



You Are Not Good Enough: Gendered Discourses of Inadequacy and the Construction of Female Subjectivity

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Abstract

This paper examines the discourse of inadequacy expressed through various phrases, focusing on terms inspired by the work of feminist writers and thinkers, like 'not feminine enough', 'the other', 'inessential', 'object', 'strong black woman', 'woman question', 'anonymous', 'second place', and 'the female aspect' in everyday life. It shows how these ideas shape the way women see themselves, affecting female subjectivity across philosophical, literary, and socio-cultural contexts. It explores the inadequacy found in the recurrent phrase "You are not good enough" as a form of gendered power to determine how women would want to perceive themselves. The paper argues that inadequacy is not a natural or personal flaw in women; instead, it is created and maintained through social beliefs, language, and cultural practices. Women are repeatedly made to feel inadequate about their bodies, language, beauty, intelligence, ambition, aspiration, performance, and moral character. The paper attempts to place this feeling of 'not being enough' in a broader social context. It shows how patriarchy, colourism, caste hierarchy, creed, and marital mediators compel women to be independent yet always accommodating and pleasing to others. Women are persuaded to dream big and be ambitious, but also told to be modest and selfless. In the article, inadequacy accounts for a powerful mechanism built into common language, media roles, images, familial rules, and workplace procedures. It calls for questioning and resisting everyday comments and judgments that normalise women as 'less than' or 'not enough'. Finally, it debates a deeper structural change in society that defines what is acceptable, competent, and worthy so that women are not measured by narrow gender standards of 'good enough'.

Keywords: Gendered Discourse; Inadequacy; Female Subjectivity; Feminist Theory; Identity Formation.



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Introduction

The discourse of inadequacy, inscribed in the repeating message ‘You are not good enough’, acts as a potent socio-cultural mechanism that churns out women’s identities across historical and contemporary settings. Feminist Philosophy, literature, and theory have repeatedly shown that inadequacy is not a natural quality of women but a socially produced condition embedded in power relations and power structures. The renowned works of feminist authors chart a clear intellectual path, where gendered inadequacy is discursively constructed, institutionally reinforced, psychologically internalised, and normatively regulated.

Structural Otherness

The Second Sex provides the philosophical basis for understanding gendered inadequacy, where Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) argues that the word “Other” indicates the position of women in a male-dominated symbolic order. Beauvoir’s critique of women’s structural marginalisation in *The Second Sex* (2011) establishes gendered inadequacy as structural rather than individual. ‘Man’ is seen as the essential “subject” (the absolute), the norm, whereas women are treated as “objects”, always defined relationally and secondarily by others. This relational hierarchy engenders an implicit discourse of insufficiency, where women are positioned as derivatives of male norms. Beauvoir’s famous statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p.293) shows how gendered identity is constructed through repeated acts of restriction and instruction. Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, suggesting yet a structural positioning of woman as secondary — ‘inherently less’. Women are not competitors but complements to men. She has no rights, no power.

In Beauvoir’s analysis, the social construction of women as “the other” is examined in depth. The society teaches women to see themselves as “the other”, not as full, independent subjects. From childhood, girls are brought up in a male context, such as daughters, sisters, to-be-wives, to-be-daughter-in-law, and to-be-mothers. So, they are defined more by what they do for others than by their own choices and desires. Instead of being encouraged to act with their own agency, they are often marked by what they supposedly lack: independence, authority, and rationality. Because of this, they repeatedly hear, in direct and indirect ways, that they are less rational, less in control, and less important than men. Over the course of time, these sentences influence how they envisage themselves and what is possible for their lives. They start to accept narrow ideas about what they can or should become.

In this way, 'not good enough' is not just about a few depraved flashes or remarks, but instead an enduring feeling that grows from how girls are raised and what they are told is an acceptable role. From a young age, they learn that their dreams and goals must fit what society expects of 'good women', rather than what they might truly want for themselves. To be feminine means to be weak, passive, pleasing, and not too assertive, gradually being trained into a position of otherness and inferiority. These subtle and repeated lessons become internal messages: 'Do not aim too high'; 'Do not compete with men'; 'You are too much, or you are not enough'. Beauvoir's articulation of women's existential condition in *The Second Sex*, the process of becoming a woman means learning to see oneself as secondary and inadequate against a male standard.

