

An Exploration of the Human Body in Post-Colonial Indian Drama

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Abstract

The human body has become a recurring theme in modern literature, as critics have studied it as an occult metaphor from various artistic perspectives. The present research paper entitled *An Exploration of the Human Body in Post-Colonial Indian Drama* aims to study the presentation of the human body in Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1963) and Mahesh Elkuchwar's play *Apocalypse* (1992). The present research adopts multidisciplinary theoretical approaches to explain the religious, philosophical, spiritual, social, cultural, materialist, and artistic perspectives of two dramatists, which reveal Indian's perspective on the human body. The main argument of this paper is that the ways Elkunchwar and Tendulkar perceived, interpreted and critiqued human needs through the metaphor of the human body in the post-colonial Indian context shows that modern man cannot easily escape three types of influences: first, patriarchal fundamentalism; second, socio-cultural power politics; third, religious-cum-philosophical idealism. This research paper studies the two soliloquies: Chandu's soliloquy and Leena Benare's soliloquy, selected from the above two plays. It helps to examine how two playwrights, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Vijay Tendulkar, look at the weaknesses and strengths of the human body and how they comment on human freedom of speech and expression at the personal and public levels. It will contribute to understanding the new image of the human body created in post-modern literature against the socially constructed primitive image.

Key Words: Individuality, Patriarchal fundamentalism, Self-pity, Spiritualism, Unmarried motherhood

Introduction:

The perennial debate about the interdependence of the human body, mind, and spirit has raged through the ages. The concept of the human body is interpreted in different ways in religion, philosophy, psychology and science (biology). In religious philosophy and spiritual theories, the human body has been conceived as an articulation of five interdependent elements: the earth, the water, the fire, the air, and the ether (sky). Moreover, it is considered a compendium of five vapour-like-astral bodies: the causal body, the intellectual body, the mental body, the

energy body, and the physical body. Furthermore, in Buddhism, “*Rupa* matter, *Vedana* feeling, *Sanna* perception, *Samkhara* mental states, and *Vinnana* consciousness” (Dhammananda351) are regarded as the five psycho-physical components of the individual. It shows that the religious philosophy conceives the human body as a vessel which contains five physical elements, five *karmendriyas*, five *jnanendriyas*, and *manas* (the soul or mind).

The spiritualists, who emphasize the in-depth study of the soul, talk about two kinds of souls: the Universal Soul, which is present in the whole of the

universe and the human soul, which dwells in the human body. Likewise, they talk about two kinds of the self or the mind: the higher mind, which is the best essence of human beings and the lower mind, which is the vile essence of human beings. It helps in understanding the interdependence of the body, the mind, the soul, and the spirit. However, the four spiritual beliefs: firstly, the soul precedes the mind; secondly, the soul is the higher self, the mind is the lower self; thirdly, the mind is the instrument of the soul, and it never becomes the guide; fourthly, the mind must be left to transcend the spiritual path, which altogether reveals how spiritualists underestimate the body and mind and uphold merely the soul or how they neglect the vital roles the body and the mind in developing the intellect and receiving the insight.

Similarly, the human mind is a unit of study and critique in psychology. Psychology gives more importance to the mind than the body; it claims that the human personality is the outcome of some complex actions and interactions between the body and the mind. Furthermore, it considers the physical characteristics of the human body; it studies human thought patterns in terms of the phallic aspect of the male and female body. Psychologists believe that the mind precedes/proceeds the body and that the body is a medium for the mind to articulate the conscious, subconscious and unconscious motives, which unfold the dark side of human personality, shield self-esteem, hide inferiority crisis, and above all protect the human self from all kinds of fears, anxieties, worries, doubts, and insecurities. The human body has been conceived as a composite of physical, emotional, and cognitive components because Freud asserted, "The ego is first and foremost a

bodily ego" (Freud, 1923 [1962: 26]) or he regarded that the ego, the conscious sense of self, is fundamentally the bodily ego.

