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# The Phenomenology Of Femininity: An Inquiry Into New Feminist Perspectives

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Simone de Beauvoir's influential book *The Second Sex* contains one of the most oft quoted lines in all of gender studies- "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." The following lines of the chapter contain explanations to the curious phenomenon that the aforementioned quote indicates:

If well before puberty and sometimes even starting from early childhood she already appears sexually specified, it is not because mysterious instincts immediately destine her to passivity, coquetry or motherhood but because the

intervention of others in the infant's life is almost originary, and her vocation is imperiously breathed into her from the first years of her life. (Beauvoir 293)

As the excerpt suggests, femininity becomes a condition that an individual acquires by way of it being instilled in the individual's mind by members of society. These 'members' seem to merely reiterate mechanically and authoritatively the age-old difference between the genders to the upcoming generation. So if as Beauvoir claims a woman is 'made', it is as a result of a state of consciousness that has been a part of the human condition speculatively since the origin of the ability to discern.

All this points to the common knowledge about gender differences being more of a



social construct than a physiological destiny. However, it does not provide any logical basis on which this thesis is constructed other than a historically consistent rhetoric. This leads one to question the basis of the assumptions that human society has embedded in the level of consciousness. It becomes self-evident that impressions about socially constructed typecasts of womankind pervade deep into the human psyche and is preserved in the name of culture and tradition. However much one tries to cloak the typecasting in cultural robes, its discriminatory nature is not easily denied. A genuine liberation from these typecasts would certainly need to involve a transformation of the state of mind.

Although several schools including Radical feminism which involved de Beauvoir attempted to bring about a revolution in the status quo of gender roles in society, the basic ideas regarding gender roles in physiological and psychological terms seemed to remain the same. Apart from attempting to acquire gender equity in all aspects of social life, the schools

always seemed to be at loggerheads at a society filled with people apparently always retaining their age old notions and intermittently acquiescing to the demands of the warring section of society.

A later development entitled new feminism attempted to appeal to society in attributing some of those aspects integral and inalienable from either genders. The focus is on ensuring that either gender understands its individual place in society and how their individual strengths and viewpoints complement each other, eventually striking a balance in the social setup rather than to target and replace androcentric power centers. This idea enables the populace to see their gender roles not as shackles but as opportunities with a goal-oriented purpose. The advantage is that feminism would no longer need to be seen as antiestablishmentarian or subversive and that instead of pursuing a dissociative path to future prospects; an opportunity for a unification of polarities in gender issues becomes possible.

The disadvantage is however that its perspectives fly dangerously close to the prior androcentric perspectives of the Roman Catholic Church, of which New Feminism is also born. Issues regarding the patriarchal hold on political and administrative realms still remain and perhaps seem to be supported in this new perspective. However, the theory of the ideology remains one to be contemplated in the sense that equal dignity to the genders need to be given, always ensuring that each gender understands and respects the importance of the other.

At this point of time it is useful to apply the ideas of the philosophical field of Phenomenology, the study of how the consciousness is constructed by the observation, understanding and absorption of every new experience. This technique provides the ability to perceive the consciousness of an individual to see how ones perspective on something is created and imbibed into the consciousness. The Stanford Encyclopedia explains it thus:

Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. (Smith)

A perspective on gender differences highlights deep seated notions of how, for instance, a woman should be. It restricts the freedom for self-definition in various subjects. In order to study this phenomenon through the lens of Phenomenology, it is necessary to see the way in which this perspective on gender differences is constituted. Like all experiences, gender differences are instilled from formative years in the human consciousness by the previous generation that is well coached in gender discrimination to take it upon itself to ‘educate’ the upcoming generation about gender differences at its infancy, even though the ability to decipher differences by oneself technically takes till adolescence.



The conditioning of the consciousness is a natural phenomenon that is explained through Phenomenology where every consciousness is shaped by every experience that is perceived and absorbed by it. The difference in the perceiving of gender identification is that it is inculcated by members of society complimented by a separate conditioning of external appearances of members of each gender. Even if one argues that the inculcation happens for many aspects in epistemological development, the identification of the physical appearance is almost inescapable, since the maintenance of the external appearance of each gender, mostly by the intervention of the parent or guardian, is catalyzed into compartmentalization due to pressure from society in making a male member look ‘male’ and a female member consequently, if not with more insistence, look ‘feminine.’

All of these aspects orient one to perceive a woman as everything that society intends to portray as feminine. The disadvantage is that this traditionally constructed image of

femininity pitches womankind in a disadvantaged position of passivity that results in womankind having to fend for equal rights in a predominantly male dominated world. The perspectives resign womankind to a state where she is always on the receiving end. With this status in mind, any and all perspective aiming at gender equity attempts to provision a certain amount of rights aimed at alleviating the disadvantaged state of womankind.

