

## **A Comparative Study of Aristotle's Philosophy and Manusmriti on Woman**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper aims to perform a comparative study of the philosophies of Aristotle and the laws enshrined in the Manusmriti. This comparative study examines Aristotle's philosophical perspectives on women as delineated in his works, particularly "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics," juxtaposed with the portrayal of women in the Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu legal text. This study aims to illuminate the divergent conceptions of women's roles, capabilities, and societal status in ancient philosophical and legal frameworks by analyzing these two distinct yet influential sources from different cultural and historical contexts. By navigating the complexities of interpreting ancient texts within their historical and cultural contexts, this comparative study aims to contribute to ongoing discourses on gender equity, social change, and the intersections of philosophy and law in shaping perceptions of women's roles and status in antiquity and beyond.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper aims to analyze Aristotle's philosophies on women in comparison to the Manusmriti. Aristotle, the renowned Greek philosopher, and the Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu legal text, present contrasting perspectives on the role and status of women in society. Aristotle's philosophical inquiries into ethics, politics, and metaphysics, as articulated in his works such as "Politics" and "Nicomachean Ethics," offer insights into his views on women's nature, capabilities, and place within the social order. On the other hand, the Manusmriti, composed in ancient India, provides a comprehensive framework of laws and codes governing various aspects of human conduct, including the roles and responsibilities of women within traditional Hindu society.

This comparative study delves into the divergent philosophical foundations and cultural contexts underpinning Aristotle's conception of women and the principles enshrined in the Manusmriti regarding women's rights, duties, and societal roles. By examining these two influential texts

from different cultural and historical milieus, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of gender ideologies and how they have shaped social norms and practices in ancient civilizations.

Through a critical analysis of Aristotle's philosophical treatises alongside the legal prescriptions of the Manusmriti, this paper seeks to elucidate the underlying assumptions, biases, and implications inherent in their respective depictions of women. This paper seeks a re-read of these ancient texts and philosophies from a gender perspective using the qualitative, interpretative method.

### **ARISTOTLE'S BIOLOGY:**

Aristotle's father Nichomachus was a royal physician in the court of King Amyntas III of Macedon. His relationship with his father and inquisitive nature prompted his interest in the natural sciences, time, space, metaphysics, etc.

He studied the male and female anatomy, biology, and reproduction process and based his theory of women on his observations of male-female biology. Some scholars might argue that Aristotle's sexist theory is not prompted by sexist reasons, but is driven by scientific reasons alone. In *Ethics* Aristotle makes a remark saying, "The relation of male to female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior - of the ruling to the ruled", this, he asserts is biologically grounded and is not a fruit of prejudice alone (Morsink, 1979).

Aristotle presumes that males and females have different tasks to perform pertaining to the reproductive process. The important question of inquiry is - what is the difference?

The answer to this question begins with a discussion of 'whether all men discharge semen or not, and whether women discharge semen too'. Hippocratic treatise *On Semen* asserts that semen is drawn from the whole body, from the soft parts, the hard parts, and the fluids in the body (*apo pantos tou sōmatos*). Aristotle in *Generation of Animals* has continually targeted the pangensis<sup>1</sup> theory and the Hippocratic author.

The Hippocratic author believes that the offspring is a combination of the seminal contributions of the mother and the father. The pangensis was true of both sexes, in semen, both the women's and the man's, there is some drawn from each part of the body; where sometimes the semen of the woman is stronger and sometimes the man's. Hence according to this theory, both sexes contribute equally to the formation of the offspring.

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<sup>1</sup> Pangensis theory - It is a developmental theory of heredity. It suggests that all cells emit substances which contribute to the heritable information. This theory was also proposed by Charles Darwin and was disproven by Francis Galton

Aristotle readily rejects this theory and links the plausibility of his hypothesis to the implausibility of pangenesis. He states that the semen does not come from all parts of the body and hence not from the bodies of both parties. He also added the female is not as much a participant in the process of generation of offspring as is the male. He stated that hylomorphism<sup>2</sup> is more explanatory than pangenesis. This assertion is not based on observation alone, he claims scientific arguments and proofs as evidence to prove his hypothesis, or rather the facts infer his hypothesis more than the other.

