

Dynamics of violence: Reading women's bodies in South Asia

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Abstract: Feminism is an ideology which seeks egalitarian attitudes towards women's rights and desires. Women have always been depicted as a 'lack' as a 'gap' which can be filled only when a woman gets a voice of her own vis-a-vis her body. Corporeal feminism was brought into focus by Elizabeth Grosz's seminal text *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994). There were other Western feminists who worked with female corporeality and female voice like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Judith Butler and et al. South Asia has quite recently evolved as the ideal literary landscape for Asian women writers to excavate and explore the female body. South Asian female body epitomizes the Oriental construction of 'other' as both seductive and detestable. The West's nexus to the colonial and post-colonial contour is measured into South Asian female bodies. Gayatri Chakraborty's overly celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994) raises the most important question which has remained unheeded for aeons: Is history of women as subjects credible? Women are doubly marginalised, doubly muted who are often placed in the peripheries, always in reference to the phallic world and sharing the masculine discourse. Women can express herself as women when the reference point is their own bodies and it is through their bodies by which women claim their rights and expose the inflictions of society. Body is the most ubiquitous, natural source of allegories of order and disorder, the primary metaphor of social and political structures. The traumatic experience of South Asian women is found in old colonial texts as well as in popular deliberations. Female bodies are not only sites of enforcement of violence but also perfect repositories wherein the memory of such gruesome violence dwells. And such memories impinged on women's bodies lead to trauma, shame and hysteria. As necessary linguistic frame of reference female bodies as bruised and battered need to lay bare the dark wounds so as to render a strong subjective dimension to their feelings. The two texts to be focussed upon in this context would be *Blasphemy* by the Pakistani revolutionary writer Tehmina Durrani and *The Circle of Karma* by the Bhutanese writer Kunzang Choden. Both of them have scraped out the bleeding crevices of female torso by narratives which expose the hollowness and hypocrisy of societies deep seated in empty rituals and customs.

Key Words: South- Asian Feminism, Female body, Patriarchal society, Violence, Trauma, Gaze, Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION:

Female body as a perfect trope of reclaiming identity looms large over the soil of South Asian countries and somewhere this picture of recovery of one's own body is hapless and twisted than that of Western standards. The feminists of the West have surpassed the hackneyed idea of heterosexuality and are concerned with the public image of body but on the other hand the feminists of South Asia put emphasis on heterosexual, domestic female body which is cabined and cribbed under the faltering judicial system, complicated inheritance laws, mal-nutrition, lack of education and economic dependence. The two primary and defining principles of South Asian women are family and religion and their bodies try to negotiate and compromise with these remaining crushed between them. The stereotyped representations of female bodies either as repositories of history and culture or as performative index of gender, as objects of control, as victims of oppression, as reformative agencies and as maternal bodies create identities which altogether subvert the traditional, essentialist notion recreating and reshaping it in myriad forms. Domestic ideology associated women not only with the household but also with the biological characteristics that objectifies them as sexual dolls. The different forms of violence extant in South Asia are domestic violence, acid attack, sexual harassment, child-abuse, incest, rape, abduction, trafficking and of course prostitution. Different analysis has shown that marital abuse against women, specifically violence inflicted upon a woman by her husband is the most palpable form of violence in South Asian societal framework. Among the atrocities and violence wreaked on women perhaps the most heinous one is rape. Rape is only an extreme manifestation of the continuum of violence that women, particularly the disempowered section of any culture are subjected to. In her phenomenal work, "Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape" (1975) Susan Brownmiller aptly calls rapists the 'shock troops' of male society. She claims that if one woman is raped then all others are controlled by the fear of rape thereby restricting the mobility and liberty of women. Linguistic violence - the

