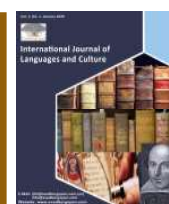




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Politics of Gender: Contextualizing Body Politics and Female Subjectivity in Select Poems

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the relegation of women under body politics in Cathy Song's "Girl Powdering Her Neck" and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." By taking recourse to the idea of "body politics" advanced by Susan Bordo along with "objectification theory" of Julie Rodgers and Fredrickson Roberts, this paper problematizes that women are trapped by body politics exerted by men and are engaged in self-scrutiny of their bodies to draw the attention of men or are likely to valorise beauty at the cost of brain. The girl in Cathy Song's poem has become the victim of body politics, which drives her to be more obsessive towards her appearance rather than ability. The beloved in Andrew Marvell's poem, by the same token, undergoes objectifying gaze of her lover through the politics of exaggeration executed by the speaker, which is likely to drive her to be more conscious of her body rather than other dimensions of her personality. The whole exaggeration is solely guided by utilitarian purpose of female body. The paper contributes by bringing the female subjects of the poems to the purview of critical analysis. It also contributes by showing how women are relegated under the body politics exercised by men, and sensitizing women not to fall prey to body politics and underrate themselves.

Keywords: *Body politics, Relegation, Objectification, Patriarchal ideology, Beauty*

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1. Introduction

Cathy Song's "Girl Powdering Her Neck" and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" unpack the status of women in patriarchy-unleashed ideology that regards them as objects of pleasure, particularly of men, being oblivious to their other dimensions such as intelligence, morality, character, etc. This deeply-rooted tendency not only reduces women into commodities but also motivates them to make their body beautiful, attractive and catchy to increase the cost value of their bodies as commodities. The poems under study unfold as to how women are the victims of body politics—the strategy to gaze women, judge them and use them as objects of pleasure finally by making them conform to false idea that beauty is the best. This socio-culturally motivated strategy drives them to beautify, glorify, verify and supply their bodies to men without defying the fact that it is simply relegating them.

By taking recourse to the idea of body politics advanced by Susan Bordo along with objectification theory of Julie Rodgers and Fredrickson Roberts, this paper argues that the poems place spotlight on how women are trapped by body politics exerted by men and are engaged in self-scrutiny of their bodies to draw the attention of men. The speaker in "Girl

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Powdering Her Neck” is aware of beautifying her body through elaborate make-ups as she is going to offer her body to have sexual intercourse. In the same way, the speaker of “To His Coy Mistress” passionately glorifies the different parts of the body of his beloved in an attempt to woo her. The description of bodily parts brings the male to gaze over female simply with utilitarian purpose. The poems unveil how women are reduced into objects of sexual pleasure putting their agencies and assertiveness at bay.

2. Literature Review

The past studies show that the perspectives of body politics have been given a dim attention by the critics so far regarding the poems by Song and Marvell. Carl R. V. Brown, for instance, analyses Song’s poem “Girl Powdering Her Neck” as Asian girl’s beautifying herself as she is going to unite with her dear one in the foreign land, more particularly in America. Regarding Song’s poem, he argues:

[...] refers to a common familial pattern among Asians immigrating to the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—when the men came first to find work and their wives followed later, sometimes years later. Meanwhile, the new immigrants possessed only pictures of their brides until the couple could be reunited in their adopted land. (42)

Here, the critic is talking about a girl in the process of beautifying herself as after a long time; she is going to visit her husband in the foreign land. It is done in order to attract the attention of her husband towards her beauty. However, the critic is downplaying the exertion of body politics to motivate the girl to beautify. Similarly, Alexandra Conte, by focusing on the customized beauty of the girl in the poem notes, “she does not possess personal expression, control, or beliefs; the beauty has created a masked figure of her. The painting does not show her face it shows her reflection” (1). Here, the focus is given on the reflection rather than the real picture of the girl. She is not in the position to express her true self but only to impress the men. The perspective of body politics from the critic also falls short herein. In the same vein, Asmaa Khalaf, focusing on the power of poetry, asserts:

The poet mentions something regarding her finishing her bathing, leaving her pair slippers outside the room, making her legs folded, brushing the mirror with the corner of her sleeve. All these behaviors are imagined to add a life to the frozen image. The poet resorts to simile to reflect the beauty of the girl when he depicts the appearance of her shoulder to be like a hill moves towards snowy spot. Again this indicates the power of poetry in indulging in detail giving life to its theme. (23-24)

Thus, the critic valorises the poem as having capable of giving a vivid description to otherwise a frozen image of the painting. In other words, she glorifies the poet for adding life to painting through her poetic creation. However, the critic does not talk about how the girl is under the shadow of body politics that drives her to focus more on appearance rather than reality.

Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” has also received a critical attention by many scholars. In this regard, Sibaprasad Dutta, in his article, “To His Coy Mistress: An Overview” argues that this poem is “a fine specimen of love lyric based on the theory of Carpe Diem and is yet marked by ‘metaphysical’ characteristics. Carpe Diem or Hedonism is the desperate bid to outwit the onslaught of time by engagement in material delight. The whole of “To His Coy Mistress” is suffused with this spirit” (1-2). Although the critic interprets this poem from the lens of hedonism with metaphysical dimension, he does not discuss the dimension of body politics. He is indifferent to how the speaker executes body politics to woo his beloved.

The critics agree with the idea that this poem is an expression of the speaker’s utmost sexual desire towards his beloved and that it turns out to be the seduction poem. However, the critic does not focus on how the body politics and objectifying gaze of the speaker come out while glorifying the bodily parts of his beloved in the process of persuading her.

Women have to satisfy men sexually as Conrad argues, Marvell sketches the entire character of his mistress against her sexual ability as if there is no more to her and the whole purpose of her life is to satisfy him, sexually like the “eastern bride” (Ferguson, 435). By taking recourse to critical line of feminism, the critic is trying to affirm that men take women as having no other purpose in life but to satisfy them sexually. However, he does not talk about this objectification of women as a part of body politics of patriarchy. Likewise, Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker, regard to the exaggeration of the speaker, argue that “Marvell begins with obvious intentions of mockery, and outflanks Petrarchanism in a series of droll and brilliant exaggerations” (639). The critics bring the exaggeration of the speaker not only to the bodily parts of his beloved but also bring his glorification of them to the fore. But their line of criticism does not clarify that the sense of exaggeration is nothing but the use of body politics of the speaker to persuade his beloved to have sex. In the case of the use of syllogism, Clarence H. Miller states:

“To His Coy Mistress” seems to be clear:
 If we had sufficient time, we could delay;
 But we do not have time:
 Therefore we cannot delay. (98)

The critic explains that the syllogism seems true but in fact it is not. The conclusion does not follow the premises. The speaker is giving logic just to win the sentiment of his beloved, who is not ready to offer her body. The critic, here, also does not talk about the speaker being a trickster to apply the body politics so that he will be able to make her ready to give in. Regarding the use of rhetoric of the poem, Anthony Low and Paul J. Pival state, “[T]he poem is a persuasion to love; and the lover uses the methods of formal logic to persuade his mistress to accept his suit” (415). The art of persuasion applied by the speaker is guided by his body politics, which goes missing in their criticism, too.

As discussed above, the reviews on both poems escape and fail to focus on the perspective of body politics exercised by patriarchy. This study seeks to bridge this critical gap by analysing the poems from the lens of body politics to expose how women’s bodies are of mere utilitarian value for men. They are fated to internalize this ideology without being so defiant. The utilitarian value to the beauty tends to motivate women to come to term with the body politics, which ultimately has coercive and crippling effects in unleashing their brain.

2.1. Body and the Theory of Objectification

This paper executes the idea of “body politics” advanced by Susan Bordo along with “objectification theory” of Julie Rodgers and Fredrickson Roberts as theoretical frameworks to make a critical analysis of female characters in the selected poems as regard to how they are the victims of body politics and become the subjects of relegation in patriarchy-unleashed ideology. Generally speaking, body politics is defined as societal and institutional strategy to control body with a great sense of vested interest. This study uses body in the context of women’s bodies that often become the target to control, caress and crave for carnal desire.

Body politics, according to Susan Bordo, “is a concept that refers to the direct grip that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life” (16). The patriarchal culture has taught the women to impress men through their bodies rather than through expression. The women’s bodies have been the sites to control their agencies and aspirations in patriarchy. And women are fated to conform to the parameters of beautiful bodies laid down by patriarchy. Body politics, Julie Rodgers asserts, “is concerned with examining the extent to which we try to control the body by creating boundaries and forcing performance and how we use the body, not just as a crucial locus of self-construction, but also as a means of protesting and expressing a wide range of emotions from hopes and aspirations to fears and malaise” (29). Body politics, in fact, has become a controlling mechanism for women. It controls women by driving them to conform to false certitudes of men rather than contest with them. It also controls them through objectification.

