

FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY: A READING OF MERLEAU-PONTY, BUTLER AND YOUNG

Ankita Paul

What is feminist phenomenology? his question is not as easy as it looks. In feminist phenomenology, two different academic fields work together. Feminist phenomenology may be defined as a feminist-oriented phenomenology or phenomenologically oriented feminism. One of the most important characteristics of feminist phenomenology is the application of the phenomenological method in feminist projects. Sara Heinamaa, Bonnie Mann, and Beata Stawarska argue that the historical roots of this discipline remain in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and they call de Beauvoir the founder of feminist phenomenology.

According to Silvia Stoller, feminist phenomenology is a theoretical approach where the phenomenological method is applied to the feminist framework in a strict or loose sense. She calls feminist phenomenology an umbrella term because it contains many different methods, orientations, and assumptions of research. In “Subject and Structure in Feminist Phenomenology: Re-reading Beauvoir with Butler”, Beata Stawarska talks about the interrelation of feminism and phenomenology and expresses her concern about ‘what happens when feminism becomes integrated into phenomenology or when phenomenology becomes feminist’ (16). According to Stawarska, the interrelation between phenomenology and feminism happens in two ways: conservative and transformative. According to the former view, the scope of phenomenology has been expanded. Here phenomenology covers unexplored issues related to feminism, especially gendered embodiment, gendered desire, and so on. In this process, phenomenology leaves the traditional methods (e.g., phenomenological reduction) and goals. It gives a chance for transforming to phenomenology. In the latter view, traditional phenomenological

methods and goals are only tested and revised without any basic change. This revision of the phenomenological approach is also discussed in other relevant traditional enquires. It is not purely theoretical; it also has an applied approach.

Johanna Oksala recalls that feminist philosophy is not about creating a better formation of knowledge; rather the main aim of feminism is creating a better society for women. In Oksala's view, phenomenology gives a theoretical and methodological foundation to feminist philosophy. But it will happen if the phenomenological method is radically revised. Similarly, Helen Fielding notes,

To think the intersection of feminism with phenomenology is not to see the former as merely another branch of phenomenology. It is of course to consider how feminist theories have drawn on phenomenology, but it is also to reflect upon how feminist phenomenologies have challenged and also transformed phenomenology, sometimes at its core. (518)

However, some critics argue that 'classical phenomenology is not only irrelevant to feminist interests due to its pretend subject neutrality, but it is also de facto hostile to feminist interests due to its barely disguised masculinism (Stawarska 15).¹³

In phenomenology, the life-world is a unique concept. This concept was popularized by Edmund Husserl in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936). Life-world is conceived as a world that is pre-given and self-evident. This concept presents a state of affairs in which the world is lived, the world is experienced. The Life-world includes individual, perceptual, social, and practical experiences. The life-world is directly or immediately experienced in everyday life in the subjectivity. It is a world of perceived things and bodies. Hence, phenomenology as a descriptive philosophical method lays out the experiences and structures of

¹³ See Linda Fisher, "Phenomenology and Feminism: perspective on their relation" for earlier feminist critiques of phenomenology.

consciousness that focus on phenomena that are understood in the context of subjective experiences. Similarly, feminism whether it is taken as a political movement or as a theoretical endeavor –tries to secure women’s rights. They discuss the inequalities, violence, and marginalization that women face in their day-to-day life. As soon as phenomenology and feminism interact, multiple female experience-related issues are available for further inspection. The feminist phenomenological works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler, and Iris Marion Young give value to the female experience which includes the female corporeal lived experience that is one of the determining features of the female identity. Feminism as a political movement is dependent on identity-oriented strategies and phenomenology has played a crucial role in shaping the feminist movement to some extent. In this writing, I try to explore the continuity and discontinuity between feminism and phenomenology with the help of the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler, and Iris Marion Young.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Connection between Phenomenology and Feminism

