

# *The Fragments of Feminism in Kierkegaard's Thought*

Aleksandra Golubović, Dajana Rakić

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If there is one thing we can say about the Great Dane with certainty, it is that he was a rather interesting writer of his works. Though considered to be the “father of existentialism” as we got to know it today, he had led a life that enabled him to truly understand many features of existentialist approach to life. The one thing he always insisted on was that a man must find meaning within himself, for himself, and each man (thus, also, a woman) must do so individually. Since the aim of this paper is to show how and where does Kierkegaard prove to be a somewhat feminist apologist, though highly misogynistic at times, first we will show how his own life had had a tremendous impact on his philosophical works, and how writing some of those works under various pseudonyms may have affected our view of Kierkegaard as either misogynistic or slightly feministic. Secondly, we shall briefly revise how are the three stages of existence important in depicting not only a man's existence (referring to only a man by gender), but also a woman's, and how is she capable of reaching her own existence, if at all. Lastly, we shall aim at showing how a single individual, hence both a man and a woman in themselves, might reach what Kierkegaard views as one's mission – to become his or her own individual.

*Keywords:* Kierkegaard, Feminism, Women, Self-realization

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## *1. Personal life as a foundation for Kierkegaard's philosophy*

As it is stated in the title, in this paper we aim to explore the autobiographical elements present in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, which are relevant to his thoughts about women, having in mind he was one of the most influential philosophers of the period of contemporary philosophy. Therefore, we will primarily focus on his diary<sup>1</sup> as seen by C. Fabro (although not exclusively), which

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<sup>1</sup> C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), Morcelliana, Brescia 1980.

is, as we might assume, one of the main autobiographical sources<sup>2</sup> and where we will see what exactly he says about women.

In what way do authors choose the subjects they deal with in their works? Put in another words, why are philosophers interested in certain subjects, questions and problems, and not others? Primarily, everyone deals with that which troubles him. This indeed is true in some cases, and as we shall see in this paper, it certainly is in Kierkegaard's case<sup>3</sup>. Some universal questions troubled Kierkegaard, for example: questions about man, his existence, the purpose of his life, just to name a few. They seemed to trouble the Great Dane before even being molded into his philosophy and published – his life revolved around finding the answer to those questions for himself.

Among many works he had written, as we already mentioned before, Kierkegaard also wrote *Diaries*, as everyone who writes them does – primarily for himself<sup>4</sup>. We can discover a lot about Kierkegaard's personality but also about his main philosophical positions from his *Diaries*, so it should not come as a surprise that Cornelio Fabro would compare them to Augustine's *Confessions*<sup>5</sup>. The Danish philosopher wrote his *Diaries* from the time he was only twenty-one<sup>6</sup>. More often than not, he intertwines at least four disciplines – philosophy, psychology, theology and literature during his interpretations, which makes it rather difficult to understand and comprehend his views<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, it only makes it hard for us to understand his attitude towards women. In some places in his works, Kierkegaard talks about women condescendingly, while in others his judgment of women is entirely different. Besides that, he mostly keeps silent about women from his family, in his *Diaries*, which is also considered to bear some significance.

But, in order to say something about Kierkegaard and feminism, we ought to define i.e. see from up close what is it about. It is generally known there is no

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<sup>2</sup> See P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996; J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2007; G. Penzo, *Kierkegaard. La verità eterna che nasce nel tempo*, Messaggero, Padova 2000; S. Spera, *Introduzione a Kierkegaard*, Laterza, Bari 1996; H. Alastair, *Kierkegaard. A biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001; A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci (e-knjiga), Rijeka 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See *ivi*.

<sup>4</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, *Diario* (vol. 1-12), Fabro C. (ed.), Morcelliana, Brescia 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Comp. C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> See again *ivi*.

