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The Perpetual Inferiority of FeMENity

Daniel Mulawa

I've always been a momma's boy. I grew up with a strong mother, who because of her intense work load, had to have me cared for by either my babysitter, sister, or my grandmother. Because of this, I was always immersed with women that were deeply affectionate, caring, and nurturing- maybe less so with my sister at the time. My sister played a significant role in shaping my personality, however. She is six years older than me, so I was always trying to be around her and trying to be just like her, much to her dismay. We played with Barbies, dressed up, watched princess Disney movies, and did so many more things that were considered to be "girls only" activities. When I started going to school, I was quickly and forcefully met by the binaries of our society. I went there with no idea that boys weren't supposed to be doing all the things that I had grown to love with my sister. I was teased, bullied, and ostracized just because I didn't see a value on putting labels on what I should and shouldn't like because I'm a boy. I remember the struggle of finding friends, and that I would cry almost every day when I got dropped off at pre-school just because I didn't want to deal with strangely mean 3-year-old children there. From that early age of 3, I was already being stripped of the things I loved in life because our culture denies the opportunities for self-expression from early ages. It was until a few years later that I learned the key of how to feel comfortable around all the other students- I had to conform.

Through the years of me growing up with the female role models in my life, I grew up with a skewed view of how strong and powerful women are. When I started going to a public middle school, I started to realize how different my mindset was from that of others. I quickly became friends with some girls there, and through them I started to see the injustices and corruption our society places on their shoulders. They constantly felt compelled to look, act, and dress in a certain way. It was depressing to watch them struggle to be unique and do things how they would naturally when all the other people around them pushed ideals for how to be a good woman down their throat. This doesn't go without mentioning how the boys were treated as well. I had always been in touch with my "effeminate" side, and because of this, I was always more emotional and surrounded by more girlfriends than that of most other boys. In order to be friends

with the other boys, I had to be a different person than who I was truly because most of them didn't want to be friends with a boy that was essentially a girl. This further set me on a track to hide my true self and create a face that conformed to the desires of society. In hindsight, I wish I had been less influenced by the criticisms of others, but as I've gotten older, I've realized the importance of expressing your true self. However, the lingering question of "Why is being feminine innately bad?" has been a central question throughout my life. Why are women forced to act femininely, and why is it when a guy identifies with this, he is inadvertently set lower within the social ladder? Through this paper, I intend to explore the facets of our society that have caused us to equate femininity to inferiority.

There is no denying that women have faced oppression over time. Until very recently in history, women have been subjected to the will of the man she is with. A personal example that comes to mind is my grandmother. Her parents moved from Germany to the United States to raise their family and get away from the political unrest that was unfolding there during the time. As she was growing up, her parents were extremely strict on her, and she was forced into being the person that she is today, rather than being guided into that position. When she was just 19 years old, she went on a date with a young man from the marines, and after one thing led to another, my mom became part of the picture that night. At that moment, my grandmother realized how her parents and even society would look at her if she was pregnant without a husband, and with that, she quickly married the marine she had recently met- my grandfather.

Though they are still married to this day, the path up until this point for my grandmother has not been easy by any means. She was in charge of tending to the house, caring for the kids, cooking the meals, and had to get a job in order to keep the money flow somewhat stable. To add upon that, my grandfather is an alcoholic, and was not a loyal husband. My grandmother was never quite sure when to expect him to be home, and I've heard many stories of her preparing really nice meals, spending all day making sure they were perfect, just to find out that he was sleeping with a different woman that night and wouldn't come home. However, even in the face of constant extreme stress, my grandmother persisted. She never quit, and even though society forced her into the position she was in, she pushed through and was successful in the end. When I heard about this, not only did I think that her perseverance was admirable, but I find it

ridiculous that she was put into that in the first place.

The ultimate reason behind a lot of her struggles in life were due to the fact that she became pregnant at a young age. She knew that life would be even more difficult if she hadn't married a man at that point, so she accepted her fate and did what she had to do to protect herself and the child she was bearing. I believe that part of the reason my mom ended up becoming so work-oriented was because she saw what my grandmother had to put up with. She didn't want to be put into a situation where she couldn't make her own decisions and need the help of a man to get her through the various obstacles in life. This one example of many just demonstrates the dynamic changes that are happening in our society. Just 50 years ago, many women were reliant on their husbands to be the provider of their homes. In present times, the situation is starkly different. Women are still fighting for equality, but the fight has shifted from one of control over one's life to being viewed and treated equally as a man. We can see how women are treated differently in various places, such as the media, the workforce, politics, and possibly one of the most influential and reflective of our time- the film industry. Women in the film industry are faced with many problems to this day, and one particular genre that accentuates this is horror film.