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical discussion of the body has immense value in feminist philosophy. Many feminist thinkers including Elizabeth Grosz, Linda Martin Alcoff, Iris Marion Young, and Shannon Sullivan have addressed the great feminist potential in Merleau-Ponty’s work. Merleau-Ponty rejects the classical traditional dualist mind-body theories and presents his work as a replacement for it. His new theory is known as ‘the theory of embodied subjectivity’ and he discusses it in his major work *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Merleau-Ponty’s work is mainly based on a pragmatic discussion of mind-body. It is non-dualistic and it is also helpful to feminism. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment helps to overcome the weakness of the traditional theories of dualism. In traditional dualisms, the mind is superior to the body, rationality is superior to emotion. In the history of western philosophy, Philosophy is defined in terms of mind, more

precisely rational mind. Men are defined in terms of mind, and women are defined in terms of body. Classical Western Philosophy in its very nature excludes women and fills up with the history of men's oppression of women. Here, women are not rational beings, not even human subjects; they are objects. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Volatile Bodies*:

Philosophy has always considered itself a discipline concerned primarily or exclusively with ideas, concepts, reason, judgment – that is, with terms clearly framed by the concept of mind, terms which marginalize or exclude considerations of the body...philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body. (4)

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy is a rejection of previous canonical concepts of ontology and epistemology – from Descartes to Husserl. He argues against the two most popular philosophical schools: rationalism or intellectualism and empiricism. He notes, "Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us any account of the human experience of the world; they tell us what God might think about it" (298).

According to Merleau-Ponty, these two schools misunderstood perception and as a result misread the relationship between mind and body, self and the world. Rationalists as well as empiricists from Descartes to Kant applied wrong epistemologies to understand the embodied subject. For Merleau-Ponty, both schools mainly concentrate on direct experience and overlook the true actualness of that experience. They represent the body as an object and the self as a constituting ego. In this way, they draw a sharp line between mind and body and misconceive the perceived experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, the empiricist theory of perception is problematic because here, perception is understood from an atomistic level. It theorizes perception

as a process where sense organs receive individual raw data, then the mind combines all of it and gives a general perception of an object. For instance, suppose the case when I see one side (e.g., top and front) of an object and assume the rest of that object to complete it. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is problematic because here, I cross the actual limit of experience. Merleau-Ponty writes:

The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what perception is. The pure impression is, therefore, not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception. (4)

Merleau-Ponty also condemns the Cartesian method. Cartesian intellectualists define self as disembodied. The world is not the result of experience; rather it is the result of the analysis. The major problem of the Cartesian method is that it believes in a disembodied almighty mind and a God's eye. The embodied knower is not able to access the world in such a way. For Merleau-Ponty, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (xviii). Merleau-Ponty believes that philosophy does not start from any abstract ideas e.g., atomic sense data or clear and distinct perceptions. Merleau-Ponty defines perception in the following way,

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. (xi-xii)

Perception is the foundation of all experiences and it is a meaningful interaction between the subject and the world. Merleau-Ponty never said that the subject constructs or analyzes the world through perception; rather it is the perception that always exists in all other analyses of experiences. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not "a

collection of determinate objects” (106), rather it is a precondition of all experiences and thoughts.

In theorizing perception, empiricism and intellectualism make the same mistake – of construing objective thought. Here, the objective thinker falsely thinks that the knowledge of the world is possible either through perception or through the subject’s synthesizing power. The subject is embodied. He/she can only perceive a thing from his/her body’s particular location. He/she is not able to experience the entire object. According to Merleau-Ponty, our sense experiences are not atomistic or totalizing knowledge of the world, but always situated, local, and embodied.

Empiricism, intellectualism, and objective thought advocate body-denying dualism. They try to draw a sharp line between mind/body and self/world. In traditional philosophy, the method of dualism mainly excludes women from rational subjects. Here, disembodied minds are legitimate knowers. Only men are recognized as rational beings and women are excluded from the sphere of human subjectivity. Feminism condemns such opinions. One of the main projects of the feminist movement is re-valuing the body and recognizing a woman as a rational, autonomous being within the realm of human subjectivity. On the contrary, in the case of perception and experience, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment does not give any authority to a particular group of people and marginalized others who are differently situated. The body is considered as a locus of all differences. The embodiment approach goes well with the feminist project. Feminist Shannon Sullivan recognizes that many features of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work on human existence are significant for the feminist movement. She points out some of them as:

