

COMMERCIALISATION OF WOMAN'S BODY AND THE POLITICS OF ITS AGENCY: READING THE SHORT STORY "KALINDI"

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Abstract

The feminist debate on the agency of women's body is nothing new in India or globally. The debate becomes even more intensified and heated when the question is of those women who employ their body to earn a living for themselves. Often put under the constraints of legislation and morality, such women's agency is often undermined. Even in literature, women who are prostitutes, bar dancers, theatre actresses, and so on, face the stigma of shame which renders them voiceless. Their silencing has resulted in the formation of opinions which either demonise them or victimise them as commodities. Such opinions, arising from the explicit use of their own bodies, downgrade their status in society. As various scholars have opined, the problem lies with these women taking control of their own bodies and putting a well-deserved price on their labours by choice – something which is indigestible to the patriarchal-capitalist society. On the other hand, the advocates of abolition of the commercial services involving female body maintain that exhibition of their bodies in public arenas could never involve agency or choice and it makes these women vulnerable. This is a never-ending feminist debate, trying to make some sense of the commodification of a woman's body. This paper addresses this debate by textually analysing an Indian short story, "Kalindi", written by Manisha Kulshreshtha. The story is approached through the lens of the politics of agency in case of commercialisation of body.

Keywords: politics of agency, indian short story, woman's body, prostitute, commercialisation of body, feminist debate

Introduction

The commercialisation of women's body has an age-old history in India. From the practitioners of embodied arts like *devadasis* and *tawaifs*, to the modern-day bar dancers and orchestra dancers, female body is commercialised in various forms. With this, however, arises the question of the agency of these women over their own bodies. Often compared to and regarded as sex workers, the women who put a price on their bodies by their choice have confused even the feminist scholars for quite a long time. While the neo-abolitionists advocate the termination of all those services which commodify women's body, regardless of their own agency, neo-regulationists feel the need of better working environment for women where they can feel safe about employing their bodies as they please (George, et al 64). Various researches showcase that there are many women who do not mind earning money through their bodies as long as the space of transaction is safe for them. The latter point of view maintains that rape, trafficking and other crimes to which such women are

prone, take place due to the criminalisation of their trade (McClintock 4). Their vulnerability in legal and social arenas make them an easy prey for the exploiters. Legislations made in favour of such women professionals have the potential of empowering them. Proper legal framework can help eliminating the exploitative elements in the trade like traffickers, pimps, middlemen, procurers, deceiving clients, etc., putting the agency of the body of such women in their own hands and uplifting their status socially.

McClintock talks about the "commercial sexual body" (1) which stands in between the transaction of body/sex and money. This transaction has often been deemed problematic by various feminists. One of the many issues that McClintock raises with such a transaction is that of the politics of agency. While women are allowed by the society to put a price on their bodies and the services their bodies offer, they are not allowed to have the agency which determine the transaction. The agency, globally, falls in the hands of the state or the men involved in the transaction.

In the case of prostitutes, McClintock notes, "A central tenet of the prostitution movement is the demand that sex workers be given the right to exchange sexual services on *their* terms and on *their* conditions, not on the terms of the state, the police, pimps, male managers, or clients" (2). This view opposes the opinion of those who think that the solution to terminate the exploitation involved in the trade of body is to stop this trade altogether. The problem is not the trade, but the agency.

The paper addresses the debate between neo-abolitionist and neo-regulationist perspectives on the profession of various categories of women employing their bodies for money through the analysis of Manisha Kulshreshtha's short story "Kalindi". The story relates to the life of Jamuna, a prostitute's daughter, and her son. Choosing a path which is different from her mother's but falls in a similar category when judged by society's morals, Jamuna is able to provide well for her son. Her son, however, is disconcerted and disgusted by Jamuna's unabashed hold of her own agency on her body. The story raises the questions of the agency of women over their own bodies through the character of Jamuna. In the story, Jamuna's perspective demonstrates that when provided with a safe and protective environment, women can benefit from the commercialisation of their bodies, if they want to indulge in such commercialisation. Jamuna's son, on the other hand, represents the worldview that the commodification of a woman's body, even by her own will, is shameful and immoral.

