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From motherly nature to sex appeal

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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In this article the transfiguration of Icelandic womanhood at the turn of two centuries, 1900 and 2000, will be analysed and compared. Our aim is primarily to outline a theoretical framework for the discussion regarding the transition in female identities in these time periods. Both eras are characterised by related scenarios: Iceland's struggle for acceptance in the international community and the attempt to develop a national image. During the first period, the beginning of the 19th century, the stance concerned the country's independence and during the latter, the beginning of the 20th century, its position as a valid actor in international markets. In both cases ideological emphasis was put on male-biased characteristics tied to ancient times. The "genuine Icelanders" were descendants of the Vikings – the valiant conquerors. Simultaneously the women's movement reached some of its historical peaks and women's struggle brought forth significant changes in society at large. The achievements of the women's movement are obvious but the downsides are not as clear. The aim of this article is to explicate how dominant ideological upswings of each period affected the image and role of Icelandic women. Is womanhood shaped by repetitive themes of history or is womanhood an innovative phenomenon of each era? What role has feminism and women's political agency played in the construction of womanhood? The theoretical approach is based on the ideological connotation between nationalism and neo-liberalism and the impact of the women's movement applying "gender" as the primary analytical tool.

Analytical tools

The term "gender" has been a central concept in feminist theories for the last 20 years and is basically defined as the socially constructed difference between men and women (Smith, 2005). Furthermore, the historian Joan W. Scott views the concept of gender as a constitutive element of the social relationships between men and women and the primary symbol of power relations. Gender is constantly constructed and reconstructed and is reflected within and from diverse social elements such as symbols and concepts, institutions and organisations. Gender shapes our subjective and objective identity that again shapes and reflects our society (Scott, 1996, 1999). For further elaboration of the dominant social structure that constructs gender within each period examined, the theories of Dorothy Smith (2005) will be used. According to Smith, the shape of gender is constructed according to the ruling interests of each social system, aiming for the economic and ideological upkeep of the power relations at the root of the system itself. Thus the womanhood of each period, women's gender, serves the defined interests of society (Smith, 2005).

Historical research has revealed that the culturally constructed ideas of man- and womanhood are to a high extent based on a dualistic notion of the sexes and their functions. Definitions of manhood have been shaped in opposition to being a woman. This foundational assumption of the gender system is reflected in the structure of the majority of the world's societies, assigning men social domination and consequently restricting women's access to power. Accordingly, the idea of the modern individual beholder of power has culturally been constructed as manly. This has been a theme of research conducted by numerous scholars who have written on how ideals, for example the need for freedom, autonomy and democracy, combined with rational nature and sense of equality, have in many ways been constructed in a hierarchic opposition to the female identity (Davidoff, 1998; Hagemann, 2000; Scott, 1996, 1999; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Two time periods

The two time periods studied in this article are of considerable symbolic and concrete relevance for the development of womanhood within the gendered substructure of Icelandic society. The time period from 1900 to 1930 is of extreme importance for nationalism and nation-building in Iceland and for the development of feminism. The period is characterised by important landmarks in the "struggle for independence" from Denmark, which finally concluded with the establishment of the Republic of Iceland in 1944. According to the definition of the period the freedom-fighters of Iceland were the true ancestors of the Vikings, brave and resolute, and needless to say: all men (Matthíasdóttir & Östman, 2003; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004). The period was also crucial for the achievement of women's rights. In 1907-9, the franchise in municipal elections was extended to married women and in 1908 a Women's Slate stood for election to the town council in Reykjavík. It won the highest share of all slates, almost 22%, and all four candidates were elected to a council of fifteen. Equal rights of men and women to education and professional appointments were granted by the Icelandic parliament, Althingi, in 1911 and in 1915 Icelandic women 40 years and older won the right to vote in parliamentary elections, the same year as Danish women.

The upswing for the women's rights movement was soon met with harsh reaction. Historians and political scientists have shown that there was a backlash in women's rights and women's participation already in 1911-1913, and more conspicuously in the late 1920s when the women's movement or women's slates finally retreated from the political arena, not to appear again until in the 1980s (Auður Styrkársdóttir, 1998; Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, 2004; Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, 1997; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2006). It is also clear that women's hopes for political influence faded in this period. Women's lack of political representation manifested itself in the fact that from 1915-1971, only nine women in total were elected to parliament. Moreover, there were never more than three women sitting in the parliament at the same time and sometimes no woman was a Member of Parliament. Icelandic women seem to have been late in entering the public arena and the professions compared to other western countries and for example the first female lawyer graduated as late as in 1935 (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir & Guðrún Dís Jónatansdóttir, 1998).

