

“Fishing for male privilege. How is fishing perceived to be inherently masculine?”

To catch a fish in this day and age, is to partake in a activity, which has existed since the beginning of man. Passed down from generation to generation, fishing is a sport that over many years has evolved into many shapes and forms. Through these adaptations and technological developments, the risk involved in fishing has become somewhat marginal. However through these changes fishing still manages to maintain and endorse a hegemonic masculine ideology.

To be a ‘fishermen’ the two most important elements are fish and water. Without these two elements fishing simply does not exist. It’s for this reason that when looking at fishing there has to be consideration into the symbolism and motifs embedded in the activity. Appearing in the ocean almost half a billion years ago, fish were the worlds first vertebrate. Over many years the fish has developed, in different cultures and religions, a rich array of meaning (Martin, 2010). The fish is known to represent fertility, life, death and is generally seen as conducive to success. It also has links to the mother goddess, the moon, and the inherent waters from which life was born (Bruce-Mitford, 2000). From what a fish is identified with you could be misguided to think that fishing is a sport actually intended for women. However from these associations to the divine feminine, it can be seen as an underlying attractant to the heterosexual male. To be surrounded by nothing but Mother Nature and its natural beauty.

There is a perceived intimate relationship between man and nature. It is thought that man is most himself (or masculine) when he is one with nature, but in order to fill the male ego man is often hieratically portrayed above nature (Easthope, 1992). To catch fish as a source of food, in a materialistic world plays on the idea that man can still tackle a natural environment head on, and survive. As fishing is often associated with the notion of rural masculinity, there is very much a play on ‘man vs wild’. This emphasises that the setting of where one may find themselves fishing is just as important as the masculine nature of fishing it self (Bull, 2009). This idea is reinforced in media portrayals and general social constructs of society. The rural masculine is often the way in which society portrays the ‘hegemonic masculine’, hence why it dictates and defines what is and is not masculine in the urban (Stenbacka, 2011).

Fish as food, or surviving off your own back is one of the central motivations behind going fishing. Another objective of the ‘fishermen’ is to catch fish as trophies. This motivation is far more complex than that of catching fish as food. It plays on a macho ideology and encapsulates man’s competitive nature to strive to do better than that of his fellow man. The trophy or token could include a physical copy of the catch mounted on the wall; a precondition being that the fish must die. Another form of trophy is a simple photograph; this allows the viewer to distinguish the fish/s in relation to size, quantity and weight, the death in this instance being optional. These forms of trophies identify when the stories are narrated and potentially dramatized in much more socially masculine environments such as pubs or sheds that they are in fact true (Bull, 2009). If you were to fish in a populated urban environment, where people often walk right past you as you fish, you are then somewhat safeguarded from the potential risks. This in turn doesn’t allow for as much, if any dramatization in terms of the risk factor.

Like many other natural productions of nature, fish are often seen as a commodity for trade or money. Around the world people take to the sea or inland water systems in order to make a living. The article “No place for Wimps: Working on Western Australian Trawlers” by Leonie Stella identifies a clear lack of female presence on fishing trawlers out of Carnavon, a small coastal town adjacent to Shark Bay, Western Australia. Stella notes that one of the latent reasons why this is the case is the perceived arduous nature of the work. It is physically and mentally demanding with crews of fishermen having to spend weeks on end out at sea. Rather than shy away from the harsh working environment, the fishermen fetishize on this perceived hegemonic masculine ideal, emphasizing the perilous nature of the work and having to live an isolated lifestyle. In many facets of society women get equal recognition, as they can potentially supply the same if not a better output than men. However in the fishing industry, because of the exaggeratedly masculine culture that it endorses, women are yet to be seen as equals (Stella, 1996).

Man’s dictatorship over the natural, is evident throughout history as flora and fauna have become endangered and then extinct. Years of over fishing in many recreational and commercial fisheries across the globe have resulted in a growing ratio of fishermen to fish (Greene, 2002; Minnegal & Dwyer, 2008; Munk-Madsen, 2000). In Newfoundland a number of regulation changes and privatizations were put in place to counteract the declining population of fish in the area. Many believe this would then have adverse affects on the men of the region, and that preserving the fish population would come at the cost of the men’s masculinity. The changes meant that many fishermen would no longer be able to partake in an activity, which was thought to be ‘in their blood’. However because the new policies put in place went onto actually solidify business interests, this notion of the men’s masculinity in crisis is dismissed, to the extent that the changes have actually enhanced the overall areas masculinity, as it reinforces a history of male privilege (Power, 2005).

