

The Mirror and the Market: Surveillance, Femininity, and Abjection in Pig Tales.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the relation between femininity, surveillance and self-discipline ingrained in the lives of females, making them more submissive and weaker as depicted in the novel, Pig Tales written by Marie Darrieussecq. This study tends to help them gain agency by realizing their importance and self-worth. Utilizing theoretical lens proposed by Julia Kristeva in her theory of Abjection. The study delves into how females are treated as subjects of self-doubt in the neo-liberal world. Using a detailed textual analysis the selected text studies to demonstrate how the submissive females become a victim of abuse and manipulation at the hands of the male dominated society. The protagonist's transformation into a pig is a critique on the individualized femininity and the female body as it reveals the bodily control culture rooted in the patriarchal society. The interpretation of the discourse through the lens of neoliberal beauty tradition reveals how the narrative acts as a satire on both the inherent practices of self-policing and surveillance in the lives of contemporary women.

Keywords: Individualized identity, Abjection, Self-surveillance, Feminist literary criticism, Femininity

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, humans are hegemonized by neo liberal beliefs and femininity over time has been exploited, supervised and controlled. Women in our society are reckoned not only to follow certain alluring norms but are expected to inhibit and imitate them in their existence. With the ongoing trends the female body has become a victim to intense surveillance and gradually it has made women lose their self-expression and assertiveness. The consumer culture, cosmetic industries and role of social media have integrated the concept of idealized femininity in women. This ultimately leads them to persistent self-surveillance, self-control and transformation. The constant internalized pressure is specifically portrayed in many literary works and through the use of satire the writers critique the capitalist society and the certain gender norms that have been established by it.

Marie Darrieussecq's novel Pig Tales also titled as Trusimes, published in 1996 is a ruffling portrayal of the contemporary society molding and constructing the feminine identity. The narrative revolves around an unnamed female protagonist who while working in a beauty boutique suffers from constant pressure of following the modern beauty standards and undergoes a bizarre transformation into a pig. The metamorphosis acts as a metaphor for the drastic outcomes of the strict gender expectations of the capitalist's exploration of the women's body. It showcases how surveillance culture refers not only to the emotional well-being in fact it is linked with the physical appearance of the female too. The constant tension and outward humiliation women face serves as a dichotomy offering the feminist critics a fertile ground of critique.

This study highlights the issue and constant demand of bodily perfection and control women have to experience living in the capitalist societies. Women often do not realize how these expectations are simply not imposed from the patriarchs but are internalized and depicted in their routine lives too. The novel questions this structure and provides a lens through which the female body is taken under observation and

seen as a site of criticism and resistance.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how the novel *Pig Tales* condemns the systems of aesthetics, authority and conformity of the neo liberal femininity through the portrayal of bodily transformation. It aims to reveal how Darrieussecq uses the absurd to uncover the ways self-regulation and surveillance that takes place through the gender constructed norms.

Research questions:

- In what ways the novel presents the female body as surveilling and disciplined?
- How is the transformation of the protagonist an illusion of Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection?
- How does *Pig Tales* act as a critique on the commodification of femininity in the neo liberal society?

Theoretical framework:

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection explained in the book *Powers of Horror* (1982) best fits this study. Abjection referring to the exclusion when someone disrupts the social and bodily limitations. The Abject is considered as something that is not completely a person or an object but its existence disturbs people. The metamorphosis is a depiction of this idea as the pig shows how the lass' body no longer conforms to the beauty standards set by the society. Hence, she can be seen as a literal embodiment where the rejection by the society takes her as a danger to the norms she once practiced. This study is a contribution to the feminist literary criticism as it features how the grotesque and bodily transformation can be combined in the contemporary literature. The text examines the psychological effects on women while conforming to the feminine ideals. The application of Julia Kristeva's theory on the research offers understanding on how the female body becomes an Abject and an embodiment of resistance and discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Feminist Views on *Pig Tales*:

