

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Embodying Female Autonomy: Breaking the Codes of “Good Conduct” in Hitomi Kanehara’s *Snakes and Earrings*

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2017, Revised-02/09/2017, Accepted-04/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to deconstruct the conventional norms of behaviour expected from women in a culture. This paper attempts to use the post structuralist theories of body in order to establish the autonomy of female body. It aims for a shift from conventional bourgeois thinking and sets off ideals of a new conduct of behaviour. The paper is an analysis of a female character named Lui who goes against all the conventions of Japan where women are considered as submissive, docile and inferior to men.

Keywords: codes of conduct, autonomy, body, Japan, conventions.

Snakes and Earrings is a Japanese novel written by a very young female writer named Hitomi Kanehara who is a school dropout. Her novels probe the rebellion of youth in Japan. Kanehara attempts to resist the mainstream culture in Japan through her characters in the novel. The novel deals with a generation of young people who try to make their own space in mainstream society. The novel during its early days of publication annoyed many people with its overt sexual passion permeating the work and more importantly Kanehara’s portrayal of men and women belonging to the new generation who go in extreme opposition to the traditional norms of ideal, disciplined, clean and pure youth.

The novel describes a generation in Japan, particularly a 19 year old girl Lui’s obsession with body alteration, sex, alcoholism and violence. The novel can be called as a tale of sex and darkness. It shows the life of Japan’s underground youth culture. The novel comes under the category of a cult novel with its treatment of explicit subjects like body modification and other practices. In the book *The Other Women’s Lib*, the author claims: “In the 1960’s as some women participated in New Left student movements, others contributed to an extra ordinary boom in literary participation by women, whose radical and shocking articulations of feminine subjectivity forced a new dialogue on sexuality and gender roles within the community of intellectuals known as bundans or Japanese literary world” (Bullock 4). The paper examines the heroine’s peculiar sex and violence filled behaviour which is against the normal code of behaviour expected from a woman.

This paper attempts to use the post structuralist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and other gender theorists in order to subvert the various codes of conduct expected from a woman. In western thought, the body has been historically associated solely

with women, whereas men have been associated with the mind. At a fundamental level, a notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women because biological differences between the sexes are the foundation that has served to ground and legitimize gender. The association of women with the notion of body and not with the mind has deemed women as object, property and exchangeable commodities by patriarchy. Women’s body has been seen as an object from time immemorial through the changing ideologies of fashion, diet, exercise, cosmetic surgery, child bearing etc. This contrasts to men’s role as a moral agent. On the other hand, the other body is recognized for its use in labor and exploitation which is generally associated with women’s bodies in the working-class or with non-white women. Second-wave feminist activism has argued for reproductive rights and choice, women’s health (movement), and lesbian rights (movement) which are also associated with this Bodies debate.

Various kinds of gender-stereotypes are then super imposed on to this body, as it were, that male body is strong, active and rational, while the female body is weak, passive, and irrational and so forth. This constructed essentialist opposition between man and woman is perceived by the patriarchal society as something normative and thus upholds the supposed priority of the male body.

The contemporary understanding about body has been shaped by various feminist theories. Body has now become a locus where various kinds of emotions, desires, identity and agency meet. It is also a meeting place of nature and culture. “The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world” (Brumberg 70). Feminists have arrived on different ideas and understandings of the body from various debates and discussions from motherhood, pregnancy, abortion, of pleasure and sex, of eating disorders. The concept of body has now been all about a radical re-thinking. Various material, cultural and social practices determine the nature of our body. The body is a form of lived experience which is fluid and ever shifting. The traditional understanding of the role of the body has changed to a significant extent in the recent years.

In the late 20th century, Post structuralism and Feminism have become the most important movements that have a cultural and political realm. These movements deconstruct the various notions of tradition. The French philosopher Michel Foucault has made a significant contribution to this field. Although he makes only a few references to the issues of women or to the issues of gender, his concepts about the relationship between power, the body and sexuality have contributed significantly to the feminist studies. Foucault’s idea that the body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena has made a significant contribution to the feminist critique of essentialism.

