

Pornography as a Representation of Sexual Objectification: The Analysis from Radical Feminist Perspective⁽¹⁾

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Abstract

This article had the primary purpose of analyzing a problem of pornography and women sexual objectification through radical feminist perspective.

According to radical feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, pornography was a main interest of feminists. This was related to concept of treating women as sexual objectification in three aspects: 1) pornography caused women sexual instruments; 2) pornography devalued women; 3) pornography degraded women. However, I realized that there were two other interesting causes that can best describe this problem. The first cause of treating women a sexual object was male gaze under patriarchal society. Another cause was women's narcissism. In addition, it was found that pornography was, as seen by radical feminist, merely a medium used to transmit the presentation of human sexual expression. Or it can be interpreted and defended differently by other feminists.

Keywords: feminist, instrumentality, narcissism, representative, objectification, patriarchy, pornography⁽²⁾

(1) It is my great pressure to acknowledge and to extend my heartfelt thanks to my advisor Dr. John Jiodano at Assumption University for his invaluable advice throughout my writing of this article.

(2) Books, magazines, films, etc. with no artistic value that describe or show sexual acts or naked people in a way that is intended to be sexually exciting (Cambridge University, 2016).

Pornography was claimed as an implicit matter of sexual objectification by mainstream feminists (MacKinnon, 1987; Dworkin, 1989) who raised the problematic issue of pornography especially in turning women into sex object. According to the viewpoint of anti-pornography feminists, pornography has been viewed as a systematic denial of equal rights and of respect to women; this point of view consequently has become a widely debated issue, raising concerns among feminists, especially radical feminists. There is no unitary definition of pornography but it could be generally defined as the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or words. According to this definition, in this paper I understand and interpret pornography as sexual objectification, which is in line with Andrea Dworkin's arguments that pornography is a representation of sexual objectification.

Why pornography becomes the main concern among the feminists? Page Mellish⁽³⁾ has stated that pornography systematically denies equal rights and respect to women, and that there is no feminist issue that is not rooted in the pornography problem (Puente, 1992, p.09A). Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. McKinnon defined pornography in the *Amendment to the Human Rights Ordinance of the City of Minneapolis* as "the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or in words..." (Dworkin, 1988, p. 264). Along similar lines, the Attorney General Commission on Pornography⁽⁴⁾ defined pornography as material that is predominantly sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal (McManus, 1986, p.8).

(3) A feminist, who is a member of Feminist Fighting Pornography (FFP), a New York-based political activist organization against pornography.

(4) Under the command of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, the commission issued a final report which was the result of a supposedly comprehensive investigation into pornography. The report was published in July 1986 and contained 1,960 pages.

Dworkin (1988) contended that the serious issue of pornography is that it has been considered as sexual instrument for men's use. As she claimed in her work *Why Pornography Matters to Feminist's Perspective*, pornography illustrates that women are things; that being used as things fulfills the erotic nature of women; that women are the things men use. In pornography women are used as things; in pornography force is used against women; in pornography women are used (Dworkin, 1988, pp. 203-204). She repeatedly emphasizes on men's use of women because men use pornography for the purpose of arousing sex. In addition, MacKinnon (1987) asserted that the possession of women can be accessed through pornography, when men consume it, then, women become sexual object. Men consume pornography as sexual reality. Pornography participates in its audience's eroticism through creating an accessible sex object, which if men possess and consume for the sexual purpose is male sexuality; which if consumed and possessed as an object is female sexuality; pornography is a process that constructs it that way (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 176). Men treat women as things which could satisfy their desires; men use women as sexual instruments. They consume pornography and treat women as sex objects.

The concept of objectification begins with the meaning in accordance with feminist's perspectives that is the reduction of women to only sex objects, not fully human subjects. Radical feminists then assume this definition in relating to the scope of sexual objectification or women's sexual objectification.

