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Sexing the Female Bodies: Four Short Stories of Manjula Padmanabhan

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Abstract:

Human bodies are, invariably, marked by codes standing in for cultural and political forces. In Manjula Padmanabhan's stories, the female bodies perform and resist roles of their gender in line with the expectations of a patriarchal system which has different sets of expectations from male and female individuals and as per their locations in the hierarchy. She explores the issues of female bodies and their resistance to social control, routinely enforced through 'normal' and normalizing expectations from female bodies in a patriarchal set up. The four stories under discussions, here, are "Teaser", "Three Virgins", "Body in the Backyard" and "Morning Glory in East of Kailash".

Keywords: Body, Patriarchy, Performance, Resistance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a crucial point when she says that "there is no such thing as an uncoded body" (Spivak, 1989, p.12). With this she draws our attention to the various ways the body is invariably marked by codes standing in for cultural and political forces. Human bodies are, therefore, marked classified and analyzed in relation to and within those factors. Manjula Padmanabhan, in her writings, put the human bodies at the center of discussion. Male and female bodies are, here, sexualised to the extent that these bodies come to embody the dominant power structure. However, her focus remains on the constructed female self - the cultural history of the body. Padmanabhan's stories bring out in the open these cultural factors at play in sexualising the female bodies. Judith Butler argues that gender does not necessarily proceed from biological sex:

If sex is gender, then it makes little sense to argue that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex. (Butler, 1990, p.7)

Again, Rosalind C. Morris (1995), in line with Butler's arguments, points out that "contrary to sociological understandings of sex as the premise of gender, the reverse is true: gender is the premise of sex" (Morris, 2002, p.568-69). In other words, both Morris and Butler point to the fact that the constructs of sex and gender may be "an effect of regulating normative mechanisms of power." (Puri, 1990, p.5)

Butler further says that "gender is not an essence but a set of repeated acts that only appear to be substantive" (ibid, p.6). In Padmanabhan's stories, the female bodies perform and resist roles of their gender through a series of acts in line with the expectations of a patriarchal system which has different sets of expectations from male and female individuals and as per

their locations in the hierarchy. Her narratives on female sexuality, in its varied forms, not only delineate the minute details of lived reality but, in the process, expose the power relationships which ultimately decide the quality of life of a woman both inside and outside the home space.

In this research paper, I am trying to understand the ways Padmanabhan explores the sexualisation of female bodies and women's resistance to social control, routinely enforced through 'normal' and normalizing expectations from female bodies in a patriarchal set up. The four stories under discussions, here, are "Teaser", "Three Virgins", "Body in the Backyard" and "Morning Glory in East of Kailash". More importantly, what engages Padmanabhan is the ways women have been sexualised, their bodies disciplined and normalized as per the expectations in the patriarchal scheme of things. She has published three anthologies of short stories: *Hot Death Cold Soup* (1996), *Kleptomania: Ten Stories* (2004), and *Three Virgins and other stories* (2013). The stories are also built around real-life issues and concerns and explore aspects of patriarchal power structure and gendered identities sexualisation of human selves.

A woman's body is a cultural construction as it is mediated by the dominant patriarchal discourse. In other words, the ideal female body is created and re created by the regulating system in accordance with the dominant male system of values. Thus, in "Three Virgins", the female protagonist gets branded as 'cute', 'girlish' and 'quiet'. These attributes are used with the specific purpose of gendering a female body as passive in opposition to the active male identity. Significantly, Padmanabhan, in this story, depicts her as a character who takes her own decisions in matters of her own body. "Three Virgins" is about this woman who literally decides to pace her sexual acts in a matter-of-fact manner, going beyond the male centric romantic game plan of men. She gets into relationships on her own terms, keeping aside the limits set by the controlling social hierarchy. In a society that fetishises female virginity and functions by pure/impure binary values, a female body is put under tremendous pressure to behave as per dominant norms. In the story, however, the female protagonist not only defies those norms but, instead, rescues a virgin male by initiating him into the sexual act. At the end, this incident leaves her with the satisfaction of doing a favour to her friend.

