
UNIT 5 COMMODIFIED BODIES

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Thanks to women's ongoing struggle in the private and public world, we have inherited ideas, concepts and language to subject sexuality to a rigorous critical analysis. The sex market is a relation of objectification, appropriation, and exchange. A woman's body is treated as a commodity, a gift, and an object of desire. Her sex, surrogacy services, biological resources and even babies are appropriated. Her genuine autonomy, subjectivity, freedom, and sexuality are denied while men's power as consumers is enhanced.

In a sexist society like ours, women are exchanged as a property in a number of social practices such as pornography, prostitution, escort services, sexual harassment, erotic dancing, strip shows, phone-sex/ cybersex and forced marriages/child marriages. Sexualisation occurs in many forms that range from sexual violence to sexualized evaluation which may even be passing a furtive glance over a woman's body. In this unit, we will build a conceptual framework to understand how and why a female body is commodified in the social practices of pornography and prostitution. We will also examine these within a legal context and identify strategies which help to resist the ongoing commodification of women's bodies.

5.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explore how a female body is objectified and commodified in a sexist society;
- Identify the complex processes through which a woman is depersonalized;
- Analyse the attributes of sexual objectification;
- Explain the commodification of a woman's body as a property;
- Discuss 'prostitution' and 'pornography' as the two major social practices that deprive women of human dignity and worth;
- Comprehend the legal status of 'pornography' and 'prostitution' in Indian laws; and
- Identify feasible strategies to help in transforming women from sex objects to human agencies.

5.3 SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification and commodification are two key terms in our analysis. They are parallel to the Marxian terms 'use value' and 'exchange value'. When body parts are objectified, they have use value, and when they are turned into commodities, exchange value is inscribed on them.

The body is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, mediating our experiences. The human body has been perceived in a variety of ways. To **Karl Marx**, it is an economic body while for **Sigmund Freud**, 'Anatomy is destiny' and 'the body is sexual'. The modern reproductive biologists hold that it is a hormonal body. The population experts consider it as a fertile body. All these views are fragmentary and do not treat the body as a whole. As you have already read in the unit on 'Racialized Body' (Unit 3, Block-1, MWG 004), the body is racialized based on skin colour, facial features, body types, and sexual anatomy. For instance, if you browse through the matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers and magazines, you will

invariably find that a high premium is placed on fair, tall, slim girls in the marriage market. In a sexist society, all available ideological and socio-economic factors converge in constructing a sexually alluring female body.

5.3.1 The Other

One problem that feminists face is how to theorize about the female sexed body without reducing it to a sexual body. Feminists attempt to inform why and how such reduction happens. The concept of objectification owes much to the famous work of **Simone de Beauvoir**, *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir dwells on the dualistic mode of viewing woman as ‘the Other’. Following **Levi-Strauss** and **Hegel** she observes that dualism is as primordial as consciousness itself. In a gender dichotomy, men and women are viewed as opposites. The body of a man and body of a woman are visualized differentially and discriminated. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir,

“... The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less” (Simone de Beauvoir, 1952, p. 17).

Otherness and equality cannot coexist. Whether a woman is viewed as an inferior being or viewed as mysterious and morally superior, she is the ‘other’ to a man.

Once oppositions are institutionalized, a hierarchy is set up, placing one category above the other. The unequal ranking thus considered is taken for granted, as natural, immutable, and inflexible. In a sexist society, a woman is ranked low. Simone de Beauvoir, citing Bordo emphasises that a woman “is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.” (Beauvoir, 1952, p.17) Being the Other to a man, a woman is subjected to a reduction process. She is reduced from a person to a mere body which is easily objectified, measured and turned into a commodity in the sex market and reproductive technology market. Let us now try to understand, what constitutes objectification of the body with reference to sexual objectification.

5.3.2 Attributes of Sexual Objectification

Martha Nussbaum in her *Sex and Social Justice* (1999) identifies seven distinct kinds of actions that may or may not be part of objectification in any given instance: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility,

violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 218). These attributes can be applied to the commodified bodies of women.

