

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. Why the Body?

The body is a cultural text made of flesh and blood. Historically, the body has been assigned a subservient role in the dichotomy of mind and body. Western philosophy has traditionally theorized the rational faculty as the most crucial element of one's existence. Philosophers like René Descartes have designated the mind as the superior one in the mind/body binary. However, this ideology of Cartesian dualism has since been challenged by many social theorists resulting in some major paradigmatic shifts in the social interpretation of the body. Classical philosophy propelled a limited essentialist view of the body as an object of nature that is thrust upon a world of meanings and that the body's objectivity is absolute from the time of birth till death. The past few decades, however, have witnessed the emergence of a wide range of critical scholarship understanding the body as a tangible exhibition of social class, culture, and other vectors of social identity. These modern critical theories on the body examine how the body is much more than a merely inherent biological phenomenon. Moving away from an essentialist point of view, the works of modern social theorists reveal an inclination for applying a constructionist approach to understanding the way the body is shaped in society.

This perspective of the body rendered it a heterogeneous space to be shaped in a varying way, depending on its cultural surroundings. Therefore, the body becomes an important medium to understand the socio-cultural and socio-political factors based on which social hegemony is built and power is contested. Bryan S. Turner (2008) is one such social theorist whose work on the body has made significant breakthroughs in the field of body studies. In his study, Turner re-configures the body as socially constructed and to explain modes of constructing the body he gives the example of the changing trends of medical display of anatomical structures of the body. Turner (2008) claims that how scientists design these pictures is not just based on empirical observations but also on their cultural framework. Following this argument of seeing the body as a social construction, Niall Richardson and Adam Locks (2014) posit that the body is manipulated in culture. Rejecting the essentialist view of the body's immutability, Adam and Locks (2014) argue

that the body is caught in a continuous process of change and is versatile based on its cultural contexts. However, Turner (2008) in his analysis of the body notes that the social interpretation of the body is perennially crowded with the question of nature and culture. The body is undeniably biological, is made of flesh and blood, and has certain empirical biological functions but how is the body experienced in society and how is it to live in a body are points that often get neglected. Turner (2008) claims that in this dilemma of whether the body is a natural or a cultural product, the question of it being a political outcome gets obscured. To analyze this facet of the body as a site for the territorialization of power, Turner takes the aid of Michael Foucault's (1979; 1980a; 1980b) theories of power. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* (1979) captures how the state apparatus exercises power over the body and how bodies are segregated in different state institutions like prisons or mental asylums to get regulated according to social norms. Foucault (1979) discusses how discourses of power are deconstructed in the manner they make the socially inscribed body perform. Disciplining the body, whose inert desires and instincts do not overlap with the prescribed "performativity," to use Judith Butler's (2003) term, reveals how certain hegemonic power relations are structured through the state's imposition of corporeal norms.

The lack of agency the body of the civilian endures in such state-sanctioned policies transforms them into "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1979). Foucault extensively discusses the controlling mechanisms that aid in the governmentality of the body and ultimately demonstrates how the most effective form of regulation is self-surveillance. To elaborate on this further, Foucault (1979) talks about the panopticon in prison systems that makes the omnipresent gaze of the guard an agent of fear. The fact that it is installed in the prisoner's knowledge that he is being watched ensures an automatic self-regulation of his body. This notion of being under a dominant gaze is effective in ensuring bodily regulation in any given context. For instance, the female body is always under the scrutiny of the male gaze and it is imperative in popular culture for it to look a certain way to satisfy the demands of the male gaze. Therefore, the Foucauldian notion of the 'docile bodies' that are easily tamed by systematic conditioning can be exemplified in the case of women's bodies. Drawing from Foucault, Turner (2008) claims that historically the state exercises its power of sovereignty less on non-human things like land and more over the bodies of its citizens in terms of regulating its population size and governance of the reproductive pool. Thus, the body is also used as a political expression and gets shaped by modes of

power-play. Such political analysis of the body reveals how it is used as a medium to make hegemonic relations tangible. Thinking of hegemonic expressions through the body also urges one to bring Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) observation of the body into consideration. Bourdieu (1984) states that the body occupies the habitus and the habitus is the habitual lifestyle of cultural expression. Through the body, according to Bourdieu, the dispositions influenced by a certain social class are expressed. Bourdieu's analysis makes the body an important tool to perform cultural and social dispositions acquired by a social class and a medium to demonstrate social power. For instance, the body of an upper-class woman in a bourgeois society may be characterized by soft delicate skin and tasteful attires while the body of a working-class peasant woman might possess harsh coarse skin due to the relentless labor that is inflicted on it. Thus, the body is a palpable marker of social class and prominently differentiates between various classes and cultures through its embodiment. Epitomizing from Bourdieu's analysis of the body, Turner (2012) writes, "The body is invested with symbolic capital whereby it is a corporeal expression of the hierarchies of social power" (69).

