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Challenges against ‘Materiality’ of ‘Sex’ and ‘Gender’ in Githa Hariharan’s *Art of Dying*

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“I am not even sure that there can be a ‘concept’ of an absolute exterior”. (Derrida 64)

Gender theorists, especially feminist theorists, have taken recourse to the definite existence of a strict and defined category of ‘gender’ and, therefore, have taken ‘body’s irreducible materiality as the necessary precondition for feminist practice. They always seek a ‘body’ prior to signification and for that purpose; they have put their effort in retrieving the ‘body’ from the linguistic idealism of post-structuralism in order for feminism to proceed as a critical practice. If ‘body’ is considered to be ‘matter’, then the two terms ‘post-structuralism’ and ‘body’ become difficult and unstable and to some feminist theorists, these two signifiers are antagonistic (Butler, *Bodies* 28).

This assumed ‘irreducibility’ of ‘body’ proves itself to be an illusion, as the effect of irreducibility is constructed through a problematic gendered matrix. Judith Butler questions this ‘irreducibility’ of the materiality of ‘body’ in feminist discourse and by questioning it, she prepares a way to free it from its metaphysical lodging and placing and, thereby, permit the term to occupy and serve very different political aims.

To problematize the matter of bodies may entail an initial loss of epistemological certainty, but a loss of certainty is not the same as political nihilism. On the contrary, such a loss may well indicate a significant and promising shift in political thinking. This unsettling of matter can be understood as initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter’. (Butler, *Bodies* 30)

Here, in this small treatise, my focus is on the materiality of both ‘female’ and ‘male’ ‘bodies’ in four short stories of Githa Hariharan’s anthology, *The Art of Dying* (1993): *Love Poem*, *Revati*, *Field Trip* and *The Warden*. Apart from questioning the ‘irreducible’ materiality of female ‘body’ invoked in the feminist discourse, this article also spots the viability and vulnerability of the ‘male’ sex and the conventional gendered matrix formed by the binary opposition between feminine and masculine.

According to Aristotle, matter is potentiality (*dynamei*) and form is actuality (*entelecheia*). Both the Greek word *hyle* and the Latin word *materia* denote matter neither as a brute positivity or referent, nor a blank surface or slate awaiting any external signification; but always as temporalized in some sense. The Greek word *byle* means ‘schema’ signifying the form, the shape, appearance, dress, gesture, figure of syllogism and/or grammatical form. As Butler shows, according to Aristotle, *de anima*, meaning soul, is the first grade of actuality of a naturally organized body. Matter is fully potential and unactualized. According to Butler, for Aristotle, the soul designates the actualization of matter (Butler, *Bodies* 45). Butler in her *Bodies that Matter* raises questions against the separability of form and matter:

If matter never appears without its schema, that means that it only appears under a certain grammatical form and that the principle of its recognizability, its characteristic gesture or usual dress, is indissoluble from what constitutes its matter. (33)

Githa Hariharan's short story *Love Poem* (119-127) plays with the concept of materiality of sex and its border to an exciting extent. The story centres around two leading characters: Neeta, who is a newcomer to the city of Bombay for studying in a women's college and her most favourite and most respected teacher, Professor Dr. Sharma. Neeta, who has been portrayed as a "Bookworm" (Hariharan 120), considers herself lonely, secluded and a representative the 'outside' in the surrounding of her classmates. As Neeta recalls after her father left her inside the segregated boundary of the hostel, her gender-identity as a 'woman' has been constructed by seclusion from the 'outside'. Her father had felt relieved as he noticed that not a single man was to be seen except for the watchman. Also, her father was not allowed to inspect Neeta's room and he was satisfied at having left her in the "custody of rules, wardens, and the constant, suspicion-sharpened company of women" (Hariharan 122).

But this seclusion does not help her conform to the laid-down practices of her gender-performativity. She withdraws herself from the ambience where she found that "they read one Mills and Boon romance a day; and they chatted endlessly about clothes and boys" (Hariharan 122). She "felt her tongue curl in her mouth" (Hariharan 122). Feeling alienated – as if she were an anomaly – within this specified set of gendered ambience, she starts speaking less and less while dreaming more and more. In the second year of her college, Neeta discovers Dr. Sharma; another "anomaly" (Hariharan 122) in that strictly 'segregated' ladies' college. Neeta starts identifying herself with the poetry that Dr. Sharma reads and with his linguistic style of delivery. She enjoys the flavour of being 'outside' the border of her existence through the language used by Dr. Sharma; especially when she finds him injecting a new spirit to the substance of common and familiar words through his vivacious pronunciation.

