

The Origin of Sexism in Ancient Greek Philosophy*

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Abstract

This academic article aims to study “the origin of sexism in ancient Greek philosophy”. It found that there are three aspects: (1) The Greek ancient myth about a dream of womanless world influent what they appear in the past and now. This ancient belief plays significant role in trampling women. (2) The doctrine of Judaism and Christianity place woman in the unfair position since the beginning. (3) Men philosophers see the same truth about woman. Plato betrayed what his teacher, Socrates believes about the woman. He intends to interpret to support his own ideas about man is the perfect human and woman is imperfect.

Keywords: Woman; Sexism; ancient Greek philosophy

Introduction

Greece dreamed of womanless world. This idea become the origin of western thought. Since Greece was considered as the source of all knowledge that shape western thought and western culture. In this article, it will trace back to how ancient Greece thought about the concepts of woman, sexuality, and woman in religion as well as in philosophy.

Woman is always a controversial subject in the world. Even though, woman nowadays have the same right as man, the half of the world is still fighting for their right. More importantly, in the deep thought of man remains the ideas of woman as low citizen or not equal physically and mentally. So, the author will make it clear the definitions of woman in mental and physical concepts. This will help to understand the basic of woman by her nature

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and the definitions. However, it has to be tracing back to the original and influent thought about woman in ancient western world in both religion and philosophy. Both fields are the main source of western ideas about woman.

Greece was considered as the central of the knowledge of the world. It is impossible to accept that Greek philosophy had shape the western thought. It means that what Greece thought about woman will shape the whole culture of the west. So that it is crucial to look back to the notion about woman from ancient Greek myths and so called wiseman, the ancient Greek philosophers.

The author will try best to raise up the original thought that place woman in very less and low status in almost every field. This is not a phenomenon or the nature of woman that live their life in very low social status and less opportunity. In order to understand the problem of woman sexuality in the present day, it need to detect back to what they define woman in the ancient Greece, the source of western world.

The concepts of woman in western religion

It is very important to look back to what religion think about woman since religion is much older than philosophy. Religion influenced the thought of philosopher much or less. Woman was framed since the beginning of the human history by those western religions as sinner. All woman is born a long with sin and disobeying.

I will start with what Christianity and Judaism treated woman since the beginning of its religion. Christianity and Judaism was unpopular with what they think about woman because what the Bible written about woman is unacceptable for woman now, especially for so called existentialist feminism. In the Jews' heavenly book, the Torah, woman has always been looked down on and humiliated. For example, we read there that a father has the right to sell his daughter like a slave and she does not have the right to disobey his decision. According to this rule, the daughter or a female is an object or property and has no human value and grace (S. M. Khamenei, 2007: 7). By this idea, woman was treated badly. Woman was just an object that belong to the family. She can be sold as a slave without any wright to protect herself.

In another place in the Torah, "Eve was born from Adam's rib, and thus woman must always obey man. Men's ownership of women originates in this very self-made claim concerning creation. This very distorted claim, whose original form is unknown to us, has been interpreted in different ways by Christian and Jewish scholars, including Paul, the founder of Christianity. In his letter to Corinthians, he writes, "For the man is not of the woman; but the

woman of the man: for neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.” (S. M. Khamenei, 2007: 7). Woman was created to obey man only and man own woman. It was wrong since the beginning. How come those saints, so called the wisemen, had the ideas of putting woman in the very low position. There must be a hidden purpose beyond this.

The reason beyond this is surly the power of ruling ideas in the past. Man do not want woman to have those power and do not want them to realize those power as well. Half of the world is man and the other is woman. It might be very difficult if woman have the power. Man has the ideas of controlling woman not by physical power only but also the belief. The comparison of man is the servant of God and woman is the servant of man is a rational idea for man to keep the woman in low position in ruling.

From the past up to now, woman has been considered as a tool to comfort man even though, behind the success of man is always a woman. She provides man love, pleasure, ideas, and children to continue man’s ambition. So how can not realize this. Probably he is not wise enough. How about male philosopher who is considered as wiseman, who seeks for the truth of everything. They must have the truth of the woman. In contrast, they are not different. Here are some ideas from Christian philosophers about woman: Augustine says that woman is not a human being; rather, she is a receptacle for the reproduction of men’s species. Some of the other early leaders of Christianity, such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and even Thomas Aquinas, had a very low opinion of woman. They considered her responsible for all the pains and hardships from which human beings suffer due to the Fall of Man. Thomas Aquinas also said, “Woman shoulders the load of the sin of humanity.” (S. M. Khamenei, 2007: 9).

