

WOMEN WORSHIPPING; WORSHIPPING WOMEN IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of this new century we are left with vivid images of women in the process of change. Texts from past centuries may give voice to great change if they can be located and interpreted from a women-centered reading. Most spectacular event in recent years concerning women's movements was the fourth women's conference at Haioru, outside Beijing, where around 40 000 women gave homage to the process of change. The experience of this unique assembly of women remains for many beyond words. Although the programme of meeting in small groups to discuss the political process and personal experiences after the Beijing conference has continued, something ineffable about the experience still remains elusive. In conversations with those present at the conference, I could gather that the impression they had about the conference was something mysterious and awe inspiring. Terms such as connectivity, *communitas*, presence, speak of another transcendent process not so readily amenable to language. Perhaps it was the circumstances of the conference, held under duress by the Chinese Government, which had not anticipated a women's NGO conference to be a subversive presence. Thus the political attitude gave rise to methods of surveillance and control by the host government, which inevitably gave rise to subversive strategies of cohesion and organization by the participant NGO groups, utilizing electronic media, visual media and the best forms networking and activist strength in being together in a civic space for a period of three weeks as an international community in China. Issues that fragment and divide women's communities were superseded by the need for collectivity towards survival. The threat of surveillance, abuse and restrictivity by the conference organizers gave rise to a sense unity and cohesion that is seldom seen on such a large scale. Unlikely bedfellows helping to

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transform unwanted agendas. It is this element that has remained unspeakable for many reasons. This event in the history of the world: a large scale ritual of worship by women for women; 'a women's Woodstock'; 'a lovefest', was a unique experience, and the sense of mammoth achievements, given the inclement circumstances, remains in the memory of those present.

2. Feminist Activism, Religion and Spirituality

It is perhaps time to begin exploring the meaning of the myth at this point of time, a modern myth of immanence and transcendence at the turn of the century. The conference in Beijing was really two conferences; first a 5000 strong meeting of NGOs, a grassroots meeting of the NGO spectrum. This was followed by a United Nations Conference attended by dignitaries and a limited number of NGOs (5000 of the 30-40,000 thousand present). The contrasts between the two events were marked in many different ways. China played the role of an uncertain host to women's passions, passions different from that initially envisioned by the hosts. The facilities for the NGO conference were meager and the conditions somewhat sparse. Much has been written about the attempts by the organizers to come to terms with the presence of a group which symbolized so much change. Thus visas withheld, material confiscated, accommodation sometime hours away, the disabled manhandled, etc. The actualization of difficulty seemed to draw the best from the women determined to be present at the event. Thus it seemed that the grassroots were positioned with the help of well-informed native informants and endowed with the power of knowledge, and the organizers positioned against them as the restrictive container of this passion for difference at the NGO conference. As women found the ways to say what they had come to say to the audiences that had come to listen, a unique flow of information between participants occurred. Somewhat like *shakti* herself disseminating, flowing between the swirls of Chinese silk that participants purchased and swirled around in spite of the rain, bog and mud, a spirit undaunted arose from the collective assembly. An ecstatic high, a shamanic collective trance lifted us all from the mundane matters of funding, right-left politics, treachery of aid organizations, UN-WTO-GATT-IMF imbroglios, etc. Solace to the bunch of weary war-horse feminists that have toiled this century for gender justice and equity.

Perhaps this was the gift to the universe or the descent of transcendence on to the assembled group. A shamanic moment in history, like the gift of Prometheus of fire, here the gift of knowledge, of *Sarasvati* herself became immanent. No Bacchus of wine, flowers and sentiment, but an elevation based on the role of women for the construction of socio-political equity.

