

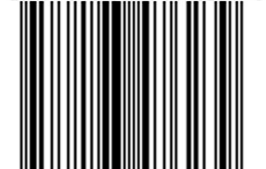
# THE BODY SPEAKETH :

Interrogating Cultural Constructions  
of the Body

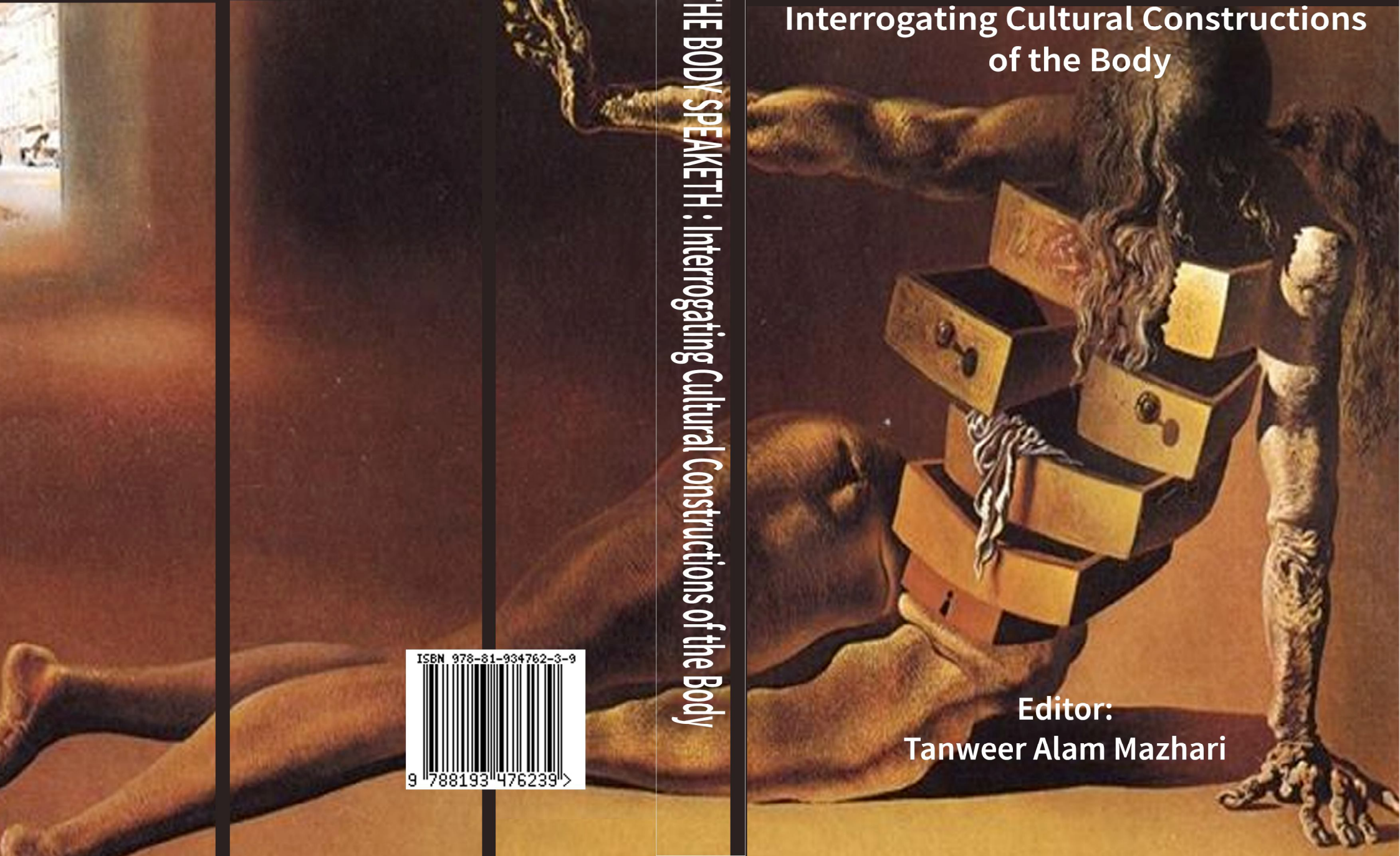
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Tanweer Alam Mazhari

THE BODY SPEAKETH : Interrogating Cultural Constructions of the Body

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**Proceedings  
of  
The Body Speaketh: Interrogating  
Cultural Constructions of the Body**

**A two-day UGC-sponsored seminar organised by the  
Department of English, Ramakrishna Mission  
Vidyamandira, Belur Math, in collaboration with the  
Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur  
University, Kolkata, on January 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017.**

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## FOREWORD

Traditionally the body has been understood and explained in philosophical and religious texts in contradistinction with either the soul or the mind, and not surprisingly the body has always come out as the second best in these comparisons. Plato's *Phaedo* and Descartes' famous thesis on the "mind-body dualism" are some of the examples in which this contrast is prominently played out. St Jerome subduing his flesh with a stone is an iconic representation of the dominant Christian view of the body. In our own religious and philosophical traditions the body is seen as subservient to the mind. In *Purusha-Sukta* in the *Rg-Veda* the supremacy of the mind is emphatically asserted as Brahamans emerged from the head of Purusha. The *yogacara* school of Buddhist philosophy goes further and sees all physical objects as fiction, and what we perceive are products of our mind, without a real external existence. For them the body is just an illusion.

However, when the Department of English decided to organise a seminar as part of the college's Diamond Jubilee celebrations the centrality was accorded to the body, and the body alone. The title of the seminar "The Body Speaketh: Interrogating Cultural Constructions of the Body" clearly foregrounds the body and sees it as a social/linguistic construct and a site where conflicts, both material and discursive, are played out for control, marginalisation, even erasure. The present volume includes papers by young scholars who have tried to explore these issues and more with erudition and passion. It is really a pleasure and honour to present these ideas to a wider readership. We have also included the abstracts of the papers presented by the resource persons and hope to come out with another volume at a later date which will include the papers themselves.

I would like to thank the UGC for their generous grant for making this seminar a reality. I am also thankful to the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University for collaborating with us for the successful conduct of the seminar. My greatest debt. of course is to my former

colleague Tuhin Bhattacharjee who not only suggested the topic of the seminar and wrote the concept note but also worked silently with me to make this seminar a success, and this publication a possibility. I would be failing in our duty if we do not thank Swami Shastrajnananda, Principal of the college, and Dr. Swarup Ray, Head of the Department of English, for supporting me wholeheartedly from the conception to the completion of the seminar.

**Tanweer Alam Mazhari**



## Principal's Address

Om Namō Bhagavate Srīramakrīshnaya.

On behalf of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira family, I heartily welcome you all. I am really grateful to all the distinguished resource persons, paper presenters, and other learned persons assembled in the audience for coming here and making the seminar a success. This year we are celebrating the Platinum Jubilee of this college and we thought that it would be befitting for an educational institution to observe such an occasion by organizing different academic programmes. Almost all the departments of the college have been able to organize national or international level seminars. Most of these events are already over. Some will be held within a month.

I am extremely grateful to the esteemed faculty members of our English Department for choosing such a theme for this seminar. Being humble learners of language and literature, we are always keen to move around and within the body-mind complex. In fact, the principal object of quest of this world, right from time immemorial, is the body with all its externalities and internalities.

Yaska, famous ancient age philologist, constructed a unique narrative of a body when he explained in his famous Sara-Vikara Sutra saying – born (jayate), existed (asti), grown up (vardhate), evolved (viparinamate), decayed (apakshiyate) and perished (nashyati).

In Buddhist philosophy, too, the concepts of Panca Ksandha and Dwadasha Niadana give unique theories on the construction of the body.

Thus, in all philosophical and cultural pursuits, deciphering the text of the body has become the principal aim.

In this context, we must not forget that the concept and construction of such a body is not limited to a human one, rather this involves a body of a group of individuals, be it human or non-human, and also includes the societal or organizational bodies up to the limit of a state. And hence, in all such concepts, there is an inevitable tendency to find out the power play of a ‘body’, its source, its characteristic features and its methodology.

I fervently hope that the 2-day-long discussion will unfurl newer facets of the theme, and that teachers, researchers and students – the entire

body of the audience will get new light to see themselves and others.

Thank you once again.

## **Obliterating the Phallic Image: Restructuring the Body with Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman**

**Santasil Mallik**

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The advent and development of art photography can be read as an extension of the highly ‘realistic’ depiction of nature and femininity by the Pre-Raphaelite painters in the mid-nineteenth century. Owing to the Pre-Raphaelite painters’ depiction of women with their passivity, ‘angelic’ femininity, and averted gaze, early photographs of the female body veered between formulaic portraits to idealised feminine figures in exotic settings. The problematic aspect, however, arose when photographers including Julia Margaret Cameron, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, and Henry Robinson started depicting naked bodies of women on print. Unlike documentaries or television programmes, photographs, according to Laura

Mulvey, are interpreted in isolation as autonomous frames that are devoid of a subsequently edited narrative or sequence for the purpose of mediated reception (138-139). Hence, nude photographs were imposed with moral and ethical obligations irrespective of their contexts. The female body projected a dual psychic state into the consciousness of art photographers – fetish and phobia. They wanted to colonise the female body through photography's inherent masculine gaze, all the while maintaining a distance from pornography and charges of obscenity.

However, in the late twentieth century, feminist photographers like Laurie Simmons, Sanja Ivekovic, Francesca Woodman, and Birgit Jurgenssen explored the possibilities of the medium by questioning the veracity of photographic realism and the stereotypes of American visual media. They often employed “high-art” modernist ideas in demonstrating their politics of the body. But amidst the intense commercialisation of the photographic medium, the conceptual vocabulary of these artists was increasingly marginalized. In Laura Mulvey's

words, “this kind of theoretical/political aesthetics also affected artists working in the climate of seventies feminism, and the representability of the female body underwent a crisis” (139). This also led to an undesirable separation between art theory and art practice, and their fight against marginalisation turned upon themselves due to their non-conforming and anti-populist ideas of art.

Cindy Sherman, however, made a significant impact in the art scene by accommodating her art within the mainstream cultural discourse. Instead of refracting her work through the prism of disassociating theoretical frameworks and structural analysis, she extensively used the undiluted forms of American visual media stereotypes, without any critical explanation, in addressing the mainstream cultural consciousness. Her postmodernist approach was revealed in the very first photo-series, *Untitled Film Stills*, where in a series of sixty nine monochrome photographs she photographed herself posed in stereotypical roles. These photographs, reminiscent of the New Wave films, evoke a nostalgia for 50s’ popular culture, displaying an

essentially postmodernist attitude of evoking the past that Frederick Jameson describes as the “return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical teleos” (xi). Sherman’s self-portraiture photographs in representational clichés underline the fluidity of subject-object dichotomy, and the artifice of photography. Therefore, in imitating a homogenous culture of femininity, her photographs display an awareness of the voyeuristic gaze, reminding us of the constructedness of these appearances. The lack of explanation in the photographs also attracts a high degree of audience complicity in interpreting a narrative behind each image, in attaching a ‘title’ to the ‘Untitled’ film stills. Each photograph is also frozen at a particular moment of heightened awareness or indifference, parodying the apparent stillness of photographs and hinting a parting jibe at Cartier Bresson’s idea of ‘the decisive moment’.



Fig. 1. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled film #16*. 1978, Gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. *MoMA*. Web. 17 Jan 2017.

*Untitled film #16* (Fig. 1), with its placement of props, depiction of interior space, and the imitative make-up of Jean Moreau gives us a visual reference of Antonioni's 1961 film, *La Notte* (The Night). It was only apt that this film, which served as a feminist critique of capitalist society, revolving around women, consumption, and the failure of ecosystem (Foster), became a pertinent photographic subject in Sherman's series. Apart from shooting it from a low angle, the superiority of the character is further imposed by the 'masculine' signifiers she is



involved with – the cigarette, the ash tray, and her posture itself. The character seems to be in the midst of some action, yet the narrative is never revealed to us by the ‘Untitled’ frame. In the *Preface* to her photography book, she writes of her closeness to the visual style of Hitchcock, Antonioni and Neorealist films, but vehemently rejects the sentimentalised, and often victimised depiction of women: “What I didn’t want were pictures showing strong emotion... but... when they were almost expressionless” (Sherman 8). Hence, the lack of expression in the character’s face is also demonstrative of Sherman’s re-representational politics. Moreover, the portrait of a typical patriarch figure in the wall behind her metaphorically illustrates the overarching presence of male surveillance behind the representational politics of women in popular media. Her characters hardly confront the camera, but when they do, they are portrayed with a frightened expression or with a visual metaphor of protection – with scarf, sunglasses, behind windows etc., as if shielding

themselves from the camera's gaze like in *Untitled #7* or *Untitled #17*.



