

# **Aristotle's philosophical influence on Western civilization, history and theology placed women in inferior positions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Aristotle's philosophical influence on Western civilization, history and theology to placed women in inferior positions**

*This paper examines the influence of Aristotle on western civilization, and it explores how this line of thinking influenced religion from the point of view of its subordination of women. Then I examine how women were excluded from historical accounts and by this omission, were treated generally and regarded as inferior beings. Next I analyze the critical feminist reaction to this male patriarchal authorship, and then examined the research methods that patriarchal writers used with patriarchal reference to the "traditional model" (i e, male as a norm in society). I will finally examine certain oppressive scriptural passages, which oppress women and help men to regard them as property. The above concept helped feminist to research a new methodology of liberation, not only to liberate women but men as well.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Historians of women so far have used traditional conceptual frameworks. They have applied questions from the traditional history of women and tried to fit women's past into the empty spaces of historical scholarship. The problem is that this way of thinking deals with women in male-defined society, and then tries to fit women into categories and value systems which consider the man as the norm or the measure of importance. Aristotle's writings are a good example of this way of thinking.

From the Greeks, whose history was written by men for men, western civilization has inherited the philosophical notion that women is by nature different from men. From generation to generation this idea has been passed on uncritically, and affectively has permeated every area of life, in such a way that it has become one of the laws of the universe. Biologists, philosophers, sociologists, theologians and people in other fields have accepted Aristotle's notion and have based it on thorough different systems of thought to the

disadvantage of women. For example, Plato, through Socrates, tried to make his society come to terms with the above problem:

“Let us come to an understanding about the nature of women. (He then raised the following questions.) Do men and women possess different nature? If so, should they be assigned different functions? If so, should they receive different education?” (Grube 1950:154).

Throughout his discussion Plato was apparently moving in the direction of acceptance of a similarity between men and women, while society insisted upon disparity between the natures of the two sexes. His inferences were that for the benefit of society, the nature of women should not be considered to be totally different from the nature of men.

Aristotle, on the other hand, proposed that men and women were by nature ordained for different functions. According to his philosophy, which was to take things as they were rather than, as they ought to be, he formed a view that reflected the situation in contemporary Athenian society. He stood as the very foundation of concepts on the nature of women that were to be developed throughout western philosophy and religion. For example, he suggested that:

“The author of nature gave man strength of body and an intrepidity of mind to enable him to face hardships, and to women was given a weak and delicate constitution, accompanied by natural softness and modest timidity, which fit her for a sedentary life” (McKeon 1941:1254).

The above statement favours men who are regarded as being in a better condition and more fit in every function. The female on the other hand is regarded as being more evil in disposition than the male and is less courageous and less honest. Aristotle had a lot to say about women in his work. He developed a biological basis for the inferiority of women:

“While still in the womb of the mother the female takes longer to develop than the male does; though once birth has taken place everything reaches perfection sooner in female than in a male, e g, puberty, maturity, old age because female are weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a ‘deformity’ through one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature” (McKeon 1941:1260).

He also designated the male, solely on the basis of the biological structure of the procreative function, as the active agent in humanity, and the female as the passive. Aristotle attributed the generation of new life to the male completely since women were not able to produce semen. This kind of thinking developed throughout the ages in such a way that it denied, diminished, and distorted the full humanity of women. If a person analyses the above statement theologically, one will find that whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women or others must be presumed not to reflect the divine or a genuine relation to the divine, or reflect the authentic nature of things. This negative principle also implies that there is a positive principle, a principle which is found in Christ, the liberator of all human beings, especially the oppressed. In his idea of the natural order of things Aristotle reminds us that:

“Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity, extends to all mankind” (McKeon 1941:1254).

Having established the superiority of males in his more scientific writings, Aristotle developed and supported this concept in his social and political writings on ethics and politics. In the social sphere he viewed the inequality between men and women as a permanent and natural situation. All power was in the hands of the males. Women were a cut above slaves:

“The man is master, as is right and proper and manages everything that it befalls him to do as head of the house; but whatever can be suitably performed by the wife he hands over to her” (Ruether 1983:10).

In Aristotle’s philosophy, the virtue of men is seen in commanding while the virtue of women is seen in obedience. Using this kind of thinking, women find their place in society as subservient to men. For Aristotle this situation was natural.