Her incessant effort to identify her passion and anger with foreign words portrays her craze for an out-of-the-border existence. Her 'out-of-the-border' identity cannot cope with her classmates' discussions about Dr. Sharma's marital and sexual statuses. She cannot identify her own status as a gendered form and does not bother about any fixed gendered identity of Dr. Sharma's existence. She only seeks "his mind" (Hariharan 123) and it is apparent that it was "his poetry that she was interested in" (Hariharan 123).

On the other hand, Dr. Sharma's fixed gender identity has been formed by portraying him as "something of an anomaly" (Hariharan 122) in a strictly segregated women's college. Throughout the story, he has been described as a person devoted to poetry, a person possessing "passion for lofty things, a poetic love for life" (Hariharan 123). The effort to secure his fixed gender-identity has been revealed in the rumour among the other girls of the college in which he is considered to be "separated from his wife" (Hariharan 123), a polygamist or a homosexual 'man'.

But, this assumed fixity becomes problematic on the eve of Neeta's poetry reading session when she is invited by Dr. Sharma to his room he rents. Neeta feels quite relaxed as she becomes able to make him feel her love for poetry, which she considers to be her exclusive potential for "something different" (Hariharan 125).

The tension reaches its acme when in the midst of an interesting lecture on ambiguity in modern poetry, he jumps off the bed he had been sitting on and begins pacing the floor in front of her while asking her about her reaction to reading a love poem. Neeta, as a lover of poetry, feels equally excited with that question and tries to answer in her own way. But, Dr. Sharma interrupts her by undressing before her and arranging his naked body on the bed "as if he was a poet's muse" (Hariharan 126). At this moment, he throws that question again to Neeta in a renewed

way, “Are you moved now? Does the image of my body excite you? The symbol of my desire?” (Hariharan 126)

Neeta “felt nothing; not fear, not indignation” (Hariharan 126) and looked at his “pale, thin, hairless body, his stick-like legs coyly crossed as if to veil the tumescence between them” (Hariharan 126). She starts relating his naked body with some lyrical phrases he had uttered, “The rain takes off her clothes” (Hariharan 126) and at the same time; she cannot dissociate herself from the fluidity of poetic self. It is also shown that she “felt, with horror, the wetness on her cheeks, and she got up and ran to the door, not so much to escape his nakedness, but to hide her own” (Hariharan 126).

The portrayal of a ‘muse’ through his naked body that tries to veil the “tumescence”, the oddity of his then trans-identity; reveals his self as akin to the androgynous self of Nature that is much more suited to his poetic presence in the classroom. The border of gender-identity has been blurred here. As gender matrix is always based on binary oppositions and, therefore, always tends to leave an ‘outside’; the whole story, through its beyond-gendered presence, denies the ‘matter’-‘outside’ myth.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, talks about the materialization of a prisoner’s body. This process of materialization is inquired and questioned in the final chapter of the first volume of *History of Sexuality* where he argues that sexuality, in relation to power, is not at all an external object, an ‘exterior domain’ to which power can be applied. On the contrary, sexuality is an instrument and also a result of power’s designs. Butler elaborates in her ‘Bodies that Matter’ how Foucault has argued that ‘subjection’ becomes more than subordination and how the subjected soul’s relation to the power as ‘external’ has been put into question. Butler shows how ‘subject’ is formed through some exclusionary practices and how, once the ‘subject’ is formed, the exclusions are overlooked.

