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**Gendered Orientations around Domestic Objects; A Study of *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life***

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**Abstract**

When Daniel Miller asked ‘Why some things matter?’, it became critical to question why they matter differently for various genders. This paper is an attempt to analyze how ‘orientations’ around objects play out differently for the female gender in Sarah Pink’s (2004) *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic and Everyday Life*. The domestic space of research informants in England and Spain is taken up to explore not only how orientations are different for the female genders, but how they also go on to reinforce gender roles. Thus works of foundational thing theorists like Bill Brown, Bruno Latour and Daniel Miller’s ideas of subject-object relations are critiqued and revealed to be inadequate until gender is factored in. Additionally, the paper also reveals how bodies then purposely attempt to break out of gender roles by molding their subject-object relations. Ultimately, things end up shaping our mind more than we can fathom.

**Keywords:** cultural studies, thing theory, object-oriented ontology, feminist studies, ethnography

Things have caught our attention ever since Bill Brown directed our gaze to the clean and dirty window and called one an object and the latter a thing. The functional window causes us to look *through* it rather than *at* it. No matter what the process, the thing has perplexed us, caused us to wonder upon its story, and forced us out of our self-obsession as the only subjective beings. But as Brown (2001) says, perhaps this story is no more than the “subject-object relations” that things form during their existence (p. 4). In that case a window may be a source of light in a dark room, or a spying tool for a curious family member. This paper seeks to add another factor to the “subject-object relation” – gender.

The question is not what the window is rather *who* is looking through it. Accessibility of and orientation towards the window are key to this study. This is something that is lacking in the analysis by foundational thing theorists. This paper seeks to critique thing theories of Bill Brown, Daniel Miller and Bruno Latour and modify them according to the revelations provided by Sara Ahmed’s theory of ‘Orientation’ towards Objects and how they vary for the female gender. My purpose is to expose the lack of intersectionality in such foundational works of object phenomenology and for this I will take up the case of the domestic space through Sarah Pink’s (2004) meticulous research of homes and everyday routine in her book *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*. In this study of homes, she investigates how men and women maintain the cleanliness and décor of their homes in England and Spain. Each case study is unique with varying age groups, family size and job occupations. Thus this paper aims to critique the ideas of things given by Brown, Miller and Latour by applying them onto Pink’s research informants and exposing that these ideas are unfit for the orientation that women have towards objects. This will reveal further how gender is reinforced performatively by the everyday orientation towards objects in the home.

When Bill Brown (2001) questions why some things are noticed and not others, he realizes that there is a “discourse of objectivity” (p. 4) at play. There are ‘codes’ which direct

our attention towards some objects and push others into the background (p. 4). But in undertaking any task what we push towards the background is also equally part of the task at hand. Sara Ahmed (2006) brings to light a particular passage in Husserl's (2012) *Ideas* wherein he is talking about the very act of writing on the table:

In perception properly so-called, as an explicit awareness (*Gewahren*), I am turned towards the object, to the paper, for instance, I apprehend it as being this here and now. The apprehension is a singling out, every perceived object having a background in experience. Around and about the paper lie books, pencils, ink-well, and so forth, and these in a certain sense are also "perceived", perceptually there, in the "field of intuition." (p. 25)

Ahmed (2006) elaborates on the writing table, and imagines that to write on it, must mean that Husserl must orient himself towards the table. He must face it directly with his body and this specific nature of his orientation might also tell others about his profession. However in order for this task to be performed, the 'background' is most important. The kids playing in the yard have been taken care of by their mother, the family has been fed and the desk cleared. "Being orientated toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend *on the work done to keep the desk clear*" (p. 30).

It is in these acts of orienting towards some objects and not towards others that Ahmed (2006) points out gender roles are also constructed. Brown (2001) claims that a breakdown in the 'circuit of production' of an object causes it to become a Thing for us, screams for our attention, like a drill breaking or car stopping (Brown, 2001, p. 4). For women like Adrienne Rich who strive to sit at the writing table but are forcibly pulled away by their children, it is not that the table has stopped functioning, but rather the orientation of some objects are stronger than others for the female gender (Ahmed, 2006).

I believe that some of the Spanish and British informants in Sara Pink's (2004) study of homes are aware of this subconsciously and thus set out to destroy the existing notions of gender roles by changing their orientations around objects in their home.

Recent work in anthropology and cultural studies has emphasized the relationship between agency and practice, seeing both rituals and everyday performances as not simply 'replication of a given script' but as 'techniques and technologies of the self/selves' that construct realities and constitute gendered identities. (Pink, 2004, p. 42)

It is there then that Angela from Pink's (2004) research becomes relevant as she keeps housework secondary even as she works from home thrice a week. If any relative happens to stop by and question the untidiness she simply retorts that she cannot because she has to work. Thus Brown's (2001) question of how does an effort to rethink things becomes an effort to reinstitute society is thoroughly answered through Angela's endeavor to keep the housework in the background and her official work primary.

