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**Body in Foucault: Significances of Body and its Contradictory Relation with  
Discourse in Foucault's Oeuvre.**

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to make a study on the significance of human body in the works of Michel Foucault. Foucault's conceptualisation of body requires special attention in that Foucault's idea of discourse entertains human body as a participant in discursive practices. Body, as per Foucault's conceptualisation, may be viewed as one of the material existences of the abstract discursive practices. This paper is going to explore the dynamic relation that body shares with history, sex, power and disciplines. The paper has also focussed on the charges and the feasibility of the charges against Foucault's specified notions of body.

**Keywords:** Body, Discourse, History, Power, Sex.

Body, in the history of Western philosophy, has a history. It all started with Plato who viewed body in dualistic terms. Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo* present Plato's dualistic notions about body. In *Symposium*, the significance of body appears positive in that the love of body helps one to recognise the spiritual beauty. Again, in *Phaedo*, Plato is found to objectify body considering it as an appendage to the self. It is viewed as "fastened" and "glued" to the self and as an alien to the thinking self.<sup>1</sup> Augustine and Descartes joined hands with Plato describing the body as an opposing entity to the self. For Descartes, the body appears to be mechanical in its functions and he considered the body as a material envelope on the thinking self. For Augustine the body acts as an enemy to shackle the self and to constrain the freedom of the soul.<sup>2</sup>

Body in Michel Foucault's oeuvre turns out to be one of the most contested topics of discussion challenging the mind-body duality in which the mind reigns supreme and assumes

greater significance. Foucault reinstated the importance of body in the construction of subjectivity. Foucault's discussion on body is scattered throughout his various writings, his "Discipline and Punish", "The History of Sexuality" and the essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" contain much of his critical ponderings on the issues related to body. In Foucault's concept of genealogy, 'body' becomes an important aspect of critical study. In both, 'Herkunft'(descent) and 'Entstehung' (emergence), two cardinal specificities of genealogy, body has been given immense importance. While discussing the relation that 'descent' maintains with 'body', Foucault says:

"...descent attaches itself to the body. It inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament in the digestive apparatus; it appears in the faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those whose ancestors committed errors" (*The Foucault Reader* 82)

The body with its history becomes the area of inspection in the 'Herkunft' or the descent aspect of genealogy. It is body that becomes the locale of genealogy's descent aspect. Let us quote Foucault to some extent for the elaboration of Foucault's standpoint:

The body—and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil—is the domain of the Herkunft. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the insurmountable conflict.

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of dissociated self. . . . Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (83)

Entstehung or emergence also accentuates on the importance of body. But in case of this aspect of genealogy, body is viewed as a political site that becomes subject to the forces. For Foucault, genealogy, which he also termed as "effective history", is unlike traditional history in that it "shortens its vision to those things nearest to it—the body, the nervous system,

nutrition, digestion, and energies” (89). Foucault also maintains that genealogy or effective history is concerned to study the impact of history on body.

In Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborated the impact of both disciplinary mechanisms and punishment on body. Human body, as Foucault observes, becomes a political sites where power relations operate with varied degrees of impact. Down the ages, from the ruling of a monarch to the governing of a nation-state, human body has always been subjected. It remains involved in political field and power relations have always borne an immediate impact on body. The body is mainly targeted or controlled by power relations to meet out the economic force. The transformation or the subjugation of the body is interlaced with “labour force” (173). Thus Foucault maintains that “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (173). But the subjection of the body is not merely achieved forcefully by violence; it may be achieved by the “calculated, organised and technically thought out” methods which might be termed as “political technology of the body”. Foucault analysed the character of this technology with the following words:

Of course, the technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse; it is often made up of bits and pieces; it implements a disparate set of tools or methods. In spite of the coherence of its results, it is generally no more than a multiform instrumentation. Moreover, it cannot be localized in particular type of institutions or state apparatus. For they have recourse to it; they use, select, or impose certain of its methods. But, in its mechanisms and its effects, it is situated at a quite different level. What the apparatuses and institutions operate is, in a sense, a microphysics of power, whose field of validity is situated, in a sense, between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and forces. (173-74)

What we may infer from the above quotation is that Foucault viewed body as a political site of contestation. The body is subjected through various procedures. Not merely instruments of violence or torture have shaping influence on body; there are micro techniques with which modern society control human bodies. What is more is that the body appears both as a cultural construct and as a productive force.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault also lays bare the subtle techniques which are imposed on body to make it what Foucault calls “Docile Bodies”. Foucault opines that in

classical age the body has often been viewed as “object and target of power” (180). The body in ancient regimes is “manipulated, shaped, and trained” so that it becomes skilful, obedient and productive. From Foucault’s standpoint, the emergence of docile bodies may be aligned to the alteration of technique that controls human body. Foucault pointed out three distinct changes in the ways of controlling body. Foucault writes:

To begin with there was the scale of control: it was a question not of treating the body *en masse*, “wholesale”, as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it “retail”, individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself- movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body. Then there was the object of the control; it was not or was no longer the signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficiency of the movements, their internal organisation; constrained bears on the forces rather than on the signs; the only truly important ceremony is that of exercise. Lastly, there is the modality; it implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result, and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement (181).

