

On the Issues of Body Vulnerability and Beauty Complex: An Outcry for Ethical Responsibility

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Abstract

The subject of the body has been a matter of interest since the earliest times. For example, the artistic representations of the body from ancient times in the form of paintings and stone carvings either for art's sake or as a religious symbol continue to influence us with the concept of 'body perfect'. Like any other physical entity, bodies are expected to fit into a 'mold' which is purposely designed by our society under the themes of 'body beautiful', 'body perfect' or 'body goals'. This certain demand for aesthetic appeal has led to a series of ethical and moral issues. Constant pressure on an individual to meet certain beauty standards has led many become victims of anorexia and dysmorphia. The demand for this aesthetic appearance is due to the rise of social media and glamorized consumerism. Stirring a huge rise in demands for plastic surgeries, and prosthetic procedures to reconstruct one's face and body to meet the standards of society. But the ethical question lies in how far it is morally permissible. There is a need for moral responsibility. For ages, the body has always been under strict scrutiny, governed and controlled by the societal constructs that dictate rules on how one should maintain the body, both outwardly and inwardly. Yet this type of control over human bodies by specific beliefs and ideals is challenged and questioned by new movements like 'body matters' and 'body positivists'. This new ideological movement under the banner of 'body positivity' or body positivists argues that all bodies despite the differences in weight and shape are beautiful. They aim to address the problems of body dysmorphia by liberating the body from all cultural prejudices. Therefore, the paper aims to critically analyze the ambiguity of the human body and the paradoxical nature of the search for beauty in the body. It shall put forward arguments by deeply analyzing the conceptions of the body, questioning if the ideas of ideal bodies were constructed and how to draw an ethical line while approaching the moral issues of the body.

Keywords: Body, Beauty, Vulnerability, Ethics, Morality

Introduction

“What is the human body? The human body is the whole human being from top to toe in the way it appears to us in our immediate

experience” (Bjurvill, 1991, p. 317).

The human body has often been considered to be an exclusively biological entity: the physical aspect of a person. Therefore, the

treatment of the body in matters of study has mostly been towards the biological and medical arenas. The body as experience, a lived embodiment is often ignored and underwhelmingly studied. So then, to highlight the significance of the body converging from the areas of subjectivity and embodiment to lived experiences becomes imperative.

Although the area that studies the physical experiences and embodiment of the body has been limited, we cannot claim that there has been no study. Chris Shilling in his work *The Body: A very short Introduction* gives us a detailed explanation of how studies of the body began to emerge in the field of social sciences and humanities under a broad area of interdisciplinary research known as body studies. According to him, this academic field addresses a wide variety of social and cultural issues, ranging from how traditional societies uphold a keen marker in maintaining the bodies, to changes in historical beliefs and cultural values that resulted in shaping the ideas of the body. To understand how the body became a viable and popular subject under humanities and social sciences we need to delve deep into the historical and social developments that raised the issues of body as an academic concern. For

him, several social and historical factors paved the way for the growing interest in the body as an academic issue since the 1980s, each highlighting different aspects of the body's importance. Firstly, he reckons the resurgence of second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s, which tried to highlight the inequalities done to women, especially in the field of health provision. Another factor that contributed to the study of the body in the academic field was the issue of ageing bodies. These led to the problem of body politics, where the entertainment industries tried to sell the idea of young / sexy / independent bodies, having an extremely negative impact on individuals falling out of this body category. The third factor was the increased growth in capitalism that encouraged consumerism. Here the body became an object of display, a medium to sell products and earn self-esteem. And lastly, the development in science and technologies that study and control the shaping and reshaping of our bodies (Shilling, 2016).

According to Shilling, body modification directed towards personal control and transformation is not a new concern, he mentions that the early Christians engaged themselves in strict regimes to control their body

to retain their faith. Cosmetic surgery can also be traced back to ancient times in the Indian Sanskrit text where accounts of facial reconstructions have been mentioned (Shilling, 2016). Bodily alteration has, however, become more individualized. The advertisements of bodies in the film industry, and social media are replete with bodily features that are young, sexy, and appealing with a definite structure. Unfortunately, those who fall outside this idealized image should redeem themselves by various measures like diet control, exercises, cosmetic procedures, and various other treatments that will help in altering the body; all to fit the criteria of physical desirability and attraction. According to Shilling, this type of influence has resulted in treating the body as a project, a raw material to be worked upon as an integral expression of individual self-identity. He provides examples of how bodies are used to build one's identity. For example, tattooing our bodies provides a stable means of selfhood for certain individuals, and in some cases a form of self-expression. Another case is how women bodybuilders use their bodies as a medium to challenge the idea of conventional gender norms. Bodies are treated as markers for social value and self-identity; therefore, a deep analysis is required to study the relation

between an individual's sense of selfhood and their vulnerability, with their body (Shilling, 2016).

