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Margery Kempe and Rudali: A Transgressive Journey Within

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Abstract:
This article examines the life of fourteenth century mystic Margery Kempe and how she has used her body to defy immobility – concretization of domesticity and chastity. In the process, attempts have been made to look into the connection between food and body – what happens when one stops having food, what significance a body with empty stomach carries socially. Is starvation an escape from the way the body is perceived in Medieval Times? Mystics like Margery Kempe and her contemporaries St. Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich used to starve day in and day out to do penance. Does a starved human body serve another purpose besides doing penance? Particular roles are set for particular bodies in society. When the very image of the body does not excite temptation, the body somehow bypasses the very rules prescribed for it. Critics have argued such a body creates a space for an alternative existence. The body becomes sacred, like the body of Christ. This process of creating a haloed body is achieved through performance. These ritualistic acts, performed by the body, enable the person in creating a space which is transgressive in nature. Margery seems to escape the roles of her gender - she stops being the wife of John Kempe; she stops being the mother of fourteen children; she even stops sleeping with her husband, however John often forced her to pay the marital debt. But it becomes problematic when she, having refused her husband's body, desires the holy body of Christ. Therefore, a sacred body proves to be tempting. She, having escaped from the very roles which her gender sets for her, ends up following the same, only this time with a more masculine man, Christ himself. Now, does she really escape from her gendered body?

Keywords: Body, Transgression, Masculinity and Gendered space.

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And he took bread, and gave thanks, and break it, and gave unto them saying, this is my body which is given for you, this do in remembrance of me.
– Luke 22:19

Despite discouragement form her husband about her worldly ways of dressing, Margery does not leave the way she used to dress, especially the manner in which she puts on extravagant headdresses. She wants to be stared at, and thus claim respect. There has been a craze for clothes which are cut into points. From very early in the book we find that her dressing is an attempt to remind her husband how wealthy she is or, rather, how wealthy her father is. It is very clear that her father John Burnham is

wealthier than her husband. Kempe's clothing has always been an anxiety for her husband. Once she is summoned to appear before the Bishop of Worcester to dine with him.

When she came into the hall, she saw many Bishop's men in clothes very fashionably slashed and cut into points. Lifting up her hand, she blessed herself. Then they said to her, "What the Devil's wrong with you?" She replied, "Whose men are you?" They answered, "The Bishop's Men." Then she said, "No, truly, you are more likely the Devil's men." ("Chapter 45," *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 146)

Kemp was no poor woman; on her way from Lynn to Constance she had 32 Pounds excluding the expense of travelling. At that time a knight used to earn 40 pounds annually. Once in a place of religion Kemp comes across a monk who holds great office. This monk asks her to talk about his sin. She asks Jesus and he tells her that he has sinned in lechery, despair and worldly goods. Now, Kemp can also be accused of the very last sin. When she goes to the vicar of St. Stephen's in Norwich, the Vicar is astonished to hear that she wants to speak one hour or two of the love of god. On her way to pilgrimage she meets with a German Priest who asks her to leave off her white clothing. This German priest is much agitated by a certain English Priest who also wants the same – that Kemp should leave white clothing:

Afterwards when she went on pilgrimage she happened to meet the priest who was her enemy and he greatly rejoiced that she had been deflected from her intension, said to her, "I am glad that you go about in black clothes as you used to do." And she answered him, "Sir, our lord would not be displeased though I wore white clothes, for he wills that I do so." Then the priest replied to her, "Now I well know that you have a devil inside you, for I hear him speak in you to me." "Ah, good sir, I pray you, drive him away from me, for God knows I would very gladly do well and please him if I could. ("Chapter 34," *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 121)

The priest is angry because of the claim Margery makes that she knows the will of god. Now whether she truly knows the will of god or not is another matter. The very fact that she is able to make such claim is something to take notice of. God is something about which priests can talk, something about men can lay claim. Only they know the will of god. People have had a hard time believing her, even another man, who is a bachelor of law, does not believe that her crying as a gift from god. Instead he believes it to be a heart condition. Margery knows that she cannot get her claim established so easily, but putting on the white cloth is certainly of great help to her. This is one her first attempts to claim that is a chaste woman, if not virgin. In those only virgins are allowed to wear white clothes. Margery likes role playing and in the book she is often seen playing different roles at different times: once she appropriates the role of St. Anne and Virgin Mary; then she assumes the angel Gabriel's role and informs Mary of her being the mother of God; she also casts herself as the maid of the Virgin Mary.