The importance of understanding Aristotle’s views of the nature of women is that in his philosophy we find the source of the currently held philosophical and theological ideas that define and, in a sense, condemn and oppress women to a social position of inequality and subordination that has lasted even until today. Women are defined relative to men. In other words, men are defined as the normative norm for humanity. For example, Aristotle believed that:

“Every male seed should normatively produce its own image in another male. Females results only through an aberration in which the lower material principle subverts the male formative principle” (Ruether 1975:15).

I wonder what Aristotle thought of his own mother. The reader can realise that an ideology of misogyny is developed, both in Greek literature and in the later strata of religion, Old Testament and Talmudic Judaism. This concept influenced patriarchal writers in such a way that the texts experienced the evilness of women and traced the origin of evil in the world to female figures, such as Eve. Ruether explores this idea and responds by saying:

“The Jewish tradition expressed its misogyny in language drawn from the patriarchal family, whereas the Greek tradition came to symbolize it in abstract philosophical language” (Ruether 1975:15).

These two traditions of patriarchal hierarchicalism were parallel and later began to amalgamate in the Hellenistic period. Christianity fell heir to the fusion. This development as an ideology of oppression towards women also showed how patriarchal writers, through cultural values, rendered women invisible in their writing, or as inferior beings. In short, Aristotle championed this type of ideology and finalised for prosperity, what was possibly the most vicious and devastating philosophy that has ever been perpetrated upon the human race. The nature of woman was defined as different from that of man in a way that it fell perfectly into man’s scheme for maintaining a diversity of function and role and place in society to the advantage of the male. This unrealistic, false philosophy of femaleness has been responsible for many of the problems that have perplexed women for centuries.

## **2 THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL WRITINGS**

Women make up more than half of humankind, yet they have been excluded from historical documents. Whenever they appear in written materials they appear inferior or treated as subhuman. Their culturally determined and psychologically internalised, marginality seems to be what makes their historical experience essentially different from that of men. Men have defined their own experience as history, but women were expected to fit into the empty spaces, assuming their traditional, marginal, “subgroup” status. The truth is that

history, as written and perceived up to now, is the history of a minority (men). They may well turn out to be the “subgroup” in a few short years. In order to reconstruct the lost memories of women in a new history, which is finally inclusive, we will have to recognize that no single methodology and conceptual framework can fit the complexities of the historical experience of all women.

Women’s experience encompass all that is human; they share and always have shared the world equally with men, equally in the sense that half, at least, of all the world’s experience has been their writing a balanced account of history which will thus involve documenting all of historical experience for both men and women. The history of women has a special character; a built-in distortion which led to exclusion and oppression of women by patriarchal systems. Women’s history comes to us refracted through the lens of men’s observations; refracted again through values which consider men the measure. Lerner says:

“Women have always made history as much and had no tools to interpret their own experience” (Lerner 1979:166).

What we know of the past experience of women has been transmitted to us largely through the reflection of men. How we see and interpret what we know about women has been shaped for us through a value system defined by men. To construct a new history that includes women as active participants that will, with true equality, reflect the dual nature of humankind – its male and female aspect – we must first pause to reconstruct the missing piece of the female experience. This will be a history that will reflect who they are.

This kind of history must contain not only the activities and events in which women participated, but the record of changes and shifts in their perception of themselves and their roles. As I read historical materials about people creating history, I realise that although it was not mentioned, there were women active in history, just as there were men active in history. No historical account of a given period should now be written that does not deal with the actions and ideas of both men and women.

### **3 AN AFRICAN STORY**

There is a fable about a little African boy who was watching a “Tarzan” movie. At the end of the movie he questioned the honesty of Tarzan’s ability to defeat all the animals of the jungle, especially the ferocious lion. The child’s mother explained the honesty of the story by telling the boy “my son, you will get a different story when the lion learns to write”.

This fable tells us that there is always another side to a story; but the one who controls the pen controls the meaning and interpretation of events. Hence, patriarchal writers were able to share their side of the story, which oppressed women and placed them as inferior or subhuman. This has caused feminist reaction to explore the missing parts of the story. Feminist writers explore the experiences of women by raising questions about the role of women in the past.

