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Occasional Paper 176

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Not for a Place of Her Own:  
Beyond the Topos of Man

Anirban Das  
March 2009



CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

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## *Introduction*

This paper deals with the relations between deconstruction and sexual difference. It tries to put into a productive conjunction the ethico-political implications of the former with the feminist concerns of the latter. Though there is a not quite small literature on the theme, I hope to intervene through a rethinking of the spatiality of the body. A close reading of certain key Derridean texts on the issue enables me to trace Derrida's take on the term 'woman' as the philosophical language of 'man' constitutes it. The question of the body as the space of enactment of sexual difference becomes central in the endeavor. I combine readings from other Derridean texts to bring out certain possibilities of going beyond the phallogocentric closures. As with Derrida's other writings, possibilities appear to be impossibilities at the same instant. I end with some other deconstructive takes on the issue of sexual difference, most prominently with those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Identities, in theories that famously come "after the subject"<sup>1</sup>, are not entities with fixed structures or unmediated grounds. Each identity, in such a view, is not only defined contingently in terms of differences from a shifting array of other entities but is internally differentiated in temporal and spatial dimensions. Yet, in the dominant mode of thinking, certain identities – like that of the male, the white or the colonizer – are fixed in the sense that they set the terms of definition of the other purportedly subordinate identities. Thus the displacements that rent all identity are straightened over in certain cases. Interestingly, the subordinate ones – like the woman, the black or the colonized – gain a flexibility that is thereby not accorded to the dominant. They often become metaphors for these displacements or slippages. Is it possible to resist the exclusionary moves thus instituted and, at the same moment, to posit a different ethical and political stance based on the

metaphorics of displacement? What would be the specificities of each metaphor in the enunciation of the ethic? What is the specificity of ‘woman’ as one of such metaphoric resources? How does this use of metaphoricity relate to the ‘real’ women? How does the plurality of women negotiate the use of ‘woman’ as metaphor? Are these – the metaphoricity and the plurality – contradictory or are they reconcilable through a certain notion of singularity? These are some of the concerns I address, perhaps inadequately, in this paper. Before going into the intricacies of my argument I begin this introduction with some elementary reflections on the question of the body as one such concept that stands in for the unanticipatable in the quotidian. As I hope to show in the following essay, I want to use this metaphoricity of the *corpus* for figuring an ethico-politics of the (im)possible even when I interrogate the production of such a metaphor.

The body is not one. This is a commonplace in the postmodern parlance. But how is the body rendered *many*? If the body of the individual is the unit of this multiplicity, that is, if bodies are many by virtue of the multiplicity of individuals who *have* bodies, at least two problems arise. The first, the logical problem, is that of defining the features of this universal category named the *body* – by what logical step does one mark and name a generality, *the body*, out of the particular individual bodies. The second problem arises out of the historicity of the category of *individual* – what about the bodies of people who themselves do not mark their selves as individuals bounded by the proper definitions of the body<sup>2</sup>. And both these questions show that once the im-mediate presence of the three dimensional space of the body is put under scrutiny, the obviousness of the individual as the unit of multiplicity gets displaced. One can then think of the singularities of the body at different registers – across identities (the *body* marked by caste, class, coloniality or gender) – being haunted by its others in each of these registers.

Body-thoughts lead one to the question of the ‘woman’. The differentiation of the body into the duality of the male and the female is at least as naturalized as the ‘presence’ of the body itself. In such a commonsensical way of thinking, when one speaks of the body, one

presupposes the difference between the sexes. When one speaks of the body in a neutral register, almost always (except a few circumscribed discourses like gynecology) one speaks of the *male* body. For the woman, who remains equivalent to the body in a mind/body binary, the body spoken of belongs to the man. Such that one may assert, echoing a celebrated aphorism, while the man *owns* the body the woman *is* the body. Going beyond this bind needs figurations that chart the cartographies of the known body and, at the same instant, bear traces of non-spaces of the beyond. These figurations may be multiple, based on divergent generalities, yet must remain open to the singularity of each enunciative moment.

The question of the body gets implicated in a feminist concern – how to mark a space beyond that of the heterosexualism of man<sup>3</sup>. Is such an effort not only not to succeed but not be ‘productive’ as well? Does such a utopia only serve the known *topos* of the male desire by reproducing the tantalizing allure of the ever-unknown enigma called woman? The debate centers on how to place ‘woman’ with respect to the world of man. If she were placed *inside* that world but as the dominated, the task of feminism would be to bring about a reversal in her position. The dissent is that this would constrain her imagination to a view that belongs to the man. If ‘woman’ is placed outside as well as in a dominated inside, she might, in addition to her struggles within, act as a resource for alternative imaginings. The disagreement is that this would rob her of her ‘real’ existence and convert her into a metaphoric resource. I begin in the first section (following this introduction) by tracing, through a reading of Derrida’s *Spurs*, the ‘desire of man’ in its fixity to see how the field operates by making ‘woman’ a metaphor of slippage. In the next section, I go on to deal with the notion of sexual difference and two names that Derrida uses to mark a space beyond – *Khora* and *Geschlecht* – to address these questions. I refer to two different uses (by Derrida and Butler) of the concept *Khora* that bring out two divergent positions on the questions above. Again, I remain partial to one of these (Derrida) without letting go of the other altogether. For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whom I deal with in the third section, the figures she chooses to mark a space beyond are more ontically connected to the ‘woman’ and bear



the marks of intimacy in disquiet of proximity. The *clitoris* and the *mother* are two such figures. On certain other occasions, Spivak chooses yet more particular figures like the characters of Mahasweta Devi's novels 'Dopdi', 'Jashoda', 'Douloti', or the Pterodactyl, and sometimes the 'Devi' in an Indic setting, or 'Lucy' in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*.

What is important for my contention here is the multiplicity of the modes of figuring the 'woman' that Spivak or Derrida seems to point at. The existing literature on each of these modes of figuration – like the *khora* or *geschlecht* – deals in detail with the dynamic of the specific figure and how it relates to the ethico-political concern of going beyond with the tools of the present. My focus is on the (im)possibility of any one figure to bring out the concern in its generality. These are multiple, each unique in its own singular enunciation, yet are traces of the general. In the final and fourth section of the essay I bring in an other fictive apparition. The figure – the woman/*maya* – bears the weight of fictional attempts at such figurations. I read a Bangla text by Kamal Kumar Majumdar to enact that gesture and its limitations. A deconstructive move to go beyond the phallogentric morphe has to posit the generality of 'sexual difference' through multiple singularities rather than through one universal u-topia. The figurations thus proffered bring out the non-repeatable 'event'ness of the ethical encounter with the other.

## I *The Woman in Ontological Difference*

The title for this lecture was to have been *the question of style*.  
However – it is woman who will be my subject  
(Derrida 1979, 1).

In Derrida's use of the word 'subject' in the above quotation, there are allusions to at least three meanings. First, woman as the theme of his lecture, subject as subject matter, the object of discussion. He wants to talk about woman, about the identity of 'woman', about her being and non-being, her ontology and the property of the proper. Second, woman as the agent-subject, the 'owner' of this writing that is being written under the proper name Derrida. As if Derrida, in this text, in the structure and dynamic of writing, is becoming woman, Derrida writing woman writing Derrida... The steadfast forthrightness of truth is thus being supplanted by the elusive enigma of womanliness. The sharp metallic edge of *Spurs* is replaced by, covered over with, the smooth folds of cloth – the sail furled around the oblong pole, the mysterious textile crease around the umbrella rod. The subject here bears the connotation of the agent. And the third, one can hardly forget, is the association of *subjection* – of the relation between the master and the slave – in the notion of the subject<sup>4</sup>. The woman is thus, at the same time, the object, the agent, and the *subjectus* to the sovereign. In the unapproachable folds of her object-ness and her subjection resides her enigmatic agency.

...[I]f style<sup>5</sup> were a man (much as the penis, according to Freud is the << normal prototype of fetishes >>), then writing would be a woman. (57)

There is no such thing as a woman, as a truth in itself of woman in itself. (101)

Of course, this allows for the woman (as writing) a certain supplementary excess that cannot be derived from the rule of man (the stylus and the style). Yet does it not replicate that eternal male imagination of possessing the

penetrating, rigid agent of creation? Isn't this inevitable, as Derrida's discussion has as its center the famous misogynist Nietzsche and his Heideggerian exposé?

