

Writing the Body as Resistance: Celebration of Female Sexuality in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Leena Manimekalai

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Abstract: For ages, female body and sexuality have been a perplexing question for the patriarchal society. Body, as it stands antithetical to mind, is always associated with women, whereas the rational mind is linked with men. As in any other binary opposition, one term has historically been privileged at the expense of the other. L'écriture feminine, at the heart, is a refusal to accept the age old western separation of mind and body. The authors associated with this movement challenged these notions by celebrating women's association with body, there by negating the subordination of body to mind. Meena Kandasamy and Leena Manimekhalai are writers who explore the theme of écriture feminine in their writings. Their poetry disturbs patriarchy, creating fissures and fault lines in its foundation. For them female body is not anathema but a source of power and wisdom. This paper attempts to read the poetry of these two writers to analyse the representation of female body and sexuality as a tool for feminist resistance.

Keywords: écriture feminine, female body, resistance, sexuality

Introduction

Female body has been viewed as a site of darkness and women are denied of the right to express their body and its desires. Women repressed the fantastic tumults of their drives, for they were taught to believe in the 'sacrosanct doctrines' of modesty. Helene Cixous writes in her influential and often-cited essay "The Laugh of the Medusa": "I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear" (321). Women perceived their body as a dark territory and

they lived their life in perpetual fear of darkness as darkness is believed to be dangerous. Woman is associated with body and at the same time she has no autonomy over her body.

“Write yourself. Your body must be heard”. Since Cixous made this historical pronouncement in 1974, there have been continual attempts to inscribe female body and its incredible stream of phantasms in writings. “The Laugh of the Medusa”, as its title might suggest, ultimately celebrates that which in women has been denigrated for centuries, and urges us to embrace ‘differences’. Cixous believes that the expression of female sexuality in literature is essential in order to break the dead lock of masculinist writing. She writes: “woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (322).

Writing the Body

Writing the body is a process of liberation. By writing herself woman will return to the body, over which she had no authority. Thus it aims at retrieving the kingdom of body to its unnamed, unacknowledged sovereigns. It gives women a chance to speak out by breaking the curse of silence. The desire to be heard as women within a female discourse rather than women as subjects of male discourse resulted in challenging the phallogocentric language. Feminine writing rejects the phallogocentric language as it is anchored and controlled by the phallus. The group of French feminists including Cixous and Luce Irigaray advocated for a feminine language to write about female experiences.

Cixous’ essay is a scathing attack on the Freudian and Lacanian concept of ‘lack’. Freud conceived female body as a “dark continent”, marked by the lack of penis. Cixous undermines this idea by using it as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control possible for women in the phallogocentric symbolic order. Through the image of the laughing, beautiful Medusa, Cixous unravels the unexplored world of female sexuality. In her famous essay “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l’Ecriture Feminine*”, Ann Rosalind Jones writes: “If women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has been

repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men” (361).

Writing the body can be considered as a process of self- discovery as well as a way of resistance. Feminist writers and thinkers used this mode of writing to subvert the age old signification attributed to female body and also to resist the patriarchal oppression. Through the overt depiction of body, hushed up feelings and emotions, writers tried to assert their right over their body. It was partly out of the realization that female body is the source of female writing and partly out of a desire to create a female literary tradition.

Body as Resistance

Meena Kandasamy and Leena Manimekalai are writers who explore the theme of ecriture feminine in their writings. Their poetry disturbs patriarchy, creating fissures and fault lines in its foundation. For them, female body is not anathema but a source of power and wisdom. This paper attempts to read the poetry of these writers to analyse the representation of female body and sexuality and also to study how it works as a tool for feminist resistance. Their writings are centered on feminism and caste oppression. Through their verse they fight back against the patriarchal oppression.

Being a dalit woman writer, Kandasamy had to face the bitterness of social oppression. Her poems are informed by a sense of gender relations that suggest being a woman in a largely patriarchal society is another form of being slave. Her poetry is powerful enough to disarm the sting of phallogocentrism. She writes about her style and purpose of writing in the preface to *Ms. Militancy*, “Should You Take Offence”:

I work to not only get back at you. I actually fight to get back to myself. I do not write in to patriarchy. My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger’s lap. All my women militate... Call me names if it comforts you. I no longer care. The scarlet letter is my monogram...I strive to be a slut in a world where all sex is sinful (8-9).

