

WOMAN'S BODY AS A SITE OF CONTROL: CONTEXTUALISING CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL EXPLORATIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract-The present research paper is an attempt to explore and analyse the social construction of woman's body and how it has been made a site of control. The paper discusses the mechanism and process of this social construction and categorisation. It contextualises the cultural settings and functions.

Key Words-Woman, Body, Control, Culture, Patriarchy

In our times, a serious engagement and categorical analysis of woman's body has become of utmost importance. Conceptual realm of body presents two broad categorisations i.e. natural and social body. Natural body can broadly be defined as a material base and biological entity for our fundamental appearance in the world. Whereas a social body can be defined as a social construction and this construction takes place through socio-cultural codifications engraved upon the body which is natural. Reflections of human existence require the agency of existing social bodies.

The body (social) like any construction is a site of power game. Body is constructed to control and subjugate by the ones who are powerful in the social structure. This control and subjugation are being operated through historical processes and hence the body should be seen in a historical context where prevailing dominant ideology of society creates a social mechanism which establishes the hegemony. Writing about the gradual construction of the 'body' through historical processes, Michel Foucault writes "the human body was entering a machinery of

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power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over other’s bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes but so that they may operate as one wishes, with techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practical bodies. “docile” bodies” (Foucault 1995: 138). This human body travels the journey where it is produced and reproduced, arranged and rearranged and subject to constant manipulations for the vested interests to maintain the structural hegemony. History has been witness to the testimony of human bodies which are controlled, regulated and in the words of Michel Foucault ‘docile’.

Woman’s body is an example of social body and is constructed historically by patriarchy. Genealogy of woman’s body has deep rooted structural linkages. Patriarchy constructs woman’s body in its socio-cultural settings to fulfill the agenda of control over it. Control over woman’s body is required by patriarchy to strengthen its patriarchal hold and hegemonic power.

Simone de Beauvoir’s historical and classical statement “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman”(Beauvoir 2011: 293) is path breaking as it has unfolded that woman is not a natural species but a socio-cultural construction. A woman is carved out of her own body. Anatomy of Homo sapiens has been the greatest example of the surgery done by the institutionalisation of power. Since the childhood her body is being manipulated, disciplined, configured and reconfigured and as Susan Bordo has explored “culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (Bordo 1993: 16). Further Simone de Beauvoir has philosophised that “the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project” (Beauvoir 2011:46). For a body to become a woman, culture at every stage produces situation. Throughout her life, there is a plethora of situations and these situations do not remain the same always. They are wilful construction of patriarchy which gets accomplished to acquire the control. A woman’s flesh is identical, her body parts are fulfilling and she is made lucrative to appear the strange and entirely a different being as such she has a different origin.

Woman’s body as a site of control represents multiple lineages. Gender which is a cultural construct is a common ground for the oppression, unequal status and exclusion of half of the

population across the globe. Through certain cultural practices, norms, engendering of roles and attitudes, the spatial mobility of women is restricted and controlled by patriarchy. Therefore woman's body is central to our understanding of unequal gender relations and exercise of power and control in Indian social structures. Reflections of control over woman's body can be found in personal as well as public sphere.

From the feminist perspective, structures are very significant and critical points of analysis. V. Geetha has argued that "the structures that we inhabit are not mere grids. They possess inner lives that constitute their core and breathe meaning into them. Life worlds of structures come alive in and through what we habitually call culture comprising all those acts and practices that grant meaning and relevance to our lives" (Geetha 2015: 131). Patriarchy through its structural mechanism has created certain binaries such as purity and pollution, honour and shame, masculinity and femininity, etc. and these binaries associated with body are being used against women.

Woman's body is subject to manipulations depending on specific cultural arrangements. In a patriarchal set up like India, factors such as gender, caste, class, race, religion, etc. make the problems faced by women more severe and acute when they act together. The cultural norms, belief systems, attitudes and practices put woman's body in male captivity. This captivity is basically the denial of the right of woman over her body and also the denial of the right to self determination.

Embodiment of woman's body can best be understood in women's lived experiences as embodiment is instrumental in developing the sense of being, belonging and personhood. It is very much clear that women do not have a monolithic experience of their bodies. Their experiences differs due to cultural variations so that they have heterogeneous experiences. Everyday bodily experiences of women make their bodies lived one. The process of socialisation and engendering of roles disciplines women as per the wishes of patriarchy.

