

Women, Embodiment and Personhood

Author(s): MAITHREYI KRISHNARAJ

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, No. 17 (APRIL 24-30, 2010), pp. 39, 41-42

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25664383>

Accessed: 12-04-2020 16:11 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*

Women, Embodiment and Personhood

MAITHREYI KRISHNARAJ

Feminism has not resolved the issue of the female body; is it all constructed by sociocultural practices and ideology, or, is there a female body prior to this construction? Is it all just a "neuter" body, where femaleness is all what society has constructed, or, is there a female body which is a given, biologically? Insofar as feminism has tried to engage with sex and gender, by trying to move away from a biological essentialism, and in trying to focus on differences between women by caste, class and ethnicity, it deflected attention away from the female body itself. The feminist viewpoint thereby became unable to speak of the body as a subject.

The essay by Sabala and Meena Gopal on "Body, Gender and Sexuality" in this issue of the Review of Women's Studies exposes the contradictory relationship women have with their bodies. There appears to be a tension between a woman's sexuality on the one hand, and her body as a reproductive being on the other. Can she experience her own sexuality as a pleasurable one, autonomously decided, that is, to be able to express it when, how and with whom? One of the fundamental demands of the women's movement has been for self-determination. Under patriarchy, a woman experiences the female body, her femaleness in diverse ways: as a desirable "object", as a desired object; as a person with feelings, emotions and cognition, she experiences a fracture. She may be venerated symbolically, she may be denigrated as seductress who prevents a man's advancement.

Our mythologies have plenty of the image of the seductress who can disturb the sage's *tapasya*. There is the "other" woman in a man's heterosexual relation within marriage, who can offer satisfactions that the wife cannot deliver – placed as she is in a situation of compulsive chastity and having the burden of raising a progeny to carry the "uncontaminated" seed of the spouse. There are enormous social and cultural constraints expressed in religious and ritualistic practices on the sexual access of different classes and castes of women to men from other classes.

Caste and Women

In feudal India, upper caste men had the right of access to lower caste women. It exists even today. The woman's body has to bear so many markers – not only as the desired object of lust, not only as the desirable object of romantic love, but also as the site of honour of the family and community. News reports abound in 21st century of punishment meted out to transgressors of caste rules. Forget our Ambedkar. His crusade did not succeed. Indian identity even today is congruent with caste affinity. The female body of a lower caste woman is accessible to an upper caste man, but the same female body cannot get access to an upper caste man. Her body is after all seen as only the soil, inert, with no volition on its own. The danger, the threat to a social order the misogyny poses comes from its potential to disrupt given social hierarchies. In the film *Samskara*, the body of the brahmin, who had relations with a lower caste woman, would not be lifted for the last rites by the orthodox community of priests. Despite this, there is enormous diversity in sexual practices across regions and communities.

There was a film by Manish Jha called *Matrubhumi*. In a village because of female infanticide, there are no brides available, the landowning family that includes father and four sons buy a bride from another part of the country. All have sexual access to the young woman. The servant is sympathetic to the woman and

Maithreyi Krishnaraj (maithreyi_krishnaraj@yahoo.com) is the editor of the Review of Women's Studies of EPW and has been researching issues relating to gender for many years.

helps her escape but both she and the servant are caught. The servant is killed and the young woman is kept tied up in the cowshed where she is sexually abused by all of them except the youngest son. She gets pregnant and bears a daughter to carry on the female subordination.

Object of Desire

The woman as an object of desire is so promoted by media and culture that women have to go to extreme lengths to look like the prescribed "body". The cosmetic industry thrives on this insecurity. It promotes notions of the ideal body shape. Sudhir Khakkar, a well known psychiatrist, in a private conversation reported that no woman is happy with the way she looks. I recall an exhibition I saw in the United Kingdom, where the display showed a hundred years of women trying to manipulate, distort, contort, disempower their bodies to conform to current beauty standards: from foot binding in China, to whale bone corsets in England to make the waist narrow, to wearing heavy earrings to lengthen the ear lobes among many tribals within India, to copper rings around the neck to lengthen the necks in sub-Saharan Africa... the story is endless.

I remember as a child how the daughter of one of our relatives was made to agonise so much over her growing breasts at the age of nine by her mother, who made her wear a thick, tight cardigan under her blouse throughout summer and winter to prevent her visible sexual maturity. Things may be different today in that Botox is needed to accentuate breasts as the mark of "approved" beauty. There is also the new fetish about having a lean body. The preoccupation with the body has also spread to the male, who go for waxing and other cosmetic treatment.

Fragmentation

What is happening is fragmentation of the body-mind-spirit continuum. Instead, we are promoting the binary of body/mind as disjointed entities. Some of our own traditions try to synthesise the triad by techniques of yoga and meditation to experience the basic unity of the triad.