Her reaction about the dresses which Bishop's men wore is hypocritical considering the fact she herself once wore those dresses and spent a fortune for them. She is very aware of her economic position in society. She never seems to forget even when she puts on the white clothing, and when she seems to forget her marital life. She certainly remembers it when she is asked to talk about it by the mayor of Leicester. She says she is from Lynn in Norfolk and the daughter of a good man who has been elected mayor five times from that borough and an alderman for many years. Her husband is a burgess from the same place. The Mayor then compares her to St. Katherine of Alexandria and says she is not of the same kind as St. Katherine who hailed from a royal family but she later renounced her privileges. Margery is then put under house arrest, not in her own house though, in the house of a jailer. However, St. Katherine was jailed for alleged Lollardy. The mayor is trying to do the same with Margery. He wants to prove her to be a Lollard and a heretic. BA Windatt opines that The Mayor has already compared

Kempe to St. Katherine of Alexandria, who converted the wife of Katherine's persecutor and some anti-Lollard rhetoric accused Lollards of targeting wives for conversion. "In 1399 Richard II had prohibited the entry into England of "a new sect of certain people dressed in white clothes and pretending to great holiness."[1]

She is also accused of being a heretic by the archbishop of York when she says she is not a virgin yet she puts on white clothes. Now only a virgin can put on white clothes. The hierarchy has been reiterated in the book that virginity is regarded the highest state, then comes the state of a chaste widow and later comes the position of chaste married women. The position of Kemp cannot be easily located, she is neither quite a virgin nor quite a married woman – However, she is a virgin woman in the sense that she is a married woman who does not live with her husband while at the same time staying married to him. It is clear that the state of virginity is the most prized position as god prefers virgins the most. Kempe's wearing the white clothes means she is seeking the position closest to god or, has already claimed to have reached the position. This is something the people like the archbishop of York refuse to accept. I agree with Isabel Davis when she repeats the argument in her essay opines:

The Book of Margery Kempe documents the paranoia that Margery arouses in some of the men that she meets: that she will tempt other wives away from their homes and lead them, Pied Piper-like, into rebellion against their husbands and their settled married lives. The mayor of Leicester reads this power of female leadership into her white clothing – again clothing draws out the patriarchal anxieties about women who refuse to live by convention. Her pious practice of charitable giving is thought by her servants to be a threat to the domestic economy and it may be the fear that she will incite such immoderate generosity in other household manageresses that alienates and worries some of her male detractors. ("Men and Margery: Negotiating Medieval Patriarchy," 51)

The mayor says that he has reasons to believe that Kempe has come to Leicester with the intension to lure his wife and the wives of many like him away with her. The Mayor is threatened by her transgression – she, having a husband and fourteen children dares to put on white clothes. She seems to represent a threat to matrimony. Again she seems not. In her appearance she is a virgin but she embraces the matrimony like she once embraced the body of her husband and she very proudly says she has never had anyone else's body other than the body of her husband. She is right because her only attempt, of sleeping with another man who she thought was interested in her, fails miserably because he refuses to have any such intension later. And the reason she gives for not sleeping with other men is because she is bound by the law of matrimony. Then, is she really a threat to the husbands like the Mayor of Leicester thinks?

An introspective reading of the text shows otherwise. Margery used to wear hairshirt for self punishment. Her sense of guilt makes her seek punishment. She may be guilty of her past, of having fourteen pregnancies, of how she has made use of her body. She would not have agreed to marry the godhead, the father, had she really been against marriage. It seems she is not happy being a wife, may be wife of a burgess. It further shows her ambition: why would she be the wife of a burgess, albeit a loving husband, when she could be the bride of Jesus Christ. The only thing required for her to be one is to be a virgin or, a practicing virgin. At first Kemp does not want to attend to her ailing husband, it is only after Christ's advice does she agree to take care of him. Alison Gulley in her article finds a reason:

Following John's fall down the stairs, Margery prays to god to heal her husband, fearing she will be blamed for the accident. He grants her request, asking in return that she take John home and care for

him. At first she refuses, citing the interference that nursing would have in her devotion to Christ. ("Not Tonight Dear: I Have a Vow Chastity," 141)

