

# COROLLARIES OF GENDERED BODY ACTS: A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING

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## ***Abstract***

*The human body has only recently been recognized as an area of study within the realms of cultural studies. While the human body has a definitive biological foundation on which it works, it is invariably influenced by the cultural and social factors that shape its activities. Cultural studies consider these aspects of personhood that are created by the interdependent working of culture and societal hegemonies. In possessing a body of a certain age and gender, the respective human body is expected to behave in a certain manner. When these expectations are breached there is a sense of discomfort and amusement. The body has become a prominent arena of academic interest recently. These aspects were addressed by Foucauldian discourses, Feminist theories, and also the surging consumer culture. Gender is one of the most prominent types of categorization that works accordingly to culture. Cultural studies address gender as an exhaustive categorization and this classifiable organism is further categorized based on the cultural attributes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. This paper seeks to explore how each of these categories governs the way these organisms act and behave.*

***Keywords: Cultural studies, Gender, Hegemony, Masculinity, Femininity.***

The human body has only recently been recognized as an important area of study within the realms of cultural studies. Cultural studies make use of varied methodologies and approaches in identifying and addressing any issue, whose sole unifying code is the in-depth study of respective cultures and their historical circumstances. Cultural studies vividly explore and expand the foundation and boundaries of culturally produced perspectives. The human body is often attributed to the sole status of a biological entity, where it is invariably subjected to the course of growth and

decay, health and illness, and every other process that corroborates its identity as a mere biological being. While the human body has a palpable biological foundation on which it works, it is consistently influenced by the cultural and social factors that habitually shape its activities and performance. Cultural studies consider these aspects of personhood as created by the interdependent working of culture and societal hegemonies. In possessing a body of a certain age and gender, the respective human body is expected to behave in a certain manner. When these expectations are breached there is a sense of discomfort and amusement.

The body has been at the forefront of academic attention with the path-breaking notions put forward by Foucault, a few Feminist theorists, and the surging consumerism. Foucault elaborated on the ways power got inscribed on the human body through the intervention of different discourses, technologies, and beliefs. Feminist concepts addressed the embodied experiences of women. Whereas the mammoth surge in consumer culture has led to the accelerated commoditization of the body. A human body is bound to inevitably follow the strides of natural processes like walking, sleeping, and eating, but how the following must be done gets governed by these cultural factors. Cultural studies acknowledge gender as an exhaustive categorization, one that stays with the person for a lifetime and that eternally works according to the pervasive imperatives of culture.

Candace West and Don.H.Zimmerman in their 1987 essay ‘Doing Gender’ described ‘Gender’ as something we do. A child from a very young age imitates the adult personas around them. However, these acts of imitations turn into the characteristics and behaviour of the child as

he or she grows up. These are the situations where biological determinants like the sex or age of an individual decide the mode of behaviour he or she is expected to possess. Gender ultimately becomes the social amplification of biological sex. Although gender differences are based on biological differences, it invariably projects these differences on other levels of categorizations that are practically extraneous. For example, there is no logical reason why men should not be interested in excessive grooming and maintenance of good looks and why women should not take up aggressive and thuggish acts. Gender norms often fail to separate themselves from the biological determinacy applied to individuals. Although biology creates the binary of male and female in a society, it leaves certain characters out of definition, characters that fail to fit into the prototype. Beyond the standards of behaviourism, societal norms concerning gender, determine the way one identifies themselves and also others as a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’.

Gender is considered to be one of the prominent determinants of the cultural shaping of a body. Marcel Mauss, a French anthropologist put forward the notion of “body techniques’ that verifiably described ‘how from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies” (Mauss 97). It is important to recognize these ‘body techniques’ as something that gets acquired through time and the intervention of culture and history. Bodily actions can never be constituted as a universal or pan-human phenomenon; it varies according to the respective ethnic and geographical background.

