

POSTFEMINIST CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN *THE VILLAGE BIKE* BY PENELOPE SKINNER

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Abstract

Penelope Skinner's drama *The Village Bike* deals with issues ranging from pregnancy to sexuality, pornography and sexual exploration. In this article I focus on the way these issues are presented and explain why pornography and sexual exploration belong to the postfeminist ideology. Namely, the author uncritically deals with these issues, objectifies a woman's body and favours gender constructs. Contemporary British drama by women playwrights is not marked by its engagement with feminism even though it might declare itself as pro-feminist or feminist. Penelope Skinner is one of the contemporary playwrights. I try to present that even though her drama seems to appear provocative at first sight this is not really the case. The provocation does not offer a critical insight and distance. I argue that this drama is postfeminist because it mainstreams pornography and presents a peculiar view on the part of sexual liberation, which is very limited.

Key words: *The Village Bike*, Penelope Skinner, postfeminism, pornographication, objectification of women, gender mainstreaming

INTRODUCTION

British drama written by women playwrights has witnessed a change since its rather provocative and experimental period of the 1970s. Here belong playwrights that have brought forward the questions of gender construction and social norms, sexual objectification and exploitation of women as well as oppression of women and people of minorities. Most notable of these playwrights are Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, April de Angelis, Shelagh Stephenson. Since the 1980s British drama written by women playwrights has changed direction from its rather transformative politics of questioning the accepted norms and gender constructs to becoming more mainstream-oriented and consumer-based. In other words, British women playwrights' drama moved away from its previous agenda. Today, drama written by women playwrights no longer challenges the status quo but rather embraces it and reaffirms it. Contemporary drama has moved away from feminism to postfeminism.

An insight into the last decade's British drama by women playwrights presents us with the negated possibility of transformative questioning of the social and sexual norms. Women playwrights of the last decade that I have focused on are the ones that have recently begun writing drama for theatre, have been promoted as most prominent playwrights and received rather substantial media attention. This is a younger generation of women playwrights that belongs to the post-second-wave-feminism's strand and defines feminism as outdated and unnecessary. I claim that this generation is postfeminist because it promotes gender mainstreaming, accepts the dominant gender constructs and norms, mainstreams pornography, supports status quo and claims feminism to be outdated while simultaneously using the benefits of feminist achievement and taking them for granted. And it does so by appropriating feminist discourse to postfeminist aims for which postfeminists claim to be empowering when in fact they are not. This is why postfeminism is usually reasonably noted as antifeminist and is largely criticised as such.¹

This article focuses on a drama by Penelope Skinner titled *The Village Bike*. The drama was written in 2011 for the Royal Court Theatre where it premiered. This drama is an example of recent British dramas written for theatre by British women playwrights. In this article I present my thesis that *The Village Bike*, a typical representative of the last decade's British women playwrights' work, follows the postfeminist idea and thus mainstreams pornography as well as supports commodification of sexual desire. I shall present how this tendency is uncritically pushed forward in British drama with an explanation that it is all about exploring sexual freedom. Paradoxically, the sexual freedom expressed in the drama is very limiting and not liberating. After a brief summary of the drama I shall first present the drama's (re)presentation of pornography with its inherent objectification of women. I shall follow this with the drama's call for sexual liberation² that is not.

The Village Bike depicts a ((non-)sexual) relationship between a husband and a pregnant wife. Becky and John are a married couple on their vacation in the countryside. They have moved from the city into their village cottage for the summer. Becky is pregnant and now that she is pregnant John refuses to have sex with her because he finds it wrong: "I don't want to kill the baby! . . . What if it's a girl? What if it's a boy?!" (Skinner 53). However, before the pregnancy Becky says that he "[c]ouldn't get enough of me [=Becky] before could you[=John]? When you wanted to conceive your child. And now it's like you've had your dick chopped off" (Skinner 52). He is overtly absorbed by parenting and especially pregnancy books and blames Becky's every wish or desire onto hormones. He is extremely concerned with the baby's development hence he limits his wife's everyday activities, outdoor activities and food choices. John is also environmentally conscious, despises industrial food and food chain stores because he supports the local business. Becky, on the other hand, does not want things to change now that she is pregnant. She

¹ For analysis and critique of postfeminism see also Genz, and Brabon; Faludi; Bordo; Reed, and Saukko; Gill, and Scharff; Brown.