Fig. 2. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled film #3*. 1977. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. *MoMA*. Web. 17 Jan 2017.

The ambivalence between voyeurism and shared domesticity is another pertinent factor in her politics. In the claustrophobic frame of *Untitled film # 3* (Fig. 2), Sherman shares her domestic space assigned to her by patriarchal discourse – the kitchen, yet looks out of the frame, hinting at a narrative which is beyond voyeuristic comprehension, beyond the masculinist narrative of photographic space-time. This extra-visual reference beyond the voyeuristic gaze forms, to use Barthes' terminology, “the punctum” (27) of the photograph,

an inherent quality in many of her photographs in the series. In the left, the off-focussed saucy handle pointing towards her breasts has an obvious phallic connotation, highlighting how the politics of sexuality in its latent (off-focussed) form controls every aspect of female representation in popular media. As Susan Sontag writes, “The camera as phallus is, at most, a flimsy variant of the inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs” (13-15).

After parodying the fashion industry and its mannerisms of codified female beauty in *Untitled Film Stills* (1984) and critiquing the grotesque depiction of feminine monstrosity through fairy tales and myths in *Untitled Film Stills* (1985), she produced her most outrageous, de-fetishizing work, titled *Sex Pictures* (1993). Here, Sherman completely replaces herself as the subject of her work with grotesque arrangements of mannequins and disjointed prosthetic body parts. These photographs could be read as invoking the Kristevan concept of the ‘abject’ among her viewers, which accounts for the disgust aroused by the inanimate

body, the disintegrating body, and bodily wastes. The viewers become threatened by something that is beyond the dynamics of identity, yet which is relatable to them in fragmented meanings. For Kristeva says, “The abject has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I” (1). Sherman’s series remarkably moves inward in dissecting the topography of the body, yet it deconstructs the X-Ray vision of popular media. She undermines the enlightenment notions of subjectivity by decentering them with the use of artificial figures “to expose the reality of human identity in its many contexts”. (Gibbons)

*Untitled #258* (Fig. 3)<sup>1</sup> of *Sex Pictures* depicts a partially assembled mannequin lying on its face to reveal its back. The mannequin is deprived of genitalia, yet its very absence often makes us consider the mannequin depicting a female body. Harping on Freudian psychoanalysis, Sherman plays

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #258*. 1992, Chromogenic colour print. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. *MoMA*. Web, accessed on 17 Jan 2017.

with the absent/present dichotomy that dictates Western discourse of sexuality, where ‘presence’ is defined by the ‘phallus’, and the woman is always associated with ‘absence’ or ‘lack’. Moreover, the ‘passive’ association of this sexual pose, as constructed through pornography, relates it to femininity. The gaping hole of the mannequin, with its gestural placement of hands, takes us inside the body to reveal the disintegrated interior and the concealed decay behind a set of cultural presuppositions about the female body.

Sherman’s *Untitled #263* (Fig. 4)<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, challenges the notion of identifying our social position with respect to the phallus – the ‘transcendental signifier’. The mutilated, disjointed hermaphrodite pelvis disrupts the very categorisation of sexual identities. This photograph,

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<sup>2</sup> Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #263*. 1992, Chromogenic colour print. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. *MoMA*. Web, accessed on 17 Jan 2017.

like Hans Bellmer's sculptures, creates a "kind of slippage that is meant, precisely, to blur their meaning, rather than to reify it, or better, to create meaning itself as blurred" (Krauss 156). The fractured heads lying beside the main subject further illustrates the processes of fission and fusion, an aspect which unifies the form and shape of the photograph, both contextually and graphically. Moreover, the Y-shaped knot of the band between the two genitalia can be interpreted as an exaggeration of the mere chromosomal importance in determining the sex of a person. According to Glenn D. Lowry, this photograph also deconstructs the modernist discourse of vaginal iconography created by Gustave Courbet's highly eroticised painting, *Origin of the World* (1866) (00:01:58-00:02:30), where the vagina is reduced to an abyss for producing life. *Sex Pictures* can also be seen as a brilliant subversion of the heteronormative view of photography. The characters, with their disjointed and random fusion of face, body and genitalia embrace a plurality of sexual identities.

In an attempt to subvert the heteronormative gaze, queer art photographers including Duane Michaels and Robert Mapplethorpe, much like the feminist artists of the 70s made their representations of queer narratives outside the rhetoric of mass consumption, and hence were class-restricted. In the meanwhile, after the founding of the LGBT advocacy group ACT UP in 1987, feminists often incorporated countercultural notions including punk and Downtown drags to signify their solidarity with the militant ‘dykes’ movement. The younger generation of ‘fags’ and ‘dykes’ started their own cultural production through cheaply produced homemade magazines which defied the institutionalised presentation of queer cultures in periodicals like *On Our Backs*, *The Advocate*, and *Girlfriends* with zines like *Fierce Vagina*, *Whorezine* and *Bitch Nation* (Bright 16). These zines were the first source of independent queer photographic practices which had a significant influence in reshaping the semiotics of fashion. But the fashion industry strategically extracted the image of ‘heroin chic’ (Wren), as Bill Clinton termed it, to

commodify fetishisms. Clinton further said in a campaign, “fashion photos in the last few years have made heroin addiction seem glamorous and sexy and cool” (Wren). He expressively blamed photographer Nan Goldin for glorifying the culture of drags, drugs and liberal sexual practices.

The ‘heroin chic’ Nan Goldin’s depiction of her queer circle had a huge influence in shaping queer subcultures and fashion trends within mainstream discourse. Her landmark work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985) chronicles her relation with the Downtown scene of New York. Unlike other queer photographers, her photographic album was primarily a part of her personal diary, not a voyeuristic engagement to document the lives of punk culture. Memory and subjectivity play an integral part in the formation of her artistic psyche and visual language. The conceptualisation of ‘snapshot aesthetics’ by Nan Goldin with her soft-toned, un-composed and intimate photographs, also denied the visual language of ‘straight photography’. Her position veers between a ‘recorder’ and a ‘mirror’ to the contemporary societal space she lived



in, and as Ben Burbridge notes, “While the former obscures the decision to exhibit what has been recorded altogether, the latter alludes more directly to the act of showing, but only in a passive sense: an act of reflection, not display” (eitherland.org).

Her ‘backstage perspective’ of photography often alludes to Edward Degas’ paintings of dancers in the backstage (Gregory) where the performativity of the characters are embraced through the exploration of personal spaces.



Fig. 5. Goldin, Nan. *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! undressing, NYC*. 1991, Cibachrome colour print. Tate, Liverpool. *Tate*. Web. 17 Jan 2017.

Goldin’s *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! undressing, NYC* (Fig. 5) celebrates such a moment

behind the performativity of drag queens, Jimmy and Tabboo!. Unlike other photographs of Jimmy, he is half-dressed and is without his wig, thus depicting an ambivalence of identity and emphasising on the performative nature of transgression. His ‘feminine’ posture of leaning on the wall in contrast to his ‘masculine’ physicality is overtly suggestive of androgyny. Goldin explores the private space as an insider, yet helps in demystifying the urban myths of drag queens by exhibiting it in public spaces. On a different layer in the photograph, we see Tabboo! on the mirror with his muscular neck being highlighted by a light source. After his performance, he seems to be discarding the signifiers of ‘femininity’. The photograph thus presents a series of interesting juxtapositions – masculine and feminine, performance and disregard, and on a technical aspect, light and darkness.

By exhibiting *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* to her own circle in public spaces, she produced a new space between the private and the public consumption of art, where it served as “raw

slices of collective experience” (Burbridge) among her community and its identity. By politicizing her personal experiences, the ambiguous line between the personal and public nature of her photographs created an outright dissent against “home-centred consumerism, marriage-centred sex, polarized gender roles, and the quest for meaning through children” (May 55).



Fig. 6. Goldin, Nan. *Nan One Month After Being Battered*. 1984, Cibachrome colour print. Not on display. [www.tate.org/uk](http://www.tate.org/uk).

Goldin’s famous self-portrait, *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (Fig. 6), was taken on her request after being violently ‘battered’ by one of her male partners. This photograph, depicting her swollen eye, is emblematic of the heteropatriarchal resistance to Goldin’s transgressive language that she used to write back her own narratives beyond

the façade of bourgeois representation. Her uncompromising gazing back at the camera, with her richly painted lips and well-groomed hair in the ‘face’ of tortures, reaffirms her feminine agency. She draws attention to the subtext of male violence by otherwise conforming to the consumerist image of feminine beauty and domesticity, and yet rupturing it by putting her wounds on open display. By refusing to name her inflictor, Brian, in the caption, she universalises her narrative in the context of patriarchal violence: “I wanted it to be about every man and every relationship and the potential of violence in every relationship” (Popkey). She, however, reacted back by photographing Brian in positions of masculine vulnerability – photographs showing him tired after sex, photographs of him watching cartoons, or photographs of him in depressed moods.

Nan Goldin’s photographs played an influential role in reframing the narratives of queer subcultures during the AIDS epidemic. Her photographs, chronicling the disease and death of her close friends, including her actress friend Cookie

Mueller, demystified mainstream media misrepresentations of people suffering from the disease. Marita Sturken recalls, how “[i]n the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, hospitals routinely set up photographic laboratories to create visual records of disease, physical deformity, and mental illness” (152). This dehumanising aspect of photography was subverted by Nan Goldin in her celebration of personal relations beyond disease and death. Unlike Cindy Sherman, her well-explained, captioned photographs resist any radical interpretation or interpolation on behalf of the viewers, thus emphasising the centrality of the marginalized narratives. In the era of late capitalism, Nan Goldin re-located the representation of queer subcultures within mainstream visibility by making it a part of her own subjective experiences. This was essential for her politics of representation in a space where the identity of the body still depends on “the degree of acquired visibility and public exposure” (Buchloh 61).

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## **Undesirable Bodies: The Persistence of Eugenics in Feminist Utopian Fiction**

**Sulagna Chattopadhyay**

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Any attempt to examine the relationship between ‘eutopia’ and ‘eugenics’ must begin with a recognition of the clear etymological link between the two words (‘good place’ and ‘good birth’) and the optimistic theories of progress and perfectibility they seek to convey. Imaginative constructions of the ‘good place’ remain incomplete without a parallel emphasis on creating better human beings, although the notion of what is better would naturally differ with time, place, and socio-political context. Francis Galton, who coined the term ‘eugenics’ in 1883, was greatly influenced by the evolutionary theories propounded by his cousin Charles Darwin, and he dedicated his life to research on how the slow evolutionary processes of nature could be accelerated or beneficially redirected either by the judicious self-regulation of reproductive decisions or

by authoritarian intervention in the procreative behaviour of entire populations. As theories of genetics had not been formulated at the time, Galton focused on a pseudo-scientific understanding of heredity as the chief determinant of a broad spectrum of human characteristics, both inherited and acquired. These ranged from physical features and attributes such as intelligence, health, and ability to ‘undesirable’ traits such as physical disability, mental illness, criminality, poverty, alcoholism, sexual deviance, and general ‘feeble-mindedness.’ In order to actualise his vision of human improvement, Galton envisaged two types of eugenic practices that are broadly categorised as positive eugenics and negative eugenics. While the former would encourage the union of the most able or worthy individuals for the perpetuation of traits regarded as superior or valuable, the latter would actively disallow ‘unfit’ individuals from procreating in order to prevent the transmission of characteristics associated with abnormality, incapacity, or degeneracy.

Although Galton was the first to offer a concerted theory of eugenics and was therefore instrumental in shaping our modern understanding of the term, his ideas were not entirely novel. The notion of improving the human stock through state-controlled selective-breeding practices had already been explored in many utopian texts, both philosophical and literary. An early example is Plato's *The Republic*, the highly influential Socratic dialogue that provides a blueprint for the utopian city-state of Kallipolis. Plato talks about a specially trained class of citizens (both male and female) called the Guardians who would be entrusted with the highest duties of governance and defence, and who would therefore represent the best and noblest aspects of Greek society. However, the responsibility of Guardianship would come with a number of caveats, as the perpetuation of this superior class had to be handled with the greatest care. Procreation would be efficiently achieved through the organisation of mating festivals, in which men would choose their sexual partners by drawing lots. In addition, the rulers would have an

operation in place to rig the lots so that the most desirable partnerships could be ensured. As Socrates explains,

We must, ... if we're to have a real pedigree herd, mate the best of our men with the best of our women as often as possible, and the inferior men with the inferior women as seldom as possible, and bring up only the offspring of the best. And no one but the Rulers must know what is happening, if we are to avoid dissension in our Guardian herd. (171)

Eugenic practices would also be extended to child-rearing, with the children of the best Guardians being raised in communal nurseries and the defective offspring of inferior Guardians (including disabled children and children born of illegitimate unions) being 'quietly and secretly disposed of' (172).<sup>1</sup> This rigorous social segregation and centralised regulation of reproductive behaviour coupled with state obscurantism entails a high degree of bio-political control over individual bodies

as well as the collective species-body. The female body, in particular, becomes the passive site of social experimentation aimed at species enhancement with little or no regard for personal preference or desire. Although the eugenicists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not necessarily acknowledge their debt to Platonic ideas, their common ideological premise is self-evident.