<sup>7</sup> More on this in the introductory study in *ivi*, p. 14.

agreement upon definition of feminism, although specific theme and notions, activism and political actions are most often mentioned and discussed. Moreover, feminism demonstrates a significant resistance towards objectivity and advocacy of universal thesis, and it supports the subjective and the emotional. In Kierkegaard's works we may find the analysis of untypical notions and outlooks on life, and hence a sort of a mind activism which has a practical action for its goal.

The other important question posing itself is how does an author (in this case, a philosopher) communicate with his readership? Primarily, we should take into consideration the following: Kierkegaard's opus falls under three different categories, in regard to the specific name he used to sign his works at a given time. Thus, three groups of works are: works published under a pseudonym, works published under his own name, and diaries (which were published posthumously by his brother Peter, a bishop)<sup>8</sup>. Actually, some of his most famous works were published under a pseudonym: writing as Victor Eremita in *Either/Or*, as Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, as Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*, to name a few.

As many philosophers do, Kierkegaard wanted to speak directly on some subjects, while on others he simply refused to be as direct, not wanting his position of author and his name influence the views and beliefs of his readers<sup>9</sup>. Not only does he as an author communicate with his audience (readers) to whom he conveys his views, thoughts and messages, but he also finds about theirs. He needed the form of rhetoric that would make people take responsibility for their own existential choices, rising beyond socially constructed norms and standards, as well as socially imposed identities. Hence, in some of his works he used irony, parody, satire, humor, and deconstructive methods in order to make conventionally accepted forms of knowledge and values not so easily attainable. The reader was to be forced to take individual responsibility for knowing who he or she is, and where he or she stands on the existential, ethical and religious issues. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are many ways in which this can be done. He can ask the people directly about their thoughts, and he can question them indirectly (make them think and articulate their beliefs). Kierkegaard used both direct and indirect manner to establish a communication

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<sup>8</sup> More in A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> More in *ivi*.

with his audience<sup>10</sup>. As mentioned earlier in this section, subjects he would usually discuss were mainly existential in character, those that troubled every person individually, and those which at one point in life are asked by almost every person<sup>11</sup>.

It is not always easy to distinguish professional from private discussions (and views) in the entirety of Kierkegaard's opus, for various reasons. Even more so, for his pseudonymity he says:

«My pseudonymity or polynymity has not had an accidental basis in my person ... but an essential basis in the production itself [...]. Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them [...]. Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine»<sup>12</sup>.

It is clear that Kierkegaard wishes to polarize his own self as an author from his pseudonyms, with equal respect to both. However, both are not to be mixed. Sometimes, alongside a pseudonym, we find Kierkegaard himself somewhere in the work, be it as a publisher in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*<sup>13</sup>. These are often considered to be his main philosophical works. He insists on the notion that views presented under a pseudonym should not, i.e. must not be ascribed to him as an author, i.e. that what is published under a pseudonym is not his opinion or belief. Roger Poole therefore believes that, on the one hand, we should acknowledge Kierkegaard's opinion that he cannot and should not be completely identified with his pseudonyms, and also, on the other hand, that the pseudonyms should not be mutually identified with each other (because they represent different possibilities of approach to certain subjects)<sup>14</sup>. However, by reading the diaries we can see that Kierkegaard did

<sup>10</sup> See S. Kierkegaard Søren, *Briciole di filosofia*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere II, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

<sup>11</sup> See more in A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Taken from J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard* – (i.e. from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 625-627).

<sup>13</sup> Both works were published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, and Kierkegaard appears in both as publisher. See more in S. Kierkegaard, *Postilla conclusiva non scientifica alle 'Briciole di filosofia'*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere II, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Comp. J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 72.

actually identify with many theses that he wrote under pseudonyms<sup>15</sup>. Thus, it is possible to draw a conclusion that many of his views, though presented under a pseudonym, were actually his own. That is why in this specific context the silence regarding women from his family is so intriguing. The fact he keeps silent about them indicates either of the following: either they are completely unimportant to him, thus he pays no attention to them, or they are extremely important to him but he refuses to discuss it in his works. It seems, or at least we aim to show that the latter is in question.

