Alienation, Embodiment, and Search for Authenticity
Under Capitalism in Mieko Kawakami’s Breasts and Eggs

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Abstract

Existentialism, a philosophy introduced in the twentieth century, is still relevant in today’s world. However, its implications have gained more dimensions since the understanding of cultural phenomena keeps deepening. Existentialism coupled with Marxism can provide us an understanding of contemporary structures and patterns of human society. Women subjected to their domestic duties and capitalism demands of contributing to the workforce form the subject of this study. Their alienation from the body is augmented by invidious patriarchal demands put on their bodies coupled with strait conditions of poverty. The study is an attempt at exploring the tenets of feminist existentialism in Mieko Kawakami’s novel Breasts and Eggs. The philosophical underpinnings underlying the study are feminist existentialism and Marxism. It will unveil the themes of embodiment, alienation, authenticity, Othering and bad faith in women who are constrained by their financial situation. The novel deals with the lives of three women in Tokyo. Their lives are characterised by their shared sense of the body and alienation. The novel highlights women’s day-to-day experiences and their quest for authenticity in a world hostile to self-assertion and authentic living.

Keywords: Feminist existentialism; Alienation; Embodiment; Authenticity; Mieko Kawakami; Women’s writing; Capitalism
1. Introduction

Men live in homes, and women live in bodies. –Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days*

Foucault enlists three types of struggles, namely: struggle against domination, struggle against exploitation, and struggle against subjection (Foucault, 2019). In many parts of the world, the struggles against domination and exploitation have not yet finished, the struggle against subjection also persists in various forms. One of its manifestations is the subjection of the body to the capitalist agendas. Contemporary women’s fiction in capitalist countries tackles the issue of the body and its attendant predicaments in the age of objectification and commodification of the female body. As the body is commodified as a product and human identity becomes entangled with the economic setup unprecedentedly, fiction writers have written on the problems faced particularly by women.

This study is aimed at gaining an understanding of bodily alienation experienced by women in contemporary Japan, a capitalist country, and their struggle for survival, their attempts at self-assertion and reclamation of their authentic selves in a bid for survival. Although, with the passage of time, there have been shifts in traditional Japanese family structure, most of the stereotypes regarding women and the patriarchal oppression have persisted. Bullock (2010) notes that until recently, femininity in Japan has been seen through the lens of dominant patriarchal discursive structures of women as nurturer and supporter of men. Docility and passive acceptance of male authority was an attribute of the ideal woman. The movements of women’s freedom in the 1970s opened up new arenas of struggle and resistance to the patriarchal systems of oppression. Lacking sophisticated means of representation in society brews anxiety and inferiority complexes in women. Their quest for life in these circumstances and milieu makes them try to find meaning in mundane, physical immediacies (like the experiences of the body) and abstract realities (like life and death). The trajectory of the life of a Japanese woman circumscribes her role in the capitalist society—which is based on greed, exploitation and segregation—and at the same time inspires her to muster new realities connected to her existence beyond the realm of conformity. Class division, profiteering on gender segregation, has created a new order of the struggling of society where anybody is willing to inflict pain and accept pain in exchange for a space to belong.

Participation in the economy of Japan is important for the national identity of Japanese society. In the 80’s patriarchal capitalism faced a backlash with women participating copiously in the wake of economic independence (Ueno, 1989). But that augmented the workload of women who had to play the double role of child bearers and economic facilitator in the household. Alienation in such a social structure of female exploitation was inevitable. Participation alone cannot guarantee the decision-making powers that solely reside in male leadership. It is a vicious cycle of capitalist exploitation that has lured women working class
into the system for a real change but in result, it aggrandized its labour force without any shifts of authority that can put its core into danger. The society has yet to witness state feminism (Boling, 2008; Shirahase, 2013).

