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The Body as Enterprise: A Foucauldian Investigation of Beauty Capitalism and Embodiment in the novel *Breasts and Eggs*

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Abstract:

Today's capitalist society is one driven by profits, where people adopt the most lucrative strategies to survive. This trend manifests itself even at the personal level. It influences one's decisions in life that affect one's physical and mental well-being. Beauty is one such goal that many find irresistible. Its standards are decided by demand in society, and meeting them is a business model at this point. Mieko Kawakami's novel *Breasts and Eggs* is a story set in Japan and which deals with the theme of pursuit of beauty and exercising women's autonomy. It presents the case of a bar hostess who contemplates cosmetic surgery to improve her professional life, and her sister, who asserts her reproductive rights by choosing IVF conception. This paper investigates this story with the help of the theoretical framework of "biopolitics" propounded by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, and considers prevalent beauty capitalism.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Enterprise, PBQ, Beauty Capitalism, Body Politics, Embodiment.

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Introduction

Cultures everywhere have developed ideals around beauty. Dominant cultures in every era effectively condition individuals to conform to prevailing ideals, rewarding such compliance. Many have conformed to reap the benefits. Those who cannot conform to societal expectations often live with feelings of guilt and regret, or insecurity. They may not cope with it all that well, or in this modern age, turn to practical solutions like cosmetic surgery. The novel *Breasts and Eggs* by Mieko Kawakami published in 2019 revolves around the lives of three female characters and their experiences as women in contemporary Japan. The protagonist, Natsuko, is an aspiring writer in Tokyo, Japan. Makiko, Natsuko's sister and a single mother, comes to visit Natsuko with her daughter, Midoriko. Midoriko is a confused teenager who is bothered by menstruation and associated bodily changes. The relationship between the mother and the daughter is not very smooth, as Midoriko refuses to talk to her mother. Makiko works as a bar-hostess and to secure her position in the job, considers doing breast augmentation surgery. In the second part of the novel, Natsuko expresses a desire to have a child without sexual means and considers undergoing in vitro fertilization (IVF). Caught in a dilemma, she evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of the procedure and ultimately undergoes it, giving birth to a baby girl at the end of the novel.

This paper examines the women's life within the framework of "biopolitics" - a concept developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which refers to the ways governments and institutions regulate human life processes. It involves subtle forms of power that shape individual behaviour and societal norms rather than coercion. In the novel, Natsuko's decision to undergo IVF portrays reproduction as influenced by external factors rather than a natural or private process. From a Foucauldian perspective, this illustrates the transition from sovereign power to biopower, where control operates through the management and optimization of life.

Makiko's and Natsuko's actions are investigated through the lens of beauty capitalism here. In the novel, Makiko's contemplation of breast augmentation highlights the internalization of societal pressures to achieve an "ideal" appearance. Society treats women's bodies as objects to view, judge, and evaluate, which influences women's mental states and fosters insecurity and self-surveillance. Makiko feels her body features to be altered to fit into the "ideal". Beauty Capitalism is a system where beauty is commodified and used within capitalist structures to generate profit and social power. Beauty capitalism shows that markets and power shape appearance. In the novel, Makiko's obsession with breast augmentation and her insecurities associated with her body reveals the pressures inflicted on individuals, particularly women to conform to socially constructed beauty ideals without embracing their authentic selves. Capitalism turns the female body into a commodity, something that can be modified and improved for social and economic gain. In Makiko's case, beauty is linked to opportunities and financial stability. Through this novel, how beauty capitalism affects working-class women is revealed.

Biopolitics, Foucault's Analysis of 'homo economicus' and the Enterprise

Biopolitics is the way external factors influence the perception of the human body. Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, uses the concept to describe how society and governments manage populations (21). It is most relevant when it comes to control of the masses. Biopolitics acknowledges that extensive monitoring of populations happens through censuses, birth rates, mortality rates and other statistics. In the past, institutions like religion regulated the population. It sets out the standard of living in a civil society, which is usually created by a government pegged against rationality in modern times (Foucault, 310-312). Dissent is assumedly discouraged in this system of control and regulation.

Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics,* uses the term 'homo economicus' to describe the individual's situation in the system of biopolitics; it is not his own idea, nor does he endorse it explicitly. According to Foucault, "*Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself…. as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself, is own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings…" (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 226). This theory argues here that the individual is an "entrepreneur of himself" or herself (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 226). The capital is the individual himself or herself. The body is thus the source of the individual's earnings; he or she is their own producer. It can be reasonably assumed that the individual thus has motivation to regulate or change his or her body to improve his or her fortunes. Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* acknowledges that the individual's life is a perpetual enterprise that has to be closely managed:

> The individual's life must be lodged, not within a frame work of a big enterprise like the firm or, if it comes to it, the state, but within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other, enterprises which are in some way ready to hand for the individual, sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual's actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for him not to be dependent on one alone. And finally, the individual's life itself- with his relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement-must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise. (241)

Everything in the individual's life is merely an addition to this enterprise – things like property and family. The individual's interests are of lesser influence compared to the interests of the enterprise. The individual's life is an entanglement of many different enterprises; not all these entanglements have great results for the individual, but they are numerous enough to keep

him or her reasonably occupied. Further, Foucault noted that life cannot be contained within the confines of a single overarching enterprise such as the government.

In *Breasts and Eggs*, Makiko emerges as an "entrepreneur" who actively manages her body and family, striving to enhance her social and personal value. Her idea of improvement here just so happens to be cosmetic surgery. Her long-lasting enterprise includes her work as a bar hostess, which she hopes to improve with the abovementioned operation. This paper further holds that she is an entrepreneur prompted by the demands and standards of beauty capitalism to change. She is unhappy with the status quo – her original embodied experience, and hopes that the surgery will allow her to perform better as a bar hostess. Natsuko wants to manage her body through IVF. She wants to control her reproduction. Her enterprise is also her body, and she wants to control it. Natsuko goes through the catalogues that Makiko had collected to decide where she could go to undergo breast augmentation surgery:

> I held off on her top pick for the moment and flipped through some of the other brochures, more interested in all the clinics that had failed to meet her standards. Most of them had white girls with blonde hair on the front, wearing almost nothing, to give you an idea of what breasts looked like, and were embellished with pink ribbons or nice floral designs. (Kawakami 28-29)

The standards of beauty capitalism manifest themselves through body politics. These external factors taught Makiko that a more attractive body would let her garner positive attention and more income. There are ways in which these societal preferences reach her; in the book, a good example would be the catalogue at the clinic she visits. Despite being set in Japan, even the catalogue shows the blonde-haired white woman as the dominant beauty ideal. Though the catalogue intends to introduce cosmetic surgery, it subtly communicates what the "ideal" body must look like. Makiko cannot match the women shown in the catalogues. The

entrepreneur that she is, she wants to improve her situation, which here translates to submission to society's preferences.

In this novel, hospitals function as an external power structure which tries to exert control over the lives of the characters Makiko and Natsuko. As mentioned before, the government or such a large, powerful entity can control and manage populations. The hospital is one of the places where the government and society can influence the individual. Makiko opts for breast augmentation as a result of her insecurities with her body, and it reveals how institutions like hospitals exert control over a person's personal matters. Similarly, Natsuko undergoes IVF, and it also shows the involvement of medical institutions in the lives of people through assisted reproductive technologies.

Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* mentions that the principle of competition is significant in an enterprise society (147). Such a society does not function merely on the principle of commodification. According to Foucault, society is not subject to the commodity effect – rather, it is subject to the "dynamic of competition" (147). In *Breast and Eggs*, Makiko recalls a quarrel at her workplace. The dispute was over the owner of the bar hiring a young woman to then overpay her and treat her more favourably, compared to an older employee who did the very same occupation. Makiko recalls the incident as:

> "Then Suzuka was like, for real, Jing Li, how much are you making? And that's against the rules or whatever, we can't talk about it, but Suzuka was like I need to make sure you're not getting ripped off. You can tell me. I can talk to Coco for you. So Jing Li was like, okay, I get 2,000 an hour."
>
> "Damn."
>
> "Wait, though," Makiko said. "You should have heard it, the sound that came out of Suzuka when she heard that number…. It was like a dying chicken. I honestly thought

she was dying. But yeah, I never knew what Suzuka was making, until then. 1,400." (Kawakami 77)

The owner's partiality injected into the situation a competitive angle and spoiled the atmosphere of the workplace. This incident perhaps invoked in Makiko the insecurity and the will to secure her position better (the surgery was a means to this end).

According to Foucault, the more enterprises there are, the more occasions for conflict arise (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 149). He explains it in the case of wider society, however, where governmental action would be necessary to quell these conflicts. Given the direction of self-enterprise examined in this paper, this concept of conflict of enterprises is still relevant. As noted earlier, aspects of life are enterprises, and Makiko has at least two which are in conflict: her work as a bar hostess and her family. The conflict or friction point is her daughter's dissatisfaction with her. Midoriko refuses to engage with her mother normally and is disappointed with the latter's decision to get the surgery.

Natsuko's life consists of the enterprises of a writer and, later, of a mother. As an author, she has to depend on her own intellect to earn a living. She is likewise dissatisfied with her embodied experience and turns to IVF as a means of transformation. She is what could be called a "consumer" (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 226). Foucault cites one Gary Becker to explain consumption: that it is not merely a transaction where money and goods change hands, but a process through which the consumer also becomes a producer – a producer of his or her own satisfaction (226). Foucault recognises consumption as an enterprise activity. Natsuko is a consumer of artificial reproduction and derives satisfaction from consuming that operation. Her finding satisfaction in motherhood is her deriving pleasure from it.

Embodiment studies are based on the body and in what ways the body influences one's identity, perception, and experiences, and Makiko is very much dissatisfied with her

experience. She is willing to alter her body to change her life experience surgically. Natsuko is also initially dissatisfied with her embodied existence, as the very prospect of intimacy with the opposite sex frightens her. She wants to be a mother, but does not want to achieve motherhood through the 'conventional' means, which is what she does towards the end of the book.

Makiko's breast augmentation plan and Natsuko's IVF might be unconventional to traditional society. Their ways to deal with their insecurities are at least unconventional compared to young Midoriko, who deals with her teenage insecurities by writing a personal journal.

Beauty Capitalism and Body Politics

The standards of this beauty capitalism manifest themselves through body politics. Scholar Naomi Wolf posited her *The Beauty Myth* that: "'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard" (12). Like a currency, it fetches something of importance. She explains that the Western beauty myth holds that beauty is objective and universal. The myth teaches that beauty in a woman is desirable and evidence of her fertility. It further states that such women are more reproductively successful and prime candidates for choice by powerful men. The currency of beauty is what earns these beautiful women better chances of reproductive success and more respect in general society. Possession of this currency elevates the social status and value of a woman. The myth conditions women to improve their beauty and thus improve their chances of success with mating and comfort in life. The reality, however, is the contrary, as beauty is subjective. Wolf notes that different cultures hold different things to be valuable (12).

Significantly, Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* later describes beauty standards in the professional space. She describes it as "professional beauty qualification" or "PBQ" (27). These are a set of biased guidelines that etch themselves into the consciousness of female

employees in fields like Makiko's. Wolf notes that, in the past, professional beauties worked jobs that were inconspicuous or 'immoral' in the eyes of society – like higher-paid sex workers or escorts. The rise of women in the workforce meant that mainstream jobs began to project an institutionalised form of beauty standard. This turns up in requirements like femaleness for a wet nurse. Wolf uses the term display professions for jobs with increasing female participation: "What is happening today is that all the professions into which women are making strides are being rapidly reclassified—so far as the women in them are concerned—as display professions. "Beauty" is being categorized, in professions and trades further and further afield from the original display professions…" (Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* 27).

Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* argues that dominant beauty standards are sustained by three key lies imposed on women.

