Simone de Beauvoir and Louis Althusser on Feminine Subjectivity

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir holds that there are no absolute values extrinsic to human choice and existence. If one prefers to do a certain action or thing over some other, his determination cannot be regarded as designations of a divine command or “an inhuman objectivity”; instead, such determination can only be made with reference to the his concrete desires, needs, passions, and projects. Louis Althusser, on the other hand, instead of suggesting that individuals determine their actions and practices, he furthers Marx’s notion of “ideology”, presenting that ideology is an ‘imaginary’ reflection in consciousness of social relations and the interpellation of individuals’ consciousness and belief. Both Beauvoir and Althusser encourage us to think about human subjectivity, and thus society and culture, in different ways. This essay will incorporate Angela McRobbie’s concept of “post-feminist disorders” into human subjectivity to explore feminine subjectivity in our contemporary society and popular culture. In order to support my argument, several case studies such as Dove’s beauty campaigns and fashion magazines coupled with theoretical concepts will be examined.

Subjectivity

i. Ambiguity and Freedom

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Beauvoir in her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* quotes Michel de Montaigne’s elaboration on our conflicted relationship with dying: “Life in itself is neither good or evil. It is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it,”\(^2\) to point out the contingency of existence where there is no standard value or predetermined human essence extrinsic to human choice and experience that compels one toward a certain value or some particular project. She explains that the human is an intentional creature, as well as a conscious actor:

“He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things.”\(^3\)

Such consciousness is an intentionality that brings itself existence, or brings itself present to the world, that is the disclosure of being. This is what Beauvoir calls “ontological” or “original” freedom: an acknowledgement that the justification of one’s own existence is only with reference to his initial desire of the disclosure of being – the primary factor that brings one into existence.

However, she maintains that such ontological freedom of humans is ambiguous. As she explains in her book, humans are unceasingly fettered by their “bodily, socially, and historically embedded facticity”\(^4\) and also free to give meaning to their lives. The ambiguity is that death

\(^3\) *ibid.*
“marks us as human.” She argues that “without death, the relation of humans to themselves and to the world would be profoundly disarranged … and that death is also that which makes the human condition ambiguous.” The human cannot choose but to exist within between living and dying these two modes of its being.

Moreover, as explained above, the human is a conscious actor, an intentional creature. Each individual’s actions could contribute to a concrete impact on our world. For Beauvoir, our body is an expression of our “relationship to the world”, a “historical idea”, and a factual condition. By the definition of a factual, historical condition, firstly, the human is flesh-and-blood; we require physical necessities such as water and food; and the body will decay and die. Secondly, as Beauvoir states, “human beings do not create the world” – the world physically exists prior to human beings; we situate in a world where objects are already permeated with meaning. Others have constructed and continue to construct “social, culture, economic and symbolic systems”, that is, a historical or factual condition that we perceive now through our disclosure. According to Beauvoir, past action constitutes present and future factivity. When we disclose being, while we disclose the values that human being have projected upon the world, we could also create or influence a “projection” upon the world through my disclosure and action.

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5 ibid.
7 ibid, 41.
8 ibid, 35.
9 ibid, 74.
11 ibid.
Therefore, the ambiguity results from both consciousness and facticity: as consciousness, we are free to choose our destinies – who we want to become, and our own action; however, as a factical being, we are restricted by the factical situation – the society that others have projected and are projecting, as well as my own past and present actions on the society.

ii. **Feminine Subjectivity**

Each human’s action is “part of an ongoing contribution to human facticity.” For example, the emergence of feminism – during the nineteenth century, a wide range of ideological, political, and social movements was undertaken to redefine, establish, and achieve personal, political, economic, and social rights for women. The human, as conscious actors as well as intentional creatures have projected a concrete impact upon the society and the world. The advent of feminism therefore also illuminates that our actions impact upon human facticity. As Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* describes:

> “The curse on the woman vassal is that she is not allowed to do anything; so she stubbornly pursues the impossible quest for being through narcissism, love, or religion; when she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility relative to the goals she pursues and to the money and rights she appropriates.”

