

A STUDY ON PLATO'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN*

Sena İŞIKGİL*

ABSTRACT

In Ancient Greece, especially in Classical Athens, women are generally identified as intellectually inferior beings compared to men. Women are not seen as self-sufficient individuals, and they do not have equal rights with the males of the city. Even though, during Plato's time the place of women in society is considered inferior to that of men, Plato seems as if he exhibits an egalitarian attitude towards the position of women and men in socio-political life due to some statements about women in his dialogues, The Symposium and The Republic. In The Symposium Plato refers to a wise woman character, Diotima, and in The Republic he proposes women's active participation in political life. However, when we examine these dialogues, we can demonstrate that Plato in fact explicitly degrades women while placing them in seemingly superior positions, and in this study I will discuss this claim in two main sections. In the first section I will clarify Diotima's place in The Symposium, and in the second section I will explain the role of women in The Republic. In doing so I will reveal that Plato's attitude towards the position of women and men in the society is not egalitarian.

Keywords: Plato, women, gender discrimination, egalitarianism

(Platon'un Kadınlara Yönelik Tutumu Üzerine Bir İnceleme)

ÖZ

Antik Yunan'da, özellikle Klasik Atina'da, kadınlar genel olarak erkeklere kıyasla akli olarak ikinci derece varlıklar olarak tanımlanırlar. Kadınlar kendilerine yeten bireyler olarak görülmez ve şehrin erkekleri ile eşit haklara sahip değildirlir. Platon'un zamanında kadının toplumdaki yeri erkeğin toplumdaki yerine göre ikincil bir konumda tasavvur ediliyor olmasına rağmen Platon, Şölen ve Devlet diyaloglarındaki bazı ifadelerinden dolayı kadın ve erkeğin sosyo-politik hayattaki yerine eşitlikçi bir perspektiften bakıyor gibi görünmektedir. Şölen diyalogunda Platon bilge bir kadın karakteri, Diotima'yı, işaret ederken Devlet diyalogunda da kadınların politik hayata aktif katılımını önermiştir. Ancak bahsi geçen diyalogları incelediğimizde Platon'un kadınları görünüşte üstün pozisyonlara yerleştirirken aslında açıkça aşağı gördüğüne dikkat çekebiliriz ve bu iddiamı bu çalışmada iki ana bölümde tartışacağım. İlk bölümde Şölen diyalogunda Diotima'nın yerini incelerken ikinci bölümde Devlet diyalogunda kadının rolünü açıklayacağım. Bu şekilde yaparak Platon'un kadın ve erkeğin toplumdaki yerine karşı tutumunun eşitlikçi olmadığını açığa çıkarmış olacağım.

Anahtar kelimeler: Platon, kadınlar, cinsiyet ayrımcılığı, eşitlikçilik

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* Research Assistant in METU Philosophy Department
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Introduction

In Ancient Greece, especially in Classical Athens, women are generally identified as less rational beings compared to men. Women do not have equal rights and roles with the males of the city. In the society, women are not seen as self-sufficient creatures; they are controlled and protected by male guardians called *kyrioi*. A *kyrios* may be a woman's father or any close male relative until she is married, and after marriage the husband takes on this role. A woman is under the authority of her *kyrios*. The protection of women is not the only function of a *kyrios*, he also has a mediating role between the private domain and social life of a woman. For instance, since it is forbidden to a woman to testify in court or conduct other legal activities such as making a contract, her *kyrios* performs these activities on behalf of her.¹

Women are also alienated from political and intellectual life in Athenian society; their roles are generally limited to domestic responsibilities such as maintaining a household and being a good mother and wife. In Classical Athens, women are not seen as *politai*, because *politai* refers to the citizens with full political rights; however, women do not have most of the political rights men had.² For example, they do not vote or have the right to comment on political life, they do not attend any meetings and are not involved in decision-making processes as jury members.³

Even though the place of women during Plato's time in Classical Athens is generally considered inferior to that of men, Plato seems to exhibit an egalitarian attitude towards the position of women and men in socio-political life due to some statements about women in his dialogues, *The Symposium* and *The Republic*. In *The Symposium* Plato refers to a wise woman character, Diotima, and in *The Republic* he proposes women's active participation in political life. One can find such examples in Plato's texts relieving women from low status, however, when we analyse these dialogues, it can be shown that Plato in fact explicitly humiliates women while placing them in *seemingly* superior positions.

