

## **The position of a woman in modern culture - that of a subject or of an object?**

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**Abstract:** Is gender clearly defined and merely biological or is it a much greater phenomenon? Can a modern woman, within her (clearly) defined role, be a subject in some important aspects of the culture she belongs to or is she still an object, following a long tradition of a (slightly changed) masculine principle?

In order to find an answer to these crucial questions, this paper first deals with the history of masculine and feminine principle, their relations and the issue of dominance. Some gender differences are presented as well, in order to provide a frame for what we wish to examine.

As only a synthesis of different cultural aspects can provide us with the real picture, this paper looks at three different spheres in the life of a modern woman – her private life, her professional life, as well as media and popular culture and the way modern woman is presented in them. Our aim is to examine certain views we can find in literature concerning these spheres, in order to approve of these views, deny them or provide some new examples from this region and the world.

**Key words:** masculine principle, feminine principle, modern woman, culture, esthetic stereotype, commercials, media representation.

### **Introduction**

The position of woman in modern culture is an intriguing question that almost equally appeals to professionals and ordinary people, so we can read about it both in scientific publications and women magazines.

Different authors deal with this issue in different ways, but the most conspicuous characteristic of their research is an interdisciplinary approach. Apart from culturologists, who do intensive research in this field, there are others who can contribute – sociolinguists, psychologists, anthropologists and even neurolinguists and bilologists. The first question they are trying to answer is whether gender is something that can be clearly defined and is biological in its nature or if it is a more complex phenomenon that should be carefully defined. Can a modern woman be a subject in important aspects of the culture she belongs to or is she still merely an object, following a long tradition of a masculine principle?

In order to answer this crucial question, the paper deals with three different cultural aspects that can provide us with a complete picture of a modern woman – her professional life, her private life and the way she is represented in media and popular culture. As our aim is to examine various views from the abundant literature and provide some new examples, we shall first briefly look at the history of masculine and feminine principle, the issue of dominance and some obvious gender differences presented in literature.

### **Men's world versus women's world**

It seems that gender dominance has always been extremely important for building the social hierarchy. Mother Earth and the cult of fertility, as symbols of matriarchate in the New Stone Age, were replaced by their masculine counterparts (warriors, the cult of arms and a conquering concept) in the Bronze Age (Tomić, 2007: 47-48). This is when men started ruling both the family and the society and when the idea of the natural dominance of masculine principle over feminine principle was developed. The great Aristotle found female children degrading to a perfect masculine principle, as women were regarded as mere material, totally deprived of any spirituality (Tomić, 2007: 48). For Lévi-Strauss, a woman was an object of exchange, whereas a man was a subject of communication in the process of the exchange, being the only one who can choose the object of exchange and attach a certain value to it (Tomić, 2007: 49). His opinion remind us of an ancient comparison of woman (and her impure body) with nature and of man with culture (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 230).

From the perspective of politics and economy, this relation can be seen as the agonism/hedonism duality. Agonism, being characteristic of underdeveloped society models from the time prior to capitalism, can see a woman only inside the family, whereas a man is always on the social scene and is given the power of

communication. Hedonism, which originated in capitalism, socialises women by giving them an opportunity to find a job and start earning their living, but it does not truly change their position, as they can be found doing only particular, 'female', jobs - those that include serving others (Tomić, 2007: 51 – 54). Similarly, the concept of andocentrism is an authoritative construct of norms which praises masculine qualities and at the same time demeans anything that can be described as "feminine" (Mesić, 2006: 340). In other words, even if woman is allowed to leave a ghetto-like family frame, she is still evaluated much differently than man in public life. In the past, a working woman was even identified with a prostitute and presented with the red colour symbolizing a bloody mass of secretion, being, thus, filthy, vulgar and threatening. In other words, such a woman is available to anyone, like a public toilet, as she is not protected from other men's eyes and desires (Tomić, 2007: 56 – 61).

