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Gender Hierarchy and the Social Construction of Femininity: The Imposed Mask

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Abstract: The problem of woman's identity, as a social construction imposed on the woman from the outside, makes the object of the present paper. Having as a starting point Simone de Beauvoir's formula: « on ne naît pas femme, on le devient », this article attempts to show how woman's identity is gradually constructed, within society. Drawing its source from the Marxist theory and from Julia Kristeva's semiotic studies, our analysis shows how the social relations between man and woman stand for a mimetic representation of the capitalist system, having at its core "the exploitation of man by man". Thus, like the capitalist economic exploiter, man uses of his patriarchal positions of a dominator and a provider, in order to extend his power over the woman. This one, on her turn, resembles a proletarian, a powerless slave incapable of doing anything to change the situation in her favour, and considers her present condition to be a natural state. The main reason for the common habit to define woman as a second-class citizen originates in the historical division of labour that allots to women the unpaid domestic work, while assigning to men the status of family head, of family provider and guarantor of the family welfare, of master. It is precisely this bipolar division of social labour that cements the social oppression of the woman to the point that a social rule might become a part of her nature. Even in our days, the woman continues to be sometimes considered as a second-rank citizen, on the prejudice of her being "the weak sex". She may not exercise, in the case under discussion, the same prerogatives as the man, and be his equal. This whole perspective makes us think that, despite everything, one is born a woman.

Ever since the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and, very late, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) or Simone De Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe (The Second Sex)* (1949), the question of the women's social identity has always been polemical, politicized, and under debate. If the suppression of the physical chains of slavery has in theory put an end to the exploitation of man by man, it has not, in practice, been totally removed from man's conscience. Today, other manifestations akin to slavery prevail in the social relationship between man and woman to perpetuate the ideology of exploitation and domination, to continue the reproduction of the metaphor of the mask that serves to define this relationship. The paradigm of gender hierarchy underpins the woman's path in her attempt to define and assume her identity, making her situation a living hell. Put differently, gender relations make the woman a constructed "other". Overall, as it is well-known, because her physique does not allow her to execute some tasks that require the use of force, the woman is wrongly and purposely considered as the weaker sex. Most social discourses define the borders of her gender and that of her male fellow citizen. They relegate the woman to the status of a dominated and constructed subject whose life is determined according to an alleged male dominant culture. My allusion to the metaphor of the mask surveys the conception that the woman's inferiority and

therefore her subjugation are culturally and historically constructed. The mask would then refer to a state of being and of acting that the woman is made to adopt in order to integrate her socio-cultural environment as a true subject.

If most feminist theorists advocate the equality between sexes, social reality demonstrates the contrary. Social gender relationships teach us that there has never been and there is no true equality between the sexes. In many cases, the woman is defined as man's subaltern and as such she evolves under his shadow. At the beginning of *Le Deuxième sexe II*, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

One is not but born a woman. No biological, economic fate defines the character that the female being has in society: it is the whole civilization that elaborates this middle product between the male and the castrato one qualifies as female. Only the mediation of the other can constitute an individual as an *Other*. (13, my translation)

This quotation indicates that at their birth, both the male and female characters are bestowed the same prerogatives. Nothing terms the new baby born as a male or a female. It is later that society constructs and differentiates their condition on the ground of otherness and according to a gender hierarchy. Following Beauvoir's assertion, it can be argued that femininity is socially, culturally and ideologically constructed and imposed on the female being. It is the society in which the woman lives that constructs her female identity according to norms that sometimes function as a cultural heritage that the inhabitants pass on from generation to generation. The woman is brought up and educated in a context that perpetuates this ideology and develops a sort of self-censorship. A collective unconsciousness invades the whole society and castrates the woman by positing her as man's dependent. This situation is the same in many societies of the world.

Pierre Bourdieu (1998) points out that the sexual division between man and woman seems to be something natural, normal, and even unavoidable. At first sight, this natural, normal and unavoidable character of the sexual division destroys the whole Beauvoirian theory. Bourdieu seems to voluntarily forget that human beings can actually act on nature and make its elements function as they want. He also seems to argue that effectively the social roles the man and the woman are assigned are not subject to human manipulation, that human beings have nothing to do with this social division. Fortunately, his argumentation clarifies his point. In the home as well as in the social world, this division is permanent. The different areas in the home are sexually divided. The kitchen, for example, is regarded as the woman's area while man's place is the dining room. This first division, to Bourdieu, is one that is objected, that is to say determined in accordance with the objects used in each area. In the kitchen, the woman exercises her influence through cooking and the cooking materials she uses are intended for that purpose. Similarly, man manifests his influence over the dining room and its equipments. Most of the time, while the woman is busy cooking in the kitchen, man, if he is at home, is in the dining/living room watching TV, listening to the radio or playing music.