This process was followed by an outspoken polarization between the Icelandic "political individual"¹ and the female subject. The nationalist "myth" promoted during

¹ The term "politic individual" is here used according to Scott's definition in: *Gender and the Politics of History*, 1999.

the first decades of the twentieth century was characterised by sharp divisions between the nationalistic, manly identity, or the identity of the “Icelandic individual” and the identity of women. Feminism furthermore fuelled the prevailing discussions on the nature and role of women in society. The debate became conspicuous in 1911-1912 when women acquired access to citizenship and exploded in the 1920s, leading to the retreat of the women’s rights movements.

Womanhood in the early twentieth century

The first decades of the twentieth century saw an increase in the discourse on the special “womanly nature” which to a great extent was a reaction against women’s political agency in the early Women’s Slate (1908-1926), their political and social rights in the period. The “nature” of women as defined in the cultural discourse was a motherly one and predestined women to be mothers and homemakers, first and foremost. This was clearly interconnected with the “housewife ideology” that was based on nationalism. The last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have seen a development which suggests a notable similarity.

First, the struggle for women’s rights and second, the increased participation of women in the public sphere and political agency in terms of the Women’s Slates (1983-1999) provoked an opposition which emphasized and revitalized exaggerated gender relations.

The historical perspective on maternalism and the housewife ideology is well documented (Friedan, 1963; Hall, 1992; Kessler-Harris, 2007; Melby, 1999) and in Iceland this body of research is growing. The struggle for independence in Iceland had highly gendered connotations. Increased emphasis on the special feminine and motherly nature in the aftermath of industrialization was the nationalistic counterpart to the manly individual – the “genuine Icelander”. The national ideology defined the so-called Icelandic “nature” in such a way that the “Icelandic individual” appeared to have “natural qualifications” to found a modern nation-state. The reference to nature was also the main argument used in defining womanhood as motherhood during the same period. The development of the Icelandic nation was thus built on the traditional dualistic idea of the roles of the sexes with regard to nature as the ultimate rationalisation as per the theory of Scott (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004; Matthíasdóttir, 2007).

The contradiction between the idea of individualism and womanhood is, among other things, reflected in the discussion on merits and proficiency in relation to women in public life. It appears to be a repetitive pattern within this discourse that women, who are barely defined as individuals, can acquire a share in the individualistic concept by symbolically surmounting the feminine. A concrete example of the gendered issues of individualism is the “gender quota” debate that took place in both periods examined. These are themes that crystallize many of the most important topics within the cultural discourse on femininity, revealing mechanisms which have been most important for gender constructions since the beginning of the 20th century. Thus it serves as an example of the comparison of gendered themes relevant in our two time periods, but that comparison will be the backbone of our research.

In 1927 a bill was proposed by the first female Member of Parliament in Iceland, Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason. The bill contended that women should get a permanent seat in all official commissions. The discussions on the bill reveal most interesting ideas and attitudes towards women’s general proficiency and possibilities to take part in public life and the government of the nation. One example is an article published in the women’s magazine *Hlin*, where the implications of the proposed law were discussed. The article for example presented the view that the qualities necessary for

political engagement, like “intelligence and reason” were to a higher extent a male attribute, rather than female (Eyrún Ingadóttir, 2001; Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, 2003). Women were furthermore placed in an ambiguous position. They might on one hand be able to develop those qualities and thus be able to take part in politics and public life. On the other hand it was highly doubted that this was the best contribution which women could offer to the nation, as it was stated that the home was the ultimate “kingdom in which most women will be queens”. The lesson seems to have been that although women might be able to develop themselves as political individuals, the qualities of such individuals were not really an integral part of womanhood. All endeavours on the part of women to develop themselves in this way were looked upon with suspicion (Sigurlaug Knudsen, 1927, pp. 124-127; see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004).

Womanhood in the late twentieth century

The analysis of womanhood in the early twentieth century provides a very interesting point for a comparison between the discourse on the same theme at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. The comparison furthermore reveals the historical and cultural coherence that womanhood is shaped within, from past to present. The special womanhood, or what is especially regarded to characterise women in the present, does however not consist of the special motherly nature, although the “motherly nature” certainly still exists as a defining factor. The type of womanhood which is highlighted nowadays is the female sex appeal. The last decades have seen a steadily growing emphasis on women’s sexuality and their sexual nature, which has become a principal defining factor of what it means to be a woman (Guðný Gústafsdóttir, 2009; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004; Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, 2002).

The emerging images in the latter half of the 1980s are related to the development in the early 20th century. The second time period starts in the mid 1980s, a decennium that marked a certain juncture in femininity discourse. The cultural differences between men and women were sharpened and exaggerated, the notion of women as first and foremost sexual beings entered mainstream thinking, and the image of the “sex bomb” reached new dimensions (Guðný Gústafsdóttir, 2009).

