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ENG 3401

20 May 2015

The Evolution of Sexuality, Race, Gender and Oppression

Since the beginning of time and throughout the course of history there have always been two (2) familiar genders: male and female and two (2) familiar races: black and white. In these genders and races, one has always been more superior to the other. Males have always been superior to females and whites have always been superior to blacks. As a result of this imbalance, there have been many obstacles to pass and hardships to face by those less important. Although times have changed and so have certain rights, ideas, and views of gender, race and sexuality, there are still many stereotypes and forms of oppression that exist today which reflect prior treatment. Using Naomi Wolf’s “The Making of a Slut”, Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird”, Gloria Steinem’s “A Lot of Learning Is a Dangerous Thing” and Homa Khaleeli’s “Female Genital Mutilation: Mother’s Need to Say No” in conjunction with occurrences and facts from the film “The Accused” directed by Jonathan Kaplan, among other sources and current events, I will discuss the evolution of sexuality, race and gender along with doing a comparison of oppression and injustice from the mid-1900s to the present day for both females and blacks. I will also discuss the transformation of the female role and female objectification while analyzing societal views and stereotypes of the Negro to determine if America’s claim of equality does in fact exist and is it true.

Section 1. Women’s Rights: Oppression and Injustices

In the early to mid-1900s women were known primarily to be housewives and homemakers. Their roles were cooking, cleaning, tending to the children and keeping their husbands fed and happy all while maintaining a clean home and neat appearance. These are just a few examples of the types of injustices and oppression faced by females by none other than their male counterparts; their superiors. Personally, I don’t know how they managed. Up until the Sexual Revolution, women had no voice. Only when the Sexual Revolution started, did women start to come forward to break tradition and become their own individuals. They fought for rights such as voting, entering the workforce and open sexual relations without marriage or commitment. One injustice that started in the past that still exists today is female genital mutilation; this process includes the removal of the female clitoris and parts of the labia. While it is not practiced in the United States, it is done in many parts of Asia and Africa. According to Homa Khaleeli, “Today 30,000 girls in the UK are said to be at risk of this form of mutilation, while 66,000 live with the consequences of it. Yet no one has ever been prosecuted for carrying out or abetting the practice (…)” (Khaleeli 313). As a woman with a daughter of my own, I cannot begin to imagine the pain and suffering of these females just to please the mind and desire of a man (those who originally enforced the tradition).

Although this injustice directly affects women, Khaleeli claims, “This has to be a man’s campaign. Until men say stop, […] it will still go on.” (Khaleeli 315). Apparently women cannot get married or engage in relationships with men unless they are mutilated; it’s frowned upon. Another form of oppression is discussed by Naomi Wolf and this is slut-shaming and stereotype. Women are given certain derogatory names based on their appearance and lifestyle choices not to mention that they are given these names by men and other women! I guess it’s easy to join the crowd when the center of attention or the subject matter is not you. According to Wolf, “In any group of girls, someone has to be the slut.” (Wolf 317). In this group of girls, “Dinah got called a slut because she was too poor and she was too proud of her body, and, by implication she was too proud of her sexuality.” (Wolf 319). As shameful as that sounds, it is true according to the society past and present. Take the show Sex and the City for example.[[1]](#footnote-1) This show involves a group of four (4) women who are all friends and all they do is talk about sex, relationships and how it has either enhanced their life or destroyed it. If this was in the early-1900s, they would not be allowed to have these types of conversations or even gather for what we now call brunch, but they can now due to the Sexual Revolution. Out of the four (4) women, as mentioned by Wolf one has to be the slut, and in this case it is Kim Cattrall’s character Samantha. In the show, it is obvious that they are all sexual beings but Samantha embraces the fact that she is the “slut” of the group and is okay with it; in fact she’s proud of being the 50 year old slut. Throughout the show they continuously compare themselves to the sexuality of men and they realize that men and women will always be different; it’s just something we all have to live with.

Jodie Foster’s character in the movie “The Accused” was gang raped by several men; an act that was encouraged by other men. Although she was not at fault in this case and was merely the victim, she was put to shame based on her actions, her appearance and her lifestyle. She was judged for being a woman who was proud of whom she was. Being forced to take the witness stand and prove that what she claimed happened to her really did happen, is a slap in the face because it comes down to a man’s word versus a woman’s word. It is very easy in society to negatively label a woman and make everything her fault but it is hard to shame a man. In the film, her friend knew what was happening but also knew deep down inside that she could not help her; especially when one of the cheerleaders (as I called them) told her she was next when she tried to peek into the back room. If it had not been for that Bob character, who is a man, testifying on her side, she may not have won. All of the odds were against her. She was a fresh, intoxicated woman who was known for flirting around. While she did receive a victory, I don’t believe the punishment matched the crime. At first the assailants were given minimal sentences during their bargaining just to save their own names but in the end she was able to get her story out.

In reference to Harper Lee’s story line surrounding the white girl, Mayella Ewell who was supposedly taken advantage of by a Negro, it was frowned upon just the idea that she could have possibly been the one to make sexual advances to a man and that of a Negro man as claimed by attorney Atticus Finch.[[2]](#footnote-2) Not only in their town, but anywhere that would be considered a disgrace to the woman and her family. Just as we now have slut-shaming, back then it would be considered slander to the woman’s reputation and her family name which is why they fought so hard back then to keep women hidden and suppressed. She would be considered a “nigger-lover” as was Mr. Finch when he took on the case for Tom Robinson if people were to think that she was capable of doing that. On the other hand, in Steinem’s piece, she discusses the role of genders when it comes to women and education. She says, “One study […] found that, in the process of learning to read, a little girl is exposed to more boy-centered stories that girl-centered stories by a ratio of five to two (5:2), to folk and fantasy tales with four (4) times more male characters, and to biographies that are six (6) times more likely to profile males than females.” (Steinem 127). I believe the point Steinem is trying to make is even as children the difference between male and female is introduced. Little girls are exposed to life centered on boys. Bottom line, the public treatment of women may have changed over time from the early/mid-1900s to now, but the overall expectation of a woman to maintain her role in society and standards has still remained intact.