A capitalist social structure follows different patterns of alienation. Every existing relation in the society is defined and judged through profiteering measures. Communication between humans loses its effects. Thoughts are unbelievably stuck in the mind. Women are supposed to behave differently from men based not on human basis rather gender basis. The relations they evolve through patriarchal principles are solely of subordinates where women's role in the society is of no defining importance. The journey and struggle of women from their real existence to imagined statue of beauty is a journey of following patriarchal rules of men's sexual satisfaction. The women in the society are a section of humans who are expected to follow discriminatory and equivocal rules without knowing and just representation. This patriarchal social structure treats the women as the Other and aliens, leaving them on the mercy of those men in power to find a way to find a connection of existence and relation to the society. Therefore, women of the society have no future as well.

Mieko Kawakami is a potent voice in contemporary Japanese literature. Her place in the contemporary Japanese society is inevitably important for the representation of her own gender in a conduit where uncertainty of the world coalesces with the certainty of her subjective truths. Her characters are a depiction of gendered identity and its ramifications. Her works "[articulate] womanhood in Japan" and the predicament of women in the workforce (McNeill, 2020, para. 4). In the time when the West was bestowing awards on Haruki Murakami as a Japanese giant, Mieko Kawakami as a young and contemporary writer, also from Japan, was influenced by him and at the same time she was also concerned about the plot of Murakami's works where female characters fall victim of objectification and sexual pleasure for the patriarchal blessing of the society. She believes that feminism is not an ideology as it is permeated. As an ideology, it has confronted backlash in different parts of the world. For Kawakami, feminism is a way of living a life. Telling the story of human (woman) pain in an unjust and oppressive system is a power tool to pass onto future generations (Kawakami, 2019; Yoshio, 2020), for “it was not her fault that she was born” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 76).

Authenticity is a central notion in existential philosophy. Various existential philosophers have given varying descriptions of the concept. Heidegger (1927/2010) coined the term *Eigentlichkeit* for the human condition of living truly, really, or in one's own way. Kierkegaard (1846/2019) has defined it as becoming what one is (Sartre, 1943/2001) derives his idea of human existence from Heidegger's Dasein, i.e. being
thrown into a situation of time and world. Human beings are faced with the unknown world, are subject to their past, a body, a social situation, and a variety of moods and commitments. These conditions limit our exercise of choice. To live authentically means to live according to one's own values and choices and realising that we are responsible for our destiny. A necessary condition of authentic living in today's world is nonconformity. To avoid this responsibility and the repercussions of nonconformity, human beings choose to live in bad faith i.e. living contrary to personal values (Tidd, 2004). In the absence of any transcendent value or meaning of life, the existent's own choices and values render life meaningful. Beauvoir built on Sartre's notion of authenticity and transcendence in *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. These ideas are linked to freedom, choice, alienation, and transcendence. According to Beauvoir, women should aim at authenticity by transcending their alienated existence and bad faith.

Developed from Sartre's existentialism and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Beauvoir (1964/2009) expounds her theory of women’s alienation in *The Second Sex*. Being an existential philosopher, Beauvoir applied this term in an existential sense to the female situation. Alienation, according to her, is the fundamental situation of the existent. A related term is living in bad faith. An individual is living in bad faith when their life is inconsistent with their personal values and desires. Faced with her freedom and the burden of choice, the subject flees herself and renounces choice and freedom. Bad faith leads to alienation and anxiety. The existent seeks to grasp her alienated existence in an external object. It is imperative for the Self to affirm itself through the Other. The Other is what the self is not. Only by interaction with the Other can the Self become aware and self-conscious. For men, the Other is mostly an external thing: the penis, woman, land, work etc. Woman, however, in the absence of a graspable thing, makes her whole body the Other, the object of self-affirmation. For man, this Other is woman; for woman, it is her own body, because it has already been objectified by the dominant Other. Narcissism in women is an offshoot of this objectification. In the absence of substantial, rewarding work, her body becomes to her a temple to adorn and worship. It is through her body that she gets male attention.

