

BOOK REVIEW

Sex Object: A Memoir by Jessica Valenti (Harper Collins, 2016)

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Jessica Valenti is a columnist at *The Guardian US*, founder of *feministing.com*, and author of several books about women's issues (e.g. Friedman & Valenti, 2008; Valenti, 2010, 2014). In her recent book, *Sex Object: A Memoir* (Valenti, 2016), which is a *New York Times* bestseller, she recounts her experiences growing up in Queens, N.Y. She reflects on her relationships, motherhood, and most prominently, her weariness of the everyday sexism she has endured. Valenti describes how living in a sexist and misogynistic culture has shaped her life. The book offers a compelling account of the author's own experiences with issues such as sexual double standards, sexual objectification, and sexualized violence in the US.

Sex Object begins with Valenti asking, "Who would I be if I lived in a world that didn't hate women?" (p. 2). She discusses what object status means to her, and how objectification has been a normative and inevitable part of her lived experience, pondering the cumulative effects of this (p. 3). While objectification theory is not a new concept (e.g. Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), Valenti uses the notion of objectification to illuminate topics, such as everyday sexism, street harassment, and online harassment, which are currently at the forefront of some feminist discourse. She gives space to confront misogynistic occurrences that are often nonchalantly dismissed or minimized because they are so commonplace, such as street harassment (see Logan, 2015). Still, not all women share the same

experience, and their definitions and encounters with sexual harassment, violence, abortion, rape, trauma, and police reporting are shaped by intersecting oppressions and identities, such as race, class, ability, age, and gender non/conformity. So, the stories Valenti depicts, while reflecting broader notions of a misogynistic culture that may resonate with some women, certainly do not reflect the experiences of all women.

The book is separated into three non-chronological parts with small individual stories, or vignettes, included within each. As a non-linear collection, some readers might find the flow (or lack thereof) between chapters a challenge. However, some literary theorists maintain that the structure of narrative is itself gendered, and that storytelling with an episodic, non-linear structure rejects more masculine, phallogentric, and/or heterosexist writing structures. So, this could be attributed as a feature of uniquely feminist writing (Roof, 1996; Felski, 2003; Smith, 1990). Further, this structure may serve the purpose of providing further literary or discursive context; where selectivity, memory, subjectivity, and ultimately, “truth” are commonly critiqued in autobiographical writing, a non-linear, and even disjointed structure can purport to be more authentic (Smith, 1990).

While critique of an author’s subjectivity could be broadly applied to autobiographical writing in general, critiques specific to the feminist memoirist are singular in that their focus is on the content being voyeuristic, overtly sexual, and not political enough (Zakaria, 2016; Corey, 2015). Miller (1994) says that,

The doxa of gender identity has indeed meant that women writers have had to wrestle with a series of powerful prohibitions: about the legitimacy of picking up the pen; about revealing their sexuality; about claiming exceptionality; about the desire for public fame.

Miller, 1994, p. 17.

Situating *Sex Object* within the landscape of other contemporary feminist memoirs provides context, and reveals some of the current debates surrounding women-authored narratives that are meant to be either explicitly feminist in

theme/content and/or are written by women who identify as feminists. Valenti's book joins a considerable list of existing white, cisgender, feminist works, and may not be as groundbreaking as other works, such as Serano's (2007) *Whipping Girl*, which redefined longstanding feminist ideas with a new trans feminist focus. However, it is noteworthy too that many who read Valenti's work will be unsurprised by the painful and personal accounts of sexism and misogyny she describes—it speaks to a disturbing reality that such occurrences are commonplace for many women. Throughout her memoir Valenti grapples with exactly the types of arraigns as described above by Miller (1994), and it is for this reason that women's personal narratives, such as *Sex Object*, are integral to feminism:

Through sharing the intimate details of her own life, the memoirist expresses the raw or very real nature of the female experience—unveiling the many (and often silenced) challenges that contemporary women face within society; challenges such as the paradigm of women's roles in relation to identity and self and the male gaze.

McCue, 2014, para. 3.

Valenti would have had more access to resources and opportunities for success in publishing her memoir than more minoritized groups (see Hurtado, 1989), and certainly she demonstrates awareness that there is a level of accountability required when locating oneself within a feminist ideological space, with the privilege of having a platform, and being a cisgendered, relatively affluent, white, woman. For example, when she writes about reporting a sexual assault to the police, and says, “The label on the books [of mug shots] said HISPANIC even though I told them I couldn't be sure of his race” (p. 63), is it evident that she is looking back at this experience critically in terms of the police response and systemic racism. Yet, she also notes thinking that the police officer who drove her around in his cruiser to look for the assailant did so to make her feel better even though the police did not think they would find him — it would be interesting to further engage with how her white privilege shaped this experience of reporting to the police (see Fine & Weis, 1998). Likewise, the parts of the book where

Valenti draws on both memoir and commentary to connect her stories to a larger point are her strongest. For example, the chapter “Anon.” recounts anecdotes alongside feminist commentary about street harassment, cyberbullying or trolling, and violence against women. She draws on an analysis of language to make a cogent argument: “somehow, inexplicably, “man-hater” is a word tossed around with insouciance as if this was a real thing that did harm. Meanwhile we have no real word for men who kill women. Is the word just “men?”” (p. 134)¹. Valenti is at her most convincing when these types of connections are made.

Sex Object culminates in a powerful final chapter that quotes some of the online harassment Valenti has received. While some may contend that Valenti gives these people a platform for their sexist vitriol, in doing so she gives her book a poignant and purposeful ending. Seeing this collection of hateful and sexist comments provides a case-in-point example of the culture we inhabit, which, according to Valenti, is a culture that hates women (p. 13). Seeing these comments in print, even if any names attributed are void of last names or are pseudonyms, seems to lend more accountability to the commenters (trolls), where they can no longer rest on a veiled virtual existence that lends anonymity to their behaviour.

Like Valenti, contemporary feminists and high-profile women who have spoken out about or have taken action against sexism publicly have numerous and systematically been targeted by cyberbullies, or trolls, in attempts to insult, humiliate, scare, and ultimately silence them and other women (see Buni & Chemaly, 2014; Mantilla, 2013; Price, 2016). Consequently, poor responses from authorities and social media platforms have in many cases prevented women from partaking in those platforms (Buni & Chemaly, 2014). Unfortunately, since the publication of *Sex Object*, Valenti herself has suspended her social media use amid rape threats to her 5-year-old daughter (Crandall, 2016)—further testament to the importance of feminism, and the ongoing work that needs to be done.

By publishing this deeply personal account of her own experiences, Jessica

¹ Editor: Interesting that there is a term ‘lady killer’ used to describe a man who is seductive or particularly attractive to women.

Valenti has created a dialogue about misogyny and everyday sexism in the US, and has helped to make some feminist topics more visible to her readers. Overall, *Sex Object* is a worthy contribution to contemporary feminist literature.

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