Consciousness EnGendered throughout Lena Dunham's "Girls": female subjectivity vs the problem of post-feminism

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Consciousness EnGendered throughout Lena Dunham’s *Girls*:

Female Subjectivity vs the Problem of Post-feminism

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences

2017
Abstract

The inequality between genders is an idea still endorsed in everyday life throughout media, political discourse, and relationships. Gender discrimination spurs feminists to strive for equity and has become the motivation for the changing and progressive message in their writings and artworks. Lena Dunham’s HBO TV series *Girls* is such a work and is distinctly unique when compared to Hollywood’s presentation of the standard image of women, and thus, has been used as an initiation into the study of post-feminism and the contemporary media. Dunham’s attitudes and ideas shown in *Girls* has the same vigorous feminist movement resembling the rebelliousness of Cindy Sherman and Carolee Schneemann. My thesis demonstrates whether Lena Dunham’s *Girls* merely follows previous feminist’s ideas or if she is actually building on them, advancing and modernizing feminism. In examining Dunham’s feminist spirit, I studied Dunham’s artistic discourse in *Girls*, her interviews, and the similar ideas between Dunham and other feminist artists. This exploration further looks into the main incentive behind the post-feminist identity.

Despite her keen zealousness and female empowering viewpoint as a female artist, an apparent post-feminist dilemma exists. *Girls* could not avoid the patriarchal heterosexism and problems of post-feminism. Post-feminism inevitably takes on notions of patriarchy and an unconscious inclination to believe in the inferiority of women. Living as new women in the year 2017, post-feminism needs to be updated and brought into the modern world in terms of consideration of global on-going feminist issues and much more.
This thesis aims to examine post-feminism and the on-going complexities within feminist struggles in the millennium era. Girls presents young feminism and a voice of their generation spoken by a female artist, Lena Dunham and through her feminist contributions. As younger generations have little idea of the complexities of the 1970's and 1980's feminism and its historical context, this loss of history leaves younger generations of feminists with only a low depth of insights that have been developed and concreted in the feminist critique theories. Younger generations are not aware of the conflicts and do not worry about the potential paradoxes in getting a law degree while focusing on appearance at the same time. There are a tremendous number of women in medical schools, law schools, and many specialized jobs now. In the twenty-first century, most young women already have come a long way conveniently in a world where the previous second-wave feminist generation have already fought, developed and achieved power in careers and education. Today, we are pulsating in a society where getting a law degree is as important as having a good appearance; the appearance is a key element for women being judged by men. In job seeking, beautiful women have a better chance in being hired, and are pardoned easier by men when making mistakes.

In Business Insider, the author demonstrates this using the following.

Data from the job-search site Shiftgig, highlighted in Christian Rudder's book "Dataclysm," drew on a sample of 5,000 profiles and found the most attractive women score the most job interviews. (Job seekers generally post their photos with their profiles.) Shiftgig focuses only on jobs for hourly and service workers, so this data doesn't include interviews for salaried occupations. But studies have shown that overall, attractive women get significantly more callbacks than women who were found less attractive. In the case of hourly and service workers, however, the same
isn't true for men. The number of job interviews men scored didn't change much with their perceived attractiveness. Other research has found that attractive people also make more money, get promoted faster, and are often more successful. Attractive men enjoy these perks too, although often not at the same rate as women.

When it comes to seeking spouses, pretty women have a better sense of value of themselves and elevate their self-quality, whereas men elevate their value through better jobs and professional abilities. Looks for women and money for men are the most significant characteristics in which we judge a good partner today. Roger Highfield, of Science Editor posits, “The new research confirms that, while humans may pride themselves on being highly evolved, men really do go for an attractive mate - though will make do with someone who falls somewhat short of this ideal - while women - apparently understanding this - adjust their desire for a "high-quality" mate according to how attractive they perceive themselves to be. In other words, beautiful women want rich men. That is the conclusion of research published today in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences by Peter Todd, of Indiana University, Lars Penke, of Humboldt University, Berlin, Barbara Fasolo, of the London School of Economics, and Alison Lenton, of the University of Edinburgh. Beauty is the key for men, since it signifies "good genes", while women, the choosier of the sexes, leverage their looks for security, fitness, and commitment.”

It is a highly patriarchal ideology to judge women with sexually objectified opinions. Here, men are in the position that judges women as sexual objects prior to their choosing of a mate who will pass along their genes to any future offspring, while women are merely the participants.

My purpose in this thesis is not to suggest solutions for the struggles of post-feminism, but is to situate the perplexity of post-feminism today. I use the term "post-feminism" to refer to a
neo-liberal view in which feminism has already achieved its goals. Post-feminism is a term used often, particularly in popular culture. However, at the core of feminism is the truth that gender inequality still continues and so feminist activism and structural feminist theories should remain. This study can be crucial to pondering on female victimization in gender troubles and engendering various forms of younger feminist thought, although the exact answers are not the point. I will deal with young post-feminism as rendered in the HBO TV series, Girls, in terms of addressing the politics of gender complexities in post-feminism in order to delve into the phenomenon of ‘after Third wave feminism’. HBO’s renowned TV series, Sex and the City, has been incredibly remarkable in noting the start of “post-feminism” in the mid-1990’s through to the millennium era and is still a memorable TV show among millions of young women today. The reason for its popularity was that the four female main characters were all successful and independent in terms of jobs and education, and powerful in terms of speaking out loudly in their own voices to society and men. And the most important factor that made that show phenomenal was that those women were not shy in talking about female sexual needs which portrayed women’s sexuality in a more progressive form, not as docile and submissive. However, Sex and the City contains a significant irony of post-feminism in that these powerful women find their happiness from men and are portrayed as very vulnerable to males, consistently expecting to find their "Prince Charming". The show also created a fantasy world in that young, single women in New York City could purchase expensive high-end clothes such as Prada and Chanel and could afford apartments in Manhattan. However, in Girls, young girls live in a more realistic world in which paying bills and unemployment are their ongoing concerns. The romances in Girls is rather disappointing in that Prince Charming does not exist and vulgar hook-ups are commonplace and young girls are exhausted and upset. Lena Dunham’s portrayal of women in Girls focuses on the lives of four female friends who are white, twenty-something, college educated, Brooklyn residents.
Girls remarkably differs from previous post-feminist contemporary television shows such as *Sex and the City*. The show, *Girls*, rejects feminine body images in that the main character, Hannah, does not have the stereotypical "model" figure, which is somewhat subversive to gendered media's traditional beauty. She is portrayed as just an ordinary girl; frumpy, plain, chubby, whom anyone can see in college. Rejecting media's feminine body image, the show tries to reinforce self-acceptance, breaking free from constraints from the male gaze. However, I examine the dilemma of ‘post-feminism’ in *Girls* which penetrates Dunham’s artistic sensibility by intensifying female characters and their narratives, minimizing the male gaze and objectification of women, and differing from stereotypical classic gendered media conventions. Nevertheless, there are still the challenges of media constructions of heterosexuality and relationships, such as that women’s lives revolve around the men who can save them and keep anticipating future romance to renew their lives.

In my bibliography, I state the problems of post-feminists; many young women these days already have achieved power and validity in education and job professions, and instead care more about their appearance and participate in the male patriarchal ideology. Young girls want to be successful in their careers, but at the same time, want to be beautiful. Myriads of young women don’t seem to mind this problem of how the media highlights sexism with over-sexualized female bodies and the male gaze. Even women themselves have chosen to be sexual objects both inside and outside of television. Post-feminism makes up a great deal of the problem of sexism by accepting objectified women in scantily clad outfits and emphasizing being sexy in the media. The media are making women think that looks are also a major factor in a successful individual's value. Such ideas are a fantasy which the media create, but a myriad of women still participate in this highly sexist, patriarchal value in which women's thin bodies and pretty faces are solely for the male gaze. Post-feminists want to achieve their professional goals and receive good educations, but at the same time, worry
about their appearances. *Girls*, in this sense, tries to overcome the endeavor of self-beautification through the main character’s rejecting of body image, but still struggles with heterosexual culture, trying to live on good terms with men.

*Girls* cannot avoid the dilemma of post-feminism because sexual objectification remains a major factor outside of Hannah’s rejecting of body image. Marnie’s sexual affair with a married man and Jessa’s sexualized appearance and many sex scenes are examples of this. *Girls* still presents those typical media body images through graphic sex scenes and young girls can still be influenced by this. I think that Dunham tries to focus on individualism through the natural self, with unflattering angles and physical imperfections, but viewers may prefer the characters of Marnie and Jessa over Hannah, and do not catch Dunham’s intentions. The show still presents the typical Hollywood norms of beauty in most of its female characters. However, *Girls* is obviously different when compared to other typical media portrayals in which sexual objectification for the male gaze and traditional ideas of beauty are so highlighted. Lena Dunham tries to challenge body image and focuses on her self-realized artistic competence. In terms of self-actualizing in her artistic ability and rejecting traditional beauty norms, Hannah subverts Hollywood’s beauty conventions.

*Girls* also has its limit in that it only addresses white, educated, young women living in New York City. The lives of white women creates a universality of speaking about young women. The show already insidiously marginalizes other races by centralizing only on white girls. The show does not address the global problems which myriads of women fight for or the conditions faced by non-white American women, lesbians, or trans-women.

I came down to this idea for my thesis. I think that Dunham is a type of a feminist for finding herself as an artist, but is lacking in many aspects such as addressing strong feminist global issues and not merely those of young, white, educated women. To say that she is a true feminist, the evidence is simply not strong enough and can be quite vague. So in this case, I
might consider that she can be regarded as a kind of young feminist artist who is aware of
the male gaze and tries to subvert the typical body image, but not strongly feminist enough to
embody all of the sensitive feminist issues such as race and women's rights. To delve into
whether Dunham’s feminist embodiment is contained in Girls' representation of millennium
era, one must first have an understanding of second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism.

