Feminising the Body and Institutionalising Gender through Smartphone Applications

Aaheli Sen

The 1970s can be considered as a major paradigm shift in the discipline of Geography when branches of humanistic geography, radical geography and subsequent postcolonial, modern and structural geography were making their advent. Around this time gender was being highly foregrounded in the discipline. The question that is raised is how gender and geography can make allies and stem off as a branch of study from this discipline. The answer has been rightly put forward by eminent Indian gender geographer Saraswati Raju in her book 'Gendered Geographies' where she conveys the aspects of spatiality in the gendered existence of being, that is to say how particularities of space, place and landscape bear different meanings and are experienced differently by men and women. In the inception years gender geography was highly influenced by works of welfare geography and made its contribution towards the analysis of gender inequality. But a major shift in discourse of gender geography was seen around 1990s. This new phase which Geraldine Pratt called the 'feminist geographies of difference' has brought to the forefront the gendered differences of both men, women, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexuals and the different connotations associated with their situatedness in different spatial arrangements. Highly influenced by cultural, post-structural, post-colonial,

psychoanalytic, queer and critical race theories this branch of geography tried to explore the geographies of body, identity, imagination and politics encompassing a broader array of social and cultural theory signifying a distinctive cultural turn in the discipline. A major important aspect of this new phase was that it tried to analyse different spatial attributes through seeking knowledge from psychoanalytic theories, stressing more on humanistic approach. A crucial and significant turn during this time in the discipline was that much of the research was directed towards studying bodies as sites of power contestation and societal regulations. The prominence of the body as a subject of study could be traced back in the writings of Francois Poullain de la Barre (1673) and the seminal work of Wollstonecraft and Taylor Mill in the 18th and 19th century respectively. The emergence of the body as a subject came to prominence in the discipline of geography in the late 20th century when geographers tried to unravel the social, cultural and political negotiations manifested in the bodies. This period also coincided with the much prominent theory of 'biopolitics' introduced by French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, where he tries to see how life evolves out of different political strategies. This theory had a large impact on the discourse of body and gender. Even the discipline of Geography responded to such a discourse by incorporating similar strategies in emerging areas of research .

As a humanist and as a geographer dealing with gendered geographies, the idea of geographies of the body has always fascinated me. When Foucault talks about 'governmentality',he talks about the methods and techniques used to govern the behaviour of human beings. This is simplified by Lemke who tells how Foucault uses the term governmentality to give a comprehensive and holistic idea about the forms of power and process of subjectification. Here 'government' does not simply talk about the administrative political

exertions of power, but also the form of governing the self. In Foucault's word the concept of governing or government could be analogous to the concept of conduct which could range through a wide range of spectrum including 'conducting the self to conducting others'. Borrowing from this 'idea of conduct' I delve into the new age governing of the self and the mind through the use of various smartphone Applications. I try to see particularly how the female body reacts and is governed through these applications that have penetrated our everyday life. I seek to know the mechanism and the pattern through which the body of a woman is governed and in the process how a woman conducts herself and the mind. More importantly, the question following the pattern is the need for such forms of 'conducted' behaviour. It is pertinent to ask how these Playstore Applications have created a space which has prepared the ground for governmentality to be exercised in the everyday life of a woman.

With the growing advent of Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest etc. there is a larger trend of clicking pictures and more so of uploading them. Selfie/Groupfie is the new millennial buzz word, where one, with the use of advanced technologies of smartphone clicks a picture of the self. But it does not stop here. The picture is then uploaded in social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and other such platforms. Clicking selfies is such a rising trend that in 2013 the Oxford dictionary named it the 'Word of the Year'. However, with the growing trend of taking selfies, it has also transgressed boundaries and has entered into an arena where lunatic, narcissistic expressions are surfaced. The act of taking selfies translates into a form of compulsive disorder where one is found to take several snaps in a single day or perhaps a single hour. The American Psychiatric Association has come up with a word *selfitis* which refers to an obsessive compulsive disorder. This compulsive disorder is often

