

Examination of Gender and Feminist Theory in Relation to Women's Painting with an Example of Work by Frida Kahlo and Paula Modersohn-Becker

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Introduction

Gender and feminism have long been subjects of extensive academic research among many thinkers, culminating in various theories that are still very much ongoing and ever-changing in contemporary society. These subjects have also been used as subject matter explored by visual artists. This essay aims to examine how gender and feminism were explored by women in painting, particularly by two artists from the early 20th century, Frida Kahlo and Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose artworks are well integrated within feminist art as they often dealt with themes of sexuality, self-identity, and breaking gender stereotypes.

In addition to analysing their work, I also intend to examine and discuss the inception of gender and feminist theory. In this essay, I will focus on theories proposed by two thinkers, Judith Butler and bell hooks. Both authors conducted an insightful but differing study and introduced terms such as gender performativity and the intersectionality of feminism. The examination of historical context will hopefully shed light on the relevance and better understanding of what gender and feminism are and how they interlink with each other, as well as their influence on the painting.

Even though both Judith Butler and Bell Hooks introduced their concepts much later (late 20th century) than the painters mentioned above (early 20th century), it is worth remembering that gender studies are a relatively young research field. Nonetheless, both gender and feminism have been very much present for most of the last century, both in writing and in the visual arts. The difference is the time that they have been properly researched and written about. Hence, this examination may bring some interesting insights and perspectives from the beginning and end of the century and create a mutual connection between theory and practice. In the first part of this text, I will refer to and examine the historical context of gender and feminist theory proposed by Butler and Hooks. Later, I will apply some of the discussed themes in relation to the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Paula Modersohn-Becker.

Gender and Feminist Theory

Firstly, before going into the broad aspects of the theories mentioned, it is vital to understand what the definition of gender is. In her book *Gender and Aesthetics: An introduction* (2004, p. 2), Carol Korsmeyer presents one that is probably easiest to comprehend. She refers to the early writers of the 1970s, who:

Distinguished between “sex” and “gender,” where the former term refers to biological differences in the reproductive morphology of males and females, and the latter refers to the many ways that cultures mold their members into different social roles.

This is to say that there are many different interpretations of that term. Although they all somewhat differ, it is safe to say that gender does not describe the biological and physical characteristics of a person but rather the social structure of what a female or male should be.

This brings us to Judith Butler and her theory of gender performativity. That term was born out of her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler believed that gender was a social construct. She claimed that aspects of masculine and feminine are in no way connected to a physical body, and gender is something that can be learnt. “Gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts” (Butler, 1990, p. 16).

But what does she mean by that? The rather radical statement that “gender is a performance” links to the idea of the fictive nature of identity that Butler thoroughly talks about in *Gender Trouble*. The socially and politically proposed idea that there are characteristics assigned to females and males is what Butler strongly rejects. There is no true and natural sex, no set of behaviours that we are born with; thus, everything that we can identify with is what is taught. “The indeterminacy of gender may be the ground for the liberatory potential of feminism” (Nash, 1990, p.171). Butler also talked about feminism in her work quite extensively. Her approach to feminist theory came from a queer person’s perspective, putting heterosexuality in the spotlight. She criticised feminist theory for its exclusionary notions:

It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism.

(Butler, 1990, p. 9)

This statement came with a warning directed at feminist theorists that they should be careful and not “idealise certain expressions of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 9), as this can result in further perpetuation of the same issues linked with oppression and hierarchy that feminism fought against.

At this point, it is worth transitioning into and introducing the feminist theory proposed by Bell Hooks in her book *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000). But most likely, the question “How do gender and feminism relate?” might have emerged. Seemingly, finding a link between the two might not be obvious right away. Feminism, as many people know, has rather anti-male and pro-female connotations, and gender is not as easily understood as many people mistake it for the definition of sex. Nonetheless, both gender and feminism studies link and merge into one another create an extensive discussion of political, social, and creative aspects that need a major shift.

Bell hooks, whose real name is Gloria Jean Watkins, wrote *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, hoping it will be an accessible read for everybody of all genders. She writes: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” (Hooks, 2000, p. VIII). Similarly, as Korsmeyer talks about gender, hooks introduces the definition of the theory in the same pleasant and uncomplicated manner. Nevertheless, it would be a great understatement to say that feminism is as simple as this definition. By looking into the ideas presented by Hooks, we can discover that feminism is an incredibly complex and broad concept that goes beyond simply fighting against oppression and sexism.

In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks talks about how primal feminism had a strong anti-male nature among the public; she points at patriarchal mass media (hooks, 2000) for representing feminism that way. The patriarchy that Hooks mentions is a significant reoccurring component of feminist theory and feminism as a movement; this is what women fought

against—a right to be included to free themselves from the oppressive system. Yet, this is not entirely the whole point; it is not just about the same pay and the right to vote to eradicate this division between men and women. It goes back to the gender inequality issue that Butler was writing about. This is evident when thinking about the whole other aspect of what feminism was supposed to be, but at some point, it lost its clarity. Hooks believed in unity and sisterhood only after women fight against their own sexism and prejudice:

The most powerful intervention made by consciousness raising groups was the demand that all females confront their internalised sexism and their allegiance to patriarchal thinking and action.