Galton's eugenic arguments rapidly gained popularity and appealed to many contemporary biological and social scientists, intellectuals, and members of the elite class in Britain and, subsequently, the United States. What is most unusual is the interest it elicited from thinkers and activists associated with the women's rights movement. It should be noted that feminism and eugenics do not immediately appear to be compatible concepts. The restrictions that eugenics imposes on reproductive behaviour undermine two of the central tenets of feminist thought—female bodily autonomy and the expansion of reproductive choice. However, the discourse of eugenics was disseminated and interpreted in highly optimistic

terms, and the general atmosphere of hope in science and evolutionary progress was used to bolster a distinctly white, upper-class feminist agenda that revolved largely around the politics of procreation and motherhood. An important aspect of this agenda was ‘voluntary motherhood’ or the freedom of women to independently determine the timing and frequency of child birth without undue pressure from their husbands. It was argued that this voluntarism, combined with a greater focus on maternal health, would contribute to the eugenic programme by producing more healthy offspring. As Linda Gordon explains,

Feminists used eugenic arguments as if aware that arguments based solely on women’s rights had not enough power to conquer conservative and religious scruples about reproduction. So they combined eugenics and feminism to produce evocative, romantic visions of perfect motherhood. (68)

This emphasis on expanding women's power in reproductive decision making was often accompanied by the justification of eugenic practices to maintain the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon population. A case in point is the notoriously controversial American suffragist Victoria Woodhull, who, in a series of speeches and articles, championed women's personal and political rights even as she expressed her anxiety over the high fertility rates of the working classes and inferior (or non-white) races. In an essay tellingly entitled "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," she wrote, 'The best minds of to-day have accepted the fact that if superior people are desired, they must be bred; and if imbeciles, criminals, paupers, and otherwise unfit are undesirable citizens they must not be bred.' (267)

Thus, while Western feminists advocating eugenics did emphasise the need for women to seize control over their bodies to surmount the limitations imposed by the gendered division of reproductive labour, their arguments were not only entrenched in the discriminatory rhetoric of racial purity and class

consciousness but also revealed a profound marginalisation of physical and intellectual disability.<sup>2</sup> Some of these tendencies are demonstrated in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose novel *Herland* (1915), in particular, continues to be celebrated as one of the most influential examples of feminist utopian literature. In this novel, three men stumble upon a land populated exclusively by an extraordinary race of women who have been gifted with the power of independent and spontaneous procreation through parthenogenesis. Their ability to control this power by modulating their own maternal instincts makes them ‘Conscious Makers of People’ (69), as opposed to the women of contemporary America who are subject to overbearing masculine whims and are consequently victims of ‘helpless involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overflow the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another.’ (69) In the course of the novel, Gilman reveals herself to be an advocate of the principle of voluntary motherhood, albeit through sexual abstinence rather than contraception.



However, within the self-sustaining textual space of *Herland*, she reifies the patriarchal mystification of motherhood by elevating it to the status of a religion on the basis of explicitly eugenic principles. Motherhood is presented as the key to collective progress and racial improvement and is therefore governed by a clear set of rigid regulations. The women routinely subordinate their personal reproductive preferences to the greater good of the nation. Those deemed unfit are not allowed to reproduce at all, while those who are allowed to bear more than one child constitute a privileged class of Over Mothers. Gilman expands this idea of motherhood as a teleological process aimed at race building in her book *His Religion and Hers*, where she asserts that the highest kind of mother has the power to develop desirable qualities in her race:

For instance, far-seeing Japanese women might determine to raise the standard of height, or patriotic French women determine to raise the standard of fertility, or wise American women

unite with the slogan, “No more morons!” (86)

While the dubious biological foundations of these assertions are self-evident, the rhetoric of racial progress (here equated with national progress) and the greater good has problematic eugenic implications as it aspires to narrowly defined, homogeneous ideals of embodiment and ontology. Human diversity is minimised or erased, and one kind of bio-political regulation is merely replaced by another.

As a result of the brutal Nazi sterilisation and euthanasia programmes, eugenics acquired strong negative connotations in the years following World War II, with former enthusiasts rapidly dissociating themselves from the field. However, this general atmosphere of retrospective revulsion and outrage certainly did not spell the end of the eugenic project. Proponents of the birth control movement in America such as Margaret Sanger often articulated eugenic aims, and the legalisation of contraception was also accompanied by the mass sterilisation of innumerable women (particularly women of colour)

without their knowledge or consent—a practice that continued in America well into the 1970s. At the same time, the momentous import of the emergent field of genetics and the development of new reproductive technologies could not simply be cast aside. The various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s reinvigorated Western nations with a sense of hope and prompted a brief resurgence of utopian writing that was often explicitly feminist in inspiration and intent. A prominent example without which any discussion of the feminist utopia must remain incomplete is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which explores the potential of technology to revolutionise human reproduction and prevalent gender relations. The novel centres on Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, a poor, middle-aged Chicana living in New York, who is institutionalised by her relatives under the false charge of instigating violence.<sup>3</sup> Her stay in the psychiatric hospital is marked by severe disciplining and heavy medication, and she is made an unwilling subject in an experiment that involves the insertion of electrodes in her brain to control her 'violent'

impulses and make her amenable to authority figures.

Piercy juxtaposes Connie's ruthless present of racial and sexual discrimination against a utopian future set in the village of Mattapoissett in the year 2137, which Connie can access through mental communion with one of its inhabitants named Luciente. The society of Mattapoissett is advanced in many respects, but Piercy's most radical innovations pertain to gendered embodiment, procreation, and parenting. Although the basic sexual difference is retained, gender is no longer an organising principle of identity or existence. Males and females are barely distinguishable, gendered pronouns have been eliminated from the linguistic register, and birth is no longer dependent on heterosexual intercourse and biological gestation. Instead, babies grow in a sort of laboratory called the 'brooder,' where genetic material is stored and mixed in random combinations to form new embryos when required. Three 'mothers' (male or female) are chosen for each baby among volunteers in the community, and all male mothers undergo a process

of genetic engineering that allows them to breastfeed infants. Thus, the concept of ‘voluntary motherhood’ takes on a new meaning that is independent of gender or sexuality. Connie is greatly disturbed by the artificiality of these procedures, which seem to her a travesty of ‘real’ biological reproduction and motherhood, but Luciente patiently explains to her the logic governing these reproductive technologies:

(A)s long as we were biologically chained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. (110)

Thus, technology is seen as liberating men and women from the constraints of their reproductive biology while offering multiple advantages—no more sexual restrictions, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, or abortions, and therefore an unprecedented corporeal freedom. Human diversity is openly accepted, and there is no division of labour or opportunities on the basis of race, class, or sex.

However, the spectre of eugenics makes a decisive comeback when we learn of an ideological debate between two groups in Mattapoisett—the Shapers and the Mixers. While the former wish to ‘intervene genetically’ and ‘breed for selected traits’ in the population, the latter oppose this kind of ‘power surge’ and prefer only to ‘spot problems, watch for birth defects, genes linked with disease susceptibility’ (246). This debate (which recalls the distinction between positive and negative eugenics) is not resolved within the space of the novel, but it is evident that despite its otherwise principled inclusiveness, Piercy’s future of genetic modification makes little attempt to accommodate the atypical or disabled body. Moreover, it foreshadows the ethical conundrum currently posed by the burgeoning field of reproductive genetics, with pre-implantation and pre-natal screening systems widely being used to detect potential risks and congenital anomalies and prevent undesirable births. Experts are also already anticipating the possibility of a genetic supermarket that would allow individuals to literally purchase desirable

traits and create babies according to pre-determined specifications. As the scope of these technologies continues to expand, it is necessary to reflect on how they may engender new kinds of social stratification and intensify the already ubiquitous devaluation of disabled bodies.

Approaches to eugenics have evolved considerably since the 1970s, with bioethicists such as Nicholas Agar advocating the possibility of a liberal eugenics that would genuinely expand reproductive freedom by foregrounding individual choice and pluralistic principles (unlike the older, authoritarian eugenic practices that frequently operated under state control and enforced hegemonic ideals of human perfection). However, it must be remembered that individual choices are seldom free of prejudice, and the medical counsel informing such choices are not always as objective as one may hope. Thus, the theory of liberal eugenics cannot entirely nullify the deep ethical ambiguities inherent in the discourse. Elizabeth Ettore has also pointed out how reproductives continues to privilege a mechanistic view of the

female body, which is reduced to a passive object of invasive manipulation and surveillance. Conversely, many advocates of transhumanism affirm that reproductive technologies will play a major role in enhancing the physical, mental, and intellectual capacities of human beings and pave the way for an exhilarating future of posthuman ontology and embodiment based on egalitarian principles. Although it may be quite difficult to reconcile these diverse viewpoints, eugenics and reprogenetics must become important components of our conversations on reproductive choice, rights, and ethics. Speculative fiction can serve as a viable starting point for these conversations, the purpose of which would not be unqualified acceptance or condemnation, but rather a balanced evaluation of eugenic aims and the exploration of possibilities regarding the prudent use of reproductive technologies. While we have much to learn from the feminist utopias of Gilman and Piercy, our progress towards techno-utopian embodiment must be a more cautious and inclusive response to the specific needs of our time.



## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> While this section of *The Republic* is often read as a justification of infanticide, Socrates's summary of the same arguments in *Timaeus* seems to suggest that defective or unwanted children were to be surreptitiously distributed outside the community to preserve the inherent superiority of the Guardian class: '... the children of the good parents were to be brought up, while those of the bad ones were to be secretly handed on to another city... these children should be constantly watched as they grew up, so that the ones that turned out deserving might be taken back again(.)' (3)

<sup>2</sup> The Fitter Families contests organised in various American states in the early twentieth century exemplified these attitudes. As Molly Ladd-Taylor explains, 'The farm families who entered a Fitter Family Contest were a self-selected group. They were almost always white, native-born, Protestant, educated, and from a rural background; they had no family member with a congenital disability and surely already considered themselves to be fit.'

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Piercy presents Connie as a victim of the unethical sterilisation practices prevalent in America at the time. We learn that Connie's attempt to seek medical help after a difficult abortion ended with a complete hysterectomy simply because her body was available and 'the residents wanted practice.' (44)

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## **The Disabled Body Beggeth; or, Does It?**

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Cultural texts, discourses and activism which engage with the subject of vocation and marginalized body, usually tend to focus on sex work and its paraphernalia. Such visible, if not dominant, discourses often ignore and overshadow the possibility of various other vocations and forms of employment for which the presence of the marginalized body is an essential prerequisite. It is intriguing to mark that in order to thrive such vocations systematically highlight and endorse the mainstream constructed notions of marginality.

For instance, the vocation of a joker in a circus largely, if not entirely depends on the presence and exhibition of the body of a dwarf. Interestingly, this marginalized body in the context of its vocation becomes overtly visible by literally occupying the centre stage. Consequently, it creates

a moment which exposes and challenges the fragility and arbitrariness of the notion of marginality itself. However, this act of subversion is not without deeper layers of finer complexities. Questions like, ‘Who occupies the centre stage-the individual or merely the body of a dwarf attired in motley?’ tend to problematize the subversive nature of the act.

Another such occupation which intricately engages with the presence of the non-normative marginalized body is begging. Here I wish to quote at length from an article titled “Begging in India: A Menace to the Society” by Rumani Saikia Phukan which may serve as a summary of the popular and popularized societal views on begging and its cultural representations:

The moment you stop your car at the traffic red light, you see a dirty looking woman with a child in her arm come running to you or a little boy with running nose banging your car window or a handicapped old man asking for alms. This is a common sight in India. You will find many of these people in the railway stations, metro stations, tourist spots, in

temples and in many areas where there is a regular crowd. At times, out of sheer pity or out of fear from being cursed by God or out of irritation, we tend to give them some coins or money and shoo them away.

This citation prepares the premise on which I wish to build my subsequent arguments. The three stereotypical images of beggars sketched in the above citation are the embodiments of vulnerability projected and imposed by socio-cultural apparatuses. In this presentation, I shall confine my attention primarily to the image of the “handicapped” beggar.

