

From Supererogation To Resistance: The Choice of Sexual Role Between Marginalised and Westernised Women in Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand*

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Abstract: Sex is an antiquated sociocultural construct that posits men as dominant and women as submissive. This paper introspects how the sex culture imposes the traditional patriarchal taboo on women to satisfy men's carnal cravings, as it interrogates whether women internalize self-objectification due to cultural lattice. Are sex and gender conceptualized as two separate entities? Sociocultural and historical context may accentuate or downplay gender hierarchies in sexuality, inducing biological and elemental differences through which cultures craft their definitions and interpretations of gender roles in sexual practices. Substantiating the female body as an agent, the paper scrutinizes the cross-cultural female subservience and sexual supererogation through the dual protagonists in the novel *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave. It offers an understanding of how the female body is a site upon which tension lies between the sexual experiences of women and the predefined sociocultural entanglements that condition and shape women. The paper will further capture two antithetical sociocultural frequencies through female protagonists and the multiple binaries that dominantly engulf the novel, such as man/woman and center/margin, that are intricately hegemonized by the sociocultural contexts..

Keywords: agency, extramarital affair, refugee, survival sex, young adult

Introduction

Sex and gender are the by-products of the social and cultural roles of men and women in different frequencies. Sexual practices are always rooted in particular sociocultural contexts; thereby, sexual relationships are embedded within cultures, societies, and historical epochs. The notions of sex and gender are not only culturally discriminated, but are culturally tailored. Sex discrimination has always been a group injury; in specific, women are posited for the marginal level. Women are sexually objectified and generally viewed as sexual objects of men. Thus, women internalize such outsider views and involuntarily self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be valued based on appearance. The female body has always been a "silence/silenced conceptual placeholder in hysterical male

discourse" (1), and their bodily identity has been considered unstable and unreliable throughout the ages. Women are bombarded with the image of subservience in the patriarchal social structure and internalize their submissive role impaired by cultural scripts dictated by the societal constructs. On the other side, men are forced to take more agentic roles than women, to act as the initiators and dictators in sexual practices. This research article aims to critically investigate the paradoxical interplay between the social role and subjugation of women, shedding light on the pervasive construct of patriarchal oppression across different socio-cultural background. The article also brings out the vulnerability of targeted community women to sexual oppression, while also expounding the resilience and agency of women by resisting, and coping with sexual constraints. The paper aims to highlight the complex dynamic of sexual and gender-based violence by placing women's experience withing the broader socio-cultural spectrum.

FEMALE BODY: SEXUAL SUBSERVIENT OBJECT

Both Gender and Sex are multidimensional phenomena that holds "different roles, responsibilities, limitations and experience provided to individuals based on their presenting sex/gender." (2). These two notions associate "maleness and masculinity with assertiveness, aggressiveness, sexual adventurism, and emotional restraint, and femaleness and femininity with docility, passivity, sexual modesty, and emotional intimacy" (3) under the socio-cultural archetype. Men and women are placed under the two contrasting spheres of gender normed scripts and sexual autonomy – where men are the dictators and women become "passive or less assertive" (4). MacKinnon in "*Feminism Unmodified*" (5) argues that 'women' are placed under the class of being objectified and 'men' becomes the objectifying class – "Women are the things and men are the self" (5). Baumeister and Twenge's Sex ratio studies suggest that gender imbalances in the sexual norms pushes female class to "sexual restraint" (6), while male class becomes "more liberal sex" (6). Such sexual objectifications impose the idea that female body is a mere object of "delicate and weak or narcissistic, frivolous and obsessed with trivialities" (7). Grosz considers female body as the "interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, significance, and representation" (8), where they have been suppressed under the patriarchal construction.