Again, while elaborating on the impacts of disciplines on human body in modern civilization Foucault writes that disciplinary mechanisms subjugate the body to explore it, to break it down, to rearrange it. And it results in giving birth to a “mechanics of power” and thereby it succeeds in controlling not merely the bodies but the efficiency of the subjected bodies. The disciplinary practices function both as a subjugating force and as a liberating one. Therefore Foucault writes:

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an “aptitude,” a “capacity,” which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it and turns it into a relation of subjection” (182).

Foucault also specified the ways in which disciplines work on body. He points out four categories through which disciplines register its impact. Firstly, there is the mechanism of

distribution that focuses on space. It functions on the subject by means of keeping it within specific enclosure. The space inhabited by the subject becomes operant in shaping the self of its inhabitant. Secondly, there acts a regulation of activity keeping the subject in a time frame. Thirdly, the subject becomes an object of assessment by virtue of his/her efficiency. It also acts to discipline the self. And the fourth category is the composition of forces that usually aligns a subject with a larger whole. Therefore, Foucault defines disciplines as “these methods which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body which assured the constant subject of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility-utility, might be called disciplines” (181).

In *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault introduced the concept of bio-power and analyses its effectiveness in controlling the human bodies. Foucault pointed out how the shift from sovereign power in society to the disciplinary mechanism of control was a transition from the right to take life or let live to the power to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (261). Foucault maintains that “Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding that power establishes its dominations” (261). Both disciplinary mechanism and bio-politics together constituted the power over life. Bio-politics keep its focus on “the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the bio-logical processes: propagation, births, mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (262).

Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality Volume One* may also be read as a genealogical study of the concept of sex. Foucault destabilises the concept of sex. Instead of viewing sex as an apolitical issue in human lives, Foucault traced the very play of power relations in the processes sex is appropriated in human lives. For Foucault, “Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for disciplines and as a basis for regulations” (267). So sex in Foucault assumes political significance in that it becomes one of the determining principles of bio-power and the very repression of it becomes the target of disciplining mechanism. About the relation of power and sex, Foucault opines that “Broadly speaking, at the juncture of the body and the “population”, sex became a crucial target of a power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death” (268). Foucault’s study on sex reveals how during the regime of sovereign power the importance on the blood and blood relation was an accepted phenomenon. The society based on hierarchy attributed an instrumental role to blood. It became functional in the formation of social alliance like marriage. It makes its presence in “the honour of war”, “the sovereign with his sword”, the execution and the torture. Foucault writes that “blood was a reality with

a symbolic function” (269). On the other hand, ours is an age of sex or a society with sexuality. Foucault opines:

We, on the other hand, are in a society of “sex,” or rather, a society “with sexuality”: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. (269)

According to Foucault’s analytical study of sexuality, sexuality contributes to the rise and emergence of fascism and modern racism. Foucault analysed the bourgeois tendency to keep sexual alliance through marriages as a mechanism of maintaining the sanctity of blood. This tendency to keep blood relation sacrosanct gives birth to eugenics and racism. Though eugenic racism may be viewed as a manifestation of the symbolic signification of blood, Foucault also traced the role played by sexuality and the power relations attached with it. In fact, the transition from the symbolic function of blood to a society permeated with sexuality is found to be overlapping with each other. So, in Foucault, sex or sexuality becomes a participant in the game of power-relations and are very much integral to Foucault’s notions of ‘body’. And what is more, sex belongs to the field of discursive practises rather than to the arena of non-discursive practices. Thus the modern society is distinguished, according to Foucault, by its use of infinitesimal mechanism of power to control human beings. Foucault’s analysis of the functions of human body in terms of its relation with history, sex and power provided scopes to many critics of different theoretical schools to locate the impact of social forces and power on body.

