

Women's Objectification: Gender Inequality in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

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Abstract

This study examines how women are represented as objects in *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee, how women's objectification reflects gender inequality, and what the impacts of women's objectification are. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method and draws on feminist criticism, particularly on the concept of objectification proposed by Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Rae Langton (2009). This study analyzes *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee as the primary source of data, while books and journal articles are used as secondary sources of data to support the analysis. The results of this study show that the objectification of women is experienced by the female characters through seven ways of objectification. This objectification is rooted in gender-based power difference, which makes women treated with less empathy and negatively impacts women's lives, while also maintaining the practice of objectification itself. This study concludes that the objectification of women is not solely individuals' misconduct, but also a manifestation of patriarchal gender relations that place women in subordinate positions as objects for men's purposes.

Keywords: Feminism, gender representation, patriarchy, sexual violence, women's subordination.

INTRODUCTION

When women are objectified, they are valued based on their bodies, physical appearances, and sexuality. Objectification of women happens in everyday social reality through interpersonal interaction, whether by words, gazes, or abusive behavior. Holland et al. (2017) found that young women frequently experience objectification in everyday life, particularly through an objectifying gaze. Meanwhile, in media representations, women are represented as passive visual objects. Women's existence in media representation is nothing more than

bodies exposed and exploited to attract audience attention and gain more financial profit. Ward's (2016) review of media sexualization confirmed that mainstream media frequently portrays women in objectifying ways across different forms of media.

According to Martha Nussbaum (1995), objectification is not about treating a thing as an object, but it involves treating a human being as an object. Based on Nussbaum, there are seven ways of treating a human being as an object, although not all of them have to be present simultaneously: instrumentality (i.e., an individual is treated as a tool to fulfill one's

own purposes); denial of autonomy (i.e., an individual is treated as lacking autonomy and self-determination); inertness (i.e., an individual is treated as lacking agency and passive); fungibility (i.e., an individual is treated as interchangeable with others who can give the same function); violability (i.e., an individual is treated as a thing with a lack of boundaries); ownership (i.e., an individual is treated as something that can be bought and sold); and denial of subjectivity (i.e., an individual is treated as a thing with no feelings and thoughts). In addition to Nussbaum's seven features of objectification, Rae Langton (2009, as cited in Papadaki, 2024) introduced three further ways, including reduction to body (i.e., an individual is treated as nothing more than a body or body part), reduction to appearance (i.e., an individual is treated primarily on how they appear to the senses), and silencing (i.e., an individual is treated as though having no voice).

Objectification of women is frequently associated with the perception of women as sexual objects; thus, it is commonly referred to as sexual objectification. Bartky (1990, as cited in Papadaki, 2024) points out how the perception of women as objects leads to women being valued by their bodies, body parts, or sexual functions rather than by their humanity or achievement. From a feminist perspective, sexual objectification is a form of oppression based on gender that disadvantages women and can contribute to a number of other forms of oppression that women experience. Gervais & Eagan (2017) found that sexual objectification of women is one of the main contributors to the high rates of sexual harassment on college campuses and in the workplace, while also contributing to the continued practice of women's sexual trafficking. Feminist criticism focuses on advancing women's rights, challenging

patriarchal assumptions, and creating a world where women and men are politically, socially, and economically equal (Bressler, 2011). Therefore, feminism challenges the objectification of women in order to achieve gender equality and ensure that women are viewed and treated as full human beings.

Women's objectification is closely linked to unequal power relations between men and women in society. Dworkin (1989) emphasizes that in a patriarchal society, men are the primary subjects of society while women exist as objects for male use. She further argues that in such a society, where women are often treated as sexual property, men perceive themselves as the human center of the world, surrounded by objects for their needs, and affirm their power and dominance. The positioning of men as the center of human experience leads to what Simone de Beauvoir (1949, as cited in Bressler, 2011) describes as women becoming "the Other", a status in patriarchal society that denies women full subjectivity and puts them in a subordinate position. The unequal positioning is not only found in social reality, but it is also frequently represented in literary works. One of the literary works that represents the objectification of women as a manifestation of gender-based unequal power relations in society is Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*.

