

## PERFORMANCE OF WOMANHOOD

### WOMEN CONTESTING GENDER IDEAS IN MODERN GREECE

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In this paper my aim is to contribute to the current debate in women's studies by providing an ethnographic account of how a small group of young women in Athens speak about being a woman in contemporary Greece. These women are friends, gathered in a feminist group, discussing ideas about gender they want to challenge and change.

In this study the qualitative methods of participant observation are employed. I did my fieldwork in Social Anthropology in Athens 1990-1991. This essay is based on my cand.polit. thesis (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo).

What is the content of a "new" women's role, or a "new" way of being female? Part of the answer to this is, I believe, that there are many ways of being female. What gender is, what men and women are, and the relationship between them is a matter of context, that is, to be a woman in Greece depends on which woman we are speaking about. Where she lives, if she is married, how wealthy she is and first of all - what choices and possibilities she has. It should be stressed that gender relations vary widely from region to region and that rapid social and cultural change makes generalizations very difficult. However, in my opinion, it's valuable to collect systematic ethnographic information to demonstrate the variety and complexity of Greece. Furthermore, recent gender studies have stressed exactly this point, that the pattern is variation (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991). These variations on ideas about maleness and femaleness is accounted for in terms of comparisons and contrasts between a plurality of contexts.

The feminist group I present in this paper has about ten members, from the age of twenty to thirty. These women are all, except for one, unmarried. They all live in Athens, but have a connection to a village where they grew up and where their parents now live (except for one who comes from a suburb outside Athens). Most of them are sharing a flat with somebody else; a sister or friends. One lives with her

parents. As they see it, it's the urban, cosmopolitan environment that gives refuge to their desire for autonomy. Through entering the university they escaped the highly judgemental community of the Greek village. One of them told me she had the choice either to marry or to study in order to get away from the family, parents and the village. It was not difficult to choose studies, because "one of the bad dreams is to get married".

These women are not representative of the women in Greece. However, they examine controversial gender questions that I believe exist among many Greek women (and maybe men) today, especially in the younger generation. By focusing on these areas, the Greek culture and the social life in general is made visible. I believe they express an emerging gender ideology that is situated in the urban context of Greece.

I want to call attention to construction of a gender model or discourse, that is "the set of ideas that informs the activity of each sex in a particular context" (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991). My intention is to show, through the voices of some Greek women, fragments of what I consider as "feminist discourse". This feminist gender model is not a fully institutionalized discourse, but contains ideas about maleness and femaleness contrasted with those of the mainstream model. I regard this as an "alternative gender discourse" compared to the "dominant model" or the "domestic model" of gender. According to Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991), the domestic model of gender is a set of ideas about men and women in married life. It encapsulates the values of marriage and informs male and female conjugal and domestic roles. In the Greek context the domestic model of gender is the dominant one. Furthermore, the feminist group creates a discursive space, "set apart" from everyday life, in which dominant definitions of womanhood are made explicit and contested. Through verbal and bodily resistance, through talking and acting in the feminist gatherings, they challenge gender ideas and establish a morality and code of conduct of their own, at variance with that of the dominant society. This model of gender, created in the feminist group, through the sharing of experiences, storytelling and role-games, reflects their notions about what it means to realize oneself as a woman. These women friends are each others allies, but also each other's most severe judges. They regard sociability with female friends as the way to find answers to their questions. As one woman said: "How can I find my identity as a woman without help from my feminist group?"

One of the central themes in the feminist group is men's violence (via) towards women. In this paper I want to focus on the self-defence (*autoamina*) and the resistance (*antistasi*) strategies, enacted by the women towards what they consider as sexual harassment (*seksoaliki*

*parenochlisi*); that is encounters with known and unknown men who annoy women by staring, speaking and touching. I regard the social practices, created in the feminist group, as aspects of a feminist discourse. They are sites of resistance against established ideas about female gender identity, and inform how the women should react in a particular gender context. I want to demonstrate that the resistance-strategies constructed in the feminist group have a performative character, used consciously by the women for the purpose of redefinition of female identity. Finally, I want to show that this resistance has aspects of ambiguity when it is addressed to “significant others”; meaning family and friends. I present their ideas and strategies against marriage to illuminate this ambiguity.