### **4 CRITICAL FEMINIST REACTION TO HISTORY**

As I began reading historical materials written by feminists as they react to patriarchal writings, I realised that the material did not reflect the realities of women’s lives. This material was also questioned by women who sought help from counselors. They are now questioning the conservative ways of scripture, worship, and oppressive relationships of abusive men. Some of the women are aware of how they have been excluded from history by patriarchal writers. This issues, challenges, poses, and raises questions about women’s past.

If women looked at recorded history as though it were a play, they would realise that the story of the performances over the years has been recorded only by men and told in men’s words.

The focus has been mostly on men, hence the following questions are raised by feminists who are seeking to recover women’s history and women’s experiences that have been excluded by male writers as they recorded history in a patriarchal culture:

- (a) What will the writing of history be like when dominance is removed and definitions are shared equally by men and women?
- (b) Will women devalue the past, overthrow the categories, and supplant order with chaos?
- (c) Can there be a separate history of men and women?
- (d) Is the past gender-determined?

- (e) How can we recover the lost experiences and memories of women in past history?
- (f) What were women doing?
- (g) How were they doing?
- (h) What was their own understanding of their place in the world?

To explore and answer the above questions will simply engage us in recreating women's history, but this move also calls into question the claim to universality which "history" generally assumes as given. If historical studies, as we traditionally know them, were actually focused on men and women alike, then there would be no need for questioning historical material, and examining the exclusion of women in history. However, looking at the recorded history of society as though it were the play, and have both directed and interpreted the play and the meaning of the action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, and given women the supporting roles. According to Lerner's highly influential book *The majority finds its past*. She furthermore says:

"Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and for the building of civilization. Women have also shared with men in preserving collective memory, which shapes the past into cultural tradition, provides the link between generations, and connects past and future" (Lerner 1986:4).

It is commonly known that men and women together built civilization and culture. One would assume that any historical account written about any given period would recognize that basic factor. Until the most recent past, however, historians have been men, and what they have recorded is what men have done and experienced and found significant. They have called this history and claimed universality for it. This background is helpful in understanding traditional history, which has been written and interpreted by men from an andocentric viewpoint. We could further interpret it as the history of men. The mere fact that women were invisible in history except as inferior beings calls attention to the fact that something vital is missing from historical scholarship. That is why feminists are questioning patriarchal material, uncovering rich experiences of women who were left out in writings by men. Their aim in re-interpreting women's history is to document as well as to re-inter-

pret that which is missing. Maya explains the position of modern women who operate in the world of men by saying that:

“Being a woman is hard work. Not without joy and even ecstasy, but still relentless, unending work. Becoming an old female may require only being born with certain genitalia, inheriting long-living genes and the fortune not to be run over by an out-of-control-truck, but to become and remain a woman command the existence and employment of a genius” (Maya 1993:2).

She continues to share about the missing experiences and exclusion of women in work by men. Then she concentrates on the exclusion of women from history because of influence that finally isolated women. Hence, the exploration of rediscovering what was lost in the past by reading past materials. This becomes an important element in re-interpreting the lost voices of women.

Schüssler-Fiorenza goes back in recovering the lost past traditions of women in scripture. She is engaged in the enterprise of historical reconstruction, and finally confronting vast untapped riches of primary sources, she recovers the important memories of women; and new definitions emerge that placed women in leadership. This way of reviewing the material becomes a methodology, a stance, an angle of vision for reviewing patriarchal materials. In other words, the exclusion of women in history as a stance, demands that women be included equally at the center of history as human beings created in God’s image. It becomes an angle of vision which permits us to see that women live and have lived in a world defined by men, and most frequently dominated by men who have shaped and influenced women’s world and all human events. Responding to the influence on the impact of Aristotle’s writing she had this to say about slave women:

“The oppression of the slave woman was more direct, moral brutal, and without redeeming feature. The black women was exploited as a worker, as a breeder of slaves, and as a sex object for white men” (Lerner 1979:70).

Her life was defined by men, and as a result of this, she lost her womanhood to that of being an object of both black and white males. Hence, as we recover the experience of women left out of the histories written by men, it will give us the insight that will shed new light on the balance and true relationship between men and women. The writings and influence of Aristotle on western civilization has



now caused feminists to react on materials of patriarchal writers. Feminist writers need to be careful that they also do fall into the same trap of patriarchal writers by excluding men in their works. Let us now examine how patriarchal methods excluded women from history.