How a person becomes an object? The implication of this question is that when a person is treated as a thing, or the notion of objectification, it is always morally problematic and very hard to clarify its concept as it is both a slippery and a multiple concept (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 214). However, I have, at this stage, conceptualized pornography as sexual objectification as consisting of three characteristics: the transformation of women to sexual instruments; the subordination of women through pornography; and the destruction of dignity in form of reducing women to sex objects. Detailed explanations of each feature are elaborated

as follows:

1. The treatment of human beings as instruments, the first quality of sexual objectification, is morally problematic and gravely concerns feminists such as Immanuel Kant, Alison Assiter, Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Martha Nussbaum. They argued that the pressing problem concerning this concept is the treatment of someone as object, not something as object. It is not the interaction between human being and human being. The problem is when man uses another (woman) to satisfy his desire and pleasure, especially in pornography, he then treats woman as an instrumental object. He views and turns a woman into an object.

The problem of sexual objectification is men treat women as things for their desires; men consume pornography and treat women as sex objects; then men use women as sex objects through pornography. When pornography is embedded in the object status of women, women are transformed to characteristic of object immediately. Assiter (1988) claims about the relations between people in pornographic eroticism that in much pornography, people (usually women) become objects for another. She explains that as one person becomes a body desired by the others, the woman becomes an "object" of male desire. She either involuntarily submits to this role or she does it voluntarily (Assiter, 1988, p. 65). In addition, objectification occurs even between the lovers, as Jean Paul Sartre said that "in the act of love-making, the lover becomes at once subject and object as she sees herself partly as the body desired by the lover. But then her identity is partly outside of her control, so she tries to turn her lover into an object as well (Sartre, 1957, pt.III, ch3).

When pointing out to pornography, women are either voluntarily or involuntarily submitted to the act of becoming sex objects. They are lacking of autonomous beings and self-determination. It usually happens to women, even between the lovers. Accordingly when women being turned into objects, they tend to become inequality; and then objectification occurred. One, who is turned into object for another's desire, is a woman. What is wrong with

pornography is that it is used as a means for man's desire to reinforce male power and to reduce woman to solely his sex object.

Kant (1963), MacKinnon, and Dworkin shared similar concept and much of the basic understanding about pornography as they describe it as something one consumes for his or her satisfaction. Kant draws analogy between the objectified individual and a lemon that is used and discarded afterwards; and elsewhere compares to a steak consumed by people for the satisfaction of their hunger (Kant, 1963, p. 163, 165). MacKinnon also blamed pornography for teaching its consumers that women exist to be used by men. A woman is compared with a cup (a thing), and as such she is valued only for how she looks and how she can be used (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 138). Along similar lines, Dworkin claims that men regard themselves the only "human center" of the world, surrounded by objects for use, including women. A man discovers his power in using objects, both inanimate objects and persons who are not adult men (Dworkin, 1989, p.104). According to these comparisons, a man, who is a user or consumer, identifies a woman as a thing such as a lemon and a cup that he uses to fulfill his own purpose and personal demand. In other words, it means the consumption of pornography enables consumers to satisfy their desire or pleasure. It conforms to the concept of objectification in which an objectifier uses and treats the object as a tool for his or her purpose. It means that pornography is bringing about sexual objectification of women to realize men's desire.

Then, since women are embedded to object status, they become instrumentality; they are treated as mere tools or things for men's purposes or pleasure. As argued by Dworkin that because sense of inequality is achieved through sex, pornography is the material means of sexualizing inequality, and that is why pornography is a central practice in the subordination of women (Dworkin, 1985, p. 527). There is a key problem regarding this characteristic of pornography--namely when man uses pornography for his pleasure, he treats woman as a sexual instrument, not a human being.

2. Subordination appears in pornography continuously as pornography is the cause of oppression in which women are oppressed by men and turned into sexual objects. Women are objectified and men are objectifier. Pornography in this sense is defined by Dworkin and MacKinnon as the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or in words. Women are subordinated and treated with inequality when they are consumed through pornography. Subordination is the cause of women being deprived of humanity and being dehumanized. Subordination of woman leads to inequality in which pornography is the main cause of the treatment of women as sex objects for men's sexual pleasure or sexual desire. As Dworkin said, objectification occurs when a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, and then bought and sold. Objectification is an injury right at the heart of discrimination: those who can be used as if they are not fully human are no longer fully human in social terms; their humanity is hurt by being diminished (Dworkin, 1988, p. 266).

