

Feminist Philosophy of Art

Subham Saha

Abstract

The feminist philosophy of art is concerned with how feminist issues are involved in aesthetics. Like feminism, feminist aesthetics show how women are objectified in art. This article will show how and why women are depicted in an objectified manner in the traditional art canon and how feminist artists react against this.

Keywords: Feminist, Women, Art, Male gaze, Objectification

Introduction

Feminist philosophy of art is a way of understanding art through the lens of feminism. Feminist philosophers and art critics draw our attention to the fact that women's oppression is common in the traditional art canon that is androcentric in nature. Hence, the feminist philosophy of art emerged as a reaction against the androcentric system of art that prevents women from exercising artistic activity on the one hand and enhances women's objectification in art on the other. A poster exhibited by The Guerilla Girls in 1989 depicted a nude reclining figure of a woman with a gorilla head. It confronted the spectators' gaze instead of seducing them. On the poster, it says: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" along with a fact that says, "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." This poster explains the nature and the aim of feminist art, which shows the women's conditions in art on the one hand and feminists' reaction against male domination in art on the other. In this article, I will examine

how the feminist philosophy of art addresses women's suppression in the traditional art canon. For this purpose, I will show how women are projected in the dominant art canon, causing them to devalue women and triggering the differences between men and women in art. Finally, we will see, through an example of feminist art, how feminist artists take a stride forward toward women's empowerment and challenge the male attitudes towards women.

Feminist (Philosophy of) Art

Feminism is a political ideology that originated as an effect of women's oppression in a patriarchal system. To define feminism properly is difficult, but in general, feminism is "... the belief in social, economic and political equality of sexes..." (Burkett & Brunell, 2023). The sexual or biological differences between men and women have been highlighted as the essence of gender differences causing subordination of women. Hence, the fundamental aim of feminism is to establish equality between the sexes by eradicating gender biases and ending women's suppression.

Art is an expressive activity that not only reflects the artist's ideas, beliefs, attitudes, etc., but it also exhibits the socio-political life of people. Feminist aesthetics or feminist philosophy of art is an understanding of aesthetic experience through the lens of feminist standpoints. In the words of A. W. Eaton, the feminist philosophy of art is "The category unites a variety of quite different approaches to explaining art and aesthetic experience around the common goal of ending women's subordination in the arts and discourses about the arts" ("Feminist Philosophy of Art," p. 873). Feminist art is not the kind of art essentially created by female artists. Instead, it is a conceptual art that focuses on the story behind a subject matter or what is being perceived. It addresses the questions linked with women's agency. Feminism starts by assuming women's oppression in a patriarchal system. Likewise, Mary Devereaux

notes that feminist aesthetics "... starts from the assumption that the historical domain of art and the aesthetic is itself patriarchal" ("Feminist Aesthetics," p. 648), where women as an artist if not as a subject of art was dominated and suppressed. Thus, feminists analyzed art in terms of feminist interests and examine the artists' attitudes towards women and women's position in androcentric societies.

Situatedness

Feminist aesthetics presupposed women's situatedness as a point of departure. 'Situatedness,' according to Eaton, is a concept of one's social situation or location. People's beliefs, experiences, and values reflect situatedness. This situatedness is unavoidable and not always harmful; it helps us perceive the world from our social position. It becomes harmful only when it causes the category of 'Other' that discriminates an individual or a group of people differently from other groups of people. Situatedness has many dimensions, but the situatedness based on gender leads to gender differences, which is the most dangerous and concerning subject of feminist philosophy. This situatedness, or rather 'systematically situated in a hierarchically structured world¹,' impacts everything, including art. Now, we will examine how it affects aesthetics or art practices.

Women's Projection in the Art Canon

Sex and gender differences are the noticeable results of women's situatedness that profoundly influence art practices. In her *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir helps women to see their personal frustrations through the general condition of women. She argues that it is the male activity that creates values, and in this value system, a woman is subdued

¹Eaton believes that sex and gender are hierarchical modes of one's social position. Sex and gender determine the order of the hierarchically structured world where men are privileged just because they are men and women are disadvantaged just because they are women.

and considered to be important not for what she is or what she experiences but for what she represents. They are portrayed "... as weak, inert, and vulnerable; in domestic or nurturing roles; identified with nature; and sexually available for men's needs" (Eaton, p. 877). From the 1960s onward, artists, critics, and art historians started noticing women's marginalization in the art canon. The androcentric perspectives are reflected in the dominant art canon where women are being gazed at by the male, and classical arts, especially the visual arts, are evidence of these, where female nudity was a central theme of art that portrayed female bodies as desirable objects for the eyes of men. Analyzing the idea of the male gaze will help us understand how women objectification has taken place in art.