But instead of glorifying this moment too much, let me just allude to this other element of the conference, rarely spoken of. This sentiment came into its own fullness at the shrine of the Feminine and the Women's Wall of Art. In the Tent City where much of the conference was housed, there was a small corner set aside for the shrine. An *impromptu* assembly of materials was provided, such as crayons, colored pens, etc. Items of sentiment and value, stones, etc. were provided from the Ontario; sand from the pyramids of Mexico; crystal pyramid from the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Votive offerings from the travelers who had assembled here like wise women of the East and West for the birth of the feminine for the next millennium. I remember stumbling into this space by chance, fleeing the rain and exhaustion of the conference and what had preceded it. Our panels on migration and South Asian feminism were over and as organizer I was free to wander. Driven by the rain, wet to the skin, this space opened up to me and left such an impression that now, after some years, as we are poised on this symbolic marker of time, a new millennium, this experience returns to be given voice. The tent was busy, yet contained; a sense of peacefulness. A right wing fundamentalist religious group literally was feeding women from the right and left, of different persuasions, who had previously jostled on the streets, sweets. The sweets, rich with almond and milk concoctions, left me with a memory of overwhelming sweetness. Political correctness was superseded by the feelings of unity of purpose. Here difference was not to be a war cry but one that could contribute, no matter how little, to solidarity. It was this old fashioned word that describes best for me this feminist spirituality of the day. Action spirituality based on the notions of *sorg*, connectivity, a *telos* of bodily care and immediacy, an *eros* of sentiment that arose from the pitch field of combat. *Agape*, love, pathos as *rasas* of the day. This collective opening in to the other world, a hard won descent and ascent of spirit is what as activists we carry best to the next millennium. An

assemblage of parts and fragments that constitute somewhat greater than the whole. An evolving tradition of activist spirituality that is based in the earth of life. A movement that transcends religion and feminist activism. This other revolution is detailed in other publications, yet it is this spiritual dimension that I wish to capture in words here.

3. Inspired Movements and Forced Conferences

I would like to contrast this spirit of action, co-operation and solidarity with the recent Women's Coordinating Conference funded by the Ford Foundation and held at Amman, Jordan. NGOs were invited to send representative to the WCRP (World Council of Religion and Peace). This effort to constitute the concept of Religious NGO (RNGOs) seemed somewhat contrived as women from within the chapters of the WCRP attempted to take on the guise of champions of NGO action spirituality. In the ensuing political racketeering for positions on to the inaugural committee the NGOs were seen as token representations of action. In the discussions that followed among the NGOs, who were present in the conference, it became clear that the honour of NGO action had been hijacked for political reasons. The NGO group orchestrated in small groups a counter attempt to feminize and spiritualize the process. To listen with the soul rather than with logos or as mere handmaidens. In small groups the emotions of exclusion were danced, sang, written in verse and chanted, and were verbalized in the draft document for the WCC created by this group.

The WCRP, the largest interfaith organization, was given a powerful position statement by the radical group of NGOs present! This again reflects the power of the subversive-activist spirituality as distinct to the religious women's groups that can be ahistorical and apolitical of their position within tradition religious structures. The appropriation of activist spirituality by elite women's groups from within religious structures is to be defined and resisted. WCRP formed a women's wing at the turn of the century, but excluded women from the voting structures. Here we are reminded again of the slowness of religious groups to take on board the women's representatives as many other groups began to do from the mid 70's onwards.

From within religious traditions have arisen attempts though small, yet steadily growing to re-site women's positions with relation to text, authority and experience. This has led to an increasing questioning of the relegation of women's roles and representation and experiences within the traditional dogmas, tenants, papal edicts, *hadiths*, *shlokas*. A revisiting of tradition from women religious elders, scholars and theologians is an urgent need. The intersection of this group and feminist activist spirituality promises much for the new millennium. Terms such as gender equity, gender justice, etc. sit aside of the reinterpretation of religious text. As Liberation Theology has already encapsulated an action front which is sensitive to the needs of poverty, health care, equity, gender as well as space for spirituality. These two streams have to merge into the large the feminist movement. As women within religious traditions need to be radicalized, so activists need the sense of *communitas*, support and perhaps belief and faith. The two separated trajectories of change could offer to each other strengths of different sorts. This common ground remains to be truly defined by women themselves and not at the behest of an aid funding organization or of transnational conscience. Thus notions of spirituality will of course need to change to accommodate notions of emergent spaces of worship, ritual and belief. In a world of rapid change, communalism, economic fundamentalism, globalization without ethics, polylocationality of meaning and respect of difference call for strategies of different kinds, networks and organizational structures that can in fact respect this emergent praxis of action that heralds a different kind of space for the girl child today, woman of tomorrow. The notion of feminism with spirituality and a religion with feminism. An engendered *telos* of spirituality and respect for the earth.

