

FEMALE MASCULINITIES: FATHOMING THE FLACCIDITY OF THE FRANGIBLE AND FORMIDABLE

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ABSTRACT: The article attempts to articulate the attributes, alignments and accoutrements of ambidextrous female masculinity to apprehend its conquering calibre and crippling conformance. The introduction to the essay delineates the disquisition of fluidity of gender through fictional frames of reference by applying an appropriate theoretical approach. The second segment of the paper lists reasons that contrive female masculinities and tries to look into a category of difference like space and place, amongst an assortment of actualities that contour the way fluidity in gender functions. The third section presents textual excerpts to validate the flaccidity of the formidable into frangible. The conclusion provides a root metaphor for female masculinity based on the analysis.

KEYWORDS: Female masculinity, Fluidity, Flaccidity, Formidable, Frangible.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Irrefragability of patriarchal parvanimity has since aeons deracinated egalitarianism for the female globally. The result has been creation of tessellated domains hypostatizing puissance and privilege to the masculine, powerlessness and proscription to the feminine. The female subject in its quest for *carte blanche* to assert self-definition has put forth resistant and subversive feminist ideologies which have yielded tangible success, though not in its entirety. The locus of focus in this paper is to examine whether attempts at definitional fluidity vis-à-vis gender has been an empowering enterprise. Against Judith Butler's concept of gender as a fluid variable the endeavour is to fathom the flaccidity of the frangible and the formidable in the performative process of feminine and masculine polarities. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, the paper shall analyse female masculinity through literary characters to interrogate its emancipatory or attenuating attributes. Icon of female masculinity from William Shakespeare's oeuvre – Lady Macbeth and Bhagirathi from the fictional saga *Tell It to the Trees* authored by contemporary Indian-Canadian author Anita Rau Badami shall serve as textual references for the aforementioned analysis. The choice of comparison between characters from literary texts distinct in its differences in genre, historic affiliation, cultural contextuality is factored in by the manifestation of female masculinity in the form of homicide.

II. RAISON D'ÊTRE FOR FEMALE MASCULINITIES:

In a world of gender asymmetry conferred identities create constricted lives. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts "controlling images" (69) crush "self-definition – the power to name one's own reality" (300). The pursuit for power to define oneself which is elusive to femininity is embedded in masculinity. Hence coalescing the feminine with the masculine as female masculinity is a contrivance to bridge the awning chasm between powerlessness and power. The susceptibility of the female subject also lies in internalising inimical identities. Shuddhabrata Sen Gupta points out that "identities are minefields..." (629). The destruction inherent in their implosion or explosion would necessitate restoration or re-construction of identities. To construe a cohesive, concrete identity combining the enduring attribute of femininity and unyielding aspect of masculinity, female masculinities get engendered.

A syncopated set of circumstances validated by "gender stratification" (Berger 4) has ensured dichotomies of deprivation and possession. Skewed competencies and incompetencies ascribed to the masculine and feminine have been emphasised by Helene Cixous's "list of binary oppositions" (Eagleton 147). Analysing the variant lineaments Mary Eagleton opines:

"Cixous's comments on patriarchal binary thinking...[where she] lines up the following

list of binary oppositions: Activity/ Passivity, Head/Emotions, Intelligible/ Sensitive...

each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance...victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor. Cixous passionately denounces such an equation of femininity with passivity and death as leaving no positive space for women:...(147).

Asperity of exclusion becomes yet another *raison d'être* for female masculinity – to deviate from preordained gender roles and asseverate as Judith Butler does, that “rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times” (Gauntlett). Can the intensity of involution in life be comprehended through binaries and the choice of fluidity between them? Does fluidity of androgyny transform frangible femininity to flourishing formidable feminine power? Do varied contextual realities operate only between the two polarities of masculine and feminine and the subversive coalescing as in female masculinity ? The multifarious methodology with which life actualizes demands comprehending it in all its multiple intertwined dimensions. Intersectionality as a theory with universal applicability efficaciously apprehends the multidimensionality and simultaneity with which categories of difference like gender, class, place, space, agency engineer the situations in life for the female subject.

