



Female Embodiment: Narrating Gender/Narrating Body in Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs*

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Abstract:

Body narratives by women writers hold an important place in contemporary cultural studies. This paper seeks to analyse Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* within the ambit of culture, gender and narration. Kawakami as a Japanese writer narrates the intimate organs of the female body in order to interpret woman's mind and soul. Writing serves as an act of ventilation for woman's thoughts. The novel explores contemporary womanhood in Japan by bringing into focus three different protagonists namely Natsuko Natsume, Makiko and Midoriko. Body shaming and stigmatization are the reasons for woman's trauma. Social and cultural constructs create an illusion that a woman should be fair with an appealing body without any blemishes in order to attract men. Thus the novel raises questions about woman being a mere reproductive machine. In Cultural Studies body is examined as a site of contestation. It is culture that constructs bodily identity and behavioral code. Culture and society oppress women and alienate them. This study unearths the condition of East Asian women who suffer due to poverty, misogyny, cultural and social constraints as portrayed in Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* and how a woman's body resists and conforms to this construction.

Keywords: Body studies, cultural studies, gender, embodiment, body shaming.

A world in which the essential binary was not, perhaps between the male and the female body but between the constant presence of the body coupled with the refusal to admit that the physical body existed... many of the possibilities of the body (sexual intercourse, menstruation, pregnancy) were never spoken of, were never admitted to that very world. (Mary Ewans, 22)

Introduction and Literature Review

Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* originally written in the Japanese language has been translated into English in the year 2020 by Sam Bett and David Boyd. This text explores the struggle and everyday life of working class women by analyzing different kinds of female characters and their bodily experience. There are certain issues which are undertaken for theoretical purpose like single parenting, poverty, appearance of a female body and artificial insemination. In order to understand and interpret body studies it is essential to know the evolution and background of feminism. Before analyzing the novel in the context of body studies it is important to take a note on feminism because they are interrelated with each other.

Helene Cixous reveals her feminist thoughts about women's writing in her essay "The Laugh Of Medusa" and she describes it as, "Women must write herself. Must write about women, her body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Helene Cixous, 875). Feminism developed when women started to fight for equality par with men. For so many years feminist writers have been fighting against the social and cultural theorization of Phallocentrism. Due to development in literacy rate, modern women tend to acknowledge their space of existence. These women argue and surpass the societal codes and conservative norms of the society to assert their femininity. In the work *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* Comboy states that "The body is a complex construction; a site on which gender differences seem materially inscribed; a symbolic construction of selfhood, identity, self-worth are intimately tied" (Comboy, 8). Though body is a biological and physical material it is only constructed by the society into genders. Gender inequality rises from this codes and construction. In order to highlight once selfhood and also to exhibit once identity, body is a site of reference and a symbolic representation. Feminism and its

theories help the female body to overcome their years of resistance and start to negotiate their rights.

In contemporary Cultural Studies, body has been considered as a key focus of argument and interpretation. In the field of interdisciplinary research body has become an exciting area of theorization within philosophy, culture and literature. Body Studies is the subset of cultural studies and they are interconnected with each other. In the context of body exists a void difference between Western culture and East Asian culture. In Western society women have overcome their cultural and social barriers with the aid of education. East Asian women suffer and fight for their rights due to poverty and prevailing social conditions. The constructions of woman's bodies are done through representations and discourses produced by a particular class of society. For example regarding cultural differences in South Africa women are compelled to follow the practices of superstitious beliefs. Superstitious beliefs include stigmatization of a woman's body by means of physical appearance during pregnancy. If the woman has a glowing face, then she is predicted to have a girl. Whereas on the other hand if she has facial hairs, then it is a boy child. This kind of embodiment takes place in African context. Male can have polygamy but for woman it is restricted. Whereas in East Asian countries people emphasize on women physical beauty. They regard women should be soft and delicate in their appearance. In East Asia the concept of beauty conscious is deeply rooted in culture as a result, women undergo various surgeries to maintain appearance which is formulated by the society. In the aspect of man's representation of woman in art and literature objectification plays a vital role. Women have never been regarded as a subject rather only as an object. She has been visualized constantly as Susan Gubar points out "as a blank page in need of inscription by the male pen, which itself has been represented as a metaphorical Penis" (Gubar, 77). Whereas, feminists celebrates and identifies female body as a site of dominating politics. They raise voice about the constraints that

culture has placed upon woman's body thereby arguing for rights to control their own body.

