

WOMEN'S OBJECTIFICATION IN MEDIA THROUGH THE CONTEXT OF ALTHUSSER'S INTERPELLATION IN SARIA WALKER'S DIETLAND

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Abstract

Women's objectification remains a significant issue in current literary studies because of the ongoing reinforcement of gendered beauty standards and consumer-driven ideals across global cultures. Broadly speaking, objectification refers to the treatment of women as mere bodies or parts of bodies, often for visual appeal and male desire. This phenomenon is further explored through the ideological framework outlined by Althusser in his theory of interpellation, which refers to how dominant ideologies "hail" individuals to the extent that they influence their identity and behavior. The study critically examines how media and advertising discourses, supported by capitalist interests, interpellate women into objectified roles and expectations through adapting Althusser's theory as a lens in Saria Walker's *Dietland* (2015). It aims to identify the ideological mechanisms that objectify female characters in *Dietland*, emphasizing the role of media and advertising as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that influence women's consciousness and their behavior regarding self-worth. It also explores how these characters internalize, confront, or resist the objectifying gaze a male-dominated media culture imposes on them. Ultimately, the study concludes that this novel demonstrates how women are interpellated into objectified roles, while also showing how they attempt to reclaim agency through resistance, rebellion, and self-definition. As such, *Dietland* reveals the psychological and social consequences of media-driven objectification and the complex processes through which female characters navigate, resist, and redefine their identities.

Keywords: Althusserian interpellation, ideological state apparatus, women's objectification, media representation, and Saria Walker's *Dietland*.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: ALTHUSSER'S INTERPELLATION AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS

Louis Pierre Althusser (1918–1990) a prominent French Marxist thinker widely recognized for reshaping modern literary and ideological theory. Concerned that Marx's ideas had been misinterpreted over time, Althusser sought to defend and revitalize Marxist traditions against theoretical and political threats (Ferretter, 2006). Drawing on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, he reconceptualized ideology from a Marxist standpoint, arguing that Marx had only initiated a deeper inquiry into its function (Savova, 2019). Within Marxist criticism, ideology is often understood in two key ways: first, as a form of "false consciousness" that obscures reality, and second, as a set of embodied practices that individuals enact daily. This second perspective, emphasized by Althusser, positions ideology not merely as illusion but as a lived material reality that shapes human behavior and sustains the dominant worldview (Venturin, 2013).

However, rethinking the idea of ideology, it was Althusser's contribution that sparked a renewed interest in Marxist theory. In his early work, *For Marx* (2005), he initially described ideology as a "system of representation" (p. 231) governed by specific rules to support political ends. This early view saw ideology as a matter of the unconscious, affecting all social classes, including the dominant class. Later, in his work *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* in 1970, Althusser revised his views, suggesting that ideology is not only unavoidable, but also becomes visible through people's actual practices and daily routine (Lee, 2020). According to Althusser, the primary function of ideology is "to reproduce the social relations of production that are necessary to the material existence of any social formation or any mode of production" (Hall, 1985, p. 98).

The idea of ideology in Althusser's thought suggests that the ruling class sustains its dominance by disseminating its ideas through cultural institutions such as education, media, religion, and the family. Althusser's work built on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony and influenced cultural materialists in recognizing the material basis of cultural practices. Althusser's influential 1970 essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", solidified his reputation. In it, he contends that ideology is central to how individuals perceive reality and how political systems shape subjectivity (Keshavarz & Abjadian, 2011). Althusser, like many Marxists, did not use the term "ideology" in the conventional English sense. Ideology, generally speaking, refers to a deliberate and conscious set of political ideas but for Althusser, ideology has another meaning: "it refers to an unconscious set of beliefs and assumptions, our imaginary relation to real conditions, especially to real conditions that may not match what we imagine" (Parker, 2019, p. 283). According to Althusser, we cannot describe our ideologies since they are unconscious, as we misrecognize the reality around us, leading us to misunderstand what makes us behave the way we do (Parker, 2019).

