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Productive Bodies: Voices of Subjugation and Resistance in Aruna Raje's *Rihaee*

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Abstract:

The productive processes involve a complex set of overlapping spatial voices of subjugation and resistance, which can be understood in terms of constructions, practices, subversions and reconfigurations. Keeping the productive process in mind, the paper is about reading body as a site of cultural construct as well as resistance, which may result in subversion of the nationalist trope of chaste Indian womanhood. I aim to problematize the concept of body in terms of the prescriptive normative social behaviour through experiences of embodiment that individual people within a culture feel and articulate. Aruna Raje's *Rihaee* provides a context for the subtle processes of corporeal acts, where 'body' is the material object through which change occurs.

Keywords: corporeal bodies, performativity, subjectification, affect, habitus

The corporeal bodies are the conduit to experience the world, as they mediate the boundary between social codes and conventions, and individual experiences of body. They are means through which people are subjected to oppression, exposed to operations of power and simultaneously the means by which they are able to resist. My argument is that the crisis in normative social behaviour occurs and reoccurs when the experiences of lived body explode and implode the set codes and conventions of a society. The paper emphasizes how women can express themselves through and with their bodies, where "bodies are not singular, bounded, closed and fixed, rather open to being affected and affecting others" (Blackman 16).

Through the film *Rihaee*, I analyze the constraining nature of social roles assigned to women, wherein, body is perceived as ideologically fixed within pure and homogenous categories. The cultural conventions concerning women, sexuality and their place in society fixate them within the 'pure' domestic space and in absolute pre-determined categories such as wife and mother - which is a terrible kind of oppression; a glorification not allowing the woman any choice. This severely compromises their individual subjective emotions and experiences. Here I will dilate upon both, the character analysis and the narrative of the selected film to expose the normative constructs and how the subtle processes of corporeal acts explode and implode the normative conducts.

Drawing from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I propose that 'the subject' is subjectified through practices which occur upon and through the corporeal body. The process of

subjectification produces subject as well as enables to perform that subject position. Both signifies the formation of the subject through power. In explaining corporeal resistance in relation to the way power acts upon corporeality, the subject reinstates or subverts his subjectification through conduct and counter-conduct (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 781). Therefore, one may deduce from the foregoing that the corporeal bodies, even when subjugated, in the very materiality demonstrate a level of agency in determining their place in the world. I will be using the framework of subjugation and resistance in relation to corporeality, with reference to the study of women in Aruna Raje’s *Rihaae*. This theoretical framework centralizes the claim that it is not possible to investigate either subjugation or resistance in isolation. They are in relation to each other and one is consecutive of the other.

Judith Butler claims that the body is an essentially performative entity, which is constantly being made up through a ‘stylized repetition of acts’. The repetition itself produces a set of behaviours and reified forms which appears as the natural configuration of bodies (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 519). Pierre Bourdieu claims that the bodily activities are acquired form of embodied knowledge. Bourdieu employs the term *habitus* to characterize how body, mind and emotions are simultaneously trained and uses this concept to understand how social status, class position and gender becomes embodied in everyday corporeal performativity (qtd. in Low 12). Saba Mahmood also explains *habitus*, in terms of moral virtues acquired through a coordination of outward behavior (e.g. bodily acts, social demeanor) with inward dispositions (e.g. emotional states, thoughts, intentions) through the repeated performance of acts (215).

It is observed in *Rihaae* that the village women’s bodily movements, behaviours and dispositions are heavily circumscribed by conventions. The specific form of actions such as laughter were regulated to conform to acceptable performative standards, i.e. acceptable levels of loudness from laughter. Other emotional states such as joy or pain were also called up for regulation according to convened behavioral prescriptions. All this defines what sorts of movements are appropriate to their gender.

As stated earlier, Bourdieu claims that bodies are trained, shaped and converted into automatic and habitual activity- of what Foucault calls “docile bodies,” regulated by the norms of the cultural life. It is observed in the film that the body movements, routines and presentations of the village women are disciplined in order to organize the interior life around the accepted poles of being. This can be explained in context to the sequence of scenes, wherein, Roopji kills his first wife for not maintaining the ‘correct body’ of society i.e. her chastity as she gets involved with the other man. It is important to mention that the body may all be subject to the prescribed norms, but is also subversive of it as well. Roopji’s first wife’s relationship with the other man exemplifies that there are moments when the body is not “in the service of ‘docility’ and gender normalization” (qtd in Pylypa), rather her ‘desires’ resists the gender domination. This implies that the human is not passive ‘being-in-the-world’, but actively participates and grapples with the world. Here, it is pertinent to move beyond the body as the surface upon which

power operates (Bourdieu) and the body as the effect of power mechanisms (Foucault). Elizabeth Grosz claimed that the body can never be fully disciplined or described by discourse. She underlines the agency of the body, a site of active resistance to inscription, to move with its own patterns and is capable of “counter-strategic reinscription” (qtd in Clever 549). This signifies that body is a site of self knowledge and potential resistance.

