

# FEMININITY RESIDES IN A WOMAN'S DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING-IN-THE-WORLD\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The question of femininity is always asked in relation to a particular period of time, a particular national and cultural context and with respect to particular educative norms. Therefore, it is important that great caution is taken not to absolutize as essential, typical of being human or of femininity what is unique to a particular culture, cultural period or social position.

Studies of woman and the feminine way of existing clearly indicate that woman has always shown genuine feminine characteristics that have distinguished her from the genuinely masculine, irrespective of any structural changes that society has undergone.

Buyendijk<sup>(1)</sup> points out that this difference in feminine existence will always endure because womanly-being-in-the-world is, from the beginning, different from a manly way of being-in-the-world. The essence of being-woman and femininity is thus found primarily in this different way of being-in-the-world.

However, when a woman is fathomed in her being different, the *humanity* that she shares with being-a-man must never be ignored. This genuine *human* way of existence, then, also must not be accepted as a characteristic only of being-woman in that it always underlies being-human.

Her being *different* is postulated by her *feminine-way-of-being-in-the-world*. Herein lies the essence of being-feminine and femininity.

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This being *different* of being-a-woman and being-a-man is discussed with respect to:

- (i) Biological differences;
- (ii) psychological differences;
- (iii) her physical-spiritual nature; and
- (iv) her particular way of existence.

In conclusion, a few significant moments of a girl in puberty are also discussed.

## II. *THE DIFFERENCES IN A WOMANLY WAY OF BEING-IN-THE-WORLD*

### *(i) Biological differences*

#### *(a) Her different sexuality:*

A woman's sexuality is an essential difference that will always distinguish her irrespective of her cultural or national context and it is given with being human.

#### *(b) The limited development of her muscles:*

According to Buytendijk<sup>(2)</sup> it has been established experimentally that, in general, women have weaker muscles and less muscle power than men. This phenomenon appears even in people where women carry out the heaviest work.

It is interesting to note that research has shown that of all skeletal muscles the arm muscles of women are developmentally the weakest, i.e., those muscles that are involved in almost all actions and gestures. In a literal sense this means that a woman has a weaker grip on the world than a man.

#### *(c) Vegetative lability as a result of the working of the vegetative nervous system:*

The vegetative nervous system accounts for all involuntary bodily functions. The effect of these functions is experienced indirectly such that a vegetative-labile person, e.g., will easily blush or pale and will readily show an accelerated or slowed pulse-rate. This vegetative lability is especially present in women and is known as female emotionality or feminine emotion.

(ii) *Psychological differences of a womanly way of being-in-the-world:*

Generally speaking, a man is more egocentric and a woman is more altruistic. This means that with a man he is more at the center and that his achievements, prestige and fame are indeed the criteria for his success as a man. Therefore, he presents himself with the goal of mastering and excelling. In contrast, a woman is oriented to loving, pampering, caring—for her husband, children and her community.

(iii) *Differences of a womanly way of being-in-the-world with respect to her physical-spiritual-nature:*

When women are compared with men from a physical, anatomical and physiological perspective clearly perceptible differences are noticeable. However, Buytendijk<sup>(3)</sup> says that as soon as one reflects on being human in its physical-spiritual aspect it quickly becomes clear that the differences between masculine and feminine ways of existing go far beyond mere physical, physiological and anatomical distinctions. He says these differences are disclosed as soon as one sees the different ways in which a woman and a man approach the world and fellow persons as a physical-spiritual being [body-subject], or, in other words, when attention is given to their uniquely characteristic ways of approaching the world and others, because human appearing is full of meaning in that it always is an appearing to another. Our appearing speaks of

ourselves, of our world and of our existence. It speaks of our strivings and our feelings. Under the glimpse of another, a person appears in his or her total bodiliness as he or she is and as he or she presents him/herself.