Material Exclusion and Intellectual Marginalisation

If Beauvoir theorizes 'structural otherness', Virginia Woolf dramatizes its material consequences in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She argues that economic deprivation and institutional exclusion lead to perceptions of female intellectual deficiency. Women have been excluded from upright formal education, financial independence, and a rich literary tradition. The absence of female authors in the canon of history was thus construed as evidence of lesser capacity. Woolf shows what inadequacy feels like in concrete and everyday terms, like "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". This line shows that women are not 'naturally less talented' but are blocked by material conditions. They often have no independent income, no private space, and constant demands on their time. These limits quietly send the message that serious thinking and writing are not really meant for them.

When Woolf says, "For most of history, anonymous was a woman", it implies erasure and systemic dismissal of women's creative identity. She is drawing attention to how many women creators were made invisible. Their books, paintings, and music were not published, were ignored, and were credited to men instead of them. This line hints at a long history in which women did important creative work, but their names were removed, never recorded, and hence they disappeared from view. Beneath this is a deep feeling of frustration and sadness; women were 'good enough' to create, but 'not good enough' to be recognised. Women are told through poverty, lack of space, and erasure that they are 'not good enough' to appear as authors in their own right. Thus, a woman needs basic financial security and private space of her own to think and write, because without money or a room, she is constantly interrupted, dependent, and made to feel that her ideas do not really matter.

Woolf reconnoiters the structural constrictions and cultural conversations that tell women they are less capable of intellectual toil. Women writers in history have been using the phrase 'there is no tradition,' which meant they are not good enough to produce literature of value. Woolf reframes this as a discursive barrier that inhibits women's creative identities. Woolf's imaginary "Shakespeare's sister" (p.87) illustrates how structural barriers produce what seems inadequate. She has no education; she has no freedom. Her talent is unrecognised. The silence that comes after this is mistaken for inability. Woolf's analysis reveals the systematic withholding of possessions, such as denying them money, time, and space, withstands the rhetoric of 'not good enough'. Inadequacy here is a consequence of deprivation, not of any inherent deficiency. She insists that a woman needs 'money and a room of her own' to foreground the material prerequisites of intellectual legitimacy.

Internalisation and Psychological Embodiment

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) writes about how a girl takes the feeling of not being good enough deep inside herself, focusing on the inner, psychological damage this causes. This process reveals the psychological internalisation of inadequacy, while Beauvoir and Woolf revealed how society and institutions are organised in a way that keeps women down. The discourse of inadequacy is enacted through media versions, community mockery, and family violence, and eventually, those occurrences outside stories became inside truths. In her novel, Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, grows up in a world that constantly praises white, blue-eyed beauty. She comes to believe that if she had blue eyes, people would finally love her and treat her kindly. In simple terms, Pecola thinks, if I looked like the beauty ideal, I would be worthy, which shows how racist beauty standards turn into personal feelings of shame and inadequacy. It displays a girl learning to see herself as 'not good enough' in a not-so-comforting way: when Pecola thinks that if her eyes were 'beautiful', she herself would be different. She is not just wishing for blue eyes. She wishes to be worthy of love, care, and respect. She starts to build the opinion that she can escape the shame only by changing herself to match the white ideal. The line "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly" shows how judgments in the eyes of people become your own voice, turning external discrimination into internal denigration.

This novel exemplifies how cultural standards of beauty and worth shape young black girls' self-image. Pecola's wish for 'bluer eyes' is symbolic of internalised messages that 'she is not good enough' as she is. External social discourses about beauty are taken in as deeply personal stories of inadequacy. Morrison's novel reveals that inadequacy is not just socially constructed

but personified. Pecola's sense of who she is depends on a world that treats white, 'blue-eyed beauty' as the highest standard for girls and women. As a result, Pecola starts to believe that her body is bad and cannot be loved. Her biggest wish is not only to look different but to get away from the hurt of always being seen as "ugly" and "less than others". The psychological damage mirrors how discourse penetrates subjectivity. In this context, 'You are not good enough' is an unspoken universal catchphrase shaping bodily awareness and self-worth. Pecola's entire experience can be read as the slow, painful absorption of the message 'You are not good enough' into her own sense of self. The racist and sexist beauty codes around her tell her, again and again, that a 'good girl' or 'beautiful girl' is white, light-skinned, and blue-eyed. She does not just hear this on one occasion but comes across it in pictures, toys, teachers' preferences, and commentaries at home. Blue eyes might take her from 'not enough' to 'enough', which damages her subjectivity.

