

Can the Woman Age? Gendered Age is min the Media Image of the Aging Female Body and Coming of Middle-Age in Mieko Kawakami's Breasts and Eggs.

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Abstract

The present paper looks at the prevalence of ageism over the media image of the female body, not only advanced by an absence of older women from advertisements for the beauty and anti-aging industry, but also defined by a lack of representation of women's changes in the body through age. As Naomi Wolf calls it the Beauty Myth, underlying deeply embedded within the image of the perfected woman, this paper seeks to foreground what a coming of middle age looks like for the aging female body amidst the media images of youth particularly in Mieko Kawakami's novel *Breasts and Eggs*. Tracing the different ways in which the predominance of the image of the perfected female body, generates greater anxiety and body dissatisfaction amongst the middle-aged woman, the paper looks at the ways in which a preoccupation with preserving youth over the female body, continues to alienate the middle-aged woman from their changing bodily experience across age, as seen in Haruki Murakami's short story collection *Men Without Women* and Junichiro Tanizaki's novel *The Key*.

Keywords: *Digital Media, Advertising, Anti-Aging, Ageism, Middle-Age, Women*

Our experiences with the body, predominate our sense of agency as subjects within the larger social, political and economic structures of which we form a part. As argued by Juliana Alzate (2020) those of our identities as embodied subjects, prevail over our experience of the world and the society, and even so, a significantly large portion of the embodied human experience, remains fairly invisible, in line with that of the female body along with the female experience of sexuality, in a societal culture deeply rooted in predominant White, Heteronormative, Capitalist and Patriarchal structure, the collective experiences of the woman remains sidelined, objectified as the flesh to be ogled at or worshipped, the female experience of the body, gets defined by an inherent alienation, experienced from youth to old age. Trapped within predominant structures, the woman's body is cut, glossed, packaged, and delivered across the realm of the digital media and advertisement industry, which in accordance with the predominant patriarchal structures, transmits the images of what Naomi Wolf calls out as the "perfected women." (Wolf, 2002) Embedded within an aspirational ideology, which seeks to transmit liability over the individual women, to meet the demands of the body they were always meant to be. The proliferation of the new media image of the female body subsumed within what Naomi Wolf identifies as the *Beauty Myth*, is further heralded by a growing incidence of a preoccupation with preserving youth, especially over the female body.

Further, the image of youth typifies what Kathryn Bayer (2005) describes as the presence of ageism, which prevails in the realm of the digital image like that of the print. Growing research in line with the predominance of ageism in the media and advertising industry reveals a significant phenomenon concerning middle-ageism, which translates into a form of discrimination in terms of ageism that targets those in the middle years, leading to a growing demand of 'anti-aging,' procedures. A preoccupation with preserving the youth or a

youthful appearance in the female body, thus comes to define the social and cultural conforming behavior that propel women towards the extreme measures of self-preservation. The female body then, is represented devoid of its signs of aging as animal specimens in bottled cases, preserved in their youth and the young body. The symbol of the breasts, then becomes a significant factor in line with the anxiety and obsession over age, amidst, the increased images of the young women, whose body exists as cut-outs; the older woman, finds it difficult to meet the standards of the beauty myth, experiencing an alienation with their own body.

Mieko Kawakami, in her seminal work, titled *Chichi to Ran or Breasts and Eggs*, explores the contemporary female experience of the uncanniness associated with the female body, and the subsuming alienation between the middle-aged woman's body and her experienced desire, under the dominant purview of the ageist beauty myth. Natsuko, one of the titular characters in the novel, contends with this growing experience of alienation with her own body, and the image of the woman she aspires to be:

...I never became the woman I imagined. And what was I expecting? The kind of body that you see in girly magazines. A body that fit the mold of what people describe as "sexy." A body that provokes sexual fantasy. A source of desire. I guess I could say that I expected my body would have some sort of value. I thought all women grew up to have that kind of body, but that's not how things played out. (Kawakami, 2021, p.55)

Consequently, the confluence of the element of youth with fertility, further heralds a preoccupation with the preservation of the woman's body in youth, signified by a social, cultural and medical obsession over breasts and eggs, which sidelines women's preoccupation and struggles with the female reproductive organs.