## **5 RESEARCH METHODS OF PATRIARCHAL WRITERS**

There were different kinds of methods which were used by historians as they were writing history. The models they used were biased, oppressive, and excluded women who played important roles in the making and shaping of history. I will analyze briefly two of the patriarchal methods, and then explore the way these methods ignored the experiences of women and their full participation in the making of history. The important issue is to explore how historians' methods of research and analysis have denied the multiple and varied experience of women.

## **6 TRADITIONAL MODEL**

The first model is the traditional research method which was influenced by Aristotle's and other writers who excluded women from their writings. This method concentrates on and favours elite males who are important figures in the making and shaping of history at the expense and exclusion of women. The method ignores completely women's experience and considers them of less value in history. Hence they consider women inferior. Women according to the writers are not capable of causing events. It is interesting to note that historians in fact share the general understanding of women – internalized by women, sanctioned by theologians and lawyers throughout the ages. It was only with the coming of exegetical doubt concerning the sacred texts, beginning with Galileo, that the basis for debate concerning the physiological, juridical and biblical – theological motives which had justified the subordination of women could be established. Christian historians in particular, following the usual criteria for research, have made a notable contribution to obscuring the role of women. For example, while the New Testament writers themselves were selected in the use they made of the material in their possession, they handed down only part of a much richer tradition concerning the role played by women in developing Christianity.

When historians have sought to include women in the traditional, they have done so in these ways described by Lerner (1979: 145).

“The first level at which historians, trained in traditional history, approach women’s history, is by writing the history of ‘women worthies’ or ‘compensatory history’”.

The writers concentrated on the following questions:

(a) Who are the women missing from history? Note that the question does not explore women’s experience, but is attempting to place women into history through the experiences of men.

(b) Who are the women of achievement and what did they achieve? This question, important as it may be, separates women into two classes – the higher and the lower class.

The exploration of notable women is not helpful because it does not shed much light on those activities to the whole society. These questions, when explored through the traditional patriarchal method, do not help describe the experiences and history of the mass of women. However, they help us to see how women were excluded from the making of history. Lerner shares an insight that is worth noting:

“The historical invisibility of women is often due to the fact that we look for them in exactly the same activities as are pursued by men, and thus we cannot find them” Lerner (1979:29).

Church historians have, up to the last few years, placed a still more masculine, andocentric, and aristocratic stamp on their work by either discounting the presence of women in the life of the Church, or leaving their real and significant participation in the affairs of Church communities out of account. Therefore, trying to reconstruct the woman’s presence in the history of the Church today presents many problems. Given the scant interest shown in the more remote past, it is difficult to find resources. These resources present a distinctly partial image of individual as well as collective viewpoints, which are in fact more complex, because the accounts that have come down to us were written by men and usually addressed to men. For example Lerner suggests that:

“The patriarchal mode of thought is so built into our mental processes that we cannot exclude it unless we first make ourselves consciously aware of it, ...[T]hus, in thinking about the prehistoric past of women, we are so much locked into the

explanatory andocentric system that the only alternative model” Lerner (1986:36).

Women have in fact been described by others, denigrated or exalted, but generally as a reflection of male ideas which excluded women from the word that has power. Women have had fewer opportunities for registering their own feelings and thoughts. I also need to mention that when I examined some of the women’s writings, I recognized that some of them even belonged to a masculine cultural system or used traditional methods of research – fitting into a patriarchal ideological framework, following accepted models and prescribed roles, even though they deplore this.

## **7 CONTRIBUTION MODEL**

The second method is that of “contribution history.” The writers (mostly male) concentrated on or described women’s contribution to their status and their oppression by male – defined society. They do this by raising questions such as: What have women contributed to abolition, to reform, to the progressive movement, to the labour movement, or to the New Deal?

In this model the movement for recognition of women stands at the centre of inquiry, especially as to how women have contributed to movements and to society. Women’s contribution is judged first of all with respect to the effect on the movement, and then by the standards appropriated to men. The model unfortunately ignores the support that helped these great women, and also the feminist awareness that grew out of the oppressive patriarchal system that regarded women as objects and inferior. This has led Lerner to raise critical analytical questions about how this model contributes to the oppression of women. Let me share a typical example from Lerner. She suggests that writers in this model see Margaret Sanger (leader of the birth-control movement) as breaking social norms. She says:

“Margaret Sanger is seen merely as the founder of the birth-control movement, not as a woman raising a revolutionary challenge to the centuries – old practice by which the bodies and lives of women are dominated and ruled by man-made laws” Lerner (1979:147).

