LIVING THE BODY

EMBODIMENT, WOMANHOOD AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

MEENAKSHI THAPAN

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Living the Body

To the memory of
Professor Ravinder Kumar

Acknowledgements

All books invariably have personal histories and this is no exception. This book's journey has taken an incredibly long time in its making and in its final completion. It began several years ago, in 1993, when I was a Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Studies at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi. Professor Ravinder Kumar, then Director at the NMML, gave me the opportunity to begin work on this project and I remain indebted to him for this. He asked me, one afternoon in late 1991, as I entered the library and was putting away my bag at the reception, 'And when will you write your next book?' I confidently replied. 'I will write my next book here' and, thinking I had overstepped politeness, apologised. He smiled and asked me to apply for a fellowship. A year and a half later, I was beginning work on this project. I was at the NMML as Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Studies from 1993–1995. It was a lively group of Fellows and we participated in several exciting dialogues and seminars chaired by Professor Ravinder Kumar at the Centre. Professor Ravinder Kumar was dedicated not just to the library and its environs, but also to the band of Fellows at the Centre whom he encouraged and nurtured with infinite support, friendship and affection. This book is dedicated to his memory in gratitude for his support for all things of the mind and the scholarly zeal he inspired in young minds.

I was teaching at the Department of Education, University of Delhi, from September 1989 until July 2002. Although my area of research was the sociology of education and schooling practices, in particular, I sought to begin new work in a completely different area. I was inevitably drawn to women's studies, partly as a consequence of my personal trajectory. With complete independence as a young woman, supportive parents and a generous spouse, I found motherhood fulfilling but also extremely constraining. My personal

experience led to a search for understanding womanhood in its complexity and diversity. I was interested in questions about how women's embodiment could be the site of not only domestic conviviality but also of violence, of community honour, and the practices of the State. State policy appeared to exacerbate women's traumatic and embodied experiences of divisions of home, families and property at different historical junctures, and fundamentalisms sought to assert national and religious honour in the bodies of women. I was particularly interested in women's lived experience of embodiment, and its representation in the media, in the visual arts, in dance and in the annals, in constructions and practices of the State. In an effort to understand some of these issues, I organised a conference in late 1994 at the NMML on 'Femininity, the Female body and Sexuality in Contemporary India'. Some of the papers presented at this conference were later edited and published (see Thapan 1997b).

Subsequently, I returned to teaching and worked on this project, along with the other commitments and responsibilities in the university and in the family. Although I began by working with, and trying to understand, the lives of middle-class women, who were educated, professionals and working, I also interviewed well-educated, but less successful women, who were struggling in the workplace as much as in their domesticity. I was struck by the eagerness with which women wanted to talk and often, I was approached by women who volunteered to be interviewed. My understanding of this aspect of women's lives would however have been incomplete if I had neglected the world of underprivileged and poor working-class women. I selected Jahangirpuri in north-western Delhi as my ethnographic site primarily because the Department of Education, University of Delhi, was already engaged in several projects in the area. This undoubtedly helped me to gain access to the homes of women, who welcomed me and often sought me out, to tell me their stories.

Earlier versions of some chapters in this book have been presented at a number of fora: the Centre for Contemporary Studies (NMML), at a seminar on *Pierre Bourdieu: Sociologist and Sociologies*, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics; the seminar on *Gender in South Asia* at Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford; the South Asia Workshop, University of Chicago; the Department of Sociology Seminar at Hofstra University, New York; the annual conference of the *Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery* at the University of Southern Colorado; *the Townsville International Women's*

Conference at James Cook University, Townsville; the Sixth *Women in Asia Conference* at the Australian National University, Canberra; the weekly seminar at the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformations Studies (CAPSTRANS), University of Wollongong; the conference on *Development Paradigm: Social Transformation and Gender Performance in Asia* at the Department of Sociology, University of Madras; the weekly seminar at the Centre for Research in Gender Relations and Women's Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver; the seminar at York Centre for Asian Research, University of York, Canada; the Conference on *Values in Education* organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation at Neemrana Fort, Rajasthan and at the University of Bordeaux, France.