For Dworkin, subordination is a cause of women lacking in humanity and of dehumanization; then, women's autonomy and self-determination are denied; and also women are turned into things. Pertaining to this point, Dworkin claimed that pornography turns women into objects and commodities; and that pornography perpetuates the demeaning and degrading of females intelligence and creativity by perpetuating the object status of women (Dworkin, 1988, p. 204). Women are discredited when they are embedded in the object status, so, they are turned in to objects and commodities. Pornography matters as it perpetuates the object status of women, the self-defeating, the low self-esteem, the distrust, and the demeaning and degrading of female intelligence and creativity.

In pornography, then, women are defined as objects which lack in human qualification. All in all, pornography brings about women's subordination but men's supremacy. Therefore, subordination is the practical way which women are defined as sexualizing

inequality; pornography is the evidence of this view. The main concern of the idea of objectification is the occurrence of women lacking in human qualification. Then, subordination of women is associated with sexual objectification.

3. Pornography reduces dignity of women. Regarding the relations between pornography and dignity, Dworkin states that pornography gives us no future; it robs us of hope as well as dignity; it further lessens our human value in the society at large and our human potential in fact; it forbids sexual self-determination to women (Dworkin, 1988, p. 205). Pornography is specially linked to the notion of women losing dignity because whenever a woman appears in pornography, she has been portrayed as something which expresses sexual desire, then, the human value is diminished.

According to Dworkin's point of view, women are often positioned and used in pornography in the way that men want to experience; however, it is portrayed as if it is women's own desires. For instance, there is the pornography in which pregnant women for some reasons take hoses and stick the hoses up themselves. As Dworkin argued, this is not a human being. One cannot look at such a photograph and say, *"This is a human being"*, *"She has right"*, *"She has freedom"*, *"She has dignity"*, or *"She is someone."* This is not possible. That is what pornography does to women. (Dworkin, 1997, p. 127). Dworkin assured that pornography is the perception of woman without dignity; it could not be considered that pornography renders noble status to women. She argued, in *Intercourse* (Dworkin, 1988), that as long as men desire women for intercourse, and women are used as sexual objects, regardless of laws and other public reforms women's real status will be low, degraded (Dworkin, 1987, p. 16). Dignity of women is degraded when men use them as sexual objects because pornography portrays women as if they are solely sex objects.

Dworkin's argument conforms to Kantian notion, which also emphasizes such the similar terms like "dignity," "human right," "equality," and "fairness" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 243). According to Kant, sexual

objectification happens inevitably between the lovers in the context of sexual relationship; sexual desire makes people lose their control on the moral point of view--one treats the lover as mere a tool of their desires for pleasure--and involves regarding someone as an object, something for us. However, he emphasizes that one should respect of other as oneself another. Dworkin saw this in the same way; the central of moral sin is treating a human being as a mere object, a tool for the ends of others, not ends in themselves.

Indignity, following "subordination," is a cause of lacking humanity, woman being taken to self-defeating, low self-esteem, distrust, demeaning and degrading of female intelligence and creativity. Therefore, finally, women will be deprived of human beings' dignity. That is the reason why Dworkin opposed against pornography and calls for the practice that man should regard woman as a human being or an end for herself, not an end for himself.

The idea of women losing dignity becomes a core problem of the two previous characteristics both of which include and indicate to human dignity. In pornography, woman is treated as sexual object, in the name of "instrumentality," as well as subordination of women. Obviously, any woman is subordinated and robbed of self - autonomy and self-determination since they are turned into object, in regard to the notion of "objectification." Then, human qualifications have diminished and are going toward inequality.

Therefore, when taking all points mentioned above into consideration we ask a question what does pornography do to women? It is too clear, in the way that the consequence reveals, when the treatment of women as objects to fulfill someone's purpose occurs, unavoidably one definitely becomes an object. It signifies that when one is subordinated, degraded, and dehumanized; then, indignity takes place. In other words, it is because of pornography, which Dworkin believes, that is the cause of women's sexual objectification. So, pornography is a representative of sexual objectification, reflecting "some actions" that regularly imply women as sex objects, when they are related to pornography.

