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**The Woman's Body as Cultural Other:
An Indian Perspective**

Adrienne Rich describes the body as “the geography closest in.”¹ The body marks a boundary between self and other, both in a literal physiological sense but also in a social sense. The visceral, tactile, and yet “cultured” body of the woman is the literal stage of this paper. The body in representation, with its details and tactile surfaces is a site of social, and therefore, cultural markings; the gestural signatures of culture, which bear traces of historical meaning, come to be coded within the representational structures of desire that construct a woman.

Before I begin to elaborate on how women's bodies have become sites of cultural meaning, I need to specify why I have chosen to illustrate my case through the body of the woman rather than the man. Although both men and women have bodies, men are, culturally, regarded as being able to transcend their *embodiment* by regarding the body as merely the container of their consciousness.² In contrast, women have been understood as being more closely tied to, and ruled by, their bodies because of natural cycles of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Culturally, the heterosexual man tends to see

“other” people who are not like himself only in relation to himself: “[h]e sees other identities only in terms of his own self-perception; he sees them as what I shall term his Other.”³ However, it is not only men who see women as their biological other. In my paper, using the epistemes of body theory, cultural studies, social geography, and, of course, the “lived experience,” I propose to show how the woman’s body with a shift in loci, is always a “cultural other.” By performing an optical fragmentation, that is, by “dividing” the woman’s body into separate signifiatory zones such as hair, back, feet, and complexion, I purport to show how these parts are constantly being othered in the visual/bodily imagination. This othering of corporeality comes across in the impossibility of cross-cultural translation.

There is no “natural” body, rather, the body is always “culturally mapped;” it never exists in a pure or uncoded state,⁴ so that what essentialists “naturalise” or portray as “essence” is actually socially constructed difference. These differences are produced through material and social practices, discourses and systems of representation rather than biology.

Feet, innocent and seemingly unadorned with signification, provide us with the easiest example as a site of othering. If the Occident has revealed its fetish for the woman’s legs (the *longer* the shank the better), the Orient (yes, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East) has its fetish for the size of the woman’s feet (the *smaller* the better). The restriction of the size of the Chinese woman’s feet is the stuff of a much-documented mythified reality.

In Bengal, the size of the woman’s feet is inversely proportional to her worth as a good *grihini* (a housewife who can usher in prosperity). Medium-structured women with

small delicate feet are rewarded with the epithet *Lakshmishri* / *Lokshishri* in cultured corporeal-centred conversations (Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth in Hindu mythology). Such is the Bengali's fascination with the woman's feet that on *Lakshmi Purnima* Night (a full moon night when the goddess Lakshmi is worshipped), women draw *alpana* (motifs) with rice-powder paste of the goddess's feet leading inwards into the household, heralding the prosperity of its inmates. Another variation of the myth is the figure of the *mechobhoot* (*bhoot* is ghost in Bengali) whose feet point backwards. This mythification of the woman's feet from ancient Indian culture finds its other in contemporary western culture's mythicisation of the white woman's legs (Marilyn Monroe's billowing skirt is the archetypal signifying shot of this fetish). This othering is present not just in terms of size, but rather the more important difference of loci: the feet versus the leg.

This othering also manifests itself in the *difference* of attire. While the western woman's slit skirt / capris / shorts ensures that the region below the thighs remains exposed, the Indian *sari* (a six-yard unstitched cloth worn with pleats), *ghagra* (or even the Japanese kimono) makes sure that only the feet can be seen, nothing above it. That is perhaps why the western stockings /socks have no parallel in the Indian culture of fashion.

The cultural othering of feet also comes across in the *bare feet* culture of India against the *covered feet* culture of the west. This is not just a matter of climatic difference (the tropical versus the temperate), but one of philosophy. A Hindu or Muslim will never pray to God with his slippers on (even touching a paper, a sign of the Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning, with the feet demands immediate redemption in the form of a *pranam*) while the Christian is perfectly comfortable singing his hymns to God with his

shoes laced up. (There is an interesting historical anecdote that makes my point clearer: in 1911, an Indian team Mohun Bagan, played *football barefoot* with an English team who were appropriately *booted* for the occasion. Indians take pride in the fact that Mohun Bagan went on to win the match and they add with evident pride, *bare feet*). The ancient Indian *khrom* (an entirely uncovered slipper with just a knob between the big toe and its neighbour) has given way to a slipper or the flip-flop while, in spite of many stylistic innovations, the western woman has retained the covered shoe for work, the sneakers/sports shoes for the outdoors, and the tied-up shoe / variations of the Roman slippers for the evening out. The Indian woman will keep her feet uncovered to show off her *alta* (a red-coloured dye used to border the entire feet), anklet or *chutki* (a toe ring). Such is the importance of the woman's feet in Hindu custom that when she enters her husband's house for the first time after marriage, she leaves impressions of her *alta*-smeared feet on a white sari. Even after a person's death, her feet are smeared with *alta* and the impression taken on paper, to be framed for remembrance later.

