UNIT 4 RE-INVENTING THE BODY

Structure

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the female body has been a predominant terrain of contestation and debate in women’s & gender studies. By now you have already become familiar with the question of how the female body has been subjected to a symbolic space of ‘desire’, ‘lack’ and ‘violence’ by assertive male hegemony. In this unit, we are going to reflect primarily on how woman’s body is re-invented as a medium of protest against patriarchy, and the manner in which it is wielded with the power of emancipation. The unit will explore, through life narratives of women, how feminists have deconstructed woman’s body and the embodied femininity is redefined. Ranging from the sacred to the obscene female body, the unit will reflect on how the same body can be perceived as vile or aesthetic, and how it transcends the line between sacred and profane.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Recognize various traditional patriarchal stigma related to the female body;
- Explain feminist movements in relation to women’s body, sexuality, integrity, identity and power;
• Explore new visions adopted by feminists;
• Analyse the re-invention of the female body as a space for liberation;
• Describe the links between violence and the quest for identity and power; and
• Discuss ‘body politics’ in relation to geographical, cultural and political space.

4.3 FEMINISM AND THE BODY

We have been examining feminist discourse on the body in various contexts throughout this programme (see especially, MWG 004, “Gendered Bodies & Sexualities”). From these earlier discussions, you would have observed that woman’s body is always under scrutiny, subjected to certain ideologies from times immemorial. It is a space of vigilance, the panoptical space that may be violated or threatened for losing its integrity. It is restricted by social oppressions and perversions that limit its mobility. The notions constructed about the ideal female body are the outcome of patriarchal socio-political systems. In the larger context, the female body is also allegorised and seen as the metaphor of various social, cultural and political spaces of possession, annexation and transgression. As a primary site for construction of social and spiritual meanings, the female body can be seen sometimes as the national space representing nationhood and sometimes representing the mysterious dark space of witchcraft. The Belgian anatomist Adrianus Spigelius in his book *De Formato Foetu* (1627) has provided a detailed anatomical study of the female body in relation to botany and geography. The allusion between flower and female body is done on the basis of modesty and reproductive function. In his art, the abdomen and the placenta open like a blooming flower to the viewer’s gaze. The uterus for Spigelius is a space that requires proper fertilization and irrigation in order to transform it into a fertile ground. Irrespective of being a body of an individual, it is the site of power problematized by gender, race and class. Further, the discourse of occidental female body and the oriental female body is another area of inquiry. Whether it is Shakespeare’s Cleopatra or the African mistress in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1975), the black woman’s body is epitomised as the space of monstrosity, raw sexuality and sin, while the white female body is seen to be the citadel of purity, serenity and divinity. Marlow, Conrad’s protagonist in *Heart of Darkness* defines the mistress as, “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman….She was savage and superb, wild eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (Conrad, 1975, p. 167).

On the other hand we find that Cleopatra’s body in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is constructed as the space of Roman invasion, exploration and difference. Her black body is therefore the space of white fantasy.
Feminist counter-discourses have ‘re-invented’ the same body as the space for female empowerment and as pace that is strongly interrelated to their emotions and psychology. Over a period of time, in feminist discourse, the body has been reflected as the space of emancipation and liberation of the mind. Not only that, the same body is seen to be the bearer of embedded history, the ‘palimpsest’ of life narratives and truths untold that cannot be erased. For instance, Mahashweta Devi’s short story titled “Draupadi” revisions the eponymous epic character in a tribal woman who is rebelling through her body. Draupadi’s nude body is itself her weapon to raise a voice when she is being stripped off by her rapists. Mahashweta Devi has delineated beautifully how her sole possession which is the subject of male aggression and violence becomes itself a weapon of protest. In the year 2004, some Manipuri women stripped themselves publicly to protest against the rape of a woman by the regiment. Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon statement in his seminal work The Wretched of the Earth (1990), that oppression and violence can be erased by greater violence, the violence hurled at Draupadi is avenged with greater violence so that the object of lust becomes the object of horror. A re-invention of the woman’s body is thus brought about in this story.

4.4 THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND REINVENTION OF THE BODY

You have already learnt about the three waves of feminism in previous courses (see especially, MWG 001, Block 1, Unit 1). Here, we will review what we have learnt previously in terms of the impact of these movements on the conceptualization and representation of the body.