Thus, a woman always appears as a woman for everyone and in this appearing she is perceived as such by all. In showing her femininity she already expresses her interiority and we notice certain specific characteristics of feminine existence, such as the following, that belong to a genuinely feminine world:

(a) *Her actual appearance:*

In her actual appearing a woman differs conspicuously from a man with respect to her roundness of form, her lesser muscularity, her broader pelvis, her thinner, smoother and softer skin. A feminine arm is rounder and her hand is usually smaller and much more delicate. Also, her countenance, her glance and her way of greeting differ greatly from that of a man.

(b) *The feminine voice:*

Also, her voice is constitutive of her bodily presence. With all people it seems that a woman's voice is higher than that of a man and there is a youthful quality characterized by clarity, freshness and liveliness.

(c) *The unique quality of feminine movement:*

According to Buytendijk<sup>(4)</sup> a woman's way of moving and walking (e.g., her steps) are much more even and flowing than those of a man. A masculine step shows an acceleration at the end of each step with a sharp division into clearly distinct and separate parts. Each part is closed off by a final point which, phenomenologically, dominates

the whole movement of that part and determines its meaning as a whole. In imitating the sound of a masculine step its characteristic timing is a march.

With a feminine step one does not find an accentuation of the pause or final point of each step but it is characterized by a more even and flowing continuity of the whole action that is usually, but not necessarily, carried out with smaller steps. In this flowing movement of a woman there is in each moment an intrinsic relationship to past, present and future. This gives rise to the idea of a wave.

It can also be stated that a masculine step has a number of stops but the feminine step goes on without stopping. There is a formal bond between woman and her environment that is maintained by the manner of her movement but never resolved by it. Once this difference in masculine and feminine movement is noticed it is clearly observable in virtually all areas of human activity.

(d) *The mysterious interiority of feminine appearance:*

The sometimes incomprehensible, the secret, the changeable, the unpredictable, the vagueness that are so unique to a woman and that constitute an important part of her uniquely characteristic mode of existence is well known. Her mere appearance is already an expression of her unknowableness, of her inner mysteriousness that can be encountered as a secret, but then only when a particular relationship is entered with her.

(iv) *The differences of a womanly way of being-in-the-world with regard to her own special mode of existence*

Here there is brief reference to two modes of existing:

*(a) Caring being-in-the-world:*

A woman's world seems above all to be one of caring in contrast to that of a man's as a world of labor. This does not mean that the world of labor is inaccessible to a woman. On the contrary, the employment of women in vocational life has become unmistakable. In our contemporary times there is mention of the emancipated woman whose femininity is not being questioned because of it, as was generally the case previously.

Emancipation of a woman has never meant emancipation to the masculine but it essentially involves a new place and role of woman in a changing society which she enters in her own particular and characteristic ways.

That this entry into the vocational world can be threatening or can mean a loss of independence and that the newly acquired independence of women can mean loneliness and isolation are understandable, but even if the stage should be reached where a woman performs the same work as a man, a woman will always do it differently from a man because from the beginning a woman's being-in-the-world is different from a man's.

Buytendijk<sup>(5)</sup> even states that a genuinely feminine woman, even in her work away from home, always introduces an element of care and nurturance and that this can be of inestimable value in many occupations.

However, where work is directed to a particular end result involving the entire activity and because labor continually takes place in a world of resistance and tension, work can also masculinize a woman. It also cannot be denied that there are women who have acquired a masculine grasp of things and the world.

Buytendijk<sup>(6)</sup> also refers to another very important aspect of women-working:

As with anyone who is weaker or has less stamina, a woman is inclined to use too much of her strength and over-exert or demand too much of herself. Or she easily falls into a form of passivity or inability to make decisions as means of self-defense or self-preservation in the world of work.

In contrast to this structure of work is the structure of caring. The world of care is one of values. The object of caring above all is the humanness of that which appears as being human. Caring, however, is not directed to an endpoint but can be viewed as a circle of which the care-seeking object is at the middle. Caring is circular and thus endless and ceases only when the object in need of care is no longer there. – This caring being-in-the-world has always been a particular way of womanly being-in-the-world. It is a caring that is sustained by a heart-to-heart knowing and as such it is an emotional participation in inner values.