The hair is only too visible an example of how one culture is another's other. The hair worn short, in many ways seen as a kind of empowering statement in the west, an effort at equality, has a totally different connotation in India. If the "boys' cut" (as it is popularly called in India) is an act of choice for the empowered women (who might "wear the trousers" in the home) in the west or even the Indian elite today, for the Hindu woman (five decades back, and even now in the heart of rural India), the barbaric act of "raping the lock" after her husband's death was a standard practice, a conscious effort at de-beautification. There is a widely prevalent superstition in India that a woman who leaves her hair open in the evening and goes out of the house, finds a ghost trapped in her

hair. That the gender of the ghost is masculine/male is of course, indubitable. This process of cultural othering is best seen in the figure of the “resident alien” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose spiky hair might be a feminist statement in the first world academy, but is a “widow’s cut” in India.

Not only this, the colour of the hair provides us with a wonderful example of how one culture is always making an effort to become that culture’s other. Rapunzel, with her l-o-n-g raven-black tresses, is the archetypal figure of western culture’s representation of its other. The Indian woman, with her black hair, will *henna* (a vegetable dye) her hair to make herself a blonde or redhead. Just as hair tries to become its own other (the straight-haired woman will “perm” her hair to make it wavy or curly while the curly-haired woman will use an iron to straighten hers), culture, too with time, often becomes its own other. The well-groomed time-consuming bun of the woman seen in the history of western art has its other in the woman who, more often than not, kept her hair loose as seen in Indian portraits of goddesses, in sculptures, or as depicted in literature. But contemporary times have seen a reversal, with the unkempt look (seen in the razor cut, the steps cut, the semi-mushroom cut) gaining currency in western fashion. In Indian myth and lore, this dialectic between the kempt and the unkempt look, between the mother and the seductress, manifests itself in the different figures of Lakshmi and Urvashi, analogous with the western Earth Mother and the Femme Fatale.

Even the back, almost without signification in western films and portraits, takes on very “different” contours in India. Unlike the permissive culture “there” which allows the “male” camera a peek (and even more) into the back’s other, the front, with the lowest of neck lines, *et al.*, the camera/artist here has only the canvas of the “back” on

which to script his desire, often using it as a proxy for the frontal grammatology. The erotics of the back are best reve(a)led in the cut of the draping fabric. Since the culture of fashion has been such that emphasis been placed on covering the organs associated with reproduction (right from the fig leaf to the bikini), the back has eluded Indian culture's censorious scissors. In doing so, the territory of the back has allowed the back-scooped-out garments like the *choli* to flourish in the Indian subcontinent.

The question of complexion constructs a unique parallelogram of othering. Matrimonial advertisements in India began with "fair," a quality to be advertised in a bride seeking a groom, and an essential quality that a groom desires in a bride. Richard Dyer notes, it is white women who have been positioned as the "apotheosis of desirability, all that a man could want, yet nothing that can be had, nor anything that a women can be."⁵ For the brown Indian, the fair skin is the other, and (s)he will go to any length to "other" her complexion. Ayurvedic recipes of turmeric cream, sandalwood, coconut milk of ancient times have transmuted into the symbolically named Fair and Lovely, the largest selling cosmetic cream in India. The white-skinned westerner, on the other hand, who has so long used his complexion as a weapon for superiority amongst the "blacks," will also take the utmost trouble of acquiring the perfect suntan, to *become* the exotic other.

There is also the important difference of temporality that comes across in this negotiation of cultures and I can cite a paired analogy to make my point: the *mehendi*-dyed design and the tattoo. Body art with the help of a vegetable dye *henna* / *mehendi* is an age-old practice in India (painting the palms of the bride with *henna* during marriage is a common custom). Usually in floral or geometric designs, *henna* body-art lasts barely

beyond a fortnight. In contrast with the tattoo, it is cheaper, not painful at all, and impermanent. This major difference in cultures is evident in the varied traditions of art and culture: the oral tradition of the Vedas against the bound and preserved tradition of the book; the sculptures in the church as against the impermanent clay idols of the Hindu gods and goddesses immersed every year; the paintings in chapels against the wiped away *alpana* (motifs of chalk/rice powder) on the floor. There is also another difference: the *type* of design painted on the woman and the *loci* of the body art. In the case of *mehendi*, floral designs are painted on the palm or the feet; in the tattoo, the locus could be anything, from the belly to the bottom, and the designs are more individualistic: the beloved's name, the zodiac sign, a lucky sign, or a favourite mascot. In this difference of loci and designs, what comes across is a dialectical relation between the two cultures: the continuation of tradition (the locus and designs hardly change in *mehendi* body art) against the rich individuality available to the western woman (the locus and the design are her own choice).

There are also other examples of othering. The Hindu woman is forced to wear white to mourn her husband's death while the Christian woman chooses black as a colour of mourning. The former has to give up her *shankha*, *sindoor*, and *mangalsutra*, the signs of her marriage, after she becomes a widow, while her counterpart in the west can continue to wear her wedding ring forever.

Different discursive regimes produce different bodies. In analysing how women's bodies are marked with "social tattooing,"⁶ I have tried to show how biology (the woman's body *per se*) is simply a raw material that is painted and operated upon by the

hands and eyes of culture, and, also more importantly, how the body, through the materialisation of *habitus*, is inevitably rendered a “cultural other.”

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Norton, 1986), 212.

² Robyn Longhurst, “(Dis)embodied geographies” (*Progress in Human Geography*, 21.4, 1997), 486-501.

³ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 6.

⁴ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990), 6.

⁵ Quoted in Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 8.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-cities,” in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 12.