



UNLEARNING FEMALE BODY THROUGH THE VOICES OF STRUGGLE IN WOMEN CANCER NARRATIVES

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Abstract : Body image relates to a person's perceptions, feelings and thoughts about his or her body, and is usually conceptualized as incorporating body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness and emotions associated with body shape and size (Grogan, 1999; Muth& Cash, 1997). Female body has been interpreted in innumerable ways throughout the various genres of literary texts. As in Shakespeare's plays, the wisest women are portrayed most elegantly, in poetries of classic writers, women and beauty of the body is presented incomparably. The perception about women and women body has a predestined image engraved in the minds of people through rituals, culture, social and demographic perceptions. Beautifying women body is seen different in each community and in each religious background, related to the climatic conditions and of very rare and peculiar beliefs. But in reality is this the same that happens in the life of women and to their body is what has been interrogated in this discussion. Through the various illness narratives specifically related to the life threatening disease cancer a new reading of reality about women and body is attempted in order to realise and understand the distorted forms of female body as deformed, leaky, medicalised, amputated, prosthetic, scarred and dying through surgery, treatment, struggle, survival and death. Creating a new form of body appearance and accepting the scarred body though alienated in the social milieu, the survival narratives bring a decoding to the ideal illusions of beauty and body image which is attempted to be observed through this study.

Key words: *Medical Humanities, Gender Studies, Body Image*

Introduction

Female body has been interpreted in innumerable ways throughout in various genres of literary texts. In poetries of classic writers, women and beauty of the body is presented incomparably. The perception about women and body has a predestined image engraved in the minds of people through rituals, culture, social and demographic perceptions. Beautifying women's body is seen differently in

each community and in each religious background, related to the climatic conditions and of very rare and peculiar beliefs.

But in reality it is not the same that happens in the lives of women and to their body. Body image includes the known and unknown aspects of one's own body. It discusses about the notions created about the personal feelings about body size, sex, and the functions of the body. Body has been placed to have a vital role in feminist theories and also in disciplines of Philosophy, Sociology and Cultural Studies. Embellishing and transforming the body with clothes, cosmetics and jewellery is meant to be associated with femininity, even though it is well documented that men were also regularly occupied in such practices.

Male involvement in elating manifestation of beautification decreased during the 18th century, due to the increase of acknowledgment of homosexuality that occurred during that period. Sexual stereotyping in dress, creating a prominent distinction between the sexes and exaggerating the physical differences between male and female became prominent during the eighteenth century. .

According to Elizabeth Wilson fashion is 'obsessed' with gender, and serves to define and redefine the gender boundary (Wilson 1985 p.117). During the Victorian era, women were specifically creating a difference of appearance to create the concept of otherness by drawing attention to the body parts like breasts, waist, buttocks and the hip that were embellished with corsets, bustles and bras. But later in the 19th century it was realised that such clothes triggered illness and discomfort leading to breathing difficulties and internal organ disorder. This brings into notice the analogy of Foucault's writing on torture, as he says "mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body" (Foucault 1977, p.34).

Even in this current scenario women are advised to avoid exposure to elements like wind, water and the UV rays of the sun in order to prevent the skin from damage and to look good, charming and to retain youthfulness. It is observed that only those youthful bodies that appear as youth are considered as beautiful and are valued in our society. Efrat Tseëlon points out: "While both sexes dread ageing, it is the woman who is expected to prevent it." (Tseëlon op. cit., p.82).

De Beauvoir argued that free movement of women were restricted with the styles and costumes introduced in the society, like "Chinese women with bound feet could scarcely walk, the polished fingernails of the Hollywood star deprive her of her hands; high heels, corsets, panniers, farthingales, crinolines were intended less to accentuate the curves of the feminine body than to augment its incapacity". Paralyzed by either too little or too much weight, by inconvenient attire or the 'rules of propriety', woman's body could then "present the inert and passive qualities of an object" and "[seem] to man to be his property, his thing." (de Beauvoir op. cit., p.189-90).

It is analysed that in the late capitalistic era, where body image dominates the visual media-magazines, televisions, internet, social network etc interests increase in understanding how the ideal, unnatural, fantasy body affect the real, physical bodies.

Women having the hegemonically defined “beautiful” body are seemed to have greater level of confidence and sexual conviction. The beautiful white body considered as healthy, lean, svelte, fit bodies. In order to achieve success and to remain healthy women are seemed turning not only towards healthier food, natural skin care products and cosmetic surgery, but also to more intense bodily activities and rigorous fitness regimes.

Body image and the interrogations about body and its importance has been increased due to the population growth, reproductive technics, cloning, delayed old age etc., creating interests in finding out how science can affect the physical bodies.