‘There’s a magic in water that draws all men away from the land, leads them over the hill’s, down creeks, and streams, and rivers to the sea. Where each man, as in a mirror, finds himself.’ - Huston, 1956, Opening Scene

Fishing in the oceans abyss, thousands of kilometres from land. Men are instinctively faced with challenges, these challenges force them to question their moral compass of what is right, and what is wrong. The 1956 film ‘Moby Dick’ narrates Captain Ahab’s hell-bent journey to catch a gigantic white wale. The story is initially set in a whaling community that is portrayed as heavily masculine, a theme that’s then concurrent through the entire film. The men set out on a boat initially to hunt wales, however the shipmen become fixated on captain Ahab’s ultimatum, to hunt a whale that once robbed him of his leg (Huston, 1956). The shipmen battle treacherous conditions to eventually come face to face with ‘the beast’ however unlike your stereotypical Hollywood film, where the masculine male deity overcomes adversity to become a hero of sorts (Rosenblatt, 1990). The film ends somewhat anti-climactic with the wale killing all the shipmen bar one, Ishmael who lives to narrate the story. The story is constructive in capturing why men go fishing, as a means of finding their inner selves. In the film for many, this search to find one selves masculinity is diminished, potentially alluding to women’s social uprising in society at the time (1956) (Schillace, 2012).

To catch fish there are many tools or instruments one may use. One of the most prolific and identifiable tools is the fishing rod. The ‘rod’ is defined somewhat by it’s engineering requirements, to bear a load. Although when the rod and other products are manufactured, marketed and actually used they can develop other meanings, than that of their intended purpose. Take for example the electric carving knife, a domestic appliance, which is exempt

from conforming to a female demographic, like many other domestic kitchen appliances. The electric carving knife plays on the traditional idea of men hunting and eventually preparing and cooking their kill. Leading us to often associate the physical 'carving' of the meat as a masculine act in contrast to that of 'slicing' vegetables or other foods, which is commonly associated with the feminine (Sanders, 1996). An interpretation of the fishing rod is that it represents with its quick, slow and fast twitches a suggestive phallic symbol (Carabí & Armengol, 2014) which again, appeals to a male ego and demographic.

It's evident that in commercial and recreational fisheries the vast majority of license holders are male. Nevertheless women still have the capacity and do make a contribution to the industry in a number of different ways. Norway in the late 1980's early 90's experienced an unprecedented decline in cod populations reducing allocations for the cod by up to 55%. This then in turn made the male skippers allocate tasks, to their wives that would usually be for paid male deck hands. One would think that because the females were forced into such a male orientated domain that they would also adopt male mentalities and mannerisms. This wasn't the case, the women would instead promote and endorse the masculinity of their husband/skipper as a means of pronouncing their own femininity. Key factor in why the wives took on such a caring and nurturing role is that their relationship with the 'skip' was bound by love and affection (Munk-Madsen, 2000). This can be identifiable with a clear misconceived ideology engrained in today's society. That in order for men to enjoy fishing, as much as they do, women must provide a parallel or juxtaposition of sorts, to add emphasis to the perceived nature of the activity.

In the western world women are seen as integral parallels in a fishing household's construct. In spite of that in third world countries, men's exclusive, authoritative right to fish is brought to the fore. In poverty stricken African fishing communities, the bulk majority of boat owners are male. The men then go on to sell their catch to women traders who take the fish to markets, a regular occurring procedure instilled into the people of the area. Because many in the area own next to nothing, the women to ensure their supply of fish, a phenomenon has developed recently which is 'fish for sex' (Béné & Merten, 2008; Mojola, 2011). Essentially to cover the cost of the fish women will offer sexual favours. This transactional sex has become normalized which in turn has led to an increase of sexual diseases including HIV in small fishing communities across Africa. The act of fishing is engrained in the psyche of women and men for that matter, to be a gendered economy or a 'man's job. Although it can be physically demanding there's nothing to say that women couldn't, if they owned boats, be fishing (Béné & Merten, 2008). A major flaw, which makes it difficult to change the mentality of the Africans, is the fact that the women simply don't have financial capacity to purchase boats, a necessity in order to catch fish. So the father's boat is passed down to his son and the never-ending cycle repeats.

Although fishing is perceived as inherently masculine, it's far more subjective to identify that this is, and always will be the way in which fishing is received. The activity is embedded with traits and symbols, which are commonly associated with the idealistic image of 'man'. Be that as it may when dissecting the activity, (without taking into consideration this idea of survival against nature, or as catching fish as trophies as a means to fill one's ego) fishing, as much as fishermen may dismiss the notion, has embedded in it beauty, tranquillity and peacefulness. A contrast of sorts with what is commonly associated with the 'masculine'. One would be naïve to think that fishing, a historically male dominated activity will all of a sudden become as appealing to women, as it is to men. However an activity embedded with such divine feminine attributes, it is hard to fathom that fishing's appeal doesn't preside to females as well as men.

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