

## **Bodies of Subversion: Rethinking Body in Multiple ways**

**Binitha Rose Benny**

**Post Graduate in English**

**Mahatma Gandhi University**

**Kerala**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an attempt to subvert the traditional notions concerned with human body. The body can no longer be considered as a natural object. It has now been discursively constructed. The bodies are not only natural objects anymore that are to be acted upon but are inherently unstable. They are produced in multiple ways through various practices, which are also productive of certain subjects and political possibilities. The body can be seen as text on which many new inscriptions can be made. This paper analyzes Body Modification, Violence and Sex which are done on body that enables a person to go beyond the cultural norms dictated by bourgeois society. The paper also attempts to subvert the gender stereotypes related to body.

**Key words:** Body, subvert, body modification, sex, cultural norms

## **Bodies of Subversion: Rethinking Body in Multiple ways**

**Binitha Rose Benny**

**Post Graduate in English**

**Mahatma Gandhi University**

**Kerala**

The very concept of body has got different views by different people. It has been simply conceptualized as a natural object in general. The body can be called at one and the same time, part of nature, culture and society. The bodies appear in different ways in society. Some make it as a medium to resist the culture. Some bodies disappear from the mainstream in order to escape authorities. Very often human beings find themselves, bodily, in the throes of such self-violating and self-overcoming institutions, disciplinary practices, and systems of belief.

There are so many bodies we can think of. The body can be thought of as singular in order to explain an individual identity or can be thought of as a collective to describe a corporate identity. Similarly there are naked and clothed bodies, healthy and diseased bodies, sacrificial bodies, cannibalistic bodies, geometric bodies etc. The body is part of nature because it is associated with physical activity, sex and eroticism. And it is part of culture and society because it is associated with economic welfare, consumer culture, dietary practices, health and fitness. Cultures rely heavily on proper bodies to be glorified and imitated, and improper bodies to be scorned and excluded. Christianity has played no less significant a part in representing the body as imperfect, transitory and impure; that it is something to be ashamed of and transcended.

Body has now become a locus where various kinds of emotions, desires, identity and agency meet. The concept of body has now been all about a radical re-thinking. Various material, cultural and social practices determine the nature of our body. The body is a form of lived experience which is fluid and ever shifting. The traditional understanding of the role of the body has changed to a significant level in the recent years.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, many movements like Post structuralism and Feminism came into being. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault develops an anti-essentialist account of the sexual body, which, however, does not deny its materiality. Foucault argues that the construct of a supposedly natural sex functions to disguise the productive operation of power

in relation to sexuality: “The notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate” (Foucault 155).

The body has now been redefined by the argument that the physical form of a body is not a natural reality. It can be called as a cultural concept. It is a way of encoding a society’s values through its shape, size and ornamental attributes. A culture’s body ideals speak volumes about how the culture perceives itself or wishes to be perceived. It also helps us understand how conventions can be perpetuated, or else challenged and reframed.

Cultural views about the body are more than aesthetic; they are also moral judgments. When a person’s body contradicts social conventions regarding weight, height, and shape, that person may be viewed as lacking in self-control and self-respect. Conversely, people whose bodies comply with valued conventions are admired, praised, and held up to others as ideals to be emulated. In short, by judging, rewarding, and punishing people of different body sizes, shapes, weights, and musculature, members of a social group persuade and coerce each other to construct socially acceptable and similar looking bodies.

Culture always dictates norms on body. Culture tries to assert binaries to body. Femininity and Masculinity are two notions associated with body. Many attributes are given to feminine and masculine bodies from the very early times. Many recent changes give more importance to individual that they start violating these traditional norms and resorts to their own modes of living by changing the ways in which their body is seen by the traditional society.

A highly cerebral philosopher, Butler struggles with her desire to deny the materiality of the body. Although she would like to consider sex as a purely linguistic and cultural construct, it is difficult to deny the materiality upon which such constructs are based: “For surely, bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts’ cannot be dismissed as mere construction” (*Bodies that Matter* 11). However, Butler reconciles the conflict by considering that “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas” (*Bodies that Matter* 13). In this way, Butler can consider body as largely constructed through cultural and thus linguistic performance.

International politics has been characterized in recent years by a proliferation of modes of violence that use, target, and construct bodies in complex ways. “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (*Precarious Life* 26). Suicide bombers seek certain death by turning their bodies into weapons that seem to attack at random. Images of tortured bodies provoke shock and outrage and prisoners who engage in hunger strikes make use of their body as site of resistance. In each of these instances, the body becomes the focal point central to such practices; the body brought into excruciating pain, the body as weapon, or the body as that which is not to be targeted and hence is hit only accidentally or collaterally. Pain and Violence is deliberately inflicted upon their body in order to resist the authorities.

Violence can function to both make, and remake, bodies, not only in the sense of harming and killing them, but in making them into knowable types. Butler’s model of gender performativity also does not go far enough to account for the ways in which bodies matter; that

is, it theorizes bodies, in effect, as only blank forms to be molded by discourse. In recent decades, feminists have articulated a vision of embodiment in which bodies have a form of agency, bodies can be productive, as well as produced. The materiality of bodies is not only an effect of political practices, but such practices are formed in relation to bodies as well. Violence which is done on body is nowadays a new form of resistance to the mainstream culture.