As you are already familiar now, the evolution of feminist movements is divided into three waves ranging from late 18th century to 21st century. First Wave Feminism, germinating predominantly in western world in the late 18th century, was concerned with equality of women while Second Wave Feminism raised issues concerning women of different ethnicity, race and colour. Second wave feminists started focusing on the body in terms of reproduction, abortion and pornography. However, the question of the female body still did not become the main concern. Third Wave-Feminism, originating in the 1990s, encouraged ambiguities, admired the body as the defining self, and celebrated individual sexuality as well as homosexuality. Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics, published in 1969, had already raised a storm in demanding that women must have complete right over their own bodies and must be free to explore their sexuality outside the constraints of marriage and maternity. French feminists like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray linked women’s writing to an exploration of the body (“écrire le corps” or “writing the body” in Cixous’ terms). These French writers and
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theorists protested against ‘phallogocentrism’ (the socio-cultural domination of the sign of the male sexual organ as the symbolic representation of power). They interrogated notions of woman’s body as a site of desire, “jouissance” or pleasure. Thus, to some extent Second Wave Feminism led to the foundation for Third Wave Feminism to explore individuality of the self and the body.

What, then, are the various agenda of Third Wave Feminism? The first revolt of Third-wave Feminism is against stereotypes, and hence it deconstructed patriarchal ideologies about the female body and embraced individualism. ‘New Feminism’ or ‘Grrl Feminism’ as it is called ventured into the male domain and reviewed woman’s body in the light of pornography, queer theory and eco feminism. It mainly originated among female musicians who went for a revolution that essentially reflects girl power. They named it as Riot Girl Movement. Here, feminism was redefined in the new light of punk rock. Bikini Kill, Lipstick Feminism and Cybergrrl Feminism were influenced by the notion of Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ (a cybernetic organism is a confluence of biological and electronic mechanism) about which you have learnt in MWG 003, Block 4, Unit 5.7.2). The encouragement to write about one’s own body is further enhanced by Haraway’s concept of the cyborg as it represents the search for a new code of language against phallogocentrism. Haraway attempts to redefine the female body in the new light of technology against the age old coercion of women to nature. The cyborg culture reflects on certain modifications of the image of the body. It breaks down the traditional image of masculine and feminine body and the cultural opposition between man and woman. In Haraway’s analysis the cyborg structure has no pre-defined codes and it is not necessary to appropriate the bodily structure to the codes of gender, race and cultural orientations. Representations of female cyborgs in movies and media reflect that they are devoid of stereotypical gendered or biological characteristics. Haraway’s revolutionary concept of cyborg in feminism further influenced Queer Theory, especially in relation to the notion of trans-identity. Haraway claims that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). The concept of the cyborg attempted to see feminism and the female body through the dimension of science, technology, empiricism and hybridisation.

The clamour to respect one’s own body and to recognise non-normative sexual identities and subjectivities is the main concern of these movements. The American author, Camille Anna Paglia, has dealt with such controversial issues in relation to woman’s body such as abortion, prostitution, sodomy and homosexuality in her book, Sexual Personae (1990). According to Paglia, the male ego tries to redefine uncontrollable nature in the female body. She defines “woman’s body as a sea acted upon by the month’s lunar wave motion” (Paglia, 1990, p. 9). This is because, according to her, woman’s
body is related to fluid from puberty to menopause. Many feminists have criticised Paglia as anti-feminist because of her radical comments. For instance, in regards to the violation and rape of the female body, she states:

Lust and aggression are fused in male hormones. ....Sperm are miniature assault troops, and the ovum is a solitary citadel that must be breached....Feminism, arguing from the milder woman’s point of view, completely misses the blood-lust in rape, the joy of violation and destruction...Women may be less prone to such fantasies because they physically lack the equipment for sexual violence. They do not know the temptation of forcibly invading the sanctuary of another body.

(Paglia, 1990, p.2)

In her book called *Vamps and Tramps* (1994), she claims that stripping is an art form that can be traced back to the practice of prostitution in ancient Babylon. She re-visions pornography as an art form and rejects the claim that erotic women dancers, such as belly dancers, are being exploited. Paglia claims that these women are independent artists, performers whose body is the material of performance. What is interesting in Paglia’s work is the altered look at the female body and pornography, and the eradication of the line of demarcation between dirty and clean.

