

The Female Body in Buddhism and Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: Our body is like a blank slate on which we ascribe various roles. In this process of ascribing roles it is accepted by our society that the female sex is positioned lower than their male counterpart. The male sex is regarded the superior. This is the patriarchal ideology lying within the customs of every society. A similar kind of thoughts can even be seen in Buddhist literature. This paper draws a comparative study of the female body in the Buddhist religious literature and the contemporary literature and society putting a focus on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

Key words: female body, rape, purity, femininity, resistance

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Bordo in 1997 stated “through organization and regulation of the time space and movements of our daily lives our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity.” That our biological bodies are nothing but a blank slate where through social practices or as Foucault says the discursive practices are turned into gendered identities. The male body takes the embodiment of the brightness, backbone, strength, the normative and all other positive adjectives; the female body on the other hand remains the docile self, the vile, and the one to be taken care of. The aim of the present paper is to deny the materiality of the female body and to show that such constructions are the results of

social constructions and culture established through discourse. The female body represented in Buddhism and in contemporary forms of art and literature is the subject of this paper.

The study of position of women in any religious society shows a steep fall in comparison to their male counterparts; the reason is the phallogocentric thought which treats religion as the generic masculine habits of thoughts and language and the females in relation to what the males have studied or researched. The result of this is the position of the Buddhist nuns or *Bhiksunis* in the *Sanghas*, who are treated as a reason for the quick demise of *Sanghas*. Rita M. Gross in her text *Buddhism After Patriarchy (1993)* tries to debunk this phallogocentric thought regarding females and their body and instead talks of the “two sex model of humanity” that is a model which will compel people to understand that there are only two sex- male and female and that both the sexes are human. Women had always held a secondary position in the Buddhist society. The importance of monastic to the institutions of the nuns was always higher. The females were regarded as a threat to the males on one hand and on the other hand they are regarded as creative, nurturant and supportive. This shows that an ambiguity always have revolved round the female sexuality in every society of the world from time immemorial.

The main aim of the followers of all sect of Buddhism is to attain the *Boddhisatwa* or the ideal Buddhist practitioner which can be attained by any one- both males and females. But a study of the customs or literature of Mahayana sect shows that if a female devotee wants to reach this path of enlightenment then she needs to shed her feminine nature and have to wish to be born as a male to attain *Boddhisatwa*. This directly shows that the female body is regarded as impure to reach Lord Buddha. If a nun do achieve the, *Boddhisatwa* then it is taken for granted that she is no longer a female. Her body image though may be of a female but imaginary image becomes that of a male. This concept of “Sexual transformation” can be seen in the *The Sutra of Changing Female Sex*. The question that arises here is that these sutras from the later period of Mahayana sect though broaden up the views on female nuns or *Bhiksunis* by taking into consideration the psychological aspect. Stating that Psychological transformations into a masculine self is needed to attain the highest goal through penance, meditation and discipline thereby shedding out her all sexual drives and desires so as to achieve *Boddhisatwa in her female birth* and not waiting for a next birth. The story of a Naga princess transforming into a male to achieve the highest spirituality is prevalent in Buddhist tradition showing how the female organs had vanished off

and the male organs getting developed. Even though we are free to question the credibility of such stories from sutras which demean the Self of a women but probably we still could not eradicate such ambivalences even from today's society.

A recent example of demeaning women because of their sex or body is the shooting of a little girl for Malala Yousafzai for the right to education for females. Educating women meant providing freedom which is not taken in a positive way by many societies till date. With time though the conditions of society have changed but the condition of female body has deteriorated. Rape, genital mutilation, branding of female genitalia to show that they are demeaning objects and need to be subjected can be seen in modern day. *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad (1999)* is an autobiography of Somali super model Waris Dirie showing the position of female body amongst the nomadic tribes. How to retain the pure, the genitals are mutilated so that they may remain pure till their marriage night. In Buddhism if attaining *Boddhisatwa* is all then in present day scenario its purity.

In contemporary society the female body is looked upon as an object. The female body is either sexualized or is regarded to be safeguarded from the male gaze. A woman who confines herself within the four walls of her home is regarded to be someone pious otherwise the society punishes them through their one and only easiest weapon "rape". This weapon is to intimidate fear in them so that a woman retains her pure self.

