

Decoding the Cultural Meanings: A Phenomenological Exploration of Femininity/ Masculinity

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to phenomenologically decode the cultural structures of femininity/masculinity and specific social conditions of their production, dissemination, and consumption. Structuralists refer to cultural structures that impart and shape the things experienced and occur in everyday life. To examine the gender power dynamics as a key element of the culture of femininity/masculinity through individual experiences that are culturally structured, the tool of the epistemological gaze is used. The main questions dealt with in this paper are: How do we explain the processes of meaning-formation that occur in our everyday life experiences? How does the epistemological explanation femininity/masculinity situated as being in the world reveal the world and things that are meaningful for us? How does one perceive and form the meaning of a situation or an action somebody else undertakes? How that constructed meaning faces contestation of experiences and shifts its locus.

Keywords: Phenomenological decoding, Cultural structures, Femininity, Masculinity, Epistemological gaze

Introduction:

The word 'cultural' in 'cultural phenomenology' underlines the intersubjective process through which the world is presented to us and is seen by consciousness. The shared conditions of meaning creation are referred to as culture. According to structuralist and post-structuralist authors, meanings derive their determination, truth-value, and validity from cultural institutions in any society. When applied to the social and cultural life of a man/woman, this general framework of meaning formation is commonly referred to as a culture system. The structure

sought by the structuralist to understand the culture is the set of generative rules historically chosen by us, governing simultaneously the mental and practical activity of the individuals viewed as an epistemic being, as well as the range of possibilities in which such activities can operate. (Bauman, Z.:2000) Because such a set of principles is rooted in societal structures, it seems to the person a transcendent law. This cultural structure has the power that projects itself as universal and is experienced by all individuals as their creative freedom. The social roles of men/women are determined by social structures and based on generative rules between men and women. Different types of inequalities and inequities arise and are reproduced in such circumstances. Social and cultural dynamics demarcate, define, and determine these meanings.

Cultural structures creating the meanings of specific cultural expressions and activities are at the centre of what has been referred to as the 20th-century cultural turn in the humanities. This point of view holds that we may understand the meanings of specific phrases by contextualizing them within a framework of cultural structures; for example, Ricoeur writes in *The Time and Narrative*: "To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of culture" (Ricoeur, P. :1990). The structuralist shifted from the notion of the structures that are universal and temporal to structures that are historical and culturally particular. Levi-Strauss' cultural structuralism has been unanimously criticized for assuming the same basic cultural structures for all cultures of all times.

Questioning the Universal Structures

Against the cultural structuralists' assumption, cultural structures are now seen by most thinkers (post-structuralists) as historically changing and culturally localized. The realization that different peoples and historical epochs have distinct cultural structures has become one of the foundations of contemporary understandings of culture and its structures.

It does not, however, imply that cultural institutions have lost their transcendental nature from the perspective of an individual. Instead, it questions the appearance of structures to women/men as both a law-like necessity and a tool of their creative freedom to generate meanings. Foucault describes cultural structures. He terms them "rules of discursive formations" as historical a priori (Foucault:1982). It is a structure based on cultural values that govern the actions, roles, and functions of men and women in society and define their behaviours. It creates inequality between men and women in its social and historical aspects. There are relations of power at every front where men are considered superior to women. On this basis, women are deprived of all social and cultural rights, and many restrictions are imposed on them. Gradually, it permeates in our values and culture. Thus, the idea of cultural structures formatting or shaping the meanings in everyday situations is well established in contemporary discourses as proposed by social constructivism or constructionism.

Need of an Epistemological Explanation

We have ontological explanations of meaning formation through cultural structures. However, we need an epistemological account of the processes of meaning production on the level of an individual mind that would explain the role of cultural structures. We must immediately emphasize that while it is commonly accepted that cultural facilities can explain the meaning of a specific act of expression, this does not imply that cultural structures can explain the causality of an individual act. Cultural institutions are required for the intersubjective validity of meanings to be formed, but they do not provide specific explanation of actions of meaning construction. Jennifer Dornan (2004) argues from the point of view of anthropology of religion that "in general, religious systems are seen as structures perpetuated by the black box of an abstract 'society' while the subjective experience of individuals that make up society is often ignored". She raises a question: "What is the connection between an individual's embodied experience of sacred and the larger,

shared system of belief that is part of a religious structure?". Hall points to the same issue: "... culture can be theorized at two different 'levels' – specific cultural meanings and generic cultural structures. Yet this distinction requires an account of the relationship between the specific and generic, at least if generic concepts are to have any utility" (Hall :2000). However, the epistemological dilemma of how people come to agreed norms of knowing that concern humanly formed realities like 'Purity,' 'womanhood' 'dignity,' and 'politeness' persists. The unanswered questions are "how people come to 'share' certain ways of understanding the world" and "how consensual modes of understanding acquire their 'force' or 'compellingness.'" To get the answer, we must go back to decode cultural structures that produce compelling meanings.