It is true that those philosophers were influent by Greek philosophy since Greek philosophy was the father of all western philosophy. However, it is also true that Greek philosophers were influent by Greek mythology that believe that man can continue their line by their own. This idea has put woman in the unnecessary position. The myth about all Athenians was born from earth not woman is clear that influencing Greek philosophers to believe in order to support their hidden benefit.

The woman in ancient Greece

In a serious study of Vigdis Songe-Møller about the birth of sexism in the western world can explain clearly how ancient Greek think about woman. The Athenians believed they could

trace their descent back to Erichthonius, who was also called the 'earth-born', and they were proud to call themselves 'the earth-born race'. This autochthonic myth relates the circumstances of Erichthonius' birth. Athena once asked Hephaestus, the Olympian blacksmith, to make her a set of weapons. Hephaestus gladly accepted the commission, but declined any payment for his labors. He said he would do it for love. Without considering what this might entail, Athena visited Hephaestus in his smithy to watch him at work on her weapons. Hephaestus availed himself of the opportunity by attempting to ravish the goddess, but Athena proved an unconquerable virgin. As she tore herself from Hephaestus' embrace, his seed fell on the earth, the soil of Athens, and inseminated that instead of her. And in due course the earth gave birth to a boy, Erichthonius (Vigdis Songe-Møller, 2002: 4).

Evidently, they dream of a world where the female sex is no longer needed, a world where men get along fine on their own. There are few places in Greek literature where the dream of women's superfluity is expressed so bluntly, yet there are good reasons to suppose that many aspects of ancient Greek culture were nourished by some such ideal of male self-sufficiency (Vigdis Songe-Møller, 2002: 3). This idea of self-sufficiency more or less was influential Greek philosophers in that time. To be truly free is to be independent, to be depend on woman in what so ever necessary is not self-sufficiency including reproduction. However, Socrates may define self-sufficiency. He is so thoroughly ruled by reason that he seems liberated even from his own body; neither cold nor alcohol nor naked flesh seem to have the slightest effect on him. Socrates is the most self-sufficient person one can imagine. He needs neither food nor clothes nor the love and care of others. All he needs is the satisfaction afforded by reason. And reason approves only of what is clear in sense and free of conflict. The Good cannot be partially good and partially bad, but has to be good in its entirety. The Good and the Just are self-identical, and therefore harmonious entities. But for Plato the body is something very different; it is the locus of arbitrariness, plurality, conflict and change (Vigdis Songe-Møller, 2002: 86).

Socrates' notions about the difference in sexuality is simple- the one who give birth and the one who begets, the short hair and the long hair. He seems to regard sex as equal. In ruling state, he suggests that the best of all women should participate in governing the state. However, Plato seems to betray his ideas by defining the male guardians as the best citizens and female guardians as the best women. Plato speaks of the most masculine of women and Plato's aim of his inclusion women among rulers is not to place woman on an equal footing with man, but rather to negate sexual difference and to cultivate a single sex. For Plato this

means that, in its ideal state, the human would be one-sexed and not dependent on anything other than the form of which it is itself a copy. If we were then to ask what that form of the human is, the answer would have to be the soul, for the soul is essentially sexless, although on closer analysis it will turn out to be characterized by masculine ideals (Vigdis Songe-Møller, 2002: 87).

Plato described the differences between man and woman very clearly. His ideas was always that man was higher than woman almost in every section. He explained that “Male Forms is active like a father, but female Forms is receptacle passive like a mother. Souls fall first into male bodies, but Souls of cowardly or immoral men fall into female bodies (Prudence Allen, RSM, 1987: 91).

This is very uncomfortable reading. It does not suggest, of course, that Plato’s views on women are worse than those of any other Greek of the day; but it does not suggest that they are any better either. And to be sure we fully understand them, we need to spend a moment looking at the precise import for him of the word ‘inferior’. A hint of it comes in the Republic, when he talks of the ‘womanish, petty minds’ of those who wait till the battle is over and then rush onto the battle field to rob the dead of their armor and accoutrements. The clear suggestion is that women have a tendency towards cowardice and this is reinforced by a strong passage in the Timaeus, where he talks about how reincarnation in a woman’s body is the punishment for a man who in a previous life was characterized by ‘cowardice and injustice’ (T.Robinson, R. Svetlov, 2017: 71).