creation of 'the other' interanimates violence on the body. In order to theorize the social text of violence we must find out the 'langue' and 'parole' of violence. The inter-relationship of violence, discourse, resistance and the body can appropriately speak the difference between repression, resistance and reclamation of one's own body. Violence becomes inscribed into the female bodies through language and penetrates deep creating dark wounds and indelible marks. Female body has occupied a special position in the genre of symbolic literature being object of voyeuristic gaze of patriarchal tradition. To recall Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is both seeing and seen, touching and touched. The gaze unites the seer and the seen - the body by which the gaze passes therefore assumes both object and subject positions. The filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey in her celebrated work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* written in 1973 speaks about male gaze which scans and scrutinises a female body in such a way that a woman remains just as an object of male voyeuristic pleasure. The body is the expressive space through which we experience the world. From the very beginning of creation, the female body has been depicted as site of unruly passions, as source of violent emotions capable of disrupting the course of the natural world and as being detrimental to the path of truth and wisdom. Body has been associated with the baser things of life; the gross elements, the uncouth physicality and this devaluing and dismembering of female bodies have been put to question by the feminists. In Pakistan and other South Asian countries, the situation of women varies considerably depending upon the geographical location and class. For instance, in the less-populated frontier provinces of Pakistan, life for women is very restricted and women are expected to comply with local beliefs and traditions. Any woman who deviates from these traditions, such as being seen with a man to whom she is not related or married can suffer penalties including death. The women observe strict Purdah (seclusion of women) and are rarely seen outside their homes. Muslim female body in her community is over protected with 'burqa' while outside her community she is subjected to humiliation, derogatory comments, physical and psychological abuse. If she removes it and mingles with the dominant culture around her, she is labelled as modernized, westernized, anti-Islamic and slut inside their religious, social circles while wearing it she faces difficulties and humiliation imposed by others outside. A man gazes at a female, mostly as an object but a female in 'veil' or considerably a Muslim woman becomes somewhat lesser than the image of an 'object being doubly muted and annihilated. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin call it "dividing line between tradition and modernity". On the other hand, Zanana is, in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, "the physical segregation of living space" whereas Burton calls Zanana as "shorthand for Indian women's imprisonment" (127). The 'purdah' and 'zanana' are for sure the codification of male authority over female liberty in the name of Allah. Thus, as always, the objectification of female body shows the darker side of male psyche and patriarchal palace. Early-age marriages, early motherhood, easy divorces, financial dependence, limited access to education, no freedom of expression, no role in decision making, etc. lead them toward submerging into a sea of darkened and tormented psyche.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

There have been quite a few remarkable works done by western feminists on female body and the associated trauma emanating from such a body and the need for an alternative body poetics to unfold the dark wounds. The feminists invoke a female symbolic ground and a parler femme which "speaks (as) woman" and advocates feminine identity in "Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of l'écriture Feminine" edited by Ann Rosalind Jones in 1981. Kristeva abjures the political construction of femininity and recommends empowering women through symbiotic signs in the language of the maternal semiotic. The 'jouissance' of the female body is being denied and the body becomes a part of the socio-symbolic community channelized into procreation, child bearing. Writing should be reflective of female embodiment and the trials and tribulations marked on them. Both Irigaray and Cixous focus on 'write the body'. Cixous in her popular work *The Laugh of the Medusa* claims that "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). The random interweaving of textuality and physicality which owns a body in process never fixed or solid but always streaming rings in the theories of Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler. Body, according to Grosz, becomes a social and discursive object wrapped in the order of desire, signification and power. The sense of shame associated with the female body was the major focus of pioneering feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer and Adrienne Rich. Greer agrees with Adrienne Rich who observes in "Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying" (1977) that "we have had the truth of our bodies withheld from us or distorted. We have been kept in ignorance of our most intimate places" (415). Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) postulates the fact that reducing women to mere biology make them disappear from the social circle and constricting them to dismembered body parts ensure their complete invisibility. In recent years there has been an inclination among South Asian women to speak about corporeal desires and the inflictions perpetrated on them following those desires. Writers like Kamla Bhasin in *Understanding Gender* (1999), *Borders and Boundaries* (1998), Shauna Singh Baldwin in *What the Body Remembers* (1992) and Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* rightly brings out the pangs of partition and the ravaged bodies of women used as marker of such harrowing experiences. In her article "History is a Woman's Body" Butalia shows how history was played out on women's bodies during partition and how women became passive sufferers of such historical movements which they were often unaware

of. Women's bodies have always been a site of communal, national, global violence irrespective of locale, colour or religion.

ANALYSIS:

Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* is a story of the predicament of a victim of patriarchal violence who never dare speak and when she really does, she is challenged by the ideologies working against her. The narrative centres around the life of Heer in synchronous as well as the asynchronous plot of the novel where thirteen chapters followed by an epilogue talk about her suffering with gory, horrible and unimaginable details in lucid enigmatic language. The titles are highly suggestive and apt. The story, in a nutshell, begins with 'release' as the title of the first chapter as it describes the death of Pir Sain, the so-called Messiah and next to Allah for the villagers and so his death is the biggest loss and lamentation to them. However, the reality is devastatingly opposite to its core. 'Release' is metaphorically used to suggest that as he was the oppressor of the poor and the deprived and his demise has truly been a release for all from his inhumane terror and deviant sexuality. In the Haveli, unspeakable horrors are perpetrated in the name of Allah. Durrani talks about different stages of her life; her naïve self at the age of fourteen, her pauper parents and siblings, her marriage to Pir Sain, his brutal and weird sexuality, his oppressive nature, painful physical beatings, humiliations, their children and their lives, her courage to reveal the truth behind the shrine, female servants, etc. in each chapter. The second chapter 'stepping out' actually envisions a journey from an innocent, imaginative and romantic world of youth into a literal hell of Pir Sain's Haveli. Third chapter 'Stepping In' horribly describes Heer's stepping into the Haveli as a queen but actually baser than a maidservant with weird experiences. 'Jahanum', meaning hell, is the fourth chapter with all gory details of Pir Sain's explicit sexuality and misdeeds. 'Unbound' - the fifth chapter where Heer gives birth to her first child - a baby girl and as expected Pir Sain doesn't look at "the bundle" (*Blasphemy* 78). 'The Lure of Innocence' depicts Pir Sain's lustful attitude even towards his own daughter Guppi and how Heer involves herself in crimes to save her own daughter from incest. Heer writes: "To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was also my daughter's molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night." (143) But at the same time, the image of her husband amongst the villagers is that of "the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach Him and save us" (143). Heer becomes frustrated with the lascivious attitude of his fake husband vis-a-vis Messiah and contemplates to release herself and others from his dirty and ugly grip. Her discussion with Tara, another victim of Pir Sain's lustful gaze exemplifies her agony:

We are bonded together in suffering, you and I ... we are captives of a false and evil system. A poisonous octopus grips us. Its tentacles usurped the strength of Islam to exploit us in every possible way. Its grip tightens but never lets us die... they allow us to breathe just enough for them to feed upon us until our flesh is gone. We survived, you and I. That is why I trust you. (195-196)

Wounds are actually the marks which impress upon sexuality and maturity as often vivified in sexual crimes. The outer scratches on one's body become her inner shame and suffering, splitting her into multi-selves, each contesting the other without reaching to a concrete point. The violations on physical body unnerve her senses and she becomes a perpetual zombie. According to the feudal lords of the Pakistan the women's body is made akin to land and possessions of more lands mean exploration and exploitation of female bodies. For, according to Mustafa in *My Feudal Lord*, a woman, like land, is "power, prestige and a property" - a commodity meant for utilization and consumption in whichever way the owner / master deems fit. The orgies of violence, abduction and rape, the mutilation and disfigurement of living and dead, the forcible recovery of women and other such things torn apart the very fabric of society. Constant humiliation, intimidation, physical violence in any form can bring about disjunction between body and mind and make them feel that their body parts and mental states are not in sync with each other. The violation of a female body leads to alienation of self and repeated physical, mental tortures lead to trauma. Trauma exists as flashback, as repetitive remembrance of the particular event of the past and shatters her present state of equilibrium. This constant reiteration of past untoward incident often blurs her speech and obstructs her thought process.

Laughter and cries of pain can be perceived as a prelinguistic expression of a female body. But Butler, the American gender theorist opines that body has no meaning or coherence prior to language because as matter it is a site of inscription. Body is a dominant site of power and control, a site inscribed with cultural practices and subjected to political, economic and social forces. Women are merely fragile vessels to cradle male desires and bear them offspring; their subjectivities lose their very essence on the way. Though female body is inferior yet she is enigmatic, elusive and cryptic. Body is an important site on which imprints of society, culture and politics can be displayed and so intensive introspection of female bodies can open new perspectives to the world where they have been always depicted as 'the other'. Women are to their bodies which men are not; being relegated to an inferior, vulnerable position, biologically predestined to sob and suffer through their bodies. The status of the female body in Western paradigm has been one of absence or denial. Western theorists despite the body's ubiquity viewed it as superfluous and non-essential. My focus would be exploring female body gestures within the ambit of Asian construct, more precisely the South-Asian construct releasing it from the complex contextualisation of Western feminine ideologies. The different political perspectives, social standings, economic stature and geographical terrains make them more constricted and restrict their space and speech vis-à-vis body. Their bodies act as the linguistic referential frame in order to question the male authoritarian