...the primacy given to bodily existence; the attention paid to the nonreflective aspects of human life; the importance of situation for understanding human engagement with and in the world; the crucial

role that habit plays in corporeal existence; and the emphasis placed on lived experience. (65)

If we ignore these elements then all we are left with is the dualist interpretation of subjectivity which is purely disembodied and also excludes women from this category. For this reason, such elements are important for the feminist movement to recreate the value of the body. According to Alcoff, Cartesian or Kantian philosophy devalues the feminine emotional importance of the body, whereas Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach offers a more enriching philosophical foundation to feminist activity. In Alcoff's words:

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers an ontology that is more open to the assimilation of corporeality within epistemology than the Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions. This marks an important break from the philosophical articulations of patriarchy, which devalued the female element alongside matter, the body, and the emotions. Phenomenology thus can offer to feminist theory the beginnings of an expanded conception of reason and knowledge, one that is not predicated upon the exclusion of the feminine, the concrete, or the particular, and one that will not require women to become manlike before they can participate in the sphere of philosophical thought. (265)

If we rule out the mind-body dualism and take Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, then men and women are the same as a knower. The mode of the embodiment does not theoretically leave out women from the realm of human subjectivity. Women can identify themselves as knowing subjects and for women, there is no necessity to become like a man. Elizabeth Grosz also pointed out the problem of the mind-body dichotomy. She states that the mind-body dichotomy is correlated with other pairs of dichotomies. These other pairs are:

...reason and passion, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and

vitalism, transcendence and immanence, temporality and spatiality, psychology and physiology, form and matter, and so on. (3)

In the mind-body dualism, the mind is the active part and the body is the passive one. In traditional philosophy, the mind represents masculinity and the body represents femininity. If women are taken to represent the body, then the mind-body dualism subordinated women.

Husserl's phenomenology is essentialist. According to Husserl, essences are universal, formal, intuitive, and only known by a purely cognitive process. Like traditional western philosophy, he also ignores the importance of experience and embodiment. According to Merleau-Ponty, the main problem of Husserlian philosophy is that it differentiates essence from existence and negates the importance of the body, its situatedness, and the other. Merleau-Ponty is an existential phenomenologist because he asks existential questions to examine phenomenological thoughts. He criticizes Husserl's phenomenology because it fails to answer those questions which are related to lived experience, human relationship with the world's knowledge, and most importantly, the embodied human situation. The phenomenological reduction is an important characteristic of Husserl's phenomenology. The phenomenological reduction is bracketing or suspension of common-sense attitude about the world. For Merleau-Ponty, this is impossible. Scientific or theoretical explanations are always secondary. Our everyday experiences construct theories – it is impossible to create abstract theories without experiences.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does a great job to develop a feminist philosophy from a phenomenological point of view by allowing questions which are of concern to feminism to be raised within the ambit of phenomenology. When does someone ask what it means to be a woman? For answers to this question, feminism needs a strong relation between our everyday experiences and theories. Theoretical understanding is made by our everyday experiences. Merleau-Ponty

establishes a connection between experiences and theories. Without experiences, we cannot make an adequate theory. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the real value of experience in the assessment of moral values, political actions, socio-political setup, aesthetic evaluation, etc. This provides a perspective to feminism for an understanding of mass politics. Alcoff writes,

Feminist philosophy, if it is to aid in the empowerment of women, must develop a better account of the relationship between reason, theory, and bodily, subjective experience. (251)

Feminist philosophy argues against essentialism. Essentialism offers some rigid categories to define something. For example, essentialism defines women based on biological structure, reproductive capabilities, etc. This characterization is misogynistic. It negates those categories (e.g., sexuality, class, race, ability) which help to make the identity of an individual human being. Essentialism adopts a dualistic approach and portrays women as objects. Feminism always fights against this type of misogynistic behavior. Therefore Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment is useful for feminist projects. Another reason for the feminist condemnation of Husserlian phenomenology is Husserl's support of universalism. Universalism creates problems for feminism. Under the domain of universalism if we try to define the concept of womanhood, then all the particularities of each woman must be erased.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the body is non-dualistic and he represents the body as intentional, meaningful, habituated. It helps to overcome traditional dualisms such as mind and body, self and the world, self and other, and so on. Classical dualistic theories present women's bodies as problematic. Merleau-Ponty's body-subject concept may assist feminist philosophy to overcome these problems. For Merleau-Ponty, bodies are knowing subjects and also the locus of agency and power. The concept of embodiment can help

feminism to be more productive in women's body-related issues. As Grosz states,

His emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism's major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges – its necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates. (94)

Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity

Judith Butler does not accept the sex/gender distinction. Normally, gender and sex are considered as two different concepts. Psychologist Robert Stoller describes the distinction between sex and gender. According to Stoller, the word 'gender' indicates how much feminine and how much masculine behaviors a person shows; it depends on a person's social factors e.g., social roles, behavior, position, etc., whereas the word 'sex' indicates the biological characteristics of a person. According to Butler, the sex/gender distinction creates a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. She introduced the normative structure of sexuality to explain the concept of gender. She has explained this theory in her early article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", and her books *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter*, and *Excitable Speech*. The traditional concept of gender does not permit us to question gender norms and roles. In the first prologue of *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticizes Catharine Mackinnon for her claim that the concept of gender is created by the hierarchical formation between men and women. For Butler, gender is not the result of such a hierarchical structure, but of the heterosexuality-based system of society. For Butler, there is no natural body that pre-exists before cultural inscription. All bodies are regarded as gendered from the starting point of their social existence. Gender is a doing, not a

being. However, it is not a doing by a subject which preexists. Gender is not a choice. The subject is not free to choose any gender which she/he wants to enact. The subject has a limited choice of gender styles and these styles are already determined by an extremely rigid regulatory frame. There is no gender identity before the expressions of gender. Butler elaborates this idea in the third chapter of *Gender Trouble*:

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured... (192).

According to Butler, gender is socially constructed. It is impossible to think about gender apart from cultural interpretations. Cultural interpretations produce and maintain the concept of gender. For Butler, gender doesn't need to be constructed by people, but people are being constructed by gender. She ponders on how gender is socially constructed. Gender roles are formed by social norms. 'Gender roles' means that some selected behavior is typical for one gender but that same behavior is not so typical for another. These gender roles are caused by social interventions. They depend on social context, time, race, class, culture, because the definition of masculinity and femininity is varied. Hence, gender is socially constructed, which means that 'women are feminine and men are masculine' is not biologically determined but rather socially determined.

For Butler, gender is a performative act. This means that it has no ontological status without its various acts which are performed and which constitutes its reality. Gender acts repetitively construct gender identity. Gender identity is unstable and gender as an identity is constituted in time, performed in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. Gender identity does not exist before gendered acts; it exists during gender acts. Gender attributes are not expressive, rather

they are performative. Gender attributes constitute the gender identity which is further expressed. The body reveals gender attributes and acts in various ways and shows its cultural signification. There is no preexisting identity that might be true or false, real or distorted acts or attributes of gender. The gender reality is created by social performances of gender. Gender performance is repetitive. This repetition means re-experiencing and reenactment of a set of meanings that are already socially established and legitimate.¹⁴ Individual bodies stylize themselves into gendered modes. It is a public action. This action has two dimensions i.e., temporal and collective. It is not inconsequential. The performance tries to hold gender into its binary frame. Butler uses the theory of performativity to explain the concept of gender. Gender is a performative act which means that gender is real only when it is performed. The concept of performativity is the unity of acts and behaviors of a person performed in his/her life. Performativity is not related to the concept of sexuality or sexual practices. Butler does not give a proper definition of the concept of performativity. However, she tries to explain the concept of performativity in the following way:

...performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration (xv).

Performativity is maintained by different and new performances. These performances are changeable and do not limit a person's life through gender roles. Butler states that theatrical performativity is not the same as gender performativity. The theatrical performances are limited by political censorship and scathing criticism. Gender performances are non-theatrical and ruled by some punitive and regulatory social convictions.