Aruna Raje moves the narrative of the film between the city and the village, showing parallel depictions of life. The film is set partly in the Bombay *chawls* where migrant male labourers live, and partly in the Gujarat village, Vadner, where the migrants’ wives eke out a hard existence by working in the fields and taking care of the kids. The migration of the able bodied men of the village to the cities led to the crisis in the dynamics of family. The wives remain all alone, trying to survive the routine life by working and quietly awaiting their husbands’ letters.

The introductory shot of the city captures men working as carpenters in an apartment. They not only ogle at the women they come across in their work life but also consider it their right to visit prostitutes regularly. The most significant aspect of the lives of the migrant men is that they thrive on the sentimental vision of their wives as devoted and chaste, waiting for them in the village. Here I would like to draw attention to the sexual frustration within the marriage, wherein, women wait for their husbands endlessly and are expected to deny their desires of sexuality.

The crisis in the village arises with the arrival of Mansukh, who returns to Vadner after spending several years in Dubai. Since the village men have gone to work in cities, Mansukh’s return results in a series of intimate encounters between him and some of the village women. The complexities of relationships, the intricacies of emotion and the often silent struggles, that are inherent in everyday life, eventually lead to the stifling of the village women’s sexuality. The female body, ordinarily a subject of secrecy and shame, is shown as a site for struggle and liberation. Lonely and deprived of emotional bonding, the village women face a dilemma of pursuing their desires in a relationship out of marriage and an idealized notion of chastity and passiveness. It is through ‘body’, the village women articulate their aspirations and desires. Far from being a docile and mechanical entity, they contest the standards set for them in terms of morality and social values. The village women emerge as assertive sexual individuals, and not as idealized wives-in-waiting. Open sexuality of some village women like Sukhi, contest constrains of the controlled and passive sexuality of the (Indian) woman that is inscribed on the bodies of good women. These good women are expected to be chaste, lack the ability to express desire or sexuality. Such prescriptive normative behaviour firmly enmeshes them in the complicated web of forbidden passions. They also assert that they have rights on their own bodies. They openly acknowledge that wives have the same sexual needs as husbands do. Thus, the village becomes a ground for breaking conventional mores by revealing the hypocrisy and double standards in perceiving sexuality in a feudal set-up.

Mansukh's sexual adventures result in two pregnancies in Vadner. One of them is Takoo. She insists on keeping her child based on the claim that destroying the foetus would be a perversion of her own body and self. She steps out of the constraining nature of *habitus*. She challenges and subverts normative structures of the society, by refusing to abort a child that does not belong to her husband. Her assertion of an independent spirit through the body, contests and resists the trappings of society. This can be explained in the context of body as agency, a site of resistance to codifications inscribed on it. The sexual assertion of Takoo Bai, can be seen as a liberating voice from repression.

Takoo's refusal to abort her child draws the attention of the panchayat, which rules that she must leave the village if she desires to continue the pregnancy. Her protest is taken up by the other village women, particularly by the older village women. The scene of revolt stages the solidarity of the village women, who raise their voice against injustice and rebel in their own way and make their own political statement. For instance, an old woman tells the panchayat, while debating the woman's right to have the child: "Do you think our nights aren't long. They are longer. It's so against nature this existence of ours? We also need warmth, comfort. You think Takoo's the only one who's committed adultery?"ⁱ The village women not only contest the patriarchal domination, but also transform themselves into a challenge against the repressive control of the normative conventions of society. They raise their voice and question things such as their existence, meaningfulness etc., jeopardizes any sovereign power that seeks to impose a set of predetermined absolutes.