According to Michel Foucault, the interplay between sexuality and body is instrumentalized by the societal norms, challenging the essentialist spectrum within the feminist discourse. Many theorists claim that sexual urges may vary among individuals according to their participation in interpersonal and societal roles. It has been considered that gender differences in sexual practices are by-products of the cultural and psychosocial processes. This standpoint has been accentuated by Foucault, who argued that cultural and historical factors not only reinforce or blunt the biological contours but also constitute or construct sexual experience among the individuals. Following his analysis, many theorists have highlighted the conventional structure of sexuality as it reproduces gender hierarchies that privilege men and suppress women. Women are instrumented to hide sexual desire, as they have been marginalized to acknowledge or interpret such desire and sexual experiences. According to Foucault, the body has been believed to be the locus of power relation: "a surface inscribed with culturally and historically specific practices and subject to political and economic forces." (7). Later, Susan Bordo noted that feminism has redefined the metaphor 'body politics': "the human body is *itself* a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control" (9). Feminists posit that the women subjugation stems from biological differences. This article introspects how female as the agent, wherein the protagonists in the selected novel resist, travel, and protest from sexual objectification to self-assertion.

THE OTHER HAND- TALES OF TWO WORLDS

The Other Hand (2008) by Chris Cleave (10), depicts duality between two contrasting worlds through female protagonists: Little Bee, an exiled African young adult refugee girl from a civil-war-torn part of Nigeria, and Sarah, a white woman from upper-middle-class Kingston-upon-Thames. Little Bee's narration predominates the readers' attention by narrating her traumatic experiences in pre-migration and transit. Without any proper documents and as illegal migrant, Bee escapes to London,

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where she was locked up as a detainee for some years. Bee's narration mainly revolves around the plight of marginalized women and how their bodies have been exploited at the hands of male dominance. While the Female body deprives the demarcation, Cleave employs the body as the agency not only to portray the exploitation and marginalization of women but also to question the dominant structures practiced by colonizers that result in subjugation and deprived social status. The novel expounds on the sociocultural construction, how the deprived migrant women are generally placed at the margins, their voices are suppressed, and their sufferings are doubled because of sexual harassment. The novel represents the vulnerability of a female's body as the result of sexual exploitation at different degrees: the second protagonist, Sarah O'Rourke, is a successful fashion magazine editor in London and a rebellious Westernized woman. Sarah's marriage with Andrew becomes a disaster, and she indulges in an extramarital affair with Lawrence Osborn, a "tall, grinning, not conspicuously handsome" (10) government employee. Through Sarah's characterization, Cleave portrays the sociocultural imbalance, wherein Sarah chooses her sexual role to satisfy her needs, unlike detained marginal women in detention centers. However, at the end of the novel, her sexual relationship with Lawrence ends with a sense of supererogation and emotional isolation. For Little Bee, the host society is alien, and she finds herself in marginal confinement.

In contrast, Sarah experiences emotional outrage and alienation in her native land, as calls herself as refugee and compares her situation with Little Bee. Navigating between these two worlds, the paper juxtaposes the sense of belonging and non-belonging by scrutinizing the two protagonists' sexual subservience and the ways to attain resistance. This paper confers the argument in the following: how marginal women are exploited in the hands of men, westernized women's choice of sexual role, and the female character's coping strategies for resistance and self-reclamation.