Another type of fragmenting is taking place through new reproductive technology such as surrogacy, where women "lend" their wombs. In this age of outsourcing activities, human birth can also be outsourced. Anand in Gujarat has become a major centre offering such services. With donated sperm and donated egg for invitro fertilisation, it is introduced to a woman willing to carry the embryo to term. Who has the right to the baby – the man who donates the sperm, the woman who donated her egg, or, the woman who carries the baby in her womb? What happens to our notions of kinship if a grandmother carried her daughter's baby in her womb? Such cases are reported to be rampant among non-resident Indians in the United States.

Using frozen sperm and ova, the entire reproduction is fragmented and the unity that originally existed no longer prevails. In the absence of a law to regulate surrogacy, it, at present, depends entirely on the contractor and contractee. When a German couple had twins by donating the husband's sperm and the wife's egg to a surrogate mother – a domestic who bore the babies through lending her womb and earning a substantial sum through this contract – nevertheless experienced care of them (*The Sunday Express* 2009).

The union government overruled the High Court of Mumbai's refusal to the issue of a passport to the children. The Supreme Court rejected the union government's decision by observing that "Should we treat children born of surrogacy as commodities? Statelessness cannot be clamped on these children."

Unresolved Issue

Feminism has not resolved the issue of the female body; is it all constructed by sociocultural practices and ideology, or, is there a female body prior to this construction? Is it all just a "neuter" body, where femaleness is all what society has constructed, or, is there a female body which is a given, biologically? Insofar as feminism has tried to engage with sex and gender, by trying to move away from a biological essentialism, and in trying to focus on differences between women by caste, class and ethnicity, it deflected attention away from the female body itself. The feminist viewpoint thereby became unable to speak of the body as a subject.

In an interesting article Seemanthini Niranjana (1997) argues that spatialising the discourse is one way out. The experience of space, femininity and the female body must become available as a form of knowledge. The female body is simultaneously deployed in several spaces. As a body in the household, the woman feels secure, as a body in her own village she feels secure. There is this inside-outside connotation. We must theorise the modes in which bodies inhabit multiple spaces according to her.

The distinction between sex and gender, which feminist theory put forth definitely makes sense insofar as sex alone does not explain the whole array of roles, traits, etc, that gender takes on. Human beings are destined to a lifetime of the sex they get at birth though, of course, changing one's sex through surgery is now possible. Among many plants and animals, sex is not affixed category; it is more elastic. Among many species of plants sex changes, from season to season, as in orchids or shrimps (Petrusky 1982). Science fiction stories depict male, female human beings as changing sex every season (Laughlin 1988) when they are able to empathise with the other. In some African societies a woman may assume male status (without necessary sex change) in the event of her husband or father's death in order to conduct the affairs of her community and household.

Notion of Non-Dividedness

Our philosophy reiterates the notion of "non-dividedness" or *dwanda vimukta*. A lot of new research on consciousness understands the connection between body-mind and spirit (loosely termed bio-energy). New reproductive technology for cure of infertility is a technofix to pander to the desire for one's own biological progeny. With millions of children who are orphans, why cannot adoption be an answer to satisfy the desire for a child? Will it not confirm our relatedness to each other, an expression of basic humanity?

A human male is also a reproductive being, but his body is not implicated in the whole process of carrying the fertilised egg, carrying the embryo to fruition, giving birth, then breastfeeding the infant. All these are bodily processes, where once the egg has been fertilised, nature takes over and the woman has no control over what happens inside her body. A woman's capacity to bring ova to maturity is not done by her on her own. While the embryo is the result of male-female fusion, a woman cannot move from ova to

embryo by herself. Human species has no "estrus" – where ovulation triggers sexual impulse as in other mammals.

To counter this, we have a complex body of social psychological pressures that channel female sexuality, exclusively towards procreation. There are religious rituals, marital rapes, and so on. The prevention of sexual pleasure for women takes grotesque forms like genital mutilation of young females in parts of Africa.

As a reproductive being, a woman undergoes enormous bodily stress, without compensation. For example, the economic cost of a woman's breast milk is calculated to be one-fourth cheaper than a cow's milk according to a World Bank study, which propagated breastfeeding to lower infant mortality. Yet, the question never arose in the minds of this august body that breastfeeding requires enormous energy – a 1,000 calories a day. Is this bodily energy compensated by rest, nutrition, by economic means for survival adequate to forgo paid employment?

Our maternity benefit system is not available to the majority of women in poor countries. Even career women in professions have few safeguards to retain their employment. For the person who is undergoing such enormous physical burden, there are few labour rights. The irony is, in reproduction, the person and the instrument of reproduction are fused. The appropriation of her power of reproduction implies direct total appropriation of the person herself.