In the following paragraphs, we shall see in which ways does Kierkegaard use his own name and his pseudonyms to advocate certain standpoints and views, and in which cases does he bash women and revoke their ability to truly become an individual as such. Moreover, we shall see in which way his life and some unfortunate events dictates his philosophical works, for most of which he needs the safety of the cloaks that are pseudonyms.

In *Fear and Trembling*, which was published under a pseudonym and published by Kierkegaard himself, the Dane discusses an important religious subject: the relationship between man and God, and his relationship to God also. The impact his father and ex-fiancee had on his life and work is most visible especially in *Fear and Trembling*<sup>16</sup>. Of all the people in his life, his father and ex-fiancee Regine Olsen undoubtedly left him with the deepest marks, and for the most part, they both pervade his works. In a way, by interpreting the story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard told us his own story and the relationship he had with his father, or more precisely, the difficulties they encountered in their relationship (all in the hopes of his story having a happy ending). By telling that story, he expressed his faith in establishing a better relationship with his father, and also his ex-fiancee. Hence, Abraham's story had served its purpose to express the indirect speech about sacrifice almost everyone in this world has to make, and about the future compensation of losses. Just as Abraham was aware of the danger of losing his son, Kierkegaard had also lost his father and his fiancee, believing he can regain them in the next life, in eternity.

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<sup>15</sup> Comp. *ivi*, p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, *Timore e tremore*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere I, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

The influence his father had on his works has been noticed by many<sup>17</sup>. Personally, Kierkegaard inherited his father's melancholy, sense of anxiety, and his pietistic emphasis on the Christian faith and values, as well as creative imagination and tendency towards philosophical argumentation<sup>18</sup>. His father's wealth has allowed Kierkegaard to pursue his life as a philosopher and a writer in a leisurely manner. The theme of sacrifice occurring in Kierkegaard's works is significantly justified once we take into consideration his father had seen the lives of five of his children taken away by the age of 34, believing this was his punishment for cursing the name of God in his youth, and for impregnating Ane out of wedlock. However, Søren and his older brother Peter had both outlived their father, though that might serve to explain the urgency with which Kierkegaard was driven to write in such a haste in the years leading up to his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>19</sup>.

Kierkegaard's personal goal was to find the truth for himself, and as an author, he wanted to help his readers do the same<sup>20</sup>. What he aims for is the subjective truth, impossible to be communicated directly, thus his role boils down to indirect encouragement, provocation and 'forcing' others to think and form opinions<sup>21</sup>. Indirect communication has the advantage of unburdening the reader of the author's influence<sup>22</sup>. Kierkegaard's dream was to become a Christian by way of helping others to do the same, so he, just like Socrates, tried to be the 'midwife' who helps the birth of their 'truth'<sup>23</sup>. He published a shorter piece, titled *On My Work as an Author*, in which he claims, regarding his authorship, that he always had a maieutic goal, and that means the absence of an authorial position<sup>24</sup>. He wanted the readers to be able to think and make decisions independently about

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<sup>17</sup> See J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; G. Penzo, *Kierkegaard. La verità eterna che nasce nel tempo*, op. cit.; S. Spera, *Introduzione a Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> See more in A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Comp. J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> Comp. *ivi*, p. 77. Comp. also A.G. Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, University of Minnesota Press 2002, p. 22. See also T. Di Stefano, *Il paradigma della verità esistenziale secondo S. Kierkegaard*, Galeno, Perugia 1988, pp. 73-90.

<sup>22</sup> Comp. J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> Comp. *ivi*, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Comp. S. Kierkegaard, *Sulla mia attività di scrittore*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere I, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995; Id., *Il punto di vista della mia attività di scrittore*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere I, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

what he put in front of them, not being burdened by an author or authority<sup>25</sup>. All things considered, we might conclude that pseudonyms can be, at least to some degree, related to his personal views and opinions<sup>26</sup>.