In his essay, Althusser (1971) claims that "ideology has a material existence" (p. 165), emphasizing that ideas and representations that constitute ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence; instead, they are grounded in material practices and structures. According to Ferreter (2006), Althusser conceptualizes the state apparatus as consisting of two sets of institutions that intersect yet maintain separate functions. The first is the "Repressive State Apparatus" (RSA), which includes institutions such as "the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, and the prisons," which according to Althusser, "functions by violence — at least ultimately" (Althusser, 1971, pp. 142-143). The second is the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA), which includes institutions like education, religion, family, and communication that serve to reproduce state ideology and maintain the existing power structure. As a key component of the communication ISA, the media significantly influences people's consciousness by reinforcing the dominant ideology. Althusser (1971) argues that ISA works by spreading values and ideas in the ruling class's interests, creating social unity and normalizing certain ideologies. Through the media, for instance, the state can manipulate its people easily through the ongoing reproduction of everyday life. For example, any involvement of the state, whether explicit or implicit, in the publication of news or events in newspapers and magazines can manipulate or change society's perception of the news or events, leading to systematic and automatic ideological manipulation over time (Sevgi & Ozgokceler, 2016).

The concept of interpellation is the core of Althusser's theory, which he defines as the process by which ideology transforms individuals into subjects. As he explains, "Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals, or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing" (Althusser, 1971, p. 174). Althusser used the concept of interpellation to explain how the ideological system maintains its continuity. Interpellation, as Backer (2018) clarifies, is "a concrete moment of ideological reproduction" in which individuals "become a subject of that ideology" and follow its principles "without any force compelling them" (p. 2). This idea of "interpellation," which literally means "calling", explains how the ideological system "calls" or "hails" us, much like someone who greets us with "hello!" When we respond to this call, we become subjects of interpellation, just as individuals are subjected to the government or legal authority (Parker, 2019).

This process is central to how individuals are born into and shaped by certain ideologies. Interpellation is not merely an external imposition, but it becomes an essential part of an individual's identity, as ideology itself is what constitutes individuals as subjects. Althusser (1971) asserts, "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects," meaning that "there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects...there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject" (p. 170). Through this perspective, Althusser demonstrates how ideas get into our minds and affect our lives, to the point that cultural ideas are so deeply embedded in our thinking that we mistakenly believe they are ours. In this case, interpellation is a process where we come to encounter our culture's principles and accept them (Septianingish & Wahyuni, 2015).

An example given by Althusser to demonstrate the process of interpellation, in which a person walks on the street, when suddenly a policeman screams, 'Hey, you there! The person responds almost automatically by turning around. This unthinking reaction, as well as the ambiguous way the police officer calls out, exemplifies how external factors place people in certain roles or subject positions (Althusser, 1971). Interpellation, as explained by Althusser (1971), is a process through which individuals are hailed by ideology, shaping them as subjects who unconsciously embrace dominant social norms. He explains, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects," which means that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects; this can be understood as "individuals are more or less subject" (p. 176). This concept is further illustrated through social practices that occur in everyday settings. For example, Kukla (2018) shows how interpellation functions in everyday social practices. For instance, when a teacher calls a student's name during attendance, the student must recognize the hail and respond by raising their hand and calling back "here," allowing them to enact and embody their identity as a student. This process not only acknowledges the teacher's authority but also reinforces the student's social identity through repeated, ritualized interactions.

In media contexts, interpellation works similarly but often intersects with the concept of objectification. Through media and advertisements, individuals do not merely hail into ideological roles; rather, they often construct these roles

around patriarchal traditions. For instance, when an ad in a magazine asks, “Are you starting to worry about wrinkles?” Such a question interpellates women by addressing them immediately, placing them as subjects who should be concerned about their appearance, and understanding that they are the ones the advertisement calls. This either evokes or strengthens their worries about wrinkles or compels them to assert themselves as those who, based on their identity, might be expected to worry about such things (Kukla, 2018). This process aligns with objectification, which feminist scholars such as Nussbaum (1995) and Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) describe as the reduction of individuals, especially women, to their physical attributes or used to serve others’ purposes. Such ads make women pay too much attention to their appearances, reinforcing social expectations and perpetuating the ideology of patriarchy.

As Kukla (2018) notes, ideology has a naturalizing effect that conceals the contingent, historical, and constructed nature of social relations, making them appear as inevitable features of reality. For instance, money has value because we treat it as inherently valuable. However, if society collectively stopped treating it as having value, its value would immediately vanish. This logic similarly applies to advertisements that present predetermined choices, like beauty products or anti-aging creams, as necessities for women, which support consumerism within gendered objectification. This process connects objectification and interpellation, making them work together to keep and reproduce ideological systems. This phenomenon extends to larger ideological systems, such as capitalism and patriarchy, which continue by embedding their norms into the behaviors of those who accept these norms as natural realities, although they are consciously aware of their constructed nature.