Aristotle does this by rejecting the claims supporting pangenesis. Three prominent evidences are:

- *Argument from pleasure* - Females don't always experience the same kind of pleasure as a male and hence the female does not secrete the same kind of semen as a man.
- *Argument from mutilation* - Since all parts contribute to the semen formation, if a parent has a mutilated organ that part does not participate in the semen formation and hence the child is born with the same defects as the parents. However, Aristotle argued that deformed parents don't always produce deformed offspring thus weakening the case for pangenesis.
- *Argument from resemblance* - Aristotle argues that children inherit many qualities that might be absent in the parent at the time of contributing to the process of reproduction; additionally, they might have qualities of their ancestors from whom nothing is drawn.

Greeks considered the heating and cooling of things as the fundamental natural forces that bring about changes in things. Aristotle suggested that heat plays a role in blending and solidifying material substance, whereas the absence of heat, or coldness, tends to result in less solidification and the creation of bulkier matter with less distinct lines and shapes. According to Aristotle, male semen is a residue of highly concocted and compacted blood. In contrast, the menstrual blood of females is very bulky and due to the association of coldness with bulkiness, females are inferred as colder than males (Morsink, 1979). The females do not secrete semen owing to their coldness. They secrete *catamenia*<sup>3</sup> because the coldness of their bodies prevents the blood from transforming into semen (Horowitz, 1976).

Aristotle has the theory of four causes since the beginning of his treatise. The four causes are as follows:

- *Material cause* - the material it is made from

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<sup>2</sup> Hylomorphism - It is a philosophical doctrine which states that every entity has a material and immaterial form.

<sup>3</sup> Catamenia - monthly discharge of blood from uterus

- *Formal cause* - that which gives form
- *Efficient cause* - that which gives impetus
- *Final cause* - the goal towards which it strives

The menstrual discharge lacks the principle of the soul. Against this background, menstrual blood is more likely to be identified as a material cause than the formal cause (Horowitz, 1976).

### **ARISTOTLE ON WOMEN:**

Aristotle, albeit Plato's most ardent student differs from him significantly in his idea of women and family. He stated that man was a social being and anyone who did not wish to live in a society was an abnormality.

*"He who is unable to live in a society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a Beast or a God".*

Plato proposed a radical idea of an equal society where men and women receive similar education and either can be made Philosopher King based on their reason alone; Aristotle took a diverging view from his master and promoted 'wifedom'<sup>4</sup>.

Three faculties of the soul are reason, spirit, and appetite; listed in their hierarchical order, Aristotle believed that woman has no reason. In his theory, slaves and women have little distinction in terms of their capacities. The role of slaves was justified from both the point of view of the master and the slave himself. The woman only had one role in the family in Aristotle's theory. Her main occupation was procreation. In his opinion, females are a deformity, a 'mutilated' or 'impotent' male; if it were not for their role in procreation, there would be no justifiable reason for a woman's existence. He uses the metaphor of earth and seed for the generation of plant to compare male-female roles in the process of procreation. He says that a woman's womb is like the earth in which a plant grows and the seed for the growth is provided by the man. A woman is only a depository of sperm and a nourishing source for the growing fetus. The man provides the seed, the rational soul, and the form while the woman plays a passive role. Aristotle rejected the 'double-seed' theory of other philosophers before him like Empedocles<sup>5</sup> and Parmenides<sup>6</sup> in favor of his 'single-seed' theory. Allen argues that this was the product of his defense of his Theory of Forms (*The Concept of Woman*, Vol 2.).

