

The Labyrinth of Her Own Making

While Albert Camus's 'Absurd' refers to a contradiction between our desire to find meaning in the universe and our meaningless existence, my 'Absurd' deals with the contradictions found in the meanings that give gender. Over the years, I have become familiar with this recurring phenomenon in my life as the 'performative paradox,' a collection of contradictions found in the possibilities of meaning that we grant gender. I have learned to map out three different layers of the paradox and accordingly formulated conclusions regarding the origins and aftermaths of these hidden paradoxes within femininity, all of which have been underpinned by my own life experiences.

The first layer of the paradox, what I paradoxically call the core, can be found in the raw definitions of the masculine and the feminine. In echo of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, one can make the claim that notions of femininity and masculinity are inherently interconnected; whereby the presence of each requires the presence of the other to exist. For example, if one does not know what constitutes as 'masculine', then they are incapable of ever identifying a potential 'feminine.' This very existence of masculinity in every mentioning of femininity is what marks the core of the paradox.

I am confronted with this initial layer of the paradox in the manifestation of the above yin-yang definition of gender. I believe, at least from what I have learned through interpreting social situations in my own life, that masculinity is typically associated with traits intrinsically bound to humans by virtue of nature. These include assertiveness, physical and psychological strength, competitiveness, protectiveness, and rational thinking - all of which are essential for human survival. On the other hand, since through the first layer we have established that femininity is the 'paradoxical other' of masculinity, or the 'absolute other' as Simone De Beauvoir writes, then I believe that notions of femininity will unavoidably suggest the presence of behavioural traits such as vulnerability, dependence, and irrationality. Ultimately, these gender perceptions weave a clear thread between the state of being feminine and the state of being a child.

It is in this inability to distinguish between childhood and womanhood that the second layer of my absurd paradox lies. Here, I have observed how the line drawn between what it means to be adult and child has become so incredibly thin that the process of 'becoming a woman' may in fact be interpreted as the 'becoming' of 'the child.' I have realized that this way of thought is particularly reflected in the views of older women, who feel that their 'market value' has decreased over time; such that their femininity is seen to rot as milk does with time's passage. This is paradoxical in that it opposes my current conception of womanhood, which I associate with maturation, wisdom, and age. My first memorable confrontation with this absurdity would be in primary school when I was sat on the classroom carpet with my legs tucked underneath me rather than, for instance, criss-crossed, a position I personally found far more comfortable. My ultimate childhood horror scene was that the potential masculinity assumed by the hair on my legs would be noticeable. Day by day I desperately wished to become more woman and less monster. Several years later, in my interpretation of this deeply rooted desire of my fifth grade

self, I was able to uncover a very unique contradiction that operated in my perception of gender at the time. On that carpet, my aspiration to become more woman, more adult, was actually defined by an embedded aspiration to become more child. After all, the physical reality of hairlessness is connected more to the bodily reality of infancy than anything else; therefore solidifying the paradox of how childhood traits are mirrored in perceptions of femininity on a physical level. In which case, it could be argued that the process of 'becoming a woman' is therefore disconnected from physical bodily changes experienced by the female subject/object as she matures, but rather is defined through the changes that she performs on her body to reverse the passage of time.

In my personal confrontations with the sexual connotations assigned to my body, I come across my third paradox. This paradox is defined by my attempt to escape the seemingly inevitable sexualization of my body and yet being drawn back to the same point from which I had begun. As Albert Camus's Sisyphus would lift a heavy boulder up a mountain by day only to see it roll back down the mountain each night, I would endlessly repeat this attempt to escape only to be paradoxically met with the same outcome that I was striving to break free from. For instance, in light of my previous discussion of my 'becoming a child' hypothesis, in hopes of opposing bodily sexualization, a female may choose to not participate in the ritual of the reversal of the biological 'becomings' of her natural maturation. These 'becomings' could range anywhere from the appearance of hair on her body to the maturation of her voice all the way to the development of her breasts; in which cases the tasks expected of her to perform to reverse the 'becomings' may include shaving, wearing a bra, speaking in a high-pitched childlike register and so on. To illustrate this third paradox, let's assume the situation, one that is also based off of my own life experiences, where the subject/object chooses to not wear a bra; since the act of wearing a bra may be seen as inducing a physical restraint to her natural womanhood. In this situation, although the intention of the female oppose the hyper-sexualization and indoctrination imposed by society on her body, the female is in fact confronted with the polar opposite of her aspired outcome. She is in fact met with a result that is very much symbolic of her starting point, if not arguably worse. This is because in the act of exposure of her breasts, she is confronted with utmost eroticisation and degradation, a feeling encapsulated by utter nakedness and vulnerability in the face of, what seems like, a predator society.

The above contradiction between the motive of escaping the vulnerabilities associated with femininity and the outcome whereby the female is met with the very condition she had attempted to rid herself of is what elucidates my thinking of all three paradoxes. It is the complexity of how notions of femininity may have been inextricably constructed to form an inescapable paradox, a child-bound pedophilic spider-webbing of forces, that ultimately trap the female within the confinements of gender. I argue that at the heart of all of this lies a main driver of this paradoxical performative maze... it is what I identify as the 'Taboo'. It is the Taboo that inhibits the female from being able to roam the Earth with her breasts freely exposed as she once did, it is the Taboo that prohibits the female from being able to parade her body in its natural order, and as Freud writes, it is the Taboo that always "rest(s) on the fear of some danger..." Thereupon, what I have uncovered through my analysis of the three layers of my

paradox is that they all seem to work towards silencing a potential 'power' within the feminine. In the case of the feminine ideal of hairlessness, the power that is being concealed is the power vested in the masculine connotations of body hair. In the case of the ideal of wearing a bra, the masked power lies in the bare breasts' challenge of the broadly-accepted perception that the female body is the sexual body, controversially proposing the female body's ability to simply be a body; such as the male's body, a body of flesh and meat with no sexual denotations attached. In turn, the act of not wearing a bra questions whether the sexual body even exists, shedding light upon the faulty paradoxes within society's most basic system of categorisation of gender, just as the visibility of hair on a female's body does.

In actuality, the biggest paradox of them all is the fact that my performative paradox with gender actually operates within a larger system of paradoxes. Patriarchy, capitalism, consumerism, media, and culture are common examples I am simultaneously confronted with. Nevertheless, I see no use in blaming these vast arrays of systems for the paradoxes that they have instilled in our day to day lives, for I believe that it is our willing participation to the illusion, our gleeful subsumption to the meaninglessness of gender, our comfort in the acceptance of the shadows we observe on the wall of the cave as truth, which allow for the paradox manifest. Wherefore, I end this essay with one closing thought: If the human nature is complicit in the construction and maintenance of these paradoxical notions through the subconscious participation in them, then can the female ever escape a labyrinth of her own making?