Section 2. Race: Oppression and Injustices

The difference among the original races (white and black) in history was based solely on the color of a person’s skin. In the present day, there are more underlying issues now that more races have been claimed and brought to light. There is no longer just the white and the black race; there is now the Latin race, the Asian race, the Indian race, etc. Although the primary issue is still the difference in skin colors because there are now more shades and hues involved, there’s now the issue of finance and race and education and race. The typical stereo type will say that Whites are better educated and as a result have more money and are better off financially while Blacks are either not educated and as a result they are poor or borderline poverty stricken. I’ve even heard some say that Blacks are afraid of learning. While that is just a stereotype, and some situations may prove that to be true now, according to Steinem, “[…] well-to-do suburban kids from intact European-American families have drug problems, eating disorders, dangerous behavior problems, and a sad proof of low self-esteem, high suicide rates-indeed, far higher than among the very poor.” (Steinem 134). When she refers to European-American families in the suburbs, you can picture the rich white family with their big house and their well-educated kids (as the stereotype leads to you believe) but recent statistics show there’s another side to the spectrum. My interpretation of Steinem’s claim is that the stereo type has begun to evolve and actually go the other way. There are now more “whites” that are uneducated, addicted to drugs and poor and some of them even come from well off families that live in the “suburbs”.

Going back to Harper Lee’s story, Tom Robinson was convicted of sexual assault just because as a poor black man, he made the claim that he felt sorry for a young white woman and decided to help her. Even though her testimony in court proved that she was lying and this man was innocent, the color of his skin determined his fate. In the mid-1960s, Negros was still considered to be the lesser human and had no moral or humane rights in the world. Their only purpose was to serve their superiors…sort of similar to the role of the woman in early days. Just like the Sexual Revolution, only until the civil rights movement did Negros start to get a voice. In today’s world, there still exists that prejudice against certain races. Race stereotypes say that, “Asian-Americans are successful, high income, studious, hardworking, quiet, […]”[[3]](#footnote-3), Negros are thugs, lazy, live on welfare, on drugs, etc.[[4]](#footnote-4) and Hispanics are sultry, loud and crazy. Once again, some of these stereotypes may unfortunately prove to be true in some ways, but it does not go for the entire race population and that is the issue in today’s society. In current events, we now have a “Stop and Frisk” policy in effect along with what I call Shoot to Kill instead of Shoot to Injure policy. Surveys show that with this new found Stop and Frisk policy, races outside of the White race are those primarily targeted[[5]](#footnote-5) and it has led to a major imbalance in America’s claim in equality.

Section 3. America’s Fake Claim of Equality

The United States of America has always been known to be the “Land of the Free” and the “Home of the Brave” as it says it in the Star Spangled Banner but nowhere in that melody does it say the land of equality. If that song is our national anthem, shouldn’t it represent what we really are? And what we really represent? Based on the events of that time when this song was written our brave soldiers were fighting for freedom but they were not fighting for equality. I can see where they were going with the song when it was written, but even though people were given what they called freedom, they were still treated poorly and they weren’t exactly free. That’s already a false claim. Slavery was abolished, but then the Jim Crow laws and other segregating laws were put into effect…so much for being free and/or equal. Funny how when it came to race and gender, white women were given more rights than the Negro population and women barely had any rights.

Reading an article on the Foundation for Economic Education’s (FEE) website, Dr. John Van Til discusses “The Idea of Equality in America” back in 1978.[[6]](#footnote-6) He explains where the ideas of equality came from and referenced that they were the ideas of politicians who were rich white folks and not the actual American citizens. According to the article, “Social and economic equality was not a constitutive principle of the American system created in the Revolution and embodied in the Constitution. […] Inequalities were obvious in such things as wealth, rank, manners, dress, speech, family and intellect. […] Of these, wealth was the outstanding criterion for high social standing, and as long as inequalities of wealth were comparatively slight…it was easy for Americans to associate political democracy with equality.” (Dr. Till). Although written in the 1970s, it is still a very true statement today in 2015. I believe that the idea of equality stems from the fact that you’re not actually born equal to your peers in every way, but you are given the equal opportunity to become like them, or become their equal. In any case, there’s another fact that makes America’s claim of equality false.

Depending on where you live in the country, you are exposed to certain opportunities or

Good fortunes that others are not; there’s another sign of inequality. In New York, you can pretty much go to any school you want or live in any neighborhood you want and be okay, but let’s say you decide to go to Alabama, Mississippi or one of those states down south, segregation and racism is still very much alive so you have to be careful on where you chose to live or go to school. America claims to be equal and yet men in the workforce are paid higher than females to do the same job with the same and sometimes even less qualifications. There’s discrimination at work, discrimination at school and discrimination in the street, so where does America think this equality is because I don’t see it.

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1. Sex and the City television show on HBO (see references) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To Kill a Mockingbird (closing argument from the defense) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NBC News online [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Virginia Commonwealth University paper [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Huffington Post online [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) website [↑](#footnote-ref-6)