

WOMEN IN ARISTOTLE'S THOUGHT: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The question of women and their rights is one of the crucial and oldest questions that have raised a lot of controversies in philosophy and some other disciplines. For ages, the woman is seen as a second class, inferior citizen, as well as object of usage in human society. To this end, Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher regards women as defaced or begotten men who are equated with slaves and amoral children. This paper therefore attempts to make a philosophy analysis of the Aristotelian's conception of women, maintaining that Aristotle's views on women are vitriolic and fallacious and should not be accepted. This paper concludes that women are persons, who have dignity and should be respected, as such, the society will continue to retrogress until there is an improvement, and development of women.

Keywords: Aristotle, Women, Human Society, Dignity, Philosophy

1. Introduction

Every human society has a social organization, that is, it has its *modus vivendi* (mode of living/culture) and *modus operandi* (mode of operation) by which the task necessarily for its continuing existence is distributed among its members. Men and women comprise the human society. As such they are assigned different roles, responsibilities, obligation, rights, and so on, according to their ages, classes, sexes, creeds, local customs, traditions and mental capacities.

Biologically, women are different from men and as a result, women have been interiorized, subsumed, subordinated to men and relegated to the background. They are seen as the weaker sex; physically, mentally, sexually, spiritually and otherwise. The questions become; who is the woman? Is Aristotle's misogynic? Are women not persons, with *voluntas* and *ratio*? These questions and many of its kind would be looked into in this paper. In other words, this article exposes the Aristotelian conception of femininity, his notion of woman as well as a criticism of his idea as regards the nature of women.

2. Woman: Towards a Definition

The idea of a woman can be understood from the notions of gender and sex. As a child, a woman belongs to the group of girls and as an adult; she belongs to the women-folk. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* describes a woman as an adult of the human race¹, while *Webster's International English Dictionary* defines a woman as a wife (and a man) in its primitive sense of human being; the female of the human race; an adult, a female human being.²

Most literature portray the woman as one who loves, who is committed to what she does and is Saddled with the responsibility of child bearing. Alfred Lord Tennyson in his book *Locksley Hall* defines a woman as “a lesser man” while Shakespeare in *Hamlet* defines a woman as “frailty”. A German proverb says “a woman has the form of an angel... and the mind of an ass”. The Cameroonians see a woman as a beautiful piece of art that embodies love, care and patience to sustain the society in which she lives.³ The woman is by nature a co-creator with God; a transformer, who shapes and reshapes the people and society. She is hospitable, generous with advice, patient and tolerant⁴.

Biologically, women are different from men and as a result, femininity has been interiorized, subsumed, made inferior, subordinated to men and relegated to the background, as women are seen as the weaker sex; physically, mentally, sexually, spiritually and otherwise. Menarche therefore marks the beginning of womanhood. The idea that women are defined by their bodies and that female body is defined by sexual and reproductive functions has a long history. Jean Jacques Rousseau argues that a man could transcend his sexual nature but a woman remains female, her whole life, dominated by processes such as menstruation, child bearing, nursing and nurturing⁵. Menstruation, defloration, childbirth, lactation and biological preparedness differentiate a woman from a man⁶. In other words, the woman menstruates, becomes pregnant, she has no penis as such cannot make anyone else pregnant but someone else can make her pregnant. She can be pregnant, give birth and can suckle an infant. These characteristics therefore make a woman powerful, unique and mysterious in her being.⁷ A woman is a female biologically; women biologically are feminine. Females are typically feminine in nature. An individual's femininity is determined by combination of factors such as the genes, XX chromosomes, hormones etc. The female develops with ovaries, a uterus or womb, a vagina and a clitoris and these features become defining aspects of her nature or her femaleness.⁸

Fertility, (ovulation) and sexuality impart important meanings to the woman's body. During the second half of the 19th century, the view flourished that the female body was entirely organized for sex and reproduction, but the essence and the *raison d'être* of a woman's existence form the expression of the cause of her existence as a woman.⁹ Women have two X chromosomes and men have X and Y chromosomes which are expressed in hormonal and psychological quality. Men and women also differ in primary (genitalia and reproductive organs) and secondary (breast, voice, hair) sexual characteristics. On the average, in weight, height and strength, they are seen as tender, soft, feeble in their emotional make up, hence they are called the weaker sex.¹⁰ For these reasons, a woman can therefore be a wife to a man; a husband to a woman but not conversely.

