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**WOMAN'S BODY: LOCUS OF ASIAN  
FEMINIST THEOLOGIZING**

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**Abstract**

The article traces the development of a body denigrating spirituality from Platonic philosophy to Augustine and other Church Fathers. The identification of the denigrated body with woman resulted in woman's self depreciation and the subsequent misogynistic writings of Church Fathers. In contrast, oriental spirituality regards body and spirit as an integral whole as expressed in the synergy of body, breath, and posture in prayer. In the light of Asian feminist theology, the article discusses the body of woman, specifically her womb and her vagina, as the locus of her commodification, oppression and exploitation as well as her greatness and glory as bearer of the cradle of humanity and the portal to life. This sacred life-giving body is oppressed and exploited by rape, incest, battering, prostitution and other forms of violence against women and the denial of her reproductive rights. What is envisioned is an integral holistic spirituality restoring the sacredness of the body.

**Keywords:** Asian Feminist Theology, Body, Prostitution, Rape, Incest, Vagina, Woman, Womb

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## 1. Introduction

Woman's body can be the locus of any theologizing. The Asian context, however, will add nuances that could differ from other contexts. In this essay I would like to trace the body-denigrating characteristic of Catholic spirituality. Then I would like to examine how Oriental spirituality regards body. It would be helpful in this regard to give a brief history of Asian feminist theology — specifically the one that emerged from the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. Then I will reflect theologically on two aspects of woman's body: the womb (the locus of woman's divine creativity) and the vagina (the locus of woman's oppression and exploitation).

## 2. Body-Denigrating Aspect of Christian (Catholic) Spirituality

I studied in a convent school for girls when I was in High School after finishing most of my elementary schooling in a public school. I remember that I had some kind of culture (religious) shock because so many things that I did without self-consciousness as a child became fraught with a lot of prohibitions. I used to roam the streets in the province just wearing a sun suit and did not pay attention to whether my dresses had sleeves or not. In the convent school, we could not wear sleeveless dresses, the depth of our neckline and the length of our skirts were measured. We were told not to take a bath naked and, of course, there were the interminable lectures about virginity, the dangers of sexual activity and how we should fight against impure thoughts, etc. I got the impression that somehow there is something wrong with our body. This kind of education can cause scrupulosity in young girls, a very unhealthy concept of their body and a warped notion of sexuality.

Later on when I was studying theology, I realized that this body-denigrating characteristic of Christian morality was not Christian at all but originated from platonic dualism that dichotomized the world of ideas and the world of the senses, and defining body as "the prison of the soul." Plato writes about the body thus:

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth. In the first place, the body provides us with innumerable distractions in the pursuit of our necessary sustenance, and any diseases which attack us hinder our quest for reality. Besides, the body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we literally never get an opportunity to think at all about anything. Wars and revolutions and

battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires. All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth, and the reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves to its service... We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself.<sup>1</sup>

Tammy Galvan Burnett comments on this and summarizes Plato's dichotomy of body and soul and traces the denigration of body to this:

The doctrine that the flesh is bad is rooted in Plato's antithesis between spirit and matter. The body is not eternal like the soul; it is unable to function after death; it is an impediment to the attainment of knowledge; and it is driven by the carnal lusts of the flesh – money, power, sex, etc... According to Plato, the body is imperfect; it grows and deteriorates. Change implies imperfection. By contrast, Greek philosophy is concerned with perfection, with that which does not change.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity spread to the whole known world and this aspect of spirituality was assimilated as for example by St Augustine who after his conversion went to the other extreme and declared all sensual pleasures as sinful. This tradition prevailed and in later years this denigration of the body somehow got identified with woman and many Church fathers then wrote misogynistic statements about the body and about women being obstacles to the spirituality of man (male).

For example, St. Jerome wrote: "As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man."<sup>3</sup>

Gracian, meanwhile, wrote: "Different kinds of temptations make war on man in his various ages, some when he is young and others when he is old: but woman threatens him perpetually. Neither the youth, nor the adult, nor the one hundred year old man, nor the wise, nor the brave, nor even the saint is ever safe from woman."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Plato, *The Collected Works of Plato*, 49, as quoted in Tammy Galvan Burnett, *Approaching Christianity: Exploring the Tragic Impact of Greek Philosophical Thought on Christian Thought*, Master's Thesis submitted at Olivet Nazarene University, July 2012, 11.