In the short story *Revati* (Hariharan 92-97) we come across the central figure Revati - a child widow, whose enigmatic and out-of-the-place presence within the family setting, deals with the issue of gender construction in a way different from *Love Poem*. Revati does not resemble the typical child widow portrayed in the pages of history from time to time. Revati happens to be a cultural shock to the narrator’s mind. Apart from being “an unpleasant reminder of a world gone by” (Hariharan 93), Revati never shows any of the “feminine niceties” (Hariharan 94) a child widow should have possessed. While a woman’s and especially, a widow’s identity is entirely constructed by her adaptation to her family’s need, Revati transcends all those prescribed ideas namely beauty, tolerance, goodness, selflessness and so on her identity and instead, she is unashamed and obsessed with her own oddity. She seems to be ‘outside’ of the ‘matter’ of femininity in every step of her survival. “She ate enough for two men” (Hariharan 94); she advises the narrator with a “hoarse, dry voice so unlike a woman’s” (Hariharan 94) and after being accompanied by an imbecile relative, she delivers an endless monologue on different kinds of burps to him by placing herself into the narrator’s “father-in-law’s favourite chair” (Hariharan 95). Throughout the story, she plays the role of an ‘outsider’ of the conventional gendered ambience prevailing in her society and as she does not bother about the necessity of performativity of her gendered role; she has been marked as a symbol of patriarchy’s failure in their role.

Ellen Dengel Janic, in her “Construction of Femininity in Cornelia Sorabji’s ‘Greater Love’ and Githa Hariharan’s ‘Revati’” (1-15), points out that Revati’s characterization dwells on the very physicality of her existence and her corporeal existence has been portrayed as just the opposite form of an ‘ethereal female ideal’. Judith Butler, in *Gender Troubles*, shows that “gender is the

repeated stylization of the body” (43) and the regularity of performativity constitutes the existence of ‘gender’. This formation of gendered self is achieved through an exclusionary operation which excludes the other ‘selves’ of an individual to fit oneself into the model of a specific gender-identity. These ‘excluded’ factors become the ‘outside’ which again is itself a constitutive element of the materiality of gender (Butler, *Bodies* 39). In the short story *Revati*, the narrator’s femininity is constituted through the exclusion of the ‘odd’ self of Revati’s presence. This ‘excluded’ presence of Revati as an ‘outsider’ of the border of femininity is presented with her complete entity even on the occasions when she is assumed to express her suppressed sexual desires. Butler explains Lacan’s psycho-sexual analysis of a ‘sexed’ self in a way where the subject ‘I’ is formed by excluding other selves and this exclusion starts at the very beginning when one shifts his or her selves from the ‘real’ stage to the ‘symbolic’ stage (Butler, *Gender* 57). Thus, a ‘sexed’ self is formed by excluding ‘other selves’ of his or her entity. But throughout the story, we experience Revati in the complete form of her existence, even in her private sessions with the imbecile man who lived with her: “She made a huge, full throated noise – a belching sound that went on and on” (Hariharan 96).

But even this ‘outside’ existence of Revati proves to be fluid when the narrator notices that she had ‘sighed greedily’ when she saw their new saris. Even at a time of momentary madness, she felt excited by imagining a mirage of a masculine figure before her. Many a time she gazed at the narrator’s bridal finery with a face “filling with a wistfulness” (Hariharan 92) and simultaneously “hideously unashamed and undisguised” (Hariharan 92). She cannot restrain her hands from touching the softness of the narrator’s sari of Benarasi silk, “It’s soft, soft, just like baby-skin, she moaned. Her hand, which had never shown an inclination to touch a baby, stroked the sari again and again” (Hariharan 92).

The history of ‘matter’ of ‘sex’ or of ‘gender’ in a gender-matrix has been formed out of a power-inscribed hierarchical relation between sexual differences. Hariharan’s story *Field Trip* is apparently a story dealing with a familiar adolescent experience of a ten-and-a-half year old boy, Krishna, who has come to his uncle’s village from Bombay. However, as the narrative unfolds itself step by step, some subtle issues regarding the fluidity of gender identity peep out of its several corners. Krishna feels outlandish before the village boys like Mani and others. He disdains their limited knowledge and savagery but, simultaneously, he cannot resist himself from feeling inferior to or, to some extent, like having some sort of a ‘lack’ before them as he cannot swim or as “he couldn’t climb a tree without feeling dizzy” (Hariharan 24). The inability to imitate the prescribed masculine actions performed by the village boys places him in an identity-crisis in the gendered ambience. The boys taunt him by calling him ‘a girl’ who might be suitable for his aunt’s kitchen with a skirt on him. Krishna raises his voice against the humiliation by placing his social and intellectual superiority before them. But to the village boys, his potentiality does not hold that much weight and Krishna is “saved” (Hariharan 25) only by a “strong, decisive voice, a voice used to giving orders”; the voice (Hariharan 24) of his “childhood hero” (Hariharan 31), Sundaram *mama*. Here, he – as a ‘subject’ – has been formed through the regulatory practices which produce as well as validate gender differences. Krishna only feels confident before his aunt, Parvati *mami* as she gives enough importance to whatever he has to say to make him feel like a ‘man’ and consequently, he thinks of Parvati *mami* as a ‘woman’. Here, Sundaram *mama*, who had been in the centre of the power-structure in Krishna’s surroundings, becomes an idol to him. The development of his inner psyche starts revolving around the desire of framing his identity by moulding himself according to his model of