Bourdieu identifies a second level in the sexual division. This level is located in the social world and is incorporated in the bodies of people, their habits, and gestures. It operates as systems of perception, thought, and action and is carried out through

arbitrary divisions of the social world. No objective reason can account for the place each of the sexes must have. Because of an ideological conception of the social division of the world, the woman is maintained in a perpetual subordination. The social order of the world, therefore, operates as a huge symbolic machine that aims to legitimate male domination on which it is based. Work division, distribution of the activities, places and instruments allotted to each of the two sexes, all testify to this symbolic machine and explain this alleged natural male domination.

The social world constructs human body as a sexual reality and as a site of principles of vision and of sexual division. This incorporated social program of perception applies to all the societies. It is a situation generated by what we know as the socialization of the individual, a process through which sexual roles are taught and attributed to both man and the woman since their teen-age and which they must progressively incorporate and develop as part of their socio-cultural heritage till their adulthood. Once grown up, man and woman act in accordance with the codes of the society in which they were raised and educated. Their actions, behaviors and thought which confer them a social identity greatly testify to this reality. Gender then is a daily construction society imposes on the individual. The latter must conceptualize and develop it in order to fit his/her environment. Defining gender and how it is constructed, Judith Butler (1990) writes:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*. The effort of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered life. (191)

Gender is not factual data. It is constructed, sustained and imposed as a way of life. It becomes “factual” when incorporated into the habits and cultures of people. Its construction is a constant search for a place to express an identity. As such, gender relations are relations of power and domination. Each gender seeks to gain more power in order to dominate the other, “opposite” one. Gender hierarchy, as we presume it here, is the expression of a male desire to dominate the woman and is illustrative of a group or individual ego: as a member of a group thought of as the “strong sex”, man is animated by a supremacist ideology. In most of his relations with the woman, man’s prime and essential objective is to demonstrate this ideology and to make it effective, to consolidate his influence in the important social decisions. Thus, anything the woman undertakes in terms of gender relations or as part of the social division of the world is not seen as convincing or opportune if not supported or sponsored by male opinion.

Social relations are generally gender-oriented. In the system of opposition man/woman, the woman appears as an instrument of conquest. Her body and mind are subjected to conquest from man. Ania Loomba (2005) argues that “the female bodies [symbolize] the conquered land.” (129) To impose his superiority, man must conquer and dominate the whole social system and structures where the woman lives. In this context, the social system and structures of thought, beliefs and actions act as agents of conquest for man. Once he succeeds in dominating these agents, he automatically has the woman under his influence. The use of the female body as a land to conquer varies in accordance with the exigencies of history.

The specific male conception of the woman depends on the reality of a given epoch. Taking up Engels's perspective about the woman's condition in history, Simone de Beauvoir underlines that during the Stone Age, when the land was a common property and strength was required for farm work, the woman was confined to the housework. Later, during the industrial age or the age of mechanization, with the advent of private ownership, man used other people he made into slaves to cultivate. He thus used the woman as a worker. This was in Beauvoir's terms, the world historical defeat of the woman (*Le Deuxième sexe II*, 97-98). The periodical and historical change in the woman's social condition from the private sphere to the public one did not imply her sexual or gender equality.

Indeed, patriarchal ideologies are reluctant to accept the woman as man's equal. Gayle Rubin in Rayna R. Reiter (1975) notes that the woman's oppression through patriarchy exemplifies the capitalist system that Marx and his followers discussed at length in their works. In reading through Marxist theories, Rubin articulates that the woman's "oppression in societies [...] can by no stretch of the imagination be described as capitalist." (163) Like in a capitalist system where the dominant character, the possessor of the means of production, the employer, exploits and oppresses the dominated character, the worker, the woman under patriarchy wears the condition of the proletarian or dominated character. One essential example of this exploitation of the woman lies in the system sex/gender where the mode of reproduction determines the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Gayle Rubin further states that "capitalism is a set of social relations [...] in which production takes the form of turning money, things, and people into capital. And the capital is a quantity of good or money which, when exchanged for labor, reproduces and augments itself by extracting unpaid labor, or surplus value from labor and into itself." (161) In a similar way, the sex/gender system is a set of social relations in which, by the act of procreation, woman is turned into capital and the children she procreates are the goods. But the sex/gender system involves more than the relations of procreation. It defines a social descending male/female gender organization. As the oppressor, man is the "noble sex" whereas the woman, the oppressed, is a "perceived being", that is to say her condition is defined from a patriarchal worldview. She must act according to what male dominant culture thinks she is or wants her to be. In one word, she is condemned to see herself through man's eyes. This disposition between male nobility and female subjectivation consistently feeds the social relations. The woman must interiorize this double bind to be a true woman: if she acts like a man, she loses her natural attributes of femininity, confirming thus man's "natural" position of power. Conversely, if she acts like a woman, she becomes incapable and unfit for her social environment. This ambivalence creates in the woman an unconscious which leads her to self-depreciation.