When read in conjunction with the American gender theorist and post structuralist philosopher Judith Butler, one can see that Kanehara’s *Snakes and Earrings* deconstructs the notions of mainstream culture about women .The characters in the novel create a world of their own which is in total resistance to the main stream culture which is hegemonic in Japan.

Kanehara, here focuses on the body as a potential site of resistance in order to oppose various social norms. The novel begins when the young and beautiful 'Barbie Girl' Lui finds herself mesmerized by the split, snakelike tongue of a young man named Ama. "One that's split in two?" (Kanehara 1). From there starts the punk life of Lui along with her friends- Ama who has so many piercing holes on his face and red strange hair and also a split tongue like snakes, and Shiba San who is a tattooist, and also has a lot of piercings on his face.

Lui goes against normal codes of behaviour and resorts to tattooing and piercing, self-mutilation, alcoholism, and, free sex; which are practices done on body. Lui feels alive only when she feels pain. Neither femininity nor masculinity in her opposes the various acts done by her. She does whatever she wishes and sets herself apart. She continuously performs her gender and "...this performativeness suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler 177). Thus, her resistance to mainstream society is expressed through some practices which are in opposition to society. Kanehara challenges the general assumption about women in Japan. As the writer Julia C. Bullock notes: "Like the feminists of the 1970s, these writers challenged the "common sense" assumptions of motherhood as woman's "natural" role and attacked binary models of gender that defined woman as man's eternal compliment (Bullock 5).

Lui also attempts to overthrow the law of heterosexuality, the law which reinforces gender binaries through performative gestures. Thus she focuses on body as site of resistance in order to subvert all the norms prevalent in a bourgeois society. Kanehara has taken body as a text on which meanings are inscribed. According to Butler: "...body is synecdochal for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge" (Butler 168).

The novel is narrated by Lui as she claims "Its Lui for Louis Vuitton" (28). She is not yet twenty and is living on her own in Tokyo. She has distanced herself from her parents. They have no role in her life, though she claims she does not have any problems in her home. She is considered as a 'Barbie-girl', but it is a label she rejects, and when she meets the 'forked-tongued' and tattooed Ama (who literally has a tongue with its tip split) she knows that this is the path she wants to take. Lui already has larger-gauge earrings with big holes in her ears, but it is that split-tongue idea that really appeals to her, and so she gets her tongue pierced and begins the slow and painful process of enlarging the hole until it can be split. Ama and his similarly punkish tattoo-parlour friend, Shiba-san, are the kind of people she admires. There is an awful lot of unnecessary pain, mainly in the form of tattoos and tongue-piercings, essentially self-inflicted pain.

This unique work, with its artistic fluidities, obviously allows some form of theorizing. Now in the novel, we can see Lui gets fascinated by a forked tongue. This is something against normal conventions. Normally people assume such body modification practices as insane as we can see in the novel when Lui observes: "Getting a forked tongue is normally something done by crazy people. They call it 'body modification'" (Kanehara1). As the novel progresses we can see, this is not an insane act but a deliberate attempt to liberate

themselves from certain preconceived notions about culture. This is all about the young women in Japan who constantly tries to build up a sub culture which always tends to resist the main stream culture in Japan.

Ama leads Lui to ‘Desire’ which is a kind of punk store in a side street basement just off the shopping and entertainment district. Lui notes that : “The first thing I saw when I walked in was a close-up shot of a vagina with a pierce vulva, and the walls were lined with photos of pierced scrotums and tattoos too”(4). Shiba-San, the owner of the tattoo parlour looks so weird with his tattoos and piercings. Ama tells Shiba -san to give her a split tongue: “She wants a split tongue too” (5). Lui is so much fascinated by Shiba-San’s art of piercing and tattooing: “I don’t know why it excited me so much. I told myself that I would also get a tattoo once my tongue was split. I want to get a tattoo” (7).

In these instances, it is clear that Lui has a great control over her body and thus becomes the owner of her own body. Her body has become a site for various changes. The body which is conceived as a project opens up possibilities for its re-formation and modification. ‘Body work’ is no longer simply a question of mechanical maintenance but of lifestyle choice and identity. As Johan Jacob Brumberg observes: “Unlike aboriginal societies, where the part to be pierced is determined by longstanding ritual and tradition, contemporary teens face an array of piercing options, just as they do with food, music, cosmetics, and everything else” (Brumberg 87). Body piercing has emerged as the latest form of self-expression among young people. These young piercees often talk very openly on why and how they perforated their bodies as we see in characters like Lui.