Conflicting Perspectives of Jamuna and Her Son in "Kalindi"

"Kalindi" by Manisha Kulshreshtha has originally been written in Hindi and translated to English by Bushra Alvi Razzack. The two main characters of the story is the mother-son duo. The mother is called Jamuna and the son remains unnamed throughout the story. The mother and the son live in the alley where one can find the women whose bodies are "available to all and whose musk draw men from far and wide" (Kulshreshtha 168). The place is an underbelly of a cosmopolitan city where all kinds of women live – from bar dancers and orchestra dancers to movie extras and prostitutes. Many of these women keep their profession hidden from their families, especially from

their fathers and sons. The first part of the story is narrated by Jamuna's son, who, by the virtue of his 'English' education feels quite out of place in his surroundings. The words like 'customer' are unsettling for him and he stays in a constant fear of his mother also having one.

Jamuna, however, does not have the time for such fears. She is busy providing a comfortable life for her son. Jamuna has tried her hands at every odd job that she could manage to get in that alley which is labelled for its disrespectability. She has been a sales girl, a tailor, and also a masseuse to the prostitutes in the locality. Her son tells:

Throughout my childhood I admired this woman. She was a fairy to me, whether in a cheap nylon sari or a cotton salwar-kameez. I admired her swarthy complexion, her curly hair, the dark circles under her eyes, her muscular back, her uncovered legs, her raised collarbone – everything. (Kulshreshtha 171)

Later, however, the son admits being angry by the sudden happiness on his mother's face which became a constant. The improvement in their financial condition also contributes in the resurfacing of his old fears that she could be prostituting herself when he is away at school. Even though he is being provided better education and facilities than any other child of the locality, he is angry at his mother and harbours suspicions. These suspicions make him bunk his school one day and follow his mother. He follows her to an art school where he sees her mother posing nude as a model for the art students. This epiphany makes the boy numb and he wonders, "Those prostitutes, the white nude women in those books – was there any difference between them and her body's naked display?" (Kulshreshtha 176). Jamuna continues to work in the art school even after she is old and never pays heed to her son's discomfort about her job.

The latter half of the story is narrated by Jamuna herself where she tells the readers about her struggles after she ran away from her mother's home – the same home in which she is living with her son – when she was young. Jamuna, unwilling to be the "expensive call girl" (Kulshreshtha 178) that her mother wanted her to become, ran away with a taxi-driver in her teenage. She was later abandoned by the driver when she became pregnant. After returning to her mother's house, she worked various odd

jobs before joining the art school. In Jamuna's version of the story, she is respected by professors and students alike at the art school and is called a "super professional" (181). She makes for herself a way to be independent and also brings up her son better than any mother in the same locality could bring up their children. Initially she is ashamed of posing naked in front of people, but later on, she comes to terms with her own body, learns to desire it and takes its agency. Even though she finds her own paintings grotesque, there is one which she admires. Named 'Kalindi', this painting is painted by Professor Mohnish and receives an award later. It is also published in a magazine called *Art Today*.

Over all these years of service, however, her son stays angry with her. Every time he meets her; he asks her to leave this job and do something else. The education provided to the son has made him a professional photographer. The denouement of the story comes when the son tells Jamuna that he is now taking up new projects to earn more money so that he could sustain his family. Jamuna mentions that she has seen the photos clicked by her son in the magazine *Art Today* under the section "Divine Nudity" (Kulshreshtha 183).