**Post-feminism Dilemma**

In second-wave feminism, the political and cultural movement in the late 1960's and early
1970's was led by young, educated women who were so tired and angry about sexism,
inequality and the seemingly unstoppable patriarchy. In a research article, “After post-
feminism: Pursuing material equality in a digital age”, Benn argues the following:

“Feminism is dead, long live-feminism. What’s most striking about this new wave,
however, is how predominantly cultural the concerns are: how issues of representation
of women or the lack of representation of women or the grossly distorted representation
of women have taken top billing, with violence against women coming a close, and
connected, second. Almost every week, one can tune into or read a debate about the
over-sexualised representation of girls in everything from Disney films to young girls’
clothing, music videos or computer games.” (1)

Post-feminism and neo-liberal perspectives implicate that individuals are free to make their
own decisions unburdened by constraints based on gender, race, class, or other factors. Young
women in a post-feminist atmosphere seem to engage in heterosexualized and feminized
performances to increase their market value and show that they have neglected feminism for
Postfeminism depends on girlness, is defined by it in fact. The aspect of postfeminism that defines feminism as “out of date” depends on girlness and youth. To count as a girl today appears to require a ritualistic denunciation of feminism, which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicized and generationalized. . . Thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold a potential feminist critique, in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl. (43)

In the 1990's, following shows such as *Murphy Brown* in 1980's, scholars have evaluated post-feminist facets in increasing media texts. For instance, *Bridget Jones, Dora the Explorer*, and most significantly, *Sex and the City*, presented an iconic post-feminist media culture in which young women have attained and grasped post-feminist elements. In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, the author stresses,

Why did the discourse of post-feminism and the heightened cultural profile of girls emerge and intensify almost simultaneously and why have they come to depend on each other? First, both post-feminism and girlness can be seen as part of a focus on youthful femininity in contemporary popular culture. Thus, examining these two sets of discourses together, as well as paying attention to their areas of overlap, can help produce a larger picture of the contemporary definition of femininity more generally. Second, one could read the cultural obsession with girlhood as a response
to post-feminism, a kind of “backlash” against the particular 1980s postfeminist woman who is unhappy with how career has displaced family or who has returned to a rather boring neotraditionalism. Thus, by displacing adult women and focusing on girls, by defining as irrelevant many aspects of post-feminism, this backlash does not have to reject post-feminism entirely. From this perspectives, postfeminist girls are too young to have discovered that they “can’t have it all” and therefore are much more fun. If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all (including discovering her sexuality) but never quite managing to reach full adulthood, to fully have it all, one could say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent no matter what her age. It would be in this context that popular phrases and slogans came about, such as “girls rule,” “girls kick ass,” “girlie,” “girlfriends,” “you go, girl.”. A Fourth explanation could be that turning toward girls is a way to keep post-feminism fresh in the context of corporate commodity culture. (44-45)

The author poignantly criticizes post-feminism as the following:

While focusing on the strong individual’s will, the tokenism inherent in post-feminism displaces the importance of the group nature of adversity as it obscures the collective nature of oppression and the need for organized action to remedy social justice. Moreover, critics maintain that post-feminism’s individualism points towards its exclusivity, whereby it is only appealing to young women professionals imbued with confidence, an ethic of self-reliance and the head start of a good education. However, this brand of feminism does not ensure that all women should receive ample opportunities and choices and, in so doing, it guarantees that a power and privilege imbalance persists to exist among them. Post-feminism’s
individualist discourse is ‘a luxury the majority of women can’t afford’ and the postfeminist woman, ‘if there is one, is rich’ and ‘she can afford to consume clichés’. Abandoning the structural analysis of patriarchal power, post-feminism is seen to mask the larger forces that continue to oppress many women’s lives and re-inscribes their marginality by undercutting the possible strategic weight of feminist collectivities for change. (38)

These quotes are sending strong feminist messages. Many female characters in the media invoke feminism, and act in ways that reverse and negate feminism. The problem lies in post-feminism that the emphasis on self-monitoring and body discipline and attachment to the idea of ‘girlness’ are oppressing women even further and on more unconscious levels.

I pondered why Dunham entitled a show about adult women, “Girls”. This title, “Girls” seems to imply the notion that even though those women are technically adults, they still have a lot of learning and growing to do. As the quote above states, this title gives the sense that the term "girl" is used in the post-feminist sense to avoid the problem of disappointment in "not having it all" that developed in the 1980's context of third-wave feminism. These women are always in process, in pursuit of “having it all”, including discovering their sexuality, but have not yet reached full adulthood. Thus, to fully have it all, the women continue to remain, in a sense, adolescent. This title can therefore be considered to be a post-feminist title.

The 1990’s and 2000's are a great example of post-feminism, Carrie, the female protagonist in Sex and the City is portrayed as successful in her career, independent, and self-absorbed as a new kind of feminist in the '90's in the way that she speaks out when she has to, knows what she wants, and lives her life on her own terms. However, as this so-called “post-feminist”-like woman, Carrie presents the dark side of post-feminism in a way that she still cannot avoid being a victimized female in a male dominated, sexiest society. Sex and the City's portrayal
of young, skinny, white, economically successful, and attractive women contributes to the unrealistic images of women. It is this crucial weakness of media presenting identities; all television has to lure in their viewers. Carrie constantly puts effort into being “beautiful” in an objectified female position for male partners. She has a perfect, thin body and acts very womanly in front of men. Her life is mapped out of a man's world, not merely herself. Carrie is able to think like a man and work like a man in her career, voicing out insightful views in her columns, and engages with strong perspectives of her own artistic ability against others like male poets such as Byron, Keats or Shelley. In the movie, Sex and City (2008), Carrie read out poems of Byron and John Keats for Big to understand and share her romanticism before their wedding. It is romantic for Big to understand her artistic sense and to appreciate romantic, avant-garde poets. He then later sends many of these poems to Carrie via email in order to apologize to her. However, her romanticism often conflicts with her gender when acting as a ‘woman’. As a third-wave feminist who has the opportunity to be feminine, attractive, and a feminist at the same time, newly empowered women cannot avoid the heterosexual, patriarchal context inherent in societal context. In the mainstream cinema, realism and representation always have the spectators adopt the stance of fetishism which allows the male spectators to maintain a distance. Laura Mulvey in Visual, Pleasure, Narrative Cinema posits,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (808)
Despite the professional careers of the four female characters, those women still struggle from the fetishism of male spectators. Carrie’s relationship with men also presents psychological participation on objectification of the male gaze. Young girls have grown up in a society where feminist progress is an everyday, “taken-for-granted reality” iii. Feminism has taught girls that they do not have to be docile, passive, and obedient, but can instead protest and act out. Class-wise, young women today do not face the inequality of decades ago. Third-wave feminism was ‘born with feminism simply in the water’ which acted as an invisible ‘political fluoride’ protecting against the ‘decay’ of patriarchy iv.

Today, myriads of young women still struggle with gender stereotypes both consciously and unconsciously. Why aren’t women aware of the potential paradoxes such as focusing on their appearance and getting a law degree at the same time? In myriads of TV shows and Time magazines since new wave era, we see sexism and gender discrimination in neo-liberal ways as embedded within systemic oppression. The reason that I delve into the HBO series Girls is that the show still presents the on-going problem of post-feminism and at the same time, the show tries to subvert the beautification and body discipline.

**Male Gaze, Objectification and the Problem of the Feminine Masquerade**

Feminist film theory has been developed focusing on the “gaze” theories to reiterate women’s oppression and restate the passionate ideology of the 1970's and 1980's. Women’s objectification by the male gaze is the central idea for women’s victimized position in Western society and on its film screens. The male is signified and the female, an object of the signifier, is an object of fascination. In the 1980's, the “gaze” theory became renowned by the explanation of masquerade for woman spectatorship. In the 1980's, many feminists contributed
to the psychoanalytic tradition, expanding, challenging and rethinking its premises. Others argued that psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on sexual difference, marginalized issues such as history, race, female and lesbian spectatorship, and women's pleasure. In the early 1970's, feminists mobilized against stereotypical, male-oriented images of women in advertising, art, literature and film. On the screen, implied heterosexuality, the female is a fetishized object. The viewer’s objectify and fetishize the image of the female. The woman spectator wears a masquerade as the one who fetishizes a fetish object shown on the screen. Kaplan stresses, “Certain tropes and conventions, common in academic fields, began to develop in relation to a “male” gaze, itself premised on certain psychoanalytic theories regarding identification with the so-called mirror/screen and the “silencing of women”. Mary Ann Doane in *Film and the Masquerade* demonstrates, “The hieroglyphic, like the woman, harbors a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness. Spectator desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman’s beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging- framing, lighting, camera movement, and angle.”

Mulvey's theory of the male gaze initiated a new field - feminist theories of spectatorship. As Mulvey points out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed three dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control. Mulvey argued that in mainstream cinema, the woman is the passive object for the active male gaze. She claimed that the structure of viewing is fundamental to male power. Irigaray stresses women’s problematic relation to structures of seeing in *Women’s Exile*.

The masculine can partly look at itself, speculate about itself, represent itself and describe itself for what it is, whilst the feminine can try to speak to itself through a new
language, but cannot describe itself from outside or in formal terms, except by identifying itself with the masculine by losing itself.

Freud pointed out that women seem to be more bisexual than men. Female sexual mobility is understood that a woman’s femininity is a ‘Masquerade’. While the male is locked into sexual identity, the female can at least pretend that she is other - in fact, sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural construction. Hence, transvestism would be fully acceptable. Kaplan demonstrates, “it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. What is not understandable within the given terms is why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity, in other words, foreground the masquerade”. Joan Riviere demonstrates about masquerade.