The novel revolves around an unnamed young lass who gradually transforms into a sow. This work is an exploration of how the female body and identity are exploited in the society and what beauty standards have been set by the patriarchs. The narrative is a representation of how women have always been objectified, degraded and seen as nothing but disgrace by the society. Sallie Muirden in her article on magical allegorical representation draws parallelism between a pig and the female body. She mentions how the narration is a critique on the beauty standards of how a female's worth and identity are linked to sexual desirability and her physical appearance. The disgust towards the so called flawed female bodies has been criticized by a grotesque transformation. Sallie mentions how the society pressurizes the women to follow the rigid beauty standards and devalues or alienates them if they fall short from any of it. The work is a study on how despite living in the postmodern era women are bound to follow the patriarchy and have absolutely no control over their body (Muirden, 2003). She mentions how the body and the biological clock are not always in a woman's control. It has the tendency to regrow, reshape and release mainly due to the hormonal changes taking place inside. Darrieussecq has clearly challenged the conventional norms and gender roles associated with women. She creates a narrative in which she depicts how a female's worth is wholly dependent on her bodily appearance. With the view of cacotopia along with the use of satire the writer has showcased how women are animalized and punished for non-conformity. Despite the fact that feminist readers give insight to the primary issue, they still take the transformation

narrative into principal consideration leaving behind the multiple dynamics of internalized discipline and control.

Parayre in the article *Beauty is a Beast* deconstructs the beauty norms and interprets the metamorphosis of the girl as a feminist critique of the argument that a female's value lies in her ability to appear desirable. She dismantles the misogynistic culture and the idea that beauty in women can only be seen through their outer appearance. The transformation from a girl into a pig acts as both a literal and symbolic representation of resistance towards the idealized feminist perspectives. The changes in her body make her less palatable to the public which is the depiction of the idea that appearance is preferred over everything. (Parayre, 2003) The aversion towards the woman and her bodily functions aligns with the notion of Abjection. Moreover, the historical linkage between the female and the animal is used as a misogynistic trope to degrade and associate shame with females. The conversion and development of animalistic features in the lass illustrate how the body begins to deviate from the norm and how the protagonist feels both elimination and repugnance. Building upon this, Parayre observes that even when her body was in the state of deterioration the voice of the protagonist remained reflective. It highlights another main disconnection between the female body and mind. Women while focusing onto their physical appearance completely ignore their own perspectives and the world inside them. Parayre showcases how Darriesscq has made use of dark satire in order to expose the absurdity attached with the beauty norms and has rejected the traditional fairytale narrative by reconstructing the established beauty into beast.

Female Body Commodification in the Neo-liberal world:

In her influential work "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", the famous feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky ramps up Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. She applies the concepts to the regulation of female bodies and points out his neglect towards the gendered dimensions attached to this. Foucault draws attention to how systems encourage "docile bodies" fostering them through the suasive ways of control. While criticizing this Sandra argues that females in our society are taught how to sit, look and act. Women often don't realize how the pressure to fit in the beauty standards leads them to continuously correct themselves. Women are made to act according to specific power disciplines where she controls her emotional expressions, her physical appearance and the beauty regimes. (Bartky, 1990) Hence, these become internalized. The female body becomes the subject that continuously engages in self-correction and self-control leading to perfect toned bodies that allure the patriarchal society. Sandra's work can be studied in relation to the narrative of *Pig Tales* where the narrator is shown working in a perfume shop and her world revolves around beauty products. The girl has to meticulously engage in personal care and maintain her physical appearance. She suffers from constant internal anxiety due to the way she looks which is a reflection of the concept of internalized discipline in women. The metamorphosis into a sow symbolizes the destruction of the ideal "docile body". Deviating from the norms and the social expectations leads her to face disgust and rejection from people around her. Through this view, *Pig Tales* showcases how discipline and surveillance are ingrained in feminine practices and aligns with Sandra Lee Bartky's critique on the contemporary male-centric culture.

Päivi Koponen in her research illustrates Julia's concept of Abjection as she regards *Pig Tales* as a dystopian novel that blurs the boundaries between humans and animals. The societal anxieties such as surveillance and conformity that a woman goes through in a society due to communist and patriarchal systems have been addressed (Koponen, 2009). The work highlights how animality and metamorphosis can be used as a theoretical ground for studying the neo-liberal femininity.

Adherence to strict rules and surviving under constant impositions makes the female identity subjective and disciplined. The protagonist of the novel is shown to be mute and lacks the ability to question her

situation just like every other woman of the society. It happens to be a typical example of how a female body is controlled, objectified and treated as a commodity.

