

Ethical Degeneration and Totalitarian Control: A Critique of Social Ethics in North Korea

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Abstract

Autocracy is a form of government in which the power is vested with an individual who represses all forms of individual freedom and egalitarian principles. These countries propagate ethical manipulations, gendered dehumanisation, absurd principles and hateful ideologies to maintain their power. This paper attempts to show the ethical degeneration of people by simply upholding irrational thoughts propagated by their government. The paper also highlights the eroding of social relations and social ethics from the perspective of ethical consciousness.

Keywords: Ethical Consciousness; Social Ethics; Human Rights.

Introduction

North Korea is a totalitarian country with flagrant social injustice, and human rights abuses achieved through brainwashing and indoctrination. The country has been under totalitarians for decades and maintained control through mass murders, incarcerations and repressions. This closed country has a very high number of exterminations, disappearances and brutalities. The authoritarians have deliberately dismantled the ethical consciousness of the people to maintain the status quo. In Literary criticism as well as in Human Rights, Ethics is a dominant concept which deals with morality and values. It teaches the obligations and code of conduct that enlightens a person's actions and choices in their life.

The notion of morality not only includes individuals, but community and society and their rights and responsibilities. People become human beings by their ethical awareness or ethical consciousness. The capability to differentiate right and wrong, good or bad is the main feature of ethical consciousness. Unfortunately, the people of North Korea with the regime's irrational indoctrination and intimidation failed to recognize humanity and mutual love. The relentless indoctrination has deformed the real social ethics and authorities manipulate the ethical consciousness of the people to carry out their whims and fancies to concentrate the power. More power to the dictator amounted to less humanity and increased suffering. The absence of a definite social ethics which prescribes the norms to

behave and respect others in a society or an institution triggers social chaos. Societal ethics will help the people to abide by the law which reiterates equality, dignity, interpersonal relationships and empowerment. It is conceived that to make a country more secular and democratic, it is important to value human autonomy without sacrificing community needs. In the article Social Ethics “The interaction between humans (as a moral person) and society attests the evolution of mankind. In the beginning, man was forced to accept some social obligations in order to remain within a social group or clan which provided survival security, since life outside the clan was not viable” (Ulman).

Aristotle brought a new concept of man in which he states that it is important to accept a man’s individuality within a group and his basic need to get a sense of belonging. To be human is to embrace not only his rationality and moral judgements but also his ability to socialize with others and be a part of his community. The idea of ethics can be traced back to antiquity where Greek philosophers encouraged the practice of social ethics to enhance people’s life. The ethical methodology by Aristotle elaborates on the learning of ethics for the welfare of the human community. Plato propagated the eudemonistic doctrine of ethics saying happiness is only possible through moral actions. Later modern philosophers like Karl Marx and Frederick Angles elucidate the well-being of humans through social, political and economic means. In the journal, *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics*, The essay Social Ethics by Ulman says

Aristotle’s notions of political wisdom (phronesis) and political action (praxis) have been benefited to connect between the Greek ethical thought and the social ethics of Karl Marx, later on. Those elements in Aristotle’s thought include emphasis on the social and political nature of man, the metaphysical relationship between substance and form, potency and act, and finally his distinctions among theoretical, practical, and productive knowledge. Divergent philosophical positions regarding social and economic justice – whether utilitarianism, formalism, liberalism, etc. – stress the distribution of social wealth in terms of individual happiness, social contract, or fairness. However, Marx believes that the essential questions of ethics and politics lie in the analysis of the nature and structure of the economic-social infrastructure and the organization of productive relations. (102)

Ethical Theories and Social Ethics: Methodology

Ethical theories can be studied and applied to society and institutions to improve governance and regime. Thomas L Beauchamp and James F Childress, both American philosophers in *Principles of Bioethics* delineate moral principles as autonomy, non maleficence, beneficence and justice. The Kantian notion of ethical behaviour is living one’s life as per moral rules and regulations. He also propounds that humanity is an end in itself not a means to an end. The inherent dignity of humans should always be valued and acknowledged. Exploitation, afflictions and torture that harm their good will are always condemned. Jeremy Bentham’s ideology of utilitarianism supports moral actions which bring happiness to the people and disregard any acts which trigger unhappiness in society. So, it is worthwhile to study these theories based on societal functions.

Kim Jong-un, the unscrupulous dictator has been reigning North Korea for ten years with little progress and development. The citizens here are heteronomous and live in perpetual fear. The repressive government always make people promise their allegiance through abuses, executions and physical torture. It is customary to install a recorder in every household as a means of surveillance. Every day becomes a humbugroutine to extol the administration of Kim’s regime by the people. If any deviation occurs, it leads to detention and torture. The predicament of North Korean people is shown in the memoir *The Girl with Seven Names* written by Hyeonse Lee. She laments “Beggars were appearing everywhere, especially around the markets. They were vagrant children, too, At first, only in twos and threes. Their parents had perished of hunger, leaving them

to fend for themselves, without relatives. One of the survival tricks was to distract a market vendor while accomplices snatched the food and ran off (81).

Inflicted sufferings were not only the way but cognitive distortion also played a malicious role in undermining the ethical consciousness of the people. All information associated with every citizen is stored in administrative departments that determine their chances of survival. The government will decide our choices and actions that will ultimately benefit the government itself. For example, one's profession is selected based on a country's needs. No individual is allowed to pursue his passion if it breaks the country's interest.

The repeated hearing of the country's fast progress and bureaucratic virtues through textbooks and news papers create a fake image of the country, making people believe the lies. They do not get an opportunity to contemplate the truth and defects of the country. The country rationalizes every injustice under the pretext of protecting the country. The people swallow it simply because the authority has forced people to negate their ethical consciousness.

Ethical consciousness makes people aware of their rationality and ethical awareness which helps in proper judgment. We need the help of ethical awareness to live with dignity and our sociality or social existence depends on morality. Monitoring now and then deep inside the minds of people will ruin their subjectivity and autonomy and thus impair their ethical thinking. In the memoir *In Order to Live* by Yeonmi Park, she says

Anything I did overhear, I learned quickly not to repeat. I was never taught to express my opinion, never to question anything. I was taught to simply follow what the government told me to do or say or think. I actually believed that our dear leader, Kim Jong II, could read my mind, and I would be punished for my bad thoughts. If he didn't hear me, spies were everywhere, listening at the windows and watching in the schoolyard. We all belonged to *inminban* or neighbourhood people's units and we were ordered to inform on anyone who said the wrong thing. We lived in fear and almost everyone my mother included had a personal experience that demonstrated the dangers of talking (16).

Conclusion

Every society must abide by legal, moral and cultural principles that enhance cooperation among humans and enable their mutual trust and dependency. In every civilised society, autonomy and sociality are the crux of social order. Since the country's sociality is based on suffering and pain, it shatters the social relations and ruins the social ethics. Beneficence and fair justice are also added pillars which help the country flourish. In the absence of these values and morals, a country will witness its destruction. Pages of history have always shown the devastation of totalitarian countries which attribute less value to human dignity.

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