One should nevertheless consider on the other hand that striving to break away from stereotypical roles also depends upon the beholder of the action and not just the expression of the doer. (Pink, 2004) Here Cornelius Castoriadis' 'index of reality' becomes important which is essentially one image that has been stabilized as the norm and is hard to deconstruct (Brown 8). For example, the act of washing dishes might seem most mundane and monotonous every time it is carried out to the onlooker. But on further probing, Rosta finds that the act can be both part of a larger emotional narrative and a silent reorientation towards creating or destroying some discourse. Pink (2004) also finds in her informants that they changed their ritualized acts of washing dishes when they were undergoing some important life changes like moving out of parents home or getting a new job. These life changes reflected in their varied methods, care or frequency of washing up. But perhaps the most vivid instance that struck me most out of her informants was of a female who after the Christmas dinner got so fed up of the greasy baking dish that she threw it out into the yard for two days. She brought it back inside on the third day and proceeded to wash it with boiling water.

While Pink (2004) elaborates on the sensory experience of the boiling water as part of a larger emotional narrative, I would like to draw upon the instance in light of the thing theorists' studies. While Miller (1998) asks "why some things matter" it can be questioned that why they matter differently for men and women. (p. 3) I can safely say what Latour (2004) calls a 'matter fact' is applicable to the baking dish for the family at the Christmas dinner and which remains a great 'matter of concern' for the housewife even three days later. (p. 235) The intricacies of such an encounter become even clearer when Ahmed brings in orientation: Clearly, action depends on the object being near enough: "I see it only if it is within the radius of my action". At the same time, while objects have to be near enough to complete specific actions, such actions are what bring objects near to me. So, you can only write on the writing table if the table is within reach, but the reachability of the table might be an effect of what you already do for a living. It exists for you insofar as it is near. In other words, the nearness of certain objects is an effect of the work the body does, and the work the body does is what makes certain objects near". (Ahmed, 2006, p. 53)

Thus one can wonder upon how the female body registers the nearness of the baking dish even as it sits outside the house for two days. It touches upon her mind and leaves its impression there, while bodies that are not part of the discourse of housework do not register its nearness even on the dinner table.

But of course, as Castoriadis asserts each object has a specific image of representation inscribed to it and this varies from culture to culture. Pilar, another informant of Pink, finds English houses not tidy and clean in the same way that they are in Spain. Through this, we are informed that bodies even of the same gender will react differently due to their conditioning in different cultures. Their orientations towards objects will vary and then so does the body itself. Kirby (1997) attests to this fact with the example of Thaipusam festival in which long metal prongs and spikes are inserted in to various parts of the body and does not result in any of the lethal effects that would occur in a 'normal' body. But it is most interesting to note the case of Evelyn Glennie who has been deaf since the age of twelve and yet is a talented soloist percussionist in classical music. She claims to 'hear' notes through her jaw, in parts of her face and her feet and so forth. (Kirby, 1997)

What I mean to demonstrate by this slight digression is another point about the orientation of bodies towards things; things we aim for are what we perceive, we have come to perceive them because it is that which we seek to be. (Ahmed, 2006) Glennie can hear notes through her skin because she *seeks* the musical notes of the instrument she perceives and *aims* to become a percussionist. We can apply this to case of purposeful aiming for the breaking away from housewifely narratives in the case of Pink's (2004) informants also.

Jenny is in her thirties and a university lecturer who lives alone. Her idea of doing housework was to maintaining housework rather than doing a thorough cleaning every day. (Pink, 2006) She would prefer to do a 'purge' every few months and enjoy it almost like therapy. Undoubtedly in this scenario, she purposely makes the objects serve *her* rather than being enslaved by them. As a result, taking cue from Ahmed (2006) and Kirby's (1997) ideas, bodies can achieve the goal of shattering societal values by orienting towards or away from them. Gender roles can be challenged within the limited domestic space itself. Likewise, this applies to male informants like Malcolm.

Malcolm had built his home from scratch and with a limited budget. (Pink, 2004) His idea of living well and comfortably did not limit itself to solely the housework and décor. Eating well and maintaining a healthy lifestyle were part of his home-making project. He compared his idea of cleanliness with his mother and concluded that they will never see eye to eye on the matter. He would spend a week cleaning the kitchen before her arrival and she would still call it filthy. Even after she was done cleaning it for three hours straight, Malcolm did not find it looking much different. His idea of an immaculate floor did not involve just the visual but also the tactile elements. In this way, Pink explains that he departs not only from the

traditional narrative of housework and house décor segregation between men and women but also from typical definitions of what ‘clean’ actually is. This finding is also in line with the Castoriadis’ conclusion of one monolithic image of things that differs for people and is hard to break for either of them, be it mother and son.