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it - much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.⁷

Therefore, womanliness is a mask which can be worn and taken off. The masquerade to the patriarchal position would be an image in that the woman can use her own body as a disguise. Thus, from Freud and Rivere’s viewpoints on masquerade, I can derive the bottom line that femininity is a mask in which the surface of an object conceals a non-identity meaning that
femininity is the other of the master, masculinity. Womanliness is a female mask and the subjective entity exists behind the gendered mask, but we don’t know what is behind the mask. Then, I question, “Is Masculinity the original gender that both men and women possess in Reviere’s sense? In Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture, the author posits the following:

Using Joan Riviere’s analysis of the substantive creation of the feminine self by adoption of the gestures and accoutrements of femininity, Woodward highlights the way in performing “youth” is a psychological attempt to forge links to “past selves”, a spectacle that reveals not the wished for continuity with the former body but rather a desire for youth and the unimpeachability of death.” She explicitly questions any each equivalence between the achievement of gender (a femininity that Riviere analyzed as a mask to conceal a “masculine” accomplishment) and that of youth, noting not only the inevitable failure of “passing” but also that, while aging may entail an “apparent collapse or convergence of sexual difference,” this cannot be understood in simple terms as a “loss”. Rather using Freud, she suggests that in fact the performance or masquerade of youth might be read as less a desire to mask the loss of femininity than an unconscious need to disguise the desire for “the return of the repressed…. The return of the other sex.” Woodward’s insights into the youthful masquerade highlight the relationship between the body, time, and the production of subjectivity. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler, too, stresses the importance of temporality to the production of gender identity: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a “ground” will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time.” Butler’s theorization of the “performative” nature of gender identity is clearly not primarily concerned with age. However, the centrality of the
temporal, the necessity for constant repetition, and the possibility that repetition will “fail” are highly suggestive for considering the relationship between age and gender as is it culturally signified in the narratives and fictions that in contemporary British and American culture concern themselves with the question of gender “in” the older body.(285)

Doane explains, "The very fact that we can speak of a woman 'using' her sex or 'using' her body for particular gains is highly significant- man cannot use his body in this way but that he doesn’t have to. The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolisation of the accoutrements of femininity." viii Apropos of a performance by Marlene Dietrich, Sylvia Bovenschen claims, “We are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman’s body.” This type of masquerade, an excess of femininity, is aligned with the femme fatale. ix Judith Butler suggests, “Gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex…Perhaps, this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”

Gender is a mask, a cultural construction. There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is a performance. Such problems can be explained with the “symbolic” purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity. Butler stresses, “The bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.”xi

After watching Girls, I also could not bear the questions in my head, "How is Lena Dunham different from the feminists of the 70's? Does she have anything new to say? Is she making fun of them? Is she saying we haven’t come any farther since then?" I think that Dunham is saying
the same things as from the 70's as a way of showing that people (men in particular) still haven’t
got the point. So, Dunham is: an old-school feminist? A new type of feminist? Is she making
fun of feminism? I think Lena Dunham is repeating the message from the second-wave
feminists because people haven’t gotten the point yet. It is still a struggle for women and it is
crazy that this is still an issue.

**Female Subjectivity and Language**

In Irigaray’s *Je, tu, nous : toward a culture of difference*, Irigaray stresses that “men are
surrounded by tools of feminine gender and by women-objects. Only through a transformation
of language will that become possible, but this transformation can only take place if we valorize
the feminine gender once more. Being a woman is equated with not being a man”. (64) It is
interesting that the author points, “we have to be free female subjects. Language represents an
essential tool of production for this liberation”(66). I will explain how women can find the
power through language in my thesis. Dunham in that sense gets power by being an artist, a
writer. In *Girls*, Dunham constantly emphasizes the importance of being artistic through her
character of Hannah; suffering from writer’s block, devouring and yearning art in daily life. It
is significant to ponder on Irigaray’s point because she renders the fundamental, incisive
critical point. She argues, “To demand equality as women is, it seems to me, a mistaken
eexpression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To
whom, or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To a salary? To a public office?
To what standard? Why not to themselves?” (4) This in-depth critical question hit me and led
me to think about liberation of women in linguistic terms.

Feminists’ interpretations in art, along with gaze theory, needs to look into “appropriation of
language” and Lacan’s theory. Lacan’s “mirror stage” is significant when we profoundly
ponder on ‘objectification’ in feminist theory. In the process of ‘objectification’, there is a ‘pre-mirror stage’, a before the mirror stage. It is Freud’s ‘pre-Oedipal’ stage. However, Lacan was much more interested in language and focused on the ways in which entering into the world of the language is itself a psychological step and is much more important than the sexual family dynamic that governs Freudian theory. The ‘pre-mirror stage’ is the stage of laughter, play, and a sense of mutuality between child and mother, child and child. There is freedom, not objectifying, more of mutual engagement. The space of laughter is before the mirror stage. A French psychoanalyst, Kristeva explains the semiotic disposition; the way we become oriented into the world that is constituted by language makes its start as a smiling and laughing space. The space of laughter was before the ‘Rational’, a ‘place’ which has a name. The child starts out laughing, babbling, playing: there is whole place of spaciousness that precedes nouns such as chair, table, door, dog, ball; defining things in the world. As if the laughter that makes a space in the early stage - the space of flexibility before language. However, with the help of repression, the place has a name; a rationale has a place that everything has a name. Lacan posited that the ‘Phallus’ is language. For Lacan, the subject comes into being - that is, begins to posture as a self-grounding signifier within language. Then, whoever is in control of the language has the power. So there is a direct link between phallus and language, and phallus and power. Obviously, by even using the form of phallus, he is implying that is male. However, the reason that certain feminist theorists like Lacan, who is not definitive about it, because it is a phallus, it is not impossible that the women can take over and that women can gain power. Thus, the phallus is symbolic. So the aim is for women to achieve the way of gaining control over the symbolic fear whereas in traditional cinema, she is objectified on the screen. She is signified, has no power, but the male constructs everything, watches signified woman and has power, phallus, and is a signifier. Thus, the idea of ‘lack’. Woman have a lack in Freudian castration anxiety. She is situated as ‘lack’, non-male, because her sexuality has only been
conceptualized within masculine parameters (vagina understood as a castrated penis). She has no separate unity which could ground an identity. In other words, she has no autonomous symbolic representation. The male alone has access to the privileged specular process of the mirror’s identification, which according to Irigaray is “the most adequate for the mastery of the image, of representation, and of self-representation.”

Doane stresses that the scenarios that ground the theory of the cinematic apparatus are all aligned in some way with the delineation of masculine subjectivity. Freud posited that men were anxious about women who were missing a phallus that men think so important. Women’s bodies makes them so anxious. Therefore, in erotic magazines, the high heel is the classic form that tries to soothe men with the shape of the phallus that these sexualized female models do not threaten anxious castration fears with the phallus shape of heels. It is comforting because it reminds men of their own phallus and associates it with women’s bodies, so it is okay. Also, women’s beauty and the sexualized female body are given an importance to compensate for the lack that she signifies (for i.e., Marlene Dietrich’s flawless legs and Greta Garbo’s femme-fatal-like face and red lips, etc). Placing women into fetishes diverts attention away from the female ‘lack’- her lack of Phallus so that she does not represent a threatening figure, but an idealized spectacle of beauty.

Everything is seen in textual terms. You cannot get outside of language. Once the symbolic stage has happened, and you enter into the world of the language, you see yourself realizing yourself as the individual, that you have a name and are an individual, you go out into the world, and you have entered into the world where there is no escaping. So you can only now manipulate the language as a way to gain any kind of authority. By reaching the realm of freedom, not symbolic stage, by transforming it, doing something with it is the way.
Kaplan demonstrates in *Feminism and Film*; “Lacanian contribution to psychoanalysis insists that sexual difference is at the foundation of language itself.”(384) xiv

The artistic sense certainly encompasses the significance of the effort to acquire female power by “writing” and “language”. Hannah keeps on suffering from writer’s block and finding ‘language’. She goes through agony to make a story. In season three, Hannah makes out an interesting story to make her friends believe in it. In that scene, her friends really believe her story and Hannah just keeps telling an impromptu making tale to tale just like she writes a book. In that scene, Hannah is a writer, a narrator and becomes a subjectivity at that moment. Hannah’s yearning for art in everyday life and creating “language” emphasizes Irigaray’s point, “Language represents an essential tool of production for this liberation.” Irigaray demonstrates about language and gender in *Je, tu, nous : toward a culture of difference* by the following:

How could discourse not be sexed when language is? Differences between men’s and women’s discourses are thus the effects of language and society, society and language. You can’t change one without changing the other. Sexual liberation cannot be achieved without changing the laws of language that relate to gender. Women sexualize their discourse. Just as they often attribute their concrete qualities and things and to places, they address themselves to sexed interlocutors. Men don’t do this but remain among themselves between they (*ils*), or between I-he/ they(*je-il*(*s*)), which is equivalent to making a non-conscious sexual choice. Should women give up sexualizing their partner of enunciation? I hope they don’t. Sex is an important dimension of culture, but we have to redress the balance of power in relationships between the sexes in language, society, culture. It would be better if women, without ceasing to put sexual difference into words, were more able to situate themselves as I, I-she/ they (*je-elle*(*s*)), to represent themselves as subjects, and to talk to other women. That requires a
development in subjectivity and a transformation of the rules of language. To date, women have had to remain among themselves not only in order for a plural to be feminine (they love each other, they are beautiful), but also for a relationship to the subjectively female world to be possible. (25-27)

In season three, Hannah works as a magazine writer for a renowned magazine company. Hannah is distinctively artistic and smart enough to write about anything, but soon quits the job because the magazine is vulgar and does not highlight her artistic sense and depth as a real writer. She chooses to learn more about writing in an Iowa writing workshop at graduate school. In this writing workshop, she is an eccentric, creative writer and often criticizes those who mention male-based prejudice or make seemingly patriarchal comments. It emphasizes Hannah as an empowering artist. It seems like in Girls, when being an artist, she can get away from the repressive masculine value system and find the self. Hannah is the subjective writer in Girls creating a world in a book. She is the subject, not the object of a male. In that sense, Dunham remains true to herself even while in a relationship. The show highlights her as the subject and is empowering when she is being creative and artistic, I think that Girls contains the significance of Irigaray’s argument; “we have to be free female subjects. Language represents an essential tool of production for this liberation”(66).

Lena Dunham wants to send the message that female artists can have her identity by being an "artist". Hannah tries to write a book and create something out of things. She is a passionate writer with OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) and interrupted, vexed feelings. In contrast, Marnie, just an average, beautiful, yet plain girl cannot be "seen in the art world” as the picky interviewer says to Marnie straightforwardly in season two when Marnie is looking for a job desperately. Marnie-like girls are everywhere. Not arty, yet looking for a rich guy who "pays her luxury rent" (as Hannah criticizes), who looks for a "relationship" that leads to proper
marriage. Marnie loves the idea of the rich, successful, male artist. But she is used and dumped by that artist. Finally she finds her own way by doing what she truly wants and is talented at: singing. In season four, Shoshanna also chooses to go to Japan to practice her profession rather than following her boyfriend’s urging to stay with him in New York. However, Marnie’s scenes still get attached to the patriarchal tradition in gender ideology. The scene in which Marnie gets jealous and is eager for her ex-boyfriend after she finds out that he became a very successful, rich CEO of his own software venture company reiterates the idea that so called “post-feminists” can always fall back to become the participant of the patriarchal repertory. In a scene where she chases him around in his office, then waits for him for forty-five minutes when he forgets about the appointment with her, here she is portrayed as desperate, being controlled by men, and pitiful. Dunham constantly picks at the reality of female unconsciousness to be ‘the other’ of the signified male position. Marnie is a typical example of today’s young women who want to be successful in her career but at the same time want to be beautiful and participate in the male patriarchy struggling through heterosexual relationships with men.

