



Womanhoods: Images on Social Media

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Abstract: Feminist theory has focused on 'woman' as a biological and a social construct. The 21st century has seen a radical change in gender relations and indeed the definition of the term 'man' and 'woman', so much so that ideas of femininity and masculinity are being re-assessed. These conversations are also influenced by specific cultural, religious, and national affiliations and identities. Our online existence, avatars and interactions are the artifacts recording our lived reality in the current age. It would not be hyperbole to suggest that future generations will turn to these to understand the present moment.

In this paper I will attempt to look at constructions of womanhood on social media as seen through various websites, you tube channels and influencers on diverse platforms. Some examples are reinterpretations of canonical heroines from literature, fan art, racial re-representations of female characters and the like. Trans-identities and the reaction to the same will also be discussed. Struggles for liberation and the impact that movements in one nation have in others will also be a focus area in the paper. One example is the support that social media influencers who make content related to fashion, make up etc. have shown to the Iranian anti-hijab protests in Iran. Similarly, the impact of individuals like Andrew Tate who have been accused of peddling 'toxic masculinity' on young men and the consequences on gender relations will also be addressed.

Key Words: femininity, social media, successful, toxic masculinity, visual representation

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women have been writing about their experiences and issues since antiquity. Sappho wrote of romantic love, marriage and politics; Maitreyi was an Advaita philosopher who explored the concept of *atma*; and Christine de Pizan's snippets are read by women even today. Mary Astell's *Reflections on Marriage* discusses the inequalities in the institution and critiques the lack of educational opportunities for women. Aphra Behn wrote about the consequences of ill matched marriages on women. Similarly, Olympe de Gouge in *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791) made a case for equal rights for both the sexes. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) furthered this conversation and laid the foundation for the feminist movement. All these writers were writing about 'women,' their lived experiences, their fears and hopes and their demands for rights and equality. However, it is this very term 'woman' that is being redefined in today's day and age.

Traditional life narratives of women divide their lives into stages. Age is a social and cultural construct through which, Kathleen Woodward argues, a culture constructs "all formulations of life events" (Kowalewski-Wallace, 1997). Gullette suggests that the dominant "age ideology" (Gullette, 1993) of our culture constructs "master narratives" (Gullette, 1993) of adolescence, old age, baby boomer etc to create a narrative of a rise and fall of the lives of men and women. These in turn lock individuals into expected patterns of behaviour and roles which need to be challenged and questioned at an economic, social, emotional and sexual level. She argues that at a 'young' age individuals are socialised into learning the age stages and apply the same to themselves and those around them. For women the earliest state is their representation as children, symbolising innocence. The adolescent young girl, which is the next stage, has become the centre of study only recently. Traditionally, the adolescent man and his journey to manhood have been to focus of research and storytelling. For the young girl, adolescence is a period of coming of age that involves a loss of self and is a time of gender role formation. For this reason, homosexual identity formation can be even more tenuous and hazardous

considering that female adolescence is formulated in primarily white middle-class heterosexual terms. The young woman in her fertile years, possessing beauty and seen as desirable to the male gaze is another stage in this life narrative. Here the passive role of the woman becomes even clearer. The heteronormative woman possesses no value other than as a mate of the heteronormative male. This stage is the representation of the “midlife progress narrative” (Gullette, 1993) which focuses on romance, marriage and childbirth. The ‘trad wife’ construct in the West is targeted at women in this stage to encourage them to become good housewives who take care of the children and keep a neat and clean home for their husbands. These are presented as normative experiences which are necessary markers of a woman’s life. On the other extreme of the spectrum is the representation of ‘old’ women. These are women who have no use, are discarded and are expected to live out their lives in silence waiting for death. Literature that mirrors their experiences has been called *Vollendungsroman*, or “novel of completion” by Constance Rooke, while Barbara Frey uses the term *Reifungsroman*, or “novel of ripening.”