Beauvoir (1964/2009) explains how in different phases of a woman’s life, she undergoes different kinds of alienation from their bodies to the detriment of their self-consciousness. As puberty sets in, the girl watches the discarded egg flow from her body every month. She is “enclosed in the species” (p. 38) and is prisoner to her biology. She sees her body as an “alienated, opaque thing” (p. 42). She is, thus, herself and the Other simultaneously. As an adult, her body is penetrated, taken control of. The greatest crisis comes during pregnancy, when “the species takes possession” of her body, suppressing her individuality. Due to these biologically inevitable factors, Beauvoir (ibid.) claims that the woman sees her body as something separated from herself. However, there are social and cultural factors which must be taken into account to explain
women’s Othering and the resulting alienation. As a housewife, she is supposed to represent in her person the wealth that her husband earns. She becomes a symbol for man’s social status. Greer (1971/2006) and Jaggar (1983) explain how in a capitalist and consumerist society, women are alienated from their body and sexuality. She has to dress herself in the garb of the Eternal Feminine and hide her real self to maintain and increase her market value. In doing so, her connection with her own sexuality and its power is severed. Men tend to look at women as the sum-total of their body parts (Jaggar, 1983) and pictorial and linguistic fragmentation is prevalent in female representations.

Bartky (1982) points out that socialist feminists have critically viewed the neglect of male/female dynamic in society and its role in production and consumption and the inability of Marxism to account for psychological complexities of an individual and its impact on her actions. She is of the view that socialist feminists had yet to work on merging the Marxist idea of alienation with feminism because Marxian ideas do not explain the particular kind of alienation experienced by women. Drawing from Marx’s ideas on alienation of a worker from his self, his work and society, she enlists ways in which alienation could be applied to the female situation: (i) cultural alienation is the alienation of women from cultural products i.e. “myth, ritual and art” as developing cultural artifacts is an integral part of meaning development for man, (ii) sexual alienation is the separation of women from their erotic side by making them objects for consumption and denying them the right to exercise autonomy, and (iii) bodily alienation is the separation of women from their bodily function which implies that they are allowed restricted use of spatiality and their desire for activity to “confront the resistances of matter and motion,” (Young, 1979, as cited in Bartky, 1982, p. 130) which reduces the woman’s existence to a mere body. Women’s alienation, however, is not limited to their bodies. The idea of the ‘Other’ takes root in their consciousness and the gaze is internalised. The result is that they develop narcissism, (also discussed in detail by Beauvoir) by objectifying their own bodies. She starts taking the same erotic interest in her body as men do. She becomes “at once seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised,” (ibid. 134). Slatger (1982) has noted Bartky's attempt to combine Marxian and Beauvoirian alienation to formulate a theory of female alienation. For Beauvoir, alienation is a necessary condition of human existence; for Marx, it is the outcome of the individual’s economic condition. Slatger (ibid.) has also pointed out that both Marx and Beauvoir fail to notice alienation from nature.

Jaggar (1983) has used alienation as the key term in her understanding of the oppression of women in contemporary capitalist society. Alienation in Marxism is grounded on the idea that labour is a fundamental human activity. Man finds meaning of his existence as a means of connecting to the non-human world. In Beauvoir’s terms, it could be a means of transcendence. Alienation of the labourer from the product of his
labour occurs when the link between nature and the labourer is severed. The product either does not belong to him or is used to perpetuate a structure of dependence. It leads to alienation from the self by fragmentation. Women’s condition in the contemporary world is one of alienation. They are treated as sexual objects. In workplace and domestic spheres, their jobs depend on their presentability and appeal either because of the sexual nature of the work or just men’s whims. They have to squander time, money and energy on taking care of their body and appearance. To be secure economically, a woman has to undergo much more rigorous and alienating tasks than men have to. Women are alienated as mothers by being forbidden to produce children when they do or do not wish. They are either forced into motherhood or prevented from becoming mothers, depending on the nature of regime and societal demands. All these forms of alienation are particular to women and are manifested in a capitalist patriarchal society.

