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Cross-border Objectification: Implications for the objectified women in the East

ABSTRACT. Objectification theory says that females are socialized to think of their bodies as objects and to internalize an observer's viewpoint of their bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While feminist literature in developed countries is profuse with objectification of women within their national boundaries, they ignore the objectification committed against women of other countries, and especially the developing countries. Although, Nussbaum has extensively dealt with objectification, her analysis and much of the literature on objectification, document intra-national rather than international objectification, which I describe as cross-border objectification. In cross-border objectification, objectifier traverses one's national boundaries to perpetrate objectification. I explain the cross-border objectification of women with the example of Thailand, a developing country, and how it is swayed by the developed world. The characteristics of cross-border objectification surpass the features of 'objectification' as they are defined in the west. Some of the specific characteristics observed as part of cross-border objectification are—providing alternate means and access to financial gains in order to exploit them; old men seeking unsustainable pleasure and company of young women; and finally, transitory emotional and non-sexual/sexual relationships, betraying social relationships of an enduring society. Further, it is exacerbated through the malicious circle of communication and transportation-beautification-objectification. The issue of cross-border objectification requires a special attention of the international community and largescale empirical researchers are necessary to investigate the nature of the problem and how remedial actions could be initiated.

KEYWORDS: Cross-border Objectification, External Objectification, Thailand

Introduction

Objectification theory says that females are socialized to think of their bodies as objects and to internalize an observer's viewpoint of their bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Referring to objectification, Nussbaum (1995) views that there are seven notions involved in objectification that include instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Although, Nussbaum has extensively dealt with objectification, her analysis and

much of the literature (Feldhusen, 2008; Koepsell, 1999; Gruenfeld et al., 2008) on objectification document intra-national rather than international objectification, which I describe as cross-border objectification. Internal objectification refers to the objectification by society of which affected women are part of, while external objectification refers to the objectification of these women by Western standards of beauty and physical appearance (Becker, 2015, p. 14). The terms internal and external are vague and do not delimit political frontiers where the objectification occurs. Further, external objectification need not be viewed from the point of western standards alone.

In cross-border objectification, objectifier traverses one's national boundaries to perpetrate objectification. I describe in this paper, the cross-border objectification of women, which largely ensues in developing world. Due to globalization, the interaction among developed and developing world is rapidly growing. The social relationships undergo significant change, with the increased interface. New dynamics emerge with the growing interaction that have far reaching implications on the people living in both developed and developing world. It is clear that tourism, prostitution, and development are interconnected in multiple and intricate ways and have implications for the health and well-being of the people involved in them (Mason, 1999, p. 61). Cross-border objectification of women is one such consequence of the growing interaction. Though I do not intend to draw any generalizations, its criticality lies in the fact that the objectified and objectifier belong to different places of origin, and the geographical dimension holds the key.

Cross-border Objectification: How it is different

I explain the cross-border objectification of women with the example of Thailand, a developing country, and how it is swayed by the developed world. Dependence on tourism, and uneven development are some of the unique features of this country. Although not an official colony, Western influences in Thailand cannot be overlooked as they have played a significant role in shaping the society of Siam into what is currently Thailand (Merisa, 2016, p. 15). At the same time, the country is also facing an identity crisis to maintain its cultural distinctiveness in the light of increased western influence. Thailand has also undergone a process of rediscovering traditional culture to counter the popularisation of

western cultures in the country, to remind people of their roots, and embed a sense of patriotism and desire to preserve what is considered tradition of Thailand or 'Thainess' (Merisa, 2016, p. 24).

Thailand is a very popular ethnic tourist destination for the people around the world. *Ethnic tourism* is defined as a type of travel aimed at visiting "alien" and "aboriginal" cultures and highlights the local inhabitants and their cultural practices as main objects of interest (Trupp, 2014, p. 346). Tourist destinations are chosen on the basis of scenic beauty, accessibility, availability of good food, receptive population etc. A country like Thailand, has all this in abundance. The politeness and supposed submissiveness that is perceived to be typically Thai by many non-Thais, is also what motivates many Western men to look for a partner in Thailand (Becker, 2015, p. 18). It is a vibrant place due to steady inflow of tourists who wish to explore the country at leisure. Thailand is also dependent on the tourism industry for its survival and progress. Tourism as an agent of change has had enormous benefits for the economic positioning of Thailand, but it has also placed it in a position of dependence on wealthy 'First World' nations (Mason, 1999, p. 59).

Apart from tourism and trade, an increased people to people contact has resulted in objectification of women. Some of the specific characteristics of this cross-border objectification are—providing alternate means and access to financial gains in order to exploit them; old men seeking unsustainable pleasure and company of young women; and finally, transitory emotional and non-sexual/sexual relationships, betraying social relationships of an enduring society. Cohen (1996, p. 274) has described the different forms of relationships between western males and Thai sex workers. Further, it is exacerbated through the malicious circle of communication and transportation-beautification-objectification.