² In the interview for *TheatreVOICE* the author of the drama says she brought forward a call for sexual liberation. The interview is recorded orally. Any transcripts from here on are mine and based on the recordings. The interview is retrieved from: Dominic Cavendish, Alex Sierz. "Playwright Penelope Skinner on *The Village Bike*". *TheatreVOICE*. The Department of Theatre & Performance at the V&A, 20 Jul. 2011. Web. 20 Dec. 2013. <http://www.theatrevoice.com/5539/playwright-penelope-skinner-on-the-village-bike/#.UzIL_YU9WYM> I shall frequently mention this interview.

does not want people to treat her differently. She likes to shop at Tesco and desires to have sex with her husband. John has sexual needs as well but is unwilling to please them other than by watching pornographic films. Becky says that “[w]hen he does think about sex he just sticks a porn on” (Skinner 67). We learn from the story that John was always very interested in pornographic films. Becky says that she “didn’t want it [watching pornographic films] on every time we had sex. . . . Nearly every time you [=John] did [watch pornographic films]. Yes you did” (Skinner 20).

In order to move around freely, Becky decides to buy a bike from a village man named Oliver. The bike makes Becky feel free. Her husband on the other hand does not approve of the bike. Becky, dissatisfied with limitations and her husband’s rejecting of her sexually, indulges in an affair with Oliver, a married village man with whom she plays out his sexual fantasies. She has a one-night stand with another village resident Mike, a widower. Mike is a plumber who does the plumbing at John and Becky’s cottage. Namely, the cottage pipes make noise, groan, shudder, leak and sweat. The pipes make it impossible for Becky and John to live in the cottage. John does not seem to know how to mend them and does not show much interest in mending the pipes. However, when the pipes stop making noise for a while, he says: “They haven’t made the noise. Doesn’t mean it’s fixed. If something makes a noise and then stops making a noise that’s when you should be really worried” (Skinner 72). The peculiar thing is that the pipes seem to make noise and leak at exactly the same time as Becky feels the sexual urge. When she seems to be sexually satisfied, during the affair with Oliver, who she later falls in love with, the pipes do not make a sound. When the affair between Becky and Oliver ends, the pipes almost flood the house. The pipes seem to serve as a (quasi-)commentator for Becky’s sexual organs and urge. In the end of the drama, Becky never wants to have sex again, she is repulsed by the mere idea of having sex. Becky falls off the bike, her lover brutally rejects her and her husband doesn’t realise she had an affair. He blames the bike for Becky’s condition and thus he scorns it, calls it names and leaves it rotting by the side of the road. In the village there also live Jenny, Alice and Monika. Jenny is an overenthusiastic mother with a PhD, but seems to be frustrated by the fact that she is merely a housewife whose husband is never at home. Alice is Oliver’s wife. Monika, who we only hear about, is an au-pair from Poland.

POSTFEMINISM

Following the drama’s short summary I shall focus on the postfeminist aspect of the drama. Postfeminism rejects and systematically disvalues feminism therefore, I shall first begin by pointing out feminism’s aims and achievements. Feminism is politically committed and sees through the functioning of the dominant system. It fights against the hegemonic patriarchy and binarisms that grant social power to certain people while not to others, establish hierarchy and cause injustice. Feminists are against women’s subjection and oppression of women, they disapprove of objectification of a woman’s body and fight against beauty ideals, which they find sexist. They are engaged in disabling sexism, they oppose gender constructs precisely because they are social constructs that support the dominant system. A feminist thus questions gender roles and does not support the hegemonic patriarchal system’s normative impositions, hence

he/she rejects working through or in support with this system which is why a feminist rejects media's attention and working with the help of advertising and through media support. This last thing, which is fundamentally important for proper functioning of feminism, is the reason why feminism is largely made a dirty word by the consumer-oriented and capitalist mass media, which distinguishes itself by working within and supporting the hegemonic system that feminists reject.

Since feminism does not operate on the consumer level it is overrun by postfeminism which not only works with the media but also supports the hegemonic system of capitalism precisely by its media cooperation, economic profitability focus and consumer oriented stanza.³ Postfeminism is not in opposition to the hegemonic system which is why it is not an apolitical movement, as some suggest,⁴ since it supports the dominant politics. Postfeminism works within the patriarchal hegemony and hence promotes gender mainstreaming, accepts gender constructs and supports the status quo. Masculinity and femininity are gender constructs that are invented and artificial and have no ground in nature however, postfeminism presents these constructs as 'natural' rather than fictional and what is more, postfeminism promotes gender constructs via practice called gender mainstreaming. It denies the actual women's subjection and searches for strong women role models, which are typically conditioned by the consumer ability. Namely, a woman constructed according to postfeminist ideology accepts the ascribed gender roles for women and thus forcefully engages in striving to achieve the desired social role and beauty ideals, among others, which involve economic expenditure. Postfeminist subject presumes itself to be free if it possesses money and embraces consumerism.⁵ Postfeminism replaces the aspect of a woman victim with promoting self-engagement, which is *again* tied to the ability to purchase. According to postfeminism, looks, life-style, personal engagement are very important.