4. Women and the Interpretation of Textuality

Analysis on the role of women in religious texts, the recasting of light on the meaning of women from the perspective of women reinterpreting texts, is a powerful movement at the present time and holds keys for the future of religious movements and the women's movements. This in conjunction with research on the social reality of women's lives as well as the description of women's engagement in rituals and ascetic practices fuel the way for a more accurate phenomenology of women's spiritual lives. The intentionality and *Dasein* of women's existence will

open new interpretations of religion and spirituality. By extrapolation from these sources it may be possible to see what is not being said in previous textual interpretations on women's lives. That which arises from the negative capability of text and experience rises to a richer account on women.¹

Bynum's interpretation of cultural religious symbols as gendered and 'polysemic' leads to the question of the correct interpretation of another's religious tradition. Cultural comparisons are difficult to make. Thus the feminine as wholeness within the Confusion tradition or as mother in the Christian tradition can be cause for caution when proclaiming the unique access to the feminine.² This analytic position is different to that of a corrective in the history of representation of women's voices within the phallo-centric theological traditions but to begin the process of cross dialogue about the richness of polysemic religious symbols, rather than a feminist rallying cause. A phenomenology rather than sociology of difference essential to a mediation on the construction and meaning of text and audience is necessary. The works of Geertz, Victor Turner and Paul Ricoeur on the nature of the symbol give meaning to experience.

Smith's work on the narrative aspects of autobiography as means of subversive assertion of selfhood, recruits the new forms of subjectivity as having meaning for the experiences and expressions of women's subjectivity. Henrietta Moore in *A Passion for Difference* brings into dialogue feminist theory with current concerns in social and cultural anthropology around issues of identity, subjectivity, collectivity.

And the limitation of theoretical language is evident in the struggle to identify the complexity and difference from within feminist frameworks. It undergirds the notions of 'we' and 'not we' exemplified in identification and differentiation, insider and outsider, authenticity and alienation.

¹See, Leslie, Julia, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Rutherford: Associated University Presses, 1992.

²Bynum C.W. Harrell. S., Richman P., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Henriette Moore takes Merleau-Ponty's approach to this matter:³ "The embodied nature of identities and experience, a notion of 'lived anatomy' and bodily practice as a mode of knowledge that draws on understanding of experience as a form of embodied inter-subjectivity. Experience is thus inter-subjective and embodied. Irredeemably social and processual."

A number of anthologies on Women and World Religions have now emerged (Arvind Sharma in collaboration with Katherine Young; Denise Carmody; Marianne Ferguson). These to varying degree attempt to locate women's religious experience within the traditions of origin. Humans are born into gender and religion simultaneously, each affecting the other in complex ways. Thus the historical constructions of religion affect the intimate and personal ways of being and self perception, as well as more legal rules of child and family laws, i.e., the rites of passage at birth, death, sexuality, reproductive health, and also notions like the image of divinity or *istadeva* and other symbolic referents. The notion of a universal civil code of legal rulings irrespective of religion is an issue of contention with respect to the current status of religious laws.

There are various reinterpretations of religious laws by feminists and theologians; but what remains still unclear is the role of choice in the matter of individual decision. Rifat Hassan's interpretation of the Koran on female equality within the Muslim tradition highlights the fact that later interpretations such as the *Hadiths*, might have been influenced by other syncretic influences.⁴ However, the social ills and oppressions facing women within the traditions remain an issue for social justice. Honour-killings, Koran marriages, low education ratios, dowry deaths, are not necessarily corrected by textual reinterpretation. Such evils need strong feminist strategies, movements and actions for the correction of religious views on the roles and rituals appropriate to women. The construction of doctrines, ethical codes, myths, ritual worship need to be examined from

³Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

⁴Rifat Hassan, "Women's Equality: The Status of Women in Islam", Emory University, 8 November 1999. But also see Rifat Hassan, "After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions", in Paula M. Coe, William R. Eakin, Jay B. McDaniel (eds.), *Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books*, 1991.

both a theological and feminist perspective, and the feminist approach should sharpen the study of women's religious experience, spaces of plurality of forms of worship. A revisiting and reinterpretation of text and a contemporary account of the forms of worship in practice have to dislodge monolithic masculinist forms of prescriptive worship. A radicalization of theology towards the formation of activist theologians who are sensitive to the history and displacement of women is the need of the hour.

Mary Daly's writings on the oppression of Oriental women are well known. While not disagreeing with her analysis, I should take this opportunity to highlight the difficulties of engaging in cross-cultural analysis, as when, for instance, Daly strays into areas like *sati* (widow immolation) in India and foot-binding in Chinese culture. The representation of cultural difference can be approached from many methodological perspectives; yet it seems that incomplete analysis of an incommensurable difference, may fall into the category of orientalist writings.