¹⁴ Here Butler is influenced by anthropologist Victor Turner.

According to Butler, masculine and feminine are not pre-given. These are neither fundamental nor essential aspects of a static self. When a baby is born, people immediately ask if it is a boy or girl. The male/female distinction is also necessary to make a newborn baby's birth certificate. The society maintains this distinctness as a primary category and it also strengthens compulsory heterosexuality. The male/female binary frame or heterosexuality-based system is the foundation of social life and also gets privilege above homosexual, bisexual, transgender categories. Society sets a standard of a valid life within the heterosexual system, and transgender, bisexual, homosexual people find themselves outside of this standard. In short, it is a particular form of power that maintains the cultural and economic situation of a state.

In Butler's gender theory, parody plays an important role in criticizing the distinctness in traditional gender categories and emphasizes their contingency. For Butler, gender identity is parodied under the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and sexual stylization. Gender parody discloses the original gender identity, and after this, gender functions are only an imitation without an origin. The relationship between imitation and origin is complicated. This relation gives us a clue about the relationship between primary identification i.e., the original meaning of gender and subsequent gender experience. Butler suggests that drag is a subversive practice. She writes,

...it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.* (187)

Gender meanings that take part in a parodic style are part of a hegemonic and misogynist style. Despite that, these gender meanings are denaturalized and mobilized via their parodic recontextualization.

According to Butler, gender is not a fact; rather it is the unity of its various acts. Without these acts, there is no gender at all. Gender is a construction; it regularly conceals its genesis. Gender reality is created by social performances. It indicates that the concept of sex and masculinity or femininity is part of the gender performative nature. This performative character established gender configuration outside of the traditional masculinist domination and heterosexuality frames.

Butler is also concerned with the relationship between phenomenology and feminism. That is why she asks a very important question in her famous article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, “How useful is a phenomenological point of departure for a feminist description of gender?” (522).

She tried to answer this question in this way: phenomenology and feminist philosophy share some similar philosophical beliefs. Feminist philosophy borrows some phenomenological concepts such as lived experience, embodied subjectivity to achieve its claims. Phenomenology introduces a world of lived experience which is constructed by the constituting acts of subjective experiences and everyday experiences that are helpful to feminist philosophy for presenting their status, situation, and struggle under a male-dominated world.¹⁵ In Butler’s words:

...the feminist claim that the personal is political suggests, in part, that subjective experience is not only structured by existing political arrangements, but effects and structures those arrangements in turn. Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context (522).

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva rejects this by saying that feminist philosophy is too existentialist.

She also adds,

...there is, latent in the personal is political formulation of feminist theory, a supposition that the life-world of gender relations is constituted, at least partially, through the concrete and historically mediated *acts* of individuals. (523).

According to Butler, phenomenology shows how gender identity is performative within cultural inscriptions, and taboos. Phenomenology focuses on various acts by which cultural identity is constructed. It is helpful for feminist philosophy to understand how bodies are crafted into genders. The body enacts or dramatizes certain historical and cultural possibilities and converts into a gendered body. For Butler, here a phenomenological theory can describe the gendered body in this way that would help understand how cultural and social conventions are enacted and embodied within the theatrical context.

Iris Marion Young's Feminist Phenomenology: From a Gender Perspective

Iris Marion Young has major contributions in the field of feminist phenomenology, political theory, international justice, ethical issues of gender, and disability. Young's earlier work is concerned with women's experiences, embodied situation, while her later works focus on structural injustices. Her feminist phenomenological discussions are mainly based on women's bodily movements, pregnancy, breast experience, wearing clothes, and so on. These were published together in *On Female Body Experience*.

According to Young, feminine bodily existence has an ambiguous transcendence. The female engagements with the world are doubtful and awkward. She states that

...a woman frequently does not trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things. Consequently, she often lives her

body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected (36).

