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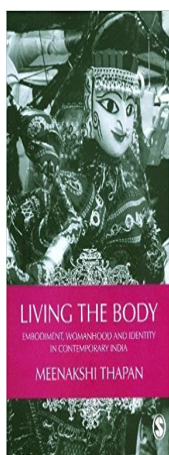
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# Voicelessness, Resistance and Embodiment

**Kalpana Kannabiran**

LIVING THE BODY: EMBODIMENT, WOMANHOOD AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA by Meenakshi Thapan Sage Publications, 2009, 190 pp., 550

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This book is a contribution to the sociology of embodiment—mediated by gender and class—in the context of women's lives in urban India today. The fact that women are located in physical and



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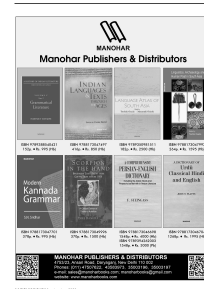
psychological space as much as they are located in cultural and social domains, and their identity is constituted through an interweaving of all these multiple locations, provides the justification for this book. The conceptual category of embodiment, Thapan argues, provide the medium through which the dualities of subject-object as well as that of structure-practice merge together (p. xv). Questions of identity, resistance and political consciousness are critical to this process of embodiment. In focuses on the lives and experiences of women, and recording their stories, Thapan aims to understand the social from the pers-pective and experience of women—charting in the process the course of sociology for women: I seek to understand women’s embodiment and identity in their everyday lives, and local knowledge(s) and practice(s) as sites of power and resistance.

I suggest that woman speaks with a complexity located in the multiplicities of economic deprivation, caste, familial and gender relations. This multiplicity is importantly located in the physical and social conditions of everyday life that women experience (p. 2).

How do young and adult women articulate this experience in their everyday lives? How may we foreground this subjectivity without reducing it to anecdotal accounts and personal narratives?

A central part of Thapan’s work is to examine the implications of Bourdieu’s articulation of the cultural, social embeddedness of postcolonial habitus for a sociology for women. The relevance of habitus may be understood along two registers: first, in defining and understanding the constancy of habitus Thapan focuses on—agency, resistance and aspirations that rest within the social fields inhabited by women; she proposes that performativity enables a woman to step out of the confines of habitus and ‘reflects the more liberatory element of play, movement and unfettered expressions of the self’ (p. 8). After a cursory glance at feminist writing on embodiment and identity in the contexts of nation, community and fundamentalism, Thapan moves to examining the place of class in women’s embodiment, because, as she says, (t)he need for economic, cultural and social capital of different kinds signifying varied indicators of status and position is expressed very differently by women belonging to different social and economic backgrounds (p. 11).

Female adolescence is a relatively unexplored area, Carol Gilligan’s work being a major landmark. The cultures of adolescence are complex and heterogeneous in India and the watermark between childhood and adolescence not always clear. Thapan explores the constitution of gender identity among urban adolescent women from ‘elite, educationally advantaged’ backgrounds and ‘poor, educationally disadvantaged’ backgrounds (p. 28). While for the first category of women, the tension between familial and socio-cultural factors and peer relations in school poses dilemma and contradictory expectations, Thapan suggests that for the second group the absence of a peer group outside the family results in the complete absorption of the women’s energies, within the family (p. 28). Yet, for this second group, despite the absence of the school, popular culture influences



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their expectations and their perceptions of relationships. Although this may make for a certain degree of levelling out between the expectations of both groups, evident in the presence of the agential voice in both groups, the articulation takes very different forms—educated women use educated men as their reference point, while for uneducated women the cognition of powerlessness provides the starting point for the building of strategies of survival and dignity.

Gender hegemonies and patriarchal values are central to the relationships between educated women interviewed in this study (all unmarried) and their parents—with the mother providing nurturance care and emotional sustenance and the father being the role model, rather distant, and appreciated for being atypical when involved (usually in the mother's absence). This normative structure of male-female relationships across generation extends also to peer interactions, with the women constantly measuring themselves up against an unattainable ideal, the *Femina* providing the images:

Young women are goaded into aspiring to be like the images they see in the magazines they read and the films they watch. This includes enhancing the idea that they too can be better than the girl in the picture, in the story or in the most popular film of the moment (p. 49).

For the uneducated women in the sample (all married except one) in stark contrast, the defining feature of adolescence is the relationship between the spouse and affines. The relationship with the father—and the husband—is defined by his authority, and the natal home is the space for reproduction of patriarchal values of acquiescence and submission. Yet the unattainability of education, the curtailment of mobility and freedom and the interlocking of violence with education does not kill the spirit: 'If we were boys, we could have roamed about. Why weren't we born boys?' (p. 53).

However, the emphasis on 'beauty' and capacity for gender specific work typifies the experience of women across both categories, as also the patriarchal structure of the family—the father who is a distant role model and the one who is nakedly authoritarian being but two sides of the same coin. These continuities between the two groups are not followed through adequately by Thapan.

How is conjugality defined in an urban middle-class context, and how do women craft resistance in the everyday context? Calling for a meeting of elders in a joint family and asking for public explanations to whispers about disregard for members and callousness in shouldering responsibilities; seeking and attaining independence from children and physical distance from an abusive husband; redefining the role of the mother-in-law by righting the wrongs across a generation—being the mother-in-law she would have liked to have had; resolutely refusing to be tormented by petty taunts in the conjugal home and believing that equality must exist within the home even when circumstances constantly weigh against it; staying overweight as a resistance to the expectation of a 'barbie doll' figure by the spouse—and asserting that a person looks good when she likes the way she looks and when she feels good.

For working class women, '(h)aving a female body means not only that you must perform "heavy work" for money outside the household, but you must also take on responsibility for the work your body performs in childbearing' (p. 134). The compulsion to bear a son, the stigma of childlessness, the enormous burdens of work and family sustenance—are the sources of suffering. Resistance, ironically, cannot be expressed in these contexts. The inability to bear a son and the utter vulnerability that results pushes women to search for other sources of dignity and respect—like catching a burglar in an act of bravery! (pp. 134–35).

In the concluding chapter, Thapan examines the emancipatory possibilities of resistance and seeks to establish the quality and power of resistance, as two sides of the same coin, that enables possibilities even as it forecloses them, allows engagement with the operation of power and simultaneously prevents the containment of power ([p. 164).

She then goes on to argue that the fact that resistance symbolizes both agency and loss is not a negative phenomenon that may suggest the eventual voicelessness and despair of the gendered subject (p. 164).

An interesting collection of essays.

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