The unbridled sexuality in Kandasamy's writings becomes the main weapon of her social militancy. For her, poetry is a way of resistance. She subverts patriarchal myths in such a way to give a voice to the voiceless. The unique and powerful language suits her purpose. She speaks about her language: "This tongue allows me to resist rape, to rescue my dreams. My language is not man-made; it is beyond the white-hot rules of your seminal texts. My language is dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths" (8-9). Her poems question and subvert all the accepted norms of sexual fidelity and chastity. According to Kandasamy, poetry heals her and helps in channelizing her anger.

Her poem "Random Access Man" retells the myth of Ramayana. In Ramayana Sita is an ideal, submissive and subservient wife. She abandoned all the comforts of palace, accompanied her husband to the forest, remained chaste throughout her life and was forsaken by her husband, Rama. Kandasamy's poem is a subversive text in which we see a husband who is cold and mute to his wife's desires. On cold nights he played Gandhi to his waiting wife's body.

Denial aroused desire and

Lust rolled on her breasts

Lust rode her hips. (46)

Instead of being a chaste wife she decided to pick a random man. She sent her husband on a wild- goose chase:

Get me the testicle of a golden deer,

She said, get me its musk

So we can rouse your manhood

She picked herself a random man

For that first night of fervor. (46)

She became another woman, hot and hungry forever. She devoured every word that he uttered and by the time she left this stranger's lap, she had learned all about love, from first to last. Kandasamy has deconstructed the myth of pure Sita in this poem. Her Sita is no longer a chaste wife. Here Sita is a transformed woman who is demanding and capable of taking choices of her own. She violates the societal norms of chastity and sexual fidelity.

“Backstreet Girls” is a poem addressed to the moral police. This poem breaks all shackles and grants independence to women. It asserts a woman's freedom to take choices. They are free to choose their own roles- sluts, gluttons, bitches, witches and shrews. No more can they be kept within the iron bars of culture and tradition. No Manu can limit or contain them. Men can no longer choose them as wives but they are the ones who picks up and “stripes random men”.

Leena Manimekalai is another writer noted for her powerful and rebellious writings. Her poetry becomes the site of contention as it acts as a medium of resistance. She laments that women in India are not encouraged to explore their sexuality, or even have one of their own. Their bodies are never for themselves- they always belong to someone else. To quote Manimekalai: “Obviously my poetry is dangerous to religious and ideologically fanatic minds. Language is my first enemy; its norms, design and usage are controlled by the dominant patriarchy”. (qtd. in Ravishankar 2)

“The Ocean that Exceeded the Tongue” is one among her noted poems. In this poem the speaker speaks about her body and its unquenchable desires. Her lust rattles like a bamboo forest. Nothing can stop the giant waves of her lust:

In the embrace

Giant waves shattered like

Magical birds

In the scream of a cruel voice

The earth turned musical.

The poet compares her passion to a ferocious ocean. Women are trained not to express their feelings, anger and dissatisfaction openly. Here poet questions this gender bias and declares her love through powerful images.

The poem “Menstrual Flowers” celebrates the creative and productive aspects of womanhood. Menstruation is generally regarded as a taboo and as a sign of female impurity. Religion and patriarchy are pivotal in reaffirming the myth of impurity. But here menstruation stands for everything that is creative in a woman. They are the fragrant flowers which the poet offers to her loveable boatman who roars in the deep ocean of her passion. Menstrual flowers are the source of productivity. It intensifies her desires and “makes the forest go mad”. For the poet, menstruation is not a painful experience but something that accentuates her passions and emotions. It is the fountain of creativity.

“Chichili” is another poem which celebrates female sexuality. Here the poet compares herself to a kingfisher and her body is multicoloured just like the bird.

When in the mood

I spread my wings

Imaging the sky

Her multihued body is her bait with which she catches the fish (victim) and satiates her hunger. Usually women are the victims and her body is the cause but here we can see a reversal of roles. The ‘dark continent’ becomes the site of power and authority, the object becomes the subject, the prey becomes the predator.

Conclusion

The poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Leena Manimekalai is an act of deliverance. Their writings attempt to erase the social stigma attached to female body. By writing the body, they undermine patriarchy and its dogmas. Their language is fiery and it has the power to blast the institutions like religion and patriarchy. They redefine words and their meanings to suit their

purpose. For these writers, poetry is all about discovering a new language and meanings. When women start to rediscover their own body and sexuality, language and patriarchy have to bow down before them. Thus their poetry becomes the site of resistance and the source of feminine rhythm and power.

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