I think that Plato's view about the role of women in society is similar to the mainstream view of Classical Athens, and to show this I will analyse Plato's negative attitude towards women in two main sections. In the first

¹ Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p: 114

² Blundell, *ibid.*, p: 128

³ Blundell, *ibid.*, p: 128

section I will examine the place of Diotima in *The Symposium*, and in the second section I will explain the role of women in book V of *The Republic*. Doing so illustrates Plato's depreciatory attitudes towards women, and in each case it will be shown that Plato's attitude towards the status of women and men in society is not egalitarian.

The Case of Eros and Diotima in *The Symposium*

If we want to understand the position of women clearly, then we should also understand eros and the role of women in erotic love. As with most activities, in erotic love women are ignored by men, and the male-male relationship is preferred to the male-female relationship in Ancient Greece. The speeches on eros in *The Symposium* reveal the position of women in erotic love. For instance, in his speech about love Pausanias defines erotic love as a male-male relationship between an older man (*erastes* or the lover) and a young, beautiful boy (*eromenos* or the beloved).⁴ This does not mean that there is a modern understanding of homosexual relationship between an older man and a younger boy because this relationship is important for the training of the society's young boys. An older man playing an active role in the relationship educates the younger boy in political, social and martial issues, and the younger boy is eager to learn the virtues shared with him. The conclusion of this intellectual communion is a romantic interaction of two men with each other, and the beloved in trainings presents his beautiful and youthful body to his lover.

In Ancient Greece older men are generally married to women as well, but their relations with young boys are more important and valuable because while older men have sexual interactions with their wives for the sake of bodily pleasures or reproduction, they have both emotional and romantic relations with young boys as a result of an intellectual connection. While women do not play an active role in the sexual life of their husbands, young boys are the primary objects of men's romantic and sexual life, because they share their intellectual, psychological and social lives with young boys rather than their wives.⁵ Although women generally spend their time in the household and domestic activities that are seen as trivial, men spend quality time together by doing athletic activities in gymnasias or having discussions in symposiums. The realms of the male and the female

⁴ Gary Alan Scott & William A. Welton, *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, p: 47

⁵ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009, pp: 181-2

are separated at home as well. While women work in loom room, men hold symposiums in the andron, and women are not the members of these intellectual parties.⁶ Since women are seen as less rational creatures, they are excluded from intellectual activities by men. As Saxonhouse claims Plato's *Symposium* "can easily be cited as evidence of the female's exclusion from the life of the Greek intelligentsia. We find no woman sitting in the circle, drinking as she pleases."⁷

Evidently, while the male-female relationship is generally dismissed, the male-male relationship is praised in society, and Pausanias' speech in Plato's *Symposium* illustrates this view. In his speech Pausanias defines two versions of Aphrodite and two different kinds of Love. The first Aphrodite is "Heavenly Aphrodite," the daughter of Uranus, born without a mother. The second Aphrodite is the child of Zeus and Dione, and she is called "Common Aphrodite."⁸ While Pausanias associates the former with "Heavenly Love," which is good and valuable, he associates the latter with "Common Love," which is bad and vulgar. For Pausanias, "Common Love" is an inferior kind of love because it is related with "Common Aphrodite," the descendant not only of a male, but also of a female. For this reason, men experiencing this kind of love are in relations with women rather than boys, and they give importance to merely bodily pleasure rather than the mind or soul of their loved ones.⁹ On the other hand, he claims that men experiencing "Heavenly Love" are inclined only towards boys who are intellectually mature enough because this love is related to "Heavenly Aphrodite," the offspring of only a male, who is defined as an innately intelligent human kind.¹⁰ As can be deduced from the speech of Pausanias, because women are defined as less rational creatures, and because it is believed that they have innately inferior soul, erotic love with women is considered vulgar.

Not only Plato's contemporaries but also Plato himself derogates women, and he also thinks that while females, as innately inferior creatures, are fond of earthly life and bodily pleasures, males are interested in "the perfection of the mind."¹¹ I will introduce Plato's real attitude toward

⁶ Morag Buchan, *Women in Plato's Political Theory*, London: Macmillan Press, 1999, p: 100

⁷ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Eros and the Female in Greek Political Thought: An Interpretation of Plato's *Symposium*", *Political Theory*, 12(1), 1984, p: 11

⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*, M. C. Howatson (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 180d-e

⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, 181b

¹⁰ Plato, *The Symposium*, 181c

¹¹ Buchan, *ibid.*, p: 98

women by using certain hints in his dialogues, and firstly, I will begin with the place of Diotima in *The Symposium*.