Building on this, Parker (2019) emphasizes an individual’s interpellation by consumerism, providing an example of an advertisement for a new product that prompts us to consider which new phone, game, shoes, or flavor of ice cream we desire, giving the illusion that we are making our own decisions and expressing our individuality. However, this process reveals how people are interpellated or hailed into accepting the ideological assumption driving consumer culture. In fact, we do not respond by saying, “Wait, I do not want a phone or a new game, shoes, etc.” Furthermore, we do not say that the system that deceives us into believing we need such products results in an economic system that divides wealth and political authority unfairly and oppressively. By unconsciously accepting these premises, individuals fail to challenge the larger structural injustices perpetuated by such practices.

The ideology of consumerism operates by presenting predetermined options as expressions of individuality, thereby concealing conformity and passive submission to the dominant economic system. Occasionally, individuals may achieve enough distance to recognize moments of interpellation; for instance, when a flashing neon sign or an ad on Facebook or TV prompts us to think that we need a new video or ice cream. At such moments, ideology congeals, a term Althusser uses to describe how ideology becomes visibly solid or palpable, revealing the otherwise hidden mechanisms of interpellation (Parker, 2020). These examples illustrate Althusserian interpellation, which explains how people are unconsciously obliged to accept and reproduce dominant ideologies. Interpellation influences identities and behaviors, whether in consumerism, educational, and personal contexts, reinforcing the ideological system that normalizes and sustains authority.

As a primary vehicle for disseminating ideas, the media has become one of the most influential tools in shaping how women perceive themselves and how society expects them to conform to certain beauty ideals and gender roles. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how media representations objectify women and how this objectification is reproduced ideologically within the framework of Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Specifically, this research focuses explicitly on Sarai Walker’s *Dietland* to investigate how media functions as an Ideological State Apparatus that imposes dominant ideals of beauty, thinness, and femininity. The current study tries to explore what objectification means in the context of contemporary media culture, how media and advertisements contribute to the objectification of women, and in what ways the female characters in the selected text internalize and respond to the media-driven ideologies of beauty standards. Additionally, the study contributes to the field of literature by introducing an ideological and theoretical analysis of *Dietland*, making the novel not only a personal transformation but also a form of resistance to dominant cultural norms. It enriches literary research by employing Marxist and Althusser’s perspectives in the analysis of contemporary feminist literature, thereby deepening our understanding of how the novel interacts with the ideological forces that shape gender identity and subjugate women within a dominant media discourse.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative literary analysis to examine the objectification of women in media and advertisements as represented in Walker’s *Dietland*. Using close reading and thematic interpretation, the study focuses on how the novel portrays female characters as subjects of media and advertising ideologies. The data collected in this study consists of selected quotations, events, and other literary elements that highlight how women are objectified. The analysis is done through Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology and interpellation, which explains how ideology “hails” individuals into predetermined social roles. In this context, the media and advertisements act as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that reinforce capitalist and patriarchal expectations, promoting conformity, commodification, and the objectification of the female body. The novel is carefully selected for its explicit criticism

of these ideological structures, and the analysis explores how female characters are interpellated into objectified roles. All formatting, citations, and references follow the APA (7th edition) style.

1.3 Hailed into Objectification: Althusser's Interpellation in *Dietland*

Sarai Walker was raised in California and Utah. She completed her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Bennington College in 2002 and later obtained a Ph.D. in English from the University of London. *Dietland*, her debut novel, was published in 2015 and adapted into a television series in 2018; in addition to her fiction writing, Walker has written several essays and articles and has held teaching positions in literature and writing at various academic institutions (Handayani, 2018). Walker grew up in a culture that idealizes thinness in the United States, which influences her idea of body image, where she said, in an interview with HuffPost media, that she was once a dieter who believed her life would only begin after achieving thinness. The idea of writing *Dietland* came to her mind in 1999 after watching the movie *Fight Club*, which is based on the 1996 novel by Chuck Palahniuk (Rahma, 2022). Walker states that the movie evoked a powerful reaction in her, as she connected with its anger, defiance, and rebellious energy, admiring how it has tackled political issues, especially those concerning gender. Although the film primarily focuses on men, gender remains a central theme. After watching it, she decided to write similar work for women (NPR Staff, 2015). Walker initially explored the idea of the novel in a short story about an overweight woman working for a teen magazine, drawing from her personal experience as a former writer for a teen magazine; later, this story evolved into *Dietland*.

