

Legitimizing Myths as a Tool of Social Dominance: The Case of Lilith, Eve and Pandora

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ABSTRACT

Classical myths and religious narratives have always served as legitimizing myths that take ideas favored by a society and propagate those ideas as apparent truths. These ideas or concepts propagated through legitimizing myths are chosen by the dominant social groups of that particular society and period. This paper tries to analyze how legitimizing myths in classical, Judaic and Christian narrative have denoted the first woman of the world as 'seductress', 'demon' or 'curse' and have thus created avenues for Social Dominance of men over women. The first woman in the world according to classical Greek mythology, Christian and Judaic narrative, namely Pandora, Eve and Lilith, are taken as examples in this paper. The paper uses the propositions in Social Dominance Theory which dictate that groups that interact in society tend to dominate over each other and the dominant groups maintain their supremacy through the disproportionate use of force against subordinate groups. It also focuses on the idea that patriarchy imposes gender roles on female subjects to apply the social dominance. This paper tries to show how Pandora, Eve and Lilith, women who went beyond the conventional gender roles promoted by their respective society, were either demonized or considered as sources of catastrophe for humankind so that they may be dominated by the patriarchal rulers.

Keywords: Legitimizing myths, Gender roles, Social Dominance Theory, Christianity, Judaism

1. INTRODUCTION

Legitimizing myths can be defined as culturally held beliefs and stereotypes which dictate how things function in a given society at a given time. Cultural phenomena like myths, folklore and even religion are tools which promulgate legitimizing myths. The designation of gender roles may be considered as one aspect of such legitimizing myths. Since ancient times, societies across the world have functioned on the basis of heteronormative gender roles and stereotypes which have given power to the males and taken away much from their female counterparts. As mythology and religion are intricately interwoven into the social tapestry, both of these sources not only reflect but determine how a particular society views issues such as gender roles, power dynamics within different genders and the sociopolitical position of the genders in that society. Classical Greek myths as well as Christian and Judaic narratives have served the part of legitimizing myths in many cultures, especially the western culture. One of the narratives that all three of these resources use is the anecdote of the first woman as a villainous character.

In all three cases, the birth/creation of the first woman is followed by them committing some actions which subvert the conventional gender norms of that society. As Lois Tyson has said in her book "Critical Theory Today," "If a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role (submissive, gentle, angelic, virgin) then the only role left her is that of a monster" (Tyson 89). Thus, any quality which indicates these women's desire for intervention into the 'male' sphere, is used as a catapult to throw them into the category of 'monster', 'demon', 'seductress' or simply a

'bane' for the mortal world. The narrative involving the aforementioned mythological women – Lilith, Eve and Pandora – portrays them as transgressors of sacred boundaries and holds them responsible for the suffering of mankind in one way or the other. Even though these narratives initially appear to be innocent anecdotes created for didactic purpose, it is their propensity of blaming one gender while absolving the other, which ultimately legitimizes the vilification of these women. These narratives show the prevalence of repressive patriarchal ideology which dictates that "women exist to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings and opinions" (Tyson 91). All three stories thus represent the conflict between 'patriarchal authority' and 'matriarchal desire for emancipation'. And the failure to reconcile these two ultimately brings the benefit of the doubt to the men, rendering women as deceitful, manipulative and evil, who bring the downfall of all mankind. This paper thus tries to show how these myths tend to demonize and problematize women who, through their propensity towards apparently 'masculine' character traits, have subverted the conventional gender roles.