In contemporary women's writing, after the rise of Cultural Studies, writers have started to narrate their experience of female body in their writing. Body and Gender narration have become a central focus of contemporary research. Some of the women writers who narrate the trauma of female body are Jeanette Winterson, Iris Marion Young, and Arupa Patangia Kalita. Besides, some of the Japanese women writers who address the issue of boy narration are Yosana Akiko, Sagawa Chika and Ito Hiromi.

Jeanette Winterson's 2007 fiction *The Stone Gods* uses biomedicine and consumerism in apocalyptic narration to examine woman's body and lesbianism. In *The Stone of Gods* there is an ambiguity in gender roles of the lead characters. Iris Marion Young's *On Female Body Experiences* an essay collection highlights the body narration from Simone de Beauvoir to Virginia Woolf. These essays portray the various experiences of female body in day to day life. Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story "Paas Sootalar Kathakata" (Narrative of the Backyard) shows the animalistic treatment given to girls who attain puberty. The protagonist has been put in a dark room and asked to sleep on the hay floor. It narrates the superstitious beliefs of the rural Assam during girls' first menstruation.

Japanese women's writing emerged after naturalism movement, where male writers started to think writing as a vocational activity, thereby providing space for women writers. Still women tend to write only about domestic affairs like house work, childbearing and family life. After 2006 woman's writing took a tremendous change and started to write their bodily experiences thereby connecting woman's body to the external world. Japanese feminists follow specific goals and ideas in their writing, like disease, poor economical conditions and also identity crisis. Yosana Akiko's *Tangled Hair* admires and cherishes woman and her body. It explores woman's gaze at her own body and thus this poetry collection explicitly narrates the female body.

Feminization and Poverty

Body has been narrated by women writers according to their society and cultural context. In the same way Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* explores female body in the context of puberty, cosmetology, colour, shape, stigma and disease. The protagonist Natsuko Natsume in her thoughts compares other women and her encountering situations with her childhood memories in certain aspects. The text's title *Breasts and Eggs* itself shows the honesty and candidness of the female body narration and its embodiment. And thus feminism has empowered and encouraged women writers to discuss the taboo concept of the society in a meticulous facet.

The novel begins with the description of poverty in Japan and how women are affected by it. Kawakami narrates poverty and the environment in which Natsuko has grown up and also through the structure of the house with windows and closets, she writes that, "The number of windows says it all. It says everything. If they had none, or may be one or two, that's all you need to know" (Kawakami, 11). So here the narration of Natsume describes how her past life had been affected. So it is understood that she has grown up in a rough situation. Compare to men, women are affected by poverty, lack of resources and gender gap. "Feminization of poverty" is an exact term to explain how poverty and poor economic conditions have always been linked with women and their lives for centuries. This situation can be compared with African women as Spicker in his text *The International Glossary on Poverty* explains this by comparing the developing countries of the world as he mentions "poverty is inextricably linked to inequality of women." This experience also shows poverty includes multi-perspective roles "affected by gender and age as well as cultural, social and economic factors" (Spicker, 1999). So Spicker's use of certain words like inequality and gender explains the fact that women does not get the wages or a proper work because of unequal treatment and due to the gender placement considered by the society.