Before I pursue some parts of the feminist discourse, I will briefly outline aspects of what is regarded as the “dominant” gender model. Subsequently I will focus on how this feminist discourse is acted out through negotiation of gender identity in interaction with men.

It should be mentioned that the elaboration of this Greek feminist discourse is part of a wider framework consisting of different feminist discourses. In this paper I choose to focus on one particular. However, literature on the women’s movement in Greece reveal that the picture is more complex. First, there exists a gap between the “autonomous feminist groups” and the women’s organizations, that is feminists within parties (it should be noted that these women are not considered feminists by many). This gap rests mostly on a different concept of autonomy (Georgiou & Stratigaki 1989), and might be considered as a clash between tradition and modernization (Vovou 1988). Second, opposing feminist discourses may occur within a feminist group (Papagaroufali 1990,1992) and outside the women’s movement (Cowan 1991). However, Cowan (ibid.) examines gender perceptions in a town in central Macedonia which she says resembles feminist discourse. The feminist group which I present in this essay belongs to the “autonomous feminist groups”, which are the modern part of what is described as the clash between tradition and modernization (Vovou 1988). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on these distinctions. Hence when I describe the feminist discourse it is with this in mind.

### ***“Aspects of a dominant gender model”***

Hirschon (1978) elaborates on what she calls the inner logic underlying the definition of the woman’s role in Greek society. It is founded in the perceptions regarding her sexual nature and categories of symbolic space, like her access to the world around the house, her use of time and control of her speech. Hirschon claims that these are beliefs to which both men and women subscribe.

The woman's role in Greek society is founded upon perceptions regarding her physical nature. Two contrasting images, Eve and Mary (Panayia) are embedded in women, the one in conflict with the other. The image of Eve is characterized by weakness and temptation in contrast to the holy image of Mary which is the ideal womanhood consisting of self-sacrifice, love and devotion to the family. Furthermore, female sexuality has an explicitly procreative end. Through childbirth a woman can transcend the limitations of her own nature. This means, her sexuality can and must be controlled, because it is regarded as a danger for the honour of herself and the family.

For both men and women marriage is an imperative. Girls are taught that there is no acceptable alternative to marriage: "A woman's destiny is to marry and bear children, for in this state alone will she find true satisfaction and her only appropriate aspiration is to become the mistress of her own household." (ibid.)

Hirschon describes three areas of cultural concern related to the woman's nature. First there is the spatial dimension. There are clearly defined conventions regarding a woman's movements outside the home. Virtuous girls are described as being "of the house" (*tou spitiou*), and women who in some way or another have lost their reputation are called "of the road" (*tou dromou*).

Second, there are conventions which specify a woman's use of time. To be a good housewife is of paramount importance and an indicator of a married woman's prestige and reputation. Hirschon notes that a woman's domestic duties are extremely time-consuming, and this is a feature of great importance. "The logic of the dictates regarding a woman's time is clear: she should be fully occupied around the house to prevent the possibility of temptation." (ibid.) Third there is a woman's verbal capacity. Women have the capacity to create disruption and trouble through words. A sharp tongue indicates a lack of self-control and women are frequently told to be silent.

The main parts of this definition of womanhood are well-known representations and notions of what the women in the feminist group call the traditional woman's role. These are gender ideas which are discussed and challenged in various ways.

The gender ideology described as the "dominant model" is perhaps mostly restricted to provincial/rural areas. Women's mobility in the city, for instance, has increased and cannot easily be held in check. However, in Athens there are still middle-class women who are not permitted by their husbands to go out with women friends, but who succeed in doing so by saying, for example, they are going shopping (Papagaroufali 1990). In a city like Athens men's surveillance is perhaps less, but still experienced as aggressive and often violent, according to the women in the feminist group.

