

Ibn Rušd on the Status of Women. A Few Reflections on His Commentary on Plato's *Republic*

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It might come as a surprise to some that the Commentator *par excellence* of Aristotle should turn to a work of Plato and write a commentary on it. In many ways the thought of Aristotle and of Plato differ greatly from each other and the same applies to the perspective from which they consider philosophical issues.

It is true that Ibn Rušd (d. 1198) was a pure Aristotelian and that he made it his lifelong mission to tear away the crust of Neoplatonic interpretation of the Stagirite's thought in order to bring back to light the pure unadulterated Aristotle.

However, after having commented on the *Nichomachean Ethics* and concluded that it served as a prelude to the Greek master's political thought, he was anxious to secure a copy of his *Politics*. After seeing his efforts come to nothing following years of futile searching, and having reached a relatively advanced age by the standards of his day (nearly 70), he decided to take up Plato's *Republic* and comment on it instead. Ibn Rušd took this decision in spite of the fact that he deemed Plato's treatment of practical government in different states and the treatment of their evolution as incomplete.

Having said that, one might venture to suggest that perhaps Plato's philosophy of government was more akin to the Andalusian philosopher's concept of the implementation of rule according to *Šarī'a*. His experience as *qāḍī* (or judge) may have had a lot to do with many of his comments concerning coercive (or penal) law. This in no way should be taken to

imply that Ibn Rušd follows slavishly the opinions of the Greek master. There are in fact instances where he contests Plato's opinion.

His intention in commenting on the *Republic* was to expound the thought of Plato, show his relevance for an understanding of current events in al-Andalus, and to interpret and restate Plato in the light of his own world, a world that was in steady cultural and social decline as the ruling Muslim power, the Almohads¹ struggled to contain the onslaught of the Christian *reconquista* from without and growing theological intransigence on the part of the 'ulamā' (Muslim scholars) from within. In this commentary one detects some subtle references, albeit important ones, to the political as well as the religious situation of his time.²

The main focus of attention throughout this paper, however, is on Ibn Rušd's thought concerning the identity and role of women in society. His primary aim in this perspective was to analyse the status of women in contemporary al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) in the light of his reading of Plato and to offer propositions as to how their contribution could be enhanced for the common good.

The conduct of guardians

Plato's *Republic* envisages a three-tiered society ordered according to classes: artisans (producers), guardians (who devote themselves exclusively to the conduct of war), and rulers (chosen from among the best of the guardians). As a commentator Ibn Rušd follows this classification.

The initial impression is that his opinion of women would not appear to be encouraging. Warning guardians against succumbing to fear and grief he states that “weeping... is an activity of ‘women and weak souls’”.³ Further on, referring to Plato’s warning against imitating women, he remarks that “the most highly regarded of people ought not to imitate the actions of women crying in the throes of birth, or women copulating with their husbands, or women – ‘believing themselves already’ fit for rulership – quarrelling with their husbands, or women mourning, crying, and lamenting. Nor will they be permitted to pattern themselves after handmaidens and slaves, nor imitate drunkards and madmen.”⁴

If the guardians’ natures are to be preserved then they should copulate “with women who resemble them in nature ‘and who’ have grown up with something like that training”.⁵ This final statement implies that, like Plato, Ibn Rušd makes distinctions among women in the light of their upbringing and education as envisaged in the *Republic*.

The nature and role of women in every class of society

Before proceeding further it would be useful to note Ibn Rušd’s reference to “this city” and to “these cities”. When writing of the former he is referring to a specific type of city as mentioned in Plato’s *Republic*, whereas when writing of the latter he is referring to the cities of al-Andalus. It is only within this framework that one can understand the comparison drawn between the role of women in Plato’s work and their role in twelfth-century al-Andalus.

Ibn Rušd poses the question as to “whether there exist among women natures resembling the natures of each and every class of citizens – and in particular the guardians – or whether women’s natures are distinguished from men’s natures”.⁶ To this he provides the following reply:

If the former is the case, then as regards the

activities of the city, women would have the very same standing as men in those classes, so that there would be among them warriors, philosophers, rulers, and the rest. But if this is not the case, then women are only fit in the city for activities that men in general are unfit for, as if you were to say upbringing, procreation, and the like.

And we say that women, in so far as they are of one kind with men, necessarily share in the end of man. They will differ only in less or more; i.e., the man in most human activities is more diligent than the women, though it is not impossible that women should be more diligent in some activities, such as is thought concerning the art of practical music. That is why it is said of melodies that they are perfected when men produce them and women do them well. If this is so, and the nature of men and women is of one kind, and the ‘nature’ that is of one kind ‘turns’ to only one activity in the city, then it is evident that the women in this city will practice the [same] activities as the men, except that they are weaker at it. Hence it is obligatory that the less recondite activities be handed over to them...