A woman's body is not merely an instrument of sexuality and reproduction, but also unremitting labour in the household to maintain the family. Especially, in third world countries where a majority of households do self-provisioning, the burden falls unequally on women. Time use studies as well as calculations of energy expenditure affirm this truth. Yet, a woman who performs this onerous task under all circumstances, has no special rights that recognise this contribution. Health studies establish backache as a consequence of this toil. Taking care of infants is not just feeding them but being available at all times, including during nights foregoing sleep. In disputes over matrimonial property on divorce, this consideration does not prevail.

Sex Trafficking

The article in this selection on sex trafficking ("Sex Trafficking and Sex Work: Definitions, Debates and Dynamics – A Review of Literature" by Annie George, U Vindhya and Sawmya Ray) brings out another bitter fate that awaits many. In the brothels of Mumbai, there is regular supply of young Nepali women brought by an organised gang. Sexual abuse is prevalent on a large scale not only in the brothels, but in places of work. Despite many legal amendments to rape law and to sexual abuse at place of work, it is difficult for women to get redress, because of the stigma attached to the victims of crimes. The rate of conviction is very low. Gender proscribes certain spaces and time for women. I recall a frightening experience. I had attended a meeting in the Mumbai University Fort Campus. The meeting ended late and I stood at the bus stop to get a bus to Churchgate station. Men kept coming close and took me to be "soliciting".

Should offering sex for remuneration be treated as a work? This is a tricky issue. The argument is that if a woman can sell her skills, learning, etc, why not her body? It is not a moral issue, but a gender relations issue. Are we accepting the codes of patriarchy where men "need sex"?

As one feminist puts it, this view has a hydrological model. The ethical perspective could be that sex for sale dissociates sex from the body-mind connection, reducing it to mere physicality with an absence of reciprocal emotions that accompanies genuine intimacy. It is, therefore, problematic to view it as a "work" because this work is conditioned by patriarchy – whether voluntary or not on the part of the woman. The ultimate test for feminism would be an autonomous action free of moral taboos.

In the 19th century, D K Karve (1931), while campaigning for birth control argued for equal freedom for both men and women in sexual relations. Today, of course, the spectre of HIV-AIDS is turning the spotlight on women "sex-workers" as the carriers of the disease. Should one, therefore, legalise sex-work as in some countries? Thailand has a relatively more open attitude to the issue. Peasant women go to town to earn money through "massage parlours" (euphemism for prostitution), then go back to villages to build houses or repay loans of the family. The Netherlands had promoted what was known as "mail order brides" – to get brides from poor countries like Vietnam. A PhD dissertation, for which I was the external examiner, gave empirical details about how the system worked. Once the so-called "brides" came, they were used as domestic servants. Sex and domestic labour went together. In another study in Nigeria, women took in boarders of men to whom they supplied both domestic labour and sex. These are examples of the multiuses of the female body.

During conflict times sexual slavery of women is common as in Japan where Korean women had to be "comfort women" for Japanese soldiers. The enemy's women become the site for conquest. So too in our own land, whether during Partition or Gujarat or elsewhere. The female body is violated as the mark of the "property" of the man. This essay will be one-sided if it does not acknowledge the abuse of the man's body in male prostitution or paedophilia or "gigolos" for rich women. In Italy, young boys were castrated to make them develop high pitch voices necessary for the opera. But, by and large, the balance is more against women because of unequal gender relations. It is important to reclaim the body.

Chandralekha, the talented dancer, choreographed a ballet called "Shariram" to uphold the beauty of the human body in labour and in love. John Berger in his classic book *Ways of Seeing* contrasted the Indian erotic sculpture, which celebrated the man-woman relation where the two faced each other in singular absorption with each other in contrast to the stylised paintings in the west, where the woman posed as an object for attention.

Let us reclaim the innate dignity and integrity of the human body.

REFERENCES

- Karve, D K (1931): "Social Dimension of Sexology" in *Samajswasthya*, Vol 4, No 12, June (translated from Marathi for "Remaking Society For Women: Visions Past and Present" for the Indian Association of Women's Studies, December, 1995, as a background paper for the Conference by Maithreyi Krishnaraj).
- Laughlin, Ursula (1988): *The Left Hand of Darkness* (The US: Harper and Row [Orbit]), Reprint.
- Niranjana, Seemantini (1997): "Femininity, Space and the Female Body: An Anthropological Perspective" in Meenakshi Thapan (ed.), *Embodiment, Essays on Gender and Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Petrusky, Ben (1982): "The Gender Changers", *Science Today*, August.
- The Sunday Express* (2009): "Surrogacy: The Grey Area", *The Sunday Express*, Mumbai Edition, 20 December, p 11.