
Understanding Eroticism in Art Forms: A Critical Analysis of Octave Tassaert's Painting 'The Cursed Woman'

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Abstract

Erotic capital is a value that one acquires as a result of sexual attractiveness which is as important as social and cultural capital. It is a combination of many attributes. It was first used by Catherine Hakim who defined it as a separate form, independent of class origin and which therefore enables social mobility. The erotic theory states that every individual has complete freedom upon their sexual life. This paper attempts to question the title of one of Octave Tassaert's famous paintings, 'The Cursed Woman'. It brings the picture of a woman receiving sex from three partners. The title translates into 'The Damned Woman', but it looks more like heaven than damnation. Sexual intercourse with more than one partner cannot make a woman cursed. Above all, the features of the painting prove the woman's state of happiness and satisfaction. She seems comfortable with what she does. It is commonly believed that women are those supposed to beautify themselves but not allowed to show their interests in sexual acts. Another fact is that the painter who considered, the woman having sex with multiple partners as cursed, was himself considered as the worst painter by the people because of the representation of sex and nudity. He had to face opposition for most of his paintings. According to the theory, the woman has a complete right over her body and thus it opposes the title of the painting.

Keywords: Eroticism, Erotic Capital, Sexology, Cursed, Painting, Woman, Multiple Partners.

Introduction

Eroticism is an expression of an individual's freedom or sovereignty in his or her sexual life. It is an important social value that gives the right for a person to use his or her body according to their wish. Octave Tassaert was a famous painter who represented eroticism in his works. The paper tries to question the title of one of his paintings. It consists of a woman having sex with three partners and the title is 'The Cursed Woman'. This article attempts to prove the woman is not cursed using the principles of eroticism. It also discusses the representation of nudity and sex in art.

Theoretical Overview

Erotic capital is a value that one acquires as a result of sexual attractiveness which is as important as social and cultural capital. Erotic theory guarantees full freedom for an individual on his or her body. The term was coined to refer to a nebulous but crucial mixture of features like charm, social and physical attractiveness etc. Eroticism is a collection of many attributes, not simply the beauty and charm of the body but something that can be learned. The term was introduced by Catherine Hakim. It is a major asset in politics, media, sports, etc.

Hakim (2012, p. 6) argues that women who openly dispose of their sex appeal and beauty are considered as stupid and subjected to many meaningful social attributes. The most powerful tool deployed by men to reduce women's use of erotic capital is the stigmatization of women who give sexual services. Once the patriarchal restrictions on women's sexual activities and lives are eliminated, the social imbalance will vanish. In the absence of social contrasts, there appears no sex difference in sexual needs or interests among the people. There has been an increase in recreational sex, in and out of marriage. Male control over women's fertility and sexuality divided women into 'non-respectable' and 'respectable', those attached to one man and the others, 'pure' or 'impure'. The subordination of women by men was sexual in its origin. The language of the dress was one of the factors used to stigmatize women. Men should get what they want from women for free, especially sex, which is the logic behind their dominance. A lot of values, cultures, and social customs are concerned with ensuring men's sexual access to women on terms favorable to them. This is termed as 'male sex right'. Men's instrumental attitude towards the world based on manipulation and domination is in contrast to women's nurturing outlook. An ideal woman is expected to be perpetually sensual and beautiful, but should not be too conscious of her beauty and sex appeal. This is a cultural construct and thus women's sexuality has traditionally

been restrained.

The male sex deficit is a factor that helps to explain men's continuing need to retain misogyny, power, male violence towards women, male antagonism towards women's autonomy and independence. Men financially benefit more than women from erotic capital. Women seem to be less rewarded than men. Male desires and sexual needs color the debates on erotic capital and its value. Women's erotic capital thus becomes intertwined with the male sex deficit, male ego, and the rhetoric adjoining power struggles between men and women. Modern sexual politics constantly denies the value of women's erotic capital and sexuality in private life. Social scientists have sidestepped and have realized its impact on both private and public life. Patriarchal norms have trivialized women's erotic capital to discourage women from capitalizing on it.