Literature Review

Juliana Alzate (2020) in “Embodiment and Violence in Mieko’s *Chichi To Ran*,” discusses the different ways in which the breast as a symbol gets commodified in a patriarchal, capitalist society, which propagates the color and size of the breasts amidst Euro-American ideals, meant to forward a virginal, youthful image on the part of the woman’s body, following which bleaching and cosmetic industries reproduce insecurities amongst middle-aged women, to buy chemical products hailing to lead them towards the body that alludes to greater desirability and satisfaction on their parts. Alzate further, clarifies the ways in which in a larger capitalist society, the norm about firmness of breasts, defines the ways in which, the female body is expected to be ‘made easy,’ to be measured and handled, as a solid object. In the novel, *Breast and Eggs*, the women are found to be preoccupied with toning their breasts in line with Euro- American ideals, reflecting the larger anxiety surrounding the aging woman’s body and the sagginess, meant to render her body as undesirable, the growing ageism gets reflected in the anti-aging products heralded by the cosmetic and advertising industry portraying the image of youth, to be aspired to. In the novel, Natsuko’s sister, Makiko contends with the procedures that can render her nipples more youthful after the change in her body post-pregnancy and breastfeeding her daughter:

It appeared that the preoccupation, or shame, or insatiable curiosity that drove Makiko to fixate on her breasts was about more than size alone. Color was a major factor. I tried to imagine Makiko getting out of the bath, whatever time that was for her, and heading over to the fridge to grab two small bottles of medicine, which she proceeded to apply to her own nipples, making them burn and itch like hell. (Kawakami, 2021, p.55)

Further, Laura Miller (2006) in “Mammary Mania,” discusses the different ways in which contemporary Japanese body

Aesthetics have been determined by the rise in the Euro-American beauty ideals within media, defined by an increased attention over the breasts, leading to a rise in nipple bleaching, in contemporary Japan. The color of a woman's nipples have been noted to define her sexuality, with a lighter pink shade showcasing 'innocence and youth,' followed by an increase in the selling of skin-lightening creams for topical use, the preoccupation with a youthful bust, that never sags, reflects a new cultural anxiety or a certain 'mammary mania,' that becomes representative of the different ways in which the beauty myth permeates across the cosmetic and advertising industry. Moreover, as defined in *The Beauty Myth*, "cosmetic companies rarely feature women older than 25." (Wolf, 2002) The absence of the older woman from the public realm and the dominant images heralded by media typifies a prevailing ageism as seen in the anti-aging beauty industry, and over here, clarifying media, in line with Harvette Gray's (2002) definition, as being composed of both written and digital technologies that transmit information, and which transmit the beauty myth in line with ageist ideals.

Makiko's obsession with her breasts and Natsuko's eventual preoccupation with her 'fertility,' as someone nearing middle-age in *Breasts and Eggs*, also define the absence of representation of middle-aged women's diverse experiences with their body, in "Gender relations and Anti-Aging Ads" Toni Calasanti (2007) argues about the different ways in which an age discrimination is promoted by marketing discourse that hides physical signs of aging, which also exemplifies one of the many ways in which, there is an absence of older women from the public discourse surrounding cosmetic and anti-aging products. The cultural ideology surrounding youth from a gendered dimension propels the female body to be devoid of any signs of aging, to the benefit of the anti-aging industry which advertises products that forestall or reverse signs of aging, consequently, the ageism surrounding our culture, has been excessively embedded so much so that the

ageist nomenclature surrounding anti-aging, such as those in advertisements relating to getting the “breasts of your dreams,” (Kawakami, 2021) seem to be a part of the normative experience.

If in contrast to the dominance of ageist imagery surrounding the female body, in particular the obsession over women’s breasts, the social-and cultural milieu within which such advertisements are advanced, would instead focus on the diverse experiences of the female body over age, then it could lead to a radical reimagining not only of beauty and desirability but also women’s actual lived embodied experiences. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* contends for a “female liberation which is inherently connected to the female beauty,” (Wolf, 2002) in line with which the advertisement and anti-aging industry predominantly transmit censored information about the body, while in place of which, the female liberation in line with the embodied experience would prevail if the imagery instead focused on women’s bodies through different ages, examining changes after birth and breast-feeding as integral to women’s bodies.

Methodology

In line with the image of the woman as a construct, in some of the popular literary works by male authors one finds the representation of the female embodied experience and the female sexuality, under the dominant purview of the patriarchal, heteronormative gaze, that either deifies or despises the female body as an ‘essence,’ in the midst of which the woman’s exploration and acknowledgement of her own sexuality across youth and middle-age remains invisible.

Haruki Murakami regarded as one of the most influential and significant contemporary writers not only in terms of the Japanese literary tradition but also the contemporary literary scene, additionally, more of his popular works like the *Norwegian Wood* have been critiqued by feminist literary critics as representing a deeply patriarchal construct of the

woman, subsuming the female figure as a medium for the male protagonist to either self-transcendence or a gradual demise. Murakami's short story collection, *Men Without Women*, explores the dynamic between the men and women interlaced through these stories and the prevailing alienation experienced by the men in the figure of the women.

