

UNDERSTANDING SUSAN BORDO AND HER WORK; UNBEARABLE WEIGHT :FEMINISM, WESTERN CULTURE, BODY

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Abstract

Throughout history of thought, there have been many views about the women, their status in society, their struggle with patriarchy, and inequality applied to them in all areas. There are different ways of oppression on women, such as confinement to home, inequality in wages between both sexes. However, few scholars have written and declared their own views about how the patriarchal world and companies form women as they wish. Susan Bordo is one of the most outstanding and distinguished feminist writers in the world who focuses on how patriarchal capitalist understanding works on women's body in terms of weight and weakness. According to Susan Bordo, male dominated capital world decides on women about what to wear and what to eat and women try to lose weight to be in the form men wish. State of starving all the time leads to an illness called anorexia. The writer bases her views on the thoughts of literary critic and thinker, Foucault. The objective of this article is to help the readers understand Susan Bordo's views and analyse her impressive work; Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body and make her known in academic world.

Key Words: Women, Susan Bordo, Diet, Patriarchy

I. Introduction

Throughout the history of Ideas, patriarchal societies have looked down on women and constructed new gender roles on them. They used different instruments to suppress and control women. Today, in a post-modern age, the techniques and instruments of patriarchy have changed to form an 'ideal' woman. For instance, male-dominated capital industry decides what to eat and what to wear. In particular, Female body is what they spend much time and money on. However, women are not aware of the fact that they are oppressed through the instruments of patriarchal capitalism, such as diet, make up and fashion. There have been few men and women thinkers and writers who express their ideas on that issue, except for Susan Bordo, a prominent Professor of Gender and Women's Studies in the Humanities at the University of Kentucky. She is not only a Professor but also a scholar in Gender analysis with her impressive Works, such as Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J., The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private, The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture, and Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, As a modern and intellectual woman of the 21 th century, Susan Bordo enlightens the people by expressing her views on the new kinds of suppression instruments on women in her precious work, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body.

II. Patriarchy and Female Body

According to her, female body is culturally constructed. In post modern period, one of the aims of dominant power is to suppress women through media to be in the shape that men desire. A thin body is expected and valued by the societies in today's world. So, to be valuable in the eyes of men, most women tended to become thinner by experiencing great hungers for a long time. Bordo argues that these women experience hunger as an alien invader, marching to the tune of its own seemingly arbitrary whims, disconnected from any normal self regulating mechanisms. Male dominated capital understanding brainwashes women in terms of focusing on the shape of body and succeeds to make them accept the view that the ideal body passes from thinness. This indirect oppression comes to such an unbearable extent that some women who don't have 'the ideal body' become clinical cases. Bordo remarks and quotes the statements of the women who suffer from Anorexia;

"While the body is experienced as alien and outside, the soul or will is described as being trapped or confined in this alien "jail" as one woman describes it. I feel caught in my body," "I am a prisoner in my body". The theme is repeated again and again. A typical fantasy, evocative of Plato, imagines total liberation from the bodily prison: "I wish I could get out of my body entirely and fly!" "Please dear God, help me... I want to get out of my body, I want to get out! Ellen West, astute as always, sees a central meaning of her self-starvation in this "ideal of being thin, of being without a body." (Bordo 1959:147)

Anorexia is a modern woman illness which patriarchal capitalism created by imposing on women about what to wear and eat and most women fell into this trap consciously or unconsciously in order to satisfy their feelings of admiration by men. Margaret McLaren remarks that 'Bordo examines the way that the cultural imperatives of femininity get expressed through women's fixation on dieting and slenderness. She identifies two levels at which cultural practices exert power over bodies: (1) the body as the text of culture and (2) the body as the practical locus of social control. The body as the text of culture refers to the ways that our lived bodily experience is affected by the changes in social practices and cultural categories, subsequently changing our bodies themselves.' (McLaren 2002: 95)

Bordo attracts her readers' attention to the point that women go on a diet because of cultural imposition of the male dominated society. She specifies that being thin is not the wish of women. In fact, it is the order of patriarchal capital thinking. In other words, it is "the power which operates on the body to produce the soul, and the concepts of psyche, subjectivity, personality, and consciousness" (McLaren 2002: 84) as Foucault emphasizes in Discipline and Punish. In that respect, Bordo's views on docile bodies are based on Foucault's ideas on the relation between power and body. Power uses various techniques to control

bodies and create submissive bodies. Foucault sees the body as “subjected, used, transformed, and improved.” The bodies are operated on through media and discourses. Foucault's ideas help Susan Bordo to contemplate on the cultural construction of female body.

In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, she tries to make the people and women, in particular, be familiarized with the eating disorders which results from patriarchal capital power in the world. She puts forward her postmodern feminist interpretations on how the female body is constructed culturally in the Western Society by supporting her views with philosophical background. Throughout the human history, women has been defined with their bodies. According to her, female is regarded as ‘alien, submissive, instinctual, passive and false self in which the true self- the active and manly mind/ soul is confined.’ (Bordo 1993) She argues that culture forms the femininity according to its rules. Culture’s repression on women is exerted through women’s body, style of dressing. In Chapter 5. *The body and the Reproduction of Femininity*, she remarks;

“ The body-What we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body-is a medium of culture. The body, as an anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture... The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines rules, and practices, culture is ‘made body’.” (Bordo 2001:2362)

Dominant power in the world makes use of ‘organization and regulation of time, space and movements of daily lives’¹ (Bordo 2001 2363) to form the female bodies, which can be called as gender oppression. Women go on a diet, follow wear fashion and make up to feel more feminine. However,’ through these disciplines, central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women –we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripally focused on self modification.’ (Bordo 2001:2363)

Women’s going on a diet, making up and fashionable dressing make them feel insufficient and feeling of ‘never being good enough’ (Bordo 2001: 2363) are what patriarchal capital system desires to see. Apparently, women seem to feel good for they look gorgeous and charming. However, ‘at the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead them to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death.’ (Bordo 2001: 2363) Moreover, they come down with illnesses called, hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa.

III. Conclusion

In post modern era, as everything in people's lives have changed, the instruments of oppression on women have also altered. As Susan Bordo stresses in her work, oppression goes on by imposing diet, make up and clothes for female body. The principle of patriarchal societies is to make women docile and be subjected to male domination. Moreover, dominant ideology designs female body according to their own wishes. Bordo also sheds light upon the illnesses women catch because of social control and imposition of male dominated global industries.

Reference

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