This positing of 'woman' as a *radical other* does not entail the giving away of feminist politics, but implies an understanding of the limits of feminism in the spirit of deconstruction. The search for a secure ethical ground for feminist politics goes against this spirit and is perhaps symptomatic of a forgetting of the undecidability that rents proper names like 'man' and 'woman'; symptomatic of a desire to be in the *process of appropriation* "(appropriation, expropriation, taking, taking possession, gift and barter, mastery, servitude, etc.)" – a process "that organized both the totality of language's process and symbolic exchange in general." (Derrida 1979, 109–111). Not that it is possible to go way beyond the limits of property, but it is the question of turning a deaf ear to, even if not bringing in to visibility, the 'call of the wholly other'; not to speak of the allure of touching the abject domain of alterity. We may shift our attention to the argument that Derrida weaves, with and around Nietzsche's 'umbrella'.

*Spurs*<sup>6</sup> starts with a few quotes from a letter of Nietzsche. This is followed by thirteen small chapters or sections. Some of which run only for a page or two. Together, they constitute a longish, loosely knit conversational essay. The argument, nevertheless, is complex and well knit. And as is Derrida's wont, the argument follows subtexts and associations at least as much as a rigorous logical order. The second section, "Distances", starts with the comment –

In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object (37).

This assertion follows the association of 'style' phonetically and etymologically (the Latin *Stilus*) with the sharp and pointed 'stylus'. Extending the associative contexts further, Derrida links the question of style to the violent penetration of a stiletto or a rapier, to the quill that secretes writing or

the phallus that penetrates the hymen, to the prow of a sailing vessel or the “projection of the ship which surges ahead to meet the sea’s attack and cleave its hostile surface” (39). It can even be

... that rocky point, also called an *eperon*, on which the waves break at the harbor’s entrance (39).

And yet, Derrida is tireless in reminding, the style is not solely an instrument of ‘vicious attack’, it can also be used as “protection against the threat of such an attack” (37). Style uses its *spurs* as a protective against “the terrifying, blinding, mortal threat (of that) which *presents* itself, which obstinately thrusts itself into view” (39). And style protects “the presence, the content, the thing itself, meaning, truth” (39), a truth that does not seem to bear the chasm of difference within. Style protects the presence of truth or the logos from that which is already effaced, from that which has already been excluded.<sup>7</sup> And the chasm of non-being (Derrida mentions death and the ghost) inscribes itself on the body of the being (present). The body that always is terrified. The ghost that watches without the blink of an eye is

... like, calm, gazing, gliding, sweeping neutral being (*Mittelwesen*) (45).

The reference to the ‘neutral being’ is, as is evident in the *Geschlecht* series of writings and in the interview with Christie Macdonald (“Choreographies”), important for Derrida in a thinking of a beyond to *sexual difference*. I shall discuss it a bit later.

Woman, as opposed to the intimate attack of the sharply pointed *style*, works (is it in absence?), “seduces” (49) ‘from a distance’. She works under the cover of distance’s very chasm, the veiled enigma of proximation – the third section of the essay is called “Voiles/Veils”. Derrida follows Nietzsche’s argument to its limit. Woman is a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum, in short, non-truth. But do not forget that for Nietzsche, the “abyssal divergence of truth” (51), that untruth, *is* truth. What is the woman then – the untruth that *is* the truth? And then, the epistemology of truth changes –

... truth is like a woman. It resembles the veiled movement of feminine modesty. ... the complicity (rather than the unity) between woman, life, seduction, modesty – all the veiled and veiling effects - ... is a deadly problem: that which reveals itself but once (*das enthult sich uns einmal*) (51).

If truth is illusion and woman the illusory representation of truth, then, woman is truth. And, unlike the ‘credulous philosopher’ who dogmatically believes in truth and woman – thereby understanding ‘nothing’ – “*she* at least knows that there is no truth” (53). Identity is the non-place of this mise-en-abyme, in the middle of the two surfaces that reflect each other infinitely. Remember the body that woman *is*, is the body of the man. And so, what is this body that the man owns and the woman is? The question looms abyssal for the (wo)man.

Let us track the logical progression of the argument to a point before proceeding further. To think seriously about any ethics or politics like feminism, class struggle, anti-colonial struggle, that locates its source in a specific identity (woman, proletariat, the colonized, the black, or some other criterion), one has to think about the identity around which the ethico-politics is constructed. In the endeavor to understand what a specific identity *is*, trying to follow the itinerary of the construction of the self, one may reach the question of the (im)possibility of a ‘pure’ being not dependant on a concrete identity-category. One reaches the ontological question of the *ontico-ontological difference*. This is definitely not the only end-point of such an inquiry. A historical charting of genealogies of identities is a very important object of questioning. But that does not exhaust the possibilities of the search. On the contrary, an ontological questioning may very well complement and enrich the historical investigation, and vice versa – a point barely recognized by present day social sciences despite their claims to ‘high theory’. The complementing of the ontological and the historical is counter-intuitive to the received vision of the division of ‘theory’ into the historical and the phenomenological. I speak here of a complementing through interruption, where the interrupting of the historical through ontology is necessary for a

conceptualization of history in terms of the trace-structure as opposed to a sense of history as full presence. Similarly, ontology needs to be interrupted by history to bring in the sense of deferral that haunts presence in its purported fullness.

Derrida in *Spurs* reads Heidegger to have affirmed a primary role of ontico-ontological difference in the making up of the identity of a self. This difference is primary in *Dasein*, the being there of the human. The other differences, of sex, class, or race, or caste, are premised on and in their turn affect, this fundamental difference. Derrida puts into question the primacy of this ontological dispersion –

... the question of sexual difference ... [is] not at all a regional question in a larger order which would subordinate it first to the domain of a general ontology, subsequently to that of a fundamental ontology and finally to the question of the truth of being itself (1979, 109).

At least sexual difference is not a regional problem within the larger field of ontology. Ontology assumes the problem of *being proper*, of propriety and property – *ontology presupposes appropriation*. And being proper means to be adequate to the *name* that marks *being* – to inhabit the space cleared by a name, within a name, marked by a name. He is talking about the intimacy of the name and the being. In the process of appropriation into the ‘proper name’ sexual difference is axiomatically presumed, and thus sexual difference remains an essential condition for *being* as such.

Is this gesture – by positing sexual difference as fundamental to ontology – undermining the blurring of the sex/gender binary? On the contrary, this move squarely brings in the question of sexual identity into the realm of construction, thus de-naturalizing it, and goes on to trace the dynamics of the process of this figuration to a pre-ontological substratum. It questions any pure existence beyond making. The social/linguistic dimension of appropriation is unassailable part and preserve of *being* in Derrida. And sexual

difference is an element of this preserve. Sexual difference as a metaphor of difference is a metaphor placed within the name and existence of sexual difference. Its metaphoricity is linked to the ontic. But then, is it possible to think of a 'space' beyond that of the inalienable being in/of sexual difference? The following section deals with the *economy* of such a gesture.

## II *Property Talks: The (Non)Space of the Name*

...[W]hat if we were to approach here... the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? (Derrida 1997-1982)

I deal with two names that Derrida uses to mark such a space of non-discrimination – *Khora* and *Geschlecht* – to address these questions, of course, not to satisfy with answers to them. I start with the two different uses (by Derrida and Butler) of the concept *Khora* that bring out two divergent positions on the questions above. Again, I remain partial to one of these (Derrida) without letting go of the other altogether. But before that, a brief discussion on the marking of the space *within*, a charting of the terrain of man is in order.

Is it then, that we remain always already inserted into a structure, which constitutes a destiny, of being, of appropriation and of sexual difference? For Derrida, this insertion, the closure of identity, becomes possible by making a leap across the abyss of unanticipatability, without a prior calculus. It is a *gift*. Elsewhere (Derrida 1992), he has spoken of the *gift* in its relation to *economy*. The concept of this *gift* is a beyond to – an interruption in the circulation of – a circular economy of giving with its anticipation of return (the economy of a Maussian rendering of the structure of the gift). To quote Derrida –

... [E]conomy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). ... [E]conomy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously *at the center*...

