

Gender and Body: Feminist Idea of the Human Body

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The Body, Identity, and the Social Construction of Gender

The human body is central to how an individual understands facets of identity such as gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality. The way people perceive their bodies is how they are psychologically invested in their appearance which is influenced by their gender, gender roles, and societal expectations. These gender roles may lead to body dissatisfaction in both men and women as well as unhealthy behavior such as violence against women in a patriarchal society where men are considered the nucleus or centre of the society and women hold the peripheral position. The human body is an active and complicated process that is shaped by power mechanisms and social processes which help society know how sex and gender are constructed. Michel Foucault presents his notion through his “Performativity Theory” that the “body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena” contributing to the feminist point of view that the body is a “social production and construct” that is being shaped and controlled by the expectations and “norms of gendered social orders” (King). This notion concerns the ways in which the human body is gendered and how this gendering impacts the identities and experiences of humans. Building on Michel Foucault’s idea of the body, this paper argues how gender is a negotiation that provides a way of dealing with societal constraints while making new realities and how feminists dismantle notions of the human body while disrupting gender, sex, and sexuality binaries.

The work of Michel Foucault has been extremely influential amongst feminist scholars as his analysis of power, sexuality, subjectivity, and discipline is curiously gender-neutral yet pertinent to feminism. Foucault was a French philosopher who made significant contributions through his meditations on the analysis of female bodies despite Foucault’s preoccupation with power and its impacts on the human body and also the critique of essentialism by exploring the relationship between body and sexuality. The Foucauldian perspective that “body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena” stimulates extensive interest in women especially feminists as he makes references to gender or women in his writings (King). Feminist scholars have been provided with an analytical framework through Foucault’s point of view that sexual difference is not an “innate” quality or attribute of the human body but the “effect of power relations” in society which forms the basis that women’s experience is challenged, controlled, and culturally determined by feminine sexuality which is a radically contingent entity.

This puts an extensive focus on the notion that the body is produced through power which “results in

the reduction of social agents on passive feminine bodies” (Bordo). Furthermore, Foucault’s notion challenges the essentialism and naturalness of body and sexuality showing how they are constructs shaped by culture and are acknowledged by power relations in the human society. His notion also implies that the body is the product of power that has some limitations as the body reduces the resistance and agency of women who are usually subjected to various forms of domination, subjection, and oppression. Moreover, the Foucauldian notion of the body uses several elements such as sexuality, cultural constructs, natural phenomena, subjectivity, essentialism, contingency, discipline, and power to discuss that women are challenged and constrained due to their body experiences.

Foucault, Power, and Bordo’s Feminist Theory of the Body

The relationship Foucault creates in body and power is meticulously explored in “Feminism, Foucault, and the Politics of the Body” written by Susan Bordo which bridges Foucault’s philosophy and contemporary feminism. The author argues that Foucault’s ideas about knowledge, power, body, sexuality, and subjectivity have been influential in shaping feminists’ thoughts. Bordo also argues how women’s bodies and roles are controlled and regulated by society and culture. She critiques Foucault’s lack of attention to sexuality and gender as Foucault is really agnostic on the issue of gender in his writings. Bordo further debunks that Foucault’s disciplinary practices of the body are insistently applied to the female bodies because women actively discipline their own bodies as they are marginalized entities in society (Bordo).

Based on Foucault’s notion, Bordo discusses two key features; modifications of material shape bodies and modified bodies carrying social meanings. One feature stresses the way that human bodies in material shape can be modified by social practices as women mould and actively discipline their bodies fearing the punishment of society and culture as well as deriving certain kinds of pleasure from their gender roles. The second feature stresses the way that bodily modifications carry multiple social meanings in social groupings that signal specific contexts of sexual desirability, availability, respectability, or participation. Therefore, the feminist view about the body is a diverse and broad perspective that encompasses the critique of the dualism of mind and body in which the body is devalued as a source of femininity, emotion, and irrationality whereas the mind is privileged as a source of masculinity, reason, and rationality in terms of power relations, particularly in regards to race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, the feminist point of view about the body is not a static or monolithic concept of gender, but rather a dynamic and evolving perspective that reflects the diversity, inclusivity, and complexity of feminine thoughts and actions.