As opposed to group action which feminism stresses as important to bring the dominant system down, postfeminism stresses the importance of self-concern or individuality. In postfeminist times, it is all about you and your failure has everything to do with your weak determination and nothing to do with the system's systematic discrimination of certain groups of people, most notably women, racial and ethnic minorities. Postfeminism propagates the freedom to choose and speaks of a pool of choices however, it promotes and normalises only certain 'choices'. Precisely because postfeminism refuses the possibility of women being the victims or the suppressed ones in our society it cannot and is unable to question the current oppressive system – nor is that in its will to do. Postfeminism is largely followed because it works through media⁶ and uses feminist discourse that it accommodates and appropriates for its own purpose, which is far from empowering – this is the empty talk of empowerment.⁷

³ See Genz and Brabone; Bordo; Faludi; Gill and Scharf (2-11); Reed and Saukko (19-39).

⁴ See Genz and Brabon page 118.

⁵ "In today's consumer culture, the notion of freedom is often directly tied to the ability to purchase, with people's agency premised upon and enabled by the consumption of products and services" (Genz and Brabon 8).

⁶ "A particular point of contention has been postfeminism's commercial appeal and its consumerist implications, which are viewed by many as a 'selling out' of feminist principles and their co-option as a marketing device" (Ibid 5).

⁷ "this leads to a perception of postfeminism as a retrogressive, anti-feminist backlash that retracts and invalidates the gains and social transformations brought on by or through the feminist movement" (Ibid 5).

Under the pretence of empowering women, postfeminism actually entraps women into the subjected position within the patriarchal society. The pressure is now no longer executed entirely by the patriarchal politics but is being taken over by women themselves; women now execute pressure upon themselves in order to be the postfeminist's advertised role model 'subject'. By accepting the postfeminist vision of empowerment, women are sufficiently subordinated. Postfeminist ideology with its support of the dominant construction of social power mainstreams pornography because through it, power positions and disempowered positions are best put forward under the essentialist explanation of 'natural' gender positions. Again, women are being subjected and told that this is the route to empowerment – they should be up for it and enjoy their victimisation.⁸

PORNOGRAPHICATION

Postfeminism is a broad term which is why I shall focus on its aspect of pornographication or in other words, presentation of pornography and/as sexual liberation. Pornographication is a state of presenting or pushing pornographic elements into everyday routine. Pornography is different from erotica which involves sensuality and emotions. Erotica should depict mutuality and thus, respect of a person. However, it could also be argued that no erotic content is really harmless or depicts mutuality since it is usually produced by patriarchy. Besides, nowadays a lot of pornographic content is labelled as erotic in order to diminish its harmful effect on society. Pornography shows no emotions. It constructs and presents patriarchal constructs of femininity and masculinity within the heterosexual normativity. Pornography lays out the distribution of social power according to gender and promotes heterosexuality and division into gendered sexual roles of passivity for women and activity or subject position for men. The same paradigm is put forward even in the depiction of homosexual intercourse. Pornography does not support emotions and sensuality, nor subversive sexuality or other non-heterosexual or mutual sexual practices. Pornography works within and is fuelled by patriarchal system thus, it (re)affirms patriarchal paradigm. At its core lies the naturalisation of gender constructs, establishment and reaffirmation of binarisms of dominance and submission according to gender, where women are typically subjected and men are in power.⁹ In pornography a (woman's) body is objectified, open for everyone's inspection, violated and degraded.¹⁰ Pornography includes violence, not only physical but also psychological. It has nothing to do with sexuality and is mostly concerned with overpowering, degrading and punishing a (woman's) body

⁸ “anti-postfeminist critics define postfeminism as a sexist, politically conservative and media-inspired ploy that guts the underlying principles of the feminist movement . . . the advent of postfeminism has engendered not the eradication of sexism but its transformation into a more indirect and insidious form. Postfeminism is depicted as ‘a hegemonic negotiation of second wave ideals’, ‘working with “patriarchal” theory’ and employing feminist notions of equality and agency for non-feminist goals” (Dow and de Toro quoted in Genz and Brabon 15).

⁹ See Griffin.

