

Some Notes towards Postmodern Masculine Subjectivities

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The notion of postmodern masculine subjectivities implies the existence of a modern masculine subject which the post in postmodern has superseded. In order to construct a framework for masculinity in the postmodern, of how we can think about masculinity 'now', it is imperative to sketch an outline of the epistemology of the subject which remained dominant in the modern period, because the developments in the formulations of the subject over time in philosophy allow us to imagine and conceptualize the complexity of masculinity in ways that are counterintuitive. So the question to be asked here is: what are the ways in which subjectivities were conceived and constituted in the modern world that could not sustain themselves in the world after the demise of Enlightenment ideas and ideals? How did we think about consciousness, its capacities and limitations in modernity and what happens to that in postmodernity?

Before I begin, I must state that there is a significant amount of debate on whether the sociological or philosophical claims of postmodernism, its proposed distinguished ontology of the present from the ways of being and doing in a certain modernist past is legitimate. On the one hand, we have Jean Baudrillard who has a "vision of the postmodern world as one of rootless, circulating fictions" (Meštrović 18); Scott Lash who uses postmodernism to refer to a 'cultural paradigm' which maps cultural change, cultural type and social stratification in contemporary society and this phenomenon in the culture is characterized by a set of 'de-differentiations', say, for example, between the cultural and the social which were differentiated in the modern era (36). We also have Frederic Jameson who uses the category of postmodernism to refer to 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'.

On the other hand, there are critics who read the contemporary as merely the extension of the modern ethos and resist using the term postmodern as a word for 'the way we live now' (Ferguson and Wicke 1-2). Hence, we see Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens using 'Liquid' and 'High' Modernity to refer to the idiosyncrasies of the contemporary and clearly avoiding the 'post' to prevent giving a sense of the complete obliteration of Enlightenment values in the late 20th and 21st century. However, even in the presence of convincing criticism of postmodernism as a category that encapsulates the vagaries of the present, it can be of value to note the ways in which the values of the modern find rejection or resistance in the contemporary.

The tenets that posit a modern stable self which is capable of producing objective knowledge and interpretations of the world with the help of universal rationality find expression in Enlightenment philosophy beginning from Descartes' declaration of individual consciousness being the producer of all truth and knowledge "when he makes the 'I think' the main point of certainty upon which philosophy can build" (Bowie 1). This tradition of foregrounding individual consciousness responsible for the creation and validation of truth is carried on by a host of other philosophers such as Rousseau and Kant. These formulations emphasize the 'I' in the creation of

the modernist epistemology in which the idea of an autonomous rational human subject becomes the centre of all discourses superseding the central role that the concept of God or supernatural powers played in the mediaeval world.

The Enlightenment thus makes a case for secular and objective, though provisional, knowledge produced by rational, autonomous subject remarkably different from theology which does not change its position even in the light of new insights. The producer of such knowledge though, this subject of modernity comes into critique in the latter half of the 20th century, and is replaced by a new subjectivity. As Nick Mansfield asserts:

the theories of subjectivities that have dominated the last thirty years of literary and cultural studies all agree on one thing. They reject the idea of the subject as a completely self-contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its own unique essence. Uniformly, they identify this image of subjectivity with the Enlightenment (13).

Post the rejection of the autonomous subject of the Enlightenment, the new subject of postmodernism appears to be decentred: lacking what Jameson calls 'cognitive maps', he is "adrift in the world without the reference points that nineteenth century and modernist humanism provided" (Mansfield 164). Rosemarie Tong presents this radical change in the formulation of the subject as well some other features of postmodernity:

There is neither a stable self nor rational powers capable of yielding universal knowledge. Truth is whatever power proclaims it to be. Freedom is the power to do as one pleases, however irrational or nonbeneficial one's actions may be judged. Science is no more objective than politics or ethics, both of which are subjective, contextual, historical, contingent, and almost always deployed to serve self-interest. And language does not represent reality, because there is no reality for it to signify. On the contrary, language constructs reality- a reality that depends on words for its existence (207).

