SOCIOLOGY OF CYBERSEX: ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN COMMODIFYING WOMEN IN THE CYBERSPACE

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Abstract
Prostitution is one of the oldest professions and if this is to be believed then it becomes almost inevitable that women have a "gendered history" of being subjected to the "male gaze" due to their identity of being a "sexual object." They assume an identity of a marketable product to be sold in the sex market and tagged with a price. Technology too has a sexual space in this global era. What is the nature of this, often called, gendered technology? How does patriarchy operate in sexualizing and commodifying both male and female bodies? More importantly, are not women being price tagged in a plethora of net sites like punternet.com and other pornographic sites? The aim of this paper is to address precisely the afore-mentioned issues in order to locate the technologized commodification of women via cyber space consequently accounting for a negotiating space offered to women and locating a 'partial' agency in them. Nevertheless in the present informational capitalist era, commodification of female body and sex has reached a pinnacle in the globalized sex market -- a development which is unthinkable without the patriarchal partner-in-crime role of modern technology.

Key Words- Cyber Sex, Commodification, Plastic Sexuality, Post Feminism, Mc Donaldization.

Introduction
'The emotional, sexual and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, "It's a girl."'- Shirley Choholm

The question that arises in common intellect is whether this statement holds true in such a globalised capitalist and "super-democratic" era when words and phrases like liberalization of women, emancipation and women empowerment are statutory agendas in the political, social and cultural front as a hue cry.

This paper puts forth an argument with regard to this question as it advocates that this aforementioned statement holds true even in this globalized capitalist era because it has a profitable sex market to substantiate and finds a lucrative criminal partner in technology. To put it more comprehensively, the capitalist globalized patriarchal era display women's bodies as price-tagged consumer goods (the consumers being limited to men only) which further stereotype them as commodified objects in the profitable capitalist sex-market and most importantly (as this paper will show) how technology of this era plays the role of a very big criminal share holder in the, once again, patriarchal capitalist sex market.

Thus capitalist or pre-capitalist, globalized or pre-globalized, liberal or pre-liberal era, three underlying assumptions remain static-
1. Women are inferior to men and that they should please men in all possible ways because of the stagnant cultural element of patriarchy thriving in every historical epoch.
2. The utmost pleasure that a man can get from a woman is that of sexual pleasure.
3. This sexual pleasure is offered by a sex market which price tags women's bodies with the sole objective of enhancing profits. Advanced technologies via websites, internet pornography sites like purnnet.com in the contemporary world has further served as a supporting partner-in-crime with profitable sex market.

Hence this paper argues that Shirley Choholm's quote holds true in every historical epoch till date. Thanks to the 'gendered technology" of this era!

Exploring insights into concerned literature
Since Modernity, a Victorian regime dominated contours of human sexuality. There are two types of biological body-male and female- that are socialized and represented through Gendered bodies(which can be further stratified along racist, class and ethnic lines though this paper does not aim to concentrate on it). Since gender is a social construction the image of the two biological bodies or sexes is a representation mediated by the socio-cultural context and political implications of the particular time period of its representation. So to talk about gender forms in the context of "technologised era" of today it becomes imperative to locate the "woman question" in cyberspace, i.e. the portrayal of women on internet and comparing it with "real" image. In other words, to feed this particular paper precisely we account for sexual activities on-line on consent of a heterosexual couple whereby women are displayed as sexual objects and consequently, drawing an analogy with cliché sex-

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work. It's a battle between real and virtual but the aggrieved party remains the women since both really and virtually their bodies and sexualities are at stake and price tagged.

Chris Ashford in his article, *Sex Work in Cyberspace,* initiated a debate regarding the view of prostitution in the recent years. Prostitutes were depicted as women who operated from street corners in order to battle extreme poverty or to feed drug habits. This perception placed sex work as a gendered activity performed by women rather than men. Unfortunately, academic discourse has been limited to examine sex work in global cyber space that is very common these days. This narrow focus is surprising in the context of the rise in the number of websites dedicated to varying forms of prostitution. Just as e-commerce has allowed for the transformation in business and e-democracy has begun to change government, so too has technology impacted upon sexuality and commercial sexual transactions making "traditional vices' ever more accessible to the general public.