Women's Bodies as Sites of Resistance and Cultural Discipline

Throughout world history, women as a peripheral gender have experienced their bodies in many different ways, some experience it in a subversive way challenging the social and cultural norms, and some in subservient ways obeying others unquestionably. In women's lives, the body means aspects of docility as well as resistance from the margins of society. The history unfolds the circumstances that view women raising their voices, challenging social norms, contradicting cultural constructs, and transgressing the boundaries set for women in marginalized societies as domination becomes unbearable. The diverse constructions, shifts, and struggles of the bodies of women by the interface of feminists are understood across gender, castes, regions, classes, religions and other distinctive categories. This is reflected in the relationship between women's bodies, their self-discovery, and their gender roles in society to dismantle notions of the human body in general and untangle the ideologies and pathologies of the female body in particular.

These ideologies and pathologies including desire and control of the female body affect women's lives and self-image offering perspectives to dominant femininity and embodiment norms in the society. Demir in the article "Understanding Susan Bordo and Her Work; Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, Body" further elaborates that Bordo divides her book into three sub-sections namely "The Slender", "The Female Body and Medicine", and "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity". Bordo in the second part "The Female Body and Medicine" discusses various aspects of women's lives in relation to female bodies such as menstruation, aging, weight loss, abortion, and aging which conforms to Foucault's perspective that femininity is a "cultural construct" as these factors Bordo explains how the human body is gendered (DEMİR).

The notion of the body in Foucault's version is based on the biological differences and cultural constructs between sexes that serve as the ground for gender inequality because the idea females are considered inferior to males in society is "naturalized" due to their weaker physical capacities than men. The body of a woman is judged inferior based on physical capacities and social characteristics with reference to ideals and norms that are set for men as they transcend the biological level due to rational faculties. Women with essentialism or their biological functions and faculties conflate with the social category of gender and the biological category of sex as essentialism puts forward that gender is inscribed from the "natural" body of humans in one way while challenging the differences between culturally constructed gender roles and ahistorical biological sexes in the other way.

Sex, Gender, and the Rejection of Biological

Determinism

However, feminists represent the distinction between gender and sex to sever the link between biology as well as culture and that a woman's biological construction, as well as body, is their social destiny that inevitably involves a "problematic dissociation of culturally constructed genders from sexed bodies" which is irrelevant to an "individual's gendered" identity (DEMİR). Furthermore, Michel Foucault's notion that the "natural" construct of a woman's "sex functions" disguises the "productive" relation of power and sexuality to invert the relationship. Foucault puts forward that sexuality is unfairly viewed and misrepresented as an "unruly" naturalistic force that can be opposed, constrained, and repressed by power. However, it should be viewed and understood as a construct through the relations of power but not repressed or constrained through the exercise of power which has led many female scholars to appropriate Michel Foucault's perspective of the sexuality and body in his "Performativity Theory" which furthers the argument that "sexed nature" should be understood prior to culture but not according to the culturally inscribed meanings associated to a pre-given sex. "Performativity" as a discursive process produces the effects that it names such as gender and sexuality as the discourse that Foucault puts forward in his theory is not a mere reflection of reality but a powerful force that makes, shapes, and regulates the reality of the gender and body. This notion argues that binary opposition between sex and gender is what is done through the stylization of the body where sex is also a social construction that is produced by discourse (Cleary).

Following Foucault, the feminist perspective of the gender roles and body regarding "natural sex" or "sexed nature" prior to cultural constructs and constraints implicates the gendered power relations that reinforce the biological as well as reproductive constraints of the sexuality on women's bodies. Moreover, Foucault's anti-essentialist perspective about gender especially women forms the basis for feminists as they have been able to rethink gender and gender roles irrespective of biological sexes.

The idea should also rethink gender and gender roles beyond the binary opposition of men and women which can help to explore the identity, fluidity, and diversity of gender identities and expressions. He also insists on the relationship between corporeal realities of the bodies of women and power as he disparages bodily pleasures based on the "sexed nature" of women and biological functions such as the reproduction capacity of women to oversimplify the "artificial unity" of the biological category of sex to show how body and deployment of power are deeply connected (Lois). This highlights Foucault's inquisitiveness to the materiality of the corporeal body and how its relation to power not only operates through norms and discourses but also through physical techniques and practices that discipline the "feminine" body. Thus, women's bodies, psychological processes, physiological processes, bodily pleasures, and sensations make it viable that biological differences in genders and cultural constructs are not consecutive to each other. Rather, these constructs and differences are bound in such a manner and fashion that is in accordance with the process through which a woman's body is modified into a "feminine" body.