Federici (2020) traces the development of body politics through history. She believes that even in the contemporary world, where women are striving to wrest economic equality and have succeeded on many fronts, the body is still subject to oppression. It was only in the 1970s that feminists started fighting for bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Women have to accept the added responsibility of home and kitchen with their responsibilities at the workplace. Federici (ibid.) observes that without change in women’s material circumstances, no substantial change in their situation is possible. The cases of sexual violence emerging after #metoo movement have confirmed that sexual violence is a structural problem and not an abuse of power by perverse men. It implies that behind gendered violence, there is an economic structure that enables men to perpetrate it and forces women to tolerate abuse silently for the sake of security and financial stability. The major concern of today’s feminists should be to alleviate women from “overwork, debt, lack of security, life as a constant tension and exhaustion,” (p. 36) which are major factors causing women’s subjugation nowadays in capitalist systems. Zakaria (2021) has highlighted how third and fourth wave feminists lost the power to confront capitalism and instead became accomplices to capitalist and imperialist agendas of first-world countries.

Japan, although subject to the west’s racially specific orientalist images, tried to assert and maintain its own identity distinct from the west and other Asian nations. Modernity in Japan was characterised by abolition of monarchy, establishment of a nation-state, development of citizen-state relation, rapid urbanisation and expansion of capitalist economy. This phenomenon led to the state projecting gendered identities on people, in response to which feminist movement began in Japan in the 1970s. Embodiment holds social meaning and is linked to citizenship. Therefore, any talk of citizenship cannot be complete without talk of bodies, because we are embodied subjects.

With the escalation in women’s rights movement all over the world, women have succeeded in gaining equal economic opportunities for themselves. Sexism, however, exists in disguised, overt forms. Women’s
role and existence is still stigmatised. It is hard to survive being a woman because of multilayer harsh realities designed by men. The world is progressing from every centre to make a better future with new scientific technologies and genetic variations but women are still finding a place and society to call their own. To find an authentic living, women adopt various means of resistance and representation. This study looks at literature as a potent space for women's subjective representation.

2. Methods
Drawing from the above discussion, this study will attempt to understand how the women in Breasts and Eggs avoid or embrace authenticity while being impeded by conventions, standards of beauty, biopower and capitalism in modern-day Japan. All the three characters are embroiled in situations with impositions and barriers, abstract and concrete. The book is divided into two parts. The setting of the first part is Tokyo in 2008, while the story in the other part takes place ten years later. While the characters remain the same, the first part focuses mainly on the lives of Makiko and Midoriko, who are visiting Natsuko in Tokyo. There are three main female characters in the novel: Natsuko, Makiko, and Midoriko. I will analyse their alienated situations and their attempts of self-assertion in a world where women are captive of two cages: the body and capital.

Sartre, the foremost existential philosopher of existentialism, argues that Marxism has affinity with existentialism in that existentialism considers existence as the struggle between the powerful and the powerless. In that sense, both methods of inquiry are complementary to each other (Sartre, 1968, 1960/2004). The study will attempt at seeing the text from the perspective of Marxism and existentialism to highlight the plight of being a woman in a capitalist country. The study will take feminist existentialism as its theoretical foundation and apply Beauvoir's (1964/2009) concept of alienation, authenticity, embodiment and bad faith and Federici's (2020) Marxist feminism on Mieko Kawakami's Breasts and Eggs. The study holds twofold significance: it contributes to the existentialist feminist studies and highlights the issues of authenticity and embodiments in contemporary capitalist Japan as displayed in women's writings. By doing so, it will display how the ideas of gender, class, and existence are inextricably linked in contemporary reality.

The following questions will guide the study:

1. How are bodily alienation and bad faith manifested in the female characters in Breasts and Eggs?
2. How are the characters in the novel engaged in their quest for authenticity?
3. What role does poverty play in the character's quest for authentic living?