Fredrickson and Roberts observes “Objectification theory posits that the cultural milieu of objectification functions to socialize girls and women to, at some level treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated” (177). They further problematize that “a culture that objectifies the female body presents women with a continuum stream of anxiety-provoking experiences, requiring them to maintain an almost chronic vigilance both to their physical appearance and to their physical safety” (183). Objectifying gaze under body politics has negative impacts on women as they begin to assimilate the idea that beauty is power and maybe, they begin to self-objectify their bodies, which make them less important as objects to be used.

2.2. Objectifying Women in the Poems of Song and Marvell

Song’s “Girl Powdering Her Neck” is an example of ekphrastic poetry – a verbal representation of image or painting. In this type of poetry, the poet verbalizes the visuals. In this poem, a girl is in an elaborate process of beautifying her body. By applying cosmetics, she is customizing her appearance to draw the attention of a person, who, she is going to have a physical relationship with. She is fully concentrating on her job of impressing others through beauty.

The light is the inside
 Sheen of an oyaster shell,
 Sponged with talc and vapor,
 Moisture from a bath.
 A pair of slippers
 A replaced outside
 The rice paper doors. (1-7)

The first seven lines supply the image of bathroom where a girl is taking a bath to create a feminine freshness. A pair of slippers and the vapor emitting from her body envision that image. She is using a personal care product like talcum powder and is consciously beautifying herself to drive the man towards her.

Morning begins the ritual
wheel of the body,
the application of translucent skins.
She practices pleasure:
the pressure of three fingertips
applying powder.
Fingerprints of pollen
some other hand will trace. (16-23)

The girl begins her rituals with morning activities that are solely concerned with making herself more beautiful and attractive for the men. She is applying cosmetics on her face so that she will be more impressive for others, particularly for men. The process of make-up is considered to be enjoyable but the poet here seems to be presenting the girl's make-up routine less confidently, which may connote that she is under pressure to do so.

She is also practicing pleasure, which may mean that she has to give pleasure for others. In this sense, the girl in the poem seems to be a prostitute. Professionally, prostitutes are expected to give sexual pleasure to the customers. "Some other hand will trace" connotes that women's body is something to touch, feel and enjoy. The protagonist in the poem is undergoing the same situation, and is preparing for that too.

The peach-dyed kimono
patterned with maple leaves
drifting across the silk,
falls from right to left
in a diagonal, revealing
the nape of her neck
and the curve of a shoulder
like the slope of a hill (24-31)

These lines exhibit that the girl is wearing quite revealing clothes instead of sober ones simply to attract the men. She is fully prepared to be beautiful and impressive. The nape of her neck and curve of a shoulder are revealing parts of her bodies. She is showing her power, and that power is nothing but her beautiful body and appearance.

Her body has actually become her power to entice men. She does not seem to be aware of the idea that she is the victim of socially constructed parameters of beauty that she silently conforms to. While discussing the bodies as social construct, Janet Holland et al. observe:

Young women are under pressure to construct their material bodies into a particular model of femininity which is both inscribed on the surface of their bodies, through such skills as dress, make-up, dietary regimes, and disembodied in the sense of detachment from their sensuality and alienation from their material bodies. (108)

As discussed above by the critics, women are pressurized to remake their material bodies through dress, make-up, dietary regimes, which simply mar their multiple dimensions such as skills, schemes and scholarships. This is nothing but hegemonizing effects of body politics. How under the influence of body politics, women are desperate to scrutinize their bodies become clear from the following lines:

She dips a corner of her sleeve
like a brush into water
to wipe the mirror;
she is about to paint herself.
The eyes narrow
in a moment of self-scrutiny.(37-42)

The girl in the poem is evaluating her body after the elaborate rituals to remake herself. Now, she attempts to confirm whether she is perfectly beautiful or not. She looks in the mirror and tries to self-scrutinize. She wants to make sure whether her beautiful body as a beautiful product is saleable in the market or not. She tries her best to qualify her product (body) to sell the customers (men).

The assimilation of beauty standard and its impacts can be seen in the following lines that say, the girl wants to speak but then remains silent as her beautified appearance can be disturbed and she may become powerless to attract the man and entertain him.

