

2. The Woman Construct: An Existential Critique

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Abstract:

The presence of women as subjects have been ignored by the patriarchal societies and woman as a category has been constructed according to the male fantasy, the inscriptions of which we find in cultural institutions and the media. The paper revisits the question of woman construction even in this postfeminist or more further in the posthumanist era, from the perspective of the existential school of thought, putting forward some elemental questions regarding the objectification of women in this age of cultural exchanges. With the 'self' being already 'split', the modern human fails to address the degradation that is wrought not only on the body but also on the psyche of the oppressed, when put to presentation in terms of objects. The same is with the women who are represented in movies, ads, pornographic films and ideologically constructed in ways so as to believe that in such ways they emerge as emancipated women. The paper therefore foregrounds the issues of choice and consent for women which can in true terms establishes them as 'free agents' and destabilize the master-slave hierarchical relation.

Keywords:

Existentialism; Look; Authenticity; Objectification; Pornography; Female Slavery

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“Every human being must wrestle with nature. But nature’s burden falls more heavily on one sex.”

Camille Paglia
(Sexual Personae, 1990, Pg- 9)

Who or what is a human being? -This is one of the simplest yet deceptive questions that have left philosophers scratching their heads. From the antiquity to the present, almost all the philosophers have tried to dealwith this question, but ironically they have found only half answers. The biggest drawback that their definitions entailed was that all of them defined human beings with a clear masculine bias- i.e. they altogether ignored the presence of women as free-agents, thereby hegemonically suppressing the woman in ‘man’. Hence, what invariably follows from this is that women have been categorized as the inferior ‘other’ of men.

A notable exception, however, can be found in Plato, who regarded women to be equal to men. In his *THE REPUBLIC*, “Plato argued that women should train alongside men and that all people ought to find their place in society based on their individual natures rather than some presumptions about the nature of the sexes.” (Scholz Sally J., Pg 39)However, he contradicts himself for “in a later work, Plato makes an altogether different claim. In the *Timaeus*, he says that women are created from souls of the most wicked and irrational men” (Scholz Sally J., Pg 39) again emphasizing the point that the women are less than ‘human’.

This dilemma has continued and although we may brag regarding our advancement as humans (notwithstanding the post-humanist views), women are still not regarded a natural part of this category and hence the resurgence of ‘feminisms’. The philosophical school that

embraced the question of women being human or not in the most humane way was Existentialism, one of the most important philosophical movements of the twentieth century.

Existentialism holds that the most important aspect of being a human is exerting one's freedom. An existentialist would aim at foregrounding the liberty of an individual, whereby the choice rests solely with him. Another way they identify human beings is by the Sartrean maxim- "Existence precedes essence". By this they differentiate between two types of beings- being-in-itself and being-for itself. Being-in-itself are those without consciousness, any inanimate object whose essence determines its being- 'the thingness of a thing'. On the other hand, being-for-itself are beings with consciousness, who have no essence preceding their existence; they only create essence by living life, a process called 'becoming'. Human beings belong to the second category as they are conscious about their existence. However, one important thing that the existentialists don't fail to emphasize is that in the process of creating essence, human beings have to conform to the rules set by others, a thing that Heidegger calls "the dictatorship of they". While conforming to others human beings lose their authenticity and under the "Look" of others become objectified. We, human beings lose our authenticity and thereby become objects for others.

It is ironical that in the present democratic world, we can still perceive feminists struggling to establish their claims and losing grounds today that were won yesterday. Hence still persists the question of women attaining the identity of 'the human', which is repeatedly thwarted because of being objectified under the 'look' of men.

What the existentialists emphasize is human freedom to choose for itself, to be authentic (true to one's self). Some may argue that in the present era, women are exerting their freedom more than ever but critical understanding of the locus that the women are in would reveal that it just follows not from women's emancipation but freedom being legitimized from the patriarchal stand point.

Women are continuously being presented as objects to be consumed by men, as commodities. From the ad-world to the film industry, everywhere we find that women's bodies and sexuality being commodified and sold to the public, which irrespective of its sexual orientation, always has a masculine 'gaze'- a phrase used by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", written in 1973 and published in 1975 in the magazine Screen. In the article she argued that the controlling gaze of in cinema is always male and the spectators are always subtly manipulated to identify with the 'look' or perspective of the male hero, making the heroine a passive object of erotic spectacle and turning her into an 'object' to be consumed and not a human subject.

In the ad-world this same thing is the case and to find it out we just need to look at any ad which is trying to sell soaps, body lotions, creams or even exclusively male products (shaving creams etc.).