Bodies can be seen as texts on which a person's history is written line by line. It is a metaphor to describe the nation, its territory and its political structures and hierarchies: the body politic. Our body can be a site of resistance. The body has got not just one language but different languages. Earlier writings on the body were forceful acts of inscription that were tantamount to body mutilation. There are accompanied by various ceremonial rituals that initiated a girl or a boy into adulthood. The various mutilations included the practices of pulling out a tooth, cutting off the little finger above the last joint, cutting of the earlobe, tattooing, perforating the hymen, cutting off the foreskin, piercing etc. Nowadays, self-mutilation is very common. In the book *The Body Project: An Intimate history of American Girls*, Johan Jacob Brumberg makes a point that:

Body piercing, once regarded as characteristic of "primitive" people, has emerged in the 1990s as the latest form of self-expression among American adolescents. Unlike aboriginal societies, where the part to be pierced is determined by longstanding ritual and tradition, contemporary teens face an array of piercing options, just as they do with food, music, cosmetics, and everything else in American life. Many girls spend long hours pondering what part they ought to pierce and what "piercewear" (i.e., jewelry) they like best. Although multiple ear piercing has been stylish in the United States for at least a decade, the repertoire of pierced parts has recently expanded to include the eyebrow, nose, and navel. There are also some audacious teenagers who pierce their lips, tongues, nipples, and genitals. Most adolescent "piercees" are ordinary high school and college students who listen to CDs, use computers, and talk openly about why and how they perforated their bodies.(87)

Some of the body modification practices are attempts to reclaim their bodies from a hostile or alienating contemporary culture. Body modification marks the body, inscribes it, and so constructs it within psychical, cultural and even political fields. In the book *Cultures of Fetishism*, Kaplan says : "The little mutilations take up her mind and enable her to temporarily escape from the frightening implications of being transformed physically and emotionally into implications of being transformed physically and emotionally into a woman with the sexual and moral responsibilities of adulthood"( 77). The modified body is often a grotesque body. It is exaggerated, inflated, reduced, distorted or deformed in a variety of unpredictable and fanciful ways, which are both comic and alarming. Identity is a phenomenon of endless transformation. The body disregards the conventional compartments.

The permanent and temporary mutilations and penetrations of the body even those merely feared and imagined) among the hunter-gatherer peoples were gestures fraught with social and celestial implications. Whether the mutilations had the same implications for the hunter-gatherers as they did for the anthropologists who observed them was never exactly clear or certain. It was, after all, a matter of

interpretation. As part of their professional indoctrination, the anthropologists came to believe that they were able to read the meanings of these cuts onto and into the human skin. The human skin could be written on. The cuts into the body were a text, and like any text, they had a latent meaning and that meaning could be deciphered and interpreted. (Kaplan 77)

We have become responsible for the design of our own bodies. No longer is the body conceived as a fixed essence. The changes that it undergoes are no longer regarded as wholly dependent on natural physiological processes. These techniques of self-development guarantee freedom even in contexts of overwhelming social power. The people who go for such modification of the bodies appears very unique in the sense that they wish to be part of a subculture and are normally considered as disgusting creatures by authorities.

Homosexuality is another form of bodily resistance against a bourgeois society. It subverts all sexual norms. Michel Foucault is a great supporter of homosexuality. It opposes the nature which gives priority to heterosexuality. Homosexuality is considered to be a sinful act from the very beginning of human civilization. Many people advocated compulsory heterosexuality. However, with post structuralism, all such traditional norms of sexuality is subverted. Sexuality itself became very free and open. Many groups of people begin to resist the mainstream culture by engaging in homosexuality.

The word 'sex' is considered as a taboo in our culture and all the languages associated with it becomes taboo. All taboos are basically connected with the body. It is basically the society which creates both sexual bodies and the distinctions amongst them. Many cultural factors contribute to it that is ideas about beauty, emotions, creativity, familial responsibilities etc. Representations of sexuality emerge from a cultures designation of a certain type of body as an ideal object of desire. The idea of body is now that of a celebrated body. "The ideal body is valuable object of sexual exchange. It is also an enduring body produced through training; and meant to compete beyond the pain threshold; a body in jeopardy, produced by putting the body at risk in the quest for excitement; a muscular body; a sculpted body"(Cavallaro31).

Thus human body is of innumerable possibilities. All the bourgeois concepts of body has now been violated and subverts the conventions of gender, sex, traditions and customs. The body has now become a unique entity. Everyone claims control over their own body and resorts to practices which they would like to do on their body.

### Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print

---. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York :

Verso, 2001.Print.

Brumberg, Joan Jacob. *The Body Project: An intimate history of American Girls*.

New York: Random House, 1997.Print.

Cavallaro, Dani. *The Body: For Beginners*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2001.Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality* Vol.1.New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.

Kaplan, Louise J. *Cultures of Fetishism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan , 2006. Print.