

## WAS PLATO A FEMINIST? A REVISIT TO PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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**Abstract**

*The present paper strives to analyse the Philosophical quest ever asked and, in fact, deals with debate in contemporary Philosophical arrangements. Plato is appreciated and accepted by many scholars as a feminist. However, it has been held by many scholars as non-supporters of women a misogynist and posed a derogatory position for women. The tags are made by partial observation of Plato's position and it may produce a distorted position of Plato as far as his views on women are concerned. The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the problem and to argue that Plato is a critical upholder of feminism.*

**Keywords**

*Feminism, Anti-feminism, Justice, Equality, Rights.*

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Scholars found Plato's philosophy has a huge contribution to feminism and his proposal made in Republic Book V is a torch bearer to feminist philosophy. Sometimes it may not look clearly as feminist but in some way or other it has some relation to feminist philosophy. Not everyone found him a feminist; some of them are also recognized as a non-feminist or anti-feminist. However, according to Plato by nature males and females are not different but are divided by their nature in terms of their abilities, so it has been argued that equality among genders was mentioned only in the sphere of the guardian class and not the other classes of women wherever it has claimed that Plato doesn't provide equal attention to other Athenian women. Does it mean he accepts partially feminism? Here efforts would be made to explain the different arguments related to it.

### **Was Plato a Feminist?**

To answer this question about the exact position of women, Whether Plato was a feminist or not one must go through the detailed understanding of his dialogue. Some scholars found Plato as a feminist and some of them held him as a misogynist. As Janet Farrell Smith understood Plato does not talk about feminism in terms of contemporary feminism, not exactly as the liberal feminist. Sexuality for recent understanding means removal of discrimination between the sexes. In terms of Economic and Educational benefits should be given equally to both sexes. As Simone de Beauvoir defines feminism states that women are objectified or women are made into "the other". (Beauvoir 2011) When Feminism trying to overcome from the objectification of women. As Smith argued in his ideal state Plato never focussing in eradication of discrimination between the sex. He found about Plato as he never thought of sex equality or feminism. (Smith 1983:597)

As like other scholars Janet Farrell Smith states Plato tried to apply justice in terms of "Organic and Functionalist" way while explaining the Social and Psychic of justice in a city, She stepped as do Philosopher who was willing to educate women and seek equal status as men. In a city one person will be ruled over the other citizens of that city and that person not necessarily is man that can be anything, man or woman. It depends on the nature of the women and men.

This post-enlightenment era, found their motivation to mark sex equality and feminism but not in the exact way as portrayed by Plato. Plato does not accept the concept of democratic egalitarianism but he follows the idea of capability and the most capable person must best deserve the highest social status. It should be noted here that term like, 'equality', 'feminism', and 'equal opportunity' such terms was not used by Plato. One more thing he added by taking such terms one cannot justify the position of women.

### **Women belong to Weaker Sections**

Smith argued that Plato accorded an ambivalent position of women in his ideal state. She claimed Plato made misogynistic and derogatory statements related to women. In the term of education women and men should get equal education.<sup>1</sup> For such and such reasons Plato's opinion on women are 'an enigma' (Okin, 1979: 14) or 'inconsistent',<sup>ii</sup> they sometimes give argument for equality, and argue against minority of racial discrimination.

In the argument of Plato concerning the equal treatment for guardian women, Smith noted a problem out of every positive thesis, 'Except for the fact that women are weaker'. Here she understood weaker means inferior in all aspects, such as, generally inferior, and intellectually inferior. One problem that may raise here in this context is that being weaker does not correspond to inferiority. Generally, if we understand the aspects of the term "weaker", it may jump to two assumptions one is physical other one is mental. Here the weaker stands for physically weaker and it does not correspond to the term inferior. Smith's arguments create an absurd position by portraying women to be inferior. Plato nowhere in her arguments stated women as inferior.

'So women must share in war and all the guarding of the city and that shall be their only work. But in these same things, lighter parts will be given to women than men because of the weakness of their sex.' (Republic 457a)

Here in this above dialogue, Plato did not deny giving equal training of war to both men and women. In war, women are assigned lighter tasks than men not higher tasks like another man.