What I see is that although pornography features something which even usually appears in general life, in the feminists' views it is a crucially problematic issue needed for discussions. Regarding the notion of sex objects, women become objects when they appear in the pornography. I have elaborated my analysis the different perspectives of pornography as follows:

First, women's objectification engendered by the male gaze. In patriarchal society, women are constructed and trained by culture and society which give priority to men because men are leaders, rulers, custodians, and directors. Aristotle (1941, p. 1254b) wrote that in traditional practice the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled. Women are seen as lacking of abilities to create any idea and so deserve not to be leaders; they should be under the rule of a master, have no right to be a member of society, and are inferior as men are supreme. Radical feminists really concern about the theory of patriarchy; the system of power that is based on an assumption of male-domination and male-supremacy. As Dworkin stated that social system of patriarchy succeeds in getting women as women is to act affectively on behalf of male authority over women, on behalf of a hierarchy in which women are subservient to men, on behalf of women as the rightful property of men, on behalf of religion as an expression of transcendent male supremacy (Dworkin, 1988, p. 193). Women are inferior and men are superior. Accordingly, women are built to be a "second sex" as the "other" as similarly observed by Semon De Beauvoir' that one is not born but rather becomes a woman (Beauvoir, 1970, p. 301). Beauvoir viewed that the situation of women is rather determined within the men-dominated society of patriarchy. In this way women become the "second sex", whose situations and embodiments are subjectively measured by the standard created by the judge, or the other sex--that is men. Men create systems of inequality which has become traditional standard. As argued in *The Second Sex*, men are solely human beings; they do not define women based on

what they are but rather on the unequal relationship in which men posit themselves as superior. Women are not accepted as capable of being independent since they are different from men; women are prejudged; women's meanings are determined by men; women are not as valuable as the ruling sex--that is men. Only a man is a full human being and a woman is designated as the "other."⁽⁵⁾ (Beauvoir, 1970, p. vxi)

Beauvoir opined that the existing definitions of manhood and womanhood are unjust because manhood means superiority and standard of the human. Hence, men identify themselves as the "only essential one" which is totally different from women that are not the absolute human type. Women's inadequacies and inferiority are primarily negative views of the "only essential one", which have been used to justify for seeing them as the "other" and treating them accordingly. In this way, men become the "subject" who decide or command, while women are to follow, and so become the "object" of another's will.

As women, defined as objects, focus on men's attitudes and the male gaze, the answer lies in the concept of objectivity.⁽⁶⁾ How women are viewed depends on men's attitude. According to Dworkin, men think they are the only "human center" of the world, surround by the objects for use, including women. It means that women are defined as objects by the male gaze that has been constructed by a system of society, a system of male-power patriarchy. Pornography, in this sense, arises from the notion of objectification in which men treat women as objects.

Asking about the matter of consent, one may contend that if women submit and enjoy doing pornography, why pornography should be labeled as sexual objectification? This point is not worth focusing

(5) Beauvoir has based her idea of the "other" on Hegel's explanation of master-slave relationships but she uses the terms "subject" and "other" instead in order to account for the relations between men and women in the patriarchal society. Her critique that the women are othered in the men-dominated world makes the term "other" become a crucial concept in the gender and sexuality study, especially feminist study.

(6) Objectivity in this sense is directed to the epistemological theory that means about the way in which the mind conforms to the world -- men treat women as they are human beings. Whereas, the objectification is about the way in which the world conforms to mind.

if not irrelevant. I personally believe that even if women or the pornography's actors are really giving their consents to do it, objectification still continues. Regarding this argument, I agree with Dworkin that the system of society, patriarchy, and the male gaze are the primary causes of women's subordination, especially in pornography. The problem in this case is related to men's attitude, the male gaze, and men's supremacy that lead to the treatment of women as sexual objects for men's purposes. Pornography only is a representation of what males use for their purposes. The solution, according to Dworkin, is to reform men-dominated society to the world of equality. So, I think that it may be true that even if there is no pornography in this world, objectification still remains. To raise an example, the relations between master and slave, for instance, demonstrate men's belief of being the center of the world.

