

FEMALE IDENTITY IN GANGSTER MOVIES: A STUDY OF THE GODFATHER MOVIE

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of visual media, women have often been dehumanized and presented as objects of sexual gaze. This research endeavors to demonstrate how the gangster movie *The Godfather* denies women the identity of holistic human beings of flesh and blood, having personalities, needs and emotions. Female characters in *The Godfather* appear merely as interludes, with no direct relevance to the main plot of the movie. The world of *The Godfather* is ruled by muscular men where men assume the role of agents or subjects, and women appear (if they appear at all) only as objects, that are to be consumed by men. This paper analyzes the movie *The Godfather* in the light of the Objectification Theory that critiques the representation of women based on their body and its sexual functions.

Keywords: objectification, identity, sexuality, mafia, gangster.

INTRODUCTION

The American Film Institute defines Gangster Film genre "as a genre that centers on organized crime or maverick criminals in a twentieth century setting" ("American Film Institute"). The American Film Institute, in its news release on 28 May 2008, rated the top movies of ten classic genres. *The Godfather*, starring Al Pacino, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, was listed as the top film in the Gangster Film genre.

The western cinema has been unfair in depicting women in its films. Most twentieth century movies, and particularly the gangster movies, present women as either pious house wives, or whores. These movies tacitly reinforce the patriarchal structures of the society, dictating women what their status and role in a society must be. Since the world of gangster movies is a world that is ruled by men, women in such movies appear as mere interludes, with no direct part in the progress of the main plot.

Sexual objectification puts unbearable stress on women who fall short of the standards of physical beauty and sexiness created by media, particularly the popular gangster movies. A number of researches have directly linked sexual objectification to low self-esteem, stress, eating disorders and depression among women. Popular media, through songs such as "I'm in love with the shape of you" and gangster movies such as "*The Godfather*" influences young women, especially the high school girls, who

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tend to internalize objectification of their bodies, thus contributing to their own dehumanization. This research endeavors to highlight how gangster movies, in a number of ways, contribute to perpetuating environments where women are reduced to their bodies and sexual functions. Thus, this research can contribute towards the education of women, especially the high school girls, who suffer from inferiority complex and sometimes go as far as committing suicide for not coming up to the acceptable standards of beauty created by media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Godfather is one of the most famous mafia movies of the twentieth century. Because of its exceptional success as a crime movie, a lot of researchers have tried to delve deep into the world of crime and explore its various themes. One of the most researched areas with reference to The Godfather movie is its violence and bloodshed. Rehman and Ajmal, in their research paper published in 2014 argued that the much talked about violence of the Italian immigrants was actually a reaction to the social injustices that these immigrants had to bear in America (2014). Their research, quite convincingly, uses some theories based on psychology to link humiliation and discrimination with violence. The research postulates that "violence is often pursued as an anti-dote to humiliation" (Rehman & Ajmal, 2014).

As discussed in the paper, the Neutralization Theory explains violence of the characters who are denied social justice. According to this theory, every human being has an in-built moral code that keeps them from committing violence and delinquencies. Therefore, when a character commits a crime, "he has to think of some logic to off-ramp the inner values" (Rehman & Ajmal, 2014). Hence, the perpetrator of crime justifies his crime by blaming his circumstances, and thus, denies the responsibility of the crime. The same Theory of Neutralization has been applied by Rehman and Ajmal to link the criminal activities of the Corleone family with the injustices that this family was subjected to in Sicily as well as America. Don Corleone was a respectable and honest man who used to work hard to earn a living for his father. However, he was treated unfairly by the white American employers who hurled the basest of gratuitous insults towards Vito Corleone that he bore with a stone-face. When Vito Corleone is denied all fair chances, he takes the crooked road and thus raises to the top.

The movie starts with undertaker Bonasera bringing his plea to Don Corleone, after he was made a fool of by the American judicial system. The Don, in order to put out the fire of revenge burning inside Bonasera, gets the two American boys beaten to pulp, who had raped and beaten Bonasera's daughter: "Justice has been served, though in an unjust way" (Rehman & Ajmal, 2014).