In the novel, Lui always rejects her tag of ‘barbie girl’. In this way she resists all the patriarchal norms which consider a woman very fragile and delicate. She wishes to modify her body which is against conventions. When Maki says: “Lui and me made an oath to remain Barbie girls forever” (Kanehara22), Lui retorts: “Did not. Besides, I have never been a Barbie girl” (22). Lui does not adhere to any conventional norms of gender. She always tries to create a different space for her. According to Butler, women are feminine just because they continue to act in the culturally prescribed role that dictates what ‘femininity’ is, and men are masculine to the extent to which they fulfil society’s expectations of what ‘masculinity’ is. This clearly implies that there is nothing that is essentially ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ and these concepts are only culturally reiterated practices that are constantly in flux. This is what it means to ‘perform’ gender: “Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed , are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means” (Butler 173). Because identity is constructed through repeated performance of cultural norms, and those cultural norms are vulnerable to constant fluctuation, she says:

...this perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to re-signification and re-contextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or

essentialist gender identities. (Butler176)

Thus gender also becomes a reiterated performance, it is open to a change when that reiteration changes and becomes a new kind of iteration.

The youth culture in Japan does not care for anything. They lead a very mundane life. Lui is a remarkably self-absorbed character, taking the world entirely on her own terms, showing almost no curiosity about anything. The world around her appears so dull to Lui that she says: “I really did not want to live in this kind of universe. I wanted to live recklessly and leave nothing behind but ashes in this dark, dull world” (43). The families in Japan and the noises around were very boring for them. It doesn't make for a very interesting life. She felt an intense desire “to be part of an underground world where the sun does not shine, there are love songs and the sound of children’s laughter is never, ever heard” (44). She does not care for any norms. She embraces a lifestyle which she chooses. The characters do not pay any attention to any moral values. She takes pride in her aggressive sense of fashion, but even she admits that her will-power progressively dissipates. In a conversation with her close friend, Maki, Lui is asked: “What’s going on with you? Is this new punk of yours trying to make you get one snake tongue? Are you two an item or something? Has he completely brainwashed you?” “...to which she considers if she is in fact brainwashed. She describes it as, “a shudder inside as all my morals and values started crashing to the ground.” (20). Just insinuating that Lui’s sense of morality no longer exists entices the reader to assume that her actions from that point are no longer hers to control, but the result of an irresistible vice. This happens when she sees the split tongue of Ama. The choice of changing her body itself is against all those moral values. Shiba san also makes a nihilistic comment: “I wouldn’t change how they look. But I would make them as dumb as chickens. So dumb they’d never even imagine the existence of a god” (11). When Shiba –san says: “he might be a child of God” Lui says: ““Child of God? Isn’t that the title of some crappy B-movie?”” (42). The characters make such disrespectful comments. All these acts naturally follow the abandonment of her morality. Shiba-san considers himself to possess “The hand of God” (62). Lui at the end of the novel figures out that Shiba was the one who raped, tortured and killed Ama. Lui however still decides to stay with Shiba, this decision being her final act of nihilism. This is a great ending since it does demonstrate Lui’s complete lack of caring, feeling or belief for anything.

The wish for a body modification by splitting the tongue, tattooing and self-mutilation is directed against a bourgeois culture. Tattooing and body piercing tend to be broadly understood as: “...transgressive practices as they have the power to violate normative expectations about appearance, gender, sexuality, or race” (Pitts 11). These practices are associated with sub-cultural movements. These movements can be very provocative. The desire to create an individuality which is very specific and distinct from others is also a major factor behind such modifications. These people aspire to be different among fellow members of the conventional society. Lui goes for a tongue splitting and gets a kirin tattooed on her back. Already the theme of the body and needing to change it sets the premise of the story-

her body is wrong, and must be changed. This change, however, starts as her choice.