... [I]s not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? ... That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, ... [T]he *given* of the gift ... must not come back to the giving ... It must not



circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, ... If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. (6-7)

And he goes on to add, “the gift is the impossible” (7). Of course, this is different from a humanist ethic of giving, an ethic that empirically does not expect a return and thus gets the return of a good conscience. This is the structure of an event (“which is one meaning of *ereignis*”, see Derrida 1979, 119) that interrupts the structure of economy with a suddenness.<sup>8</sup> It is a sudden, unanticipated break in the economy of sexuality and identity, not determinable by prior machinations, an impossible burst of possibilities –

The history of Being becomes a history in which no being, nothing, happens except *Ereignis*’ unfathomable process. The proper-ty of the abyss ... is necessarily the abyss of property, the violence of an event which befalls without Being (Derrida 1979, 119).

What is it to treat the *event* called sexual difference as a *gift* beyond the economy of *proper* identities, as a gift that goes on to make possible the very premises of *being*? For Derrida in his series of *Geschlecht* writings<sup>9</sup>, paradoxically, this relates to a certain *neutrality* of the Dasein. He (Derrida 1991 a, 384) quotes Heidegger –

For the being which constitutes the theme of this analytic, the title ‘man’ (*Mensch*) has not been chosen, but the neutral title ‘*das Dasein*’

Just a little later, he marks this neutrality to be in the direction of sexual neutrality, and a certain *asexuality* [sexlessness – *Geschlechtslosigkeit*]. Derrida goes on to explain that this *neutrality* is, for Heidegger, neither negative, nor necessarily related to the sexual difference. On the contrary, in Heidegger’s later texts, “thirty years later” (385), the word *Geschlecht* “will

be charged with all its polysemic richness: sex, genre, family, stock, race, lineage, generation” (385). But Derrida does not miss the import of the fact that –

... among all the traits of man’s humanity that are thus neutralized [signified by the word *Geschlechtslosigkeit*], along with anthropology, ethics, or metaphysics, the first that the very word “neutrality” makes one think of, the first that Heidegger thinks of in any case, is sexuality (385).

The body is so much naturalized as the *sexed* male body, that neutralization almost ‘naturally’ refers to a passage from the masculine to the neutral. Still later in the essay, Derrida points out that the neutralization refers not as much to *sexuality* as such, as to the marks of difference, and specifically, *sexual duality* (387). Differentiating sexual *duality* from *difference* as such, his reference is to a certain positivity of, and not a negative implication to, the asexuality being spoken of. Again he quotes Heidegger (387) –

But such asexuality is not the indifference of an empty nothing... , the feeble negativity of an indifferent ontic nothing. In its neutrality, *Dasein* is not just anyone no matter who, but the originary positivity...and power of essence....

For Derrida,

... here one must think of predifferential, or rather a predual, sexuality – which does not necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated... (387-388).

Thus the ‘absence’ of *Geschlecht* in the *Dasein* is, here, a positive potential rather than a negation of ‘presence’, an inversion of the unanticipatability of death gone (to the) past, a possibility of sexual multiplicity rendered impossible by sexual duality that marks the presence of the being. It may lead on to the question, at the heart of the question of sexuality –

... how does multiplication get arrested in difference? And in sexual difference? (401)

In a slightly later text marked by the proper name Jacques Derrida, an authorless yet authorized text called “Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida” (1987-1984), the ‘speaker referred to as “response”’ that gives the account of the responses of Derrida to queries of the seminar-participants, tries to unravel the connections of the *gift* and the *neutrality* of the *Dasein*. Through the incalculable suddenness of the gift, *Dasein*’s neutrality becomes the *impossible* (remember, “the gift is the impossible”). The *gift* of sexuality is not of non-sexuality but of sexual non-determination in the sense of opposition. It is sexuality out of frame of the known duality, “totally aleatory to what we are familiar with in the term “sexuality”” (1987-1984, 198). Of course, Derrida is aware of a type of neutralization that “can reconstruct the phallogentric privilege”, the neuter in the model of man. But what he is speaking of here is in the order of the incalculable, of absolute heterogeneity and undecidability. He calls this a liberating of the field of sexuality for a *different, multiple* sexuality –

At that point there would be no more sexes...there would be one sex for each time. One sex for each gift. A sexual difference for each gift. That can be produced within the situation of a man and a woman, a man and a man, a woman and a woman, three men and a woman, etc. (199)

The *gift* of *Geschlecht*, if we can speak thus, is a figure of a beyond to the familiar terrain of sexual difference. Interestingly, it has certain other connotations.

Tina Chanter, in a short piece (1997)<sup>10</sup>, has noted how the multiplicity of meanings of the word *Geschlecht* can be productive of a sensitivity to associations of the issue of sexuality to other issues. In that piece, she discusses race. Another very important matter that Derrida’s writings in this series address, and which has been discussed in detail by Spivak (1994) and Krell

(1992), is the question of animality. In *Geschlecht II*, Derrida explicates the “problem of man, of man’s humanity, and of humanism” (1987, 163). He marks the use of the word *Geschlecht* as “an ensemble, a gathering together..., an organic community in a nonnatural but spiritual sense, that believes in the infinite progress of the spirit through freedom” (163), as an ‘we’ that becomes in the end, humanity. The role of the ‘hand’ in the definition and the partition of the human from the animal are discussed in detail. Derrida starts with a discussion of the mode of presence according to either of the two modes, *Vorhandenheit* (independent presence to hand) or *Zuhandenheit* (ready to hand). *Dasein* is neither. But the other in whose relation *Dasein* presents itself has to be present in either of the two modes. Derrida puts the question thus –

What hand founds the other? The hand that is related to the thing as maneuverable tool or the hand as relation to the thing as subsisting and independent object? (176)

And he goes on to quote Heidegger (182) –

Man has no hands, but the hand occupies, in order to have in hand, man’s essence.

This hand that Heidegger speaks of is related to writing, not to caress or desire. This hand, *is*, in the singular. It is not the prehensile organ that the apes also resemble to have, but the singular hand of the man that speaks and writes. The *general principle of difference* that is at work in the ‘arresting’ of multiplication of sexes in a sexual difference as duality, thus works at the level of the differentiating principle of the human from the animal –

... every inauguration of the world by *Dasein* is struck through by the inaccessible animal (Spivak 1994, 31).

Elsewhere (1991), Derrida has spoken of how the declaration of ‘Thou shalt not kill’ had not included the whole of the living in the Judeo-Christian

tradition. It has been the indictment against the killing of the other man, not the killing of the living in general, and Derrida has spoken of a 'general animality' in *Of Spirit* (quoted by Spivak 1994, 32). Not going into the details of Spivak's clear indictment, following Derrida, of the Heideggerian attempt to mark the animal 'off from Dasein', although, as she emphasizes, "the animal has some relationship with the world" (31), I stress the point that, for Derrida, even the utopic space of *Geschlecht* is not a pure unsullied reserve of multiple possibilities. It is also marked by the discriminating and dualizing powers of/in being. But Derrida prefers, not the word u-topia, not a non-topos, but a different name for the space he, in a way, aspires for – *Khora*. A brief introduction to the concept of *Khora* itself is in order.

Derrida's argument regarding the 'place of the woman' is now quite well known through his exchanges (1997-1982, 1984) with Christie Macdonald and Verena Conly.<sup>11</sup> What is the place offered to the woman in his theory? To such a query, he responds by rendering problematic the notion of 'a place for woman'. It reminds one of the home and the kitchen. He speaks of a choreography of voices, the multiplicity of sexually marked voices, rather than a *place* for the woman. If one relates this unease with the *place* with a prior focus on the *space* named *Khora* in his writings, it might be productive of a different figuration for the 'woman', I contend. Hans Ramo points out that the term 'choreography' (writing dance) derives from a root (Greek word for dance, *choreia*) different from that of 'chorography' (mapping a region) that derives from the Greek word for space: *chora*. "Still, there is an element of similarity in that the Greek word for dance originally had a connection to a (certain) place" (1999, 324), he admits. Derrida's *Khora* is a variant spelling of this *chora* with the connotations of space. But what kind of a space is it?

Ramo speaks of two types of space in Greek thought, analogous to the two divisions of time. *Chronos*-time is abstract (homogeneous?) time and *kairos*-time is meaningful, 'value'-laden time. *Topos* is concrete place and *chora* abstract space. He refers to the Homeric (Iliad 8.491) use of *chora* as a definite space, a piece of ground that is *clear of the dead* (not filled by

the deadly or the dead). There is a later shift in meaning of the term to an indefinite, partly occupied space (not void). *Chora* is thus not emptiness, but also not the ‘condensed, concrete, and meaningful’ place called *topos*. According to Ramo, for Plato,

... chora is a non-place of non-origin and a ‘space’ for giving and creation” (314).