3. Puberty
Midoriko, the youngest of the three women, is going through a crisis of puberty. She is undergoing an
existential ennui that manifests itself in her hatred for her constantly altering body, resentment with her mother, boredom, and antinatalism. As the daughter of a single mother who has to make both ends meet by hard work, she is filled with guilt and remorse. Her guilt is twofold: on the one hand, she is acutely aware of Makiko’s destitution and her own inability to help financially, on the other hand, she also feels guilt for being an emotional burden for her mother. Since her childhood, Makiko has fed her with a constant stream of complaints against her failed marriage. Midoriko is a living reminder of that fiasco. She resents that because of Midoriko, her body is not the same. Her pregnancy and nursing have changed her figure, which is unpleasant for her. Makiko constantly tells her that her body altered for the worse after Midoriko’s birth. As she reminds Midoriko how she is the cause of her deformed and unappealing body, Midoriko is filled with guilt. She is the cause of her mother’s troubles and is an added financial burden. This guilt is transmogrified into resentment for Makiko. Her angst shows itself against her mother, whom she considers the fountainhead of all her problems. Moreover, Makiko is preoccupied with her figure and breast implants to the point of obsession. Midoriko’s resentment takes the form of an internal crisis. She ceases talking to her mother. Her silence is emblematic of her inner turmoil. “One day, Makiko said something to her, and she didn’t answer. That was it” (ibid. p. 21). At school, she had a normal routine but to her mother, she spoke no words, instead wrote her answers on paper.

Since Makiko gave birth to Midoriko, donated the egg that bore Midoriko, Midorik’s anger is directed at Makiko. Her silence is a rebellion, not only against the regular tirade of her mother, but also against the mother, who brings people into the world. Since she is denied any other forms of protest—she cannot leave her home because she is not an adult, and because she loves her mother—she resorts to the only form available to her. She uses her pen and paper as the only means of any little communication they have and retreats into herself. It becomes an outlet in the world that oppresses her and traps her in her own body. She is still condemned to live with Makiko and watch her toil to the detriment of her body earning a pittance. Enraged at this injustice of the world and people, Midoriko becomes an antinatalist at a young age. Why struggle to stay alive in such a harsh world? and to bring another life into this world when you cannot bear the burden of this world yourself. She realises that it is better not to be born than to be born.

As she does not speak to either Makiko or Natsuko, we get to know Midoriko’s perspective through her journals. She is repulsed by the changes in her body. When Natsuko meets them at the airport, her first reaction at seeing Midoriko is one of surprise. She cannot help noticing how big Midoriko is. “Where did these legs come from?” (ibid. p. 20). Midoriko, however, is embarrassed at being noticed. She feels disgust for her body because it is an instrument for procreation. When she realises that the word ovary originally means egg, she is disgusted (she comments that dis- means to undo, while gust means taste, and the word becomes a pun), that she has been eating eggs all her life. She feels contempt for the girls at her school who show excitement about menstruation and future marriage. The girls talk enthusiastically about their
menstrual periods and want other girls to listen. Although Midoriko’s cycle has not started, there is a dread of impending doom. She wonders how anyone can be cheerful about something which is painful and occurs every month for the most of a woman’s life. “That scares me so bad. I can't do anything to stop it from happening,” (p. 44) writes Midoriko in her journal. She questions the prevalent vocabulary and ritual surrounding menstruation. Girls running off to tell their mothers when they “get their first period” as if it were a gift. “Does blood coming out of your body make you a woman? A potential mother? What makes that so great anyway? … It feels like I’m trapped inside my body. It decides when I get hungry, and when I'll get my period. From birth to death, you have to keep eating and making money just to stay alive” (p. 44). Her body is a prison because it ensures perpetuation of the species; she vows to resist it by not having children. Her question is the basic question of identity being connected with gender. Is woman the sum total of her breasts and vagina? Is she defined by her reproductive parts?

Midoriko's case is one of heightened consciousness of her body as puberty approaches coupled with her mother's financial situation and her own helplessness. These circumstances have created in her a general displeasure with life itself.