When a woman's body is depersonalized and viewed as a thing, she is treated as a tool for a man's desire and thus serves the purpose of instrumentality. When she is treated as if lacking in agency or self-determination, her autonomy is denied. When a woman's body is viewed as an inert object, it is used as an exchange item for money in selling and buying anything and everything. Fungibility (a good or asset's interchangeability with other individual goods/assets of the same nature/class that simplifies the trading process) in this sense means that a woman's body is treated as if interchangeable. When her body is considered as a commodity owned by another, she loses the ownership of her body. When she is treated as if there is no need to show concern for her feelings and experiences, it is denial of her subjectivity.

Check Your Progress:

Define sexual objectification with the help of any examples that you may have come across in the news or in your everyday life.

5.4 COMMODIFICATION OF A FEMALE BODY

In the previous section, you were introduced to the concept of objectification. You must have understood by now that both objectification and commodification are mutually inclusive concepts and they reinforce each other to be sustained in the market. The female body and its parts have long been a target for commodification within myriad cultural settings. Commodification of sex, generally, means that a female body is treated like a commodity, bought and traded, sold and negotiated. The Oxford Dictionary reveals that throughout the 16th century, the term 'commodity' embodied a sense of convenience or utility. But with the rise of capitalism and market economy, it gave way to impersonal and self-interested patterns of exchange and profit. 'Everything can be commodified' is the emerging sentiment. There is a growing 'consumerisation' of parts of the body from cradle to the grave. The amazing scientific and technological growth in the field of Biology finds a female body a rich mine. **Donna Dickenson (2007)** calls it a new Gold Rush, where the territory is the human body. Human eggs are used in huge numbers for the stem cell technologies and women's tissue is worth more than men's. Women are deprived of their rights in terms of control over their bodies.

5.4.1 Dismemberment of the Female Body

Sexual objectification disregards the personal and intellectual capabilities of a woman and reduces her to the status of a mere instrument. A woman is spoken of or interpreted only as a body; either the whole body is objectified or body parts fetishised. A depersonalized body is easily and profitably exchanged in the sex market. **Andrea Dworkin** (1979), a radical feminist, writer and an ex-prostitute herself, writing on the abuse of a woman's body in prostitution, states: "In prostitution, no woman stays whole. It is impossible to use a human body in the way women's bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. It's impossible. And no woman gets whole again later, after" (<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourl.html>). Hence the female body, objectified and commodified in social practices such as pornography and prostitution, is fragmented, mauled and broken into parts, and not seen as whole.

5.4.2 Woman as a Property

Devaluation of women begins with property ownership, a seizing, objectification and commodification in an exchange market. **Claude Levi-Strauss**, in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), emphasises that men have traded in women throughout most of human history and have regarded them as currency in every country of the world, in societies where monetary system was never arrived at. Thus, in a system controlled by men, women are placed under the control of men and their value determined by men.

As you have already seen in the unit on "Formative Feminism" (Unit1, Block 5, MWG001), **Marxist feminists** argue that the capitalist mode of production is the cause of women's subordination. With the introduction of private property, women became the property of men and the first oppressed class. **Fredric Engels** in his famous work *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) describes the colonisation of women as 'the world historic defeat of the female' (pp.120-121, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02c.htm>). To Radical feminists, the control of women's sexuality in a patriarchal society is at the root of all forms of oppression.

'The personal is political' because women are subordinated not only in the public world but also in the private worlds of family, marriage, sexuality, and biological reproduction. Women's conversion of subjective self into commodities have led to their subjugation to the market, hence they are eventually alienated from their own bodily existence and experiences.

5.5 ALIENATION

Pornography shapes both female and male sexual desire into victim/abuser roles. It is a sexuality of dominance and submission. This structuring is similar to worker/capitalist dialectic in Marxism.

Marx identifies four types of alienation in labour under capitalism:

- Alienation of the workers from themselves
- Alienation of the workers from other human beings
- Alienation of the workers from their product
- Alienation of the workers from nature (Marx, 1844, cited in Vieta, 2007).

We can see how women suffer alienation in forms similar to the workers' subjugation in capitalism. **Firstly**, women are alienated from themselves by the manner in which males control female sexuality. Not only is a female relentlessly treated as a sex object but also subjected to "dismemberment" which means parts of a woman's anatomy are portrayed in isolation from the whole. The idea is that a woman is nothing but a sum of her bodily parts. As a result, fragmentation occurs within their minds and she becomes a sex object to herself, taking toward herself the attitude of a man. She adorns, beautifies, and decorates herself as a sex object in a sort of fantasy. **Sandra Bartky** calls it 'feminine narcissism' (Bartky, 1982). Given this fragmented consciousness, women cannot discover their own sexual interests and potentials.

