

Misogyny in ancient texts



Misogyny tends to devastate the authority of woman by depriving her of equal treatment to her male counterpart. There are two conversations that seem to circle around ancient texts and misogyny. Did religious texts directly affect the perceptions of society on women or did the mentality of society play a role in cultivating what is written in these religious texts? As Dean Frisina states in his lecture, this subject matter can be associated with the renowned riddle, “ who came first, the chicken or the egg?” Woman being created for man, from the rib of man, in ancient holy texts can be the origin of sexism in its various forms of patronizing physiognomies. Nonetheless, it may also simply be the reflection of an already existing mindset that has lingered among mankind from the era of hunters and gatherers where men were seen as the physically dominant sex and women, the tenuous caretakers. Along with ancient religious texts from the Hebrew, Christian and Islamic Bible, plays such as “ Aeschylus II” whose writings present clear evidence to the misogynistic ideals that were (and very well may still be) believed. Misogyny is traceable through the story plots as well as the characteristics and personalities being depicted by the women in these texts.

The story of Adam and Eve, and the forbidden fruit, has frequently been placed in the center of a heated debate on whether or not sexism resided within these early writings. Biblical scholar Phyllis Bird suggests that the misogynistic ideas bound to biblical stories are misconceived. She states, “ woman is, along with man, the direct and intentional creation of God and the crown of his creation. Man and woman were made for each other” (The Hebrew Bible Accounts). This side of the argument has a solid reasoning

behind its claim of equality between the two, even though Adam was formed first and Eve from Adam. The two were made from the same rib, perhaps to show two halves of a whole. But it seems more as if Eve would not be complete without Adam whereas Adam was born whole. Later on, Eve was the one who was drawn to the serpent and the wisdom which would come from the forbidden fruit. She was portrayed as weak minded and foolish for giving into her temptation. On the other hand, Adam was merely a compliant husband who ate the fruit given to him by his wife.

Women in early writings were often vilified for the same actions that a man would be praised for. They would be disparaged for having the same personality traits that a man would be admired for. Clytemnestra, for example, was seen as duplicitous for killing her husband, although the reason behind it was to avenge her daughter's murder. Her daughter and her son both despised her for her actions. However, when Agamemnon killed his daughter Iphigenia in order to win a war, his other two children, Orestes and Electra, commended their father's heroic sacrifice. Electra mourned Agamemnon's death stating, " To call you father is constraint of fact, and all the love I could have borne my mother turns your way, while she is loathed as she deserves; my love for a pitilessly slaughtered sister turns to you" (Aeschylus, 239-242). This quote illustrates the admiration of a man whose actions of killing his daughter is justified by his incentive to win a war. One may think that the sacrifice of Iphigenia for another woman (Helen of Troy) demonstrates that women were valued, but this is not the case. Helen was seen as stolen property; something that belonged to her husband Menelaus; a cause for which Menelaus and Agamemnon had to destroy Troy. Iphigenia,

the slaughtered daughter, was a pawn in their nonsensical retaliation and symbolized how women are of only physical use to men. They are a currency, a piece of property.

Sarah, Abram's wife in the Hebrew Genesis, was also a woman whose actions were pejoratively scrutinized and assumed the worst of. As professor Keller states in her lecture, Sarah was narrated as villainously going back on her own decisions and casting out her surrogate maid out of jealousy. Sarah, distraught, claimed " I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem" (Genesis 16. 2). She indicates, to Abram, that she could not stand feeling inferior to Hagar and for that, Sarah treated her harshly. However, Sarah's actions can be justified as, in Professor Keller's lecture, we learn that Sarah was merely doing what she believed to be religiously legal. Codes of law of the time state that the surrogate is of no relevance after birthing the father's child, and that child will grow to care for his birth father and his wife. The Hebrew Genesis, nevertheless, depicts Sarah as not only physically incapable (at first) but also, emotionally unstable in her own decisions. Sarah also questions God's ability in the bible and is shown to mock his power. She is portrayed as a cynical woman who did not believe that God could allow her to conceive a child in her old age. The Lord asks Abram " why did Sarah laugh saying ' Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is there anything too wondrous for the Lord?" (Genesis 18. 9). God himself mentions Sarah's lack of faith as a displeasing mention of his command. Although some women and men today may see Sarah as an intrepid woman of her time, she was, in fact, originally depicted in an unfavorable and misogynistic way.

It seems as if man and woman both have been assigned specific roles that each must play in order to remain inside an acceptable level of societal norms. Men must be bold and strong and women must be nurturing and unobtrusive. Of course there is no definitive interpretation of these writings and one can easily understand them as a reflection of his or her own judgments; what some may call, implicit bias. My own interpretation of these texts is instituted from the misogyny I see today. Society today still glorifies mothers and wives but objectifies independent women, much like Clytemnestra. Society still values a woman but only up until she is of physical value.