

Book Review

Philosophy Without Woman

Soeurng Seam¹,
Chakkapan Wongpornpavan², Jaras Leeka³ and Uthai Kamolsil⁴
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Khon Kaen Campus^{1,2,3}
Mahamakut Buddhist University Roi Et Campus⁴
Corresponding Author, Email: jerrynewlife2022@gmail.com

Abstract

This book review aims to present Philosophy without women, the reason women are excluded from philosophy. The author tried to trace back to the origin of the western thought that influenced from the myth of ancient Greece. Greek philosophy was influenced by the Greek mythology about the birth of man without natural reproduction. There is a notion of Platonic philosophy, contradiction on Tragedy in Greek myth. Women are represented merely as object that serve the men's sexuality, and the moral writings have nothing whatsoever to do with women.

Keywords: Womanless; Sexism; Western-thought

Introduction

This book, the Philosophy Without Woman, the Birth of Sexism in Western Thought by Vigdis Songe-Møller in Norwegian and translated to English by Peter Cripps. The publication was supported by The Norwegian Research Council and English translation was supported by University of Bergen in Norway 2002. There are 198 pages in paperback with (ISBN-10: 0826458491) (ISBN-13: 978-0826458490) and item Weight: 11.3 ounces. It has dimensions: (of 6.14 x 0.42 x 9.21) inches. The price is 40.95\$ with Paperback and 135\$ with Hardcover.

* ได้รับบทความ: 6 พฤษภาคม 2567; แก้ไขบทความ: 16 กรกฎาคม 2567; ตอบรับตีพิมพ์: 21 ธันวาคม 2567

Vigdis Songe-Møller, born 1 April 1949, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bergen. Songe-Møller's Philosophy without Women was a feminist exploration of ancient philosophy. Her own experience as a pregnant woman – for whom "the Parmenidean idea of all things existing ultimately as one and self-identical is, to say the least, far from self-evident" – led her to investigate connections between "the Greek philosophers' ideals of unity, self-identity and eternity and their attitudes towards sexuality, reproduction and sexual difference."

This book, the *Philosophy Without Woman, the Birth of Sexism in Western Thought*, written originally in Norwegian by Vigdis Songe-Møller. The essays in this book are largely based on her lectures over ten years period, independent of one another, although all deal with the same themes: gender, sexuality, and reproduction in the myths and philosophy of ancient Greece. This book started with her own experience of pregnancy. Her idea that she was neither one nor self-identical, yet beyond all doubt she existed. This idea threats to notions of Parmenides as well as other antiquity philosophers. It focuses on the contrary of the myths and philosophical notions in ancient Greece that dream of womanless world. It portraits the origin of western thought of the beginning of birth without sexuality mixed and the developed ideas by later generation according the myth by philosophers. It raises up how woman was excluded from philosophy.

The main ideas of this book are about the reason of the beginning of sexism in the west. It begins with the ancient Greek mythology that reproduced without the need of motherhood. Platonic philosophy which was influenced by the myth adapting to their own thought of notion. This notion spread out to the western thought of woman exclusion in philosophy.

This book is the answer of my big question about why there are less women philosophers. There are not much books about what happen or why women philosophers disappeared from philosophy world. The title of this book suit so much to my question and the author is a woman which is very perfect to deal with this problem.

1. The Structure of the book.

This book consists of two parts. Part one consist of three chapters that traces back to the original western thought on sexism. Parts two consists of four chapter.

Chapter four and five are about the problems in the notion of Platonic philosophy and chapter six and seven are about the views of the two philosophers who study the ideas about woman in antiquity.

Chapter I: The Greek Dream of a Womanless World

In this chapter, the author started her introduction note in Greek democracy which is only equal only in man not woman and slave. Woman and slave were excluded. The term “Equals” presupposes the existence of “the unequal”, those whom the democratic city state excluded, and these were first and foremost woman and slave. Numerous aspects of early Greek thought are marked by the exclusion of woman and feminine and the democratic ideology of the Athenian city state derive from the notion of woman’s superfluity. This is the foundation of platonic philosophy which has been influence western thought. They dream of womanless world. This is the beginning of exclusion of woman in philosophy.

The Athenian believed that they started a boy by the seed of a father falling on the earth and the boy was born from the earth without the participation of the mother. The boy has a father, but not a mother. The very first Athenian was a reproduction without woman. Athenians regarded themselves as the descendants of earth-born Erichthonius, and could thus explain their origins without recourse to woman. The original thought of the Athenian was they can stand alone without woman for reproduction. This idea is the foundation of Greek thought that implied to democracy.

In attempting to determine more precisely the border on which woman stands, we discover that we are in fact dealing with two borders at diametric extremes. Firstly, woman symbolizes the city state’s “Outer border”, that is the border towards that which lies outside the political space of the polis. In this respect woman constitute a fringe group, and as such they are associated with other fringe groups: slave, foreigners, youth. As this particular borderline phenomenon, the woman is opposite of Hestia; despite her essentially feminine connotations, the latter has been appropriated by the man. The married woman has no place in the city state simply because the man represents wholeness, or totality.