Boddu opines that the achievement of "American Dream", which means to rise to the top hierarchy of power and wealth, is the binding string in all the gangster and mafia movies (2015). He explores the themes of glorification of violence, masculinity and revenge in The Godfather to reveal the darker side of the American Dream. Discussing the interesting aspects of the movie, Boddu claims that The Godfather owes its uniqueness to the fact that for the first time in the history of gangster movies, the humane side of these gangsters has also been shown. These gangsters are shown as family men, who dine with their family and never discuss business there; gangsters who attend church and baptism and weddings, and gangsters who have children and godchildren (2015).

Akkan, in his study of *The Godfather* novel, elaborately expounds on how the movie challenges and debunks the so-called American Dream. In his analysis of the last scenes of the movie, Akkan compares the church scene with the intermittent scenes of bloodshed and violence:

“While the baby is being prepared for the ceremony by the priests, we can see the gunmen shaving and getting dressed, as if them, too, are getting ready for a ritual about to take place. More ironically, as the priest asks Michael if he renounces Satan, he answers ‘I do’, and via the immediate crosscutting, we see his men start killing their enemies (2:40:40). When the baby is finally baptized officially with the holy water, the dead bodies left behind from the massacre are shown, cold with horrified expressions on their bloody faces. The calmness on Michael’s face at the meantime represents how reluctant he is against the massacre of extreme violent measures taking place in contrast to his godson’s holy baptism.” (2017)

This scene, in a nut shell, is an ugly metaphor for the underlying truth about the American Dream: The American Dream is not realized through toil and sweat, rather through frenzied violence and senseless bloodshed!

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Objectification Theory was presented by Barbara L. Fredrickson, from the University of Michigan, and Tomi-Ann Roberts, from Colorado College, in 1997. The Objectification Theory posits that “...many gender differences have little to do with biological body, and much more to do with differential socialization of boys and girls, and perhaps even more profoundly, with the different social status and power held by women and men in the society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).” The Objectification Theory claims that among all the forms of gender oppressions, sexual objectification is the most pervasive and has the most profound effects on the mental health of women (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). A host of other oppressions towards women, such as sexual violence as well as gender discrimination in employment stem from the sexual objectification of women. While explaining the theory of Objectification, Fredrickson and Roberts postulate that “The common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body (or a collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (1997).

The contemporary heterosexual culture suggests that it’s a “socially sanctioned right of all males to sexualize all females, regardless of age or status (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).” In doing so, the bodies of women are treated as objects of pleasure, to be consumed by men. One of the most prevalent means of sexual objectification of women is the sexualized gaze. Women are often subjected to sexualized gaze and since it is not in their hands to control or avert this gaze, it is hardly possible for them to avoid potential sexual objectification. Out of the three arenas of a sexually objectifying gaze, i.e., interpersonal and social encounters, presentations of these interpersonal and social encounters in visual media, and peoples’ encounters in visual media that spotlight women’s body curves (and thus seamlessly aligning viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze) Fredrick and Roberts find the last one to be the most insidious (1997). A plethora of researches suggests that sexual objectification of women’s bodies is not confined to pornography, rather can be pervasively found in mainstream movies, visual arts, magazines, paintings, television shows as well as sports photography (Fredrick & Roberts, 1997).

Discussing the “face-ism/ body-ism bias”, Fredrick and Roberts highlight how representations of women in various forms of media focus mostly (and sometimes exclusively) on women’s bodies or body parts; conversely, representations of men focus mainly on the head and face, bringing out the details and expressions in the face (1997). This body-ism is a kind of objectification suggesting that women can be represented exclusively through their bodies. Linking female objectification to patriarchy, Objectification Theory postulates that a woman’s physical attractiveness is suggestive of her reproductive function, and thus, men often rely on physical attractiveness of women for selection of spouse. This, in turn, reinforces the male dominance and power in patriarchal environments (Fredrick & Roberts, 1997).

This research will endeavor to unearth the identity of female characters in the movie ‘The Godfather’ within the framework of the above discussed Theory of Objectification.

ANALYSIS

The movie opens with Don Corleone at his home, listening to the plea of Bonasera while sitting in his office. The office is shown as dimly lit, with lights only falling on the two characters’ faces, with the rest of the background dark and invisible. The camera shows only the head and face of both the characters, and sometimes, showing the neck and shoulder as well. The scenes shot in Corleone’s office have no background music, thus focusing exclusively on the characters’ dialogues. The absence of light and music direct the viewers’ attention entirely towards the facial expressions of the characters, and their talks.