<sup>2</sup>Burnett, *Approaching Christianity*, 10.

<sup>3</sup>Jerome, *Commentary to the Epistle to the Ephesians*, III, 5.

<sup>4</sup>Gracian, as quoted in C.R. Boxer, *Mary and Misogyny: Woman in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415-1815*, London: Dockworth, 1975, 100.

In the history of asceticism there developed some unhealthy practices mostly involving inflicting pain on the body, as for example the practice of self-flagellation. Some contemplative congregations have retained this practice until recently. I recall a Sister psychologist of ours who used to give counseling to contemplative nuns. Some of them told her that when they do the self-flagellation, they were actually sexually stimulated. So our Sister went to their Prioress to discuss the matter and told her that instead of making the nuns holier, the practice causes them temptation. The Prioress then stopped the practice.

### 3. The Body in Oriental Spirituality

In contrast, in most of the Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, a dichotomy between a “sinful” body and “pure” spirituality has not existed and thus the human body has retained its sacredness. According to the Soka Gakai International,

Buddhism regards life as the unity of the physical and the spiritual. It views all things, whether material or spiritual, seen or unseen, as manifestations of the same ultimate universal law or source of life defined in the Nichiren tradition as Myoho-renge-kyo. The physical and spiritual aspects of our lives are completely inseparable and of equal importance. This is expressed in the Japanese expression *shikishin funi*. *Shiki* refers to all matter and physical phenomena, including the human body. *Shin* refers to all spiritual, unseen phenomena, including reason, emotion and volition. *Funi* literally means “two but not two.”

Nichiren expressed this in a letter to one of his followers, stating: ‘A person can know another’s mind by listening to his voice. This is because the physical aspect reveals the spiritual aspect. The physical and the spiritual, which are one in essence, manifest themselves as two distinct aspects.’<sup>5</sup>

The body has been considered as a worthy medium to praise spirits and gods. Many forms of performance, for example temple dances, are, in fact, regarded as offerings, prayers, gaining merit or a kind of spiritual meditation.

The body is regarded as the locus of spiritual activity locating the different “chakras” where spiritual energy (the chi) flows giving vitality not only to the body but to the spirit. The base of the spinal column is considered the place of the coiled “Kundalini” which, in

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<sup>5</sup>Soka Gakai International, Buddhism in Action for Peace, *The website is: <http://www.sgi.org/>*

spiritual practice of contemplation, uncoils itself to reach the head chakra where enlightenment is achieved.

Asian spirituality regards prayer as an activity not only of the mind but of one's whole being. It prescribes certain bodily positions that can help focus the mind. It gives particular emphasis on concentrating on one's breath as a means to prevent the entertaining of thought which is considered an obstacle to contemplation. In the Tantric branch of Hinduism, the sexual union is considered the locus of highest spiritual enlightenment.

#### **4. The Emergence of Asian Feminist Theology**

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians was founded in 1975 in Daresalaam by Third World theology students studying in Europe and America who found that the theology they were learning was no longer relevant to the situation of their societies. Within this organization, the women members felt the need for theologizing from the perspective not only of women, but of women of the Third World. And so in a meeting in Geneva in 1981, they established a Commission on Women that had the task of delineating the nature, tasks and project of a feminist theology of liberation from the perspective of Third World women. They considered as their task the deconstruction of what is oppressive in religion and the reconstruction of its liberating aspects. They realized that these tasks are gigantic tasks and would take a long time because they had to consider this in the different branches of theology: God-talk, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Mariology, Missiology, Moral Theology, and Spirituality.

In a further development the Asian, African, Latin American, and cultural minorities of the United States felt that each one of them had also their own unique perspective. And so the Asian feminist theologians delineated their own perspectives and prepared their own theological projects. They had to consider the unique characteristics of Asia — the variety of religious traditions, the small percentage of Christians in the area, the prevalence of poverty, the consequences of colonialism and neo-colonialism. I was fortunate to be a part of this pioneering group of Asian feminist theologians.

#### **5. Asian Feminist Theology and Woman's Body**

As a feminist theologian, I find it interesting to reflect on the body of woman as a source of her glory and as the locus of her oppression and exploitation. In what follows I consider two vital parts of the

woman's body from an Asian feminist theological perspective, drawing on the context of the Philippines as well as my own.