Aristotle is described as the founder of sex polarity because he was the first philosopher to argue consistently that there are philosophically significant differences between men and women and that man is by nature superior to woman. A summary of Aristotle’s theory follows: Man is superior contrary, hot like form, and active but woman is inferior contrary cold, like matter, passive, and privation. Man is fertile seed and provides soul but woman no seed and provides body. Man is rational soul capable of ruling irrational soul, wisdom, and public speech but woman is rational soul without authority over irrational soul, opinion, and silence (Prudence Allen, RSM, 1987: 92).

Rome took her learning, her culture, and her assumptions about the world from Greece. Greek was the everyday language of the eastern half of the empire, but it was also the language of learning throughout. Roman scholars wrote their learned treatises in Greek, just as, centuries later, Renaissance scholars would write theirs in Latin. All the popular schools of philosophy had been founded by Greek thinkers, and Greek learning shaped the attitude

of every thinking Roman on just about every subject. In general, those Greek philosophers had little use for women as people: But Hermippus, in his *Lives*, tells about Thales, the story that some tell of Socrates. He used to say that he thanked Fortune for three things. “First, that I was born a human and not a beast. Second, that I was born a man and not a woman. Third, that I was born a Greek and not a barbarian.” (Mike Aquilina and Christopher Bailey, 2012: 12)

In all these historical cultures, whether Greek, Roman, Jewish, or Christian, woman is nothing but a tool for the man’s enjoyment and for serving him. She lacks the right to independent ownership even if she inherits the property or earns it through hard work. Even nowadays, in spite of the apparent changes and given titles, women are still wanted for the satisfaction of men’s desires and whims or for working in offices and factories. Even, a woman’s family name, which is an important part of her identity, still depends on her husband’s, and if she marries for a second time, she has to change her family name. This is because her identity depends on his and, of course, on his enjoyment and sexual satisfaction (S. M. Khamenei, 2007: 18).

What happen in that time, if a woman is wise enough to be self-sufficiency. A woman who have chance to be educated equally as man and wise enough to lead her life without man was considered as a witch or a pagan. Even though, it was not quite equal among male and female philosophers, but female philosophers were not treated as a risky thing. In religion, it was totally different. The best example is about what Christianity did to a famous female philosopher in Alexandria. It is a martyr in the history of philosophy.

Hypatia was a woman who has great opportunity to have education as man do in that time due to her father was the head of the academy in Alexandria. Therefore, she was qualified to teach in the academy. Alexandria was the center of knowledge which attract all people to seek for knowledge and most of them were rich and aristocratic. Her teaching was purely about Neo-Platonic philosophy. All her students respected and worship her as a noble one. By her wisdom, most of the time she was asked for advice from the head of the city who was also her student. Her advice made Christian mob not happy because they were trying to have only faith, the faith in God. She was considered as threat to them and this led to her unfair and terrible death. Tragically it was this civic-mindedness and her influence amongst the powerful that eventually led to her brutal death, which is not a tale for the faint-hearted. From around 382–412 CE the Pope of Alexandria was a man named Theophilus, who maintained a good relationship with Hypatia, despite their different beliefs. However, after Theophilus died, his nephew Cyril fought to take power of the city. One of Cyril’s critics was

Hypatia's friend Orestes, who asked for her advice in dealing with the conflict. Rumors sprang up amongst Cyril's supporters that Hypatia was at fault for Orestes and Cyril's inability to reconcile their differences, which was leading to greater violence in the city. Shortly after these rumors began, a group of monks called the Parabalani raided Hypatia's carriage while she was travelling. The mob stripped her naked and tore her body to pieces using what is translated from Greek as either oyster shells or roof tiles, before dragging her limbs through town. They then set her remains on fire (Rebecca Buxton, Lisa Whiting, 2020: 29).

It is very unfair what they did to a wise woman as Hypatia. It cannot deny that those ideas of misogyny are from the influential notion of ancient Greek myth, religion, and male philosophers. It is clearly not a phenomenon. There is a purposely intention of them to put woman in that situation. The history of philosophy has not done women justice. To see this, you only have to look at some of the recent books published on the topic. In *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers* only two women feature, with Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir taking the seats of honor. In *The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Turing*, no women made the cut. Each chapter in that particular book was written by a contemporary philosopher, all of whom are also men. At the time of writing, a newly published book by A. C. Grayling, boldly titled *The History of Philosophy*, includes no sections on women philosophers. The book does include a three-and-a-half-page review of 'Feminist Philosophy' in which only one woman philosopher – Martha Nussbaum – is mentioned by name. You're beginning to sense a theme (Rebecca Buxton, Lisa Whiting, 2020: 8).