This work has benefited from research at the NMML, the Ratan Tata Library at the Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, the Koerner library at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, the Regenstein library at the University of Chicago, the Social Sciences Library at the University of Oxford, the University of Wollongong and the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris.

Earlier versions of some of the chapters in this book have been published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Women's Studies Special issue 28 October 1995, Vol. XXX, No. 43) *Gender and Nation* (ed. NMML, New Delhi 2001), *Women's Studies International Forum*, (2001, Vol. 24, No. 3/4), *Gender and Development* (July 2003) *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India* (eds Radhika Chopra and Patricia Jeffery, Sage, 2005) *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (2004, Vol. 38, No. 3), *Women's Struggle for Existence* (2006, UNDP-TAHA), *Reading Pierre Bourdieu in a Dual Context. Essays from India and France* (eds Roland Lardinois and Meenakshi Thapan, 2006, Routledge, Taylor and Francis).

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who provided me with the funds and facilities to conduct fieldwork in Jahangirpuri over 2001–2002. I am very grateful to Rachna Singh and to Malini Mittal who helped me conduct the fieldwork.

My parents have supported me in innumerable ways through the years I was struggling to complete this and other work—thank you for being there at all times. I am always grateful to George who is my greatest support, worst critic and best friend and forever beholden to Jyotsna and Ayushya for their unconditional love.

I was privileged to spend two and a half months at the Rishi Valley School, in rural Andhra Pradesh, in mid 2007 where I was able to finish this work in an atmosphere of complete silence, pristine natural beauty and intellectual companionship. I thank Radhika and Hans Herzberger, A. Kumaraswamy, Geetha Varadan, M.S. Sailenderan, and other friends, for all this, and more.

Above all, I remain indebted to all the women who agreed to be interviewed and spent several hours of their time talking to us in their homes and at work.

Introduction

AN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOCIOLOGY OF EMBODIMENT

> To work on a "paradigm of embodiment"... is not to study anything new or different, but to address familiar topics—healing, emotion, gender or power—from a different standpoint. (Thomas J. Csordas 1999a: 147)

> ...it is in the everyday life of women, articulating the poisons that enter social relationships, that the act of hearing and recognition gets done, and through which I propose that culture acquires a soul—that it is born. (Veena Das 1995: 178)

This work is concerned with the development of a sociology of embodiment, rather than a sociology of the body, in the context of women's lives in contemporary, urban India. My understanding of this focus on embodiment is mediated by gender and class, two critical elements, that constitute identity in relation to embodiment. My earlier works on women (Thapan 1997a, 2000, 2001a, 2004, 2005a, 2005b and 2005c) as well as an edited volume (Thapan 1997b) emphasise my effort to understand the complex relationship between embodiment, gender and identity. At a symposium held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in 1997, on the release of the book *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity* (Thapan 1997b), Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, one of the key discussants, commented that the book explores 'trendy' concepts such as 'embodiment' and 'identity' and she wondered whether this would lead to meaningful research in women's studies. To understand women, their position and their struggle in Indian society, the perspective of embodiment is imperative, as a woman is undoubtedly located in a physical and psychological space as much as she is in the cultural and social domain.

It is not surprising that there has been a growing interest in this area in feminist scholarship in India: John and Nair (1998) and Niranjana (1999, 2001), among others. Unravelling the complexities inherent in a multi-layered and fluid construct such as 'identity' has been a continued preoccupation in my work, whether it is in the area of transnational migration (Thapan 2004, 2005c), education (Thapan 2006b), or religion (Thapan 2007) and engages my attention in the present work.