The background for this shift can be traced to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe 1989-1990 which created an ideological gap in Western countries. The gap created a fertile ground for neo-liberal ideology and individualism. In Iceland, the mid-1990s further marked the beginning of extensive trade liberalization, deregulation and privatization following the establishment of the European Economic Area. This watershed in European history intertwined with a backlash for the feminist movement. This was conspicuous in Iceland and may be compared to the backlash in the second and third decade of the 20th century. The “second wave movement”, the Red Stockings and the Women’s Slates, had already won great victories in Iceland. In 1987, the Women’s Slate made great inroads in elections to the Icelandic parliament, getting 10% of the votes and six seats for women in the parliament. Support for the Women’s Slate decreased successively the following years. In 1991 it got 8% of the votes, and ended in only 4.9% in 1995. In 1999 the Women’s Slate merged with the Social Democrats and in 2003 its direct influence could no longer be seen (Guðný Gústafsdóttir & Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, 2009; Kristín Jónsdóttir, 2007; Þorgerður Einarsdóttir & Lilja Hjartardóttir, 2009).

At the end of the 1980s and through the 1990s the weight of social power shifted from politics to a neo-capitalist free market in Iceland as in many other western countries (Guðmundur Jónsson, 2009; Stefán Ólafsson, 2008). The enhanced voice in parliament in Iceland subsequently became watered down, as stated above. At the

same time social structures of Iceland, including gender, were reconstructed according to new values (Scott, 1996, 1999). The players on the market and the holders of power remained men and the “political individual” became the “economic individual”. Women also received an updated function according to the new rules of the market. Instead of being mothers of the nation with circumstantial political influence, women now became redefined as subjects of the free and limitless market of neo-capitalism. Their functions, still first and foremost body-related, became those of glamorous sex objects (Guðný Gústafsdóttir, 2009).

This development is reflected in an interesting way within the history of Icelandic beauty contests in the 1980s and 1990s. Shortly after the rebellion of the Red Stocking Movement in the early 1970s, beauty contests in Iceland were disbanded for about a decade. The contest was re-established in 1982 and in 1985 Hófi (Hólmfríður Karlsdóttir) became the first Icelandic woman to win the title Miss World (Annadís Gréta Rúdolfssdóttir, 1998). Defined by the image, Miss World was the ambassadress of feminine purity. The image of Hófi fitted the description and thereto was intertwined with the pristine beauty of Icelandic nature. With her, the Icelandic beauty-myth reached a new level (Íris Ellenberger, 2007; Þorgerður Þorvaldsdóttir, 2001). Furthermore, the image of Hófi was linked to an ancient image of virgin motherhood. Her pure countenance combined with her professional and publicized affection for children resembled Holy Mother of Christian mankind and, a comparable icon of the 1980s, Lady Diana of Wales.

Only three years later, in 1988, another Icelandic woman won the Miss World contest. The victory of Linda Pé (Linda Pétursdóttir) established the myth of female Icelandic beauty. Throughout her reign Linda was assigned the same image as her predecessor, that of an Icelandic ambassadress of pure femininity. In the year of 1989, the contest undertook multiple changes including an image-shift. The former image of virgin beauty was replaced by the image of female sexuality. We suggest that the cause of the shift can be linked with the political and economic transformation that took place in the western world, setting out by the fall of the Berlin wall in autumn 1989, which lead to an increased marketisation of every niche of society, including female sexuality. In 1990 the magazine *Mannlíf* delineates a new and provoked image of Linda by number of photos described as: “Sex appeal, passion and play [...]” (Gunnar Gunnarsson, 1990, p. 74). The photos are intrusive and erotic with a clear connotation to another icon of the eighties: Madonna. The cultural definition of the Icelandic female beauty gained a new dimension by stressing sexual accessibility (Guðný Gústafsdóttir, 2009).

By observing and comparing the double image of femininity illustrated and highlighted by the two Icelandic winners of the contest Miss World and pop culture, an age-old double bind of female identity seems to unveil itself. Female gender appears to be linked to either motherhood or sexual accessibility: counteracting each other but both reducing female gender to bodily functions and thus restricting the possibility of social agency. The double-bind image of womanhood also seems to produce a two-faced restriction in the political discourse. The above-mentioned debate on quotas, past and present, sheds light on this issue. Quotas are said to be degrading for women as they will be stigmatised for being favoured because of their sex and not rewarded for their merits and proficiency. The present discourse has remarkable similarities with the debate around Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason’s bill in 1927 (Anna Kristín Pálsdóttir, 2010; Björn Bjarnason, 2004; Eyrún Ingadóttir, 2001; Helga Guðrún Jónasdóttir, 2003; see also Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, 2005, 2007).