III. FATHOMING FEMALE MASCULINITIES

The textual references chosen for study – Lady Macbeth and Akka are individuals whose positions in their psycho-social space are beyond binaries. The milieu they are situated in calls for examining their “identities as fields of intersection” (Sen Gupta 629). Highlighting the nature of intersections, Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill state that “intersections create both oppression and opportunity” (322). Lady Macbeth’s conscious scrutiny of her ‘self’ galvanises her towards acquisitive action. As Macbeth’s spouse, her gendered identity disallows her to wield power in anyway. This subordinate stature is oppressive. On the other hand her position in the aristocratic echelon as the wife of the general of the Scottish army subservient to the king, her femininity assigning her a role of passivity, her ability to exercise her agency to stake claim to royalty as the queen of Scotland when the occasion presents itself in the form of the prophecy of the witches, constitute the matrix of intersections that provide Lady Macbeth an opportunity to don the mantle of masculinity to plot and ensure the murder of monarch Duncan. In addition to this the Lady’s space – her home, the castle at “ Inverness” (Mac. 1.4.41) to which her agency is confined, becomes the invincible bastion where her guest Duncan, the sovereign of Scotland cannot foresee or escape his death. Patrick R. Grzanka rightly points out the pivotal role “that particular environments play in engendering privilege and disadvantage” (99). Thus the Lady’s domestic space privileges her and diminishes Duncan’s regal sovereignty. The “spatial dynamics...space/place...as another dimension of difference...” (Grzanka 99) results in the mutation of oppressive domestic space into one of optimal opportunity for Lady Macbeth to realise her motive into fruition. Adhering to her homely virtues as the hostess she lays out a cordial welcome to the King who commends her hospitality and addresses her as “our honour’d hostess!” (Mac. 1.6.10). The passive role of hostess is a perfect dissimulation for her proactive role in murdering the unsuspecting monarch. It is evident that an assortment of interwoven factors aid in the transformation of passive feminine compassion to active masculine manipulation and manoeuvring. To perform her masculinity of violence with unswerving focus, Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits to aid her in staying the course:

“...Come, you Spirits
That tend on *mortal thoughts, unsex me* here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage to *remorse*;
That no *Compunctious visitings of Nature*
Shake my *fell* purpose,...”(Mac. 1.5.40-45)

She wonders if Macbeth’s “ *milk of human kindness*”(Mac. 1.5.16) would efface the wickedness required in him to commit the regicide .When Macbeth is assailed by compunction regarding the treacherous murder, Lady

Macbeth by her ruthless allocution on her husband's cherished ambition of ascending the throne of Scotland marred by his moments of cowardice, exhorts him to conserve his courage constantly and execute the deed. Simultaneously we also notice a chink in the Lady's carapace of courage, when she anxiously waits for her husband to return after snuffing out Duncan's life. The unpredictability of the situation and fear if the plan had failed, all of which makes the moment marooned by incertitude makes her state:" – Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done't..."(Mac. 2.3.11-12) Her unassailable resolve does show her feminine filial compassion making one wonder about the fixity of gender fluid stance. Alternately the shift in performing gender seems to be so flexible that it defies rigidity.

Lady Macbeth's castle – her home, the place and space over which she wields absolute power favours her assumption that her female masculinity will be infallible in executing her purpose. She resolutely snatches the blood soaked dagger from Macbeth's hand to put it back in the murdered king's chamber and smear the king's guards with his blood. Lady Macbeth mocks at her husband's inconstancy and penitence, asserting that "A little water *clears us of this deed.*" (Mac. 2.2.65) The formidable indefatigability portrayed here soon crumbles to frangibility when we see Lady Macbeth the queen of Scotland in her somnambulist delirium. She cries in pathetic desperation "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!...Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.Oh!Oh!Oh!" (Mac. 5.1.30-33.45-50). The malevolence of her masculinity no longer makes her mighty but mauls her into a miserable death illustrating the flaccidity of female masculinity. The malleability of performing gender falls short of stability of stance and in an eternal state of flux, it jeopardizes the subject's resilience.

The second textual reference which lends itself to the interpretation of female masculinities is Bhagirathi – an octogenarian from a gynocentric narrative *Tell It to the Trees*. The possibility of the power of acquiring courage, to steer the course of one's life entangled in an imbroglia of cross-cutting dimensions of difference, attenuating the ossified mantle of gender socialisation is illustrated by novelist Anita Rau Badami. Having led her life as a victim of domestic abuse, Bhagirathi also known as Akka is crippled and confined to her wheelchair. She sheds the shroud of family's respectability with which she had encased herself for years and tells their tenant Anu Krishnan through her implicit narrative, of the mariticide she had committed. Akka narrates the story of a marauding elephant which destroys a sparrow's nest with her fledgelings, inspite of her fervent appeals to desist from doing so. Distraught at her loss, the inconsolable sparrow finds empathy in an ant who decides to teach the elephant a lesson. The ant creeps into the pachyderm's anus and keeps biting hard. As the mighty animal runs amok in pain, the sparrow hovers above the elephant's head chirping adding to the chaos. Not being aware of where he was heading to amidst the agony and cacophony, the elephant falls over a cliff losing his life. Akka says, "The moral of the story ...is that the mighty do not always win. You don't have to be as big as an elephant to get your revenge!" (Badami 164).