The horror film industry, though most likely unconsciously, implores the facets of society that seek to keep women from being treated equally as men. More often than not, the movie will have hyper sexualized women that, because of their feminine qualities, are unsuitable to survive or at least survive by themselves. However, there is a particularly different reappearing female that transcends across many different horror films. This girl is dubbed the infamous "Final Girl" by Carol Clover. This girl's attributes of being virginal, "intelligent, watchful, levelheaded," and an outcast set her apart from the rest of the women in the film (Clover). She doesn't pertain to the feminine qualities that the other girls have, and as a result receives the spotlight. She has the "opportunity" to fight the monster, and eventually, with the help of either someone else, luck, a transition into masculinity, or some combination of those, is able to walk away with her life, unlike many of those that come across the monster. But why is this archetype so common? Why does such a vast array of horror films actively choose to use a woman with a gender recombination to be the survivor? I believe a good place to begin is with how femininity is without a doubt one of the key elements for either death or monstrosity.

There are three movies that I am going to focus on: *The Exorcist*, *The Babadook*, and *Halloween H20*. These movies all have a female lead, and through that, we can see how the role of the “Final Girl” and femininity play throughout each film as a whole. *Halloween H20* is a prime example of how gender and the “Final Girl” interact with one another to create a “hero” that we can root for. In this movie, Laurie Strode is yet again faced with the treacherous task of fighting off her psychotic brother, Michael Myers. However, the situation behind this story is slightly different in the fact that she is now a mother, and she has resorted to alcoholism in order to cope with the trauma of her past. The movie centralizes around how Laurie’s son had just turned 17 years old, and because of this, Michael decides to track him down and kill him. When Laurie figures out that her son is in imminent danger, she instantaneously becomes a fierce protector, much unlike how she acted whenever the same happened to her at that age. In this, “Laurie is faced with and must come to understand her own relationship with the monster who has haunted her life and dreams”.

Laurie intentionally pursues Michael, and with that, embarks on a battle that relies on her wit and perseverance to endure. She isn’t afraid to use phallic weapons and the gaze, and with these tools, she is able to finally put an end to the monster that seems to never perish. The Laurie in this movie is a stark difference from the Laurie we all grew to love in the classic, *Halloween*, however. In the original, Laurie is the embodiment of the Final Girl, whereas in *Halloween H20*, she has lost the status. When Michael is attacking her, she relies on her quick wit and resourcefulness to get her through the fight, but ultimately, it’s just a game of survival for her.

Her attacks against Michael only bring him down for brief moments before he gets up and goes after her again. “Laurie has the chance to kill Michael, but she rejects this opportunity, showing that she has not yet mastered the masculine violence necessary to defeat a psychokiller”. It’s not until Dr. Loomis shows up and shoots Michael that the fight is finally over.

So, what makes Laurie capable of defeating the monster in the *H20* and not the original? In *H20*, Laurie has grown to be a woman full of corruption, losing the purity that so encompassed her when she was a young 17-year-old in the original. She has become dependent on alcohol and lost her virginity, thus stripping her of the feminine qualities that we admire in the Final Girl. Though Laurie must take on masculine qualities in order to fight Michael in the original film, the qualities are on a whole different level in *H20*. Rather than just defending

herself, Laurie becomes willing to attack. She has evolved from the innocence of her young adulthood into a hardened mother, willing to do what is necessary in order to protect those that she loves. This evolution into being a Final Woman, coupled by Laurie's abandonment of femininity, allow her the strength and drive to take action herself, and not to just sit around surviving until someone else can be the hero for her.

The Babadook has an interesting take on horror film. It is about a young mother, Amelia Vanek, who has lost her husband due to a car accident when driving her to the hospital during her labor. Over time she has become exhausted trying to raise her six-year-old son Samuel on her own. One night, Sam asks his mother to read him the pop up storybook, Mister Babadook. The book is about a monster that tortures those who find out about his existence. After they read the book, Sam became convinced of the monster's existence, and Amelia is forced to comfort him many nights in order to help him sleep. Then, the strange things started to happen. Bizarre sounds echo through the house, doors seem to have minds of their own, and glass is found shattered on the floor. Amelia blames Sam for these, but he claims that it is because of the Babadook. Eventually after things escalate, Amelia destroys the book, just to find it reassembled on her door step. Soon after, Amelia becomes possessed by the Babadook, and until her son assembles an elaborate plan to subdue her, she terrorizes the house and kills the dog. When Sam has her tied up in the basement, he lovingly holds her face to which the demon is expelled from her body. Amelia confronts the monster and is able to make it resort to refuge in the basement, because "you can't get rid of the Babadook."