Materiality, Cultural Meaning, and the Limits of Foucauldian Analysis

In this way, Foucault breaks down the claim that the body can be produced and targeted by power without due regard for bodies' materiality outside of their cultural significations. This claim argues and challenges that the essentialist notion of "sexed nature" and "natural sex" is about the fixed and innate biological basis for gender differences. He also proposes that gender and sexuality are "socially constructed" and "regulated" by power relations that shape the bodies, habits, desires, roles, and pleasures of men and women.

Contrary to the feminists in view of Foucauldian notion of body, some feminists do not agree with Foucauldian anti-naturalistic rhetoric as he explores the relation between "sexually- differentiated" bodies and social power which denies the existence of a natural or essential sexual difference and instead views sexuality as a "social construct" that is shaped by power relations. His anti-naturalistic idea of sexuality exposes the socially contingent nature of body and power as feminists have acknowledged the idea of "normalizing-disciplinary" that appropriates the notions of social control of women and the "subjection" of the feminine body. This subjection appropriates "disciplinary practices" for a feminine body such as beauty regimens and exercises that form an embodiment of how women's bodies are conformed according to the prevailing social and cultural norms of attractiveness (Lois).

However, these disciplinary practices subjugate feminine identity by judging it on the stereotypical and patriarchal scales that take away power from women and their bodies. The more women do not refute such stereotypes and willingly accept such practices and norms, the more the physical construction of their bodies is promoted to the larger disempowerment. This calls into question an important facet of the personal identity of women that is bounded up with the sense of "competence" dismantling the association of self-control of the bodies and power following the disciplinary technology of the bodies that conform to the ideal norms and practices of a feminine body. The "disciplinary technologies" for the bodies of women are some effective forms of voluntary self-control, self-normalization, and self-surveillance that take hold of women at different levels including their bodies, habits, desires, or gestures to create feminine who are exposed to their own subjection in the contemporary rhetoric.

Body Positivity and Feminist Alternatives to Conventional Beauty

The idea of feminist ideals related to beauty, delicacy, or attractiveness is not what feminism inscribes as women feel more positively about their gender and bodies than those who ascribe to such ideals. Following Foucault's that body and sexuality are "social constructs" that have been

pushing women to the negative effects of patriarchy, gender difference and the interwoven tapestry of the notion of women's body call for the focus on the establishment of unique bodily qualities and personal worth that women of all races, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures can find in themselves.

The feminist perspective of the body is a way to look at the human body in general and the feminine body in particular that challenges patriarchal and dominant views about the materiality of female bodies that often objectify, ignore, suppress, or oppress women's bodily experiences because women as "weaker gender" is a cultural construct. This perspective recognizes the bodies of women as diverse, stronger, complex, and multifaceted in beauty regimens dealing with various cultural, social, and political contexts and constructs. Furthermore, the perspective of feminists about female bodies explores women as entities that do not have bodies but they themselves are bodies that are the source of perception, interaction, expression, and resistance with the world. Foucault's attention to the materiality of the body offers a crucial perspective for feminist scholars to challenge the normalization and naturalization of body, gender, and sexuality to resist the subordination of women's bodies by patriarchal and dominating structures. This perspective is not just a single or unified theory about the body but a diverse and rich field of inquiry in different spectrums of experiences women's bodies observe and experience in the world that aims to understand, claim, refute, critique, and transform the world about the notion of the body from a women-centred point of view.

In conclusion, Michel Foucault's "Performativity Theory" related to gender and body as well as his anti-essentialism and anti-naturalistic behavior have significantly contributed to the feminist philosophy that embodies meticulous attention to the bodies, in general, and feminine bodies, in particular, plays a central role in the gendered embodiment. The Foucauldian perspective of the body in terms of "natural sexes" and "sexed nature" provides a general account of the relationship between women's body and their sense of self which has been stressed by feminist scholars and literature that makes sense of the embodied self in women's bodies. The anti-essentialism idea of Foucault unhinges sex from gender, biological construction from the cultural construct, enables women to assert that feminine subjection and subordination are the products of unequal social, cultural, and political relations that cleave gender and sex as a self-evident biological truth rather than inferior embodiment of the feminine bodies. The feminists' truth about gender is that it is the re-enactments of the "stylization" of the body on highly rigid regulatory and disciplinary frames such as mannerisms and learned behavior that appear to be natural. Moreover, sex has been gender all along that constitutes the materiality of bodies as the sexual difference in gender is socially constructed and is always inscribed with gendered meaning. In a nutshell, the feminist perspective in relation to the Foucauldian notion of body, gender, and sex is concerned with the political, historical, and social meanings of the sexual difference in the body and what specific meanings those spectra of experiences in terms of society, history, and politics produce.

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