Foucault’s conceptualisation of body as a cultural construct has been fairly accepted by feminists. Though feminists have criticized Foucault for his inattention to the issues of gender, they primarily kept themselves aligned with Foucault’s theorisation of body as a discursive product. Foucault has been criticized as androcentric since he maintains gender neutrality in sorting out the effects of disciplinary mechanism on body. Such criticisms are grounded on the belief that gender neutrality always presupposes a male body and thereby negates the problems of female body. Thus Sandra Lee Bartky opined: “Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (*Femininity and Domination*, 65). Taking cues from Foucault, Bartky applied the effects of disciplinary practices on female bodies. Margaret A. McLaren in her *Feminism, Foucault and*

*Embodied Subjectivity* (2002) has pointed out how Bartky has applied Foucault's theorisation of body and divided the disciplinary practices into three categories. She mentioned Bartky categorisation of disciplinary practices as: "(1) practices that aim to produce a body of a certain shape and size, (2) practices that elicit a certain repertoire of gestures, and (3) practices that encourage bodily adornment" (*Embodied Subjectivity* 93).

Judith Butler, another insightful critic, adopted Foucault's theorisation of body as a cultural construct in her *Gender Trouble*. She examined how both the concepts of sex and gender are culturally constructed. In her "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions", Butler viewed Foucault's views on body paradoxical. Butler argued that Foucault's concept of body as the "inscribed surface of events . . . totally imprinted by history" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 83) posits the body in a pre-discursive field, that is prior to history. Again, in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* Foucault projected body as a cultural construct. Thus, for Butler, Foucault appeared paradoxical in his ideas on body. Margaret A. McLaren exonerated Foucault from Butler's charge in her *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity* arguing that Butler's criticism of Foucault grounded on considering Foucault's idea of social inscription model of the body. McLaren delved deep into Foucault's multifaceted conceptualisations of the body. She opined that Foucault's notions about body is not merely based on the inscription model rather the "complex notion of the body oscillates between models of inscriptions, internalisation, and interpretation" (*Embodied Subjectivity* 106). She examined Foucault's use of multiple verbs to "describe the effects of power on the body" (106). Foucault argued that the relationship of domination "establishes *marks* of its power and *engraves* memories on things and even within bodies" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 85). Foucault also mentioned that "the body is *molded* by a great many distinct regimes" (85). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault mentioned that in ancient regimes we have "the body that is *manipulated, shaped, trained*" (180) and also opined that "Discipline increases the *forces* of the body" (182) [emphasis mine]. McLaren analysed Foucault's association of multiple verbs with the following words:

Foucault uses many verbs to describe the effects of power on the body . . . . While marked and engraved seem to fit with the social inscription model, molded fits less well. And shaping, training, and responding evoke the idea of some interplay between the body and power. Moreover, a body that increases its forces implies an active body, rather than simply the passive recipient of social and cultural inscription. A closer consideration of his genealogical

works reveals that the inscription model does not adequately capture the different ways that Foucault talks about the body (*Embodied Subjectivity* 106).

In fact, Foucault's use of words to frame out the impact of disciplinary mechanism on body reveals his conceptualisation of body both as a passive recipient (manipulated, shaped and trained) and as an active agent (responds, forces). Thus disciplinary practices function in diametrically opposite way: it turns the body a cultural construct and it also enables them to hone their forces and capacities. However, the feminists in spite of their differences in views regarding Foucault's conceptualisations of body remain indebted to his ideas. Taking into consideration all that we have discussed so far, we may encapsulate Foucault's notions about the body as follows.

- i) In Foucault's concept of genealogy as an interpretative methodology, body plays an important role.
- ii) Body, in Foucault, may be considered as a political site that bears the struggle of power relations.
- iii) Body is a construct of discursive practices and also a participant in discursive practices.
- iv) Disciplinary techniques work ambivalently on body: it is both repressive and reproductive.
- v) Disciplinary techniques along with bio-power constitute the power over life.
- vi) Sex is also interrelated with body as sex is one of the determining principles of bio-power and one of the repressive targets of disciplinary techniques. Like body, sex, according to Foucault, is also a participant and product of discursive practices.

The relevance of Foucault's theorisation of body is not merely limited to gender studies or literary studies; it may be accepted in the interpretative study of history and sociology. It provides us an insightful understanding to the materiality of discursive practices and reveals how various discursive practices across different cultures remain imperative in human lives.

**Note:**

1. See, *Phaedo* in *The Dialogues of Plato*. Ed. and Trans. Benjamin Jowett. 83d.
2. See page no. 164 of St. Augustine's *The Confessions*, trans. R. S. PineCoffin. An elaborate study has been carried out in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* by Susan Bordo.

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