

REFLECTION ON WOMEN’S BODY AND APPETITE: A STUDY OF ISAMAT CHUGHTAI’S “THE ROCK”

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Abstract

The arena of embodiment theory is very vast. Biologically conceptualized body has been starting seen from cultural perspective. As far as woman’s body is related, it has been a site of desire for liberation and control. Having a crucial relationship of body with appetite in woman’s context has a number of applications. The absence of representation of showing woman eating in literary texts and feminist theorist’s views on the area, have made it a interesting subject of research. This paper examines the link between woman’s body and their appetite in Ismat Chughtai’s “The Rock” and tries to find out the situations in which the female characters’ body become a place of disciplinary control and locus for resistance. And how deviant appetite or aberrant eating results either in loss of identity and power or their effort in reclaiming their bodies. The resistance of woman through indulgence in food in the story unfolds how the body embedded within an environment; seem to be influenced by the psychological, social and patriarchal determinants.

Keywords:- embodiment theory, cultural perspective, feminist theory, social, psychological.

“Of all the objects in the world, the human body has a peculiar status: it is not only possessed by the person who has it, it also possesses and constitutes him. [...] The body is the medium of experience and the instrument of action. Through its actions we shape and organize our experiences and distinguish our perceptions of the outside world from the sensations that arrive within the body itself.”

Jonathan Miller (2011, n.p.)

Ismat Chughtai, a controversial and courageous writer, has carved a niche among the contemporary twentieth writers. She took the courage of exploring those areas not explored

before especially issues related women's sexuality and lesbianism due to which she had to go through the charges of obscenity. Being a feminist writer, she questioned the norms of standard behavior decided for women and lashed out the patriarchal structures of control forced on women. Narrated from a young female narrator, the story "The Rock" delineates the positions of daughter-in-laws in a Muslim household where restrictions are brought to bear on them. The title suggests Bhaiya'a (the center male character) unwavering patriarchal attitude like a rock towards her women especially towards her wives.

The theory of body has taken a vast prominence in philosophy and social sciences. Many writers and philosophers, especially the feminist writers, express their views on the concept of body and its continuously changing image. The concept and the history of embodiment are quite new as far as western philosophy is concerned. In the last few decades opinions about body has changed. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, body is "the organized physical substance of an animal or plant either living or dead." But as many philosophers emphasize that body should not only be seen from biological perspective but also from culture and social perspectives. In recent decades, women's bodies have been seen only as sites of construction and repression, a center of desire and the locus of subversion of societal norms. Susan Bordo extends Mary Douglas' views on body that bodies are registered into culture, says:

"The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture. From quarters as diverse as Plato and Hobbes to French feminist Lucy Irigaray, an imagination of body morphology has provided a blue print for diagnosis and/or vision of social and political life. The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michael Foucault (among others) have argued, a *practical* direct locus of self control" (Unbearable Weight p.165).

Contemporary theorists have exhibited the symbolic prominence of food in women's lives across cultures, putting emphasis on the issues of consumption and appetites in relation to the female body. Anyway, the vast theorization of women's body in literary and philosophical works has manifested a number of approaches and female body started to be seen as sites for disciplinary control. The discursive construction of female body also challenged the patriarchal agency, stereotypes and taboos in many societies where the images of women's eating and appetites are not given any voices. Even in literary texts, there is less or no description of women's consumption is portrayed. Here, such types of construction of body at once try to debunk such forbidden stereotypes and seem to be endorsed female appetites.

Ismat Chughtai's story "The Rock" seems to challenge the notion of patriarchal power and strictures of agency put upon female's bodies. The story revolves around the main character; Bhabhi who puts the need of her family above her own. In this process, she becomes fat and alienated from her own personality. So, her husband abandons her for the sake of a thinner girl. 'She let herself go and her body slackened like dough left overnight' (The Table is Laid p.101). Now, in order to see her resistance, she turns to food for consolation and 'becomes more overweight and ungainly' (The Table is Laid p.100). Her compulsive act of eating or indulgence in eating shows her resistance and disregard to the patriarchal structures of femininity and the notion of slim and perfect body image.

