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The Body As Metaphor
—Socialisation of Women in Punjabi Urban Families

THE centrality of the body as a metaphor for society has been repeatedly asserted in sociological and psychological literature. While the body may be seen as a metaphor for society, the meaning inscribed in the use of the body is also internalised as subjective experience.

In the Indian context, Mary Douglas has argued that the concern with controlling the peripheries of the body in Hindu rituals reflects the concern with controlling the boundaries of social groups. In this paper, I would like to explore this double perspective on the body—the body as object and the body as subject, as they pertain to the feminine body and I shall argue that the sense of being a woman is internalised through this double perspective.

I have drawn examples from many sources—manuals of behaviour, anthropological monographs, folklore and my own experience with urban Punjabi families among whom I conducted fieldwork. The purpose is not to attempt a complete description but a possible way to constitute the problem. It is the argument of this paper that the female body may be best described in terms of the life stages of a woman.

Virginal Girl Child

In early childhood, the body is seen as bearing the marks of a future gender identity but the male and female identities are not crystallised. The sexual organs are considered to be a *nishani* or mark. Since they do not embody any sexual functions there is no shame associated with them, no attempt to hide them.

In childhood, the ritual occasion when the identity of the girl appears in a most marked fashion in its femininity is the occasion of *kanjak* or *kanya ptija*, when girls are worshipped as embodiments of the goddess.

Decked in finery, they stand in a row in each house while the father or the brother washes their feet. Finally, they are offered food and money so that the goddess may be placated through the whole year.

Although the ritual is especially for girls, one often finds little boys included in it, for the differentiation between boys and girls is not supposed to be sharp in childhood. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that boys participate in this ritual by virtue of being like girls. It is the feminine virginal body which is the abode of the goddess.

In the ritual of *kanjak,* the little boy finds a place by virtue of being assimilated to the female sex.

In language, it is the girl who imitates the boy, often taking on the gender markings of the boy. There is an indulgent attitude to this kind of linguistic behaviour and it is seen as part of baby speech. As girls grow older, they are encouraged to use the female gender markings in a systematic manner.

It seems, then, that female and male identities may not be sharply distinguished in early childhood. Yet, while this statement may be true in the sense of the being of childhood, it is not true for its becoming. For, while an indulgent attitude is taken towards the mixing of male and female identities in ritual and language during early childhood, the parents are already looking towards a near future when the gender identities will have to be sharply

Washing the feet of little girls as part of Kanjak ceremony

segregated, and towards which formal socialisation will soon turn its attention.

Narrowing Horizons

The onset of menstruation marks a radical change in the orientation to the body. In many parts of India, the onset of menstruation is ritually announced. The initiation rituals, at this stage, define the female body as crystallised and sexually mature. It is important to note that male initiation rituals, such as the *yagyopvit sanskar* give the male an external and ever widening universe. The male initiate is ritually taken outside the house, often to the edge of the city, near the river; he is introduced to a preceptor and is thus taken outside the domain of the family. The whispering of the *gayatri mantra* in his ear gives him privileged access to the domain of the word. Although these themes appear in a very elaborate fashion in brahmanical rituals, I believe that variations of these themes may be found in the rituals of other castes in which the male neophyte is introduced to a wider spatial and social world.

The female initiation rituals, in contrast, emphasise the inferiority of feminine domains. For the period of her menstruation, the girl is confined to a room where, as the Newars say, even the sun does not have access. Her movements are completely curtailed and for the duration of her period, she may not bathe, change her clothes, comb her hair or wear any ornaments. On her return to purity, which is publicly celebrated among many communities such as the Coorgs, the Nairs, the Newars, and the brahmans of Tamil Nadu, the themes of covering and binding the body become predominant.

Now acknowledged as a concrete sexual being, the woman must, for the rest of her sexual and productive life, oscillate between the periods when her body must be hidden, separated spatially and made bereft of all cultural symbols, and the times of her purity when the body may be available for the gaze of a well defined kinship group but must appear as hidden and bound by clothes.