Secondly, women, like workers in capitalism, do not enjoy common interests or come together as a community. They fail to see the commonly shared interests among themselves. The need for economic security forces them to depend on men and compete with each other in proving their loyalty to the man. In such a sexual competition, women appraise each other's attributes in comparison. They fail in establishing a collective fellowship to ensure their autonomy and self-worth.

Thirdly, women are alienated from the product of their procreative capacities, birthing of children, and bringing up children. In the hands of medical technology, childbirth is defined as a 'medical emergency', 'an alienated labour', placing the woman at odds with her body. **Adrienne Rich** in her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution* (1976) describes her own experience of giving birth: "... The experience of lying half awake in a barbed crib, in a labor-room with other women moaning in a drugged condition, where no one comes except to do a pelvic examination or give an injection, is a classic example of alienated childbirth" (Rich, 1976, p.176). Even the mother-child relationship is dictated and codified by ambivalent patriarchal standards. The modern mothers,

pushed to a situation where they have to raise their children single-handed, are subjected to a great physical and mental stress and haunted by a sense of guilt at their inability to manage the children. But when the children grow up and leave the home, mothers suffer the alienation.

Finally, women are also alienated from their biological nature. They are alienated from their women-specific biological phases. Normal phases of their physical growth such as menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, and aging do not relate them to men and are associated with taboos. A woman's body and body parts are deemed to be valuable only as long as they satisfy men or the commercial interests in the consumer society and could be traded-off successfully. Hence women are alienated from their own body, viewing it as tainted and impure during those women-specific biological stages.

Check Your Progress:

How do women suffer from different forms of alienation. Use examples from everyday life to think about these issues and develop a discussion.

5.6 PORNOGRAPHY

Pornography comes from the Greek 'to write about prostitution.' At its root, it has the mercantile notion of the female body as a sexual object to allure male customers. Pornography is an offshoot of the 19th century print information revolution with the advent of print technology in Europe. The period also witnessed the emergence of modern democratic states and capitalist economies with a need to promote the new political and scientific ideas among the people. Pornographic literature and engravings flourished as a distinct cultural genre because they were found to be a convenient strategy to take the new political ideas to the mass.

Today, in India, one has an easy access to different kinds of pornography: softcore, hardcore and online pornographic literature. The movies produced in Indian languages have lengthy scenes exposing semi-nudity of women within similar storylines, especially lengthy and meaningless bathroom scenes. *Debonair*, the adult magazine, displays pictures of many nude models. Various websites and forums are used for such nude exposure of women models. Though hard core pornography is banned in India, some hardcore Indian porn is available illegally in Indian markets.

5.6.1 Sexuality in Pornography

In course of time, pornography lost its political content and purpose and turned into a sexist, racist and misogynist medium. **Germaine Greer** in her work *The Whole Woman*, says, “The sex of the millennium is pornography” (Greer, 1991, P. 181). Pornography manipulates images of women for sexual titillation, entertainment and erotic instruction. Its elements are sadomasochism, misogyny, fascism, phallocentricism, and voyeurism. **Myrna Kostash** (1982) further defines these constituents in her article *Whose Body? Whose Self?*:

“Sadomasochism: the woman’s body is subjected to various bondages, abuses, humiliations, from which she is often seen to extract her own pleasure. Misogyny: contempt for the female and her chastisement. Fascism: the male “lover” is frequently costumed as a militaristic superman, triumphing over the female subhuman, particularly where she is non-Aryan. Phallocentricism: the pornographic scenario is organized, overwhelmingly, around the penis and the ejaculation. Voyeurism: the deployment of the woman’s body so as to excite the viewer” (Kostash, 1982, p. 46).

The pornographic representations generally carry the message that sexual violence is a pleasure to men, and that women desire and at least expect this violence.

