

Culture Always Operates Through and in the Body: How Culture Constructs and Reshapes the Female Body

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between culture and the body, with a particular focus on the female body and the cultural construction of its biology by society. Culture always operates through and in the body, which is often embodied through the spheres of labour, production and reproduction, and is constantly reinforced in scientific knowledge and social common sense. This article is based on the literature research method to explain this view. The article explores the ways in which scientific knowledge and social practices perceive and shape women's gender and bodies from different perspectives such as labour, production and reproduction, concluding that culture always constructs and operates on the female body. At the same time, the female body is not only culturally defined and interpreted, but also culturally and economically altered in a physical sense. Biological science and society's traditional views on gender and the body are deeply entrenched and need to be changed in many ways, from the law, education, publicity and, most fundamentally, institutional and policy direction.

Keywords: culture, female body, labour, production, reproduction

1. Introduction

When we talk about the body, our first thoughts are about the figure, body structure, health and disease. And we find it difficult to separate these words from "natural". Actually, the human body is not entirely natural. Our perceptions of our bodies and those of others are shaped by socio-cultural concepts. Culture is always expressed and acted through the body. So, are there physical activities that are completely natural and free from human interference? Or does culture always operate and express itself through or in the body? Or how does culture construct a system of theories about the body? Before giving my view, I think it is important to review the relationship among the human body, physiological activities and cultural constructs.

In recent years, research on the female body has focused on the perspectives of appearance anxiety, body imagery, femininity and identity politics. Transnational cultural and economic mobility has had an impact on Indian society, with women occupying a confident screen presence in recent Bollywood films, rather than the traditional subordination to the male protagonist (Ahad & KoçAkgül, 2020). Some scholars have also studied the attitudes of American college women towards having their bodies pierced or tattooed, which also provides insight into women's relationship to their bodies, and bodily practices (Kwan et al., 2020). And in recent years, through social media, media campaigns and public exposure, we can also see how the state discursively constructs women's bodies and identities (Rahbari et al., 2019), and how individuals re-examine their bodies and manage their images (Phillips & Halder, 2019; Boothroyd et al., 2020).

In these studies, the body, especially the female body, is holistic, cultural imagery that carries political discourse from the large to the national and social, and cultural metaphors from the small to the individual aesthetic. In this article, however, I want to turn my attention to the female body in a biological sense as a way of exploring how the female body is perceived and shaped by society throughout each life course.

The physiological process of human beings from fertilisation to birth to growth to death cannot be defined or intervened in without culture. Science and technology, as well as biomedical knowledge, play an important role in this. For most biological scientists, many technical terms are self-evident and some descriptions of physiological activities are consistent with natural and biological characteristics. Common sense is derived from this simplified

and widespread scientific knowledge. This scientific knowledge and common sense are written into textbooks, put into the media and promoted as a point of knowledge that generations have taken for granted. However, it is argued that the application of science and technology is itself highly subjective and ambiguous. Social constructivists make it clear that official ideologies of objectivity and the scientific method are particularly poor guides to the actual formation of scientific knowledge. Like the rest of us, scientists believe or say that what they do and what they actually do are highly inappropriate (Haraway, 1988). Our stereotypical thinking and power systems have a profoundly constructive effect on science and technology, and there are traces of artificiality in neutral, objective natural science. In turn, these sciences and technologies enter the public eye and are believed by the public, thus deepening the ideas that guide this science and technology. We can see that the body, the physiological activity, does not have a one-way effect on cultural knowledge, we also see culture conceptually constructing the body in turn — it is a two-way interactive process.

Generally speaking, the construction of our bodies by scientific knowledge becomes our first impression of the body, which is one-sided, preconceived and even full of prejudices and stereotypes. This essay offers a more diverse perspective on the development of gender studies and feminism by reflecting on and critiquing this current scientific phenomenon and understanding the body of culture and cultural knowledge in the body from the perspectives of labour and reproduction.