2. ‘WOMAN’ AND THE FEMININE:

Before embarking on any discussion on the representation of women, it is imperative that one be clear as to what this category entails. A closer look reveals that ‘woman’ has been a category that has been the centre of debate in 2022 and is being redefined. Dictionary.com designated the term ‘woman’ as the ‘word of the year’ for 2022. Cambridge Dictionary modified the meaning of the word. The traditional meaning was: ‘an adult female human being.’ This has now been revised to “an adult who identifies as female though they have been said to have a different sex at birth.” The definition of ‘man’ has also been amended to “an adult who identifies as a male though they may be said to have a different sex at birth.” Similarly, Merriam-Webster defines female as “relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to bear young or produce eggs.” However, it has revised the definition to include someone “having a gender identity that is the opposite of male.” These changes make it apparent that the category ‘woman’ is a site of biological and social tussle and transformation. These definitions have real world ramifications; for example any revision of ‘woman’ and ‘womanhood’ (Cambridge dictionary: “the state of being a woman, or the period of time when someone is a woman”) have direct consequences when the United Nations, in its attempt to “attain gender equality and empowerment of women” (*About UN women*, 2021) works with governments and civil society to create laws and policies to “benefit women and girls worldwide” (*About UN women*, 2021). In other words, these definitions impact ideas of gender and sexual identity, social justice and economic welfare. The redefinition of ‘woman’ connects with Adams’ (Adams, 1989) critique of the essentialist construction of ‘woman’ as a unitary category possessing traits that transcend historical and cultural practices. She uses the concept of Freudian unconsciousness to argue that gender is a psychic reality and interacts in complex ways to create the ‘woman.’ In other words, a “woman is not born, she is made.”

Therefore, one needs to be cognizant of these debates concerning gender identity that are raging on social media when one embarks on a study of the representation of ‘women’ in social media. The digital landscape has transformed massively since the emergence of digital communication in 1969 in the form of ARPANET (the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network). According to statusbrew.com (Devgan, 2023), as of October 2022 there were 4.74 billion social media users worldwide. This has increased at an average rate of 6 new users every second in the past year. An average social media user is on 7.2 different social media platforms in a month and spends an average of 2.5 hours every day on them. Of the various platforms Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp have an active user base of over 2 billion per month. WeChat, Instagram and TikTok have an active user base of over 1 billion per month. Male interaction dominates female interaction on social media, except for YouTube (56.2%) and Pinterest (76.5%). This rapid adaptation has transformed the way we interact with the world, access information and organise ourselves to demand political change. Events happening in one part of the world travel the world and impact other areas swiftly. Users share billions of pictures and videos over these platforms every day. According to phototutorial.com 1.81 trillion pictures are taken worldwide every year. The number of videos shot and posted online is even higher. A look at the data presented above makes it clear that even though more content is being created, men are dominate this space. Since content creation is an example of cultural production, issues of cultural hegemony, patriarchy and the destabilisation of the centre need to be addressed. Unlike traditional forms of production like literature, music, and painting, content creation for social media presents a more democratic platform; anyone with a mobile phone and basic skills can be a content creator. This allows women to meet the hegemonistic male gaze head on and create content that reflects them and their issues. Nonetheless they must deal with hateful comments that follow.

There is a similarity in the various ‘types’ of women one sees on so social media to those represented in traditional literature. However, the visual and ‘live’ nature of these representations and the fact that a real time communication occurs between the viewer and the content creator gives these artifacts greater relevance. They offer a greater insight into the stances and beliefs of the population at large. At the same time these representations raise issues

of commodification of the female form, the consequences of ‘echo chambers’ since users inevitably end up interacting with content that matches their previous search parameters and algorithms, and ‘wokism.’ Social media is a double-edged sword: while it gives people an opportunity to familiarise themselves with new ideas, places and thought, it is also full of vitriol and abuse. It is however not something that one can escape. Social media is a mirror into our aspirations, fears, prejudices and hopes. Like other aspects, the representation of women on social media also follows this paradigm. On the one hand one can find positive and inspiring representations of women and their experiences, on the other images of objectification, subjugation and dismissal of women abound. In addition to cis-women, trans-women, lesbians, women of colour, women of diverse economic and cultural backgrounds can be seen on social media. The formulation ‘woman’ also encapsulates the child, the adolescent, the young lady and the older woman. This diversity of constructions needs to be celebrated and encouraged. It is also reflective of the various important issues of the times concerning the various ‘women’ that are playing out in the public space. Ideas of femininity and womanhood are being negotiated on social media. It is here that the conversations of our age are occurring. We are currently in an interesting time: the advances of the feminist movement have ensured that women are visible in positions of power and are actively participating in decision making. At the same time the absence of some ‘types’ of women from the public and decision-making spaces is also being debated.