My disquiet about the writings of Daly on the cultural oppression of women in other cultures stems from a number of reflections, notably the mode of cultural analysis employed and not that such oppression is justifiable.⁵ The analysis of cultural difference does not, I feel, negate the truth that 'woman's rights are human rights.' Feminist anti-violence campaigners in any culture have pretty much the same dogma. However, as a cultural feminist that lives in the first and third world, I feel that much is left unsaid in the descriptions of the East by western feminists. The closure is oppressive. In the language of stereotypes, black and white facts about oppression are helpful in the analysis. However, in that gray zone

⁵Sharma, R and Bilimoria, P, "Where Silence Burns: *Sati* ('suttee') in India, Mary Daly's Gyocritique, and Resistant Spirituality", in Marilyn Frye and Susan Hoagland (eds.), *Mary Daly, Rewriting the Canon Series*, Penn State University Press, 2000.

_____ (eds.) *The Other Revolution, Feminist and NGO Perspectives from South Asia, Naari Studies Series no 3*, Delhi: Satguru Publications 1999.
 Sharma, R. (ed), *Representations of Gender, Democracy and Identity Politics in South Asia, Naari Studies Series no 2*, Delhi: Satguru Publications, 1996.

resides complexity. Daly cites Katherine Mayo's work on *sati*, but not the plethora of other writings on the subject, i.e., the works of Pandita Ramabai, a fierce reformer, feminist and scholar whose works predate that of Mayo's. The common ground is, of course, the outrage expressed by women against orthodox practices. However, a cursory reading another's culture eludes, ellipses and ultimately oppresses by the production of yet another set of stereotypes. Edward Said, while writing about Palestinian nationalism, distinguishes the issues faced by the nationalist movement from the issues of the indigenous feminist movement. It is this form of particularity that cultural feminists and post-colonialists such as Chandra Taplade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Rajeswari Suda Rajan, Kukum Sangari, Tanikar Sarkar, Said and a whole host of others are at pains to express. In standing apart from that which is brave and courageous in Daly's writings, I wish to make a plea for the experiences of difference expressed by numerous cultural feminists and activists towards the fostering of notions of gender and identity from the margins. New kinds of universals may help to shape our notions of body, identity, self, secularity, and history. In this respect my exploration of the Indian tradition does not differ from that of Daly, but is defined by generation, culture identity, etc. Furthermore, a postmodern analysis of self, culture, and gender allows for a greater particularization of context than a purely radical feminist analysis based on gender difference alone. This conceptual difference need not transcend a gender-based analysis but would contextualise and be inclusive of such differences along with other differences. I will demonstrate my argument by drawing from historical examination of particular cultural production of feminist resistance.

In times of major cultural and political crisis (or compounded crises), there is ferment which 'magically' mobilizes a concerted response by womenfolk. In such moments gendered spiritual resources come into sharp focus under a collective canopy, with its energies and often vociferous resistance directed against oppressive regimes (male-based and institutional), and it may even be geared towards a secular *telos*, such as the nationalist cause of ousting an external imperial regime. Such a movement in recent times germinated as part of the early 19th century 'renaissance' in India with its revision of the traditional conceptions of woman and womanhood as championed notably by Raja Rammohun Roy

[Rai] in his campaign for educational and social reforms. The reformist first 'father' of modern India, Rammohun Roy, in his spectacular struggle led the movement against the *sati*, and pursued the case, though some orthodox Hindus lodged an appeal, all the way up to the British Privy Council in London where the final verdict was cast, upholding the proscription a year later.⁶

Mahatma Gandhi in his own inimitable way continued and built on this resource for the revolutionary freedom struggle as this newly unleashed gendered energy complements perfectly, and supplements, his re-vamped principle of non-violence or non-injury (a disposition amenable to the non-conscriptable womenfolk). Gandhi had claimed that Indian women, the moral realism of truth, and an attitude of devotion and dedication formed the backbone of the freedom movement which had no equivalents in previous historical experience. After Independence eminent women leaders and peaceful fighters went on to establish or operate community-based hospitals, hospice, care-centres, schools and colleges, centers for the arts and cultural experimentations, ashrams and retreat centers, village industry collectives, trade unions, credit unions, and so on. Exactly fifty years after Independence the legacy is celebrated and continued by women's groups, NGOs and individual women activists and academics in many parts of India and among the diaspora hyphenated-*desis* also.