In “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” (1980), Young “combines the insights of the theory of the lived body as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as developed by Beauvoir” (31). She shows that there is a typical feminine style of throwing, running, swinging, hitting, climbing, walking, and so on. She mentions three modalities of feminine bodily movements which project ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity with the body and its surroundings. Under the influence of de Beauvoir, she defines femininity as “a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society” (31). A woman is never sure about her bodily capacities and feels that she does not control the motion of her body. That is why her attention is divided between the task which she performs and the body which performs that task. These three modalities have their root in the fact that the feminine bodily existence is both as a subject and as object regarding the same act at the same time. For performing properly, most of the movements need an effective engagement and coordination of the body. Women put the motion only in one part of the body and leave the remaining as immobile. For example, when a woman throws a ball, she does not use the whole body, but rather “tend[s] to stay in one place and react to the ball’s motion only when it has arrived within the space where she is” (40).

Women live their bodies as subjects as well as objects. Young follows Merleau-Ponty for claims that the body as a subject constitutes space, without the body, there is no space at all. The body is not an object – it never exists in space like water in a glass, rather it is constituted by things that are produced by human transcendence. Young notices that feminine bodily existence is laden through with immanence. Women are not subjects who actively constitute space, rather they live as an

object. Feminine transcendence is ambiguous – women are not only subjects but objects as well. It is the result of a patriarchal society which represents women as objects. She writes:

...in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies. As essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that present itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention (44).¹⁶

Women are always subject to judgment for their appearance. Women are not only objectified by others, but they also take this objectification actively and are concerned about what others think about them, and shape, mold, and decorate themselves according to other's opinions. Women's intentionality and freedom are always restricted by patriarchy's inappropriate interventions. Young continues:

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections (42).

There is no necessary connection between such sexist oppression and being a woman. She makes it clear that there are some actual women to whom this sexist oppression does not apply.

Where these modalities are not manifest in or determinative of the existence of a particular woman, however, they are definitive in a negative mode – as that which she has escaped, through accident or

¹⁶ Here Young is influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness*.

good fortune, or more often, as that which she has had to overcome (43).

Young's work "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation" (1984) is a phenomenological explanation of pregnancy. Her discussion of women's experiences during pregnancy is based on the phenomenological description of the embodiment. She argues against the phenomenological concept of the unified subject and shows that in pregnancy, the bodily situation of a woman is unique; her consciousness is decentered, double, and split. Young notes,

She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head. This split subject appears in the eroticism of pregnancy, in which the woman can experience an innocent narcissism fed by recollection of her repressed experience of her own mother's body. Pregnant existence entails, finally, a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future (46-47).

Young points out that according to male-dominated culture, women are considered as beautiful only when slim and sharply. The pregnant woman does not look sexually attractive and pleasant. Her male partner may not want to engage in any type of sexual activity with her and her physician may suggest limiting sexual intercourse during pregnancy, even though her sexual sensitivity and desires are increased. In this way, she may find herself ugly and alien. Though the male-dominated culture desexualizes the pregnant woman's body, it allows the woman an opportunity for self-love. This liberates the woman from the male gaze which objectifies the woman in her non-pregnancy state. Sexual objectification converts a woman into an object. In pregnancy, the woman feels some relief from such alienation. Young writes,

The look focusing on her belly is one not of desire, but of recognition. Some may be repelled by her, find her body ridiculous, but the look that follows her in pregnancy does not alienate her, does not instrumentalize her with respect to another's desire (54).

For Young, the relationship between the pregnant woman and her body is unique. It is an innocent narcissistic pleasure where the pregnant woman observes each change of her body and thoroughly enjoys it. Here, Young recalls her own pregnancy experience to demonstrate such feelings:

As I undress in the morning and evening, I gaze in the mirror for long minutes, without stealth or vanity. I do not appraise myself, as whether I look good enough for others, but like a child take pleasure in discovering new things in my body. I turn to the side and stroke the taut flesh that protrudes under my breasts (53-54).

However, it must be noted that Young's descriptions about pregnancy are only applicable in a wanted pregnancy; it is difficult to fit an unwanted pregnancy into Young's description.