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<sup>4</sup> Wifedom is a coined term, it refers to a rule over ones wife

<sup>5</sup> Empedocles proposed that both parents provide half of the seed necessary for coception

<sup>6</sup> Parmendius proposed that both parents provide one seed each that battles for dominance during conception

Aristotle's Theory of Forms states that any entity is made up of form and matter. Matter in itself is shapeless and undefined; Form provides its shape. His views on women were heavily driven by his biological theories. Apart from that, a single male could impregnate multiple women, the woman receives the seed, and an offspring is produced, the way Matter is given Form and gains shape, this draws parallels from his Theory of Forms (Leithart, n.d.). The heat in the male body gives him the capacity to refine his blood until it becomes fertile to carry the seed transmitting the immaterial human Form thus playing an active role. The female body being cold, is the passive participant and her blood becomes the material for generation, Matter. This explanation complies with his metaphysical explanation (Leithart, n.d.).

Aristotle's teleological principle<sup>7</sup> recognizes a woman's place in family and society solely on a reproductive basis. A woman's role is only to provide for procreation, with a subordinate and politically marginal role in society. He claims that women don't have the ownership of rational faculty and hence cannot be a part of society. They are not a citizen because they cannot participate in the deliberative and adjudicating processes of the *polis*. They have neither the reason nor the leisure time for the aforementioned participation. Their role is only recognized as caregivers for the children. They have little power and authority at home, their primary responsibility being maintaining the household but without any autonomy over it and child-rearing and providing a conducive environment for them to develop their faculties (*Aristotle's Account of the Place of Women Within the Polis*, 2022).

According to Aristotle, the natural relationship of male and female was that of the ruler and the ruled respectively. A female was incompetent to be a citizen because a citizen can both rule and be ruled, but females only know how to obey, they are not subject to authority. In the friendship<sup>8</sup> of husband and wife, the husband asserts the dominant role and the wife fulfills all his needs and desires. He said that modest silence was the crown of woman.

The distinction between a slave and a woman is highlighted when Aristotle states that slaves cannot develop reason but women can develop reason. They are destined to be subservient to men because of their lack of control physically and psychologically to exercise reason. Women exhibit imperfection, irrationality, weakness, and passivity (driven by his biology of sexes) and are thus confined to the domestic sphere. For Aristotle, gender roles in a society are determined by the biology of the sexes (*Everybody's a Little Bit Sexist: A Re-evaluation of Aristotle's and Plato's Philosophies on Women*, n.d.).

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<sup>7</sup> In Aristotle's teleology, everything in this world is moving towards its end goal (*tellos*). Everything in this world is striving to achieve its *tellos*.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle's theory of friendship states that three types of friendships exist in a polis. The first is based on mutual gain, 2, on sensual pleasure, 3, based on virtue where both parties become virtuous in each others company.

## **MANUSMIRITI ON WOMEN:**

The Manusmriti is an ancient legal text and the most authoritative of the books of the Hindu Code (*Dharamshastra*). The Manusmriti and its legal codes have been the foundation of the Brahmanical patriarchy, caste system, and the heteronormative structure of ancient India. Manu is alleged to be single-handedly responsible for the plight of women and the derogatory status conferred upon them in the post-Vedic period. Ratan Lal Basu (2011) claims that because of its comprehensive coverage and wide range of subjects Manu occupied a very significant position among the *Dharmashastras* in ancient India. The Manusmriti take every possible step to restrict their mobility and control their right to production, procreation, generation of knowledge, and sexual life. Prem Chowdhary (2007) observed that the value of honor is tied to women 'in her body and conduct due to her reproductive and procreative capacity' (p. 16-17).

Sexuality became the primary site for control of women through Manu. In Manu, women are described as sexually promiscuous, sly, wicked, secretive, and out to hunt and capture men. They are objectified and their bodies are sexualised. Manusmriti's depiction of women showcases them as libidinous creatures, who need to be kept under control by the male authoritative figures in their lives - father and husband. Their fundamental essence was that of high libido and uncontrolled and troubling carnal needs (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

From Manusmriti's point of view, the primary purpose of sexual unions was procreation alone. The idea of a family was driven by the motivations of procreation. He compared the woman's body to the agricultural field and the process of reproduction to agriculture. The seed for germination was to be provided, necessarily, by the husband. Through this union of earth and the seed, all living creatures are born. Manu promotes monogamy for an ideal family life but allows man the indulgence of polygamy if he so wishes (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