Having said this, I must also indicate that there are feminists within India who echo Judith Butler's observation that both traditional and normative discourse are less sanguine about women's direct agency especially as the latter supervenes on the exercise of asserting individual rights and legal entitlements.⁷ Certainly the resurgent religious fundamentalism and instrumentalist political exigencies have threatened to reverse the 'modern' trend of re-writing autonomy in terms of ungendered

⁶Ashis Nandy, "Sati - A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest", in his, *At the Edge of Psychology Essays in Politics and Culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 1-31, 2-17.

⁷Butler, Judith, *Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Post-modernism*, in Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*. London and New York: Routledge. 1992, p.13.

individual agency. This tussle is a critical one and it raises a host of other issues in respect of negotiating communal/family practices constituted as personal law (which is gendered in various of its codes and recognized in the Constitution) versus positive rights and entitlements of the individual citizen under the Constitutional Bill of (Fundamental) Rights. Space constraints do not permit us to go into this issue with all its contradictions here, but its bearing on the current debate on *sati* is certainly significant, a resolution of which *a fortiori* lies in attending to both strands of the contests without sacrificing or unwittingly compromising either, in the interest of the greater good. And, in the exploration of conceptual alternatives, as Susie Tharu reminds us, "the discourse of our times will constitute our worlds as much as they constitute our subjectivities, but it is necessary all the same, that 'a historically informed analysis' be sensitive to the subversions, elaborations, hybridizations, transformations, re-alignments or re-appropriations that do take place within oppositional discourses".⁸

5. The Bodily Textuality of Sacred Spaces

So the point I have been labouring to make – and the present collection of essays in this issue of *Journal of Dharma* well attests to – is that in re-reading religious texts from a feminist perspective the location of women's spirituality cannot be seen from a monolithic perspective. Rather, we have to bring to bear a polyvalent expression involving a number of frameworks, including the phenomenological, socio-economic, religious, political, critical-philosophical, and postcolonial – to mention the popular ones. Trinh T. Minh-Ha reminds us of the dangers inherent in one feminist reading of the other's sacred spaces.⁹ In reducing complexity to simple

⁸ Tharu, Susie and Lalitha, K. (eds.), *Women Writing in India from 600 BC to the Early 20th Century: An anthology with Introduction*, London: Pandora HarperCollins, 1993.

⁹ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York: Routledge 1991. *Framer Framed*, New York: Routledge, 1992. *Women, Native Othe.: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. For contemporary analysis of representations of self and other that attempts a non-western interpretation of symbolic forms, see note 7, Judith Butler, *Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question*

statements the dangers of stereotypes tend to occlude perceptions of the phenomena of spirituality. Distinctions between church, state and the laws, on the one hand, provide some frameworks for the reading of institutional structures that govern women's lives; yet other kinds of readings may be necessary to uncover the traditions that have permissible forms of spiritual expressions and empowerment for women today. However, in order not to repeat a worn-out binary stereotypes in relation to women and indigenous spirituality, it is worth reciting Trinh Min pearls of wisdom:

Knowledge (a certain knowledge can not merely be rejected in a contaminated world where every gesture reverberates endlessly on others). But it has to be exceeded. Thus it is through the individual parts, and the relations between the fragments in the process of decentralization that change continues to engender change (*loc cit*).

Her representation of female knowledge defies reification within feminist hegemonies towards the expression of the forms of experience beyond conceived notions of duality, again, she continues:

Chinese thought which is rooted in the crossing of double movement of the Void and the Full, and within the Full of the Yin and the Yang, remains profoundly ternary rather than dualistic. At the heart of the Yin Yang system, the Void constitutes the third term, and with it the binary system becomes ternary (the Void being the interval between the Yin and the Yang.), While the ternary system tends ceaselessly towards the unitary the oneness of the Yin Yang circle.

