

Extract from Nivedita Menon *Seeing like a Feminist* (Penguin/Zubaan 2012)

BODY

'If they see breasts and long hair coming, they call it woman

If beard and whiskers they call it man

But look, the self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman...'

The body in early modernity and in non-Western cultures

The first thing to note is that the rigid division of bodies into 'male only' and 'female only', occurred at a particular moment in human history, that is, at the inception of the constellation of features that we term 'modernity'. Thus, a set of assumptions that form common sense today were absent in Europe prior to the late 16th century, and in South Asia and Africa until the early 19th century, when European modernity was universalized through colonialism. That is, assumptions such as the idea that nature exists separately from humans as a passive, inert set of resources to be put to human use; that bodies are naturally entirely one sex or another; that hermaphroditism (bodies possessing both male and female sexual characteristics) is a disease; and that desire naturally flows only between 'opposite' sexes. Anne Fausto-Sterling points out that in Europe, it was only by the 17th century that hermaphrodites were forced to choose one established gender and stay with it, the punishment being death for failing to do so (Fausto-Sterling 2002).

The key notion central to European modernity that enables the 'common sense' assumptions outlined above, was the putting in place of the notion of the individual - that 'I' am this body and that 'my self' stops at the boundaries of my skin. Although this seems an entirely natural identification to the modern mind, it is in fact only about four hundred years old and has specific cultural moorings in the experience of the West. In non-western societies this notion of the individual, separate from all other individuals, as the unit of society, is still not an uncontested one. At every level in non-western societies then, there remains a sense of self that is produced at

the *intersection* of individuated bodies and collectivities of different sorts. Individuation then, that is, the process of recognizing oneself as primarily an individual, is always a process *in the present continuous* in our parts of the world

It is against this backdrop that we must ask the question - was sex/gender a *universally* relevant criterion of social differentiation at all? That is, did all societies at all times and in all places make male/female distinctions that sustained themselves over stable bodies?

This question is raised frontally by Nigerian scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi, who challenges the universality of gender as a social category. She argues that western anthropologists, even feminists, failed to understand African society in its own terms, because they assumed that gender identities and hierarchies were universal: 'If the investigator assumes gender, then gender categories will be found whether they exist or not.'

Oyewumi argues that the emergence of patriarchy as a form of social organization in the West is rooted in particular assumptions that emerged with modernity in the West – the gradual privileging of gender difference as the primary difference in society, and locating this difference in certain visual cues. (The blue-for-boys-pink-for-girls principle as it emerged in the West is an instance of this, and we will return to its surprising history a little later).

Oyewumi makes the radical suggestion that 'gender' as a category did not operate in any significant way in pre-colonial Yoruba and many other African cultures. For instance, she cites a study by a Western anthropologist, of Ga people in Accra (Ghana), which began by looking for 'women', tracked these 'women' in the processes of their work, and found they were overwhelmingly traders. The author of that study conceded 'I started out to work with women; I ended by working with traders.' Oyewumi asks the question – why did the author look for 'women' in the first place? Her answer is - because 'woman' is a body-based identity, and body-based identities tend to be privileged by Western researchers over non-body based identities such as 'trader'. The identity of trader in West African societies is non-gender specific, says Oyewumi, but the Ga traders continue to be referred to in the study as 'market women', 'as if the explanation for their involvement in this occupation is to be found in their breasts, or...in the X chromosome.'

Oyewumi argues through her own work that among the Yoruba, *seniority* is the defining axis of hierarchy, not *gender*. Seniority is not only based on chronological birth order, but on

interrelationships established through marriage. Thus seniority is always relative and context dependent, depending on who is present in any given situation. Yoruba language in gender-free, Yoruba names are not gender specific, nor are *oko* and *aya*, usually (wrongly) translated into English as husband and wife; and the terms for 'ruler' too are gender-free (though translated into English as 'king'). Thus, gender is not the relevant category to understand power relations among pre-colonial Yoruba (Oyewumi 1997).

Ifi Amadiume's work on the Igbo of Nigeria too, establishes that in pre-colonial Igbo society, daughters could assume male roles and become sons, and wealthy women could obtain 'wives'. The linguistic system of the Igbo had few gender distinctions, and terms for roles such as 'head of household' were un-gendered, while the 'master' or 'husband' role did not necessitate a male classification. Amadiume terms this as 'gender flexibility'. However, we can go further with the framework that Oyewumi provides us, for it enables us to radically interrogate whether the category of 'gender' existed in any recognizable way in pre-colonial Igbo society. Oyewumi insists that African ways of understanding the world were radically different from the Western, but have been continually translated into Western categories and languages already loaded with gendered and patriarchal assumptions, even by African scholars. Was 'gender' then, invented in Africa through the processes by which colonial interventions made African societies legible to Europe in its own terms? (Amadiume 1987)

Similarly, in Native American culture, before the Europeans came to the Americas, 'two-spirit' referred to people who were considered gifted because they carried two spirits, that of male and female. It is told in ancient artifacts that women engaged in tribal warfare and married other women, as there were men who married other men. These individuals were looked upon as a third and fourth gender, and in almost all cultures they were honoured and revered. Two-spirit people were often the visionaries, the healers, the medicine people, the nannies of orphans, the care givers. This type of identity has been documented in over 155 tribes across Native North America (Roscoe 1988).

Consider now the poets of the Bhakti movements in the landmass we now call India – these movements originated in the southern part, in the Tamil region in the 6th century CE and flourished in the north from the 15th to the 17th centuries. These mystics expressed a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the

loss of maleness as power and the loss of femaleness as sexualized powerlessness. AK Ramanujan suggests that 'the lines between male and female are continuously crossed and recrossed' in the lives of the Bhakti saints. They demystified the body and sexuality by dismantling the codes and conventions that 'sex' the body. Bhakti saints turned away from sex in this world, but not from fear or hatred of sexuality, but because their sexual passion was invested entirely and in a disembodied manner, in the chosen deity as lover.