Chapter II: Thought and Sexuality: A Trouble Relationship

The origin of all things

Hesiod said that everything begins with Earth, Chaos, and Eros. All three are independent and opposite to each other. Earth is the safe of all, Chaos is the destruction, and Eros is the compromiser of both. Chaos is a divisive and destructive principle. Chaos give birth to Night which give rise in turn to a range of destructive and sometime formless powers, including Deceit, Love, Age, Strife, Work, Forgetfulness, Famine, Pains, Battle, Murders, Killings of Men, Quarrels, Lies, Disputes, Lawlessness, Ruin, Death and later these destructive forces that are associated with woman's entry into the world. Hesiod regard women as a necessary and problematic phenomenon.

Parmenides' Poem: Thought instead of sexuality

The try to investigate the contrary of Parmenides' notion in his poem about a young man. She investigates that Parmenides' ontology distinguished Being and Not-Being, Unity and Plurality, between immutability and change, a distinction which in his case does not involve a clear separation of mind and body. Parmenides, as other philosophers in that time, subscribes to Hesiodic line of argument about a world without sexual reproduction so there is no requirement for two distinct sexes. And this indeed is Parmenides' project: to establish a concept of existence divorced from sexuality, and hence remote from birth and death.

Parmenides sketches his ideal notion that life is independent of sexuality, birth, and death. However, he does not deny that we are born or each of us has a mother. What is terribly about human mixing and birth, in effect about human sexuality, is simply that it leads to death. Parmenides seeks to envisage the world without sexuality and sexual difference, and thereby to evade death.

Chapter III: The logic of Exclusion and the Free Men's Democracy

In chapter III, the author raised up how Democratic Polis was built in Greece. It was built according to the geometric model, both physical and abstract. The nation was divided into smaller division and governed from the core circle of the government. Agora was built surrounded by marketplace and people's houses. It belonged to the city state as such, in the word, it belonged to everyone and no-one. The construction of the nation based on a geometric model, the circle.

She also explained how they excluded woman by raising up Aristotle's theory of liberty which only self-sufficient person can achieve. According to Aristotle, only man is sufficient enough to be independent and qualified to participate in state ruling, but not slave, woman, and foreigner. Aristotle stated that man is effectively self-sufficient in both biological and a metaphysical sense and man does not require anything extraneous to himself on order to continue his line. He, therefore, justified man as the sole origin of the child.

The author also tries to analyze the differences between Anaximander and Parmenides ideas. In the philosophy of Anaximander, sexual difference is unproblematic, since it amounts to a relation between two conflicting, but equally endowed force. For Parmenides, the other hand, it poses a significant problem, since his system cannot accommodate any kinds of differences. These two ideas that she tried to raise up show the differences, one idea is about the opposite things that necessary for each other, while the other is opposite thing is excluded because of hierarchy. She concluded that we cannot male and female principles are not subject to any kind of hierarchy.

Chapter IV: Tragic Conflict or Platonic Harmony: Tragic Ambivalence

In this chapter, the author analyzed the contradiction on Tragedy in Greek myth. This tragedy treated all people- both man and woman as imperfect, they do not imply a view of the woman as imperfect man, which she is in the tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle. According to the tragedy, only gods are immortal because who come into being by sexual means must also die. Both man and woman are mortal, therefore imperfect.

Platonic Concord

Socrates was the true self-sufficient person because he can depend on himself. He needs neither food nor clothes, nor the love and care of others. All he needs is the satisfaction afford by reason. Whereas Plato tends to associate female with the body and heterosexuality with the enslavement of the body. Only homosexual love can dissociate itself entirely from the others. So that man can be truly self-sufficient and be away from death.

Chapter V: Sexuality and Philosophy in Plato's Symposium

The author analyzes the ambiguity in Plato's philosophy in Symposium about woman whether he abolished or it was absent by itself. She made a comparison between Socrates' and Plato's ideas about sexual different. He compares reproduction and birth, and philosophy as a form of love, then philosophy must also have reproduction and birth as its aims. Plato's ideas are not clear about sexual difference Plato's ideas are more unclear than Socrates' who explained the reproduction and birth as the purpose of love between man and woman.

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, Socrates 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.

The author also explained how Pausanias praise the heavenly pederastic eros. He admired how pederasty work so well among Greek male citizen. The elders satisfy his need while the youngers get in exchange the valuable knowledge from them. Both of them are free slave and free master. He called it Unity and Sameness, the ideals of love. Whereas Aristophane talk about three types of erotic desire: heterosexual, homosexual and pederasty. The sexes of that ideal is that the pederast demonstrates the most virile constitution. These ideas seem to contras with Socrates who claimed that love means create and to give birth.

In this chapter, the author tries to investigate how Plato applied feminine in his own view which was different from Socrates'. Plato described how Diotima explained what the ideal of love intentionally to support his platonic philosophy.

Chapter VI: Virginity and Masculine Reproduction:

Plato in a woman looking-Glass

Irigary's reading of the cave myth.