The Politics of Agency in "Kalindi"

While defining agency, Rajan talks of four parameters – choice, autonomy, desire and voice (117); and the story "Kalindi" employs all these parameters to show how Jamuna possesses an agency over herself. The story has both a narrative and a counter-narrative. If Jamuna's son gets to tell his version of the story, relating to his anger and suspicions, Jamuna also gets a voice which is very rarely given to the 'immoral' women in literature. She gets to narrate her version of the story and tell about her reasons for choosing the profession every day of her life till she gets old. The story, first and foremost, gives the agency by giving her a space and a voice in the narrative to the character who is morally undignified by the standards of the society. Moreover, the story provides Jamuna the autonomy of making her own decisions throughout her life. The decision of not joining prostitution like her mother is her own, just like the decision of working as a sales girl, a masseuse or a nude model in the art school – which she

does for a long duration of her life, even after her son becomes independent.

There are many differences among her previous jobs and her current job. The main one is that she gets a stable income from being a nude model to the art students. She is also respected by the people at the art school. Here, her own choice of commodifying her body gives her agency over herself. The other, more subtle reasons relate to the organisation of this work as compared to prostitution and other jobs. Here, Kulshreshtha, in the rejection of the job of salesgirl and masseuse by Jamuna, creates an analogy between these jobs and the job as a sex worker – both are unorganised and poorly-paid. Yet, the latter does not get the same acceptability in the society that the former two do. If Jamuna was earlier dissatisfied by the ill-environment of her mother's home, she is also dissatisfied by the uncertainty of the other jobs. Reiterating the remark of McClintock that she made for sex workers, the women who commercialise their body do not find the trade, but the social context demeaning (2). When she is ensured of a safe environment, a stable income, and protection against any sort of harassment, even earning through the display of her body becomes acceptable for Jamuna. In addition, she learns to own her body. She is not ashamed by the anger or suspicions of her son. In fact, she willingly lets her son follow her so that he can know about her job. Even after her son's multiple reprimands, she refuses to leave the job which is safe and pays better than any other job she has ever done. Moreover, the fact that she does not leave the job at the art school even after her son becomes independent and she becomes financially stable, suggests that she is transacting over her body by her own choice. The essential agency of her body also makes her come to terms with her ageing, sweating and wrinkling body which she knows is on display to so many people. Not only the students, but the viewers of their paintings see Jamuna's body as it is getting old. Her self-admiration for one of her paintings called "Kalindi" is the portrayal of desire in her for what she does which leads to self-acceptability and the sense of security in oneself.

In the process, one realises that the transactions which involve bodies in exchange of the money also deserve dignity in society, just like any other transaction. By extension, the story makes a point for all those people

who indulge more directly and actively in the flesh trade. Jamuna, as well as her son, is shown to be cohabiting and assimilating with the people of the locality who are indulged in all sorts of jobs. Jamuna dislikes her mother's profession just like her son dislikes hers. Jamuna, however, realises later that any work that pays could be respectable and there is no shame in using one's own body as a commodity. Her son also starts photographing nude models to earn better, realising the same but never admitting in front of Jamuna. The possession of agency by the mother and shame by the son for the same kind of job could be one of the reasons that the former is given a name, an identity while the latter remains nameless throughout the story. Thus, the agency over one's own body is necessary to demystify the misconceptions of respectability in society.

Conclusion

Short story "Kalindi" is an example of the neo-abolitionist and neo-regulationist debate over the commercial trade of women's bodies. The conceptions of morality and shame associated with these kinds of trades impact a large arena of professionals including sex workers, masseuses, nude models, bar dancers, strippers, porn actors, etc. Such conceptions arise from the legal and social unacceptability of these professionals which have long overlooked the issue of their working conditions. If the professionals are provided with a safe space like Jamuna to work and earn, they can gain agency over their own bodies. This safe space includes respecting and taking into account their terms of working rather than imposing the working conditions of the state or other stakeholders on them. It is the aggravating working conditions which subjects these workers to shame and exploitation; and makes them more

prone to crimes. Because of such perceptions, they are demeaned and judged not just by the society but by their own relatives like Jamuna and Jamuna's mother. Therefore, instead of attempting to abolish the trades which involve commercialisation of bodies, our social and legal framework should work towards bettering their conditions and uplifting their image. Thus, if "sex work is a labour issue" (McClintock 4), so are other professions which involve the trade of bodily services rather than the issue of morality and respectability.

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