Though much unappreciated and scorned back in his day, Kierkegaard had eventually become an important part of late 19th century intellectual life, and a founder of existentialism as known to us today. His insistence that an individual – hence, a man and a woman, respectively – must find meaning within himself and for himself in his own way, may have fueled some feminist interpretations, and we shall see in which way is it possible to read Kierkegaard as either a complete misogynist or a slight feminist.

Kierkegaard's relationship to his mother, notably invisible in his work, shall not be taken into further consideration in this paper. However, some might even pose significance to the absence of her mentioning in his works, remembering Kierkegaard as an silent advocate of indirect communication. We shall leave that to others' efforts<sup>27</sup>. Our primary focus here is on his savagely broken engagement to Regine Olsen. His infatuation with Regine, inflaming his poetic production, was crucial for aiming his life on a course. However, breaking of the engagement may have allowed Kierkegaard to devote himself ascetically to his religious purpose, escaping the standard of married bourgeois life.

Though breaking the engagement might be viewed as a reaction of despise to his father's sexual excesses, it is more likely he had reached the age of philosophical maturity of his own works, where he realized the Christian life necessarily entailed constant anxiety, suffering, and despair in faith's absurd<sup>28</sup>. Even if it may seem he had genuinely loved Regine, it is evident he was unable to reconcile the prospect of marriage with his vocation as a writer and a philosopher. He could not bring himself to marry her for the sole reason of his constant melancholy, and his passion for silent, pure Christianity. However, later he would beg his fiancée Regine to forgive him his actions: «Above all, forget the

<sup>25</sup> J. Watkin, *Historical dictionary of Kierkegaard's philosophy*, Oxford 2001, p. 198.

<sup>26</sup> Comp. C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), op. cit., Introductory study, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> See J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> See more in I. Adinolfi, *Il cerchio spezzato*, Città Nuova, Roma 2000; E. Castoro, *Esistenza in preghiera sulle orme di Kierkegaard*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2001; B. Faber, *La contraddizione sofferente*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 1998; M. Iiritano, *Disperazione e fede in Søren Kierkegaard*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1999.

one who writes this; forgive someone who, whatever else, could not make a girl happy»<sup>29</sup>.

Though in some parts of his works he is clearly capable of idealizing women, especially innocent maidens, he found the union of marriage utterly frightening, an obstacle to his own salvation, to making himself the “universal individual”. By breaking the engagement off, he also freed himself from any further personal, sensual entanglements with women, leading him to objectifying women as ideal creatures, and thus conjoining to the patriarchal traditional social roles of women as mainly mothers and wives. But, what is of the most importance is that ultimately, regardless of one's life circumstances, social roles and gender, Kierkegaard regarded every person equal before God, in the light of eternity to come.

## 2. *The importance of stages of existence in One's self-realization*

When discussing possible feminist points present in Kierkegaard's works, it is important to recognize how he perceives one's existence as such, whether a “one” is a man or a woman. As his readers already know, existence of an individual is divided into three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. All three represent developmental phases<sup>30</sup> in one's journey to the ultimate goal – achieving religion, or becoming a Christian<sup>31</sup>. In this division into three stages, Kierkegaard is somewhat similar to Hegel, who recognized main stages on the way to the Absolute (being, essence, and the notion). Characteristically for Kierkegaard, he refuses to describe his own stages of existence in a systematic manner, in order to avoid objectivity<sup>32</sup>. Here, we will shortly outline all three stages of existence as seen by Kierkegaard, and then we shall discuss how they might be reflected onto feminist view, because women too should be able to reach them.

The first stage of existence is *aesthetic* stage, in which one is concerned primarily with what is natural, corporeal, sensual. Though its name might suggest, it is not in any relation to something beautiful, nor it is devoted to beauty, but it denotes such a life which is oriented towards the goods of the senses. Drowning himself in worldly pleasures, the aestheticist takes pride in his

<sup>29</sup> Alastair, *Kierkegaard. A biography*, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> J. Watkin, *Historical dictionary of Kierkegaard's philosophy*, op. cit., p. 198.