Moreover the lexicon of sex work is significant in that it divides sex work into its myriad forms. For example-the cornucopia of commercial sex websites often use the term 'escort' rather than prostitute but the activities of an escort do now amount to prostitution if they include sexual services to another person in return of payment. These escorts are displayed in feminine sexuality with demographic details for men to choose and perform the act. Though there are male escorts too, it is often too less in number or negligibly seen. Hence women pay the price. In fact, the shift within commercial dating websites towards legitimization and mainstreaming of prostitution, albeit in a sub-cultural context, suggests a deepening of prostitution-the partner in crime being, technology.

Imagination, Culture and Activity
Cultural imagination is needed to figure out the nature of changes that computer technologies are bringing into our lives. Here human 'presence' is granted within the electronic networks. "In cyberspace, everybody is in the dark." This further makes the male clients in cybersex or viewers of porn sites fear-free to commit a crime. Moreover the basic form of cyber mediation in human interaction is semiotic. Thus the various 'escort sites' having women offering their biographical details are semiotically understood by male clients who further move on to fulfill their sexual desire. This means technology in this post-mechanic era is producing immaterial artifact whereby the separation between tools and symbols, between processes happening "outside' (cliché sex-work) and processes happening "within' the mind (cybersex) vanishes. This further supports the analogy that this paper draws between sex work and cybersex.

Lacan's Cyberbody
To Lacan, the subject is condemned to the body, rather than to his consciousness. It suggests that when people meet, they "apologize" for their bodies because their bodies are never 'perfect,' never adequate and never quite behave exactly how people want them to. These bodies adopt 'increasing plasticity' in terms of identification which Lacan propounds as the 'subject's otherness.' The subject is also the body.

Cyberspace is expected to be an alternative universe where users can be free from the burden of the body of flesh and from the necessity of any such apology. It is a space where users can discover their so called 'true selves' or acquire new identities. We concentrate for our purpose in this paper on the aspect of gender in identity as an example of how technology challenge and channel sexuality. In the virtual world of the *Second Life* (cyberspace) the subject (user) design different manifestations of an "imaginary self" to avoid direct sexual implications and performs a gender identity in several ways-discursively (through instant messages), and by means of representations (through graphics).

What is more interesting is that choice of a virtual body is not enough; in addition to the male and female shapes a user can purchase attachable genitals which have become the best selling products in *Second Life*. The underlying view is that technology in this era has played a pivotal role to commodify every sexual artifact. Since women are viewed as 'sexual objects' for male gaze we can conclude that patriarchy with partner technology promotes commodification of women's bodies utmost in cyberspace.

Internet-a Shop Window for Service Providers
Any cursory internet search will reveal a huge number of sites dedicated to advertising the services of escorts and call girls. Such sites take a number of forms. There are agency sites which are dedicated exclusively to Asian, Black, 'Large-breasted' women with a common pricing structure and terms and conditions, although individual services may differ. There are sites which advertise independent escorts as well and also sites associated with massage parlours. What all these sites have in common is that all of them provide a display picture of women, majority of them include professional or near professional standards of glamour shots, involving provocative clothing and posing, semi-nude poses revealing thighs and breasts which

shows that they replicate top-shelf pornography. All of them have a price tag. This recalls Berger's position when he writes, 'Men act and women appear. Men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at.' This is the male-gaze

(1972; p.47) -the voyeuristic consumption of women's bodies by men. In fact, Sullivan argues that with the emergence of the World Wide Web women's objectification and internalization continue.

Now that we have entered the age of economic globalization, it is becoming   increasingly important for sexologists and other health professionals to take a global view of sexual dimension. The sex drive is more intensely embedded in men and therefore they all compete to impregnate, while all fertile females are virtually assured of finding a mate. In fact human males are extremely lucky in that society has evolved a social system that enables most of them to have sex and technology in this globalized era has been a partner of society in this enabling. Moreover the most modern form of dating is on the internet. Cyber-dating is mostly used by men looking for women and as a result, women get about fifty times more replies to their personal advertisements than do men. In selecting women in cyber space men prize physical attraction while women look for 'dads' not 'cads.' This further shows how women's bodily appearance is 'on there' on-line as a showpiece to be sold to clients or internet male users who wish to perform cyber sex.