As a result, I would like to claim that social culture constructs as well as regulates the body through gender, class, labour, etc. And people's perceptions of the body are reinforced by scientific knowledge and social common sense. Here I want to examine the ways in which culture produces new constructions and outputs of knowledge about the female body. The awakening of feminism has gradually broken this convention and begun to deconstruct traditional systems of power, such as scientific discourse, to pursue the power of interpretation and control over the self-body. I will then give some examples of how the female body has been defined and shaped in social culture, from the perspective of gender, labour and production and reproduction respectively.

2. How Folklore and Scientific Knowledge Explain Body and Biological Process

2.1 Gender Metaphors in Biological Knowledge and Common Sense

Emily Martin (1991) focuses on the relationship between biological knowledge and cultural constructs: established scientific knowledge is not all-natural, but based on social stereotypes of gender roles and the construction of cultural concepts that map women's social status onto natural science, giving women's natural bodies the same status and nature as theirs in society; at the same time, she suggests that science is culturally constructed and a system of culture, and that science, nature and society and culture are not antagonistic but interact and intermingle.

For example, the description of egg activity, and the relationship between sperm and egg, reflects the socially established cultural ideas that biologists project onto their observations, records and even interpretations. In popular perception, the male symbolises dominance and power, and the female symbolises passivity and acceptance. As the saying goes, a woman's beauty is a scourge. The analogy of this proverb to the sperm-egg relationship is the "fragility, senility and wastefulness" of the egg; it also alludes to the aggressive metaphor of the sometimes-active nature of the egg — she had done nothing but cause disaster because of her pretty face. This cultural environment and this personification are reproduction and reinforcement of the role of women in society. The story that so many people enjoy is also the "hero saves the beauty", in which the male hero plays a brave and aggressive role, while the female protagonist is simply the one who needs to be rescued from her predicament. In other words, men are active and aggressive, women are passive and reactive. This view is also one of the criteria guiding the gender division of labour in modern society: women are often advised to become teachers, doctors and other secure jobs, while men are encouraged to choose jobs that require a lot of energy, such as firefighters and police officers. Coincidentally, this perception of the gender binary is widely accepted in both the West and China. In traditional Chinese culture, yin and yang represent the feminine and the masculine. Yin means moon, which means women, who are placid, passive, dormant and cold; Yang means sun, which represents men, who are hot, positive, active and sunny. The Chinese people, in their quest to reconcile yin and yang, often use gender as an analogy, for example, the saying "Men and women work well together", where the two genders, male and female, have their strengths and weaknesses, and their strengths and weaknesses are opposites, so that they must be combined to complement each other.

So, the process of fertilisation, in the eyes of the public, must be one in which the sperm is active, and the egg is passive. When talking about fertilisation, an image must come to our mind of a swarm of tadpole-like dexterous sperm competing to surround the poor bulky egg, and whichever sperm is faster and stronger gets to possess the egg. This is already a culturally acceptable and self-evident truism. However, Emily Martin's (1991) collection of

medical data shows that the opposite is true. Under the microscope, the sperm appeared to be passive and slow-moving, with the egg having a target on its exterior as a means of aggressively searching for the right sperm to actively complete the fertilisation process.

An obvious challenge for feminism, therefore, is to evoke similar metaphors in science, especially those involving descriptions of the egg and sperm, which will lead to a better understanding of nature, and a better understanding of how familiar, socially customary practices about gender are naturalised.

2.2 *Stereotypes of Female Physiological Activity*

It is no coincidence that, in addition to some physiological phenomena, the process of female reproduction is subject to multiple socio-cultural and power constructs. Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause: several specific stages are stamped with stereotypes, and menstruation and menopause, in particular, are stigmatised and marginalised, yet these are precisely the stages that demand attention from women, whose perceptions of these life stages are often very different from the social consensus.