(Hooks, 2000, p. 12)

And that link to the intersectionality of feminism becomes apparent. Race, gender, and the inclusion of women of colour were two of the major issues within feminism that Hooks spoke loudly about. She proposes a new type of feminism that is not exclusive to one type of oppression and does not neglect race, class, or gender. “We continue the work of bonding across race and class. We continue to put in place the anti-sexist thinking and practice” (Hooks, 2000, p. 18).

Gender and Feminism in Women’s Painting

Knowing the the theoretical nature of gender and feminism, it is worth examining the visual side of it. One of the artists whose work was inspired by motifs of womanhood, gender and self-identity was Frida Kahlo. The Mexican artist was unapologetic in her work, creating evocative paintings often depicting herself. She chose herself as the subject matter, because she stated to know herself best. But could it be that the self-portraiture is an indirect result of oppression and gender inequality? “They (self-portraits) are part of the language painters use to make a point” (Borzello, 2016).

For Kahlo, perhaps the need of expressing her pain and difficulties of her life was an important factor. However, with her work being on such a personal level, it is clear to see that her

intentions of what she wanted her work to be are more than just a need of painting herself. Being Mexican and being a woman, she strongly depicted these elements in her work, almost as an act of defiance against the patriarchy.

Paintings that could particularly portray this idea of feminism and gender identity, are *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (Fig. 1) and *My Birth* (Fig. 2). Both artworks are greatly different, offering a strong contrast between a power of gender identity and haunting experiences of unfulfilled motherhood and reproductive issues.

In her self-portrait (Fig. 1) Kahlo sits on the chair, in a black suit, with short hair and scissors in her hand. “Kahlo makes a comment on the idea of performing gender and sex during her time period.” (Mushro, 2017). An inspiration for this painting came upon Kahlo finding out about her partner’s affair. She chopped her hair off in act of liberation, and by doing so making an important remark on gender performativity that Butler wrote about decades later. Long hair is usually associated with feminine traits, and by getting rid of that she gave up on the sexual power and embracing her masculine side.” Distancing herself from the very feminine, she demonstrates that she is completely in control of her sexuality and her power.” (Mushro, 2017).

In *My Birth* (Fig. 2), Kahlo offers a different set of ideas and as opposed to her expression of gender, she depicts herself at probably most vulnerable state. Encouraged to paint her major life events, Kahlo embarked on a series of deeply emotional paintings, this one representing her own birth. Yet, this profound artwork symbolises of her inability to become a mother.

Blood surrounding the head could indicate her previous miscarriage. Above the bed a painting of sorrowful Virgin Mary, an ultimate symbol of motherhood. In her lifetime Kahlo, also underwent medical abortions. It ties into the feminist fight for their reproductive right, about freedom of choice. Kahlo’s work is a crucial element of that discussion.

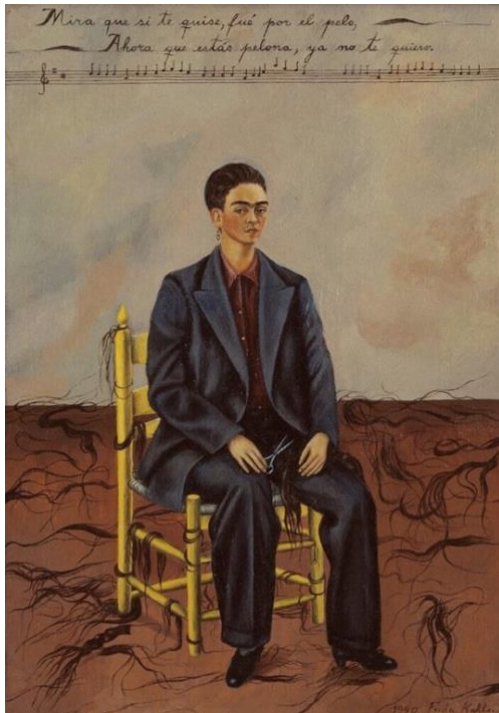


Figure 1. Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair



Figure 2. My Birth

There is something inherently more captivating about women representing themselves through their own brushwork. Self-portraiture seemed like an effective “tool” for women to express their feelings and address the social and political challenges that women faced, especially during the first few decades of the 20th century. “Frida Kahlo is responsible for bringing pain into female self-portraiture.” (Borzello, 2016, p. 164).