In the story titled, "An Independent Organ," the identity of the fifty-two year old is told through the eyes of another male onlooker who vows to create a "clear portrait," (Murakami, 2017) of Dr Tokai, whose profession as a cosmetic surgeon further foregrounds an integral aspect to the creation of the image of the young woman, which much like the predominant anti-aging and advertising industry, hails to the preservation of desirability over the female body, in one such scenes in the short story, Dr Tokai proclaims, to the significance of the alterability of appearances, for "as long as there wasn't some major flaw that aroused his professional interest, and as long as her looks weren't so boring as to make him yawn, that was enough. If you were worried about your looks, and had enough money saved up, you could alter your appearance pretty much any way you liked (as a specialist in that field, he knew of numerous examples)" (Murakami, 2017).

The language used by the doctor comes across as similar to the nomenclature used by the anti-aging industry advertising a perfected body, consequently, the aspect of the doctor as the male authority figure with the ability to alter appearances, predominates the construct of the female body, that imagines the woman's body through the eyes of the beauty myth, yet, the figure of the woman, in particular the middle-aged woman remains absent, as she does even in the advertisements forwarded by the anti-aging industry, for in place of the woman's actual experiences with her changing body, there is a perfected vision of the female body, in the male author's literary work, in reminiscing about the sexual encounters with women in the short story, Dr. Tokai recalls "at this very moment a baby might be nursing at the marvelous breasts he

used to lovingly stroke.” (Murakami, 2017)

The mammary mania that predetermines women’s experiences with their bodies, in particular their breasts, is further propounded by the male preoccupation with or obsession over the female breast as a symbol for male desire. Yet, the image of the perfected woman, whose body continues to hold the signifiers of youth, stands in contrast to the female description of her own aging body, that is not only reflective of her insecurities with the mania surrounding her body in the public domain, but also in line with coming to terms with the uncanniness of being an embodied subject in the female body. Showcasing a lack of the female subjectivity and pleasure-seeking within the image of the perfected woman, the female body in its diverse, unique shapes and configurations remains absent. Natsuko in *Breasts and Eggs*, finds it difficult to come to terms with the changes in her body, reflecting a certain dissociation from the image of the idealized youthful, woman with the perfected ‘breasts,’ in line with the patriarchal gaze, she recounts:

I remember what it felt like when my breasts started getting bigger. How out of nowhere I had grown these things...as a kid whenever I saw the naked women in the magazines that kids in the neighborhood got their hands on, or saw a grownup woman expose her body on T.V, I guess on some level I thought that someday all those parts of me would fill out, too, and I would have a body just like them.

(Kawakami, 2021, p.55)

The female experience with the uncanniness of the body gets foregrounded in Kawakami’s exploration of the middle-aged woman’s anxiety surrounding her aging body, in contrast to the dominant image of the idealized female body, as embedded within the female figure in Murakami’s short story collection *Men Without Women*, whose bodies not only exist as potential gateways for the male characters from the larger social, economic sphere, but are also fetishized as an essence

leading to the demise of the central male figure, in turn, the sexuality of the middle-aged woman, who appears in a majority of these stories, remains invisible, failing to represent the diverse experiences of the female body, which as argued by Juliana Alzate (2020), represents an embodied experience inherently composed of menstruation, beauty practices, reproduction and mothering which as collective experiences, continue to remain absent in the public image of the woman.

The figure of the woman continues to exist as a mystified essence, that shown through the eyes of the male narrator in Murakami's *Men Without Women*, exists as a medium for a possible escape from the alienation experienced by the male character, yet the aspect of the female sexuality continues to remain unexplored, for seen through the eyes of the other her body is objectified as a femme fatale or a lethal weapon against the male character, which according to feminist critics, Kitada Sachie and Miya Lippit (1994) continues to prevail in the works by male writers as a part of the literary canon, that presents a dominant image of the female body within these works. Japanese feminist critics have identified works by popular writers like Junichiro Tanizaki as representing a literary tradition that presents the woman as an essence, with the male characters showing a contempt of the woman hidden beneath "an attachment to and admiration of the female body." (Sachie & Lippit, 2017)

Tanizaki's radical exploration of sexuality in his novel *The Key*, situates the reader in the position of a voyeur like the male character, as he and his wife share their sexual experiences in the form of a diary, told through the form of an epistolary novel, that sets out to explore the complex dynamics between the husband and the wife, in addition to which there is an inherent connection between the aspect of the image and pornography, as central to the sexual relationships explored in the novel, particularly in line with the rise of the print image. Yet, Tanizaki's exploration of sexuality in its explicit eroticism continues to project the image of the perfected

female body, wherein the middle-aged woman's sexuality is explored under the dominant patriarchal construct that looks at the female sexuality through the binary of a reified image or that of 'insatiability.'