Despite this masculine idea of woman's position, things slightly changed after the World War II concerning woman's position in the public life. Woman's representation in this sphere got more sex-appeal than before (for example, warm-blooded Merylin Monroe replaced Greta Garbo's cold beauty) and soon after this the famous sexual revolution took place (Tomić, 2007: 64). However, something that changed the image of woman and her position in the world forever was the feminist movement (Zaharijević, 2007: 14). Being a movement which primarily asks for respecting five crucial rights in every woman's life (to vote, to work, to be educated, to have an abortion and to get divorced) it has several, more or less radical, forms which are influenced by different doctrines. For example, the so-called liberal feminism simply asks for all the people to be equal concerning education and the right to vote, whereas the so-called radical feminism goes much further, denying the entire patriarchal system of values and asking for a total separation of feminine and masculine world (Tomić, 2007: 66 – 67).

It is obvious that there is a constant need for separating and opposing these two worlds. Are they really so different and how can it influence the position of a woman in modern culture?

## **Gender differences and their real importance**

An opinion that men and women speak different languages and that they even come from different planets (Mars and Venus) is now so overspread that we can read about it even in women magazines and bestseller literature (Cameron, 2007: 1).

Biologically speaking, certain hormonal differences are held responsible for various realistic differences between the two sexes, especially when it comes to emotions. Owing to a higher level of testosterone, men are far greater risk-takers and much more aggressive, whereas women are more capable of expressing (positive) emotions, are more talkative, more cooperative and better-organized, but their spatial and mathematical skills are less developed than those of men (Barker, 2002: 119 – 120).

It is also thought that the gender/language relation can reveal many gender differences and many linguists have been working on this field since 1970's. Lakoff (1973, quoted in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 1) first described women speech as totally different from that of men, claiming that this difference shows a degrading role women have in society. She noticed that women very often used mitigators and unnecessary intensifiers and she, thus, defined women speech as trivial, tentative and powerless and concluded that such a speech gave absolute power to men. Linguists also think that women often use diminutives and euphemisms (Gumperz, 1982: 197), that they are listened to less carefully, are more often addressed by first name and are more often and more easily interrupted while speaking (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 238). Moreover, some studies showed that men use sexually explicit and profane words more often and more easily than women, which means they possess courage, self-confidence and social power (DeKlerk, 1992: 286), whereas girls are always taught to speak and behave like ladies (Gumperz, 1982: 199). Of course, modern culture often denies certain stereotypes according to which women are absolute language puritans, but women certainly find it much more difficult than men to decide on using informal and abusive language and even when they do use it, they usually do it inside an intimate group and less productively than men.

On the other hand, culture regards gender and sex as social constructs that are not influenced much by biology and there are, thus, innumerable combinations inside gender (Barker, 2002: 117). The term psychological gender, which is now often used, means that there are typically masculine and typically feminine characteristics inside one person, regardless of the real biological sex (Myers and Cortese, 1995: 5) and this casts doubt on all the previously mentioned clear-cut differences between the two genders. In other words, it is rather possible that there are various forms of femininity (and masculinity) which are used by one and the same woman in different situations, which means that the universal cultural category of "woman", that all the women in the world share, must be questioned, although it is something the feminists insist on (Barker, 2002: 111).

So, we should discover what position women really have in modern culture and if it is identical with its traditional image and the perceived gender differences or whether women have left the boundaries of patriarchal society.

## **The position of a woman in modern culture – has anything changed?**

### **1.1. The professional life of a modern woman**

As we have previously mentioned, capitalism and hedonism brought certain changes to the lives of women by allowing them to work and earn their living if they wanted to, but in a strictly controlled way and under different conditions than those men had. It was then that certain "feminine professions" were created - those professions that demanded having particular feminine qualities. In other words, some qualities are much more characteristic of women than of men, such as empathy, kindness or care, so women are thought to be much better at doing particular jobs (e.g. being a nurse). At the beginning, women used to be offered only badly-paid part-time jobs (McDowell, 2003: 347), but even that was a step forward, as there had previously been only three locations a woman could be good for – bed, kitchen and street (Tomić, 2007: 150).

Although this opinion is present in modern culture as well, it must be said that women have a much better position on the labour market than they used to. McDowell (2003: 347) claims that women have even managed to beat men on the labour market owing to better results in school and a stronger will for achieving high education. So, a woman boss in a company or a highly qualified woman are no longer difficult to find. However, even though women and men are now equal concerning education and competence, women still earn up to 20% less than their male colleagues on same positions (McDowell, 2003: 348).