It is interesting to notice that the archbishop and his retinue of clerics are not able to find a way to punish her. It is true that she is no virgin yet she is practicing virginity. She comes to an agreement with her husband never to sleep with him again. In return she agrees to pay off his monetary debt, and she does pay off his debt before going to Jerusalem. Ironically, her paying off his monetary debt does not pay off her marital debt in which both husband and wife are supposed to be bound in a sexual bond of marriage. She knows the rules of the game and she also knows its loopholes. Thus, she just buys her body back from her husband. She wishes to regain part of her body, the virgin part which she has lost in marriage, in fourteen pregnancies. For her that is the only way to get out of the vicious cycle of giving birth and creating her own identity. Her earlier two attempts of making her own has failed miserably – first at brewing and second at weaving clothes. Melissa Hofmann in her article comments:

Following the teachings of Paul, chastity was promoted in order that one might emulate Christ and the Virgin Mary, thus virgins and widows were thought to have a special connection to God. "The virgin's body was described as a jewel, a treasure, a sacred vessel, a temple of god which was to be cherished and honoured. As bride of Christ the virgin needed to be carefully guarded so as to remain "unwounded" or "untarnished" for her eternal bridegroom" (Schulenburg 128). A married woman might also practice chastity (after all she was a potential widow), but she needed the consent of her husband first. ("Virginity and Chastity for women in late antiquity," 1)

Kempe is very much aware of what the body of a woman is associated with. She knows The Bible; she often refers to the scriptures. She knows what Eve is associated with in The Bible – how she becomes the accomplice of Satan in the crime against humanity. Therefore, in the book she very carefully distances herself from all this negativity by choosing a life of celibacy. Celibacy moves her body to a position which is not carnal and therefore not within the realm of her gender. In other words, apparently, she somehow escapes from being a woman. Now what the body means in the Middle Ages and how the body of Margery Kemp is situated in a culture which is predominantly patriarchal remain to be seen. Karma Lochrie in her book opines:

My point is that the body is not something we can take as a "given", nor something which is the same for the Middle Ages as it is for us in the 1990s. The body, particularly the female body is itself a construct of science, medicine, theology, literature, education, the clothing industry, advertising, and fitness centres. Except for the last two industries, the same is true for the Middle Ages. The female body, simply put, has a history and that history is determined by social and religious values, institutions, and patriarchal power structures. As Susan Rubin Suleiman has argued, "The cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh and blood entity, but that of a symbolic construct." ("Introduction," *Margery Kemp and translations of the Flesh,* 3)

Contrastingly, male body has been identified with the spirit. In chapter one of her book Lochrie contends that women are identified in the Middle Ages with the flesh which is not synonymous with body. Since women bodies in the Middle Ages are seen as flesh which can cause disruption in human psyche, a pious living and chastity are instructed. Kemp is a pious woman and she also lives chastely. Then how does she cause disruption? Her bodily access to the scared, or at least her claim that Jesus talks to her is something that threatens construct. Questioning her privilege access is actually questioning Christ himself, the most powerful entity of the structure. She thereby develops a strategy to negotiate the rules. Woman body in the Middle Ages is controlled by the Church. Her putting on the white clothes and

choosing a celibate life make sense when it is put in the context of her crafting a place in religious society. Kempe seems to be saying if she is to be controlled, she will only be controlled by Christ himself and no one else. Kempe imitates Christ in mortifying her flesh. Another way of her imitation is by going on pilgrimage to the holy land, places in which Christ once lived. Pilgrims are expected to inhibit the major events of Christ's life. The purpose of this visit is to reconstruct in her memory Christ's bodily presence. Thus remembering god enables the pilgrim to feel the presence, the flesh of Christ. Thereby Christ comes alive and becomes Human. The concept of flesh which Lochrie builds up in her book is very problematic. She opines:

Because the flesh is heterogeneous – neither body nor soul, but carnal and spiritual at the same time – abjection poses a continual threat to the Christian subject. Yet it also offers a radical notion of perfection. The excess of drives – those heaving powers of the flesh – topple over into love of God. The same interior flux or perviousness of the flesh which leads to sin likewise leads to perfection. According to Kristeva, self-abjection requires of the mystic continual avowal of her impurity, yet is not necessarily masochistic in the usual sense of the word. ("The Body as Text and the Semiotics of Suffering," 39)