It is clear that women who question models are described as problems, because they are breaking the norms that guide the society. Male ignore the fact that these norms were created by them with less

input from women. The male writers in those days did not explore the conditions women have to experience in a society that discriminates against them. They will not examine questions like: Who oppresses women? How were they oppressed? How did women respond to such oppression? These questions, when fully explored, would help in examining economic or social oppression. People would then learn through answering these questions, what individuals, society, or a group of people have done to the oppressed, imposing conditions upon them and creating a norm that violates who they are. One can see how the inferior status and oppressive restraints became an aspect of women's historical experience (this idea will be further explored through Aristotle's concept of women). This approach has its own limitations, because it makes it appear that either women are largely passive, or that, at the most, reacted to andocentric pressures or to the restraints of patriarchal society. This method also fails to uplift positive as well as essential ways in which women function in history. Lerner reminds us that the method is limited:

“Essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework; values established by men” (Lerner 1979:148).

Another pitfall of this method is that it ignores how notable women became oppressive to other women by virtue of their position and power. It also ignores the role of status in the society that divided women into upper and lower classes. We need to be aware that it is not only men who oppress women, but women also oppress each other. As I write this paper I am aware that my thoughts come from a masculine cultural system: a system that shaped me in a patriarchal ideological framework. Hence history is not complete until it is corrected by female voices. Feminists have now come out with new methods that correct some of patriarchal writings. Schüssler-Fiorenza, for example, approaches the materials by applying the hermeneutic of suspicion in order to find out what is not said about women. Her approach is different from patriarchal writers who were interested in the descriptive model that explored the conditions of women and not the experiences they suffered. Feminist scholars are now asking and applying critical methods of questioning to patriarchal, traditional writings so as to discover the lost traditions of women's experience which will enrich both males and females, and liberate both the distortion created by male gender biased history.

For example, as the writers engage the materials of birth-control, they will approach this subject from a women's viewpoint, which will lead them to the reasons why birth-control was important at that time, and how it affected women. They also examine it as an issue expressing deeper cultural and symbolic values of physical conditions to which women are prone, such as menarche and pregnancy, women's ailments, attitudes, and fashions affecting women's health and women's life experience. This insight and approach leads to a different way of exploring the issue, but it also makes us aware that women have a different experience with respect to consciousness, depending on whether their work, their expression, their activity is male-defined or women-oriented. Women, like men, are indoctrinated in a male-defined system and conduct their lives accordingly. Aristotle and other patriarchal writers are good examples of how men and women were influenced by their works.

## **8 PATRIARCHY AND ITS EFFECT ON RELIGION**

The Bible is thought by many readers to be an anti-feminist document. The sacred scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity are considered to be detrimental to the well-being of women, especially in the modern world because of abuse and domination that occurs between men and women. The Bible has been used as a resource for arguing against a woman's desire to be anything but a dutiful housewife and mother. Many persons speak of the "obvious prejudice" which the Bible has against women. With the above comments in mind one can understand the treatment of women as inferior by men. For example Eve's creation from the rib of Adam provides the biblical stigma of fundamental inferiority and secondary status. Eve is blamed for the "fall" of Adam. The patriarchs from Abraham through Joseph, and then Moses expose a concept of God that is exclusively masculine and an attitude toward wives and women that is thoroughly paternalistic. The Bible is full of stories of abused women. These passages of scriptures create a problem today as justification for and/or explanation of violence and abuse among human beings.

The number of abuse cases is increasing partly because of additional reporting due to raised consciousness, partly because the incidence of male violence in society (South Africa) is increasing, and partly because there is a global reactionary backlash against women as they move into non-traditional roles which may be

perceived as threatening to traditional male dominance. Cultural violence is expressed in families as well as on the streets and in the media, and abuse in families translates, in turn, into a more violent society. A feminist perspective on abuse in families requires that people first face the degree to which violence against women is a normal part of patriarchy, expected and condoned. Then when we analyze the extent and pervasiveness of abuse against women, we must conclude that it is not just a problem of the marital or personality maladjustment of a few, but it is also a historical and social problem. Social scientists and psychologists working in the field of battered women are in agreement in their view of patriarchy and its effect on wife abuse, as Clarke states:

“These writers have generally singled out as the starting point for a theory of wife abuse the patriarchal foundation of the family itself and the hierarchical power structure that provides the framework of modern social systems” (Clarke 1986:23).