### **5.1. The Womb**

It is awesome to think that woman has the capacity to be co-creator with God in the propagation of the human race. People talk about "penis envy," but I think that there is much more reason to have "womb envy." Motherhood remains to be one of the greatest achievements of a woman. I once saw a cover in a magazine which depicts a wooden icon of Mary holding her child carved from one piece of wood, mother and child looking at each other. But what struck me was the caption which read: THIS IS MY BODY, THIS IS MY BLOOD! These, as we know, are the solemn words of consecration in the Eucharist at the most solemn moment when Catholics believe that God becomes present in transubstantiation. As I was reflecting on this, it struck me that actually only mothers can truly and literally utter these words. The priest says them mystically, but the mother looking at her child means them literally. The child is really flesh of her flesh and bones of her bones. She and her child are one all throughout the nine months that the child nestles in her womb. What a privilege and responsibility!

And yet, it is in this extraordinary capacity that woman can be exploited and oppressed. Everyone knows the hazards of pregnancy. When a woman decides to get pregnant, she is actually putting her life on the line. There are many ways that pregnancy can claim her life — ectopic pregnancy, sudden rise of blood pressure, bleeding from threatened miscarriage or abortion. That is why she is the one who has the primary right to decide whether to get pregnant or not. And yet we know that other people can take this right away from her. Rape can put her into this state without her consent. Male authority, both secular and religious, claims the right to decide for her or to coerce her to make a decision. Secular authority can force her to use dangerous methods of contraception even against her will or even without her knowledge (as in the case of inserting a diaphragm) and even those hazardous to her health. Religious authority can prevent her access to the means ensuring her reproductive health.

The recent controversial passage of the RH bill in the Philippines is an example of this. The hierarchy put up almost a delirious fight against its passage concentrating on the aspect of the use of contraception, sex education, and some penal provisions. It is the right of the Church to make objections and to make critique. But it is

unfortunate if this critique goes beyond intellectual integrity building scarecrows and demolishing them. It is puzzling how they arrive at the contention that the provision on contraception making it available to people will create a "contraception mentality" which will lead to "abortion mentality." The conclusion does not seem to proceed from the premises. Contraception is a means to prevent unwanted pregnancies which is remedied by abortion. So how can that which prevents the reason of abortion encourage abortion? Also the Philippines is not 100% Catholic, so why prevent the State from providing contraception to those who find no moral problem in using it? The Church can of course try to discipline its believers not to access the supply provided.

Other corollary problems are child marriages and teen-age pregnancy. It is a violation of a child's body if she is forced into sexual activities and into pregnancy when her body is not ready for it. This is actually child abuse and should be stopped in spite of its being a part of a particular culture for thousands of years. Teen pregnancy is of course caused by various factors but definitely it could be diminished by a holistic sex education that is not only physical, but psychological and spiritual. And yet the Church has shown resistance to any sex education as if ignorance can save the youth from unwanted pregnancies.

## **5.2. The Vagina**

A clear consequence of our body-denying spirituality is the fact that most of us cannot even name this part of our body and have to resort to euphemisms. I recall that as President of a Catholic College, I announced that the Vagina Monologue will be shown in the College Department for those who have taken the women's studies course. Several of my co-Sisters vehemently objected. I remember meeting them for a dialogue in my office and I remember one saying: "Can we not change the title" I said jokingly "You want to call it Nose Monologue?" But seriously that is missing the whole point. The Monologue is trying to say that there is no part of our body that we cannot name, because all parts of our body are sacred and not an object of shame. Actually of all parts of the body, the vagina is the most sacred, because it is the door through which human beings enter into life and into the world!

In the education of young girls especially in convent schools in the past decades, there is an impression made that the sex act is intrinsically sinful. How could that be? If God did not intend human

beings to engage in sexual intercourse, how come God made it the means of pro-creation? We could just as well be propagated like the amoeba by asexual multiplication. It is true that certain sexual acts can be sinful because of circumstances surrounding it like coercion in the case of rape. Actually any act that is done for exploitation and oppression would be sinful. It is likewise the message of the Monologue that it is also this organ where the woman is most violated, degraded and dehumanized in rape, incest, prostitution.