In cultural structures, a particular image of women has been created in society in a specific way. During such cultural processes, those women who do not fit into the strict social feminine frames are not only considered as 'bad women' but outcasted. Similarly, men are not considered good men if they have not developed a strict structure of masculinity. All the submissive and compassionate traits are found in their most expanded state in women. Similarly, the unique characteristics of men (which can be both good and bad) or those things that define masculinity are constructed in men. If masculine qualities are reflected in women, then that woman is considered an evil woman, and if men practice femineity, then it is considered wrong by all. The qualities and characteristics that are exclusively feminine, or if we look at them only by associating them with women and believe that they are determined by nature, even then, there are possibilities to be inculcated by others. Both men and women are of two contrary types: women are sacrificing, compassionate, loving, submissive, and sensitive. Men are considered to be self-centred, unkind, rude, and aggressive. If men want to nurture these positive and constructive qualities in them, they are not allowed to flourish or develop such feminine qualities.

Most of these ideas deal with the construction of cultural institutions on the level of a society as a whole or the level of certain social groups. Less focus has been placed on the problem of how cultural structures function on the level of individual consciousness and behaviour formed by these structures.

Phenomenological Explanation of Making of Meanings

The essential phenomenological insights of Edmund Husserl may be helpful in creating an epistemological lens to decode the meaning formation issue. I intend to do so by returning to the philosophical understanding of phenomenology. For this, two fundamental problems may be taken from the phenomenological theory of Husserl: (1) for meaning construction, in which the locus is individual experiences, and (2) the idea of the intentionality of these contents, which is achieved through their meaning. (Husserl :2001) To return to our original questions, how can we make and interpret meaningful signals with the surplus value of justifying, explaining, or legitimizing (or the reverse) a given attitude or action and produce a universal solution? Such solutions not only legitimise the dominance of one section over another but also force a particular section to become submissive to follow such constructed cultural norms. When we investigate the epistemological aspect of processes that create humanly constituted values like femineity, submissiveness, responsibility, duties, or gender typology, and how do we use them in acts of identification, communication, and socialisation. We found that we construct it in such a way that the contents of these acts gain intersubjective validity and a justificatory, legitimizing, or provoking function in a given social encounter, what strengthens such culturally dependent processes of meaning formation, we found that as long as we are conscious of something (which is almost always the case), an intentional object is constituted. An intentional object is included even in dreams and imagination. Husserl claims that if one thinks of God or an angel or such a logically impossible idea as a circular quadrangle, we are still dealing with an intentional object. (Husserl:2001). This is why

consciousness is always a consciousness of (something). If we try to decipher it more rigorously, the point that matters are not whether or not there is an object but what the characteristics of awareness cause it to be as if there is an object constantly. When anything is experienced so that it can be identified, recognized, memorized, recalled, spoken, felt, interested, bored, or angered about, the occurrence is imbued with meaning. As Husserl phrased it, experiencing something entails experiencing something as something. In other words, an object we know is always perceived as having a specific meaning or sense. The most crucial issue in our goals is Husserl's suggestion is that an object's intentionality is achieved through its meaning. Again, the question is how that meaning is constructed.

However, we must distinguish between two sorts of meanings, *Auffassungssinn* and the noematic. *Auffassungssinn* is a specific meaning of the same intentional object, which can be experienced in different acts. At the same time, the noematic is a general meaning through which not only this specific object but also other objects of a similar sort are understood. (McIntyre, R. :1987). Let's take one of Husserl's favourite examples of dice. We must distinguish between the specific dice, the surfaces I may comprehend from various points of view and which I may intend to in various complex acts, and the general notion of dice that I am using to name this particular object as dice. I call this object dice (rather than anything else), but I will do the same for other little cubes with one to six dots symmetrically positioned on each side. I do not develop the general notion and name of dice throughout the series of perceptions of this particular dice. Still, it is a component of my perception of this specific thing. If I didn't know what dice are in general before looking at this particular thing, I would recognize it as a cube with several equally arranged dots on its sides. From this example, it is evident that we require an account of this essential element of meaning that precedes the establishment of the meaning of a specific item. Whereas the debate over the meaning of noema has largely been discussed, I argue

