

Under A Heap of Dust They Buried Her 'Cage'- Tragic, But No More

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Abstract:

Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices that Michael Foucault describes. But he is blind to those forms of subjection that engender the feminine body perpetuating the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed (Sandra Lee Bartky 27). This is similar to burying the already 'caged' in a heap of dust in order to avoid visibility, this is tragic but for how long can They [they] bury the very essence of women? This paper attempts to trace the struggle against such tragic entrapment of the female self amidst literature and life.

Keywords- Disciplinary practices, Michael Foucault, Feminine Body, Struggle.

Michel Foucault's works cut across disciplines, encompassing all branches of knowledge-medical, political, sexual, et all for he attempts to show that all systems of knowledge, past and present and yet to come, are linked within a great chain of being. This great chain of being is invariably implicated in and impacted by one's experiences of femininity and masculinity, vicariously through literature as an art that reflects life. But Foucault is criticized by Sandra Lee Bartky, for considering the body as if it were one throughout, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of the modern life

(Bartky 27), in his account of the disciplinary practices that produce the "docile bodies" of modernity in *Discipline and Punish*.

"The Order of Discourse" taken from *Discipline and Punish* raises the question of the freedom of what is spoken and written, particularly the role of social institutions, as, for example, the rise of prisons in the early nineteenth century and the exercise of power through the discipline of the "body", which is the Panopticon model oriented towards the production of isolated and self-policing subjects. This Panoptican process of observation and reflection has characterized a profound transformation in the exercise of power, which Foucault calls "a reversal of the political axis of individualization", as quoted by Sandra Lee Bartky. For example, the brutal methods and gross assaults used to regulate bodies in the early times by the Royal Individual, the Monarch, have now been achieved with ceaseless surveillance and a better understanding of the specific person, of the genesis and the nature of his "case". In Bartky's words, "it is a finer control of the body and its movements." Such "finer control" or surveillance leads to a self that is committed to a relentless self-surveillance which is a form of obedience to patriarchy. This panoptican model reduces the mechanism of power in its ideal form, in the name of safe haven.

Northrop Frye uses the metaphor of the caged bird for this system of psychological oppression

that immobilize, segment and freeze the women's spaces (since the panopticon parallels the cruel, ingenious cage). Women are identified with birds that are characteristically non-predators and lacking in intelligence or nobility, such as chick, canary, chicken, pigeon, dove, parakeet, and hummingbird. Breaking away, Isabel Allende, a feminist Chilean writer, identifies a girl with a strong "eagle" in *The City of the Beasts* (2002). Moreover, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) extensively uses avian vocabulary and imagery for understanding women's oppression. The association of women with birds may owe its oppressive quality to the cages that immobilize them. The protagonist, Edna Pontellier is a metaphorical portrayal of a bird that came out of the cage by the means of *self-reinvention of the body and soul* but chooses to drown herself in order to escape from a society that sought to confine her and leave her lying buried under the dust of oppression as a minimal figure.

In 1972, Mary Wollstonecraft published the first Feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of a Woman*, using symbolic birds to refer to women's oppression. According to Wollstonecraft, women are "confined in the cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch." This metaphor of the caged birds allude to women's entrapment in marriage, a social constraint which Edna Pontellier is forced to confront as she is relentlessly under surveillance by the inhabitants of her own house and even herself, because she always feels herself, because she always feels aware of her role as housewife. For instance, she forces herself to be in cheerful mode in front of her guests, even though she is *internally* upset.

This internal surveillance or internalized oppression is the result of the disciplinary practices she has learned about being a lady. For Bartky, these practices that control the female figure, its gestures or behavior, movements, and cosmetics turn women into prisoners once they become their own panopticon. Such drawing of the women by the patriarchal pen is spread across theories and literatures like a topping over the crust.

The interest in the application of discipline through discursive and other practices continues in the last of Foucault's work, the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. The seventeenth century was the period of sexual frankness, when codes governing obscenity, indecency were lax. The later seventeenth century- which Foucault characterizes as the age of sexual repression-choked sex with repression. The Puritan fathers in American thought of raising prisonhouses in order to constrain sexual liberties. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, set in the seventeenth century Puritan Boston, juxtaposes the proliferation of sexual discourses alongside the institution of confession and the importance of penance, as in the case of Hester Prynne, the female protagonist, as a retribution and re-incorporation for the ills of the flesh.

William Shakespeare, with complexity, associates the tragic and the comic contexts with sexuality. Desdemona in *Othello* is both witty and courtly, as well as admiring, if not envious, of her husband's martial prowess; in Emilia, wit is portrayed as the means of expressing women's sexual desires, just as with Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Shakespeare gives a hope through such a vivid picture of social transition but

condemns women to death for their wit and desires in tragedy (Cordelia in *King Lear* and Ophelia in *Hamlet* embody the same virtues and suffer the same fate) while he makes them triumphant in comedy, for instance, Rosalind in *As You Like It*. In *Shakespeare and the Experience of Love*, Kirsch has shown how in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio's misperception of Hero is based on his idealization of her. He cannot see her properly, because he sees 'with other men's eyes, the mind of the past, the myth of women's infidelity and sexual insatiability'. Thus, Shakespeare produces a representation of representation, forcing the readers to see how characters without a consolidated sense of self, force all their objects to fit in the archaic images.