Menstruation is synonymous with obscenity in most cultural systems. In ancient China, menstruation, like childbirth, was taboo. Men were not allowed to see blood because it was “dirty”, so even though a wife gave birth, her husband was not allowed to enter the delivery room, which was more of a cultural taboo than a hygienic function. In China, after giving birth, women should have a confinement period (*zuo yue zi*) for around one month, during which they are not allowed to see outsiders. Instead, they should stay at home, lie in bed covered with blankets, and not even take a bath or wash their hair. On a physical health level, it is believed that this method is in keeping with the specific constitution of East Asians and allows women to recover better after giving birth. Digging deeper into the cultural aspect, the menstrual cycle symbolizes the woman who has to expel the blood that accumulates in her body after childbirth, a physiological phenomenon that is hidden and difficult to see, and which is also called lochia. This word is called “dirty dew” (*e lu*) in Chinese and means disgusting, bad fluid. And this pejorative term is not only used in folklore, but also by obstetricians in hospitals when helping women recuperate from childbirth. In addition to childbirth not being seen, menstruation is even more so. For example, women who are menstruating are not allowed to go to sacred places like temples. Women are mostly referred to as having their period as “having an unclean body”. In other words, the blood that comes out of a woman’s body is very often considered unclean or even unlucky. In contrast, virgin blood has no dirty connotations, as it represents newness and cleanliness. It is all the same blood, but it has a very different meaning because of its age and status. In contemporary society, however, many women or men are reluctant to refer to menstruation, often using the word “that” instead, because of the association between menstruation and sex. Socio-cultural factors are deeply embedded in social and even biological phenomena, manifesting themselves in people’s bodies, and in turn reinforcing this conventional thinking through academic discourse and folklore.

3. The Body of Labour, Production and Reproduction

The body of labour refers to the demands and controls placed on the body by women at work. Under capitalist conditions, the demand for productive efficiency imposes equally efficient regulations on the body, requiring women, especially lower-class working women, to work actively, to reduce physical waste, and to invest all their energy and strength in labour. In turn, the working body is influenced by various things such as race and class, and upper-class women reduce the repression of their bodies to work, or even disengage from work. At the same time, emotional labour is as important as physical labour. In her study of the silk weaving industry in northern Italy, Yanagisako (2012) emphasises the role of the family business in this, including the construction, inheritance, and distribution of family information networks, the intercourse and communication within the family, and the emotional and desire factors. These form the context of the craft industry in northern Italy, a unique situation. Her descriptions show the importance of the emotional element and the immaterial labour. These factors arise from the family atmosphere and the social environment; and, together with physical work, form the body of labour.

In another book, *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin (2001) analyses why this social stereotype has emerged from the perspective of labour. In the socio-economic context, industrial society and capitalism require more efficient production and reproduction of labour, which in turn requires women to withdraw from the productive sphere and give way to men who do not have to give birth and are not constrained by life cycles such as physiology, and to return to the domestic sphere to provide labour for society through reproduction and nurturing (Martin, 2001). This economic and social reality has gradually led to a devaluation of women’s value and role, which has led to women being labelled as “inefficient and prone to ageing”, a label that seems to come from the biological cycle of women’s fertility, menstruation and menopause, which is the biological science’s judgement and understanding of women, and which has also reinforced the social construction of female identity. In this cycle, society shapes gender roles and the natural sciences are influenced by the reality of society to incorporate similar

gender descriptions, which in turn later solidify and exacerbate social stereotypes.

In the book, *The Woman in the Body*, women's pregnancy, childbirth, etc. are bodily processes of reproduction, while menstruation and menopause are disruptions and interruptions of reproduction (Martin, 2001). Based on this, Western biological and medical interpretations of menstruation and menopause tend to start with pathology, seeing them as decline, collapse, and destruction, and therefore have a negative image of them. Here I will use concepts such as the reproductive body and the body of labour to explain how culture shapes the female body and how women respond to it.

In the process of reproduction, women themselves are confronted with the need for self-imagination of their bodies. They see childbirth as an important part and the culmination of the life course and should not face alienation, loss of experience, loss of control, intervention by doctors, instruments, and medicine, i.e., they demand autonomy and dynamic control over their bodies. In other words, they want to achieve autonomy, control of the body, and naturalisation of the reproductive process. This means that they want to control their bodies with their consciousness and to give birth through their efforts. More and more women are choosing to have a normal birth and are trying to make the delivery room look like a bedroom (Inhorn, 2006) so that they can relax and feel as if they are in a safe and comfortable place during labour, thus making the birth of their baby more natural.