¹⁰ Ibid.

without a cause. Pornography makes women appear as willing and enjoying victims.¹¹ Postfeminism mainstreams pornography. This practice is called pornographication, which is a process of making pornography a usual everyday affair because it aims at imposing gendered (dis)empowered positions. Postfeminism's agenda neatly coincides with the pornography's gender ideology and in line with this, postfeminism supports and promotes pornography. The reason for this is usually explained as postfeminism's fight for sexual liberation and female empowerment.¹²

PORNOGRAPHICATION IN *THE VILLAGE BIKE*

Pornographication is thus mainstreaming of commoditisation of sexual desire and sexuality. It is also a way of objectifying a woman's body and sexuality. The latter is typically presented as one to serve a man's sexual urge¹³ and, quite paradoxically, heralded as women's sexual empowerment¹⁴. Pornography claims to be a representation of 'natural' sexuality and thus aims to create such perception. Concerning this, Wolf says: "The sexual urge is shaped by society. . . . It is learning rather than instinct" (132). Jackson and Scott tell us that pornography "effectively tells us what we should be doing" (329). Drama that uncritically presents pornography in fact supports it and perpetuates it.¹⁵ The popular opinion that these theatre dramas merely point towards the pornography as one of the nowadays' problems does not hold since by merely showing without offering an alternative, such drama simply (re)creates, builds and in fact, quite paradoxically, supports the aspects it actually claims to find problematic.¹⁶ In line with this, Becky finds John's watching of pornography problematic however, she

¹¹ "Representations . . . have the power not to create desire from nothing, but to shape it in particular ways. . . . Pornography is, obviously, a form of representation . . . it [pornography] may be criticised for its role in shaping certain forms of desire (and not others)" (Jackson, and Scott 328).

¹² See Genz, and Brabon, chapter 4. In one of postfeminist sections namely, *Do-Me Feminism and Raunch Culture* as they title it, they say that the two strands of postfeminism "blend the sometimes conflicting ideologies of women's liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually provocative appearance and behaviour (including exhibitionist stripping) as acts of female empowerment" (91).

¹³ "That the prototypical stories told in pornographic fictions are narratives of (male) transcendence and mastery is obvious enough from content analyses which are available. But it has also been argued that the form of the pornographic representation carries this meaning too. The reader or looker in pornography becomes the Subject of the representation, while the person(s) represented is/are objectified . . . it is the Self and its pleasures which become the central focus" (Jackson, and Scott 330).

¹⁴ For further detail read also Genz, and Brabon (chapter 4). They cite Helford: "The notion of sexual/feminine empowerment is criticised as a 'new arrangement of an old song' that mobilises women's sexuality and femininity in service of patriarchal agenda and status quo" (Helford quoted in Genz, and Brabon 97).

¹⁵ "[T]hey [=pornographic ideas] pervade our everyday, unremarkable sexual encounters as they do the grotesque acts" (Jackson, and Scott 331).

¹⁶ "[T]he various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows [sic] strict lines to be drawn between performance and life" (Butler quoted in Loxely 142). Loxley discusses this: "An important implication of Butler's argument here is that if this ontology of gender goes, the parallel ontology of theatrical performance goes with it. If our identities offstage are the product of the various acts through which we become who and what we are, then the notion of an essential person underlying those acts turns out to be merely a socially dominant dissimulation of that process of performative constitution. In which case, the ontological criterion for distinguishing between onstage and offstage, the invocation of this kind of fundamental difference between role-playing and just being ourselves, cannot be upheld" (142-143).

knows no other way than enacting pornographic roles herself. She willingly subjugates herself in hope of the promised empowerment and enjoyment however, she is in the end repulsed by sex and never wants to have sex again. The reason for this is probably her non-enjoyment in subjugation. However, the author does not understand this. To further illustrate this point, Skinner said for *TheatreVOICE* that she did not want to problematise the pornography – the dynamics of which she uses in her drama.

In the interview for *TheatreVOICE* Alex Sierz asked the author whether she was trying to show a contrast between a fantasy and everyday reality through the use of metaphors, word puns and double meanings. Skinner answered that “our lifetime choices come from our fantasy”.¹⁷ Interestingly, she *herself* defined where pornographic ideas come from – they come from fantasy that is created by authors of fantasies, who write them and plant them into people’s realities. This is the dynamics of pornography. First there is a fantasy which is typically gender biased and in support of patriarchy. By incorporating it into our everyday realities it is perpetuated. And by perpetuating it, the real life activities are no longer a *choice*, as is frequently propagated, but they become a must, they become prescribed, they become the only ones we know and even worse, they become interpreted as *normal*. The use of word puns and metaphors, which are meant to be a funny and ironic comments of the situation are in fact only an excuse for nonchalant way of dealing with serious issues.¹⁸

OBJECTIFICATION AND PORNOGRAPHICATION IN *THE VILLAGE BIKE*

In the drama there are many cases of objectification of a woman’s body. Drama offers woman’s sexual objectification in two ways. There is a literal objectification. Namely, the objectification on the linguistic level. That is to say that object names stand for a woman character and her sexual organs. For example, Becky’s sexual organs are represented/described through the imagery and semantics of pipes. Pipes are in colloquial pornographic speech often referred to in the context of sex or female sexual organs. Plumbers are often colloquially referred to as the ones who fix woman’s pipes. There exist numerous examples of this kind of usage of the words “pipes” and “plumber” in pornographic films.¹⁹ Needless to say, the author plays with these words and their imagery. Mike, a village plumber tries to fix the pipes in John and Becky’s cottage and not before the end of the drama he has sex with Becky. His work as a plumber is not successful since the pipes in the house remain groaning and shudder with a flood almost ruining the house. The subtext of this implies that Mike is also unsuccessful as Becky’s lover because she still desires Oliver, another village man.²⁰ Thus, the pipes of the house groan, leak and flood the house at exactly the same time as she goes to beg Oliver to stay with her and confesses to him that she desires and loves him.