Dietland is a novel that criticizes multitudes of issues faced by women, including social beauty standards, consumerism, objectification, and patriarchy. It presents different perspectives on how women adhere to socially constructed beauty standards, leading to self-objectification and low self-esteem. A feminist bildungsroman novel traces Plum Kettle's journey of self-discovery and empowerment, where Plum undergoes psychological and moral growth throughout the novel, making it a coming-of-age story. Plum's journey in *Dietland* shows her internalization of the ideology promoted by the media and advertisements, where they function as ideological state apparatuses. From the novel's beginning, Plum views herself as inadequate, believing she must be thin to be complete. This internal struggle and desire for change are further exacerbated when Plum encounters the diet advertisements on TV. This perception is evident in her words; "My life had a narrow parameters, which is how I preferred it. I saw myself as an outline then, waiting to be filled in" (Walker, 2015, p. 5), indicating that she sees her existence as incomplete until she gets the ideal body.

Walker's choice of *Dietland*'s title is very significant, since it hints at a dystopia rooted in the very fabric of the capitalist state itself. In this context, the title serves as a metaphor for a society where even dissatisfaction is packaged and sold. Furthermore, the word "diet" typically refers to a strict eating plan, often associated with the pursuit of thinness and the idealization of female bodies. Additionally, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for consumer culture or society that promotes diet products, which interpellates or hails women to purchase them. The novel criticizes how these industries sustain themselves and affect women's self-esteem.

As a crucial literary element in literary texts, the setting of *Dietland* reflects a consumerist and patriarchal American society that reinforces women's objectification. Walker strategically locates the novel's events in Harper Lane (Los Angeles), Vermont, and New York, each mirroring stages of Plum's internalization and eventual resistance to social beauty standards (Handayani, 2018). Walker wrote *Dietland* in the 21st century, heavily influenced by the cultural environment of the United States, where society had become increasingly obsessed with beauty standards and ideal body images. During this period, the rise of the internet and the widespread use of social media platforms allowed these unrealistic beauty ideals to spread rapidly. The media became a space for women who conformed to these narrow standards to display their appearances. Meanwhile, women who did not meet these ideals often experienced feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, which is precisely what happened to Plum.

The imitation and adoption of the media and advertisements can be regarded as a form of ideological interpellation, which, according to Althusser (1971), is how individuals are transformed into subjects. In this sense, advertisements hail individuals, positioning them within an ideology. This hailing is evident in Plum, who is attracted by the TV diet program advertisements she watches. At the age of seventeen, she is hailed by an ad for the Baptist Plan, a diet program that provides pre-arranged meals for its customers to limit calorie intake. Its method closely resembles the one used by another actual diet program in the United States, called Weight Watchers, where each meal has a calculated calorie count, just like the program Plum follows after her failure with the Baptist Plan, called Waist Watchers. One of the advertisements that shows the social expectation imposed on women to conform to the beauty standards, especially the expectations of thinness, where women are interpellated into dominant ideologies, is the following, "There was Rosa, age twenty-three: 'If I had to look fat in my wedding dress, then I'd rather die an old maid.'...Rosa was thin"(Walker, 2015, p. 42). In this commercial advertisement, fat women are presented as powerless, sad, and unable to enjoy life because of their bodies. The ad shows that Rosa would not marry if she were fat, expressing her fear of not looking ideal in her wedding dress. The advertisement reflects a capitalist strategy that makes women feel incomplete. By showing fatness as a personal failure and thinness as a purchasable solution, the ads encourage women to consume products and services aimed at fixing their bodies. As Nussbaum (1995) explains, "The objectifier treats the objects as a tool of his or her purposes" (p. 257). In this case, capitalism benefits from

objectifying women, tying their worth to their physical appearance, then profiting from the anxiety this creates. Women's bodies become commodities, where capitalists sell the idealized image of beauty while at the same time offering the products needed to reach it.