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12 *ibid*, 78.
Women no longer state that “if I were a man, not a woman, I would have achieved …” There is no initial contingency that restrict women’s possibilities and development. To elaborate the sexual discrimination, Beauvoir also use the notion of ambiguity to maintain that in order to will oneself free, one must be conscious of the freedom of others.\(^{15}\) For Beauvoir, the ambiguity is that our existence “assert itself as an absolute which must seek its justification within itself”, but there is no foreign absolute value that can justify our existence. She concerns with the fact that we are lacking a “principle for making choices”\(^{16}\) that can serve as a moral principle, which can be applied to all humans in an interconnected way, as individuals are not “separate existants”\(^{17}\) but “at the same time…bound to each other.”\(^{18}\) One’s projection will potentially impact upon others. Therefore, with regard to sexual discrimination, one who projects restrictive facticity for women, he also restricts himself.

Consider a situation that a husband wills himself free, but also wills a restrictive facticity for his wife. He wants to live within a condition in which he has a variety of job choices, but he concerns with the situation that if his wife has the same kinds of job opportunities, her choices will limit his. Note that the husband is impacted from previously factical situation. For example, when he was young, he learned the gender stereotype that different genders suit different activities. Since this kind of facticity has been widely constructed, if the husband intends to reject it, he will need to make efforts to overcome previous facticity; he may need to run the social risks to disobey common belief. Hence, the husband may choose the easier acts according


\(^{16}\) ibid, 10.

\(^{17}\) ibid, 18.

\(^{18}\) ibid.
to previous facticity. He then wills that his wife should have a restriction on her choices of jobs and only have the opportunity to work inside the home. For Beauvoir, such willingness regarding restriction on the freedom of others is in effect a restriction on one’s own facticity. Since the husband cannot cease adopting particular masculine values, he limits his own freedom.

**Ideology on Post-feminism**

i. *Althusser’s Theory of Ideology*

Beauvoir continues to believe that there is nothing extrinsic to human choices and experiences, and each person’s present or past actions project a concrete impact upon the world.\(^\text{19}\) Althusser, on the other hand, points out that the origin of beliefs and ideas are not generated by the individuals. They appear to be the sources from Ideological State Apparatuses: institutions such as family, education, the churches, media, and law which are outside state but transmit the ideologies of the state to interpellate or hail individuals. He calls this process as “interpellation” or “hailing”; it it also a process that an individual is changed into a subject on the function of ideology. He maintains that the ideology is a reflection of “imaginary” social reality in consciousness, as well as the representation of the “imaginary” relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence.\(^\text{20}\)

Generally, as what Beauvoir insists, human beings are regarded as separate, independent individuals along with their own thoughts, consciousness, beliefs, and actions. However,

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\(^{20}\) ibid, 100.
Althusser considers the society as a complex system of relations where different actions and practices are interacted with each other. Rather than suggesting that human beings determine and define their actions and practices, Althusser considers that the actions and practices constitute human beings. For Althusser, the notion of a self-defining and free individual is an “ideological concept”. He believes that individuals’ conditions of existence are unable to manifest to them and thus they in practice live in an imaginary presence, “as if” they were provided.  

He further explains the working of ideology by revealing the fact that humans are made to live in a false reality through the interpellation or hailing of ideology. In patriarchal societies, for instance, an unborn child’s identity will be pre-determined, as he will certain bear his father’s name. Also, in an example of religious ideology, people who believe in Christian religious ideology will believe in a “Unique, Absolute, Other Subject, i.e. God.” In the Christian Ideological State Apparatus, Christians define and shape their lives based on the higher model – the exclusive, unique subject, God.

The interpellation of ideology can make humans become subjects in various ways as mentioned above. by making obedience, this interpellation may detrimentally impact upon our freedom of being independent and conscious individuals. McRobbie in her article *Illegible Rage: Post-Feminist Disorders* states that female bodily anxieties and melancholia are associated with their demand for social approval, as feminine beauty and sexuality are normalised by the society and

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21 ibid, 99.
22 ibid, 107.
popular culture.\textsuperscript{23} In this case, modern girls and young women are interpellated by the normalisation of femininity, as well as social approval; this is because one can choose his institutions or communities based on his feelings, thoughts, and interests (i.e. individuals can determine whether to be a Christian and be interpellated by Christian religious ideology), but he cannot choose the society and even the world.