The same hold true in case of beauty contests as it perpetrates the sexual objectification of women. In these contests woman's body is again commodified for the male 'gaze' (Nayar Pg-99) - we find that the female contestants are presented on stage in an ways as if they are like some 'items' to be packaged neatly to make them more attractive for the consumers, in this case the male judges who pass their judgments based on standards of sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir's arguments regarding physical appearance and social expectations are very relevant in this connection. She discusses a huge assemblage of social expectations, which include physical appearance, but she doesn't fail to highlight the fact that these expectations are more crucial and in a way degrading for women as the so called 'standards' usually frustrate their ability to act as free agents. Sandra Lee Bartkey in her ground-breaking book "Femininity and Domination: Studies in Phenomenology of Oppression" has regarded this kind of sexual objectification as disgraceful and as playing a subtly crucial role in strengthening gender inequality. What these theorists argue is that the events like beauty pageants eat away/thwart the freedom of choice (from) women and they are implicitly and

explicitly forced to conform to the social standards of beauty by the patriarchal society and thereby turning them into sexual objects, lacking human agency which the existentialists so passionately associate with a true 'authentic' being.

Jean Kilbourne in her famous documentary series "Killing Us Softly" points to this very issue by demonstrating the way images of femininity are being packaged and catered to the general public by the glittering world of advertising. She forcefully argues, citing numerous examples from ads collected from all over the world, that the images of women that are in circulation in the advertising industry are "sexist, unrealistic representations" having very far-reaching and harmful consequences like eating disorders, excessive dieting, cosmetic surgeries which do nothing but rather turn them into a kind of blank canvas on which the male fantasies, ideas or ideals are painted and forcing them into internalizing them as ideals to strive for. In each of these cases we find that women are being presented as objects whose essence precedes its existence. They are being made to be 'being-in-itself' as women are being defined only by their body and sexuality, without acknowledging their human agency.

The foremost radical feminists of the postmodern era Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon have employed this critical method of argument in their discussions on how pornography objectifies women. They have defined pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words" and have argued that this phenomenon of sexual objectification of women is a 'manufactured' way of representation by the multi-billion dollar porn industry where women are perceived, assumed and treated like sexually materialized objects ready to be exploited. If we approach this scenario from the existentialist stand point what we find is that in treating women merely as means of sexual gratification, they are denied of their 'human' dignity and are being projected as mere sexual objects rather than a 'human subject'. Existentialists give most importance to human freedom and they believe that it is this freedom- to choose for oneself and also to

value that of others- and also the responsibility it entails that make us authentic human beings, but in pornography where degrading visual images, reduce the female body just to sex objects, the freedom of women is ignored and the whole politics of subordination, humiliation and domination are made to appear acceptable and common place. To add to this is the recent addition of another category which is most ironically called “lesbian pornography”, but even here we find that they are made for the male voyeuristic eye because once again the object of visualization is woman and her body. So pornography here comes in different levels- and since in both the cases, whether its between man and woman or between woman and woman, it is meant for the male consumption because male pleasure remains in full view there and hence once again the institution of hierarchy between man and woman gets accentuated.

Such objectification is not just limited to cultural artifices and the media. It ranges from social to the domestic, wherever she has to share space with the ‘other’. To explicate these issues, we may take up Catherine A Mackinnon’s ‘Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination’, where she delineates the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality and economics. Mackinnon here uncovers the fact that in capitalist societies, women are not only segregated in low-paying, service jobs, but that ‘sexualisation of the woman’ is part of the job. And when a woman resists and protests the advances of a man, she is often branded as ‘sexless’ or a ‘lesbian’.

Mackinnon has also raised serious questions about the meaning of the female partner’s ‘consent’ in heterosexual relationship, which has defined force as part of the preliminaries for intercourse. Thus there remains no fundamental difference between sexual harassment and rape, and normal heterosexual intercourse. Rape is no doubt a case of violence, but it is at the same time a consummation, a result of perverted desire. If only violence is taken into account in rape, then once again the whole question of the presence of woman is just ignored. Gender in relation to sex, the very act is just removed.

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Mackinnon also speaks of castration anxiety not of the woman but of the man – because she argues that man is constantly in fear of losing his domination or supremacy over women. If we go into the details of this discourse, this fear often takes away the male performance on woman. The fear Mackinnon refers to, is the fear of women and of women's sexual insatiability. This is also associated with the institution of heterosexuality and the adverse impact of this is female slavery because when one is much too anxious about one's sexual performance and about keeping the woman to himself, then he comes up with certain rules and regulations which construct and tend to perpetuate the female slavery system, under which women remain subject to men.

Hence what follows from this is that women has not just been represented but also ideologically constructed in such ways as to ignore their identity and dissolving them under the narrative of man. Women's history has been a history of domination; oppression and even repression, for patriarchal societies preserve the possibilities of desire only for the men folk. However when women have consciously attempted to attain subject hood by rejecting the objectification imposed upon her by forcing her to play specific gender roles, the narratives have been such that their desires have been held responsible for the invariably entailing tragic ends.

Thus whatever role a woman might take in her life, she is almost always a victim of objectification, forced to mindlessly conform to the patriarchal and capitalistic ideologies, devaluing her authenticity as a human being.

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