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Sexual Pleasure through a Male Lens: How Women's Pleasure has been Overlooked through the Years.

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‘Sexual Autonomy’ refers to an individual’s sexual preferences and choices regarding their sexual activity. It is the freedom of an individual to decide when, how, and with whom they wish to engage in sexual activities. It is also the right to say ‘No,’ set boundaries and refuse sexual advances that form a part of sexual autonomy. Sexual autonomy in a more detailed understanding can also be inferred as an individual’s right to derive pleasure and satisfaction from the sexual activities that they engage in. It is deeply linked to bodily autonomy, personal agency and sexual health of an individual.

‘Right to sexual pleasure’ forms an integral part of sexual autonomy of an individual. Through the years there have been many articles, papers and books on how sexual pleasure can be derived and how it is important for the mental and overall well-being of an individual. But the complete discourse around sexual pleasure and autonomy has been drawn by men with much of literature on this topic being written by men. Historically, women’s sexuality and their sexual preferences have been ignored or controlled by men. We can link this to the early religious and philosophical texts, which have often portrayed women’s sexual autonomy as dangerous and undesirable, associating it with a moral decay of the society’s ideologies.

Male Gaze: -

Male gaze is a concept which has been written down in many papers and articles, first introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, where she talks about how women are most of the time portrayed in movies, media and art, that is through the lens of what men desire. This phenomena over the time has been accepted as something extending far beyond film, shaping the very societal norms throughout the modern times. Men in this manner have controlled the narrative of the sexual pleasure, framing it through and out from the male perspectives, highlighting control, domination, and violence over mutual love and equality.

Male Gaze has significantly contributed to erasure of women’s authority over their pleasure.

Women’s sexuality has been significantly influenced by culture and religion in India. For years Religion and Culture have supported the patriarchal idea of Men’s control over women agency and their bodily autonomy. In most of the religions sex for women is seen as a duty that they need to perform in order to procreate. After marriage, a woman’s body is seen as their husband’s property and a sense of submissiveness is expected from them. These concepts have been reinforced through texts such as Manusmriti, and concepts such as Sati and stridharma. In recent times, there has been significant efforts by modern feminist writers to challenge and reshape the narrative around women’s sexual pleasure and autonomy. There have been significant efforts to reshape and reclaim the narrative around women’s sexuality by critiquing the traditional feminist thought process and challenging the portrayal of women in film media including pornography.

In the pornography industry, women are seen as an object and male fantasies are perpetuated. This has been argued by authors such as Drucilla Cornell in her works. Women's role in these films are often shown as that of submission and objectification. However, Cornell also argues against the feminist demand of banning pornography. Instead, she argues for a women centric approach and establishment of female agency and mutual respect in the industry. "How can a feminist approach to pornography that challenges rather than replicates gender stereotypes be developed? How can we both recognise the nitty-gritty reality of the industry and the suffering it can impose upon its workers at the same time that we affirm the need for women to freely expose their own sexuality? ... I advocate an alliance with two forms of representational politics currently being undertaken by women pornographers and porn workers that are challenging the terms of production in the mainstream heterosexual porn industry"(Cornell 149) This shows her support for reimagining of pornography, challenging the patriarchal narrative and promoting women autonomy in the process.

Writers like MacKinnon argued that male dominance is intertwined with sexuality. "Male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not men alone, sexualise hierarchy; gender is one. As much a sexual theory of gender as a gendered theory of sex, this is the theory of sexuality that has grown out of consciousness raising in the women's movement." (MacKinnon 316) In most patriarchal societies gender hierarchy is structured in a way that not only shows gender inequality but also promotes male dominance and sex are not just biological realities but are deeply influenced by the eroticisation of power—where men are dominant and women are subordinate.

To further argue, women's sexual autonomy is more than just a fight against dominance and violence, it's about reclaiming a sense of empowerment through reclaiming pleasure. "When pleasure occupies a smaller and smaller public space and a more guilty private space, individuals do not become empowered; they are merely cut off from the source of their own strength and energy."(Vance 441) This was argued by writer Carole Vance. She further argued that feminism to be truly empowering must encourage discussions regarding women's agency through sexual autonomy. The focus of the feminist argument has been on dangers that women face but it should extend to their pleasure as well. This will help in empowering women and giving them a sense of courage to face the dangers and violence that they face.

There are mainly two types of feminist views in modern times – Protectionist, who focus on shielding women against male violence and aggression. And on the other hand, there is the Expansionist view that has argued for grant of sexual autonomy to women since the 20th century. They have argued that urbanisation, wage labor, access to contraception, and the right to abortion would allow women greater independence and the freedom to explore sexual autonomy beyond the patriarchal traditional framework of marriage and reproduction, helping them gain agency over their body. This view is also reflected in Vance's paper named Pleasure and Danger: Toward a politics of sexuality - "Others, more often in the twentieth century than the nineteenth, have been expansionist and exploratory, believing that women could venture to be sexual in more visible and daring ways, especially as material changes which favoured women's autonomy in general (wage labor, urbanisation, contraception, and abortion) also supported sexual autonomy." (Vance 2) It can be clearly understood from the excerpt that expansionist view was vital for pushing the boundaries of women's sexual rights and exploring their capacity for pleasure.

In my opinion, women's pleasure has been systematically overlooked and the narrative around sexual pleasure has been set around men by the patriarchal society. Women's sexuality has been seen as source of reproduction and gratification over the years. Numerous factors including religion and culture have reinforced this marginalisation of women. In recent times there has been a demand for shift of feminist narrative from protecting women from dangers in the society to empowering them through agency on their sexual autonomy and control over their desires. Various writers have started challenging the male dominated narratives in various fields. One of such field discussed above is pornography. Although, there has been a lot of progress, but much work still needs to be done. Promoting women's sexual pleasure is not just an issue of liberation but that of equality and empowerment. Marginalisation of women still exists in various fields such as media, healthcare, sexual education, etc. Feminists must include and argue a more nuanced approach to women's sexual autonomy. Discussions should be encouraged around pleasure with consent and autonomy being the central theme. The society should collectively ensure that women's pleasure should be acknowledged and celebrated in all aspects of life.

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