¹⁷ Skinner for *TheatreVOICE*.

¹⁸ “The ironic pornographic discourses . . . present women as knowingly and willingly engaging in their own sexualisation. Potentially, sexist depictions of women can thus be played down as an ironic ‘joke’ shared by women and men alike” (Genz, and Brabon 102). For more read Genz, and Brabon 101-102.

¹⁹ One of such offers the drama itself namely, *Get Me Wet Mr Plumber!* (Skinner 20).

²⁰ Becky says to Oliver: “I love you . . . We’ve got a connection” (Ibid 91).

The author also equates Becky, a real living-being woman character, with a bike, an object. To the author the two are one and the same.²¹ Equating a living being or a human character of the drama with a thing or object gives the message of the two having the same characteristics, same usage, same application, same purpose.²² The characteristics of an object are typically to serve a purpose, to be of particular use, to be used. Equating the two means that the living being, in this case a woman, is reduced to a thing that has no will, no soul, no thoughts and no intelligence. She *is* the bike. And the bike is her; a thing that has no will of its own, no soul, no intelligence, no feelings is a representative of a living being. Equating a woman with a bike is a degradation of a person.²³ This act of degradation holds within the tendency towards a commodification of women. Author uses the objectifying language and in such fashion mainstreams and perpetuates the pornographic imagery. Objectification goes hand in hand with pornographication. In the interview the author gave to Alex Sierz for *TheatreVOICE*, she states that bike stands for Becky and is meant to give impression of someone who goes around or “for a woman who sleeps around”.²⁴ Hence, Becky is not only reduced to a thing, she’s also considered to be loose. Griffin says that “in the pornographic mind, all along, the virgin *is* a whore” (23). To elaborate, on the one hand Becky is considered to be an image of a gloving innocent pregnant woman but on the other hand, Skinner also pornographically presents her character as a ‘liberated’ porn star, which she condemns at the same time as she demands her being more liberal about sex. This, as we shall see later on, is in contradiction to the author’s statement that this drama cries out for sexual liberation. Were sexual liberation really the author’s prime concern, she probably would not firstly, support pornography and secondly, scorn her woman character for being sexually explorative. Probably she would have to give her woman character autonomy over her sexuality. However, the sexual exploration in the drama is uncritically based on pornographic representation of sexual ‘exploration’ as the only kind known. This is not done for the sake of pointing out the wrongs in order to disturb, intervene, end and correct them in the end.

To further illustrate, the drama’s text in itself lays out pornographic dynamics. Becky is reduced to an object and her sexual organs inevitably connected with her intelligibility, psyche and emotions are presented as isolated from all these aspects. In other words, Becky is reduced to a sex organ that is meant to be exploited, used and inspected. Her being, her intelligibility, her soul is non-existent; the text does not support her human aspect. Even the drama’s front page supports the pornographic imagery. Namely, the drama’s front page (Skinner, 2011) depicts a woman made entirely of object particles or object constituent parts such as handlebars (wide apart

²¹ Skinner in the interview for *TheatreVOICE* states that bike stands for Becky.

²² “We know that a *being* exists only in order to exist. For a woman or a man exists for no *particular* material purpose. But a thing, an object, must have a reason for being. And where the pornographic “woman” is concerned, that function is to please a man” (Griffin 37-38).

²³ “To be made an object is in itself a humiliation. To be made a thing is to become a being without a will. But it is not the nature of a living being to have no will. Objectification of another is in itself a sadistic act, for to be made an object is to experience a pain of loss of a part of the self: the soul. But to this degradation, the reduction of a whole being with a soul to a mere matter, we must add the knowledge that matter itself is despised, and hated in its very essence” (Ibid 47).

