

Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India

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Understanding women – their identity and roles demand capturing the complex layers through which they perform. A probe into women's roles in conflict situations reveals that they are not only fighters and victims, but also negotiators; thus transforming conflict situation as a site of "potential change."

A major difficulty in any discussion on women lies in relating the ideological to the experiential, i.e. of relating various *symbolic constructs* to the lives and actions of women. An intervention through an unstructured methodology (if binaries such as Male:Reason/Female:Unreason constitute the mainstream Rationality paradigm) and weaving a history of the lives of women through scattered narratives have been conceived as a kind of disjunction in patriarchal politics and philosophy. Therefore *speaking for* women is also *speaking from* a woman's perspective which creates a subversion of the duality between male and female universes of discourse, deconstructing the duality with the goal of altering women's exclusion from paradigmatic male discourses of politics and philosophy.

Feminist thinkers like Helene Cixous have offered alternatives of speaking and writing beyond male prescriptions. Writing as breaking silences and writing as inscription of the self constitutes both a writing on paper and writing on the body.¹ Such inscriptions inspire the idea of "other history" which could redeem women from the phallographic descriptions of binaries of the male/female constitution. This idea of an "other history" has been instrumental in constructing certain types of subjectivities in certain categories of women who either internalized the models offered by her male counterpart or celebrated as a self reflexivity, creating alternative mediums of expression. Such alternative mediums of expression do not stem from already existing

documents and sources of history; they arise from women's encounter with the world that forms and re-forms their subjectivities, as also it gives rise to interacting contexts, which LaCapra called "work-like."²

An engagement of such a kind with the lives and histories of women, particularly of South Asian communities, involves a multilayered inquiry and intervention because of the invisibility of women in dominant discourses of power and politics. This is also because of the absence of recorded histories on women. This has resulted in stereotypical male-centric descriptions of women, particularly with regard to their roles in a conflict situation and during violence. South Asian women have frequently been conceptualized in colonial, academic and postcolonial studies more as objects of description.

This has led to a monolithic and pathological description of South-Asian women, particularly by western academics. An increasing growth of texts that "sought to give voice" to the South-Asian women reinforced the stereotypes of *sati* and other oriental images to feed the western need to sympathize with "these helpless creatures."³ Therefore, a balanced reading into the histories and lives of women as *subjects* of the South-Asian social and historical forces would have to take into account the "interactions of capitalism, racism and patriarchy,"⁴ vis-à-vis an attention to the personal experiences of women as it was experienced by them. The interplay and contradiction between the images and the reality of gender identity in South Asia continues to raise concerns of representation. This calls for a study of the construction of gender identities, and examination of some essentializing categories – traditional vs. modern, oppression vs. liberation – used to understand the position of women in South Asia.

Further, in attempting a study of this kind specifically in the context of Northeast India, one finds that, in the contemporary scene, the gendered impacts of armed conflict and political violence has been ignored or generalized. The gendered causes, costs, and consequences of violent conflicts have been underrepresented, and often misrepresented. One observes that the image of women and/in violence and conflict literature posit women as victims rather than as active actors, largely as a result of patriarchal structures in academic disciplines. Women, in fact, occupy a number of roles and create different fates for themselves, as conflict situation is also a site of potential change. An analysis of women's roles and inclusion of women working in conflict situations reveal that women are not only fighters and/or victims, but also negotiators in post-conflict futures. A critical examination of women's participation in formal and informal peace-building activities shows that in most cases women are excluded from formal peace negotiations. Such high-level negotiations are

identified as male domains⁵, which means that they employ discourses and practices that are closer to men's reality than to women's. Nevertheless, women have demonstrably played an influential role through their work in grassroots organizations working for peace and reconciliation.

From within these organizations, women constantly challenge the authorities and other members of society with demands for peace, non-discrimination, accountability, recognition of human rights, etc. While always positioned on the margins, these organizations show their ability to mobilize large numbers of women, and to translate individual grievances into legitimate social concerns. Moreover, many of them play a significant role in building a new culture of peace at the local level by organizing peace education and community-based reconciliation and social reconstruction activities.

It is a political imperative to note how women have appropriated conflict and violence from a marginalized position in the transitory phase of the 19th and 20th century amidst social and political dislocations caused by Partition and the logic of statist violence legitimized by the Postcolonial nation-State. Therefore, our understanding of women's roles in conflict situations must go beyond the universalistic narrative of "violence on women" and their vulnerability. The specificity and diversity of women's experiences must be acknowledged. Only on this basis we can conduct comparative analyses and begin to develop a deeper general understanding of conflict and violence from a gender perspective. Such a perspective would involve a shift in the representation of the image of women from vulnerable victims to an image of women as a highly differentiated group of social actors, who possess valuable resources and capacities and who have their own agendas.

