree that the relational-self is at lost when in union with an independent-self, since the wellbeing of the beloved will eventually turn into the wellbeing of the lover due to their joined identity (Soble 13). It might not matter that much if the relational-self is submerged in the identity of the beloved because by promoting the good of the independent-self, the relational-self also benefits. What's more, if the relational-self wellbeing were to decrease in order to promote the wellbeing of the independent-self, the former wellbeing will eventually increase because their lives are joined. For example, if the independent-self receives a promising work offer that requires to move to another part of the world, the relational-self will also benefit from the beloved new position since his success is also the success of the joined union. Thus, even if there is no robust concern in love unions, there is also no self-sacrifice on the part of the beloved.

However, there are life situation in which promoting the wellbeing of the beloved, the lover might risk losing not only the relationship, but also part of her identity, which is tangled to the one beloved. As Friedman pointed out, there might be case when the independent-self "begins to put no special emphasis on the quality of his relationship to her (relational-self), and takes projects and commitments that conflict with her" (Friedman, Marilyn 1998). If the lover is committed to support the beloved despite him leading the relationship to the breakup point, then the relationship will eventually come to an end sooner or later. The lover does have an option to salvage the relationship by attempting to "modify those of her lover's commitments that conflict with maintenance of their relationship" (179). To change the lover's mind the beloved must exercise autonomy to identify with her sense of self that guides her independent

decision on the actions she needs to take to save the relationship. However, if her sense of self is poorly developed, she will either not be able to come up with a solution, or she might lack confidence in its validity. Therefore, the relational-self lover is not only prone to be dominated by the independent-self beloved, but also risk losing the relationship.

In this paper I attempted to illustrate the gender inequality of identities in traditional societies. The relational-self identity might promote the wellbeing of the overall society, but in reality, it requires the sacrifice of the wellbeing of the individual. Women traditionally have been raised to be the carrying and connecting link of humanity, which is a noble role that is not much appreciated. This trend can change if women can be encouraged to develop a strong independent identity, while men become more caring and relational. Or perhaps, to borrow Kittay's idea, we can see each other on equal terms when we realized that we all are all someone's child.

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