Let us briefly consider a popular myth commonly associated with the etymology of the word ‘handicap’, which is as follows:

In 1504, after a brutal war in England, the country was left with a large number of disabled veterans. King Henry VII, who could not envision the disabled soldiers being able to hold a job or contribute to the society, passed a legislation and proclaimed begging in the streets to be legal for people with

disabilities. So into the streets with their *cap in hand* went King Henry's disabled veterans to beg for money. Thus originated the word 'handicap' (Mikkelson).

Though, in all probability, this is but a myth without any authentic basis, the story is useful and interesting in understanding the close connection between disability and begging, imagined, promoted and internalized by mainstream societal thought patterns. Again, in his popular rhyme "The Village Market", Rabindranath Tagore quite casually offers a sketch of Kanai, a blind person as one who "by the roadside begs singing a song" ("*Hat*"). This fleeting description has emerged almost as a prototype for the representations of disabled beggars in popular cultural semiotics.

Ableist attitudes have a tendency of conceiving the disabled beggar as a crude personification of victimhood and choicelessness. Such conveniently simplistic equations get disturbed when we think of a story like "*Harun Salemer Masi*" by Mahasweta Devi in which Gauravi – a woman with locomotor disability and Hara – a boy

with intellectual disability by choosing the profession of begging attempt to transcend the pathetic compulsion of dependence and seek to realize their potential of self dependence.

Here it needs to be briefly pointed out that begging occupies a uniquely ironic position in the spectrum of professions. In the words of Saikia Phukan, “For many begging is just like any other profession. They go out to earn money *not* by *working* but by *begging* [emphasis mine].” In a capitalist socio-economic system, professions are evaluated and arranged hierarchically taking into consideration the discernibility of labour and production. However, since in such a system begging is neither recognized as labour nor associated with tangible production, it is sharply distinguished from any form of ‘work’.

To return to the idea of non-normative body being used in professions, I wish to separately highlight the primacy of the body in the popular discourse on disability. According to the medical model of disability, as pointed out by Ciara Doyle, “Health is the absence of abnormality... disability is

seen as the failure of a part of the body (very specifically) which must be put right. Because only normality is acceptable and normality must be strived for at all costs.” It is perhaps not too difficult to discern that since the disabled body deviates from the constructed patterns of normalcy, therefore, in the popular consciousness it is identified with imperfection, abnormality, incapacity, defects, unattractiveness and even ugliness or repulsion. In fact, the mechanism of othering is so thoroughly efficient and deep rooted that it often succeeds in projecting a disabled body either as an entity solely defined by basic physical instincts or as one completely bereft of them.

In the subsequent section of my presentation, I shall attempt to critically read the multi-layered narrative of the body of the disabled beggars as recorded in Manik Bandyopadhyay’s short story “*Pragoitihashik*”, through the characters of Bhikhu, Panchi and Bashir. This story which seeks to unravel the dark secret recesses of the prehistoric human unconsciousness, traces the inconceivable journey of Bhikhu from his life of robbery, murder, havoc and



lechery to one of disability and begging. In the words of the narrator, this journey may be summarized as – “What a life that had been, and what it had come to now!” (42) The subtext of this utterance of frustration and regret reminds us of the moral model of approaching and interpreting disability. According to this model, which is, closely linked to the idea of “just world hypothesis”, disability is viewed as a deserved punishment caused due to moral lapse and divine retribution (“2–3 Societal Perspectives”). It is intriguing to mark that the story deftly evokes this societal view of disability, but does not endorse or subscribe to it. Rather the story subtly mocks the fallacy of this model in the following mutterings of Bhikhu: “If only God had taken the left and spared the right [arm]!” (46) Moreover, Bhikhu’s life as a beggar with a “withered” right arm is described by the narrator in a matter of fact tone as “the second phase” of his “primitive uncivilized life.” (39)

To begin my discussion on “*Pragoithashik*” I wish to focus on Bhikhu’s “first lesson” in begging. The narrator describes –

He bathed dipping again and again in the river, and washing the blood marks off his body, entered the town. He was faint with hunger. But he did not have a single pice on him to buy some puffed rice. He put out his hand to the first man he met in front of the market and said, ‘Please, babu, give me two pice.’

The gentleman looked at his thick, rough, matted, dusty hair, the mud-coloured dirty strip of torn cloth wound round his waist and the limply hanging arm as thin as a rope, and perhaps felt compassion. He gave him a pice.  
(39)

This evocative scene with its visual details is pregnant with multiple layers of significance. Bhikhu’s act of washing the blood marks off his body shows his attempts to decriminalize himself and his body more specifically, by deleting the visible physical markers of the first phase of his life. While the blood marks speaking of his criminal past emerge as a disadvantage for Bhikhu and therefore need to be silenced, there is another set of markers

which he uses to his advantage. His “thick, rough, matted, dusty hair, the mud-coloured dirty strip of torn cloth wound round his waist and the limply hanging arm as thin as a rope..” which are conventionally seen as the signs of victimhood, poverty and trauma ironically turn out to be his assets in the profession of begging. In fact, these bodily markers testify the authenticity of his act of extending the arm. Interestingly, it is the gaze of the “gentleman” which converts Bhikhu’s liability into his asset, a metaphor quite emphatically used in the story.

It is remarkable that this story explicitly associates the language of commerce with the profession of begging. By using jargon like “advertisement”, “income”, “asset” and the phrase “the most exposed department of the oldest business in the world” (40–46) in the context of begging, the story linguistically claims a space for begging in the mainstream discourse on profession. Begging as a profession is a form of conscious performance in which the elements of exhibition and being looked

at constitute the essential precondition for the existence of the profession.

The description of Bashir, a “lame” beggar succinctly captures this performative aspect of begging-“...this man’s leg had withered from the knee downwards. Spreading it in front very carefully, he was calling upon Allah to attract the compassion of all around... A short wooden leg lay by his side.” (44) Words like “spreading” or “attract” are too obvious to evade our attention. Again the narrator offers an unsettling description of Bhikhu’s attempts at *fashioning* himself as a credible beggar when he states:

He had, mastered the gestures and language of his appeals as if he were a beggar by birth. Now he did not even clean himself. His hair was soon matted into clusters and many a family of lice kept increasing their numbers in it...He had earned a torn coat from begging. He wore it in the muggiest of weather to hide the mark on his shoulder. The withered arm was the strongest advertisement he had when begging; he could not afford to

cover up his limb. So he had torn the entire right sleeve of the coat from the shoulder. He had also got hold of a tin mug and a stick.  
(40)

Bhikhu's disabled body sustains itself and even asserts its saleability by performatively conforming and appealing to the normative gaze.

Finally, I wish to take up a discussion on Panchi, a beggar woman in the story to show how she and her disabled body with its overt gender connotation further complicates the reshaped configuration of the power politics, discussed so far. Here I cite the description of Panchi's body as provided by the narrator:

Right at the entrance of the market sat a beggar woman. She was young. Her body was tight. But on one leg, right from under the knee to the foot, she had an oily, weeping sore. (43)

This description has two distinct parts. The overt sexual connotation of the adjectives "young" and "tight" evoke the conventional attractiveness of the female body. However, the "oily, weeping sore" on

her leg significantly depreciates Panchi's sex appeal. Here the conjunction "but" is remarkable for it subtly speaks of the rupture of the patriarchal expectations built up by the "young" and "tight" body of Panchi. To the patriarchal gaze, her physical deformity appears to be unattractive and even repulsive. When Bhikhu, impatient of living alone, approaches Panchi to stay with him, he asks her to heal her sore. He places a condition: "...You don't have to beg once that sore is healed-know that? I'll keep you." (43) Interestingly, it is this ugly sore that Panchi uses as her strength to explode this condition and resist the anticipated patriarchal violence and exploitation. In her reply to Bhikhu's proposal, she acerbically says: "And then, after some time, when you drive me away, where shall I get this sore from?" (43) In fact, her sore places Panchi in a more advantageous position than Bhikhu in the competitive profession of begging. The intricately complex nexus of gender, body and power is further jeopardized by the hierarchical pattern of disabilities arranged on the basis of their value in a given profession. The narrator unequivocally declares: "It

was this sore that brought her more alms than Bhikhu... That was the reason she took such care for that sore not to heal.” (43) This uniquely subversive attitude of Panchi dismantles the medical model of disability discussed earlier which seeks to treat and cure ‘undesirable disability’. To summarize, Panchi’s body resists the dual oppressive structures of patriarchy and ableism which function simultaneously.

In Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, by way of discussing the ceremony of laying the foundation of the playhouse, it has been categorically mentioned that “...from the places of the ceremony undesirable persons such as heretics...as well as men with physical defects should be turned out” (17). This, which epitomizes the undesirability of disability, is a crude and violent manifestation of the attempts of rendering disability invisible, with the aim of perpetuating ableist habits. However, these ableist attitudes get significantly disturbed by the frequent visibility of the disabled beggar. Owing to their visual ostentation, the disabled bodies refuse to be overlooked. Ironically enough, while *begging* these

disabled bodies *demand* attention. By projecting begging as a form of conscious performance and their body as spectacle, the disabled beggars strategically convert passers-by into audience and alms into income. Bandyopadhyay's "*Pragoitihashik*" astutely uses the context of begging to unearth the possibilities of transforming a useless, helpless "non-entity" (42) into an existence of value, countering mainstream normative standards.

I wish to end this presentation with a scene from *Sabuj Velvet*, a novella by Muhammad Zafar Iqbal:

...Right after this a lame person came leaning on a cane to beg. This person succeeded in softening the heart of a comparatively larger number of people. However, Sharmin could not be sure whether it was out of pity for the person or disgust caused by his nasal song. The lame person came near Sharmin and continued to beg in a nagging nasal tone. The man sitting next to her shouted at him—"Shoo! Shoo! You cripple." If Sharmin had not



witnessed it herself, she would not have believed that someone could hurl abusive words like cripple at a lame person. However, the lame person was not offended a bit. Rather he seemed to be quite impressed by the fact that his physical impairment has been noticed by this man. He said-“I am an invalid person, a crippled person. For the sake of Allah, give me some alms.”

“Don’t disturb. Go away.”

The lame person has been involved in the business of begging for quite some time. Judging by a person’s voice, physical gestures and social position he can more or less understand who would give alms and who would not. Seeing a possibility, he decided to spend some more time here.

He said-“Sir please, help this poor man. I don’t have the capacity of earning by doing work. I am a crippled person, an invalid person.”

“How did you become crippled?”

“Since my birth I am invalid, sir. I don’t have strength in my legs.”

Sharmin saw that the person sitting next to her making a disgusted gesture took out a moneybag from his pocket. There were only a few notes in it. He took out a tattered ten rupee note and said-“Give me nine rupees.”

Sharmin has seen many such ways of giving alms. But that someone can take change from a beggar, Sharmin had never seen before. But this practice is surely prevalent, because the lame beggar took out a bundle of old, dirty notes from his pouch and having given change from it, took the ten rupee note. Wishing a long happy prosperous life for the person sitting beside, he moved ahead with the support of the cane, delivering a speech on his wretched life in a singsong manner. [Translation mine] (16–17)

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## **Radha's Image in the Body of Sri Chaitanya: The Politics of Perception and Medieval Bengali Poetry**

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The Vaishnava Padavali movement that occurred in Bengal from the 15th to 17th centuries produced a huge repertoire of medieval Bengali poems and songs that not only enriched the Bhakti Movement that was taking place throughout India at that time, but also resulted in the construction of certain images of Radha, her ecstatic madness and her body. These are images which keep returning in Bengali poetry to up to this day. Great poets such as Joydev, Vidyapati, Chandidas, Jnanadas, Radhamohan who belonged to this era gave birth to Gaudiya Vaishnavism which in turn led to the writing of poetry in the nascent Bengali language much of which was based on the divine love of Radha and Krishna, their union and separation. If we

look at the images of Radha in most of these poems, we see her as either a calm and saintly person contemplating Krishna or as a woman who does not know what to do without her lover and gradually descending into madness. One of the most famous poems describing Radha is written by Chandidas. He says:

No one knew what ailed Radha  
She sat alone  
All by herself  
Eternally in prayer  
She looked at the clouds  
Her stares were blank.  
Starving  
In red clothes  
Like those of saints.

This part of the poem is seen by most critics (such as Sukumar Sen) as Radha's saintliness. She resembles a *yogini* or a *sanyasini* concentrating on God as an imagined lover. However in the later part of the poem she is seen a woman who is completely mad. It says:

Her plait is loose

The flowers in her hair  
Are falling off.  
She smiles to herself  
Looks at the clouds again  
Raises her hands.  
Then stares intently  
At the blue throats  
Of peacocks.  
Chandidas says  
This is the new identity  
Of the wife of Krishna.