Women influence the course of things, and their actions are constitutive of post-conflict societies. The reduction of women to subjects or objects of violence both fail to recognize their contributions and thus contribute to their marginalization. There is also a need for gender-specific data and gender-focused analysis in order to see women's situation within a gender framework which pays attention to how gender roles and relationships are continuously constructed and contested by different actors, and which recognizes the gender dimension inherent in all aspects of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. Political realism constructs a violent and anarchical picture of Northeast India without taking into account the ways in which non-state actors influence and are influenced, in turn, by those developments. Women not only experience the politics of "betrayal and resistance" in such moments through direct acts of violence on them by the perpetrators but also play active roles in addressing

such conflicts. We have several examples of the roles played by women in the conflict situation in India's northeast.

Many women organizations of Northeast India like the Naga Mothers' Association and the Mizo Women's Federation have been on a collaborative project either with the State actors or the ones opposing it.⁶ These organizations along with the *Meira Paibis* of Manipur display a unique gesture of intervention where individual mothers address the community as social mothers thus enlarging the space of tradition-specific roles. This is a delicate construction of a maternal identity through a weaving of impersonal communitarian entity with a personal female self. From this general description of the gendered constructions of identity in various conflict situations in Northeast India, I would now closely look at three types of identity construction from a gendered perspective. All of these three cases represent the female body as a crucial site for the inscription of power.

The first two cases are based on realistic political narratives of Manipur while the third captures a moment of the violence of Partition as evident on the female body through a fictional narrative. The fictional here has been employed to link the symbolic with the imaginary in a mode which de Man, in defending the fictional, says – "This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort. What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of the linguistic with natural reality with reference to phenomenism."⁷ I would like to argue that women exhibit unique ways of constituting their subjectivities for *speaking* and *writing* in response to dominant discourses of power. Although it is the socio-cultural context which in large measure enables each person to reach an understanding/perception/definition of her self, every person is reflexive and has the potential to modify definitions of her self given by the social context. Perhaps this is the nature of "internal capabilities"⁸ which constitutes human good and development.

The modification of the perception about *self* by the *other* is based on personal experiences if the latter is at variance with the socially given definitions; the subject may modify them and thus create a self-fashioned subjectivity. Subjectivity therefore constitutes a point of intersection wherein an individual's gendered performance is worked upon by the structures and categories of the outside world. This space of subjectivity is neither exclusively determined by forces and structures in the outside world, nor is it purely the product of a free, intentional rationality. This is perhaps how women and the subalterns have always been able to fashion a space of creativity even under the most oppressive and fascist structures, away from the gaze of the oppressors.

A unique agency of intervention can be seen in the *Meira Paibis* of Manipur Valley. Known as torch bearers, they have also a direct programme of action on social issues like drugs and alcohol. Recently they have changed the face of political protest by using their "body as weapon."⁹ The Manipur Valley has turned into a field of overt social and political struggle where women often have to invent different ways of speaking for themselves. In speaking for themselves, women have made use of their body, their *phanek* (sarongs) and their whole being to stand as a distinct subjectivity of their own. There were many occasions when women exhibited their *phaneks* in order to protest killings in the state. Here, the gaze of the oppressor and the oppressive structure of the state fell on them in the form of violence and physical assault. That the police often crossed and also watch the hanging line of *phanek* in order to disperse protesting group of women brought out the livid picture of a desperately repressive state in the Imphal valley.

The question arises: Why is it that women require to make themselves visible by way of articulating through body and its extended representational artifacts such as the *phaneks*? One possible answer to this question lies in the inseparability of body and subjectivity that finds an inevitable expression in any condition of repression, as an attempt to separate body and all its extensions in an act is to agree with the repressive state that it can separate women's body from their being. A statement such as "naked body is the perfect icon of (...) political rightlessness" that links "political vulnerability" and "physical vulnerability"¹⁰ is a *horrific*¹¹ response to situations of "terror" by the State. Such an understanding forebears an elimination of women's subjectivity, as any act of protest involves an irony that turns annihilation of women's sense of being against itself. Protest – be it naked or using the symbolism of disrobing and exhibiting *phaneks* to send a message to aggressor – evolves through a complicated act of immanent connection between body and being as well as a transcendent act of "intruding" into the space of the aggressor, the violent State. One possibly needs to re-learn this new language of protest from the Manipuri Women's movement, as they bring alive the voice of the dead with the counter-production of women's essential being that symbolizes an affirmation of life over socially and politically determined decline of continuous existence as such.¹²

Women's voice as well as acts of protesting in the public space constitutes an interconnection between the self and the other, which is an inalienable ontology for women's subjectivity. This inalienable ontology presents itself through an enactive and performative agency that establishes the link between body and being in the lived experience of the body. Lived experience of the body is how the subjectivity of the body-subject constitutes

her world. This is also a moment of transition from the gross experiential everyday to an autonomous assignment of meaning and subjectivity to one's public self. Such a transition is available in the course of women's movement in Manipur. The basic point is that the assumed dichotomy between the private/public, self/other, proximate/distant is resolved in the "work-like" actualization of "performative agency" of the body of the women that contextualizes itself in developing a "counter-concept of self" that takes performance at the limit of an action. This counter-concept is presented in the daring naked protest by women *Meira Paibi* activists before Kangla Fort on 15th July 2004.