Radical feminists, unfortunately, have reinforced patriarchal moral objections to the deployment of erotic capital. Even if there are daily reminders of its importance, erotic capital is the fourth personal asset so far ignored. Erotic capital is the most complex personal asset with several features like sex appeal, beauty, charm, and charisma, social skills, sexual performances, and fertility as well. Unlike all others, it begins from an early period and thus avoids a visible impact on all stages of life. One of the elements of erotic capital is definitely social. It is defined that erotic capital is multifaceted. Particular features may be more or less salient in various societies and at different points in time. Despite these variations, sex appeal is in short supply and therefore universally valued. In some cultures, fertility is considered as one of the elements of erotic capital and this is one reason for stigmatizing homosexuality as it cannot produce offspring. In some cases, erotic and cultural capitals are closely interlinked. It is a combination of visual, artistic, social, physical, and, sexual attractiveness to other members of society. The title of the work, 'Psychopathia Sexualis' by Kraft-Ebbing, makes it clear that this examination of desire adopts a medical perspective on the psychological and pathological condition of erotic life. Sexology remains worryingly inconsiderate to the historical eventuality of the scientific methods it employs to estimate sexual deviancy or normativity, adequacy or inadequacy. One can find sexological writings seeking to produce some everlasting truth about the sexual capacity of human beings. Sexological writings remain pensive with the quantification of data based on sexual behaviors and functions that they rarely pause to consider why or how sexuality might resist the structures or arrangements that sexual science proliferates at an exponential rate. Sexual love in married life is based on the fetishism enjoyed by men. This concludes how men select their partners in a discriminating rather than lustful way. Strict social methods of respectability, that considered sex as an unspeakable topic, militated against the circulation of sexological writings. The ethnic practice of sheathing the genitals derives from multiple sources: a biologically defined sense of modesty and an inbuilt erotic drive. Tattooing and body adornment in so-called ancient cultures can be considered as having the same dual function. Auto-eroticism to some extent is a physiological manifestation. It becomes morbid in certain conditions such as in individuals who are previously morbid. Even among animals, auto-eroticism is a largely diffused phenomenon. Auto-eroticism belongs to a pattern of psycho-sexual development. It is always a precursor of fully developed sexuality and manifests itself a long time before puberty.

By developing this view, Weininger (1903) expands in modern form the conviction that masculinity and femininity are derived from one sex, not two. Sexual differentiation is never complete. All human beings abide by a perpetual bisexual condition. Eroticism deals with both social and physical attractiveness. These reinforce each other. Single women and lesbians were at times considered inferior beings who had failed to preserve the fruits of womanhood. One of the highly examined fields from the mid-century has been the relation between women's sexual rights and heterosexual desires. These discussions intensified with sexological research enhanced the need to improve erotic potential.

Sexology has been far too analyzed on categorizing sexual types and measuring sexual behaviors, setting norms and targets for each. If sexology has shifted from pathologizing certain sexual aspirations by placing more focus on the choice of individual erotic contentment, it will be difficult to understand how sexuality may defy and exceed bodily function. Eroticism extends beyond the scope of the reproductive abilities of sexually matured people. First, there is the existence of homosexuality. Second, those people who are grouped as perverts, who behave like sexual ones but at the same time entirely disregard the sexual organs or their normal use. Erotic capital thus explains the right and freedom of an individual on his or her body.

The Cursed Woman

'Cursed Woman' is one of Tassaert's famous paintings. Also known as 'La Femme Damnee', the painting brings in the picture of a woman receiving sex from a few people. This particular painting marked an end to his exhibitions in 1857 at Salon de. Octave Tassaert was a French painter of historical, religious, and allegorical paintings. Tassaert was a lithographer and an engraver. His grandfather was a carver named Jean-Pierre-Antoine Tassaert. He won popular but not an expository success and his works showing common lives were felt theatrical by critics but approved by the public. He was a carver and painter of works that were highly expensive, depicting the carnal act, inclination, seduction, and sexual pleasure. He was the patron of lust in the world of art.

His paintings represented the life of the poor, dysfunctional families, sick people, or dying mothers and children. Its subject tends to be women far more than men with clear inspiration from classical depictions of women's figures and involves inspiration from classical forms. The harmful addiction to alcohol and the unrelenting loss of vision dragged the talented artist away from the arts and into a listless life where the only break was literature. What truly led to his lack of recognition and society's repudiation was the theme of his works, eroticism. His paintings drove him further into obscurity in the art world. Since the paintings represented nudity and sexual acts openly, people found it a little difficult to accept. This lack of interest in discussing such topics grew into opposition against the painter. Some of his other paintings involve 'Flora', 'The Bedroom Mishap', 'The Jealous Cat' etc.

Octave Tassaert in his paintings has tried to bring concepts to different areas. In his painting 'The Cursed Woman', a woman having sex with three partners is portrayed. Sex is a basic and usual need is represented in it. Usually, sex is something about which most people show reluctance to speak about. Representation of sex in art makes people realize sex as something that is as common as the basic processes like sleeping, eating, etc. Such paintings provide a ground for people to discuss such matters openly. There has occurred much critical opposition against this painting. Nudity, sex, relationship bonds are some of the common themes of Octave Tassaert. The title of the painting says that the woman is cursed. There can be several ideas behind this title for the painter. He may want to convey that a woman having sex with more than one person is like being cursed. It can also show the inferiority of a woman while having sex. Or else this title may be meant tongue in cheek by the artist, way back then. The painting was made in 1859, a period when many injustices and problems prevailed in society. According to Tassaert, eroticism was not the only area he explored in his paintings, but also many works on social injustice.