Pachinko (2017) tells the story of multiple generations of a Korean family from the Japanese colonial period to the late 20th century, from their lives in Korea to their experiences as immigrants in Japan. While the story focuses on Korean experiences, it also includes some Japanese people with their experiences and perspectives. The novel presents women's experiences in patriarchal society by telling stories from the perspectives of female characters in both Korea and Japan.

Korean women, in the novel, are not only experiencing the impact of Japanese colonialism and ethnic discrimination, but also facing objectification. However, Japanese women are also portrayed as experiencing objectification, and this suggests that this form of oppression extends beyond ethnic differences.

Previous studies of *Pachinko* have examined issues of identity, migration, and discrimination. Studies have found that in the novel, migration and intercultural interaction experienced by the Korean diaspora in Japan, lead to an adaptive hybrid identity that bridges Korean and Japanese cultures (Amri & Istiani, 2024; Oh, 2024; Pavithra & Subbulakshmi, 2025; Trihtarani et al., 2019; Vaishnavi & Senguttuvan, 2024). Other studies examined the novel's representation of ethnic discrimination faced by the Korean diaspora in Japan (Stanciu, 2025; Susilawati & Wajiran, 2024). Park (2024) found that Sunja's clothing reflects her emotional struggle to cope with shame and preserve her identity as a Korean living in Japan. Another researcher examined the impact of translation strategies on readers' perceptions of cultural elements (Gaska, 2024). Furthermore, a study by Albait & Hartati (2024) compared *Pachinko* with *Hinomaru* and found the similarities and differences in social, cultural, economic, political, and educational conditions of Korea and Indonesia under Japanese colonial rule.

Several studies have examined women's objectification in novels, films, and songs and found that women are objectified through reduction to body and physical appearance (Arrizqa et al., 2026; Febrianto & Udasmoro, 2024; Sayekti & Fitria, 2023; Zahara & Farlina, 2023). Other studies found objectification of women in beauty advertisements (Jafar et al., 2022), appearance-focused social media interactions (Vendemia & Fox, 2024), and

sexualized online comedy skits (Akalonu & Ha, 2024), where women are reduced to their physical appearance and treated as objects of sexual desire. Moreover, studies on women's experiences of objectification among women from the white working class (Chan et al., 2024), black women (Stanton et al., 2022), and college women (Ertl, et al., 2021) showed that objectification of women happens in various social contexts and has negative impacts on women's well-being.

Although several studies have discussed *Pachinko* from different perspectives, there have been few studies focusing specifically on feminist issues, particularly on the objectification of women. Furthermore, despite the extensive studies on the objectification of women, the representation of Korean and Japanese women as objects in an Asian English-language novel set within specific historical contexts has not yet been examined. Therefore, this study employs feminist criticism, specifically on the concept of objectification proposed by Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009), to analyze how women are represented as objects in *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee, how women's objectification reflects gender inequality, and what the impacts of women's objectification are.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to examine the objectification of women in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*. In a study using a qualitative method, the researcher interprets texts and delivers the results in a form of narration and description rather than numerical data (Ahmadi, 2019). Since the study's object is a literary text, a qualitative method is appropriate, as it emphasizes the

interpretation of literary texts. Moreover, to examine women's experiences of objectification as a form of gender inequality, the analysis is conducted through the lens of feminism, with a particular focus on the concept of objectification proposed by Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Rae Langton (2009).