<sup>31</sup> See J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, *La malattia mortale*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere III, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995; Id., *Esercizio del cristianesimo*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere III, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

“closeness” to reality, which is in fact a make-believe. He is not, in any way, consciously aware of his shallow existence, floating on its very surface, not reaching depths in any way<sup>33</sup>. The aestheticist lives for here and now, surrendering himself (or herself) to passion and desire. However, the aestheticist does make a choice, but a rather self-contradictory one:

«The aesthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity... If one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment»<sup>34</sup>.

The second stage is *ethical* one, and it occurs at the very moment when the pleasures of aesthetic stage fail to satisfy. One realizes she must build her life on morality, and have its foundations firmly in ethics<sup>35</sup>. At this moment, the individual (whether a woman or a man) realizes her primary goal is to satisfy to the demands of moral obligations (either universal or cultural), and moral conformity is set as the primary goal. However, it should be noted and understood that the transition needed from aesthetic to ethical stage brings great dissatisfaction – the individual comes to understand that she cannot live to the demands of morality, and she understands that later than sooner. Her painstaking efforts to conform to it make her more and more aware that she cannot conform to morality. Thus, crushing guilt, suffering and utter despair ensue. Regardless of the gender they assume, they realize marriage is not their ultimate goal<sup>36</sup>.

Reaching beyond ethical stage, an individual comes to the most progressive stage, the *religious* one. Once an individual realizes she has lived, and still is living in dissatisfaction with her achievements so far, she might be able to understand there is only one way to go – through faith. Understanding faith as the utmost absurd, and taking that famous “leap of faith” in her efforts to reach religiousness and God as such, she becomes individual reborn, whose existence is

<sup>33</sup> See C. Fabro, *Diario* (vol. 1), op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> H. Hong, V. Howard and H. Edna, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1997, p. 73.

<sup>35</sup> See more in J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> See more in A. Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the limits of the ethical*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York 1997.

finally given meaning<sup>37</sup>. By choosing to become religious individual, she escapes existence characterized by absurdity and suffering in despair. She gives herself into His hands through faith, with her whole being, however vulnerable and unable it may seem to Kierkegaard. By living the Christian faith and Christian way, she reaches a subjective relationship to an object which can never be completely known, but only believed in. She is constantly renewing her passionate belief in Jesus Christ, which is offensive to reason, since it only exists in the face of the absurd (the paradox of the eternal, infinite God incarnated in time and space as a finite mortal)<sup>38</sup>. It might be interesting to notice how Kierkegaard contemplates that every individual goes through the developmental phases (from an aestheticist to a religious individual) and only in the final phase, in the religious one, the individual reaches the peak. In this context, i.e. only in religion is everyone equal before God, whether it be a man or a woman.

### 3. *Misogyny in Kierkegaard's words*

It has not gone unnoticed that Kierkegaard had, to some extent, shown a certain amount of misogyny in his works. Either signed by his real name, or usually, under a pseudonym, it may be correlated that these misogynistic views could have their source in his own personal relationship to Regine Olsen, a relationship that was rather tragic and lacking a happy-ever-after. Knowing he has incorporated most of his personal life and experiences into his philosophy, i.e. trying to live his life in a rather Socratic way, it is not surprising to notice the omnipresent, slight despise towards women.

*The Seducer's Diary* in *Either/Or* is the foremost example of his misogyny: this is the half-philosophical, half-personal display of his own contemplations in a form of a diary, under the safety of a pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio<sup>39</sup>. In this work, Johannes presents us with an absolute subject, one that is complete and omnipotent, deciding on the fate of a woman, who is in herself completely unformed, like a piece of coal that has not been made a diamond yet (or it ever

<sup>37</sup> See more in J.D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, *Briciole di filosofia*, Fabro C. (ed.), Opere II, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1995.

