



Breaking The Cultural Codes: The Bodily Play From The Fringes

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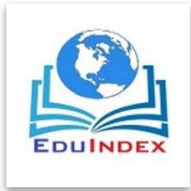
Abstract

The notion of body transcends the fixities of biological entity in the postmodern cultural context. The power discourses defines the bodily subjectivity and the inscription of cultural codes in it makes it politically charged. The social, cultural, historical and political discourses enacts upon the body through multiple narratives. The body of the 'other' breaks the hierarchical cultural discourses inscribed on them by voicing its own extreme materiality. These ideas are exemplified in the context of the marginalized characters of J.M. Coetzee.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Body, Representation.

The body is a key notion in the contemporary cultural studies. Since the post-structural era the notion of body has been extended from the biological sphere to the linguistic and cultural ones. The self- contradictory elements inherent in the cultural manifestations of the body make it one of ambiguous nature. The pre-defined fixities and limits regarding its representative potentials breaks down in the postmodern cultural scenario as the significance of boundaries itself is being questioned. All the experiences related to time and space in our life is determined by the nature of our bodily existence. It extends to the surroundings and employs a pivotal position in the formation of our subjectivity. We perceive the world through our body and in return our body is defined by the discourses of power. The cultural codes inscribed upon the body opens up its multiple political potentials like sexuality, race, nationality, gender, caste and class in the present context.

The political and social meanings are inscribed on to the body through the discursive power practices. In the process of defining things outside it and creating the 'other', the body defines itself and its identity. Even as remaining as a material entity, the body is perceived as a fore grounded space where multiple social, historical and cultural narratives enact. All these diverse discourses may complement or remain antagonistic to one another.



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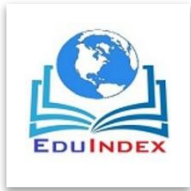
The performing ability of the bodies liberates it from the pre-defined dichotomies. The cultural embodiment of the body overcomes its material status through this quality of indefinable feature of playfulness. Even after acquiring the pre-discursive material entity, the body has to get entangled with the discourses perpetuated by multiple power practices and cultural images. The body that resists confining itself in a pre-supposed space subverts the discourses of power. The sidelined bodies act as the other side of the dominant narrative and challenge it from its disadvantaged position. The body in pain is antithetical to the language, since the painful body is a muted one. Thus it has got the potential to challenge the existing symbolic order.

The above thoughts regarding the notion of body can be exemplified through the works of the Nobel Laureate South African novelist J M Coetzee. In his works, namely, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Age of Iron*, the counter-narrative strategies of the sidelined and 'other' bodies can be noticed.

The protagonist Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* rejects a language that has patriarchal features as its core fabric. She substitutes an oppressive patriarchal language with bodily writing and stands outside representational discourses. The subversive nature of the writing of the body transgresses the static notions of patriarchy. Its self-referential quality foregrounds the materiality of the body. The hysteric nature of the body makes it incomprehensible for the male discourses. By narrating from an oppressed position of disadvantaged hysteric body the account becomes politically charged.

At one point, the narrator, Magda remarks: "I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue" (97). This patriarchal language is broken by her through the extreme bodily content and mediating it through the deconstructive and contradictory nature of diary entries. The fluid narrative involved in the diary entries transcends the rigid fixities and spreads outside from the male defined spaces. In the novel, she thinks of herself "exploring the pleasures of drowning, the feel of my body sliding out of me and another body sliding in, limbs inside my limbs, mouth inside my mouth" (53).

Here the semiotic bodily narrative challenges the symbolic in the process of signification. The patriarchal linguistic constructive is unsettled in the narrative of excessive bodily content. The negative attributes linked to the excessively speaking hysterical body of the protagonist gives voice to the muted female body. The talking body breaks the silence and challenges the patriarchal discourse. The unstable materiality of the body is mediated through the textual play of the epistolary narrative. The different interpretation of the same incident of bodily mutilation is represented in the numbered diary entries. By focussing and writing on the experiences of bodily violation, the narrative acts as a liberating one and reclaims the female body.



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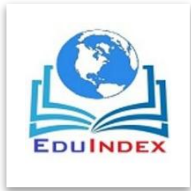
In the novel *Age of Iron*, the protagonist Mrs. Curren develops a narrative of cancerous body which counters the established discourses. By narrating about the nuances of cancer the disintegrating body is constructed in a postmodern experimental narrative. The textual nature of the bodily narrative links it to the injustices of history. The diseased body becomes a metaphor for the political turmoil out there in the society. By speaking from an unprivileged position the narrator unsettles the established power structures.

Our identity as one constituted by the corporeal reality of body is one that cannot be negated. All the empirical experiences that define our self are framed through it and it is also the physical limit to our identity. It is pivotal in the idea of subjectivity as it is materially present everywhere as a living reality. In colonialism the diseased body in a patriarchal framework is in the disadvantageous position of two fold oppression since it is moulded in the doubly antagonistic atmosphere of power practices and male dominance. The marginalized female in a colonial context is the extreme case of the 'other'.

When illness is reproduced in words in the form of a letter to her absent daughter, it acts as a bridge between the different spaces of the body and outside realities. It foregrounds the injustices outside by making the body as a site for socio-political and historical events. The cancerous body is metaphorical in nature since it is open to multiple reading. The state of disease grants the body an ethical position of advantage. The narrator says: "So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter... words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb" (9).

The opening up of the body to multiple reading elevates it a socio-political one from the level of the personal. The excessive materiality of the body is transformed into language and then it is reclaimed in the reading as the narrator writes in one of the letters: "These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on" (131). The heightened consciousness regarding the diseased state of the body enables the narrator to render it metaphorically. The historical and cultural inscriptions associated with it are decoded by the competent reader.

According to Susan Sontag, illnesses have always been used in representations to indicate the corrupt and unjust state of a society (72). The painful narrative of illness links the protagonist's pain to the pain of others also. The material body is metaphorically mediated through postmodern tactics and these voices from the margins problematize the powerful discourses of patriarchy. The position of 'other' has been questioned through the dynamics of excessive bodily materiality and its representation in a playful language in both these works. In a constructed language the suffering of the marginalized bodies is linked to the history also. It can be noticed that in both these postmodern narratives, the gendered discriminations



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and the disintegrating political body outside are foregrounded by the unnatural bodily attributes of the protagonists, especially by their illness.

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