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becky luxon
rluxo1@u.brockport.edu

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Double Standards in Everyday Life: Book Reviews

Introduction

Although I have always been aware of the double standards and gender stereotypes of being a woman, a mind-blowing moment occurred in my spring 2016 Feminist Theory class. I had never subscribed to the gender double standard¹ towards sex or even thought about it until I watched the documentary *Inside Deep Throat* (Bailey & Barbato, 2005) about Linda Lovelace. This documentary follows Linda Lovelace, former adult film star, and deconstructs the film *Deep Throat* (Gerard & Peraino, 1972), which featured Lovelace performing oral sex on a large penis. *Deep Throat* was a hit across mainstream America. When it premiered in 1972, it was the first time that a female actor had performed that type of oral sex (deep throating) in popular cinema (Bailey & Barbato, 2005). However, the film was not a hit for Lovelace, who years later, testified that every time she watched herself in the film, she felt like she was being raped (Bailey & Barbato, 2005).

Why did people judge her? What prompted her to take this role? Moreover, would it be so bad if she did want to perform this role? Traditional gender roles, gender inequality, and sexism are constructs based solely on the ways society socially inscribes

¹ According to the sexual double standard, boys and men are rewarded and praised for heterosexual sexual contacts, whereas girls and women are derogated and stigmatized for similar behaviors (Kreager, 2009).

sex and gender identity. I considered the compromises Linda Lovelace faced while reading feminist scholar Jessica Valenti's *Sex Object: A Memoir*, and her 2008 title, *He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know*. Valenti argues in both books that women should not have to follow traditional gender stereotypes in our society. I agree and argue the same.

Jessica Valenti

Sex Object: A Memoir

New York: HarperCollins, 2016.

224 pp.

This book is called *Sex Object* not because I relish the idea of identifying as such: I don't do it coyly or to flatter myself. I don't use the term because I think I'm particularly sexy or desirable, though I've been called those things before at opportune moments (Valenti, 2016, p. 2).

In *Sex Object*, Valenti's first memoir, Valenti discusses the daily pressures forced upon women to look and act a certain way. She demonstrates through her writing that society views women as sexual objects first and people second. She makes the reader take a closer look at sexism, which she defines as "the way women are treated like objects, the way we make ourselves into objects and how the daily sloughing away of our humanity impacts not just our lives and experiences but our very sense of

self..." (p. 3). Valenti explains that the sexism she experienced a decade earlier still plays a role in her life. This is essential to Valenti's argument that women face daily sexual harassment such as catcalling. Sexism is real and it affects women more than one would think.

Part One

Sex Object divides into three parts. The first part of Valenti's memoir begins with "Line Violence," which discusses the cycle of violence in Valenti's family where "rape and abuse are passed down like the world's worst birthright" (p. 10). Valenti recognizes that this is not a phenomenon unique only to her family:

Yes, we love the good men in our lives and sometimes, oftentimes, the bad ones too -- but that we're not in full revolution against the lot of them is pretty amazing when you consider this truth: men get to rape and kill women and still come home to dinner cooked by one (p. 15).

Valenti writes about personal events such as being asked out by her teacher. She argues that men do not experience the daily harassments and sexism that women do.

Valenti hopes that expressing a want for change can result from telling the truth about what happens to women day-to-day. Women are hesitant to talk about their experiences because when

we do decide to talk about the sexism, we are called man-haters and accused of being overly sensitive or unable to take a joke. “But no one wants to listen to our sad stories unless they are smoothed over with a joke or nice melody” (p. 15). However, in order to enact change women must speak up about their experiences.

“Line Violence” has meaning for me because I was sexually harassed at my place of employment. I am a library page, which means I shelve materials and keep the library neat. I used to park my book cart and organize books in the very back of the library with two green chairs directly in front of me. One afternoon, an older man sat in one of the green chairs to read an erotic novel. I noticed his hand was in his pants. I was a shy 17-year-old, but I told my boss and he and the branch manager of the library called the police. Not only do these issues affect us in the present, they affect us for years to come.

Part Two

The second part of Valenti’s memoir is about the good men in her life and the not so good men. Reading the second part of the book, I thought about how much she learned from every experience and how it led her to her current husband. When dating, she knew what she liked and what she did

not like. Much of her sexual promiscuity and relationships helped her discover herself. She determined from her experiences that she does not like the way women are treated and that she is going to do something about it. The chapter “College” resonated with me the most. Valenti discusses her relationship with her college boyfriend Paul, a good guy:

I would like to say that being with someone who legitimately loved and respected me brought out the best in me but the truth is that anything good that Paul gave to me I rejected. I know that I loved him – he’s probably the only other person than my husband for whom I really think that’s true – but I treated him poorly, still (p. 95).

I not only have a Paul, but this matches up with my current circumstances: looking forward to graduation, building a career for myself, buying a home, and starting a foundation for the rest of my life. It is difficult because I know I love my Paul, but at the end of the day, I reject anything nice he does for me. This chapter validated that I cannot be responsible for someone’s happiness. Valenti did not want to be a homemaker and a stay at home mom. I have similar feelings to this. This is a gendered stereotype that women should not have to follow. A woman can

choose to be whomever she would like, be it homemaker or president. The choices lie with her.