²⁴ The author says so in the interview for *TheatreVOICE*.

from each other) instead of legs, a locknut for a belly button, two nuts representing breasts and a sprocket instead of a head. The woman made of object particles is lying flat on her back, has her thighs wide apart and has no hands to fight off, to lift herself up etc. She is immobilised. This illustration is further pornographicised by a wrench representing a hand reaching between her thighs. This instrumental and coarse hand is almost grabbing her vagina. The fact that a wrench is used to fix things, screw things together or unscrew things apart is very telling information. From the illustration, one can predict the drama's content: a woman made of object particles shall be "fixed", taken apart by intervention, her constituent object parts will be inspected and screwed together in certain fashion. This instrumental metallic hand will do the job. (This woman has no mind of her own and serves a purpose since the constituent parts usually serve a certain purpose.) The text that follows tells the exact story that the illustration presents. The text and the illustration both rely on the same approaches as pornography. In line with that, Becky is a part needed for a man's sexual fantasy and as a baby oven. The text denies her every right to have a desire, wish or opinion. The text ties her down to the situation she is put into and does not allow her to fight against it. She is immobilised, passive and exploited.

As stated above, one way of objectifying a person is by equating one with objects or describing one with object names. Another objectification that takes place in the drama is the objectification of a woman's body and being through the character's 'actions' that the author dictates or more accurately, through the character's proscribed inactivity. A woman is presented as a commodity, as an object on market, as an item that is for everyone to reach and view.²⁵ The act of objectifying a woman, in this case the author's objectification of Becky, is presented as a woman's supposedly willing self-objectification and self-subjection. That is not done through language alone but through the imagery that the drama offers. To her husband, Becky is reduced to merely "an [baby] oven"²⁶ with more rights ascribed to the foetus than to her. She serves the purpose of bringing a child to the world. During this process of pregnancy all her needs and desires are essentially ignored. She is denied every wish and opinion. Her desires to have sex with her husband, her craving for industrial food, her wish to move around freely, exercise and do what she likes are all declined to her by her husband. Griffin says about this status of a woman as typical for the postfeminist culture that this is "a culture which has allowed the female presence to exist in its mind only as a creation of its imagination" (44). She is not allowed a step forward into being herself, a person.

She appears as a gadget for Oliver's sexual urge. She is needed for Oliver's fantasy. Her sexual preferences are in fact not represented. Hence, she is reduced to merely a body and that body is not meant to be in her possession. For her husband, she has to have a child and repress her sexual needs. For her lover, although Becky's affair is presented by the author as seeking *her* own sexual freedom, she must play out *his* sexual fantasies and not hers.²⁷ In postfeminist times, this is often presented as positive, explorative and empowering when in fact it only promotes self-subjugation for women

²⁵ "She is the one to be known. To be wanted. To be used . . . the pornographer's idea of his object's pleasure is to please him. She exists for no other purpose" (Griffin 38).

²⁶ "He [=John] just thinks of me as a machine to make babies. An oven . . . I'm an oven" (Skinner 67).

²⁷ "I like being *your* fantasy" (Skinner 70). The emphasis is mine.

and supports the patriarchal construction of heteronormativity with its encompassing gender constructs. There is nothing explorative, liberating or empowering about this.²⁸

Objectification most obviously takes place in pornographic discourse and imagery. In the drama, the scenes of sexual intercourse are taken directly from pornographic films. Each pornographic film that Becky watches or mentions during the drama gets to be enacted with Oliver or Mike.²⁹ This is again in contradiction with the claim the author gave for *TheatreVOICE* that her intention in this drama was not to present how pornography influences our behaviour and sexual performance.³⁰ However, the drama directly shows exactly that. Namely, each pornographic role playing from the pornographic films that are watched or discussed in the drama is then carried out. Becky presents her sexuality as constructed in pornographic films. She is being directly influenced by these films and consequently knows no other way of sexual performance than such as she has seen in the pornographic films. If the author is really unaware of this influence that she has actually, apparently unconsciously, illustrated then this clearly demonstrates that pornography does in fact influence our understanding of sexuality and sexual performance.³¹ Unfortunately, the author has no critical attitude towards this learned pornographic sexual behaviour and what is more, she presents it as natural and uncritical. She does this because this is in line with the postfeminism's aim to teach people to internalise gender constructions with the underlying power inscription or distribution. She presents male characters as naturally aggressive and violent and female characters as passive. This is a social invention and not a biological fact. It is in this manner that power relations are established and perpetuated. Moreover, she presents pornographic sexual behaviour as a kind of empowerment. According to this, a woman should find her sexual freedom in pornographic performance. However, there is no freedom here because "[t]he external cues of beauty pornography and sadomasochism reshape female sexuality into a more manageable form than it would take if truly released" (Wolf 132). A woman's sexuality is manageable when it is not expressed and owned by a woman agent but when she is passive, immobilised, inscribed-upon and torn apart to constituent parts that no longer pose a threat of wholeness. Her sexuality is under control when she is demanded to obey the proscribed and imposed way of expressing her sexuality, which typically serves the purpose of granting superiority to the agent, while she must remain an object and selflessly deny herself any autonomy.