Woman's bodies are always connected with economic circumstances. Natsuko makes a comparison between herself and a ten year old girl to highlight the truth that even after twenty years of difference the situation of women prevail the same without any upliftment. In the novel *Breasts and Eggs*, Kawakami explains this situation through Natsuko's monologue as, "the kid was way too skinny. Her dark skin made the patches of psoriasis even harder to overlook. Her lips were tight and her shoulders were stiff, she reminded me of myself as a kid. That it got me thinking about what it means to be poor" (Kawakami, 12). She could easily get back to her childhood memory by observing a passerby kid with same skin disease of her childhood. Though women forthrightly narrate their body, but their struggles have been never come to an end. To explicate feminism and economy in Piven's words, Vasintha Veeran in her research article "Feminization of Poverty" compares gender and economic status, "in both industrialized and developing countries the relationship between gender and economic stratification is evident" (Piven, 2000). Piven's statement provides an argumentative insight as the reference to the context feminization and poverty. Due to woman's physical strength in the working area, they are provided with low wages comparing to men in the beginning. Biological reasons like menstruation and child bearing made women as a weaker sex before the emergence of feminism. After the wake of feminism, women try to come out of the web created by the codes and construction of the society.

"Multiple organ failure brought about by cancer. In May they told her she had cancer in her lungs" (Kawakami, 367). Natsuko's friend is a single mother who suffers from lung cancer for a long time, without letting anyone to know about her disease. Lung cancer is portrayed through three characters by Kawakami in the text namely Natsuko's friend Sangewa, Natsuko's mother and grandmother Komi. From this text it is evident that women are more prone to lung cancer compared to men though they don't smoke. Natsuko remembers about the painful sufferings of her mother due to cancer

and she explains her thoughts as, “I thought about Komi and mum. Both of them had known that they had cancer, but failed to grasp how bad it was or get the care they needed. I guess no one bothered explaining what was happening” (Kawakami, 370). Komi as well as Natsuko’s mother are from poor family background. They strived hard to provide food for the kids and so they didn’t take care of them and they don’t have awareness about the seriousness of the disease. Similarly Sangewa is also from poor background and she also suffers like Natsuko’s mother because of her husband and also due to cancer and hence poverty stands as the backdrop of their deaths.

Natsuko remembers her past memories through Sangewa. All the three Komi, her daughter and Sangewa are all single mothers. They want to provide bread for their family as breadwinners. This highlights how their lifestyle in reality is very sympathetic because there is no one to care for them. Komi and her daughter are uneducated and they didn’t have knowledge about diseases. The society leaves men happy without any questions or criticism. It is because of Natsuko’s father her mother suffers a lot. After he left them she has forced herself to work in a bar, and involved in adultery in order to provide bread for her kids. Societal pressure and economical condition have made her prone to lung cancer.

After Sangewa’s death, Natsuko’s dream is occupied with other women characters whom she meets in her life. She could visualize Rika, Yuriko, Makiko, Kura, her mother and grandmother. In her dreams she could hear Sangewa say, “atleast there is no more pain” (Kawakami, 374) which highlights how death is better than living a kind of painful life. According to Task force research lung cancer is the third most common disease which affects women due to poverty. The research also shows that women in East Asia are more prone to lung cancer though they don’t smoke. The research states that women are more prone to lung cancer due to household chores like burning of fuel for cooking and carcinogens.

Female Body Narration

Makiko's daughter Midoriko has the habit of writing a journal. Being twelve years of age she experiences lot of changes in her body. She thinks instead of talking, it would be more meaningful to write about her bodily changes. Midoriko's curiosity and lack of awareness about her sexuality is explained with the incident where she discovers about ova and about eggs, as she says that, "So, I have been eating eggs for my whole life... today I learned that women have "ova", as in "oval", which literally means egg." Kawakami's argument states the inequality in gender narration through Midoriko's thoughts as she narrates, "How is it possible I knew about sperm first? That doesn't seem fair" (Kawakami, 14). This shows the absence of female writing about body and gender even in academic books. This is another kind of inequality which prohibits women from knowing their own bodies.