It is interesting that among some

Worship of the goddess embodied in virgin girls

social groups such as the urban Punjabis, there is no formal ritual to mark the onset of menstruation. The taboos on the woman are silently observed and communicated, and have also been considerably abbreviated. For example, the only food item which a menstruating woman may not touch is pickled food which is said to spoil by her touch.

Early Silencing

However, precisely because there is no acknowledgment of the woman's condition at the level of the collective group, the responsibility of observing these taboos falls entirely upon the individual woman. Thus, the laws regarding pollution and purity are observed but must be communicated without the use of speech.

The onset of menstruation is experienced by girls as a terrible curse, as if an alien being had come and taken possession of their bodies. Youth for a woman is an enemy *(bairi)*, say many women, for it robs them of the freedom of childhood and the spontaneity they could experience in the father's household. Sooner or later, they must move into the family of the husband where they will have to strain themselves to the utmost in order to preserve the honour of the father's house.

When a girl begins to menstruate, she learns that one of the most important ways in which women must learn to communicate is by nonverbal gestures, intonation of speech and reading metamessages in ordinary languages. "What kind of a daughter are you if you cannot read the way to which the eye of the mother points ?" mothers frequently admonish their daughters.

I came across an example of this. A man was visiting his brother's house and he expressed the wish to take his brother's daughter out for the day. In the Punjabi ethos, parents may never make their authority over their children explicit if it contradicts the kinship ethos according to which the children belong to the entire kin group. So the mother could not have refused permission. Her explicit verbal behaviour, therefore, emphasised that the father's brother had complete authority over the girl, and could do what he wished. Her nonverbal behaviour, on the other hand, signalled to the girl that her going out would not be approved of. Thus, the father's brother could not take the girl out because the girl insisted that she was not feeling very well.

One of the lessons of adulthood for women is that their use of language must be different from that of men, for women must never use words which make emotions explicit, reveal the tensions of a situation or subvert authority, especially in domains that include relations between men and women. Menstruation is the first event that reveals this side of social life to the girl.

Regulating Sexuality

The Hindu law books show great interest in the sexuality of women. We may discern two major concerns in these rules, both of which are expressed through the metaphor of impurity. The first set of rules relates to the periods of impurity which regulate sexual access to the woman. For example, a woman is sexually inaccessible even to her husband during her menstrual period. Sexual intercouise with a menstruating woman is said to be dangerous for the man and harmful for any progeny thus conceived. A woman becomes pure only

on the fourth day of her menstrual period when her sexual desires are said to be at a peak and a man is advised to approach his wife after she has had her bath. This is the period also considered propitious for procreation.

A woman who has engaged in adulterous sexual relations with a man of a higher caste remains sexually inaccessible to her husband till she has had a menstrual period. Rituals of purification and expiation vary according to the caste status of the adulterous lover. But the text emphasises the woman's return to purity, her sexual accessibility and the responsibility a householder has towards his ancestors to procreate and increase his line.

His Punjabi social life, a new bride is always blessed with the words: "Bathe in milk, and be fruitful with sons." A new Dewan bride wishing to take part in household chores may be told : "Sit on a high bed and increase the creeper of the Dewans. Aren't there enough servants to do all these chores ?"

The point I wish to make is that the law texts, which present the place of women in a patriarchal universe, emphasise the woman's accessibility to the male, her return to purity and her obligation to increase the lineage. The blessings showered by old women on brides are blessings showered by "female patriarchs" for old women may often speak on behalf of men. In fact, if women did not internalise the voices of men and speak like patriarchs themselves, the social order could not be maintained. Coercion and force can never ensure the authority of the rule as an internal voice. Hence we should be sensitive to the manner in which women define their sexuality in accordance with the dominant paradigms of their societies.

Three generations

For Consumption

However, though women internalise this obligation to be sexually active and to procreate, this is the perspective of a third person on the woman's body. Underlying this is a first person perspective which is articulated amongst women. According to this, the impurity a woman incurs during sexual intercourse is the impurity of a thing partially consumed. A woman's body, they say, is made *juthi* every day. The words *asauch* and *sutak* used in the law texts define pollution as capable of being exterminated by passage of time. But that which has been made *jutha* by partial use can never attain purity again. Hence, the women's language emphasises the irreversibility of a pollution that a woman is obliged to incur through the process of sexual relations.

