

**National Seminar**  
**on**  
**“Agency, Autonomy and Power: A Dialogue on Women and Body”**

**Dates:** -25<sup>th</sup> February-27<sup>th</sup> February 2010, Delhi, India

**Venue:** Women’s Studies & Development Centre, University of Delhi, Delhi

**Organiser:** Women’s Studies & Development Centre, University of Delhi.

**Concept Note:** Women’s empowerment remains incomplete unless and until it leads to the strengthening of agency and autonomy of women. Women historically have been marginalized in thought processes as well as in social arrangements. They do not get adequate opportunity to exercise their agency in the public domain and remain marginalized in almost all the walks of life. They happen to have hardly any power and control over their own bodies and lives. As a result, they remain voiceless within the family, as well as, in the public domain.

Historically body has been used as a tool of oppression and subordination of women to be controlled and objectified by patriarchy irrespective of cultural and religious differences. The female body has been converted into a site of shame and embarrassment- that is the story of womankind. The reproductive power associated with the female body, which should have been regarded as the strength of women, historically has been turned into a major weakness.

We need to ask, if body is really gender, then is there no such thing as body? And if everything is gender, then does the body no longer matter? If body no longer serves as the ontological ground that gives rise to gender, then does body simply disappear? And if it does not, then what role will it play?

We cannot fail to recognize the players in Thomas Laqueur's story-the human sexual organs and pleasures, food, blood, semen, egg, sperm-in short, body. But we will be amazed at the plots into which they have been woven by scientists, political activists, literary figures, and theorists of every stripe, i.e., the politics of body, especially of the female one.

As per the one-sex story, woman is an imperfect version of man, and her anatomy and physiology are some way or other a less evolved shape of the male organs. Thus it represents the reality of women’s having the reproductive power, of women’s body not as the genesis of life, but as reverse. To this school of thought woman’s body is thus just a representation, and not the foundation, of man’s body. Nonetheless, as per the two-sex story, as it is commented, the body determines gender differences, that woman is the opposite of man with incommensurably different organs, functions, and feelings. The two plots overlap; neither ever holds a monopoly. Science may establish many new facts, but even so, Laqueur argues, science was only providing a new way of speaking-a rhetoric and not a key to female liberation or to social progress.<sup>1</sup>

While Butler rejects any theory grounded in ontology of the body, she still finds something fundamental about bodies: bodies, for Butler, are vulnerable. A body is both dependent upon others and subject to violation by another. Through our bodies we always remain exposed to others, and our very vulnerability ties us to others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Laquer Thomas. Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud. Harvard University Press, USA, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Chambers, Samuel. "The Body: Reconstructing Judith Butler’s Theory of Sex/Gender" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Marriott, Loews Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA, Aug 31, 2006

In this sense, and only in this sense, we find something primary about the body, something fundamental, and undeniable.

Thus, in the 'Modern Times', smiling and posing from the racks as mainstream world waits in line at the grocery store, male and female fitness models shining as beacons of wellness- buffed, oiled, flexed, but above all sexy, these men and women represent a promise of a better life within the covers. Fitness magazines preach a doctrine no less rigid or demanding than the imperatives of the fashion industry to be thin or the cosmetic industry to be beautiful; however, they do so behind the shield of "health" that so often keeps them from harsher criticism. However, if one only works hard enough, and wants it badly enough, the magazines preach that dreams of "health" and "fitness" can be realized. The discrepancies, while not surprising, are nonetheless indicative of the unequal ways women's and men's bodies are displayed and consumed-an object for pleasure of men and exploited in the hands of men. However, some would argue that based on gender, one's goals should be different. <sup>3</sup>

Yet, this does not mean that the body can be reduced to discourse. Nonetheless, to say this is not to dismiss the body, nor is it to ignore the constant question, 'what about the body?' The seminar will focus on women's agency and autonomy with special reference to their bodies and productive as well as reproductive functions. It aims to take up some of the issues discussed above and more.

The sub-themes of the seminar would be as follows:

- Reproductive health and reproductive rights.
- Women's commodification and objectification in media.
- Marriage, Prostitution.
- Violence against women.
- Sexuality, heterosexuality and LGBT movements.

Participants from within India presenting papers will be provided with travel and hospitality as per the University rules. Participants from outside India are welcome. However, it may not be possible for the Centre to provide any financial support towards travel to Delhi. Boarding and lodging will be arranged by WSDC for all.

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<sup>3</sup> Dworkin Shari L. and Wachs Faye Linda. *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*. New York University Press. USA. 2009.