**Deconstructing the Body in Prostitution & Pornography**

The above discussion about the dichotomy of the sacred and obscene body, the oppressed body and resistant body leads us to an important area of discussion. A prostitute’s body has always been looked down upon as defiled and unholy, the marginalised sexualised ‘other’. Third wave feminism reinvented how the same performing body becomes holy and unholy. The feminist pornographer Candida Royalle in her interview has claimed that “pornography is like looking at prostitutes. It [is] just another version of prostitution. Instead of being with a prostitute....you look at a prostitute” (Nagle, 1997. p. 156). This process of equating of prostitution and pornography both as performance provides us with an important way of examining the re-invention of the female body. Feminists like Luce Irigaray and Carole Pateman had viewed prostitution as male defined female sexuality or a kind of social contract that publicly encourages male sexual rights. In contrast, postmodernist feminist Annie Sprinkle believes that the body, while performing, feels empowered. In this act of performance, the woman is the sole controller of her body. Her body is in her control and she is, as Catherine Elwes explains:
author, subject, activator, director, designer. When a woman speaks within a performance tradition, she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions,... She is both signifier and that which is signified... There is no man-made script to give the male spectator an easy escape via author identification—nothing can protect him from direct confrontation with the woman who returns his gaze and demands freedom of speech and equality of communication.

(Freeman, 2003, p. 18)

From this perspective, the prostitute’s body is re-invented as a body of art. Even the body becomes the medium of articulation, an organ of speech, a medium of communication and empowerment. This reminds us how Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* used her body in a strategic manner to conquer Antony and Caesar. Her art of self-representation indulges not only eroticism and beauty but also changeability. She is always in flux, and her brilliantly arrayed body is always empowered to set Rome in turmoil.

**Check Your Progress:**

*In what ways does the performing body act as a telling life narrative? What can it reveal to us? Explain, using a gendered perspective, as discussed above.*
4.5 BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: THE BODY AND BEAUTY IDEALS

Woman’s body has been enmeshed in notions of spatial surveillance, protection and denial. The woman herself is deprived of the right to take control of her own body and contrarily, it has become an inhibition for herself. The idea of beauty as an essential requirement is further problematized by such discursive issues like fertility, civilization and power. Dominant beauty ideals have varied across chronological, geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries. Why is bodily beauty essential for a woman? It is significantly related to socio-political demands and therefore to her self-esteem, happiness and importance from the perspective of the male gaze.

Complicated by issues of race and colour, bodily appearance has often led to mistreatment and discrimination. Women have been running after whitening and anti-ageing creams, or suffering from anorexia in order to follow the western ideal of a lean, thin, white body. The dichotomy between ‘ugly’ and ‘beautiful’ female bodies is nothing but reflection of male gratification. Many feminist writers have therefore to unveil such stereotypical recurring definition of the beautiful and the ugly. One of the well known Australian feminist poets Judith Wright, in her autobiography called Half a Lifetime (2000) has delineated in her candid narration how she confronted her adolescent body as a space that stands for inadequacy, resentment and confusions. The male parameters for the female body have resulted in a constructed definition of an ideal female body which acts like a social force and orders sexuality. With her granny-glasses, large nose and teeth out of alignment for which she is called Bucky, Wright remembers her inability to be like the French sleeping doll gifted to her as a feminine model. She has hated such prioritized discursive elaboration of an ideal body and hence her body has not been admirable but an ‘abject’ space of anguish and lack. The term ‘abject’ is derived from Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory in her book Powers of Horror (1982). Kristeva points out the psychic trauma, revulsion and bodily disgust that is the result of a fractured self. Judith Wright also observes, in a frank manner, her hatred of her own adolescent body as a tabooed space:

The miseries of early adolescence had begun. I was acquiring lumps and spots, as well as the terrible little towels which I had personally to wash and keep out of everyone’s sight...I thought now that this curse has descended I would never again be able to ride horses or go swimming and would have to wear uncomfortable safety-pinned towels forever.