Midoriko's view parallels Virginia Woolf's concept of women. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf states that women need room for their own and poverty does not allow them to have their own room, pen and paper to flow their thoughts. Like Woolf, Midoriko feels that, "writing is the best. You can do it anywhere, as long as you have a pen and paper. And you can write whatever you want" (Kawakami, 15).

Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words pretty and ugly; she soon knows that to be pleased is to be a pretty as a picture; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princess and fairies from tales. (Beauvoir, 304)

The society and its construction compel women to look pretty in order to please the opposite gender as Makiko says, "I have been thinking about getting breast implants" (Kawakami, 37). Though Makiko knows the pain behind breast implants, she forces herself to take such risks because she works as a hostess in the bar. Culture

has specific norms to determine the concept of ugly and beautiful as Beauvoir points out culture and society always compel women to appeal them in every aspect.

Embodiment of Female Body

Natsuko feels offended by her bodily changes because she couldn't understand the fact it is natural as she says, "when my breasts started getting bigger, how out of nowhere I had grown these things" (Kawakami, 55). Again cultural constraint is the reason which invokes the fear of body consciousness in women. She explains the societal thoughts on women's body as, "a body that provokes sexual fantasy" (55). Many feminists starting from Wollstonecraft to contemporary feminists have highlighted the norms prescribed by society in relation to female body. To highlight in Beauvoir's words, "our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of... masculinity and femininity" (Beauvoir, 91).

During the conversation between Makiko and Natsuko regarding the shape and colour of Makiko's organs Kawakami explicitly highlights the shape and colour to represent objectification and so she writes, "She pulled off the damp towel and pointed her bare chest at me. She asked me well? Well what? 'the colour, the shape'. Okay forget about the size I already know that" (Kawakami, 57). The concept of objectification has made women to think and worry about their body appearance. Thus, this will clearly fit into body stigma. To explain body stigma, a good example is toothpaste advertisement, where white colour of the teeth is considered as 'perfect'. Similarly fairness cream and body fitness capsule advertisements also provoke the common people's thoughts regarding colour and slender appearance of body. So, who created the notion that white is perfect? And hence thus it comes under social constraint and social construction of its culture where body is objectified rather than as a subject.

Makiko feels that her body is not in the good shape because of giving birth to a child. Though child birth is a natural process

women assumes themselves as vulnerable because of this fact. Elizabeth Grosz in the text *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* annotates the natural process of women body as, “Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (Grosz, 14). Natsuko’s notion urges her to compliment Makiko by mentioning her nipples look “strong”. Kawakami describes her opinion on women’s nipples through the protagonist Natsuko and her body concepts as she explains it as, “What’s wrong with having strong nipples? Or dark nipples, for that matter? Who wants their nipples to be cute or pretty? You’d think that, in the world of nipples, it’d be the strong, dark, big ones that would reign supreme” (Kawakami, 59). Colour and shape are primarily connected with women. Even a young girl child can feel embarrassment out of her looks. Because typical society make them to think like in a very young age. But Natsuko’s opinion is opposite from typical thinking, she explains that women’s thoughts or her achievement is in no way connection with neither shape and nor colour.

According to culture and social constraint women should look cute like fairies rather than strong. Strong is always associated with a male body. These days’ popular media is also responsible for circulating such ideas thereby stigmatizing the concept of body image. In the above advertisements, they showcase that white teeth, the fair and fit body are categorized as standard beauty. In the literary works produced by males women are portrayed as objects. Whereas men are portrayed as strong and they tend to protect women. In order to show the distinctive traits of female writing Elaine Showalter introduced the term “gynocriticism”. She wants women to have vocabulary of their own. In order to analyse women’s literature as a separate part of literary studies gynocritics have formulated a female framework which replaces male experiences with female. To certain extent women have achieved their position, their gender and body narrations are as natural as their body. Natsuko in the common bath place finds a lesbian couple,

Kawakami narrates it as, “One of them, who looked like she was in her twenties, had a typical woman’s body, but the other one was something else. She had to be a man. The one, still wearing makeup, whose slender neck and curves and blonde hair reaching down her back were unmistakably feminine”. (Kawakami, 59). She represents this for female appearance and to denote male appearance she describes the other girl’s physique as, “looped her arm around the bicep of the other – who had a guy’s haircut and a thick chest that was basically flat, and a towel pressed over her crotch” (59).