5.6.2 Image Construction in Pornography

Images representing people are not created in a vacuum. Our perceptions which are different about different categories of people go into image construction. Generally, the image constructors are men in high places or powerful men. How women are viewed by these constructors and how the images are presented about women, depend on their consumption needs. **Sheila Ruth** contends that pornography satisfies the puerile interests and sexual fantasies of male consumers:

“... the official macho attitude requires that women in their dependence, timidity, gullibility, and softness, are to be used and enjoyed like a peach plucked ripe from a tree and discarded just as easily. ... Contempt blossoms into hatred; women are stupid, dangerous, wheedling. The only exceptions are those who cannot be contemplated as sexual partners—mothers and sisters, for example, or nuns” (Ruth, 1980, p. 49).

The eroticized images in pornography do not reflect the actual anatomical characteristics of women. The bodily parts of women are violated, mutilated, exaggerated or diminished or debased to constitute the fantasy of pornography. The *Hunter College Women’s Studies Collective* (1983) explains the manipulation of images of women in pornography thus:

... While the non-erotic witch-woman may consume men (the vagina is sometimes imagined to have teeth), the erotic sex object offers herself to be “eaten.” She is displayed as merchandise and popularly called “sugar,” “honey,” “dish”, “peach,” “tomato.” She may be reduced to a bodily part and called “cunt” or “pussy.” If her bodily parts are perceived as threatening, they may be rendered more harmless by being portrayed as childlike. Juvenile pinups, deprived of threatening adult characteristics, make the sex object appear more accessible, more harmless. She may be referred to by the name of small animals such as “chick,” or “bunny.” If she is perceived as being too pure to be accessible, her breasts and buttocks may be exaggerated. ... Vulnerable women, debased, in chains, and totally available to male penetration, constitute the fantasy of bad pornography (Bates et.al, 1983, p. 33).

Erotic images are key components of the mechanism for producing and maintaining male domination. Further, as Greer observes, indulgence in pornography signifies escapism from true relationships. She says that women are not the focus of pornography. Pornography is men’s denial of sex as the basis for a relationship, their rejection of fatherhood, their perpetual incontinent adolescence. It is men’s flight from woman and Greer concludes that the victims of pornography are men not women.

5.6.3 Pornography-cum-Beauty Industry

A woman’s body is subjected to different meanings by different cultural conditionings and these changes are highly accentuated in pornography. A number of feminists conclude that pornography is not simply a reflection of sexism and male domination, but it “nourishes sexism” (Longino, 1982). The impact of pornographic images is drastic on women. They are encouraged to strive hard to adapt themselves to these images. They are impelled to reform their own bodies to conform to male erotic expectations. For the radicals, women are subjected to social pressures to be “beautiful” so that they become qualified chattel or merchandise to be displayed and exploited. They try to imitate the images currently acceptable to male interests which sometimes result in painful and harmful contrivances like skin peeling, reshaping of the noses, fitting breasts with silicone, wearing false eyelashes and false nails, and starving at the risk of damaging their health. For socialist feminists, the promotion and sale of cosmetics and fashionable clothing to women was a divisive class-based capitalist strategy to sell more consumer goods. Liberal feminists like Betty Friedan focused on a critique of images of women in advertising which are used to promote consumerism among “New women”. Since the 1960s, the pornography-cum-beauty industry has flourished into a global industry. Powerful signals are bombarding women to reshape themselves through TV, movies, magazines, phone/cyber links, fashion shows and beauty contests held at venues ranging from small towns

to international cosmopolitan cities. In 1968, in the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, in a bid to draw the attention of the public and the press, members of the protesting feminist group symbolically tossed their bras in a garbage can. News stories erroneously reported that the women had burned their bras and the term “bra-burners” entered the media vocabulary as a pejorative for feminists (Davis, 1991, p. 107).

The sex-alluring products carry subtle and brazen sexual innuendos promoting sexual fantasies of both men and women. Women are tempted to become active collaborators in the reduction process which diminishes their value as autonomous human beings to mere sex objects and commodities. The modern women experience a beauty dilemma regarding the cosmetic consumerism as to whether the beauty products are symbols of oppression or a new pathway to power.

5.6.4 Anti-Pornographic Movement

The ideology of patriarchy governs every aspect of our life. Women work in complicity with men in areas that bring shame and self-degradation to them because they are socialised and internalized by the values, attitudes and beliefs nurtured and cultured by their sexist society and its institutions. They are codified to accept the discriminating images as granted and natural.

