



Research Paper

Examining the Gendered Body as an Ethical Site in the Philosophy of Simone De Beauvoir

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ABSTRACT: *From the mundane to the myth, a woman's identity is deeply intertwined with her body. In ancient philosophy, the question of whether the self or the identity of a woman is fictional did not arise. For, religious thought, the notion of the soul continued to have a life as in ethical theories. For scientific purposes, the notion of a unified self-replaced the idea of the soul. Philosophical views of self and personal identity were dominated by the philosophies of Kant and Hegel. The mind/body dualism that long underpinned Western culture made males the guardians of culture and mind, while it associated females with the contingencies of the mortal body. The idea of right and wrong, ethical and non-ethical, values and social norms are imposed over the body. It is articulated through the body, as if ethical norms are solitary customs made for females. "A central principle of feminist theory has been to recognize that gender differences are not fixed in the character of the species but arise from specific histories and specific divisions of labor and power between the sexes."¹ The sexuality of a woman has always been a deciding factor of her way of existence in the world, which is constructed as a gendered body by the other. This is linked with the objectification of the female body. What is the relation between woman's mental life and her body is taken by the community, culture and society? How are our commonplace observations for the gendered body mapped the ethical norms on the body and what is the story behind making the woman's body as an ethical site for society are the issues taken and will be discussed in this attempt? The body, as a site for ethics, calls for some important considerations and engages with the sexuality of the body. Discussion is confined within the periphery of the biological body and the cultural identity imposed over it.*

KEYWORDS: *Sexuality, Gender, Society, Mind-body dualism, Cultural identity, Lived-body, Human situation, Freedom, Choice.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The woman with the vermillion powder on her head all along her center parting, her fingers drenched with attar, and a double bond gold pierced on her nose, long strings of heavy jewelry emerge on her breast revealing the certain lifelessness on the body. No one can see the body only as a self, a human being, or an agency in society. The woman can stand gently but can be observed as absorbed by the ethical stigmas.

While addressing the notion of embodiment there is a need to emphasize the sexuality of the body. When we talk about ethical norms, desirable and undesirable, ought to be and ought not to be, it is required to examine the gender of the body. Sexuality is given, while gender is acculturated. To give clear justification on the distinction between the two, it is important to investigate Beauvoir's formulation of "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."² She suggests in her dictum, the distinction of sex and gender. Sex is given and gender is acquired by living in a particular body. This section is the crucial discussion on the journey from biological, anatomical body to acquired, acculturated gendered body. Existentialist defines body from phenomenological standpoint.

¹ Schiebinger, 2000:01

² Beauvoir, 2010: 293.

II. BODY IN-SITUATION

Embodiment requires sexual body, whether male or female. However, it is situation which makes it gender embodiment. Situation plays a vital role in Beauvoir's notion of embodiment. The concepts of situation and body are central to any understanding of what human being is. 'Situation' is also a crucial term to deal with and in more detail understanding of the notion of body. Beauvoir's account of woman's situation can be understood with Sartre's description to define the difference between woman's situation with man's. For Sartre, Sonia Kruks describes, "Others are commonly presented as only a peripheral or indirect structure of my situation. For de Beauvoir others are directly involved in my own constitution of the meaning, of even a free project."³ attaches phenomenological idea to the woman's situation. Beauvoir rejected the idea of building a system to explain the world or human consciousness and instead used existentialism and phenomenology as analytical tools for understanding the human situation. For Beauvoir, the notion of embodiment is based on lived experience and the situation of the individual is expressed and lived through the body. This situation of the body is lived-body (the body one lives with). Lived body is always a first person's body experienced through a first person perspective. Simone de Beauvoir extends the notion of lived-body as explained by Merleau-Ponty. Her concept of the lived body unfolds the body as expression, not in pathological cases, as in Merleau-Ponty, but the lived female-body in the context of male power. Not only can our body represent our expression toward the world, but also the ideas and expectations of others can be represented in us. For example, de Beauvoir describes young women's first menses in great detail, and gives many different ways that it could be experienced. She writes: [I]t is because femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame.⁴ Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the body is representation of our attitude towards the world and the attitudes of others. Beauvoir does differentiate lived-body with non-lived body. She considers lived-body in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, as "the body is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world. It determines no behavior."⁵

Hence, the historical, cultural and social situation of an individual will mark how the individual is embodied. "For her, situation includes our embodiment, the place and time we live in, societal mores and our psychological response to and experience to these elements."⁶ In the given world woman is, Beauvoir stresses, forced to live in almost exclusively in immanence. Here it will be fruitful to discuss Immanence, to hold the idea of woman's situation as per Beauvoir. The body as situation is to be grasping in its totality only after unpacking the two key ideas of Beauvoir's philosophy i.e. Immanence and Transcendence.

III. IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Immanence for Beauvoir is defined as passivity, stagnation, confinement to repetitive tasks, and subjection to given conditions. Beauvoir consider woman as immanent because she usually sticks to conditions, which she has not chosen: biologically she is confined to the monotonous task of giving birth, and because she is not as strong as man is, she cannot actively engage in the same projects that man does.

In contrast, Transcendence is defined as engaging in freely chosen projects, activity, no repetitive tasks, and not being subject to given conditions. Transcendence for Beauvoir, as Butler suggests, "{is} a gender-free model of freedom as the normative ideal for woman's aspirations."⁷ Beauvoir suggests that woman should demand for their independence. Their sacrificial attitude makes them trapped into their gender. Thus becoming of a woman is the result of her own giving up nature before masculine gender. She should notice her capacity for transcendence.