Another expression of this discourse today is when high achieving women distinguish themselves from femininity by claiming that their accomplishments are unrelated to their sex but earned solely on individualistic grounds. A theoretical exploration indicates that this is connected to the masculine underpinnings of the

notion of individualism and that heritage is reconstructed and kept alive in current discourses on gender and individualism (Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir, 2010; Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, 2010). Thus, the definition of womanhood both grounds and justifies women's absence from social power.

On the spine of feminism

The standard assumption, revealing an interesting contradiction in the discourse of womanhood reflecting the symbolic dualism of the gender system, is the definition of feminists in an opposition to femininity. The women's movement has for instance been deployed as a symbol of the "unfeminine" in past and present. This article suggests that images of Icelandic womanhood in the two time periods examined were conducted by the ideological sways of each period according to the ruling interests. It furthermore argues that the fruit of feminist struggle was cut down by the following backlash. That implies that new images of womanhood would not have been possible without a basis in the feminist struggles which already have taken place. Thus the article argues, that the idea of motherhood at the beginning of the 20th century relied upon its opposite: the unwed and childless suffragette. In a similar manner, the sexually attractive, accessible and often provocative female of the early 21st century rests upon women's political agency, including the feminist fight for sexual freedom in the 1970s, and the fight against sexual exploitation and gender based violence after the 1980s. Both the traditional mother and the free female sexual "individual" claim true femininity to be theirs depicting feminism and feminists as the opposite.

Needless to say, women presenting themselves in opposition to the perception of the feminine are a threat to the very dualistic substance of the gender system. This can be connected to the writings of the main protagonist of the "first wave feminism" in Iceland, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, who was preoccupied with the prejudices against women's rights as well as women's reluctance to relate to them. According to her, these were directly related to the "mockery and scolding" which the women's rights activists had suffered, a fact which seems to have formed a main hindrance against the ideology of feminism (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 2004. p. 272-3, as cited in *Kvennablaðið* 9. Sept 1906, p. 67). In the last decades of the 20th century, "bad fashion sense and Birkenstocks" acquired a status as one of the main symbols of this discourse.

The repeated themes in the development of Icelandic womanhood expose the persistence of the gender system we live in. It seems that political and economic upheavals that loosen ideological trammels, for a moment indicate drastic changes but ultimately tighten the fundamentals of the gendered power relations society is based on. The fights and achievements of the women's movement that temporarily demonstrate increased equality have fuelled a forceful reaction against feminism. Thus women's liberation is undermined on the very terrain of feminist claims for independence and freedom – on the spine of feminism.

Conclusion

The development of feminine identity in the two time periods defined has certain similarities as well as differences. The Zeitgeist of neo-liberalist capitalism of the last decades has in some way played a similar role as the nationalism of the third decade of the 20th century. Whereas the ideological justification of maternalism and the "housewife ideology" was to a great extent based on nationalism, the sexualisation of women and womanhood today, so conspicuous in the last years, has to a high degree been based on the neo-liberal ideology, which emphasizes the freedom of choice. The

marketised image of women, highlighting sexuality and accessibility in the name of free choice and individuality, has made its mark on the position and the identity of Icelandic women.

The gender scenario of our times has ideological links to the past. Iceland's businessmen have been accredited in the country with the winning nature of the Vikings for decades and Icelandic womanhood remained naturally tied to the opposite, a primarily bodily function now restricted to sexuality. The sexual exposure and accessibility of all women is the offspring of neo-capitalist theory, based on the idea of the free consumption of the individual. In the free market economy, each niche of society was redefined and utilized, including women's gender. In this definition, women's function was no longer restricted to the production or consumption of a product – women became a product. Women's gender became "see-through" in the literal sense of the word and thus exposed to the convenient definition of the ruling interests of the Icelandic society, aiming for economic and ideological upkeep of the gendered power relation (Guðný Gústafsdóttir, 2009; Scott, 1996, 1999; Smith, 2005). This is for example well illustrated in the description of the development of the beauty queen's image. The modern Icelandic womanhood is rationalized with women's free choice. The notion of modern individualism, however, is a foundational concept in neo-liberalism, and has a strong male bias (Scott, 1999; Smith, 2005; Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, 2010). Liberalism, revitalized upon the end of the cold war, strengthened the rationale for masculine ethos and values in political and economic life. Gender relations and identities are infused by societal processes at the same time as they reinforce the same. The manly notion of individualism, and the delusive conceptualization of unrestricted "freedom of choice", is vital in the current Zeitgeist. Cultural, western representations of the sexualized femininity and the woman who "freely chooses" to express her individuality through the "sex appeal discourse" must be conceptualized against this background.

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