

“Epistemology of Daily Lives!”- Representation of ‘body’ in select Jhumur songs.

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Abstract

The tantalizing rhythm of Jhumur heals the aridity of the Manbhum region. As the songs are inseparable from the lives of the local people, materiality and embodiment forms the core of the songs. Keeping the widening spectrum of Body Studies into consideration, this paper considers the representation of the ‘body’ in select Jhumur songs and the significance they bear on a metaphorical level.

Keywords: Materiality, Jhumur, Manbhum, Body Studies

Representation of the body and corporeality is a crucial issue in Jhumur songs as the narrative of Jhumur is essentially material and sensuous. Though the sensuality has often been interpreted as ‘obscene’, rigid moralization of the representation can’t be taken as the ultimate aesthetic response.

“*Adirasatmak*” is the word that has often been associated with the tradition of Jhumur. Yet it needs to be looked at, how ‘body’ is represented and codified inside the cultural text of Jhumur. Looking at different traditions of Jhumur with a keen eye on the representation of corporeality will be a very useful portal to understand the very essence of Jhumur. Leena Chaki opines that both women and men used to work in the arid lands for agricultural purposes. As it was an extremely difficult task, they lifted the burden of hardship, at least a bit, by choosing not to work silently, i.e. by taking Jhumur as a companion (Chaki 35). She mentions two specific reasons.

“Ek, parisram laghab; dui, jangal er moddhe kaj korte-korte gan er maddhyam e ek dawl dur er ar-ek dawl er kache tander upasthiti r janan deye. Anek ta hank para r mawto.”

[(trans. “Firstly, for lifting the burden. Secondly, while working in the jungle, one group asserts their presence to the other group. Like a loud bellowing to call someone.”) Chaki 35]

Thus, it is inevitable that Jhumur is intrinsically linked to the lives of the people of Manbhum.

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As a result corporeality forms an important factor in them.

A huge corpus of theories have focused on the representation of bodies. Approaches differ, however, in response to how bodies are conceived in the cultural text. In the constructionist approach,

“Bodies are shaped in myriad ways by culture, by society, and by the experiences that are shared within a social and cultural context. In addition, bodies are shaped by history, and as such, they are always changing, as are our ideas about them. Bodies are contingent: molded by factors outside of the body, and then internalized into the physical being itself.” (DeMillo 5)

On the other hand essentialism opines that,

“...bodies are defined largely or entirely by their biological makeup– bones, muscles, hormones, and the like – and that much of human behavior can also be reduced to many of those biological functions.” (DeMillo 7)

Body as a social construction and body as a biological category has been placed side by side to theorize it. Theorists like anthropologist Mary Douglass, who was concerned with “universal human anxiety about disorder” and subsequent categorization of natural and social things (DeMillo 11), Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, Michael Foucault’s “body/power”, as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas of “habitus”, “cultural capital” and “physical capital” all are mainly centred round the body. However recent feminist scholarships on body studies focus on topics like,

“the role that fashion plays in the construction of the female body... how women’s experience of their bodies is shaped in part by being subjects of the “male gaze”... or how women’s bodies are constituted through the discourses of science.” (DeMillo 16)

Keeping this in view, how ‘body’ has been defined in Jhumur songs, needs to be introspected upon.

Representation of the body in local cultures needs to be looked at, as it might open a new portal for body studies, beyond the essentialist/constructionist debate.

Jhumur is a folk song and performative tradition popular in the entire Purulia district and certain parts of other districts like West Midnapore, Bankura, Bardhaman of West Bengal and

in different parts of Jharkhand and Bihar, widely known as Manbhum region. Though Manbhum happens to be a region that is not an official geographical entity at present in the map, yet it is very much alive in the cultural cartography of the Jhumur tradition, retaining its socio-historical significance.

Ramanath Das in his book *Jhumurer Dhara O Bibartan* (trans. “Tradition and Evolution of Jhumur”) divided Jhumur into four categories that evolved with time: *Tanr* Jhumur, *Danrshaliya* Jhumur, *Bhadaria* Jhumur and finally, *Darbari (Baithaki)* Jhumur.

Tapan Kar writes,

“Sangeet Damodar er shei bahu prachalita ukti ti ke smaran korte hoy, “Pray Sringarabahula”...Ataeb, prathamei swikar korte hoy, Sangeet Damodar anujayi Jhumur Gan e Sringara Ras er prachurjya chilo.”

[(trans. “We must recall the popular saying of Sangeet Damodar ‘Pray Sringarabahula’...As a result, we must admit that according to Sangeet Damodar, Jhumur Song had an abundance of Sringara Rasa.”) Kar 62]

As Sringara Rasa appears to be the predominant Rasa of the Jhumur songs, body forms a very significant aspect of it. Body has been described with a brilliant blend of Romantic and Realistic sensibilities. One Panta Shaliya Jhumur needs to be mentioned,

*“Sakalei shui uti go biti namhal er taka.
Namhal e taka sahaj e to ar mafate hoyna
Chamranga sehe aye kali porilo.”*

[(trans.