On the heels of the story of destruction and retribution, the old woman gives an account of her husband J.K.Dharma's death to her visitor:

"You want to know how he died? Henh? He froze to death. Right outside our front door. And me fast asleep inside. Didn't hear the doorbell, didn't hear him knocking away,bang,bang,bang! They found him the next morning, propped up against the front door. Frozen solid, like a statue. God punished him for making my life a misery!" (Badami 167).

Akka had exercised her masculinity within the precincts of her ordained feminine space – home. She had been deliberate in the act of letting her monster of a husband freeze to death. In the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed, the place and space of oppression and redemption too matters. Grzanka elucidates this aspect of spatial supremacy, inclusion and exclusion by drawing our attention to:

...consider the centrality of space in the ordinary occurrences that shape everyday life,.... Space and place are integral to how social interactions and behaviors are encouraged and discouraged, sanctioned and condoned, celebrated or castigated, and the meanings and norms attached to spaces help to signal, who "belongs" in certain places, and who does not (100).

Accordingly Akka confined to her domestic space – the site of her being a victim of spousal abuse, utilizes the same place to put an end to her misery. She does it by barring her tormentor access inside the house in a blizzard, just like her walled domesticity had excluded her from seeking recourse in the world beyond it, which was her husband's domain. Akka's agentic aura in deracinating the cause of distress diminishing her life does not avow itself when her son Vikram batters his first wife Helen. As a woman who has been a victim of domestic abuse, she empathises with her daughter-in-law but does nothing beyond offering words of solace to Helen and counsel to curb his vicious behaviour to Vikram. Helen clandestinely makes good her escape from her crucible of cruelty, leaving behind their young daughter Varsha. Akka does not disclose her son's bloody satanic streak as a wife-beater, when she speaks to her prospective second daughter-in-law Suman from India.

When her son unleashes his orgy of domestic violence on his wife Suman and daughter Varsha, Akka is incapable of putting an end to it or protecting her vulnerable daughter-in-law and grand daughter. She tells her grand-daughter to confide about her father's cruelty to the trees as they would keep the family's secret sepulchred from the world outside. "Go tell the trees", Akka said. "They won't tell a soul" (Badami 25). It is obvious that Akka's attitude of reinforcing the gender role of acquiescence and silence is in contradiction to the bold step she had taken to unfetter herself from stifling servility and sorrow. Grzanka notes that "the particulars of landscapes and geographies create sites of oppression and activism that are inextricable from racial, class, gender, and sexual dynamics" (99). The place where the Dharma family home was situated, stood secluded from the other human settlements amidst a gelid landscape of a tiny town in northern British Columbia. Hence the operability of the dynamics of place and space made the home a site simultaneously harbouring oppression and opportunity.

Be it Lady Macbeth, the bereaved mother bird in the anthropomorphic tale narrated by Akka or Akka herself – each one of them put forth a portmanteau persona of the feminine and masculine manifesting the fluidity of gender. But the force of flow to inhere the two gender polarities is riddled with enmeshed spatial aggrandizement which they strategically scheme to augment their circumscribed place and space. As Valentine "reminds us that contests over power not only happen in space, but over space – who can use it, who can have it, who has rights to it, who is changing it" (Granzka 101). Therefore Butlerian "gender fluidity" as it emerges from the analysis is not facile fluidity but one fraught with friction while negotiating a farrago of facets, space and place with all its allied attributes being just one among them. Female masculinity while being the bestower of regality to Lady Macbeth and vanquisher of victimhood to Akka weakens into velleity falling short of constant contradistinctual consonance. Queen Macbeth allows her robust resolve to reduce to a ruinous rubble and Akka quells herself into being quiescent choosing to let perpetration of domestic abuse percolate into the next generation of her family. Therefore we see their daunting female masculinity doused by flaccidity, stultifying themselves and those who were in need of their strength of purpose as their succour.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the aforementioned literary characters prove that though gender as a fluid variable accords femininity the choice to empower itself by donning the mantle of masculinity, the emancipatory attribute is devoid of the firmness to remain formidable and fizzles out as being flaccid rendering the subject frangible. This can be summed up through the root metaphor of a clam. As happy as a clam is an idiom which connotes happiness and contentment. The clam's sense of inviolability lasts only as long as its hard mantle remains intact. The moment its mantle is pried open it renders itself vulnerable to the dangers lurking in its environs. So is female masculinity –evanescent in its empowering ability, lapsing into the state of being sequacious. Irrefragability of female masculinities therefore rests on the extent to which a conscious individual allows or disallows the percolation of gender socialisation, streamlines the appropriation of space and place with sagacity and inures herself to the censorious world of patriarchy.

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