Another presentation of the counter-concept of self is written through her body by Irom Sharmila, the iron lady of Manipur. One can draw here a useful comparison between Sharmila's act of countering the repression of the State by trans-figuring herself in the domain of collective suffering and Apunba Lup's protest in the public domain. Sharmila's continued act of fasting and her being forced to eat through her nose by her captors projects the impossibility of living in Manipur, which is as good as being robbed of one's appetite and, in a deeper sense, staying alive only in flesh and blood. Sharmila projects the state of being robbed of Being in her continued "staying alive" to express the phenomenon of socially determined decline of continuous existence. A distinct-ion between the self that passively suffers to tell us a story about the evil that rides over it and a self that encounters suffering by overcoming consequences of suffering tells us a different story of suffering in me for the other.

Sharmila's suffering is an act of becoming one with existence, as it goes beyond what suffering could inflict. Sharmila stays alive in an enactive, receptive and performative mode that affirms a bodily presence more passive than experience in order to transform her suffering body into a body and being beyond the binaries of repression. This is a body that states, narrates and describes itself in which Sharmila's being can take part, a body that encounters every experience of repression beyond the concept of repression. Many still understand Sharmila's protest through fasting in an instrumental sense by calling "body as a weapon," a deadly cliché that needs to be relinquished. Sharmila's fasting rather overcomes the "repressive" binary between the aggressor and victim by turning consequences of repression against itself. Body here plays a multi-dimensional role. By an apparent suffering of the body, Sharmila turns her bodily victimhood against the "subjection" that suffering inflicts. She not only transcends "suffering" by "participating" in that subjected body but has also the effect of bearing the suffering of others. Her imprisoned, incarcerated and monitored body in the hospital-prison is a

social body that now belongs to the domain of every other suffering self in which Sharmila can participate.

Sharmila's participation in her own act of turning the suffering against itself can be contrasted with the naked protest of women on July 15, 2004, which highlights an Agambenian state of "suspension of sovereignty." The complete sway of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in Manipur, including its subjection of female bodies, are brought out into the "open" by the unique and historic protest. When protestors display posters such as "Manipur under Siege," it not only speaks of suspension of every democratic political right, but also means that the disused rights of the people of Manipur are now in the "open" in the Agambenian sense. Agamben defined "open" in the sense of disconcealment of the acts of taking hostage, repression and subjection, which according to him is biopower in display. When such a disconcealment comes out into the open, all its constituents such as body goes "outside of being." Women's protest in their naked bodies for the first time lays bare the statist violence which has already subjected the body of the women in Manipur. Biopower discloses itself in the open with all its subjected constituents – women's body being the signifier of such subjection. Women's protest before the Kangla Fort is one form of recovery of the being in the subjected body, an affirmation of subjectivity against the repressive apparatus of the State.

Therefore, the incarcerated body of Sharmila is simultaneously a site for writing her protest as well as for reaffirming an identity beyond the stereotypical construction of gender roles in society. The case of women protesting outside the Kangla Fort is inscribing/writing resistance with/on the body and presenting it in the public domain. In the case of Sharmila, the body is used for reversing such a process of inscription. Sharmila instead inscribes her act of resistance through fasting on the body of the state. Her defiance and resistance, on the one hand, makes a mockery of statist power while, on the other hand, she poses a moral threat to the state putting her life at stake. In order to free her body and her *being* from the coercive rules of the state, she must make her incarcerated and suffering body a site of transcendence for her as well as for others.

The moot problem in this debate about women's agency and subjection is the play between an open display of effects of power versus a strategy of transcendence over power. The play comes as an event in the subjection by centres of power. This difference is presented in the difference between Sharmila's act and the act of the women before Kangla Fort, which are manifestations of two forms of subjectivities that women constitute with their bodies on the face of a coercive power structure.