After all this, Sam and Amelia have found peace in their lives, with the subtle addition of the monster living within the basement. Throughout this story, it is apparent that Amelia's status of being a Final Girl isn't very typical. She is a hard-working mother, trying to make ends meet, but when the monster takes over her, she becomes a monster herself through abjection. Abjection in terms of a maternal figure is "where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent" (Creed). This definition encapsulates the essence of this story because the father had died, and the child is struggling to cope with his mother, who after a long struggle, succumbs to the power of the Babadook. This inability to "move beyond trauma" makes Amelia susceptible to being possessed,

and through this monstrous gender recombination, she becomes unable to save herself as a Final Girl (Grafius). This causes a disruption in the Final Girl archetype. Gone is Amelia's femininity-motherly, nurturing characteristics, which has been replaced by a cold, distant, destructive, masculine female.

On the other hand, her son displays the characteristics we typically associate with Final Girls. He is intelligent, virginal, and an outcast among his peers, so he in a way fills the role when Amelia is forced out of it, thus creating a Final Boy. Because of this, Amelia relies on her son to devise a plan to save her, which ultimately exposes her to the femininity of her son's love and compassion, dispels the heathen which resides in her, and causes her to be the Final Woman that we also see in Laurie Strode. This does not go without noting that Sam was not able to fight the monster himself. His feminine characteristics made him unsuitable to take action himself. Amelia then uses the masculinity of her motherly ambition to save her child by defeating the monster, and thus in turn, protects the Final Boy.

We've addressed the Final Girl, Final Woman, Final Boy, motherly abjection, and how they all interrelate, but what happens when the Final Girl is actually a little girl that becomes possessed? The Exorcist is undoubtedly one of the most iconic horror films of all time. In this movie, a young, innocent girl, Regan MacNeil, is possessed by the demon, Pazuzu, after she uses a Ouija Board. After some time, she slowly displays more and more signs that she needs help beyond what a doctor can provide, so she begins to receive an exorcism. When confined to the room, Pazuzu forces the girl to do various awful and bizarre things, such as masturbating, making her head spin in a complete circle, say vile statements, and so many other things.

Through this torturous event, Regan, the Final Girl of the movie, is subjected to gender modifications that portray her as a monstrous female. This movie "while seemingly invested in the spectacle of the rebellious, possessed female body, actually works to preserve the patriarchal order by purging it of the monstrous-feminine" (Olney). This is shown by how the movie others women "by constructing the feminine as an imaginary other that must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order" (Creed). This process includes a "graphic association of the monstrous with the feminine body," making possession a "rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh," which is resolved through a "ritual of purification"

(Creed). Through this, it is apparent that the movie characterizes the possession of the little girl as a catalyst of the underlying desires that females have, and with that, the female is seen as needing to be fixed and purified into the natural feminine course of things. This ultimately demonstrates that the patriarchal status quo dominates our culture, and in effect, causes us to relate a relinquishment from our conception of femininity in a female as a horrid, monstrous act. In the end, Regan relies on the masculine priest to expel the demon that causes the “horrific” changes within her, and when she is returned back to her normal self, she is also reintroduced back to the feminine qualities that she once had, and as a result, is freed from being a monster.

All these stories demonstrate how a Final Girl is the lucky survivor of the film, but also displays the sheer inability for femininity to do anything remarkable. Regan MacNeil shows that when her femininity was tampered with she became a monster, and the only thing that could stop that monster was a masculine character, which in the end, restored her to her feminine state. Laurie Strode and Amelia Vanek both had been originally feminine Final Girls, but once they were exposed to the power of masculine traits that a mother can have when she stops at nothing to save her child, they each became a dynamically different character. Both had a regained sense of strength and determination to actually combat the monster, and as a result get to be the hero that saves the day, all because they embraced the masculinity of a Final Woman.

Though substantial progress has been made in the way for feminism, there is very clearly a long way to go before we can firmly say that women and men are treated equally. Horror films reflect the ideals of our culture and demonstrate that we as a society believe that femininity is innately inferior, and that the only way to combat and solve the problems that we face is to be masculine. Until we resolve this plaguing belief, the perpetuation of sexism towards women will transcend the test of time, and the gender binary will always be weighted to favor masculinity.