> Those three vital lies are: (1) "Beauty" had to be defined as a legitimate and necessary qualification for a woman's rise in power. (2) The discriminatory purpose of vital lie number one had to be masked (especially in the United States, with its responsiveness to the rhetoric of equal access) by fitting it firmly within the American dream: "Beauty" can be earned by any woman through hard work and enterprise. . . .(3) The working woman was told she had to think about "beauty" in a way that undermined, step for step, the way she had begun to think as a result of the successes of the women's movement. This last vital lie applied to individual women's lives the central rule of the myth. . . (28)

Such lies construct the illusion that beauty standards exert a far greater influence on women's lives than they actually do. PBQ inculcated in women that only those with great beauty could succeed. The second lie applies to Western society and a heavily West-influenced society like

Japan. The third lie diminishes the importance of women's qualities beyond beauty, encouraging them to overestimate the role of appearance in achieving success.

The character Makiko here has imposed upon herself her own PBQ. Moreover, to meet this standard, she contemplates surgery. She believes to an extent the abovementioned lies or a version of them. She saw how her employer seemed partial to the younger and arguably more beautiful employee, reinforcing the idea that greater beauty did indeed fetch greater success in her professional space. She comes to embrace a Westernized version of beauty, a realization reinforced by the example photograph of a model in the clinic's catalogue. Natsuko in *Breasts and Eggs* equated beauty with value: "People like pretty things. When you're pretty, everybody wants to look at you, they want to touch you. I wanted that for myself. Prettiness means value. But some people never experience that personally" (Kawakami 42). Natsuko internalised what beauty standards were from more mundane sources – like magazines: "As a kid, whenever I saw the naked women in the magazines that the kids in the neighborhood got their hands on, or saw a grownup woman expose her body on TV, I guess on some level I thought that someday all those parts of me would fill out, too, and I would have a body just like them." (Kawakami 41) Both women internalised or learned from the same kind of social messaging. Makiko's version of PBQ essentially acts as a chain that binds her, an insecurity that gnaws at her.

On Embodiment

Embodiment studies help explain how beauty capitalism shapes women's motivations and experiences. It, as a field, is generally interested in uncovering how the body influences experiences in life. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that institutions do not simply select individuals but actively shape and discipline their bodies to fit specific roles. This process aims to create a class of obedient and task-appropriate professionals, whom he refers to as "docile bodies." (135). He describes the desirable traits of

a soldier across history and explains how institutions recruited individuals with the required bodily attributes—an experience that shapes their perspectives for the rest of their lives. Professions set out standards, whether written or not, and bodies influence how experiences in these professions differ for every person. A soldier with the desirable body type may be treated more favourably compared to an unfit one. Their experiences are not the same. The same argument may be used for other professions, like a bar hostess.

Critic Katherine Hayles described embodiment in *How We Became Posthuman* as a contextualised activity: the way the body interacts with the world or the experiences it affords (196-197). Embodiment is very much influenced by time, space and culture. It need not be the same for every individual, as she admits, "…embodied experience is dispersed along a spectrum of possibilities" (201). It is subject to individual enactments. She discusses the naturalization of the body, distinguishing it from embodiment, "It is primarily the body that is naturalized within a culture; embodiment becomes naturalized only secondarily through its interactions with concepts of the body" (198). The body naturalized in Japanese culture, as shown in *Breasts and Eggs*, is one that Makiko is not blessed with, nor can she attain it without cosmetic surgery. Her embodied experience is not the kind reserved for the 'beautiful,' and she is quite dissatisfied with it:

> She dunked herself into the water, her towel draped across her chest.
>
> She turned to me and asked, "You call this hot? Is this what baths are like here?"
>
> "Maybe it's not as hot as it says."
>
> "Not even close. It doesn't even feel like it's a bath."
>
> Without the slightest hesitation, Makiko scanned the bodies of the other women in the room, as if devouring them, especially the ones who stepped into the tub. It was