### **5.2.1. Rape/ Incest**

Rape is one of the most if not the most degrading and traumatic experience a woman can have. It is a forceful invasion of her inmost being and shatters her self-esteem and sense of dignity. And if one believes that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, rape is not only a crime, it is a sacrilege and desecration.

Feminist theology treats rape in the context of a critique of society as a whole. Hence, patriarchal values and structures and their socializing processes mean that the connivance of religion and patriarchy form the context of feminist discussions on rape. Significantly feminist theologians consider rape not in relation to sexuality but in relation to power. It is made possible by the sense of entitlement and proprietorship males have over women as a result of the long practice of patriarchy — what I tell men “is the virus in their computer.” Without this sense of entitlement and proprietorship, it would be difficult how rape can be possible. Rapists are not monsters but ordinary people, husbands, fathers, brothers. In the case of date rapes, the victims are students who come from prominent schools even from Catholic Colleges. In 99.9% of the cases of rape, the victims have not done anything to the rapist that would cause him to rape them in revenge. Sometimes they are not even known to them. So what is the woman’s “fault”? — that she is a woman and that she is present (sexually available)? In many cases of rape, the woman is also killed and usually she is thrown into a dung-heap. When one reflects on this, the message is that woman’s body can be used for one’s pleasure and can be discarded. Like any used commodity, she is disposable and belongs to the garbage with other used commodities! More theological analysis of rape is shown in the following:

Feminist theologians... examine the Scriptural treatment of rape but highlight in their analysis the question of male property rights and the subordination of women. The story of Eve, the violent gang rape of the woman in Judges 19 and a selection of Pauline texts are frequently



quoted, among others, to this end. Feminist theologians go on to challenge exclusively male images of God, which are viewed as restrictive and potentially harmful spiritually. Misogynistic texts in the tradition, particularly from the Church Fathers are highlighted (though sometimes in a selective manner). Formative religious stories are thoroughly critiqued (that of Maria Goretti in particular) and theological definitions of rape are scrutinised from the perspective of patriarchal intentions.<sup>6</sup>

Sr. Pauline goes on to critique the teachings of forgiveness in relation to rape:

Most significantly, however, traditional theologies of forgiveness, suffering, ownership, and sacrifice are profoundly challenged as abusive to women and as positive supports for a rape culture. Feminist writers argue that traditional interpretations of suffering, sacrifice and atonement have led to the acculturation of women to accept abuse.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist theologians point out that victims' stories indicate that Jesus' mandate that we forgive those who wrong us, while true in itself, has been used manipulatively for the purpose of silencing. Such theologians seek then to articulate the complex relationship between forgiveness, truth-telling, mercy and justice and challenge strongly the pathology of a 'forgive-and-forget' theology or practice viewing it as both simplistic and dangerous. They insist that theologies of forgiveness or reconciliation require treatments that acknowledge their enormous complexities and that pastoral practices need to be founded on more developed and enlightened theologies.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of incest, theologies of ownership are strongly challenged. Incest perpetrators justify their act by reference to ownership of the victim. I once sent my students to a police office to document their cases of violence against women and children. The students reported that they documented the case of a father who was arrested for raping his 8 year old daughter. His statement was: "She is my daughter. I have the right to her before anybody else!" I told my students that if they did not understand what patriarchy is, the statement of the father which they recorded is exactly what it is. Indeed incest is a sin crying to heaven for vengeance! Because a father should be ready to give up his life to protect his child! What monstrosity causes him to be the one precisely to destroy the life and future of his own flesh and blood? The mother is usually in denial because she does not want to admit

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<sup>6</sup>Pauline Logue, "The Treatment of Rape in Theology," *ITB Journal* (December, 2000) 63.

<sup>7</sup>Logue, "The Treatment of Rape in Theology," 63.

<sup>8</sup>Logue, "The Treatment of Rape in Theology," 64.

that her husband could prefer to have sex with his child rather than with her and also if she admitted the husband's guilt, the consequence would be his getting arrested and jailed and a loss of a bread-earner for the family. But if children cannot be safe in their own homes, where can they be safe?

### **5.2.2. Prostitution**

Asian feminist theologians are one in considering prostitution as exploitation of woman's body and an expression of her commodification. Many are victims of human trafficking and, even with their consent, it is still exploitation because their choices are limited by their poor economic situation and the absence of better employment or their lack of skills in seeking better employment. This is in contrast to some Western feminists' stand that prostitution which they call sex-work is a legitimate occupation of women and not a victimization.