Plum continues to watch the TV ads, and instead of passively comprehending them, she enters a phase of introspection and identification with the images presented. She imagines herself on TV wearing her black dress and being overweight, which fuels her dissatisfaction with herself. Seeing herself through the lens of advertisements, Plum internalizes the message that her body is unacceptable. "I imagined seeing that photo on TV, me in my ever-present black dress, the roll of fat under my chin. Burst I'd obliterate that hideous girl. I wrote down the toll free number, determined to become a Baptist" (Walker, 2015, p. 42). Feeling annoyed, Plum quickly takes the phone number in the ad, determined to become a Baptist, where she strives to be thin, and joining this program indicates that the dominant ideology interpellated her. The advertisements do not just promote weight loss; they actively "call out" to viewers, shaping their self-perception. AS Culler (1997) states about interpellation, "You are addressed – by ads, for instance – as a particular sort of subject (a consumer who values certain qualities), and by being repeatedly hailed in this way you come to occupy such a position" (Culler, 1997, p. 45).

These ads addressed Plum directly, "Hey you there!" in a manner that Althusser describes as interpellation, where individuals recognize themselves within dominant discourses. Althusser (1971) explains that "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (p. 174). For him, ideology works through interpellation, where individuals are compelled to recognize themselves within a discourse that seems natural and inevitable. The ad functions as a tool of ideological control by positioning thinness as the key to happiness and self-worth. Media, in general, and TV in particular, serve as ideological state apparatuses by showing ads and establishing themselves as standards by which an individual's social existence is measured.

After closing The Baptist Program, which Plum follows, she does not give up and decides to join another one, "In College, I joined Waist Watchers" (Walker, 2015, p. 65). Many people wish to get a slim body and fit society's criteria for an ideal body, which has become harsh to most people, particularly women. This reflects Wolf's (2002) argument: "Ideal beauty is ideal because it does not exist; the action lies in the gap between desire and gratification. Women are not perfect beauties without distance. That space, in a consumer culture, is a lucrative one" (p. 176). The feeling of not being enough, as in Plum's case, is highly profitable, where capitalist industries such as diet, beauty, fashion, and cosmetic surgery make billions from women's insecurities by selling expensive products and services that promise to bring them closer to the ideal of perfection.

The program's name, "Waist Watcher," functions as an ideological tool that interpellates individuals into a specific subject position, the self-surveilling consumer who must monitor and control their body to conform to socially constructed ideals. As Wolf (2002) discussed, "the ideal is not about women, but about money" (p. 232). The term "Waist" in the program's name draws attention to a specific part of women's bodies, indicating that women's waists must be tiny to fit the beauty standards put forth by men to satisfy the male gaze. This reflects a form of objectification in which media and advertisements often transform women's bodies into commodities that must be consumed, modified, and controlled.

After failing at Waist Watchers, Plum decided to undergo a weight-loss surgery as the only solution to her problem. "Given my failure at dieting, my plan was to trade Waist Watchers for weight-loss surgery" (Walker, 2015, p. 7). Surgery has both psychological and physical outcomes, often causing severe pain and distress. Despite this, she insists on doing it, which shows how much the privileged ideologies have influenced her. According to Handayani (2018), since Plum is obese, she automatically does not match the standards. Especially in America, women must have a slim body to be socially accepted; otherwise, they will be a nightmare. As Plum describes herself, "I'm every American woman's worst nightmare. It's what they spend their lives fighting against, it's why they diet and exercise and have plastic surgery—because they don't want to look like me" (Walker, 2015, p. 102). Nightmares are typically linked to fear and avoidance, and Plum compares herself to such experiences, viewing herself as something unpleasant that many women wish to reject or remove. Thus, women try hard not to gain weight, such as exercising and undergoing plastic surgery.

At Austen Media, the magazine where Plum works, the obsession with thinness is a defining trait among women, where fat women are viewed as something terrible, ultimately reducing them to objects of visual appeal rather than individuals. This manifests their sexual objectification, which occurs when a woman's body, her physical features, or sexual functions are detached from her identity and treated as mere tools or considered as representations of her whole self (Bartky, 1990). This concept is vividly illustrated in *Dietland*, where the magazines present women sexually, which indicates that women become sexual objects for male readers. A clear example is found in the depiction of myriad lad's magazines, which openly show such a kind of objectification, "there were also myriad lads' magazines, as they were called. The lads' magazines weren't on the top shelf, but were at eye-level for everyone to see. The graphic covers featured naked women" (Walker, 2015, p. 95). In this way, media portrayals treat women's bodies as products to be displayed, consumed, and objectified, which plays an important role in how individuals perceive themselves.