Undoubtedly, a sociology of the body has been around for some time, as is evident in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Bryan Turner (1984, 1996, second edition), Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991), Shilling (1993), and others. Feminist scholarship in the west has also addressed embodiment in specific areas, such as, Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995), Conboy, Medina and Stanbury (1997), Price and Shildrick (1999), Emily Martin (2001), and others. However, it is also the case, as pointed out by Helen Fielding that 'the more the body comes into focus,' as it has in recent times, 'the more our understanding of embodiment recedes' (Fielding 2000:124). An interest in locating women firmly within their embodied experience of everyday life runs the risk of 'essentialising' women, that is, seeing them only in terms of the biological bases of existence, resulting in a feminist fear of working with the conceptual category of embodiment. An alternative perspective is that of phenomenology that views embodiment, not merely in corporeal terms, but always in a social and 'relational' context. This work therefore addresses embodiment very much as 'the existential richness of being-in-the-world', through the 'vividness and urgency of experience' (Csordas 2002: 3). No doubt, the historical influences and social and cultural backgrounds and spaces which encapsulate women are significant to this experience. As pointed out by Shildrick and Price, the notion of 'being-in-the-world—or more appropriately, becoming-in-the-world—is an expression of indivisible corporeal subjectivity in which the temporal and the spatial are fully operative' (Shildrick and Price 1998: 8). Moreover, the embodied subject is not an isolated, experiential self in relation to the world, out there, perceived as a separate entity. Contrarily, 'it is the nature of the embodied subject to move into and be taken up by the world around her. Essences emerge through this intertwining, in the space between. They are enacted but always and only in relation to the world and to others' (Fielding 2000: 132). In this process of playing out, enacting

performing selves in relational terms, it is significant that we are collapsing the dualities of subject-object (as did Merleau-Ponty 1962) as well as that of structure-practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) through the conceptual category of embodiment. I do not discuss the work of Merleau-Ponty at length but certainly elaborate on Bourdieu's focus on 'practice' as the cardinal anthropological principle for understanding embodiment through the concept of habitus.

If the paradigm of embodiment is essential to understand women in everyday life, it is no less important to emphasise identity, in its fluid, incomplete sense, as the sum of this experiential embodiment. An essential component of both the experience of embodiment and the playing out of an identity, always on the make, as it were, is that of resistance. In both experiential terms, as well as in terms of an awareness and knowledge of their condition and the possibilities for struggle open to them, women in telling their stories, pay acute attention to this aspect of their embodied lives. Resistance in fact is a double edged sword in women's lives, one with which they constantly articulate and exhibit their struggle but one which does not always enable complete success. Resistance, nonetheless, remains central to their lives whether or not it achieves social transformation. In being crucial to their telling of their lives, their stories that reflect their dilemmas and their conscious choices, it certainly transforms women's experiential living out of an embodied identity. This undeniable reality gives them a strength and dignity that is of their making, driven by their awareness and understanding, and therefore lies outside the domain of what is socially approved or normative behaviour.

WOMEN AND THEIR WORLDS

My work focuses on two sets of adolescent and adult women, those who are educationally advantaged—in school or working, professional, career women and those who are educationally disadvantaged—located in slums and engaged primarily in unskilled labour or domestic work. The professional and educated women are articulate and conscious of their dilemmas and rights and view the world from their position in particular sections of society. I seek to understand their lived experience from their location, listening to

their constructions of their everyday world, as an experienced and contested social reality. Undoubtedly, poverty is central to women's experience in the slum. This includes not only the objective criteria that define the parameters of poverty such as life expectancy, female mortality, assets, economic deprivation, access to education, consumption, nutrition, health, and so on, but also the 'subjective experience' of poverty as an everyday reality. I consciously take their subjective experience of poverty as central to their recognition of themselves as gendered subjects and assert that subjective experience is crucial to our understanding of the complexities characteristic of everyday life.

My analysis of women's experience is based on their accounts during my interviews with two sets of women:

a) Forty adolescent young women from educationally advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and 25 middle- and upper-middle class adult women in New Delhi. These women were selected on the basis of a snowball sample and particularly represent the category of urban Indian women, who because of their educationally advantaged and privileged status and position in urban society, are exposed to an array of visual images and textual discourse on embodied representation in the media and elsewhere.
b) Fifteen adolescent, married and unmarried, educationally disadvantaged young women and 25 adult migrant women from a Gujarati community and from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh who live in a slum in north-western Delhi.