*(b) Motherliness:*

Motherliness is a woman's highest expression of true womanliness and is characterized, e.g., by self-denial, willingness to make sacrifices and dedication. The most characteristic expression of motherliness is her feminine tenderness: tenderness in her look, in her gestures, in her motherly caressing. Consequently, motherliness and tenderness call forth the childliness of each person. This tenderness of motherliness is sustained by a caring being-in-the-world.

### **III. FEMININITY WITH REFERENCE TO THE GIRL IN PUBERTY**

It must be indicated what this differentness in a womanly way of being-in-the-world holds for a girl in puberty and how it touches her on her way to feminine adulthood.

It is especially during her puberty that a young girl becomes aware, in particular ways, of her feminine "otherness" and of a womanly

way of existence. Now it is lamentable that so many authorities and parents mainly identify two occurrences, i.e., changes in her body and the appearance of menstruation as the only moments in a girl in puberty's become a woman. These two events are not unimportant. On the contrary, they are of great and far-reaching importance but it is meaningless to take them as the only occurrences of importance.

What occurs during puberty and how is this connected with her becoming a woman?

The following aspects are distinguished and briefly discussed:

*(i) Physical change:*

Bodily change the a girl undergoes during this period can exercise a far-reaching influence on her becoming a woman because now she is confronted with a new body that also is different from that of a boy. She must accept this new body because it is through this body that she appears to others. However, often she rejects this body since she does not yet feel ready for it, usually because she has not been adequately prepared for these important changes.

*(ii) Menstruation:*

Another very important occurrence for a girl in puberty is menstruation. This fills some girls with pride but for others this results in shock and revulsion especially when the necessary preparation is not timely or does not progress as desired.

Rumke<sup>(7)</sup> refers to the fact that various psychiatrists confronted with adult women who could not accept their femininity and he asks to what degree this rejection of the female body and feminine lot is directly related to and a consequence of defective or inadequate preparation. Thus, preparation for puberty, especially by the parents, can never be stressed enough.

Rumke<sup>(8)</sup> finds that during puberty two strands of development occur: an erotic-psychic-spiritual development and a physical,



sexual maturation. Both begin when puberty is entered but clearly progress separately but then come together at the end of puberty.

(iii) Rumke<sup>(9)</sup> says that during puberty a girl is primarily concerned with the *erotic, the psychic-spiritual, the attractive, the beautiful* and secondarily with the physical, bodily and sexual. For a boy this developmental event progresses with much more tension because the erotic and the sexual are intertwined.

Thus, a girl in puberty is primarily concerned with what is attractive, beautiful, and at this stage her beauty/attractiveness is her personal criterion and her feeling of self-esteem is closely related to the recognition of her beauty or its rejection that she receives from another's look.

Linschoten<sup>(10)</sup> indicates, e.g., how a girl in puberty discovers her own body and the way she sees it is a reflection of her experience of another looking at her. Of interest is the fact that the look of the other of concern to her is not primarily that of a boy or man but of another woman.

De Miranda<sup>(11)</sup> indicates that her immediate relationship to her own body, her identification with its outward appearance and her experience of it that she senses, under the other's look and in terms of her own criterion of beauty give rise to an ambivalence in a girl in puberty.

(iv) As far as this *ambivalence* is concerned, on the one hand she has a desire to *cover* this new, developing body and on the other hand a yearning arises to *display* it. She is eager to have her body looked at and this is genuinely feminine because a woman likes to be looked at.

In the author's opinion this is one of the most important reasons why a girl in puberty suddenly becomes so aware of the prevailing modes because not only are they a sign of particular ways of attracting but they are a strong indication that at this stage there is a preference to uncover and an inclination to cover.