The indefinability of Body

What is the body? The meaning and the value that is attributed to the body have taken its due course of change over time. A series of 9 articles written by Eugenia Ivanova titled "The Body as an Idea in Ancient Greece Series: The Culture of the Greek Bronze Age" to "The Body as an Idea in Ancient Greece Series: The Culture of Late Antiquity" discusses the idea on how the body has been perceived in different civilizations and cultures. Her aim in discussing the matters of the body was so that, it could help address the real and the illusory social pressure that dictates the rule of self-presentation. In her nine extensive writings, we can see how in ancient cultures people associated the female body with the fertile soil by the idea of its ability to give life. Many symbolic images, artworks, and ornaments give us an idea of how female images must have been worshipped. In her second chapter, "The Body as an Idea in Ancient Greece series: Heroic nudity," she describes how the concept of heroic nudity a scholastic term used for describing a phenomenon in Ancient Greece marked the start of an appeal towards classical artistic tradition.

This heroic nudity implied the depiction of an ideal naked body as an allegory of a complex of the highest human qualities, comparing the depicted allegory with heroes and gods of antiquity. Nudity reflects their strength and superiority, expressed in the ideal and the balanced proportions of their bodies. These artistic representations of physical perfection from that era of Ancient Greece continue to influence contemporary conceptions of the body. We are fixated on the image of an ideal body with balanced proportions. In her 5th chapter, Eugenia explains how later in the Ancient Greek Philosophy the perception of the body revolved around the period's desire to comprehend reality:

Originating from the desire to cognize reality in all its manifestations, philosophy forthwith pondered over the issues of the physical embodiment of a human being. The matter of perception and of understanding of the body were developed and solved under cross and social traditions, philosophical thought, natural sciences and medicine. (Ivanova, 2022, para. 2)

With philosophical developments and cultural changes, the concept of the human body became more complex than simple. The Ancient

Greece philosophers have devoted sustained devotion to the relationship between body and mind. This relationship between mind and the body, or body and spirit has been puzzling since ancient times. The idea of soul and consciousness and their relation with the body became a pool for debate. While for Socrates there is a dependency of the body on the soul. For him good soul by its virtue renders the body the best. Aristotle a philosopher as well as biologist says that "soul and body are not separate entities but two mutually complementary and inseparably connected aspects – the 'form' (morphê, eidos) and the 'matter' (hylê) – one of the same entity, viz. a living being" (Royal College of Psychiatrists, n.d., p.3).

Meanwhile, in the seventeenth century the dawn of modernity, thinkers like Descartes started to develop their notions that the mind and body are separate entities; it was with his philosophy that the dualistic nature of mind-body began to flourish intensely. According to him, we experience ourselves in two different ways: first, as bodies occupying a specific location in space and time and, secondly as a self who is associated with the process of thinking. For him we cannot associate ourselves with any aspect of our own bodies,

for if many of the attributes of our physical presence were to disappear, we would still continue to exist as a self (Burkitt, 1999). For Descartes, the idea of self, the idea of what I am is truly distinct from the body (Descartes 1640/1968). However, this idea is questioned by Ian Burkitt in his “Prolegomenon to Bodies of Thought” for him, the radical viewpoint of overlooking the body’s relation to the self is wrong because if we observe the connection between the mind and body we find the being embodied and located in the extended time and space is not only necessary precondition for thought, but rather, its basis (Burkitt 1999).

The idea of the body had a radical shift in philosophy with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, influenced by the thoughts of Husserl’s Phenomenological reduction; the latter presented an idea of the body that was different from Cartesian Dualism. His idea of the body was a lived body, a body that was involved in the act of perceptual process. For Merleau-Ponty the act of perception is fundamental to give us experiences of the world, this act of perception is embodied meaning that bodily experiences are fundamental to how we perceive, understand, and create meaning in the world (Burkitt 1999). Here lived body is a

non-object body that is involved in the perceptual process (Gallagher, 1986).