A 10th century devotee of Shiva, Devara Dasimayya, wrote:

If they see breasts and long hair coming,

They call it woman,

 If beard and whiskers

 They call it man.

 But look, the self that hovers in between

 Is neither man nor woman...ⁱ

Ramanujan points out that when women saints like Lalla Ded of Kashmir and Mahadeviyakka of Karnataka threw away their clothes, they are making us see that 'modesty', which is invested in hiding the body with clothes, is 'a way of resisting and enhancing sexual curiosity, not of curbing it. It is this paradox that is exposed when clothes are thrown away...By exposing the difference between male and female, by becoming indifferent to that difference, [they are] liberated from it.'

This is how the female saint Mahadeviyakka, who clothed herself only in her own long hair, perceives the body:

 You can confiscate

 Money in hand;

 Can you confiscate

 the body's glory?

 Or peel away every strip

 you wear,

but can you peel

the Nothing, the Nakedness

that covers and veils?ⁱⁱ

Clearly even by the time of the Bhakti movements, normative notions of masculinity/ femininity and appropriate/inappropriate sex had come into being, against which the Bhakti saints were in rebellion. But considerable fluidity still existed even till the mid to late 19th century, when the processes of colonial modernity in alliance with the modernizing nationalist elites began the process of disciplining it.

Historical work on cross-dressing (male actors playing female roles) in theatre and dance in late 19th/early 20th century India, that is, at a moment when the practice was beginning to be delegitimized by the discourses of modernity, shows that arguments about gender verisimilitude were made in order to end the practice of men playing women's roles – that is, that they didn't look feminine enough. But simultaneously such arguments displayed an anxiety that female impersonators were so feminine that they could 'soil the fancy' of men! (Bhattacharya 2003). Feminist scholars have shown that female impersonation, far from appearing unnatural, in fact fashioned 'a widely circulated standard for female appearance and modified codes of feminine conduct' (Hansen 1999). Female viewers indeed, were instructed to model themselves on the transvestite actor. The new nationalist bourgeois woman was to learn how to be a proper woman by watching the production of appropriate femininity by the male actor.

Bindu Menon brings to our attention work about a legendary female impersonator on the Malayalam stage, Ochira Velukkutty (Sreekumar 2006). A recent book on a history of women in Malayalam theatre (Madathil 2010) reveals that when Mavelikkara Ponnamma, one of the first female actors of the Malayalam stage, was approached to enact the role of the beautiful Vasavadutta in the play *Karuna*, a role performed and immortalised by Velukkutty, Ponnamma was hesitant since she felt she could never reach the perfection of Velukkutty's performance. Only when she received a letter from Velukkutty (by then ill and bed-ridden), encouraging her to perform the role, did she feel she had his blessings. After this, she says, 'Even my voice changed. I became Velukkutty, and then Vasavadutta'.

In other words, says Menon, 'having a woman's body was not sufficient to perform women on stage. Femininity was a highly coded practice, and these codes were developed by Velukkutty and similar female impersonators.'ⁱⁱⁱ

This scholarship is of course, but a tiny part of a vast field of work that tracks the ways in which the fluid identities and practices of pre-colonial societies were rendered legible to and by colonial modernity through the 19th century in India. The process was never 'completed' though, and heterogeneous forms of sexuality continue to simmer below the skin of 'normal' society in the non-West, as we will see.

We should remember that processes of modernity in Europe had already performed this exercise of fixing sexual identity, over the 16th-19th centuries. In the 20th century then, in Europe/USA there arose significant philosophical and sociological interventions, feminist and non-feminist, that began to question the key concepts that had stabilized as 'natural' by that time – the body, sex, sexuality.

'Sex is to nature as gender is to culture'

The making of a distinction between sex and gender is intrinsic to feminism. The initial move was to use the term *sex* to refer to the biological differences between men and women while *gender* indicated the vast range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference. This distinction is important for feminism to make because the subordination of women has been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological differences between men and women. This kind of philosophical reasoning that legitimizes various forms of subordination as natural and inescapable, because it is based supposedly natural and therefore unchangeable factors, is called biological determinism. Racism is a good example of this, as is the caste system, because both ideologies are based on the assumption that certain groups of people are superior by birth, and that they are born with characteristics such as greater intelligence and special skills that justify their power in society. Biological determinism has also been one of the most important legitimizing mechanisms of women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is therefore, crucial for feminist politics.

Feminist anthropologists, pre-eminent among whom is Margaret Mead, have demonstrated that what is understood as masculinity and femininity varies across cultures. In other words, not only do different societies identify a certain set of characteristics as feminine and another set as

masculine, but also, these characteristics are not the same across different cultures. Thus, feminists have argued that there is no necessary co-relation between the biology of men and women and the qualities that are thought to be masculine and feminine. Rather, it is child-rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuate certain differences between the sexes. That is, from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender-specific forms of behaviour, play, dress and so on. This training is continuous and most of the time subtle, but when necessary, can involve punishments to bring about conformity. So feminists argue that sex-specific qualities (for example, bravery and confidence as 'masculine' and sensitivity and shyness as 'feminine') and the value that society attributes to them, are produced by a range of institutions and beliefs that socialize boys and girls differently. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, 'One is not born, but becomes woman.'

In addition, societies generally value 'masculine' characteristics more highly than 'feminine' ones, while at the same time ensuring that men and women who do not conform to these characteristics are continuously disciplined into the appropriate behaviour. For instance, a man who expresses sorrow publicly by crying would be humiliated by the taunt, '*auraton jaise ro rahe ho?*' (Why are you crying like a woman?) And who does not remember that stirring line of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan - '*Khoob ladi mardani, woh to Jhansi wali rani thi.*' (Bravely she fought, the Rani of Jhansi/Like a a man did she fight) What does this line mean? Even when it is a woman who has shown bravery, it still cannot be understood as a 'feminine' quality - bravery is seen as a masculine virtue no matter how many women may display it or how few men.