Since the concept of sanctity has been held in high regard in almost all religious traditions, the physical needs of the human body are underestimated on moral grounds. For example, sex between unmarried couples or extramarital affairs is considered immoral. It gave rise to many ideas, such as the human body being the source of inappropriate, lustful desires and abominations and that sexual desire enslaving man. It led to feelings of disgust for the body and aversion to sensual or sexual pleasure, which later became dimensions to measure human attachment to the body. Thus, the human body has become a fallen and immoral object, subject to shame and guilt and needs to be disciplined against psycho-physical weakness, corruption and degradation.

It shows as the soul is a critique in religion, the spirit is a critique in philosophy, the mind is a critique in psychology, and the morphology of the human body is a critique in (science) biology, which altogether disregards the body. On the one hand, it disrupted the preconceived notion of the divine body of religion and philosophy and, on the other hand, it created a complication in understanding the true nature, function, and purpose of the human body. It creates the mind-body-soul problem, i.e., determining interrelationships between the body, the mind and the soul or decoding how they communicate with one another and maintain balance despite their dualistic structure. This fragmentary and disrupted depiction of the human body seemed against the religious thinking of the divinity of human beings. It spurred materialism to idealize the physical body

and to think that the human body is a tool to receive and enjoy sensual and sexual pleasure.

Such material complexes are attractive to psychoanalysts and anthropologists, artists and writers. These new branches of learning sought to resolve the rationalist belief in the coexistence of body, mind, soul, and spirit. On the one hand, they consider the human body as flesh and blood or the physical elements necessary for life and on the other as a medium for conveying messages and ideas and expressing human attitudes, feelings and aspirations. Thus, the human body is conceptualized only as a medium of expression in art and a subject and object of study, it has become a meaningful field, space and subject for expanding new theoretical perspectives in literature.

Discussion:

Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) and Mahesh Elkunchwar (born 1919) are among the legendary Indian dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad who took Indian drama to a new height with technical experimentation and innovative themes. In this research paper, the following soliloquies have been considered to explore Tendulkar and Elkunchwar's views of the human body.

Leena Benare

Miss Leena Benare is the lead character in Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The court is in session*. She is presented as an intelligent and independent woman or a woman of her convictions. She is a teacher by profession and a single woman of about thirty-four years. In the play, so many charges are imposed against her. First, she is accused of having attempted suicide out of disappointment in love. Further, she is accused of having an

affair with a married professor. Then, she is accused of being "pregnant before marriage" (69). Subsequently, she is accused of raising the offspring of her "immoral relations" (67). Finally, she has been charged with the crime of infanticide under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. Then, the court gives her "ten seconds" (72) to speak about the charges against her. In the following monologue, she answers all those accusations and reflects on the importance of the body. She exclaims:

Yes, have a lot to say. . . . I knew that life is no straightforward thing. People can be so cruel. Even your own flesh and blood don't want to understand you. Only one thing in life is all important-the body! You may deny it, but it is true. Emotion is something people talk about with sentiment. It was obvious to me. I was living through it. It was burning through me. . . . I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love. . . . How was I to know that if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone-if you felt that just being with him, gave a whole meaning to life--and if he was your uncle, it was a sin! Why I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was. . . . I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. . . . For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That's all! Again, the body! [Screaming.] This body is a traitor! [She is writhing with pain.] I despise this body- and I love it! I hate it-but-it's all you have, in the end, isn't love it! It will be there. It will be yours. Where will it go without you? And where would you go if you reject it? Don't be ungrateful. It was your body that one burnt

and gave you a moment so beautiful, so blissful, so near to heaven! Have you forgotten? It took you high, high, high above yourself into a place like a paradise. Will you deny it? I want my body now for him [her unborn baby] alone (Tendulkar, 72-75).

Benare's soliloquy appears to be a sincere, powerful, and empowering utterance of a subdued woman. It stands for Benare's self-justification, self-explanation of bodily needs against punishment, and proclamation of single motherhood, which is contrary to the social script and unrealistic. First, she accepts all the accusations and confesses her sin of falling in love twice, where she was deceived, abandoned, punished, and held responsible for her exploitation. Her words explain that when a married man seduces an unmarried woman, "The whole responsibility of morally upright behaviour is bulldozed on women" (Subha Tiwari). As she discovers that all men are interested in her body, she expresses her ambivalence about the body.