### ***Contesting womanhood***

In the following section I shall try to elaborate some of the ideas that form central parts of the Greek feminist discourse.

The feminist group considers men's violence (*bia*) towards women, and women's acceptance of this situation as crucial for maintaining societies social order which is governed by patriarchal (*patriarchikos*) and "falokratikos" principles. These two concepts are not entirely synonymous, but are used by these women to describe different power-relationships. "Patriarchia" describes men's power directly through the societies order, where as "falokratia" is connected to the relationship between men and women, where men's power is directed towards women in a more direct way. The feminists would, for instance, maintain that the streets of Athens are governed by "falokratikos" principles through sexual harassment (*sexoaliki parenochlisi*).

"*Piragma*" or "*parenochlisi*" are Greek words for harassment, annoying or teasing. However, the women involved most often describe this as "*andres pou sou tin pefton*", that is an expression meaning men who "fall on you". In this connection it means men who harass you, but it has a stronger connotation than the more formal *parenochlisi* or *piragma*.

Statements made by the feminist group reveal their view. I quote some parts:

"The everyday violence that is used against women has to do with all sides of women's lives (this includes both physical and psychological violence enacted upon women in "the house" and on "the road"). Men consider it as their indisputable right to annoy and violate the personal time and space of women....We have accepted a refusal of ourselves through our education, we are pathetic receivers of facts and situations. The weakness of women is a myth that has to be overthrown....We have to react dynamically if we want to change our role....It starts when women realize their right to defend their desire, their dignity and their sexual life. It is their right to say "no" to what they don't like, to what disturbs them."

These women struggle to construct and put into practice new definitions of womanhood, through an active, creative and reflective process. This perspective resonates with Herzfeld's (1985) discussion of the poetics of manhood, where poetics is about "doing" and "making" oneself ("as a man"). Cowan (1990) also focuses on the "doing" rather than the "thinking" of gender. But Herzfeld's depiction of "doing", however, portrays it as more entrepreneurial and innovative process than Cowan (*ibid.*) Cowan believes we must also keep in view the constrained nature and unchosen conditions of human beings "making" and "doing", and asks if the women have such scope for innovation as the men have. I believe the feminist project is about

creating a "poetics of womanhood"; that is, "making" oneself "as a woman". The women in the feminist group believe in a special innovation for women, and are determined to bring about a radical change in their lives. The feminist discourse is a way towards this end. I quote:

As she has learned to be frightened and weak, she can learn to be powerful and have sovereignty. She can learn how to stop violence by the way she stands against it: the way she moves, the way she looks at the one who provokes her and the way she answers to a provocation.

The way the act is performed is of ultimate importance for the result, or the impression they give. First of all, they emphasize the need to react to any kind of attack from men and to challenge men's view on women, either verbally or physically. To be silent or passive, means agreeing upon men's definition of womanhood. This definition, they believe, is that women are "silent, kind, calm, soft and polite, passive, pathetic and with no personality". When men try to give them this role, they must react dynamically and aggressively without showing any fear. I quote:

We must walk in the street with proud and straight bodies; show self-confidence and no fear by looking men straight into their eyes.

When they meet a man in the street who annoys them in some way or another (this happens every day), they believe for instance that how the words are said, how they speak and react is more important than actually what they say. The stories that are being told about different confrontations with men are an important aspect of the feminist discourse. "What did he do - what did she do - what could she have done different?" Strategies about how to "answer back" are discussed, judged and constructed through the stories. I quote a part from one of our discussions about "screaming":

A: "We must learn how to scream... I have problems with screaming, because when I scream I feel ridiculous."

Y: "Let us discuss what is the use of the scream, why we must scream or why we must not?"

A: "It's important to scream to show other people that we have rights, that they must see us like persons, not like nothing, like a zero, because women used to scream hysterically, not to scream for their rights."

Y: "Here in Greece when a woman is very hysterical, this is a different kind of scream, when she is complaining and screaming about things

to her husband, her children. And what I want to ask is what is the difference between our scream and this kind of scream?"