The methodology employed for engaging in fieldwork among adolescent young women varied: on the one hand, I was able, with the help of a research assistant, to conduct interviews and have fairly elaborate discussions with students who also answered a long questionnaire. This interaction took place in the location of their schools. On the other hand, we had long discussions, group meetings and interviews with groups of young women in their homes in the slum. Undoubtedly, this resulted in vastly different sets of data based on written and interview material in the one case and oral testimonies in the other. This did not cause any serious problems except that the interviews with the educationally disadvantaged young women

required us to draw them out in greater depth to ensure that we had sufficient material on which to base our analyses. Data were collected therefore through a written questionnaire distributed randomly to 50 women students from different co-educational, public (that is, fee paying) and government schools in New Delhi and also a boarding school in southern India spread over 2002–2005. The students were all aged around 16–18 years. Our meetings took place in the location of the school where we met students without the presence of teachers; students experienced a certain sense of freedom in responding to questions away from their families and in the absence of teachers.

Interviews were also conducted with young women in the age group of 16–20 years in their homes in the slum. A larger age span was used for this group in order to understand the experience of adolescence at different stages. Interviews were conducted in groups, largely in the absence of older women and other family members. These young women are members of the Gujarati community and are the daughters of migrants who work as labourers in the vegetable and fruit wholesale market and do other odd jobs to earn a livelihood. The young women have either never been to school or have been there for a very short period (three to five years) only. In the first part of my fieldwork among these women, I conducted intensive, in-depth interviews with 30 adolescent and adult women of varied castes, belonging to different regional and linguistic backgrounds and living in different blocks in the slum. These were followed up by focused group discussions and meetings with the same women over an extended period of a few months.

By focusing largely on interviews in which we recorded oral testimonies and women's voices, and were dependent on their construction of their experience, it would appear that my understanding of embodiment is limited, as it is based primarily on the inter-subjectivity of the interview. This may also suggest that the temporal dimension is removed and there is therefore a lack of engagement with women's social and personal histories. My focus in Chapter 1 on the processes of social inclusion and exclusion, the drawing of boundaries, and the development of the habitus based on class, capital and culture points to the social and historical bases of the personal trajectories I seek to establish through the interviews. Time and space are crucial elements to how lives are shaped, as well as told. The life course is one way of experiencing time in different spatial settings.

Moreover, no individual lives in a particular social or cultural vacuum and clearly, marriage and the family are not the exclusive markers of women's embodiment and identity. The educational and professional background of women, in one case, ensures an embodiment that is expressive of a particular habitus, developed over more than one generation, that bestows the women with certain capital. In the other case, marriage and the family may be significant markers in the experience of embodiment but women's engagement with work of various kinds is of no less importance. The habitus is developed over generations of socialisation into bodily gestures, movements and practices that both reflect and reproduce the women's relationship to both domestic work and unskilled labour.

The two sets of women in this study are very diverse not only across categories of the slum or middle-class/professionals but also within each category. This is suggestive of a heterogeneity that is part of the everyday in terms of both location and experience. The book does not seek to explain the similarities or differences between or among the women. Nor does it set out to focus on those aspects that are common to both sets of women. The purpose is precisely to give voice to multiple voices and diverse locations to enable a nuanced understanding of the interplay between embodiment, culture, social relations and agency.

In the writing of the book, the voices of women are present, as they are, without any embellishments, keeping always to the spoken or written word, as it was said or written. Apart from Chapter 1 that lays out the conceptual framework for the work, there is one chapter that examines textual and visual material from a women's magazine, and the remaining chapters are based on material from women's voices. Although my attempts at explanation within the overarching theoretical frameworks underlying embodiment, identity and resistance are no doubt present in different forms throughout the text, I have refrained from interfering with the stories of women, both in their telling and in their presentation. The varying manner in which the women spoke, with a quiet, morose sense of finality, or more excitedly and sharply, with tenderness, or with an acute consciousness of wanting to say only the 'right' thing, in a conspiratorial whisper, in minute detail, with gestures, smiles, silences and tears, sharply brought out the urgency and vividness of their heterogeneous experience. I have attempted to bring this out in the text. Simultaneously, I was always conscious of my presence as an ethnographer and