The article, “Neoliberalism and popular women’s culture: Rethinking choice, freedom and agency.” by Eva Chen questions the use of feminist language in relation to choice, freedom and agency within the neo-liberal discourse. Neo-liberalism focuses on the concept of free market values and portrays young women as sexual subjects who willingly make choices unlike the traditional passive women. With the rise of ‘Girl Power’ in 1990’s women sexuality and erotic bodies are being flaunted in the neo-liberal society. The media industry plays a major role in putting the female bodies to display. The All-Girls’ music bands, the alluring movies and the seductive lingerie advertisements objectify the female body. The advances in technology has given rise to the aesthetics industry in which bodily makeover and surgeries have become common. Hence, the demand and hopes for the flawless female body is increasing in the neoliberal society. The article discusses this transformation of viewing the female as sexually objectified to sexually subjectified in the contemporary world. Despite the fact that emphasis of the neoliberals remains on the concept of ‘Free Women’ but they still end up acting according to the demands of the control culture. Women in the neoliberal society are depicted as free but the surveillance culture has been embedded to such an extent that it cannot be uprooted now. The Patriarchal society and capitalists have always promoted the typical heterosexual relationship to adorn the erotic female body. From cosmetics to advertisements or from media to discourse studies women are seen as dependent and unhappy subjects(Chen,2013). All women irrespective of their profession and background are seen as needy and yearning for male partners. Chen’s article provides a critical lens by satirizing the commodification of the female body. It portrays how women who fail to idealize the contemporary beauty standards are ultimately rejected or treated as discarded. Hence, it is a socio-political commentary on how the females subjugate themselves by actively constructing their identity through the media, beauty and media industry.

METHODOLOGY:

The research uses the qualitative approach by the conducting a close textual analysis of the novel. The narrative structure and imagery used by the author has been analyzed. The analysis explores how Marie Darrieussecq has critiqued on control women face while living in the neo liberal society. The narration is both a critique and a representation of how femininity and surveillance play a part in the lives of women. The analysis of Julia Kristeva as presented in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980) provides the main theoretical framework for this research. Abjection according to Kristeva is the course through which any individual refuses and rejects anything that disrupts their personal or social boundary. The theory applies to Pig Tales in which the collapse of idealism is depicted through the girl’s transformation into a pig ultimately resulting her exclusion from society. The notion serves as a censorious lead in analyzing that how the depiction of bodily disturbances in the novel destabilizes the regular and socially accepted ideals of femininity. The following key points from the text have been taken into consideration for a targeted analysis. Firstly, the mirror gazing scenes of the protagonist showcase how continuous watchfulness and self-surveillance is practiced by women to meet the societal expectations. These instances are a reflection of how internalized discipline leads to emotional burden. Secondly, the beauty boutique is analyzed as a symbol of commodification where the female body is treated as an internalized product. Lastly, the human transformation into a pig is studied through the concept of abjection. The transformation is taken into account acting as a metaphor for the rejection of violently imposed feminine notions. Through the critical reading of the text the role of gender and bodily control is interpreted. The study uncovers how Pig Tales acts as a narration of the constant pressure women’s bodies suffer from. The methodology discusses a few selected scenes from the text that are packed with symbolism and reveal the internal and external pressures associated with feminine regulation. Close reading and analysis has shown how Darrieussecq uses the repetitive theme of bodily abjection and self-discipline. Ultimately, the study

presents a profound reflection on the societal structures that demand perfection from the female and punish the ones who reject or fail to meet the criteria.

ANALYSIS:

The novel is set in Paris but the reader finds no evidence of the setting in relation to the time period of the novel which portrays the transformation of the woman as universal. The narrator's realization about the changes in her physical appearance, her being alienated from the society and then her eventual transformation into a sow-looking woman is a reflection of the novel being allegorical in nature. The emphasis remains on the psychological and social changes rather than being on the chronological order of time. The writer has knowingly kept it unveiled because the humiliating treatment towards women in terms of their body, status and conformity have always been a part of every society hence the novel acts as a timeless critique on the social structures, role of media, the consumer culture and the notions of identity.

The protagonist indulging in the practice of maintaining herself since the beginning of the novel reflects how much of she is obsessed with her physical appearance. It seems that her identity is only dependent on her being socially presentable. Julia Kristeva's notion of identity being dependent on the pure self is reflected in the text. The mirror is a powerful symbol used in the novel as it forms the relation between the continuous self-monitoring females go through being a part of the neoliberal world.

The mirror cannot be treated as just an object of reflection instead it acts as a site for the protagonist to correct herself. One glance in the mirror and the protagonist inspects herself according to the socially constructed idols of the society.