To answer the research questions, data in qualitative research are collected in the form of words, utterances, or discourse. (Djiwandono & Yulianto, 2023). In this study, the primary data are taken from the novel *Pachinko*, and the secondary data are taken from books and journal articles. The data are collected by carefully and comprehensively reading the novel and taking notes on words, phrases, sentences, monologues, and dialogues relevant to the research objectives. Furthermore, to examine how women are represented as objects in the novel, how the objectification of women reflects gender inequality, and what the consequences caused by the objectification of women, the collected data are then analyzed through the following steps: (1) selecting and reducing the relevant data; (2) classifying the data according to the research objectives; (3) analyzing the data through the lens of feminism with a particular focus on the concept of objectification proposed by Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009); and (4) drawing conclusions based on the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of women as objects in *Pachinko*

Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* portrays women's perspectives and experiences through the stories of its female characters. One of the women's experiences in the novel is objectification by men. When women are

objectified, they are viewed and treated as objects or tools used for men's pleasure. Women are valued for their bodies, body parts, or sexual functions rather than by their humanity or achievement (Bartky, 1990, as cited in Papadaki, 2024). By employing Martha Nussbaum's (1995) seven ways of objectification, further extended by Rae Langton (2009) with three additional ways, this study provides a more detailed analysis of how women are represented as objects in the novel. The ten ways of objectification, based on Nussbaum and Langton, are: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, ownership, violability, denial of subjectivity, reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing. Except for inertness, reduction to appearance, and silencing, the other seven ways of objectification are identified throughout the collected data. However, not all seven ways are present simultaneously in a context. Each quotation context reflects only some of these ways, with the number and combination varying across contexts.

The first context in which women are objectified is when Sunja and Chiyaki are gazed at by the male characters, who focus their gaze on the women's specific body parts (breasts). Sunja, a young Korean woman, is gazed at by a young Japanese man while walking home after shopping, "He was gauging the size of Sunja's breasts." (Lee, 2017, p. 34). Meanwhile, Chiyaki, a Japanese girl, is gazed at by a male customer when working at her grandparents' sock shop, "The man stared exactly (breasts)" (Lee, 2017, p. 276). By intensely gazing at the women's specific body parts, the men treat the women as if they are things that are nothing more than their attractive specific body parts, allowed to be gazed at freely. Thus, women are objectified by men through reduction to body.

Additionally, when men gaze at women's specific body parts to get sexual pleasure, they treat women as tools or instruments for their own sexual pleasure; they objectify women through instrumentality. Since men prioritize how they can get sexual pleasure, they do not care whether women feel uncomfortable by their intense gaze or not. In other words, they objectify women by denying their subjectivity. Overall, the men's behavior of gazing at the women's specific body parts indicates the objectification of women through reduction to body, instrumentality, and denial of subjectivity.

Sunja and Chiyaki are objectified not only when they are gazed at by the male characters, but also when they are subjected to sexual comments. The objectification happens when the young man with his two friends makes sexual comments to Sunja, such as, "The yobo has really big tits."; "Let's take her somewhere and see what's beneath this long skirt" (Lee, 2017, p. 34), and the male customer behaves the same way toward Chiyaki, "Nice (breasts). When can I pick you up tonight?" (Lee, 2017, p. 276). The first way of objectification in this context is reduction to body as the men make sexual comments about the women's specific body parts, which means they treat the women as objects that are nothing more than their attractive specific body parts. The second way of objectification is the denial of subjectivity as men inappropriately make sexual comments to them as if they are objects that can be freely commented on and whose feelings and thoughts do not have to be considered. Since men make sexual comments without considering the women's subjectivity, at the same time, they treat the women as tools for their own purposes, which are to entertain themselves and solicit sexual acts. Therefore, a further way of objectification in this context

is instrumentality. Taken together, when the men make sexual comments to the women, three ways of objectification are involved: reduction to body, denial of subjectivity, and instrumentality.