directed towards one particular 'perfect' shot which satisfies the narcissistic mind and ego. There are different ways a photograph is captured but this disorder can be recognised best in solo-selfies where the sole focus is upon a single subject. This trend is mostly seen among the youth where the act of creating a self-image and preserving it is of utmost importance. The key element however is 'perfection'. Through this arduous task of clicking multiple selfies one tries to achieve perfection and through this perfect state of projection one tries to achieve prominence in the virtual spaces of Facebook or Instagram. No space can be seen as a mere container of things or phenomena. It should be perceived as a complex whole with intersections of human activity and social structure. As Gillian Rose points out , spaces are inhabited and experienced through human instincts, desire and imagination. This is almost similar to what Soja talks about when he says that spaces are constituted by humans and are socially produced. Likewise the virtual space can be perceived in the same light. It is something that doesn't have an absolute entity or existence but is lived in through human interactions and emotions. The role of human agency is of utmost importance here and the sense of perception plays an important role. Virtual spaces like Facebook/Instagram are acted upon and produced everyday through our daily activities and channelized through our lives. Lefebvre's work Production of Spaces also expresses a similar line of thought where he puts forward the argument that spaces are not abstract containers but contains traces of processes that operate in them, subsequently produced and acted upon by a complex interplay of material and cognitive processes.

The production of selfie talks at large about the processes that govern its production. The primary aim of a selfie is to attain perfection and thereafter prominence and this is best mediated by a certain set of applications which govern or conduct the way a selfie should be

taken. The question I explicitly try to raise is how governmentality is imposed upon the female body through mediators like these applications who try to define a sense of beauty on its own. The question seems a little bizarre in the first place but if one sees it clearly and tries to investigate then there are numerous 'beauty' enhancing applications and it becomes important to investigate the reasons behind the existence and use of such applications. For instance there are applications like 'Beauty Plus', 'B612-Beauty and Filter Camera', 'Beauty Camera-Selfie Camera & Photo Editor', 'Face Makeup Camera & Beauty Photo Makeup Editor', 'Beauty Plus Smooth Camera'etc. which serve as mediators or catalytic agents in governing the female body. If one looks at the icons of these applications or the advertisements, they try to pass on the message of moulding (governing) or recreating a female face in the light of conventional beauty. Also if we stress upon the pattern of nomenclature of these applications they mostly revolve around words like beauty, make-up, filter, edit etc. These applications also have certain editing tools like 'face correction', 'perfect eye', 'slimmer waist' etc. which nonchalantly motivate and act as governing agents especially towards the female body through their interventions in the daily life.
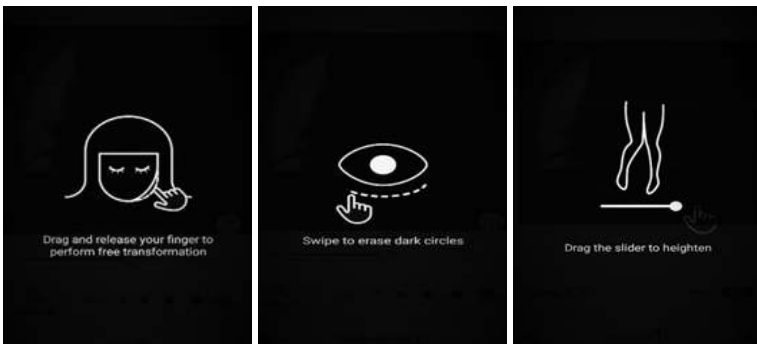

Plate. 1 Editing tools to enhance beauty in 'Beauty Plus Me App'

Since the ultimate aim is to attain perfection through satisfying one's narcissistic ego, one builds an image by submitting oneself to these propaganda perpetuated and mediated through these applications. The female bodies thus become a site of political and commercial exploitation and at the end the selfie that is being produced creates a distance between the subject and the object. This can be explained through Heidegger's existential phenomenology which talks about how things are represented in the manner in which they are perceived rather than what they actually are. Thus the very essence of existence of a woman in the digital space is the way she is being represented and thereafter perceived. Therefore it can also be inferred that the female body acts as a site of governing processes resulting in the creation of particularised gendered identities, expressed through bodily actions and perceptions.

The point of contention lies here that is it solely the commercial virtual space that exercises power on female bodies and is it that women are mere passive agents. The production of everyday life alienated self is a result of the governmental practices imposed upon a female body mediated and guided by certain virtual spaces but they cannot be considered as absolute agents working in the process. In the earlier paragraphs it has been stated that taking a selfie and alienating oneself to create an image also fulfils the narcissistic instincts and desires of the mind. Women cannot be reflected solely as passive adaptors of the process. The editing tools and applications and projecting the 'best self' on social media is definitive of its role. It can be regarded as a dominant game player and subordinating to this is the role of a woman who consistently fuels the entire process of governmentality by allowing the body to be a site of power play between politics and power.