In this case, many women objectify themselves after being interpellated by media portrayals in magazines, which means that women internalize the media's ideological values. According to Venturino (2013), "internalize is to make any philosophy, ideology, or viewpoint part of your natural 'way of seeing things.'" (p. 357). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the messages sent by the female readers of *Daisy Chain*. For instance, "Why are all the models in your magazine so skinny girls are so lucky I'll never be anything but fat ass bitch he said to me after class but I still like him ...can you help me please cuz my legs look so fat in a swimsuit" (Walker, 2015, p. 14). Here, the magazine interpellates its readers, hailing them into a system where thinness and flawlessness are constructed as the norms and desirable traits. Additionally, the fact that only slim models can work in the magazine reinforces these standards. This representation has a significant impact on readers, especially girls. Hall (1997, as cited in Govender et al., 2014) argues, "Representation is the construction of meaning through language. Language, signs, and images play an important role in shaping and developing what people perceive as reality, thereby developing their identity" (p.2279). This process of representation leads the speaker to internalize the idea of how the woman should appear in the magazine and become dissatisfied with her body, believing it does not resemble the ideal body she sees in the magazine. Moreover, her classmate's insults further reinforce this ideology, where his words reflect the social norms as women's bodies are judged and objectified. Despite her classmate's cruelty, she admits that she "still likes him," which shows that she has internalized the need for male validation. This proves her subjection to the dominant ideology, even at the expense of her self-worth.

The speaker's request for help means that the magazine's presentation of ideal beauty has interpellated her. As Althusser (1971) urges, "The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject...That is why they 'work all by themselves'" (p. 182). According to Althusser, individuals believe they are free to make their own choices, but they are under the control of the dominant ideology, which makes them think they are acting freely, but they are following certain beliefs or expectations without realizing it. In this case, the girl believes it is her choice to alter her appearance, but in reality, she is conforming to the norms established by magazines and society.

A key factor behind Plum's determination to be slim is her belief that her life will improve. Additionally, she holds the false belief that only thin women can marry; this is one of the misconceptions society imposes on women. For instance, when her father invites her to visit him in Boise, where he lives, she refuses because she is on a diet and cannot take all her frozen meals with her. "I can't, Daddy. You'll be proud of me when this is finished, I promise...I was his only hope for grandkids. If I was fat, no one would want to marry me (Walker, 2015, p. 53). Plum's speech illustrates how deeply ingrained traditional gender roles are in her thinking, where she considers marriage and reproduction as inevitable, even obligatory, emphasizing the belief that women exist mainly to have children. Furthermore, her words indicate how much she internalizes the societal pressures, treating weight loss not as a personal choice but as a duty to her father and society's expectations.

As the events progress, Plum joined another diet program offered by Verena Baptist, a woman who challenges conventional beauty standards and encourages women to reject the oppressive ideals promoted by the media. To persuade Plum to change her mind about having surgery, Verena offers her \$20,000 to join The New Baptist Program, and Plum must complete specific tasks. One of these tasks is called Makeover, which is led by Marlowe, a famous actress in a major 1980s television program. She was once celebrated as a beauty icon due to her gorgeous image, a white girl with long blonde hair. "Marlowe appeared in a series of shampoo commercials with a Rapunzel theme, and she posed for the cover of *Vanity Fair* naked, with only her hair to shield her. Her hair was her trademark" (Walker, 2015, p. 131). Marlowe's image is commodified in the media, reducing her to a product for commercial purposes, and her presentation in the ad suggests that she is viewed as a sexual object intended to attract consumers' attention. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that women, to different extents, adopt an external viewpoint of themselves, leading to self-objectification by viewing their bodies as objects to be looked at and judged based on appearance. Furthermore, Kilbourne (2021) contends that the advertising industry has traditionally dedicated female beauty narrowly, portraying desirable women as typically young, slim, light-skinned, and attractive. These advertisements encourage girls to change their appearance by imitating the models in the ads and subsequently purchasing their products. In Plum's case, she unconsciously connects with the advertisement and feels pressured to conform to its ideal image; upon seeing Marlowe's hair, she is interpellated, believing that buying the shampoo will help her reach that standard. According to Jayamohan (n.d.), interpellation is subtle; the core of interpellation is for a person to engage with something without even being aware that they are doing so. Interpellation plays a significant role in various aspects, particularly in the marketing of products. This example illustrates how advertising is an ideological tool that maintains traditional beauty standards within consumer culture. As Sajjadi and Ahmadian (2018) explain, capitalist societies rely on this process of interpellation to maintain their control and dominance over individuals without using direct power or force.