Even in contemporary Indian society we still find a similar picture. There are temples in Southern part of India where female devotees are not allowed to enter the temple premise as they are vile. Social practices of ostracizing young girls when they attain the age of puberty can also be seen in Indian family system. Whether in India or in any part of the world irrespective of class, race or religion the condition of females had always been same; the question of whether the female body is pure or not would always remain a question of enigma for the phallogocentric society. A recent report on The Hindu dated 30th November 2015 states that "*Temple 'Purifies' idol after women offers prayer*". This is the headlines in the 21st century. Demeaning the women and regarding her as impure has always been there in the past created by the patriarchal knowledge and can we are failing to lower down this demeaning even today because we are failing to re-read the history and undo the staunch beliefs. It is here where literature is coming forward to put up a resistance to this biases and stereotypes against women.

Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi born British writer like any other diasporic writers writes to show the resistance that the female sex is putting up against the patriarchal ideologies. In her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) she draws in a similar question and the materiality of the female body in the Diasporic lands; and also tries to provide a mode for freedom of expression of self in modern day. In the words of Kaja Silverman 'our experience of "self" is always circumscribed by and derived from the body.' (Alsop 168)

Brick Lane is a lane in the East London inhabited mostly by Bangladeshi migrants. Monica Ali's debut novel focus on lifestyle of these Bangladeshi migrants living in westernized society yet clutching on to the staunch social practices. Ali in this novel shows the life of her main protagonist Nazneen. She begins the novel quoting Heraclitus saying that a man's character is in her fate. The fate of many young female children lies in the hand of their parents- i.e. whether the mother should give birth to the child or abort her. Nazneen's childhood begins with such a fate. Its again fate that gets her married to a man called Chanu all the way from London. The novel continues to show the plight of Bangladeshi women living in London through other characters like Razia, Mrs Islam and Jorina and others.

Chanu describes his wife Nazneen: "She is an unspoilt girl. From the village" (Ali 14). She is a girl who is not that beautiful but can satisfy her husband physical drives. Nazneen's body becomes an object of pleasure for Chanu. She is a pure girl who can give birth to a healthy baby boy. Ali Ali tries to show the imaginary self of Nazneen by bringing in the visuals of dancing. In contemporary times the literatures are being used as a medium to oppose the discursive practice of showing the materiality of female body unlike the ancient religious literatures. The visuals which Nazneen witness on the television screen of ice skating where a female clad in a tight costume "raised one leg and rested her boot...on the other high, making her triangular flag of her legs ... she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her." (Ali 29).

The notion of purity and chastity is an abstract idea created by the patriarchal society. If in the above religious texts it is shown that women are just an idea and it is men who are the reality, then our contemporary literature too projects the same thing but with a twist. Monica Ali's, *Brick Lane*, through the character of Haseena do show that women should be the epitome

of the abstract ideas created by the patriarchal society; and if they do not conform to that idea they need to be punished. Hence, we find Haseena getting raped and inflicted with both physical and psychological violence. The character of Haseena is shown as a free woman, independent, who does not abide by the patriarchal laws and therefore to rectify her paths, and make her mind pure, the tool rape is used against her by the society.

Women are the carriers of the patriarchal customs. A woman's identity is derived through her tastes of signs, beliefs, lifestyles which she is made to impose on her with time. If women fail to accept the patriarchal thoughts and if she wants to present herself as an independent person she pays the price by inflicting pain on her body through rape. The Buddhist religious literature regarded the male sex as the superior, so does our contemporary society too. Even though we question the credibility of the literatures, we should never forget that the literatures were written by the males and especially for the male society. Today's society is also the same. The patriarchal politics underlying the society has become more subtle, the vileness of the female body is reflected through the position which the women hold in the society and through the various kind of violence inflicted upon her body to remind her repeatedly that she holds a lower position than her male counterpart.

The society expects the female to get compartmentalized in the roles they ascribe to them as they regard the women to be lower than men in status and it has been seen in every society the moment a woman tries to resist she is inflicted with violence. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine(1991)* we also find the same picture where a woman while searching for her identity gets raped. Searching identity means questioning the position of women, the position of female body in the society and therefore, this is not the accepted norm and to rectify her faults she is reminded that she is below men.

The representation of female body and females in society lies in the second order and this order can be changed only when we start questioning the existing knowledge, and re-read the history and then re-create history and the modern forms of art; literature is trying to do the same thorough resistance writing.

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