(Wright, 2000, p. 97)
Kristeva enumerates how the various bodily changes like menstruation, pregnancy, or sexual arousal account for a convulsion and release of anguish and anger. Wright’s lament is because of the space of denial that she inhabited after becoming conscious of the obligation of possessing a body that is always under observation. But in her later poems the Australian bard has endorsed her derelict body in the process of the evolution of the self. In the poem ‘Naked Girl and Mirror’ she loves her “swelling softness,” comparing it to the topographical space of Aboriginal Australia:

Smooth once-hermaphrodite shoulders, too tenderly
your long slope runs, above those sudden shy
curves furred with light that spring below your space.
(Wright, 2000, p.138)

Feminists have gradually rejected such oppression in favour of the re-appropriation of women’s bodies as the space of liberation and intimacy through exfoliation of the self. They have celebrated their sexuality through their body. An interesting essay in this regard is “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) by Hélène Cixous, in which she deconstructs Lacanian phallocentrism and Freudian imposition of passivity on women. The images of Medusa, the chthonic monster with her multiplicity of emotions appears in Cixous’ discourse as expressive of repressed desires and unrestrained impulses. The image of a woman with her wanton sexuality emerging in her writing disarrays all phallocentric structures. In the practical sense, one glaring example is the American pop star Madonna, (whom Guinness World Records certified as the world’s top-selling female recording artist) with her exorbitant libidinal energy in relation to her profligate creativity. Madonna’s exposition of the body has been subjected to several criticisms. The artist has changed her bodily structure from voluptuous to lean and thin. Her video Open Your Heart which exhibits her body, is seen by Susan Bordo as one that will “facilitate rather than deconstruct the presentation of Madonna’s body as an object of display” (Schwichtenberg, 1993, p. 287). (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snsTmi9N9G). According to Bordo, the new body of Madonna conforms to the new definition of beauty which is muscular and bony but “it conceals its praxis, it does not reveal its pain” (Schwichtenberg, 1993, p.286).

Madonna’s constant change of her images reflects the several culturally constructed feminine images which are essentially not her identity. These innumerable images reflect how Madonna has explored female empowerment through her body where each time a new identity evokes new challenges. Interestingly in her video ‘Open Your Heart’ we see that Madonna’s body ultimately sublimates into an androgynous form. Thus, what it signifies is that the culturally constructed image of a woman is unstable and yet Madonna’s empowerment lies in her ability to construct each time a new
image playfully stretching and deconstructing the boundaries of gender identities.

**Check Your Progress:**

What are some ideals imposed on the female body? Sum up, in your own words, how feminists have reacted to these beauty ideals.

**Activity:**

*Read Cixous’ essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”.* Jot down your reactions to the essay in the light of the above discussion on the female body.
Madonna has been the popular and encouraging epitome for later female pop artists like Spice Girls, Britney Spears and Kelly Osbourne who have popularised the concept of ‘Material Girl’. The most significant among them are the Riot Grrrls who ushered in new images of femininity by inheriting Madonna’s idea of incessant recreation of the image of the self. The Riot Grrrl band often projected the adolescent female body which has been subjected to surveillance and consumerism. They dismantled the appropriation of the feminine body as an industry for commercialism. Instead, the Riot Grrrls reveal how a woman’s body can create a room of one’s own. Instead of consumption, the body becomes a medium of production so that their style, their music and body art become the symbolic representation of their creativity. Their protest against reduction of the female body to an object of desire is registered through the act of marking and tagging of body parts such as stomach, hand, and forehead, as well as with lacerating abuses and political slogans hurled at women. The Riot Grrrls also rejected traditional cosmetics and accessories to decorate their bodies and instead they used crayons and sketch pens as a revolutionary style of their own. Their unconventional hair style, boots, tattoos and body piercing which may appear to be ‘unfeminine’ is a way to communicate their individualism and independence. In fact, their vehement appearance is sometimes criticised as aggressive by the patriarchal society because they destabilise the iconic images of women down the age. They have embraced images of ‘fallen women’ like prostitutes and whores, and redefined these identities with female empowerment. They also recalled the Amazonian women who have mutilated their left breasts.

Besides the Riot Grrrl band, another popular rock band called Spice Girls of 1990s also reflected athletic body with muscular bony stature. Melanie Chisholm, also known as Sporty Spice, epitomised her masculine body as the images of freedom and liberation. This bodily representation is complemented by a tomboyish attitude and gymnastic dance movements which represent freedom, unlike the restricted movement of women in the early days where it was customary that ‘lady-like’ attitude should be reflected in certain codified movements and postures. The constructed definition of ideal femininity has given rise to cosmetic surgery to correct the flawed body. Forceful reduction of obesity or silicon breast implants and various other cosmetic surgeries are examples of an indirect way of surveillance and domination of the female body to uphold the ideal definition of beauty. However, some feminists endorse cosmetic surgery believing that it can also empower a woman to take control of her body through technology.
Activity:
Can you think of a contemporary popular band/group/performer who either endorses stereotypes about the female body or questions the conventional notions attributed to the female body? Describe your views on the work of this popular artist.