Erotic Analysis

The title of the painting is questioned by the theory. The painting shows a woman having sex with three partners. The painter considers the woman as cursed. But there is nothing that makes the woman cursed in the painting. Sex, a universal and biological phenomenon among all living beings, is practiced by the woman but with multiple partners. Having sex with more than one partner cannot make a woman cursed. Above all, the features of the painting itself prove that the woman is happy and satisfied with what she does.

The title translates into 'The Damned Woman' but this painting looks more like heaven than damnation. The woman seems she is comfortable with what she is doing. Why does a lady being worshipped by multiple partners called cursed? It looks like more of a blessing than a curse and a pretty standard fantasy for most people. A keen observation of the physical features of the painting shows that all the people involved here are happy and satisfied. To explain in detail, the woman's hands, her face, and all such physical characteristics make clear how happy she is. The sexual intercourse might be under her consent. The painting also has some features of angles, showing that the sexual partners can be three angels. The painting was made in a period that faced many social injustices. It might have made to show such social injustice. But this particular act of having sex with multiple partners cannot be listed under social injustice. It could have been away for artists in a time of censorship to paint exactly what they want, just framing it in a negative way to escape said censorship.

From the point of eroticism, there are 'normal sexual lives' which lead to heterosexual intercourse, that involve behaviors that do not have a direct function in the reproductive process. There are many parts of the body that can become sites of great sexual valuation. All such theoretical ideas are found to be difficult for people to accept. This might be the reason for considering the woman as cursed. According to Freud (1905), 'the sexual instinct has to fight against certain kinds of mental forces which can act as resistances', notable forces such as shame and disgust. With this, he explains how sexual instinct itself combines varying and often conflicting elements. The title of this Tassaert's painting was accepted by a wide range of people. This might be because of the belief in their minds that sexual intercourse, that too with multiple people, was a sin, and thus the woman given the title of cursed is an apt one. Sexual practice is not something that should be kept a secret in a conversation or public discussion. Freud (1905) declares that sexual impulses are already present in the newborn child. To explain the child's incipient autoeroticism, he considers the infantile practice of thumb-sucking. In his writings, Freud (1905) remarked, "I have been led to ascribe the quality of teratogenicity to all parts of the body and to all the internal organs". A glance at the painting itself would have made the viewer's accept the title of the painting. People are not ready to accept sex as a common process. A keen observation of the features of the people involved in the painting could have made the viewer's understand that the lady was comfortable and satisfied in her act. Another interesting fact is that the painter who considered a woman having sex with multiple partners as a cursed act was himself considered as the worst painter by the people because of the representation of sex and nudity. Most of his paintings brought out the themes of nudity, sex, relationships, etc, and thus he had to face much opposition from the people. People who consider sex as one's personal choice and right may not be able to find the reason for considering the woman in the painting as cursed.

There has happened much opposition from the people for the presentation of nudity in such paintings. Nudity when shown in art is found to receive opposition, whereas nudity in religious paintings is highly supported. Pictures of nude Gods and Goddesses are even worshipped by the same people who oppose nudity when portrayed in art. Such religious paintings are highly praised and often those painters are rewarded.

Another reason can be a woman having sex with multiple partners. If it was a man, there might not have been given this title 'cursed' for the painting, rather the three women would have been blamed. Women's sexual interests, their initiatives, and their choice of sexual partners are always denied when observed from the past. They are usually subjected to accept sexual pleasure from their male partners without a personal way of choice or wishes. Women are enclosed within a structure that either puts them into discrimination or subjugation. When a woman and a man indulge in sexual intercourse, it is considered as a mistake only for the woman and not to the man or not that extend faced by a woman. Women are those supposed to their sexual photos or pictures are considered as so-called 'bad' in society, while those who do the same are praised for the same. Here the woman is having sex with multiple partners under her consent and she is enjoying the moment with great pleasure. The right of the woman to have sex with people whom she loves is being questioned through the title. When observed from the point of erotic capital, a woman's body is her personal right and her sexual partners are her choice. Nobody can question these and it will be like peeping out into other's lives.

Conclusion

The theory of eroticism focuses not only on beauty and charm but also on the rights of an individual in his or her sexual life. This particular concept of the freedom of a person on his or her body is highlighted in this paper. Erotic capital and its social value are represented in the paper. The title of the painting, 'The Cursed Woman' by Octave Tassaert, considers the woman as cursed. The paper, using the principles of eroticism, concludes that having sex with multiple partners cannot make a woman cursed and thus questions the very title of the painting. The different ways of response towards the representation of nudity and sex, with respect to the context and art form, are also analyzed in the paper.

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