Ideological Control and the Double Bind

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism*, Bell Hooks (1981) expands her analysis by showing how dearth narratives work as ideological devices. Hooks argues that sexism does not kill women's power but limits or exploits it. Women are seen as either 'not enough or too much'; too emphatic or too emotive; not supportive enough or too self-determining. This double dilemma ensures that they are always being judged by shifting standards. We teach our young woman to shrink themselves, speak little, ask minimally, and to reduce their shine. This is a direct reflection of 'not enoughness' discourse, which shows socially regulated inadequacy messaging about their aspirations. We tell them, Girls!! You can 'be ambitious', but not 'too ambitious.' Women are often told two opposite things at the same time: they should have big dreams and be ambitious, but they must also stay modest, selfless, and obedient. Because of these mixed messages and unrealistic expectations, women are made to feel that they are never quite 'good enough' no matter what they do.

Advertisements announcing the sale of enslaved Black women used the terms "breeding slaves", "child-bearing woman", "breeding period", and "too old to breed" to describe individual women (p.39). Multiple notions or narratives of inadequacy work against Black women, damaging their perception of themselves, making their identities complex, and limiting their options. The black female who thought herself "too good" to do domestic work or other service jobs was often ridiculed for being uppity. (p.77). Depictions in media label black women as "too angry", "too loud", and not docile. Black women have always been regarded as "too uppity".

(p.103). Like the American white male in the 50s and 60s, black men were concerned that all women were becoming too assertive and domineering (p.180). It is essential to understand hooks' message that notions of inadequacy are a form of oppression by design, in identifying women as insufficient, patriarchal power can exercise control over them. Women get used to thinking that 'they are not enough', and they start aiming lower and holding themselves back. Even when people praise women as "strong" or "caring," these compliments often have conditions: they value women mainly for how well they serve others, especially men, rather than for their own dreams and needs.

Contemporary Social Conditioning and Aspirational Limits

In her book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows how inadequacy has persisted even in progressive contexts. She mentions that young women are guided to 'shrink themselves', 'make themselves smaller', which means that they should keep their ambition slow lest they make men feel threatened. Whereas past discrimination was more blatant, the current discourse is based on subtle manipulation. Women can be stimulated to do well, but not too well. They can be asked to voice their opinions, but not too strongly. The examples Adichie gives include instances in which women and girls are constantly reminded that they are never enough - never intelligent enough, never focused enough, never strong enough for being only girls. This affects the esteem of young women, their professional expectations, and their sense of what they deserve. The main lesson we can learn from Adichie's work is that even empowerment discourses carry within them an element of subordination.

Normative Regulation and Performativity

The Theory behind such phenomena has been put forward by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, gender identity is constituted via continuous performances under normative inspection. Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, suggesting the need for steady performance under normative inspection. Otherwise, there will be a judgment made about the inadequate performance. Social norms constantly define what constitutes a 'good woman', thus implicitly making other women inadequate. Inadequacy creates fear, making people conform to societal norms to avoid such feelings. Butler (1990) reminds us that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, through a stylised repetition of acts" (p. 179). If gender is something we do again and again, then society also judges how well we do it. Those judgments decide whether we are seen as a "proper" woman or "not good enough" as a woman. When a

girl does not dress, speak, or behave in the expected “feminine way”, she may be told she is “too loud,” “too ambitious,” “not ladylike,” or “not a good woman.” These comments are forms of punishment for “doing gender wrong,” which Butler notes can range from criticism and exclusion to more serious sanctions. Over time, this constant policing of gender performance teaches women that their worth depends on how closely they match an ideal of femininity that no one can fully reach, keeping them in a constant state of feeling inadequate.

