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Rubana Huq

## In Transit

October 20, 2010



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Women amaze me.

A regular look at the women in the garment factories poke and open up a new consciousness. Their discussion on diet and divorce, their issues of diluting dogmas fascinate me. They seem to be more liberated than a rich handful living branded lives. In contrast, our Eves behind the machines truly spell Beauty. The threshold of power seems to have shifted from the Hyenas to the Helens. Every morning, the defiantly disciplined queue of women in our regular city routes tells us a new story. They speak of 'Fair and Lovely', powders and creams, ribbons and Indian lipstick that we would otherwise not hear of in our domestic bubbles. They hold the strings of the purse while their husbands line up to get tiffin-money during lunch time. Such is emancipation at 'their' level.

Who is this woman?

This woman today runs the tracks of time and discipline, and yet is a conscious duty-bound womb, a balancer. She juggles better than anyone set in the circus, she hovers around multiple job stations, is eager to be a multi-tasker and to prove to the world that she no longer is the woman of the past and that she has graduated to the next platform of evolution: she is the New Woman, writing a New Text. Her body indeed is the text of her survival. Whether it's the Selina-s in the workplace or 'us' writing a new page, the woman today is changed specie. Question is, does she strive to be the New Woman in an agony stemming from her struggle or has she evolved naturally? Answer is not quite so simple. She has struggled, yet she thinks she has overcome the hurt in the memory and has carved her way to the perfectly balanced entity. This does not belittle her metamorphosis, but it also does not ease the burden of the patriarchal past. The New Woman, from all the corners of the society today bears the stamp of the new ecriture feminine and is about writing about the struggle to 'be' and the anxiety of authorship that makes her new Tomorrow.

The elite Helen has a different focus: she has a new body, an improved body which checks diets, runs a few miles everyday and looks good on screen and in a ramp. Our modern Eve is almost anorexic... The body comes into play. Be it hunger or imposed diet, the body does play a significant role in the life of the Today Woman.

Susan Bordo, the modern feminist philosopher, cross references Anorexia with a direct response to powerlessness. Her essays clearly refer to 'body' being marked by the 'power' that 'shapes' and ends up being a parodic one. Bordo's body is a parodic body standing as a metaphor for culture. She refers to Foucault and calls the body 'docile' which is subjected to 'improvement' and is less socially oriented and is focused on self-modification. Bordo states the needs of a new political discourse that will chart the female body and at the same time re-explains the following:

-Power may be constitutive and not oppressive (meaning oppression may be an accepted discourse)

-Power may not only be belonging to a group rather it may be a network of practices, institutions, technologies that sustain dominating positions (meaning patriarchy is a matter of tradition and not a matter of grouping)

-Transformation is not constraining but liberating and our bodies unwittingly play a role by being “enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression.” Bordo calls Body the Text of Femininity and thinks that body suffers with the ideological construction of femininity.

This construct of the female body suffered the tag of ‘hysteria’ in the 19th century (Elaine Showalter); it has also suffered the tag of ‘agoraphobia’ in the 20th century (‘50s and ‘60s) where a woman was content in a “world of bedroom, kitchen, sex, babies and home.” (Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: Dell, 1962, p. 36)

A woman also often took recourse to anorexia as a token of “hunger”. As a practice, the female body has always had to be subjected to the traditional concept of a woman being and emotional and a physical nurturer and a female body also had to perennially remain as “the ministering angel.”(Bordo). Like Bordo, Susan Brownmiller defines femininity as: “a tradition of imposed limitations” in her book, ‘Femininity’, while Toril Moi’s woman is “gagged and chained to the feminine role.”

As a response to all the pre designated tags and labels, during post World War II, the new discourse on ‘The New Woman’, ‘What Women Want’ and ‘What Femininity Is’ arose. The new perspective of anorexia surfaced: a woman wanted to look like a male, and therefore a body lost the 19th century hourglass model of a woman. The woman of Today had become a “practical body” not in the brute biological sense but as a register of the “useful body”, a socially well adapted one. The new woman put herself into the text: “I write woman: woman must write woman.” (Helen Cixous: *The Laugh of the Medusa*) On the other hand, Julia Kristeva examined the bodily drives and affects that entered into language and activated creative, transformative and revolutionary mode of cultural production. She defined two forces which compete for expression in the language of poetry: i) symbolic that allows language to refer; ii) semiotic that bears the trace of language user’s own body and mother’s protolinguistic presence. Kristeva also referred to the “chora” (Plato) and looked at the word as the receptacle, the space and the womb, representing the body literature as the core.

While Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Guber both opine that western literary history is overwhelmingly male, they also defend that woman’s literary authority is covertly patriarchal. A female body of text, according to them often appears as “indefinable, alienated and a freakish outsider.” Therefore, the woman today moves towards redefining herself in terms of socialisation and this is where the ‘Re-visionary struggle’ a term used by Adrienne Rich becomes relevant to our discourse. A woman of today has begun re-visioning, “entering an old text from a new critical direction” as an act of survival. Today’s Woman writes about her struggle but her anxiety of authorship stems from her inheritance from her literary forefathers who taught her patriarchy. She writes today with “infection in her sentence” (Emily Dickinson). Every text of hers has become a text of weapon. Little can we deny that this new woman still inhales Despair, an agony inherited from “foremothers” who had conveyed their traditional anxiety to their bewildered children. The 19th century could have witnessed tight lacing and vinegar drinking to be frail, but today the same woman suffers from anorexia stemming from the same curse and discomfort. Emily Bronte and Charlotte Bronte’s heroines were mostly anorexic while Jane Austen’s ones closed their mouth on silence and inhaled the “power of refusal”. Emily Dickinson’s ones could have been “...hungry; all the Years” and could have opted for “Sumptuous Destitution”; Christina Rossetti’s ones may also have longed to “suck and suck on goblin fruit”... they all have one voice of longing to break out in the open, of severing the clutches of the accursed past and they all have finally ended in some form of a struggle to internalize the patriarchal structure. And, above all, women today have all won through their “disease” to a literary strength and artistic health.

I return to the women slugging behind the machines for eight to ten hours of day and I salute them for firmly treading their own grounds for mere survival.

I also return to address women who seek refuge in vanities in order to escape the rich-yet-strapped lives of theirs, not knowing any better. I speak of them, or I speak of ‘us’ in one breath, simply because all their/our lives are but a long strand of a same tale, a same drop of tear and a same single passion... in transit.

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Tags: [gender issue](#), [women](#)

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1. Mozammel on October 21, 2010 at 11:31 am

I read your article about women.

When you mention the garments worker talking among themselves about Indian lipstick and fair and lovely cream and her male partner is standing in the queue for overtime.

The woman develops anorexia nervosa to reflect her hunger control.

Women register as the practical in place of useful body.

Woman develops agoraphobia, woman like to be a man.

All these thoughts provoke me a distance of molecular length between man and woman.

But all the time this distance is utilised by powerful practical hominids in its favour and sometime it goes against man and sometimes against woman.

A mother nurtures her baby by natural instinct and whatever this baby is — either a boy or a girl, if the mother tries to put control over the boy he takes it with respect.

Here is the question of some intangible factor to maintain co-existing and this becomes the key factor and responsibility of a scholar, leader, teacher and any in hierarchy.

To me the two Susan ladies' voice reflect a distance between man and woman as absolute and everlasting truth.

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2. Akhtar Shah on October 20, 2010 at 6:05 pm

Thoughtful, velvety and scrumptious read. Left me pondering to the depths (of the article) on a chilly sunny morning.

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