We can look at the virginity which is something that has been institutionalised in the patriarchal male psyche and social living as an accepted norm. The critical point is that this virginity is mainly seen only in relation with a particular body that is woman's body. Men do not have the

notion of virginity for themselves. The woman's body which is not virgin is always considered polluted and stigmatised by the patriarchy. Our society does not welcome a rape victim because her virginity (purity) is lost. A rape victim suffers multiple oppression and humiliation during the rape and seclusion after the rape. Established notions and tendencies make the life of a rape victim of shame and stigmatised as if she is the one who has committed the crime. A dignified life is denied to a rape victim. This notion of virginity controls female sexuality as well.

Another case can be taken of widows. A widowed woman is highly oppressed in our patriarchal social structure as she is a woman and widow at the same time. Patriarchy has stigmatised the body of widows and this stigmatisation makes the body undesirable and unpleasant in rituals and certain walks of life. Certain religious scriptures which are mainly patriarchal constructs set the guidelines for widows as what should they eat, how should they be dressed, etc. Our patriarchal social structure enforces such guidelines and code of conducts. In the societal practices, we can observe that body of a widow has been considered a defiling one. Our cultural practices make the body of a widow undesirable in occasions such as wedding and other ceremonies where people celebrate. Widows do not receive a welcome in such rituals. Widows are advised and often forced by patriarchy to tonsure their heads and not to interact with the males outside the family. We have to locate this issue in a wider context where the oppressive agenda of patriarchy to control and subjugate woman's body finds its powerful existence.

The body as a social reality can be categorised under canonised bodies, grotesque bodies (Mikhail Bakhtin), filthy bodies, servile and docile (Foucault) bodies. In these mentioned categories different bodies come such as pro-creational bodies, non pro-creational bodies, penal and criminal bodies. Patriarchal construction of woman's body has led it to fit into the different above mentioned categories. Taking canonised body as a case, it has universal acceptance; canonised body is such a body which attracts others and which is desirable. This desirability of a particular type of body is a social construct. As it is a desirable body and standard norm, women are expected to have canonised body. This construction creates cultural desire to have it and for those who do not have canonised bodies, it becomes a source of humiliation. In India purity and pollution was attached with body and this notion strengthened untouchability, social exclusion and injustices. Colour of the skin, certain features of physical appearance, body of a woman in

general and a dalit and tribal woman in particular, body of a differently abled woman, body of a prostitute, body of a so called abnormal woman, etc. These all bodies led to social exclusion and humiliation. Menstruating body of a woman is considered polluted and filthy. During the menstrual cycle, a woman is forbidden to perform worshipping and other religious tasks. Our Socio-cultural practices have made the menstrual cycle a curse for woman where a woman's spatial mobility is restricted during the few days of every month. So body is made a site where control becomes operational.

Feminist scholarship has extensively written and discussed on the issues of identity and recognition of women. The quintessential importance of woman's body as a site of control lies on the question of 'self'. Woman's body in captivity results in the development of false notion of 'self' among women, due to lack of consciousness and right to self determination, women find themselves unable to develop the sense of true and a rational self.

The privileged position of men and denial of the same to women and patriarchal structures of power and processes lead to women becoming the lesser political animal. Subjugation, marginalisation and exclusion of women from various spaces result in political exclusion. As becoming of woman requires her to become identical with her flesh, figure, bodily features and colour of the skin, she has made victim of cultural brutality. Lack of social recognition of universal human capabilities, individual awakening and consciousness among women can be reflected in passive political participation of women in India. Not having the substantial role and visibility of women in political processes and decision making are resultant of the deliberate cultural agenda of patriarchy for political exclusion of women in India. Women's voices are either unheard or made forcible reflection of the choices and will of patriarchy in the form of husband or son who represents her (This can be seen in the pamphlets, posters, banners or other modes of advertisement where along with the picture of a woman elected representative, her husband or son's picture is posted with the line below it which clearly states his relationship with the woman).

Patriarchy has constructed an unjust and unequal society which denies the individual autonomy, various rights and freedom to half of the population and the focal point is always a socially

constructed woman's body which can help us to understand highly complex phenomenon of control.

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