\textit{ii. Social Approval as Ideological State Apparatus}

McRobbie brings Judith Butler’s notion of “gender melancholia”\textsuperscript{24} to discuss contemporary field of female disorders, from the mildest to the most severe.\textsuperscript{25} She proposes that feminism, for girls and young women, has become an object of loss and melancholia. The spiralling of female disorders and discontents in relation to body image arouse the accusations towards the media, especially magazines, which play a key role in the “cultural production of female psychopathology”, reaching the status of sociological platitudinousness.\textsuperscript{26}

“The most common non-medical responses to these various forms of distress by medical practitioners and various other experts often involve making reference to cultural norms of female perfectibility promoted and endorsed in girls’ and women’s magazines and by consumer culture.”\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{ibid}, 87.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{ibid}, 89
Popular culture forces girls and young women to give up the feminist awareness to act and behave as “real woman”; they follow the fashion images and popular culture to enact the fantasy of coherence or wholeness. As McRobbie elaborates, this notion of “producing a self as a whole” inevitably and invariably bring about frustration; as girls and young women strive for “perfection in all spheres”, the magazines and fashion images are required to self-regulate with regard to the promotion of “extreme thinness, stick-thin legs and arms, almost completely flat chests, with barely a hint of breasts, narrow boyish hips, flat tummy, sculptured facial features, large eyes and chiseled cheek bone.” Such “fascinated features of looking” as well as young women’s desire of “producing a self as a whole” make femininity as a normalised performance rather than self-centered femininity. Girls and young women now express their anxieties regarding being a real woman: “They become the ways in which ‘we’ understand ourselves as women, hence also a way of excluding those women who dis-identify with these normalising strategies.”

Therefore, contemporary society and popular culture bring about post-feminist disorders – that is, anorexia, depression, low-esteem, and self-mutilation as they promote the normalised feminine looking and performance. These female bodily anxieties are in relation to their demand to be the wholeness in terms of the normalisation of female beauty, in order to achieve the social approval.

### iii. Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign

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28 ibid, 88.
McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* also presents a concept of “female empowerment” – girls and young women are able to make their own choices self-consciously and freely. As post-feminism has been incorporated into consumer culture, girls and young women has shifted from passive, subordinate consumers to active, powerful consumers. Corporations have also incorporated emancipatory notions into marketing strategies and campaigns for a long history. McRobbie maintains that feminism in 1980s and early 1990s, affected by social values such as fashion images, had become an object of loss. In this part, the essay will explore another dimension of loss, that is, feminine empowerment in corporations’ campaigns. Corporations prefer to promote a similar image of feminist independence, success, and beauty to claim that their products empower feminine consumers with these identities and performance.

Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty” is a marketing project claiming to challenge restrictive feminine beauty ideology and promote a more democratic notion of beauty. For instance, an Internet advertisement promoting Dove’s “Self Esteem Fund for young girls” captures confessions of girls regarding their physical anxieties: they feel dissatisfied with their weights and appearances, then a voice-over issues the following slogans: “Let’s tell her she’s wrong. Let’s tell her to be real. And brave. And true. And she’ll be beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful. Let’s make peace with beauty.” Dove’s campaign, while it opposes narrow beauty standards, fails to promote the idea that the beauty should not be regarded as an essential part of a woman’s identity, life, and social success; the notion that every woman should pursue beauty is in practice unnecessary.

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29 Dove Real Beauty Campaign 2005a
In addition, although the corporation use the ideology of empowerment to appeal female consumers by claiming that their product enables women to gain an identity in relation to independence, self-respect, and personal strength, it fails to conduct any work regarding consciousness-raising, but only uses a simple corporation slogan. Moreover, contrary to the previous century in which media coverage were constantly blamed for the emphasis on extreme thinness, current consumer culture challenges hegemonic beauty standard to promote the image of feminist success and independence, which also leads to an object of loss; as for women, the emancipation should not be manifest to a certain form, such as the normalisation of feminine beauty or feminist independence, but as what Beauvoir elaborates the intentionality: we are intentional creatures as well as conscious actors. There are no extrinsic values to our choices, we should not be interpellated by a certain Ideological State Apparatus.

**Conclusion**

This essay brings both Beauvoir’s idea of ambiguity of freedom, as well as Althusser’s theory of ideology to examine the relations between human subjectivity, society and culture. Specifically, the essay incorporates McRobbie’s concept of “post-feminist disorders” into human subjectivity to examine feminine subjectivity. Beauvoir holds that human experience is ontologically ambiguous and that there is no standard value or predetermined human essence outside to human choice and experience. Each person’s actions and practices project impacts upon the society and world. However, Althusser maintains that the origin of our beliefs and thoughts are not generated by ourselves; they appear to be the sources from Ideological State Apparatus. Then, Althusser’s ideology is applied to explain what McRobbie calls post-feminist disorders: young women are interpellated by social approval; by echoing McRobbie’s notion of post-feminism as an object of
loss, Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign is also examined as another object of loss, that is, McRobbie calls “empowerment”.

References