In *The Symposium* Plato describes Diotima as a wise woman who is an expert about love and many other issues. Furthermore, he ascribes Socrates' whole knowledge about the subject of love to Diotima.¹² It can be clearly said that Diotima is among the exceptional women of Plato. According to Buchan, because Plato refers to exceptional women in *The Republic* without full description, we can identify them as women whose capabilities are equal to those of men.¹³ However, Plato's praise of Diotima should not be regarded as a threat to his humiliating attitude towards women since, as Hasan observes, his antifeminist attitudes are clearer and stronger than his rare references to exceptional women.¹⁴ I think that the reason why Plato referred to an exceptional woman in *The Symposium* is more important for understanding his real attitude towards women.

Plato defines Diotima as a wise woman in his dialogue not because he wants to glorify womankind but because of a literary necessity. I think that Plato does not randomly choose characters to interact with Socrates. He chooses characters according to the subjects discussed in the dialogues. When we analyse *The Symposium* we become aware that the initial goal of the symposium seems to pay homage to Love; however, after Socrates speaks, the praise of Love is converted into an investigation of the nature of love, indicating that the real subject of Plato's *Symposium* is the function and the nature of love. Diotima's speech about love in *The Symposium* explains the function of love by using the words, pregnancy and procreation, metaphorically. That is, instead of a man, a woman, Diotima explains the transformation process of physical procreation into spiritual procreation, which means giving birth to knowledge as a definition of love. Pregnancy and procreation are biological abilities of women, and because they belong to women exclusively, Plato casts a highly experienced woman instead of a man in Socrates' speech as a literary tool. Groneberg's article also asks why Plato uses a real female character like Diotima, instead of a character like Tiresias who spent his life as both a man and a woman, and he answers his own question by explaining that, although Tiresias knows the pleasures and the desires of both sexes, "procreation is something else," and only a real

¹² Plato, *The Symposium*, 201d

¹³ Buchan, *ibid.*, p: 123

¹⁴ Abia Hasan, "Plato's Antifeminism: a new dualistic approach", *E-LOGOS*, 2012, p: 12. Available on line on, <http://nb.vse.cz/kfil/elogos/ethics/hasan12.pdf>

woman can be a master of it.¹⁵ His words support my idea that Plato includes a woman character as a literary tool in *The Symposium* because of her experience in physical procreation.

A detailed analysis of Diotima’s speech shows that Plato’s real aim is not to glorify women by using a wise female character in his dialogue because although Diotima is a female character, there are derogatory attitudes towards women in Diotima’s speech as well. As mentioned, while investigating the function of love, Diotima uses the process of pregnancy and procreation in a metaphoric way, and she claims that the function of love is “giving birth in the beautiful in respect of body and of soul.”¹⁶ According to her, “all human beings are pregnant, [...], in body and in soul,” and when they grow to maturity, they want to give birth.¹⁷ In these words, Diotima refers to two kinds of pregnancy. The first kind is the physical pregnancy of women, and men who prefer the love of females for the sake of bodily pleasure have merely physical children at the end of this process. However, the second kind is the spiritual pregnancy of men who prefer the love of boys, and these men have wisdom and the other virtues as the spiritual offspring of their intellectual relations with boys. According to Diotima the function of love is achieving “the knowledge solely of the beautiful itself,”¹⁸ and she implies that a man can gradually reach this goal. He may begin with the bodily pleasures of this world, but in time, he should improve and tend towards intellectual pleasures rather than physical pleasures. She claims that when a man prefers the perfection of mind by being in love with a boy in the right way, he can almost achieve this ultimate aim.^{19,20}

¹⁵ Michael Groneberg, “Myth and Science around Gender and Sexuality: Eros and the Three Sexes in Plato’s Symposium”, *Diogenes*, 52(4), 2005, p: 42, doi: 10.1177/0392192105059469

¹⁶ Plato, *The Symposium*, 206b

¹⁷ Plato, *The Symposium*, 206c

¹⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*, 211c

¹⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, 211b

²⁰ After Diotima, Alcibiades speaks in *The Symposium*. He complains about Socrates, saying that, although he offers his beautiful and young body to Socrates, Socrates does not want sexual interaction with him. He rejects Alcibiades. This also supports that Socrates is a man who transcends the desire for merely physical beauty and prefers the perfection of mind through the true love of the boys. Love with young Alcibiades is not the right kind of love because there must be reciprocity between the lover and the beloved in the superior kind of love: while the lover teaches wisdom and the other virtues to his beloved, the beloved must be eager to learn them, and while the beloved learns beneficial things, the lover should give birth to knowledge due to the energy he receives from his beloved. However, Alcibiades’ speech makes it clear that he is not an appropriate character for the right kind of