Foucault fosters a new idea of sexuality and power that ultimately defines a new conception of the body. For him, bodies can be understood as a surface of inscription of past and current systems of political power. Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I* claim that the body is a site of culturally contested meanings. He explains that bodies are constructed by cultural constructions. Foucault’s main idea was to describe how distinctive forms of power and knowledge have historically exerted a pervasive effect on people’s bodies (Shilling, 2016). His idea of sexuality and questions on power ushered a new movement and a new outlook later in both academia as well as in human society. His emphasis on the sexual body as a target and a vehicle for a new form of power and knowledge has been hugely reproduced in feminist analyses which shall be discussed later (Sawicki, 1994). His description of the body as culturally constructed has left a question on whether there is in fact a body that is external to its constructions, a body that represents a dynamic locus of resistance to culture per se (Butler, 1989). The question remains what is the existential status of the body?

The idea of the body has a dynamic shift with the approach of Butler in contemporary times; following the works of Foucault she questions the ontological status of the body by asking whether the body is ontologically distinct from the process of constructions it undergoes (Butler, 1989). Butler's concerns about the body, however, center on the issues to link the question of the body to the performativity of gender (1993, p.10). The idea that our bodies are shaped by social forces rather than being ruled by our natural biological factors is mostly contested by Butler and the advocates of gender theorists. In general belief, it is usually accepted that there is a fundamental and immutable difference in the psychological and neurological makeup between men and women based significantly on their role in biological reproduction. These facts of biologically sexed bodies are bound to constrain and direct the organization of society (Shilling, 2016, pp. 24-25). Despite these general views, the subject of sexed bodies and the gender theory provide an excellent yet very contrasting viewpoint to challenge how social relations and cultural meanings have influenced the assignments of a person's identity as male and female. The problems for the classifications of human

embodiment into two neat categories as men and women or what really constitutes the sexed bodies is now debatable. However, the paper shall refrain from any specific answers to this debate; the main idea here is to specify the concept of body understood in the locus of the sexed bodies.

Butler claims that the category of sex is from the start normative. For her, sex not only functions as a norm but is a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. Sex is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time (Butler, 1993). This materialization for Butler occurs through repeated practices of certain norms and dictates. For Butler, the question we need to ask is through what regulatory norm is sex materialized? For her, it is through performances i.e., arranging our bodies to engage in certain performances that are usually schematic and repetitive acts fixed in gendered coded ways.

For Shilling, Butler's focus on structured, gendered performances and performativity can help us indicate how the relationship between the body, sex, and gender is fluid, though appears to be fixed. This illustration of gender fluidity for Shilling is referred to the phenomena of transgenderism,

where a person feels immense dissonance between their bodies and sense of gendered identity; therefore, they deliberate upon and often decide to change their identity into the match of the latter identity (Shilling, 2016). According to Shilling, Butler's suggestion that sexed bodies can somehow be brought into being by performances is useful in addressing a key theme: "the difficulty of specifying what is natural or even 'real' about the body in the contemporary era" (Shilling, 2016, p. 39).

Social System and Politics of Body

Although the attitude towards the approach of the body has been different, the importance of the body goes beyond abstract and ambiguous philosophical definitions. Our embodied existence is a foundation through which we build our empirical experience of our society, identity, culture, and history. Through our embodied body we recognize our ability to shape our own life and create impact for others. Thereby, our bodies become important in both practical as well as in intellectual matters (Shilling, 2016). A holistic approach to the study of "body matters" and "body's embodiment" is necessary to be discussed, so that, we get a clear perspective on how we approach our everyday affairs through our embodied experience.

Our culture affects our idea of how we perceive our body. Therefore, a keen consideration is needed to understand these complexities of how the body is interrelated to culture, beliefs, and politics. How the body is constructed before and after the arrival of modernity, and modern science, and to what extent the beauty standards set by our society have affected the treatment of bodies. Shilling in "The Body and Social Theory" systematically describes how we conceptualize body, self-identity, and death. He highlights how in a "high modernity" society body became a factor for political and cultural activity. He explains how in recent times body has become a major interest; news and media are full with features on body image, plastic surgery, and how to maintain young, sexy, and pleasing bodies. This type of promotion has positioned the body within contemporary popular culture with an unprecedented individualization of the body. "Growing numbers of people are increasingly concerned with the health, shape, and appearance of their own bodies" (Shilling, 1993, pp. 1-2). Bodies are now either used as an expression of their self-identity or used as a marker of the individual's identity.

For Shilling, this rise of high modernity has led to a reduction or

a decline in the power of religious authorities to define and regulate bodies, yet modern science and technologies have failed to provide us with values and moral guiding principles. This has left many individuals to make their own meanings of life. As he says, "With the massive rise of the body in consumer culture as a bearer of symbolic value, there is a tendency that people in high modernity to place more importance on body as a constitutive of the self" (Shilling 1993, p. 3).