<sup>39</sup> See more in J. D. Caputo, *How to read Kierkegaard*, op. cit.; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, op. cit.

will be). He acts somewhat as his own personal “god”, elevating<sup>40</sup> the woman up to his level of subjectivity, in order to educate her towards her self-consciousness.

Johannes, under the Kierkegaard's pen, has assumed the role of a divine subject who guides Cordelia towards self-consciousness. Even if she believes it is by her own will to do so, he insists upon subjecting her to male absolute subjectivity, the one that remains hidden from her. The very act of engagement is turning into an act, a performance on how to become a subject, and Cordelia believes to be regaining her freedom once she breaks the engagement. But, her freedom still remains under the dome of an omniscient, male consciousness. She is only able to rule her own self by means of a man and through his self, and not her own. She achieves a phantom personhood, thus becoming semi-autonomous agent of her self.

The very irony of engagement and even marriage is most beautifully expressed in the following citation:

«If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it... Laugh at the world's follies, you will regret it; weep over them, you will also regret that... Believe a woman, you will regret it, believe her not, you will also regret that... Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will also regret that... This, gentlemen, is the sum and substance of all philosophy»<sup>41</sup>.

It is quite clear his own thoughts were torn between the opposites, and he cannot truly find himself content and satisfied with either.

His further contempt towards woman's inability to fully achieve her own self-consciousness and attain her own existence in the same way a man is able to do is evident in the following:

«Woman [...] is a flower, as the poets like to say, and even the spiritual in her is present in a vegetative manner. She is wholly subject to nature, and hence only aesthetically free. In a deeper sense she first becomes free by her relation to man, and when man courts her properly, there can be no question of a choice»<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Comp. S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part 1. (ed. and tr. by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1987, p. 337.

<sup>41</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (tr. by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, Princeton University Press), London 1944, pp. 30-31.

<sup>42</sup> S. Kierkegaard, (tr. by Gerd Gillhoff), *Diary of a Seducer*, Continuum, New York 2006, p. 137.

In a quest to find a feminist lines in the works of the Great Dane, a feminist philosopher might find herself torn between having liberating and challenging feelings. From the above stated, we have already seen he is not able to completely reconcile his opposing thoughts, those signed by his real name and those under the mask of pseudonyms. Misogynist statements appear all too often in his works, no doubt about it, but we should not consider him to be a misogynist in a completely straightforward way. We might be jumping into conclusions, and as philosophers all too often do, we should give it some further thought. Knowing that he addresses his reader (regardless of gender) indirectly via pseudonyms (among all thirteen of them), he assumes different voices or roles, different points of view that he himself might not have been able to express and sign it as himself. It might be even thought he is writing different genres of his own philosophy, toying with his contemplations in various forms, aiming at his audience strategically through irony, farce, satire etc. Taking into consideration the fact he wanted to draw attention from himself as the author, and to lessen the possible impact his real name might have had onto his audience, it might be all too soon to conclude he is a misogynist. Finally, having in mind he thinks all individuals, hence both women and men, are equal before God in the light of eternity to come, there might be some space for argumentation in which women are still able to find their own voice, on their own, in themselves, and reach their “universal individuality”, their own subjectivity, free from all ties but that towards God.

However, it should not go unmentioned that Kierkegaard's existentialism had influenced one of the most prominent names in feminism and later existentialism of the 20th century: Simone de Beauvoir. Pushing aside hegelian objectivity, she developed an existential ethics, the so-called *ethics of ambiguity*, under the influence of Kierkegaard's works<sup>43</sup>. She never hid the fact her relational, individualistic ethics had its roots in Kierkegaard's existentialism, and within the framework of her existential ethics, she contemplates the issue of the existentially seen human freedom, refuting universal, objective and strictly rational systems as such. All crucial questions that bore any significance to Kierkegaard were also crucial to de Beauvoir, especially the question of relation between the truth and

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<sup>43</sup> For more details, see S. de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Citadel Press, New York 2000.

the subject as such<sup>44</sup>. The only difference is that, unlike Kierkegaard, de Beauvoir does not include God as a factor in her existentialism. Taking that into account, and refusing any universal principles of authority to be the ones that govern and direct the individual's doings, it should be noted that «without any moral absolutes to fall back on, humans are forced to own their ethical decisions to a greater extent»<sup>45</sup>. And taking action, or more even – taking account for one's actions, is something that essentially terrifies people, since it is much easier to have some sort of an Absolute to blame for. The final thoughts of Beauvoir's is that there is no comfort in the universal systems, and we ought not seek one in universal objectivity.