The notions of self and identity in the West may be held differently from perceived notions of spirituality, as they are underpinned by a kind of Cartesian dualism. If one moves in to a ternary space, then Being, time and selfhood may be integrally intertwined with conceptions of godhead and spirituality. If 'purusha' (spirit) and 'prakrti' (matter) are the indefinable cultural essences of personhood from the point of view of another tradition, how does one then label and define this radically other notion of self? Is it possible to be an atheist in this culture when conceptions of self are integrally intertwined with a cultural-spiritual worldview? Of course there be limitations within the tradition given that its idea of the essence of

of Post-modernism, on the difficulties with a descriptions of embodiment.

personhood or the best candidate for it in the world order may be gendered and biased or weighted in other ways. Notwithstanding that, one wonders still whether the 'other' of western discourse on identity and religion cannot find coherence or correlation to the worldview unless defined by symbol systems imbued with symbolic constructs in relation to the divine. The juxtaposition of the language of cultural difference in relation to the tropes of western feminist theological arguments on gender inequities highlights a contrast of concepts on gender itself.

The descriptions referred to earlier by Katherine Mayo which Mary Daly reiterates on cultural practices in relation to women in India, while important in the illumination of arcane structures persisting to this day, in practices such as dowry and *sati*, do not go far enough to examine the roots and origins in their historical, structural and communal basis. This insufficiency leads to easy condemnation; but a continued incomprehension of cultural differences is curtailed. Buimillar repeats this kind of shock tactics analysis more recently in her popular novel.¹⁰ In contrast, more recent analysis such as by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Rajeswari Sundar Rajan point out these ambivalence, and repressed analysis on the notions of pain, agency and other sorts of attendant emotions that this sort of cultural analysis invokes.¹¹ It is perhaps also Judith Butler's work on the body that holds most hope for the development of perspectives on areas

¹⁰Buimillar, Elisabeth, *May You Be the Mother of Hundred Sons: a Journey among the Women of India*, New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991 repeats the sort of analysis seen in Katherine Mayo's work on women in India from a subject-object first-third world observer position.

¹¹Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice", *Wedge*, Winter/Spring, 1985, pp. 120-30.

_____ "The Rani of Simur" in Francis Barker et al. (eds.) *Europe and Its Other*. Vol 1, Proceedings of the Essex Conference on Sociology and Literature July 1984, Colchester: University of Essex, 1985.

_____ *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1988..

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari, *Real and Imagined Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 1983.

Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1995.

of seeming cultural diversity which perhaps may open most vital for newer ways of analysis.

The ironic location of the traditional texts in postmodernist perspectives that encompasses the pre-modern as well as the postmodern location of cultural studies that offer hope for a rounded understanding of gender and cultural difference. If in a Foucauldian light religious experience can be constructed by *epistemes*, in a further deconstruction there are essential physiological experiences in the lives of women that are supplemental to the difference. These comprise, but do not exhaust, birth, menstruation, sexual orientation, menopause, and bodily limits, which challenge to be interpreted differently according to *episteme* as quantifiers of cultural knowledge. (Some account, for instance, has to be given to mothers who believe in certain parts of northern Africa that clitoridectomy is necessary for their daughter's future healthy lives.) Yet something remains constant through these differences. In defining bodies and selves does deconstructionism as a political enterprise do justice to or help to decentre from the bodily location of self? A radical departure would be to conjecture a cultural reading of body and its functions as a basis for women's spirituality. Thus the disembodiment (starvation, homelessness) of the *bhakti* women poets can be read as resistance, somewhat akin to that of Simone Weil and Gandhi, both also embarked on enterprises of a kind of "subversive spirituality" and resistance through fasting, writing, solitude. Anorexia as a method of resistance and strength has been spoken about.¹² This act inverts the master-slave relationship to produce a freeing of ability within restrictive and oppressive spaces.

¹²I am indebted to Ramu Gandhi for sharing his thoughts on the connections between bipedality, (walking) disembodiment and thought. The solitude of writing and the commitment to the action of writing combines in an experiential way to provide a kind of enhanced spirituality which does not distance from action but combines body, thought and action in a powerful mix. It was also remarkable in Beijing to see women activists committed to the cause of action, not as a religious way but in a manner that could be described as nothing else. It is interesting to note the level of grassroots commitment to ideals that emerges from South Asian activism, this would not of course be described as spirituality by many who would count themselves to be agnostic or atheist. Janet Chawla, *Child-Bearing and Culture*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1994.