3. THE FEMALE CHILD ON SOCIAL MEDIA :

One finds status-quoist representations of women in all these roles as well the undermining of the same on social media. Another salient achievement has been the racial diversity in the representation of women in social media. While mainstream television and cinema have foregrounded white, upper class heterosexual women alternate identities find expression on social media. Images of your girls with blue eyes, blond hair and a pretty smile abound on social media. A good example is the Instagram handle @taytumandoakley with 3.1 million followers and their YouTube channels @FishFam (4.45 million subscribers) and @TaytumandOakleyShow (106K subscribers). Since the twins are minors their parents run and administer their accounts for them. These are wholesome channels where the parents have brought the world into the personal lives of their twin daughters as they grow up. However, this centring of an Anglo-Saxon idea of beauty is being challenged on social media through representations of young girls of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. The Instagram handle @coco_pinkprincess belongs to a 12-year-old girl who became Japan’s Instagram icon when she was 6 years old. Alternate racial and regional representations of the female child are presented through handles like @lilblackbabies, @black_kids_haven, @pobcadvocate and @latinxkids. @mymissanand is the handle of one of India’s most prolific child content creators. She began posting content on WhatsApp and Instagram when she was 6 years old and currently has 13 million subscribers across various platforms. Megan Rakesh, @megandthemiracles is a 10-year-old girl who posts songs, remixes and videos regularly. She posts something on her account daily. With more than 50K followers she is the youngest pop star of the country.

The issue of children on social media is complicated. A look at the personal accounts of child influencers reveals that these are carefully curated representations of children in a quasi-adult avatar. Often, they are dressed like mini adults attending press junkets, endorsing products etc. Another aspect is that they perpetuate a childish, immaculate and perfect image of the girl child. She is someone who is ‘feminine’ – obedient, conformist, and docile. She may however be given to feminine tantrums which are a marker of her gender. Young girls following such accounts are in danger of imitating such behaviour subconsciously. One cannot deny the possibility that personal accounts fetishize childhood and adults who follow them become voyeurs in the lives of such children. This commodification of the girl child created a furore during the Balenciaga “Gift Collection” 2022 which featured girls carrying bags which looked like teddy bears. These bears were dressed in bondage gear including harnesses and spiked collars. The company pulled the ads from all social media platforms following a furore. Monetisation of childhood by parents and the audience raises its own ethical issues. Britney Spears’s journey from childhood to adulthood mirrors the rise of social media. The damage that living under the glare of constant scrutiny has done to her mental health and general well-being does not portend well for such child influencers. Similarly, the damage done to the mental health of Miley Cyrus as she negotiated the path from a child star to a ‘troubled’ “bad girl” of the music industry raises questions about the representation of women on social media and the brutality with which they are judged on the various platforms.

Nonetheless the representation of children of diverse races and ethnic identities makes the girl child confident of her own identity. The foregrounding of multiple identities in racial terms creates a more inclusive virtual and real’ world. [Coloursofus.com](https://coloursofus.com) is a website where multicultural books, toys and clothes for children are available. Similarly, YouTube channels like @kidshut, @TamilMoralStories, @storytimewithkody6317 provide children with access to stories that reflect their lived reality (Hindi, Tamil and Nigerian respectively), and mirror children that look and speak

like them. Alternate representations of the girl child through Gabby in *Gabby's Dollhouse* (Netflix), Maise in *Sea Beast* (Netflix), Halle Bailey playing a black Ariel in the latest iteration of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* are important. Such visualisations of alternate conceptions of femaleness are necessary for a generation that interacts with the world on social media. This inclusivity makes it easier for the child to accept herself in all her difference and not feel ashamed or shy about who she is.

4. ADOLESCENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA :

Adolescent women in the age of 10 to 19 year (as per WHO guidelines) form a huge chunk of female users on social media platforms. It is here that one finds a rich variety of female experience being presented. This is the time of puberty where questions of desire, sexual identity and one's place in the world take centre stage. Niana Guerreo (14 million followers on Instagram, 15 million on YouTube, and millions on TikTok) from Philippines is known for her dance videos. She also writes her own songs and posts them online. Marley Dias is the founder of the #1000BlackGirl Books and is an activist and author. Most content creators in this age group create content around fashion, make up, travel or in entertainment in an effort to increase their visibility among the entertainment industry. Some of the most popular teenage influencers in this category (Ooruz, 2025) are Hastu Goyal (@hastu_goyal, 1 million followers), Anushri Mane (@anushrisurekamane, 192.3K followers) and Stefy Patel (@stefy_patel, 234.8K followers). These social media interactions reveal the anxiety of young girls to conform to a tenuous and unrealistic idea of beauty. The influencers and their posts can be seen as a conversation occurring within this generation in their search for individuality and self-expression. This conversation can take the form of a competition marked by comparisons and bullying. One disastrous consequence of this is the rise of anorexia among young women. A report by the Wall Street Journal (Wells et al, 2021) showed that teenagers spending hours on Facebook and Instagram suffered from severe body image issues. Images of slim, svelte women performing "100 burpees in 10 minutes" (Fraad, 1990) led many girls to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Social media interactions are causing girls to feel bad about their bodies, while "Instagram made them feel worse" (Wells et al, 2021). Internal communication from Facebook reveals that the company knew that social media posts about the perfect body, hair and make-up has caused increased rates of anxiety and depression among teenagers. In many cases this led to a desire to commit suicide. It cannot be denied that one can witness a collective form of hysteria on social media. However, girls are not blindly following this trend, as is evident in the viral video of Feroza Aziz (@officialferozaaziz) who in a video about how to put fake eye lashes talked about the inhumane treatment of the Uyghur Muslims at the hands of the Chinese Government (Basu, 2020). She also regularly posts about political issues, food insecurity and other human rights issues. Anisha Dixit (@rickshawali, 3.06M followers) tackles taboo subjects like puberty, periods and interaction with parents in a funny manner for an Indian audience.

The normative celebration of the desirable woman on social media by most influencers is a manifestation of the "alienation from the body" (Chernin, 1981). According to Kim Chernin anorexia is indicative of a dissonance between the body and the mind. Social media and its barrage of perfect body types lambasts the "unruly" female body thereby exacerbating the relinquishing of female power by women on the diverse platforms. The preponderance of influencers pedalling make up tips, fashion advice and pseudo-psychological advice need to be seen in this light. In fact, social media creates the perfect storm wherein the pressure to present perfect bodies transforms young women into unwilling consumers of the capitalist fitness industry at the expense of their physical and mental wellbeing. Angela Guarda, director for the eating-disorders program at Johns Hopkins Hospital and an associate professor of psychiatry in the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, said it is common for her patients to say they learned from social media tips for how to restrict food intake or purge. She estimates that Instagram and other social-media apps play a role in the disorders of about half her patients.

5. OTHER WOMEN :

Similarly, the representation of 'older' women has also increased on social media. The Gen X and Baby Boomers are connecting with long lost friends and posting their creative output on various platforms. Nisha Madhulika (10 million YouTube subscribers) and Kabita Singh (9.5 million subscribers on YouTube) share recipes with a primarily Asian audience. Older women aren't simply exchanging food recipes for the family; they are also creating online communities where they can share experiences. Zeenat Aman's Instagram page is a perfect example of this. She posts pictures of herself and her experiences as she negotiates the world around her. She is indicative of an evolving category of women who are comfortable in their own skin and are willing to enjoy old age at their own terms. At the same time the tussle between the generations is evident on social media as well: one can see the incomprehension, in a section of older women, at the refusal of younger women to toe the cultural line. The cultural wars are unfolding on social media even as they play out in the 'real' world.

It is here that the representation of trans women plays an interesting role Feminist theory suggests that a woman in “made.” Feminist discourse has challenged the socially rigid interpretations of ‘womanhood,’ However this gender bending has taken an entirely new course in the interaction with trans women. When one looks at any of the social media handles mentioned above one thing that stand out is the unequivocal agreement of “woman” as a category: one possessing a womb and being primarily heteronormative. Lesbian women also fall in this category irrespective of their sexual preferences. There is a complete reassessment of the female category when one looks at trans identities. Irrespective of how one views trans women, it cannot be denied that they do highlight the artificiality of ‘natural’ feminine behaviour. Simultaneously they also cultivate ambiguity in gender relations and bring a chameleon like quality to them. This gender bending raises questions on the nature of the archetypal ‘feminine’ experience: are trans women ‘women,’ or are they performing an act of mimesis. Moreover, is the refusal of society at large to give veracity to their identities a cause of trauma, or an act of resistance by women to having their voices and experiences highjacked by a category that is suspect at best. Whether one is dismissive of women on social media or takes them seriously, it cannot be denied that across ages and regions they are creating a female discourse, language and identity. The young girls in Iran protesting the hijab found resonance in women around the world attempts to control women is a universal phenomenon and every act of rebellion needs to be celebrated.