The point I try to raise here is that the woman, in order to integrate her social world, unwillingly or helplessly submits to the patriarchal norms and consequently partakes in her own victimization. What is specific with a dominant class is its desire to impose its particular standards of being as universal. In many societies, the child's education is generally gender-oriented. Whether the child is a boy or a girl, he/she receives a different or sexed education. In such circumstances, each gender

internalizes the social position imposed upon it by the outside world. For instance, while the girl is forbidden to take part to rough games because her physique is not fit for such games, the boy receives no restriction. The girl is offered toys such as dolls or utensils, and during playtime she takes the dolls for her children and learns how to cook with the utensils. Admittedly, these toys prepare the girl to her future status of a mother and her subsequent confinement in the private sphere of the home. The young girl grows up internalizing the female attributes and reactions she is early taught through the use of play things.

Another good example of the woman's assimilation to a weak sex and thereby her continuous subjugation through patriarchal ideologies occurs in the public sphere. Experience demonstrates that the social world is more demanding and more restrictive to the female being than it is to the male one. While the female subject is asked to cross her legs when seated the male one can freely adopt any kind of position. All the same, during public debates such as TV or radio broadcasts with male guests, the woman is most often ignored or deprived of language or even stopped during her times of speech. Sometimes, she is told that it is not her turn to take the floor or if the organizer dares to give her the floor, she is intermittently stopped. The woman must often protest to be given the floor or to signal her presence on the set. This way of trying to pass her ideas may create a climate of cacophony and turn the debate into some kind of dialogue of the deaf.

The same system of misogyny occurs at the professional level. Working places are often sexually segregated. Though there are rare cases where the woman has the same salary as her male colleague or earns more than him, she is generally discriminated against. Some historical and subjective reasons can explain this inequality. In fact, because the woman has historically been confined to the private sphere, her appearance in the public sphere is regarded by patriarchy as an intrusion, a challenge to or a contestation of its hegemony. Historically, too, the job the woman does in the private sphere is not paid. As such, her claim for a salary, even an equal or a higher wage in the public sphere seems to be beyond the understanding of many patriarchs. Many patriarchal advocates think that since in the home it is man who provides for the woman as his dependent, it is not necessary that the woman gets a (good) wage. This position puts into question the evolutionist and egalitarian ideologies that man and woman in society constitute the two faces of the same coin; if one of the faces is deteriorated, the coin loses its value. Unfortunately the patriarchal structures encourage man to maintain the woman under his control and to reject, thus, the notion of gender equality.

At the professional level, there always are expressions or terms that man astutely uses to extend his domination over the woman. Phrases such as "my little darling" or compliments such as "you are nicely dressed," that the directors or managers, generally men, address to their secretaries, or again the small taps on their jaws as they go by to express their kindness and sociability, are diversions from man to mark his territory, the work place, and express male domination. Sometimes, the woman's oppression at work operates in the form of a sexual harassment. If she refuses advances from a male worker who happens to be her hierarchical responsible, she is often threatened with dismissal. A female job seeker may also experience similar

sexual harassment. She may have the qualifications but be declared unfit for the job if she does not comply with the immoral rules of having sex with the employer. To face the threats that make her helpless, the woman must adopt conformist attitudes to make her way through. Thus, in social life, the woman uses clothing techniques such as make-ups, figure-hugging dresses, tight-fitting trousers, and other ingredients of beauty to make herself noticed. In so doing, she claims a presence in a world already marked out by male ideology.

Significantly, these clothing techniques confirm the woman's status of a dominated and a constructed subject insofar as they give the woman a sense of being. If these techniques have important effects, it is understandable that they contribute to enforce the effect of the social relations that put the woman in a position of a subject condemned to see him/her-self only through the eyes of the male categories. The woman exists as such because she acts in ways the male dominant society expects her to, by wearing clothes that define her gender and by drawing the attention of those surrounding her. We can therefore assume that the woman's gender identity is constructed and shaped by the patriarchal norms of her society. If she does not conform to these norms, she will evolve as an "invisible" human being: she will not, so to speak, exist. Existence, for the woman, then, is synonymous with the ability to adapt to social requirements.