Mc Keganey and Barnard (1996) identified five aspects that motivated clients into "paid sex'.-
- Capacity to specify particular sexual acts that they wished to perform- This form of immediate and commoditized desire whereby sexual acts become "standardised' has been subsequently termed as *The McDonaldisation Thesis* (Ritzer:1995). The growth of the internet and in particular on-line forums built around commercial 'sex scene sites' often allow clients to seek out a prostitute to perform a specific sexual act. This would further appear to support the 'Mcdonaldization' thesis with men seeking sexual acts as one might consult a menu. It has also parallels with the 'customer' asking a street worker what sexual acts they are willing to undertake.
- The capacity of having sex with a range of different women.
- The ability to seek out women with specific female attributes or displaying particular images.
- The thrill of doing something that was socially frowned upon.
- The limited unemotional nature of the contact with the prostitute- the impersonal nature of the interaction is a two-way process. The internet and forums also allow for dialogue to develop between clients and prostitutes.

Today the contextual framework includes internet. The shift within commercial dating websites towards legitimization and mainstreaming of prostitution, albeit in a sub-cultural context, suggest a deepening of prostitution – the partner-in-crime is technology.

In a parallel argument, Donna Haraway invokes the term 'informatics' to describe the inextricably linked cultural, linguistic, social, sexual and biological connections and networks that derive from technologies. New technologies have also generated an abundance of utopian and dystopian fantasies and these fantasies are an expression of 'real popular needs and desires' along with being powerful and persuasive means of social agencies. (Constance Penley and Andrew Ross). However, there is a power factor working in the background. This is because the gender fibre is intrinsically connected to social and political relations. Gender as a social and symbolic, material and semiotic institution is singled out as a primary location of power in a complex manner which encompasses both macro and micro relations. Gender is the socio-cultural assignation of identity in a polarized and dualistic model of masculine/feminine implemented in our culture. Since technology is all the more being integrated within this cultural fold in this globalised milieu it leaves no stone unturned to cling on to the dualistic dimension of culture. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that technology is also a patriarchal partner to enforce gender politics. This paper concerns the methods of textual analysis of certain pornography sites, the escort sites and cyber sex artifacts to depict the commodification of women's bodies in the 'cyber-space' and available literature on sex work and sociological theorizations. Semiotics, whose basic concern is to discern how meaning is generated with particular reference to the media of communication like internet sites and display picture on them along with books (which is referred to as texts), along with content analysis, which is used to systematically analyse communication content are utilized as method of data collection. It would provide studying the selected sample of pornography sites like the punternet.com, the escort sites like escortography.com, independentescortservices.com, and escortik.com.

Sociological Analysis
The social theorist Manuel Castells has argued that growing numbers of people increasingly live in the world which is a space of flows rather than a space of place. Movement is facilitated by innovative technologies that reduce the friction of distance and link people in ever expanding patterns of impermanent connections. This technologised era calls for every kind of relationship which is contextualized in the "cyber-space." This era also engendered the "visual culture" and hence the

focuses on image, representation, gaze, identification and to add psychoanalytical terms like voyeurism, fetishism and scopophilia. Feminists have enabled us to acknowledge "the power of the image" which would go a long way to describe the role of technology in commodifying women's bodies as a sexual object to be viewed and acted upon for satisfying sexual pleasures in and within a cyberspace. Cyberspace creates a virtual environment where multiple users of an online service can "chat." Just as people get together socially, some of those who meet in online chat rooms later choose to have sexual relationships with each other. In the case of those who meet in online chat rooms, these sexual relationships are most often acted out online in the form of cybersex chat.