For Beauvoir, feminine bodies and masculine bodies are not two kinds of entities but different variations of human embodiment. They both realize and recreate in their different ways the human condition, which is characterized by fundamental ambiguity. The sexual structure of embodiment has no necessary structure across individuals, though each individual does have their own necessary core of meaning that is the bare structure of their embodiment. Our bodies are locus of necessary meaning, and they also given meaning. Therefore, woman is immanent because of her adjacent bond to her body and she is not encouraged to engage in freely chosen activity. These concepts are significant to understand for Beauvoir as she uses these terms not only to unfold the idea of the situation of woman, but also in relation to any marginalized group.

Man, however, is free to choose and assume his conditions. In contrast, woman neither can decide nor can opt her condition. Since she is lock up to her feminine body, which binds her situation against her desire. She can never escape her body, thus situated in her body. As for Beauvoir "situation refers to how a human being

³ Kruks, 2016: 116.

⁴ Beauvoir, 2010: 156.

⁵ Beauvoir, 2004: 41.

⁶ Felicity Joseph, 2011: 162.

⁷ Butler, Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex, 1986: pp. 35-49.

as an individual consciousness is engaged in the world with regard to other people, to time, to space and to other products of his/her facticities.”⁸ It is important to notice that facticity is only givenness, but situation is about engaging in the world with these facticities.

IV. SITUATEDNESS OF A GENDERED BODY

The ‘body as a situation’ is a principal concept of Beauvoir’s philosophy, which needs to be, understood in its philosophical context. Butler suggests twofold meaning of body as situation. She says, “As a locus of cultural interpretation, the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations. No longer understood in its traditional classical senses of ‘limit’ or ‘essence’, the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew historical set of of interpreting anew historical set of interpretations which are become imprinted in the phase.”⁹ Situation as concept highlights the region and field of human conditions, which had been neglected by traditional philosophers. To be human, for Existentialists, is to refuse to accept the world as given. Whether it is God, Nature, Political Authorities or Parents, the authority of the other to define one’s embodiment and situate the individual within the world, must be discarding. It is also true that a human being, if aspires to occupy the place of the subject, the one who exists as the freedom of self-definition must take a stand.

The concept of gender embodiment is very much rooted in the situated body, which is truly Beauvoir’s discovery. Female body is, of course, gendered body, as per Beauvoir. Denial of her existence as other than subject must be demand from her own side. In other words, the body is a historical Situation and is slightly differs with that of facticity described by Sartre. That means body develops in a certain manner and it reproduces non-natural historical situation. Kruks writes, as “for de Beauvoir, my situation is always mediated for me by others- hence we have seen, her argument that I need freedoms equal to mine in the world. For woman (and other oppressed group), however, such a confirmation through others is impossible: paradoxically the social nature of her situation constitutes for her a denial of her freedom, not its confirmation.”¹⁰ Woman should revolt to the social structure decided by man for her. How can man understand her terms and conditions of living? Freedom always demands for some negation. Freedom is always freedom for something, from someone or collectivity and for woman it is always her situation which includes all these factors.

V. BODY AND LIVED-BODY

The distinction between body and lived-body, suggests that all material bodies should not to be treated alike. Being a body is not to be a lived-body. Likewise, living in a female body is not to the same as embodied with the male’s body. More significant is the way others treated gendered body (female body). Female body is always having been a matter of gossips on which society has imposed its norms, criteria and she locked up herself within the periphery of morality or ethics. She lived with her body, but her body is something other than herself. She performs according to the man’s expectations. To perform is to act and to act means valuing something. She treats her body as something other than herself. When we act, we act through our lived-body. Living being is not about breathing, walking, or about physicality, but living means to perform. To act upon your choice. If gender is a result of act, we must determine to act freely. Beauvoir wants to establish the point, “how to act must be given philosophical priority. De Beauvoir, like other existentialists, calls the impossibility of not willing/ acting the fact of human freedom.”¹¹

Beauvoir agrees with Sartre, “Man is condemned to be free”¹² and “Man is nothing but what he makes of himself”¹³ However, it is also true that, maxim does not fit in the Beauvoir’s concept of embodiment. For her, man is free to give his essence or definition to the world as Beauvoir says, She is determined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with “world belongs to men”¹⁴. However, it is not easy for woman to define herself in the midst of the world. Woman can only be defined as that which is not man or as the other.

⁸Tidd, 2004: 30.

⁹ Butler, 1986: pp 35-49.

¹⁰ Kruks, 2016: pp. 111-122.

¹¹ Felicity Joseph, 2011: 99.

¹² Sartre, 1946: 04

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Beauvoir, 2010

VI. CONCLUSION

We need to apprehend Beauvoir's vision of refashioning culture or ethics from existential point of view. Women in everydayness are not responsible for her deeds. Her life is dominated by her objective situation. Beauvoir claims that society is not the reciprocal division of the two sexes. Embodiment can be liberating or oppressing, it depends upon gender of individual, and not one's performance, act or choice. Thus, body is always a site of ethics. Society doesn't assign tasks and responsibilities, rights and actions same for men and women. Ethical action is expressed through the biological body; it is taken on, but it is not given anywhere or there is no rule which says gendered body ought to be taken as such or in this way. Body as a site of ethical acts, is constructed and not a natural given. It is about habituated in a certain manner. Habits can be broken, and thus ethics and moral responsibilities can be changed as per women's choice. This is the point of Beauvoir.

At the same time, we were intrigued by the middle ground between ancient cultures and hypothetical futures. Whenever I think of the vermillion body, I think of a house, she makes a house a home. What if this edge of vermillion powder draws on soul and not on her body, does this ethical site be secured?

Paper is an attempt to explore ideas at the axis of progressiveness and tradition, and speculate on alternative timeliness or different futures. It shows that biological differences will always remain; human being should change history by maintaining reciprocity among human essence and by refashioning ethics.

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