But an anti-pornography movement emerged against pornography’s alignment with human trafficking, desensitisation, pedophilia, dehumanisation, exploitation, sexual dysfunction, and inability to maintain healthy sexual relationships. The feminists split into two opposing camps over questions about pornography, consent, sexual freedom, and the relationship of free speech to equality. Liberal feminists argued that when one is paid for sex, a person enters into a contract to give away her freedom and sexuality. Others have claimed that selling sex harms women because pornographic works could precipitate sexual assaults against women as they endorse or recommend the violation and degradation of women.

5.7 PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is not an unknown phenomenon. It has been of ancient origin and has been thriving in various forms with social sanctions. Prostitution is one of the branches of the sex industry. Estimates place the annual revenue generated from the global prostitution industry to be over \$100 billion. Associated with crimes and torture, it has become a taunting human rights problem today. In 2007, the **Ministry of Women and Child Development** reported the presence of 2.8 million sex workers in India, with 35.47 percent of them entering the trade before the age of 18 years. The number of prostitutes has also doubled in the last decade. Though China has more prostitutes than India, fewer of them are forced into prostitution against

their will. For **Kathleen Barry** (1994), a sociologist and feminist, ‘a prostitute is a woman reduced to her sexual utility’. She attaches three qualities to female sexual slavery; being trapped, having no freedom, and experiencing violence and exploitation. **Barry** also explains how for women who have only sex to sell and with no other means to sell, prostitution is an alternative.

5.7.1 Trafficking

You have already read about the trafficking of women in the previous Unit 3, “Racialized Body” of this block. Trafficking has become the third highest income earner after the illegal arms trade and drug trafficking. **Kristof and Wudunn** define trafficking, technically, as taking someone (by force or deception) across an international border. They quote that the U.S. State department has estimated that between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year and 80% of them are women and girls, mostly for sexual exploitation. According to them, trafficking has increased because of three reasons. Firstly, when Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, the power vacuum was filled by criminal gangs. As a result, capitalism not only created markets for rice and potatoes but also for flesh trade. Poverty and international tourist industry make millions of women and girl children cross national boundaries for commercial sex where female bodies and labour are bought and sold. Secondly, globalisation has increased the number of such sex slaves. Thirdly, because of the fear of AIDS, customers prefer young girls so that they will be less likely to be infected and also because of the myth that AIDS can be cured by sex with virgin girls (Kristof and Wudunn, 2009, pp.10-12).

According to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, trafficking is:

“...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (cited in Social Development Notes, 2009, p.1).

Trafficking of women and children is under the control of insidious Mafia groups in collusion with local police. Statistics show that the number of girl children trafficked is on the increase every year. Every day, one million children are affected in Asia alone while two million are trafficked every year across borders. Sex tourism has become a booming industry. Thailand’s

economy thrives on sex tourism. Almost 49% of the tourists come for sex with children and come mostly from East Asia, the United States of America, and Europe.

5.7.2 Prostitution by Choice or Force

Feminists like **Kathleen Barry**, **Catharine MacKinnon** and **Laura Lederer** hold that prostitution is not a conscious and calculated choice of women. **Dr.V.Mohini Giri**, who was the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women, India, in her analysis on the Indian situation states that there are four distinct ways why women enter into the flesh trade:

- I) Girls are kidnapped, induced, allured and sold (in many cases by parents themselves). Nearly 80-85 percent comes into prostitution through this pathway.
- II) About 10 percent are off-springs of the prostitutes- unwed or wedded. In such cases, even though the mothers do not like their daughters to follow them in their profession, the powerful nexus of Gharwalis (brothel keepers), pimps, and pahalwans (musclemen) decide otherwise.
- III) Then there is caste/community specific prostitution. Going from generation after generation, this is the type of child-prostitution which is practiced in specific areas in some communities under the gaze of the family itself.
- IV) And finally we have special types - the profession with links in some of the religious customs. Instances are Devadasis in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra, Bhavanis in Goa, Kudikars in West Coast, Johins in Andhra Pradesh, Thevaradiyar in Tamil Nadu, Basavis in Karnataka and Muralis, Jogateens and aradhinis in Maharashtra (refer Giri, 2001).