One of the significant changes that occurred to Plum during the makeover task was her way of dressing, where she used to wear only black clothes, avoiding colorful ones, because she believed black could make her invisible to the public, as she felt ashamed of her body. "I always wore black and rarely deviated from the uniform of ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved cotton tops, even in the summer" (Walker, 2015, pp. 14-15). Plum's choice of black reflects

her inner struggle with self-image and her desire to remain unseen. Marlowe said to Plum that a makeover is not merely about changing one's appearance but also increasing what she calls the "fuckability quotient," (Walker, 2015, p. 139), which is a measure of women's ability to attract men's sexual attention. This case highlights the persistence of sexual objectification by depicting women's bodies primarily as sources of male pleasure, thus reinforcing their reduction to sexual objects. According to Bartky (1990, as cited in Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), "Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her"(p.175). Although Plum believed she could not make this change initially, as she was unable to wear her clothes differently as she used to, she eventually did. This vision embodies her self-objectification, as she views beauty and desirability as being achieved only through a different, thinner version of herself.

Another task assigned to Plum by Verena is called Blind Dates, where she forces Plum to face her fears about relationships and date four men. Plum, who has been taking antidepressants due to heartbreak, has never dated anyone since her last painful experience with a boy named Tristan, as she believes that no man will date or marry her because of her weight, which leads her to think that a woman's worth is tied to male perception. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) states, "She cannot think of herself without man...she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex, absolute sex, no less." (pp. 15-16). Although it is difficult for Plum, she agrees to date the men. During those dates, she tries her best to wear a bright dress and apply makeup, as she learned in the makeover task, to look beautiful and satisfy the men's gaze. "I tried to remember what characters in movies did. Deception was part of it. Pretending to be prettier, slimmer, and less hungry. Being a woman means being a faker. That's what Marlowe had said" (Walker, 2015, p. 160). In this quote, she tries to imitate female characters' behavior in movies, using the products they use to achieve beauty, which embodies interpellation, where Plum is passively and unconsciously drawn into dominant social assumptions (Parker, 2020). Furthermore, this act indicates that femininity is an act of deception, meaning that Plum suppresses her natural self in favor of an artificial ideal. The phrase "being a woman means being a faker" refers to the way patriarchal norms construct beauty rather than seeing it as inherent. Despite her efforts, Plum's blind dates are unsuccessful, all the guys reject her, and she rejects them too. This shows that Plum herself is not ready for love because she does not love herself. However, this experience serves as a stepping stone for Plum, allowing her to open up to future romantic relationships.

The last task Plum must complete is disconnecting and reflecting, which can be seen as a reflection of the media and ideologies that interpellate women. In this task, Plum is isolated in an underground apartment, part of Calliope House, without access to sunlight. She was provided with everything she needed except mirrors, which were intentionally removed to prevent Plum from seeing her reflection, as she never appreciates what she already has when she looks at herself in the mirror. Additionally, the removal of mirrors serves as a symbol of women in society being disconnected from their identities and instead being subjected to external social standards of beauty. The apartment has many screens that display pornographic videos, where women are almost naked and face sexual harassment. Mulvey (1975) notes that the media frequently objectifies women, treating them as passive subjects for the male gaze. This sexual objectification depicted on screens contributes to low self-esteem among women and a distorted perception of themselves due to misguided thoughts and self-beliefs.