Objectification through reduction to body and instrumentality also happens when Sunja and Chiyaki experience unwanted sexual touching on their specific body parts. The young men touch Sunja's breasts without her consent, whereas the male customer touches Chiyaki's buttocks without her consent. In this case, they are treated as objects that are nothing more than their bodies and used as tools or instruments for men's sexual satisfaction. Moreover, when the men continue to touch the women, even though they have expressed rejection, it reflects a denial of subjectivity and autonomy. "Afraid, Sunja decided to forget the groceries and start walking, but the boys crowded her and wouldn't let her pass." (Lee, 2017, p. 34). The young men ignore Sunja's fear and her refusal; hence, they deny her subjectivity and autonomy. Likewise, the male customer ignores the fact that Chiyaki feels uncomfortable and refuses to do what the male customer wants: "You can't," "You're too old for me." (Lee, 2017, p. 276). The male customer then continues touching her without her consent, "The man pulled her to him" (Lee, 2017, p. 276). At the same time, what the men do to the women is violating their physical boundaries, which means they objectify the women through violability. Thus, Sunja and Chiyaki's experiences of unwanted sexual touching reflect objectification through reduction to body, instrumentality, denial of subjectivity and autonomy, and violability.

Another context of women's objectification in *Pachinko* is Sunja's experience of sex by deception. Throughout

their relationship, her intimate partner, Hansu, conceals the fact that he is already married. Only after Sunja becomes pregnant does he tell the truth. After knowing that Hansu cannot marry her because he is already married, she decides not to continue the relationship, "I will never see you again" (Lee, 2017, p. 56). In this case, Sunja's consent to become sexually involved with Hansu is determined without knowing anything that would have significantly affected her consent. Thus, she is objectified by Hansu through the denial of autonomy. Her consent to have sexual intercourse is not her genuine consent, as it is not free from deception concerning essential information. According to consent and autonomy theory, lies and deception can violate one's autonomy in the same way that force or threats might (Scheidegger, 2021). At the same time, she is objectified through violability, as Hansu violates her boundary regarding the right to give genuine consent by concealing his marital status. Moreover, Sunja is objectified by Hansu through instrumentality and denial of subjectivity, since Hansu treats her as a tool or instrument to fulfill only his sexual desires, while ignoring how Sunja feels and what she thinks. Taken together, Sunja is objectified by Hansu through the denial of autonomy, violability, instrumentality, and denial of subjectivity.

Just as sex-by-deception reflects objectification through the denial of women's autonomy, so does the sexual exploitation experienced by Jinah and Noriko in prostitution. Sexual exploitation is a practice in which individuals' sexuality is abused to obtain sexual satisfaction, financial benefit, or advancement, while violating their rights to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and psychological well-being (Barry, 1995). As a form of sexual exploitation, prostitution

inherently denies women's autonomy, because their capacity to make genuine decisions about their own selves is restricted by exploitative circumstances. Both of them are involved in prostitution primarily because of economic hardship and the presence of the sex industry, especially Jinah, whose position as a Korean woman in Japan further limits her available opportunities, "The war and the American occupation had toughened her, like the other girls who worked at the bar, and because she was so pretty, she had been with many men." (Lee, 2017, p. 256). Through the exchange of money for sex, their clients disregard their consent as something more important than their satisfaction. Therefore, Jinah and Noriko are objectified by the men through the denial of autonomy.

Moreover, Jinah and Noriko are also objectified through instrumentality, since they are treated solely as tools or instruments for the clients' sexual satisfaction. They are also objectified through ownership and fungibility, since their bodies become commodities that can be bought and sold for sexual purposes, and they are also considered interchangeable with others who can serve the same function in sex work. Additionally, in Noriko's case, she finds herself facing brutal violence by her clients, which left her nose severely damaged. Thus, the brutal violence carried out by her clients reflects objectification through violability, since her client treats her as a thing lacking physical boundaries, so that she is considered as something that can be violated. Her client does not hesitate to physically abuse her simply because he finds her bothersome, "He hit her again and again, banging her head against the side lamp of the car until she stopped making any noise" (Lee, 2017, p. 381). Since both Jinah and Noriko are treated as mere instruments of male sexual satisfaction,

the violability inflicted upon Noriko suggests that Jinah remains equally vulnerable to the same treatment. Overall, Jinah and Noriko are objectified by the men through the denial of autonomy, instrumentality, ownership, fungibility, and violability.