A sexualised female body is a matter of constant debate and claims over that body vary in accordance with her different relationships. Padmanabhan highlights the ways parents and lovers have different and contradictory ideals of ownership over a female body. In "The Body in Backyard", a young woman, Sonu, is torn apart by the different sets of expectations from her parents and her stubborn lover. While her lover believes a "young man needs to... have sex now and then" (Padmanabhan, 2004, p.122), she is horrified to think how her parents would react if 'sex' happens. Sonu has to be a virgin as per parental expectations and sexually liberal for the sake of romantic love. In the process, her opinion is never sought either by her parents or by the man claiming to love her. In the story, Sonu is a bundle of nerves and confused by the contradictory claims of people in a position to exercise power over her. Dani Cavallaro(1998) believes that a body is produced by our physical drives and a society's relentless screening of those drives. Sonu is an example of how a female body and

its identity is built up and regulated through a variety of laws and rituals. Unfortunately, the blame is, also, on her if she finds herself at the bottom of the power relationships. By being submissive to both her parents and to her lover, she, thus, silences herself and, in the process, empowers her tormentor as a lot of power given away to people is 'ascription' (Atwood, 1983, p.44). The silencing of a woman is part of patriarchal politics over the female body in which a woman does not get to decide what to do with her own body and its expectations.

The patriarchal politics over a female body also involves male gaze resulting in fragmentation of a female self into fetishised and objectified different body parts. In that discursive recreation of a female body, it is merely there to be looked at as a male prerogative. Cavallaro defines the idea of gaze as "a form of power associated with the eye and with the sense of sight" (Cavallaro 1998, p.115). Power is exercised by the powerful bodies by looking at powerless bodies in certain ways:

When we gaze at somebody or something, we are not simply looking. The gaze probes and masters. It penetrates the body and bounds it as a passive object. The gaze objectifies the body. (ibid.)

In Padmanabhan's stories, women are gazed at in certain ways by the powerful men using their privileged location in the social hierarchy. In "The Body in the Backyard", Sonu is forced into a sexual act by her lover who as a young man believes it is his right to sexually pin down a woman against her will. On the other hand, Sonu is also at the receiving end of lusty male gaze of her servant, Narayan, who has no qualms looking at a naked female body engaged in a sexual act. In fact, he finds the whole scenario of a young woman sexually taken over by another man arousing. While two men get their share of pleasure out of a female body, Sonu remains afraid of her parents all along. However, as Narayan's dead body is dug out, at the end of the story, even the investigating police officer does not find anything wrong with the dirty male gaze of Narayan which resulted in his death. Thus, in a patriarchal society, it is considered 'normal' to have desires befitting a man. Again, in "Morning Glory in East of Kailash", the female protagonist is confronted with male domestic help Gopi's unusual interest in her under wares. He inspects those objects as "scraps of ultimate femininity" (Padmanabhan, 2004, p.177). She, however, doesn't feel elated to find her mundane clothes like the underwear getting the undue attention. In fact, it disturbs her immensely:

It disturbed me [the protagonist] because it altered the way I related to myself. I did not like knowing myself as someone else's cult object" (ibid, p.178).

Clearly, this obsession with female underwear is suggestive of how a woman gets reduced into bits and pieces of her body parts. Female lingerie represents those fetishised body parts and that explains Gopi's obsession over those objects.

Both these stories, "Body in the Backyard" and "Morning Glory in East of Kailash", significantly also bring in the different aspects of 'subordinate masculinity'. In *Seeing like a Feminist*, Menon (2012) has this to say in this context:

Male domestic servants in the South Asian context embody a 'subordinate masculinity' that renders them 'not-male' vis-a-vis the men of the house, since they perform the tasks allotted to women"(Menon,2012,p.89).

Menon finds these subordinated masculine people simultaneously irrelevant and dangerous. In "The Body in the Backyard", Narayan is submissive but licks with eyes his female employer's body without any inhibition. On the other hand, Gopi, in "Morning Glory in East of Kailash", performs his male self by imaginatively getting hold of a female body through her underwire. These subordinate male characters, thus, engage in an interesting flip-flop game of power with the marginalised female bodies.