WOMEN: A HYPERSEXUALIZED OBJECT IN MEDIA

In the post-colonial age, women are considered an object of desire in the media culture. Through the novel, Cleave explicates the absurdity of media culture where the nudity of the female body promotes sexual submissiveness as a way to attract and please men. He asserts that the dominance of Western culture in the global north is constantly rooted in pictorial half-nude or nudity and calls London the world full of an "enchanted federation of miracles" (10). Whereas countries belonging to the global south, in particular Africa, have been labeled as dull and unmagical without soft-core pornography. Media is the most prominent site for representing female bodies, where they are sexualized and objectified for the male and the market. Media and advertisement can act as the catalyst for what a culture considers normal. When the media emphasizes the power dynamics that devalue women passively, it puts forward sexual submissiveness and gender-based violence. Female objectification and hyper-sexualization in media amplify the notion that values on women have been primarily based on their physical appearance. Thus, the sexual objectification of women in society has been accelerated through media by perpetuating the belief that women are just mere sexual objects. In one episode, Cleave has brought out the vulgarities and sexual hierarchies depicted in media that promote gender-based inequalities, where women as the submissive objects for men and men as the masters. Cleave sheds light on the media culture through Little Bee's lens by questioning Western values. As she belongs to the global south, Bee often involves in an imaginary conversation with the adolescent friends from her native land after looking at the nude pictures of the white women in the magazines and newspapers. In Western countries, though nudity is offensive in the public sphere, the economy of media and advertisement has converted the female body into a passive commodity to trade the products in the market. For individuals like Little Bee, it is strange and unusual to show naked breasts, even in newspapers. Thereby, Cleave unveils the degrees of sexual objectification across cultures.

MARGINS: PROTEST AGAINST BODY AND GENDER

In an arbitrary discourse of male domination and female subjugation, sexual violence, as an instrument, becomes an inescapable facet of women's lives in the wide range of sociocultural structures. In such women's subordinate social status and class exploitation, black women become more

vulnerable to various forms of abuse and subjugation. Refugee women who have fled from war and armed conflict suffer doubly, as they are the survivors and the victims of persecution. As survivors, they experience trauma both physically and emotionally, and as victims, they have witnessed the brutal death of their loved ones and unimaginable massacres in their pre-migration. Such terror maims and disrupts their assumption against the object and spiritual world. Due to racial discrimination and illusory borders between the global north and the global south, the African refugee women are placed at the margins, their voices are muzzled, and their traumas are even more exacerbated when they are sexually exploited. Within the detention walls, rape becomes a medium to ensure the control of mass incarceration and the dominance of male supremacy. The rise of detention rapes has split the detention population along gender and racial lines. Inside and outside of the detention process, female victims are often traumatized by sexual assault and have been perceived as helpless and weak. In the novel *The Other Hand*, Cleave exposes inhumane treatment faced by refugee women by the immigration detention regime, and the novel gives voice to the marginalized, voiceless victims. Through this notion, Cleave extrapolate the interplay between the Bee's adolescence transition, her experience as a detainee, and her refugee experience in London. Cleave, through Bee's lens, posits contradictory ideas about London society. In the epigraph, Cleave stresses a contradictory notion about London, as it provides safe haven for the people who escapes from war and armed conflicts.

On the other side, Bee's narration satirizes how London society is unsafe for a refugee girl. Bee carries a distressing sense of dispossession upon London that is evident on the initial page of the novel, where she compares herself with a British pound. Bee believes a better alternative to being a British pound is safer than being a refugee girl in a detention center through her interior monologue, as pound can travel across oceans, deserts, and mountains. These comparisons emphasize her yearning for mobility in the immobilized space, symbolized by the free circulation of the British pound. In contrast, she is restricted from crossing the nation-state border surveillance and controls.

By using disguise as a storytelling technique, Cleave alleviates the intensity of the need to conceal Bee's gender and identity in her transit period. Literature is marked with the enormous accounts of cross-dressing characters from classical to modern literature. The female characters cross-dress as men to attain socio-economic status or for safety. For instance, William Shakespeare commonly uses cross-dressing as a conventional technique in his plays to afford the female characters more privilege and control their role in a restricted society. His female heroines use masculine clothing to disguise as men instead of being confined to their boundaries. Most of the time, the trope of cross dressing as men represents a resistance against social expectations confining female to domestic roles. Like Shakespeare, Cleave justifies female-to-male cross-dressing by transforming Bee's character by giving her voice and empowering her with subjective initiative, but without depriving her of the qualities of being feminine. Unlike Shakespeare, who portrays cross-dressing on a lighter note, Cleave reinforces cross-dressing as an essential need to maintain Bee's gender identity. He adheres to the character's nonconformity and sexuality rather than gender roles. As the notion, "*To survive you must look good or talk good*" (10) echoed throughout the detention center, Bee chooses the latter. She prefers to be genderless in order to escape from sexual slavery. By describing men as "wolves" (10), Cleave animalizes them for their sexual appetite, and their 'ravenous eyes' posit female inmates as vulnerable sexual objects. Thus, choosing to talk good instead of looking good, Bee uses transvestite as a tool to look unpleasant in front of those lustful gaze.