Liberal feminism which advocates individual's free will conceives prostitution as a contract in a private business transaction. On the other hand, radical feminism views a prostitute as a human being who has been reduced to a piece of merchandise. The liberal contends that a woman is free to enter into contracts. However, the radical feminist does not believe that a prostitute's desire to enter into such a "contract" is done of her own free will. Even if prostitution has been an independent decision, it is generally the result of extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, or of serious underlying problems, such as drug addiction, past trauma (especially child sexual abuse) and other unfortunate circumstances. **Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn** (2009, p. 5) quote one 2008 study on Indian brothels and say that out of India and Nepali prostitutes who started as teenagers, about half said they had been coerced into the brothels; women who began working in their twenties were more likely to have made the choice themselves, often

to feed their children. Those who start out enslaved often accept their fate eventually and sell sex willingly, because they know nothing else and are too stigmatized to hold other jobs.

Most suggest that valid consent to prostitution is impossible or at least unlikely. It is found out that impoverished women, women at low level of education, women from the most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in prostitution all over the world. “If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it?” asks **Catherine MacKinnon** (1987). Most prostitutes are in a very difficult period of their lives and most want to leave this occupation. **MacKinnon** (1987) argues that ‘in prostitution, women have sex with men they would never otherwise have sex with. The money thus acts as a form of force, not as a measure of consent. It acts like physical force does in rape’. For radical feminists, this is because prostitution is always a coercive sexual practice.

5.7.3 Decriminalisation

If prostitution is an economic exchange in the flesh trade, it calls for decriminalisation, legalisation, and normalisation of prostitution. Since the mid-1970s, sex workers across the world have organized, demanding the decriminalisation of prostitution. Sex worker activists argue that sex workers should have the same basic human rights, labour rights as other working people, equal legal protection, improved working condition and the right to travel and receive social benefits as the pension. But, **Kristof and WuDunn** (2009) do not subscribe to the legalize-and-regulate model as it simply has not worked very well in countries where prostitution is often coerced. They advocate a law enforcement strategy that pushes for fundamental change in police attitudes and regular police inspections to check for underage girls or anyone being held against their will. In 1985, feminists and sex workers developed the “World Charter for Prostitutes states that that prostitutes should be guaranteed “all human rights and civil liberties,” including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage, and motherhood, and the right to unemployment insurance, health insurance and housing” (cited in Ditmore, 2006, p.625).

Behind all these discussions lingers a sad truth, as professed by a prostitute to Kate Millett, “It is not sex the prostitute is really made to sell: it is degradation. And the buyer is not buying sexuality but power over another human being ...” (Millett, 1971, p. 88). In fact, the self-denigration and shame that millions of girls and women suffer in the brothels cannot be restored by any formal law.

Check Your Progress:

Prostitution and human trafficking are existing social practices, which contribute towards the commodification of the female body. Discuss with the help of suitable examples.

5.8 BODY POLITICS

You were introduced to the concept of body politics in the first unit of the Block, i.e., Body in Bio-medicine, which analysed the aspect of execution of power through institutions and social practices is equally relevant in the context of commodification. In the 1970s, during the second wave of feminist movement, the term ‘Body Politics’ was used to fight against objectification of the female body, and violence against women and girls, and the campaign for reproductive rights for women. The powers referred to body politics include institutional power expressed in government and laws, disciplinary power exacted in economic production, discretionary power exercised in consumption, and personal power negotiated in intimate relations.

‘Body Politics’ is a broad topic. Let us now try to understand what it means, with reference to the legal status of pornography and prostitution in India.

5.8.1 Legal Status of Pornography

Prostitution and distribution and publishing pornography are illegal in India and attract several penal provisions. But nothing is mentioned about accessing pornography.

- The Indian Penal Code, 1860, and the Information Technology Act, 2000, are the only laws dealing with the subject of obscenity in India. Neither the IPC nor the IT Act defines what obscenity is.
- Section 293 specifies, in clear terms, the law against Sale etc. of obscene objects to minors. **Section 292** of the **IPC, 1860**, defines obscenity as “ a book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting representation, figure or any other object, shall be deemed to be obscene if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect, or (where it comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items, is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.”

- The *Information Technology Act*, Chapter XI Paragraph 67, the Government of India clearly considers online pornography as a punishable offense.

5.8.2 Legal Status of Prostitution

In India, prostitution (exchanging sex for money) is legal, but related activities such as soliciting sex, operating brothels and pimping are illegal. A sex worker can be punished for soliciting or seducing in public, while clients can be punished for sexual activity in proximity to a public place.