While Diotima praises the male-male relationship, she also mentions the male-female relationship as an inferior kind of the love and associates love of women with love of the merely physical. She does not describe bodily pleasure as a thing that must be suppressed or excluded, but it may only be the beginning of the process of giving birth to knowledge. In section 211b, she clearly emphasises that if men desire to give birth knowledge of the beautiful, they must transcend the physical through the true love of boys. This means that women can never give birth to knowledge; giving birth to knowledge is only intrinsic to males. As Buchan claims:

Physical love, like physical procreation, is a vulgar version of the Form of love and the birth of knowledge which are attained only by those who can transcend the physical. This does not include women, as Diotima makes clear. It is not only the praise of boy-loving in the correct way, but the denigration of femininity and the relegation of normal female functions to inferior status which are expressed by Diotima.²¹

Females only represent physical procreation, while through Diotima's mouth Plato asserts that the best level of procreation is procreation of knowledge, which has an intrinsically masculine character.

These are not the only parts of Diotima's speech that devalue women; her explanation about the birth of Love also denigrates women. She defines Love as a child of Resource and Poverty. According to Diotima's story, Resource drinks at Aphrodite's birthday festival and falls asleep in the garden of Zeus. Poverty, who has no resource, wants to have a baby by Resource, so she lies next to him.²² Since Love's mother is Poverty he is always poor and far from being beautiful. Like his mother, he walks barefoot in the streets and sleeps outside the door without bedding.²³ On the other hand, because his father is Resource, he is eager to learn and research. He is clever and a lover of wisdom like his father.²⁴ This story associates the female with poverty and ignorance, and the male with wisdom, cleverness and resourcefulness. This can also be cited as evidence for Plato's depiction of men as superior and women as inferior.

love because he does not heed the useful advice Socrates gave him. He only tries to deceive Socrates to be alone with him, and by rejecting him Socrates reveals that he disdains merely physical love.

²¹ Buchan, *ibid.*, p: 127

²² Plato, *The Symposium*, 203b-c

²³ Plato, *The Symposium*, 203c-d

²⁴ Plato, *The Symposium*, 203d-e

In the light of the analysis above it can clearly be stated that giving place to a wise woman character in *The Symposium* does not show that Plato glorifies womankind. Plato uses Diotima as a literary tool, and several of Diotima's speeches in *The Symposium* are demeaning towards women.

A Response to a Possible Objection: The Case of Guardians in *The Republic*

The previous section's analysis of the case of Diotima tried to show that Plato does not have a positive attitude towards women. However, there may be a possible objection to my claim, and I would like to address it in this section.

In *The Republic*, Plato proposes women's active participation in political life by giving equal rights to women and men to perform the function of guardianship. In Book V, Plato defends this position as follows:

[...] [N]one of activities connected with running a city belongs to a woman because she is a woman, nor to a man because he is a man. Natural attributes are evenly distributed between the sex, and a woman is naturally equipped to play her part in all activities, just as a man is [...].²⁵

When we consider the position of women in Ancient Greece, Plato's positive attitude towards women may seem as revolutionary. And thus it might be objected that Plato has an egalitarian attitude towards the status of women and men in socio-political life. However, I believe that when Plato proposes that both sexes should have equal rights to perform the same occupation, his real aim is not to protect the rights of women, and in this section I will show this claim by analysing two main points: Firstly, I will point out some parts of *The Republic* that show Plato's anti-egalitarian attitude towards women, and secondly, I will explain why Plato offers women the opportunity to be in the guardian class as a response to this objection.

In book V of *The Republic* Plato introduces two kinds of distinctions between human beings. The first is natural differences among human beings, but the second is the gender discrimination between men and women. While the first kind emerges from the diversity of innate abilities and tendencies, the second emerges from the thought of inequality between

²⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, Tom Griffith (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 455d

the sexes.²⁶ Plato argues that natural differences among people are related not to their sexes, but to their souls. For instance, to be able to be good at medicine is related with the innate tendency of a person's soul rather than gender for Plato.²⁷ In other words, according to him, occupations should be assigned considering people's nature rather than their gender. He argues that while some people's natures are inclined to be rulers, others are inclined to be farmers or workers. Starting from this point of view, in book V Plato claims that men and women can perform the same occupations equally well, since their intrinsic abilities are not determined by their gender. For this reason, women and men can both perform the function of guardian successfully, if their souls appropriate for it.