The Male Gaze

Gender differences impinged on the male attitudes towards women have determined women's appearances in art. In art, women are projected as being looked at as passive objects, whereas men are seen as active-looking agents. According to art historian John Berger, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (*Ways of Seeing*, p. 47). Laura Mulvey's concept of 'the male gaze' is relevant to the understanding of women's position in art. Eaton puts this idea of 'the male gaze' in the following way:

'The male gaze' refers to the androcentric attitude of an image; that is, its depiction of the world, and in particular of women, in terms of male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes, or values. More specifically, 'the male gaze' usually refers to the sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its feminine subject matter, presenting her as a primarily passive object for heterosexual-male erotic gratification. (p. 878).

The term "male gaze" refers to the heterosexual male gaze that objectifies

women in the end by viewing them through the lens of masculine desires. A woman, as subjected to the male gaze, is represented in art as a desirable object that satisfies male desires. Men are looking at women through the male eyes. This kind of looking is not essentially seeing women how they are; instead, it is a way of seeing them through their biased perspectives (Eaton). In our society, men and women are affected by this male gaze; not only do men see women in an objectified manner, but women also see themselves through this established male gaze. Even the spectators of a work of art identified themselves with either the male artist or male characters.

Women's nudity is depicted in art as a direct consequence of masculine gaze. When a lady is shown as naked in art, it's because the artist finds pleasure in seeing the subject in such a state. Furthermore, the artist provides the same enjoyment to the audience. In some cases, the artist portrays his subject (a woman) in such a manner that the subject herself is aware of her being looked-at-ness and joins the perceiver to look at her objectification. In this regard, Berger's interpretation of 'Susannah and the Elders'² is worth mentioning. Berger says,

She is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her.

... this is the theme of the picture. We join the Elders to spy on Susannah taking her bath. She looks back at us looking at her.

In another version of the subject ... Susannah is looking at herself in a mirror. Thus she joins the spectators of herself.
(p. 50)

²Here, the author refers to Tintoretto's versions of 'Susannah and the Elders' created between 1550 and 1560.

In the context of the film, the spectators' gaze is identified with the male characters, and the spectators get pleasure as the male hero gets pleasure from the depiction of women as desirable objects. Even female consumers either relate to the masculine protagonist or find masochistic thrill in the objectification of women (Devereaux). Thus, men are the bearer of the look, and women are looked at. The male gaze determines most relations between men and women and between women and themselves.

The Absence of Women Artists and Women's Art

Women's objectification in androcentric art is not the only byproduct of women's situatedness. This situatedness also triggers the absence of women artists and women's art in the art canon. Because of sex or gender inequality, women were treated as weak, unintelligent, incapable of creating art or high art, and allowed to serve the male's interests and other domestic or household stuff. Thus, either women were not allowed to practice art, or they were allowed to practice needlework, quilts, and pottery, which were regarded as less valuable art or decorative art that was not cognitively engaging (Eaton et al.).

Explaining the Canon Problem

We have seen that the traditional art canon reflects androcentric perspectives where women are undignifiedly depicted in art. This art canon also prohibited women from creating art on the one hand and disregarded and devalued women's art on the other. Now the question is, how do gender or sex differences shape our understanding of art canon? In this regard, Eaton's two explanations, the humanistic approach and the gynocentric approach, are worth mentioning, that help us detect the causes of the canon problem in question. Let us see how Eaton explains the canon problem.

Humanistic Approach

Eaton describes what makes the differences between male and female artists, and the lack of female artists in the art canon, is the patriarchal system that create our attitudes towards producing and appreciating art. In an androcentric society, most artists are men, and men predominantly set the aesthetic tastes. Consequently, art shares heterosexual male beliefs, interests, and values. In this circumstance, women artists and women's art are generally considered inferior. In some cases, there was prejudice regarding the things created by women because of their association with household uses. Humanist feminists deal with the differences in artistic practice by rejecting the conventional belief that the lack of women's involvement in artistic practice is normal. They argue that it is not the women's natural or sexual differences to men but rather the socio-cultural or gender differences determine the differences in the production of art. In response to the dominant view, humanist feminists claim that female artists have the same productivity, talent, and capacity to create art as the male artists. So, the 'lack' is not the lack of women's artistic capacity but "what has been imposed on women through oppressive social conditions or prejudice" (*Feminist Aesthetics*, Ecker, p. 16) causes the failure to produce great art by women.

Humanist feminists explicitly show that, in order to create real artistic products, only talent is not enough, but the artists need to access socially mediated material conditions (Devereaux). In her *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes how women's socio-economic barriers prevent women from exercising art practices. According to Woolf, in order to become a successful writer, a woman needs enough space to exercise her creative activities. A woman needs sufficient money to support herself. Women's social, material, and financial disadvantages prevent them from cultivating artistic qualities and skills in themselves. Nochlin, in her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" argues that, in

the nineteenth century, women were not allowed to attend life-drawing classes, including learning to paint nude, which caused women's incapability to draw human figures, which was the dominant theme at that time. Thus, feminist view claims that lacking various kinds of advantages, including socio-economic and material advantages, hindered women from becoming great artists.

