

The Wound and the Flower

Surti Singh

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“Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant’s vocabulary” (de Beauvoir 2011, 3). Only a few years before the publication of *Minima Moralia*, Simone de Beauvoir had published the *Second Sex*, a work in which she raised this paradox of femininity: it was something so enmeshed in the understanding of womanhood, and yet, could not be properly located. Femininity was to be found neither in the biological body, “secreted by the ovaries,” an effect of being in possession of a womb or uterus, nor in the appeal to some eternal feminine soul, which by the mid-twentieth century had already become anachronistic. Yet, on de Beauvoir’s account, femininity was also not simply a gender performance—the donning of a frilly petticoat—as Judith Butler would later famously argue. For de Beauvoir, femininity was a negative term, something that embodied everything that in a heterosexual, patriarchal society, man is not. If masculinity and femininity shared an abstract legal parity, in concrete reality, there was a deep asymmetry. The “feminine character” is Other—it is inessential, inferior, irrational, a situation of bodily imprisonment marked by menstruation, childbirth, menopause and hormones—a condition, therefore, of great repulsion.

Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* is not a feminist text, but it is comprised of a set of aphorisms that, like de Beauvoir, ask after the condition of femininity in a patriarchal society. In the aphorism, “Since I set my eyes on him,” (§ 59) Adorno discusses the feminine character, and the ideal upon which it is based, as products of patriarchy and, in a fashion similar to de Beauvoir’s, views this masculine production of the female character as a “negative imprint of domination”. This aphorism culminates in Adorno’s provocative formulation “femininity itself is already the effect of the whip”. Adorno refers to the infamous passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the little old woman says to Zarathustra, “You are going to women? Then don’t forget the whip.” For Adorno, this injunction reflects Nietzsche’s adherence to the idea of an eternal feminine soul, and the equation of “the feminine” with women, “hence the perfidious advice not to forget the whip”. Adorno thus reverses Nietzsche’s formulation: rather than woman requiring submission through violence because of the unruliness of her feminine nature, femininity itself is always already an effect of male violence.

Adorno’s provocative formulation has formed the basis for thinking about how a feminist critical theory might be recovered from the canon of the Frankfurt School, in which it appears to be all but absent. Recent feminist accounts of this aphorism have positioned Adorno as holding both radical and conservative views of sex, as both a queer theorist *avant la lettre* (Duford, 2017) and as reproducing the dichotomy between male sadism and female masochism as the only horizon of female sexuality within a heterosexual patriarchal society (Marasco, 2006). I cannot enter into these debates here; instead, I propose to return to this aphorism once more, but through the door opened by de Beauvoir. There is an unexpected experiential dimension—the lived experience

of the body—that Adorno attends to in this aphorism, which complicates his notion of the feminine character.

Adorno recalls the founding psychoanalytic myth of femininity, according to which a woman experiences her body as an effect of castration. Because of castration, a woman's genitals are perceived as a wound, and this wound is reactivated when she begins to menstruate. This experience of the body gives rise to neuroses but also to a certain epistemic privilege: "The woman who feels herself a wound when she bleeds knows more about herself than the one who imagines herself a flower because that suits her husband" (§ 59). The crucial distinction Adorno makes in considering this myth of femininity is that between feeling and imagining, between the experience of one's corporeity and the fantasy that one adopts about it. Adorno suggests that women come closer to knowing their feminine character through their embodiment, through their lived experience, rather than through the assumption of an ideal.

Yet the distinction between feeling and imagining is not so clear in Adorno's analogy, for to imagine oneself as a flower is also at the same time to feel oneself as a site of injury, which in the patriarchal script of womanhood is an injury either on the horizon or one that has already transpired. That is to say, the wound or injury of castration, which is reactivated during menstruation, is reactivated yet again when a woman loses her virginity, when she is *de-flowered*. The image of femininity as a flower is thus not so innocent for it in fact contains a history of bodily injury, the flow of blood as a rite of passage that confirms a woman's purity to her husband.

In Adorno's formulation, to imagine oneself as a flower, as a being-for-others, happens through the male gaze of the husband, and later he gives another example in relation to the gaze of the jealous male:

The femininity which appeals to instinct, is always exactly what every woman has to force herself by violence—masculine violence—to be: a she-man. One need only have perceived, as a jealous male, how such feminine women have their femininity at their finger-tips—deploying it just where needed, flashing their eyes, using their impulsiveness... (§ 59).

This performative aspect of femininity requires an active form of mutilation, one that requires woman to violently bend herself to the prevailing ideal, an ideal produced by the (male) ego and thus fully adapted to the rationalized order. Adorno presents the she-man as a female form that wields the violence of masculinity, a paradoxical figure of allure and frustration, desire and horror; but does this figure, when flashing her eyes and using her impulsiveness as the jealous male watches, *enjoy* her masculine femininity? For de Beauvoir, enjoyment borne of submission was an obstacle to women's emancipation from the patriarchal order. And surely for Adorno, if the she-man bears enjoyment, it only serves to further will her own submission. In the dialectic between the wound and the flower, between embodiment and the assumption of an ideal, enjoyment is not discussed, but it arrives on the scene.

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Biography

Surti Singh is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University. Her research interests include Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Global Critical Theory, Psychoanalysis, Feminist Philosophy, and Aesthetics. She is Co-Principal Investigator of the research project, *Extimaces: Critical Theory from the Global South*, and currently serves as President of the Association for Adorno Studies. Recent publications include "Dark play: Aesthetic resistance in Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2020), "Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Artwork as Monad" in *The 'Aging' of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: 50 Years Later* (2021) and "Mahdi Amel and the Non-Identical," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* (Forthcoming).