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Beauty in Autonomy

It is well known that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. But is that true all the time? By comparison of the works, “Northanger Abbey”(1817) by Jane Austen, “Life of A Sensuous Woman”(1686) by Ihara Saikaku and “A Vindication of the Rights of Women”(1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, the true double standards of society regarding expectations of “beauty” and its influence on the “eye of the beholder” across different periods and geographical locations can be found, as well as the impact it had on the autonomy of women.

Although the texts portray very different societies, it is clear that female beauty was a key factor that gave women an advantage or disadvantage in their surroundings and determined a lion’s share of their self-worth. The exact descriptions of the ideal features of women also have many similarities. Men’s preferences were often warped by these expectations of perfect physical appearance which were unrealistic and dehumanizing to women as they were stripped of individual identity and had to fit in the restricting molds of society. In the text, “Life of a Sensuous Woman”, the extent of the extremity of these requirements were highlighted by the author in the quote, “a woman between fifteen and eighteen with a full, oval face of the kind so popular then, skin the light color of cherry blossoms, and perfect facial features” (Saikaku 659). The young age limit shows the fetishization of youthful and underage women and perpetuates the idea that a woman’s value is only present when they are young and that it is a “first come, first serve situation” for men. A lot of the facial features mentioned still remain ideal in many Asian societies, including features such as, round eyes, “a gradually rising nose”, and a definite body

type such as mentioned in the same paragraph, “her waist firm and slim, and her hips full” (Saikaku 659). Such standards make women feel like a stranger in their own skin and become a fuel for self-hate and low self-esteem as they are deemed of less worth than their peers with the ideal features and make it further difficult for women to achieve autonomy.

Additionally, a similar description of the physical appearance of a young woman can be found in the text “Northanger Abbey” during the introduction of the protagonist of the story when the narrator states, “At fifteen, appearances were mending; she began to curl her hair and long for balls; her complexion improved, her features were softened by plumpness and colour, her eyes gained more animation, and her figure more consequence” (Austen Chapter 1). Similar to the prior text, there is great emphasis placed on young age, skin tone, and body type.

“Plumpness” here implies the curves of the body and the softness of the skin. This is similar to the ideal body mentioned in the previous text which was a slim waist and full hips, essentially an unrealistic hourglass figure. It can be inferred that women with such figures were thought to be ideal for childbearing and that is how the standard came about. To adhere to the norm, women in Europe would wear attires designed to provide the “illusion” of an hourglass figure by making the skirts larger by putting layers of material underneath and making the waists narrower using boning and corseting. Such superficial requirements were detrimental to women, as Mary Wollstonecraft points out in the text, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” the following, “To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves” (Wollstonecraft 22). Wollstonecraft criticizes the way women are pressured to retain their “natural” beauty, even to the extent of abstaining from exercise and self-fulfillment in fear of becoming masculine or out worldly.

Society enforces a particular lifestyle and beauty standard for women which encourages only the artificial notions of attractiveness and vanity and shuns away other balancing qualities one need, like intellect or reason. It is evident that such rigid standards were perpetuated by the men in societies across ages to suppress and objectify women and to ensure they were reliant on men to climb up the social ranks.

In addition to laying out their disappointment regarding the inequalities women face in society, all the authors encourage and praise autonomy and expression of self in women in midst of the challenges they face. It is highlighted when women shine in their courage and resist against the resilient and unfair norms of the time. The belief that women were the inferior sex and only exist to support their male counterparts has been prevalent throughout history. Mary Wollstonecraft critiques this view by saying, “Though, to reason on Rousseau's ground, if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife one, that she should rely entirely on his understanding; and the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous” (Wollstonecraft 135). Wollstonecraft proposes that men are not infallible and can be immature and make wrong decisions, thus women should be allowed to use their own sense of reasoning and intelligence where their wellbeing is considered. To be independent, they should be provided with the same resources of education and employment that men receive, allowing them to reach their full intellectual potential.

In the text, “Life of a sensuous woman”, the protagonist is shown to possess a great deal of autonomy. Although she cannot control certain aspects of her life due to circumstances, in most cases she makes the most of the adversities she faces and makes independent decisions. This includes traveling to various places independently and exploring her sexuality. She also

recognizes and expresses disappointment in women's lack of autonomy within marriage by stating, "In my opinion, a lord's wife isn't allowed to show her jealousy like most commoner women would" (Saikaku 661). This shows the double standard where the woman is expected to stay loyal to her husband but the married man is allowed to engage in adultery and infidelity and the wife is not even allowed to express her distaste or jealousy and is just expected to be silent and accept it. The protagonist's strength during her tough life is admirable and heartbreaking at the same time. Similar character development is found in Catherine from "Northanger Abbey" where she changes from oblivious and naive to independent and wise. At the beginning of her journey, she wishes to be the "heroine" who is the personification of society's ideals of women: beautiful and fragile. Later she realizes that being the 'damsel in distress' is not what she wants in her life. She makes mistakes and wrong decisions but learns from them and treasures the people in life who truly care for her and cut off the people who are toxic and try to use her. Austen makes it difficult not to root for Catherine throughout her tumultuous journey as she navigates through an unfamiliar and strict society.

Through the various texts, readers are provided a glimpse of the lives of women across the ages as they were forced to choose between succumbing to social pressures of "beauty" and seizing their livelihood and personal passions in life. The bravery of these women in the face of such adversity inspires the reader to view beauty more objectively and question modern-day beauty standards that restrict women to this day. Instead of finding beauty in superficial and temporary things, the beholder might be inclined to find true beauty in one's free will and the happiness one gains from authentic self expression.

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