Banality of Heterosexual Sex

There is a lot of sex in Girls. Unlike Sex and the City, sex in Girls is expressed as somewhat boring, an exceedingly meaningless act of ‘in and out’. Hannah’s on-again, off-again boyfriend, Adam, is shown to think of sex simply as a means of ejaculation. He calls her mainly to have sex. She breaks up with Adam because she finally gets sick of his selfishness. Adam shouts to Hannah, “I came. You came hard. We all laughed.” It seems that Dunham
reiterates the messages of Kate Millet’s. In Millet’s Sexual Politics, her argument about sex is poignant.

While patriarchy tends to convert women to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence. For the great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet. (119)

It seems that Dunham portrays sex in a similar sense as in Millet’s message. Sex scenes are transitory, empty, and somewhat repetitive in Girls. The exhausting sense of sex as shown in Girls reminds me of Millet’s description, “animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet.” However, Dunham also shows women experiencing pleasure. In these cases she is contradicting Millet’s thesis. Marnie gets immense pleasure when she has sex with a married musician in season four. She is hurt by his lies, but gets a masochistic pleasure from his masculinity and boisterous temperament. Marnie is manipulated and used by this "Casanova-like" married man who only wants to have sex. In their sex scenes, Marnie is in a very submissive position and sexually objectified. Marnie is shown to be masochistic and passive when it comes to sex. She is both objectified and appears to gain authentic sexual pleasure from the experience. Millet would likely call this construction a male fantasy that women like to be dominated and love to have sex with men. Therefore, in this sense Dunham does not reiterate Kate Millet’s message.

Sex in Girls reminds me of the expression in art work by Yayoi Kusama (fig 2). The shape of potatoes and the heels symbolize the phallus figure. In fig 2, showing repetitive images
of potatoes hanging on Kusama’s body represents a female tired of phallus-based sexualized society. In other word, the image appears to show that the female body seemingly has a mere connotation as a “house” for the Phallus: extremely tiring, soulless and oppressive. Lena Dunham wishes to rid herself of banal sex with no spirit and ponders about female desire in the years after *Sex and The City*, which had introduced that women can claim their sexual desire by ‘having sex like a man’. Sex presented in *Girls* is somewhat like the painful, vacant waste as demonstrated via the image, overly obsessive, sexualized by Yayoi Kusama. Heterosexual love seems to always connect to heterosexual sex in *Girls*. If a man and woman like each other and have chemistry, they always fall into sex scenes too fast even though they are friends or in unlikely relationships for impromptu sex. Even Adam and Hannah suddenly start having sex to get rid of stress when they are supposed to be communicating and talking through their problems in a supposedly serious situation. Also, Marnie and Hannah’s gay friend suddenly have sex when they are drunk. Hannah also sleeps with many different men abruptly. Adam sleeps with another girl for a rebound after breaking up with Hannah. The sex scenes are portrayed as repetitive and boring in that the rebound girl gets tired of Adam’s selfishness and insensitivity, so she breaks up with him. Thus, sex scenes in *Girls* are excessive and exhaustive in a somewhat negative way.

*Nilesh Patel* demonstrates, “Kusama is a pioneering artist whose enthusiasm spans into the whole manifestation of creativity, ranging from painting, writing, fashion, sculpture, silk-screening, dance, design, furniture and musical composition. She has had a profound effect on the world of art. Even before Andy Warhol’s iconic one-dollar bill pieces, Kusama was creating minimalist, repeated-image based work. Prior to Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures, Kusama produced them in the form of the phalli themed sofa and objects. Yoko Ono has noted Kusama as one of her influences. In 1993, she was selected to represent Japan in the Venice
Biennale, and has had a large number of solo exhibitions around the world, including the Serpentine Gallery in London, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Kusama’s work and identity as an artist are intrinsically intertwined. We can often see her photographed together with her art. She has said that if she did not have her art, she would have killed herself a long time ago. Kusama has dedicated her whole life to disassembling her identity and freeing the self.”

Helen Sumpter explains after interview with Yayoi Kusama; “Yayoi Kusama was born in 1929 in the city of Matsumoto, in Nagano Prefecture, where her middle-class parents worked in seed production. In a similar scenario to that experienced by the young Louise Bourgeois, the marital infidelities of Kusama’s father had a lasting impact on his free-spirited daughter. ‘My father had lots of lovers and I had to spy on him for my mother. Because my mother was very angry it made even the idea of sex very traumatic for me. My work, including the naked happenings, is always about overcoming that bad experience. And my visual language all still comes from my hallucinations, which I have seen since my childhood.’”

In Kusama’s work, *Phallic Dress* 1970, the potatoes shown both hanging and placed in shoes symbolize the Lacanian theory-based “phallus figure” in a highly obsessive, repetitive and sexualized way. Yayoi creates phallic themes with food very obsessively in her work, *Aggregation – One Thousand Boats Show 1963.* The boat with bananas embodies obsessively sexualized images emphasizing the phallus figure. It is somewhat grotesque, but the observed expression serves to show how people today think of sex. The woman’s thin body behind the banana boat is sexualized and objectified. Kate Abbott demonstrates in her article, “In one room was her first installation, a penis-covered rowing boat cast adrift in the dark room of its masculinity, or her fear of masculinity. It's a shame so much of her work seemed to show an innate fear of men; they've been following her lead for half a century.”
common factor between Kusama and Dunham in that both artists put their naked bodies into their own works and sexualize and objectify themselves in their artworks. Kusama highlights somewhat traumatic, phallic images but ends up objectifying herself. Females participating in the male gaze as sexual objects are rather sad from a feminist point of view and I can say that while Dunham repeats and harkens back to the 1960's and 1970's feminism, she did not create any new feminist messages for our new era.

It is interesting to see her naked body in her art that is similar to Schneemann’s “Paper Scroll” in 1975. New York Times recently printed on an article entitled, “Challenging Boundaries With Her Naked Body”, written by Hilarie M. Sheets in October 2016.

“Today, young and vocal feminists in the media, including the “Girls” creator Lena Dunham, follow in Ms. Schneemann’s wake with bold narratives about their own bodies. Ms. Dunham, who has experienced backlash for disrobing on air, recently posted on social media: “I live for the nude rabble rousing of Carolee Schneemann.”

Dunham is certainly influenced by feminist artist Carolee Schneeman, who made her name during the 1970's and has exerted a powerful influence upon later artists.

Hilarie states, “Yet at the time, pieces such as “Meat Joy” or “Interior Scroll” (1975), in which Ms. Schneemann read a monologue she pulled from her vagina while striking modeling poses, were widely trivialized and branded as pornographic. She said that she was vilified by many first-wave feminists for “playing into male fantasies,” which she said was the most hurtful part of the backlash.” In Schneemann’s work, Interior Scroll 1975, Schneemann stood naked on a table, painted her body with mud and she slowly extracted a paper scroll from her vagina while reading from it.
Schneemann sexualizes her own body and worships female sexuality. She was criticized by first wave feminists because she objectifies her own body for the male gaze. She is thin and sexually posed with both legs open to pull a scroll of paper from her vagina. Dunham is influenced by Scheneemann’s radical works. Dunham also exposes her own body.

Like Scheneemann, Dunham exhibits her naked body in a radical way. Dunham’s imperfect, average body can be viewed as radical body art performance in resistance to cultural beauty norms. However, Dunham depicts herself actually engaging in sex, which is a form of sexualization. Dunham reiterates the 60's and 70's feminism rather than creating subversive feminist messages for our own time where new and innovative wakening messages are needed.

In Kusama’s art works, sexualized images are exhibited with everyday foods such as potatoes and bananas. I would interpret the food as means of representing the repetitive, thoughtless, and cliché-like sexual act. People have sex without love, soul. After Sex and the City, the new pronoun, “sex-buddy” became much publicized among younger generations. Multifarious women participate to use and be used sexually, unintentionally getting hurt. Some women do not even question the problem of patriarchy within sexual relationships. Males argue that they can have sex just as a sport, like going to the toilet, and think of women as sexual objects, but they love their wives when they get caught cheating. Often, a number of wives forgive their husbands believing sex without love is alright. In that sense, sex now has lost the meaning of noble, sacred love between a man and a woman. It has become more of a joke, a triumph between immature teens and experiences to tell friends. Kusama’s work seemingly contains that pointless, vapid sex through her work by repetitive, obsessive, melancholy phallic objects and rather grieves the idea of forlorn, lonesome sex. Lena Dunham expresses this emptiness of sex in Girls. On-again, off-again relationships always bring about impulsive sex, but the point
is that within this chaos of loneliness and wilderness. Lena Dunham keeps telling us that finding the self can only be achieved through art and being a subject in an intellectual profession. However, Dunham couldn’t achieve becoming subversive. She only repeats 1960's and 1970's feminism, especially self-exhibition such as Kusama and Schneemaan who participated in exposing their naked selves in a form of sexualization.

**Dunham and Cindy Sherman as Creators of Their Own Images through Staging and “Directing Themselves as actresses”**

There is a common aspect of an artistic sense between Sherman and Dunham. They both capture the reality and parade the cliché by instantly presenting and poignantly portraying their realness. Sherman takes numerous pictures (Untitled) of typical Hollywood images—terrified, beautiful girls, wet t-shirts, sexualized women, etc. Dunham depicts how artistic female writers can be forced by a vulgar male boss into writing something uncreative within the masculine value system and can be pushed to write something that is not theirs. Hannah, thus struggles even more with writer’s block. This scene speaks to the idea that talented female artists are bound to repeat patriarchal repertoire such as teenager’s sex, rape, etc. if the producers and the art directors are patriarchal males. Cindy Sherman is an exemplar of the instability of identity and illustration of critical analysis of the specularization of women. Jones demonstrates in her article, “Tracing the Subject with the Cindy Sherman”,

With the specifically feminine masquerade, the “victim” takes on with a vengeance all of the myriad surfaces of femininity, which the gaze wants to corral into “woman”. She reiterates femininity with a twist, opening the formerly sutured gap between its
conventional codes and the bodies these codes are designed to fix as ‘female’. In Sherman’s self-photos, she mimics cultural productions dominated by the male gaze, namely Hollywood movies and film posters. She is brilliant in that her pose in a wet t-shirt clinging to her breasts is same old thing: a sexualized, fantasized women. Sherman poses as terrified female characters in horror movies for instance. There is no one ‘I’ in her work. She is open-mouthed, vacant-eyed, sweating, a woman in a wet t-shirt, a witch, a pig, a corpse half-visible under dirt and vomit. Sherman imitates female images objectified by the male gaze and created by mass media. These negative representations were disturbingly close to the way men have experienced or fantasized women. Her camera seemed male and her images are so successful not because they threatened phallocracy but because they reiterated and confirmed it. Cindy Sherman designates a distance between masquerade and a woman.