Furthermore, he found that the act of doing housework before conducting work calls from home actually put him in an ‘ordered frame of mind’ and ready to face the rest of the day. I would like to bring to attention the housework which is liberating to Malcolm but deliberately set aside by Jenny to avoid becoming another caricature of a homely woman. Thus both in an effort to change the discourses around home and its relation to gender are making conscious efforts to reorient themselves around the house. The use of their domestic space and objects becomes their agency in redefining masculinity or femininity.

On the other hand, are the tables turned when Latour (2004) says “They too act, they too do things, they too *make you do* things”? (p. 242) Objects are never as simple as our projections on them. It is difficult in the end to decode whether humans are slave to things or vice versa. But for the purposes of anthropological enquiry into things, Pink (2004) agrees that some categories are needed and one such useful category to compare across vastly variant cultures and locations of homes for her is gender. Miller also demonstrates the problems of categorizing the world of things with sub-disciplines which will greatly limit the scope of research and therefore the results. Chevalier would never have been able to grasp the resemblance between the English garden and French kitchens and their dedication to the transformation of natural forms had he limited himself to the discipline of Horticulture or Culinary Sciences alone. (Miller, 1998)

Even so, as Pink (2004) looks in to the gender relations to objects in the domestic space and how they provide agency and oppression to the bodies that surround them, one is forced to ask does these silent acts of reshaping the gender norms actually cause a crack in the monumental traditional gender discourses? Julie Seymour finds that even as women might create a disruption in the housewifely narrative by doing things differently in the home, it is unlikely that the overarching patriarchal structure of division of labor will be affected. I believe that this strongly depends upon the rigid orientation of objects and the even more stringent gaze of the beholder. To apply this back to Angela’s case, she may be avoiding the housework in order to make a point about the priorities of her career, but this does not automatically entail that more housework is assigned to her husband in the same act. This is because as many surveys indicate, other factors like class also play a major role. Women of the lower class may be participating more in the workforce but were then likely to be pulling a ‘double shift’ of housework and job duties, as the traditional gender roles remained rigid in that domain.

On a more optimistic note however, Cohen and Rapport argue that it is the individual agency and consciousness that molds culture and society and thus even small acts in the home can become large acts of dismantling the monolithic stereotypes surrounding gender. (Pink, 2004) With this in mind, I would like to recall the examples given by Brown (2001) regarding the movements like constructivist materialism and surrealism that were ‘on the track of things’ and their social lives (p. 10). In their purposeful liberation from housework and chiseling their own narrative of gender, or even their continued wrestling with the objects of the domestic work, are women then more ‘on the track of things’? Brown also asks if thingness and thinking are two sides of the same coin (p. 16). I can argue that in the case of the woman this is exactly the case, since she is consciously *thinking* about how to battle the overpowering traditional housework segregation and its *thingness*.

I found a final resolve to the muddle between thinking and thingness, the over-looming question of whether things *make us* do things or they are only the means to an ends to achieving agency, in the Actor-Network Theory. Here Latour (2005) has elaborated on the sociologists’ predicament of the local interaction always leading the researcher away from the site away to the global in search of ‘context’. For instance, the local interactions of the home in Pink’s study will always lead the reader to the wider forces outside the home that cause them to *act* in the

way they do. Later Latour (2005) finds the researcher always ends up coming back to the local when he/she cannot discern the ‘structural features’ of society that cause the acts in the local. This ‘micro- macro’ quandary, he believes can be solved through the Actor-Network theory (p. 169). When applied to the context of Pink’s venture in to the local space of home, it would mean considering all, both living and non-living beings, male and female and others, both inside and outside the home as *actors*. It would mean not settling on any space between local or global, on the actor or the network, but to consider them both simultaneously and to take seriously the quandary itself. In turn, the sociologist who is not able to discern whether gender is imposed on things or vice versa does not display a weakness, but rather makes a very important point according to ANT; these sites and questions are “the shadow image of some entirely different phenomena” (Latour, 2005, p. 171).

In conclusion, when I applied thing theories on Pink’s (2004) work, I was able to locate the agency that people exercise in homes as they consciously and subconsciously orient around objects. Even as they were a small drop in the ocean, in the ANT one finds that the homely acts of disruptions in discourse lead to a ripple of waves in the network of the societal scene. In addition, the theories put forward by Brown (2001), Latour (2004) and Miller (1998) also need considering of how objects matter and do not matter for different genders, classes and further divisions. What may be a matter of fact for one gender may be a huge matter of concern for the other, and this is precisely how objects form their orientations. The background actors supporting Husserl’s writing and writing table must be brought to the forefront, once and for all.

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