Lerner gives an excellent short account of wife beating as it recurs throughout patriarchal history. This issue of abuse also reflects a time when physiology determined hierarchical roles. Since then there has been a resistance to change by most men and some women. In pre-patriarchal history women were revered for their ability to give birth. Lerner evaluates the beginning of patriarchy by saying that:

“Once man realised the significance of his coitus, however, man’s religious status gradually changed as a woman’s status gradually became debased. As man became the patriarch, society did an about-face towards a repressive mode of living” (Lerner 1986:129).

Other writers such as James Emerson and R W Dobash believe that the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal family has legitimised wife abuse (beating) to subordinate, dominate, and control women. The institutions of Church and state have supported the patriarchal tradition and resisted any change in the status of women. The cultural belief was that men had the right to dominate and control women, and that women whereby nature subservient to men. This idea of man’s authority to rule over women is traced to God’s intention in the account from Genesis 2 and 3. The message that has pervaded the religious tradition is that women and their offspring are the property of men and hence subject to man’s power. Patriarchy finally

provided a social structure of ownership of women by men, which made it possible for men to do whatever they wanted with their women.

This issue of abuse has become central these days in South Africa, because women are questioning their subordinate position in family, work and society. They also question the patriarchal structures and institutions that perpetuate domination and subordination. The overall question to address is what will explain women's historical "complicity" in upholding a patriarchal system that has subordinated them, and the children of both sexes perpetuating that system from generation to generation.

Traditional male scholars have offered us the patriarchal answer. Women have not produced important advances in thought because of their biologically determined pre-occupation with nature and emotion, which has led to their essential "inferiority" with regard to abstract thought. Since men and women are biologically different, the values and implications based on these differences are in my opinion, the result of culture. Whatever socially functional differences are discernable in the present in regard to men as a group and women as a group are the result of the particular history of women, which is essentially different from the history of men. This is due to the subordination of women to men, which dates from the earliest civilizations, and the denial by men of women's history. The existence of women's role in history and religion has been obscured and neglected by patriarchal thought, a fact which has significantly affected the psychology of men and women. This thinking has also affected how children are raised in a society that is influenced by patriarchal structures. It is also important to note that Greek influence, on the concept of inferiority has affected religious metaphors, especially the work of Aristotle. Greek philosophy provided theoretical resources for patriarchal ideology and religion. Through this new channeled by male domination, women and minorities become oppressed. What should be obvious is that all oppressed people struggle to rise. All want to escape bondage and attain their share of freedom and justice. That is why patriarchal relationships have become a controversial issue in South Africa, and in the modern society. Male dominance is under constant attack theologically by feminist theologians. As a result, masculine monotheism is to be re-examined.

## 9 RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

Through Aristotle's writings, religion was affected seriously especially in the western civilization. It drew many of its leading metaphors and definitions of gender and morality from the Bible, hence make monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rules through its religious system in a way that was not the case with the paired images of god and goddess in pagan systems. African world adopted these metaphors and used them to oppress women, even though our African languages have no use of the vocabulary of "she" and "he". In the Old Testament structure, God is modeled after the patriarchal ruling class, and is seen as addressing this class of male directly, adopting them as his "sons."

They became his representations: this kind of thinking makes women now as symbolically oppressed as the dependent servant class. Women, children, along with servants represented those ruled over and owned by the patriarchal class. Let me share an example that will help the reader understand the above concept from the Bible. "Then the Lord God said":

"It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper fit for him, ...so the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman, and brought her to the man" (Gen 2:18-22).

To the woman God said:

"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16).

Therefore, man's authority to rule over woman is traced to God's intention in this account from Genesis chapters 2 and 3.

Many other biblical passages, however, could be quoted to offset this view in favour of the equality of women and men in the eyes of God. Yet the message that has pervaded the tradition is that women and their offspring are the property of men, and hence subject to man's power. Throughout history, laws of various societies have attempted to limit the extent and means of man's control, but the underlying message, built into the words and structures of religious tradition, remains constant. By God's design women and chil-



dren are subject to men. In other words, women relate to men as men relate to God directly. In the Old Testament, furthermore, this hierarchical “order” appears as a general principle:

“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ... For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor 11:3-4).

