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Beyond the Veil : Exploring Feminine Identity in Ancient Greek Society

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Abstract

“The greatest glory is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame”, wrote Thucydides, the Athenian historian of 5th century BC about womenfolk. Though not invisible in the pages of classical literature, they were contained in ‘oikos’, portrayed as deceitful, manipulative, and lowly who needed to be chaperoned by their male counterparts. Although Athens prided itself of having pioneered democracy, their women did not enjoy the unconditional voting rights till 1952. Independent women were looked down upon and treated with contempt, their sexuality was often harnessed to fit into the domestic sphere. One of the ways to understand the role of gender in ancient Greek society, is the portrayal of women through mythology. This paper intends to explore how popular myths and narratives of the times mirrored the accepted culture, providing valuable insights into the finer nuances of their everyday world, their socio-political ideologies, their economy, their religion, their gender biases, so on and so forth. Works like Oeconomicus or The Iliad and The Odyssey or the myths of Pandora or Eve or Aphrodite had transformed themselves into instructional texts and were instrumental in manoeuvring the sexuality of womenfolk. Through a discussion of three plays, Sophocles’ Antigone, Euripides’ Medea, and Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, this paper intends to explore the accepted gendered roles that were thrust upon women accentuating the prevalent stereotypes, pushing them away from their normal selves.

Keywords

Classical Greek Literature, Gender biases, Women sexuality.

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1. Introduction

“I think the god from the very beginning designed the nature of women for the indoor work and concerns and the nature of man for the outdoor work. For he prepared man’s body and mind to be more capable of enduring cold and heat and travelling and military campaigns, and so he assigned the outdoor work to him. Because the woman was physically less capable of endurance, I think the god has evidently assigned the indoor work to her.” So said Socrates in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, arousing food for thought about the subtleties of managing the domestic sphere. These classifications were projected as the handiwork of mysterious male gods, thereby pronouncing it as something which was a “natural” fallout. Men were forever engaged in the social, political, and military affairs of their *polis* whereas women were tutored to adhere to their *oikos*, the four wall of the house, hearth and child bearing. In his edited book, *A Companion to Tragedy*, R. W. Bushnell states that the Greeks were wary of the irrationality, religious fervour, and sexual passions of these ‘othered’ sex. Thomas R. Martin, in *An Overview of Classical Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander* also states about Aristotle’s idea of women as deformed, incomplete males, designed to be subservient to men. Many ancient myths were used to perpetuate the differential treatment meted out to women. They were expected to play a more subservient role than their male counterparts, with not much socio-political rights. Odysseus’s son Telemachus asked his mother to go inside and tend to her work, the loom, and the spindle. “Making decisions must be men’s concerns, and mine in particular; for I am master in this house”, (Homer, 1991 : 13) refers to different roles assigned to men and women. Penelope is regarded as the ideal wife, calm and composed waiting patiently for Odysseus to return from the Trojan war despite being surrounded by hordes of suitors to replace the absent husband. Men had the whole world before them. Transgressors were seldom subjected to social ridicule. There was nothing unusual for the male gods also to be pursuing mortal women but the reverse was considered reprehensible.

Classical literature abounds in myths that reveal the unequal treatment meted out to women. The myths of Hera, Aphrodite, Pandora etc., upheld undue prominence accorded to men. Pandora was conceived specifically as a chastisement for Prometheus who had stolen the fire from Zeus, "...But I will give men as the price for fire an evil thing in which they may all be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction" (Hesiod, 1949 : 55-59). Although it was Prometheus who was responsible for the combat between the mortal men and divine beings, Pandora received all the flak. To this day, Pandora's name is synonymous with one who brings scrouge to mankind. She is the mythical deceitful woman who has unboxed untold affliction and plague upon this world. Similarly, Eve too is fabled to have lured Adam into eating the 'Forbidden Fruit' thus becoming the catalyst for mankind's fall from grace. Both Pandora and Eve myths are misogynistic in their very conception. "The folktale of Pandora, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve, is etiological to explain the origin of woman, marriage, and suffering in the world" (Barry, 1995 : 115).

Homer, who was a much-revered figure in ancient Greece and no education was complete without studying him, portrayed Hera as mean, squabbling and scheming goddess, and Aphrodite as promiscuous and frivolous, flaunting her sexuality to her advantage in *Iliad*. Helen too is looked down upon as someone who brought nothing but shame and humiliation to her husband, Menelaus and destruction to Sparta and Troy. Paris, on the other hand is above all chastisement. Interestingly, Agamemnon's killing of his daughter Iphigenia is proclaimed as sacrifice to the gods, but Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon is considered as a cold-blooded murder. The skewed relationships could be seen not merely in mythological tales but in the workings of society as well.