Gynocentric Approach

According to Eaton, gynocentrism is another feminist approach that aims to delineate the differences between men and women in art in terms of sexual differences. Gynocentrism maintains that the human body, along with its experiences, is the fundamental subject matter of art, and the production and appreciation of art are possible to experience through the body. Hence, differences in sex creates significant differences in artistic activity, or "...at least some of such differences are the manifestations of particularly sexed forms of bodily experience of artistic sensibility" (Eaton, p. 881). According to gynocentrism, women's art is valuable in its own terms and different from men's art since it is inspired by and tries to capture distinctive feminine sensibility and imagination. Appreciating women's experiences about the world paves the way for evaluating or appreciating women's artistic creations. So, we need separate criteria that exclusively applies to women's unique creative expression, and based on that, we should value women's art because the standards and values that apply to men's work will not apply to women's work.

Rhythm 0: A Feminist Art

It is time to see how feminist art incorporates women's questions against patriarchy. For this purpose, I have selected a performance art, *Rhythm 0* (1974) by Marina Abramović, that attests to what we have discussed above. This art form simultaneously forces the audience to reveal its barbaric nature and establishes women's agency. Let us see first what

Rhythm 0 was.

Rhythm 0 was a performance art that offered an experience of how far the audience could go if the artist did nothing. The artist was left to the stage and to the audience for six hours. The artist stood motionless, and there were 72 objects on the table, such as a rose, perfume, a glass of water, grapes, wine, scissors, nails, a metal bar, etc., and finally, a pistol with one bullet. Along with these, an instruction from the artist, "I am an object. You can do whatever you want to do with me, and I'll take all responsibilities for six hours" (Abramović, 2016). The act began smoothly. The audience gave a rose to the artist, looked at her, and kissed her. Someone gave her a glass of water to drink. Gradually, the audience became wild. One cut the artist's neck and drank drops of blood from there. They may have raped her, but because of the presence of galleries or volunteers and in the presence of the public and their wives, they could not. Instead, they put her on the table and put a knife between her legs. A person gave a pistol to her hand as if she herself was the target, and the galleries again interfered and saved her. They cut her clothes with scissors, pierced her with the rose thorns. After six hours, when the performance was over and she started moving, the audience ran away because she had been a puppet for them for the while, and now they had no courage to confront her as a person.

This art displays kind of a brief history of women's position in the androcentric patriarchal societies which is usually overlooked by the unreflecting eye. But at the same time, it shows how a woman becomes an artist and establishes herself as a woman with an agency. An objection may be raised that, in *Rhythm 0*, it is the artist's instruction that exhibits herself as an object, and consequently, she becomes a puppet for the audience. How does it differ from all other typical arts that objectify women? The response would be a positive one because the difference is clearly visible. In this art, the artist wants to push the limits of the body

and explore the possibilities of the mind. The instruction, though it directs the audience to see her (the artist) as an object, also implies that the artist herself is the controller of her body, and she has the choice to use her body to create art, and she is solely responsible for her actions. It proves that she is a has a free soul. And finally, after the end of the performance, when she gets back her activity and starts moving, the audience cannot confront her as a person. This incident challenges society for upholding 'male attitudes' towards female bodies that work as obstructions in seeing women as dignified human beings.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how feminist aesthetics confront traditional art theories and criticizes the values upheld by traditional art theories. To bring a change to women's conditions in art and their status as artists, feminists began explaining the philosophy of art in terms of feminist concerns. We have seen sex and gender differences pave the way for the differences between men and women in art. Hence, feminist philosophers of art believe that women's socio-economic freedom, abolishment of gender differences, and appreciation and encouragement of women's experiences can change the scenario and improve women's condition and status in art. Feminism encourages women to become empowered. Which is a way to be free from the patriarchy. An empowered woman, as Beauvoir defines, is one who

... wants to be active, a taker, and refuses passivity man means to impose on her... she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking disparage them, she declares herself their equal. (*The Second Sex*, pp. 674-675)

Thus, according to feminism, empowered or active women can reduce gender differences in artistic practices. While creating art, an empowered

woman tries to change the trajectory of women as an artist and as a subject of art. *Rhythm 0* is an example of this. By creating feminist art, women are taking control of their bodies and minds in their hands and setting the values for women and women's art.

In conclusion, we may say that if more arts will be produced that portray women as individuals with their own inimitability, with their own creative agency, and the more support is extended to women artists, the society will be compelled to adapt and learn to value women as individuals and as a result of this feminist movement real education can be imparted that will raise an awareness of uniqueness of women. It will help to embrace women art and women artists.

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