As Don Corleone conducts business inside his office, the scene shifts to the lavish garden of the house where the wedding ceremony of Don Corleone’s daughter is being held. Women, all dressed in attractive wedding gowns, sing and dance to the music. The camera captures the wedding scene from a distance so that no female guest gets any particular importance. One can see that the wedding scene denies identity to the female characters, where no woman gets a chance to speak anything worthwhile. While the entrance of Don Barzini is shown exclusively with a closer camera shot and audible exchange of words between the two dons, no such evidence can be found for the female guests. Even on the day of his daughter’s wedding, Don Corleone has to carry out business, and we see Tom Hagen, the Consigliere, kissing his wife as he leaves the wedding and goes inside the office (0:10:50). As he tells his wife he needs to go, the camera shoots the scene from behind the wife, not revealing who the wife was, only showing her shiny blonde hair beautifully done in a bun.

As the wedding proceeds, Sonny, Don Corleone’s eldest brother, eyes the bridesmaid. He whispers in her ear, and she gets up immediately, ready to submit her body unconditionally for Sonny’s sexual gratification. While the camera shows the bridesmaid in the distance getting up and moving towards the house into a private room, a few girls are shown more closely, laughing and ridiculing the bridesmaid on lack of her sexual appeal. The girls burst into a fit of laughter as one of them spreads her hands, showing what the bridesmaid’s boyfriend had once said about her, that she was “too big down there” (0:16:20 – 0:16:26). The scene shows how the pervasive objectification influences women to such a degree that they start internalizing it. So much so, that it’s not just the men who objectify women, rather women themselves fall prey to it and ridicule other women for not coming up to the standards of “sexiness”. Bridesmaid is laughed at by a group of female wedding guests because

they believe sexual attractiveness to be the only parameter to judge a woman. Evidently, this sexiness serves to please men, and hence, a woman's worth is measured on the scale of her ability to grant pleasure to men. This identity, as depicted in the above discussed scene, dehumanizes women and gives them a subordinate status to that of men.

While Jonny Fontanne sits in The Godfather's office discussing how his voice is going weak, The Godfather asks Tom for his son Sonny. Sonny is nowhere to be found among the wedding guests. As Tom knocks at the closed door asking for Sonny, the camera, for the first time, shows a female wedding guest clearly from the front. Here, once again, one sees objectification of women as the camera shoots the scene of Sonny and the bridesmaid having sex from above Sonny's shoulder, and in doing so, the viewer views the bridesmaid from the perspective of Sonny, assuming the role of the on-looker or the subject, where the bridesmaid is reduced to an object. This is the first scene since the movie began that involves a female character with no background music. As discussed earlier, the absence of music serves to focus the viewer's attention towards what is actually being said by the character. However, in this scene, the bridesmaid does not utter a single word. The only sound that the viewer can hear is the highly sensuous moaning of the bridesmaid. Hence, the shooting of the scene from above the shoulder of Sonny so that the viewer assumes the position of a voyeur, focusing of the bridesmaid's face as she distorts her features according to her sexual experience and the absence of background music to emphasize the moaning of bridesmaid contribute towards the objectification of the bridesmaid. In doing so, one can clearly see that gangster movies in general are filmed keeping in view the male audience who assume the role of voyeurs and direct their sexualized gaze toward women, treating them as sex objects.

The movie proceeds and Jonny Fontanne sits in The Godfather's office, telling him how his voice is getting weak and how his career is at stake. He tells the godfather wistfully that if he gets the role in the film *Wolz* is soon to make, he might once again rise to the top. *Wolz* had made it clear to Jonny there was no chance he could get the coveted role in that movie. In resignation, Jonny Fontanne sits with his head drooped, saying with hopelessness "Godfather, I don't know what to do... I don't know what to do" (0:23:55). Infuriated, the godfather springs up from his chair, and slaps Jonny in the face, telling him he should "act like a man". He shames Jonny on his weakness and helplessness saying, "Is this how you turned out? A Hollywood finocchio who cries like a woman?" (0:24:06) This is one of the most explicit examples where women are identified as vain cry babies who give up in the face of the slightest of challenges. Jonny Fontanne, in saying that he was helpless and hopeless, was acting like a woman, and the godfather tells him to act a "man".