“Oh he asks for my hard earned money of Namhal
That money is not an easy income
My fair skin grew dark due to that.”) qtd in Mahato 124]

The pain of hardship is vivid. Yet the romanticism of the depiction is inevitable in the last line, where the transformation of the skin color becomes a symbol of pain. Body becomes the intersecting zone of both sensibilities. Beauty and Physical Labor, Affluence and Poverty, Pleasure and Pain both are experienced via the body. We must also notice how the woman (speaker) is claiming agency over both her body and her hard earned money. Such brave

responses of not giving in to the agency over her body is present in other Jhumurs as well. Some need to be mentioned here:

*“Kulyir murai tana tani
Char-laoha dibo ami
Khalbhara r etoi mon e chilo
Bharti joubun e daga dilo.”*

[(Trans.

“At the end of the road, he is pressurizing me (I have to see that!)
I will throw away my iron bangle (I’ll deny this marriage/I won’t live as his wife)
All this time, is this what resided in his heart?
He betrayed me in my full bloom.”) qtd. in Mahato 120]

*“Muluk er chanra tanile jabo nai
Jhinkile jabo nai, Mon khusi dire chalibo.
Katakhi kai tawr katakhi dhari tawr
Tanite dibo nai Jhinkite dibo nai.”*

[(Trans.

“If the men forces me, I won’t go
I won’t go, I’ll go by my will.
Do I live by your will? No
I won’t let you force me.”) qtd. in Mahato 128-129]

While the first song uses the tone of grief, the second one is a clarion call of protest. Both speakers are claiming complete agency of their own respective bodies. Body here is not a site of violence or domination but of unhesitating protest.

Body has also been represented as a site of poverty.

*“Chitorar chanri, din sinai matibasi,
Din sintha kate, bochor akaal, pani nai,
Kahi sinan kahi tel,*

Matha chul rishi rishi dhanrai rahilo.”

[(Trans.

“Oh that Maiden of Chitora, sits in the ground after shower everyday,

She dresses up her hair

This year is fruitless, no water at all,

Where to take a bath? Where is the oil?

O the hair grows dry.”) qtd. in Mahato 125]

A year of drought is presented through the metaphor of dry hairs. Body here becomes an agricultural as well as economic metaphor. The arid land of Manbhum is extremely adverse to agricultural practices. This adversity gets represented keeping the body at its centre. In a different song, however the speaker seeks liberation,

“Khate dibar murad nai

Alsha dhenkir ghoom

Juan Morod, chare hami

Palabo Assam,

Parle doj bor er songe lo.”

[(Trans.

“My husband is young,

Yet just as he is lazy, he can't even afford to provide food (for twice a day)

Thus I've decided

I'll fly away to Assam

Even if with an elderly Man.”) qtd. in Mahato 120]

The speaker is ready to leave her husband and go away to Assam, as he is extremely lazy. Here she refuses to tolerate the pangs of starvation caused by the irresponsible husband. If body is the site of poverty in the earlier example, in this song, body becomes a metaphor for liberation from Marital obligations. A bold statement of subversion is also indicated here.

Body is also a site of desire, of experiencing the sweet pains of desire:

*“Chokh e chokh e ishara te moner kotha boli tomake,
Rasik je jawn, bujhbe se jawn amar mon er bedona
O hamar jouban jwala boro jwala bandhu bindheche Modona.”*

[(Trans.

“I tell my secret words to you via my eyes
Only a true connoisseur will decipher my pain
O my pain of youth, o how love aches me.”) qtd. in Majumdar 94]

Here the speaker is speaking through her body, her eyes. Body here, is a locale of the non-communicable, thereby having a meta-linguistic status.

However, if body is a realm of pleasure, it is also a reminder of the transitory nature of life:

*“Akhra ma duldul
Akhra tawle biti danrali kene?
Nach gaw biti nach, khel gaw biti khel
Ee jiban gaw biti arai din.”*

[(Trans.

“Akhra, is shaking in music
O Maiden, why did you come here?
Dance o Maiden, Play o Maiden
The life is but of two and a half days!”) qtd. in Mahato 126]

This corporeal life can be enjoyed for only two and a half days. Yet the tone is celebratory. Body appears as a site of celebration of fleeting life.

Thus the representation of the body in the Jhumur songs is something beyond the essentialist/constructionist debate. Body becomes a metaphor of agency, beauty, poverty, power, protest, desire and finally, above all, celebration. Thus ‘body’ simultaneously gains historical, geographical, social, economical and mostly poetic significance.

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