But of course, what is considered to be masculine or feminine, shifts from time to time. Until the middle of the 20th century in the West, for instance, pink was the colour for boys and blue for girls! In the 1800s most infants were dressed in white, and gender differences weren't highlighted until well after they were able to walk. At that point of time in the West, it was considered to be more important to distinguish children from adults than boys from girls. But when the interest in differentiating between boys and girls emerged in the early 20th century, the colour associated with boys was pink, and it was blue for girls. In 1927, *Time* magazine wrote about the disappointment in Belgium at the birth of a girl to the royal family, saying her cradle had been 'optimistically decorated in pink, the color for boys.' Close to the end of World War I, *The Ladies Home Journal* advised new mothers that 'the generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger colour, is

more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.’ Some argued that pink was a close relative of red, which was seen as a fiery, manly color. Others traced the association of blue with girls to the frequent depiction of the Virgin Mary in blue. It is only in the mid-20th century that the opposite colour-coding began to appear ‘natural’ (Adams 2008, Belkin 2009).

Consider also Fatima Mernissi’s work comparing the writings of 11th century Islamic scholar Imam Ghazali on sexuality with the writings of Freud. Ghazali, writing in Persia in the 11th century believed he was attempting to reveal the true Muslim belief on the subject; Freud, at the triumphant inception of modernity in Europe, could claim the authority of Science to elaborate, not just a theory about European sexuality, but a universal explanation of the human female. She shows that while both Ghazali and Freud see female sexuality as destructive to the social order, Ghazali argues this through an understanding of the *active* nature of female sexuality, while Freud makes his argument through an understanding of female sexuality as *passive*. Mernissi argues that in comparing Freud’s and Ghazali’s theories, we are in fact comparing the two cultures’ different conceptions of sexuality, the former’s assuming female sexuality to be passive, the latter to be active, but with each seeing women as destructive to the social order, for those entirely opposite reasons (Mernissi 1987).

The initial sex-gender distinction made by feminists, as laid out above has been complicated in several ways.

Many scholars argue that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are dialectically and inseparably related, and that the conceptual distinction that earlier feminists established between the two is not sustainable beyond a point. In this understanding, human biology itself is constituted by a complex interaction between the human body, the physical environment and the state of development of technology and society. Thus the hand is as much the *product* of labour as the *tool* of labour – that is, human intervention changes the external environment and simultaneously, changes in the external environment shape and change the human body.

This is true in two senses. One, in a long-term evolutionary sense, over the millenia. That is, human bodies have evolved differently in different parts of the globe, due to differences in diet, climate, and nature of work performed.

Two, in a more short-term sense, in one lifetime. That is, it is now recognised that neurophysiology and hormonal balances are affected by social factors like anxiety, physical labour, and level and kind of social interaction, just as much as social interaction is affected by people's neurophysiology and hormonal balances. For instance, certain chemical changes in the body may produce certain symptoms of stress that can be treated by drugs. But equally, high stress levels can in fact be the reason for higher chemical imbalances, and it may be possible to restore the body's balance only by changing the conditions in which it lives (Jaggar 1983).

When we apply this understanding to the sex/gender distinction, that biology and culture are interrelated, we see that women's bodies have been shaped by social restrictions and by norms of beauty. That is, the 'body' has been formed as much by 'culture' as by 'nature'. For instance, the rapid improvements in women's athletic records over the past two decades is an indication that social norms have shaped the capacities of their bodies. Feminist anthropologists have pointed out that in some ethnic groups there is little physical differentiation between men and women. In short, we must consider that there are two equally powerful factors at work - one, there is a range of interrelated ways in which society produces sex differences and two, sex differences structure society in particular ways.

'Sex', in this view, is not an unchanging base upon which society constructs 'gender' meanings, but rather, sex itself has been affected by various factors external to it - there is no clear and unchanging line separating nature and culture.

A second kind of rethinking of sex/gender has come from a kind of feminism that argues that feminists must not underplay the biological difference between the sexes and attribute all difference to 'culture' alone. To do so is to accept male civilization's devaluing of the female reproductive role. This is a criticism of the liberal feminist understanding that in an ideal world, men and women would be more or less alike. The contrary claim is that patriarchal social values have denigrated feminine qualities and that it is the task of feminism to recover feminine qualities as valuable. Here the understanding is that there are certain differences between men and women that arise from their different biological reproductive roles, and that therefore, women are more sensitive, instinctive and closer to nature. Such feminists are often called 'radical feminists', and they believe that women's reproductive biology, the process of gestation

and the experience of mothering, fundamentally affects their relationship to the external world. Women are therefore, in this understanding, closer to nature and share in nature's qualities of fecundity, nurturing and instinct. These qualities have been rejected by a masculinist patriarchal society but feminists should accept and revalue these qualities.

Eco-feminism for instance, is a feminist philosophy that celebrates the feminine difference derided by patriarchy. This philosophy points to the predominance of what it calls a masculinist ideology that structures the world, through which both nature and women are to be controlled, dominated and their productive capacities harnessed for certain kinds of economic goals. Vandana Shiva for example, shows how both women and nature are thought to be passive by masculinist ideology, productive only if their energies are harnessed in a certain way. A forest is thought of as unproductive until it is planted with, for example, commercial woods. Until it is planted with teak and other woods that can be cut and sold, until something commercial happens, a forest is not thought of as productive. The very term 'natural resource' suggests that nature is merely a resource for capitalism to yield profit, and so until the forest does that, it is thought of as non-productive. But Shiva points out that its productivity is actually continuous – a forest is preserving groundwater just by standing there. It's replacing oxygen in the atmosphere, it is providing habitat for animal species, it is providing food and fuel for local inhabitants. So what eco-feminism tries to do, is to reclaim from masculinist ideology a radicalized notion of the creative feminine (Shiva 1988).

Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice* (1982) uses a psychoanalytical framework to argue that because the primary care-giver in childhood is invariably a woman (the mother) - given the sexual division of labour - the process by which men and women come to adulthood is different. Boys come into adulthood learning to *differentiate* themselves from the mother, while girls do so by *identifying* with the mother. That is, in a sex-differentiated society, while all infants identify with the mother, gradually boys learn that they are 'different' while girls learn that they are the 'same' as their mother. This results, Gilligan argues, in women having a more subjective, relational way of engaging with the world, while men have a more objective, autonomous mode. Women relate to others, while men learn to separate themselves.

Gilligan's focus in this work is the difference in the ways men and women take moral decisions, and she comes to the conclusion that women are less influenced by abstract normative notions of

what is right and wrong, and more by contextual factors like empathy, concern and sensitivity to another's predicament. Men, on the other hand, tend to take moral decisions based on well-accepted, context-free notions of right and wrong – for instance, it is always wrong to steal, no matter what the circumstances. Thus, Gilligan concludes that the basic categories of western moral philosophy - rationality, autonomy and justice - are drawn from and reflect the male experience of the world. The female experience is invisible here, and women's tendency not to take hard, de-contextualized moral positions is seen by mainstream western philosophy as a sign of their moral immaturity. To deny difference is therefore to agree with the patriarchal negation of femininity as worthless.

Later developments on Carol Gilligan's work showed that the autonomous individual, abstracted from all socio-cultural context, taking context-free moral decisions, is not just produced by 'masculinity', but by cultural contexts inflected by race. That is, it was found that both men and women of non-white and immigrant communities tended to relate their moral decisions to context and to be more located within communities than wealthy white men and women. This has resonance with Radhika Chopra's work on South Asian masculinities which she terms as 'supportive' as opposed to that of the autonomous disconnected masculinity familiar from western literature. The patriarchal privilege of South Asian men is defined within a network of responsibilities they are expected to fulfill towards their sisters, younger brothers and parents. Thus their control and power over women and younger men is mediated by a sense of responsibility towards them that can often be prioritized over their own individual desires and ambitions. Chopra has also pointed out how the institution of domestic servants in South Asia compromises the 'masculinity' of the male domestic servant within an Indian household, vis-à-vis his female employer (Chopra 2003).

In other words, feminism has long recognized that gender identity is not determining in all contexts and that other identities – race, class, caste, religious community – intersect and are relevant for understanding particular issues. This will become increasingly clear as we go along.

Now, the arguments discussed above, theorizing cultural constructions around the biological body, all stop at the limits set by the biological body, assuming it to be a given natural object. What has increasingly come into view is a kind of understanding of gender that problematizes

the body itself. The body here, is not a simple physical object but rather, is constructed by and takes its meaning from its positioning within specific social, cultural and economic practices.

'Gender performativity'

A feminist philosopher whose name inevitably arises in this context is Judith Butler, whose first book *Gender Trouble* (1990), is seen as a landmark. Butler argued that if we take seriously Simone de Beauvoir's dictum that one is not born, but *becomes* a woman seriously, it means that all of us have to *learn* to be men and women. If so, there is no reason why 'feminine' qualities should attach only to bodies marked female and 'masculine' qualities to bodies marked male. She thus suggested a 'radical discontinuity' between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.

Butler uses the term *heterosexual matrix* to refer to a sort of grid produced by institutions, practices and discourses – from biomedical sciences to religion and culture - looking through which, it appears to be 'a fact of nature' that all human bodies possess one of two fixed sexual identities, with each experiencing sexual desire only for the 'opposite sex.' The removal of this heterosexual matrix will reveal that sexuality and human bodies and desires are fluid and have no necessary fixed sexual identity or orientation.

Thus, her startling argument is that 'gender' is not the cultural inscription of meaning on to a pre-given 'sex'. Rather, gender as a way of thinking and as a concept, pre-exists the body, it is gender that produces the category of biological sex. And gender produces sex through a series of performances.

We must not understand this 'performativity' as something superficial, (that is, 'mere' performance' as opposed to 'reality'). Butler's argument is that bodies are 'forcibly materialized over time' by the reiterative, repeated practices of gender performance (Butler 1993). That is, over time, bodies come to meet the criteria of legibility laid down by the heterosexual matrix – intersex bodies are surgically disciplined into one of two sexes; breasts will be reduced or enlarged, and inappropriate breasts kept hidden and invisible; depilation, clothing, and make-up will take care of the rest. We will address some of these phenomena in the next section.

What Butler draws attention to is the fact that the project of becoming male or female is never completed – it is a 'performance' that must be repeated every moment of our lives until we die.

Even a fifty year-old, burly moustachioed man who has fathered children cannot say – *it is well established by now that I am a man; tomorrow I can wear a sari to work*. At no point in our lives can we be confident that our gender identity is secure; we can never let up on this performance.

What about ‘real’ bodies?

What is rendered invisible by the ‘heterosexual matrix’ is the multiplicity of bodies. A range of bodies become invisible or illegitimate through the functioning of hegemonic legal and cultural codes. When an idea is ‘hegemonic’, it has become common sense, and has been internalized even by those oppressed by it.