Although this approach is assisted and abetted by feminist perspectives and policy makers alike, a careful analysis of the perspective provides an alternate shade of meaning to the situation that could work in a counterproductive fashion. The act of assisting womankind also brings to the forefront the perspective that womankind is in need of assistance. The issue here is that since womankind is seen in a disadvantaged light, it seems as if she will always be seen as the one that requires assistance to get ahead in this world. Provisioning for women can simply mean that they cannot fend for themselves. It

is evident from the scenario today that this statement is not true, given the fact that members of any gender are given equal importance in being allowed to utilize the freedom allocated to every individual in today's empowering world regardless of discrimination. However, the contrary that there are indeed aspects to life that womankind need help with is also commonly propagated, as when violence or harassment of women gains a special voice among public spaces.

This is the point where New Feminism attempts to bridge the gap by ascertaining responsibilities to gender roles all the while emphasizing on the necessary importance and respect that the genders need to be given by members of the other. It turns out to be an attempt at reconciling the differences between gender roles by allowing the members of every gender to embrace their role with pride, thereby bringing about the stability that feminism seemed to take away from society. Beatriz VolmerColles, author of the essay

'New Feminism: A Sex Gender Reunion' makes the following comment:

... the self-fulfillment of women, rightfully advocated by feminists, is not accomplished by separating sex from gender but by acting in consonance with their true selves, whereby is revealed their gendered being. (53)

There is once again a need to examine this perspective for validity. It implies that gender equity relies entirely on balancing gender roles in society. The criticism against New Feminism is based on the power-centric state of gender roles, insisting that androcentrism is not merely a social structure but a monopolization of power by patriarchal society, provisioning policy making primarily to men and provisioning rights to women. Provisioning is established on the basis that meaningful gender coexistence comes from exercising power. Coexisting, which ought to be the ultimate goal needs only a delegation of



power, thereby making provisioning a needless act.

The crucial change that needs to change in the perspectives of human consciousness is that a woman is not one who needs special treatment. This also throws light on the possibility that true gender equity cannot be achieved while womankind is seen constantly in a disadvantaged light. In order to change this perspective, it will become necessary for womankind to speak up for the cause of not needing special treatment. This seems to go against every policy that aids womankind from being targeted, but it will be seen that it is a progressive step towards the seemingly elusive gender equity.

In order to facilitate such a perspective in womankind, it becomes necessary to consider the perspectives that womankind has about itself that manifest a debilitating side. If a woman is made, it can be seen that the woman is moulded as one who is taught constantly to be ashamed of her body. Her perspective of herself is a shattering one, infused in her from

adolescence in the form of chastity and virginity. The purpose of this perspective can only be speculated upon, be it a need to preserve generational integrity or mankind's need to ward off insecurity in relationships. However, a more controversial interpretation of this perspective is to see how it is utilized by members of the male gender exploiting it to extract sensual arousal either in themselves or their victims. This is often a negative aspect manifesting as crimes against humanity that ranges from eve-teasing to rape. The psychic scar inflicted seems to become a source for exploitation. It seems to become a weakness in womankind to attack and bring about an end to gender equity. The problem, in any case is still the perspective.

The ultimate solution to this situation would be a reworking of this perspective. It is then not an issue of protecting the sanctity of a woman's privacy, but becomes a liberating movement that removes the scarring aspect of feeling shame, which is surprisingly at the root of the perspective. This perspective is

expressed vividly in one of Mahasveta Devi's play entitled Draupadi. It narrates the tale of a woman named Dopdi who is caught by the police in the midst of a volatile communal battle and is interrogated by law enforcers. She is stripped tied down and gang raped all through the night under the pretext of interrogation. The tactic used is that the men of the story exploit the aforementioned perspective about a woman's shame to crack her into submission. The story however takes a controversial turn where Dopdi confronts the Antagonist Senayak and challenges him. Dopdi makes a startling statement:

You can strip me, but how can  
you clothe me again? (Devi 36)

Senayak is seen to crumble at the sight of the disrobed and molested Dopdi who does not crumble under the night-long 'interrogation' but rises like a phoenix to face her oppressors strangely liberated from the shackles that made her subject to the efforts by the men.

The importance of this literary example is that it bolsters the idea that the most debilitating

force present is not the power exerting male contingent but the self-effacing and shame-inducing perspective instilled in the woman by society. The resultant condition is that womankind always harbours the debilitating aspect within itself in spite of itself. A Phenomenological analysis suggests that this perspective that is instilled at a young age is what eventually diminishes the ability to transcend the sidelined position that womankind has in society. A solution obviously will need to involve a reworking of this perspective. It is not an easy task to say the least because this perspective has defined woman identity since probably the dawn of civilization. It will however involve the negation of womankind being seen as a constant victim and a benefactor of uplifting schemes. It will include members of all genders to consider the fact that the woman so far has been consciously designed as one with a self-destructive and shattering self-image and that its reshaping will involve the acknowledgement from all genders that

Womankind needs to be identified in a more egalitarian sense where the fundamental principles of femininity are reworked into a more individualistic and empowering definition for itself.

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