Discussion

Photography in Tanizaki's (1961) *The Key*, represents an oncoming of Western technology and devices within the Japanese society, as the men discuss the relevance of a polaroid camera, it functions as allusive to the present-day proliferation of digital media images and those augmented by the pornography industry that represent an obsession over or preoccupation with the female body, in particular a fantasized and fetishized version of the body. The aspect of the male gaze continues to focus on the different ways in which the woman's body is literally and metaphorically put under the spotlight, yet the representations of the image of the woman in literature by popular male authors like the glossed, perfected images in the digital media, do not align with the woman's actual lived experiences with their body. In one of the instances in the novel, the professor, in *The Key* gazes at his wife's naked body while she remains unconscious his voyeurism represents the male sexual fantasy of the woman's body, as "how extraordinary for a woman to have reached the age of forty-four, and to have experienced childbirth, without suffering the slightest injury to her skin! Never before had I been allowed to gaze at this superb body, but perhaps this is just as well." (Tanizaki, 1961)

The female body, as defined in Tanizaki's novel, continues to stand as the image of the youthful woman, whose body holds the signifiers of youth, standing in contrast to the female description of her own aging body, that is reflective of her insecurities with the mania surrounding her body in the public domain, especially those of coming to terms with the 'sagginess' or hidden aspects of age and change that form a part of her embodied experience. Natsuko as the woman

nearing middle-age in *Breasts and Eggs*, experiences alienation with her own aging body, which when seen in the private sphere before the mirror does not conform to the ageist image of the young female body, that represents the norm, as "...I stared at my own body. My breasts were in the middle of the mirror. Little, just like Makiko's. Brown and bumpy nipples. My hips had barely any shape, but there was flesh around my belly button, stretch marks curving around my sides." (Kawakami, 2021)

Laura Mulvey (2009) in her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," discusses the obsession with scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, underlying the image as seen in the medium of the cinema, this voyeuristic pleasure, invariably extends to the female body as opposed to the male body, wherein pleasure gets split between the active male voyeur and the passive female whose body gets objectified under the purview of the male gaze, which projects the male sexual fantasy over the female figure. In contrast to the image seen, the male figure does not take the place of the object of pleasure, as the male body "cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification." (Mulvey, 2009) In many ways this rings synonymous with Wolf's contention about the lack of positive sex imagery for women, whose pleasure does not feature within the dominant image of sexuality that is made available to her gaze, neither can she find her body represented with its varied diverse signs of aging and change, nor can she find pleasure in looking at the passive female figure in these images.

Conclusion

What continues to be a lack in the representation of the female body within the dominant image of the woman resonant amongst the anti-aging industry, alludes to a an ageist preoccupation with the preservation of youth, particularly on the female body, the woman as a viewer and object of desire within these images, comes to feel alienated from her own

body, experiencing a dissatisfaction and insecurity with her body, especially in line with the aging body in its diverse growing changes, her embodied experience continues to remain absent within the public domain. Consequently, what is needed then to bring about a social and cultural change is not only more sex positive images of female pleasure, but also presenting the female body in its varied and aging experience.

Integral to celebrating women's bodies in its varied complexity and age, is also significant in terms of celebrating their post-partum bodies, laden with stretch marks, scars, surgical marks and age, as reflective of women's embodied experience, for Natsuko in *Breasts and Eggs*, the space of the bath house represented a communal space of women's shared experience with their changing bodies, for:

There were always women in the space beyond the steamy air. Babies, girls, and older women. Naked as they sudsed up their hair, sank into the water, heated their bodies. Countless wrinkles, straight backs, sagging breasts, gleaming skin. Stubby little arms and legs, age spots dark and light, articulated shoulder blades...Where had all these women gone? What had happened to their bodies?

(Kawakami, 2021, pp.217-18)

Women's changing bodies in its nakedness, and variance, at the bath house as opposed to the fabricated image of the female body strewn across the advertisements for breast implants in the novel, comes to represent the female embodied experience, which often remains absent within the print and digital image, much like the image of the women in the works of Murakami and Tanizaki, wherein there remains a stark gap between the representation of the aging woman's body, with its diverse needs and pleasures. Within the hypervisibility brought about by the images of the female body, the woman's embodied experience remains absent, one wonders, where have the women gone? especially the middle-aged woman, whose signs of aging do not form a part of the

public domain. A radical change in the ageist beauty myth then would come about with a proliferation of visible images of women celebrating their varied shapes, and changes with post-partum and breastfeeding, foregrounding the female embodied experience across middle-age.

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