#### 4. *Mary Magdalene as an epitome of a Christian feminist*

In this part of the paper, we aim to display Mary Magdalene as the epitome of feminism, both then and now, in the terms of Kierkegaard's development of one's existence. In other words, we shall try to depict our interpretation of Mary Magdalene as the sole individual who has succeeded in reaching her own self-realization, who has gone through all three kierkegaardian stages of existence, and who has surrendered herself to the ultimate being encircling her existence – to God.

Early Christianity had actually started off in a somewhat proto-feminist spirit, where women were seen as equal to men, and were encouraged to help spread the Word of God. Unfortunately, with the passing of ages and the strengthening of the Church and its patriarchal values, male authority had erased women out of their societies and the roles they had assumed up until that moment. With the admirable figure of the exemplified Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, the women back then had been urged by men to stay at home, tend to their families, and become submissive to their men (husbands and fathers primarily)<sup>46</sup>.

However, being the highest epitome of virginity and motherhood, Virgin Mary was and still remains to be an impossible role model to look up to and an ideal

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<sup>44</sup> See more about this in:

<https://irishsecure.com/books/The%20ETHICS%20OF%20AMBIGUITY.pdf> or in S. de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> See Sipe, *Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship*, p. 19, as found in <https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/146/117> (September 1st 2018).

<sup>46</sup> See more in Sipe, *Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship*, as found in <https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/146/117> (September 1st 2018).

that is out of one's reach<sup>47</sup>. Her only role, though beloved as an icon, was to help keep women “at a leash” in their subservience, inside their homes, like prisoners. Of course, each side has the other, so the opposing image to the virgin was that of a whore, and with Church teaching sex, sensuality, women's bodies and women's parts were dangerous, it was understandable how it all led to death and ultimately, spending eternity in fire (according to Church). The power of the woman's body to create and bear a child, the power of lovemaking, the power of their sensuality refused to be acknowledged as holy. The only lovemaking allowed was the one done in the dark, inside the necessary wedlock (the one that Kierkegaard's father lacked), for the sole purpose of procreation<sup>48</sup>.

Since women of that time, and times to come afterwards, could not be able to follow the purity of Virgin Mary, the ultimate epitome of a perfect Mother, they had to turn to other epitomes of feminism – thus, Mary Magdalene had become, for modern feminists as well, an inspiring figure which challenged misogynistic, patriarchal ideas. Throughout history, Mary Magdalene has been re-imagined to serve different patriarchal purposes and for that matter, different cultures had their own versions of her story, some more, and some less feministic. However, she still acts as a figure for female liberation and is considered to be an indirect prophet of feminism, as well.

As told throughout the ages, the story says Mary Magdalene was a beautiful prostitute who heard Jesus Christ preach, and she later repented for her life of sin, living as a temptress. Once Jesus had forgiven for her sins, as he always does to those who show sincere repentance, she became one of his disciples from his early ministry. She stood underneath the cross at his crucifixion, she never denied him nor ran away, she had seen him buried, and was the first to find his tomb empty and to witness his resurrection.