However the connotation of cybersex in this paper is presented in broader and through quite different dimensions than this one to establish the argumentative postulate and further a sociology of cyber sex that incorporates watching porn sites, escort sites, downloading and watching blue films and sexually explicit images, buying sexually provocative artifacts like artificial genitals- all of which, either implicitly or explicitly, represent women bodies as objects displayed like mannequins(naked, semi- naked or otherwise) in the "cyber spatial" sex market. In the course of establishing this, another very important and taken for granted fact crops up and that is without this advanced technology with its virtual and visual culture patriarchy would not have been anchored in the global-technologized ground.

In her book, *The Beauty Myth,* **Naomi** Wolf (1990) has argued that capitalism, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality interact to produce a crude ideology, *"be pretty get a man, be complete escape poverty and misery."* What she calls is the "Beauty Myth" is a media ideology that perpetuates the idea if women are able to portray themselves as sexually appealing they will be able to conform to patriarchal ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness. As a result of this, one can deduce that the various pornography sites and escort sites, by displaying the most "properly shaped" display pictures of women try to attract as many male clients as possible. If one views sites like escortography.com one gets a view of such pictures that sexually arouse the viewer to contact the most appealing picturesque woman. The underlying argument is that technology has an intervention here too. There is a software known as picasa that shapes and beautifies a picture and of course escort girls use it to their advantage and consequently to the advantage of online sex market. Thus technology, particularly cyber space should be thanked to perpetuate the ideology of beauty myth without which these girls would not have earned well by selling their "beautiful picturesque well-shaped" body- a commodity for male sexual consumption.

George Ritzer has produced a critical analysis of the impact of social structural change on human interaction and identity. Such human interaction can be brought down to the most intimate individual level of sexual conversation and activities via the well developed technology.

Accounting for the five dominant themes envisaged by Ritzer in the Mc Donaldisation process one can simply draw a correspondence between food culture and cybersex market. *Efficiency,* by which specific end of the customer can be achieved after choosing the appropriate means correspond to the clients logging into their escort or porn sites of interest. These sites are provided with a menu of pictures that are attracting from which any one or two of their choice is selected for 'consumption to satisfy their sexual appetite.' Secondly, *Calculability*, would concern the type of sexual desire that the clients or the interacting individuals may have and what nature of escorts or porn they are willing to consume given their limitations of time, cost and an idea of quality. Thirdly, *Predictability,* refers to the structuring of an impersonal environment. This cyber environment is virtual and personal. The clients, thus, do not have to fear the social stigma associated with pimps and men who visit the red light areas in the real social world. Fourthly, *Control through the Substitution of Non –Human for Human Technology*, whereby the non-human cyber technology controls intimate (sexual too) relations thus, blurring the boundary between real and virtual, human and non-human. Finally, *Irrationality of Rationality* can be comprehended when the systematic porn and escort sites consequently become self contradictory for the viewers and consumers in the sense of paying for a "plastic sexuality" or instant pleasure. Such a 'technologized intimacy' may give rise to situations that individuals may find existentially troubling because this promises psychological support but in its absence individuals may feel the ontological insecurity of personal meaninglessness and dread.(Giddens; *Transformation of Intimacy*) One need not be reminded of the victims of such ontological insecurities that render themselves through feeble family ties, uncertain marital relations and divorce potentialities being on a hike.

However, the women bear victimhood much more than their male counterparts because the former are conventionally upheld to be the pleasure givers while the latter, the pleasure seekers. One needs to direct one's attention to the perfection with which the woman escort tries to display her individual biography after having worked on it prior to the display, just to earn bread by making it appealing to the male gaze. On the other hand, men, being the satisfied consumers, may be absolutely behind the virtual curtain.

Agency Implications-an After-Thought of Commodification

In order to escape academic refutations of telling a one-sided story of women's victimhood and passive actors of gendered bodies, I would like to borrow the arguments reminiscent of the Post Feminist scholarship followed by Foucault's perceptions in his work, *Technologies of the Self.*

Foucault argues that his work has been to "show people that they are much freer than they feel" (1988a, p. 10). Technologies of the self, Foucault observes, allow individuals to effect operations on their "bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection..."(Foucault, 1988b, p. 18). Here, he recognizes the relationships between truth, power and the self. More specifically, Foucault acknowledges the links between care of the self and ethics of the self. To refuse ascriptions (subject positions), to know the limits of freedom, to explore the 'other', to push the limits of parameters of freedom is to engage in resistance; all these undertakings, according to Foucault, require 'a care of the self' (see McNay, 1994, pp. 145-149).

