Self-Discovery through an Outsider’s Eyes:
The Construction of Women’s Confidence through the Male Gaze

For many women, our sense of self is a malleable, unstable, and susceptible identity. Since female power in our society is most readily attained through our value to men, women often easily gain or lose confidence as a result of our perceived physical attractiveness. In Eve Ensler’s monologue Because He Liked to Look at It, a woman learns to love her body by seeing it from her boyfriend’s point of view. While it is wonderful that she gained this self-confidence, she became a passive bystander in the discovery of her own beauty. Marisa Navarro offers a contrasting experience in Becoming La Mujer. The sexual attention she received from men during her adolescence detracted from, rather than improved, her self-esteem. Marilyn Frye’s In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love helps to explain the inequalities between women’s own self-image and the identity bestowed on us by the “arrogant eye” of patriarchal society. Because the construction of women’s confidence is heavily dependent on the male gaze, women become inactive participants in the formulation of our sense of self. Women will not be able to create stable self-images until we are the primary actors in the shaping of our identities.

Before meeting Bob, the narrator of Because He Liked to Look at It hated her vagina: “I hated my thighs, and I hated my vagina even more. I thought it was incredibly ugly. I was one of those women who had looked at it and, from that moment on, wished I hadn’t. It made me sick. I pitied anyone who had to go down there.” (Ensler 54) It is unfortunate that women somehow learn to despise such an intimate part of themselves. It
was not until the narrator dated a man who “loved vaginas” (Ensler 55) that her view of
that body part changed:

I began to see myself the way he saw me. I began to feel beautiful and delicious –
like a great painting or a waterfall. Bob wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t grossed out. I
began to swell, began to feel proud. Began to love my vagina. (Ensler 57)

She began to love her body only after a man loved her body. The creation of her self-
esteeam was executed by her boyfriend; the narrator became a passive spectator in the
formulation of her confidence. In the words of Marilyn Frye, “She has assumed his
interest. She now sees with his eye, his arrogant eye.” (74)

In Becoming La Mujer, Marisa Navarro recounts her early experience with the
male gaze. As a young woman, her body was repeatedly objectified and sexualized by
men in her community. The invasiveness of their gaze greatly diminished her developing,
fragile self-worth:

Trying to walk down the street with my head up has become the most political act
of my teenage life. I dread major roads and busy intersections because men yell at
me or stick out their tongues like deranged lizards. I hate how all they see is long
hair and breasts, and how with each honk they take a piece of my self esteem with
them…I start to hate everything that makes me look like a woman – the breasts,
the hips, the long hair – because I’m getting lots of attention, but no self
esteem. (Navarro 42-43)

In contrast to the narrator’s experience in Because He Liked to Look at It, the “positive”
male attention Navarro received negatively impacted her sense of self. She began to hate
aspects of herself that defined her as female because only her outward appearance was
labeled as valuable. She became a passive receiver of men’s sexual advances and was
unable to construct a self-image independent of the objectification of her body.

In her article In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love, Marilyn Frye
explains the difference between the “arrogant eye”, which perceives the world in an
individualistic, narrow point of view (67), and the “loving eye,” which includes others’ needs and perspectives in its perception of the world (75). Women’s self-image is constructed through the arrogant eye of androcentric society, and therefore, we are often hesitant to build independent identities that would exclude the patriarchal definition of femininity (Frye 80). Our self-image becomes dictated to us, rather than created by us.

Frye offers a possible solution to women’s poor self-image:

> We need to know women as independent: subjectively in our own beings, and in our appreciation of others. If we are to know it in ourselves, I think we may have to be under the gaze of the loving eye, the eye which presupposes our independence. The loving eye does not prohibit a woman’s experiencing the world directly, does not force her to experience it by way of the interested interpretations of the seer in whose visual field she moves. (Frye 81-82)

Through the objectification of women’s bodies, our thoughts, ambitions, and personalities become broken down into a narrow range of accepted behaviors. With the comfort and respect of one’s body comes an innate sense of entitlement and agency – without this confidence, women are unable to build autonomous identities. Until women are able to experience life independently, and not live indirectly through patriarchal society’s view of us, we will not be able to fully rise out of sexist oppression.

It is difficult to predict what women would choose to look like and act like if we were not pressured by society to fit into the established norms. Our formulation of self-image through the male gaze sometimes grants us confidence and sometimes fosters hatred for our bodies; in both cases, our identity becomes something created for us, not something we actively construct. Women will not be able to generate stable self-images until our identities are created on our own terms. Sada Mecca’s poem, *Not of Reality* provides encouragement for the deconstruction of the male gaze: “I’ve broken down the wall they’ve built/ Based on what they see/ A weak foundation/ Not of reality” (Mecca
241). Perhaps women will someday be able to construct strong, autonomous self-images through their own, individual gazes and openly reject society’s unrealistic expectations of ideal womanhood.
Works Cited