> embarrassing to sit beside her, to the point I wound up whispering, "Stop it, Maki," but I seemed to be the only one concerned that one of them might take offense. She barely answered me. She didn't care. At some point, I gave up and joined in her evaluation of the women in the room. (Kawakami 39)

This situation at a bathhouse that Makiko and Natsuko visit shows Makiko's dissatisfaction. Makiko's evaluation of the other women is a contextualized activity enabled by her embodied experience. Her interaction with her world here is her insecure gaze on the women. It is personal, and Natsuko is quite embarrassed by it (though she obviously gives up and actually joins her sister). Here is a journal entry by Makiko's daughter, Midoriko:

> Dear Journal,
>
> My mom has this medicine she takes before she goes to bed. Last night, when she wasn't home, I checked to see what it was. Cough syrup. The bottle was almost full, but when I looked today more than half of it was gone. Did she drink all that last night? It's not like she had a cough or anything. What's it for? She keeps getting skinnier all the time, too. She said she fell off her bike on the way home from work the other night. I wanted to ask if she was OK', but I couldn't break the silence. It makes me so sad. There are so many things I'm dying to know. Why do you have to drink that stuff? Are you in pain? Are you alright? They were saying on TV how somewhere in America, a man got his fifteen-year-old daughter a boob job for her birthday. Seriously. The world is crazy. They also said that in the U.S. women who get boob jobs are three times more likely to kill themselves. Does my mom know that? Maybe she'd change her mind if she knew. I need to find a way to talk to her, to really talk. I have to ask her why she wants to do it. Can I, though? Do I have what it takes to ask? It doesn't matter. I need to. I have to, I have to do it. (Kawakami 92-93)

Several of these journal entries appear in the novel to divulge important perspectives from the daughter. Even this young girl notices the energy of insecurity her mother exudes. The daughter is sufficiently perceptive to resist internalizing her mother's attitudes and is therefore critical of her. Makiko is willing to take clear risks to improve her physical beauty, as it is evident from her act of consuming medicines. Midoriko cannot tolerate Makiko's discontent with her embodied experience, and more so, the painfully obvious ways it manifests itself.

On the other hand, Midoriko's concern about puberty and menstruation reflects her alienation from her own body. Midoriko experiences puberty as something that makes her lose control of her own body, making embodiment a deeply fragmented experience. This sense of estrangement from her own body is reflected in her silent acts of rebellion, such as refusing to speak to her mother. Through Midoriko, embodiment is presented as a site of resistance, loss of control, revealing how social taboos around female body can make one feel uncomfortable. Midoriko's thoughts as expressed in her journal: "Once I start getting my period, every month, until it stops, blood is going to come out of my body. It's terrifying. I can't do anything to stop it from happening, though. I don't have pads at home, either. Just thinking about it is upsetting" (Kawakami 32).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Breasts and Eggs,* through its nuanced portrayal of lived bodily experiences, reveals how institutional control, market-driven beauty standards and societal expectations collectively regulate and discipline women's bodies.

Makiko is dissatisfied with her original embodied experience. Her beauty ideals are heavily influenced by her experience in relation to the world. She believes in dominant beauty standards, both because society has conditioned her to do so and because of her pragmatic observations at the workplace; consequently, she contemplates cosmetic surgery. By improving

her beauty by such artificial means, she confirms her belief that beauty is necessary for success in her profession, and she becomes an 'entrepreneur' of herself. As an entrepreneur, she likes to improve her chances of (economic) success and wants to improve her currency to success – her beauty – according to the ideals dictated by PBQs (which she figured out herself). This would, she expects, change her embodied experience for the better.

Natsuko is an individual who wants to exercise her own reproductive rights. She chooses IVF and thus demonstrates agency. She, too, is an entrepreneur who relies on her intellect and writing ability for survival.

Drawing on the framework of Foucault, it becomes evident that power functions not only externally but also through internalised norms, compelling individuals to self-monitor and conform. At the same time, the text exposes the commodification of the female body within capitalist structures, where beauty becomes both a form of value and anxiety. This study underscores that the body is not merely biological but deeply political.

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