Another serious problem is a specific boycott that men impose on their female colleagues on the same or higher position. They do their best to prove that women are too fragile for fighting the cruel world of business, trying to illustrate this by harsh and often discriminatory behaviour – yelling when talking on the phone, demeaning their female colleagues and women in general, showing disrespect, telling rude jokes and showing off and generally behaving in an overemphasized chauvinistic way (McDowell, 2003: 149 – 150). Gender discrimination is particularly obvious in certain typically male professions, and in the case of British police, for example, it can be noticed in almost bizarre ceremony of initiation that is designed only for women. There are many such examples, especially in a more conservative milieu where a woman doing a "male" job is considered to be "mannish, unfeminine, wierd, unattractive, cold".<sup>45</sup>

Despite all the above mentioned obstacles, women are about to start dominating the labour market. McRobbie (2003: 358) even claims that highly educated young women have become a metaphor for a social change and been given a task to establish a new meritocracy, and in order to illustrate the importance of this fact, she mentions a huge interest Tony Blair's government showed for this target group and their behaviour. Owing to media influence, ambitious young women start to believe that an award for hard work and sacrifice will be a good material status or at least financial independence, as well as the ability to afford good looks and glamour. McRobbie calls these women "TV blondes" and media present them as a model for what a young woman should become and which is opposite to the image of poor, untidy young mothers holding crying grimy children in their arms (2003: 359 – 366). She warns, though, of a new and dangerous phenomenon – ruthless female individualism –and of a fact that more and more successful women consciously give up motherhood, claiming that children and family would deindividualise them and disable them of following their brilliant careers (McRobbie, 2003: 360 – 365).

Together with the ideal picture of a business woman we can see in media, there comes a certain youth imperative. Usually, a desirable (female) candidate should not be more than 35 years old and she should also have at least "agreeable" looks. However, women themselves often use their looks to get quick and easy money and seem to have no problem with this. For example, a very popular "profession" in this region is the job of a promoter, which is almost exclusively done by female students who wish to earn some pocketmoney. The job is usually well-paid and includes promoting a particular product or brand and selling it to potential customers. Promoters usually wear special uniforms and are provocatively dressed in order to attract the attention of potential (male) customers. Although the mere existence of such jobs is a great step forward in comparison with patriarchal and traditional culture, we need to wonder how different this is from some "traditionally" female professions – an entertainer, a dancer or a starlet – that were identified with women in hedonistic concept, in order to perceive women as consuming goods (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 231; Tomić, 2007: 54).

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<sup>45</sup> These answers were given by a certain number of men in Serbia when they were asked what they thought of women who did a traditionally male job (e.g. a police officer, an engineer, a manager, a taxi driver, a bus driver...).

## **1.2 The private life of a woman**

Unlike the professional sphere in which the position of women has gone through certain changes over time, it seems that not much has changed in the private sphere and that women are still, more or less, determined by tradition and patriarchal practice. In other words, the image of a heroic mother (Tomić, 2007: 58) is still an ideal and is superior to any other manifestation of a modern woman.

According to the traditional form, a woman is supposed to stay at home and she plays the role of a perfect housewife, wife and mother (Nenić, 2007: 245). From the aspect of politics and economy, the difference between male and female world is actually the difference between productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) work (Mesić, 2006: 340) and women are in 'charge of' the latter. So, owing to (patriarchal) gender role distribution in the society, woman's basic role is reproductive, that is – sexual. Paradoxical, thus, is the fact that patriarchal society at the same time anathematizes woman's sexuality, trying to repress it (Tomić, 2007: 57). This aspect of patriarchal society is very important for the image of woman herself in modern culture, as it means a deeply set contrast between an innocent and pure nature of a perfect woman (a wife, mother and housewife) and a warm-blooded eroticized woman who is public and thus filthy.