The process noted above can be best explained by the psychoanalytic concept of 'abjection' put forward by Bulgarian-French philosopher

and literary critic Julia Kristeva. The Powers of Horror-An Essay on Abjection, written by Kristeva in the 1980, talks about the art of abjection. Borrowing from psychoanalytic theories it talks about what an abject is. In simpler terms an abject is neither a subject nor an object. If it is at all anything then it is something which opposes and challenges the object. The abject is that entity which is created by the self and it disrupts the conduct of law or governing. It is something that lies between the one that is governed and the governed self. An entity which is ambiguous and does not conform to any particularistic order. The creation of an abjected self occurs every time one processes a selfie by employing the editing tools to further reshape it and finally culminating into an object. The first encounter with the selfie camera produces an ephemeral state of abjection. A site of horror. This becomes a point of contention, an opposing entity to the object that is to be recreated by using the editing apparatus in the applications. The female body becomes a site of everyday negotiation between the abject and the object. The projection of the abjected self on social media sites has its roots in the violent attacks and subordination and ultimately marginalizing the abjected self which gets repressed since it disavows any form of governmental practice. Kristeva also make us look at the narcissistic side of the subject. The repressive state of the abject is grounded in the desires and wants of the subject and from this what she calls 'the narcissistic crisis' the object is formed. Likewise, analogous to this is the narcissistic mind of a woman, who is horrified at the first glance of the self in the selfie. This horror, accompanied with desire, want and fulfilment give away the abjected self to create the object, and in this process a woman is not simply a receptor, but also acts as an active agent who complies with a pre-conceived notion of beauty standardised by the society. The body space of a woman is being reiterated to reinforce gender in its most invigorating forms. It

becomes noteworthy that both the applications' editing apparatus and the woman is subsumed into this process.

The question here is that why do women subsume or labour themselves in this process of objectification. Why does the abjected self acts as a site of horror and why does it need to be repressed and violently attacked upon. It also raises question about why women give scope to these editing tools and applications to govern them by creating certain stipulated gendered identities that are manifested through their bodies. In this regard it becomes very important to study the concept of gender as a performative act. This idea that gender is a performative act was put forward by Judith Butler who argues that gender is performative in the sense that gender is being produced and reproduced every time through certain performative actions. When she talks about gender as a performative act she claims that a self becomes gendered through the performance of certain behaviour or following a code of conduct that gives society an impression of being a man or a woman. There are certain societal laws that stylise the body to perform gender. Nobody is born with a gender but it is rather infused through certain practices and norms. Gender is institutionalised rather than being a natural phenomenon. This can be supported with the Beauvoirian argument which states that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. A female child is reproduced as a woman by institutionalising certain societal practices. Beauvoir points out that when a girl child enters puberty it becomes an entry point to her future and the future starts to create a place in her body. A girl is made to represent herself as a woman from this stage and all the social customs and norms govern her to alienate herself to build an image of her own. Beauvoir also makes it a point that society is fitted with patriarchal lenses, that is to say that society perceives a woman through the eyes of a man. She also argues that women are also made to perceive themselves through   patriarchal

lenses. And in the process a part of her own narcissistic mind gets satisfied. There happens to be a prevalent dualistic mind which works towards satisfying both the narcissistic self and the male gaze. By alienating oneself into an object the woman is trained to achieve a sense of accomplishment and acceptance to best suit the patriarchal order of the society. The social media sites are spaces which are lived in the daily lives and they have also become a platform to showcase the objectified self. The editing tools and applications govern and aid the mind of a woman and transcend into bodily actions which help to situate herself as an object and more so as a feminine entity. Taking selfies with a particular camera angle and focussing on certain contours of the face are nothing but governmental practices imposed upon a woman's body and the woman here is an active agent who coherently subsumes to the idea of beauty institutionalised by the patriarchal society.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borge & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Book, 2011.
- Johnston, Ron, Sidaway, James D. *Geography and Geographers*. Routledge, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell, 1991.
- Lemke, Thomas. *Bio-Politics: An Advanced Introduction*. Trans. Eric Frederick Turmp. New York University Press, 2011.
- Lennon, Kathleen. "Feminist Perspectives of the Body." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Metaphysics Research Lab. 2014.
- Raju, Saraswati. *Gendered Geographies: Space and Place in South Asia*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Rose, Gillian. "As If the Mirrors had bled: Masculine Dwelling, Masculinist Theory and Feminist Masquerade." N. Duncan (ed). *Body Space: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. Routledge, 1996.

- Singh, Sanchita & Tripathi, Kaushlendra. "Selfie: A New Obsession." 2016. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hannah_Westley/publication/315855563_Reading_the_Self_in_Selfies/links/5a60acc00f7e9bfbc3f8de5d/Reading-the-Self-in-Selfies.pdf>

- Soja, Edward. Postmodern Geographies: *The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Verso, 1989.