The primary law dealing with the status of sex workers is the 1956 law, referred to as ‘The Immoral Traffic (Suppression) Act’ (SITA). According to this law, prostitutes can practice their trade privately but cannot legally solicit customers in public. Organized prostitution (brothels, prostitution rings, pimping, etc) is illegal. Unlike the case of other professions, sex workers are not protected under normal labour laws.

In practice SITA is not commonly used. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) which predates the SITA is often used to charge sex workers with vague crimes such as “public indecency” or being a “public nuisance” without explicitly defining what these consist of.

Recently, the old law has been amended as ‘The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act’ or PITA. Attempts to amend this to criminalize clients have been opposed by the Health Ministry. The main points of the PITA deal with defining and punishing sex workers, clients, pimps and babus, and brothel keepers, procuring and trafficking. Prostitution and its legal status is still a contentious issue in India.

To reduce the destructive impacts of sexual objectification and commodification of women’s bodies, one cannot depend on laws alone. Much can be done by women and men, hand-in-hand in solidarity and by informed and gender-sensitized individuals. Transformation should occur at all levels to build a healthy on man-woman relationship: individual, social, economic, political in collaboration with community, social bodies, governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Think about what we can do in writing, arts, reporting, media production, training, science and technology, school curriculum, socio-cultural practices, legal status, policies and rights, collective movements, and in our personal relationships and ideologies, to bring about positive changes in the representations of women’s bodies.

Check Your Progress:

Think and write a feasible transformative strategy that can be implemented either contextually, ideologically or practically to build a better environment in the context of what you have read so far.

5.9 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to capture the relative position of women to men in the booming sex market within commodities/consumer paradigm. As you have seen above, the two major and widespread social practices objectifying and dismembering female body are prostitution and pornography. They reduce a woman from a person to the most demanded sex object. The reductionism is worked through various interrelated constructs. The woman is treated as ‘the Other’, her attributes viewed in binary opposition to whatever man is, and placed in the institutionalized hierarchy as a subordinate. Images are constructed and manipulated in such a way as to objectify the whole body or fetishize different parts of the body of a woman. The woman is an outsider in this process but socialised and internalized to collaborate willingly or unwillingly and contrive her body to the dictates of the consumer. In this politics, she is alienated from the product, from the process, from other women and her Self. Though prostitution and pornography cannot be easily eradicated, they can be attenuated through collective efforts.

5.10 GLOSSARY

- Alienation** : A condition created by the capitalist mode of labour organized in such a way as to alienate the individuals from their own products, from the process of their work, from their coworkers and the non-human world.
- Commodification** : Commercialisation of an object or activity that is not normally and intrinsically regarded as a saleable product.
- Exchange value** : The production of commodities or services for sale, for the market; work as the exchange of goods or services for money or other financial considerations.

- Pornography** : Sexually explicit material consisting in graphic pictorial depictions and verbal descriptions of sexual organs and various modes of coitus.
- Sexism** : The belief that persons are superior or inferior to one another on the basis of their biology.
- The Other** : A gender dichotomy that locates women as the other of men and holds that women are different from men and therefore inferior to men; neglects strong areas in women as inessential while it views male strengths as more basic or essential.
- Trafficking** : Illicit and clandestine movements of persons across national borders, largely in developing countries and some countries with economies in transition, with the end goal of forcing women and girl children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for profit of recruiters, traffickers, and crime syndicates as well as other illegal activities related to trafficking, such as domestic labour, false marriages, clandestine employment and false adoption.
- Violence Against Women** : Any act of gender-based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Article 1 of the 'United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women' and endorsed by the 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action').

5.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the process of objectification and its key constituents in relation to the commodification of body.
- 2) Examine a fashion magazine. Find the differences in the way a male body and a female body are used. What message is being conveyed to the reader? Discuss with the help of what you have learnt in this unit.

- 3) Apply the Marxian concept of Alienation to the concept of women's relation to their bodies.
- 4) How do you visualize the beauty dilemma that modern women are supposed to experience? Does commodification of body mean oppression or liberation for women? Discuss.
- 5) Imagine that you meet a prostitute who narrates her life story to you. Write a report on it to an English magazine with your own commentary at the end.

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