S: "You said it already, it's a hysterical way of screaming, it has nothing to do with expressing yourself. It is not a screaming to ask for something you want, it's a screaming out of control."

Y: "We have to answer with a strong voice, a voice that is steady and it comes from deeper, from inside."

S: "When something happens on the street or in the bus, for example a man says "oh, what big breasts", I feel angry and that I have to react but I cannot make myself ready to say what I have in my mind. I have in my mind to say "fuck off", at the same time I feel that it's nothing."

Y: "Yes, you are right."

S: "I say it more because I have to, because I have to say something. I cannot go without saying something."

Y: "That's why we have to practise on this."

S: "If I leave myself to feel this anger, do you know what I could ask back? I could say "what you say idiot?", but in a very angry way, not "ai gamisou" (fuck) with a weak voice. We say it so soft, "ai gamisou re malaka" (fuck you wanker; malakia is the Greek popular word for masturbation) It's something I have to do for myself.... to say strongly "ti ipes askimo fatsari" ( what did you say ugly face ) or "ti ipes ilithio plasma" ( what did you say idiotic creature ), something like that, I think it will express more what I really feel, this aggressiveness, because I think he is an idiot, something bad and I want to express it. To say "ai gamisou" is *cliche*.... It has to do with how you react, to say it clear and to mean it. One girlfriend of mine told me a story from the bus, she answered "go to hell", but the whole bus was laughing, can you imagine? If you really want to defend yourself it's how to say it, not what you say."

Herzfeld notices in his book *The poetics of manhood* (1985) that there is less focus on "being a good man" than on "being good at being a man". The attention is not on what men do, but how the act is performed.

This perspective is interesting when discussing this feminist discourse, because of the central position that performance is given. The women in the feminist group were actually avoiding the image of "being a good woman". It is, in their opinion, the traditional women's role they are challenging. Instead, "being good at being a woman", the performance of womanhood, that is what they consider as womanhood: a woman that is "strong, dynamic, successful, selfconfident, in control of her life and situation, active, doing things, a sexual human being that is able to combine being feminine, powerful and aggressive at the same time."

"Being good at being a woman", means challenging traditional ideas or what they consider as myths.

Especially the idea of women's silence is confronted and changed inside the feminist discourse. This idea is, in their opinion, created by men, fathers and husbands telling women "*mi milas*" (do not speak).

Herzfeld (1991) has argued that women's silence represents a problem for the study of the creation of meaning in the contexts of female interaction. He suggests that what women perform is maybe their lack of performance, because performance means you do something, and the dominant ideology seems to define women as those who do very little.

With this in mind, we must view the feminist discourse emphasis on performance. The women in the feminist group stress the opposite of "silent performance", namely the verbal and bodily performance, which often means risking an open confrontation on the definition of womanhood.

Papagaroufali (1992) stresses the performative aspect in an article on alcohol drinking as sites of resistance among feminists in the urban context of Greece." The women presented here engaged in specific forms of drinking in order consciously to resist, even subvert, Greek men's cultural power..." (ibid). She describes their drinking practices as performative strategies through which women exposed, to outsider-witnesses, demand for the acknowledgement of their own naturalness and legitimacy.

In order to become subjects and not objects in the eyes of men, these women believe confrontation is a means in achieving this. When they act strongly and dynamically towards men, they are able to "win this fight" that is about definitions of womanhood.

One of the women makes this statement:

How many times have I felt angry because of a man's disturbance? How many times have I felt his control of space by his presence in the streets, but also in my house and my job, with bad jokes which hide something about my body and my appearance. He takes my words and my voice. The men speak for us, they steal it and leave no voice for our own. How can we learn to resist? I don't want to tremble when I hear steps behind me or when they throw swear words at me. In the feminist group I learn to keep my body prepared. I learn to use my power and to have my body in discipline. Self-defence is a process to get to know yourself, our scared and hidden inner selves, and to demand something. We will walk in the streets together, empty streets or bad areas, and see the reactions of the men. We could enjoy it, maybe.