Women's objectification and gender inequality

In the novel, women experience objectification because they are treated as things by men to fulfill men's sexual satisfaction, including through reduction to body, instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, denial of autonomy, violability, ownership, and fungibility. However, the objectification of women is closely linked to gender inequality because it is rooted in gender-based power differences in which males are the dominant subjects or the center of human experiences, while women are positioned as "the Other" or subordinate. As Bender (1989) explains, "Gender difference does not cause gender inequality; gender inequality is gender difference translated into hierarchical power relations in which one gender (male) is privileged" (p. 949). Beauvoir (1949, as cited in Papadaki, 2024) further explains that the perception of women as objects or "others" in patriarchal society is constructed through male domination in defining women's nature and experiences. Consequently, gender inequality embedded in a society where men are put in the dominant position leads to an objectifying attitude and treatment toward women.

How gender inequality is embedded in a society and leads to the objectification of women is reflected in the context of Sunja's and Chiyaki's experiences of sexual harassment as a form of women's objectification. According to UN Women (2018), the widespread nature of sexual

harassment, along with the fact that perpetrators rarely face consequences, reveals structural and systemic issues where men's dominance is perpetuated by social, economic, and political structures. When sexual harassment is experienced by both Sunja, a Korean woman, and Chiyaki, a Japanese woman, it shows that sexual harassment is not only a matter of individual misconduct, but also a manifestation of gender inequality in a society. This manifestation of gender inequality is demonstrated when a man warns Sunja, "Listen, you have to be careful not to travel alone or ever be out at night...they're looking for girls now" (Lee, 2017, p. 36), and the male customer, in Chiyaki's case, faces no punitive consequences, although a police officer who handles her case knows that the male customer "is a creep who often bothers the younger girls who work here" (Lee, 2017, p. 277). The two statements suggest that it is women who have to restrict their own mobility to protect themselves, while men rarely face punishment. Thus, as long as such gender inequality is maintained, women will remain at risk of experiencing sexual harassment as a form of objectification.

A further instance of gender inequality embedded in society, which leads to the objectification of women, is found in the way Hansu objectifies Sunja. Hansu's behavior is a manifestation of a double standard in patriarchal society that enables men to get their sexual needs outside marriage, while imposing greater social consequences on women. The double standard is reflected in Hansu's belief that men are not designed to have sex with only one woman. This belief is supported by Hansu's social surroundings rather than being just his opinion. The fact that Hansu's father-in-law "had said nothing about the other women" (Lee, 2017, p. 388)

indicates that his behavior is tolerated. Such tolerance reflects a patriarchal norm in which men, due to their higher social status in patriarchal society, have been given greater freedom to satisfy their sexual needs outside of legal marriage (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). In contrast, the woman involved in an extramarital relationship, Sunja, faces severe social consequences. She will be considered as “a common slut who would be disgraced forever,” while her child would be labeled “another no-name bastard” and even her mother's boardinghouse would be “contaminated by her shame” (Lee, 2017, p. 56). As a result, if the double standard is perpetuated, society will continue to tolerate men's behavior that objectifies women, while women are left to bear the social consequences.

Jinah's and Noriko's experiences in prostitution also provide an example of gender inequality leading to the objectification of women. Since Jinah and Noriko are involved in prostitution because of economic hardship, and prostitution becomes their only available source of income for them, it shows that their options in life are restricted by their conditions rather than because they make truly autonomous decisions. In this case, their consent to prostitution becomes illusory because it is given in the context of a lack of survival options. MacKinnon (2020) found that one of the main forms of inequality experienced by women worldwide is the exchange of sex for survival. Moreover, the manifestation of gender inequality is shown in how exploitative circumstances are sustained in a patriarchal society. The fact that Jinah and Noriko become involved in prostitution cannot be separated from the existence of the sex industry, which creates a space where women can be sexually exploited. According

to MacKinnon (2011), in a society that is characterized by gender inequality, women's involvement in prostitution is accepted, and men are positioned as those who buy and sell women for sex. Overall, the core of such inequality is that the system prioritizes male demand while systematically ignoring women's autonomy, dignity, and freedom, thereby maintaining the objectification of women.