‘masculinity’ – Sundaram *mama* – because to Krishna, “he was something more – a strong armed, honour-bound man, like a hero” (Hariharan 28).

The more this desire becomes intense, the more he loses confidence over himself. Though while leaning swimming with Sundaram *mama*, the village boys’ taunt “you’re a girl! Be a man” (Hariharan 26) becomes faded, it erupts again when he becomes afraid by mistaking a weed for a snake. He feels “saved again” (Hariharan 27) by Sundaram *mama*, the ‘man’, and his obsession with his manly image increases to such an extent where he glows “with pride every time someone in the village said he looked like Sundaram.” (Hariharan 27) The power structure and the ‘subject’ becomes ‘one’ and their position is co-extensive.

The desire for the strong ‘masculine’ identity reaches its acme when Krishna reaches the farmhouse with his uncle and finds Vengamma, sister-in-law of Karuppaya, Sundaram’s field assistant. As Vengamma gives him an oil bath, Krishna becomes conscious of what he could see in “her tight choli, ... two large wet patches made her underarms a deeper pink” (Hariharan 29) and also what he could not see, “her long, slender neck ended in a surprisingly fleshy but firm expanse of bare brown skin.” (Hariharan 29) His newly born ‘masculinity’ cherished to possess that ‘feminine’ body of Vengamma but “he had been too afraid.” (Hariharan 29)

But at the night, when Sundaram *mama* does not come to bed with him and he notices two shadows on the walls against his room with a low voice and silence with some intervals and then “a soft giggle that dissolved into a moan” (Hariharan 29), Krishna thinks how “Vengamma’s breasts were full and round” (Hariharan 29) and how “her hips swelled softly in her coarse sari” (Hariharan 29-30). He feels that Vengamma is a woman like Parvati *mami*. But, when the long shadows “merged” (Hariharan 29) with one another, he perceives the shadows as “the disjointed fragments of a nightmare” (Hariharan 29). Here, we can again relate Foucault’s idea of ‘subject-formation’ through Krishna as he deems to be the ‘produced’ ‘subject’ within the gendered power-matrix. Krishna is not only worried about his ‘journey’ towards ‘masculinity’ as he stumbles over the performativity required for reaching the destination, but he also frames his identity on the basis of the notion of the binary opposition of ‘male’ and ‘female’ and feels “an ache” (Hariharan 25) even by imagining himself in the form of ‘another’ gender. This tension reaches its zenith when he gets excited by seeing the shadows on the walls during the night at the farmhouse. He knows the ‘bodies’ behind those shadows and his excitement, when he hears some familiar but mysterious sounds with the movement of the shadows; comes out less of his adolescent curiosity, than of his fear for the ‘mingled’ self of a genderless entity – where two ‘different’ genders tremble, or as he finds, they have “shifted abruptly” (Hariharan 29), seemingly from one identity to another and then, as it seems to him, they have “merged” (Hariharan 29) with one another. This ‘displacement’, the ‘taking’ of ‘another form’ and the ‘disruption’ of his known gendered ambience echo back to him as “disjointed fragments of a nightmare” (Hariharan 29). He starts hating Vengamma not only because he cannot possess her but also because she happens to be the cause of his disillusionment with ‘masculinity’. That unavoidable frustration he has gone through in front of the village boys due to his lack of ‘masculinity’ comes back to him from the very source of masculinity when he feels insecure at the night in the farmhouse. The long-cherished obsession with Sundaram *mama*’s ‘masculinity’ is, at least temporarily, not there anymore and he feels like going back to Bombay “to Vivek and Suresh with whom he could be an astronaut again or a space scientist” (Hariharan 30). Being an astronaut or a space scientist does not require any gender fixity like ‘masculinity’ and he gets back his comfort and relief in a state of mind that is beyond any prescribed gendered identity.