Self –inflicted pain is another major form of resistance she chooses. Tattooing and Piercing are such painful activities. Even having an ear lobe pierced can be painful, and having a complicated tattoo, an incision into the penis, or the insertion of a ring into the tongue or the clitoris may be exquisitely so. ‘Masochism’, the association of sexual excitation and the experience of pain, is sometimes given as an explanation of why a person might seek out a painful experience. Lui wants her tongue to be pierced. Lui wishes to get a spiritual ecstasy out of this pain. Kanehara cleverly describes how Lui feels a disconnection from the society and life that she can’t care about herself nor keep herself safe in the midst of the acts of her own living . She longs for pain, since as she frankly states: “I need it to feel anything” (20)

Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain* shares Arendt’s idea of bodily pain’s wordlessness. She is more open to the possibility of body in pain to enter into public realm. Even though the person in pain is “so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak on behalf of those who are” (6). In fact, Scarry is endorsing “avenues by which this most radically private of experiences begins to enter the realm of public discourse” (6).

She endures pain in extreme happiness. For Kanehara’s characters, pain can be an antidote to power. In the novel we can see that Lui notes: “I remembered once being told at a body jewellery place that the tongue was the most painful body part to get pierced after the genitals” (5). She is willing to take that pain on her body. She felt it like having sex. She felt a kind of ecstasy when Shiba-san began to pierce her tongue. She says:

His words made me picture him having sex. I wondered if he warned as if he was going to come with the same soft voice. The next moment there was a clamping sound and shivers much greater than those of an orgasm through my entire body. Goose bumps ran up my arms and my body went into a slight spasm. My stomach tightened and for some reason so did my crotch where I felt an ecstatic, tingling sensation. The piercing-gun snapped open, releasing the stud. (9)

The very act of sex for Kanehara’s characters is treated in a different way. Shib-san, according to Lui is “psycho-sadist” (36). Body is targeted in all these acts that Lui remembers “once I let a guy put a small glass bottle in me, which he then tried to smash with a hammer. And there’d even been some real wierdos that got a kick out of poking me with needles” (37). Like the tongue-piercing, however, sex with Shiba involves levels of pain that shock her out of her apathy. Lui has sexual relationship with Ama, Shiba-san and many other people. Free sex is another form of resistance the characters choose against the conventional norms. In Lui’s case, she goes against all those ideals of purity associated with femininity. She and her

friends go for wild sex. Lui does this with Shiba-san in quite a disturbing way for us. The characters are very open in their relationships. Lui is the only female character at the forefront in asserting her freedom and identity. She hates her sur name 'Nakazawa'. She has "no interest in elite guys in suits" (56). She uses her body in whatever way she likes. Lui deconstructs all notions associated with femininity. She engages in all sorts of activities which her mainstream culture resists. For her, Gender is not at all a matter of concern as Simon de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one" (34).

Lui hates her job. The job is to serve and host rich men who have "important business" meetings at the bar where she's employed. The job is illustrated as a work place where young girls giggle and smile and act as cute as possible to please men; that is acting out a role usually expected from women in patriarchal societies. Lui states she is very good at this job. So good in fact that many men leave her their phone numbers. Lui then adds: "But it's not me their interested in, it's the role I play that their interested in" (54). In a following inner thought Lui comments on how most people mistake her for an orphan. This is a subtle hint that Lui as a person comes off as quite alone and separated from all in the world.

Her drinking binges, self-starvation, and peculiar love affairs, along with her obsessional interest in body piercing, seem to resist the very culture. She finds it difficult to attach any actual meaning or recognizable human motive to anything she does. The transgressive aspects of her behaviour do suggest, however, that she is determined to identify herself as a nonconformist, in flight from mainstream Japanese society, which would regard her alteration of her body as a violation of the tradition of filial piety.

Thus, the writer aims to overthrow the conventional codes of conduct expected from women in Japan where they have to be very submissive, fragile and docile. The Japanese culture insists various norms and regulations for women. Kanehara staunchly resists the normative constructions of gender and subverts the hegemonic discourses of femininity in Japan through her character Lui. She violates all the conventions of gender, sex, traditions and customs. Thus she embodies her autonomy and disrupts the codes of conduct prescribed by the society.

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