Derrida inaugurates the discussion on what he calls *Khora* with the short and incisive sentence –

*Khora* reaches us, and as the name (1995, 89).

That which *is* a non-place, cannot lay claim to the proper place of a name, is thus given a name, *Khora*<sup>12</sup>. That this name, the (by definition) non-present referent of the name, defies the “logic of noncontradiction” is evident. Derrida refers it to a “third genus” that is neither “sensible” nor “intelligible”. It is said to belong to a third genus of discourse, beyond the mythos/logos binary. And the name *Khora* is by definition, from its inception, a misnomer, a mistranslation of a non-referent, for it is not amenable to reference. Interpretations, if we remember the form/matter binary of Greek thought, tries to give form to it, determine it by naming. *Khora*, named receptacle (*dekhomenon*) or place (*Khora*) in *Timaeus* where Plato discusses it in detail, remains –

... inaccessible, impassive, “amorphous”, ... and still virgin, with a virginity that is radically rebellious against anthropomorphism... (95).

Derrida raises the point of ‘its’ association with the ‘woman’. Plato compares *Khora* to a mother or nurse. Derrida is aware of the intricate twinings of the text that places this fiction told by someone who has heard it from someone else and then on to a far back teller of tales, in a text that is ambitious enough to speak of the origins of the Platonic world, of a genealogy of the great

Solon – it speaks of the origin of the human race, and that *is* the same thing as the origin of the world. Derrida repeats the word anthropomorphism, a *morphe*, the body of the anthropos that underlie the discussion. He untiringly reminds us that the figures that ‘describe’ *Khora* are, of necessity, inadequate, false; the figures of receptacle, mother, nurse, or imprint-bearer. Philosophy cannot speak of these directly –

Philosophy cannot speak philosophically of that which looks like its “mother”, its “nurse”, its “receptacle”, or its “imprint-bearer”. As such, it speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own. (126)

At the end of the essay, Derrida points at the Aristotelian interpretation of *Khora* as matter (*hyle*) but reminds us that Plato never used this term to qualify *Khora*.

Judith Butler approaches the idea of chora, differently, in her discussion of matter in the context of what she calls the feminization of matter. Depending on the discussion of Irigaray, she brings up the two ways in which the feminine is treated by the masculine. The subordinated other within the binary is called *specular* feminine, and that which is excluded through an erasure is the *excessive* feminine. She is perfectly aware of the impossibility of *naming* the excess, which, by definition, cannot be named. Yet, in a nuanced argument, Butler is able to make the point that the excluded gets the figure of the feminine and the included gets defined as a binary other of the masculine. Thus the ‘woman’, if she *is*, is outside the symbolic domain of the man. Remember, my earlier reference to the woman defined as the body and the body defined in the model of man, so that, the woman *is* and does not *have*, the body. Butler, in discussing chora and Plato’s concept of materiality (*hypodochē*), succinctly marks that this discourse on materiality–

does not permit the notion of the female body as the human form (1993, 53).

Agreeing with Derrida that the chora cannot be identified with the feminine,

Butler claims to take the argument a step forward. To me, there are two aspects of this step she speaks of. One, naming it a “nonthematizable materiality” (42), Butler characterizes the feminine as the necessary foundation to the thematized symbolic, the feminine that is rendered *impossible* by the structure of the symbolic that it itself brings into existence.<sup>13</sup> As such, the possible resisting move to this exclusion is an inversion – to bring in the feminine to the symbolic as a resource for resistance. This possibility flows from the second aspect I want to point at, that of the Irigarayan mimesis of the dominant as an act of insubordination. This is to displace the originary displacement perpetrated on the feminine. The strategic move for the ‘woman’ is to mimic the rules of the ‘male’ symbolic. As ‘woman’ is by definition excluded from this symbolic, the act of mimicking becomes an act of transgression. To speak of the ‘woman’s place is to displace the displacement of the ‘woman’ from space. And we may very well remember, this is in perfect agreement with Butler’s notion of the Lesbian Phallus as an oppositional move to phallogocentrism.

*Khora* as a figure of a possible inversion, or that of an impossible responsibility that would question the act of figuration itself? Put into such binary terms, which neither Derrida nor Butler seems to imply (they differ in point of stress), I would choose the latter. To remain within the logic of inversion, even when one extends the implications of inversion to a displacement, is to remain oblivious of the many unanticipated possibilities of the impossible. This logic correctly reminds that imaginations of the radical outside have to be derivable from the present; these imaginations need to be rooted in the ever-inadequate present. Yet this tends to forget that the future-to-come is not wholly derivable from the present. It is important that the ethical moment has to bear the marks of a radical unanticipatability. What is vital for my contention here is the multiplicity of the modes of figuring the ‘woman’ that Spivak or Derrida seems to imply and employ.



### III *Figuring Sexual Difference: Multiple Singularities*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's submission is that, as the male philosopher dissipates the fixity of the identity of the man in the enigma of woman, the woman philosopher might turn her attention to the transparent rigidity of man. The question she addresses is –

What is man that the itinerary of his desire creates such a text? (Spivak 1997-1983, 62, repeated with emphasis in 67)

Let us try to trace her argument's course. All human beings are irreducibly displaced, whereas, in the discourse that privileges the center, women alone have been diagnosed as such.<sup>14</sup> For Derrida, miming the privileged discourse while unsettling it, woman is the name/metaphor of all displacements, and displacement is the event which he tries to bring about in all centric figures. The woman who is the 'model' of this deconstructive discourse remains a woman generalized and defined in terms of the faked orgasm and other varieties of denial in acceptance. Spivak goes on to mark the 'masculine' location from which this double displacement of the woman acts. She refers to the scene of Derrida's discussion of a pantomime commented on by Mallarme – "faking a faked orgasm which is also a faked crime" (50). The woman 'fakes' the desire of man, for that is the only desire available to her. Her orgasm is already faked. Yet for the (male) philosopher Derrida to trace this displacement of the woman is to perpetrate another displacement on her, a doubling –

[The hymen's] "presence" is appropriately deconstructed, and its curious property appropriated to deliver the signature of the philosopher. (51)

Man can problematize but not fully disown his status as a subject. Deconstruction thus may be viewed as an attempt to a feminization of philosophy and not a masculine use of woman as instrument of self-assertion. Yet this feminization still remains "of" philosophy itself.

The language of a woman's desire does not enter this enclosure. ...

... it is the phallus that learns the trick of coming close to faking the orgasm here, rather than the hymen coming into its own as the indefinitely displaced effect of the text (50-51).

Women remain as the instrument of male self-deconstruction.

[Derrida,] differentiating himself from the phallogentric tradition under the aegis of a(n idealized) woman who is the "sign" of the indeterminate, ... cannot think that the sign "woman" is indeterminate by virtue of its access to the tyranny of the text of the "proper" ... that [Spivak has] called the suppression of the clitoris... (Spivak 1987-1986, 91).

Spivak uses two concept-metaphors to point at ways beyond – the *clitoris* and the *mother*.

How is Spivak's critique of Derrida different from those other feminist criticisms which point at the attenuation of the possibility of women's agency when one posits woman as a radically other? When she characterizes Derrida's attempt in deconstructing the male desire as man's 'proper' appropriation of the displacement of 'woman', she seems very near to such a position. Yet she is always wary of the fact that Derrida's move is different from the 'masculine use of woman as instrument of self-assertion'. Spivak appreciates the call of the *wholly other* and is far from reducing politics to a calculable cartography of possibilities thought from within the dynamic of the self. Aware of the inevitability of figuring the other in terms of the within, she points at some problems of figuring the other as 'woman' in the way Derrida does. She wants to keep possibilities open for figures less general and more intimately associated with the ontology of the woman. The clitoris and the mother are two such figures. In certain other occasions, Spivak chooses yet more particular figures like the characters of Mahasweta Devi's novels 'Dopdi', 'Jashoda', 'Douloti', or the 'Pterodactyl', and sometimes the 'Devi'

in an Indic setting, or ‘Lucy’ in Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*. These singular figures bring out the intersection of generalities in intricate and minute details. Feminism, for Spivak, is inevitably multiple-issued as opposed to a base on a single issue of the ‘woman’.<sup>15</sup> Maybe, the singularity of each event is thus figured in better ways, though not thereby doing away with generalities. On the contrary, this might open the way to a perceiving of other generalities<sup>16</sup>.