Aware as we all are that literature is always rooted in the period in which it is written, it is imperative to approach it with an understanding of the cultural context and the societal norms of the time. While some texts perpetuated stereotypes and limitations for women, others offered more nuanced perspectives that hint at the complexities of women's lives in ancient Greece. Since a great deal of literature came from the pen of its male authors and rightly so as education too was under their control, women found themselves represented through the lenses of male gaze. In literature, they were

often objectified and portrayed as either idealized figures or sources of trouble, conflicts, wars, and temptation.

Peter Barry, in his book, *Beginning Theory : An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, emphasized the importance of discussing the women's status that is reflected within male literature as they provided "role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable version of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations" (Barry, 1995 : 122). Through their portrayal of womenfolk, the male writers inadvertently brought about some socially predominant stereotypes about gender roles. They created a fictional aspect of their own versions of the feminine that falls in line with the patriarchal mindset. An analysis of such delineations, has laid bare the "cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuate cultural inequality" (Barry, 1995 : 122). The women's portrayal in classical times "either reflected the perspective of the playwright or of the theatrical tradition on women" (Case, 2007:132). There are some "positive roles which depict women as independent, intelligent and even heroic and, a surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the Bitch, the Witch, the Vamp or the Virgin/Goddess" (Case, 2007 : 132).

2. Role of Women

Writing about the status of woman in ancient Greece, Blondell (1999) in his essay, "Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides" refers to her as a "passive conduit of male fertility, on long term loan by her father". The relationship between husband and wife was rather unequal in nature wherein the woman was obliged to remain loyal but man was under no such obligation of sexual fidelity towards his wife. In his, *A Companion to Tragedy*, Bushnell (2005) describes how the children too were under the ownership of their fathers.

Women were, by and large, under the patronage of their fathers before marriage and later their husbands and sons. They could not own or inherit any property or land of their own, had no say in the state administration or defence of their city-state. Their primary areas of work were marriage, procreation and managing the slaves and household activities. Education, art, religion, politics, and other aspects of political and social life were not accessible to them. They were kept secluded from the outside world and were married off early between 13 to 15 years of age to keep their virginity intact. Their

fertility was shielded to ensure the legitimacy of their progeny. The average marriageable age for men was around 30 years. In his *Social and Political Roles of Women in Athens and Sparta*, Kay O. Pry (2012) states that Aristotle regarded women as “mischievous and deceitful”, creatures who exerted a baneful influence on society. He opined that women were “utterly useless and caused more confusion than the enemy” and it was in the interest of the city-state to keep them segregated from the rest of the society. Plato also believed that if civil and political rights are extended to women, it would substantively alter the nature of the household and the state (Robinson, 2004 : 300).

3. Spartan Women Vs. Athenian Women

Spartan women enjoyed a comparatively better degree of freedom as compared to their Athenian counterparts. Their marriageable age was also higher and motherhood enhanced their status considerably. Since menfolk were always away at the battlefield, the responsibility of raising and rearing the prospective heroes and running the entire household fell on women’s shoulders. They had access to education which was mostly at home and were also sometimes allowed the liberty to venture into big business transactions. Athenian women could only do small-time domestic transactions. Womenfolk from Delphi, Gortyn, Thessaly, Megara, and Sparta also could hold or inherit property and were provided physical training too. The Athenian women, on the other hand, held no civic or political rights, nor any legal status of being a citizen since citizenship was linked to property. In, *The Rein of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Greece*, Eva Keuls (1985) states that women were never given a voice, and were under the beck and call of “*kyrios*”, their male counterparts. In fact, women were referred to as “*damar*” which itself meant “*to subdue*” or “*to tame*”. The laws on gender segregation were very much in place in the Archaic age, and men were indifferent to women’s plight, (p. 28) writes Don Nardo (2000) in his book, *Women of Ancient Greece*. Some stoic philosophers, with a contrary mindset however, were in favour of equality of the sexes. They modelled their argument on the ethics of Cynicism and regarded any form of sexual inequality to be contrary to the laws of nature. “Marriage should be seen as a moral companionship between equals and not merely as a biological and economic necessity” (Colish, 1990 : 37-38).

Although Athens was considered as the cradle of democracy and philosophy, and people could take up poetry or art or philosophy as their profession, but women were excluded from 'art' and 'literature'. Sappho, the 7th century celebrated poet from Lesbos was one of the few fortunate ones who shot into limelight through the brilliance of her words.