Carlo Mac Millan argued that the foundation of every feminist thinking is based on the presupposition of the moral process that equality should be considered in every respect. As every human being rational everybody should be treated equally irrespective of their sex, age, color and intelligence. (Millan 1982: ix)

Allan Bloom states that Plato does not at all believe in the capability of women but makes utopian notions about guardian women. (Bloom 1968: 383) Bloom argued that the childbearing quality of a woman will be ignored and will not be considered in the Guardian selection, only ability will be taken into account then the number of women Guardian will be much less. While asserting this Bloom highlighted the position of women by taking advantage of Platonic dialogue where he stated women can play the role of a Guardian not because they are as capable as other men but because they are taking care of children and men are unable to do so. They both may have the same kind of soul but have different bodies which may

create the same problem. Socrates creates a utopia about women's nature but is unable to treat women as equal to men. (Bloom1968: 383)

Morag Buchan states that if Bloom's approach is right then the question was that Socrates may think to create another way to solve the problem concerning reproduction which will not create hindrances for women from doing such task which she is not fitted. By doing this Plato will follow his beliefs then he will destroy his ideal state if he places those who are not fit best for the roles they are appointed. Therefore Plato would have failed the purpose of making the ideal state. (Buchan 1999: 139)

Gregory Vlastos is the person who is supposed to be coming under the group and understands Plato as a feminist. He found controversy among scholars by taking the position of Plato regarding women's diverse capabilities. He held Plato as a feminist by considering the view of Plato where in he provided women and placed them in the position of guardian of a city notwithstanding the fact that he said Plato sometimes drew the picture of an anti-feminist. Where he does provide enough importance to the other Athenian women. He said Plato is very much inconsistent in his approach when he forms different opinions for women.

Here Vlastos noted some rights where he clearly shows that Plato cleverly drew women's rights. As Gregory Vlastos argued that what he found in the Republic books IV and VII the ruling class women are called as guardian women and he found this as a assertion of Plato as unambiguously feminist. At the same place, he found the maximum other women are free, they are engaging in the industrial and agricultural activities of a state and he took it as the unambiguously antifeminist position of Plato. Another way Vlastos tried to prove that there is no such the initial inconsistency is there in Plato's philosophy. He stated that the way Plato has taken a stand on the position of women and made a picture of feminism here no one ever in the history of classical philosophy thought of it. There is a certain area in which Athenian women were not allowed to do so but fortunately, guardian women were allowed. Here Vlastos tried to point out certain points like the Right to Education, the Right to Vocational activities, the Right to unimpeded social intercourse, and Legal capacity, where women found opportunities. Here Vlastos tried to strengthen his argument that in every aspect women are allowed to perform similar activities as other male members are doing for which one can reasonably be held that Plato seems to be a feminist. (Vlastos 1994: 13)

Julia Annas argues that Plato's proposals about women are radical because they involve the admission of women to the highest class of the state, the Guardians, and the abolition of the family as a private institution. However, she notes that Plato

does not present these proposals as measures that will make the state more just than its rivals, but rather as measures that will make it more efficient. Annas argues that this is a significant difference because it means that Plato's proposals are not motivated by a concern for justice or equality, but rather by a concern for the well-being of the state as a whole. She notes that this is consistent with Plato's overall philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of the common good over individual interests and the efficient functioning of the state. (Annas 1981:182)

The arguments given by Julia Annas are elaborated as follows: Firstly, Annas argues that Plato's proposals are not based on a concern for women's needs or rights, but rather on a concern for the efficient functioning of the state. This means that Plato's proposals do not challenge the underlying patriarchal assumptions of his society, but rather reinforce them. Secondly, Annas argues that Plato's proposals are based on an utilitarian view of society, where the value of individuals is determined by their contribution to the state. This view is criticized for ignoring the value of individuals as individuals and treating them as mere means to an end. Thirdly, Annas argues that Plato's proposals are authoritarian in spirit, rather than liberal. This means that if a woman did not want to be a Guardian, Plato would be committed to compelling her to serve the state. This is seen as problematic because it means that Plato's proposals do not respect individual autonomy or freedom of choice. Overall, Annas argues that Plato's proposals about women are not truly radical or feminist, but rather reinforce the patriarchal assumptions of his society and prioritize the efficient functioning of the state over the needs and rights of individuals. (Annas 1981:184)

The contemporary debate on feminism which is placed in the limelight today it may not be a proper criterion to Judge Plato and his view on women. However, it may be reasonably held his views on women are not antifeminist considering the adverse patriarchal ethos of ancient Greek society. It was indeed a very bold of Plato to accord a place to women nearly at par with the male in his ideal state. There is no such term Feminism was coined at that time and Plato did not protest and make any such arrangements to be called a feminist.

**Notes:**

- i. See e.g. Okin (1979: ch-1), Annas (1976: 307-321) Stresses Plato's Misogyny to his 'Metaphysics and Misogyny', ties Plato's misogyny to his dualistic metaphysics.
- ii. For an analysis of their positions see Allen (1975: 131), Also Lange (1979)

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