

Cruel optimism: contemporary femininity and its desperate need for evaluation.

Introduction

In "Notes on the Perfect," Angela McRobbie examines the relationship between capitalism and modern feminism from a critical perspective, focusing on how consumer culture and the media shape and perpetuate the idea of the "perfect" woman. This ideal perpetuates a cycle in which women are controlled and exploited, and it is closely aligned with the goals of capitalism.

According to McRobbie, by encouraging competitive individualism, this alignment directs feminist energy away from collective endeavors and toward individual achievement. This dynamic creates the appearance of female empowerment while maintaining male dominance. By forcing women to exercise their independence, it also contributes to the maintenance of the existing power structures.

Capitalism

McRobbie delves into the complex relationship between modern feminism and capitalism, especially as seen through an understanding of the idealized "perfect" woman. This ideal is reinforced by the media and popular culture, and it closely corresponds with the objectives of capitalism, trapping women in a cycle of exploitation. The "insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" were two areas where capitalism required new techniques as it developed (Fausto-Sterling 2020:261). While Sterling's work focused on the standardization of male bodies, McRobbie contends that this ideal now acts as an outline of expectation, pushing young women to pursue perfection as a means of self-definition. This links feminism to individualism and competition, two essential elements of neoliberalism.

This alignment is extremely beneficial to capitalism. Consumption is fueled by the pressure to attain perfection, especially in the beauty industry where women are constantly targeted by social media and advertisements to purchase products that are meant to improve their appearance and way of life. The longing for the ideal life and body turns into a self-control mechanism that quietly upholds male dominance while creating the appearance of female empowerment. This dynamic is demonstrated by the way feminism is reconciled with the competitive individualist ethos, which implies that consumption and personal effort are the means to success and perfection.

This cycle is made worse by social media, which gives the constant promotion of the idealized ideal woman a platform. Women are pushed to carefully curate their lives and bodies in an attempt to get approval from others through likes and comments. Because of this increased visibility, there is a new kind of social control where one's value is determined by the approval of others. According to Fausto-Sterling, "men and women have their needs permanently redirected to fit the needs of the market, in their obsessive pursuit of sexuality, the medium through which they seek to define their personalities and to be conscious of themselves" (Fausto-Sterling 2020:64). Consumption

creates a false sense of control and the promise of a perfect life, leading to a type of "cruel optimism" in which pursuing happiness and perfection spirals out of control and becomes a never-ending, destructive cycle.

Unprecedented access to "consumer culture, symbolized by the booming fashion sector and brands like H&M, and provided some nominal degree of equal participation in civil society" (McRobbie 2015:8) was made possible by women's entry into the labor market and ability to support themselves. But this change also linked their identities and social standing to materialism. As women gained economic independence, there was also an increased expectation placed on them to make lifestyle and appearance investments, which served to further reinforce the idea that social success and personal worth were derived from consumption.

Mental Health

Within the context of modern feminism, McRobbie delves deeply into the psychological struggles that women encounter, paying particular attention to the idea of the "perfect" woman. Women become competitive with themselves as a result of this idea, trying to live up to a very idealized and divided definition of femininity. Women are subjected to a long list of social expectations from an early age, which negatively affects how they view themselves and how they compare to other people. "A mechanism unleashing new waves of self-harm" (McRobbie 2015:4). The quest of perfection creates a harmful atmosphere in which one's value is continuously assessed in relation to an unreachable standard. Young women constantly seek validation through carefully curated online personas on social media and digital technology, which has led to the rise of "mean girls" culture.

Today's protests against this culture draw attention to how harmful these expectations are. Modern feminist movements fight against the idea of a single ideal image and support a variety of depictions of womanhood in an effort to undermine these unattainable ideals. But sometimes, good intentions can backfire as well. For example, Victoria's Secret made an effort to redefine its image by bringing in a wider variety of models and advocating for inclusivity and body positivity. Despite these initiatives, women are still pushed to meet certain aesthetic requirements in order to be deemed worthy or beautiful, and the underlying commercial motivations frequently support this self-competitive nature (Ellen 2023).

This argument affects all facets of life, including relationships with family, work success, and motherhood, in addition to physical appearance. The paradox that results from the pressure to "have it all" is that women are pushed to achieve in fields that have historically been dominated by men while still leading perfect home lives. The objectives of collective feminism are undermined by this dual expectation, which results in an ongoing state of self-surveillance and internalized competition. Results being the "consequences for girls and young women of this heightened visibility" (McRobbie 2015:6). Gerodetti states that women "become symbolic of neoliberal ideology where individuality, personal responsibility and hard work breed success (Gerodetti

2017:360)” serving to bolster a narrative of meritocracy that masked more fundamental systemic problems.