In order to settle the matter with *Woltz*, the big shot who had bought movie rights to a bestseller, Tom Hagen flies all the way to California. While Tom eats dinner at *Woltz's* lavish house, *Woltz* tells Tom that although that part in the movie is perfect for Jonny Fontanne, he cannot grant that role to him, no matter what the consequences might be. He explains to Tom Hagen that he would go to the last limits in order to drive Jonny Fontanne out of business. The reason for his hatred, as he explains to Tom Hagen, is that "Jonny Fontanne ruined one of *Waltz International's* most valuable protégés". He then goes on to explain why that protégé was "the most valuable" asset of *Waltz International*: "She was beautiful. She was young and innocent. She was the

greatest piece of ass I have ever had and I have had them all over the world." (0:31:40 – 0:31:50). Here, the most valuable asset of the Waltz International, i.e., "the greatest piece of ass" is highly sexualized and dehumanizing representation of a woman. Thus, women are denied personalities and are not treated as holistic "human beings", having both body and soul.

When don Corleone refuses to accept Sollozo's offer, Sollozo tries to kill him so he could strike the deal with Sonny. Michael decides to take revenge on Sollozo and Mc Cluskey by shooting both of them at the restaurant where a meeting is planned to be held between the three. Clemenza, in his den, teaches Michael how to shoot and what to do after both Sollozo and McCluskey are dead. As one takes a closer look at Clemenza's den, it can be seen that there are some portraits hanging on the walls of the den. One of the portraits is a monk, draped in a modest gown and a cross hanging around his neck. Towards left is another portrait, a woman, her shiny, thin and long bare legs visibly pronounced against the dull background. As the camera moves farther to reveal the other pictures, one can see a portrait of a nude lady, wearing high heels and sitting on the floor, her arms crossed beneath her knees. Another portrait shows a woman sitting in the laps of a man with her back towards the viewer, the man's hand resting on her back. The wall that Michael and Clemenza stand next to shows a seminude woman, revealing the impeccable white skin of her upper body, staring in the eyes of the on-looker invitingly. Amid all the nude and seminude portraits of women, the portrait of a modestly dressed monk looks not only out of place, but also ridiculous. In all the portraits, women's curves have been conspicuously painted in order to draw the viewers' attention (1: 16: 04 – 1: 16: 50). These portraits, objectifying women's bodies, hang on the walls of a gangster's den, and are meant to be looked at by men. This is yet another example of how gangster films present women's bodies to be looked at for the sexual gratification of men. These portraits give just one identity to women, that of sensuous bodies, that wait desperately to get men's attention. It is ironic here, that the two men talking in the room have their bodies completely clothed, and the camera focuses their face, showing only the upper part of their bodies. Hence, this contradictory representations reinforce the face-ism/body-ism bias which presents women as objects, depicting their bodies, and men as holistic humans, showing their personalities.

Don Corleone returns from the hospital, and there is much hustle at the Corleone family's house. As the men gather in the godfather's room to talk business, all women huddle inside the kitchen and get busy in preparing food. Once the dinner is served, Carlo, the godfather's son-in-law tells his wife to "shut up" when she tells Sonny that their father never talked business at table. When Sunny warns Carlo angrily not to be disrespectful towards his sister, their mother tells Sonny "not to intervene" (1: 36: 32 – 1: 36: 45). Connie, Carlo's wife, becomes quiet submissively when her husband tells her to shut up. In the short scene where the godfather's family sits at the table, none of the women get to speak except Connie, and she too is told to "shut up" immediately. The women are shown usually as cooking meals, or looking after the children. The world of The Godfather is dominated by muscular men, where women rarely get any voice or representation.

The scene shifts from America to Sicily. Michael Corleone, walking through his home town Corleone, comes across a group of Sicilian women, and is attracted by the physical beauty of one of them. His bodyguards tell him that the Sicilian women are more dangerous than gunshots (1: 40: 23). Later, Michael and his guards sit at a local

ale house, and one of Michael's guards tells the host they've seen some real beauties, and describes the woman that particularly attracted Michael's attention: "Such hair... such mouth" (1: 41: 21). Infatuated by this Italian beauty, Michael decides to marry her, completely forgetting about his love interest Kay Adams he has left in America. While Kay awaits Michael in America, Michael marries Appolonia. Not only this marriage shows how men select their spouse by judging women entirely on their looks, but it also shows that to these men, women are completely dispensable objects.