In the photos of *Untitled*, she appears in heavy make-up and costumes. In her theatrical works, Sherman is a masked female and the object of someone’s gaze. She draws attention to the performative nature of both masculinity and femininity and the lack of a stable meaning behind the gender. She wears red lipstick and a long hair style which represents femininity, but her arm muscles and the pose with her legs spread seems masculine. As in *Untitled #96*, her make-up is playful and humorous to shock the viewer and only reinforce that the subjective entity exists behind the gendered mask, and identity is worn. Irigaray argues, “Female beauty is always considered a *garment* ultimately to attract the other into the self. It is almost never perceived as a manifestation of an appearance by a phenomenon expressive of interiority – whether of love, of thought, of flesh. We look at ourselves in the mirror to please someone, rarely to interrogate the state of our own becoming. The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority – of a very particular kind. The mirror signifies the constitution of the
fabricated female. I seek to be seductive and to be content with images of which I theoretically remain the artisan, the artist. I have yet to unveil, unmask, or veil myself for me – to veil myself so as to achieve self-contemplation, for example, to let my gaze travel over myself so as to limit my exposure to the other and repossess my own gestures and garments, thus nestling back into my vision and contemplation of myself.”

Irigaray’s concept of mirror is that of a flat mirror as a tool for self-reflection. As Mulvey’s on-screen woman is punished by the mirror and camera lens, Irigaray’s objectified woman is punished by the superficial images on the mirror through the male gaze. This punished woman is all expressed poignantly in Sherman’s self-photos.

The striking thing about Sherman is that she mocks the mass media and the image of typical “women” depicted by the male gaze and endless depictions of mass media and the Western canon is representational and reinforces a particular ideology. She exaggerates gender signifiers to the point of parody appearing in heavy make-up or costumes. Sherman deliberately draws attention to the performative nature of both masculinity and femininity.

In her work, ‘Untitled #92’, the woman seems vacant-eyed, terrified, and vulnerable kneeling down in a womanly posture on the floor with wet hair. Sherman mimics stereotypical school girls in horror movies. In her ‘Untitled’ images, Sherman has a ridiculous look with this feminine garment. Her make-up is exaggerated, highlighting hyper femininity, yet her muscled arms and opened legs has the sense of masculinity. For instance, in her work, ‘Untitled #355’, the woman is masculine with muscular hairy arms and legs but is worn scantily clad girly outfit. It parodies masquerade that gender is unfixed. She adopts a variety of identities representing both masculinity and femininity by costume, posture, and make-up. Thus, womanliness is a conscious mask, and gender can be worn.

In ‘Untitled #359’ and ‘Untitled #360’, her hair and make-up are playful, humorous elements designed to shock the viewers. Sherman unravels the idea of how self-identity is unstable
between social inquiry and the self behind the mask of gender. With this range of settings, gender ambiguity occurs in which Sherman understands gender and identity to be a cultural construction. Thus, such exaggeration and hyperbolic expressions in her photos reiterate that femininity is worn and read. In this sense, both Sherman and Lena Dunham subvert the male dominated art society by being a director, actor, and creator, and is a felicitous artist who is able to absorb the chaos and express troubled feelings about substance and put it into art. Dunham’s voice in *Girls* resembles Cindy Sherman’s consumed, worn psyche, battered from excessive Hollywood productions based out of the limited male gaze. Dunham mentions, “A lot of my parents’ friends were performance artists, so I think I just understand that the body could be a tool in that exploration.” Both Dunham and Sherman direct and perform using their own bodies as tools for their artistic means. Their performances are projected onto the screen in resistance to cultural consumerist beauty production.

The overt example of Dunham’s resistance to media’s cultural consumerism and vulgarity is shown in season 2. When Hannah writes an e-book and gets stuck with writer's block, her skinny, peevish, male boss pushes her to write something even more mediocre, such as a teenager having sex or something. He commands her to make things up, to be liked by readers if she can't think of anything to write. Then, it is not her art. It is not artistic. The male boss signifies the masculine hierarchal power even in the art world in that the female artist is oppressed and pushed by masculine values. If Hannah follows what he wants, then her art would become a vulgar piece, typical mass media - Hollywood’s typical images overwhelmed on screen. The mass media becomes not art, just exceeding repetition to fulfill mediocre taste. Also, in season three, Hannah quits what everyone considers to be a dream job as a magazine editor after she gets tired of mass media’s typical consumerism and excessive capitalist control. Hannah provokes the boss’s vulgar opinions and Hollywood-based production images which
everyone might like and criticizes that they are not creative and are boring. Hannah could never enjoy being a magazine editor and realizes that the job is not the place for her.

Dunham and Cindy Sherman are both creators of their own image through staging and directing themselves as actresses. They both did performances of the self.

Deborah L. Rhode states in her book, *What Women Want: an agenda for the women's movement*; “Third-wave activists are individualistic, inclusive, and conscious of the intersectional nature of identities across race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In comparison to their mother’s generation, third-wave feminists often claim to be less rigid and judgmental, and more willing to claim sexual pleasure and actively play with images of femininity.”(34) Third-wave feminism refers to the 1980s and 90s feminism (Doane; Irigaray; Sherman) and second-wave feminism is of the 1960s and 70s (Millet; Mulvey; Schneeman; Kusama). "Post-feminism" refers to the Millennial era (*Girls*). I think that Dunham has been influenced by both second and third-wave feminism and has mixed the messages of second and third wave feminism into her own art.

Second wave feminists, Kate Millet, Gloria Steinem, and Betty Friedan were incredible, radical feminists. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* argued that "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect" and goes on to discuss the role that patriarchy plays in sexual relations, looking especially at the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. Millet argues that these authors view and discuss sex in a patriarchal and sexist way. In *Girls*, when a guy in the writing workshop says, “some stories about blowjobs have literary merit like D.H Lawrence, Henry Miller, Philip Roth, Martin Amis”, and Hannah shouts, “Ha! You only named writers with penises. It’s the same kinds of patriarchal bullshit female authors have been dealing with for centuries.” This quote has the implication that Hannah is familiar with the notion of sexual politics which Kate Millet argued for decades. Kate Millet applauded homosexual writers and Freud. It was because homosexual writers distract from patriarchal
gender politics. In season four, Hannah’s father comes out as gay. This episode shocks everyone, especially Hannah’s mother who has taken on the wifely role for years with conformity and within a firm marital system. It is radical in the way that Girls tries to break the traditional convention, which is a heterosexual marriage construction. Hannah’s mother becomes nihilistic, feeling that all she did was being a wife, mother, and take care of her family for nothing. Homosexual touches in Girls gives a message that gender is a culture, a constructive politic that tradition has already set within our minds and society. Thus, breaking it is radical and leads the viewers to think about gender as a construction, a masquerade. Dunham seemingly wants to scream about this problem - the unstoppable patriarchal force and women's oppression by it and the unbearable, tormenting feminine masquerade.

In season two, Hannah meets a much older man, Joshua, whom she meets after confessing about her using his trash cans and they end up having an impulsive sexual relationship in his brownstone house. In this episode, Hannah wears a womanly mask in which she is a young, femme-enfant, sexual as Lolita when she is around him. By being a twenty-something young woman who has sex with a middle aged, handsome, clean guy on the first day of meeting him, Hannah is seen as a feminine, young, sexualized, objectified woman by his gaze and the viewers. However, this conversation reveals Hannah's distressed, worn out attitude towards the feminine masquerade and female anxiety when she takes the mask off.

Hannah: I just want to be happy. You know I think what I didn't realize before I met you was that I was lonely. In such a deep, deep way. You know I was reaching for all this stuff. But all I needed was to look at someone and be like, "Oh, that person wants to be there after I'm dead," you know?

Joshua: Mm-hmm.
Hannah: You think I am a crazy girl?

Joshua: No. I don't think you are crazy at all. I wasn't thinking that.

Hannah: If anything, I think I am just too smart and too sensitive and too, like, not crazy. So that I am feeling all these big feelings and containing all this stuff for everybody else and it's like... Okay I read this article about Fiona Apple in "New York" magazine where she said, "oh, everybody acts like I am nuts. I am not nuts. I just want to feel it all." It's like that's what I am like. I just want to feel it all. You know?

Joshua: Yeah. I get it. That's...that's a great goal. Um.. I'm gonna go to sleep. I've gotta get up really early for work tomorrow.

Hannah: You're going to work tomorrow?

Joshua: Well, I gotta.

Hannah: Do you wanna kiss me?

Joshua: Yes.

Hannah: I can't believe you are doing this.

Joshua: Doing what?

Hannah: You basically begged me to tell you all my feelings.

Joshua: No, I am glad you did.
Hannah: Well, you are not glad that I did. Cause you are not acting glad. And also, you didn't tell me anything about you. I asked about your divorce. You said two sentences. "Oh. I was busy working on the house. My wife missed, you know, the San Francisco bay."

Joshua: San Diego.

Hannah: I am like an orphan you took in off the street. So, what's your damage, Josh?

Hannah finally wants to open up about her damage to Joshua and be frank about her realness, but Joshua does not understand her artistic agony; that she is not nuts and just wants to feel it all. Rather, he becomes aloof. Hannah, then, is silent and sits on the bed quietly and leans down on the table on the terrace alone and leaves his house in the morning. This conversation epitomizes that Joshua stands for the patriarchal male who only objectifies and sexualizes male-oriented, stereotypical images of women, especially uncomplicated, not sensitive, young women, and that Hannah is an exhausted female, tired of the masculine patriarchy which stimulates women to wear the male-oriented, objectified feminine mask in front of them to be loved and win their attention. The scene where Hannah is sitting in a daze and leans her face down on the table echoes the epiphany that the artistic female is too smart to be understood by plain, boring, heterosexual, patriarchal males. Hannah becomes upset with Joshua when she thinks that he sees her as a crazy woman. Hannah is revealing her feelings to him and, at least to her, the problem is refreshing and big because it is in this very moment that Hannah truly decides to be herself, wanting Joshua to understand her artistic ability and inner feelings through long talks; opening up about her own emotional, personal feelings and expressions. However, Joshua's lackluster reaction makes her anxiety even greater. Joshua's ignorant
reaction to Hannah's realness expands even into an expected cliché. This scene seems to intensify the female artist’s anxiety over the dull, ignorant heterosexuality in which woman artists are seen as “hysterical” or too “oversensitive” about anything. I think that Dunham also wants to highlight that she does not want to be considered a “woman artist”. Heterosexual prejudice has offered the idea that men are simple and clear; women are complex, unnecessarily sensitive, and hysterical in a negative way. Masculine construction has looked down on women’s keen insights and penetrative intuition because men are inferior in that extent. In this scene Dunham profoundly demonstrates a female artist's anxiety along with the vexed thoughts, the sense of poignancy, as opposed to Joshua's simple, dull masculinity. The aim for feminists is to achieve a way of gaining control and the notions that women have to become who they are and be the creator, the artists. Not only should new feminists be aware of 1970's feminists’ complexities and post-modern and modernists’ critiques, but also global and young feminists are at the dawning of a new era of reinventing the patriarchal authority by acknowledging it, playing with it, subverting it and making “art”.