It is this sense of being, and *consciously embodied being*, that I, following the post feminist theoretical comprehension, assert as empowering femininity of women represented in these escort and porn sites of internet. These women represented in the virtual space negotiate and re- negotiate their status of commodified objects by asserting a sense of independence from social stigma as everything takes place in the virtual world and most importantly, exercising their own volition to choose their sexual partners. The cartography of their sexual desire, therefore, does not owe any obligation to a male patriarch. The right of self-expression is exploited in a limited way and it comes hand in hand with the encouragement to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices. Supporting this view, Mihaela Miroiu also states that post feminist lifestyle is the product of the economic independence and sexual freedom of women. Post feminism is also a *sensibility (Gill, 2007)* characterizing large parts of contemporary culture. This post feminist sensibility includes the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and disciplining, a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm,' a resurgence of ideas of 'natural' sexual difference, a 're-sexualization' of women's bodies and an emphasis upon consumerism and a co modification of difference.

The point I want to focus on, is that there is a powerful resonance between post feminism and cyber sexism (as discussed in this paper) because both appear to be structured by the current of individualism that has almost replaced the notions of the real, social or political. Secondly it is clear that the self regulating, autonomous woman subject of cyber sexism bears a stark resemblance to the freely, actively choosing self re-inventing subject of post feminism. Moreover, cybersex, of the kind discussed in this paper, creates a terrain of sexuality upon which the contradictory tendencies of modern social life play themselves out in full. In fact, the emergence of plastic sexuality can be held responsible to offer women a sexual agency since Giddens analyses it as a sexuality freed from its intrinsic relation to reproduction- in terms of emotional emancipation implicit in pure relationship as well as women's claim to sexual pleasure. Being a decentered sexuality, cyber sex for both the male clients and female escorts remains a liberating experience freed from both reproduction and subservience to a fixed object. Premised on plastic sexuality, the virtual relationship is not expected to be exclusively heterosexual; it is neutral in terms of sexual orientation consequently creating a space of sexual emancipation for women. Finally, cyber sex feasibilities in the space of the virtual world are structured to enable individual selves to 'commit and omit' bonds much circumscribing to the 'liquidity of modernity' and 'frailty of human bonds' envisaged by Baumann. This can further be read as an emancipatory experience for women of today contrary to their domestically-confined reproducing wife and sacrificing mother counterparts a couple of decades ago.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades there has been an explosion in the open discussion and depiction of sex in terms of pornography. From the perspective of 1990s the adult videos in hotels and near naked advertisements seem to thrive on the media culture thus relegating the battles of 1960s over *Lady Catterley's Lover* and Henry Miller to the old-fashion parade. Live sex chats in cyberspace which includes female ridicule and perversion, though, are acts of mutually consenting participants; nevertheless imply female sexuality to be at the threshold of danger and exploitation.

Commodification undoes all moral strictures. The global economy initiates commodification of 'everything' including women's bodies and fits into the global culture. However if I explore a bit more I question why women are being demeaned? This further explicates the stagnant cultural element of all historical epoch-patriarchy. The story does not end here. Globalization has a third constituent predominant element that in reality facilitates the other two which are commodification and patriarchy- technology. It is therefore least to comment that technology as a partner in crime with patriarchy commodifies

women as sexual objects to be sold in the sex market corresponding to the sex sale in pre globalized era via sex work. There may be a transition of context from pre-global to global culture and economy but patriarchy still strives and paradoxically the implication of global as "equal" assumes a duality and hypocrisy as long as women are concerned. No wonder, *Silk,* the biopic representation of a South Indian actor and porn star, *Silk Smitha,* had to commit suicide in her biographical film text, *The Dirty Picture,* 2012!

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