Child prostitution is especially reprehensible because of children's lack of power and inability to choose. It is doubly reprehensible when their very own parents not only consent to their prostitution but even act as pimps. In recent times, a Filipino couple was arrested because they were actually engaged in child pornography using their own children and sending their pictures in sexual poses to foreign customers. A pastor once talked to a couple in a town called Pagsanjan where child prostitution was rampant and begged them to stop using their children and offering them as sexual objects to a foreigner who would come on vacation every year to their town. They said this foreigner has built them their house and is sending the children to school. They ended with telling the pastor "We cannot eat your morality."

There is double exploitation when, in raids, the women victims are the ones arrested while the johns and the pimps go scot free. This is criminalization of the victim. It is also a fact that the prostituted women and children get the least percentage of fees most of which go to the pimps or heads of syndicates. Because of their sense of degradation, and to forget their situation, prostituted women and children are lured to take drugs and become drug addicts which worsens their situation. Many of them are infected with venereal diseases and AIDS and go into deep depression and even become suicidal.

## **6. Conclusion: Challenges to Asian Feminist Theologians**

So what does our exploration of the woman's body as the locus of Asian feminist theologizing reveal to us? It is clear that the body/soul

dichotomy is of a Western/Platonic origin and was not even originally Christian. However it has been assimilated by early Christian theologians that then developed a body-denigrating spirituality. In the course of history the denigrated body became identified with "woman" and this resulted in women's self depreciation and woman's body becoming the object of woman's commodification, oppression and exploitation. As Asian feminist theologians we have a legacy of an oriental spirituality that considers spirit/body as an integral whole and prayer as a harmonious movement of the embodied spirit and the spirit-ed body in a dance of worship and praise. We also saw that those parts of the woman's body that are made objects of oppression and exploitation (the womb and the vagina) are the locus of woman's greatness and glory, the cradle of the human race and the portal to life.

How might a Christian response look in the face of this reality? In what follows I briefly discuss three faces of how such a response might look like.

### **6.1. The Feminist Theologian as an Activist**

When the women members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) were developing the concept and practice of a feminist theology of liberation from the perspective of Asian women, they realized that to be an Asian feminist theologian, one must be a feminist activist. They came to the conclusion that it is necessary that they are a part of the women's struggle for their rights and for their liberation. One cannot be just a scholarly feminist theologian whose realm is the classroom and the library. She must be where the action is. She must experience what she is going to reflect on and what she will theologize about.

### **6.2. The Formation of Conscience**

When one reflects on the difficulty of fighting for the reproductive rights of women especially in the Catholic Church, the feminist theologian can contribute very much to the formation of conscience which can be the solution to the dilemma faced by many women regarding this matter. Somehow women have to realize that their conscience is the ultimate judge about the rightness or wrongness of their decisions and actions. It would help if students early in life are already guided about the formation of a good conscience. Somehow children get the idea that to be good is to follow rules. It is important to have rules and guidelines, but children have to be taught to seriously consider these rules but have to see them in the context of a

concrete situation. They have to be taught to decide responsibly, think of the consequences of their decisions and accept the responsibility for the consequences of their decisions.

### **6.3. The Need to Reconstruct a Body-friendly Spirituality**

It has been shown that the woman's body has been the target of her exploitation and oppression because of the denigration of the human body and the identification of the body with woman. It is therefore imperative that to fight against this, feminist theologians must continue what actually has been begun in reclaiming the dignity and value of the human body, of woman's body and the development of a spirituality that is holistic and integral. I have found that oriental spirituality with its emphasis on the importance of the body in prayer and meditation is helpful in this endeavour. It is also important to incorporate dance into our rituals and our advocacy. It is at once an expression of freedom and celebration of the human body and, at the same time, a powerful form of protest. In this regard, the One Billion Rising campaign begun by Eve Ensler, author of the *Vagina Monologue*, with the help of Monique Wilson, a Filipino feminist activist stage performer, has mobilized more than 200 countries to dance against violence against women. It was indeed awesome to see our own 4,000 students, teachers, administrators and nuns at St Scholastica's College dance the One Billion Rising at the indoor quadrangle of the school. It sent a powerful message that violence against women should end and end now.