On the one hand, Benare says that she hates her body because it has disrupted her life and that her pregnancy has become a source of horror, shame and disgust. Her suicide attempt reveals her dislike of her body and her self-denial. On the other hand, she says that she loves her body because it holds her child inside, and she is grateful for her body because (unwanted) pregnancy gives her a purpose to live. So, she needs her body to have a mother and a father for her baby. Moreover, her determination to bear her child makes her bold enough to affirm the positivity of single/unmarried motherhood, the value, strength and power of the female body, and assert the empowerment of fertility. Her bold move is to "escape from

structures of dominance and submission" (Rich 1979), challenging the traditional conception of married motherhood against unmarried motherhood amid her sexual violence, failed marriage attempts, and threatened motherhood in the personal and public spheres and outside the social and cultural spheres.

Benare's rational choice of unmarried motherhood or unwanted pregnancy and childbearing, against her mind and body, is open to multiple criticism and controversy. It shows that since the female body has been conceptualized as a tool for achieving sexual pleasure, producing children, and nursing family members, it has become the property of others and a source of subjugation and vulnerability. Men and women are fundamentally different because of the biological devaluation of women in patriarchal societies. A woman's existence is embedded in physical consciousness. Therefore, the body is an essential marker of class differences. Moreover, it presents a feminist consciousness and echoes the feminist insistence on reconstructing a new theory of unmarried motherhood against the stereotyped theories of female (dis)capacity, power relations, and married motherhood, which are products of materialist attitudes and socio-cultural politics. Likewise, her abortion is a stain on motherhood and a gross violation of women's rights. It echoes the feminist assertion that every woman has the right to decide what to do with her body. Thus, the unmarried pregnancy and the compelled single motherhood exemplify male oppression and sexual violence, challenge traditional assumptions and reveal the existential struggles of unmarried women/mothers. "Benare's long, but unspoken soliloquy symbolize [sic] that

women are not allowed to voice out their thoughts, feelings in our male-dominated society” (Garima), which not only ignores women's physical needs but also their existence, destroys the soul/self and crushes the spirit/essence.

Chandu

Chandu is an important character after Parag and Abhay in the Wada trilogy. In *The Old Stone Mansion*, the first part of the trilogy, Chandu is presented as a servant, who is treated like a doormat in the family. This part mainly depicts his mental anguish. In *Pond*, the second part of the trilogy, he is presented as a pious man who first leaves his home to live in a temple and then abandons his village in search of the pond. This part mainly depicts his physical suffering, spiritual restlessness, and quest for the pond. In *Apocalypse*, the third part of the trilogy, he is presented as a failed spiritual seeker to discover the pond. This part mainly depicts the frustration that comes after his spiritual failure.

In *Apocalypse*, when Parag goes to Kashi to immerse his grandmother's ashes in the river Ganga, he finds Chandu on Dashaswamedh Ghat in an utterly degraded condition in a line of beggars. So, Parag brings him back home. Abhay wonders how his spiritual journey, which started following the 'call' of the pond, ends up on the beggars' line. In the following soliloquy, Chandu tells about his failure in searching the pond, and he holds responsible his body for the failure. Chandu tells:

I'm tired. How long can I run away ... (Silence.) from the world . . . from myself. . . . I thought at first there might be some purpose, some design. . . . I walked through jungles and thorny bushes,

with bruised and bloodied body, following its wild call. I saw nothing. I found nothing. . . . God! Burn my eyes. Down to their sockets. Scorch this vile body, this contemptible life. . . . I had created my pond and deluded myself all along. My life was over. Finished. I had wasted it, running after that mirage, but with all its defects, my body still existed. I had never given it its due. Never heeded its call. (Silence.) So I threw myself headlong into the lusts of the body. Grabbed whatever pleasures I could get, wherever I found them. Even then, why does the mind continue to be torn? Why does every pleasure produce an instant blister on the soul? (Silence.) There is no joy, no pond. This body and its writhing pain are the only truth. (Silence.) Who is responsible for this? No answer to this question exists in the entire universe (Elkunchwar, 277-78).