Beauvoir lays down the ontology of woman as “the other”, while Woolf discusses the actual processes through material and institutional mechanisms that create intellectual marginalisation. Morrison discusses how racialized and gendered inferiority becomes internalised in women. Hooks provides us with the ideological mechanisms of oppression, while Adichie focuses on contemporary society.

Comparative Synthesis

These authors collectively demonstrate that the discourses that say, “You are not good enough” do not only exist as personal attacks – they are part of larger structures of culture embodied in language, story, expectation, and institutional practice. The discourse impacts how women see themselves, frequently linking femininity to deficiency. It impacts the construction of the self through the internalisation of appropriate behaviour, ambition, and capability. It impacts career aspirations, whether through the limitations set on their ambitions or by making those ambitions socially dangerous. From the context of philosophy to literature and to feminism, woman as the “other” denotes structural inadequacy; her splendour and the standards of value denote cultural inadequacy; drive and desires denote aspirational inadequacy; thought and talk denote epistemic inadequacy. “You are not good enough” goes as a cultural catchphrase for women rather than an isolated insult, a cultural message catalysing their identity, self-confidence, and life trajectories.

Each author discusses the different contexts of entirely different fields, but more or less reveals the same socially produced inadequacy. A contradictory note that women must be strong yet submissive, motivated yet modest, independent yet interactive, because these expectations are doomed to fail if these qualities cannot coexist, the resulting sense of “not enoughness” is not accidental but systemic. This body of literature collectively suggests that inadequacy serves as a mechanism of power. It disciplines bodies, regulates ambition, and forms identity. The discourse of patriarchy makes women feel that they are never good enough, making them obey without any direct force. The convergence in these feminist perspectives points towards the importance

of looking at inadequacy as a discursive construct rather than a personal problem. Between modernism and postmodernism, it is clear that subjectivities develop out of language and image. “You are not good enough” as a structural catchphrase enables a shift from personal records of insecurity towards analysing how inadequacy functions across institutions such as marriage, home, families, schools, circles, and the workplace. The prevalence of such discourse across time and space advocates its deep-rooted standing in arrangements of gender control.

Together, these thinkers and authors provide a complex model to understand gender inadequacy. Structural positioning, material deprivation, psychological internalisation, ideological control, aspirational conditioning, and performative regulation intersect to create a powerful cultural story of insufficiency that continues to form women’s self-perception, identity, and social participation in contemporary contexts. Based on their writings, the inadequacy construction is not random or psychological; instead, it is constructed by language and sustained by institutions. From existentialism, modernism, feminism, and performativity, these authors show how the position of women is rendered as structural “Otherness,” material exclusion, symbolic misrepresentation, and ideological regulation. Notably, the comparison exposes the contradictory nature of the discourse of “not enoughness”. Hence, this calls for women to aim for the sky yet remain grounded, to be independent yet self-sacrificing. It ensures continuous self-evaluation and internalised doubt. Such discursive instability produces compliant subjects who regulate their own aspirations in anticipation of social judgment. Inadequacy thus becomes a form of self-regulation implanted within everyday life.

In the socio-cultural context, the inadequacy discourse is further complicated by the influence of caste, colour, communal norms, and capitalism. Concurrently, it is a time for women to negotiate respect at domestic, educational, and occupational fronts. Empowerment discourse itself may also be implicated in the reproduction of conditional approval, where women’s successes are only celebrated if they remain socially acceptable. Such a fluid standard of adequacy emerges from the study. ‘Inadequacy’ as a form of discourse contributes towards interdisciplinary feminist theory, encouraging scholars and stakeholders to consider how linguistic, representational, and institutional practices continue to reproduce patriarchal power dynamics. It evokes the prerequisite for modernistic discourses in pedagogy, literature, and the place of work that encourage extensive and wholesome definitions of womanhood. The dogma of “not enoughness” will require not only symbolic inclusiveness but also transformational change in the construction of value, competence, and legitimacy. It is only by sabotaging cultural narratives

that justify women's inferiority that more balanced notions of subjectivity and participation can be initiated.

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