The rise for concerns about health, body, and appearance might have risen in early modern society however its impact is still apparent. In our current society the external body has become a symbol of the self, there is an unprecedented value attached to being young, slim, sexy, and sensual body. Society has created a rigid idea of who can be considered beautiful; any person falling out of those categories is often marginalized under undesired or ugly bodies. The desire for perfect bodies and attainment of body goals has been inculcated in us. We are either influenced or taught to attain such unsettling ideals. This according to Shilling is due to the rise of consumer culture. In the contemporary consumer culture, the media industry is a multi-million-dollar industry, often

profiting by promoting the business of weight loss and beauty. This marketing is further aided by big celebrities who have a large fan following. We often associate negatively with our exterior body, which results in developing anxiety towards our appearance.

This tension between the body as an embodiment of experience and a product of the cultural system has continually been debated. Bryan S Turner in his work *The Body and Society* terms this a somatic society and it describes how the body in modern society become the principal field of political and cultural activity (2008). With the rise of popular demand for young, slender bodies led to a rise of the body in consumer culture attaching a symbolic value to the external surface of the body. The body is now a symbol of the self. Shilling says that body promotion systems tend to promote self-care regimes which are not only associated with preventing disease but are also concerned with making us feel good about how our bodies appear to ourselves and others (Shilling, 1993). Therefore, investing in the body provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of possibly feeling good.

To understand how conceptions of ideal bodies are sold in our society,

let us examine some analogies brought out by some eminent scholars. Sabine Gieske in her paper "The Ideal Couple: A Question of Size?" argues how the picture of an ideal couple – taller man with a shorter woman, is culturally transmitted (2000). She shows how in the 18th and 19th centuries especially in middle-class society, there was an unconscious pattern in the selection of partners, this unconscious production of a specific bodily regime has gradually turned from social to self-compulsion. The requirement of a couple in a specific bodily regime is a display of our aesthetic sensibilities. It is not only the aesthetic appeal but often an unspoken display of symbolic gender roles that is generally attached to this ideal couple picture. To be tall is secretly attached to being strong; thereby being shorter in height in comparison to the wife displays a sign of being a weakling. Man and Woman as a couple is poured into a symbolic mold that confirms the stereotype of the man who is physically and intellectually superior to the shorter woman who is more delicate. She mentions that in the mid-century, these values have gradually changed, where an ideal union was based on emotional compatibility. However, the question remains whether the ideal physique and aesthetic sensibility

continue to influence us (Gieske 2000).

A paper by Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund titled "The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture" writes that there are thousands of healthy women in the United States who perceive their bodies as defective (1995). There is a myth of somatic femininity where women are somehow forced to pursue a feminine delicate body making them believe that their bodies are never feminine enough. She calls this a condition of somatic femininity, where women are deliberately and painfully made to remake themselves like cosmetic surgeries for breast implantations, liposuction, rhinoplasty, double eyelid surgery, fillers and botox, and dieting cultures. According to Urla and Swedlund, this describes a condition where bodies are dramatically accentuated under consumer capitalism. This fact becomes one prime factor that encourages us to consider the deviant bodies and the images of the feminine ideal that might be socially constructed (Urla & Swedlund, 1995). The most iconic doll in human history was the invention of Barbie, which was the brainchild of Ruth Handler, who was inspired to create Barbie after

seeing her child play with paper dolls. It soon became an icon, using it as a marker for women to achieve Barbie's body standards. As Urla and Swedlund write, it is not the motive to question or critique the idea of Barbie as such but offer a question that will enable us to see how there is an ironic usage of her body measurements by comparing it to the lived humans, especially women. "Barbie is fantasy" yet this creation soon hit the sociopolitical and cultural setting (Urla & Swedlund, 1995, p. 279). Barbie was quickly used as a symbol of femininity and class, enabling the impositions of gender roles. It is portrayed as an allegory of a good girl who is sexy with polished skin and hair, yet, is docile, innocent, and naïve. Barbie also made a perfect icon for capitalism as she was marketed with a captivating body, filled with pleasing clothes and lifestyle. These slowly were commoditized not only in the commercialization of the dolls but also encrypting the idea of being feminine and having a slim body.

This encryption of a slim body having feminine qualities is perhaps what Foucault meant by how cultural meanings are inscribed in the bodies. If in contemporary culture, an imposition for an image of an impossibly thin woman's body has become a reality then we need

to reconsider the ideas on how to recourse our natural bodies. The idea that one can manage one's body and choose the body one wants by artificial procedures and extreme diets, is a pervasive feature of consumer culture.