Padmanabhan's stories are about the experience of the female bodies locked as they are in power relationships. Their life stories open up the debates relating to the analysis of the power politics thriving on binary mode of thinking. Madeleine Davies is illuminating, in this context, as she discusses the embedded socio-political foundations of a female body in our society:

... female bodies are therefore coded bodies that tell the story of the subject's experience within a political economy that seems to consume them, shrink them, neutralize them, silence them, and contain them physically or metaphorically.(2006,p.6)

Female bodies are literally the sites on which male power is performed and authenticated and the discourse of love is one way through which the subordination of a female body gets ensured. In "The Body in the Backyard", Sonu's lover, Rickey, harps on the idea of love to get his way. Although, she tries stubbornly to resist his sexual advances, she is told 'true love' needs to be validated by sexual acts at regular intervals. Thus, it is a power-relationship where Ricky gets to decide what 'romantic love' is or what his privileges are as a young man. On the other hand, Sonu is left with no other option but to accept her own violations. But in a male-centric system of knowledge, rape or even the threat of it has interesting connotations. The fantasy of getting a female self to submit totally to male power, again, fires the imagination of a serial abuser on the streets in Padmanabhan's story "Teaser". The story is essentially about Rakesh, a college going male and his gloating plans for eve-teasing acts daily in public spaces. He believes that penile power is a 'miracle', a manifestation of the 'divine' and a sure sign of 'higher approval'. For him, women are as good as their bare bodies. Rakesh knows how attractive and normal a submissive woman is but he nurtures, at the same time, a secret fascination for a 'resisting' woman. Rape fantasies come in varied shapes in Padmanabhan's stories. While Rakesh pursues his dreams of sexual fights with a defiant woman, in "Betrayal", Nick develops a full blown theory of rape as a female fantasy. He puts his faith in the patriarchal idea of a female self as 'instinctive' and 'emotional' This 'impulsive' female body is what 'betrays' a woman in a physical relationship with a man by becoming "moist when a man tries to push himself in". Female bodies, in Nick's opinion, get condemned by its gradual melting down in face of a man's penile power. What gets emphasised, here, in Nick's theories of rape, is a woman's supposed lack of agency. Women consequently, get dismissed as a mere corporeal self, devoid of any ideas of her own.

The dominant male discourse harps on this idea of submissive yet impulsive woman who, therefore, needs constant prodding by a man to realize what she has ‘impulsively’ felt all along. It’s taken to be a ‘fact’ in Sonu’s life in “The Body in the Backyard” as well as in Maya’s case in “Betrayal”. Clearly, male and female bodies have different social as well cultural values. But it’s also an interdependent power relationship as only an impulsive female body can warrant a rational male supremacist performance. Another aspect of this differential treatment meted out to a woman relates to her right to an abortion. Historically, abortion has never been a woman’s right but a means to secure patriarchal interests. A pregnant body is not only a potent sign of transgression but is also suggestive of dangerous female sexuality in a society obsessed with female virginity. A female self has to, therefore, manoeuvre its identity under constant surveillance of parents or larger family circle. However, despite all these screening aimed at a female body, physical relationships do get established resulting, at times, in pregnancies. This pregnancy in case of a unmarried young woman is nothing less than a ‘scandal’ as it really is in Maya’s case in “Betrayal”. She has to, therefore, get rid of the foetus in secrecy and at immense danger to her life. In Maya’s narrative, she is always the passive victim: “things have been done to her.” But when she wants to take matters into her hands by getting rid of the foetus, she not only faces practical problems but even her friend, Angie, is uncomfortable about it. Abortion, in our society, involves shaming a female self as they get socialised into an ‘ethic of care’ from an early age. Angie stands by Maya in times of need but even she has expectations from her friend who doesn’t quite support the idea of abortion.

Ketu H. Katrak (2006) points out that a politics of the body involves multiple layers of ideological influences. This is, of course, a normal corollary in a society where sexuality functions primarily as a signifier of power relations. In her stories, Padmanabhan, too, explores these varied forms of power relationships in which men and women differ in their access to power. With their privileged location in the social hierarchy, a man enjoys greater mobility while a woman’s self is built upon a series of constraints placed on her being. Sexuality is, thus, relational and should be understood in terms of active or passive social relationships. The sexual politics of constraint keeps a woman’s self confined both inside and outside the home space. Within the four walls or out in the open air, a woman’s body keeps on performing the feminine self. This series of socially sanctioned acts perform into being an ideal woman’s self. Female gender is, thus, not a constant but a set of repeated acts that only appear to be substantive. Within this oppressive framework, a woman learns to discipline her body. In “Betrayal”, Maya is dependent on her father but her pregnant body stands for a ‘betrayal’ of male code of honour. That also means, in her darkest hours of crisis, she doesn’t have any familial support. When pregnancy happens, it confines her within the four walls and ultimately needs male support to get back to her normal socially acceptable existence of a young woman. “Teaser”, on the other hand, deals with the problems faced by women on the streets. On a crowded bus, Rakesh regularly looks for female ‘targets’. What he looks for, in a woman, is submission to his priorities. It is, again, about how society has different sets of expectations from different social bodies: if Rakesh believes in aggression, then, his ‘targets’ are expected to compliment male priorities by being passive. On his way to college, he