Part Three

The third and final part of Valenti's book is primarily about her adult life and caring for her baby, Layla. Two parts of this section made an impact on me. Valenti writes,

Fake it till you make it, but at what point are you just a fucking faker? The feminism of the day says we need to lean in and stake our claim and not be shy about our accomplishments, but it wasn't so long ago that taking up any kind of space was considered feminist blasphemy – a thorn in the movement's side (p. 143).

"Fake it till you make it" is something I say all the time, but how long can I fake it until I am not myself anymore? Even now, when I am telling people about my major in Women and Gender Studies and that I am a feminist, I sometimes want to back in a corner because I have received so many negative responses. Feminism is important to me, and I need to stand behind what I believe in without worrying about what others will say. The second part that stands out to me is when she writes about her second abortion. She was married, had a career, and already a mother to her daughter. Valenti explains how she questioned

her own abortion decision because of the stigma and her position as a mother. However, it is her body and her choice no matter what.

Jessica Valenti

He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know

California: Seal Press, 2008.

224 pp.

Valenti does not present any solutions in *Sex Object: A Memoir*; she simply states how detrimental sexual objectification is and what women have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. In her previous book, *He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know*, Valenti exposes the gender double standards society places on women and men, and presents straightforward solutions on how to try to remove the double standard.

Valenti explains that it is hard enough to be a woman politician in a man's world, but women also have the added pressures of judgement based on how they look. This was true in the 2016 United States presidential election. The media cared more about what Hilary Clinton was wearing and how much jewelry she had on than they did about her political platform. The solution Valenti presents is to draw attention to

these intolerable actions. Even sharing an article, image, or post on social media about the detriments of sexism could be powerful. One of the reasons I enjoyed *He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know* is because while many authors simply write about a problem, Valenti proceeds to present a solution. As a reader, I walked away from this book angry, sad, and hopeful about the future for women. Even with the concrete solutions Valenti presents to the reader, I was able to brainstorm additional ideas of my own to try to change the treatment and perception of women.

Both of Valenti's writings are significant to me because of the sexist double standards that I have encountered in my life. Based on my experiences growing up, I did not fit into the typical gender stereotypes, the expected roles, actions, and behaviors designated to any given sex or gender. The expectation of women is to love the color pink, paint their nails, and wear makeup. While I admit that I do like some of these things, I also like being outside, getting dirty, and working on my car, which society stereotypes as being masculine activities. Growing up, my dad always had motorcycles, snowmobiles, and four wheelers. I remember going for

rides on these and LOVING it. My dad has never prohibited me from doing certain activities based on gender stereotypes. My dad encouraged me and my brother to always pursue what we wanted regardless of other's judgements.

I was 11 years old when my parents divorced. Many women in my life told me that I was wrong in making the choice to live with my dad. Since I was 11 years old people have told me, "a man can't raise a girl;" "girls need their mother." As I got older, the comments have turned into, "you don't want to buy a house without a man." Part of me is infuriated that others doubt my autonomy, and then the other part of me is sad that some women have no idea what they are capable of because they are solely dependent on men. In *Sex Object*, Paul tells Valenti a story when she was very drunk about how she does not need a man. He reminded her that she could take care of herself. This is exactly how I feel; I can take care of myself. I do not need a man. The difference between needing and wanting a man is huge.

Conclusion

As Valenti describes in both *Sex Object* and *He's a Stud, She's a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know*, gender stereotypes such as

driving, mowing my lawn, and working on my car, are all activities I received negative backlash for because they are not considered feminine. When I was 16 and got my drivers permit, I drove a truck, which generated a ton of negative attention from friends and family. Rather than being excited and proud of me for learning to drive, these individuals paid attention to the fact that I was a girl driving a truck. Recently, I moved away from home, but I rent an apartment from my dad. To help him out, I mow the lawn at his house. Maternal family members and friends make comments like, "That's a man's job" or "Why do you do that, you poor thing." I remember thinking to myself, why is this such a bad thing? This helps my dad and makes me feel accomplished. Those same people criticized me for working on my car. Last summer, my dad and I changed the oil and then rotated the tires on my car. As I was putting one of the front tires back on, I heard a voice behind me say, "Oh, you've got Becky working on her car. You better be careful; she might break a nail." Why can't a girl work on her car? Many people take pride in their cars, and regardless of gender, it is important and useful to know basic car care and repair. People are more concerned about gender roles and what people are

"supposed" to be doing rather than the actual productive and exciting things we have going on in the world.

All of my experiences with gender double standards relate back to Valenti's writings. She is encouraging young women to break out of these typical gender roles and double standards. Like Linda Lovelace, you do not have to do what society has decided for you. Valenti has experienced a lot of sexist backlash in her writing, and this became especially visible after publishing her memoir. Some examples of the hate emails Valenti received are included in the endnotes of *Sex Object: A Memoir*. These include:

GET BACK IN THE KITCHEN
AND MAKE ME DINNER,
BITCH.

Tiny brained women, why did we
ever let them think they are someone?

- Email, June 8, 2008 (p. 193)

Or,

Jessica you are having a baby? I
thought you didn't believe in having
babies...just killing them. I feel sorry
for your child who will learn to
devalue human life.

- Email, May 1, 2010 (p. 197)

Or,

Show me a woman or girl, and i [sic]
will show you someone with issues.

no respect for themselves and their bodies.

- Email, March 15, 2012 (p. 198)

This is real. It shows real emotion and feelings about how people view women. It does not say whether these people are

men or women, but this shows the sexism. If Valenti did not prove her point, these emails sure do. Note to self: Be you, stop adapting to the rest of the world, let the world adapt to you.

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