Tourism is an international phenomenon that acts on a global scale bringing about unprecedented changes in many countries. Sex tourism is one such change that has been wrought in a number of Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand (Mason, 1999, p. 51). Tourist destinations thrive on the income generated through large inflow of tourists. While tourists are interested in leisure and pleasure, the receiving destinations try to maximize the returns for the services provided. In this process, attempts are made to explore ways and means to maximize financial gains. The rules framed by the host country, their implementation and facilitation significantly influence the inflow of tourists. Thailand has paved a liberal approach in entertaining the tourists and accordingly, the

country is used variedly by the people of other countries. As part of this, services such as massage parlors, escorts (providing company to the visiting guests) and dance bars etc., are offered to the tourists. At the same time, they have also provided a shot in the arm for those interested in making quick bucks, through extending the services beyond these designated services. Monk-Turner and Turner explore how the experience of receiving massage in Thailand differs by four types of establishment (street front, massage schools, spas, and high-end resorts) and whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017, p. 57).

The majority of Thai sex workers are women from the countryside, who either were lured to this line of work without their consent or because of its remunerative prospect (Van Esterik, 2000). This is one of the considerations, leading to objectification of women of the financially deprived sections of population and/or those impacted by modernization. The sex workers lead dual lives every day. Prostitutes involved in the sex industry generally live on the fringes of poverty and waver back and forth between times of relative affluence and destitution (Mason, 1999, p. 54). In the absence of these alternate opportunities, the communities would have found their own ways and means of livelihood, and perhaps lived less-luxurious lives that their ancestors led for centuries. Montgomery views that 'children in Baan Nua turned to prostitution only after they had tried a variety of other jobs such as scavenging, working in sweatshops or begging. Prostitution paid them considerably more than these jobs and they perceived it as less physically demanding' (Montgomery, 2008, p. 908).

An important characteristic feature of the inbound tourist population, which is either ignored or understated is the demographic nature of the population that seek pleasure from the services rendered by the local population and especially women. Exploration of geographical and scenic beauty is an important dimension that attracts tourists and especially the older age-groups. The services provided by women as mentioned above comfort especially older population across the world. Combined, they attract large number of foreign tourists on regular basis. The services provided as mentioned above comfort especially older population across the world. This has resulted in old men, well past their youth to seek the company of young women. Old aged clients who are retired and have surplus money find affordable vacation destination like Thailand as safe-heaven. There is a steep raise in the inbound old-aged

tourist population. They made up about 19% of all tourists traveling to Thailand in 2015, up from 16% in 2009. Arrivals of seniors here are growing at the rate of 18% per year on average (Sutapa et al., 2017, p. 23).

There is an exchange of service for the financial gains, but beyond this there is an unconventional relationship, often with an immense age difference between the objectified and objectifier. Visiting a prostitute in the West or as in Thailand 'taking a girl off' from a bar is seen by the majority of us non-buyers as something depraved, as something that we condemn as an act that 'you just don't do if you have a slight respect for a human being' (Re, 2003, p. 41). It is more so, if there is an age difference between objectifier and objectified. Montgomery narrates (2008) how child abuse by western world is widespread in Thailand. Referring to the child abuse he views 'That this was happening under the guise of tourism was particularly objectionable and the idea that Western men were travelling the world, abusing their financial, social, gender and ethnic privileges by buying sex from children was rightly condemned' (Montgomery, 2008, p. 904).

Compatibility of age in terms of sharing love and affection among members of civilized society is accepted all over. Man and Woman, approximately of the same age are considered to be more compatible than otherwise. Prevalence of widespread difference in age between the objectifier and objectified runs contrary to this belief. While there could be exceptions around the world and especially in the west, pertaining to male-female relationships with wide age difference, they are either intended to be long lasting or considered exceptional. The Age difference between the objectifier and objectified is the key element of objectification that goes against the interest of objectified, who is forced to enjoy the company of the objectifier.