that a sound and complete phenomenological theory of human experience requires an account of cultural structures. At this point, I propose what Husserl characterized as the "grasping sense" as a generic meaning that precedes a specific complex act due to cultural information assimilated by human consciousness. (Smith :94) As we discussed, the intended object's identity and objectivity are formed by the same experience elements. In other words, I propose that the grasping sense of vision be seen as a product of internalized cultural structures known as cultural forms or symbols. As a result, an artistic form of dice is required to recognize a specific cube as a dice. This object has intersubjectively acknowledged identity and objectivity as a dice. Interpreting this particular cube as dice does not result from the accumulation of my encounters with such cubical things. Still, the fact is that these things would never become dice for me if cultural forms were not there. When phenomenologically studied, where does this additional effect, this surplus value that makes us feel something in addition to recognizing the particular action, person, or item, come from? It should be derived from cultural forms utilized for communicating and comprehending the message and identifying and making sense of the things and people around us. The senders' mentioned values of care, responsibility, and submissiveness, as well as the discriminatory classification and social conventions, are intersubjective cultural forms that are part of our internalized cultural structures. They have a distinct intersubjective validity and potency that predate the act of meaning construction.

If the model of femineity projects women as an object of desire, it makes no sense to use it to explain or justify men's behaviour toward women. In reality, it would make being feminine impossible because being feminine is at least partially the outcome of a specific form of social acknowledgment that, anyhow, devalues the woman. The same is true for the responsibility of a man as a breadwinner: if responsibility were nothing more than a private ideal, no one could explain his behaviour only with this word, not even himself. For this explanation to be

practical, the source must assume that everyone feels the same about this objective. These examples show that when cultural forms are involved in meaning construction, they are better suited to the concrete sensual contents than the dice example suggests. Their suitability is rarely unproblematic, and they are prone to leading sense-formation in directions that are only sometimes desirable or, at the very least, consciously chosen by the experiencing subject. However, it is this human ability to be conscious of something as something that allows them to live in culturally constructed worlds - amongst other things that are determined by idealities that do not come from factual aspects of the surroundings. This ability enables the existence of homo-symbolicum, whose classificatory deeds and normative principles of behaviour and thought, as well as general orientation in the surrounding world, is determined by what is good or evil, right or wrong, beautiful or strong, active or passive, submissive or arrogant, and so on. Cultural forms can distinguish between "us" and "them" between men and women, oppressor and oppressed, and powerful and powerless. For instance, whenever a particular woman is revered as a 'Bhadra mahila' (Descent woman), our construction depends on the codes, practices, and value orientations that the community members adhere to. This may be an example in which a sociocultural influence appears evident. Yet, something similar is true for attributes such as behaviour, performance, or acts as an object within a given community. These properties are no less socially determined, acknowledged, or agreed upon. We must distinguish between the meaning of cultural forms and the meaning of specific everyday manifestations or instantiations made meaningful by these cultural forms. In everyday contexts, cultural forms are used, and related interpretations are given without the subject's conscious attention being drawn to the cultural forms' significance. Cultural structures do not define what we experience but what they want us to experience. Thus, even if meaning-formation occurs in the centre of a subject's attention in everyday life, it sometimes does not follow that the generated meaning

is shaped according to the subject's initiative and will. In most situations, cultural forms work as machines – meaning formation automatons that leave us with the already meaningful object of experience. Most of the time, it takes time to deconstruct the meanings constructed through cultural forms or to juxtapose them with new, possibly contradictory meanings. The more a cultural form becomes socially normalized due to frequent intersubjective use, and become the more complex and out of place, hard to reject or replace it.

Untying the Epistemological Gaze:

In this way, every society includes many levels of "identity"; this is what every person adopts. In this, we also have social acceptance. This system of society is not only for women, but it is also for men. All the privileges are given to men by the community, it is not men themselves, who have snatched them from women. The way women are forced to follow their masters, to sacrifice themselves, there is silent acceptance of women too in playing femininity, and in that acceptance, they find a kind of comfort. This comfort is located in their cultural structures and their given meanings. Even though many things are taken away from women in the name of femininity, no matter what happens outside, they will not speak a word in that time. The same situation exists with men also. The society also creates men. Our cultural web of "Identity" has been around us since ancient times. The images of being an oppressor and an oppressed have been created. Yes, this is not their own choice but a compulsion. If men do not behave like this, then such culturally deviant courage should not be accepted in society. However, indeed, atrocities should be treated as atrocities, not as chauvinism. In cultural structures, the definition of manhood includes many types of atrocities and selfishness. Further, explain how these social and cultural values and institutions shape the actions and roles of men and women. Men have their own "essential" nature; hence, they remain as they are, and no one can change anything about it. Similarly, it is said that women also have a definite nature of their own due to innate nature, or it comes from cultural structures. It is