Spivak has posited the figure of clitoris as signifying an excess to the dominant economy of the uterus – clitoral as sign of excess in/of the woman, a clitoral economy vis-à-vis the uterine economy – in multiple instances. She has used the practice of clitoridectomy as shorthand for the forcible exclusion of the woman’s desire acting in the proprietorial rule of the man. The figure of motherhood, for her, does not *necessarily* exhaust itself within the uterine economy. Especially in “French Feminism Revisited” (1993), she has dealt with the matter in details. The figures of four women philosophers/thinkers – Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, and Luce Irigaray – structure her argument. Not going into the minutiae of that labyrinthine reasoning exquisitely executed, I broach a few points relevant to our discussion.

One, almost opposed to the Derridean project of making ‘woman’ occupy the place of a general critique of the history of western thought (Spivak 1984) as an act of unfleshed figuration/nomination, the name of the mother bears the paleonymy of embodied women, ‘homogenizing multiplicity into intelligibility’. The ontological inaccessibility – in that, in the dominant view, the womb is not accessible to the ontology of the full person and remains as a precursor to, not yet full, a person – of the womb marks it as a prepropriative site. Two, despite differences among the four thinkers referred to above, Spivak has woven a common textile with them around the figure of the mother and the ethical imperative of sexual difference. Beauvoir’s female body in gestation is not biologism, Spivak asserts. For her, the pregnant body is conceived as species-life rather than species-being, a site of a wholly other rather than man-consolidating other. It is the prepropriative space before access to the properness of the species-being of each female subject. *Mother*

is the situation that cannot situate itself but must take responsibility. With Cixous, woman must be faithful to the subversive logic of plurality and thus become part of the body of all struggles. The fundamental struggle is to split, open, and fill all generalized, unified struggles with plurality. The “production of individuality” for her is not merely an exclusionist repressive construction, but a necessary underived fiction, the agent’s springboard for a decision in the face of radical undecidability. Helie-Lucas calls for true internationalism that can be read as not inter but *antre*<sup>17</sup> – speaking of the *pouvoir/savoir* of the feminine. She places the female individual in a political rather than familial collective. For Irigaray, the maternal-feminine is a limit, an envelope, the other place consolidated into *her* norm. Mother-woman is the *place separated from “its” place*, not having its own place it becomes the place for the other, the “him”. The propriety of the ‘mother’ is in hosting the ‘proper’, in being the place where the proper is ‘born’, and as such, in not having a proper place of her own.

This brings us into the third point I want to talk about – sexual difference for Irigaray as Spivak reads her. Sexual difference here, not a decisive biological fact, is posited as the undecidable in the face of which the now displaced “normal” must risk ethicopolitical decisions. Sexual difference is the limit to ethics. An ethical position must entail universalization of the singular, and one universal cannot be inclusive of difference. For Irigaray, the positing of the multiple is not the solution –

At best, this singular act would allow for a balancing act between the one and the many, but the one remains the model which, more or less openly, controls the hierarchy of multiplicity: the singular is unique and/but ideal, Man. Concrete singularity is only a copy of the ideal, an image. ... [P]rivileging concrete singularity over ideal singularity does not allow us to challenge the privilege of a universal category valid for all men and all women. ...

To get out from this all powerful model of the one and the

many, we must move on to the model of the two, a two which is not a replication of the same, nor one large and the other small, but made up of two which are truly different. (Irigaray 1995, 11).

So Irigaray takes the risk of positing two universals – sexual difference – two different ethical worlds, opened up by the gender-divided caress. Woman is to become the fecund agent of the caress. In a Levinasian phenomenology of *eros*, within the confines of a ‘reproductive ethics’, fecund caress can become indistinguishable from violence. Irigaray de-genders the active-passive division (in erotic love). Both partners do things and are not inevitably heterosexual. The caressing hands may then remind the other of the prepropriative site, the impossible origin of the ethical that can only be figured, falsely, as the subject as child-in-mother. Irigaray thus gives the woman to the other, to rememorate being-in-the-mother as the impossible threshold of ethics (not inaugurating the law of the father). This is a rewriting of the fecundity of the caress as the figuring of the prepropriative into an (im)possible appropriation. Here again, Spivak brings in the question of the colonial divide that (French) feminism tends to forget a bit too soon.

How does *sexual difference* mark the struggle for the equality of men and women? Despite a suspicion that the former undermines the latter, they can be shown to complement each other at one level. The fight for *equal* rights is not for the *same* set of rights. Equality and sameness may (though not necessarily) act at different registers. The woman’s body, marked in a specific way for the proper reproduction of the ‘human’ in society, may demand some special ‘different’ rights within the ambit of *equality*. The sexual difference we are speaking of has a separate itinerary – it ‘frames in undecidability the sure ground of decision’ (Spivak 1993, 159). Yet when the ‘minimum’ requirements for ‘life’ (the defining of normative notions *have* problematic implications, yet one has to take decisions over the undecidable) are at stake, it is foolish to not work for them within the boundary of sameness. Conceptually, one has to work through and with the parameters of equality to reach their limits; difference is inconceivable without sameness. To put

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sameness to question, threatening it with undecidability, the moment of sexual difference has to inscribe its course on the body of the *same*. Only, it remembers the calculus of equal rights, respectfully. Otherwise, the violence of androcentric hierarchy is repeated. For that, one has to go back to the story of man and the itinerary of *his* desire.

Well aware of the gradients in power and economy operating across the imperial/colonial divide that mark their traces upon the post-colonial theater of ‘independent’ nation states, of the inequities and imbalances that enmesh the cosmopolitan playground of global capital and national identity politics, Spivak remains wary of rejecting the goods of sameness in their entirety. Consistent with her refusal to forget the centering of the subject in a deconstructive move, she favours the ‘risk of responsibility’ to decide, to take ‘decision[s]’ that ‘[require] persistent supplementation’. Working both in and out of the universals in the registers of global political economy, culture and continental feminisms, not oblivious of the sanctioned ignorance even of the latter,<sup>18</sup> Spivak points at the paleonymy – the traces of the history of the uses that cling tenaciously to words – that undercuts many a resisting move, even those that highlight the body in its sexual difference:

Sexual difference is the critical intimacy...that can presumably think sexual difference as radical alterity, always from *within sexual difference*, of course. (Spivak 1993, 140 emphasis added).

For Spivak, the body of the third world woman – as it bears the burdens of paleonymy, not only of the ‘uterine social organization’ that structures western norms of womanhood but also that of the purported traditions of the ‘oriental societies’ – signifies an economy of excess.

This is an excess to the economy of reproduction materialized in the womb, the excess figured in the organ clitoris. The womb is everything that the woman as an object of ‘exchange, passage, or possession in terms of reproduction’ signifies. Situated in the haloed circle of motherhood and the

family, the womb keeps in motion (im)perceptible machinations to crush the girl and the child even as it (re)figures them. The clitoris is the organ effaced along with the ap-propriation of the womb, as it ‘escapes reproductive framing’, representing the multiplicity of female orgasmic pleasure dis-jointed from the reproductive act (vis-à-vis the singular connection of the male orgasmic pleasure to the reproductive function of semination). The danger of putting ‘the female body at the center of a search for female identity’ notwithstanding, and knowing fully well that a reclaiming of the excess of clitoris ‘cannot fully escape the symmetry of the reproductive definition’, Spivak, in order to de-normalize uterine social organization, would suggest an investigation into the “effacement of clitoris – where clitoridectomy is the metonym for women’s definition as “legal object as subject of reproduction ....”, the effacements active in a discontinuous and indefinitely context-determined manner. The figures she uses as tropes to make her point include Douloti ‘the bountiful’ – the bonded prostitute beyond and below the capital-family nexus, with her ‘tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in her dessicated lungs’ lying spread-eagled on a map of India the ‘independent nation’ – the ex-cesses of gender-nation-capital, a sad caricature of signifying the excesses of the sexed body. Likewise, Draupadi or Jashoda,<sup>19</sup> in different ways, act out the context-determined markings of the trauma that clitoridectomy entails.