A woman serving in the massage parlor and offering services to a male client may seem to be a business transaction. It is not the sexual pleasure that the men seek, but a desire to be serviced by a woman. The other forms of interactions such as dance bars and escort services have far more implications for those people who are objectified. The bar is a metaphorical encounter between two cultures. It is the meeting of two worlds, two desires, two ways of fulfilling needs that apparently cannot be exhausted in another manner. It is the encounter of a Thai woman and of a Western man (Re, 2003, p. 50). All this shows Thai women in poorer light among the community and before the westerners, and result in Cross-border objectification. Perhaps, what makes it unique is the

exclusivity of services offered by Thai women to western men. Re (2003) views that 'My decision to focus on the Western demand was motivated by the fact that the women I interviewed and that were working in the bars in all the tourist resorts I visited were ONLY catering for westerners' (Re, 2003, p. 6). The services one cannot obtain in one's own geographical space either due to immense cost factor or lack of anonymity, is responsible for cross-border objectification. As the client finds it convenient to move away from one's own locality, the ability to interact and display free-spiritedness are accentuated.

Communication-beautification-Objectification

The extensive communication through mediums such as Facebook and WhatsApp serve as platforms for sharing information between objectified and objectifier, belonging to two different geographical locations. These platforms facilitate communication among strangers on regular basis, enhance networking and facilitate cross-border objectification. Communication on real time basis enables the objectifier and objectified to know each other's movements better. The improved transport network, and especially air transport has augmented the mobility of people. Highly accessible and competitive fares of transportation have made it possible not only for the rich, but even not so affluent in developed countries to opt for these destinations. Spreading communication among the objectifier population about the availability of scope for objectification, has boosted the momentum.

Communication happens in the language of the objectifier, then the objectified. It is paradoxical that the objectified has to communicate in the language of the objectifier, in her native geographical space. Interactions take place in form of sign language rather than direct spoken communication, which leads, amongst others, to an un-willingness to participate in tourism due to the possibility that *farangs* "might laugh at me because I cannot speak their language" (Dolezal, 2015 p. 176). The objectifier has no intent to learn the language of the objectified, as he is only a pleasure-seeking tourist. Contrarily, for the objectified woman, it is her survival in the competitive market place. Invariably, a woman is forced to learn the foreign language.

At times, a good language competency turns out to be a disability. Re views in a study that 'men do not want girls that can speak English

fluently. The motive, she said, is that the customers think that a woman that speaks English has worked for a long time with customers' (Re, 2003, p. 39). But in general, a woman's chances of survival improve with increased ability to speak in a language like English, when objectifier intends to socialize for the duration of vacation. This symbolizes the dominance of the objectifier over the objectified. Communication between the objectifier and objectified also happens to the bare minimum, due to inability of the objectified to acquire mastery over the foreign language.

The centrality of objectification is the beautification of women. Becker views that 'Globalization, especially its repercussions on the interconnectivity of media and information exchange on an international level, have altered the way Thai womanhood is defined. Often, Western standards of beauty and attractiveness are reflected in local Thai media' (Becker, 2015, p.17). Attributes of *farang* such as an English language ability, fair skin, and light hair colour are adored and desired by local Thai people (Merisa, 2016, p. 21). Objectified needs to survive in the market open for competition. The younger and, beautiful a woman is, the better is the opportunity to face the competition. Communication enables awareness generation to match to the current trends, and provides conducive environment about the latest fashions to survive in the competitive market. Since beauty is shared in exchange for money, more the beautiful, higher the remuneration. Beautification is often achieved through starvation to keep oneself fit. Beautification is also defined by the preferences of alien men. Although there are different standards of beauty..., the dominating standards of beauty still remain prevalent in a society as seen in the media where lighter skin colour, slim body and flawlessly made up faces are popularised and represented in magazines (Merisa, 2016, p. 24). Beautification is not a pursuit in itself or for one's own fulfilment, but to serve the interests of someone else. For young girls serving the old takes away their essence of being living creatures, and brands them as mere puppets in the hands of clients.

Conclusion

Cross-border objectification is an under-examined research area. While feminist literature in developed countries is profuse with objectification of women within their national boundaries, they ignore the

objectification committed against women of other countries, and especially the developing country like Thailand. The Western world's desire for imperialistic domination over Asia relates to its desire for sexual domination over Asian women. ... Without first undermining the White sexual imperialist regime, Asian feminists cannot effectively achieve sexual-racial equality for Asian and Diasporic Asian (Woan, 2008, p. 31).

The characteristics of cross-border objectification surpass the features of 'objectification' as they are defined in the west. They are perpetrated against women of other countries, who are deprived socio-economically and educationally. It is aggravated by the fact that older males are the objectifiers and young girls are the objectified. Literature is replete with references to the young girls, but does not acknowledge the profiles of male clients. The Girls are Oppressed in their own country by being forced to speak in an alien language, in which they fail to speak many a time as reported above. Their failure to communicate puts them to shame and lowers their confidence. In moving around with an old male client as Part Of Escort Service, a girl's self-esteem is further lowered before other members of the community. The issue of cross-border objectification requires a special attention of the international community and largescale empirical research is necessary to investigate the nature of problem and how remedial actions could be initiated.

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