**Empowering Woman Shown in Girls**

In season four, Hannah stands out as distinctively different when compared to Marnie. Marnie is a mistress of a musician she works with, despite the fact that he is married. She wants to be his girlfriend but he manipulates her by saying that he already made it clear that he will never leave his wife. This displays a female as so weak and unempowered, a sexual object under a masculine metaphor. However, Hannah on the other hand, moves to Iowa, a small town far from the fun, busy city of New York, and from her boyfriend, Adam. When she decides to move away for graduate school to complete a writing program, she is very decisive and not swayed by Adam. When Adam gets angry because Hannah is leaving, she is still firm about her own decision. It shows that she is an empowered female who is not afraid of whether a man
might break up with her because of her absence. She prioritizes her own decision and dreams of becoming a writer over being with a man. These aspects of both Hannah and Marnie are complete opposites in terms of female reactions to males. Hannah even bravely goes to a remote area like Iowa. Even though she assumes that the place will give her massive loneliness and anxiety, she chooses her dreams, not simply to be a good girlfriend. In a writing group meeting in graduate school, Hannah stands out for her depth of opinion in writing and speaks out with her voice as a “feminist”. Hannah says, “I don’t understand why everyone’s so judge-y about popular writings. I write one story with a blowjob in it and suddenly I am 'Fifty Shades of Gray' Girl.” Another man in her class says, “Yeah, some stories about blowjobs have literary merit like D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Philip Roth, Martin Amis,” at which Hannah shouts, “Ha! You only named writers with penises. It’s the same kinds of patriarchal bullshit female authors have been dealing with for centuries.” The man adds, “you are starting to sound, like, a little hysterical here, okay?” and Hannah says, “Hysteria? Hysteria is how they diagnosed women who they found ‘uppity' in the 1800's. They had an excuse to have their ovaries removed. Being pigeonholed isn’t fun.” And with that, Hannah leaves the room.

In this scene in season four, Hannah is a totally empowered, smart woman who stands up as a feminist and takes control, speaking rationally, and criticizing men's patriarchal comments in the group.

Gender stereotypes are inherent in a society in which both men and women have been developed through social relations. Lena Dunham presents these gender roles and how even a smart, artistic girl like Hannah struggles when she wants to take on a feminine role and still stay a feminist throughout Girls. But Hannah shows a subversive version of millennium feminists who steps further. She puts an ultimatum to Adam after she is exhausted by playing the feminine role. She cuts her hair very short and shows a radical change in her own life. She does not respond to Adam anymore.
Dunham endows a message into *Girls*, on behalf of a young feminist, that female artists are screaming against the masculine construction. Such presumption is nearly precise because she cuts her hair right after she is frustrated by her male boss’s order to make things up in her novel. Her frustration was expressed through her obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) that her female soul is wounded. She also plunges a q-tip too deeply and roughly into her ear so that she hurts herself, and counts compulsively, which all epitomize the self-destructive, restrained and discordant conflict with capitalist control. Hannah’s cut hair has a masculine look and symbolizes her as a non-conformist. She does not behave womanly; she appears more boyish with short hair and a loose t-shirt. Toward the end of season two, Hannah seems more like a boy in contrast to the girlish, womanly image she portrays by wearing make-up and feminine outfits in earlier episodes.

In season four, the female empowering message is more overt when compared to previous seasons. Hannah comes back to New York and finds out that Adam has a new girlfriend whose name is Mimi-Rose. She is portrayed as a thin, pretty, and blonde artist who mesmerizes Adam, as well as her ex-boyfriend who still wants her back. Adam treats her totally different compared to how he acted towards Hannah. Adam was more self-centered and self-absorbed around Hannah whereas Adam treats Mimi-Rose like a queen; for example, not bothering her when he wakes up. He puts the blanket over her body and quietly gets up and makes breakfast for her. It is not a usual tendency for Adam. Hannah is hurt and angry that Adam can move on that quickly after she left for her Iowa workshop. This episode parodies how men react differently to skinny, beautiful, self-centered women. So, ultimately, Hannah rejects Adam when he wants her back after breaking up with Mimi-Rose. Hannah instead chooses to be with a co-worker who treats her nicely, is more delicate than Adam, and has a mutual interest in being a school teacher. This episode gives the message that Hannah is no longer manipulated by Adam and follows on her own dignity and choices.
Hannah is different when compared to Marnie or Jessa. Marnie lives her life following the whims of a manipulative married man and must beg for his love and attention. Jessa sets Adam up with Mimi-Rose while her best friend Hannah is away just because she wants Mimi-Rose’s ex-boyfriend for herself. Jessa had a purpose in having sex with him, and that was to have twins. It is very shallow of Jessa that all she cares about is her sexual desire and empty goals of having sex and having twins by a man whom she feels is a cool guy. The sex scene emphasizes a typical sexually objectified female body and a masculine male. I think that the portrayal of the other girls such as Jessa and Marnie can be a parody of sexual politics and an example of how nowadays women still seem to be stuck in these patterns.

**Rejecting Female Body Discipline in *Girls***

I would like to relate Dunham’s challenge on standard beauty stereotypes to the art works by a female French painter, Suzanne Valadon (23 September 1865–7 April 1938). In “*How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon*”, Rosemary Betterton points out very crucial concerns for the women’s movement such as Laura Mulvey’s shrewd critical argument about the male gaze onto female sexuality. Betterton suggests to draw some questions: Firstly, “what does it mean to look from a woman’s point of view? And, secondly, how do women appear in images made by women?” xxvii The author focuses on spectatorship, both male and female, in relationship to the representation of women’s bodies in the visual media. For example, female sexuality has given in to the bias of western culture towards fetishizing the female body. She points out that the nude in art has been enshrined as an aesthetic beauty, the icon of artistic objects since the Renaissance, and epitomizes “the objectification of female sexuality” xxviii She stresses that women artists are bound to be
restrained by masculine ways of seeing. She demonstrates, “the work of Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) shows how a woman artist working within a male tradition of representation could produce images which disrupt the conventions of a genre.”

First, I strongly agree with the author’s point of view on the culture of male tradition and its problematic conundrum on feminists’ resistance against the fixed gender construction. In that sense, Suzanne Valadon challenges the convention of the image of the nude via male spectatorship. Betterton argues that “male artists and critics have constantly justified their enjoyment of the nude by appealing to abstract conceptions of ideal form, beauty and aesthetic value.” Such a view implicates an invisible relationship of male dominant power and female subordination. Betterton briefly explains how Ingres’ painting, ‘The Great Odalisque,’ (1814) from the early nineteenth century, known as the ‘classic’ tradition of the female nude represents the image of female sexuality as a sexual object possessed by men and reinforces the aesthetic idea of female sexuality. In the painting, Ingres portrayed a naked woman showing a glimpse of her breast, buttocks and thighs which emphasizes her sexual objectification for men. The author points out that the drawn curtain represents the revealing hidden scene. In the nineteenth century, the theme of the odalisque (slavery) was extremely sensual in representing female sexuality as a possession by the men who gaze upon her for sexual pleasure. The author emphasizes an exhausting endless circle split between the male gaze (surveyor) and the female gaze (surveyed) which sees themselves through men’s eyes. Despite the feminists’ challenge to change such convention, it is still hard to change the connotation of gender inequality in the artworks such as the nude. As Betterton cited in de Beauvoir’s quote, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.” The representation is a construction which is hard to be changed. The author cited Berger’s quotation very effectively to point out the issue. Berger states, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This
determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to
themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns
herself into an object.” xxiii I think this quotation is significant to explain the author’s argument.
Women themselves view herself through men’s eyes which means that she only participates in
her objectivity and sexuality in relation to men who look at them and possess them.

Betterton stresses that Laura Mulvey argues that “the male gaze projects its fantasy onto the
female figure… In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and
displayed, with their appearance coded for strong erotic and visual impact so that they can be
said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” xxxiii Thus, Suzanne Valadon addresses the innovative
female image of a woman in ‘The Blue Chamber’, (1913) as one supposed to be looked at not
by men only, but by women themselves without looking through men’s eyes, perhaps, the new
inner beauty via a women’s gaze which can possibly change the idea of real beauty. In that
painting, a fat woman is posing very relaxed on the bed, smoking a cigarette and wearing
pajamas which represents her realness and a narcissistic sense not to impress men. This
modernist artist is very creative in a way that portrays a woman as an individual, not as a sexual
object of men. Voyeurism maintains a distance between himself and the image. The fetishistic
representation of the nude female body, fully in view, insures a masculinization of the
spectatorial position. The woman’s look is literally outside the triangle which traces complicity
between men, the nude, and the spectator. Doane posits, “The feminine presence in the
photograph, despite a diegetic cantering of the female subject of the gaze, is taken over by the
picture as object. Female gaze is left free-floating, vulnerable to subjection.” xxxiv Valadon’s
female image in ‘The Blue Chamber’ does not stand for the object of the male gaze – neither
vulnerable nor empty.

I think that such consciousness creates a deep-rooted, complicated problem for feminist artists. The first step to challenge the conventional image of female sexuality is to create a new visual image of a ‘new woman’ just as Suzanne Valadon expresses a female dominant model, a fat, smoking woman in ‘The Blue Room, 1923’ and embed a new beauty which constitutes the idea of inner beauty - strong, powerful and nonchalant women who are not subordinate to men, are not trying to be looked at, and are able to look at themselves through female eyes.