Both Spivak and Irigaray work with(in) the metaphoricity of the body, bringing out the overdeterminations that mark its multiple presences – a metaphoricity inevitable in body-talks, the process of writing (on) the body. The risk of marking these presences with a certain correspondence with the pre-ontological onticity (not in the sense of a universal phenomenology but as located being) lies in an essentialization of the presence. This position aims at the unveiling of an agency in the body as such, which all theories – being articulated in language – tend to obscure. More than Spivak, Irigaray remains open to this possibility. Yet, this risk seems to be worth taking and, unavoidable. Attempts to move beyond the mind/body or man/woman dichotomies remain marked by the same dichotomies nevertheless, working with and in the multiple, shifting constitutivities that make up our (past-

present-future) continuous be-ings. Descartes' elusive body haunts the projects of authentic bodily experience, as do the immediacy of the Cartesian mind in the metaphors of embodiment.

So, what is the way out of this dilemma between the authority of the biological body and the dissipated pragmatism of the socio-cultural practices of embodiment? One step is to complicate the links between the ontological commitment and the ethico-political positions. To remember that a belief in the ground level 'biological fact' of the 'body' can go very well with a pragmatic ethical view, where the fact of biology is seen not to affect the desirability of a political stance based on identity. And, an awareness of the constructed nature of identity can equally match a political commitment based on the 'just' bases of that identity. Pointing at the dangers of falling back into the end of the bodily mystique, I reach my own contention of a need to think of 'other generalities' when writing (of) the body. Reaching out into singularities has to negotiate the metaphors of the general and the particular, responsibly.

The question of generalities is related to that of singularity. Singularity, as I see it (see Deleuze 1990, Spivak 2005 b), is the immanence of the moments of becoming, not particular instances of the universal but the repeated unrepeatable unit of the general. Unlike the relationship between the universal and the particular where the particular instantiates the rule of the universal, singularities act out interruptions in the general, interruptions that constitute the dissipated becoming of the general. And as such, the notion of the general and other generalities give way to the thinking of the (im)possibility of beings and their interconnectedness. The experience of the impossible thus enacts the ontological link between the self and the other. And this link calls for a responsibility to the other in the very being of the self – ethic as not something to be added on to ontology but as an inalienable constitution of ontology itself. The thinking of other generalities, even in the realm of the episteme, thus might clear the opening into an ethics of the (im)possible, of course, if not thought of in terms of closed epistemologies.



How can the body act as a resource for thinking an ethico-politics of the beyond? The immediacy which ostensibly authenticates the body as a material unthought ground makes it possible for the body to be a resource for a space beyond the prevailing structures of thought. What is unthought is marked to be beyond thought. It thus has the potential to act as a metaphor for that beyond. The metaphoricity of the corporeal allows the corpus to open up the possibility of an other beyond the rules of the same. That enables one to think of a notion of the politics of the (im)possible based on ideas of embodiment. Such a politics is juxtaposed to the politics of the possible, where politics is thought of only in terms of elements that can be derived from the present. In such a present-centered politics, the body is conceptualized as a signifier of spatial location where the notion of space remains inadequately theorized. Discussing sexual difference in conjunction with ontological difference, I deal with a different notion of space. Following Derrida, I speak of *khora* (not *topos*) that *is* (strictly speaking, one cannot speak of *khora* in terms of *is*-ness) a non-space and a beyond space which defies and grounds the ipseity of space itself. If the spatiality of the body is thought of in terms of *khora* and not that of *topos*, one may get a hint of such a politics of the (im)possible based on embodiment. Yet, replacing *topos* with *khora* is not the sole answer to the problem of going beyond the heterosexual universal. The diversity of figurations of the (im)possible exceed the calculus of a single name. Multiple *singularities* go on to mark the spaces in and out of *sexual difference*. Acting through and in the bid to go beyond the phallogentric *morphe* of the human, I bring in an ‘other’ figure in the next section of this article. The figure – the woman/maya – I discuss in this section bears the traces of a fictional attempt at such figurations.

#### IV *Yashobati's Story – Maya in a Trace-Structure*<sup>20</sup>

Kamal Kumar Majumdar's<sup>21</sup> Bangla novel *Antarjali Jatra* was published in the 1960s, built on a theme set in early Nineteenth Century Bengal. This was later put to the cinema in the 1980s, by Goutam Ghose, a filmmaker well known among the Indian non-mainstream directors.<sup>22</sup>

The storyline of the novel revolves round the 'journey into water' (*antarjali jatra*) – a specific expression denoting the last rites of a man that involves immersion of half the body in (holy) water – of the dying old Sitaram, which becomes literally true for his beautiful young wife, Yashobati. Yashobati is married to the man at the cremation ground, even as he is waiting to die, brought to the cremation ground on the bank of the Ganga to complete the final rites. The not so tacit understanding between Yashobati's father, the sons of Sitaram, and the scheming Brahmin 'purohits' is that she would commit *sati*<sup>23</sup> when her husband dies. This would rid the father of his burden of an unmarried daughter, would provide money and gold for the Brahmins in the ceremony of sati, and mean nothing but a gain in prestige to the sons. Outside this caste Hindu Brahminic nexus of cash and tradition is Baiju – the *chandal* – the outcast who burns corpses by profession. The novel flows on from a vivid dialogic narration of the scheming and the tensions among the authors of this incident and the somewhat forced participants like the Kabiraj (the Ayurvedic doctor), to the utter inability of Baiju to come to terms with the injustice, dishonesty and cruelty of the event to come. The relation between the young bride and the dying old groom slowly acquires multiple dimensions in this setting. The narrative shudders as Baiju's brute, defiant, desperate attempts to save Yashobati confront her shifting, tremulous, tentative yet pliant resistance, a resistance that implicates the tentacles of patriarchal norms constituting the selfhood of the woman, as much as something beyond, a sense of 'maya', the fiction/affection of myth and life. The narrative explodes into the time and the space where the untouchable, passion-ate Baiju and the sati Yashobati come together. Their bodies touch, with Yashobati's willingness. Earlier on, Baiju had touched her, even in nakedness. But she had remained untouched. This was the first time she

moved out, burst out of defilement into desire. Did they make love? That was not relevant. The bodies touched. And separated. The tides came. As the flood washed away old Sitaram, the funeral pyres, the ground beneath and the clay utensils, Yashobati jumped into the water – “and then only the blood-red waves! For now the moon is red”. Yashobati had to bite through Baiju’s flesh, and spit his hairs off, to reach this end.

How do we read such a narrative?<sup>24</sup> I whisper certain conjectures, build shadowy figures out of my own affective fictions. Into images in theory. Yashobati and Baiju are the evident outsiders. Of course not in the sense of a Meursault who bears the ennui and existential vacuity of a modern bourgeois life (Camus, 1982). (Meursault’s existential crisis explodes, albeit in a seemingly commonplace manner, in the killing of the Arab. That is not our concern here.) The woman enters the novel in a ‘duli’, the small improvised palanquin with a cloth-cover printed in red fabric, “the bearer of an impossibly sad dim crying sound”. She is the sati-to-be who almost remains the object of male manoeuvres and finally is drowned in the tidal flood. The ‘chandal’ – the ‘chnardal’ in colloqui – the man cast out by birth into the burning ground for his profession, the only one who roars, howls and bodily tries to break the decrepit orders of tradition, is finally left foiled in his effort to save the woman. Both of them are outsiders in a sense more phenomenal. Yet they are marked by the ‘inside’, by the orders that exclude (them), in ways more than one.

In one sense, each empirical site, be it an individual or a phenomenon or a process, is ever always crisscrossed by a number of structural identities – structural in the sense of playing out a role (fixed or contingent) in a specific analytical structure, subject to ‘multiple overdeterminations’. As such, no protagonist (in life, in fiction) does ever ‘represent’ a single identity corresponding to a fixed playing out of a single role. Baiju has the marks of the *inside* of the great *Hindu* tradition in a fundamental sense. *Chandal*, in the scriptures, is defined to be the son of a *Brahman* (the uppermost in the caste hierarchy) father and a *Sudra* (lowermost of the castes) mother. The whole theme of pollution and miscegenation hovers above him. And again,

in this genealogy, the male father is being polluted by the female mother, an act destined to be incomplete, albeit irreversible, in a heavily gendered context. Baiju has something of the (polluted) *Brahman* in him. May be this is what makes him so irresistibly tragic. At the same time, he bears the distinctive traces of a modernity that is inexorably to take the place of the bonds of traditions. ‘Baijunath definitely can bear with the corpse but not with death!’ – Foucault, among others, has drawn our attention to the intimate engagement of the modern (man) with the corpse that had opened the knowledge of the body to him simultaneously as he had learnt to abhor death. He delves into (the body of) the dead in order to keep death away from his own body.