The social institution of marriage in which man and woman are expected to mutually feed and respect each other is also an area of oppression for the woman. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) states that marriage, in fact, is always differently felt by the man and the woman. Both sexes are important in a marriage, but this importance does not always generate reciprocity between them. The woman is never considered as man's equal. Socially, man is an autonomous and a complete individual. He is considered as a producer and his existence is determined by the work he does in his community. Contrary to him, the woman, in terms of marriage, embodies the slave in her community. Traditionally, she has functioned like an article. She was offered by her parents, generally men, who determined the amount of the dowry to pay. The marriage contracts were usually signed between the father-in-law and the son-in-law to be or between the two in-laws respectively headed by male persons, but not directly between the man and the woman. This condition of the woman has not considerably changed with the evolution of the contractual form of marriage. Nowadays, marriage still preserves some of its traditional aspects. The woman in some societies can have her part of the dowry or heritage. However, these goods still enslave her to her family.

An important trait of the woman's subjugation is that under marriage, she must adopt attitudes that illustrate her imposed identity. These attitudes are more compelling to the young girl. Once married, the woman's social identity changes against her will. She loses her maiden name for that of her husband. She is, for example, called Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Fernandez, Mrs. Bertrand, Mrs. Kouassi, etc. All the same, her husband becomes a sort of imperialist. He is economically responsible for her, and, as such, he acts on her behalf within the community. He chooses the home for the family, generally according to the place where he works. He is the conscience of the family, a half-god. The woman, in turn, is detached from her past, her usual environment. She is supposed to get integrated

into her husband's area, his social class and his family. She is "annexed" to his universe. In marriage, the woman's life is reduced to repetition and routine. Usually, from early in the morning to late at night, if she does have a nanny to help her in her tasks, she must care for the welfare of the family alone. She must travel several times between home and school to send the younger children to school or take them home, or she must go to the market to buy what the family needs. At home, she sweeps the yard and the house, washes the dishes, and cooks for the family. She watches over the younger children and takes care of the old. On the smallest cry of a child, she is the first to rush up in order to see what is happening. This amount of work, usually unpaid, is done by the woman on the ground that it is her lot as a female being.

The social world defines childbearing as one of the woman's essential functions. Ann Oakley (1974) well underlines this function:

Biological purpose seems to require completion through conceiving, being and nurturing children... Her generative organs seem meaningless unless her womb has been filled, her breasts suckled... The woman's creativity as a mother becomes a central matter that provides meaning and balance to her life. (187)

Society constructs the woman as a reproductive machine. It is through childbearing that her female condition is defined. From a traditional worldview, the child assures autonomy to the woman. If as a wife the woman is not a complete human being, she attains this status as a mother: the child helps her to realize herself sexually and socially. Childbearing then plays a crucial role in the woman's life. Whatever her social or economic condition, the woman is nothing if she is childless. Children are a great social insurance. In this regard, any woman who does not want to procreate or whose biological condition does not permit her to procreate is a social pariah. In some traditional African societies, such women are considered as men. They can take part in sacred ceremonies forbidden to women. They can also take decisions which logically fall to men mainly when they live in families where there is no elderly male. Besides, when a couple have no child it is the woman who is the first to blame for this situation.

African female intellectuals take an interest in the traditional and cultural conception regarding motherhood and its role in the woman's life. Admittedly, an important part of their writing falls within the scope of a feminist attack on traditional and cultural ideologies that prevent the African woman from owing her female self and force her to live as an outcast when she is childless. It is important to indicate that my concern is not to lay emphasis on procreation as the woman's ideal or her self-fulfillment but to show how this contributes to put pressure on her, often leading to hysteria and psychological trauma. Here, the woman feels childlessness as a plight. She becomes culturally alienated as she takes the cultural ideologies of her community about childbearing for social norms and tries to live according to them. Eventually, she comes to despise herself and consider herself useless for her community.

From a feminist perspective, African female intellectuals explore childbearing as a place of oppression for the woman, which adds to the assumption that the woman lives in a permanently oppressive world. In the field of literature, Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* (1966) or Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) largely account for the

importance of children in the African woman's life. In *Efuru*, for instance, when the eponymous heroine does not procreate long after her marriage, the whole community's expectations turn into despair. To them, it is inconceivable that a woman should remain childless; only children may make a marriage happy and fulfilled. The complaint of the community illustrates the traditional and cultural conception that a woman must give birth to children and that a marriage must "be fruitful". (137) *Efuru* understands this too well and she knows that only this act can provide her with a social identity, with a sense of living, of being, and of belonging. To this purpose, she consults a traditional priest who asks her to regularly perform sacrifices by the village lake, at sunset, to make the ancestors let her have a baby (25-26).