2. GENDER ROLE AND THE ASSIGNMENT OF 'PUNISHMENT'

Gender role, known also as sex role, can be defined as the set of behaviors and actions that a person is expected to perform based on their assigned gender. Gender performativity, in turn, is a term that focuses on the performing of one's gender role as a ritualistic practice to cement and develop said roles. These roles are not determined by biological factors, but by societal conventions. Famous philosopher and feminist critic Judith Butler in her seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* indicates how the arbitrary designation of gender roles is something that is 'created' through an ongoing process - "...woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification." (Butler 45)

Unfortunately, society has been running for too long on the basis of this arbitrary designation of gender roles and have established stereotypes through the legitimizing functions of myth and religion to create a dominant group within society, namely males. According to Pratto, group dominance in societies "feature an intersecting kind of group oppression, namely sexism, where men hold a disproportionate amount of power and freedom in comparison to their female counterparts" (Pratto 1). And the tool that this dominant group use to impose their power over their counterparts is the stereotypical notion of gender roles. As Butler espouses, gender is something which is not concrete. It is a social phenomenon created through the repetition and combination of 'acts', without which there would be no idea of gender. Thus, these women, who transgress their boundaries and "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler 522). Furthermore, these women were created to serve the purpose of patriarchy and eventually turned into objects of criticism for defying patriarchal rule. Christine C Keating indicates in her essay, "Unearthing the Goddess Within" that "Words, our primary agent of expression, signify a discourse that has been established by a patriarchal myth.". These characters, their beauty, virtues and imperfections were given to us by men.

The greatest example of Keating's statement can be found in the anecdote of Pandora. Pandora was created by Zeus with the sole purpose of being a punishment to Prometheus who stole fire from the gods. As has been stated in Hesiod's *Work and Days*, Zeus reproaches and mocks Prometheus for outwitting him and providing man with fire, which he proclaims will bring- "a great plague" to Prometheus and to men". He further refers to 'Pandora' as "an evil thing" which they will gladly embrace.

The very reason of the first woman's creation, then, was to serve as retribution for man's misconduct; Pandora's purpose was to beguile – On the outside, she was beautiful, but on the inside, she was full of chaos, deceit, and misery. Although it was Prometheus, a divine being of the male gender, who had initiated the conflict between divine and mortal beings, neither he nor Zeus were held accountable for their contribution in releasing wickedness into the world. The onus fell solely on Pandora, a woman, who would not have existed if not for Prometheus's act of stealing fire from the gods. Ironically, it is shown in this anecdote, how sorrow and pain were not caused by a man's actions and rather by a woman's. The relegation of blame is probably the most patriarchal theme in this narrative: Pandora, despite being implicated by Zeus' vengeance in the same way as men, was held responsible, while the actual culprit, Prometheus, was free of blame (Meehan, "Containing the Kalon Kakon"). Moreover, Pandora was shown to have doomed mankind twice; once by her disobedience and excessive curiosity causing the jar to be

opened releasing all sorts of negative emotions into the world; secondly by her action of closing the lid on the only emotion that could serve as salvation for humankind- hope.

Pandora's depiction as weak, deceitful, and the cause of humanity's downfall coincided with male oppression and segregation of elite women in the Greek world. In *Theogony*, Hesiod writes, "Of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no help meets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth." Hesiod attributed all sin and darkness to the actions committed by one woman. Therefore, he urged the rest of mankind to reign over women during their mortal lives so something similar could not happen again. Helen King explains how, "For the Greeks, woman is a necessary evil, a *kalon kakon*" She is evil because she is assumed to be disobedient and lustful, lacking the self-control of which men are capable. And yet, she is necessary to the society created and controlled by men, to reproduce in it. This perception of women explains why they were consigned to household duties while men were given the authority outside. "In the household, women could be shaped and molded by men to be obedient, submissive, and subordinate, three characteristics that would counteract the deceptiveness that Pandora displayed." (Meehan, "Containing the *Kalon Kakon*")

Similar portrayal of the "first" woman, Eve, can be viewed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the beginning, there was God and God was perceived as male from the start since He had presumably created the first man Adam in His own image. Woman, on the other hand, was apparently an afterthought, created by God from one of Adam's ribs, so that Adam might have a helper and companion much like himself (The Holy Bible Douay Version, Genesis: 1-27, 2-20). But woman gave in to the temptation of the serpent, ate the fruit that was forbidden by God, and persuaded her husband to do likewise. Consequently, God cast Adam out of Paradise into a world of toil: "to till the earth from which he was taken" (English Standard Version, Genesis: 3-23). Millett (1969) describes the story of the Fall as "the central myth of the Judeo-Christian imagination" and considered it as part of the "immediate cultural heritage". She continues: "This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes" (Millett 52). Woman is shown both as weak to temptation and the temptress who brought mankind down due to her 'original sin'. Moreover, it is her action of performing a seemingly 'masculine' action of taking independent decision and Adam's failure in controlling her that causes such catastrophe. This makes clear how the legitimizing myths such as this narrative problematizes woman's actions of subverting typical gender expectations.