We see women sharing arts with men except that they are weaker at it, although most of the women in [some] art may be more diligent than the men, as in the art of weaving, sewing, and other such ‘arts’.⁷

This statement is very much in line with the thought of Plato who affirmed that women were to be trained in the same way as men, and that in the ideal state they were not simply to remain at home and mind the children but were to be trained in music, gymnastics, and military discipline just like men. Plato justified his position by stating that men and women differ simply in respect to the roles they play in the propagation of the species.⁸ He believed that

women were weaker than men, but he also stated that natural gifts are to be found in both sexes alike.⁹ He also affirmed that as far as her nature is concerned, the woman is to be admitted to all activities pursued by men, including war.¹⁰

Concerning this latter point Ibn Rušd writes: “As for their sharing in the art of war and the rest, why this is made clear from the inhabitants of deserts and the ‘City of Women’ [Dāghūda].”¹¹

Following these statements Ibn Rušd then proceeds to lay bare the stark contrast between the status of women in Plato’s society and in that of his own. His damning judgement was that the subordination of women in his own society was wrong, was based on ignorance, and led to poverty:

The competence of women is unknown, however, in these cities since they are only taken ‘in them’ for procreation, and hence are placed at the service of their husbands and confined to procreation, upbringing and suckling. This nullifies their [other] activities. Since women in these cities are not prepared with respect to any of the human virtues, they frequently resemble plants in these cities. Their being a burden upon the men ‘in these cities’ is one of the causes of the poverty in these cities. This is because they are found to be double the number of men, while not understanding through [their] upbringing any of the necessary actions except for the few actions – like the art of spinning and weaving – that they undertake mostly at a time when they have need of them to make-up for their lack of spending [power].¹²

With the above statement Ibn Rušd is not only presenting a far from flattering report on the dire situation of women in contemporary Andalusian society, but he is also making a plea for women to be given the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity and ingenuity in a

society marred by obscurantism and sliding into economic backwardness.

It is obvious that Ibn Rušd is departing from the interpretation given by some contemporary Muslim scholars of the status of women in the Qur’ān. It is most unfortunate that one still encounters a rigorous and literal interpretation of the sacred book of Islam, in this area as well as in others, by Muslim movements such as the Ṭalibān in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, as well as the Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. The role of women in these countries as well as their contribution to the progress of their societies is virtually non-existent. To a slightly lesser extent one encounters the same predicament in most regions of the Arab world.

Given that Ibn Rušd was not only a philosopher and an enthusiastic follower of Aristotle, but also a *qāḍī* who interpreted and applied the norms of *Šarī‘a*, one cannot help but admire his judiciousness as he comments on contemporary Andalusian society in general and on the situation of women in particular. His position on the issue of women should serve as an inspiration to legislators in the Muslim world to challenge destructive ideologies and to acknowledge the contribution women could offer to Muslim societies.

Such an undertaking cannot succeed without the adoption of a dynamic interpretation of the Qur’ān which takes into consideration not only the text but also the *context*. It implies doing away with the application of stale concepts that only serve to exalt ignorance in order to hide an innate fear of innovation. Ibn Rušd himself was a victim of such attitudes. He suffered the indignity of being dragged before a tribunal and the subsequent public burning of his works, not to mention his eventual banishment to Lucena (a village just outside Cordoba with a majority Jewish population). Bringing to light and discussing his ideas would go a long way towards the integration of his thought into the fabric of Muslim societies. His tribulations would not then have been in vain.

NOTES

¹ The Almohad dynasty (al-Muwaḥḥidūn, c.1120 -1269) founded by Ibn Tumart (d. 1130) was of Berber origin. Its roots can be traced to Tinmel in the region of the High Atlas mountains. They gradually occupied the entire region of Morocco and Muslim Spain taking over from the Almoravids (al-Murābiṭūn, c. 1040-1147). They were, however incapable of resisting the onslaught of the well-organized Christian armies and were defeated at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. They were subsequently overrun by the Marinids and collapsed in 1269.

² See, for example, 92:1-12 wherein he states that al-Andalus under the Almoravids had declined into timocracy and that under the Almohads it had decayed even further, becoming a hedonistic society.

³ *Averroes on Plato's Republic*, translated with an introduction and notes by Ralph Lerner (New York: Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1974) 32:5f (p. 23). There is no extant copy of the original work in Arabic. What we possess today is a Hebrew translation composed by Samuel b. Judah of Marseille (d. after 1340). The first set of numbers refer to the page and line numbers of the Hebrew in I. J. Rosenthal's critical edition and translation, *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956) and maintained by Lerner in his translation. The page numbering in brackets refers to the page numbers in Lerner's translation.

⁴ 34:4f (p. 26)

⁵ 53:30 (p. 57)

⁶ 53:30f (p.57)

⁷ 53:4-23 (pp. 57-58)

⁸ *Republic*, V:454d

⁹ *Republic*, V:455d.

¹⁰ *Republic*, V:457a.

¹¹ Ibn Rušd, *Commentary*, 53:24. The geographer al-Idrīsī (d. c. 1122) refers to this city in his *Kitāb Nuzhat al-muštāq fī ḍikr al-amṣār wa 'l-aqṭār wa 'l-buldān wa 'l-ḡuzur wa 'l-madā' in wa 'l-āfāq* (*The Book of the excursion of the desirous in the account of cities, regions, countries, islands, towns, and distant lands*) Its inhabitants were renowned for their warlike qualities.

¹² 54:5-15 (p. 59).