4. Beauty

Makiko’s obsession with her breasts because good looks are a job requirement. As she is working as a hostess at a cheap bar, her value lies in being attractive. She is increasingly aware of her age. Natsuko notices how old she looked. “She didn’t look older. She literally looked old.’ However, it is not for some specific male that she wants breast augmentation. The male gaze exists for her as an objective, omnipresent thing, not as a personal experience. She is alienated from her body and sees herself from the eyes of a man. Moreover, her body is an object for her to capitalise. Close to destitution, despite serving hours of her day at the bar, she adheres to a thin rope that her imagination has thrown her. She thinks having an attractive figure will help her retain her job. Here, capital is equated with the male figure. Since men are, in large part, in control of businesses and the economy, the system is designed to gratify their desires. Hence, to please her male customers and her employer, Makiko must not have small breasts.

It is a paradox that the ideal body type constructed by society is ruined by the function society wants it to perform. Women are expected to produce children and at the same time to have an immaculate figure, not only for her male partner but for the gaze of the society. Both Natsuko and Midoriko are repulsed by her fascination. She knows all the medical terminology, the names of chemicals for skin lightening. In the bathhouse scene, Natsuko feels awkward because Makiko’s persistent stares at women’s breasts and comparison with her own. Her readiness to undergo a painful surgical procedure for beauty’s sake is indicative of the complete internalisation of the male gaze. Her obsession has metamorphosed into narcissism. She is not ready to go for welfare funds because it would be embarrassing to run the house on
government funds. At the same time she is ready to squander millions for the implants. Even Natsuko wonders whether it is her “preoccupation, or shame, or insatiable curiosity” (p. 55) that makes her neglectful of her own daughter. She wears tons of makeup to hide her wrinkles, which ends up making her look even worse. It only reveals that she is not ready to bear the degradation of her body. Her situation is a combination of self-loathing stemming from her narcissism and extreme self-importance. Pursuit of beauty becomes the pursuit of happiness for her, as Natsuko muses, “Beauty meant that you were good. And being good meant being happy” (p. 56).

5. Motherhood

Breasts and Eggs deals with the issue of biopower in a capitalist society. Natsuko is the first-person speaker of the novel and the second part of the novel revolves around her. Her character is marked by her acute sense of the body. Through her character, we see the experience of a woman’s embodiment. Although in the first section, the narration is focussed on Midoriko and Makiko yet we discover the childhood traumas of Natsuko’s life. Deprived of her parents’ love at a young age, she and Makiko, her elder sister, had to work while studying. The cause of Natsuko’s frigidity is never revealed, but even when she was in her first relationship with Naruse, she tells us how she never derived any physical pleasure from their sexual intercourse. Close friends and confidants of mind and heart, Natsuko was totally estranged from her boyfriend physically. The loneliness intensified in bed. However, she pretends to enjoy sex because she has assumed that it is a woman’s duty to let the man think that she is deriving pleasure from his company. Another reason for it could be her fear of abandonment. She uses pretension as a means of holding on to him. However, Naruse has sex with another woman, even while claiming that he loves Natsuko. Bewildered, Natsuko splits with him, after which she prefers to stay alone. Later, on a phone call, Naruse tells Natsuko that she is single because of her inability to like what she does not want to like. Her frigidity or asexuality can be traced back to her deep-seated traumas: her father abandoning the family, her mother dying at a young age, working odd jobs before coming of age. “If I had been a normal kid and had a normal family, we would have had more time together every day” (173). Her feeling of abandonment pushed at the back of her mind during the day, quelled at finding a close friend in a boyfriend, resurface during intercourse. Her writing block can be thought of as a direct reflection of her inner turmoil. She is unable to be roused, either sexually or on paper. She is not satisfied with her work, despite Sengawa’s affirmation that Natsuko’s writing has a character. Neither the structure nor the content is to her satisfaction. She is seeking transcendence through her artistic creation but is constantly frustrated. Sengawa advises her to hone her writing skills, because she will be lost in the crowd if she continues writing popular fiction. Sengawa thinks that children will intercept Natsuko on her path to greatness to which she is destined. Even Makiko is astonished at her plans. Natsuko, despite all advice and opposition, chooses to have a child. Rigid
societal conventions on one hand and liberated feminist woman on the other, who thinks that refuses to conform to the set norms of conventions of the society and out-dated feminist ideals. Only Rika seems to understand her plight. She tells Natsuko how men can never understand what women really want. She thinks it to be “structurally impossible” (p. 314), because it is men themselves who are mainly responsible for most of their suffering. The traditional patriarchal family system has been detrimental to women’s physical and emotional interest.