This idea of confirming to social construct, especially in the case of women has been heavily criticized by Sandra Bartky, a feminist philosopher in her book *Femininity and Domination* who gave us a compelling argument on how disciplinary technologies have produced a specific targeted feminine embodiment, where a woman is expected to maintain her female body with strict diet regimes and exercises, a woman is regulated by certain discourse on how to walk, talk, style one's hair, care one's skin and wear one's makeup (1994, pp. 68-74). Bartky argues the dominant control of patriarchal power and structure has programmed women to adjust their nature and appearance according to its standards. According to Bartky, this fashion and beauty complex commonly persists among women as they are often tied to a central component of normative feminine identity namely, sexual attractiveness. Another feminist who addresses this issue is Susan Bordo, who gives a detailed account of the cultural analysis of anorexia

nervosa. She argues that women are subjugated under the “tyranny of slenderness” unconsciously submitting themselves to men and their unnatural cultural standard for the ideal human body (1993, p. 154). Bordo gives us a deep analysis of the current epidemic of eating disorders as disciplinary technologies of the body. Following Foucault, she points out that the body has been a product of cultural practices, which not only shape and manipulate the physical body but affect the lived experiences of a person. According to her, anorexia nervosa represents the imposition of widely encouraged dietary regimes that have come to be associated with new forms of a healthy, attractive, and disciplined life (Bordo, 1993, p. 139). Although this study has been analyzed from the perspectives of American society, it is safe to assume that this type of control over the physical body either by societal constructs or through capitalist schemes is widespread and can be seen in almost every society.

Body Vulnerability and Responsibility

From bodies as an artistic representation that influenced and shaped body ideals to thinking bodies, governed bodies, and sexed bodies. The conceptions of the body have been varied. Yet the most

important question that lingers is how all the assumptions of the body make it vulnerable.

It is quite clear that based on gendered stereotypes it is not just women, but men as well that are subjected to the tyranny of maintaining their bodies following societal demands of the body ideal. Men are encouraged and expected to train their bodies so that they achieve masculine strong bodies: a display of strength and dominance. Meanwhile, women are directed towards aesthetic concerns, focused on appearance and dieting. The body is constantly shaped, monitored, and controlled according to the musings of social demand, which opens a big ethical concern on the vulnerability of the body and self-identity. The fragility of the body is undeniable in all the previously discussed social conditions. If we are engineered to assume that our bodies can be designed under the themes of femininity and masculinity. Then what defines this masculine and feminine? And if designing of the body was mostly to enhance the attainment of the better self, then, who is responsible for this design pattern? Lastly, if the body is reconstructed for the attainment of beauty and aesthetic appeal, the question of beauty and the search for beauty arises. Is the search for

an ideal beauty real? Beauty as understood generally can be said to be a harmony of a given state, where all elements are proportionate and in symmetry, something which is pleasant to look at, which can generate an interest on the onlooker. But if we are to compare this ideal concept to the body, then, a body is biological and genetically made up. It occurs naturally. Therefore, we are in an ethical dilemma to reconsider the sanctity of natural.

It is evident that during the Victorian era, women wore corsets and used various other caricatures to enhance their femininity at the risk of their physical health. This condition is a demonstration of the body's fragility and vulnerability under the demands of social standards. Historically, it was mostly women who were pressured by socio-cultural standards to look a certain way. The case is different in the present context. A person both man/woman is often valued based on their aesthetic appeal. If we look at the present scenario of our society, there is a case of pretty privilege; this privilege has become more and more evident after the increased usage of social media. There is a widespread phenomenon where the body is objectified. Body shaming has massively impacted both men and women.

We are unable to recognize that there is an unconscious production of a specific bodily regime in everyday life. This social compulsion has gradually turned into a self-compulsion. There seems to be an aesthetic sensibility that is deeply embedded in that we tend to idealize or fantasize. There is a symbolic mold where a person is expected to fit in. A certain type of body shapes tend to become obsolete and unattractive because society deems them to be. Feminine and masculine forms of embodiment are often used as a quality to be possessed. It is seen as a quantifier, a category to denote a person as being beautiful or handsome. Such criteria created by our society have led the human body under the subjection of a particular aesthetic beauty appeal. Therefore, it is crucial to raise an ethical concern on how social variables affect the body and lived experiences of a person.

If the body is a mechanism that enables us to move and function then our experience of life is undoubtedly experienced through our body. The body is constitutive of an individual's experience and perception. The body becomes central to the person's sense of self-identity. Therefore, there is a fundamental importance to address the problems of the body in the

sphere. We need to change and usually constructed by society, then deconstruct the ideals of beauty many individuals might fall apart. standards that are forced upon The question remains how we can individuals. If bodies are expected safeguard the real nature of the to keep up with ideals and trends body?

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