Second, women's self-admiration: Apart from the idea of woman being treated as sexual object by men, another quality that causes objectification involves women's admiration--women are objectifying their own selves. So, there is sexual objectification appearing on the women's activities which are concealed under an appearance of admiration or infatuation. That is, woman always care and treat themselves for the purposes of good looking; such as her face, body, shape, weight, and body's gestures as well. The questions are: why women do this?; and who is the target for these activities? The purpose of this paper is not to find the reasons behind these questions, but the most important thing is to unravel the riddles. Women do all activities in order to satisfy the male gaze. It is no meaning and significance anymore if the performance has no audience; performers should appreciate enthusiastic audiences. Sandra Bartky (1990) called this group of women in her work *Femininity and Domination*, "narcissist" which is defined as those who are infatuated with one's bodily being (Bartky, 1990, p.131). Bartky explained how a woman falls into victim of her own objectification: in the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality woman makes herself "object and prey" for the man and woman lives her

body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other (Bartky, 1990, p. 73). This is similar to Beauvoir's argument that narcissism consists in the setting up of the ego as a double 'stranger' (Beauvoir, 1970, p. 375). For the reason that woman acts in favor of the male gaze makes herself turned into an object.

Likewise, Janet Lee claimed that the way girls understand the importance of appearance in society may be attributed to feelings of fear, shame, and offense that some experience during the transition from girlhood to womanhood because they sense that they are becoming more visible to society as sexual objects (Lee, 1994, pp. 343-362). This is one example illustrating sexual objectification in men's society. Women (including girls) have been framed within the concept of sexual object with the aim to keep men satisfied. It means that if women or girls want to be a member of men's society, they need to show themselves as sexual objects in men-dominated society. Along these lines, Bartky argued, with the attitude of narcissism, women learn to see and treat themselves as objects to be gazed at and decorated; they learn to see themselves as though from the outside (Bartky, 1990, pp. 131-132). Even if the idea of admiration in women's bodies appears in a usual way, the implicit significance as I mentioned above, is related to the notion of sexual objectification. Admiration or infatuation, so, is leading to sexual objectification by women themselves. As stated by MacKinnon, admiration of natural physical beauty becomes objectification. Harmlessness becomes harm (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 174). In other words, pornography never benefits women, rather it always harm them.

However, according to Beauvoir and Bartky, women with narcissism attitude regard themselves as objects. This point out to women who agree to show her bodies in the way they want their bodies to be presented. That is to say they desire to draw the audiences' interests to their performances. What kind of problems that objectification will lead to has been discussed elsewhere in other studies and it is not necessary to find out here because it is not the main point of this paper. But, it is essential to address, in this

sense, that women is the primary cause of the problem of objectification as they objectify themselves, valuing themselves through their appearances, which is evaluated by men—who are the audiences. In the other words, women's values depend on men—the audiences. By this way, women define themselves as objects. In this sense, they (women) become objects not by the external cause but by women themselves.

For the second argument, I consider that women are the cause of objectification, opposing to the first argument that I mentioned above (the male gaze is the cause of objectification.) Body's admiration and infatuation make sexual objectification concept possible, namely, women, with or without consent, are turned into sex object by themselves if they appear in the pornography.

Both arguments have different aspects, but one thing I want to remark is that, pornography may be defined or interpreted in both positive and negative ways. Even though Dworkin believes that pornography is a primary cause of women's sexual objectification, I think that is not always the case. It depends on how the perceivers or the audiences view it as I argued earlier. In facts, pornography is functioning as the medium between the purpose of the audiences and the purpose of pornographic-makers and actors. Pornography may be more complicated than the just interpretation as a representation of sexual objectification according to perspectives of several feminists if it has been considered outside sexual context. Although pornography in the conventional perspective of radical feminists is usually associated with sexual objectification, I challenge this view, contending that it is not always that line. From the different angle, pornography can also be viewed in a good light. Currently, other feminist perspectives, such as McElroy (2008); Green (2000), view pornography as an alternative avenue for individuals to introduce family planning, to solve divorce problems, to use as a therapy of dysfunction, and to display women's sexual freedom, for example. As pornography does not have one single, harmful interpretation and impact, it is something that remains acceptable in some societies,

and therefore, is continued to be produced and consumed to this day.

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