*-[67:2] "The ritual of marriage is traditionally known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women; serving her husband is (the equivalent of) living with a guru, and household chores are the rites of the fire".*

Historians like Uma Chakravarti (1993) have criticized Manu's objectification of women through his conceptualization of marriage. According to Manu, marriage is not between a man and the woman by her free will, it is rather a contract between the father and the groom. Her preferences and desires are not given consideration and her marriage should be fixed with a man deemed appropriate by her father. Manu advises people to marry their daughters young (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

*-[92:9] "A girl who chooses her own bridegroom should not take with her the jewelry given to her by her father, mother, or brothers; if she took that away, she would be a thief".*

Manu permits a girl to have the groom of her choosing only under special circumstances when her people are unable to find a groom for her. Unions born out of desires are labeled immoral.

Manu urges people to marry their girls young when she has received no education and developed no capacity for the understanding of marital or sexual relations. This helps in his cause of a subservient wife. He prescribes a wider age gap between the girl and her groom to help establish the groom's authority over his child bride (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.). The Manusmriti dictates:

*-[94:9] "A thirty-year-old man should marry a twelve-year-old girl who charms his heart, and a man of twenty-four an eight-year-old girl; and if duty is threatened, (he should marry) in haste".*

Manu has hyper-sexualized women's bodies and blamed them for leading men astray.

*-[213:2] "It is the very nature of women to corrupt men here on earth; for that reason, circumspect men do not get careless and wanton among wanton women".*

According to Manu women are dangerous as even a respectable man may lose his honor in their presence, he says, that even a learned man as a priest should stay vigilant and guarded in the presence of women. Manu treats women as sexualized objects and often as objects of pleasure especially for upper caste males. Manu advises avoidance of rendezvous at all costs because according to him the carnal instincts are very strong and women's sole purpose being seduction, a respectable man may very easily lose his honor (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

Manu states:

*-[215:2] "No one should sit in a deserted place with his mother, sister, or daughter; for the strong cluster of the sensory powers drags away even a learned man."*

A woman is expected to obey every dictate of her husband with little autonomy over her life. She is expected to fulfill all her husband's desires without a word of protest and be loyal to him at all times. A virtuous wife is modest, silent, and one who serves and worships her husband like God. The wife's behavior towards her husband is not subject to the latter's behavior towards the former; the husband may be violent, abusive, freely indulge his lust, and be devoid of any good qualities, but a virtuous wife must remain true to her duties. She may, under no circumstances raise her voice against her husband or try to point out his mistakes (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

-[78:9]“If she transgresses against a husband who is infatuated, a drunk, or ill, he may deprive her of her jewelry and personal property and desert her for three months”

There is no provision for divorce or separation from husbands for a woman. The husband however is free to desert his wife under several circumstances. The role of a woman in marriage is reduced to procreation and the creation of progeny alone (M & Kuruvilla, n.d.).

- [81:9]“A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year; one whose children have died, in the tenth; one who bears (only) daughters, in the eleventh; but one who says unpleasant things (maybe superseded) immediately”.

For women, consuming liquor, associating with vile people, separating from husbands, sleeping for unreasonable hours, and dwelling are strictly prohibited and are demerits. Such women are disloyal and have extramarital affairs.

Manu has labeled women as impure and epitome of falsehood, he, however, drastically digresses from his thought when he states:

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This means that the place where women are worshipped, where they are honored is the abode of God. divinity blooms in such a place. In a place where women are dishonored, however noble an action may be it is unfruitful (Yeasmin, 2021).

**COMPARISON**

The female kind has been highly criticized in both Manu's and Aristotle’s philosophies. Both have reduced the role of women to the domestic sphere. Women have been objectified, their bodies sexualized, and their only contribution to society and the state is procreation. Both describe women as vile, impure, lustful, deceitful, promiscuous, and wicked.