Lena Dunham reminds me of Suzanne Valadon’s subversiveness on traditional beauty reinventing the meaning of beauty. It is remarkable that Lena Dunham, a young artist, now embodies the greatness of modernist feminist artists and acknowledges earlier second wave feminists’ strong movements, unlike many young girls who take their hard work for granted.
Lena Dunham’s subversive representation of her female character with an imperfect body image is related to Valadon’s breaking traditional beauty.

In *Girls*, Hannah wears no make-up, is rumpled, unattractive, so indifferent about her appearance. Marnie, the perfect standard Hollywood beauty, is rather a surrounding beside Hannah, which *Girls* leads the viewers into considering Marnie as *cliché*, although a number of vulgar male viewers with no insight would still see her as a true beauty, and Hannah, as the overweight, ordinary one, leaves one with the perception in their mind: how-in-the-world-is-she-the-main-character?

Nevertheless, Dunham accomplishes her subversive work in *Girls* by trying to change the stereotypes set up for Hannah, the main one being an opposite to the standard Hollywood beauty convention. Hannah’s sudden impulse to cut her hair connotes women’s emancipation from oppression. This incident happens after her break-up with Adam, and Hannah transforms into an almost new being - nonchalant, more self-absorbed, isolated from friends and men. Her cutting of her hair also demonstrates her decision to wear a masquerade as a boyish persona which implies a repudiation of the femininity that she has been playing for Adam and some authority forcing her to be that way. Dunham’s public persona is also a mask in which she plays in the same concept of a Halloween party where everyone wears masks in order to become the character of the mask. In photo shoots for Vogue magazine, she wears thick make-up with her hair perfectly done, looking somewhat beautiful and chic. Dunham is a peculiar character, as though a Woody Allen in a postmodern way that we do not know who she really is. On and off the screen, Dunham appears to be a multifaceted persona in which she seemingly adopts a variety of characters. The surface of the mask, then becomes the reality and the reality we think of as that person's identity is worn. In *Girls*, Marnie also wears a bunny outfit as a hostess, creating a sexy, coquettish image that only reiterates the womanliness as masquerade.
Lena Dunham draws the viewers’ attention to other elements as well, such as presenting the reality through the main character - her uniqueness, unfixed character, unusual disposition such as OCD, hyper-ambivalence rather than focusing on her appearance like the characters in *Sex and the City*. In *Girls*, real dilemmas which a young girl goes through in the process of growing into an adult in their twenties is well presented and constitutes who Hannah is and leads the viewers more drawn into her inner beauty. Dunham’s deliberate setting of a main character as an opposite appearance to the standard beauty stereotype, an unattractive appearance, ignores the importance of Hollywood's standard of beauty – perfect body figure, skinny and beautiful. The importance of traditional beauty is nullified by Hannah’s complicated personality characteristics. As the show goes along, the viewers tend to sit their eyes on her eccentric, colorful, and intriguing characteristics, not on her appearance and are wound up wondering who Lena Dunham is, why the writer and also producer plays the main character. She extraordinarily shows post-wave feminism still struggles and attempts to subvert the masculinist value system on screen. Even now the post-wave feminists are struggling against the male gaze. Lena Dunham continues to acknowledge the problem of post-feminism by becoming a creator in a male-oriented art.

**Mixed Messages about Women within the Show Girls**

In the following sections, I will present upon the post-feminism typology represented in the HBO television series, *Girls*. Post-feminism causes tensions and discussion within the series. Heterosexual women will always have a limit when they are both a feminist and in a relationship with a heterosexual man because they are associated with female gender roles and the pursuit of equal power in terms of psychological controls. Being a feminist is to have equal
power in society and class as men have. However, when they love heterosexual men, they are bound to be their partners who eventually end up in the role of a wife or a proper girlfriend. Third-wave feminism still faces the self-centered male.

In *Girls*, the show constantly does not focus on the importance of “beauty”. Hannah is the most real among all of Hollywood’s television shows and subverts the standard Hollywood beauty image. However, the positive sides of subversive female body discipline tend to nullify its optimistic context when Hannah becomes so vulnerable when it comes to relationship struggles.

Dunham herself says she shows "just as much as any girl of my generation". *Girls* is more realistic than *Sex and the City* in the way that the episodes show the darker side of the younger generation's struggles with both themselves and with others when they have and seek for relationships and careers in their twenties. It shows, as Dunham states, how in reality, achieving a goal and having a relationship with a perfect guy, is different than the perfection represented by *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City* deals with the idea that in relationships there are tangled patterns, such as how an S&M relationship with an avoidant man like Mr. Big matches well with an anxious, complicated yet smart woman like Carrie. Those destructive relationship patterns of Carrie and Big are realistic, but the reality of the whole thing including the perfect job and Carrie’s capability to be able to afford an apartment in New York City as a single columnist in her mid-thirties and having a perfect relationship ending with a perfect guy is found only in a fictional fantasy. However, *Girls* is more real in a practical sense. In the first episode in season one of *Girls*, Hannah is told by her parents that they will stop financially supporting her and Hannah must suddenly worry about rent because she is still seeking a job as a writer. It contrasts to *Sex and the City* which eliminates all problems of real life and tells that sex is confusing. The twenty-eight-year-old writer, producer, and actress in *Girls*, Lena Dunham frankly depicts women and their real problems such as STDs, sex, and unemployment,
and does not hesitate to show her imperfect, tattooed, naked body in front of the camera. The main character whom Dunham plays, Hannah Horvath, is a privileged Oberlin graduate, newly arrived in New York, unemployed and struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder. She makes mistakes and has an on and off relationship with a tall, strange man named Adam, portrayed as a free-spirited guy matching Hannah’s artistic sense, yet with a quirky, self-centered, irresponsible and wandering spirit. While watching *Girls*, season three, I wondered, "Is Lena Dunham a feminist?" Looking at the mere question of whether she is a feminist or not, I realized that I like her idea, an idea of living. Hannah, the main character pursues her dreams and owns her body. It doesn’t matter that she is “just a girl”, she doesn’t let her being female get in her way. She lives her life as a person, not as a girl.

She pushes hard and has mapped out her own thoughts to create the source of her book. So, she doesn’t live a life ordinarily. She created a norm into art itself. Her daily doldrums and mundane epiphanies become a book. She is a writer, an artist, not specifically female. So the question of whether she is a feminist or not doesn’t come into my mind as too important and does not require any interpretive contexts. However, I can still find the show goes along with a male dominant context. For example, Shoshanna is so concerned that she is not valuable unless she attracts men for being a sexual object. She values herself through men being attracted to her, that they want to have sex with her. She is so worried that she is a virgin which proves to her that she will not find any man who wants to sleep with her. It is a very unempowering facet of women who are swayed by the male gaze and female objectification. Secondly, Marnie does not get pleasure when she has sex with Charlie in season one. The reason is that she is bored because of his apparent lack of masculinity, which is a quality she finds sexually attractive. However, later, when he becomes successful and too busy to respect her, she is turned on and starts liking him. This is also an unempowering female, and in fact many young women get sexually attracted to bad guys who treat women disrespectfully. This aspect
portrays myriads of young successful females and post-feminists who want to find their value by being attracted by stronger, masculine men. This leads to a phenomenon in which young girls endeavor to be successful and at the same time want to be beautiful in order to attract the male gaze. Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter in their book, *The Illusions of "Post-Feminism": New women, Old Myths*, posit; “Women’s identity is determined by their ‘attachment’ to a man. Unattached women are seen to be ‘a problem’” (161). I agree with the author’s arguments and it is relevant to *Girls* that the show contains mainly heterosexuality and those four characters are each strongly attached to a man for their happiness and daily life worries. The author also argues, “Women’s sexuality is defined primarily within the context of heterosexual, monogamous relationships and ultimately, reproduction” (159). In *Girls*, the four characters are all heterosexual and committed to monogamous relationships which leads to the context of women’s sexuality as merely for reproduction. In that sense, *Girls* reiterates the patriarchal value where women’s sexuality is defined by the other of male since the show is attached to mainly monogamous relationships.

With respect to this, Girls can be said to be one of the shows that reinforces post-feminism which centers on male dominance. However, there is a shrewd difference from stereotypical shows. *Girls* rejects body discipline. Lena Dunham, the main actress, a writer, and a producer, not only is of a heavier figure but also displays semi nudity which is not designed to be attractive at all, simply normal. These exhibitionist scenes and her normal appearance do not lead the viewers to think of her body sexually, but rather focus on the story more in a realistic range and start to look into her thoughts and emotions, rather than her body. Hannah poses nude not to attract men. The exposure demonstrates that she is comfortable with her own body, it is not simply for the male gaze. In the "Beach" episode in season three, Hannah walks around the town in a small, green bikini. She is not embarrassed or self-conscious about her normal, heavier-than-typically-skinny-model body. It frees the female body discipline in some way.
She is not an object, but a subject who controls the viewers’ view. Also, she mentions that she got a tattoo to "take control over her shape" because she gained weight really fast in high school. She did not go on a heavy, unhealthy diet to be skinny, but rather she chose a way to "take control over her body". It is artistic and from a creator of images; an empowered artist. Her acceptance of her own body means empowering females and denies women’s bodies as sexual objects.

So I think that Lena Dunham presents a facet of male dominance through characters such as Shoshanna and Marnie and others which can be then interpreted as the show being post-feminist. However, the originality and creativity of the main character shines through in her artistic ability and self-acceptance, so it is not just a post-feminist show. It is different. It portrays an artistic, unique woman who acknowledges all the problems of post-feminism (body discipline and stereotypical female images) and also wants to be a radical and empowering person who pursues her dreams on her own terms and lives by her own creativity, not through stereotypical gender ideology, nor as a female.

I find the positivity in Dunham’s artistic sense. Compared to other post-feminist television shows showing stereotypical female beauty and Hollywood’s media images, the show is poignantly different because Dunham tries to show the problem of post-feminism by rejecting feminine body discipline and wants to find her power through language, writing, and art in daily life. Lena Dunham has portrayed young females with some problems of male dominance, such as Shoshanna or Marnie or even sometimes Hannah herself face while struggling in her relationship with Adam.

In season two, Marnie works as a hostess. She plays the objectified female to pay the rent. The point of the feminine masquerade is performance. But Lena Dunham also shows that Marnie participates in the male patriarchal repertoire. In the scene where Marnie meets a
famous male artist at the bar and follows him into his studio, he puts her inside of a group of televisions stacked together showing scenes of blood, screaming babies, loud music playing, animals, and fetishized, disorganized, alternating images which creates a disrupted feeling rather than "art". While she is not enjoying his art, he is calmly blending his coffee and does what he wants on his bed. Marnie represents the sexualized female muse for the male artist who just uses her as a sexual metaphor. After he lets her out of the stacks of televisions, instead of saying she does not like it, she says "WTF! You are so talented." The point is Marnie does not see through the whole picture. She only participates in being objectified by the male gaze.