Kemp's continual self-denial creates a void. This is an opening of a self-effacement to replace her body with embodying the body of Christ in text. This sublime body is encrypted to topple over the discourse. Kemp's love for Christ is both carnal and spiritual. The knowledge of Christ is invested both with physical and meta-physical. Kemp's desire is for something which is absent – the body of Christ. Therefore she creates the absent body in language and also in her memory, especially when she goes on pilgrimage in place where Jesus once lived. Her continuing disregard for the body is an attempt to negate its very existence. On the other hand she loves the body of Christ. She considers it to be very precious. This love for the body of Christ and self abjection of her own impure body give Kemp the hermeneutics to read the body of Christ. Christ also has blessed her with an excess of crying, so much so that Kemp requests Christ to relieve her of public crying. Once Grey Friar banished her from church for she was crying out loud during his sermons. Grey friar is not alone in the league of men who are annoyed with her crying. They just do not have any idea of how to deal with her crying. It is again threatening to them as it redirects public attention from them to her. They feel helpless in the moment. They are silenced by a loud crying for Christ. During that moment she transports private crying to public crying, to a spectacle which is transgressive in nature. Understandably Christ does not grant Kemp her wish. Christ wants to make a mirror out of Kemp in which men and patriarchal society at large may see their image.

Kempe loves Jesus but marries his father the Godhead in Rome. Sarah Beckwith in her essay talks about this ambivalent response:

It is a typical and ambivalent gesture which holds dialectically in tension the rejection of the father with her own abasement before Him so that her preference for the son can be reread as the measure of her humility rather than her megalomania. But it is nevertheless this refusal and all that it implies in the eyes of her commentators – her lack of a seriously vocational mystical career, her wish to release the son for the father, her need for mediation of earthly roles, her preference for embodied relationships rather than heavenly transcendence – that have earned her considerable abuse as a mystical writer. ("The Uses of Corpus Christi and the Book of Margery Kempe," *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, 74)

Marriage between young women and older men is a social practice, prevalent in medieval England. Kempe is about forty when she goes to Rome. She is also married for quite some time, probably twenty years. Still she is made to look like a new bride. These marriages are aristocratic marriages, arranged for

political and economic reasons. Kemp belongs to an aristocratic bourgeois family. Kemp's identification with Christ engenders her identity and changes her role in cultural position of society. Technically she is married to her husband John, and then she remarries the godhead, but she espouses that she is the bride of Christ. Despite all this Christ sanctions her piety. Christ's sanctioning her piety gives her a position in society which is very precarious, reserved for neither wives nor virgins. She fissures in between. She transgresses both the boundaries of being a wife and a virgin. Therefore celibacy ceases to be a prerequisite for piety.

Once lord Jesus Christ bids Margery to go to the vicar of St. Stephens who happens to be a very good preacher and does his job well. When she meets him she talks about god for over an hour or two with him. The very fact that she, being a woman, can talk about god for so long, makes the vicar nervous. People like the vicar have been accustomed of seeing only men preaching about god, claiming to have the access to god and therefore grace of god. Afterwards she has been taken to the Archbishop of York who, like many people before him, does not want her to be in his diocese, as people believe that she may lead people after her. They fear that she has an influence over people because she knows her faith well. Knowing the scripture is something not expected of a woman. One who knows the scriptures, is likely to have followers. This is exactly what the men of church do not want. The archbishop also asks her not to teach people in his diocese any lessons of the Bible. But Margery is someone who has read the Bible as well as they have done. She quotes the gospel and says nowhere in Bible has it been stated that a woman cannot talk about god with people who like to hear. The other clerics being present there also quote St. Paul about women not being able to preach. She replies, "I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live." [2]

Generally in church, a pulpit is the platform from which preaching is addressed to the people gathered in church. Preaching is the gospel of Jesus Christ from the Bible. The physical space of the pulpit in a church is an elevated place. This elevated position gives, one who stands on a pulpit, authority and sets one apart from those who come to listen to the preaching. Therefore, the preacher commands respect from the crowd. A pulpit has a dedicated place in church, and one who preaches from the pulpit also has space inside church as well as outside in society. Margery does not have access to a pulpit. That is why whatever conversation she has with others about god cannot be called preaching. She rather likes to call it teaching. The same gospel, which she addresses, is preached by the clergy in church. Therefore, preaching has a relationship with the pulpit. What Margery means when she says that she does not preach is that she does not need either a pulpit or a dedicated place in church to preach the gospel. The men of church do not even allow her to stay inside the church because of her crying. Her crying out loud makes other people annoyed with her.