The narrative also presents a critic of the ideals of beauty that lies in the thinness of the female body. Susan Bordo, a feminist and philosopher, says that such these practices of femininity may lead women to "utter demoralization, debilitation and death. As the feminine ideal becomes increasingly confining, she imagines herself disappearing" (qtd.in Royanian and

Yazdani p. 236). Aberrant eating conditions and consumption habits in women that challenge the notion of patriarchal authority at once through deviant consumption, they try to reclaim their bodies. When Bhaiya and Shabnam's antics were going on, Shehnaz finds solace in food:

“she kept her head down and proceeded to devour the cake with intense concentration; she ravenously swallowed fried potatoes dipped in chutney, and rapidly gulped down pieces of toast laden with butter and jam. Bhaiya and Shabnam had become a source of apprehension for us, and Bhabhi must have been worried too, but she was burying her head in rich foods. Constantly suffering from gastric distress, she nevertheless managed to do successfully digest pulao and qorma with the aid of churan. Her gaze felt restlessly upon Shabnam and Bhaiya as they chuckled and talked” (The Table Is Laid p.106).

Here, female body through the deviant appetite and indulgence in food resist the hegemonic control and conditioning forces and societal pressures. Bhabhi sinks into food as a revolt to Bhaiya's agency of making her fat because he did not like thin and skinny girls but she doesn't try to think of making herself slim and thin. Instead of it, she starts eating more and more. Her body is shaped by her husband's likings. Chughtai also remarks on the issue of fat and the ideals of beauty that lead women into depression. These ideals may become a tool in the hand of male oppressors to subject women.

“Bhabhi was pushed into the water that day she slid from our hands like a heavy bundle. Her wet clothes clung to her body and revealed her unshapely figure, a frightening sight; it seemed as though someone had wrapped a comforter around her waist. She didn't look that horrible when dressed in normal clothes. ‘Oh God, how fat you are; Bhaiya exclaimed, squeezing lump of fat on her buttock. ‘Oh my goodness, look at your tummy! You look just look like Gama, the wrestler.’ ‘Hunh! After four children my waist...’ ‘But I also have four children and my waist has not been transformed into a Dunlop tyre’ (The Table Is Laid p.107).

But the consumption and appetite may be used as tool to confirm or resist the socially prescribed body images. Chughtai show how the female body is shaped by the patriarchal relations and as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that ‘there is no such thing as uncoded body’ (qtd. in The Table Is Laid). All bodies seem to be influenced and shaped by the social, psychological, and political determinants put on them and physical body becomes a social body. In this way, appetite conditions open a vast arena of ideological positions. Watching her husband with the other woman, Bhabhi's anger is shown in her aberrant eating:

She was “arranging a layer of cream over apricot jam. Her head was lowered, her eyes were red, her lips were white, and her doll like plump cheeks were puffer than usual. At lunch Bhabhi looked extremely unhappy. She proceeded to consume the apricot with jam and cream with ardour. Shabnam looked at the dish and shuddered as though it contained not apricots but snakes and scorpions.... Bhaiya glared at Bhabhi but she continued to gobble up the jam noisily.... Bhabhi paid no attention to him and emptied nearly the entire dish of apricots into her stomach. Seeing her devour the jam in this manner, you felt as if she were building a dam to halt the storm of envy and jealousy” (The Table is Laid p.107).

The act of compulsive eating and its effects on women's body may be a 'situation' that needs a treatment. Above passage shows that Bhabhi's unconscious indulgence of appetite is due to her jealousy. In order to put up with her inner struggle, she indulged into food. Now, the narrative also indicates towards the discrimination between self feeding as an act of pleasure or deriving aesthetic joy and an act that grows out of despair, jealousy and loneliness. The story also reinforces the idea that fatness is expressed negatively so prevails the fact that being thin is normal and fat is a deviation from normal or healthy condition. The patriarchal agency also uses the issue of fatness to perpetuate its norms and conditions onto women to subject them. Bhaiya doesn't like slim and thin girls, so, he in a way has made her wife fat. He made her altogether different in looks from her convent schooldays. Bhabhi's sister's run away made Bhaiya very eager to mold her in to a homemaker. The masculine society promotes the concept of femininity to control women. Bhabhi's indulgence in food is the result of such norms and practices that perpetuate social suppression. Here, the double standards of patriarchy are shown. On one hand, Bhaiya hates thin and skinny girls; on the other hand, he fell for Shabnam who is very slim and delicate.