said that women embody sacrifice, compassion, love, and care, and whenever and wherever we hear qualities like sacrifice, compassion, love, and care, we will be sure that they are the incarnations of Mata (mother goddess). He is human, but masculine qualities are his things or gems that either do not exist in women or, even if they exist, are entirely in seed form. It is a matter of thinking and understanding that if a person does not have these qualities, what kind of person are they? Only through these masculine/feminine qualities can a person become worthy of being called a human being. Even if the interpretative machines could not work without the psychological input of individuals, this does not imply that they create results based on their choices and intentions. As a result, meaning formation cannot be viewed as a process carried out by a single agent, which is supposed to be an individual's mind. It is a collaboration, as well as a competition, between several poles or foci of activity. Such structure creates oppressive structures. Women who want to fight for their rights and dream for themselves, insist on their own choices, want to be something, serve their interests, such women think more about their development and are not seen as good women in our homes and society. The percentage of people who view this type of woman positively is very few. Women internalize the feminine ideal so profoundly that they lack the critical distance necessary to contest it and are even fearful of the consequences of "noncompliance," and ideals of femininity are so powerful that to reject their supporting practices is to reject one's own identity. (Sandra B: 1988)

The "Identity" of a woman as a fighter, courageous, stubborn, strong, and more than a submissive woman is seen as irritable and wicked. If men behave differently from their masculinity, then along with society, they also have to listen to many types of negative comments and taunts from the community. It is a society that imposes this kind of behaviour on them. In this way, a complete blueprint has been created in the society. Like women, men are also required to act and are forced not to show

courage to behave contrary to their constructed "identity." (Kinsella: 2017)

An examination of power dynamics is important to this decoding mission of comprehending the nature and causes of women's subordination. Using the classic notion of power as repression, several varieties of feminist thought have believed that patriarchal social systems that secure men's power over women can explain women's oppression. Other feminists, however, are increasingly calling this assumption into question in order to counter what they see as the oversimplified view of power relations that this view entails, as well as the problematic implication that women are simply passive, powerless victims of male power.

Some feminists have used Foucault's work on power in the context of this discussion to build a more complicated explanation of the relationships between gender and power that rejects the premise that men's holding of power causes women's oppression in any straightforward way. Feminists have sought to challenge accounts of gender relations that emphasize domination and victimization in order to move towards a more textured understanding of the role of power in women's lives based on Foucault's understanding of power as exercised rather than possessed, circulating throughout the social body rather than emanating from the top down, and productive rather than repressive (Sawicki 1988: 164).

The reinterpretation of power by Foucault has made an important and diversified contribution to this undertaking. With Foucault's theory that power is constitutive of that upon which it operates, feminists have been able to investigate the often-complex ways in which women's experiences, self-understandings, comportment, and capacities are produced in and by the power relations that they want to transform. Foucault's redefinition of power has made a significant and varied contribution to this project. (Petton:2017)

In this regard, with the help of epistemological lens we find that habitus is "structuring structures." Or, more precisely, they are structured as systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured and predisposed to function as structuring structures. That is, in principle generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aim at ends or an express mastery of the operations required to achieve them. They can be collectively orchestrated without being exposed as the result of an organizing effort by a conductor since they are objectively "controlled" and "regular" without being the result of rule adherence. As a product of history, the habitus develops individual and social actions, and hence history, by the schemas created by account.

The phenomenological habitus and its construction

At this point, we must go beyond Husserl's extended interpretation of the phenomenological technique because it primarily demonstrates the predominance of cultural traits over physicalistic characteristics. By incorporating the concept of cultural structures, I'd like to locate it in the domain of cultural phenomenology. It involves embracing the idea that cultural horizons of experience inhabited by transcendental meaning-formation and automaton actively participate in the development of meanings in individual consciousness. Depending on which component of meaning construction is highlighted, these machines can be regarded as agents of culture, language, society, or power. However, it is vital to recognize that they have a life of their own - an autonomous logic of meaning construction that may not suit the interests and purposes of the individual experiencing the meanings produced by them.

The ideology of "Essentialism" (essentialism or fundamentalism) may be used to decode the hurdles of meaning-making processes in the context of gender. While doing so, we may examine that some images are formed in society that everyone considers essential. According to this, any person or thing has an important element, which is defined by that crucial

element. A person is known for that; it comes naturally in this form only. On the contrary, some incidences are cultural formations where some things do not have essence but are created according to the situation and environment. Changes keep happening. So, the ideology of "Essentialism" on the subject of gender separates women and men from society and reality. It dominates thinking and also influences cultural structures. According to this ideology, men and women in society are universal and fixed kinds of human beings, but it never denies the contestations and shifts.