According to society, a woman’s body should fit into the vocabularies created by male like makeup conscious, slender neck, curved hips and blonde hair. This type of body is considered as feminine. Whereas, certain features like bicep, short haircut, thick and flat chest with hairs are compatible with masculine features. Social constructions create an illusion about body structure, sex and gender. Devdutt Pattanaik’s novel *The Pregnant King* construe that according to nature, there are differences between plants, because every fruit is either sweet or bitter, and this concept of difference is applicable to animals and human beings as well. Through mythology the novel creates pregnant king who distorts the thought of male and female bodies. Similarly Makiko conceives that people around are shouting that, “there is no such thing as women... there are no men no women and nothing else” (Kawakami, 64). This highlights how she yearns to create a society deprived of discrimination and differentiation.

Child Bearing and Parenting

Through Natsuko’s recounting, the author Mieko Kawakami highlights how women feel submissive in the aspects of both emotional and physical level while having a sexual intercourse with male partner because they didn’t like their bodies to be dominated by male. Natsuko is in a relationship with her friend. She says that he is a good guy and she too liked him but having sexual intercourse is worse, as she states that, “I trusted him. I really tried but it was

not working. Sometimes I wonder if I am really a woman. I know I have the body of a woman. I get my period like a woman... But sex, opening my legs and having him inside me was the worst” (Kawakami, 312). The religious representations starting from Bible have made the society to think that women are created in order to serve and oblige men. The representation of Eve in the Bible is to serve Adam and God created her as a companion to Adam. Because of this social construction Natsuko doubts her very own gender as she was not comfortable with sexual intercourse.

Another character Rika also supports Natsuko's opinion on this aspect by saying, “everything men do repulses me. I can't tell you how good it felt when we got divorced... it was like I could breathe again” (pp. 313). This clearly explains how Rika has been suffered while living with her husband. She has a child named Kura. She very well knows how it is difficult to raise kids as a single woman in Japan's economic situation. She thinks men are repulsive and to live with them is suffocating both in mental as well as physical aspects. Most of the women shown in *Breasts and Eggs* are single mother. Natsuko's grandmother Komi, Natsuko's mother, sister and most of her friends all are single mothers who are constantly attacked by their male partners. On seeing all these Natsuko has developed a repulsive attitude towards marriage. She doesn't want to surrender herself to a man. But she is interested in having a baby of her own. She wishes to raise her kid on her own. Once when she sees an advertisement about Donor conception baby, she determines to have a kid on her own. She meets a donor conception named Jun Aisawa, a man born through artificial insemination. His father is infertile and he couldn't give birth to a child therefore his mother is compelled to get a donor conception upon her mother in law's insistence. As Mieko Kawakami says, “Damn, I have heard people call women baby making machines and all, but that's like ten times worse” (Kawakami, 249). According to culture men weakness cannot be revealed to the outer world. But after decades things have changed

because of feminism where women desire to have babies without sex.

Conclusion

In feminist theories of embodiment the central focus is on woman's bodies which are analysed in the light of ethical, metaphysical, social and political thought. In the beginning of feminism, women couldn't narrate about their body in a natural way. But after the struggle of feminist writers women could boldly narrate about their body and mental suffocation. Mieko Kawakami has shown the multidimensional aspects of body like single mother, lung cancer, child birth, lesbianism and so on by introducing various female characters. Thus this article explains body stigma and how the women characters have overcome it. Kawakami narrates different kinds of thoughts about female body through Natsuko's experience as a working class woman marks a new beginning where women have finally liberated themselves from male domination in conceiving a child.

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