Although Margery is hindered in many places of her own country while travelling, she enjoys more freedom of movement than many nuns do outside the cloister. These nuns keep whatever goes on inside inaccessible to the world outside. Obligation to such secrecy can only be realised through chastity which goes beyond the physical realm. It requires a metaphysical or rather a verbal chastity. Therefore, Margery Kempe can hardly be trusted as she is outside the convent and she is not a virgin. These men of church are as much concerned about her physical virginity as well as her will to keep matters of the church inside its boundary. Donna Alfano Bussell in her review of Sarah Salih's article opines:

The virgin is always suspect until proven otherwise. Margery Kempe is the frequently cited example of this need for proof; Salih observes that Margery is fully involved in recuperation of her maidenhood. She relentlessly pursues a virginity that seems elusive and difficult to maintain in spite of the many

divine assurances Margery records for her "creatur." Margery's self-conscious effort to construct a spiritual self continues to engender considerable debate. ("Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England," 3)

Men like the mayor of Leicester have always objected to women like Margery who try to place her outside a space designed by the men. As for them, it should be a place inside the house, in the kitchen, and in bedroom. Margery has been in all these places, doing the best she could have done as a wife, as a mother. Problem arises when she tries to move out of this supervised space, and claims her identity. Her identity of a practised virgin has faced much critique from all parts of society. Her wearing white clothes has always been discouraged, as only the "virgin" should wear white clothes. She tries to replace her identity of a married woman outside the cloister with the identity of a practised virgin. However, she has neither a place inside the cloister nor does she have a place outside. She constantly moves in and out of the religious and social spaces, and therefore cannot be located. Likewise, she moves in and out of different identities, that of a married woman and a practised virgin. Susan Morrison in an article opines:

Public movement is like public speech—both function as declarations of faith. Public movement functions as a speech act of motion or space…. In Kempe's work we see the topos of the sexualized woman pilgrim, whose body, moving through public space, becomes the property of viewers, a body open to interpretation. Even the bodies of virgins and post-menopausal women are public bodies. Margery Kempe causes great anxiety and antagonism while wearing white clothes which signify a virgin, something she no longer was. But that such apparel was understood reveals the public display of costume. Clothing functions as a metonymy for the sexual state of one's body, one made public knowledge. ("Performing Margery Kempe," *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 129)

Public movement may be public speech, and for Margery it is her crying which acts as her speech addressed to the public. Her crying in public becomes an example for other women who may wish to go out on a pilgrimage. Her crying creates followers and gives her a space in society with some command. This carves out for her a contested space in society, which is subversive in nature. Her crying becomes a performance. Therefore, the mayor of Leicester is not very wrong when he says that Margery can lure his wife and the wives of many others away with her. The archbishop of York is also very worried that Margery can influence people in his diocese with her way of life. All she does is talk about god and cry, a lot. Since she cries in public most of the time, which, however, is contrary to what people have seen or, like to believe that crying is a private affair. People crying out loud in public are often seen as pretenders and crying as pretence. Crying seems to be more spontaneous and people's presence may get in the way of one's giving vent to emotions. But performance is more conscious an act. Here Morrison seems to mean Margery's crying is an act, though an unconscious act, as it is because of the grace of God she cries. Her crying is also very influencing as it influences others. Morrison in the same article further says,

Kempe's roarings and tears function, as does laughter, as a comment on society and her marginalized position in it. They allow her to carve out a privileged space for herself by subverting culturally sanctioned public speech. For example, the Grey Friar banishes her from his church because her roarings silence him, the purveyor of approved public speaking. By appropriating the public space for her tears, Kempe questions the patriarchal language of the Church. ("Performing Margery Kempe," 136)

In a Hindi film *Rudali*[3] it has been shown that, in India it is a custom prevalent in parts of Rajasthan where women of lower caste are hired by the upper-caste families to mourn the death of a male member in family. These women are professional mourners. They mourn with loud wailing, chest-beating and

lamenting. Now this kind of crying is a demonstration, an act and certainly a performance. What Margery does with her crying is something she cannot help. But these professional mourners are trained to cry, and it is an act of labour. Interestingly, in private chamber of the Archbishop Margery does not cry, she talks and answers in the language best understood by the Archbishop and his men. While she is inside a church, she cries out loud making her presence felt in an otherwise disciplinary space. These instances in the book seem to indicate that Margery is very conscious with her crying which varies in different places. Her performance creates a luminal space for her to claim her own spirituality which threatens the religious hierarchy. Though crying is an act of resignation, Margery while crying feels empowered.

Notes:

1. B.A. Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 318-319.
2. ——— *The Book of Margery Kempe*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 164.
3. *Rudali*, directed by Kalpana Lajmi (1993; Jaisalmer, Rajasthan: Doordarshan) DVD.
4. Bibliography: Beckwith, Sarah. *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. London: Routledge, 1997.
5. Bussell, Donna Alfano. Review of *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* by Sarah Salih. *Le Cygne*, new series, Vol. 1 (Fall 2002), pp. 45-49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44633409
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