I'd put on weight-four or five pounds, perhaps-because I'd started feeling constantly hungry, and I could see in the mirror that those pounds had distributed themselves nicely around my figure. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 03)

Any deviation from the ideal becomes an imperfection or flaw which makes her act as an external observer and reflect the idea of internalized gaze among women. The watchfulness of the protagonist is itself an act of self-abjection where she desires to appear perfect. The mirror on the other hand reflects the reality and destroys the protagonist's illusion of flawlessness. The protagonist uses her energy to conform to the beauty ideals which mask the intense psychological and emotional turmoil she undergoes. Thus, every glance in the mirror contributes to the protagonist suffering from bodily suppression and the effort to conform with the neo liberal standards.

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection broadens the understanding of novel for the reader. Abjection according to her is a process through which a person gets rid of any impurity that threatens the identity. The protagonist of the novel is the prime example of this as her beauty regime is a representation of the practices of abjection.

I washed my entire body, soaping every last little corner, trying to get clean. A most peculiar odor clung to my skin. The hairs were especially repulsive. I dried myself carefully with a nice fresh towel, patted on some talcum powder, and felt somewhat better. Then I shaved my legs and tried to do the same with my back, nicking myself slightly (it's hard to shave your own back). (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 46)

She continuously shaves her body so that no body hair becomes visible to any of her clients. She always acts cautious of her makeup so that no scar or freckle can be seen and she makes sure that she smells heavenly all the time. These attempts to purify her body by removing everything unpleasant that threatens

the concept of the 'Ideal woman' is where abjection plays its role.

The broader view of the mirror scene establishes the theme of fragmentation in which the female is treated both as a subject and an object. Her subjectivity is fractured which results in the collapse of identity. Similar to the protagonist of the novel where the rigid internalized beauty standards paved way for her decline.

Hence, the protagonist's relation with the mirror at the start of the novel foreshadows the deterioration towards the abjection she suffered through the bodily changes occurring in her. The continuous attempts to maintain her feminine image reveals how the neo liberal society promotes the ideals of perfection for women removing every possibility of a flaw.

The protagonist's workplace acts as a microcosm in the novel. While working at the beauty boutique the girl delves into the idealized form of femininity. From just selling products to her becoming a sex worker she remains in the constant struggle to appear polished and presentable. Her outer appearance becomes inseparable from her economic role and she realizes that only maintaining her physical allure will help her attain professional success.

Honoré said that with a body like mine and such a blooming appearance, I would get all the ritzy boutiques I wanted. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 08)

In the shop the protagonist remains in constant need of self-purification in order to conform to the beauty ideals. But all in vain, as the body acts in accordance to nature. It is bound to age and expand due to the changes occurring in it. Hence it becomes a threat to the polished image presented by the society.

Every minute change in the body becomes noticeable for her and adds to a threat to her socio economic importance. Her profession becomes an abjection here as she gradually dismantles and rejects any change in her physical appearance that does not conform to perfection.

The director forced me to lower my prices, and in order not to reduce the firm's earnings I had to cut my percentage. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 42)

The workplace is seen as a site of exploitation rather than a place for female emancipation. The place blurs the boundaries between the bearable and the hideous.

In addition, the shop also exploits the protagonist emotionally. In the urge to appear charming and stimulating desires within men she continuously hides her exhaustion and restlessness.

I swiped the products recommended by the magazines and smoothed creams carefully onto my skin, but nothing helped. I was just as fatigued; my head was still in a muddle. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 39)

The workspace's environment is a depiction of the role of the neo liberal capitalists. Abjection is enforced through the system of commodification where the female is bound to repress her bodily processes and appear to be flawless. She is expected to behave just as a controlled and disciplined product and failure to do so destructs this façade.

Hence, the physical transformation of the girl is the exposing of such controlled systems where the female is placed under the violent societal expectations.

The loss and collapse of identity is evident through the physical transformation of the protagonist.

The change in her human form is what aligns with Kristeva's definition of Abject. The society rejects the transformation in order to maintain its order. Her commodified feminine identity is collapsed and she becomes socially unacceptable.

The loss of menstruation is where the protagonist's body transformation begins. Her period cycle vanishes which is not only a physical change but is considered to be a loss of productivity and the idea of conventional femininity.