While Aristotle’s biology of sexes (which led to his scientific prejudice) and his Theory of Forms were the key drivers of his philosophy of women, no such driving force is visible in Manu. The theories proposed by Aristotle are scientifically grounded with empirical backing while Manusmriti appears as a legal text with codified laws that state the acceptable behavior to be practiced by people. It is a discourse given by Manu and Bhriгу on Dharma and various topics like duties, rights, laws, virtue, conduct, etc. It can be seen as a guide to a virtuous life as perceived and accepted by Manu.



According to Aristotle, of the three faculties of mind; reason, spirit, and appetite, women lack reason. The Hindu analogous to this would be the *Trigunas*. The *Trigunas* are the three mental attributes of a personality according to the Vedic literature. The three attributes are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas listed in the hierarchical order (Sharma et al., 2021). Manu, however no claims attributing *Tamas guna* (associated with lethargy and rigidity) to women.

Where Aristotle is mostly interested in the comparison of women with men, Manu only lays guidelines for women on how to lead a virtuous life. Aristotle states that woman is an inferior species to man, he points out the demerits of a woman in comparison to a man. His arguments find ground in his biology of sexes which proves women to be cold and incapable of secretion of semen necessary for procreation and hence are an inferior species. They only carry the fetus and serve as a source of nourishment for it. Manu straightforwardly labels women as vicious, promiscuous, and impure and offers no evidence for his claims.

Both Aristotle and Manu engage in the metaphor of agriculture to explain procreation. They compare women's bodies to agricultural field waiting for seed to be sown by her husband for the generation of a plant, i.e. the child. Both believe that the union of females and males must be strictly within the bounds of marriage and with the purpose of procreation.

In Aristotle's philosophy explicit definitions of marriage and marital laws are visible within the ambit of the caste system. Neither is an explicit prohibition of women's sexuality visible. Manu very clearly states bounds on women's sexuality and the need for chastity. The need for control on women covers every aspect of her life; including social, economic, political, and sexual dimensions.

Aristotle's philosophy gives an important place to citizenship and describes why and how women are not citizens of the *polis*. Manu places no such emphasis on citizenship.

### **CRITIQUE:**

Aristotle has been known to have laid the foundation of sexism, even though his theories might not have been inspired by sexist reasons his theories have helped build ground for sexist beliefs and views for hundreds of years now. Aristotle's biology though not of sexist origins has led to sexist, long-lasting consequences.

Aristotle's remarks that the relationship between man and woman was that of superiority and inferiority, of the ruler and the ruled respectively has been an important cause for the social and political subordination of women in society and the state. Aristotle failed to acknowledge that the biological inferiority of women is not directly correlated to her alleged social and political

inferiority. Through the biological inferiority of women in Aristotle's philosophy, inference cannot be drawn about her social and political life in the *polis*.

A legendary example of the great philosopher not living up to his word is found in the famous 'Phyllis Riding Aristotle' which became a popular inspiration for drawings, sculptures, paintings, ivory carvings, etc. This tale has been recounted by various historians. In Jacques de Vitry's rendition, Aristotle admonishes Alexander the Great for prioritizing his wife over public affairs. In retaliation Alexander's wife pursues Aristotle's affections, ultimately gaining his compliance by demanding a piggyback ride before granting her favors. She then humiliates Aristotle in front of Alexander, who witnesses the scene and is bewildered. However, Aristotle uses this incident to highlight his theme: beware of women.

For an individual with scholarship as great as Aristotle, it can be alleged arrogant to completely ignore the possibility of women to a role more significant than mere caregivers. His proposition of insignificance supported by his Theory of Forms would only succeed if his biology of sexes is proven coherent and not missing important biological facts. It has been proven that each parent provides fifty percent of the genetic material and the offspring has dominant features of the dominant genes. This is diametrically opposing Aristotle's biological explanation which is the basis for his theory of women.