Despite being far from perfect, the private sphere has undergone some changes as well, owing to the fact that a huge number of women nowadays are employed. While a woman living in an underdeveloped conservative social environment still has to accept the role created for her by the traditional system of values, a woman living in a modern milieu tries to unite two different forms. In other words, a modern woman is usually employed, she has the same working hours and duties like her partner, but at the same time she often tries to be a good housewife, as well as to meet the reproductive demands. The trend of giving up motherhood that McRobbie (2003: 359 – 369) warns about when illustrating what is going on in modern British society, seems not to be that serious in this region yet, as women here are still trying to find a balance between the traditional and the modern. Moreover, a woman who does not get a child in a milieu like this is implicitly considered to be unsuccessful (Butler, 1994, quoted in McRobbie, 2005: 74). In other words, woman is supposed to find a recipe for reconciling career and family (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 230).

Another thing that shows a modern woman is trying to reconcile two different models is her frequent decision to take her husband's surname upon getting married. In some traditional, mostly rural, places, this also means accepting her husband's parents as her new parents and feminists think that by doing this the woman also gives up her identity and accepts a new one. How important the choice of a surname is to men themselves can be seen during the wedding ceremony when "the groom's guests" applaud and cheer the bride's decision to take her husband's surname. It is thought that by doing this a woman puts herself to a particular position, shows that it is possible to "tame" her and women usually accept this because it is "common, they will have the same surname as their children when they have them, it goes without saying, it is less complicated, it is the most natural thing in the world."<sup>46</sup>

## **1.3 The representation of a woman in media and popular culture**

Apart from putting her professional and private life into balance, a modern woman finds it important to be present in media and popular culture as well. The way women are represented in newspapers, on television and especially in marketing and advertising, has become very important in their lives and can give us the complete picture of women's position in modern culture.

Nowadays, it can be easily said that if you are not in media, you do not exist at all, so it is essential for both genders to be equally present in this field. Many people (mostly feminists) claim that media is still dominated by men, but there are also those who maintain that things have changed (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 227 – 228).

First of all, it cannot be said any more that women do not have their place in media, both as employees and as "the news". For example, the number of female journalists and TV announcers is constantly growing and on the global level there are 58% of women who do these jobs. In Serbia, 48% of all the employees in electronic media are women and there are even some editors among them. However, it should be mentioned that a huge

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<sup>46</sup> These answers were given by young married women in Serbia when asked why they have accepted their husband's surname. They all have their careers and are financially independent.

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number of these women are under the age of 35 and that they all have "agreeable looks" (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 237), which brings us back to two most important criteria for getting a job if you are a woman and in the case of media this is even more conspicuous than in any other field.

On the other hand, representation of women in media seems to be far from modern principles and equality ideals. The image of a woman in media is thought to be mostly in accordance with tradition and it should revitalize patriarchal gender role distribution in modern society (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 239). In other words, media in a more conservative milieu still tries to project particular male/female stereotypes and it is often successful in doing this, owing to a traditional lifestyle in that social environment and people's mentality. So, media still gives women roles of mothers, wives and good housewives or, perhaps, the role of a man's companion. If we look beyond documentaries and informative programmes, there is another manifestation of women in media – that of entertainers; so, most of the women we can find in media are singers, fashion-models and TV-hostesses, who are all beautiful and young and wear expensive and modern clothes. This is obviously paradoxical. On the one hand, women can be satisfied with the way they are represented in media and their beautiful image, far from home and kitchen. On the other hand, feminists claim that such an image is meant for feeding a typical male fantasy (Višnjić and Miroslavljević, 2007: 231), which is no different from the time before the 1950s.

The field of commercials and advertisements can most clearly show that women are represented in media mostly through their body and sexy image and that they thus still play their sexual role. Billboards and other forms of advertising show women as eroticized objects (Nenić, 2007: 252). What has changed in this field?

What almost all the commercials from 1960s and 1970s have in common is depriving women from their right to be smart, successful and equal to superior men in any way. The woman of this time is a two-dimensional creature who is totally incapable of existing anywhere but in the house, but who is at the same time beautiful and sexually attractive. For example, an advertisement for Mini Morris from that period shows a young woman sitting at the driver's seat, squeezing the wheel with both hands, her eyes wide open with fear like she has never driven before, but having very nice make-up, a beautiful hairdo and a lot of shiny jewellery. The slogan in the advertisement emphasizes the fact that even a not very bright person can drive this car ("The Mini Automatic. For Simple Driving."). There are also many advertisements from that period which place woman in the house and one of them, which advertises American vacuum-cleaner brand Hoover, shows a woman in an elegant dress sitting on the floor by the Christmas tree and reading the manual for the new vacuum-cleaner she had just unpacked, with an expression of admiration on her face. The slogan is important again - "Christmas Morning – she'll be happier with a Hoover". So, the best possible present for a woman is a vacuum-cleaner; she will have a great time tidying her house (as there is nothing else she can do, anyway).