Philosophically, a woman is a person, and a person refers to an individual of the human species, not identified. It is a name expressing the entire reality in a precise and univocal way. In other words, a person is an entity distinct from a mere thing, a being entitled to be treated in a special manner. The person is the totality of the individual being, which

embraces matter of substantial form (the soul), the accidental form and the act of being (*actus essendi*) which is maximum perfection.¹⁰ F.X Arnold comments:

The woman is a person and an individual who contains within herself the value and the purpose of her existence, who is provided with the same rights and the same freedom as the man: this is the decisive and fundamental view of women as expressed by revelation...¹¹

Rationality, self-consciousness, transcendence, rationality, openness, intentionality, spirituality, awareness, freedom and communication are the main qualities of a person. Rationality distinguishes humans (man and woman) from other lower animals. With self consciousness a person recognizes itself, socializes and perfects itself...¹² A woman is a subject and a person, endowed with a mode of being that distinguishes her from other lower animals. Levi-Strauss says that woman could never become just sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world, she is still a person and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must (still) be recognized as a generator of signs.¹³ She an entity with *voluntas* (will) and *ratio* (reason) distinct from mere objects or lower animals. She is a composite being (made up of body and soul), an end in herself as well as a source of value in her own right. In other words, a woman is a being who has a legal rights and duties. She is a full fledged human being endowed with human consciousness just as a man is; she makes up half of the human race.

Existentially, a woman is a being-in-the-world, who is guided by her intellect as such she makes choices and is held responsible for her acts. She therefore possesses the greatest intentional openness in transcendence; she can first communicate with herself, with others and with God. Simone De Beauvoir asserts that one is not born but becomes a woman, which is in line with Heideggerian aphorism that man (woman) nothing but what she makes of herself and from the phenomenological angle, "I am a woman because I know I am and people around me also have affirmed that I am". Ontologically, a woman is a being and a being is that which exists, that can be known, that can be thought of, something that is not nothing. A woman therefore is one (*unum*), intelligible or true (*verum*), good or desirable (*bonum*), beautiful (*pulchrum*) She is a substance, that is, that which belongs to itself and not another.¹⁴ Finally a woman thinks, speaks, generates, communicates and manipulate symbols, categories and values, hence she is seen as *homo faber* (working being), *homo viator* (traveling being), *homo liber* (reading being), *homo religiosus* (religious being), *homo loquens* (talking being), *homo culturalis* (cultural being), *homo artifex* (creative being), *homo ludens* (fun loving being).¹⁵

2. Women in Aristotle

Aristotle another ancient Greek philosopher and the successor of Plato, wrote on women, in his work; *The Politics*. As regards the nature of a woman, Aristotle explains that the female nature is afflicted with a natural defectiveness. The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.¹⁶

Men and women are different; naturally and biologically. Since nature makes different things for different purposes and women are psychologically different from men, they have functions different from those of men;

There is a permanent inequality between men and women. Man by nature is superior and woman, inferior; physically in need of support; that is why a husband should rule over his wife which is a constitutional rule. The male is by nature fit for command than the female, just as the elder and well grown are superior to the younger and (he more immature).¹⁷

However, he further compares a woman to a slave and an amoral child: "for the slave has no deliberate faculty at all, the woman has but it is without authority and the child has, but it is immature."¹⁸ Using the analogy of the soul and body, human beings are the union of body and soul, where the soul is the form of the body. That a given human has a female body, therefore, is of vital import, especially with regard to the procreative function: women not only carry the fetus and give birth, they also suckle the young child. Both the souls and bodies of women differ in nature from those of men, the soul lacking sovereignty in its deliberative part, and the body having a different role in the activities and relationships in the household, such as reproduction and child-rearing. Having different natures, women should serve in different social capacities than men, as nature makes different things for different functions.¹⁹

On this view, women require the deliberative part for their roles in the rearing of children and the maintenance of the household; but that part of the soul is *akuron* for the practice of politics, for to make women participate in such activities goes against nature, which reserves one function for each thing. As a woman's function in the household is clearly given by nature. Men are therefore born to rule women just as the soul, which is superior, rules the body and reason rules passion, which is the principle of necessity that extends to all mankind. Aristotle regards femaleness as the deformity that affects half of the human race. The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities and people should regard female as afflicted with natural defectiveness, as such, he conceives femininity to be a defaced human nature, in other words, as misbegotten men.²⁰