Yet along with the innovative scientific progress, the fragility and imperfection of human body has emerged as something to be studied, especially when human beings are affected by various unpredictable illness and epidemics.

Contemporary theories analyse the understandings of bodily routines, bodily activities and bodily sensations. It also discusses about the various types of bodies like female bodies, active bodies, sleeping bodies, high modernity bodies, emotional bodies, painful bodies, performing bodies, diseased bodies etc. Illness is considered as a bad or unhealthy condition of the whole body which has been derived from the change in seasons, or due to self-denial or it can also be the consequence of natural disorder.

Through the various illness narratives specifically related to the life threatening disease cancer a new reading of reality about women and body is attempted in order to realise and understand the distorted forms of female body as observed by Mary K.Deshazer in *Fractured Borders*, as deformed, leaky, medicalised, amputated, prosthetic, scarred and dying through surgery, treatment, struggle, survival and death.

Cancer is considered as one of the most important medical issues in the present social situation. Cancer affecting at the age of peak efficiency of a person’s lifespan becomes a crucial turning point to alter decisions about one’s future both in men and women. Though disease and body image affect both men and women, it is more important for women because of the present social standards and due to the preconceptions of the image of a hegemonically perfect body.

The physical changes created among women during the time of diagnosis and treatment influences the body image and the quality of life of the diseased and also creates discomfort even leading to certain psychological disorders. “In fact, women with breast cancer believe that breast removal is the excision of a body organ, which symbolizes their sexuality, femininity, and motherhood.” (Kunkel EJ:129).

It is identified that diseased women reveal considerable dissatisfaction with their body size and shape. As a result, they are highly exposed to the unsafe issue of body image distress. Dealing with the diagnosis of illness could have a profound influence on their perceptions on changes in body composition and weight related lifestyle factors. Despite available information and guidelines, studies suggest that women hardly experience support in their struggle to deal with the diagnosis and treatment. Many women experience psychological stress and impaired quality of life as a result of the diagnosis and

treatment. Studies suggest that women's overall health and their altered bodies are constant reminders of their illness and its treatment.

Surgical therapies for cancer, including glumpectomy, mastectomy, and axillary lymphnode dissection may be disfiguring and often traumatic. Mastectomies and reconstructive surgeries develop body image problems, especially in younger and sexually active women.

Cancer patients frequently experience sleep disturbances, and chemotherapy and radiotherapy can cause increased levels of fatigue. Surgery and other treatments of cancer cause changes in survivors' physical appearance, sexuality, subjective well-being, and self-esteem. These changes can lead to impaired functioning in intimate relationships, lower perceived social support, and limited social activity.

To maintain the expected hegemonical body image, women are prone towards getting into reconstruction surgeries and plastic surgeries, but writers like Susan Sontag, Audre Lorde, Sunan Gubar, Metaphorically and Philosophically resist and revolutionise the acceptance of the scarred body as normal.

Audre Lorde, Black, American, feminist, lesbian writer resists on the practice of reconstruction surgery and prosthetics body, in *The Cancer Journals* in 1980, "I find little support in the broader female environment for my rejection of what feels like a cosmetic sham"(Lorde 16), she analyses how gender, race, convictions and sexuality influence her choice to be unreconstructed. "I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialised behind lambswool or silicone gel"(Lorde 60), the reconstruction surgeries which makes an alien to oneself, questions the presumptions of a perfect body notion prevailing in the existing social scenario.

Creating a new form of body appearance and accepting the scarred body though alienated in the social milieu, the survival narratives bring a decoding to the ideal illusions of beauty and body image which is reflected in the writings like of Eisenstein and Susan Miller. "I built a new chest and rejected implants. My path was to build my own muscle and create sexual/sensual pleasure on this new terrain" (Eisenstein 67) , "I cherish this scar"(Susan Miller 236).

Even in this supposedly equal, liberated and progressive society femaleness is still disturbing enough to require supervision and containment by forms of discipline that men are not subjected to. The story of women's emancipation and increasing self-determination is clouded by the continuing presence of restrictive ideals of womanhood that Myra Macdonald claims 'defensively reinvent'. (MacDonald 1995, p.220).

As Foucault claimed, resistance exists wherever there is normalisation and domination. Power is not always stable, if it is exerted on 'micro levels' it can be contested on micro levels; there is "no single locus of great Refusal" but a "plurality of resistances" (Foucault 1998, p.95-6). Therefore assuring a new reading of female body is what the disease culture had developed in the present era of medicalisation and therapies. Acceptance of the scarred body and redefining the ideology of perfect body could become the rejuvenation of the mind and soul for a holistically content living.

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