Contrary to *Efuru*, *Nnu Ego*, the protagonist of Emecheta's text, gives birth to several children. Her great fertility contrasts with *Efuru*'s sterility. By opposing these biological states, Nwapa and Emecheta explore the two limits of the female condition: the woman can either suffer from a childlessness leading to her social isolation or she can be productive, which makes her a social icon. *Efuru* and *Nnu Ego* respectively embody these two categories of women. While *Efuru* symbolizes what it means for the woman to be childless, *Nnu Ego* is described as a goddess of fecundity: "many people appealed to her to make them fertile." (224) However, *Nnu Ego*'s sufferance depicted at the end of the novel – her having been abandoned by her children and her lonely agony – brings into question the idea that children constitute a social insurance for the woman. Procreation does not necessarily lead to happiness for the woman, as patriarchal ideology seems to make the woman believe by forcing her to admit that her social and female condition depends on her capability of conceiving children. The value bestowed on this biological act is a continuation to the woman's oppression and her social confinement. *Nnu Ego* embodies, thus, the woman's plight of devoting her whole life to her children, while receiving nothing in turn.

If one of the woman's roles is procreation, the fruit of this role, on the other hand, does not belong to her. The children she conceives are, first and foremost, the "property" of her husband, according to the patriarchal family model. In this perspective, the woman does not own her sexuality, nor the products of her sexuality. Since the social world recognizes man as socially and economically responsible for her, it then follows that what the woman produces, in capitalistic terms, belongs to him. He is the capitalist while the woman constitutes the labor force. He has property rights over the children, stronger than those of the mother. This situation is essential in traditional societies and in most societies which still have some traditional standards of living. Even in modern societies, where children enjoy their right to autonomy earlier, the woman does not exercise her rights over them to the same degree as the man. Radical feminists strongly oppose this social injustice. This is why they advocate the re-appropriation of the woman's body and the products of her sexuality to her. To them, heterosexuality and therefore procreation are forms of oppression for the woman as they permit man to control woman's body. They contribute to the construction of the woman as a dominated subject rather than as an independent subject that can own its self. We understand that for radical feminists, the social construction of gender operates like a system in which the woman, like the proletarian, is a victim. She cannot realize herself sexually. There is no need insisting

on the whole theory of radical feminism. The one thing worth underlining is that the position of radical feminists is justified by their postulation that heterosexuality reduces the woman to sexual dependence and enslavement.

Julia Kristeva deals with the construction of the woman's social identity through what she terms "femininity as marginality". The woman's identity is generally defined from the patriarchal point of view which is often motivated by male class interests. Therefore, since patriarchy is the code that defines and also oppresses the woman, the woman cannot be; she only exists negatively. She is, according to Kristeva, "that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies." (in *Moi*, 1985, 163) This definition clearly indicates the marginality of the woman. She is described as absence, negativity, lack of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness. She is nonbeing. Here, the notion of marginality has something to do with the repression of the woman in terms of her place in society. This raises the question of positioning in so far as what one qualifies as marginal depends on the position one occupies. Patriarchy sees the woman as marginal because it develops a class interest, a position, which requires the repression of the woman to avoid that she puts this class interest into question, if she is accepted as an equal human being. In so doing, it determines a place for the woman and a place for itself. Any attempt from the woman to cross the borderline is considered as defiance that needs to be repressed. This imaginary inside/outside world constitutes an ideological battlefield of man and woman, but, since the social stage is dominated by patriarchal rules, this battle seems to be lost by the woman in advance. Kristeva further states that if patriarchy sees the woman as marginal in the symbolic order, that is to say the order dominated by the law of the father, then it can construct her as the borderline of that order. In her quest for equality, the woman stands at this borderline and wants to cross it to integrate man's world on equal terms. This intention or desire creates, in some way, a chaotic situation. Kristeva then concludes that from a phallogocentric point of view, the woman represents the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because the woman is seen as marginal, she seems to merge with the chaos of the outside (167).

The woman's repression by patriarchy also exemplifies Kristeva's notion of abjection she extensively articulates in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984)¹. To her, abjection is that which is "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you..." (4) Many writers take up her term to make it more accessible and understandable. David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2000) state that "abjection's ordinary meaning denotes being thought inferior, either by oneself or by others, something unworthy or vile, or less than human, and something to be cast out." (32) For Judith Butler (1990), the abject designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other'. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The constitution of the 'not-me' as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject. (181)

¹ This English version is from Margaret Walker.