Sandra Lee Bartky talks about how the women's bodies in a sense do not belong to women. Every moment of a women's public life is scrutinized and judged on the basis of what a man likes or wants her to look like. Men and society are as a whole are forcing discipline upon women and their bodies by coercing them to fit in these perfect moulds. Women's body movements were, and still are, coerced by fashion and as Iris Young argue, "restrictions on feminine body comportment generate a restricted spatiality in women as well, a sense that the body is positional within invisible spatial barriers." Female fashions, particularly since the Victorian era, seem to have been especially concerned with marking difference spectacularly on the body by constantly drawing attention to sites of 'otherness' such as the breasts, waist, buttocks and hips which have been exaggerated by internal organ displacement caused by the nineteenth century corset in particular, it is possible to draw

an analogy with Foucault's writing on torture, which he says must "mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy" (Foucault 1977, p.34). This is, according to Foucault, an art of disciplining the body and behavior, which in turn creates "docile bodies" or what we recognize as civilized bodies. A woman like this is objectified not only because of her appearance as an upside-down flower or an hourglass clock, but also by having her eyelids lowered and not looking as a subject does. She becomes an object to be seen, just like present day models do when being photographed to sell products. Their bodies are fragmented- into an admirable bosom, an elegant face, a small waist, or an angelic persona. Not only were dresses uncomfortable because of the underskirt frame, symbolizing a kind of birdcage, adding to the corset that aimed for a created "perfection" as if women were born imperfect.

Paradoxically, as women begin to realize an unprecedented political, economic, and sexual self-determination, they fall ever more completely under the dominating gaze of patriarchy and this gaze is alert everywhere to 'observe their actions.' This *fin-de-siècle* New Woman is seen as an embodiment of the over-confident Icarus (a classical allusion from Greek mythology), the son of Daedalus, who flew too high and near the sun with artificial wings that the heat melted the wax in the wings and he fell to his death. But, unlike the doomed Icarus, "a woman can use her strong, yet flamed, wings to remove herself from the world that cannot comprise her."

With changing time and space, women offer

resistance to patriarchy and step towards eroding the older forms of domination with widespread resistance to currently fashionable modes of *feminine embodiment* or *joyous experimentation*.

A popular literature of resistance has grown that confirms Feminist consciousness. For example, the novels of Toni Morrison bring the black women out of their ‘invisibility’ and create a world dominated by black women, feminizing spirituality and using female language. Morrison’s feminist consciousness enables her to see beyond the racial boundaries and showing identification of patriarchy as a greater evil. Though Toni Morrison is a black writer, she is referred to as a Nationalist who “first approached question of race and imagination with urgency and rigorous open-mindedness.” (New Republic, Brian Lanker). For example, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is the turbulent story of Picola. It launches a powerful attack on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women besides exposing “the ugliness” of black poverty, powerlessness and loss of positive self-concept. Picola is rejected by society, black community and her mother as ugly. Longing for love, educated under the *white look* she wants to escape her ugliness by acquiring a pair of blue eyes (Morrison). This story is developed as the story of African Americans search for identity and racial self-discovery in White America. Bombarded and humiliated by images of white beauty and the bourgeois ideals Morrison’s characters develop self-hatred and invite ostracism until their lives cease to have any meaning beyond seeking the unattainable- to be *white*.

In the Indian context, the Bollywood actor, Abhay Deol recently criticized the fairness creams on twitter saying that:

“If Indians were white, would there be dark and sexy?”

Furthermore, Morrison asserts that “freeing yourself was one thing, owning that freedom was another.” (BL 116). In the similar line of thought, the theme of freedom forms an inevitable part of the race relations between Black and White in almost all the Black writers and beyond. Here is a line of thought of different yet appreciable pathways chosen by these eminent writers for “owning that freedom.”

First, Franz Fanon believes in the concept of Assimilation followed by Immersion and Fighting. Second, Elaine Showalter chooses the trajectory of Imitation and Internalization to reach Self-Discovery but through the means of Protest and Advocacy. Third, Alice Walker’s faith lies in Suspension followed by Assimilation to reach the stage of Emergence.

Though Morrison criticizes the prevailing system and presents its limitations, her most powerful characters are those who help themselves. The protagonists of these novels were rarely a mullatto man; it was dominantly a mullatto woman. Barbara Christian makes a vital point when she discusses the need of mullatto women as the protagonist to point out physical, cultural and emotional miscegenation:

“Woman in the white culture is not as powerful as man. The existence of a mullato slave man who embodies the qualities of the master is so great a threat, so dangerous an ideal

even in fiction that it was seldom tried.”

Considering the sexuality as core, without references to race or color, Helen Cixous gives a rhetorical call provoking much speculation about sexual difference as an aspect of literary production and is critical of the gender codes that differentiate male language as rational, logical, hierarchical, and linear and female language as irrational, illogical. Cixous celebrates the difference of the female body and rejects the traditional psychoanalytic notions, which take male sexuality as the norm and model and suggests that female sexuality is not marked by a *lack* but is marked by *multiplicity and abundance*.

Such Feminist consciousness from all the corners of the world offer wider resistances to the oppression women are subjected to and tend to abolish the tragic aspect in the women’s life, giving way to a liberated and empowered self. This resonates with the new quirky- mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the *wittiest* of them all; replacing the *caging beauty* with wit and intelligence.

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