Since the hegemonic understanding of the human body now is that each and every body is clearly and unambiguously male **or** female, large numbers of bodies that do not fit this description are designated as diseased or disordered in some way. For instance, infants born with no clear determining sexual characteristics; eunuchs; men and women who have characteristics that are ‘non-masculine’ or ‘non-feminine’ respectively. All these have to be disciplined into normalcy through medical and surgical intervention, or they must be declared to be abnormal or illegal. Our very language, held implacably as it is in the grip of a bipolarity of gender, falters in attempting to refer to such bodies. Is an intersex child he or she, *avan* or *aval*, *voh karega ya karegi?*

Take for instance, a revealing letter to the medical column of a newspaper in India, from ‘A grieving mother’, who seeks advice about her 18 year-old son whose sudden depression she traced to the fact that ‘his nipples and breasts are bulging out, which disgust him.’ The doctor’s reassuring reply is that nearly 30 percent of men have ‘suffered’ from what is termed ‘gynecomastia’ at some time or the other. In some cases, the cause could be tumors or malnutrition, but this is rare. The most common cause of ‘gynecomastia’, says this doctor, is simply this – ‘pubertal’, due to the fact that breast tissue, normally dormant in boys, is ‘super sensitive to the minuscule amount of circulating female hormones.’ The doctor says that once the ‘rare causes’ have been ruled out by an endocrinologist, either the condition is self-limiting, or if it is not, may require surgery.^{iv}

In other words, nearly a third of the male population can have ‘breasts’, and if it is not due to rare endocrinological causes, the condition is perfectly normal. It seems to have no other ill effects

than causing ‘disgust’, but nevertheless, it is pathologized and made into a disease (‘gynecomastia’), and when other serious illnesses are ruled out, the advice is not to relax and stop worrying, but to undertake surgery, to make that body conform to a mythical norm.

In a fascinating study of the emergence of hormones as the definitive marker of gender difference, Nelly Oudshoorn demonstrates that in Western thought from the ancient Greeks until the late 18th century, male and female bodies were understood to be fundamentally similar. This ‘one-sex’ model of humanity, with the woman as a lesser version of the male body, was dominant since antiquity. In the 18th century, biomedical discourse began to emphasize differences between the sexes rather than similarities, and from the 20th century the hormonal conception of the body has become one of the dominant modes of thinking about the root of sex differences. As Oudshoorn points out, the hormonal conception of the body in fact allows for the possibility of breaking out of the tyranny of the binary sex-difference model. That is, if bodies can have both female and male hormones, then maleness and femaleness are not restricted to one kind of body alone. However, the biomedical sciences prefer to treat the presence of androgen in female bodies and estrogen in male bodies as abnormal. Further, the female, but not the male, is portrayed as a body completely at the mercy of hormones. In this process, a clear nexus has emerged between the medical profession and a huge, multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical industry. All sorts of ‘disorders’ in women – such as the aging of the skin, depression, menstrual irregularities – are prescribed hormonal therapy (Oudshoorn 1994). This pathologization clearly extends to male bodies that react to the ‘minuscule amounts’ (as the doctor in the letter above firmly qualifies), of female hormones circulating in them.

Lactating males, unmaternal females

I learnt recently that lactation can be induced in adoptive mothers even if they have undergone complete hysterectomies, because prolactin and oxytocin, the hormones that govern lactation, are not produced by the ovaries, but by the pituitary gland. Through a process of preparation involving a hormone regimen and stimulation of the breasts, almost all women can lactate, although despite following protocol, some women may fail to do so. It occurred to me that if pregnancy is not the only condition in which women can lactate, and if the hormones required for lactation are produced by a gland present in all humans, then perhaps lactation can be induced in men?

Turns out the answer is yes. There have even been recorded instances of men spontaneously lactating; but in any case, through the process described above, it is possible to induce lactation in men if they have babies they want to nurse (Swaminathan 2007, Shanley 2007). Certainly the breasts will enlarge, and certainly you will be the freakish guy who lactates. The problem is not that this isn't natural, because really, what's natural about inducing lactation in women?

Male lactation? I bless every little boy out there who thinks that when he grows up, his baby will drink milk from his boo-boos (and you all know such boys). May he no longer have to grow up to the devastating recognition of its impossibility!

So males can lactate, but unmaternal females?

The legendary dancer Chandralekha was once asked a question in a public interview in New York, about whether she regretted not having had children. She is reported to have answered by flamboyantly outlining her breasts in the classical Bharatanatyam style, and declaring, 'My dear, we worship the Goddess as *apeethakuchaambal* – She whose breasts have never suckled.'^v

Through the figure of female deities powerful in folk and urban cultures till this day from the dim past of pre-history, Chandralekha (1992) has insisted on the disruption of the fertility/maternality dyad – for her the fecundity principle is a mysterious force, over time being sought to be domesticated into the figure of the 'mother' goddess. She demands,

'On what basis do you call them *mothers*, these dynamic figures of fierce power who look so calm and confident on the bull, lion, tiger; who wear weapons as ornaments in their hair, who are not at all maternal?'

The 'domestication' of the fierce, uncontrollable fertility associated with nature into tender, vulnerable motherhood is a feature in the historical development of not only Hinduism, but also Christianity.^{vi}

The unsettling question then is, what happens to our ideas of men and women if we can think of fertility, 'maternal' urges, motherhood and even lactation, as separate features of the human condition regardless of the gender that is assigned to the body?

'If men could menstruate'

Menstruation is certainly one feature inescapably associated with the female body. But the ways in which it acts as a disability have to do with social and cultural, not natural constraints.

American feminist Gloria Steinem wrote a savagely funny meditation on what would happen to the understanding of menstruation in a patriarchal society, if men could menstruate. Because everything that men do is valued, that fact that men can and women cannot menstruate would become yet another indicator of the superiority of men:

‘What would happen...if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?

The answer is clear - menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event:

Men would brag about how long and how much.

Boys would mark the onset of menses, that longed-for proof of manhood, with religious ritual and stag parties...

Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free...

Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ("men-struation") as proof that only men could serve in the Army ("you have to give blood to take blood"), occupy political office ("can women be aggressive without that steadfast cycle governed by the planet Mars?"), be priest and ministers ("how could a woman know what it is to give her blood for our sins?") or rabbis ("without the monthly loss of impurities, women remain unclean")...’

She imagines headlines like “Judge cites monthly stress in pardoning rapist” (Steinem 1978).