Through the narration, Cleave highlights that detention centers have become an arena for forced commodification of the female body. Sexual violence remains a part of women's life, especially for marginalized women. Throughout her stay in the detention center, Bee deliberately wears worn-out clothes and heavy boots to look unattractive. Though Bee hides her feminine body by hiding her breasts and chopping her hair, as an adolescent, she yearns to enjoy her physical transition. She stashes nail polish from the charity box and paints her toenails in a hidden area. Here, the nail polish satisfies her feminine urge and awhile revives herself from all suppression. Flashbacks of her deceased sister Nkiruka amputate Bee's mourning process. As a teenager in the detention center, Bee craves for a normative adolescence passage like how Nkiruka enjoyed her physical transition. Cleave has portrayed Nkiruka as the most enticing among all the female characters in the novel. Nkiruka, with her flirtatious smile, attracts all men in her village and flaunts her growing femininity, which leads to her mother's

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scolding. However, it is antithetical for Bee's adolescence transition. There is no one to guide or admire her femininity, and the transformation itself becomes a threat to her survival. Her teenage period under a fluorescent light in a dark room, aggravates her trauma. The lexical choice of 'fluorescent light' reiterates that Bee's life has been locked up inside the dark, and the repetition of 'cold' symbolizes lifelessness and spiritual death. She calls herself a "creature", "a new breed of human", a "halfling", "a child of unnatural mating", and an "unfamiliar face in moon" (10). These metaphors encapsulate the loss of herself in a dystopian setting, and the detention center imposes a sense of non-belongingness and immobility.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND FORCED SEXUALIZATION

Cleave's narration sheds light on the plight of other female detainees, who are equally exploited and subjected to abuse. Like Bee, the young detained girls are triply marginalized: first, due to their nationality, as they belong to the global south, as illegal detainees, and finally, due to their sexuality. British anthropologist Victor Turner states that people in margins represent "communitas" (5), wherein they cultivate the feeling of affinity and connection with others who share the same trauma and sociocultural injustice. Little Bee becomes part of the 'communitas' through experiencing a parallel feeling of displacement with the co-detainees. She finds a kind of solace in reconnecting to her African culture, as the detainees of the detention center are entirely belonging to marginal communities. As the detention center imposes the notion of either looking good or talking good, all the female inmates fall prey to the convention to satisfy the male detainees' sexual appetite. Cleave brings out their struggle to survive in an ongoing climate of sexual violence and repression as they suffer from physical and sexual torture. Sexual harassment prevailing in detention centers exhibits women as sexual objects in the hands of men. The novel reiterates the hostile and unsettling condition of some female inmates by framing them as anonymous sexual objects without giving their names, "The girl with no name", "The girl in the yellow saree", and "The girl with the documents" (10).

Survival sex has become the only option for their survival in the detention center. Even in their pre-migratory phase, other women detainees are exposed to increased vulnerabilities, including physical and sexual violence. In most cases, sexual violence upon women is often employed as a tactic to destabilize and degrade the targeted community. Like Little Bee, all the other female detainees share collective trauma in their premigration. Their stories start with "*The men came and they-*" and end with "*and then they put me in here*" (10).