What about Paula Modersohn-Becker’s contribution to the subject? Contrary to Kahlo’s haunting and graphic work, Modersohn-Becker portrayed herself in a rather simple and gentle way. Yet, this aesthetic approach was in no way diminishing what she tried to convey. In her *Self-Portrait on the 6th Wedding Anniversary* (Fig. 3), she painted herself half-nude, appearing to be pregnant. But motherhood is not something that she was wishing for in her marriage. Interestingly, in the painting, although she embraces her pregnant stomach, she was not actually pregnant at that time. This might “be an indication that as an artist she felt within herself a creative force similar to that of an expectant mother” (Laukötter, 2020, p. 32). Modersohn-Becker in her diaries often referred to the subject of motherhood and marriage in her work; strangely, she was quite ambivalent towards these two, even though

she was married and eventually had a daughter. Could it be that she felt obligated in some way to marry and have children because that was what was expected of women back then? Quite possibly. Delving into her life, it is often mentioned that she was pushed by her mother to do things that are associated with woman-like behaviour, such as attending cooking classes. Modersohn-Becker, on the other hand, was not interested in that; she wished to devote her life to art. However, on the other hand, she spent a great deal of time pushing topics that she was so ambivalent about in her artistic vision, such as the reoccurring subject of motherhood.

"She acknowledges her artistic ambitions as "masculine" and remarks on the mutual exclusivity of female sexual love and artistic success." (Chadwick, 2011, p. 171). This can be analysed as Modersohn-Becker's strong awareness of her own femininity and sexuality, but without ignoring her capacity for exploring and expressing her masculine side. That, again, could be a very relevant subject within gender studies.

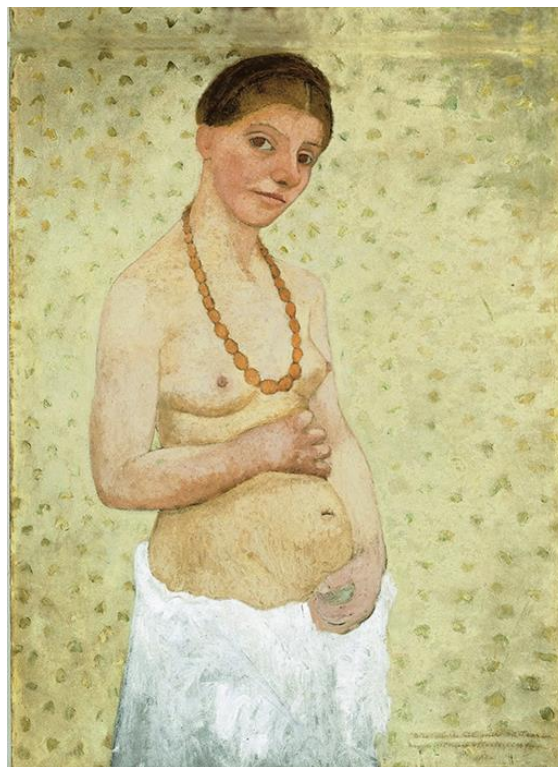


Figure 3. Self-Portrait on the 6th Wedding Anniversary

Self-representation through art has been used by other female artists throughout history. "For centuries, women artists have portrayed themselves with originality, charm, and magnificence, and they continue to do so today." (Borzello, 2016, p. 25). Due to the lack of visibility and constant male dominance, women struggled to get noticed with their art, even though they had been here all along. Over the course of history, the context and inspiration changed constantly within women's self-portraiture, from not being able to get into education to studying their bodies to the interrogation of their own sexuality and patriarchy.

All of these could be considered evidence that women at any moment in history have been, in some ways, exploring and dealing with the challenges that only women faced and keep facing to this day.

Conclusion

Through history, a significant number of artists and thinkers have researched and explored the ideas of gender and feminism. Within the theoretical field, many studies, especially those related to gender, have not been summarised and written about until only a few decades ago. Even though both feminism and gender existed and were part of a movement as well as cultural and political upheaval, it took a great deal of effort and extensive research for them to become understood and widely acknowledged amongst many generations.

With the gender theory proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, the concept of gender as a social construct and gender performativity became part of that conversation. Bell hooks's *Feminism is for Everybody* talked about intersectionality and the importance of feminist inclusion for women of colour. She also aimed to promote feminism as a movement for all, not just women.

In the visual arts, especially early 20th-century female painting, self-portraiture became a successful form of artistic expression. Artists such as Frida Kahlo and Paula Modersohn-Becker challenged not only the aesthetic side of art but also the conceptual aspects linked with the

issues of gender and patriarchal society. They expressed their pain, ambition, and issues linked to reproductive rights.

In conclusion, by considering various theories and artistic visions of women throughout history, we can see that the subject of gender and feminism encompasses a broad range of issues and ideas that are imbedded within our everyday lives. They tackle issues such as gender and sex distinction, sexism, racism, and women's rights, just to name a few. By analysing just a few examples of women and their take on the issues mentioned above, I believe that the conversation regarding these matters should continue to be researched and explored by both thinkers and artists.

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