However, subsequent writers of the feminist tradition have tried to refute this portrayal of woman as the bearer of damnation for humankind. As Judith Plaskow iterates in "The Coming of Lilith: Towards a Feminist Theology", "Since stories are the heart of tradition, we [can] question and create tradition by telling a new story within the framework of an old one." One may thus question the amount of blame that should fall on Eve's shoulder. It becomes necessary to analyze whether she was truly responsible for the eternal damnation of mankind or if it was just an approach of the patriarchal society to socially dominate all women by imposing conventional gender roles upon them.

In the Biblical narrative shared by Christianity and Judaism, we see slight discrepancies in the title of 'first woman'. Whereas Christianity entails the narrative of how Eve "was made from man" (English Standard Version, Corinthians 11:12), in rabbinic literature, we find Lilith who "is variously depicted as the mother of Adam's demonic offspring following his separation from Eve or as his first wife." (Britannica). However, many critics assume that the woman implied in Genesis 1:27 may have been Lilith, Adam's first wife (Britannica):

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
(English Standard Version Genesis 1:27)

This account of the Hebrew Bible implies that Lilith may have been created together with Adam with equal qualities and position. However, due to her refusal to lie beneath Adam and to be subservient toward him, resulted in her expulsion from Paradise and her subsequent demonization.

3.LEGITIMIZING OF MYTHS

As we can see from the three narratives, the narratives themselves were created for the purpose of legitimizing the conventional roles of man and woman in society. As Powell states, "The folktale of Pandora, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve, is etiological to explain the origin of woman, marriage, and suffering in the world" (Powell 115). Pandora's tale attempts to legitimizing the idea that women are meant to be bearers of damnation and calamity upon mankind as they transgress their given boundaries and possess lower moral standards. It also implies that women should not try to act in masculine manner as curiosity towards the unknown is not meant for women. Similarly, Eve, curious about the power of the forbidden fruit and perhaps ambitious in her mind, had transgressed the boundary set up by God, essentially the most powerful male figure in Christianity. She is thus forever condemned to be the instigator and reason behind the 'original sin'. Moreover, she is punished to bear the pain of childbirth (English Standard Version, Genesis 3:16), a punishment unique to women, while she is also forced to be subservient to her husband. Lilith also went against the traditional concept that women must be obedient to her husband. (English Standard Version, Colossians 3:18) Thus, she was demonized and became a calamity for human beings. It is important to note that the stories of all three women became part of the legitimizing myth that control the western society's perception of women even now. We can thus understand the effect of legitimizing myths such as mythological and religious narrative in determining the power dynamics between man and woman. This in turn helps one social group, in this case – man – to dominate women for by placing women in morally lower position and placing themselves in a higher position in the hierarchy.

4.CONCLUSION

Legitimizing myths are a part of every society across the world, albeit the way these legitimizing myths are manifested and the social groups they affect may vary from case to case. By analyzing the anecdotes of the three etiological women in western culture – Pandora, Eve and Lilith – we can understand how the patriarchal society has created a pervasive concept that women subverting the established gender roles will only bring misfortune and disaster upon themselves and the society of which they are a part. Moreover, these myths and narratives promote the assumption that women are inherently lacking moral standards and self-control, thereby relegating them to a lower position in society. This is how the social dominance theory explains the establishment of men's dominant position in western society. Despite poststructuralist and feminist attempts at turning the situation for the better, it is inevitable that the after-effects of such legitimizing myths cannot be refuted very easily.

5. REFERENCES

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