With his heroic attempts to save the woman from dying; to save the beautiful, stereotypical sati; with his penetrating gaze into the society and the female body at the same instance, Baiju has in him elements of the lone bourgeois hero. Baiju as a character bears traces of both the margin and the center. He brings out the impossibility of choosing between the two. The traits of marginality are ever always present in the discourses of the center (to be), as gaps that both constitute and disrupt the center. Baijunath is not only an individual but a ‘chardal’ – drunken, corporeal, brute, animal-like, who saves the woman, saves her from her irredeemably self-imposed fidelity, to kill her through a paradoxical agency born of shame, guilt, a sense of self-abnegation enhanced by its momentary transgression in pleasures of the body, and, perhaps, something called ‘maya’.

This woman, the girl who is the real *pilgrim to the water*, has a multiplicity of selves to call her own. She is the small girl who is the victim of patriarchy, a passive victim to the machinations of the male actors like her father and the ‘purohits’. She, at least at times, is a willing victim who seems to choose the role of sati allotted to her, steeped in the ideologies of womanhood, plunging away from the moment of pleasure, deep into the torrential streams, following her husband. Yet the seams tear for a moment, Yashobati calls out, ‘father’–

... the utterance bore lingering traces of the frightful battle  
between the cat and the bird.

This is not all. The same girl undergoes other changes –

[D]esire was born of rage, all the quarters of the earth darkened, alone in the dense clouds, she dared to enter her own long blank sky, she came out of her own possession.

Yashobati touched Baiju. For one feminist critique (Sunder Rajan – 1993), this event signals a blatant foregrounding of the woman's body, yet falls short of the 'potency and potential anarchy of her sexuality'. One could ask, tentatively, does not this conceptualization of a woman's sexuality posit the woman as the Hegelian other of the civility of the man, as the negative of the (moral/linguistic) order, and as such, a derivative of that same order. Can we not look at this primal, primeval surge of the (woman's) body as a way in which the symbolic (order) views, grapples with, the unsymbolizable: in its own (i.e., the symbolic's) terms. When the others of the other surges in, they seem to be a variant of the other modelled as just negatives of the self – negatives (tongue in cheek, I submit) that might easily be, with some appropriate treatments, turned to black and white photographs.

Kamal Kumar works within a mind/body binary that acts itself out in the reason/emotion dichotomy. Yet there is a certain twist in his usage. The reasonings of the petty schemers serve the irrational urge of tradition while the bursting out of emotions in the two central characters seems to answer, in *essence*, the call of (universal) reason. As these ambiguities are played out *in/by* the bodies of Baiju and Yashobati, they react differently to the impulses. Baiju, the miscegenated Brahman, maintains a distance (of the observer?), even spatially, as he cruelly and unambiguously strikes the edifices of the socius, physically. May be this distance saves him from death, but leaves him defeated. Yashobati is more intimately implicated in the moves that tie and, at the same time, constitute her. For the dying old man to whom she is married, she has the sense of affection that surely goes beyond the stereotype of the dutiful wife. But maybe this is how stereotypes work, by conferring subjecthood in the dual sense. And maybe, the tacit invocation of the (il)legitimacy of the construction of a sterile non-desirous decrepit old man

is the familiar ploy of the cunning of patriarchy. Ambiguities of the situation notwithstanding, Yashobati has to destroy her *body* to come to terms with it. The body that made her transcend her mind cannot bear the weight of the transgression, the body that goes over the bounds is irremediably *polluted* – the self that is marked by this body is marked for/by absence, beyond redemption.

Women writers in Bangla at the end of the Twentieth Century have spoken eloquently on the sense of *abjection*<sup>25</sup> that the body entails (translations, if not otherwise stated, are mine) –

I am afraid of walking, afraid to stand up. Constantly apprehending the danger of the piece of cloth coming out in the open. Slipping casually down before the eyes of the people. Lest everyone come to know. Lest the floor be flooded with stinking blood. And the people burst out in cruel laughter. My own body. This body is putting me into disgrace. Drowning my own self down the gutters in broad daylight. (Nasrin 1999, 194)

And specially the sense of being irrevocably polluted after an unwanted and sudden sexual encounter –

I started thinking of myself as a sinner. Was it my sin that Sharaf uncle undressed me alone in a room! ...” (Nasrin 1999, 72)

Being silenced by pain led on to a still greater loss of speech for Paramita, the protagonist of a novel by Jaya Mitra. She lost all her strength to resist, to hate and even to save herself. Now she was totally alone with herself.

... This is her waking up to her body. What a way to wake up! Configurations of her own flesh and bones have brought her fear and disgust. (Mitra 1993, 59)

These feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness are, as the authors themselves know, consistent with the constructions of the gendered body.<sup>26</sup> They are enraged by this, by the constitutive injustice and cruelty of the predicament, trying to forge ways in and out of their (im)possible selves. In the process, the elements of class, coloniality, religion and other identities overdetermine their attempts. Mitra gets involved in the war between the classes, retaining a rare sensitivity to class differentials even in her march for what she herself calls *womanism*. A not too disguised valorization of motherhood as creative of life and the human underlies her project. Nasrin, implicated intimately in the circuits of global cultural production, remains acutely aware of the coercions of the family – ‘the machine for the socialization of the female body through affective coding’ (Spivak 1993, 82) – bringing out the (im)perceptible machinations that work within it to crush the girl and the child even as it (re)figures them. Her rage at the cultural powers of the religion and patriarchy is deeply marked by the empire-nation reversal axis, as such, not being able to avoid complicity with the latter. **Brown women** rescuing brown women from brown men: a forgetfulness of the traces of the white in the **brown** and the men in **women** would entail an erasure of the marks of situatednesses – a violence of omission. The same violence that would accompany a good-natured attempt to theorize the located body in a universal frame. Not to forget the reverse, which is, that this is a necessary gesture, something that we cannot not do.

The novel ends with a certain possibility – “A single eye, like eye mirrored in hemlock, was looking at her, the bride desiring union; the eye was wooden, as painted on a boat, it was painted in vermillion and moist with incessant tidal waves, able to shed tears; and so, somewhere maya still remains.” I do not dare to translate *maya*, the sense of fiction/affection with its referentiality to the philosophical, religious and colloquial tonalities of usage.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Partha Chatterjee (1997), I cannot assert that “the driving force of our modernity was our maya for the past”. I want to retain some elements of evanescence and specificity (characteristic of a different structure of feeling) in the category, which makes it difficult to speak of *maya* as driving force. It can be argued that *maya* as it is referred to above is a

construction of the patriarchy which it is claimed to transcend, albeit in an eternal momentariness. Maya can be seen to flow from the same role-playing of women as nurturer, affectionate and tenderhearted, vis-à-vis the male qualities in the opposite. The novel might be seen to bring this out: Yashobati's *maya* for her husband acts as the patriarchal ploy to constitute her (subordinated) subjectivity. I would argue that even in the tender moments of her brief nuptials, there remained a sense of fictive affection that transcended the role-playing of the loving wife. And as the woman destroys her own corporeality – torn between the blatant objectification of traditional patriarchy and the aesthetic and moral objectifications inherent in the bid of the modern to save the body-beautiful – what remains is *maya*. It remains in the glimpses of fiction/affection with the old man and in the tearful painted eye in wood. It remains eternal yet evanescent. Evanescent yet inalienable. I thus try to speak about the (im)possibilities of conceiving the slippage of an evanescent category and its concomitant moorings in the persistence of/in one's being. That is how this fiction falteringly tries to mark the symptoms of 'womanhood'. In men, women, and perhaps for in-betweens.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The allusion is to the canonical anthology of essays *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991) edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy on the question of the subject in theories that are often clubbed together by the epithet post.

<sup>2</sup> The problem is evident in an anecdote by the missionary anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt quoted in Csordas (1994). In response to Leenhardt's suggestion that the Europeans had introduced the notion of 'spirit' to the indigenous way of thinking, his interlocutor, an indigenous Canaque philosopher said that they had always been acting according to the spirit and, "...What you've brought us is the body" (6).

<sup>3</sup> Is there a heterosexualism of 'woman'? The subsequent discussions on sexual difference would point out that there is no simple answer to the question, as the positions of sexual two-ness and sexual multiplicity remain implicated in a mutual non-resolution. At this point I suspend the query to deal with the problem of going beyond a heterosexualism that is marked by 'man'.