The Athenian women were, however, at liberty to participate in some religious rituals. There were some festivals which were primarily reserved solely for women. The cult of Athena Polias was one such rituals. The patron goddess of Athens, she was an embodiment of wisdom, wit, courage, and intelligence, the most resourceful and the most conspicuous of all the goddesses. Another important women's festival was the festival of Thesmophoria, which celebrated the fertility rites for Demeter, the most revered goddess of harvest, agriculture and fertility and her daughter Persephone. Hera and Aphrodite, on the other hand, were portrayed as mischievous troublemakers who enticed men and led them astray. The male gods pursuit of mortal women was considered norm but the reverse was treated with contempt.

4. Female Sexuality

Women were regarded as intellectually inferior and physically weak. Their sexuality was steered by their male counterparts. If they failed to preserve the family honour, they were branded as witches and criminals and had to abdicate from all religious ceremonies. Some women also worked as sex-workers. They were divided into two categories, *porne* or the brothel prostitutes, and *hetaira* or the higher-class prostitutes. *Hetaira* were adept and well-versed in culture and music and formed a lasting-relationships with men. Women as virgins also worked as priestesses to female deities like Athena or Demeter.

5. Women in Literature

Medea, the central protagonist after whom the play was named, is 'othered' as a fiercely wild-spirited woman from the exotic east, uncontrollable in the extremities of her behaviour. She displays all the stereotypically heroic attributes which were held in high esteem in males by Greeks but looked down upon in women. She displayed ingenuity and resourcefulness, power and perseverance, confidence and courage, wit, and determination to conceive and

successfully carry out her plans effectively. Her passion and revenge are equally vengeful. Her love for Jason had led her to transgress all limits of social behaviour. She had no qualms about killing her brother and cutting him down to pieces before throwing them away one by one to stall the very process of being captured by her father, no remorse for leading to the horrendous death of Jason's new bride and no compunction in killing her own children to spite her unfaithful husband. What is interesting to note is that although it was Jason who was the root cause of it all, but nowhere does he get rebuked, reproached, or censured for his egocentricity. The blame solely and solely rests on Medea's shoulders. "Hell, hath no fury like a woman scorned." Making us privy to a woman's angst she states,

Surely, of all creatures that have life and will, we women
 Are the most wretched. When, for an extravagant sum,
 We have bought a husband; we must then accept him as
 Possessor of our body. This is to aggravate
 Wrong with worse wrong. (Euripides, 1984 : 229-232)

And then she also springs the extremely loaded question contemplating whether the man that they get would be "good or bad" for, "divorce is not respectable; to repel the man, not possible" (Euripides, 1984: 235-6).

She goes on to say further,
 Still more, a foreign woman, coming among new laws,
 New customs, needs the skill of magic, to find out
 What her home could not teach her, how to treat the man
 Whose bed she shares. And if in this exacting toil
 We are successful, and our husband does not struggle
 Under the marriage yoke, our life is enviable.
 Otherwise, death is better. (Euripides, 1984 : 237-43)

Medea was compelled to take the reins of her life in her own hands. She extracted the price of revenge and passion from her unfaithful husband Jason and challenged the patriarchal norms so prevalent in those days. She gets branded as a 'witch', a 'murderess', a 'beast'. She is betrayed by one for whom she has sacrificed everything, her family, her home, her integrity. Completely alienated from all fronts, with nowhere to go, after a lot of deliberation she feels the best way to appropriate revenge on him

would be to deprive him of his own male progeny. All sympathies get directed towards Jason and his newly killed bride but Medea refuses to feel victimized and dons the mantle of a tragic hero, proving herself as Jason's equal in relationship.

In ancient Greek society, xenophobia and a distrust of foreigners was a norm. Medea's outsider status may have contributed to her negative depiction, reinforcing cultural biases of the time. Her foreignness, her brazenness, her impudence gets foregrounded and arouse scepticism in people. Her downright rejection to conform to societal expectations of passive femininity earned her grave disrepute. But she refused to be cowed down and brazenly challenged the heroic archetypes.

Medea becomes a compelling tragedy of a scorned woman's revenge who made herself heard in an equally compelling and gruesome manner. Her husband's betrayal triggers a chain of events that exposes the potential dangers associated with women who act independently and assert their own desires, especially in the face of male rejection. She challenged the patriarchal social structures, where power and authority were predominantly held by men, where women were accorded subordinate roles, and their opinions and perspectives were deemed less valuable than those of men.