Here I would further my argument with the subtle processes of corporeal acts that reflect the more liberatory elements of play, movement, and unfettered expressions of the self. These are the bodily experiences of untrodden paths of revelation, strength and surprise. Initially, Takoo Bai resists Mansukh's advances. She prefers to stay within the framework of social and individual confinement. She fears of resisting and revolting against herself. Thus, Takoo is a subjugated subject that only recognizes the defined structures of the sovereign power. The moment of subdued passion comes into the fore, wherein, intense moments of physical contact and intimacy, implicitly suggest desire and sexuality through her body. In one of the shots, when Mansukh puts his hand on the shoulder of Takoo Bai, she shivers all over. Takoo's body emerges as a site of resistance to discourse of chastity, articulates her dissatisfaction with the confines of her social role as a wife-in-waiting and to make sense of her identity as a woman of flesh and blood. This scene can be explained in context to the intensive capacities of a body to affect (through an affection) and be affected (as a result of modifications), which signifies corporeal attitudes having a performative as well as an affective side (Simonsen 3). Takoo delves into the forbidden land of the unknown of the self that transcends the boundaries of the utilized, submissive body. The concept of affect can be described as unformed and unstructured intensities. It is the felt aliveness given in the pre-individual bodily capacities to act, to engage, to connect (Gregory 8). Deborah Gould sees affect as those non-conscious and unnamed but registered experiences of bodily intensity in response to stimuli exerted upon the body. These

experiences are registered in that the organism senses the impingement and the bodily effects, but non-conscious in that this sensing is outside of the individual's conscious awareness and is of intensities that are choate and as yet inarticulate. Gould uses the word non-conscious rather than unconscious to refer that is outside of conscious awareness, the difference is that the non-conscious perceptions do not require repression (19-20).

Affect is in many senses prior to feelings and emotions; having a feeling is not the same as knowing it's a feeling. Being able to name a feeling, to classify feelings within some kind of emotional taxonomy is to render affects available to consciousness, make them knowable, to recognise them. But one is in affect, participating, before this happens, affect precedes these kind of classificatory and cognitive activities. Affects remind the body's intensities and multiplicities, of the autonomy of experience. They are a surplus, an excess; they are about those registers of the self that escape the knowable, manageable subject. What is valuable about this account of affect is the way it makes trouble for all those epistemologies that begin with a knowing subject ready to act on the world or be acted upon. For the body in affect is not subjectivity to the world's objectivity, it is a body in transition, a body in relation. This opens up an understanding of how we are in and of the world, how being is a kind of ontological tension between manipulable objectivity (reality and all those things that represent it) and elusive qualitative activity (becoming: all those things that break in from the outside, that surprise, that enliven, that introduce unpredictability) (qtd in Hawkins). This provides new meanings in efforts to challenge, appropriate and subvert normative structures.

Here, I would also draw attention to how women negotiate the ideal through the strategic bodily practices. Clothing is used in the film strategically in revealing and emphasizing the female body. The village women move between a prescriptive normative behavior of constructed femininity and their own individual subjective emotions and experiences. It can be explained in context to the 'body work' they perform, whilst it expresses and conforms to the 'ideal' simultaneously forms the site for strategic subversive acts. Banerjee and Miller describe the sari as a 'lived' garment, claiming it is the main medium operating between a woman's sense of her body and the external world. They further claim that the way a woman may manipulate her sari and respond to its movements "expresses not only her personal aesthetic and style but also her ideals about what it is to be a woman in contemporary India" (75). They state that the sari is inherently ambiguous in that it has the "flexibility to accentuate, moderate or hide features of the body" (75). For example the pallu of the sari can be exploited and manipulated by women to present themselves as coy by covering their faces when a lover passes by, as erotic by letting it fall away to reveal and accentuate the curvature of their breast. This expands the idea that their erotic experiences assert the humanness of the self in contrast with the mechanical, tainted with fear, body image that has been imposed and submissively accepted.

To reiterate, the village women through their body resist the discourse around chastity. They break down established patterns along with Foucault's ideas of the body and its relationship to disciplinary body, through erotic practices. Since the erotic experience is one of

subversion of boundaries as well as transcendence, it could also imply a rediscovery of body as a site of resistance to the discourse of women's chastity that tries to define its agenda within a certain framework that only recognizes the body as a means of subjugation.

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ⁱThe quotations from the film are taken from the English subtitled version on DVD, *Rihaae*, directed by Aruna Raje, distributed by Shemaroo Video Pvt. Ltd. in India. Unfortunately, the English translation does not do justice to the original words.