In this chapter, the author started her point by analyzing Irigory's reading of the cave myth. According to her reading, Plato's ontology and epistemology are simply not gender neutral. For her, Plato's philosophy is in turn the foundation not just western metaphysics, but of western culture as a whole. Platonic philosophers considered the true organ of reproduction is not female body, but the one that propagates genuine knowledge, namely masculine thought.

Next topic, she shows the sketch about the cave myth. This is a metaphor of Plato which she finds out the new interpretation that the cave is like a womb of a woman. For Greeks, the earth was a birth-giving goddess, then it does not seem to far-fetched to regard the subterranean cave of Plato's myth as a uterus.

Chapter VII: From Pederasty to philosophy

on Foucault's view of sexuality in antiquity

In this chapter, the author analyzes the study of Foucault's view on sexuality in antiquity. Foucault studied sexuality in modern time but, he turned his interest to sexuality in antiquity for almost eight years. His study helped the author a lot to understand how sexuality in Greek society works. It showed that the Greek citizens had the right, the power, the authority and freedom to engage in whatever sexual relationship he desired, both inside and outside the institution of marriage and of course with both sexes.

Foucault found that it is an entirely masculine morality we find among the Greeks, a morality written by men for men. Women are represented merely as object that serve the men's sexuality, and the moral writings he studied therefore have nothing whatsoever to do with women. Greek morality was masculine and virile, in all circumstance, the Greek citizen's first concern was to conduct himself like a man. Although the citizens of the states were expected to conduct like a man, it was not also woman, but also slaves and children who were regard as feminine, or who has to submit to the authority of the citizens in all matters. Or to put it another way, it was expected to this later group that it should behave in way that were passive, submissive, and hence feminine. The distinction between the masculine and the feminine was therefore not just distinction between the sexes, but also one of a political nature.

The author also explained about Foucault on the Aphrodisia, the goddess of love which include both the sexual act itself and the various desires most commonly experience by taking “subject” and “object” in their strictly grammatical senses. The woman can be regarded as the object of sexual act in the sense that she does not do anything, but is rather the thing to which something is done.

Conclusion

Based on my plateau effect after a summary of the whole book, may draw the conclusion among those chapters as follows, starting from Chapter I to Chapter III, the author tried to trace back to the origin of the western thought that influenced from the myth of ancient Greece. Greek philosophy was influenced by the Greek mythology about the birth of man without natural reproduction. This can be called the dream of a womanless world. She also analyzed Hesiod and Parmenides about the trouble relationship of thought and sexuality. It seems to be woman is the symbol of decay and death therefore woman is not the unity and mortality. This leads to the exclusion of free man democracy. Since women is not self-sufficient, they cannot be one of the Greek citizens. Man is the only citizen that can be qualified in democracy. Democracy is made by men and for men only, not for woman, slave and children.

In chapter IV and V, the author investigates the notion of Platonic philosophy, contradiction on Tragedy in Greek myth. This tragedy treated all people- both man and woman as imperfect, they do not imply a view of the woman as imperfect man, which she is in the tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle. Socrates was the true self-sufficient person because he can depend on himself. So that man can be truly self-sufficient and be away from death.

In chapter VI and VII, the author talks about the view of Irigaray and Foucault. For Irigaray, Plato’s philosophy is in turn the foundation not just western metaphysics, but of western culture as a whole. Platonic philosophers considered the true organ of reproduction is not female body, but the one that propagates genuine knowledge, namely masculine thought. Foucault found that it is an entirely masculine morality we

find among the Greeks, a morality written by men for men. Women are represented merely as object that serve the men's sexuality, and the moral writings he studied therefore have nothing whatsoever to do with women.

Concept of Reviewer

This book was structured very well. The author started her point by taking us back to the original thought of the dream of womanless world. The second step, she raised up the contradiction of its own philosophical notion about sexuality. The last step, she took some ideas from other philosophers who also interested in this theme.

The author's ideas from this book are a big impact to nowadays society. These ideas of woman exclusion are always a question with less and unsatisfied answers. In this book, we found the seed of the problem that carried on up to now about woman disappearing from important fields in the west. It is not only a phenomenon but also philosophical ideas involved in this.

The language and the contents of this book are very deep in philosophy which related to very specific theories and notions. These are very difficult to understand for people who have no background in philosophy. Since the subject about woman inequality is very interested for all kinds of field, the language and explanation should be easier and more structural, especially the conclusion of each sub-heading should be clear and easy for all level of background.

New knowledge from this book review

The knowledge from this valuable book is how the author can take us back to the early thought of sexism in western world and how it influenced to philosophers that supposed to be the one who seeking for the truth. They are not only unable to find the truth but also try to distort some notion to support their own ideas that exclude women from all important roles that they supposed to have. What surprise me is how can they ignored natural reproduction that man and woman have equal part in it. This simple truth can be blind by these philosophers for their own beneficial notion.

Reference

Vigdis Songe-Møller. (2002). *Philosophy Without Women: The Birth of Sexism in Western Thought*, Continuum; UK.