This woman emphasizes especially the bodily resistance used by entering space dominated by men. However, it is stressed as a necessity in order to challenge men's definition of women. They create their own expression, which can be viewed as a bodily counter-expression to the male mode of expressing. Another woman also points to this line of confrontation:

I walk into the forest when the wolf is not there. "Wolf, wolf are you here?" Is this maybe the question you whisper when you walk alone in empty streets? And when he was there, didn't you suddenly feel like the myths; the fear stuck your legs to the ground. All these myths make us feel the panic. Because you are a woman. This means object without decision, suspicious and not going straight but hiding. There is a time coming when you realize the power to make your body in rhythm, that is to control your movements. Your scream doesn't stimulate anybody, but creates a fear for the other. And then you defend yourself very steadily, rejecting all the myths one by one. With the self-defence practice I start to communicate with my body, and have the courage to answer when they verbally rape me every day in the streets. But you have to face the jokes and the laughs. They think you are "looking for trouble", and slowly become a man. My answer is that if the right I have to respect my personality and my body, to walk without fear in the night without male companion, if all this means that we are "looking for fights", then that is what I am doing.

Cowan (1991) examines perceptions on gender and space among people in Sohos, a town in northern Greece. The emergence of a new kafeteria, a place where women and men can meet (in contrast to the coffehouse, or kafenion which is unambiguously regarded as a male space), is an establishment that does not slip neatly into the familiar classification of gender and space. Cowan asked the Sohoians if it's a good thing or not for females to pass their time in the kafeteria. They disagree about the matter. "From the viewpoint of those men and women committed to the domestic model, "going out for a coffee" means entering a dangerous world where female vulnerability can be exploited, promoting the sensual side of womanhood.(...) A virtuous woman is expected to show no public interest in such a place. For the young enthusiasts of the new institution, having coffee in the kafeteria suggests equality between the sexes, female independence, relaxation and sociability, and an opportunity for a woman to associate with others, not in sexual terms, as an object of men's desires, but simply as a "human being."

Cowan claims that this emerging ideology of the woman as an autonomous being, in control of her body, resembles feminist discourse.

In an urban context, like Athens, I believe that womanhood is made explicit and contested in many different situations and places. However, women often avoid a confrontation with men by, for instance, crossing the street when they see a man coming towards them, or avoid any discussion about female-male roles or gender ideas. However, in the feminist group, these are questions of utmost importance and are always made explicit when possible.

### ***Ambiguities of resistance***

The struggles of the women in the feminist group to put into practice new definitions of womanhood reflect the contradictory dimensions of their everyday reality. To have an open confrontation with unknown men in the street is considered as less difficult than engaging in a confrontation with close friends. Furthermore, to oppose and resist their parents view on, for instance, marriage is something that most of the women are avoiding or postponing. Marriage is closely linked to what the women consider the traditional woman's role. As a consequence, not to marry is part of the feminist discourse. They view feminism and marriage as difficult or almost impossible to combine. However, marriage is a matter of great sensitivity because of the connection to their close family, and the reputation of their family in the village they come from. Unmarried girls often receive wishes "for your happiness and a good husband" (*stis hares sou ke me enan kalo andra*), when they lift a glass of wine to drink. One of the women, who is now twentyfour years old, told me that when she visited her village she couldn't even lift a glass of water before somebody expressed wishes for "a good husband". Two other women in the feminist group make these statements about marriage:

S: "My mother has already started to prepare me, to search for a man to marry.... because you know the time is running, and this must happen before I'm 25 years old. She has this limit. My mother will never accept it, me not to marry, because this is her world. She will never accept it inside, because it's out of her moral. She thinks that the most important thing in life is to be married, not educated, no, no, the most important thing in life is to have a good husband and be happy.... After some time I will choose to make her unhappy, but now I cannot face it. Because I have time."