SARAH'S PASSIVE SEXUAL SUBMISSION

In many countries, the notion of womanhood is embodied by a woman's sexual chastity. Societal rules have made married women sex slaves to their partners, and the practice of monogamy has denied women all their sexual fantasies. Marriage is considered discordant with sociocultural norms, leading to physical and emotional instability. Contradicting Bee's characterization, Cleave has brought out the need to satisfy women's sexual desire and claims adultery as self-care to escape from loneliness through the second protagonist, Sarah. Many radical feminists have voiced out for women's liberation and consider it equal to sexual liberation. They believe that the assertion of the primacy of sexuality would be a significant step toward women's liberation; thus, gradually, women are encouraged to enjoy sex, initiate sexual activities and experiment with different forms of sexuality. Subsequently, the core ideology of feminist movements toward sexual liberation for women is to pursue sexual pleasure both physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Gradually, these feminist movements have created a social climate in which women can enjoy their freedom in sexuality rather than being forced to hide their sexual desires. Through the novel, Cleave has created a space for sexual freedom and subsides the emphasis on monogamic tradition. As the second protagonist, Sarah gains attention by justifying her extramarital affair as a refuge from her unsatisfied married life. Cleave changes Sarah's character from being a loyal wife and loving mother to committing adultery. His writings echo Bertrand Russell's concept of 'Free Love', considering sexual intimacy as a natural drive akin to human needs like thirst and hunger, comprising physical and emotional aspects. Parallely, Cleave opposes the idea of forced sexual practices between married couples and advocates that both men and women can equally use

body as agents to satisfy their sexual needs. Sarah, as a second narrator, gains sexual freedom through extramarital affairs rather than being confined within the unsatisfied monogamic sexual practices.

In the flashbacks, Sarah seems to respect love over physical intimacy. At first, Sarah adores her husband Andrew as a foreign news editor, and his ideologies are unique to other men. Due to her mother's denial, Sarah marries Andrew in haste. However, later, Cleave portrays Sarah's marriage life as a worst nightmare. Sarah's feeling of emptiness and impuissance provokes her to indulge in extramarital affairs. Though Andrew tries his best to save his family, Sarah considers her marriage a failure. Post-marriage between Andrew and Sarah is simply an act of sexual supererogation, wherein Sarah indulges in sexual intimacy without any desire and only to please Andrew. The shallowness of relationships in *The Other Hand* is shown in public space and the protagonist's private life sphere. Sarah and Andrew's love-making scene is an instance of the failure of marriage. The sexual act has become one of the household chores, "More for him than for me, really. By that stage of our marriage it had become a maintenance thing, like bleeding the air out of the radiators – just another part of running a household" (10). In contrast, the love scene between Sarah and Lawrence has the depth of romance to escape from all the emptiness in her life. The illicit affair between Sarah and Lawrence is a kind of escape from their own tragedies. Despite feeling guilty for indulging in extramarital affairs, she finds adultery is the only way to revive herself.

Contradicting to Sarah and Lawrence, Andrew values old-school love and the institution of marriage constructed by society. When Sarah confesses to Andrew her relationship with Lawrence, she states that it is purely sexual: "It was just sex" (10). Andrew accuses her of minimizing her infidelity, "sex has become one of those words you can put 'just' in front of" (10). He condemns her act, by calling her "*A slut for his mother*", "*adultr*ess", *cockholder*, and *narcissist*" (10). Sarah blinds out that she is hurting another human being out of self-pleasure, and it shatters Andrew's conviction towards marriage. At his funeral, Sarah's contemplation serves the complexity and absurdity of her situation. Part of her identity, being a wife, has unwillingly been taken away from her. Even though Sarah leads an unhappy marriage, it can be assumed that she did not want it to end this way. It is evident that, though women choose their sexual roles in Western countries, they have been victimized by patriarchal norms.

COPING STRATEGIES

Little Bee and Sarah's narration highlight how women bodies are treated as objects and subjected to exploitation and suppression. Indeed, Bee's story throws light on the exploitation of women in the detention center, which is additionally burdened by the idea of marginalization and forced sexual slavery. Cleave uses the body as the agency not just to reflect upon the violence exerted on women in a society shaped by patriarchal discourses but also to highlight how the mere objects of torture- the body, turn into voices of resistance. Bee embraces the wounds and scars on the detainees' bodies and reminds her that they have survived amidst all their suffering. Apart from this, Bee and Sarah's stories reveal that the body becomes the agency through which the female character resists, challenges, and protests against the injustices and mechanisms of society's so-called pluralistic hegemonic agents. Thus, Cleave's reclamation of the 'body' as an agency in both narratives is a derivative of the pressure in a patriarchal sociocultural construction. Cleave's activist tendency of writing and his role as a writer quite fruitfully appears through these narratives, particularly of the oppressed and marginal women, when he is outspoken about every layer of exploitation, more particularly of sexual slavery.