The fact remains that something that affects half the population is simply absent in public consciousness. Clean and plentiful public toilets and inexpensive and easily accessible sanitary napkins would make monthly periods for most women simply routine. But because the public realm is structured around the assumption of the able male body (and in India, one that can use any public space to urinate or defecate), this seriously compromises normal (let alone efficient) functioning for women outside the home.

The Indian market in sanitary napkins is controlled by two multinational companies, Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson. The overwhelming majority of women in India make do with extremely cumbersome and inescapably unhygienic ways of dealing with their periods. State

subsidy for sanitary napkins should be routine, because they are unaffordable for most women, and given that the Indian state still does subsidize commodities from diesel to condoms. But recently, Indian feminists encountered a strange situation.

In 2010, newspapers reported government plans to supply free sanitary napkins to an estimated 200 million rural women, at a cost to the government of Rs.2000 crores annually. What is disturbing is that it seemed that this project would be in collaboration with one of the two MNCs, which would then be the chief financial beneficiary. Around the same time, it had emerged that a social entrepreneur had developed a low cost sanitary napkin manufacturing machine within the financial reach of rural women's self-help groups, who were availing of bank loans to buy it. This project is already being implemented in about 200 places across India, and in Maharashtra, the State government is associated with it. Banks would be even more willing to give loans to self-help groups for purchasing the machine if the government would guarantee that it would buy back the napkins from them. This would not be more expensive than the other project, which would benefit only the MNCs, while this alternative would be sustainable and generate employment while making women's lives easier (Kumar 2010). At the time of going to press, nothing further was known about the government decision.

The point is that the 'disability' of any natural bodily function can and must be understood as a product of its inescapable *social* dimensions.

Intersex

Intersex people are born with both ovarian and testicular tissue or with ambiguous sex organs. Intersex people, or hermaphrodites, as they used to be called, were not a problem for society until the rigid male/female binary was constructed with the coming of modernity. From the 20th century in the West, it became common for doctors to assign one sex or the other to intersex babies, and to make surgical interventions to match this assignment. A study conducted of intersex babies and sex assignment in the USA showed that medical decisions to assign one sex or the other were made on *cultural* assumptions rather than on any existing *biological* features. That is, in some cases, the parents 'wanted a girl/boy' (with all the cultural expectations that 'being a girl/boy' involves). In some, the tissue available could be fashioned either into a satisfactory clitoris or a small penis, and given the general assumption that to live as a man with a small penis is to be avoided at all costs, the decision would be to make the child into a girl.

And so on. Thus, a baby might be made into a female or male but then still require hormonal therapy all her life to make him/her stay in her surgically assigned gender (Kessler 1990).

Recently, a sensationalist and irresponsible piece of reporting in an Indian national daily claimed that in the city of Indore, hundreds of female babies were being surgically turned into boys to fulfill the preference of their parents for sons. There was immediate and widespread outrage from feminist groups as well as government agencies, and finally an investigative report in another newspaper clarified the situation (Jebaraj 2011). The report quoted doctors as stating that it is medically impossible to change a female child into a male, and that what had been carried out in Indore was a legitimate medical procedure called 'genitoplasty' for male infants 'born with abnormal genitalia.' This procedure is described in the article as 'a corrective surgery for babies, regularly recommended by paediatricians and urologists when faced with a child with congenital abnormality of the genitalia. For example, the penis may be small or seem missing because it is buried under the skin due to abnormal curvature.'

'It is about making a male child a better male, functionally or structurally. It's not about converting a child's sex,' said a doctor.

It is still not clear whether these babies were born intersex, but the report also cites a study by India's premier medical institution, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, which found that 'in cases of extreme ambiguity, where the child is considered 'intersex,' the doctor must 'assign' the sex of the child before deciding how the genitalia are corrected'. The AIIMS study admits that 'The gender assignment takes into account the prevalent social factors in a community and the parent's desire.' This is not unusual as we saw earlier, in the case of the US-based study. This could well mean, said the report, that in some cases, the desire of Indian parents for a boy could influence the doctor's assignment of sexual identity. The writer also pointed out that there is a wider international debate on whether corrective surgeries should be done at all on such children, or whether 'intersex' children should be left to decide their own sexual identity upon reaching adulthood.

There is of course, another possibility – that they could live perfectly healthy and fulfilling lives as intersex people, even being capable of reproduction. So the only reason to shape them into the either/or pattern is cultural, not 'biological'. There is a growing intersex movement globally, that draws attention to the fact that treating the intersex condition as a disease is a phenomenon that

started with the 19th century in the West, and the goal of intersex advocacy groups is to have people understand the intersex condition, not as a disease, but as a perfectly ‘normal’ way of being. As the website of Intersex Society of North America puts it:

‘Intersex is a socially constructed category that reflects real biological variation...

...]N]ature presents us with sex anatomy spectrums. Breasts, penises, clitorises, scrotums, labia, gonads—all of these vary in size and shape and morphology. So-called ‘sex’ chromosomes can vary quite a bit, too. But in human cultures, sex categories get simplified into male, female, and sometimes intersex, in order to simplify social interactions, express what we know and feel, and maintain order.

So nature doesn’t decide where the category of ‘male’ ends and the category of ‘intersex’ begins, or where the category of ‘intersex’ ends and the category of ‘female’ begins. Humans decide.’

In India, queer groups are in touch with a few people who acknowledge their intersex condition but publicly live as either male or female. There has generally been no conversation that they have had with their parents or their doctors about their condition. Thus they live in the sort of loneliness experienced by many others who have to hide important parts of their identities.^{vii}

The question then really, is this:

Would you pass a gender test?

‘Gender verification’ tests for the Olympic games were suspended in 2000 after enough evidence had emerged that ‘atypical chromosomal variations’ are not atypical at all, but rather, so common that it is impossible to judge ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ on the basis of chromosomal pattern alone. In other words, maleness and femaleness are not only culturally different, they are not even biologically stable features at all times.