Mauss further in his study identified how factors like age and gender shaped the bodily actions of an individual. For example, the way women hold a baby is due to certain unconsciously

acquired body techniques, similar is the case with the action of applying makeup. Women are generally perceived to throw softer punches than men, which are explained by Mauss, to be due to the clasping of their thumbs inside their fists. Physical duals also vary extensively among men and women due to these acquired body techniques, when these traits are easily transgressive and crossable. “Throwing like a Girl”, a 1980 paper by Iris Marion Young illustrates the altercating bodily movements among men and women by explaining the movement, spatiality, and comportment respectively adopted by them. This subordination of female bodies further worsens when they are reduced to the status of a mere object, identified purely based on their appearance and body. Therefore these notions regarding the engendered bodily capacities must be identified as an ‘inhibited intentionality’ (Young 145). These bodily concepts are not innate or logical. Modern societies effortlessly regularize this engendering of the human body. But it is noteworthy to remember that if these gendered body techniques have a cultural substratum, then it also has the scope for transformation. There is nothing biologically ingrained within the human body that makes them perform in a certain manner. Recognition of these gendered expressions as social constructions is vital for an understanding of the gender dysphoria under study. The human body is in charge of a communicative activity that emits these multifaceted and nuanced body techniques.

The inconclusive studies of the prevailing connection between physiology and behaviourism are primarily based on several stereotypical notions and biased exaggerations. The improbity of these established connections is proven through the variations that exist historically

and ethnically across the world (Keenan 1974; Kulick 1993). The gender concepts have been so strongly established that it has become considerably difficult to accept the individuals who go beyond these prescribed norms. There exists an insatiable pursuit for the biologically established dichotomy to consequently arrange the gender identities. Gender identities have a smart way of eradicating likeness and exemplification of minor differences, thereby strengthening the bigotry.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues about the vainness in combining ‘men’ and ‘masculine nature’. She refers to identifying masculinity and femininity as two parallel dimensions that could be passed over by individuals as per their preferences, which she terms as ‘independently variable’. She opposes the idea of dichotomy existent within mainstream ideas related to gender. She questions the inflexibility of male and female traits and concludes that it is that ‘some people are just plain more “gender-y” than others’ (Sedgwick 15-16). John MacInnes forecasts a time in the future where there would be no dissimilarity between a man and woman, except for the anatomical difference, “both in the real-world and our analysis of it is time for the end of masculinity” (MacInnes 47).

Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne put forward the three terms often addressed within the arena of gender, namely: ‘men’, ‘male’ and ‘masculinity’ and ‘women’, ‘female’ and ‘femininity’, where each of these terms differs and have no connection in common. They say “an essentialist “male-female” dichotomy cannot account for the ways people are gendered in different places at different times...the idea of “being a man” can no longer be treated as universal” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 3). Theorists like Judith Butler and David Morgan present gender

identity and related acts in the light of a Goffmanesque presentation. Here, the gender-oriented acts are identified as mere performances. The fundamental nature of gender identity is questioned by Butler who addresses it as a ‘performative act.’

There is a clear dissociation between gender assignment, gender identity, and gender roles. The gender assignment of a person is purely based on biological facts, done soon after the birth of an individual. Gender identity is the identity an individual assumes for himself or herself, depending upon how they view and experience their bodies. While gender roles are based on the essentialist notions of gender, driven by the gender regulations imposed on each one of the two respectively. A poststructuralist reading of these gender notions views them as pure discourses, permeated by power-knowledge relations regulating individuals based on their genders.

Gender has a concomitant influence on the ways infants are treated and brought up. There are different expressions of masculinities and femininities that transgress the prescribed boundaries. For instance, female bodybuilders stay clearly out of the normative patterns set for a feminine identity. However, this ‘nonconformity’ is often considered problematic. There are instances where these female bodybuilders are forced to reinforce their physicality as a woman, where they often opt for breast implants to restore the breast tissues lost during heavy training (Johnston 1996). There is a constant resurgence of gender roles, no matter how they attempt to transgress the boundaries of gender.

Human bodies become a medium through which individuals depict what they experience and perform as part of their gender identity. Gendered actions are the result of discourses and counter-discourses on the ways an individual is expected to perform based on his or her gender. Children unwaveringly follow certain gendered patterns based on the kinds of dominant discourses that intervene in their lives. They follow the exaggerated and exemplified gender performances as ways to avoid peer bullying or public humiliation, which eventually leads to stereotyped gender performances. To curb the surge of these behavioural patterns in children they can be presented with more varieties of the right kind of gender roles and identities.

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