A reproductive body can also affect a productive body. For example, menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, and childbirth can affect the state of the body to a greater or lesser extent, leaving them physically unable to adapt to the discipline of work, and women's reduced labour productivity seems to be due to this. And Martin (2001) argues that this is a biomedical stereotype, that women's inefficiency is not a universal phenomenon that they are born with, nor is it pathological, and that some women are even more active during their biological period. It reflects the expectations of class, gender, race, and even cultural practices regarding the role of women, but we can see that women are expected to manage the relationship between production and reproduction, work and family, to find a balance between the two roles, between the two bodies, and are taken for granted to be more focused on the domain of reproduction.

4. Reshape the Body

In addition to labelling bodies and genders, society and culture also regulate and change bodies. Many are forced to do so, and some actively cater to fashion trends, but in any case, the workings of power and culture on the body can be seen.

In *Footbinding as Fashion*, Shepard (2018) explores what motivated women's foot binding in ancient China. She rejects the identity-political perspective of national identity and the assumption of a one-sided pursuit of craft production, inferring economic and cultural influences. Their foot binding demonstrates the relationship between labour relations and social status, class level, cultural discipline, and fashion tyranny.

For the body of labour, foot-binding means a diminished capacity to work and is a blow to production. In ancient times, women had to work in the fields (pulling weeds, ploughing, planting) as well as in handicrafts (weaving threads, weaving cloth), and they were an important part of the family's workforce, as men were mostly responsible only for agricultural work, while the family's handicrafts would be seen as women's work. However, women of different classes and statuses were involved in labour to different degrees, and their foot-binding intensity varied. For the wealthy families and the dignitaries, they did not need to work, and women were only active in the home; for the middle classes, for the sake of status and respect, and because it was not too costly to give up productive work properly, women did not work; for the lower classes of families, who had to work and bind their feet, both to gain a livelihood and to prevent ridicule, women had to balance family and work. While for the poorest families, foot-binding was not practised to make ends meet, but rather the body was devoted to working.

The reproduction of the body means that the body becomes a vehicle of value, detached from its original meaning, through which people go about forming identities and moving through classes. Footbinding was a way of reproducing the body by forcibly altering the shape of women's feet to meet social trends and customs to gain respect and status, while those who failed to complete perfect footbinding were left behind by the times. Generally speaking, the highest families would devote their women's energies exclusively to reproduction and parenting; middle families would also exempt women from labour and focus on domestic chores for the sake of status; lower families were faced with the conflict between labour and reproduction and might sacrifice each other, and the poorest families might abandon the area of reproduction or focus more on labour and have much less physical discipline, but they would be seen as humiliated or undignified.

Shepard (2018) explains the phenomenon of footbinding in terms of economic necessity and the tyranny of fashion,

where people did not want to be ridiculed, left alone, and desired status in the context of popular aesthetic trends. Footbinding was a symbol of fashion and respect, representing the withdrawal of women from the sphere of labour and their entry into the sphere of reproduction. The appearance and form of the body became a means of showing class differences, and foot-binding altered women's bodies to varying degrees and, in doing so, reflected the influence of class, economic level and fashion discourse on women's bodies, labour, and reproduction.

5. Conclusion

There are many stereotypes of women in society which suggest that women are the second-sex dependent on men and that the female body and the biological stages they are going through are often derogatory, negative, and detrimental to women's work and socialisation. For women themselves, however, these biological activities do not affect them much, and they are even happy to experience them, as these phenomena contribute to their physical and mental well-being. In addition to metaphors, social culture also regulates women's bodies, urging women to mould themselves to cultural trends through discourses of power such as fashion, to conform to the dominant aesthetic.

Ultimately, it is important to stress once again that the whole system is a cultural construct and not a natural phenomenon. And in the face of this situation, as Ortner (1972) says, the situation must be attacked from both ends at the same time. Efforts aimed solely at changing social practices — for instance, through the setting of hiring quotas, or provisions for equal pay for equal work — will not have a lasting effect if cultural language and images continue to pursue orientations that devalue women. And on an ideological level, efforts that simply seek to change cultural assumptions are also hardly successful, for example, through increased gender awareness, or changes in publicity such as amending educational materials and media images. We should seek changes in top-level design and top-down reforms in society and the state — and these changes in cultural attitudes will only succeed if the institutional foundations of social change support and sustain them.

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