The impacts of women's objectification

The objectification of women reflects gender inequality because patriarchal society, which places men in a dominant position while women are placed in a subordinate one, normalizes and maintains the objectification of women. The widespread nature of sexual harassment as a form of objectification indicates that it is not merely individual misconduct, but rather part of the social structure that supports male dominance over women. This inequality is further reinforced by the acceptance of double standards about extramarital relationships and the normalization of prostitution within patriarchal society, both of which legitimize the treatment of women as objects for men's purposes. Because women are treated as objects in a society characterized by gender inequality, they face consequences that negatively affect their lives.

According to Galdi & Guizzo (2021), when women are regarded as objects, their humanity is disregarded, leading to a lack of empathy toward them. In other words, the perceptions of women as objects make women receive less empathy. This consequence is reflected in Sunja's experience, in which the young men do not hesitate to further sexually harass her. The fact that the men know Sunja is “unable to keep crying” (Lee, 2017, p. 33) indicates that

they lack any empathy for her fear and suffering. After the men finally left, "Sunja began to cry" again (Lee, 2017, p. 35), which suggests that the objectification left a lasting emotional impact that extended beyond the incident itself. Noriko also experiences the same consequence of being objectified. In prostitution, her own body functions as a commodity exchanged for money; she is treated as a tool that does not deserve empathy. As a result, she faces physical violence from her client that left her nose severely injured, "even after the surgeons did their work, the girl's nose would never look the same again." (Lee, 2017, p. 382). This injury leads her to a work that is far more vulnerable than her previous work in prostitution, as Noriko is sent by her boss to work serving men at a bathhouse that is physically harmful due to frequent exposure to high temperatures. Her body, as Lee states, "last(s) half a dozen years at most in the hot water" (Lee, 2017, p. 382). To sum up, objectification makes women treated with less empathy and results in negative impacts on their lives.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that *Pachinko* represents the objectification of women across various contexts, including sexual harassment through body gaze and sexual comments, sex-by-deception, and sexual exploitation in prostitution. Through the experiences of female characters, women are represented as being objectified by men through reduction to body, instrumentality, denial of autonomy, ownership, fungibility, violability, and denial of subjectivity. The representation of women as objects in the novel indicates that objectification can be experienced by women regardless of their ethnicity, perpetrated by both intimate

partners and men other than intimate partners, and manifested in various forms across different contexts.

Furthermore, the study found that the objectification of women is closely linked to gender inequality, in which men occupy a dominant position, and women are in a subordinate position. Therefore, objectification should be understood not only as individual misconduct committed by particular men. Such objectification should also be interpreted as a manifestation of patriarchal gender relations that define women as the "Other," impose social meaning upon women as sexual objects for men's sexual pleasure, and eventually perpetuate male domination and control over women. As a consequence, women face negative consequences for their lives as they are treated with less empathy. At the same time, the continual imposition of women as sexual objects in a society maintains and normalizes objectification; the objectification of women will persist as long as society continues to maintain patriarchal gender relations.

This study promotes awareness of gender inequality and encourages respect for women's autonomy and subjectivity. Nevertheless, this study is limited to the analysis of a single literary work and to the application of feminist approaches to literary criticism. Thus, future research may conduct comparative studies between Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* and other literary works across different authors or historical settings to examine similarities and differences in the representation of women's objectification. Moreover, interdisciplinary research that integrates psychological perspectives may further examine the representation of women's objectification in the novel, particularly on the concept of self-objectification.

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