

Body as a site of resistance in Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings*

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Abstract

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The paper entitled "Body as a Site of Resistance in Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings*" is an attempt to deconstruct the traditional notions about body. A close study of Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings* reveals to us that body is now being used as a site of resistance in contemporary Japan. The theories of Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and many such post structuralists deconstruct traditional notions associated with femininity and masculinity. An examination of the novel in the light of such theories questions the various conventions associated with body such as "pure bodies", "impure bodies" and so on. The author attempts to highlight and channelize the post structural unwillingness of a group of young minds in Japan to surrender to the idea of a mainstream bourgeois culture which dictates laws to its people. The characters in the novel resort to many body modification practices like tattooing and piercing, self-mutilation, alcoholism, free sex which are obviously practices done on body. Such practices try to bring about a radical change by exploring the power of body. The various norms of society are thus subverted by treating the body as a site of performance. The body becomes a site for all social changes and is the focus for all measures against the mainstream culture.

Index Terms: Body, Deconstruct, resistance, culture

Paper:

Generally a body is defined as a natural object, a physical structure which includes bones , flesh and other organs.it has been simply conceptualized as one biological object among others and part of a biological universe. In the socio anthropological realm, bodily differences between men and women are primarily a matter of recognizing certain kinds of gender stereotypes. Thus, we all are beings in a body and we are the subject of other's gaze.

The very concept of body has now been radically rethought by both science and philosophy. We can no longer look it as a natural object. The body is actually a cultural representation constructed through various media. It is discursively constructed. Societies produce ideals of proper body in order to define their identities. "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). Nowadays, body is the focus of many issues. In short, the body has become a terrain on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary societies.

The Japanese writer Hitomi Kanehara's *Snakes and Earrings* can be called as a cult novel that has extremely explicit contents. The book deals with unrestrained matters like tattooing, piercings, sex, alcoholism, drugs, self-mutilation. Kanehara has made an effort to subvert the conventional norms related to body and made it as a site of resistance to oppose various cultural practices. Kanehara utilizes a literary legacy of the body in order to make her writing relevant in the virtual, hyper-commodified culture of the twenty-first-century Japan. This unique work, with its artistic fluidities allows some form of theorizing on body. 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'"

(Kanehara 1).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 body. The characters in the novel Lui, Ama and Shiba-san resort to body modification practices which are against normal conventions.

All these characters have a great control over their body and thus become owners of their body. Their 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. 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 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 Ama.

In the novel, Lui always rejects her tag of ‘barbie girl’. In this way she resists all the patriarchal norms which considers woman as 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, Ama and Shiba-san do not adhere to any conventional norms about their gender. They always try to create a different space for them. 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 fulfill 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. (176)

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 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) suggests that many modification practices are often characterized as self-mutilation by mainstream journalists. 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. Ama has got a forked tongue along with a dragon tattoo. Similarly, 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. Shib-san has his body covered up with tattoos and piercings. These groups sought to create a symbolic rebellion and a subcultural style of life by using their body as

a site of rebellion. Tattooed persons were perceived to be “ ‘marginal, rootless, and dangerously unconventional,’ and so tattooing became appreciated as ‘a symbolic poke-in-the-eye’ directed at mainstream society.”(Pitts 5). Lui, Ama and Shib-san use their “semiotic” power of body to resist the bourgeois culture. They are performing their body through such practices and are liberating themselves from elite main stream society.

Maurice Merleau Ponty, the great French phenomenologist philosopher maintains the view that the body is not only a historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming that the body is a historical idea, he means that it gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. According to him, body is a materiality that bears meanings. In his view, the body is a set of infinite possibilities. It is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence. The body is not merely a matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. Thus body becomes its present form through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time.

Some of the body modification practices are attempts to reclaim their bodies from a hostile or alienating contemporary culture. Body modification marks the body, inscribes it, and so constructs it within psychical, cultural and even political fields. In the book *Cultures of Fetishism*, Kaplan says : “The little mutilations take up her mind and enable her to temporarily escape from the frightening implications of being transformed physically and emotionally into a woman with the sexual and moral responsibilities of adulthood”(77).

Self inflicted pain is another major form of resistance they choose. Tattooing and piercing

were such painful activities. Lui wants her tongue to be pierced. Lui wishes to get a spiritual ecstasy out of this pain. She longs for pain, since as she frankly states: “I need it to feel anything” (Kanehara 20).

Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain* shares with 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).

When coming back to the text, we see Kanehara’s characters’ happiness in bearing pain. They find a kind of independence and autonomy in mutilating their own body. They assert their subjectivity on their body. The society’s view of objectified body is deconstructed by a subjective approach. They endure the pain in extreme happiness. For Kanehara’s characters, pain can be an antidote to power. In the novel we can see as 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 to her body. She felt it like having sex. She felt a kind of ecstasy when Shiba-san began to pierce her tongue that 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 shot 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-san 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 a quite 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 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). Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-French philosopher and feminist in her seminal essay titled *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* says:

The story that feminism tells itself is a story in which gender plays the lead role. Once we realize that femininity was culturally constructed, and not inscribed in our natures, we could change the ways in which gender was constructed and not inscribed in our natures, we could change the ways in which gender was constructed. Since we can transform culture, whatever natural

differences that distinguish the sexes become insignificant. In effect, then, sex, nature, biology, and bodies are written out of feminist picture. (37)

Thus it is hardly surprising that, like Julia Kristeva , a lot of other feminist theorists of the last fifty years, worked to account for a revision and restructuring of 'prescribed' gender roles. However Post Structuralist Gender Studies moves a bit further to insist that the individual is always the site of conflicting forms of gender identities. The individual here is considered as a body.

Here also, body is the target. Body plays a greater role in a culture. According to Michel Foucault, the body plays a central role. Foucault's genealogical work explores body as a site of oppression and exercise of power. In his landmark study, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality, far from being prescribed or repressed in the nineteenth century, became part of a discourse that sought to identify and regulate all forms of sexual behavior. "Instead of a massive censorship," he claimed, "what was involved was a regulated incitement to a normative appropriation of the so called deviant discourses" (34). Religious confession, Psychoanalysis, Sexology, literature- all was instrumental in this incitement, which simultaneously made sexuality a public matter and a target of social administration. "Under the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated so that, it was no longer directly named sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no rethinking" (25).

Kanehara's characters disrupt all conventional notions about body. They also disrupt the heterosexual normativity on which the bourgeois society depends for authority. Human subjectivity, for Butler, is "...always already variable and various" (*Gender Trouble* 146). The characters in the novel involve in body modification, violence, free-sex which are practices done

on body to resist the mainstream culture. According to Butler:

All social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and ..all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment. (*Gender Trouble*168)

Human body, especially female body has undergone dramatic changes with the advent of many movements and theories. All the traditional norms associated with body are now subverted and body has now become a unique entity. Everyone claims control over their own body and resorts to practices which they would like to do on their body. The body has become an important site of resistance to mainstream culture. It subverts all traditional notions and thus rebels against the bourgeois society.

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