Absorb And Endure

One consequence of this view of the female body in sexuality is that women see themselves as the persons who absorb not only pollution but also sin and danger. Just as a woman absorbs in herself the pollution of sexual intercourse, so that the life process may continue, so does a good wife absorb in herself the dangers to her husband. Women blame themselves excessively if a misfortune befalls the husband and may also be blamed by others. The whole notion of *sati* implies an ascetic life by the wife through which the *dosh— a* generic term including faults, pollution, sin and danger—may be internalised by the wife.

On the one hand, then, the female body is seen as constantly transformed by use, as being progressively polluted. On the other hand, it is the very capacity of the woman to absorb the negative forces of the cosmic and social world that allows men to be regenerated. An example of this may be found in the following episode.

A girl I knew had come away to her mother's house because she said she could not bear the drunkenness and abusive behaviour of her husband. One of the old women who had assembled there, appealed to me : "You are a married woman. Tell me, can one find a man who has no faults ? The *jat* (race) of men is like that. But surely, it is the *dharm* of a woman to hide the faults of her husband, deep inside the pit of her stomach."

As the lawful wives of men, women pay allegiance to the entire male discourse on female sexuality. However, burdened with the task of maintaining the orderly world of patriarchy represented by law, they are not always averse to maintaining appearances at the cost of individual transgressions. For

example, a woman who was not able to conceive was advised by her sister-in-law to exchange her quilt, a verbal pun by which she was being advised to become pregnant by another man, thus confirming that maintaining order sometimes involves individual transgressions.

I would also like to point out that a woman's sexuality binds her to the cosmic world in a relation that is very different from that of a male. A woman is said to be married to three gods before she can be given to a human husband. As many of the *vratkathas* emphasise, a woman's sexuality may sometimes be claimed by her divine husband and she may bear him a child. In some groups such as the Newars, a woman is first ritually married to Suvarnakumar and Vishnu and secondarily married to a human.

In some of the *vratkathas*, a woman may have a snake for a brother who may, in turn, be mistaken for a lover. Thus, the collective consciousness acknowledges, through these *kathas*, certain preoccupations of women that emphasise the inadequacy of the official kinship norms to give an exhaustive and definitive understanding of the sexuality of women.

The Maternal Function

A specific function of the female body that is treated as an object of thought is the maternal function.

Julia Kristieva suggests that in Christian theology, maternity is only a vessel for divinity. In fact, the notion of the child as the alien who comes to inhabit the body has such a "taken for granted" quality in Western thought that it seeps into modern philosophical discourse.

In contrast, the Hindu cultural milieu thinks of the changes occurring in the mother's body as closely related to her volition. Although the Sanskritic texts, representing the patriarchal view of the body of the mother, describe the womb as *kumbhinarak*, a particular kind of hell in which the foetus finds itself enclosed and from which it struggles to escape, the discourse of the women alters this alien, struggling being into a welcome and cherished guest in the body of the mother.

Mother and daughter

Punjabis believe that the mother and child are in direct communication with each other, and the body of the mother is the medium through which this communication takes place. The food cravings of a mother are indulged because they are said to emanate from the foetus. A craving for sweet foods indicates that the foetus is male whereas a female foetus is attracted towards sour goods. If a pregnant woman dreams of strange lands, people and events, these are said to be the memories of the previous birth of the foetus.

Everything the mother does during the pregnancy—the food she eats, the people she visits, the thoughts she has, the stories she listens to—is believed to affect the character of the child. This belief is supported by the medical texts of Ayurveda and reinforces the position that the maternal space is not alien but deeply intimate.

Mothers think of the pregnancy in terms of the voluntary suffering that they underwent in order to give birth. "I kept you inside me for nine whole months—and is this how you are going to treat me?" This is the question women often put to their grown up sons if they feel that the maternal wishes are not being respected.

One should emphasise that the mother does not use her relation to the son to secure his allegiance to the domain of patriarchal rules but rather to those of her wishes that individualise her relations with her son. The individual allegiance that a son owes his mother is seldom used to subvert the authority of the patriarchal rules.