Later, commercials became a bit more subtle and they mostly used puns, but they also started showing woman's body much more explicitly. A famous advertisement for an American underwear brand Wonderbra, from 1990s made a top-model Eva Hercigova planetary popular. A stunning girl with a substantial cleavage in a black bra is smiling from the billboard and saying she can't cook, but she doesn't care! Advertisements that appeared after this one exploited (nude) female body even more and some of them were so scandalous that they finally provoked negative comments in public. One of these is certainly the commercial for tires Kumho which shows an almost naked ballet dancer doing the splits, followed by the slogan "(she is) adjustable to any material". The public was shocked and protested for some time, but there were no real results and the trend of such commercials continued.

Apart from these commercials that undoubtedly show woman's sexual role, there are many commercials that remind women of their position in family life and at home. For example, commercials for various types of washing powder all show woman as someone who cannot think of anything else but of her laundry that must be clean and perfectly white (and better than her neighbour's!). In a rather new commercial for a brand of hair shampoo one man asks the other: "Is that the bride?", and he replies: "No, but she will be", emphasizing that the only good and profitable thing a woman can do is get married as soon as possible.

It seems that feminists and culturologists are most attracted by commercials for beer, as a typically male drink, where a woman is put on the same level with beer or peanuts, that go perfectly with watching football with friends (Tomić, 2009: 150). In these commercials, a woman is never treated as a person who can drink beer herself, but as a nuisance who is distracting the poor man from drinking beer and cheering his favorite team with friends (Djordjević, 2008) or as someone who should contribute to the holiday of football with her perfect looks.

However, it seems that something has changed in the field of sexist advertising after all. A commercial for beer in Croatia has recently provoked many negative comments in public, although it is not different from other beer commercials. Similarly, a commercial in Bulgaria, which used an idea similar to "blonde jokes" was banned soon after release due to a public feminist campaign, whereas the Croatian prime minister urged for the entire tourist campaign of her country to be changed because of a nude female body that was intended for attracting male visitors.

## **Conclusion**

What can be concluded about the position of a woman in modern culture? By looking at the history of male/female duality, it can be said that the positions of men and women in this eternal struggle have not changed since the ancient times, but that they have certainly taken on different forms. Supported by some biological differences of the two sexes, men in modern culture try to maintain their superior position by emphasizing their manly characteristics. On the other hand, it seems that women are gradually taking over even those positions that used to be traditionally male, owing to hard work, persistence and a strong will for being well educated.

Does this mean that the question we asked at the beginning of this paper is affirmative – that a woman in modern culture can have a position of a subject? In their professional life women have certainly made a huge step forward, as they have grabbed a chance to work and earn their living and thus become financially independent and able to decide on their own lives. However, when looking at other aspects of woman's life, we must say the answer to the question is much more complex. Looking at women's private life, we can easily find examples that remind us of old times, but they are at the same time integrated well into modern culture, giving us an illusion of progress. Even though it seems that woman is no longer expected to be only in the house and at her family's disposal, she is still expected to reconcile her various roles and never give up the role of a mother and a wife. Most vivid examples of a subtle objectification of woman's position in modern culture can perhaps be found in media, as they offer an illusion of glamour and at the same time show a sexist image of woman inside the popular culture.

Putting all the examples together, we could say that the answer to the question we asked is somewhere in the middle. It is hard to claim that woman has entirely won the role of a subject in modern culture, as it would mean being equal to man in all important aspects of modern life, as well as not being treated in a sexist way. Owing to media in the first place, it seems that women are still only instruments rather than subjects in creating the social reality. However, we cannot say that woman is necessarily an object, as she is gradually moving forward, showing that she is ready to break the housewife-mother-wife mould. As it is a long and slow process, it will probably take much time before we are able to say that the position of woman has drastically changed.

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