There will come a time when women stop having babies. Or, I don’t know, we’ll reach a point where the whole process can be separated from women’s bodies, and we can look back at this time, when women and men tried to live together and raise families, as some unfortunate episode in human history. (p. 315)

Natsuko’s choice to have her own child by artificial insemination is problematic because it eliminates the role of a male in the traditional family structure. It has been thought that the union of egg and sperm is epitomised by the union of male and female, in a family with a male head. Natsuko learns otherwise. Still, at times she is confused because her personal sense of identity does not fit with the identity society has chosen for her. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m really a woman” (p. 312). Why should she be expected to use a part of body to prove her female-ness? In the end, she gets inseminated by Aizawa. Her decision can be pinned down on her insistence on living her life by her own choice. “Happiness is the base unit of consciousness, our single greatest motivator. Saying “I just want to be happy’ trumps any other explanation” (p. 56). She tells Yuriko that she feels the desire to know her child, to which Yuriko replies, “Desire is a justification all its own” (p. 348). However, Yuriko insists that a child never asks to be born into the world and it is only the parents’ selfishness to have children. Having children is a gamble in which the stake is someone else’s life.

From Natsuko’s explanation of her novel to Aizawa, we learn that she sees life as a linear progression of events. Aizawa construes her first novel as rebirth and repetition. Natsuko, however, refutes by saying that in her novel, things progress in a straight line. Yuriko later describes it as “the novel where everyone dies but they keep living” (p. 417). From this we can deduce that Natsuko is not a pessimist. Her choice of having a child can be seen as her rejection of the Nietzschean notion of eternal recurrence. Since things do not move in eternal circles, there can be room for improvement. Her assertion that she would “rather fail than let go” (p. 417) indicates her resolve to try life as it tries human beings. Her decision is the answer to Midoriko’s path of antinatalism. By bringing a child into this world, she refuses to prostrate before pessimism. The child provides her a means of transcendence (connecting with the Other as an equal) and a
hope for the betterment of the human condition.

6. Breaking the Eggs

The novel reveals that the three main characters are having a crisis of existence on their different levels. Midoriko's disintegrated self and separation from her body and Makiko's alienation and narcissism finds its culmination in the climax scene of the first part. Makiko comes home in a state of inebriation and starts yelling at Midoriko for subjecting her to pain by her silence. There is a row between the two and they even come to blows. In a symbolic act of resistance, Midoriko takes out eggs from the crate and smashes them on her head one by one. By breaking the eggs, they are breaking the constraints on their bodies, the various demands and taboos attached to them. They are no more defined by their physicality. Midoriko breaks her silence and reconciles with her mother. In the next book, we see both of them living more or less contented lives. Natsuko, on the other hand, overcomes her alienation by embracing her motherhood, despite opposition.

Conclusion

The paper dealt with the questions of poverty, embodiment, body image, alienation, subjective female experience and reproductive autonomy in contemporary society. It unveiled the structural flaws of society towards women. The novel showcased existential angst and women’s marginalisation. Gender plays a monumental role in defining the role of women. Women lead a different life than men. Society encourages women to primarily practise motherhood and perform house chores. They are unable to resist because this whole structure feeds on exploitation and sometimes people (even women) become the accomplices in the bloody quest of survival and existence. But Kawakami's characters go through transformations, tackling taboos of antinatalist thoughts, using silence as a form of resistance, undergoing alienation through patriarchal standards of beauty, and surviving through harsh economic realities. They brave a world while ageing in a society where men are allowed to age but women are not, dragging them to seek refuge in costly plastic surgeries, to finding meaning in motherhood without succumbing to pessimism. Kawakami's dialectical approach of addressing ideas is phenomenal. For motherhood is not just an experience of delivering a child into the world but also an experience of being born.

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