But in sports as in all other spheres of life, despite all evidence to the contrary, it continues to be assumed that every human being can be assigned to one of two sex categories. Thus the Olympic Committee retained a policy of ‘suspicion based testing’ on a case by case basis, as did other sports bodies. This policy at different times resulted in two women athletes - South African

Caster Semenya and Indian Santhi Soundarajan - being disqualified after winning their events, for failing 'gender tests.' Their experiences raise a host of questions about this biological body that is considered to be simply available in nature.

Three sets of characteristics are held to determine sexual identity:

- a) genetic, that is, the XX female and XY male chromosomal pattern
- b) hormonal – estrogen (female), androgen/testosterone (male) and
- c) genital, that is, the visible physical characteristics of penis/vagina.

However, feminist scholars of science studies have directed our attention to developments in biology that show that the three are not necessarily linked. Thus, if a body has female genitals it is not necessarily the case that it would have preponderantly female chromosomes and female hormones. Moreover, sex chromosomes themselves often defy the pattern of XX (women) and XY (men) and have been known to exhibit other patterns such as X0 (females with only one X chromosome), XXY, XYY, XXX, or a 'mosaic condition' in which different cells in the same individual's body have different sex chromosomes (Buzuvis 2010).

Most bodies marked male and female in this world (including yours and mine) would not pass 'gender tests' if the perfect congruence of these three factors is being examined. The point is that in everyday life gender tests are not routine, because once a sex has been assigned at birth, one lives one's life accordingly.

It is mainly in sex-segregated activities like competitive sports that the question arises, and only for women, because it is assumed that having male characteristics is an advantage in physical activities. Thus 'real' women would be facing the unfair advantages that 'not women' have on the field. Of course, women athletes disqualified for some chromosomal, hormonal or physical variation that casts doubt on their 'femaleness', do not get categorized as 'men'. They are still excluded from men's sports events and professions reserved for men.

At least two questions arise here.

First, how fair are competitive events that assume male bodies to be the norm, such that to have male features is an advantage? This only reflects the general understanding that any quality associated with men is superior and must set the norm for all humanity. In whatever ways

women are different, their difference is considered to be an *inferior* difference, not *just* a difference, or a *superior* difference.

But the more fundamental question here arises from the fact that not all natural advantages are considered illegitimate in sports. For instance, height in basketball is an accepted natural advantage, while American Olympian swimmer Michael Phelp's particular body proportions that enable him to cut through water more easily than 'normal' men may in fact be a disease called Marfan Syndrome.^{viii} Different ethnic groups have different physical characteristics, such as height and build. The point is, really, that competitive sports does not sort out competitors on the basis of comparable physical features and athletic ability – there is no level playing field. Men of different physical attributes, levels of training, and differential natural advantages such as height and strength, compete against one another, as do women. Is it not important to ask why the only standard of difference applied is that of an assumed gender bipolarity? To put it in the striking words of one scholar:

'Saying that no one can use natural advantage is antithetical to sport. The average individual does not become a world-class or Olympic athlete... [Those who excel in sport have genetically acquired physiological advantages whose potential has been realized fortuitously through cultural and environmental factors]. Yet, for conditions other than those related to sex, such variation is not challenged as beyond the bounds of fair play' (Buzuvis 2010)

Consider an intriguing story from the war zone of the sports field. In the 1936 Olympics, Polish sprinter Stella Walsh, known as the fastest woman in the world, was beaten by American Helen Stephens, who set a world record. After the race, a Polish journalist protested that no real woman could run so fast, and Olympic officials performed a 'sex test' on Helen, in which it was established that she was a woman. Forty-four years later, Stella Walsh, who had become an American citizen, was shot to death in a parking lot. The autopsy of her body revealed that Stella, who had run slower than Helen, had in fact 'been a man' (Boylan 2008). Another strange story from the same Berlin Olympics - twenty years afterwards, a Hitler Youth member who had competed as a woman and ranked fourth in the women's high jump event, confessed he was a man who had been forced by the Nazis to compete as a woman. This 'real man' came fourth, behind three women (Buzuvis 2010).

All men do not run faster than all women, all men are not stronger than all women, all men do not jump higher than all women...This is why it has often been suggested by feminists that athletes should be categorized on the basis of physical characteristics relevant to the sport, rather than on the basis of sex.

The point is that we are not clearly bounded male and female bodies with immediately obvious male and female characteristics, with only a few abnormal people not fitting the bill. When a child is born, it is usually the presence or absence of a penis that dictates gender assignment. But children who don't have penises do sometimes have internal male reproductive organs and XY chromosomes. Because females are defined in terms of *lack of penis* rather than *presence of vagina and uterus/ovaries*, it is quite common for children who are genetically male to be raised as female.

Even more fascinating is the discovery of recent biological research that hormones to some extent are produced by gendered activity rather than the other way around. That is aggressive interludes produce increased androgen; while periods of non-aggression – nurturing of infants or of the elderly and so on – produce a reduction in androgen. Such a feminist position rejects the idea that scientific facts about the body simply exist to be discovered. Rather, scientific facts are deeply embedded in society and culture. 'Sex' itself is constructed by human practices, of which Science is one.

Historian of science Emily Martin draws our attention to the fact that science, far from simply describing natural phenomena, is in fact an interpretive exercise. She shows us how science tells the story of the process of human reproduction in such a way that the Egg and the Sperm are cast into roles drawn from narratives of heterosexual romance in the contemporary western world. We are all familiar both with such romance narratives (active energetic hero, passively waiting heroine) as well as the narratives of biology text-books (active sperm, passive egg). In biology textbooks, the egg is 'passively transported', is 'swept', or 'drifts' along the fallopian tube, waiting for the active sperm to take the initiative and make her fulfil her *raison d'être*. Once released from the ovary, says a standard text-book, the egg will die 'unless rescued by a sperm'. 'It is remarkable,' says Martin, 'how 'femininely' the egg behaves and how 'masculinely' the sperm'. New research suggested that the sperm's motion is not strong enough to propel it forward, and that in fact, the egg's surface exudes an energy that actively draws the sperm

towards itself, where it is held fast by the adhesive surface of the egg. Martin points out that even these revelations did not lead to a more interactive view of their relationship. Instead, either the 'aggressive sperm' metaphor continued to be deployed, or another cultural stereotype came into play, that of woman as an aggressive and dangerous threat to male autonomy. Martin suggests that an alternative model is already available in the field of biological sciences that can be applied to the egg and the sperm - the cybernetic model with its conception of 'feedback loops' and 'flexible adaptation to change'. Such a model would enable a reading of the egg and the sperm as interacting on more mutual terms (Martin 1991).