Manusmriti has been wildly condemned for its portrayal of women. It tries to limit every aspect of a woman's life - economic, social, political, and sexual. Manusmriti is the epitome of oppression and patriarchal social structure. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar has been highly critical of Manusmriti for its misogynist standpoints and discriminatory view, he observes,

*"The view of the women was both an insult and an injury to the women of India. It was an injury because, without any justification, she was denied the right to acquire knowledge which is the birthright of every human being. It was an insult because after denying her the opportunity to acquire knowledge, she was declared to be as unclean as untruth for want of knowledge and therefore not allowed to take sanyas, which was regarded as a path to reach Brahma" (as cited in Rege, 2013, p.121).*

Bhattacharji (2007) argues that following Manusmriti women became helpless and victims of marginalization during the Vedic period. Manusmriti implements every possible step to deprive them of autonomy over their lives and restrict their right. A few are listed as follows

- Right to choose their partner
- Right to bodily integrity, right, and dignity

- Right to decide whether to have a child or not
- Right to separation from their husband
- Right to abortion

Jotirao Phule critically analyzed the Manusmriti and other mythological narratives in Gulamgiri. Dr. Ambedkar made a powerful statement in December 1927 during the Mahad Satyagraha, burning the Manusmriti in the presence of thousands of individuals at the age of only 36. In 1922, Periyar declared his intention to burn the Manusmriti, which later became a symbolic act of protest carried out by the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidar Kazhagam. Nearly a century later, Thirumavalavan echoes the radical actions of Dr. Ambedkar and Periyar by advocating for its prohibition.

When discussing the rejection of Manu or utilizing hashtags like #ManuMustFall, our thoughts are inevitably drawn to images of Kantabai Ahire and Sheela Pawar, two courageous Dalit women who defaced the statue of Manu at the Rajasthan High Court. Ahire, speaking to *The Wire* in June 2020, highlighted the belief in Hindu mythology attributing the authorship of the Manusmriti to Manu, who purportedly sanctioned the hierarchical degradation of humanity based on caste and gender. Despite its regressive nature, the figure of Manu still retains legitimacy in contemporary India, with his statue prominently displayed within the premises of the high court.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Manusmriti is one of the key agents responsible for years of oppression met out to women and the current state of women in India, specifically in Hindu society. Manusmriti advances the cause of child marriage by stating that girls should be married off young. It supports abusive, violent relationships by claiming that the wife must treat her husband like God even if he does not possess any God-like qualities. It strips women of the agency of their lives and condemns them to a life of servitude. It subjects them to abuse, oppression, and a loss of dignity in the overview.

It makes a case for marital rape claiming that the wife must fulfill all of her husband's needs and desires. It promotes sexual violence against women and the caste system simultaneously while describing women as sex objects, especially for men of the upper castes; simultaneously trying to suppress their sexuality. Manusmriti labels women as seducers making them liable for any injustice thrown at them, in any case of violence - physical or sexual, the onus of blame is placed on the victim. Manusmriti very clearly prohibits freedom of speech for women and abortion rights. Based on such dictums it becomes culturally appropriate to exert control over women. Manusmriti appears to pass a verdict about women without exploring other approaches and the potential and benefits of empowering women.

## CONCLUSION

It is safe to conclude that both Manusmriti and Aristotle's philosophies are extremely sexist. Whatever might have been the intention behind such views it has led to grim consequences for women all over the world. The Western philosophies of Aristotle have continued to make life miserable for women. Manusmriti has left no stone unturned to restrict the growth, mobility, knowledge generation, and sexual autonomy of women. Several historians and gender-study experts have tried highlighting the inconsistencies in these theories, they have tried to explain how these theories are not based on rational logic. These theories are very narrow-minded and have little scope for arguments and deliberations. Most of these theories are circular and self-supporting, this could imply that they are built on dependent foundations, the fall of one would inevitably lead to the fall of another. Some of these are just rules and guidelines that are not supported by reason or logic and are merely stated as such.

In contemporary times conscious efforts are being made to free the world from the shackles of such regressive philosophies and dictums. This is a monumental task given that such beliefs are deeply ingrained in the minds of people and to uproot them is a hefty job.

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