These definitions, though different, meet on the idea that abjection is a state of being one is made to experience. In this state, the abject is thought of as uncanny and disgusting. He/she inspires something ignominious that repels. The social relations between man and woman exactly reproduce the same situation. Patriarchy assumes that the female sex must be kept under domination because it is inferior, marginal. It consequently develops an ideology of repulsion and depreciation to maintain the woman in what can be called a social and cultural castration.

The woman's discharge, to take up Butler's term, represents an expulsion from the social and cultural construction of gender identity. The woman is victim of a construction of a "not-me," that is to say that which is not part of me as subject and consequently must be expelled. This "not-me" – which repulses as an alien element, discharge, excrement – is produced by gender pride that prevents man from transcending his class ego to accept the woman as his equal. The concept of "not-me," then, sets the boundaries of gender identity construction. The woman's aspiration to be recognized as an active rather than a passive social subject is constantly challenged and frustrated through negation and privation. The fact that man refuses to acknowledge woman as a free and independent subject ascribes to a fundamentally existentialist context: to exist, in the male worldview, means to submit the other, the abject, to patriarchal rules. On the other hand, for the woman, to exist is to be able to act on her own behalf; but because male dominant culture is defined as social norm for gender identification, female identity represents a denial, a negation, and subjugation. The woman functions as man's subaltern, his other, in a sort of cultural cannibalism which she seeks to overcome. In their social interaction, man is the "cannibal" who leans on his historical position of the strong sex (that has been so rooted in the collective conscience of people that it is now taken for a cultural reality) to oppress the woman. At this level, the notion of castration as that which frustrates one's desire to act on one's free will plays an important role in the analysis of social relations. It imprisons the conscience and delays the legitimate aspiration for self-identification and self-assertion. And progressively, but surely, the victim becomes caught in a trap from which he/she cannot escape.

If in his relationships with the woman, man's ultimate goal is to keep the woman under his domination, it is also important to indicate that sometimes the woman herself contributes to her own castration by passively admitting patriarchal ideologies. In so doing, she justifies the social assumption that female identity is imposed on the woman from the outside. Through the woman's passivity, gender identity gets the characteristics of an imposition. It is true that the social world helps much by "formatting" the woman to a passive attitude. But she has her "play" in her subordination, which may make people think that she is a masochist subject. On many occasions, the woman refuses to play a foreground role; she prefers to let this place to the man. In daily life, we constantly see scenes in which the woman is prompt to disclaim a responsibility pretending that it falls to man. She usually takes refuge in declarations such as "I am only a woman, what can I do?" "This is a man's work or responsibility" or "I cannot decide in the absence of my husband" when she must take a decision concerning her family or her collectivity. Such declarations encourage man to take pleasure in what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) calls *libido dominandi* ("the desire to dominate").

Woman's refusal to assume some responsibility or other comforts or gives confidence to man in his position of a dominant subject. From then on, his *libido dominandi* increases while the woman sinks into domination: the more man desires to dominate, the more the woman's condition of a dominated subject takes form. Buchi Emecheta's text to which I referred earlier portrays this self-repression of the woman. Nnu Ego, the heroine, knows that, as a woman, the bride price paid for the marriage of her daughter Taiwo does not belong to her, but to Nnaife, the father. Since the latter is in prison, the price should be paid to her, as a parent. But according to the patriarchal conception of her community, she must not take the bridewealth because she is a woman. So, she makes sure the price is paid to Adim, her son, as the male representative of her husband (220). Outstandingly, Nnu Ego's refusal to assume the responsibility by taking the bride price testifies that in her community, and in most African communities, children belong first and foremost to the father, the man.

In addition to its desire not to let the woman enjoy the products of her sexuality, patriarchy maintains the woman in utter silence. Martha J. Cutter (1999) points out that "women's silence is part and parcel of a system of patriarchal representation that labels them as passive objects rather than active creators." (14) In many communities, the woman is silenced at many levels: political, cultural, and economic. This idea of confinement sends to Julia Kristeva's term of "metonymy of a want-to-be" she articulates in *Revolution of Poetic Language*. As already mentioned, man's wish to maintain the woman in the status of a subaltern ascribes to the central question of positioning. Such positioning is always motivated by a desire that Kristeva finds as a recurring pattern in otherness:

Desire is thus the movement that leaps over the boundaries of the pleasure principle and invests an already signifying reality – "desire is the desire of the Other" – which includes the subject as divided and always in movement. Because the subject is desiring, he is the subject of a practice, which itself can be carried out only to the extent that its domain – the "real" – is impossible since it is beyond the "principle ironically called pleasure." This desire, the principle of negativity, is essentially death wish and, only as such, is it the precondition of that practice, which can be considered, in turn, an effectuation of desire. (131)

Because man desires to control the woman, he has to silence her or deprive her of language. Language, indeed, is very important for the subject. It can condemn or release him/her. To deprive one of language is to posit one as a dependent subject in terms of language utterance. In such a position, the subject has no control of his/her linguistic self, since all the semiotic system is controlled by the dominant subject who is in the control of the linguistic structures as well. In the social world, the woman is spoken about but does not speak for herself. She has no voice or does not act as a speaking subject. Luce Irigaray qualifies this imposed discursive pattern as the woman's subjectivation to phallogocentric discourse. Thus, in *Le Langage des déments* ("The Language of Dementia", 1973), a study of the patterns of linguistic disintegration in senile dementia, Irigaray states: "Spoken more than speaking, enunciated more than enunciating, the demented person is therefore no longer really an active subject of enunciation.... He is only a possible mouthpiece for previously

pronounced enunciations.” (in *Moi*, 127) In the social structures of language, the woman evolves as a demented subject. Her passivity embodied in her declarations (that I mentioned here above), as her refusal to assume responsibility in her community are expressions of patriarchal language patterns. When the woman asserts face to a situation that she is only a woman, that such task or such responsibility falls to man, or that she cannot decide on her husband’s behalf, she reproduces patriarchal forms of domination. Her own language is for her a place of self-condemnation rather than one of release.

The question of the woman’s condition is one of the many issues facing human beings in the new world context. If globalization, with mass-production and consumerism, tends to unify the world into a huge planetary village, it is expected that social relations would also be “globalized”. Traditional relations between man and woman that confined the woman to the position of a subaltern, a demented subject, must be revised. The cultural patterns that shaped traditional society must also be rearticulated to fit the new world context. Ignacio Ramonet (1997) notes that this cultural readjustment embodies anthropologic culture, that is to say the culture of “the traditions rooted in the customs, that of villages, fairs, and feasts, of proverbs and superstitions, of peasant recipes, of grand-mother’s medicine and of traditional knowhow. This culture [...] still greatly defines mentalities; it is at the origin of numerous antinomies and serious misunderstandings.” (204-05, my translation) This statement underscores the premise that the new cultural world order reproduces aspects of the traditional cultural system. But it is Raymond Williams in John Storey (1991) who better exposes this cultural reproduction:

The traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its *contemporary* system of interests and values, for it is not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and interpretation. In theory, and to a limited extent in practice, those institutions which are formally concerned with keeping the tradition alive (in particular the institutions of education and scholarship) are committed to the tradition as a whole, and not to some selection from it according to contemporary interests. The importance of this commitment is very great, because we see again and again, in the workings of a selective tradition, reversals and re-discoveries, returns to work apparently abandoned as dead, and clearly this is only possible if there are institutions whose business it is to keep large areas of past cultures, if not alive, at least available. (55)

Unfortunately, the reproduction of these aspects of traditional culture in some cases has led to the historical division of work that debased the woman. Also, today, many countries are so confronted to development problems that they unconsciously develop a tendency to put the issue of gender equality at the background. In this context, it seems, the woman’s social identity will not improve as expected.

If the situation of the western woman has greatly improved throughout history mainly because of the improvement of human rights and the actions of numerous feminist movements, even though some pending barriers are still to lower, that of the under-developed and developing countries is still critical. In most African societies, for instance, the traditional barriers that stratify societies in gender classes still exist despite their contact with the western civilization. The numerous debates on or declarations in favor of this issue repeated at length by the leaders of these countries

are often ways to divert people's attention. Aminata Traoré (2002) is right to ask if in the Africa to build, African women can stand high by their men and claim, at the same time and like them, a new local and world order (117). This question extends to the whole world context. In most countries, the woman continues to live under the shadow of man. On the political scene, there are very few women who play important leading roles, the great mass being confined to secondary roles, generally under the supervision of men. At their workplace, women most often hold positions that have previously been organized and occupied by men. As regards wage level, there are great differences between man's and woman's incomes for the same job and the same amount of work. In addition, the woman is refused access to some jobs because she is thought to have physical features unfit for them. Sexually, if she decides not to sacrifice her erotic life, then she falls again under man's domination. Finally, despite its great promises to settle populations' preoccupations at a planetary level, globalization has not yet succeeded in finding a solution to gender inequality.