Mary Ellen Waithe in her great wondering how women philosophers disappeared from the history. Then she took a deep study in it. She found that there are hundreds of them did exist in the world. There must be somethings wrong about it. If we trace the history of philosophy to Hesiod, we know that philosophy, at least in its written form, was engaging men since at least the 8th century, B.C. Verbal philosophizing no doubt predates Hesiod, but without a record of that oral history, we do now know by how much. There is a record that Pythagoras received his aesthetic principles from a woman priestess-philosopher, Themistoclea, but there are no further details to be found about her. Theano of Crotona, wife of Pythagoras of Samos, was from an aristocratic, Orphic family. There is a document attributed to her, in which she discusses Pythagorean metaphysics, and there are records of her apothegms from which we can sketch her views on marriage, sex, women, and ethics. Little more is known about Theano, except that her daughters Damo, Myia and Arignote were also reputed to be among the original Pythagorean philosophers. Other women, including Phintys

of Sparta, Aesara of Lucania, Perictione, Perictione II and Theano II were Pythagoreans, but they lived several centuries after the members of the original Pythagorean community (Mary Ellen Waithe, 1987: 5).

It is certain that all those men involving in making wise women disappear from history so that women are always less important and obey to what men need. Plato and Aristotle involved with making woman less important in Greek philosophy. There is no logically necessary reason why misogyny should be any less acute in this universe than it is in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, yet in many cases it is. I consider it important to bear in mind that in antiquity there was in fact an intellectual perspective capable of accommodating sexual difference. This, however, was not destined to become the dominant current in European philosophy, which has largely preferred to regard - and has remained faithful to - Plato and Aristotle as its origins (Vigdis Songe-Møller, 2002: 88).

The origin of sexism in ancient Greek philosophy

By the information above, there is no reason to deny that man has nothing to do with it. It is clearly not a phenomenon. It is only an academic bias but also it is the involving of the belief that tend to support man's benefit and power. In the two most influent societies, religion and philosophy plays significant role to keep woman under their control. It is common for the leaders of religion who treat woman as what appear in the doctrine. It is possible that they are blind by faith and they keep practicing this idea according to the doctrine.

For instance, there is no excuse for men philosophers who their purpose is the seek for the truth and they never find the truth about woman. They love and live with them, they eat with them, they associate with them, they have sexual pleasure with them, and they raise their children together but they never see the truth in them. How can this strange thing happen to the one who is called the noble one, the wise one, the rational one, deity one. They can answer the metaphysical question about the universe, the soul, and all the questions related to mysterious things. All the answer might not always correct but it develops the answer closer to the truth. However, they seem to intend to avoid answering to the question about what is the reality of woman.

Instead of finding the true answer of the woman, they tend to trample woman in every way. Both religion and philosophy shape the world thought so what they think about woman shout loudly to the world. This is not only these both sections, but historian also play a very

important role in this action. They supposed to write about what really happen in the world, for instance, they choose to write only about man.

Conclusion

By the information above, it helps us to get a clear understanding about what happen to women in the past up to now, especially what happen to women philosophers. There are three aspects to analyze in this topic: The ancient myth of womanless world, religious doctrine about women, and men philosophers in their bias notions.

Greek civilization shape western culture and western thought. The Greek ancient myth about a dream of womanless world influent what they appear in the past and now. This ancient belief plays significant role in trampling women.

In major religion in the past, Judaism and Christianity start their doctrine by God created man and created woman from man's rib. Man is a servant of God and woman is a servant of man. The idea place woman in the unfair position since the beginning.

This religious unfair belief about woman also shapes what men philosophers think about woman, too. There are a lot of truth they had found goes against what religious doctrine about. None of those truth support women. They seem to see the same truth about woman. Moreover, Plato seems to betray what his teacher, Socrates believe about the woman. He intends to interpret to support his own ideas about man is the perfect human and woman is imperfect.

New knowledge

I am personally interested in women philosopher. By writing this article "The origin of sexism in ancient Greek philosophy", it help me to understand the why there are very less women philosophers. The knowledge that I get from this article is that it is a systematical thought to place woman in a very low and less necessity in society so that man can rule woman easily and to supply to their needs.

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