My periods still hadn't returned. I kept getting hungrier, and to vary my meals I'd bring hard-boiled eggs, some chocolate. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 13)

Absence of menstrual cycle acts as something outside the symbolic order which defines the key idea of Kristeva's theory. Her body defies the biological pattern and leaves her to be socially unacceptable. The loss of female period cycle is an abject being the naturally occurring process of the body and something that is considered a taboo in the society.

According to the patriarchal norms the disappearing of menstruation cycle brings in the idea of the loss of womanhood and fertility. The body of the protagonist is no longer viewed as beautiful or a source of commodification hence the girl is titled as monstrous as she acts uncontrollable.

The body changes taking place are referred as impure in the views of the society. The boundary between the animal and human and the pure and impure is blurred causing disgust amongst the reader.

Every slight change adds into abjection. The protagonist's once flawless skin changes to roughness, her perfectly toned body becomes thick and she starts making animal sounds. The body stops acting in accordance to the natural process which counts as a loss or abject. The socially undisciplined female body is to be expelled in order to maintain morality in the society.

The skin of my back was red, hairy, with strange grayish spots running down my spine. My thighs, once so firm and well proportioned, sagged beneath a mass of cellulite. My rear end was as smooth and fat as a huge pimple. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 49)

Also, the societies' merciless reaction plays its role in rejecting the new identity of the protagonist. She gets rejected by the people around her when she loses the womanly body. This change makes her an outcast and in order to maintain the social order the society simply abjects her calling her a monster. What the society does not realize is the objectification that the Protagonist suffers from.

I saw Honoré looming over me, opening his mouth as if for a kiss, then biting me savagely in the bacon. I saw my clients pretending to nibble the flowers at my cleavage so that they could sink their teeth into my neck. I saw the director ripping off my uniform and howling with laughter at discovering six teats instead of two breasts. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p.46)

The protagonist becomes undefinable and her identity becomes unclassified. Her bizarre figure disrupts the social order because neither she is human nor an animal.

I counted and recounted, there was no mistake: that made six all right, including three fully formed breasts. (Darrieussecq, 1996, p. 49)

Eventually, she loses her job and all her entities. Every social structure that relied upon her feminine ability rejects her. Building upon this, the metamorphosis into a pig cannot be seen just as a biological

transmutation instead it symbolizes the abjection of lost femininity due to the neo liberal expectations. The protagonist herself becomes a brutal example of the effects of commodification and surveillance.

Through Kristeva's lens, the novel portrays how the abject female acts as both a reality and danger for the society. Kristeva's theory showcases what the society tries to hide -the mess, the decay and the downfall. Throughout the novel, the protagonist's journey is revealed. From self-development to suffering from bodily abjection the narrator exposes the interconnection between the female consumer and control culture. The Theory of Abjection reveals how the failure of maintaining a perfect feminine body leads not only to exclusion from the society but also to the total collapse of the female identity. Hence, the narrative is a critique on the neo liberal and patriarchal society that tends to define the female body.

CONCLUSION:

Marie Darrieussecq's pig tales offers a stinging critique on how the contemporary society treats the female body. The intense forms of discipline and commodification ultimately make the female body oppressive. The female bodies that do not conform to the ideal standards of neo liberalism are usually rejected and seen as a disgrace. Similar to the transformation of the protagonist of the novel which reveals the influence that the internalized self-control and discipline have on the lives of women. The protagonist being continuously concerned about her appearance, her work dynamics and her physical transformation all relate to the systems of control that are discussed by the post-feminist theorists like Sandra lee Bartky.

The application of Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection in the analysis portrays the transformation the protagonist goes through while being excluded from the social and the symbolic order. Her rigorous practices of grooming depict her inner desire to maintain her allure in the male centric society. Her body deviating from the norm is marked by the absence of menstruation which makes her abject and the society considers her disgusting.

Abjection operates on various stages in the narrative. It takes form in terms of retribution to not conforming to the standards and it acts as a symbol of resistance where beauty ideals are challenged. The metamorphosis is a bizarre portrayal of the horrors of womanhood. It showcases the underlying consequences the female body undergoes if it refuses to be chained or tamed. The abject provides a critical lens to feminist literary criticism as it destroys the binaries of the subject- object, pure-impure and feminine-monstrous. Hence, the concept of Abjection is applicable to gendered body literary texts. For future research, scholars can compare Pig Tales with body-horror texts and explore what role Abjection can play in Queer narratives where issues of bodily control take on political significance.

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