Sheila Rowbotham and Stephanie Linkogle (2001) are cogent enough to indicate, in the light of this failure, that women's mobilization for livelihood and rights is a resistance against globalization. A study of the women's movements for the improvement of their condition, in different parts of the world, their book pictures women's actions for emancipation: fight for environmental and reproductive rights, mobilization against poverty and racism, fight against the inequalities imposed by structural adjustment programs, and campaign for human rights. These different actions represent a skeleton of what globalization in terms of commonality and reduction of the disparities among populations fails to achieve. In fact, little consideration has been given to the question of whether the suppositions behind the theories of development or population policies actually relate to the realities and experiences of the woman herself. The historical portrayal of the woman as a passive recipient whose place is in the household continues to make its way. Economic development requires the woman's reproductive roles to support the household unit. But at the same time, it denies her reproductive rights through fixed notions of family size, fertility, and population control. There arises here a double role imposed on the woman: when she must procreate to sustain the family or the community, then her reproductive role is acknowledged. She is encouraged to bear children. In contrast, when the community's livelihood to which she greatly contributes is to be shared out, she is urged to help reduce the population size through the control of her fertility. In such circumstances, the woman appears as an article whose importance depends on the owner.

While the various approaches to the woman's roles in development are exposing the international development organizations' adherence to sexist assumptions about gender roles, little attention is paid to the interactions of other policies. Many international conferences or colloquia are organized that focus on the different actions to undertake in order to reduce the disparities between genders, but most often, the organizers do not implement the decisions taken. Sometimes, this does not occur for lack of means, but because of the patriarchal ideologies that still lie heavy on the collective conscience of the decision-makers. And if it is the woman who must undertake the necessary steps for the implementation of these decisions, she constantly faces obstacles or she is convinced that time is not appropriate for such

actions. Thus, from disappointment to disappointment, she either gives up or directs her energy to other goals not exclusively related to women's issues.

The declaration of the United Nations Women's Decade in 1976 was received with great enthusiasm insofar as it recognized the woman as an active participant in development through her productive and reproductive roles. This period saw the birth of many development policies such as the equity approach which located the woman's subordination in the family but also in her relations with man in the marketplace. The woman's independence therefore should be achieved through equity and her needs were positioned with their rights to earn a livelihood. As a matter of fact, the woman was to be drawn into the development process through access to employment and the marketplace. Another important approach, the gender and development approach (GAD), also came to life following the criticism that the previous development policies targeted the woman without actually questioning social relations. It noted that the roles that man and woman are assigned in society are socially constructed and not natural. It sustained that the reproductive activities have historically been taken for granted and the woman's contributions to the household economy has not been considered, hence her invisibility in the economy. Finally, for the GAD, the assumptions that man is the provider and the woman the consumer and a dependent are socially constructed (Rowbotham and Linkogle, 99-100). All this adds to the idea that the woman still has a long way to go for her social integration as man's equal.

What is the woman in the end? An independent human being or man's other? This is the problem that I have tried to elucidate all along this essay. Going from Simone de Beauvoir's assumption that one is not born a woman, that it is society that transforms the social roles assigned to man and woman, I have attempted to demonstrate that gender identity is actually a social construction. My argumentation was based on the idea that the social relations between man and woman are a reproduction of the capitalist system, with man as the capitalist and the woman as the labor force. Historically, the woman was confined to the private sphere of the family, her major roles being to take care of the household and to bear children. She was considered as man's subaltern, a constructed subject, an abject: she was man's other. The evolution of the mentalities and human rights has led to the expectation that the woman's traditional roles would change. Unfortunately, the same patriarchal ideologies that have defined and maintained her as a secondary subject continue to subjugate her. She is almost the same as formerly. Even though some notable actions are undertaken to improve her condition, the woman is still confined to her traditional social roles. The question now is to know if we should give up hope. At this level, Mary Wollstonecraft's response to the educational and political theorists of the eighteenth century who wanted to deny women an education is still topical: the woman ought to have an education commensurate with her position in society. She is essential to her nation because she educates its children and because she can be a true "companion" to her husband, rather than a mere wife. Instead of viewing the woman as an ornament to society or a property to be traded in marriage, she must be treated as a human being deserving the same fundamental rights as man. But this egalitarian and evolutionist vision of gender relations is far from becoming a reality. For, in a

world where patriarchal ideologies continue to act as social norms, femininity continues to be a socially constructed identity imposed on the female subject, a mask she is compelled to wear and that sticks to her like her own shadow.

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