In this context, let us consider a literary re-creation of the journey of the sperm towards the egg by an early modern feminist writer in Malayalam, Lalitambika Antarjanam. In a short story (1960), she envisages the egg as the female Deity, towards which thousands of anxious sperms yearningly travel as pilgrims, a journey in which only one will find self-fulfilment. The narrative is in the exalted, trembling voice of one sperm.^{ix}

This account too, draws on local cultural resources – in this case, Mother-goddess worship in Kerala – and is explicitly a creative exercise, reworking the roles that modern science attributes to egg and sperm. Here the womb is the sanctum sanctorum of the deity; the egg, maternal feminine energy with magnetic power; while for (western) science it's a Mills and Boon romance!

Evidently, modern scientists, as much as the creative writer, equally use emotive and locally relevant cultural metaphors to describe a supposedly objective 'natural' process

Male bodies and masculinities

Masculinity has been theorized for a while now in different ways. In *The Intimate Enemy* Ashis Nandy made the argument that pre-modern Indian society was marked by fluid gender identities, a fluidity erased by masculinist British imperial ideology. His reading of Gandhi as a figure embodying sexual ambiguity, his political style incorporating key elements of the feminine, has become very influential (Nandy 1983)

Sudhir Kakar, a practicing psychoanalyst, argues that the hegemonic narrative of Hindu culture as far as male development is concerned 'is neither that of Freud's Oedipus nor of Christianity's Adam. One of the more dominant narratives of this culture is that of Devi, the great goddess,

especially in the inner world of the Hindu son.’ However, unlike Nandy, he does not see this as a sign of fullness and completion, or of fluidity, but as a fantasy that produces particular forms of misogyny. The most salient feature of male fantasy in India, he argues, is the composite figure of the sexual mother (who inspires rage) and the unfaithful mother (who inspires dread). This mother ‘pervades Gandhi’s agonizings but also looms large in clinical case histories, myths and in popular narratives.’ While across patriarchies a common response is to view women as dangerous antagonists to be subdued, Kakar says the ‘defensive mode’ of Indian male fantasy takes a specific form – that of ‘desexualization, either of the self or of the woman’, the former through celibacy and ascetic longings, and the latter through transforming the woman into either a maternal automaton or ‘androgynous virgin.’ Kakar suggests that a sublimated form of femininity may be more acceptable in masculine identity in India than in some other cultures, including the greater acceptability of bisexuality amongst men (Kakar 1989)

An interesting reading of feminized masculinity in Hindu culture is offered by Anuradha Kapur’s study of the transformation of Ram from Tulsidas’s gentle, boyish, androgynous body whose feet were wounded by the grass in the forest and who cried bitterly at Sita’s abduction, to the hyper masculinized, aggressive Ram of the Hindu right-wing Ramjanmabhoomi movement of the 20th century that led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Kapur 1993).

Deviant male bodies too, face disciplining procedures and marginalization – the gay male body, the effeminate male body, the aged male body. The ‘subordinate masculinity’ of male domestic servants vis-à-vis their female employers in the South Asian context can be perceived sometimes as irrelevant or non-existent, sometimes as overwhelming and dangerous (Chopra 2006).

It seems that the last bastion of sex difference, the body, is itself revealed to be, not simply given by nature, but made visible in specific ways by different kinds of discourses. Of course, we do experience the world and live in it, in embodied ways. If the body we inhabit is marked male, that has one kind of effect; if female, another kind of effect; if Black, or Dalit, or disabled, yet other effects. These effects are structural, material and psychological simultaneously. But the point is that the body by itself does not produce effects – these are produced by its location in a world structured around certain qualities, assumed to be universal. For instance, the world assumes sightedness and the ability to walk to be the norm; but in a world structured around

sightlessness and wheelchairs, it is the sighted person and the person walking on two legs who would have to struggle to manage – steeped in darkness; hearing and touch-impaired; slipping down steep ramps...

As we live out these identities, we either reaffirm their worth and value, or reject them and actively seek others. What does this mean for feminism? Is it liberating to realize that the body is not our prison, that it has long histories of being understood and experienced in multiple ways? I think the answer is - yes.

ⁱ English translation in AK Ramanujan (1973: 29, 110),

ⁱⁱ AK Ramanujan Ibid:129

ⁱⁱⁱ Bindu Menon in a comment on my post 'The Disappearing Body and feminist Thought' on the blog kafila.

<http://kafila.org/2011/02/18/the-disappearing-body-and-feminist-thought/>

^{iv} This letter appeared in *The Asian Age* (Delhi) sometime in the late 1990s. By now, plastic surgery advertisements routinely offer both breast augmentation for women as well as breast reduction for gynaecomastia.

^v Thanks to Sadanand Menon for a graphic account!

^{vi} There is a large body of scholarship, but for instance, for Hinduism see Gatwood (1985) and Humes and McDermot (2009); for Christianity, Ruether (1994).

^{vii} Thanks to Chayanika Shah for a discussion on this.

^{viii} A genetic disorder of the connective tissue. People with Marfan's tend to be unusually tall, with long limbs and long, thin fingers

^{ix} For an English translation of this story, see Devika (2007)