According to Vaishnava philosophy, she is now the *ladini shakti*, i.e. divine pleasure itself. This concept of *ladini* or pleasure is intrinsically linked to the body and will be accepted by a large number of Vaishnava scholars as the only way to fully achieve Krishna as well as freedom. However, as Jessica Frazier in her book *Reality, Religion and Passion: Indian and Western Approaches in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rupa Gosvami* points out, that although Vaishnava critics see Radha as pleasure incarnate, it is not clear whether she is receiving pleasure through this. Frazier says that Radha's

actions are: “...by no means a source of pleasure (for herself). Its character is not festive or joyful, and it draws into question (the nature of her) of the bliss (*ananda*)...” Another example from Chandidas’ poems show Radha with her

Hair flying wildly  
 Clothes falling off  
 Radha is in love  
 Her eyes dance  
 Her jewellery whirls

...

Betel leaves  
 Spill off her mouth.

...

Chandidas says  
 This is a sign  
 That the Lord is pleased.

The paan dribbling off Radha’s mouth is a frightening image. What becomes even more complicated is that all these symptoms which can be seen in Radha are perceived by later poets and scholars of the Vaishnava tradition as foreshadowing the birth of Sri Chaitanya, the 16th



century monk, philosopher and social reformer of Bengal. Every action of Radha is seen as predictions of the arrival the male mystic, Chaitanya (also known as Gaurango Nimai) by a huge number of male theorists and devotees. Radha is suddenly re-interpreted and reread as a shadow, an incomplete body that would lead to the advent of the ‘complete’ divine body of Sri Chaitanya.

One of the most famous poems written by Chandidas spoke about how one day Radha had wanted Krishna to teach her how to play the flute. Krishna said that his flute would only create music if Radha exchanged clothes with him and stood as he stands. So, they cross dressed, Radha wearing male clothes and Krishna’s crown while giving him her sari to wear. The poem ends with the *gopis* looking at them from far away and wondering how the dark god became so fair. The fact that the moment Krishna starts behaving like Radha and vice versa the *gopis* become confused shows how in these poems gender becomes equivalent to performance. Instead of just assuming that they had changed clothes, the *gopis* wondered how Krishna had

changed his skin color. It is easier for them, or rather the poet who is representing the *gopis* to imagine a man being able to change his skin colour than to be able to wear a woman's clothes. Consequently, this poem became one of the major poems that Vaishnava scholars reread as a signifier of the coming of Chaitanya. The feminine figure disguised in male clothes desiring Krishna was no longer only Radha but also the male Chaitanya, who was 'as fair as her'. After this connection was made, poets like Govindadas Kabiraj, Jnanadas, Radhamohan, Basudeb Ghosh and others started to repeatedly link the body of Sri Chaitanya with that of Radha. In the poems that regard Chaitanya and Radha as one, two very important things occur. First, the lines between the perceptions of masculine and feminine bodies are constantly blurred as Chaitanya is seen as Radha reincarnated. Second, if the poems are read carefully, we find that the moments when the images of Radha collide with those of Chaitanya, are also the moments when both of them are seen as "mad women". In the works of these poets, Chaitanya is not just channelizing Radha's thoughts, desires etc.

when he is ecstatic and “insane”, but also as gradually transforming his biological body into that of Radha, thus problematizing his own sexuate identity as well as those of his male disciples, primarily the six Goswamis--- Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami, Gopala Bhatta Goswami, Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami, Raghunatha dasa Goswami and Jiva Goswami who had to reconsider the entire corpus of Vaishnava as well as Hindu religious theory in order to insert new ideas and philosophies that would help make sense of the performances of Chaitanya, perhaps in a way that would not threaten their maleness. (For example, one of these theories that was used to explain this was drawing upon the dual recognition of gender principles by declaring that the self was essentially genderless which was not something that unheard of in Hindu philosophy. In fact, Swami Prabhunanda of the Vedanta society in the USA on hearing of Oscar Wilde’s trial was quoted saying “poor man, all lust is the same.” However, it is not so simple here because here we see the creation of a space where men can behave/perform as women and get away

with it without criticism or censorship from his group of disciples.) The theories can be explained better, if some poems are considered as examples. Jnanadas writes:

Sometimes he faints, sometimes he laughs  
Sometimes he is ecstatic  
He does not have the power to stand up  
Life seems so heavy to him.

The ways in which the words are used make it clear that Radha's body, image and performance are constantly being remembered and commemorated. Jnanadas further describes how Chaitanya has lost all perceptions of reality and thinks of himself as Radha going on an *avisar*, a journey undertaken to have a secret tryst with Krishna. He is falling on his friends, he cannot support himself anymore; he goes half a foot and loses consciousness. There is music, *kirtans* and drums. His disciples follow him as he enters Vrindavan in grandeur. However, it is interesting to note that Radha's *avisar* is very different from Chaitanya's in certain ways. She is continuously moving inwards, trying to conceal her body while

she contemplates her expedition because she needs to hide her actions from everyone. She accepts great pains in order to achieve this. One of the poems that describe Radha practising for her expedition says:

Thorns cover the yard  
Radha with her lotus-like feet  
Passes through them.  
She has flooded the road  
Now she walks on water  
Her toes pressed to the ground.  
Madhava, this is only for your *avisar*  
The journey is difficult  
Radha keeps walking  
The temples have announced the end of day  
She covers her eyes  
As she moves on  
Her desire is to walk without light.  
She has given away her kankan  
To learn from snake-charmers  
How not to get bitten  
Radha does not listen to her elders  
She's almost deaf  
Almost incoherent.

Whatever her family says  
Makes her laugh uncontrollably  
Govindadas remains witness.

We find that Radha is practising how to walk on thorns so that when Krishna plays his flute and she follows the music, she does not end up making any sound even if sharp stones pierce her bare feet. She has spilled water on her *uthon* so that she can easily walk through water logged streets if it's monsoon. She takes precautions so as not to get bitten by snakes. However, what is most significant is that she does not want to share what she is doing with anyone. Chaitanya's *avisar* is entirely public. It is a performance. He wants everyone to see that he is Radha, although everyone knows that in reality Krishna is not waiting for him at the other end of the forest. Something very important happens here. The masculine discourse that Chaitanya and his followers create tries to engulf Radha completely. She is no longer given any agency; everything that she has said, done, been through is now swallowed by the organic body of a male mystics who theorize this situation to their own advantage. Radha is now

seen as a part of Krishna. She is pleasure itself and thus Krishna/God had alienated her from his own biological body in order to experience/observe/love himself. But the male God is not completely pleased yet. Thus Chaitanya is born with both Krishna and Radha inside himself. He is born from the desire that Radha feels for Krishna and an equal desire that Krishna feels for his *ladini shakti, ananda* incarnate. But now the site, the constructed space has been dislocated from Vrindavan into that of the body of Chaitanya. That is why according to him he is unsteady, almost decentralized. (He can say anything because madness is encountering the unexpected. Chaitanya's friends now take up the position of the handmaidens of Radha who feel "as-if" they are experiencing Radha's experiences. June McDaniel suggests that this is not "merely vicarious, but consciously distanced. When there is a lessening of distance--- such as acting out Krishna and Radha's activities on earth, having men dress as women, or experiencing the Sahajiya transmutation of *rasa* (from abstract essence to personal liquid)--- the orthodoxy disapproves." Thus what Chaitanya

suffers/experiences is *radhabhava* trying to approach the *mahabhava* but what his disciples feel is the impersonal *rasa*. *Bhava* is the religious extreme of the personal while *rasa* is the religious extreme of the impersonal. One of the reasons for which only Chaitanya is seen as Radha and not the others is because otherwise the entire discourse created by the Vaishnava patriarchs would fall apart. They cannot afford to become Radha since they are rooted and grounded within their maleness. Krishna is seen as *Rasaraja* since that refers to someone who is so impersonal that he is beyond time, space and person--- hence male. Radha on the other hand is, as mentioned earlier *mahabhava* which indicates “The Lady of the Great Emotion” and thus the essence of personal feeling. The ancient discourse of women being unreasonable, emotional, unpredictable, and men being impersonal, reasonable and distanced is thus reinscribed into the philosophies surrounding Chaitanya. Also, Chaitanya is seen as “Bahirange Radha, Antarange Krishna” which means Radha on the outside and Krishna on the inside. But what remains ambiguous is why Chaitanya’s mind is



considered male instead of his body. Is it because women are always aligned with materiality and not with rationality, nature and not civilization? In that case Radha's madness becomes trapped in the body and never reaches the mind which is male, godly and therefore sane. Her insanity is material, like that of Ophelia. Chaitanya is merely translating Radha's actions for the benefit of the male god and the male devotees. The others can only voyeuristically watch him from afar. This might remind one of how Luce Irigaray uses the mirror as a metaphor for women who are perceived as passive, empty and who act as validation for the masculine ego. Irigaray says: 'some "mirror" is needed to reassure it and re-insure it (the male subjectivity) of its value. Woman will be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back "his" image and repeating it as the "same". If an other image, an other mirror were to intervene, this inevitably would entail the risk of mortal crisis.' Something similar is happening to Radha here but only to a certain extent. If the poems are read carefully she emerges as much more than a mimicking mirror of the male ego.'

When we look at accounts of female mystics and femininity in mysticism we often find that it is linked with the wounded, ‘castrated’, deficient body that attempts to gain pleasure but through suffering and pain. Irigaray, in an extremely problematic passage her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman* says that Jesus is “the most feminine of all men” because of his “nudity offered up to inspection, the gashes of his virginal flesh, the suffering extension of his crucified body, the wounds made by the nails that pierced him, his hanging, his passion and his abandon.”

She further describes him as a “model who, in his crucifixion, opens for her (the female/the feminine) a way of redemption from the degeneration in which she existed.” Thus by reading femininity in Christ’s flesh, Irigaray somehow re-establishes the language of lack that surrounds female mysticism. This is where the Vaishnava poets, I think, do something quite different. They channelize Radha through the body of Chaitanya to reach Krishna, but the language she is circumscribed in is never the language of lack. In fact they change the existing

language drastically in which the idea of the “not all” is almost absent. She is not seen as mirroring Krishna, but she calls him her mirror (*darpan*) in a poem written by Govindadas. It is made very clear that they constitute “the absolute truth” together.

Also, Radha is never seen as the mother, the bride or the daughters of a male god, like most female Christian mystics are. For example, Margery Kempe is continuously seen as the bride of Christ, so are mystics like Joan of Arc, Bridget of Sweden, Dorothea von Montau. The married brides of Christ were seen as reflections of Mary, who was the first bride of Christ but also married to Joseph. In fact, we see that in most Christian narratives the idea of a “spiritual marriage” is very common. The language is fraught with sexual imagery but sexual intercourse with Jesus is never spoken about. Either virginity is insisted upon or celibacy within marriage is made clear. But in the Vaishnava poems there is not just eroticization of language but the incidents described between Radha and Krishna are also directly erotic and sexual. Repression of sexuality is never a characteristic of Vaishnava Padavali. Radha is not a

mother goddess, nor is she connected to *Prakriti*. In fact, she occupies a very strange position, even in the Hindu pantheon when compared to goddesses such as Durga, Kali or Laxmi. Many scholars did try to relate her to Laxmi since Krishna is seen as an avatar of Vishnu and Laxmi is his wife but that is not the case in medieval Bengali poems. In the Vaishnava Padavali, we find that Radha, in the end is united with Krishna. Unlike most Christian mystics, she does not have to wait for death to achieve perfect union. Unlike traditional Hindu goddesses such as Parvati or Sati, she does not have to get married to her lover, either. Nevertheless, this union portrayed by the Vaishnava poets is a complete deviation from Classical Hindu mythology which states that Krishna never came back to Gokul, never met Radha again. But in this case, Radha is united with Krishna through poetry and through a language that was subverting many centralized ideas. However, Chaitanya's union is always left deterred. The poems that describe his devotion are always descriptions of processes, mostly in the present tense. It is something that is never

accomplished. His meanings and significations are always communicated through performances that never end. For example, Radhamohan says about Chaitanya:

He speaks of so many incoherent things  
 The mad man who is beautiful  
 He goes into trance  
 Again and again  
 But, perhaps, in the end  
 He will reach the *dashami dasha*.

A body that has reached the *dashami dasha* is also a body that is dead. There are several questions which remain unanswered here. Does this happen because *Chaitanya* in the end does not manage to ‘become’ Radha entirely? Or is this because a union with Krishna would create too many homosexual connotations that were unacceptable in the Vaishnava community? Or is it as Bataille suggested that when a mystic tries to become all from one, at the same time s/he also realizes that “the other...is radically, contingent, partial and incomplete”?