At the same time debates about what actually is a ‘woman’ are raging. One thing that is certain is that the binaries of male/female are collapsing. The advent of post modernism has meant that older ways of gauging identity are giving way to richer, more complex formulations based on cultural and geographical contingencies. This permeability of cultural boundaries and human identity has meant that articulations of binaries that were once seen as oppositional are now being viewed as mutually constitutive. One cannot understand what a ‘man’ is without having some conception of what a ‘woman’ is. The realisation of this mutuality destabilises not just the primacy of ‘maleness’ over ‘femaleness,’ but also questions the entire construction of gender. Consequently, questions are being raised about the veracity of male/female binary identities as absolute and rooted in biology, tradition and religion. Once this concept of gender is questioned it leads to the exploration of the sexed body. The sexual being is no longer identified by their biological parts, but rather by self-identification. Congruence with sexual identity and not biological sex is becoming the marker of gender identity. This is where debates about the rights of transgendered and non-cisgendered individuals are occurring.

Sexual orientation is now understood as separate from gender identity, so that a transgendered individual may self-identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual (open to all sexual identities), or asexual. Transgender should not be confused, of course, with transsexualism, where the misalliance between self-identification of a gendered identity and biological sex leads an individual to seek sex reassignment through medical procedures. An additional vocabulary applies to erotic preferences - androphilia (love of men), gynophilia (love of women), bisexuality, asexuality, and so on. To some extent, this redefinition of gender identity traces its roots to older feminist articulations: one thinks of Woolf’s early explorations of androgyny, or Simone de Beauvoir’s well-known dictum that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Yet the rapid proliferation of new terminology for sexual experience and gender identification suggests that we are moving in-to a new landscape where the binary opposition between male and female will be further eroded.

6. CONCLUSION:

The image of the successful woman who has everything in control and presents a flawless public persona has undergone a radical change with the rise of social media. Actors, sportspersons and other public figures can now talk directly to their fan. While it cannot be denied that often these public profiles are carefully curated, a bond is created whenever stars talk to their fans. An excellent example of the same is when Deepika Padukone came public with her struggle with depression. Seeing their idol struggle and acknowledge the pain made it possible for her fans to acknowledge their own struggles with mental health. It also began conversations of the oft neglected aspect of women’s’ health in families. This smashing of a far-off public figure to reveal a human being subject to the same trials and tribulations as the rest is one of the greatest advantages of social media. One can separate the representation of women on social media either as perfect creatures or as Amazons. Barbara Welter described the representation of women in 19th century American fiction as belonging to the “Cult of Womanhood.” These women were pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. The image of the Amazon in cartoons, animation, fan fiction etc has a dual representation. Gal Gadot’s *Wonder Woman* is a manifestation of women’s power and independence. The Amazon is a deliberate and conscious break from the romantic figure evoking a patriarchal past. Instead, she is an activist “fighting to transform the future” (Wittig, 1969). She is a model of “political power, of military prowess, and a role model of autonomy and hence dignity” (Salmonson, 1991).

While addressing the issue of representation of women on social media, one has to mention content creators like Andrew Tate who spout toxic masculinity and harp to an imaginary time when men were men. Their constructions of men as bread winners, warriors and hunters. He suggests that a man is one truly only when he ‘chases’ and captures the girl which interests him. Thus, by limiting the woman to a sexual object he, as Abby Kleinbaum says, creates a heroic image of the male figure and thus enhances his sense of “worth and historical significance” (Kleinbaum, 1983). Women therefore become sites on which this masculinity is played out. Tate is revisionism of the worst kind; his machismo hides the inability and refusal of the modern man to engage with the modern woman in her struggle for agency and equality. Moreover, it posits cowardice as bravery and puts the onus on women to pander to the male psyche and bolster it. Women are placed in an untenable position: even as social media celebrates the thin fit woman, it also ensures that most young girls are indoctrinated by suggestions of the desirability of obedience to their male partners. At the same time the fluidity in the idea of “woman” makes it very difficult for them, and indeed older women, to precisely calibrate and define what feminine behaviour is. Social media is thus the site of the latest fight that women have on their hands: a fight for access to the various platforms without being bullied off them; and, more importantly a fight for their recognition as women, both as a social and a biological category.

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