As a consequence of this claim, it seems as if Plato is trying to salvage women from their inferior position in society. However, this is not a true way of evaluating Plato's real attitude towards women, because as mentioned before, Plato not only introduces natural differences between people, but also makes a sexual discrimination between men and women in some parts of the *The Republic*. Although he proposes that women should practise all the professions that men do, like his contemporaries he also makes sexual discrimination by asserting that "in all of them [the activities] woman is weaker than man."²⁸ In some parts of book V, he uses sexist expressions emphasising women's incapability:

Can you think of any human activity in which the male sex is not superior to the females in all these ways? Or do we have to give a long account of weaving, cookery and baking cakes – things the female sex is thought to be pretty good at, and where it is particularly absurd for them to be second-best?²⁹

Like the Ancient Athenians, Plato also believes the real mission of women is domestic tasks such as cooking, weaving or other tasks seen as feminine practises in the society. For this reason, Plato cynically says that if men are superior to women in domestic activities, it will be absurd. Yet, as Annas claims, by saying these words, Plato also implies that if a man tried his hand at domestic tasks, he would be better at these activities than women.³⁰ On the one hand, he asserts that women can do the same jobs with men; on the other hand, he treats the male sex like a special kind of human

²⁶ Hasan, *ibid.*, pp: 5-6

²⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 454d

²⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 455e

²⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 455c-d

³⁰ Julia Annas, "Plato's "Republic" and Feminism", *Philosophy*, 51(197), 1976, p: 309

being by asserting that unlike women, men are explicitly adequate for all activities.

As the quotation above shows, Plato implies that men are more talented than women in *all activities*; this means that men are always superior to women, not only physically, but also mentally. Plato’s expression is quite problematic because he does not say that some men are superior to some women, but he claims that the male sex is superior. Although it may be the case that there are some women or men who are superior to the rest of humanity in some activities, he implies that in every task men are always more talented than women. About this issue Bloom correctly argues:

[...] Socrates also admits that the best women are always inferior in capacity to the best men; it is then highly improbable that any women would even be considered for membership in the higher classes. Thus the whole consideration of their education as guardians is unnecessary.³¹

Although Plato proposes that like men, women should also be trained and given the right to be in the guardian class, he does not present a vision that protects the equality of both genders. Even if men and women do the same jobs, women will always play second fiddle to men.

402

In some parts of book V Plato also describes female guardians as the “common property” of male guardians.³² He claims that no man should have his own private wife or children. Like children, women should be common wives of all male guardians. According to him, violence or fights between males occur in order to possess private property such as wives, children, money and houses, and in order to suppress such violence, there should be “common property” instead of private property of male guardians.³³ That is, Plato proposes this idea for the sake of the well-being of the state; however, this aim does not change the simple fact that describing a woman as the “common property” of all men means humiliating women.

Although Plato looks down on women, and although he asserts that women are always weaker than men in all activities, the reason for his proposal that women should be members of the guardian class must be determined. I believe that he gives women the right to be in the guardian class not because of his awareness about the rights of the female sex, but for the sake of the continuity and the well-being of the state. As mentioned

³¹ Allen Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, New York: Basic Books, 1968, p: 383

³² Plato, *The Republic*, 457c-d

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, 464c-e

before, like the Athenians of his time, Plato also thinks that women who make up half of society spend their time by engaging in some trivial domestic activities and not making any contribution to the welfare of the state; however, according to him, they can be beneficial for the continuity of the state by performing not domestic activities, but public activities as men do.³⁴ In his work Buchan corroborates this idea with the following remarks:

Plato's theory is not, in fact, based on a belief in individual political rights for either men or women. Indeed, it would be surprising if it were. [...] Plato's theory rests on the idea that all social and political arrangements within the state should be for the good of the community.³⁵

When women are included in the guardian class, not half, but the entire community makes an effort to serve the continuity of the state.

Moreover, in book V of *The Republic* (459d-e) Plato implies that thanks to education of women as guardians, well trained, masculine women and men have sex with each other, and the community can have both mentally and physically more talented children as descendants of the bests. For the ideal state, descendants of the bests are important because the state will be stronger with each new and better generation.

In the light of these it can clearly be said that Plato's proposition in book V about women's active participation in political life does not demonstrate an egalitarian attitude towards women. Plato gives women the chance to be in the guardian class not for the sake of equality between the sexes, but for the sake of the well-being and the continuity of the state, and in some parts of book V he explicitly humiliates womankind.

Conclusion

These discussions demonstrate that in Ancient Greece, especially in Classical Athens, the position of women is considered inferior to that of men in all activities, and Plato's real attitude towards women is similar to the view of his society. In *The Symposium*, Plato refers to Diotima, a wise woman, as a mentor of Socrates, and in book V of *The Republic* he gives women equal rights with men to be in the guardian class. However, as this paper argues, a more careful analysis of these dialogues reveals that Plato is not interested in the equality of the sexes.

³⁴ Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, p:183

³⁵ Buchan, *ibid.*, p: 135-6

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