Butler, in her *Gender Troubles*, opines that the conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender and desire, but also suggests that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire (30). Besides, Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, considers 'subject' as inseparable from the power inscribed upon her or him. When Krishna fails to perform the actions required by the gendered world, he shifts his focus to developing his identity in the world of intellect which can permit him, to some extent, to exist as a non-gendered or sexless being.

The fluidity of his self-formative desire does not stop deviating from the established model of gendered identity as it flows back to the phase of his evolution where "his eyes became cool and intense behind his thick spectacles, a little like his childhood hero" (Hariharan 31) again. This ever-changing phase of identity-formation is always triggered by the prevailing power-structure which determines the emergence of new subject every time. A sexed or a gendered 'matter' has no separable existence excluding the 'outside' (Derrida, *Positions*) and Luce Irigaray, as interpreted by Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (37), has considered this 'outside' as the enabling condition of the materiality in another detailed context of gender matrix.

The sex-gender-desire trilogy is explicitly nurtured in another story in Hariharan's *Art of Dying, The Warden* (32-40). The entire story is woven by relentless monologues of two women, the warden and the apparently mad woman, also the mistress of the house. The mistress, in spite of being mother to three children, is not at all ready to accept her own motherhood and retorts against the said claim in her own way, "Once they brought a baby and I liked him ... Mine, they said ... Liars ... No baby came out of this body" (Hariharan 35). She also considers her husband as nothing but a "hairy bee" (Hariharan 34) to her own flowery existence. She had bitten her husband while he had once tried to be close to her physically. She not only feels like knowing "all kind of magic" (Hariharan 34) so that the warden "cannot bring that hairy bee" (Hariharan 34) back to her but also feels fiery passion about her warden: "you don't know why your big balloon breasts burst, do you? Didn't you see me lying quietly in the corner, looking? My tongue rolled out and wriggled across the dark shadows of the room. It wriggled like a long, long earthworm. When you looked, it played dead and you thought it was nothing ... shall I kiss you? Or send the worm crawling up your thick, scaly legs? (Hariharan 34)"

All those 'aberrations' from feminine identity could have easily been counted as nonsensical expressions of a mad woman with a strong motif of madness being described as a defence against the character of the mistress as it is portrayed. But, a close glance will shatter the charade and the reader will be placed before a hyper-sensitive lesbian woman who reveals her suppressed inner psyche in various ways, "I learnt the art of cunning when I was very young ... Now it is almost time to pick the fruit. I can feel it, clusters of parasitic growths in my head, ripening" (Hariharan 36).

On the other hand, she is well aware of her femininity not only when she requests Basamma, the warden, to comb her hair properly and to tie her sari but also when she signals with her 'blood' that "trickled down like a long thin snake all the way down" (Hariharan 34) to her knees. At the time of her first meeting with her daughter-in-law, she made her sit on the stool before her and adored her face and her long thick plait ornamented with flowers. But, when everyone feels relieved at her 'normalcy', she surprises everyone with her approach: "She bent down and lifted the girl's sari" (Hariharan 36).

Monique Wittig, in her essay "One Is Not Born A Woman", shows how 'sex' as well as 'race' is taken as an 'immediate given' or a 'sensible given' 'physical features' belonging to a natural order and, therefore, the fixed materiality of 'sex' or 'gender' proves to be a myth. In the story,

The Warden, the 'gender' identity of the mistress, the mad woman, neither conforms with her sexual status always, nor does it place itself as 'outside' permanently and the suppressed as well as the expressed desire of her self is not bound within the expected framework of social discourse.

In *Gender Troubles*, Butler raises questions against the construction of 'sex' as 'natural' and 'pre-discursive'. If gender is a cultural construction, then there can be more than 'two' genders and in that case, the construction of 'gender' is inevitably independent of 'sex' as there are only two accepted kinds of 'sex'. So, male or 'masculine' can very well define a feminine body or vice versa and, hence, we can conclude with the notion that 'sex' also cannot be defined properly even with the help of the science. The concept of 'sex' is as much a cultural construct as 'gender' is and 'sex' itself is a gendered concept. The border of the matter of 'sex' as well as 'gender' is never secured and the 'exclusion' outside the 'matter' which appears as violence to the established truth-regime of sexual difference works as a future horizon to proceed.

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