Similarly, the Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, also have commodified the portrayal of women to a large extent. Helen of Troy is projected as the primary cause of conflict overshadowing her real self. Her silencing is a complex and nuanced aspect that reflects broader themes of gender, power dynamics, and societal expectations. The epic tradition explores extensively the heroic deeds and conflicts of male warriors like Achilles and Hector shelving female experiences completely, thereby exposing the deeply ingrained gender norms and patriarchal structures. In her essay "Helen in the 'Iliad' : A Reassessment of Homeric Values", classicist Helene Foley argues that Helen's character should be reconsidered, emphasizing her intelligence and her awareness of her own agency. Attributing the Trojan War solely to her would be oversimplifying a complex mythological and literary narrative. While Helen's elopement with Paris is central to the traditional story surrounding the Trojan War, it is crucial to recognize that there were other reasons too. The war was the result of a combination of divine interventions, political factors, historical animosities, and the

actions of various characters, all intricately woven into the fabric of ancient Greek mythology and literature. The geo-political and historical factors too were at play. Agamemnon's desire for power and control, the rivalry between the Greek city-states, and the longstanding enmity between the Achaeans (Greeks) and Trojans all contributed to the complexity of the conflict.

Sophocles' *Antigone* also challenges traditional gender roles by prioritizing familial duty over political authority whereas her sister Ismene tows the conventional line, petrified that she is of male authority. Though not explicitly focused on her sexuality, *Antigone's* defiance to king Creon could be perceived as a form of subversion against the societal expectations that sought to regulate and manipulate women's behaviours. She brazenly confronts the highly skewed power structures that lead to her tragic demise.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* along with her band of women comes up with a unique notion of sex strike to arm twist menfolk into abandoning warfare and ending decades old Peloponnesian War. Harnessing the power of their own sexuality, they display their native wit, grit, and determination to overcome an adverse situation. But here too, they draw flak and are called flamboyant and frivolous. They get referred to by men as "a pestilent disease" whom we have "kept and fed within our homes" (Sophocles, 1984 : 150).

Asked by the Magistrate, as to what have women done for the war efforts, *Lysistrata* retorts, "We have contributed twice over and more. We have given you sons, and then had to send them off to fight" (Aristophanes, 2002: 164). And further,

We are in the prime of our lives, and how can we enjoy it, with our husbands always away on campaign and left us at home like widows?... A man comes home - he may be old and grey - and he can get himself a young wife in no time. But a woman's not in bloom for long, and if she isn't taken quickly, she won't be taken at all... (Aristophanes, 2002 : 164)

echoing Euripides' *Medea* when she says,

If a man grows tired

Of the company at home, he can go out, and find

A cure for tediousness. We wives are forced to look to one man only" (Euripides, 1984 : 246-8).

Aristophanes may have made *Lysistrata* the central protagonist of his 'peace play', but he is far from being a feminist. He has merely created a fantastic situation and given a comic slant to the desires of womenfolk wherein they think that they'd be able to exert their control over men and also bring about peace among the warring states.

6. Conclusion

The silencing of women's voices has deep historical and cultural roots, and it has manifested in various societies throughout history. The historical imbalance of power has been heavily tilted in man's favour. As the dominant gender, he has been able to control societal institutions, including legal, political, and religious systems which gradually paved way for a systematic marginalization of women. Religious and cultural beliefs have also contributed in justifying their subjugation. Interpretations of religious texts and cultural traditions were often used to legitimize the silencing of women by attributing it to divine or cultural mandates. Limited education impeded women's intellectual development and denied them the tools to articulate their thoughts effectively. They were kept financially dependent. Literature, culture, and public discourse was a male prerogative, used to their advantage in shaping narratives, exercising controls, reinforcing stereotypes, and limiting diverse voices. Women who expressed opinions or sought autonomy were often perceived as a threat to the existing power structures and had to face social stigma, ostracization, and even chastisement. Fear of repercussions discouraged many women from expressing their thoughts openly.

The dominant social mindsets intersected with the individual experiences of fictional characters like *Antigone*, *Helen*, *Lysistrata*, *Medea* etc. exposing the wariness of menfolk towards unbridled female sexuality. Whether through disobedience, elopement, or revenge, these characters challenged the traditional control exerted on them. *Antigone's* defiance, *Helen's* choices, and *Medea's* vengeance had severe consequences. *Antigone* was condemned to death, *Helen* endured the ravages of war, and *Medea* lost her children. The popular narratives served as deterrents against any kind of sexual deviances for those who dared to disrupt the societal expectations by stepping outside prescribed roles.

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