As regards procreation, Aristotle maintains that both the male and female are the principles of the process of procreation; but the male is the forming principle who gave the seed and the female procures the material element for warmth, which is lacking, in the female principle.²¹ Aristotle did not see women qualified for education, politics and for the study of philosophy; hence women are maimed men. His ideas could also be likened to the roman tradition which holds that, "man as the head of the family have, the power of life and death, only over his wife and children but also over other members of the family. It could also be likened to the Decalogue, which includes a woman as a

man's possession, along with his house and land, male and female slaves, his ox, ass. Since a woman is a property, she can be maltreated, as she has no rights at all as a misbegotten human.

3. Objections to Aristotelian Thought

Aristotle's conception of women is misogynic in nature and also portrays a dangerous chauvinism. His chauvinism and misogynic image of women has enormous negative influences on the vision of women, not only in the western world but in the whole contemporary world and religion. Aristotle regards femininity as a deformity that affects half of the human race. If femaleness is a deformity that affects half of the human race, then something is missing in women; but if on the other hand femaleness is not a deformity, then something may as well be missing in Aristotle who thinks that there is. Whether femaleness is a deformity or not, femaleness is affection for they are the most basics of any society. Hence W. I. Thomas explains; while women remain nearer the infantile type, man approaches more to the insane. The extreme variation tendency of man expresses itself in a longer percentage of genius, insanity and idiocy, women remain more nearly normal.²² While men and women share a common human nature characterized by a common basic, physical and spiritual composition (body in soul) and by the ability to breath, think, speak, feel, act, there are real and substantial biological and emotional differences between them. Women also occupy more than half of the human population and denying them their various rights as a result of biology is inimical to societal and sustainable development. A.E Odionye writes: women constitute a greater percentage of the population. It then implies that if women are neglected in the development process of any country, there will be a human resource gap and this may cause serious hitches in the development process.²³

As regards superiority of men over women, women are neither defaced nor inferior in intellect, but have insights, instinct, resourcefulness, initiative, skill, aptitude or personality. Inequalities are product of cultural factors (like customs, conventions, taboos and others) and not on biology. Scholars have written and spoken how in almost every sphere of human endeavours, women have proved that they are no less intellectually endowed than men. A typical example is motherhood, which is a blessing not a bane. Chinue Achebe, illustrates this supremacy of womanhood symbolized by the popular Igbo name "Nneka" in his *Things fall Apart*.²⁴ Women have distinguished themselves in their various spheres of human endeavours, there are women heading various governments, in various countries of the world; women vice chancellors, women senators and ministers and philosopher-queens such as, Margaret Thatcher, Chris Anyanwu, Dora Akunyili, Hilary Clinton, Agbani Darego, Chidimma Ukaolor-Ikea, Florence itta Gwa, Abike Dabiri, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Mary Onyeali, Mother Theresa, Bimbo Odukoya, Chimamanda Adichie, Ogochukwu Okpokwasili, Sr Marie Pauline Eboh among others. These women have contributed and are still contributing towards the development, uplift of the society and nation at large. Women are agents of

peace and crises management in the family, community, state and nation. The typical role of *Umuada* (in Igboland) in dispute settlement cannot be neglected. Aba women riot of 1914 was used by women in correcting some societal anomalies. According to Rose Acholonu, the Aba women war has placed the Igbo women on the world map as front liners in the female struggle for actualization and self-realization in political arena; Igbo women are admirably endowed with intellectual brilliance, bravery, dynamism, resourcefulness and a keen sense of justice and organization acumen.²⁵

However human persons are defined in terms of consciousness, rationality, openness, and with body and soul, and not on biology. Biological differences do not mean that females or women are inferior, for biology is not destiny. The argument here is that women are not the weaker sex. Weakness of the sexes is an individual issue. In other words, it involves nurture as well as environmental factors as opposed to nature; as such nature is to biology as nurture is to upbringing/orientation. Women also fit into the definition of person as such, women are persons with self consciousness, with rights and are ends in themselves. They are also entities logically abstract from mere objects. Simone De Beauvoir in line with this sees women as metaphysical entities assuming the "immanent feature of human conduction"²⁶.