As a result of her intense ambivalence between displaying and covering her body, however, at this stage she can so easily fall prey to an extremely capricious mode and because, as a girl in puberty, she is a “not-yet” (not-yet independent, not-yet a moral adult, can not-yet take responsible for her choices), an adult or adults (where possible the parents) need to give support to her regarding her choices, and by giving support in a sympathetic way they are able to intervene when an improper choice is made. However, it is extremely important that the intervention be done with insight and only when there is a relationship of trust between the adult/parent and the child; the author’s view is that interfering without a relationship of trust can do more harm than any correction aimed for.

De Miranda<sup>(12)</sup> also refers to a very important fact of disclosing and covering; i.e., covering/clothing always means the creation of a distance. This distance is defined by a particular situation and it is a precondition for real contact and intimacy with the other.

*(v) Becoming a person [person-forming]:*

A very important aspect is a girl in puberty’s becoming a person because if her person-forming is impeded, her body becomes her surrogate person.

What does it mean if her becoming a person is impeded or does not develop favorably? It means that a disturbance in her relationship with others arises such that she must use her body to force contact by means of her clothing, excessive and injudicious use of make-up, hairstyle, etc. If a womanly body has to be used and misused in this way a girl or young lady becomes stripped of all femininity. When a girl is educated to the necessary personal forming and responsibility she can make use of the prevailing modes in a feminine way that now answer to the demands of propriety.

However, if she grows up in a pedagogical vacuum where her relationship to her educator, others and the world are disturbed, and persons and things are judged on the basis of her own convenience, interest, use and pleasure, a girl in puberty who then is involved in displaying her body already lacks a life reality and

lives in a world of appearances that must continually be maintained by artificial means.

Now, the tragedy of the matter is that such a girl does not have at her disposal the feminine possibilities and refinement to be able to use these artificial means with judgment and taste.

Characteristic of these young girls is that their dresses are always too short or too long, too loose or too snug, their blouses are too loose or too conspicuous in design. They are continually searching, smoking, eating too much and then too little. They have an insatiable appetite for music and can do nothing unless the radio is playing. Their only interest is in their own body and appearance.

In this context, De Miranda<sup>(13)</sup> points out that with a less than strong personality, the appearance of such a girl does not provide the distance that is needed as a precondition for an encounter, but she offers her body; and because clothing and make-up always speak a particular language to the other, the other knows what quality is being offered.

De Miranda<sup>(14)</sup> nicely summarized the life world of these girls when he comments that they really want to say, "Here I am"; but in reality they have no I to offer. The I is what is offered cheaply in an enticing, provocative package. The I of her young body has become a thing among things: a thing that a person cannot encounter, but can buy, use and cast off as if its time of service has expired. Such a use only requires a paying for it and is the opposite of a precursor to a marriage, which is grounded in a human encounter.

#### *(IV) CONCLUSION:*

The author concludes with the following questions:

- (i) What human image and what image of a woman, of femininity and of a woman's lot does a girl in puberty become acquainted with when she enters this period? More specifically: What image of a woman and of femininity does a girl see in her own mother, e.g., with respect to

- (a) Her person?
  - (b) Her hierarchy of preferred values?
  - (c) Her choices, her taste, her feminine refinement:  
and
  - (d) What image of the feminine does she see in her  
mother's inner circle of friends?
- (ii) What is the relationship between mother and daughter? It is a relationship that must have begun from the beginning, but it is a relationship that continually must be intensified as her daughter grows older so that not only the example of a feminine way of existing (as embodied in the mother) precedes her daughter's puberty but that there will be spontaneous moments of encounter in the mother-daughter relationship in preparing her for her puberty and that the mother's sympathetic intervention will be positively accepted and assimilated by her.

Thus, from the beginning femininity resides in a woman's different way of being-in-the-world, but femininity, as well as its forming, is also dependent on educating if it is to unfold properly in order to allow for the fullest and best realization of femininity in adulthood. A girl is continually committed to being educated to a person-forming that will lead to a genuine encounter in an I-thou relationship without a need to use her feminine body to accomplish this.

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