In "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling" Young says that women's breasts are a sign of their femininity and their sexuality. The male-dominated culture fetishizes women's breasts and defines the best breasts as 'high, hard, and pointy' (77). This fetishization of women's breasts creates female anxiety. The fetishized breasts are considered as objects or things for the male gaze that are easy to handle. Young mentions some situations where women can get the pleasure of breasted embodiment outside of the patriarchal taboos. These pleasures are not dependent on male desire. The breasts are the locus of women's independent pleasure. The brassieres objectified the breasts and limited and confined their movement. Without a bra, women's breasts are not objectified or substantialized; their shape radically changes with their body movements and position; their fluidity has no definite shape or borders, unlike objects. During breast-feeding, the woman can get the

pleasure of breasted embodiment. When the breasts are used for nursing, they are desexualized. Young writes her own experience during breast-feeding and shows how this process is pleasurable for a woman:

When I began nursing I sat stiff in a chair, holding the baby in the crook of my arm, discreetly lifting my shirt and draping it over my breast. This was mother work, and I was efficient and gentle, and watched the time. After some weeks, drowsy during the morning feeding, I went to bed with my baby. I felt that I had crossed a forbidden river as I moved toward the bed, stretched her legs out alongside my reclining torso, me lying on my side like a cat or a mare while my baby suckled. This was pleasure, not work. I lay there as she made love to me, snuggling her legs up to my stomach, her hand stroking my breast, my chest. She lay between me and my lover, and she and I were a couple. From then on I looked forward with happy pleasure to our early-morning intercourse, she sucking at my hard fullness, relieving and warming me, while her father slept (88-89).

Young's feminist phenomenological descriptions are exciting and enduring. She takes her discussion in several directions. Her work is valuable for many women for understanding and refiguring the limitation and disempowering states in which their embodied subjectivity is formed.

Conclusion

There are various initiatives connecting feminism to phenomenology, particularly the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenological description of lived experience and embodiment are the main centers of feminist attention. Phenomenological descriptions of the embodiment and lived experience fit in well with feminist projects which try to express women's disempowered situation in a male-dominated society. The concept of life-world or world of lived experience plays an important role in constructing feminist

phenomenology. In feminist phenomenology, phenomenology is used to analyze female experience that contributes to solve many deadlocks that are deliberately unseen by mainstream philosophical discourses. However, this connection is not universally accepted. Many feminist thinkers are unsympathetic to this interrelation of feminism and phenomenology. In 1981, Butler wrote an article named 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*'. Here, she criticizes Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality from a feminist perspective and does not value the contributions noted above. She writes,

... Merleau-Ponty offers descriptions of sexuality which turn out to contain tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality. Not only does he assume that sexual relations are heterosexual, but that the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body. Indeed, as we shall see, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the sexual relation between men and women on the model of master and slave (86).

Butler also condemns Merleau-Ponty's idea of the subject because it is abstract and anonymous. The subject is devoid of the idea of gender. It creates two problems: one, this supposition devalues the importance of gender in the discussion of the lived body, and two, the description of the subject is as much like the male subject, and masculine identity is used as a model for describing the human subject. It not only devalues gender but women also. At the end of her article, she also talks about the future of phenomenological feminism. For Butler, the future of phenomenological feminism does not lie in the works of Merleau-Ponty, but 'in the works of philosophical feminism to come' (95).

In 'Throwing Like a Girl: 20 Years later' (1998), Young also criticizes her earlier writings written under the influence of Merleau-Ponty for being one-dimensional. In her early writings, the feminine embodied

experience is presented negatively like a kind of victimization. She presents the feminine embodiment as being harmed and exploited and also ignores women's multi-tasking abilities. She also mistakenly accepts an equivalence connection between the values of the universal humanist framework and masculine modalities of movement. Young notes that, 'Women are...even under the oppressions of patriarchy, active subjects, full of wit and wile, with active projects of their own' (287).

Here, my suggestion is that we need to modify some discursive accounts of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy. His rejection of the mind-body dichotomy has been a great resource to feminist philosophy. But at the same time, we need to revisualize some aspects of his philosophy in the context of its effectiveness for the feminist project as is evident from the work of Butler and Young because 'current gender arrangements, including gender-based oppression, cannot be justified as the inevitable result of natural and immutable human characteristics' (Preston 184).

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Research Scholar
University of North Bengal