The mouth parts
as if desiring to disturb
the placid plum face;
break the symmetry of silence.
But the berry-stained lips,
stenciled into the mask of beauty,
do not speak. (43-49)

After beautifying her body with elaborate make-ups, the girl tries to open her well-composed plum face to break the silence therein. However, she cannot open her berry-stained lips. Now, she is under the perfect mask of beauty. She is conformed to be beautiful and impressive. The above lines from penultimate stanza capture the real plight and predicament of women victimized by body politics.

The adverse effects of body politics is that it motivates women to suspend their competence and assimilate the societal norms established by patriarchy regarding how women should look and behave. The so-called body politics discourages women to defy the set structures of a male-ordained society. It has merely induced women to impress rather than express.

The speaker of “To His Coy Mistress”, by applying the rhetoric of the “brevity of life” and “almighty time”, exerts body politics just to have physical relationship with his beloved. Throughout the poem, the speaker gives a frontal value to the body of his beloved. The beloved is showing her shyness regarding sexual matters while the lover (the speaker) is trying to woo her from the very beginning.

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love’s day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would (Marvell 1-7)

These first seven lines of the poem tell us that the speaker is persuading his beloved to consummate love while she is not ready to give in. She, therefore, is showing her shyness. However, the speaker is saying that coyness is a crime as they do not have time to enjoy love. This is the right time to love. There is no enough time to date at the bank of Ganges and Humber. Banks of river have been ideal places for lovers to meet and express love.

The mind of the speaker is preoccupied by the beauty of his beloved. He simply wants to make love. To persuade her, he goes to the extent of glorifying her bodily parts by using an extended metaphor thus:

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast;
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part, (11-17)

The male gaze towards female bodies becomes clear in the above lines. “Eyes”, “forehead”, “breast” and “the rest” parts of his beloved’s body have been the targets of glorification. The body politics of the speaker comes to the surface as he is concerned only about his carnal desire. Implicitly, this idea of praising bodily parts advanced in the poem may drive the women to suspend their other fundamental qualities and succumb to beauty.

The speaker further uses rhetorical language not to praise his beloved’s intelligence but to woo her for the consummation of love. By foregrounding the transitoriness of human life, he is striving to fulfil his desire to seek pleasure from her body.

Thy beauty shall no more be found,
 Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
 My echoing song: then worms shall try
 That long preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honour turn to dust
 And into ashes all my lust:
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace. (25-32)

Under the guise of the rhetoric of “brevity of life”, the speaker attempts to persuade his beloved by saying that her beauty will be no more with the passage of time. His youthful lust and her preserved virginity will also be turned into dust. The image of grave further unravels the uncertainties of life, so delay to enjoy sexual pleasure will merely be regretful at the end. The speaker further brings the image of sexual pleasure in the following lines:

Now let us sport us while we may,
 And now, like amorous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour
 Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
 Let us roll all our strength and all
 Our sweetness up into one ball,
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Through the iron gates of life: (37- 44)

“Amorous birds of prey”, “sport”, “role all our strength” and “tear our pleasure” all imply the act of sexual intercourse. Throughout the poem, the speaker is whole heartedly obsessed by the body of his beloved. That too, is only for sexual pleasure. The speaker has objectified the body of his beloved. To say more explicitly, she is sexually objectified. At the heart of this poem is the speaker’s utmost emphasis on his beloved’s youthful body only fit for making love, which brings his mindset of objectifying women’s body—an agenda of body politics.

3. Conclusion

The poems by Song and Marvell, thus, are the faithful poems to show how women are the victims of body politics and objectifying gaze. The girl in Song’s poem has become the victim of body politics, which drives her to be more obsessive towards her appearance rather than ability. She, therefore, is in the process of elaborate make-ups to customize her body. It is because she expects to increase her value in patriarchy-unleashed social set ups. The beloved in Marvell’s poem also undergoes objectifying gaze of male. The speaker is gazing her bodily parts to have sex with her. His sense of love to her is only meaningful till she has an attractive body with skin-deep beauty and charm that resonates the speaker’s underlying beam of patriarchy-unleashed ideology. The politics of exaggeration executed by the speaker in the poem is solely guided by utilitarian purpose of female body. The poems, if critically observed, are capable of sensitizing women to go against the body politics and objectifying gaze that drive them to conform to a monolithically set ideals and socio-cultural imperatives regarding the female body. The so-called body politics and objectifying gaze mar the schemes, skills and scholarships of women and contribute to reduce them into the passive objects rather than the active subjects. It is, therefore, imperative for women to be aware of false ideology of body politics before they are entrapped and relegated under it.

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