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## **Narrating Nothingness: Women and the Absent Body in Euripides' *Medea***

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Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a  
worm.

–Jean-Paul Sartre,  
*Being and Nothingness*

Euripides' *Medea* begins with a wish for non-being. In the opening lines of the play, the Nurse recites a rather conventional Euripidean prologue, providing the necessary background information, but in an unusual negative mode:

If only they had never gone! If the Argo's  
hull  
Had never winged its way through the grey-  
blue Clashing Rocks  
And on towards Colchis! If that pine on  
Pelion's slopes  
Had never felt the axe, and fallen, to put oars  
Into those heroes' hands, who went at Pelias'  
bidding



To fetch the golden fleece! Then neither  
 would my mistress  
 Medea ever have set sail for the walled city  
 Of Iolchus, mad with love for Jason, nor  
 would she,  
 When Pelias' daughters killed their father at  
 her bidding,  
 Have come with Jason and her children to  
 live here  
 In Corinth. ... (1-11)

Nor would this play be written and performed, she could well have added! This opening expresses a wish that the Argo had never sailed to Colchis, so that events would not have led Medea to the point at which this play begins. The very beginning of the play's narrative, therefore, seems to be endangered by a desire for its own absence. Hung in a limbo, as it were, between an impulse to narrate and a simultaneous resistance to it, the text becomes a kind of absent presence: it is present only in its, and as its, desire to be absent.

Literatures across the world have struggled with the problem of articulating absence through language. The well-known Sanskrit philosophical

treatise *Yoga Vasistha* tells ‘The Story of the Three Non-existent Princes’. The story begins thus: “Once upon a time in a city which did not exist, there were three princes who were brave and happy. Of them two were unborn and the third was not conceived” (Venkatesananda 122). The story is a brilliant example of the ‘unnatural narrative’, in that it distorts our notions of existence, temporality, and causality, and then attempts to transform this ‘unnaturalness’ or ‘impossibility’ into a cognitive frame. The task of articulating absence, however, is doubly difficult for the women in Euripides’ *Medea*: the desire for the narrative’s absence is tied up with the text’s awareness of the absence of a signifying system to articulate women’s experiences. In lines 421-430, the Chorus of Corinthian women, won over by Medea’s arguments, welcomes her announcement that she plans revenge with an ode that rejects the male literary tradition on the subject of women. Apollo had not given the gift of song to women, they protest, for if he had, women would have “found themes for poems/ And countered with our epics against men”, showing that “time is old,

and in his store of tales/ Men figure no less famous/  
Or infamous than women” (426-430). This remarkable critique of phallogocentrism is also an impassioned plea for the woman to inscribe herself in language, to ‘write’ herself into symbolic discourse. But as the Chorus seems to have realized, the writing of such an alternative, gynocentric past is always under a linguistic strain because of the lack of any access to an alternative language. Alternative narratives of the past cannot be written without reproducing the ‘masculine’ language they seek to critique. How does a woman ‘write’ her history then? How does she narrativize her experiences? I shall argue that, inter alia, this is the question that Euripides’ *Medea* seems to respond to. It is important to emphasize here that the concerns of postmodernism about the instability of gender categories would have been foreign to the ancient Greek people. Greek society was strictly divided in terms of gender and any appraisal of a play like *Medea*, which appears to destabilize gender binaries, requires that we situate the play in the complex web

of ideologies surrounding gender and performance in classical Athens.

The emergence of rational thought in Greece, J. P. Vernant has argued, sought to locate the cosmos “in a mathematical space composed of purely geometrical relationships” (121). The social space of the polis, which was imagined as a microcosm of the cosmos, was organized around a centre, in relation to which individuals and groups occupied symmetrical, albeit hierarchical, positions. The entrance to Plato’s Academy bore the inscription, “Let no one enter here who is not a geometer”, and in his *Gorgias*, Plato closely linked the knowledge of *isotes* or geometrical equality, on which the physical cosmos was based, with *dikaiosyne* and *sophrosyne*, the political virtues which formed the foundation for the stability of the polis (129). The new order of the polis was ideologically set against the *anomia* of the previous ages and characterized by the higher standard of the *dike* or justice whose purpose was to harmonize the discordant elements in society and make of them a single, united, and stable community. “[T]here was

but a single temporality”, emphasizes Vernant (103). These ideas were very much current in fifth century Athenian thought, when Euripides was writing his plays. At a time when the Persian wars had not yet faded from Athenian memory and the Peloponnesian war with Sparta seemed inevitable, the security of the polis demanded a shared belief in the strength of this ‘imagined community’.

Social events like the festival at Dionysus Eleuthereus encouraged this feeling of togetherness, by fostering a sense of sharing the same time and space. Although the presence of women in the theatrical audience at the festival of Dionysus remains a contentious issue, scholars are unanimous about the fact that women were strictly debarred from performing on the stage. This was but an extension of the Greek ideology of gender in which the woman was often defined by the rhetoric of absence. In a speech by Lysias known as ‘Against Simon’, the speaker in court tries to impress the jury about the honour of the family by saying that his sister and nieces are so well brought up that they are ashamed to be in the presence even of a man who is

a member of the family. There was a similar tension inherent in the concept of female *kleos* or glory. The Athenian leader Pericles, at the end of his famous ‘Funeral Oration’, addresses women by saying “Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men, whether for good or for bad” (Thucydides 88). Yet, as Ruby Blondell et al. have pointed out, “since *kleos* by its very definition means being spoken of by others, this Athenian ideology places women in a lose-lose situation” (51). In the absence of a positive ontological register, the only language available to women was one that was essentially masculine. The only way to ‘be’ a woman, particularly on the Athenian stage, was to wear a mask, both literal and figurative. This mask, however, was a signifier without a signified, in that it did not refer to anything except to itself. In a space where women were constructed by male ventriloquism, there was nothing ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ this mask – it was its own signified.

The Pythagorean ‘table of opposites’ that Aristotle mentioned in his *Metaphysics* (Book I) associated the male with one, limit, stability, the square, and the good, while the female was allied with the many, unlimited, instability, the oblong, and the bad. The female was thus defined only negatively, as the obverse or antithesis of the male. Felicity Crowe has noted that women in classical Greece were believed to suffer from hypersexuality, and were seen as intent upon destroying men. It was incumbent on men therefore to control women’s bodies by enacting laws and customs (545). Michael Zelenak similarly writes about the opposition of the sexes in the Greek ideology of gender where “women were by nature weak, irrational, ruled by passion and emotion, prone to deception and driven by sexual desire.... men, on the other hand, were by nature strong, logical, practical, honest, and competitive” (23). The values that the female sex was identified with could potentially disrupt the construction of a masculine Greek identity based on rationality and justice, thus threatening the welfare of the polis, which would in turn adversely affect the

pursuit of *eudaimonia*. It was necessary, therefore, to repress women and their narratives for the sake of the polis' stability.

Traditional feminist scholarship has attempted the difficult task of recovering women's narratives, of reinstating women's voices in the otherwise univocal metanarrative of history. Nevertheless, in narrating the histories of women, feminists have often partaken of the same historical models and temporal schema that they have sought to criticize. In fact, the history of feminism itself has been represented as a series of "waves" or "phases", thus committing to the teleological notion of historical time. Jacques Derrida, however, observes that resistance to the metaphysical concept of history entails a resistance not only to "history in general" but also to "the general concept of history" (*Positions* 57). A resistance to "history in general" might imply subscribing to something like Althusser's critique of Hegelian history, which "aims to show that there is not one single history, but rather... intervallic, differentiated histories" (58). While such critiques surely encourage the



writing of more histories, they still conform to fundamental principles like linearity and causality that underlie the way we write and think about histories. Thus it fails to do away with “the general concept of history”– that Derrida identifies as “an entire system of implications (teleology, eschatology, elevating and interiorising accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth etc)” (*Positions* 57). The very concept of history or histories presupposes some common denominator, some sameness between the narratives that it denominates. But such metanarratives can exist only by repressing the differences between themselves and other narratives. History, therefore, is a structure of exclusion – it is only by repressing differences, by fencing off other narratives, that a historical narrative becomes narratable. A feminist critique of history, therefore, requires that we interrogate not only the content of histories written by men as such, but also the fundamental assumptions behind the process of historicisation, which by its very nature renders women’s

experiences 'absent'. Euripides' *Medea* seems to respond to these issues, in that it provides us with the possibility of a narrative paradigm that seems to dislodge the centrality of presence and show how *difference* is constitutive of the process of narrativization.

The Athenians did not draw a sharp line between myth and history. Though the unity of the polis had led to the dominance of certain narratives, alternative versions of the past co-existed at the margins of Athenian consciousness. The social organization of the polis necessitated the exclusion of peripheral narratives from the construction of a common past. I have argued above that if not resisted, such narratives could introduce confusions, conflicts, tensions, and ambiguities that could significantly affect the production of a stable Greek 'self'. Even though Aeschylus and Sophocles manipulated existing myths and incorporated lesser known versions into their plays, it is in Euripides that the politics of these deviations seem to be at the centre of narrative interest.

Classicists like Bernard Knox (194-195) and Fritz Graf (21-43) have shown that Euripides had a wide range of options to choose from in constructing the biography and character of his Medea. None of the variant versions of this myth, extant mainly in the works of the scholiasts of Alexandria, provide evidence that Medea murdered her own children. In at least two such versions, by Pausanias and another scholiast, Medea is summoned by the Corinthians to be their queen since the land belonged to her father. It is through her, consequently, that Jason becomes king of Corinth, and they beget children. Later however, the Corinthians revolt against their queen, and kill her children in the temple of Hera. In another variant by the scholiast Creophylos, Medea kills Creon, here the king of Corinth, and then has to flee for her safety. Since her children are too young to accompany her, she secures them in the temple of Hera. Creon's relatives, however, find them out and slaughter them in revenge of their kin's murder. In yet another version, in the lost *Corinthiaca* by Eumelos, Medea does kill her own children, but only accidentally, while trying to immortalize them.

All these narratives, therefore, emphasize Medea's motherhood and the overt concern she feels for her children's safety, an aspect that Euripides flagrantly undermines. As various scholars have noted, Medea's infanticide is in all likelihood a Euripidean invention (Knox 194).

What makes this departure from conventional narratives so interesting, however, is how self-conscious the text appears about this transgression, constantly alluding to versions of the story that it is excluding. After having secured a refuge in Athens through the unexpected visit of Aegeus, Medea mentions her plan to murder her children. In her famous speech beginning at line 1021, she wrestles with her conflicting emotions in response to this plan. It is here that the text constantly vacillates between older versions of the story and the one that it is about to narrate. "I'll take them/ Away from Corinth", says Medea, "Why should I hurt them to make/ Their father suffer, when I shall suffer twice as much/ Myself?" (1045-48) But then she chastises herself for being a coward and hardens her resolution to kill them, only to allude to another

conventional variant: “I will not leave sons of mine to be the victims of my enemies’ rage” (1060-61), clearly referring to the versions of the story where the Corinthians kill her children. Moreover, towards the end of the play, just before Jason realizes that Medea has already murdered his sons, he says, “I’ve come to save my sons, before Creon’s family/ Murder them in revenge for this unspeakable/ Crime of their mother’s” (1303-05). The “unspeakable crime” here is that of regicide which Jason fears would be avenged by Creon’s relatives, thus alluding to the version that we know from Creophylus. The play appears unusually aware of how it partakes in this politics of exclusion, by distancing itself from other narratives, while simultaneously acknowledging their presence within its own body.

There are other instances too where the text draws attention to the exclusionary politics of narrativization. Though the play seems to emphasize the nature of Medea as a ‘barbarian’ as opposed to Greeks, there are moments that undercut such easy binaries. After she has killed her sons, a devastated

Jason tells her that no Greek woman could have done such a thing (1339-1340). The implication of Jason's statement is that it is Medea's 'otherness' as a 'barbarian' that allows her to commit such a crime. Firstly, Medea's identity as a non-Greek is complicated by the fact that Euripides' audience would have been familiar with fragments from Eumelos' *Corinthiaca*, as well as some passages of lyric poetry, which suggest that Medea's father Aeëtes was king of Corinth, before leaving for Colchis (Dutta 134). This would render Medea Greek, and thus undermine one of the foundational binaries of the play: Greek/barbarian. But more importantly, Jason's claim that a Greek woman could not have killed her own offspring is contradicted by the Chorus of the play itself in the fifth stasimon, which mentions the legendary Greek queen Ino murdering her own children:

There was but one in times past,  
One woman that I have heard of,  
Who raised her hand against her own children.  
She was Ino, sent out of her mind by a god.