The character of Becky is portrayed as always responding to male sexuality under the pretence that that will please her. Male sexuality in this drama is presented as the one in real full control. The author makes the character of Becky say: "I love being your fantasy" (Skinner 78). But Becky never says what *her* fantasy might be. In one fantasy,

²⁸ Becky says that at certain times having sex with her husband was not something she really wanted: "I've done it [=fellatio] loads of times when I didn't really want to . . . It's shit" and to John's amazement "Not with me!", she replies "What? Yes with you. Course with you. That's what I'm saying . . . It's horrible. It makes you feel like shit" (Skinner 54). In the end of the drama, when her sexual 'exploration' ends, Becky says: "I don't want to again [have sex]. Not ever. It[sex]'s disgusting. It disgusts me" (Ibid 98).

²⁹ Namely, "*Get Me Wet Mr Plumber! . . . The Intruder . . . Threesome Addicted Euro Sluts . . . Cheating Housewives Three . . . Wenches*" (Ibid 20).

³⁰ Skinner's statement for *TheatreVOICE*.

³¹ For further detail see Jackson, and Scott 231.

she is a teenager, in another a victim of a rapist that is played by Oliver in balaclava, in yet another she is a third party of a threesome, another one of Oliver's fantasies. She is being commanded and ordered around by Oliver: "Come here . . . Sit here . . . (*He pulls her hair.*) . . . Wouldn't expect a teacher to be such a dirty little bitch" (Skinner 60-61), and

Now sit on the chair. I want to fuck you again before you go . . . I'm not asking. Sit down . . . Do as you're told. Sit down. Sit down! . . . SIT DOWN! . . . Open your legs . . . (*He grabs her face.*) Open your legs bitch or I'll cut your throat! (Ibid 71)

Her needs and her words are being ignored by Oliver in the same manner as by her husband. She is not being listened to: "The less you say the better" (Ibid 79), says Oliver to Becky. This directly demonstrates that in the drama, Becky is Oliver's sexual commodity, merely an object to satisfy his sexual needs, which have more in common with the will to overpower the other. His sexuality is presented as naturally in the domain of testosterone aggression and hence, as naturally violent when in fact, it is only constructed as such. Overall, the drama denies that women have needs, sexual preferences and opinions since women are not even allowed to talk and are never listened to. Moreover, it does not present a woman's autonomy in understanding and showing her own sexuality. The text does not overcome this issue by any alternative; a way out of misuse or a debacle of the dominant imposition of sexuality, which is why the overall message is not critical of the situation it depicts, but is in fact reaffirmative. The drama *does* portray a very important issue but only to perpetuate it further on. As readers we are not offered a way out of the misuse of women. Instead, what we get is a feeling that a woman's body exists to serve. In this context of forced, controlled and constructed sexuality in the media, where drama certainly belongs to, Wolf says:

we are asked to believe that our culture promotes the display of female sexuality. It actually shows almost none. It censors representations of women's bodies, so that only the official versions are visible. Rather than seeing images *of* female desire or that cater *to* female desire, we see mock-ups . . . that reveal little about female sexuality. (136)

That this drama portrays censored and controlled female sexuality rather than free sexuality, which it claims to promote, is further affirmed by portrayal of other women characters of the drama. They too are presented as commodities. Namely, Monika, a Polish girl, is paid by Oliver to be one party of a threesome, Oliver's fantasy. Becky speculates that Monika is under-aged. Becky feels guilty for having had threesome with Monika. That is not the case with Oliver who appears to have no remorse. Moreover, he believes that having sex for money is inherent to Monika: "I know she needs the money. And look at her . . . She's filth" (Skinner 77). Becky also feels that Monika did not enjoy being the party of a threesome. But Oliver assures her that "[p]eople don't do things if they don't want to" (Ibid 77). However, Oliver comes to contradict himself when stating that the reason Monika had sex with them is because "she needs the money" (Ibid 77). In this way, he merely used her lower social and economic status to dominate her. Her subordination provided him with an image of his superiority – this is a power play.