The tasks make Plum think differently, and she perceives the world in a new light. It is about how society treats and judges her, as well as how she treats herself, disregarding societal expectations. "Because I'm fat, I know how horrible everyone is. If I looked like a normal woman, if I looked like you, then I'd never know how cruel and shallow people are. I see a different side of humanity" (Walker, 2015, p. 197). Plum's negative view of society is that most women are judged solely by their appearance, where women who are considered attractive are treated with dignity, whereas those who are less socially accepted in appearance may face mistreatment. As a result, many of them strive to improve their looks to gain society's approval. However, Plum no longer needs to be suited to society: "I don't want their approval" (Walker, 2015, p. 197). A person cannot be everything society wants to be, and this is precisely what happened to Plum—many unfulfilled societal expectations cause Plum to feel hated, neglected, mocked, and disrespected. Furthermore, regardless of whether Plum has met what the society considers as acceptable, she will always be subject to judgment. As she said, "living in Dietland, which meant control, constriction—paralysis, even—but above all it meant obedience. I was tired of being obedient" (Walker, 2015, p. 201). This quote reveals that Plum sees herself as only an obedient person, as she lives in a society where superiority and dominance are given to men, while women are regarded as their objects. Such a social structure is what constructs beauty standards, as Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949), women are not seen as independent but as the "Other," whereas men are considered the default. She states, "Thus humanity is male, and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him" (p. 15). So, men establish and control the appearance standards for women, which is what makes Plum believe that her need to be attractive comes from her excessive conformity to what society calls beauty norms.

Ultimately, Plum comes to understand that she will never achieve real happiness if she continues to live under these expectations and does not enjoy herself; thus, she changes her life and accepts her new self. She gives up dieting and starts eating whatever she wants, rejecting the strict beauty standards that have controlled her for so long. Furthermore, the day that Plum was supposed to have surgery, she decided to host a party instead, in which Plum

showed her new self and liberation from the obstacles that tied her to society, “The thin woman inside me, the perfect woman, my shadow self.” I’m reclaiming her. That perfect woman, that smaller self, was only ever an idea. She didn’t really exist, so she doesn’t need a name.” *Alicia is me*” (Walker, 2015, p. 292). Plum’s words can be seen as a form of resistance, one of Althusser’s concepts, in which her rejection of the thin woman signifies her resistance to the ideological constructs that define female identity through unreachable beauty ideals. Her assertion that the perfect woman was only an idea means that Plum has matured enough to accept herself as she is and reject her shadow self, Alicia. Moreover, the party that Plum hosts, along with the women around her, suggests that her perception extends beyond personal freedom, emphasizing the collective struggle against objectification. This event embodied the novel’s critique of how ideological power influences women’s perception of their bodies, leading to the claim that objectification is not just an external imposition but also an internalized construct that must be intentionally dismantled.

Throughout her novel, Walker encourages readers, especially women, to resist the harmful standards. Through her main character, Plum, Walker demonstrates that self-love and self-acceptance do not rely on conforming to societal beauty standards; instead, one must accept and appreciate one’s unique beauty. “As I walked I steady myself, raising my chin,... daring someone to say something. People had always insulted me by calling me fat, but they couldn’t hurt me anymore...the weapon they had used against me lost its power” (Walker, 2015, p. 222). Thus, Plum overcame her obsession with beauty, as she decided to change her view of beauty and realized that the societal standards are endless and impossible to satisfy. She comes to realize that no matter what she does, she can never appear beautiful to everyone, as there will always be those who reject her true self. What matter most to her now is how she perceives and values her own body, as her vision of the world changes. Finally, Plum can face the society with a transformed perspective on beauty and happiness; thus, the novel closes with her running down the street, filled with a sense of release from the oppressive ideals she once believed in.

1.3 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Dietland* by Sarai Walker intricately examines the profound impact of media and advertisements on the construction of women’s identities. Using Althusser’s concept of interpellation as a lens, the analysis reveals how women are hailed as subjects of the male gaze. By adopting the ideologies conveyed through magazines, advertisements, and television, women immediately internalize and try to imitate, leading to their objectification. Walker illustrates this struggle through the novel’s protagonist, Plum, who internalizes the media’s messages and experiences internal and social conflict due to her body size. Her attempts to meet the expectations set by media and society ultimately prove meaningless as she gradually comes to accept and love herself. Through Plum’s transformation, Walker presents a sharp critique of consumerist culture, which interpellates and objectifies women for profit by reinforcing narrow beauty ideals. *Dietland*, thus, becomes both a feminist resistance narrative and a call for body acceptance, with Plum’s journey serving as a symbolic rejection of media-driven interpellation.

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