(1282-85)

The choice of Ino as a paradigm for Medea is intriguing, to say the least. One must remember that it is a convention in tragic drama to refer to precedents when acts of violence take place. Rick M. Newton rightly notes that within the framework of such dramatic *exempla*, the allusion to Ino in the *Medea* stands out as “unusual” and “abrupt” because “in parallel situations in other plays the chorus cites two or three paradigms in succession” (498-99). Euripides and his audience (and Jason too) would have been aware of many other, more appropriate, examples that could have served as precedents in the act of a mother killing her child. Besides obvious names like Althaea and Agave, the name that is mysteriously absent is that of Procne, who had killed her own son Tereus and served him as a meal to her husband to avenge the latter’s infidelity. The relevant point here is that both Procne and Medea kill their children for the same reason: to punish their faithless husbands. Euripides’ suppression of the reference to Procne is made more conspicuous by the fact that Sophocles’ play *Tereus* had only recently been performed (Newton 499). Fragments

from the lost play indicate that Procne was one of the major characters and was portrayed, like Medea, as voicing the difficulties that women face. In the *Medea*, by making Jason lie in saying that no Greek woman could have murdered her own offspring, and then having the Chorus state exactly the opposite, but only to reveal how they are also suppressing other narratives, Euripides seems to be deconstructing the art of narrative itself. In displaying an unusual awareness of its narrative schematism, the play becomes what Foucault would perhaps identify as “a multiplicity of discursive elements...that we must reconstruct with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden” (Foucault 100). The things “concealed” allow the discourse to produce and enforce power, but also simultaneously to undermine and expose it.

By constantly drawing attention to its intertextuality and to its repression of alternative paradigms, the play highlights the historicisation of identities, and therefore the textuality of the ‘self’. The construction of narrative, and therefore the



construction of the self, is constituted by its difference from narratives that it purports to exclude, but that it invariably encounters in its own unconscious. These repressed narratives come back to haunt the text as ghostly, intertextual presences, as Derridean ‘supplements’, that disrupt the construction of any self-identical meaning. Absence, therefore, becomes the condition of possibility for narrative, and in underlining the absent presence of alternative possibilities, Euripides’ *Medea* seems to subvert a patriarchal culture that valorises presence and defines women by a constitutive absence. If the Chorus is correct in pointing out the lack of a gynocentric language, then the play succeeds in reinstating this lack at the heart of a phallogocentric narrative. However hard one might try to fence off the chaotic ‘feminine’ narratives, one finds them always already present in their absence.

The departure from conventional variants in portraying Medea as killing her own children could then be read as a metaphor for the dissolution of a symbolic discourse that privileges the male. As Christopher Gill has pointed out, the murder of the

children destroys in the most literal way the proof of the *philia* between their parents, and therefore of their shared past (Gill 154-74). In ancient Greece, the status of a married woman in the family was determined by her production of legitimate children. The erasure of this proof liberates Medea from the patriarchal institution of marriage, and possibilitates a (de)construction of her past. Indeed, here Euripides anticipates Seneca's version of the play, where Medea sees her infanticide as a way to become a virgin once again, and thus metaphorically reclaim her past. "My kingdom comes back to me, my stolen virginity returns" (984), she says, after murdering her children. By constantly moving back and forth between past, present, and future, Euripides's *Medea* shows how each of them is constitutive of the other. Derrida writes that one needs to understand time not as an *a priori* metaphysical truth that exists in the present but as "a dialectic of protension and retension that one would install at the heart of the present" (*Of Grammatology* 67). The illusion of the present, indeed of the 'presence' of Euripides' narrative, is destroyed by

the traces of other ‘absent’ narratives, which bear with them the specters of the past and the future.

Scholars like Ruby Blondell have shown how Medea is totally in control of the roles she enacts, of the ‘masculinity’ and the ‘femininity’, the ‘Greekness’ and the ‘non-Greekness’, the ‘humanity’ and the ‘divinity’ that she conveniently performs to suit her own needs (149-168). If the character of Medea distorts the dichotomies in Athenian ideology by inhabiting the liminal space between them, Euripides’ telling of her story complements her character by exposing the ambivalence in such distinctions. This it does through a narrative that celebrates difference rather than presence, a narrative that is consequently androgynous, and hence ideal for performance at a festival of Dionysus, whose character blurs the lines between human and divine, male and female, Greek and non-Greek, Self and Other.

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## **Unreason and Uncanny: An Analysis of Body beyond Colonial Governmentality**

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Our story can start with the year 1835 when Madhusudan Gupta, the young medical student, plunged his knife to dissect a human body in Calcutta Medical College. Apparently it signified the triumph of modern western science over the prejudices and superstitious beliefs of the native population. So overwhelming the triumph was that Fort William celebrated it by firing a gun salute (Prakash 123). With the introduction of western therapeutics and medication, native body became a normative category (Butler) for the colonizers, regulated by the governmental aspirations of the British Empire. Emergence of the discourse of health and physical well-being of the population in general became one of the essential objectives of the British political power in the nineteenth century. The sudden importance assumed by medicine and

the governmental policing of popular health created the homogenous social body of 'subjects'- an object of governmental surveillance, analysis, intervention, modification and so on. The body of the subject population appeared to be the bearer of new variables for outlining the administrative apparatuses of the Empire. The project of a technology of population began to be sketched, demographic graphs and ratios were defined, the level of mortality and life expectancy rates were charted. The biological traits of the population became relevant factors not only for the economic management of the Raj and its administrative perquisites but would constantly justify its utility as utilitarian state. Hence 'body' was created, speculated and disciplined through highly regularized governmental policy that was devoted to 'the welfare of the subject population...the increase of its wealth, longevity and health' (Foucault 100). Certainly it tried to determine the historicity of the bodies both living and dead and constituted an image of the native body along with its contours and spatial limits within the empire. So far as the living

bodies were concerned; we find that David Arnold has rightly emphasized the extraordinary importance of state medicine in the production and subordination of subject bodies in colonial India. In Arnold's view, the bio-political strategies of the Raj can be defined as a modified version of the 'noso-politics' (Foucault 95) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European countries, which in India, developed in response to the outbreak of recurrent epidemics and famines and was directed to act on its population, nurture its health and cultivate its resources (Arnold 6). It developed and practiced as a 'service' operated as one of the components of assistance by the state. But so far dead bodies were concerned; it remained nothing but a matter of statistics and enumeration. Since the colonial government could not determine the social implication of death in the different social framework of the colony, it tried to define the impact of death as well as mark its spatiality in tangible material terms (Bhattacharya). Centrally operated programmes of hygiene and health entailed a number of authoritarian interventions when death was concerned and exercised them primarily in the



urban spaces. Firstly it tried to dilute the importance of death by disassociating it from the public sphere. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with a magnified vision of sanitation programme, the state embarked upon a concerted effort to cleanse the urban limits of the metropolitan cities from any unsavoury association with the physicality of death (Bhattacharya). In the words of the contemporary municipal authorities, appropriate means were to be devised for allocating cemeteries and crematoriums particular place within the city and making the burning of human bodies less objectionable for the white residents of the town and their memsahibs. Masses were forbidden to throw corpses or carcass into the river, nullah or canal within the limits of the town. Any lapse on the part of the citizen would result in fines up to Rupees 20 and for continuing offences Rupees 10 for every day after such notice during which the offence was continued. In keeping with the new spirit of disconnecting the materiality of death from the civic life of the living, new equipment were proposed to dispose of corpses in such a manner that their corporeality could both be

minimized and sanitized. All these became decisive factors for the mortality and morbidity of the urban dwellers. Now, this sanitization of death produced interesting parallels. On the one hand, legislating against the corporeal excesses of dying created an ahistorical register of death. Only their numbers were documented but all the elaborate public rituals that used to be an indispensable part of posthumous ceremonials during the 18<sup>th</sup> century were severely curtailed (Basu). As death was defined as an extreme withdrawal of life and power and denied historicity, there was no place to situate death or the afterlife ‘fantasies’ within the fringes of the city. The city rather emerged as the absolute medicalised object- the administrative unit of the British Empire (Basu). It was placed under strict surveillance of a whole range of urban developments, constructions and institutions. So insistent was the demand to hide the ‘remains’ of the dead bodies, that the contemporary medical gazettes argued in favour of cremation than burial as in cremation the gases evolved to generate vegetable life and the ashes

could be used for manuring and fertilizing soil (Bhattacharya).

But on the other hand, this process of consistent denial and de-historicisation of death created a spectral space in itself. As much as it got detached from the everyday life and reality of the urban population, it became more a secretive private affair, not to be talked upon in public but to be confined in emotion, sentiments and imagination. The city-folk never failed to relate to the story of their past-lives. They always nurtured a dilemma within, continuously straddling between their 'dis'beliefs in afterlife and uncanny incidents from the past and a thoroughly sanitized, de-spectralised, medico-administrative regime of the present which obscured the 'past' completely. Sometimes their dilemma manifested through spurious uncanny events, that spontaneously became the 'silly-talks' of the town, mocked and ridiculed by the newly educated urban intelligentsia. Kaliprasanna Sinha depicted how the city got ready to behold the grand spectacle of the return of the dead from the abode of Yama, the most bizarre rumour of the nineteenth

century in his famous satire *Hutum Penchar Naksha*. The author also described how the spectral frenzy gradually petered out after being proved to be miserably untrue (Nag). The modern city was trying to validate itself as a colonial space, evolving against the primitive superstitions and ghost stories. The dead bodies, henceforth lacking in power, historicity and a well-defined social space could only look up to their spectral images for giving them a sense of history and social validity. These phantoms with their undefined supra-humane qualities unsettled the normative parameters of the colonial bodies and transformed the colonial space into a spectral space. From the rational perspective of the modern era they might have had looked like products of a manufactured time- a rupture with the colonial time. So it was quite obvious that the colonial era branded this 'otherness' in absolute pejorative terms and sealed it off as an aberration from its own territory. It was precluded as extremely unreal, uncanny and phantasmatic. But I would like to probe that these phantom images with an uncharted 'otherness' at their disposal could have

had searched for an alternative to the given normative order of colonial society and domesticity. The horror that run through the discursive of ‘otherness’ or gothic apparition to be specific challenged the existing pattern of modernity, destabilized the rationale and most importantly asked for its denial (Khair). It hardly matters if this challenge ended with the predictable containment of that otherness by the normative, but an encounter with the ‘unreal’ engendered the possibility of rethinking the real self anew.

So my focus today is the ‘other’ bodies, which did not conform to the rules and rationales of the colonial government to produce ‘talking subjects’ of the empire. As far as the perception of ‘otherness’ is concerned, I will keep it to the realm of fiction here, as I am not indulging into the paranormal practices that became prevalent among the luminaries of Calcutta during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So far fiction was concerned, Rabindranath Tagore was the first to come up with a string of exquisite ghost stories in order to illuminate the uneasy negotiation between the modern ‘self’- representing

a perfect blend of colonial body and rational mind and its 'other'- the deceased body, devoid of all those essential moorings of modern era. And for today, I have chosen two of such stories namely 'Kankal' and 'Manihara' by Tagore where the return of the deceased provides glimpses into the violence of repression and silent subordination through which contemporary middle class women learnt to negotiate the everyday experience of their despicable existence. As death was getting transformed into a secretive private affair, Tagore has strategically chosen the innermost recess of the society; the domestic sphere, as the site for appropriating the anxieties of the alternative power-structure. Both of the stories were composed during the 1890s when the debate over the Age of Consent Bill sharpened the critique over the integrity of the Hindu household and the female bodies once again. I will just briefly run through the stories.

'Kankal' is the story of a young widow, her secret desire, betrayal and death. Her skeleton narrated the story to a medical student one night. 'Manihara' is a story of an unrequited lonely wife

whose life was filled with a pathological attachment to her jewellery. She died a brutal death and her skeleton came back to her deserted bedroom in front of her husband to take those ornaments back that she left behind. The dead bodies and the images of their skeletal remains are significant in both of the stories as they symbolically capture a moment of transition—a transition from life to death, from the rational to the uncanny, from history to fantasy. And in both of them the central spectral encounter forced the primary narrator of the story, a highly educated, rational upper class male of the modern era to confront the contradictions inherent in a colonial household. So it was not only a transformation of the earthly bodies but a transformation of identity that disturbed the fabric of household. The dead, denied body, life and historicity were endowed with power to contest the norms of colonial domestic order, by generating a sense of terror.