<sup>4</sup> Within a vast literature on the co-implication of subjection and subjectivation in the word subject, I draw attention to Balibar's (1991) reference to the two words *subjectum* and *subjectus* being active in the "equivocal unity of a single noun" called the 'subject'.

<sup>5</sup> "The style-spur, the spurring style, is a long object, an oblong object, a word, which perforates even as it parries. It is the oblongi – foliated point (a spur or a spar) which derive its apotropaic power from the tout, resistant tissues, webs, sails and veils which are erected, furled and unfurled around it." (Derrida 1979, 41).

<sup>6</sup> A large part of the small literature on Derrida and feminism has taken up this small book, which is rather a single long essay, for meticulous scrutiny. See specifically the essays in the two books Holland 1997 and Feder et al 1997. Refer also to works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Drucilla Cornell and Elizabeth Grosz among many others.

<sup>7</sup> One may productively treat this as a deconstruction of Sara Heinamaa's (1997a, b) notion of sexual identities as modes or styles of being. Heinamaa's effort, based on a reading of Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, is to complicate the notion of a constructivist theory of sexual difference. For her, an attention to the constructed nature of the man/woman divide may very well retain a causal explanation with sexes being defined as ensemble of acquired attributes. Her way out is by pointing at the nature of the body as the iterable condition that makes objects possible for us. Even this view may very well retain a domineering ethic of masculinity, Derrida's discussion seems to suggest.

<sup>8</sup> Françoise Dastur (2000, 187) treats *Ereignis* as a word by means of which Heidegger tried to think the "almost unthinkable coincidence of Being and "man"". The coincidence of "the interiority of expectation" and the "exteriority of surprise" –

*Ereignis* means not only "happening"...but also, following its double etymology in both popular and scientific use, "appropriation" and "appearing to view". (187)

<sup>9</sup> I could use three of the *Geschlecht* pieces (I, II, and IV, 1991a, 1987a, and 1993, respectively) and the book called *Of Spirit* (1989), which David Farrell Krell (1992, 252)

characterizes as “the volume that interrupts the genetic transmission from the... third to the...fourth generation [of *Geschlecht*]”. *Geschlecht III*, probably unpublished in English till now, was unavailable to me. The word *Geschlecht* could mean “sex, race, species, genus, gender, stock, family, generation or genealogy, community” (Derrida 1987a, 162).

<sup>10</sup> Also see Chanter 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Ritu Sen Chaudhuri’s essay in Bangla (2007) deals with the issue in detail and offers a close reading of Derrida’s text on ‘woman’. I owe much of my argument here to this essay.

<sup>12</sup> To remember, *khora*, as also gift, or the trace, is one of those differential markers that continue to appear in Derrida’s writings as they strain to speak (of) the unspeakable. See also Derrida 1989b for a detailed dealing of the matter.

<sup>13</sup> Butler invokes Kristeva’s use of chora as being similar to her own (41), but Chanter’s (2000a) detailed comment makes Kristeva’s position look more complicated. I do not go into the details of the arguments here.

<sup>14</sup> Displacement – Freud’s word is *entstellung* (usually tr. as distortion, Spivak 1997-1983, 47, this footnote follows her discussion) – in general: dream as a whole displaces text of latent content into the text of manifest content. (Not as in displacement *in* the dream work.) This sense is extended to the general working of the psychic apparatus to problematize the subject. This originally displaced scene of writing is the scene of ‘woman’ – displaced out of primordial masculinity.

<sup>15</sup> See specially Spivak (1987b) for a discussion of “a blindness to the multinational theater” in “bourgeois feminism” (91).

<sup>16</sup> For a hint of a different generality, see Spivak’s “Moving Devi” (2001).

<sup>17</sup> The argument in this paragraph reflects those in Spivak 1987a.

<sup>18</sup> For Spivak’s indictments on this register, see specially (1987).

<sup>19</sup> Draupadi and Jashoda are two characters in two short stories by Mahasweta Devi. For detailed discussions on them, see Spivak 1993a and Spivak 1987a respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Spivak (2005) speaks of how Derrida “slips the trace into [reproductive heteronormativity]” (103) and then goes on to ask “What, then, is a trace?” (104). Her answer is –

It is or is not, or, more important, is in the possibility of always not being, the material suggestion that something else was there before, something other than it, of course. Unlike a sign, which carries a systemic assurance of meaning, a trace carries no guarantees....I am my mother’s trace. The Father’s name is written within the patronymic sign system. (104)

<sup>21</sup> Majumdar (1914-1979) was a versatile man. He had interests in mathematics, literature, drama, woodcuts, and a host of other subjects and activities. He is one of those rare persons who are acceptable to, almost revered by, both the mainstream and the avant garde of the Bangla literary world. It might be instructive to remember that the narrative I deal with below is written in post-colonial India by a man in whose writings sexism is not often under erasure. He writes, among other things, of a woman in colonial Bengal.

<sup>22</sup> The film has been dealt with, among others, by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) and Gayatri Spivak (1992). Spivak's indictment of a brash reduction, in the film – of irreducible lineaments of identity and figuration in the novel – in the interests of an international audience receptive to ready character-lines, is to me, absolutely on the mark.

<sup>23</sup> 'Sati' is a much contested figure in the postcolonial feminist literature. The writings on the sati are varied, rich and present a multitude of positions and interests. Lata Mani (1989) in some of her writings, and Ashis Nandy (1995), had dealt with sati as a concrete site to bring out colonial and post-colonial discursive encounters. Mani's brilliant discussion did empirically try to show how the British almost literally invented the authentic Hindu tradition, as they built it on the bases of scriptures and a canonization of disparate popular practices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999) insightful accounts did pose important foundational questions regarding the (im)possibility of representing the 'subaltern'. Here, sati acted as a trope through which Spivak is able to explicate her point. Interestingly, she deals with two characters who were not satīs, characters who either resembled sati, or failed to be one. The problems of agency in a (third world, discursively mute) woman are brought out poignantly in her essays. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's (1993) efforts to (re)constitute the 'subject' of sati, at the same time addressing the problems of representation, are rich and variegated in texture. Yet, as she moves on to and from attempts to trace the discursive nodes that mark the pre and post colonial narratives on sati, and a search for 'pain as a specific, gendered ground for subjectivity', she seems to be caught up, a bit uneasily, between the symbolic and a positivistic real, between (analysis of) discursive constructions and the (somewhat under-problematised) phenomenal existence of the 'body in pain'.

<sup>24</sup> Masterfully, Spivak points out that –

What the author of the novel is trying to do *takes as understood* a fully formed ideological subject, to whom the reader is invited to be ex-centric.... Majumdar expects the reader to have enough internalized perception of a certain kind of Hinduism, as a heteropraxic cultural system...

...This text is exactly not for the outsider who wants to enter with nothing but general knowledge, to have her ignorance sanctioned. (1992, 800)

In "Moving Devi", Spivak herself goes on to weave such a text resistant to easy appropriations by the unconcerned onlooker, I would conject.

<sup>25</sup> Butler(1993), Grosz(1994).

<sup>26</sup> In spite of the generic difference between the novel and the autobiography, I have used quotes from both to refer to the sense of abjection being written in the works of women authors across boundaries of genre.

<sup>27</sup> Spivak (2001) translates *maya* as 'fiction', not as 'illusion', as it is not just 'false'. She wants to "carry the paradox of the range of power of this antonym to "truth". In the essay she speaks on the difference between the female unitary *devi* and the male multiplicity of deities – "...she does through fiction and they ... through method". Also points out, "[f]or reverence for fiction (*maya*) as female to be unleashed, ...the female subject exit sociality". Not going into the *dvaita* mindset of which Spivak speaks here (undoubtedly a probable productive arena of talking in our context), I would instead refer to the associations of

femininity, fiction and female subjectivity with the notion of *maya*. Chatterjee's (1997) use of *maya*, though insightful, is somewhat loose, and does not go into the gendered connotations. Again, he is dealing with a different problematic. I invoke 'maya' as a figure used in the novel to indicate the slippage as well as the moorings of/in one's being a 'woman'. I do not comment upon whether 'maya' as a philosophical category can bear the weight of such representation. Moreover, there is a slight but definite shift from the connotations of the word in philosophical Sanskrit (available in short introductory texts like Sharma 1944) to that in the commonsense Bangla use where the sense of affection is unmistakable (like that in the dual word *maya-momota*, an expression which denotes care and affection).

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