One might argue that the attributing of man’s ownership of woman to God’s intent was a way of explaining, justifying, and preserving what was already an accepted social behaviour. Therefore if the woman does not glorify man, then the use of violence against her in order to maintain control is simply an extension of the right of ownership; an ownership which was believed to be ordained by God. A lot of African men have issued this passage of scripture in order to justify beating of women. In Europe men was allowed to beat their wives with a stick that is thicker than their own thumb. This theology of ownership is pervasive and foundational to much of Christian thought and practice, though it is rarely named directly and most of its practitioners are unaware of it. It manifests in the attitudes and behaviour of many clergy as well as in the very structures of most Churches. Some clergy condemn women through passages of scriptures. This kind of idea developed, and later began to be part of the lives of men over women, Miller is helpful in explaining further this concept:

“The maintenance of a dominant – subordinate social structure depends on the belief by subordinates in the rightness of, not so much their own position, but that of the dominant” (Miller 1976:6).

In other words, subordinates focus most of their learning about the dominant group and provide them with what they require. If a woman question the structures of subordination, force is applied as a way of correcting that which is not the norm. This is particularly true in South Africa, especially when women try to obtain equal rights. They are perceived by men as disturbing the balance of power within the relationship of marriage – hence there are so many cases of violence in marriages. The previous past law treated women as infants, they could not own a house let alone buy furniture. Their husband’s signature was required. Ruether reminds us that:

“Power struggle is always associated with relationships between male and female” (Ruether 1986:48).

In patriarchal relationships women are expected to obey and agree to everything suggested to them. This idea is further supported by scripture. One could clearly see how religious traditions are relied upon to provide the underpinning of social norms. Yet it also seems that social norms often give rise to religious traditions to justify them. Rediger when discussion to concept of power that is evil which destroy other says:

“One of the characteristics of the power of evil is its eagerness to exploit human (women my own concept) weakness and institutional naivete. Normal people with bad habits and poor self-management skills, mentally disordered people, and spiritually undisciplined people are vulnerable to the power of evil” (Rediger 1997:12).

In other words, men who misuse their power, collude in the influence of evil by choosing evil behaviour intentionally, and therefore becoming evil and destroy those who seek to balance power in a relationship. They will use scripture in order to continue subordination of women. To add to this problem of power struggles, the issue of sex, complicates the whole matter of relationships further. For example, the right to say “no” to a man for a woman is normally taken as a game meaning “yes”. The ethical issues at stake here are complex. The tendency for our society to confuse sexual activity with sexual violence is deeply rooted in our cultural consciousness, and profoundly influences our beliefs, feelings and behaviour related to sexuality. In other words, there is confusion in differentiating between sexual activity and sexual violence. This idea has prevented many people from realizing how frequently their sexual experiences are really experiences of coercive sex. These experiences happen because of male dominance and the struggle for power over and against women; a structure that was created by a patriarchal system. This kind of relationship does not allow women the right to say “no” to any form of sexual contact, especially when married or involved in a patriarchal relationship. Women have no right to their own “no” to sexual activity respected, if the husband is determined to have sex. Working with women in therapy especially those in relationships of abuse, I have come to conclude that, throughout history and through religion men have dominated women, and the man’s ability to define women’s realm as inferior, apart from Aristotle, further depended on

the success of male hunting and warfare, and it also developed a pattern for domestic units in society. As a result of this process males had power to create and enforce laws and rituals, and became definers of society. The struggle for domination became the order of the day. Roles of superiority and inferiority became part of life between men and women. It reinforced male dominance, because the interpretation of scripture was biased against women. In other words, male culture became a symbol of control over nature in ambivalent ways. Ruether says, as an example of this:

“that the story of Genesis 1 may command Adam to fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it” (Ruether 1986:76).