The unsuitability of cultural forms may also be shown in our everyday instances because I assume that the female colleague refusing to help a male friend is aware of the many alternative readings of her attitude, which is why she rejects the ideal of feminine frame. The same holds for the statement "You should earn your living" for men. The question is why only he should earn since everyone should because this is their duty. However, the general perceptions show that females/males should not shift their cultural locations, distorting meanings will disturb the whole cultural and societal structures. The inadequacy of alternative cultural meanings for men/ women may also be demonstrated in such cases.

We do not need to move from an individual's experience to an analysis of "us" as a social group with specific common mental characteristics, nor do we need to fantasize about collective brains or collective unconscious structures. We can proceed from personal experiences even if we concentrate on collective transcendental procedures of meaning production. By doing so, we get at the phenomenology of collectively structured, or, to put it another way, culturally constituted, but individual experiences, which comprise the very subject of cultural phenomenology. Individual experience remains there in dormancy form.

But the thing to remember is that there are other fields of work besides these fixed ones may have different dynamics. Their primary domain or work area of women is limited to inside the house only. The

responsibilities of the "public" sphere outside the home mainly lie with men because they are the leaders and doers there. Or it can be said that he is a "public" sphere agent, and the private agency is a women's specialty. These two identities will be in danger if they overlap, cross their domains, but it will be safe if they run together like parallel lines but do not meet each other. In this way, society-imposed women's identity as a private agency and bound it only to their land and home. The same thing happened with men by keeping them away from the private domain to the public one.

In this way, the "identity" of men and women was created in society, which is still with us today. As a social and cultural being, we are working on our "Private Identity." Let it be the identity of women or the identity of men. It is mainly from the "public" domain. Although it is not entirely banned and cannot be prohibited, bringing vegetables from the market and dropping the children to school is a male-only job. In a crisis, if the husband falls ill, women will take care of him and simultaneously take over all outdoor responsibilities. So many women come to the public sphere due to their situational crisis, not as an individual choice.

Determinism reappears "in the first instance," and the habitus becomes the source of "objective" practices but is itself a set of "subjective" generative principles produced by the "objective" structures that frame social life. In essence, it must be recognised that such a model constitutes no more than another form of determination in the last instance.

Thus, there is also a politics of gender that has been going on since the beginning in the name of these "identities" of man and woman. The root of "Identity" is "Gender Politics". Under this gender politics, women are seen in a definite role that most of such roles make them deprived of their rights. Under the cultural structures, "Identities" are delimited differently in some exceptional circumstances. But still, the question remains: how are these "identities" carefully carved and defined, and how are demarcating boundaries developed as an agenda of "Gender Politics,"

where men and women are fixed on distinct footings and unable to contest.

The various "unconscious" expectations, assumptions, and beliefs that hold the status quo in place are outcomes of a historical process and have often been preceded by open conflict: What appears to us today as self-evident, as beneath consciousness and choice, has quite often been the stake of struggles and instituted only as the result of dogged confrontations between dominant and dominated groups.(Crossely: 2001) The significant effect of historical evolution is abolishing history by relegating it to the past, that is, to the unconscious, the lateral possibilities to be eliminated. Legitimation and stability are not inevitable but are instead the contingent and observable object of a dying down of struggle. But in contemporary discourses, the traditional form of "identity" is slightly changed, or rather, new branches emerge as a dissent against these cultural structures. Let's redefine the meanings as per dynamic gender relations.

Conclusion

Unlike classical philosophical epistemology, which accepts only one active centre of meaning-formation that is more or less closely associated with the individual mind, cultural phenomenology takes multiple vibrant centres of meaning-formation that interact and conflict with each other, in some more powerful than others in their mutual conflicts and interactions. Cultural phenomenology is similar to structuralist and post-structuralist viewpoints in this sense, except that all of these tensions and interconnections occur within individual experience. The experiencing ego remains the source of psychological energy and the working axis in all meaning formation processes. However, in most circumstances in everyday life, a more decisive role is played by meaning automatons that shape the validity, truth, and power of the meanings we experience.

My final criticism of structuralism and post-structuralism is that they argue that the habitus shapes and constitutes human subjectivity without

spelling out how we might examine this. While using the epistemological lens, it is apparent from the discussion of Husserl that it allows us to consider how habituated expectations and typification embellish our perceptions and conceptions and examine how the "perceptual schemas" to which Bourdieu (Bourdieu: 1998) refers actually work. My intrusion into phenomenological territory has been inspired by a desire to strengthen and deepen an already persuasive and highly sophisticated approach to decode meaning-making through an epistemological lens.

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