Chughtai's story also signifies that the woman who can't control their appetites in the society where restrictions are brought to bear on them, come to grief. The social contexts where thinness is considered the ideals of beauty and femininity, the act of indulgence in eating or deviant appetites, relegate to powerlessness. Bhabhi's aberrant appetite results in obesity and then, in her divorce. Her husband started hating her 'quivering obesity' (The Table is Laid p.109). But Bhaiya's philosophy has changed altogether in case of Shabnam. He again changed Shabnam into an overweight woman:

“Shabnam was singed, muddy-looking ash; her dark, gleaming complexion had turned yellow like a lizard's stomach; those liquid eyes had become murky and lifeless; the thin, serpentine waist was nowhere in sight – Shabnam looked permanently pregnant; the well-rounded arms that had glowed like the delicate, shiny limbs of a tree were now thick and ungraceful and looked like a pair of dumb-bells” (The Table is Laid p.111).

Shabnam also changed in appearance. She was enviously looking at her husband and Egyptian dancer. The Egyptian dancer, whose body confirms the ideals of thinness, attracts Bhaiya. And again, in order to distract herself from both and 'downed large morsels of roast chicken in order to distract herself' (The Table is Laid p.111). Shabnam also tries to evade patriarchally encoded body and tries to defy the notion of consumable bodies. Like Shehnaz, she is no more sexually desirable to Bhaiya. “To hide her anguish she quickly picked up the jug of cream and emptying it over the raspberries in her plate, she began eating with great fervor” (The Table is Laid p.112). Thus compulsive eating both in the case of Shabnam and Shehnaz can be seen as the conscious and purposeful acts that shows women's powerlessness but at the same time, an effort to get power over their bodies. Bartky says that it is the disciplinary body that inscribes femininity on women's body.

“The message that women should look more feminine is everywhere: it is reinforced by parents, teachers, male partners, and it is expressed in various ways throughout the media. Men, then, are not the only ones to blame for women's situation. Because of the pervasiveness of this disciplinary power that inscribes femininity, women's constant preoccupation with appearance has come to be regarded as something

natural and voluntary; it is something that women have internalized” (qtd. in Feminist Perspectives on Objectification).

In order to confirm the ideals of beauty and thinness, women either starts control their appetite or indulge in food. This may results in a fragmentation in their personality as Sandra Bartky accepts in her book *Femininity and Domination*:

“... [their] entire being is identified with the body, a thing which... has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind or personality” (Bartky 1990, 130). All the focus is placed on a woman's body, in a way that her mind or personality are not adequately acknowledged. A woman's person, then, is fragmented” (qtd. in Feminist Perspectives on Objectification n.p.).

The thin body that confirms the socially accepted notions of femininity and beauty becomes sexually desirable for Bhaiya:

“The Egyptian beauty contorting her flat stomach, her lips gyrated in circles, her voluptuous arms fluttered in the air, her golden legs could be seen quivering like pillars of ivory behind a thin veil of chiffon” (The Table is Laid p. 111).

Such bodies as Bartky believes that are “designed to please or to excite” (qtd in Feminist Perspectives on Objectification n.p.). The Egyptian dancer's body which is symbol of femininity also bears patriarchal surveillance. She confirms to the modern world's standards of beauty. As soon as, Shabnam comes aware of this fact she also indulged into act of compulsive appetite like Sheenaz. Both the wives' fate becomes same when the male chauvinist behavior attaches with theirs. They lost their womanly dignity but at the end, try to revolt against the patriarchal system.

Conclusion

The theory of embodiment has vast implications as far as women's body is concerned. A lot is yet left to explore in the connection of women's body with the appetite issue. Ismat Chughtai's story “The Rock” tries to debunk the social norms in the context of women's body and appetite. Both the women Shabnam and Shehnaz's fat bodies offer a powerful resistance to the male chauvinistic attitude as a site or space for female embodies revolt. But as mentioned above, the act of compulsive eating can be seen as a ‘situation’ in women's that calls for proper treatment. Though, their act of aberrant eating can be termed as an act of ‘loss of dignity’ but on the other side, it may be a way of revolting against the male chauvinistic action of controlling women.

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