Chandu's soliloquy reveals that as a pious man, he believed that human life has some definite purpose and started his search for the pond. His quest for the pond, initiated by his abandonment and isolation, reveals two motives. First, it exhibits a religious motif of leading a simple, peaceful, and love-inspired life of spiritual persuasion and seeking the embedded essence, meaning, purpose, and design of human life. Second, it exhibits his escapist intent to escape family responsibilities, the harsh realities of worldly life, or his physical and psychological sufferings. In short, Chandu's search for the pond appears to be an extended metaphor for spiritual discovery, self-realization, salvation or Moksha.

Furthermore, Chandu's soliloquy appears as a meditation on the role of one's physical body in spiritual progress. Being

a spiritual seeker, he continues a rigorous spiritual journey by neglecting bodily needs, suppressing passions, and ignoring craving sensual desires for many years. However, he fails in seeking the true meaning of life. It changes his mood, corrupts and distracts his mind. Frustrated and tired by spiritual delusions and illusions, Chandu gives up his religious trance and turns to satisfy his body. He frankly admits that his physical cravings are responsible for his spiritual failure. While expounding reasons, he holds responsible for his body and curses it. He tells why he turned to satisfy the needs of his body and was trapped in the webs of bodily lusts, lingering desires, and suppressed or neglected passions, and how he lost his balance and fell off the spiritual path. At the same time, he expresses a new realisation that sexual/sensual pleasures are difficult to satisfy. Such pleasures neither calmed his mind nor his soul, but they left them to tear further. Besides, Chandu tells how each moment of pleasure created an intricate ripple of fear, abhorrence, anguish, guilt and aversion in him. This realisation leads him to conclude that there is no joy in spiritual search and sensual pleasures. Human life is a mirage, and the spiritual quest is very intricate. The only truth is the body and its pains. And he has no answer to know why it happened to him.

Chandu's failure implies his failure to control his wild desires, passions, and carnal lust. By this, he is a symbol of sceptics, who are caught up in the flesh-blood conflict and divided into the dualities of body/mind, or soul/spirit, and who consider themselves to be only a physical body, never leaving physical consciousness. His scepticism seems to be a result of materialistic thinking. Along with his reattachment to his body, his

inability to understand the interrelationship and interdependence (i.e., opposition) between body, mind, and spirit appears to be the main reason for his failure. Thus, his body becomes a great source of insecurity and preoccupied sensitivity, a curse to his mind and spirit and a hindrance to spiritual progress.

As Leena Benare and Chandu seem chained into webs of bodily impulses, they become the symbols of the human attachment to the body, and the human body emerges as a mystique metamorphosed mega-metaphor of all human clinging and cravings associated with the body, the mind and the intellect. It reminds us of the Buddha, who talked about the thirty-two kinds of impurities and ten kinds of fetters in the human body, and about the six passions *kama* (sex drive), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *mada* (ego), *moha* (infatuation), and *matsara* (hatred), which are considered root causes of human sufferings. Furthermore, Leena Benare and Chandu evolve as archetypes of the worldly people who fail to realize, "There is no fire like lust, no grief like hate, no net like delusion, no river like cravings" (251) and "From affection springs grief; from affection springs fear (213), and to understand that "From lust springs grief, from lust springs fear" (215) and "From craving arises grief, from craving arises fear" (Dhammananda, Verse 216) which the Buddha taught.

Leena Benare and Chandu's reflection on their physiological needs reveal three points of view. The first is a positive perspective. It comes to the surface when diving deep into passions, they talk about the glorious sensual pleasures they get to the physical levels and praise their bodies. It shows their love

and attachment to the body. The second is a negative perspective. It comes to the surface while from the recess of the heart, they project their sufferings, pains, and irritations they receive at the mental level and hate their body. It shows that their excessive attachment to the body is the root cause of their anguish. The third is a new awareness. It comes to the surface when they reflect on the disgusting impurity, disability and inferiority of the human body. They realize that the body wrapped around the skeleton, which appears as a bundle of flesh, blood and bones, is a perennial source of reprehensible desires and an empty vessel, bubble, illusion, or mirage that creates destruction. These three points of view of Leena Benare and Chandu show their bodily ego, misrepresentation of personality, self-delusion and new consciousness. It helps to underline Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar's viewpoints of the human body.