4.7 RACIALISED AND COLOURED BODY

You have already become familiar with issues concerning race, ethnicity and gender from your previous readings (see especially, MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 1). In these units, we have already discussed questions of difference and the double marginalisation of women of colour based on gender and race. In literature by women writers, the dark skin female body is a space of duality—attraction and repulsion, fear and enchantment. It has been seen as the vulnerable and mysterious space inviting the gaze to explore and create myths and fantasies. The very famous Ugandan poet called Okot p’ Bitek has wonderfully dealt with the abuses that a black female body suffers and unfolded the real beauty and power embedded in the same body. One of her characters called Lawino in the collection of poems called Song of Lawino (1995) criticises the modern African woman who wants to mimic the white female body. The section is titled The Woman With Whom I Share My Husband and Lawino makes a sharp criticism of the English speaking African modern woman who desires to be like the white woman:
The beautiful one aspires
To look like a white woman;
Her lips are red-hot
Like glowing charcoal,
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood,

And she believes
That this is beautiful
Because it resembles that face of
a white woman!

She looks as if
She has been ill for a long time!
Actually she is starving.
She does not eat

She says a beautiful woman
Must be slim like a white
Woman;

And when she walks
You hear her bones rattling,
Her waist resembles that of the hornet.
The beautiful one is dead dry
Like a stump,
She is meatless
Like a shell
On a dry river bed.
(Bitek, 1995, p.18)

Bitek celebrates the African woman’s body in its representation of the famous dictum “Black is beautiful”:

When Ocol was wooing me
My breasts were erect
And they shook
As I walked briskly, And as I walked
I threw my long neck
This way and that way
Like the flower of the Lyonno lily
Waving in a gentle breeze.
(Bitek, 1995, p.39)
Inscribing the Body
Through Life Narratives

An African female body has always been the geometry of sexuality for the whites. According to the European philosopher Immanuel Kant, beauty is subjective. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1788) Kant associates beauty with pleasure and pain. A dark female body gives a discursive definition of beauty and reveals that bodily beauty has no universal paradigm but varies from person to person.

### 4.8 LET US SUM UP

Woman’s body has been the text on which men have attempted to inscribe hierarchical systems, cultural meanings, symbolic order and rules and regulations that are strictly male centric. In this unit, we have seen how second wave feminism raised the question of the individuality of the female body, while third wave feminism demanded woman’s right over her own body and freedom from socio-political demands. Deconstruction of traditional definitions of an ideal female body have helped to undo homogenous, universal, racialized beauty ideals. In so doing, women have protested that the female body is not meant to serve as a conduit for patriarchal ideologies. Thus the body is re-invented as a medium of one’s identity. In this unit, we have focused on the idea that, in the quest of the self, the body plays a vital role in defining women’s narratives within the cultural context. The revolution can be seen also in the field of music where female rock bands emerged with a new image of woman, sometimes bony and masculine, sometimes tomboyish and sometimes androgynous. Pornography and prostitution are no more seen as tabooed but re-viewed as performing art where the woman’s body is endowed with power to take control of the gaze. The body is no more a passive receptacle but in its re-invention, it appears as a voice that challenges, deconstructs and perturbs patriarchal ideologies.

### 4.9 GLOSSARY

**Hegemony**: This is a term coined by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony for Gramsci is a kind of predominance of one class over another in a way where the dominated class accepts the views and ideas of the dominator as natural. In a way the process of domination involves willingness and consent of the subordinate class.

**Panoptica**: This term refers to Jeremy Bentham’s architectural space of imprisonment which is always under constant surveillance. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault used the concept to exemplify that physical domination is not necessarily the way to control but constant observation is itself a way to control. Woman’s body like the panopticon is always under observation, and therefore dominated by the ‘gaze’. 
4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Explain the various body politics associated with female body, with the help of literary examples.

2) How have the different waves of feminism helped in the re-invention of the body? Discuss some examples of life-narratives which reflect these changes.

3) Comment on Material Girl and the reinvention of female body by female rock bands.

4) How do you think a woman’s body of desire transforms into a body of protest and horror? Explain with examples.

5) How do you think that identity and body are inter-related? What are new ways that the female body is represented in popular culture and media?

6) Explain the politics involved in race, colour and female body. How is beauty re-invented along with the body in literary works by women writers?

4.11 REFERENCES


4.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