Mary Magdalene was not just a disciple, but a disciple who had a very privileged position – she attained her “higher” status thanks to her proximity to Jesus in terms of their pupil-teacher relationship. Knowing that all disciples had to learn from him via their proximity to him, it is evident that Mary Magdalene had been very close to Jesus, maybe even more so than the others. Through her deep knowledge of his teachings, she somewhat assumed a leader's role as a key Apostle, regardless of the despise from a patriarchal society and the church. Being a woman surrounded by patriarchal oppression, her resistance and her

<sup>47</sup> See S. Kierkegaard, *Timore e tremore*, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> See more in I. Adinolfi, *Il cerchio spezzato*, op. cit., pp. 167-208.

struggles are only highlighted and that much more appreciated by women (and men) today. She refused to have her voice suppressed by patriarchy as such, and thus poses an authority with which patriarchy does not know how to deal with.

Seeing her life through Kierkegaardian stages of existence, it might be possible to conclude she represents a perfect example of an aestheticist living as a temptress, thus living in sin, then reaching over her own morality when she accepted and followed the teachings of Jesus Christ, and finally achieving ultimate self-realization through God, by becoming the Christian. Being a human being first and foremost, it is hard for Mary Magdalene to completely realize how exactly should she reach the final stage. For example, in the scene when she grasps Jesus, his response is «Do not hold on to me» (John 20:17), which might be interpreted as his urging to take her impure hands off him, as many anti-feministic interpreters might foolishly do. However, Jesus seems to be teaching Mary, even in death, and he is telling her to let go because of his ascension to the Father, and he knows she needs faith to continue teaching after his physical being is completely gone. As Kieffer notices, «Mary needs to hear that, after Jesus' appearances, faith, in the absence of physical contact, is the only important thing»<sup>49</sup>. It is reasonable that she appears to be distraught about the physical loss of her teacher and her Lord Jesus, but she resumes her role as the preacher of his workings, his faith, and his way. By assuming and living through all three stages as depicted by Kierkegaard here, and by rising above aesthetic and ethic levels through leap of faith, she is a fully encircled self-realized individual, a perfect Christian as ever imagined by Kierkegaard.

### 5. Conclusion

With his philosophical endeavours Kierkegaard had influenced both the establishment and development of new philosophical schools and views (existentialism, etc.). Moreover, his contribution is seen even in the development of feminist philosophy – insofar that, just like the feminists, he had given a new approach to perceiving many philosophical themes, especially on the level of viewing existential and ethical (and religious) issues. Instead of pinpointing that which is general, he suggests a more individualistic approach, and even more so, it may be said he advocates active engagement in an individual and his or her

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<sup>49</sup> See Kieffer, R. *John*, in J. Muddiman and J. Barton (eds.), *The Gospels. Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 238.

care for their own realization, instead of objective he accentuates subjective dimension, instead of theory he suggests giving more value to action. Furthermore, he also draws the attention to almost neglected notions such as: possibility, fear, anxiety, despair, hopelessness, emotions, subjective, open-mindedness, individual, lived experience, etc. – notions that are closely connected to life and everyone's thinking (and those are also a part of major notions of feminist philosophy). Generally speaking, he accentuates the value of an individual and his or her capabilities, and valuing those aspects of reality that were ignored so far.

May we, then, finally say what is Kierkegaard's outlook on women? The answer to this question does not come easy for so many abovementioned reasons (the use of pseudonyms, the possibility of various views and valuing the same appearance, an event, a person, a case, etc.). Namely, as we have already seen in the article – in his youth, Kierkegaard was more prone to stereotypes about women, while in his ripe age he was at least sharing high opinion for some women (such as Mary Magdalene, Virgin Mary, etc.), which only goes to say he thought of them as role models and the pillars of society he lived in. He valued them and respected them just like Abraham and Christ, who were heroes of the faith to Kierkegaard. His stages of existence also presuppose an individual's growth, so it must not come as a surprise that the last stage is a religious one and that he values it as the highest, because only then a basic equality between people, both man and women, young and old, etc. is made. If we view his philosophy as a mission that every individual needs to fulfill, then women just like men have their own final life goal, which is to reach a self-realization through relationship to God (and, in other words, that means we are all equal before God). If we look at feminism through the aspect of calling into action by means of taking a stand for one's own realization and thinking, then Kierkegaard had indeed paved a significant path.