was asked questions about my life, my family, my work, by all categories of women. I replied to their questions with honesty but I was always consciously present as an ethnographer in the field and did not try to achieve professional or personal erasure amidst women who gave of themselves to me with complete sincerity and openness. I explained my role as an ethnographer to the women and was accepted by them as such. This work does not seek to make generalisations about 'women in contemporary India', their travails or their successes, and consciously speaks from the standpoint of women's voices alone. It is no longer possible, however, to imagine that the text, truthful to the voices of subjects, reflects reality 'as it is' to even the participants in the process. Undoubtedly, all representation of the lives of others is always an incomplete reality, a 'partial truth' (Clifford 1986) and this work is, in that sense, no different.

In the telling of their stories, women play out the tensions between self and society through the 'presentation of a unique self which can also be recognised by society' (Chanfrault-Duchet 2000: 61). Women in this manner seek to define their identities in relation to the distinctive character of their experiential self as well as to their living out of the social in everyday life. The 'good' woman, whether she is selfless worker, wife, daughter, mother is a significant trope in the stories, so that women work for the survival of the family, those who are in 'bad' marriages stay on for the benefit of the family, or are obedient daughters, or seek to establish their place as 'good' women in their aspirations to be recognised as such by the family and community. Similarly, among one category of women, it is quite evident that they seek to be identified as 'radical' women, consciously defining and aware of their lived experience, in its telling and in the articulation of their departure from social norms, whether it is as rebellious daughters, or as those who seek to assert their identities as reflective, thinking beings who challenge the social order. The significance of 'work' in relation to identity in the lives of another category of women points to a negotiated self and brings out their effort to establish an identity that is socially coherent as well as unique to their perception of their everyday existence. The social self, so to speak, confronts, contains and liberates the distinctive, personal self and the evolving relationship between the two, perhaps unexpressed, unconscious, and yet deeply present, results in the construction of both, as a gendered subject.

THE CHAPTERS IN THE BOOK

Within the larger problematic of embodiment, identity and resistance, this book seeks to cover ground in different dimensions pertaining to visual and textual representation and womanhood, the experience by young women of adolescence in the context of schooling, marriage and peer group cultures, women's lived experience among poor, educationally disadvantaged women and among middle and upper class educationally advantaged women.

Chapter 1 lays out the conceptual framework within which this work is located. The paradigm of embodiment, through lived experience, is viewed as being central to an understanding of women's lives as well as of Indian womanhood in a changing society like India. I consider the linkages between embodiment, gender and identity and how these point to the socially, emotionally and individually constructed human body. To understand these linkages, I examine Bourdieu's widely influential conceptual category of habitus in the context of 'recolonisation', an ideology that induces global flows, among other colonising practices. I also discuss the politics of the ambivalence in constructions of Indian womanhood in contemporary India.

In Chapter 2, there is a foregrounding of young women's lived experience in order to understand cultures of adolescence as they prevail in two different groups of young women. Clearly, there is no well-defined age period within which adolescence is experienced as a marked lifecycle event and in fact there are a series of transitions in the lives of young women that mark the lived experience of adolescence in particular and varied ways. The influence of family, peer group and schooling, or its absence, and marriage and domesticity emerge as significant components of the adolescent young woman's life shaping their recognition and articulation of the experience of embodiment, sexuality and embodied self and other 'images' in diverse ways.

Chapter 3 seeks to address the question of how representations of woman's embodiment and definitions of identity are embedded in textual and visual displays of a popular women's magazine *Femina*. While one set of women do not read this magazine and are not subject, therefore, to its specific influence, this in no way undermines the importance of women's magazines in urban India. This particular magazine, in this genre, provides a legitimate space for developing normative definitions of woman's embodiment within a trope of