The author is not critical of pornography as she says in the interview she gave to Alex Sierz for *TheatreVOICE*.³² She claims that she is interested in and passionate about pornography and exploitation of women and wants to express this. However, she says that her intention was not to be critical or negative of pornography. Rather, she says that “*The Village Bike* is a kind of backdrop of pornography and sexual exploitation underneath it”.³³ When asked whether her intention was to present how pornography, available almost everywhere, affects people’s behaviour and speculate whether pornography is the reason why people, “certainly women”³⁴, feel the need they have to perform in this way, she answered that she did not have any such intention. She makes it clear that she had no interest in the influence of pornography on our everyday lives but rather how one feels about women who participate in pornography and where does pornography come from, because, she says, “once the film is made it is there forever”.³⁵ She reassures us that Becky is lucky because in the end it is the bike that gets punished by being mangled and abandoned by the side of the road, while Becky is not and has a safe existence, even though she has made some choices.³⁶ But we must not forget that the bike stands for Becky and that Becky appears to be left mangled or damaged as well. The author comes to contradict herself. Namely, she claims to promote liberty and hence multiple choices but at the same time she scorns her main character for making certain choices. This implies that Becky has after all chosen the wrong choices out of a pool of all-alright choices. This is contradictory, since liberty should not be about censoring and limiting one’s choices. Hence, one can ask oneself, whether the author’s intention was sexual liberation which was the question Alex Sierz asked Skinner. Her answer was affirmative. However, she does not separate sexual liberation from limitations of one-sided pornographic presentation of mostly exclusively heteronormative sexuality. Skinner says that “negative feelings about pornography are uncool”³⁷ and make one a prude or a feminist.³⁸ Pornography, in her words, is very “mainstream”.³⁹ In her opinion Becky searches for sexual liberation, “she’s liberal about it . . . she embraces it”.⁴⁰ With this said, Skinner *herself* offers us an insight into the postfeminist ideology and a definition of postfeminism itself. She also confirms the thesis of this article namely, the ever more increasing tendency to mainstream pornography in today’s postfeminist times. Postfeminism sees feminism as redundant and unnecessary, which is exactly what Skinner claims in an interview for *TheatreVOICE*.⁴¹

³² Skinner for *TheatreVOICE*.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Alex Sierz in the interview with Skinner for *TheatreVOICE*.

³⁵ Penelope Skinner for *Theatre VOICE*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this drama represents the postfeminist agenda, which claims to be all about women emancipation and empowerment both of which should, according to postfeminism, be most obviously demonstrated in sexual freedom. However, sexual liberation that postfeminism offers is very much antifeminist which means that it has nothing to do with women emancipation or empowerment. From a postfeminist point of view Becky is typically seen as a woman who is empowered and determined to take her sexual life in control. However, she is not the one possessing control or autonomy over her sex life. Postfeminist ideology of this drama presents her as strong, sexy, up for anything and not afraid to take action. However, a closer inspection shows that Becky is not an agent. She merely imitates pornographic films. Her sexual performance reflects the learned poses and role playing of pornographic films. Whatever Becky does, she ends up further subjugating herself, which is intact with postfeminist promotion of women's willing self-subjugation, decoratively wrapped in exclamatory phrases that praise a woman's right to choose, be empowered and in full control. However, there is no promised power, no control and no freedom or joy in letting oneself be exploited by others and refusing one's own autonomy. The postfeminist so-called 'empowerment' acts out as an obligatory and normative choice, or more accurately imposition, since all the other choices are negatively proclaimed as prudish, outdated, old-fashioned etc. Her body is exploited, put into roles and positions that are not even a part of her fantasies. She is being used as a sex object and she is not being listened to nor are her needs catered to. These negative consequences of her postfeminist sexual 'exploration' are of course silenced by postfeminist quasi-empowerment advertisement. Actually, what we have witnessed from the drama tells us that postfeminism only puts women back in time, before sexual revolution to be precise, and before feminism. Postfeminism actually disempowers women, which is carefully masked under the propaganda or pretence of quasi-empowerment. To put it in other words: "This is a postfeminist moment, in which activities which might in an earlier era have been explicitly presented in terms of 'pleasing your man' are discursively repackaged as all about 'pleasing yourself'" (Gill, and Scharff 61).

The author brings forward several important issues however, she does not do this in order to point out their wrong-being but merely to present them *again* and reaffirm them. By not offering an alternative to the culturally imposed sexual constructs the author supports and perpetuates them further on. The author in this view resembles the pornographer. Because, by merely presenting something without surpassing it, one does not do else but reinstates it. The author does this under the label of empowerment, which is taken from past feminist discourse and put into nowadays' nothing-to-do-with-feminism postfeminist view. In other words, "it is merely a postfeminist repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that renders them depoliticized and passes them into the service of patriarchal consumer capitalism" (Ibid 54). Women's sexuality and sexual needs are not represented in this drama. In fact, we do not even get any insight into what they might be like, despite the author's claim that her drama is about sexual liberty. Sexual liberty here is understood quite uniquely; this drama defends the kind of sexual 'liberty' as is offered in pornography. Of course this kind of 'liberty' is censored and

even though postfeminism wants to lead people on to believing that it offers multiple choices, it actually offers only one which is women's subjection and this one must be obligatorily followed.

Contemporary British drama, as presented here by Penelope Skinner, points out the problems but then simply accepts them as a natural state of affairs. And what is more, by not offering an alternative it simply supports and perpetuates the status quo.

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