In the origin and consolidation of the decentred subject of postmodernity, Althusser has played a crucial role by positing the concepts of Ideological and Repressive State apparatuses in which he assigns institutions such as education, religion, the family, culture and media as apparatuses "within which we assume identities and become subjects" (Weedon 6). The social and cultural institutions of marriage, family and education produce discourses within which the individual is linguistically assigned subject position when the individual responds to the 'hailing' of the discourse. Discourses are always there before the arrival of the body and the subject positions the body takes happens within the discourse. If Enlightenment posited the individual as a transcendent subject which remains up above the realm of the culture; following Nietzsche and Foucault, the perspective on the constitution of the subject gets a dramatic shift in postmodernism, and the subject comes to be seen as constituted by social forces, a product of a multiplicity, overdetermination of discourses. This tradition of putting the subject firmly within language, discourse, and power finds much more emphasis in the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault who have shaped much thinking on gender in the last few decades and both theorists can be leveraged to construct of a postmodern decentred subjectivity for the male subject. Butler's notion of gender performativity, which is truly a postmodern feminist view, attacks the modernist tradition so much so that the category of 'woman' which the feminist theory and politics endeavours to emancipate from oppression is deemed empty.

Butler's paradigm is essentially a radical extension of the social constructionism present in the works of earlier gender theorists and renders all acts of human interaction, irrespective of how 'normal' or natural they seem, as a form of performance in which the performer is not all that

different from performance as everything is performative. This notion of performativity is of course derived from a tradition of philosophy of Nietzsche, Foucault, and J L Austin which firmly posits the construction of subject positions as a discursive act and in which the subject does not exist before and beyond the discourse on it. Foucault also puts discourse at the centre in his new history of ideas wherein it comes to shape our perceptions about the world and thereby participates in its construction. For Foucault discourse refers to

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations which inheres in such knowledges and reactions between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 108).

Butler's theory of gender performativity questions the allegedly stable category of 'woman' which feminist politics claims to speak for and attempts to liberate. Each woman as an individual is unique and there are a number of differences between them along the axes of class, race, and ethnicity, hence it would be a falsity to put them all in one box because of their sex, or because of their ability to give birth, as such a process shall lead to the exclusion of a number of women who cannot or are unwilling to get pregnant. Therefore, "the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding term" (Butler 1). She writes that "by conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject; feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (5). This ontological fallacy, according to Butler, calls for a new epistemology in which the very category of woman is destabilized or deconstructed to fight the same 'ideological regimes of power' that have brought 'woman' into being and has situated it in binary opposition with 'man'. As Loxely confirms, the identity of women "has been forged both through the intellectual and political work of feminism itself and also- more troublingly- through the regimes of power and ideology [feminism] opposes" (114).

Also, for Butler, gender and desire do not emerge in a linear fashion from one's sex. The idea that gender gets socially inscribed on naturally sexed bodies is problematized by Butler in a way in which sex itself is posited as a cultural category which is governed by gender. If sex is a cultural category, unlike the vision of previous theorists such as Simone De Beauvoir, who had maintained Enlightenment dualism between sex and gender, in which the former was natural and the latter cultural, then the ontological stability enjoyed by 'woman' in the feminist and the commonsensical discourse gets exploded. Butler's extreme culturalism keeps both sex and gender within the paradigm of cultural and discursive constructionism and deems woman's being problematic. She writes that "if there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (45).