Tendulkar's views of the human body:

Leena Benare's soliloquy reveals Tendulkar's realistic style, materialistic attitude and feminist perspective. The things that show Tendulkar's approach toward the human body is materialistic are Benare's looking towards her body as a medium for satisfying physical needs, seeking the meaning of life in sensual pleasure, condemning her body after disappointment and talking about the opposition between the body and mind. The ways Tendulkar reflects on moral, social and political considerations regarding the exploitation and the inferiority of the female gender shows that the philosophy of flesh and blood is central to his writings.

Similarly, Benare's vivid and frank depiction of the ugliness and the preciousness of the female body, the violence of the mind against the body, and women's desires and bodily needs reveal Tendulkar's realism. Furthermore, Tendulkar's questions, which comment on gender inequality, power politics and the position of women in a patriarchal society, set associated with the socio-cultural ideology and traditional concepts of morality, help to understand his realistic approach. During an interview, Tendulkar says, "I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. . . . My work has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live" (Bhaneja).

Likewise, the emergence of unmarried motherhood and the bearing of an illegitimate child as powerful symbols manifest Tendulkar's feminist perspective. The unmarried motherhood emerges as a metaphor for fertility, and the unborn child arises as a purveyor of creativity, empowering the female body. Although this magnification goes against sexual orthodoxy, religious ideas and social morality, it has universal appeal in the postmodern context. The nobility or exaggeration of the illegitimate unborn child as a boon, which appears as a slap to orthodox societal principles, echoes a reproduction of feminist theory or the critical approach advocated by feminist scholars in art and literature since the 1970s.

Elkunchwar's views of the human body:

Chandu's soliloquy reveals Elkunchwar's expressionistic style, religious attitude and spiritual perspective. The way Chandu, Elkunchwar's protagonist,

honestly blames his body for his failure; speaks of the weakness of the body in the religious context; emphasizes the significance of pleasing physical needs; abandons spiritual pursuit and turns to fulfil his neglected physical needs, as a true expressionist rebel, which shows that the playwright's approach is essentially expressionistic.

Similarly, the following three determinants show that Elkunchwar's approach to the body is fundamentally religious: First, Chandu's character represents a subclass of conservative devotees. Second, his austere practices resemble religious asceticism. Third, his physical and mental sufferings, expressed through his wounded body, can be interpreted in religious terms as the result of sacrifice and renunciation.

Likewise, the way Elkuchwar presents the human body as the great barrier to spiritual accomplishments reveals the playwright's spiritualism. The way Elkuchwar puts at the centre metaphysical probing in the spiritual framework and speaks about the association and dissociation of the body, mind (self), and soul (spirit), Chandu's soliloquy appears as a reproduction of some spiritual theory of self-realization (or spiritual awakening), and the playwright appears as a spiritualist, who deals with religious ideas and moral values. It makes apparent that Elkunchwar believes the man is a soul-wearing-physical body and that the man is neither solely a perishable corporeal entity (body) nor an immortal

entity (soul), but it is an odd mixture of earthly and divine qualities.

Conclusion:

This research confirms that the human body has become a locus of multi-layered discourse in post-colonial Indian drama. Primarily, the human body has been used as a religious symbol to express religious precepts and moral ideals, to explain the dichotomy of body and mind, to reveal the divinity in human trivialities, and to symbolize the spiritual essence of the material man. In the plays of Tendulkar and Elkunchwar, the human body appears to be a medium for representing the power of masculinity and femininity, as it expresses the power relations existing between the two sexes. In material terms, it becomes a metaphor for moral corruption, degradation and perversity; in religious terms, it becomes a metaphor for manifesting transcendental perfection and divinity; in socio-cultural terms, it becomes a metaphor for reproducing moral values and political idealizations. This complex attitude, which conveys transformed social reality, cultural conditions, and artistic perceptions, seems partly a result of the influence of western materialistic philosophy and psychoanalytical theories and partly a result of multiculturalism and post-structuralism. However, it requires the attention that it seems against the artistic representation depicting the human body as an ideal and elegant object and as the perfect symbol of beauty and man as a microcosm of the universe.

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