When we analyze the mythic story of paradise in Genesis 2 and 3, we notice that it pictures a time of dependence on the fruitful earth that gave of itself without human labour. The human effort to control and define one’s own life is seen as a revolt against dependence on God, precipitated by women, resulting in a loss of earth as a spontaneously reproductive paradise. In the end, the woman is punished for her role by being subjugated to man. Ruether (1986:93) reminds us that the former Martin Luther had this to say about men and women:

“This punishment too springs from the original sin, and the woman bears it just as unwillingly as she bears those pains and inconveniences which had been placed upon her flesh. The rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God’s command. He rules the home, and states, wages war, tills the soil, builds, plants ...[T]he woman on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home. The wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and concern the state... In this way Eve is punished”.

From the above statement we can see as a logical step the development of patriarchy and the distortion of equality into domination and subjugation. Ruether in her book then quotes Karl Barth who emphasizes the concept of subjugation in the following words:

“The covenant of creation dictates a certain order, a relation of priority and posteriority, of A and B. Just as God rules over creation in the covenant of creation, so man rules over woman. He must be A; and he must be first. She is B, she must be

second. He must stay in his place. She must stay in hers. She must accept this order as the right nature of things through which she is saved, even if she is abused and wronged by the man” (Barth 1986:139).

In this paraphrased commentary on Karl Barth, Ruether notes that this is how reformers and writers interpreted the male place of women, and all the voices of patriarchy echo their teaching in ecumenical accord. Popes, patriarchs, and Bishops join hands in fraternal alliance over the prone body of women. This is how Christian theology further developed a history of inferiority and marginalization of women. It was the continuing of the struggle for power and survival for human beings as well as for patriarchal head of the family. Somewhat as humanity (Israel) is the bride of God in the Old Testament theology. The human patriarch has sovereign power over women and children. The relationship is somewhat like that of a parent to a child (that is, unquestioned and unkind authority). In this kind of relationship it finally begets alienation as both parties partake in a distorted relationship that is harmful to both child and mother. When a woman had to raise a child under such circumstances, the child was bound to elevate men and devalue women. This also created a split personality disorder, especially in how children saw their parents. It is interesting and useful to see that even in the Greek domination which operated in a patriarchal mode, male consciousness was raised to the same transcendent status as God; while women were symbolized as analogous to the lower realm of matter or body; to be ruled by or shunned by the transcendent mind. Ruether shares an insight that is worth noting. She says:

“human (male) consciousness is seen as partaking of this transcendent realm of male spirit, which is the original and eternal realm of being” (1983:78).

While a passage from Aristotle’s politics says that:

“.... ruling-class Greek males are the natural exemplars of mind or reason, while women, slaves and barbarians are naturally service people, represented by the body and passions, which must be ruled by the head” (McKeon 1941:1159).

From the above quotation of Aristotle, it is clear that women and children were treated as property with no consideration of their feelings in relationships. They were equal to slaves and barbarians –

indeed the serving class. McKeon (1983:167) further share insights of Augustine who viewed women in the following way:

“... the woman does not possess the image of God herself, but only when taken together with the male who is the head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God, just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one”.

## 10 CONCLUSION

According to the understanding of traditional Hebrew thinking, the fundamental problem for humanity is the relationship between male and female. The concern of historians was not so much the origin of man as the origin of the problems of mankind, the foremost being what transpired between male and female. Western religious tradition, through influence of Aristotle and Greek philosophy, has emphasized the role of the woman, Eve, in mankind's demise and in turn placed on women the ultimate blame for all human ills, making her sex the object of many forms of prejudice and the originator of problems. This line of thinking can be seen throughout scripture, especially the way women are portrayed in this Genesis account. Kasl reminds us of the beauty of sexuality among women. She says:

“Sexuality is a part of all of us. Being alive to our sexuality is part of being alive to who we are. We have been taught to disconnect from our sexual feelings, to hate, only secretly enjoy or feel ashamed of them, thereby blocking much of our creative capacity. Many women walk in frozen bodies, holding back energy in their productive and sexual areas” (Kasl 1989:14).

Hence men have mistaken women's sexuality as part of production. The seed is placed in the womb and women becomes objects of production and nothing else. We need to remember that women's sexuality and their capacity to create life within their body is mysterious and powerful, and therefore when a source of power is shamed, hated, or denied an outlet, it can turn on itself and become a destructive force. Scripture passages in Genesis and other passages creates an inferiority complex that leads men to regard women as objects.

This is a problem we are faced with, and we need to work on educating theologians in order for them (especially men) to break this chain of oppression.

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