This influential perspective of Butler which does away with the stability of sex, gender, and desire and posits 'woman' as a subject always in the process of becoming has significant implications for the reformulations of conceptual boundaries within which the concepts of men and masculinities are conceived. If the category of woman can be rendered empty, then the same can be said of men. Indeed, if looked at closely, it can be easily submitted that the idea of what a man is or should be changes from time to time and from culture to culture and any strict definition would lead to the exclusion of many male bodies that do not subscribe to that notion. Ruth Vanita draws our attention to such shifting contours in the perception of masculinity using her work on Urdu poetry from the late eighteenth century to the nineteenth century in which she

identifies a "shift in perception and practice of masculinity [in] urban Indian men's transformed relationship to dress" (Dasgupta and Gokulsing Intro). Dressing up in heavy jewelry and brightly coloured embroidered clothes, she writes, did not appear a sign "for effeminacy or any particular sexual predilection" in pre-1857 North Indian culture. In fact, "noticing and commenting positively on another man's looks and dress was both common in both poetry and prose at this time", however, these ways of being for men witness a remarkable change with the experience of British colonization. The fondness for bright colours and extravagant jewels among men fades out along with "certain attitudes to pleasure, play and sexuality" and gives way to drab Western dress. Vanita's attempt to display masculinity's contingency according to temporal frames is successful; and it is also worth noting that the ubiquitous practice of holding hands among Indian men is seen as a homoerotic gesture by their counterparts in the West. Even though Ruth Vanita implicitly and unwittingly promotes the notion that men in a particular culture and a given/ set time frame act and behave in a singular manner, and the possibilities of signaling the fluidities with a singular culture or time are somewhat lost; yet her reading does relativize the performance of masculinity according to space and time and is also skeptical toward the metanarrative of a natural unitary masculinity, and therefore directly adheres to the ethos of postmodern cultural theory which emphasizes relativism and a cynicism toward grand narratives. Echoing Ruth Vanita, Todd Reeser also presents cases where:

Students of the European Renaissance... are often struck when they read heterosexual men's writings about their intimate love for other men. They are even more struck when they learn that this writing does not make male writers seem effeminate or homosexual in their socio-historical context, but that, quite the contrary, expressions of male-male intimacy are more likely to reaffirm their masculinity...[and]... while some French men might appear effeminate by other cultures' standards, in context this is usually not the case (2)

While such examples from these authors consolidate a case for multiple configurations of masculinity across cultures and across time, it is also important to point out how such knowledge of masculinity militates against the notion of a uniform oppression of women by men. As Berggren affirms that, "there are difficulties in reconciling an attempt to capture historical variability [of masculinity] with the presumption of a transhistorical structural notion of men's power over women" (234). As the nature of gender and desire cannot be pinned down with an absolute surety given the fluidity of both categories, but what about sex? Sex as a gift of nature and its distance from culture has been a dominant notion in traditional materialist feminist theory, and because critical studies on men and masculinities have come to happen under the intellectual shadow of feminist theory, this binary between sex as naturally stable and gender as culture finds implicit replication in much of theorization on masculinities. As Reeser writes to show how conventional ideas on sex assign it stability even if gender may be posited as historical: "masculinity might be open to change, but maleness remains fixed. A man can change his relationship to violence or homophobia, it may be imagined, but biology cannot change" (72). Part of the reason why gender as well as sexuality are seen in stable terms is because of the notion that both gender and sexuality emerge directly from sex; hence any radical destabilization of sex as a natural and stable category will automatically lead to the explosion of normative and solid ideas of gender identity and sexuality. In such an endeavour postmodern theory is greatly applicable, as "the primary shibboleth of postmodern theory...is its deprecation of "identity" in any form, whether conceptual or logical self-identity, referential identity, or the singular identity of the subject" (Ferguson and Wicke 11-12). When Butler declares, following Derrida and Foucault, that discourse constructs the subject it speaks of and that the subject never really reaches a point

of being, this trajectory of theorizing constructs a masculine subject that never is, but is always in the process of becoming. In such a scenario, the idea of the complete, unified, socially constructed masculine identity is untenable; therefore, the notion that men, the container or the possessor of masculinity, an oppressive identity that is solid, can be discredited. Men perform masculinity in multiple ways, their sex is a product of discourse, and they are always in the process of becoming masculine, but never are, and therefore this fluidity, this instability cannot allow for the creation of men as a category that is uniformly oppressive.

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