

A history of ideas

Since the past few months, everything in our lives has been redefined. Nothing is as it was and nothing will ever be as it was even when all this is over. I am of course referring to the pandemic that has completely changed the course of the 21st century. If you consider the impact of this tiny virus and how it has affected the lives of millions of people within mere months, it seems to make everything insignificant. The average lifespan of a human being is considered to be 79 years. In comparison to the lifespan of the earth-4.5 billion year-we are merely a speck of dust in a vast desert. Yet we spend our entire life questioning our existence and trying to find a purpose for ourselves, a purpose that justifies the time we have spent on the earth. What if the purpose is that we are just biding time for the earth itself?

That's a debate for another time. However, in this journey that men and women make throughout their lives, one is considered to be often struggling for the wrong outcome. To put it simply, it is women who are often trying to find a purpose in a place that has been mentally constructed by a patriarchal society. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir raises concern that there are many groups in society that face oppression. That oppression creates some sort of hindrance for that group in their way to achieving Freedom; as that is the fundamental destiny of humanity. It is not necessary that this oppression is physical oppression. That oppression may be mental, emotional, economical, sociological, cultural or in any other form that can exist.

This oppression is partially highlighted in Jean Kilbourne famous series called *Killing Us Softly*. She brings to light the countless ways in which women have been objectified in the media. In the most recent addition to the series, (*Killing Us Softly 4*) she says "We almost never see a photograph of a woman considered beautiful that hasn't been photoshopped." She explains how the globalization of the media, specifically in America (as a leading producer of content) has caused beauty standards all over the world to appear in the form of a tall, white, skinny and blue eyed women, regardless of the ethnicity of the woman viewing this.

This concept can also be understood through Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* in which he explains how we, as consumers long for commodities because we are obsessed by the appearance of them, not their purpose in our life. He says this is done by how the spectacle *shows* us "a world that cannot be grasped" and creates a sense of alienation and estrangement for us, making us want more of it, thus thriving in that alienation. In his text he says that the spectacle is the "opposite of dialogue" and the alienation of spectator arises from the unconscious mind that is overpowered by the spectacle that exists everywhere around him and hinders the contemplation of the spectator.

The unconscious mind can also be understood through Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in its earliest usage as something that is *not known*, or *not knowable* however, in a more modern context it is explained as something that one is *not aware* of, driven from the opposite of what the word *Conscious* means.

But returning back to our argument of how women are portrayed in the society, one cannot even begin to imagine the kind of ways this impacts the minds of young women who are

growing up watching all of this. For instance, if we take Guy Debord's example in a current context, we can take it to mean how we are always *trying to appear 'cool'* to our peers on social media. This has given rise to hashtags like #ForTheGram which entails that an activity was conducted solely for the purpose of displaying it to the audience on your Instagram.

Though, to look at the positive side of things, we have inspiring women like Paula Scher as well, the first female principal at Pentagram, who, in *Abstract: The Art of Design*, explains how she has spent her entire life struggling as a woman to work hard and make an individual name for herself. This can be understood better with the context of her husband Seymour Chwast who is also considered to be one of the greatest names in the history of graphic design and the fact that she probably would not want to live in his shadow.

Yet... the significance of a woman's (or any person for that matter) life can be narrowed down to that of Joyce Carol Vincent. As explained in BBC's *How Can I Know Anything at All* podcast series, Joyce Vincent was a woman discovered in her apartment at age 38, almost three years after dying, her body decomposed to the extent that it was identified only after a DNA test, with no apparent reason for being forgotten. One can only wonder how she went unfound for such long period of time, how isolated and alienated she possibly was for that to happen. It is important to note, that once she was discovered, she was not remembered for the way she died, instead she was remembered by her friends and family for all that she accomplished in her life. But, at the same time, she is known widely as the woman who was found 3 years after dying. So how does the world remember her?

This paradox is thoroughly discussed by Roland Barthes, in his essay *Death of the author* published in *Image, Music, Text*. In this case however, Joyce had entered her literal death. The contradiction for women is often described through the theory of the Self and the Other. To somewhat define these terms, Self is a reference by an individual to the same individual person and Other is used to refer to a person or thing that is different from one that is already known about. The Other is considered as part of the Self, an alter ego.

The concept was first introduced by Friedrich Hegel and was later built upon by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir believes that Man has occupied the role of the Self, the free being, and he sees the Woman as the Object, as a sexual partner, but not as an independent entity. And since it is fundamentally unnatural to live in the role of the Object, she tries to find the middle ground by becoming the Other and surrendering her claims to freedom. Thus she is never able to find her transcendence or transformation.

This transformation can also be explained through the work of Carl Jung who explains the process of '*Individuation*' in his translated collection *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. For Jung, '*individuation*' occurs as a transformation when the Self meets the Ego. It occurs because the conscious mind strives to meet the unconscious mind. And so, in a way, it is when *real* meets the *imaginary*.

Reality and imagination have a dialectical relationship. They exist as binary oppositions. But one of the ways in which they meet are dreams. Dreams are considered to occur when the unconscious mind strives to communicate with the conscious mind. According Philippa Perry, upon being interviewed by Cath Pound in *What do our dreams mean?*, in dreams we try to make sense of those feelings that otherwise do not manifest and are triggered by emotion. Having a lot of emotions to process will cause you to dream more vividly.

In *Dream Notes*, Theodor Adorno explains the interconnectedness of dreams by saying that they form a continuum and exist in a unified world. He also believes that "the individual experiences his own death as a cosmic catastrophe" in dreams. This is explained through his

repeated notes of seeing himself dying or having near death experiences. This brings to mind the local myth, which may or may not be true; but it is believed that seeing someone die in your dream means that they would live a long life, or elsewhere it is interpreted as a part of their former self dying so that they can move onto the next good thing in their life. Perhaps this dream-death is what one needs to experience in order to achieve transformation or transcendence in life and perhaps a collective dream-death is what can finally free us all as individuals.

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