In both of these stories, the fear has crept into the innermost recess of the Bengali domestic space. It becomes extremely significant when we contextualize the fear against the background of the

discourse of domesticity and household in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The home, then, had to complement the world outside and compensate for all the work and relations there that lay beyond personal comprehension and control of the Bengali white-collared men. And out of the entire gamut of household relations, conjugality was found to be ideally relevant to the discourse. Conjugality was based on the apparent absolutism of the male partner and the complete subordination of the female. The conjugal relationship seemed to replicate colonial arrangements between the ruler and the ruled most precisely, albeit in a miniscule form (Sarkar 43). But the stories signify a reverse. The ‘home,’ that was held to be the bastion of safety, sanctity and identity of colonized men is being imperilled because of the spectral return of the female inmates. And most importantly, fear is being transmitted by those deceased bodies which are otherwise denied any substantial physical existence either in the city or in the society at large. What becomes more poignant in this discourse of the ‘other’ bodies is their freedom to express their hidden desires and wishes with an



unforeseen authority. They broke the silence. The widow in *Kankal* came back for the much needed companionship of someone sensible and sympathetic to the story of her lifelong suppression and Manimalika returned for her treasured jewels. Those were the desires they secretly cherished in their life. Death and the subsequent transformation of their physical bodies into spectral bodies functioned as a threshold to a different terrain of self-searching and politics of identity.

The modern domestic space is palpably concretized in these stories. Given the women's absolute and unconditional preoccupation with household, the author has produced a meticulous description of every familiar object she had been attached to in her lifetime and which she was denied after death. This was an authorial strategy to establish her identity. I am just using an excerpt from 'Manihara': the eerie jangling of jewellery that Phanibhusan heard from inside, stopped by the dressing room where the saree still lay pleated on the wooden racks, the lamp stood in its niche, near the box with dry betel leaves lay upon the tea table

and beside the cupboard that was filled with all sort of unique items that Mani had collected throughout her life (Tagore). It seems that Mani paused at each corner and relished every bit of her old, familiar self. It was not only a self-searching on her part but was a kind of self-assertion. The object-filled home that was otherwise lifeless and still and could have been activated only by the strategic placement of its inmates, i.e the man and the woman and the compulsory submission of the latter to the former took an abrupt shift. The return of the spectre created an illusion so as to metamorphose her subordinated social self and transformed the domestic sphere into the ultimate ground where she could exercise her authority to the fullest even at the expense of the submission of her husband. Death reshuffled the familiar domestic environment and redefined the status-quo.

In the nationalist discourse of the Hindu nation, the creation of female bodies that glowed radiantly throughout the late nineteenth century virtually became a marker of purity, uncontamination and chastity against the colonial

servility of native men and the political subjection of the nation. Her submission to her husband and her observance of strict austerity during widowhood had not only symbolical but real political value for the rising nation. It acted as the significant spiritual repository for the evolving nationalist ethos. It was the nature of the woman's commitment to the conjugal order and her voluntary abdication of any earthly pleasure after the death of her husband that bound the domestic fabric together, which in its turn, provided an effective counterfoil to the public sphere of the colonial state. So in the social discourse, a woman's life was counted not only in terms of her birth or death but also in terms of her self-sacrifice for the sake of the household. Death dismantled this ideal design of the private sphere. Denied life, physical self and historicity, the phantoms could easily transgress the boundary of their social self and evade the injunctions thrust upon their material bodies to facilitate the nation's claim to inner sovereignty. The spectre of the widow could easily narrate the story of her illegitimate love for a young man and the murder she committed.

Mani did not hesitate to express her desire for jewellery. Death of their social bodies had empowered their inner self to speak out their true stories to their satisfaction.

I would rather see in this a politics of identity. The native body that used to be the captive of the multifaceted bio-political and anatomopolitical regimes of the colonial state was released from its materiality after the destruction of its mortal self. But what it created in turn was an 'other'. This 'other', however, was not an absolute 'other' but an integral part of the 'self' since it allowed greater space for exercising the choices of the self that had been denied in the lifetime. The 'other' legitimized the suppressed desires of the physical self, authenticated the forbidden wishes, and validated the resistance of the self against the normative dictates of the society and domesticity. And that the social space is found unable to offer any possible respite from this deep, unsettling anxiety, intensified the sense of dread and eeriness in these stories. The modern social space consumed the 'other' in the name of uncanny, unreason and untrue. The young

doctor in 'Kankal', who had been the listener of the story, maintained the spirit of western science and rationality alive and dismissed her story as hilarious. In 'Manihara', the husband Phanibhusan himself condemned the story to be untrue and fictitious. But somewhere, unconsciously, their denials and discomforts reinforced the fear of 'other' possibilities and offered an elusive definition to the stories. Bereft of the body, inner identity of the self that had been completely denied any significant social space otherwise became manifest in the confrontation between the 'real' and 'unreal'- the normative and the deviation. The 'other' having been freed from the body declined the body, countered the spatial limit of the social body and confirmed the true individual self.

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## Abstracts of Papers Presented at the Conference by Resource Persons

### ‘Words More Naked Than Flesh’: Sapphic Lineages in the Body Poetic

**Brinda Bose** is Associate Professor at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and co-founder of MargHumanities. She teaches, and researches, in literary modernisms, gender and sexualities, cinema, and the humanities.

Abstract: A 5<sup>th</sup>-century *hydria* in the National Museum of Athens portrays Sappho reading from a papyrus. While it is not known whether Sappho was literate, this image, as Anne Carson avers, is an accurate representation of the Greek lyric poet of the island of Lesbos, because the power and intrigue of word-clusters printed – and missing – on a page have remained the most fascinating aspect of Sappho’s poetic legacy. Born in 630 B.C., Sappho apparently composed 9 books of lyrics, of which only one complete poem and a myriad fragments have surfaced; she is known, therefore, as a poet of fragments. Carson - formidable poet herself, as well as translator and literary critic - who produced in



2003 a widely-acclaimed translation of Sappho's fragmented lyrics titled *If Not, Winter*, has upheld the primacy of the eye on a plain sheet by playing with signs and symbols, letters, lines and punctuation scattered with careful intent on each page. With the liberal use of blank spaces and different kinds of brackets, Greek text and English translation facing each other in camaraderie and combat, Carson both recreates Sappho's nearly-illegible etchings on papyri discovered accidentally in an ancient rubbish tip around the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and seduces attention to the body of the text, which also then becomes, by a peculiar material transformation, the embedded – yet living, writhing – body in the text.

Sappho has spawned a worthy lineage in poetry, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century following the discovery of a heap of her poem-fragments on bits of papyrus. It is a lineage, however, that is inadequately traced, merely as one that legitimizes a homosexual identity in women's poetry – 'the first lesbian poet from whose birthplace, Lesbos, the term is derived'. What I will try to lay out in this paper is an entwined significance of 'the body' in the Sapphic lineage of writing through a close look at a

few poetic fragments – as well as ruminations on them – from Sappho herself, and Gertrude Stein, H.D., Anne Carson, Jeanette Winterson.

I will contend that the sexual (especially female) body and its enactments of desire in representing sexuality in this lineage is woven with, and interrogated by, the body poetic both in language and form: in the tactile sensuality of words as well as in the visual contortions they demand of the eye as printed symbols moving across and down each printed page in unexpected ways, sometimes solid and terse, sometimes liquid and swirling. And that Sappho inspired in these poets/poetic prose writers who engaged so intimately with her work – its fragmentary presences, its tantalizing absences – this conscious experimentation with poetic form as much as with poetic language: a constant play as much with the texture and timbre of words as with their shapes and spaces and movements on the page, creating a volatile, sometimes floundering art of poetics as inflammatory and unpredictable as the female body in desire, of desire.

## The Adventures of an Instagrammer

**Aveek Sen** is Associate Editor, The Telegraph, who writes regularly in the media and academic publications on art, literature, music, and society.

Abstract: My paper, “The Adventures of an Instagrammer”, refers to Italo Calvino's story, “The Adventure of a Photographer” from his collection called *Difficult Loves*. It will be divided into three parts. The first part will focus on Calvino's story and his tribute to Roland Barthes, and look at the writings of both as a way into the underlying concerns of the next two parts of the paper: the problematic relationship of the photography to the empirical and the invisible, the embodied and the disembodied. The second part will focus on the photography of the blind. The final part will explore the relationships among art and smartphone photography, cinema, writing, the mysterious power of the human face and certain difficult emotions. There will be no images in my presentation. The audience will be encouraged to simply close their eyes and listen.

## Women, Bodily Habitus, and Physical Culture in Bengal

**Supriya Chaudhuri** is Professor Emeritus, Department of English, Jadavpur University, and has served as Coordinator, Centre of Advanced Study; Head, Department of English; and Director, School of Languages and Linguistics. She is Faculty Coordinator, Project E-QUAL, Jadavpur University, and member, Joint Working Group in Critical Thinking and Knowledge Systems. Recent publications include *Conversations with Jacqueline Rose* (co-authored: Seagull/Chicago, 2010); *Petrarch: the Self and the World*, edited with Sukanta Chaudhuri (JUP, 2012); and *Sport, Literature, Society: Cultural Historical Studies*, edited with Alexis Tadié and J.A. Mangan (Routledge, 2013).

Abstract: The concept of *habitus* (Greek *hexis*) can be traced back to Aristotle, but in its modern use it has been claimed by many sociologists, including Norbert Elias, Marcel Mauss, and Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu himself thinks of *habitus* as a set of

acquired mental dispositions, habits, sensibilities, or taste. In a lecture delivered in 1934, however, Marcel Mauss linked it to bodily dispositions. In my paper, I would like to examine an imagined set of bodily techniques, a form of training and education, or regime of physical culture, pressed into service to construct a new kind of woman. The constitution of this imaginary female subject in colonial India was, paradoxically, more of a *male* social and discursive imperative than a task for women themselves. I will look at two novels by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay to ask why the burden of *anuśīlan*, of physical culture, falls in these inaugural moments of Bengali nationalist self-making upon the woman's body, and how Bankim's transgressive heroines try out, assimilate and normalize a set of ideal bodily practices. This is in keeping with the nationalist hope of what we might call somatic reform, a programme that links the *sannyasi*, the wrestler, and the revolutionary.

## **The Discursive Body: Lalan Phokir and the Embodied Archive**

**Sudipto Chatterjee** is Professor in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, where he teaches Performance Studies. He also teaches regularly at the National School of Drama, Delhi, as well as in its Sikkim Campus. He has a PhD in Performance Studies from New York University. He is a performer / director / scholar / playwright from Kolkata, India. In 2005, he wrote and solo-performed *Man of the Heart: the Life and Times of Lalon Phokir*. He is the author of *Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta* (Seagull Books, 2007).

**Abstract:** *Man of the Heart* is an exploratory piece of theatre on the body-based philosophy and practice of a sect among Bengali Sufis and Vaishnavs known as Bauls. Of them, Lalon Phokir is regarded as the greatest. He practised personally but spoke publicly through his songs. His music performance and practice embodied a highly syncretic philosophy

that drew from diverse religious sources. He confronted orthodox fundamentalisms and preached a radically different search for divinity that, according to his beliefs, could be located within the corporeal frame. Lalon Phokir was a so-called illiterate poet who worked within his small space in 19th century Bengal, never aiming to reach high or even enter the world of literary fame. His songs have spread by word of mouth, often as lingering melodies that refuse to leave public memory, and have survived the ravages of time. *Man of the Heart* probes into both Lalon's history and legacy, through an exploration of his songs and what they say.

The larger *Man of the Heart* Project — a combination of research and performance, moving between the disembodied archive and the embodied repertoire of the body — is located between academic research and creativity, ethnography and mediated live performance. It is theatre that takes an unconventional route and engages with the rigours of academic inquiry into the practice and philosophy of the Baul-Phokirs of Bengal who offer a message

that is relevant for the rest of the world to hear. Lalon Phokir wanted to situate his “faith” as counter-institutional, but not as a counter-institution itself. He believed that Divinity dwells within every human body. The search for the Divine, thus, has to travel inwards through ethical introspection and moral cleanliness. In a world rife with communal strife, Lalon’s message carries a simple significance that is important to communicate, with all its philosophic depth, to the widest audience possible.



## **The Body in Indian Ascetic Traditions**

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Abstract: It may be assumed that the ancient Indian ascetic traditions' exemplification of the austere treatment of body and bodily mortification as a way to spirituality and purity underlies the assessment of body in these traditions. However, this understanding is simplistic and does not reflect other complexities present within individual traditions that also ought to have a bearing on any attempt to evaluate within them the human body in its entirety. In this paper, I shall consider in detail how early Buddhist literature refers to the body. An

investigation of the Pali Canon shows that there is a constant allusion to the body in many different contexts, but an absence of specific information. This must be drawn out and analysed in order to determine if a cohesive understanding of the body is possible here. The latter part of the paper will include a brief discussion on Ajivika and Jain philosophies such as existed around the same time as early Buddhism. Their views regarding the human body will be identified to demonstrate that their quite different beliefs result in their valuing the body in fairly different ways. My paper will end with some concluding remarks.