Different and yet similar in some ways is the fictional text, *Bindu Bindu Jal* (Drops of Water), by Shekhar Das,¹³ which also attempts at representing the inscription of violence of Partition on the female/maternal body. The text has several sections depicting different actors in the event of Partition. The geo-political locale depicted is the Surma-Barak valley which has suffered an added burden of Sylhet Referendum. The first narrative depicts the death of little Parul, the 12-year-old daughter of Surabala and Nalini. Shekhar Das gives a very poignant description of the journey of Surabala and her three children from home to an unknown and uncertain locale across the border in a bullock cart. Little Parul drops little rags, spoons and pieces of her bangles as the cart moves towards the border explaining that she would use them as landmarks to get back home whenever there was a chance. Little did she imagine that in a few hours she would be cremated in the most unceremonious manner on a river bank after being attacked by cholera. Her mother and brothers could not even provide her with a drop of drinking water amidst the unhygienic environment of the refugee camp. Little Parul, so full of life a little while ago, lies lifeless on the twigs to be lighted as her funeral pyre. As her mother Surabala bathes her for the last time on the river bank, dressing her in her white frock, this lifeless body of a 12-year-old child becomes the bland page on which the violent history of Partition would be inscribed.

Running parallel with the narrative of Surabala's family are other narratives of people of a small village consisting of 20 houses. But the most tragic of all is the story of Basumati and her husband Dwijen who, in their desperate run for life, had picked up her three-year-old son Ratul's side pillow instead of the sleeping child. As the realization sunk in, it was too late as Dwijen saw the whole village ablaze in fire from a distance. Basumati turns completely insane after days of waiting for her husband to return with her son Ratul. Even birds seem to shudder at the deranged condition of Basumati now completely without any sensation of pain or shame which categorize one as being human. She sleeps under trees and runs around throwing stones unable to even remember her own name.

In his narrative of brutal violence and inscription of the same on human body, particularly that of the female (as shown in the case of little Parul and now Basumati), Shekhar Das constantly treads the borderline between the human and the animal existence. While human beings are reduced to animalism in their mad instinct for violence, animals are depicted as possessing the so-called human values – like jackals running away from the bamboo bushes after seeing the mad killing of man by man while birds seem to spread their wings to cover the almost naked body of Basumati who, even in her insanity, cannot escape sexual violence on her body. The irony of the situation is

heightened by the fact that another child orphaned by the violence has got attached to Basumati who is not in a state even to be conscious of her own self. Yet she is the proxy mother to this boy who might have lost his own mother in the exodus just as Basumati has lost her son Ratul and whose name she still remembers.

Madness as destruction of human sanity and as infliction on the *self* has been understood by many as an inseparable aspect of a collective madness accompanying the violence during and after Partition.¹⁴ Sadaat Manto in his short story *Khuda Ki Kasam* (I Swear by God) written in the backdrop of Partition depicts a mad mother wandering from city to city in North India, mumbling incoherently, half naked and hair matted just like Basumati refusing to believe that her child is dead. This is how the Partition has resulted in a “partition of selves” by partitioning families and communities.¹⁵ Under such a partitioning of the self and the reversal of human and animal values, one wonders as to what would be the epistemic status of reason or rationality, “right” and “wrong,” “moral” and “immoral,” “sane” and “insane.” Gendered representations of this kind perhaps destabilize the conventional claim to the ontology of the self and knowledge claims.

In such a context, the figure of “Basumati” as the real witness of the violent history of Partition now turned into its other (because of her insanity) represents the “unrepresentable” both in the sense of an impossibility of “being” as well as of a distorted and victimized *effect* of not having the “being.” The “violated” being of Basumati acts as a signifier of victimhood. The question is: Can the violated signifier signify its usual historical, objective and cultural reference, or imply an impossibility of representation of its originary suffering of violence. Shekhar Das almost ventures into a zone of impossibility between signifying and suspension, but not completely without a passage from reality to history. He poses the signifier “Basumati” as the sign of being the violated “mother earth.”

The constitutive split in Basumati between speaking and silence, between past and present is an “unrepresentable” that poses the Lyotardian differend¹⁶ between Basumati’s self and Basumati proper that keep crossing each other in the play between logic of identity and logic of difference as a co-occurring history in the metonymic space of the face, body, civil society and the nation-state. The differend affirms an erasure of the self in both the moments of a portrayal of Basumati’s traumatised self as well as in Basumati’s past, the post lived experience. The silence of Basumati over her state of being as well as the language of those who speak about it forge a regimen of differend that cannot be captured, ironically enough, in language. These elusive states of being

reappear as the body-being that is “being-with of being-there,” to borrow Jean Luc Nancy’s¹⁷ excellent phenomenology of being. This can be described as a conception of the subject which he suggests can be answered by way of a supplementary framework derived from a concept of anxiety. The anxiety of body-being shelters both protest and affirmation, a plurality of selves that cannot be covered within one as it emerges into a trajectory of identities, each contesting the other in a serial erasure of both body and being.

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