N: "I think it's very, very difficult for a woman to have her own life, to realize herself and at the same time be married, because it has to do

with the style of the family, husband, wife, children. When I imagine myself thirty, forty, fifty years old, I imagine..., but it's not logical and therefore more true. I imagine myself with a child, but not with a man. I don't know what I will do, of course, I have the utopia to be with a man, to live with a man, but not to marry. I have also the hope that maybe if I get married because of pressure, the social pressure, for example, I will try to change the roles and the situation."

They are challenging a supreme value of the Greek society and this is difficult because of the social pressure from society and their families, and because women's role and identity are closely linked to the status of being a wife and a mother. "Since women's "destiny" is to give birth and bring up children (du Boulay 1986) it seems that women's only option is to marry and to identify with a household of procreation." (Loizos, Papataxiarchis 1991)

Marriage and the family is a dominant and important orientation in Greek life. "In Greece, marriage is of supreme value because it is regarded as a necessary condition of procreation and, therefore, of the continuation of life and, in a more metaphysical sense, of the self through the perpetuation of family names and the persons of the parents" (Loizos, Papataxiarchis 1991). Several ethnographers of Greece have stated the imperative status of marriage (Campbell 1964, du Boulay 1986, Hirschon 1989).

However, the development of what Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991) call "a secular consciousness of womanhood" that is juxtaposed to the domestic model, leads to a public clash with gender orthodoxy. "The open contestation (of gender) can lead to a subversion from within, to new synthesis, and indeed can foreshadow significant transformations in the meaning of marriage toward a more "open" type."

The increase in urban divorce rates suggests important changes in the meaning of marriage. A story was told to me about a young woman who had been living with her boyfriend for two years in the second floor of her parents house. The relationship was in this way "official", it means that her parents accepted that they lived together because one day they would marry. However, their relationship was not working very well and the girl wanted to stop it. This was impossible since they had been living together in this "official" way. She decided to marry him, because, as she said, "the first possible step towards divorce is to marry." It was possible to accept a divorce from a married couple, but impossible when they were living together. The meaning of marriage for this woman was to use it as a transitional stage towards ending a relationship. Other women have expressed a similar view on marriage. Because of the social pressure and the imperative status of marriage they plan to marry, but at the same time they plan that after a few years they will divorce. In reality these strategies

created to handle the social pressure might not be widely practised, but I believe they are important aspects of construction of a gender model on the way to be institutionalized.

### ***Conclusion***

All the women in the feminist group express the strong influence feminism has had on their lives. They often speak about themselves with reference to “before I joined the feminist group” and “after”, and emphasize the importance of the feminist group for confirmation of their identity.

Research, carried out in Greece about twenty years ago, maintains that women today are facing more stressful situations due to the lack of role description suited to the new kind of relations in her life (Spinellis, Vassiliou & Vassiliou 1970). They characterize this as a culture conflict between old and new values that has led to serious role strain in the behaviour of men and women caught in the transition (ibid.)

The women presented in this paper view themselves as agents of change through negotiation of gender identity. However, they stress a notion of role strain and a need for new models and patterns. The feminist discourse created in the feminist group is believed to be a way to relieve this strain.

In this paper the performative aspect of this Greek feminist discourse is stressed as important. The social practices, the verbal and bodily resistance strategies created in the feminist group are viewed as sites in which gender ideas and relations are realized, comprehended and made real. To use Herzfeld's argument (1985), the ultimate focus is on “being good at being a woman”, contrasting “being a good woman”. This “new” way of being female is contested through negotiation of gender identity — to answer back — any kind of attack, where the ultimate value is put on the performative act, verbally and bodily. The ideal act is to show a dynamic and self confident attitude, to do things, to be active and able to show aggressiveness. All this is embedded in their feminine, sexual human bodies. This is a contradictory definition of womanhood according to the traditional Greek context.

This emerging ideology of womanhood, which I have described as a feminist discourse requires the verbal and bodily articulation of resistance. “To be good at being a woman” means to display, perform and be in control of their own womanhood.

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