Aristotle argues from the point of view of ancient biology that, naturally women are subordinate to men. There are biological differences in men and women and these biological facts about women and men cannot be denied, hence Socrates held that the only difference between men and women is one of physical functions; one begets and the other bears children²⁷. Men and Women differ biologically and genetically. These differences are neither the yard stick for rationality nor discrimination; thus, B. Nwabueze explains that while men and women share a common human nature characterized by a common basic, physical and spiritual composition (body and soul) and by the ability to breath, think, speak, feel, act, there are real and substantial biological and emotional differences between them.²⁸ The intellect (intellectual capacity, which is invisible) is the most important thing in human being. Hence, he bases his argument on appearance, which is very deceitful.

Aristotle compared a woman with a slave and amoral children. Women are theomorphic, composites as well as companion to men. This does not entail that they are slaves or amoral. They are persons who think, speak, read and there is nothing in the female person that entails inferiority. Thus, St. Ambrose maintains that every man and woman must know that he/she bears God's image and likeness, while St. Basil declares that the woman no less than the man possesses the privilege of being created of her God's image; both sexes have the same dignity and virtue. God created the woman in the same way and with the same dignity as man.²⁹ Motherhood is primarily one of the women's natural gifts as such should not be seen as a barrier to their active participation in politics, education and philosophy. No career is too hard for women, and the exclusion, seclusion and segregation of women leads to retardation of national

development and it is *infra dignitatem*. Women are therefore agents of social, positive change and development and the human society will continue to retrogress, if there is no improvement in the place of women. Thus, Boutrous Boutrous Ghali, a former Secretary-General of the United Nations once said that without progress in the situation of women, there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name, if they exclude the female, who is half of humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings and all societies.³⁰

More so, Aristotle maintains that women are not fit for education, philosophy and politics. Women like human beings have rights to education, franchise, et cetera. These rights are human and not strictly men's nor women's. These rights are natural endowments, as such the respect for human rights and fundamental freedom are for all, without discrimination on race, sex, nation, language or religion. Denying women right becomes a violation of their personhood and humanity. Hillary Clinton explains:

...It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small. It is a violation of human rights when individual women are raped in their communities and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war ...It is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation. It is a violation of human right when women are denied the right to plan their own families ...and against their will.³¹

Women are rational beings (*ens rationis*) and also have the intellectual ability for philosophy and education. Education, both proper and formal, becomes a vital tool that will help redefine the womanness of womanhood. That is, it goes beyond the general goal of education of imparting knowledge, but developing critical thinking. D. Chartrabarty explains that women do not only need education, but value based education (VBE):

Education opens our mind, but value based education (VBE) gives us purity of heart too. Education provides us with skills, but value based education (VBE) provides us sincerity too; education extends our relationship with the world, but value based education (VBE) links us with our own family members too. Education makes our lives better, but value based education (VBE), makes our lives better too; education teaches us to compete with others, but value based education (VBE) encourages us to compete too; education makes us good professionals but value based education (VBE) makes us a whole human too. Education takes us to the top, but value based education (VBE) takes the whole society to the top. Education gives

us capacity for better learning, value based education (VBE) gives us the tool for deeper understanding too.³²

The right education therefore means “*sa vidya ya vimuktaye*”, which means that knowledge is what helps women attain fulfilment, growth and sustainable development. which is the main purpose of living.³³

4. Conclusion

The above has therefore given a detailed exposition and philosophical of the Aristotlian conception of women. No doubt, Aristotle wrote from his Athenian background, where women were relegated to the background. All these vitriolic conceptions of femininity started from the Christian fall story at Eden, when Eve gave Adam-the forbidden fruit. Sin came into the world through Eve and that sin came into the world through Eve, who is a woman, does not mean that all women are evil and are woes to men. All human beings by nature are ambivalent; capable of doing good and evil. The human individual by nature desires to know and it is as a result of this natural inclination to curiosity that Eve, a philosopher queen tried to know. This natural quest in Eve to know was satisfied by a serpent, with the forbidden apple.

These ideas of Aristotle are vitriolic, chauvinistic, fallacious and should be discarded. These views about women's subordination and inferiority are anachronistic, and myopic. Aristotle may be accused of committing the fallacy of hasty generalization or better still the fallacy of conservatism. The human society can be an *eldorado* of virtue if man and woman complement one another, and if the human society is to survive, it must have a pattern of social life that comes to terms with the differences between the sexes.

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