Marnie tells him that she is his girlfriend now because they sleep together and date, and he takes her to his party as a partner to introduce to his people. However, he denies being her boyfriend (saying, "I didn't know that I had a girlfriend.") just because they do such things and even blames her because she loves what he has, not who he is just like everyone else. He throws two wine bottles in a row out of anger. Marnie leaves after she gets hurt by his violent male patriarchal response. Dunham posits here that Marnie plays the typical “other” of the signifier, the male. Gender ideology locks our mind consciously and unconsciously on the idea that women dangerously participate in being objectified, signified the 'other' even in a marital system. Marnie constantly looks for a “proper type” of husband whom she idealizes to support her financially and bring ‘happiness’ to her. Thus, the “rich” artist is perfect for Marnie. So, the male artist knows all this and get angry at vain girls who like what he has. Not only men but women themselves tend to agree with their inferiority to men, at least unconsciously. This gender ideology has been practiced along with education, family, and social values, which Dunham tries to show.

Essentialism in *Girls*
Laurie Penny claims, “Essentialism is as racist and classist as it is sexiest.” She makes crucial points, “In 2012 Kendra James, a black writer with a social and educational background similar to Dunham’s, asked: “Why are the only lives that can be mined for ‘universal experiences’ the lives of white woman?” In mainstream culture white, straight, middle-class women don’t get to speak about their experience without having it universalized and made meaningless in the process. Meanwhile, black women, poor women and queer women usually don’t get to speak about their experience at all (in 2013, only one black female director released a major film). Only white girls get to be Everygirl. That’s why the idea of Everygirl is bullshit. Girls is asked to speak for every young women everywhere but is torn apart when it doesn’t, because nobody can and nobody ever could.” xxxv

In the show, Girls, the four female characters show that the show does not avert essentialism. Although Dunham tries to repeat the message of the 1970’s feminism and criticize Marnie, Jessa, and other characters, the show still shows many sex scenes in which Marnie or Jessa’s sexually objectified images are also for male spectators. Despite Dunham’s comparison between Marnie and the central character of Hannah, the Girls viewers still like the idea of Hollywood beauty shown by Marnie and Jessa. Plenty of young female watchers like Jessa’s character because she is boisterous and cool. Many male viewers like Marnie’s submissive character and sexual images in sex scenes. Also, young girls are likely to copy Marnie’s girly disposition and looks, not Hannah’s. So in result, the repetition and parody of sexual politics shown in Girls still reiterates the masculine heterosexual convention.

In the latest issues of several feminist articles, MS magazine is focused on social political issues for feminists and how their efforts have made a lots of progress such that women have achieved equal rights in voting, health care, salary, etc. It is incredible how second wave feminists’ hardships and efforts have contributed to today’s equality. Bust deals with sensitive issues which young feminists deal with. For instance, one article criticizes school's dress codes
for girls. Public schools banned girls from showing cleavage, wearing tights, or showing too much leg, etc. This can lead to victim blaming. “Sexually suggestive”, “distracting”, and “revealing” are not appropriate language, this article points out. This kind of article can be very informative that dress code and its language can make not only adults, but also children, rethink dress code and the issues of objectification. *Bust* is a more realistic magazine in that it also deals with Poland’s abortion ban and feminists’ protests.

*Girls* also fits in many of today’s feminist issues such as abortion. In season four, Adam’s new girlfriend, Mimi-Rose gets abortion without telling her boyfriend. Adam is outrages by this because he thinks that it is insane. Mimi-Rose does not feel awkward at all and says that she has had abortions several times and does not need to discuss it with him because it is her choice for her own body.

The abortion issue that Hannah brings up reflects today’s feminist issues as shown in *Bust* magazine. However, the show *Girls* limits itself from the global issues of abortion. It is surprising to see Mimi-Rose get an abortion on her own without any social restriction. This episode is surprising to other countries such as Korea or Poland because the show is merely dealing with America, where abortion is mostly not restricted.

Mimi-Rose is portrayed as somewhat guiltless and malicious for doing it so nonchalantly, without even discussing with her boyfriend, Adam. She is portrayed as negatively and cruelly making Adam suffer. The show does not address the sensitive and controversial nature of abortion. Whether or not abortion is highly controversial globally, in *Girls*, the sensitivity of abortion is not dealt with at all in that Mimi-Rose just easily gets it done in the hospital. Abortion is prohibited in some states in the US and many other countries due to ethical and religious reasons, and millions of women are still in positions of inequality and experience sexism regarding abortion matters. On *Feministing.com*, the website deals with anti-abortion laws such as in the article entitled, “Fighting Texas’s Anti-Abortion Burial”. Also, on
msmagazine.com, the website deals with many abortion issues, such as in the article, “Tennessee Woman Pleads Guilty to Attempted Procurement of a Miscarriage” So, the scene of Mimi-Rose’s quick abortion does not make much sense globally. It can be both universalizing and marginalizing that the lives of white women in New York City are meant to speak of the lives of all women in the whole world.

In this way, Girls does not reflect the various other on-going issues feminists face today because the show does not address global feminist issues such as strict anti-abortion laws in many countries. Abortion is so controversial in Korea that feminist organizations and plenty of women want to fight for their abortion rights because the law in Korea does not provide a secure back up plan to young mothers. For example, female workers are often fired after they give birth and do not get enough legal maternity leave. The child care system is incredibly poor in Korea. Thus, abortion is a much needed service especially for those of a poor social situation, but the government strongly bans abortion for so-called ethical reasons. It is a sexist, unfair, and patriarchal valued law.

Many Korean women and feminist organizations are protesting for the right to access abortions. They claim that abortion is a choice for women who should have rights over their own bodies and their futures. A large protest was held near Gangnam Station in which picketers held up signs with messages such as, “my womb is mine, not the government’s; the early stage of pregnancy is only a cell, not a soul, not a human being; I can choose to get rid of the cell for my own life choice; the Government should support safe abortion and provide birth control education more openly; Anti-abortion brings about unsafe abortion routes and a guilty life”, etc. Many more websites and organizations have been founded in Korea alerting people to feminist issues and problems. Western feminist websites such as Bust and Msmagazine are active in discussing inequality nowadays including how it relates to job seeking in the US, sexual violence in Israel, discrimination against transgendered women and men, misogynistic
comments in business and politics, and so on. However, these websites and organizations need to be made available more openly and globally.

Western media is highly influential all over the world. HBO series and numerous television shows are exported to other countries, including Korea. A westernized culture is created by the media in which sexual objectification and the male gaze is now deeply inherent. The dilemma of post-feminism in the HBO series *Girls* lies with the show’s lack of realistic feminist issues that women face now. There are plenty of misogynists in the world and also women who are not aware or simply do not care. HBO television programs are still highly dominated with media norms of whiteness while marginalizing others. It is a sad fact that we still read numerous cases of date rape, abuse and murders in which ex-boyfriends have beaten women to death in revenge of perceived wrongs. It is unbelievable that these crimes are increasing annually all around the world.

Even in Korea, misogyny crimes have been very controversial. In an incident from May 2016 referred to as the “Gangnam Station Murder Case”, a man in his twenties cruelly murdered a young woman in a unisex public toilet. He waited specifically to kill a woman, passing over seven male toilet users. At first he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but after a second trial, he was pardoned of his crime due to schizophrenia and his sentence was reduced down to twenty years. Many doctors and researchers have said that he has a propensity for schizophrenia. The government and the judge in this case have been criticized by feminist organizations and women, but not many men have criticized the results. In Korea, the politics and laws are still patriarchal in nature and a lot of misogyny exists. Young women today are more aware of the patriarchal conventions and misogynistic comments and deeds by men, and many feminist organizations are becoming more active.

Even though Dunham radically creates her own image and directs herself as an actress just as Cindy Sherman did, and repeats 60's and 70's feminist messages such as Schneemaan’s, she
still could not avoid sexualization and objectification for the male gaze. I think that even feminists themselves can easily fall back to playing into male fantasies unconsciously, particularly in heterosexual society. The reason that this happens in Girls could be due to the show’s popularity and wanting to include stimulating scenes in order to lure the greater number of viewers. Thus, female artists are left in a difficult position to innovate tradition and stereotypes in order to create feminist messages for our era and the future. Young feminists should keep working on subverting and changing the masculine value system in journals, magazines, books and other media in order to enlighten not only young women, but also men, and send the message of how callously oppressed we still are. I hope that new media present more of the on-going global feminist issues and female characters are not shown merely as sexual objects, but as free and empowered; their subjectivity not swayed by heterosexist monogamy. One example could be the main female character’s changing portrayal in that the viewers can notice and start to recognize female objectification and oppression, leading them to ask, “what for? Why are we seeking beauty? Why is it only women who sacrifice? Why are women still not equal?” etc. Also, portraying characters who are minorities, such as blacks, Asians, and homosexuals, and not simply heterosexual whites should appear as more significant characters. More of the media should represent and deal with global on-going feminist issues such as abortion restrictions in other countries and gay or lesbian rights. These changes may bore some viewers who are comfortable and accustomed to Hollywood’s female sexualization and heterosexual values system, however making some simple changes to Hollywood’s standard values, as well as adding more minority characters and their issues in a profound and realistic way, surely will help create interest and wake the viewers to new perspectives for the coming generation.
References


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**TV shows**

*Girls.* Season one, two, three and four. 2012-2015

*Sex and the City.* Episode 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

**Movies**

*Sex and the City 1* (2008)

*Sex and the City 2* (2010)
Pamela Engel demonstrates that your chances of getting a job interview greatly increase if you’re an attractive woman.

Roger Highfield briefly explains in this article that men seek beauty, and women want wealth.


*Ibid*, 115

*Ibid*, 213

*Ibid*, 80

*Ibid*, 427


*Ibid*, 39


Suzanne Valadon” p. 3

xxviii Ibid., p. 4

xxix Ibid., p. 3

xxx Ibid., p. 5

xxxi Ibid., p. 4

xxxii Ibid., p. 6

xxxiii Ibid., p. 3

xxxiv Mary Ann Doane (1982) ”Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” p., 141

xxxv Laurie Penny (2014) “Why Lena Dunham’s Girls can’t speak for all women and shouldn’t have to” New Statesmen, Ltd. 143(5195), 19