Subtle Subversion

The classical example of this at the level of myth is the story of Parshuram, the famed sage, who had to decapitate his mother in obedience to the father. In everyday experience, I found that the formal position reiterates the rights of

the father over the child. But there is a subtle way in which this chain of command and obedience may be subverted. A mother may be so grieved by the punishment given to a child or a course of action proposed that she may become depressed, refuse to eat her food or fall ill. In deference to her wishes, the father may alter his command.

One frequently encounters cases of a father saying that the son was being indulged by the mother and he would send him away to a hostel for study. The mother is so grieved by the prospect that the father is unable to implement his plan.

I have encountered several cases where men have been compelled to pursue certain careers in deference to the wishes of the mother. One man, now in his fifties, lost his mother when he was 13. It seems that she had made her husband promise that the son would become a doctor, so, although he intensely disliked the subject, he was compelled to take up medicine. Another man, an air force officer, could not forge ahead because his mother was terrified of flying and would only give permission for him to be part of the ground crew.

Thus, the mother may be formally compelled to hand over the son to the patriarchal domain but her continuing hold over the son finds expression in her individuating wishes and the legitimacy of these wishes in the special position of the maternal body.

Although the mother and son relation may be seen as a dyad, the father is not absent from consciousness. Punjabis often state that if a woman really loves her husband, she will bear him a son who is a replica of his father in looks, character and habits. The resemblance is not attributed to genetic factors alone but to the thoughts of the pregnant woman. In all cultures, resemblance is a means of positing connectedness, continuation and contiguity.

Punjabi statements about resemblance are complex. A child may take after the paternal or maternal kinsfolk, and, in general, it is thought that sons should resemble the mother while it is auspicious for daughters to resemble the father.

Within this overall complex of beliefs, for a woman to produce a son who resembles the father in every way is the great gift that she may give to her husband's lineage. Old women often jokingly tease their daughters-in-law : "I want my little son back from you and in exchange you can have my grown up son." The emphasis on resemblance as an index of love also shows that the patriarchal social formation cannot be reproduced but for the loving cooperation of women.

The dependence of the patriarchal order on the cooperation of women is, naturally, viewed with some ambivalence in the masculine discourse of society. Hence, the purest creation, that of the ascetics, is a creation by the word alone. If we are correct in assuming that the word constitutes the domain of the masculine, patriarchal order, then these stories are symbolic of a world from which women have been expelled and their functions abrogated by men.

Pure In Death

At death, the search for purity and the engagement with pollution come to an end. The preparation for cremation involves the process of cleaning the body and making it closed and whole. The body peripheries are closed by stuffing them with sandal paste.

The dead person may be given an insignia that indexes the kind of life he or she lived. The colour of a woman's shroud is a marker of her matrimonial state. Married women go on this final journey bearing the signs of their married state whereas widows are cremated in white. When the corpse is ready to be cremated, relatives often gather round it and praise its beauty and tranquility.

The body made whole is, by definition, a body without organs. Its beauty cannot be soiled. The dead person may take on new bodies as one takes on new clothes but the affair with this particular body is over. Whereas the Christian and Muslim universes emphasise the importance of the body as the means by which one may be resurrected again, for the Hindu the body made beautiful by closure signals a terminal event rather than a transitional one. ❐

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Women Protest Against Bigamy

Manini, Women's Voice and Joint Women's Programme jointly organised a demonstration in front of state Janata Party office, Bangalore, demanding the expulsion of Shri Rajavardhana, the government chief whip in the Karnataka state assembly. Elected on the Janata ticket from Madhugiri, Tumkur district, near Bangalore, Rajavardhana was formerly a minister in the Janata government from 1983 to 1985.

The women's organisations accused him of bigamy. They alleged that he married Indira, his second wife, about seven years ago, and has now forced her to leave the house without making any provision for the maintenance of her and her child. She has now approached the court for maintenance.

After raising slogans, the women submitted a memorandum to the chief minister and the state Janata party president, demanding the expulsion of Rajavardhana from the party, to uphold the party morale. They also demanded a code of conduct for politicians.

— K. Sharada Bhatt