Despite advances in feminist thought and political participation, women are still held to strict and often repressive standards of perfection, according to McRobbie's article, which explores the persistent societal expectations and competitive pressures faced by women in modern neoliberal times. In addition to being a personal goal, women are under pressure from society to attain this perfection, especially in places of employment.

Political

McRobbie addresses the political dynamic of women being seen as competitors with men, which is made worse by the idea of "the perfect." This ideal of perfection puts women in a vicious cycle of control and rivalry—not just with men but frequently, and more brutally, with other women. It is expected by society that women can only hold positions of authority if they live up to these frequently unachievable standards of perfection that are ingrained in rigid gender norms. Though it is generally understood to be either “a historical shift within feminism, a backlash against feminism, or an epistemological break within the movement, there is little agreement regarding the nebulous concept of post-feminism” (Gerodetti 2017:354).

A key setting where these dynamics are evident is the corporate environment. Although contemporary workplaces make the claim to support diversity and equality, they frequently support subtle forms of discrimination as well as unfair expectations. It is expected of women to uphold traditional feminine ideals and perform exceptionally well in their roles. This can be seen in the policies and procedures of many organizations, which, under their progressive exteriors, remain committed to meritocratic principles that prioritize stereotypically masculine traits while ignoring the particular difficulties faced by women. According to Fausto-Sterling, “women at both ends of the economic spectrum had new appetite for political organization” (Fausto-Sterling 2020:156) but there are still substantial barriers that women must overcome in the corporate world. Policies aimed at promoting diversity or work-life balance, for example, may unintentionally perpetuate gender stereotypes. Women may face greater pressure to uphold a particular body image, dress code, or work ethic that is consistent with corporate culture. This pressure can result in elevated levels of stress and self-surveillance. According to McRobbie, these demands frequently represent a deeper societal tendency to control and regulate women's bodies and behaviors in order to uphold preexisting power structures.

An assessment of the "equal" workplace of today reveals a gap between the ideal of gender equality and women's actual experiences. Even though feminist movements have made great progress against overt discrimination, inequality still exists because of the subtle, every day enforcement of competition and perfection. Not only do women compete with men for positions of authority, but they also face constant strain to live up to an unattainable ideal of perfection. This conflict shows what McRobbie refers to as the “biopolitical” patriarchal power, in which radical

social movements, such as feminism, collide and adapt their positions in response to one another's claims (McRobbie 2012:47). Which is a hope in changing this consequence of contemporary feminism.

McRobbie (2015) further highlights the need of laws that deal with these disparities by identifying and eliminating the widespread and invisible norms that women must adhere to succeed both personally and professionally.

Male Privilege and involvement

Male privilege is a complex topic with several aspects. McRobbie argues that even as feminism has advanced, male privilege is preserved in part because of the internal rivalry that women are encouraged to have. This phenomenon, which is frequently made worse by neoliberal values, pushes women to race against one another in an attempt to achieve an unachievable standard of perfection.

Because competitive femininity undermines female solidarity and upholds traditional gender roles, it poses a serious obstacle to true female empowerment. Women are often judged on how well they manage their careers, families, and personal appearance, which puts them in a constant state of self-competition and self-surveillance as they strive for perfection. By keeping women focused on self-improvement rather than group action, internalized competition not only deflects attention away from the threat of gender-based power structures already in place, but it also strengthens them.

Beasley states, "feminist theorizing now appears to have significantly challenged the theoretical agenda which is dominant in Masculinity scholarship" (Beasley 2013:119) and that this challenge "involves a challenge to the conception that Masculinity Studies has of itself, a conception which includes an understanding of its socio-political commitments and alliances" (Beasley 2013:119). Under the pretense of progress and modernity, this dynamic not only impedes real empowerment but also brings back more traditional forms of female culture. This demonstrates how male reactions to feminism, which are frequently marked by guilt, lead to "political inertia rather than potential transformation" (Whelehan 2022:181).

Conclusion

The examination of modern feminism by Angela McRobbie in "Notes on the Perfect" highlights its complexity. Male privilege and traditional gender roles are upheld by the consumer culture's demand of the "perfect" woman. Women's internal rivalry serves to maintain systemic inequality by drawing attention away from broader feminist objectives. A move from individual perfection to group movement and solidarity is necessary to confront these deeply embedded systems. Feminism can better address the disparities that still prevent women from experiencing true empowerment by identifying and eliminating these ingrained norms.

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