performs his gendered role of a man by constantly harassing women. R.S. Rajan (2000), here, aptly sums up what eve-teasing involves in this context:

...as both social behaviour and phenomenon, it is viewed more seriously in context where women's chastity and men's honour are major values... [It also] reveals anxieties about female sexuality, or superior social status, social mobility, or a combination of these (Rajan, 2000, p.149).

"Teaser" is remarkable the ways Padmanabhan brings out in the open the male fear of an independent woman, her mobility and her uninhabited sexuality. Eve-teasing is, thus, more about how harassment on the road is exercised to wrest back the control that patriarchy always had over the bodies of women. This spatial politics is also referred to in "Morning Glory in East of Kailash" where a woman's body faces its daily ordeals in physical abuse with nauseating regularity. In fact, the idea of sexualised female body can only be understood in relation to how that body is located in the power hierarchy vis-a-vis a privileged male body.

In these stories of Padmanabhan, female bodies reflect the wider social relations. With men dictating terms from privileged locations of power, women are forced to accept their secondary roles, complement male codes of romantic relationships and corroborate the dominant ideas of proper/improper body formations. The sexualised female body is a construct of the dominant male whose power, however, also depends on female submission. But, in Foucault's words, "there is no power without resistance." (Foucault, 1980, p.142).

Padmanabhan's stories significantly posit female resistance in unequivocal terms. *Betrayal* begins with a pregnant woman's ordeal but Maya's vulnerable state does not weaken her will to get matters done in her own ways. An abortion is what she demands in a society which views a pregnant body as a 'scandal'. That pregnancy, however, came despite all her precautions to protect her body from unwanted pregnancies. In a society where a shaming a woman's body is a way to contain her mobility, Maya resists the idea of a shy passive woman. Again in "Morning Glory in East of Kailash", the protagonist refuses to become a man's 'cult object'. She does not quite enjoy the male attention that comes her way as the house servant Gopi sniffs at her under wares in her absence. In "Three Virgins", too, the protagonist is in charge of her body and decides to pace the sexual act which is matter of fact, unattached, prompt and beyond the male-centric romantic game play. The female protagonist believes that mind "could never be invaded or colonized" without an individual's consent. She agrees to three sexual relationships but holds on to her right over her own body and its priorities. That's what a 'liberating realization' is for the woman in this short story.

The sexualised female body has always contributed to male sexual fantasies but then in "Teaser", Padmanabhan highlights the dangers and ridiculous aspects of such masculine standards. The story begins with Rakesh who symbolises 'phallic masculinity' but suffers from considerable anxiety relating both about his sexual performance and his capacity to enact a potent male self in front of a woman. On a crowded bus, he approaches his female target but as she looks back at him, he gets uneasy. In an ironical reversal of male exploits,

she, in fact, forces him into an unintended ejaculation right there on that bus. His male power depends on a sexual performance over a submissive female body but with his premature ejaculation is a sheer humiliation to his male ego. Brittan's (1989) thoughts are relevant here:

A man is only a man in so far as he is capable of using his penis as an instrument of power (Brittan, 1989, p.11).

Padmanabhan, in *Teaser*, depicts the journey of a man who ends up in a wet pant but more importantly, here, points to the idea that codes of the power game could always be reversed. By its very nature, power, according to Foucault, remains "unstable because it's diffused throughout all social relations rather than being imposed from above" (Foucault, 1980, p.88). In Manjula Padmanabhan's stories, the power gets exercised from different locations within the patriarchal structures and while these structures are strongly in place they are also getting challenged, negotiated and reworked in an ever-continuing process.

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