Bee compares those scars and wounds with the stars and moons embellished on the sophisticated women's dress. For people like Bee, the scar is an identity marker for their survival. One of the coping strategies to escape from men is to find many ways to commit suicide. In detention center, she discovered many ways to kill herself rather than be exploited in the hands of men. Though Bee's coping strategy is not appreciable, the novel reinforces the idea of how society has forced women, especially margins, to seek suicide as an escape from sexual abuse. However, detention center imposes a site of vulnerability; Bee finds a space to empower herself by mastering the foreign language. By calling it "Queen's English" (10), mastering the host country's language facilitates her adaptation and integration into the host community. To a certain extent, speaking Queen's language empowers and liberates Little Bee and enables her gain knowledge in cultural context and thus assert herself to question the readers.

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Little Bee's linguistic nativity challenges and subverts the leadership of whiteness and questions the bias against the blackness. Bee individuates and cultivates a hybrid identity after learning the UK's language and history. It helps Bee cope with her trauma by narrating the imaginary conversation with the girls back home.

On the other hand, the white characters in the novel are looking for some refuge from their unsatisfied life, just like the margins. Sarah and Lawrence seek refuge in their extramarital affair, and Andrew finds his refuge in committing suicide. Later, Sarah's affair with Lawrence as a result of escaping from the marital difficulties becomes a passive subservience, wherein she uses her body to satisfy Lawrence more than herself. Though Sarah enjoys her physical relationship with Lawrence, she cannot overcome her emotional isolation. Cleave comments on the differential frequencies of gender, even in Western countries, through Sarah's characterization. Sarah's relationship with Lawrence ended like Andrew's, as their ideologies differ. At first, Sarah's marriage life was too sheltered, and the affair with Lawrence came as a refuge. However, later, Sarah feels Lawrence has overshadowed her life, and she chooses to be independent without any male dominance. However, both narrators come from different sociocultural hierarchies; they feel that they share the same trauma of being subjugated by the patriarchal norms. And both the protagonists find coping strategies to rebuild their self-assertion.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of women in the sexual practice is unequivocal: they are treated as sexual objects in the hands of patriarchy. However, female sexual subservience is constructed and shaped in sociocultural contexts. Cleave has brought out how the ubiquitous female sexualization among women of different social statuses arbitrarily finds themselves as sex objects assigned by the traditional patriarchal status. The novel repositions the figure of these female characters by focusing on their body as agency and subjective phases. The novel captures the persistent struggle in life in order to cope with the hostile forces of societal and cultural structures. Encountering forced sexual roles, the female characters grapple with their emotional isolation and the strategies of finding their own place in the odd situation. In the novel, sexual subservience takes the forms of different variables: estrangement from the self and the external world and assigned societal roles. Little Bee subverts her trauma as the main narrator by narrating her struggles to the readers. Her struggle as a marginalized female refugee in the detention center is an allegory of many unaccompanied refugee women who try to rebuild their lives in a foreign land. The portrayal of survival sex among the other minor female characters sheds light on the broader issue of sexual violence and resilience in such an uncertain life. While Sarah gets refuge from her unhappy life by indulging in extramarital affairs, Bee seeks refuge from sexual torture by rebuilding her self-assertion and mastering a foreign language. As Sarah overcomes her sense of alienation through sex, and thus, for Sarah, sex has become a pure physical activity. Thus, the sexual roles differ from men to women and even women to women according to their social and class structure.

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