The scene shifts to America again. There are men in black suits, guarding an apartment where Sunny has come to "to do his job" on Lucy Mancini, his mistress. The poor girl appears in the entire movie just twice, and both times, she appears as an object of Sunny's sexual gratification. So much so, that the poor girl's name has not been revealed in the entire movie, and one can guess her name only from the novel that the movie is based on. Not revealing this character's name shows how who she is does not even matter, since the sole purpose of her existence in this world of gangsters is to gratify men's need for sex. One can also see the internalization of objectification of this character, as she seems to be very happy at being Sonny's mistress. She sees Sunny off at the door with a hearty smile, while Sunny teases her when leaving: "I'll knock you dizzy" (1: 46: 44).

As Sonny reaches his sister's house to pick her, he finds that her pregnant sister has been beaten blue by her husband. Fearing her brother might beat her husband, Connie tries to convince Sonny it was her fault, and it was she who had started the fight (1: 47: 25 – 1: 47: 50). Connie, being a "good Sicilian wife", cannot see her husband to be hurt because of what he had done to her. Happy at her subordinate status, she does not mind being humiliated and beaten by her husband, despite the fact that she was in the family way, and this beating could have taken the life of her future child. Acting like a typical Sicilian wife, she has internalized her subservient status and accepts beating as the "normal" thing. Later, in an attempted plot to kill Sonny, Carlo calls Connie a "guinea brat" and beats her terribly, not caring the poor woman was soon to give birth to his first child. Carlo chases the pregnant Connie through the house with belt in his hand, beating her like an animal and hurling abuses at her. Despite this humiliating treatment and her husband's obvious part in Sonny's brutal death, Connie loves her husband with all her heart. Connie's character is a deplorable example of how women are raised in way that they accept a subordinate status as wives. Their role is defined on the basis of their gender, i.e. to look after their husbands and give birth to their children.

Back in Italy, Michael weds Appolonia, not once thinking about his love interest in America, Kay Adams, whom he had left without a word. Kay, failing to reach Michael in any possible way, desperately reaches his house in the New York. Tom Hagen tells her that Michael is alright but refuses to take the letter Kay has written to be delivered to Michael. Disappointed at not hearing a word from Michael for a long time, Kay resigns to her hometown, to her parents' house. The characters of Kay Adams, and the Sicilian girl Apolonia are particularly interesting. While in Italy, Michael does not think about Kay even once and marries Apolonia, never bothering about the hurt Kay would have felt if she got to know about this. When Apolonia dies and Michael returns to America, he marries Kay, without telling her anything about her previous marriage. Earlier, Michael had forgotten about Kay altogether and married Apolonia. Apolonia was pregnant with Michael's child, but died in the bomb planted in the car to kill Michael.

Michael then goes to meet Kay, and when asked, he tells her he had been back in America for more than a year (2:14:04). For an entire year, Michael had been in America, but he never bothered to meet Kay. This shows that both Kay and Apolonia had been entirely dispensable objects for Michael. After his unborn child and his wife Apolonia die, Michael then returns to Kay so that he could marry her, and have children by her. Thus, women, in this male dominated world, are just numbers that are replaceable whenever needed.

Soon after his marriage to Kay, Michael flies to Las Vegas to settle the casino business with Moe Greene. Freddo, working with Moe Greene in Las Vegas, knows in advance about Michael's visit, and makes arrangements for Michael. When Michael reaches the casino, Freddo takes him to a room crowded with semi-nude women and tells him all those girls were for him (2:20:44). When Michael does not like the idea and tells Freddo to "get rid of the girls", Freddo shoos them out of the room as if they were street cats that had entered into a house uninvited: "Hey, take off. Take off. Let's go. Hey, that's it. Hey, come on! Scram!" (2:21:14 – 2:21:22). These women appear in the movie as mute objects, who had been brought to entertain Michael, and were later told "scram". As they leave the room, none of them asks why they were being told to leave. They silently get up and exit the room.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the movie, it can be seen that the female characters appear as objects, primarily for their sexual appeal. If one analyses the women in the Corleone family, it is evident that none of them plays any part in the main plot. They are all "good housewives", subservient to their husbands, taking care of their children. The female characters in *The Godfather* that are not the members of the Corleone family appear mainly as prostitutes, providing sexual pleasures to the gangsters. The identity given to the female characters in the movie is that of either pious housewives, or sluts. The movie denies the identity of holistic human beings to women. Besides, the movie also shows how the women have completely internalized their objectification, and they do not seem to be aware of their inferior status in comparison to men's. The women seem to be satisfied, rather happy at their objectification.

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