Paul Ricoeur's reading of the phenomenology of the body is illuminating in its complexity of meanings.¹³ In his reading of the transcendental philosophy of Husserl he locates the juxtaposition of body corporeality with inter-subjectivity, i.e., relational self as the space of intentionality, towards otherness. This ternary opens up possibilities of the interpretation of otherness based on cultural differences and a constitution of objective nature on the basis of inter-subjectivity. A phenomenology of (bodily) constitution alone fails to account for the constitution of the 'otherness' of the foreign (-other on the horizon of perception is another thing.) However, the fact that in order to comprehend a foreign subjectivity, it is necessary to formulate the idea of oneself. The bodily location of suffering and indeed fertility are different for the sexes. How then does this locate the experiences of the *other*? The *other* in the horizon of one's bodily location provides a map for oneself *via negativa* of difference, or the *other* as one self, i.e., by negative difference one finds oneself. I have commented on the *other as self* in my work on 'Empathy' in order to differentiate this concept from psychoanalytic concepts. The historical deconstruction brought me to the work of Edith Stein, the first student collaborator of Husserl who wrote a book on this subject entitled, *The Problem of Empathy*. Her work progressed from developing the notion of inter-subjectivity to the notion of empathy, to women's issues as a writer and activist. Her subsequent conversion from Judaism to Christianity did not prevent her execution, due to her Jewish identity, during the war. Her works remained dislocated from the academic discourse of the University unlike the works of Husserl or Scheller on sympathy and inter-subjectivity. However, the trajectory of Stein's work from inter-subjectivity to empathy on gendered difference and spirituality leading to her experience of a numinous conversion and a life of the spirit as a nun, has perhaps a location in today's conception of thought, emotions and spirituality. In proposing the notion of a black mirror of history, as the unthought spaces of non-western feminist cultural history, I am inspired by Stein's contradictory positions during her lifetime. Is it that women's history provides a history of *abjections* and *aporias*. This black mirror, as an inversion of the Lacanian notion of vision and clarity contains valuable unrecorded and unvalued testimony of women's experience and

¹³Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 322.

spirituality. Foucault casts light on the location of spirit and the emergent self within the time frames of history, a history of the other, white elite male privilege. In the case of third world women then, the double injunction of the colonial gaze and patriarchy, need consideration. Thus the *other* forms the prototype of the self in the absence of a recorded history of self, the 'others' history is projected onto oneself. In reversing a reading of Ricoeur of proceeding perceptually 'from oneself' towards the other as oneself could raise some interesting relocation of identities.

In reading resistance from the site of women's bodies Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan examines the location of the experiences of "real and imagined women". The examination of the discourses on rape, *sati*, pain, death, leadership and the politics of representation have as much importance of the reading of victimization.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Fatima Mernissi does this through her own contextualisation of the relationship of women in Islam to the culture of Islam with respect to the role of bodies, adornment, and sexuality from behind the veil. The appropriateness of a critique that is not informed of perspectives from within traditions has been much criticised in the literature on third world women. It is to return to an examination of the role and place of spirituality given the postmodern deconstruction of binary compositions that other sorts of spaces have opened for analysis. The hybrid text of spirituality in any given place, location, or culture shapes the given expression of women's spirituality in contrast to the doctrinal laws formed by institutional orthodoxy. A further complexity is entertained if one views the sects within Islam, for instance, the women in the Sufi traditions were

¹⁴Rajan Rajeshwari.Sunda, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, New York: Routledge, London. 1993. This form of analysis can be contrasted with other forms of contextualization which incorporates historical analysis of a different order. See for example "Sati" in J. S. Hawley (ed), *The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, and L. Harlan Courtright, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Others who have attempted an analysis of contemporary feminist and cultural analysis in relation to religious practices are: Steven David Ross, *Plensihment in the Earth*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995; Frederique A. Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin, *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; and H. Afshar and M. Maynard, *The Dynamics of Race and Gender*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1994.

inspiring as poets, oracles, fearless in the travels and ecstatic in the pronouncement of Allah's name, or in the search of the beloved, in the form of Allah was permissible and indeed respected. This, again, is in sharp contrast to the notion of confined spaces popularised as the only version of women worshipping in Islam.¹⁵

¹⁵Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Redding: Addison Wellesly Publishing Company, 1991. Also by the same author *Beyond The Veil. Male Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society, 2nd edition*, Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. This sort of culturally sensitive analysis is somewhat at odds with the 'goddess generalizations', that can come from certain archaeological tropes. The *Chalice and the Blade* essentially examines the history of women's spirituality in the Judeo-Christian world. The risk of applying this analysis to the world of other cultures can be at the cost of repeating orientalisms in a new form. See also *Sufi Women*, New York: Nurbakhsh. Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1990.