regime and fill the gap which has so long deprived them of their subjective positions. The once neglected form of feminism in South Asia is attempted to be revived by addressing women's sexuality, violence against women, secularism through the repressed voices of the other. There have been continuous forays into the patriarchal world by 'the other' to specify the different nuances of female body through its own voice vis-à-vis power and dominion to break the male hegemony. Kunzang Choden is a renowned Bhutanese writer whose novel *The Circle of Karma* etches out the lives of Bhutanese women among the men folk of the mountainous region. The biological difference in bodily contours leaves the women deprived of cultural and academic constructs, because they are women, they are prohibited from monastery education, "You are a girl. You are different A woman does not need to know how to read and write" (21). Bitter tears of rejection filled Tsomo's eyes and also the floor unnoticed by others. Matriarchy is practised in Bhutan but women are prevented from gaining knowledge mostly from learning religious scriptures. The main protagonist Tsomo finds herself anew in her travels all over India and discovers the essence of femininity in richly interwoven tapestry of life. Her body is a passive sufferer unable to establish power on the male chauvinistic society by speaking out the right. There is a particular custom called 'chod' which is followed by them and which involves offering of one's body to feed every creature and satisfy every desire. This custom truly reflects the definition of feminine body in its truest sense portraying a woman as the subjects of sexual pleasure. Because they are deprived of healthy sexual relationship with their husbands, they become more like sexual agents asserting freedom to either attract or repulse other men. Unrecognised love which resulted in unwanted pregnancies was a curse for the women for they had to undergo a kind of ablution or purification called 'tsangma' because those pregnancies were considered soiled if not clean. If there were any unnatural occurrences in the nature the bloated female body was held responsible to it. "Unpurified pregnancies disturbed the birth gods and the locality gods" (36). The frailty of feminine beauty does not touch the women whose faces are smirched with mud and dust, eyes watered with dust and wind; hands roughed and cracked bleeding profusely, lungs filled with cooking tar. But in spite of such hard and gruelling living they still yearn to have a domestic life of their own. Life does not spare these unfortunate hearts for they not only suffer from dire poverty but are also sexually abused by the male employer: "...he took every opportunity to sexually molest me in secret and abuse me and humiliate me in public" (108). Tsomo's body violates her because her protruded belly causes apathy in others' minds and they hold her responsible for this. Her deformed body makes her subject to mock and ridicule and her karma is being questioned at. Because her body is different, she is ostracized and left hapless and she too feels it is her negative karma which makes her suffer so.

Body language is best explicated in the inflictions vis-à-vis the gender violence as the centre of power and control by subverting the male dominated discourse. Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma* is also replete with passages describing marital torture and torment. The protagonist Tsomo had to suffer humiliation by her husband:

He had begun to hit her regularly.... Look at you, who would want you? With this he got up and kicked her in the ribs. (92-93)

Rape is one such kind of gender violence where body remains inert and passive unable to reciprocate any sensual feelings other than being wholly traumatized. Body trauma is questioned at the cost of being crushed under patriarchal wantonness. In *The Circle of Karma*, Kunzang Choden narrates the rape of a minor girl Dechen Choki who becomes Tsomo's sister-like and a good companion in her journey of life:

Dechen Choki lying in the wet mud, her hands pinned above her head, her kira lifted up to her waist and the Lajab astride her, struggling to keep her down. Dechen Choki was crying in a frightened and muffled voice as Lajab's free hand covered her mouth. (119)

It simply expresses a man taking advantage of a woman's helplessness and destroying her femininity because woman's bodies are visualized as a commodity to be used, reused and rejected. Tsomo comes to rescue the young woman who is otherwise overpowered by the perpetrator and writhes in pain. The body raped undergoes tremendous repression and is unable to fight back to avenge the heinous deed and takes it as her lot to suffer.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, being a space away from white academia and white feminists, the South Asian terrain where men easily take the leading light and make their very physical and bodily presence felt, the researchers are concerned with the possibility of creating a space away from existing societal structures. Instead of spending our energies on urging the importance of gender in South Asian forums or race in feminist spaces, we should start the extremely demanding task of thinking through the differences within the somewhat insubstantial label of South Asian women. The South Asian ethnic community, utterly outside mainstream Western society, becomes a resistant, defiant subversive historical space. With their surfaces hardened like shells, the women of South Asia struggle hard to reverse the objectification and traumatisation inflicted on them. South Asia or more specifically South Asian feminisms, cannot be held within an easily distinguishable or singular framework because this will continue negotiating with repressive feminist ideologies which continue considering woman as 'the other'. It is this diversified terrain that has reshaped feminist struggles and movements and given them power enough to break the glass ceiling.

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