Thus, the body is not only tamed and institutionalized by the state's regulatory forces to maintain hegemonic relations but also becomes a marker of social class and a medium of cultural expression. Expanding on how the body is treated as a tool to communicate the power structures of society, Nancy M. Henley (1977) in her discussion of non-verbal bodily communication points out that all bodily conversations are performed in the context of power. Henley describes how even a simple corporeal act of making eye contact is loaded with meanings that assert a hegemonic dialogue. However, in all these arguments the body is interpreted as a tool of socio-cultural and socio-political expression regulated by dominant power discourses. Turner (2012) problematizes Foucault's perspective of corporeal disciplining by interrogating the passivity that it thrusts upon the body, seeing it as merely an object to fulfill social ambitions. The body is inscribed by social practices aligned with the beliefs and customs of society. However, these practices do not take into account whether they abide by the body's needs and desires. In such a scenario where they don't, does the body perform any form of resistance or is it just a passive receptor of tormenting socio-political and socio-cultural governance? Firstly, to answer this query, it is important to reflect on another philosopher's theory on the body and that is Merleau-Ponty (1962). Merleau-Ponty (1962) offered the concept of 'body-subject' which emphasizes how bodies are not just passive actors directed by objectifying social processes

but also active reactors seeking individual agency. This essentially necessitated a dual approach to understanding the body: one is the body as it appears to the world, abiding by its rules, and the second is the body which is experienced in cognition, the lived body. The body as a subject has its urges, limitations, and desires that might transgress the accepted realms of normativity. The body as an object therefore acts upon what the social norms dictate but the body as a subject is “our understanding of our own pleasure and pain” (Tolman et al., 2014, 761), and when these dualisms do not collaborate, it further problematizes the question of corporeal agency. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) idea of corporeal subjectivity or the lived body opens the processes of embodiment for criticism and also encourages us to consider the possibility of bodily resistance in such processes. Victoria Pitts (2003) studies the political meanings of body modification and reveals a conversation she had with one of the body modifiers in the case she was studying for her research. Upon being asked about the motive behind such a choice of body alteration, her responder says, “In body modification, you can take control of what you otherwise could not” (Pitts, 2003, 2). The scripting of the body according to one’s own will renders a sense of corporeal power and autonomy and this exposes a form of bodily resistance.

To take charge of one’s own corporeality and to decide its performativity provides an agency to the otherwise subjugated subjects. Adam and Locks (2014) talk about the bodily tendency to resist as they claim that where there is embodiment shaped by cultural, social, and political dominance, there will always be a reactionary practice of bodily resistance. Another instance of such resistance can be cited in the fat acceptance movement on the internet against the bullying of overweight people. Margo Demello (2014) while discussing the overall pressure of being limited to a specific body size, mentions how there are legit organizations like the ‘National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance’ that encourage people to not obsess over their weight or not indulge in self-hatred because of popular body ideals (193). Demello in her introductory theorization of the body, also deliberates on Foucault’s contribution in deconstructing the restraining of sexuality and mentions that according to Foucault (1980b), the controlling of the body and more precisely the controlling of sexuality “can be dangerous because it also engenders an intensification of desire” (13). What Foucault points out here is that the repression of a certain bodily urge can also tend to morph into the explosion of that bodily desire. Similarly, in her ground-breaking work, *Sexing the Body* (2000) biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling opens her argument with the case study of a female athlete who fails the sex test

and is consequently banned from the Olympics. Fausto-Sterling (2000) goes on to reveal that upon deeper investigation it was found that the female athlete suffered from a condition called androgen insensitivity in which her body fails to detect the testosterone hormones even though the person has a Y chromosome. On the other hand, as typical of puberty “her testes produced estrogen (as do the testes of all men), which, because of her body’s inability to respond to its testosterone, caused her breasts to grow, her waist to narrow, and her hips to widen” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 2). By providing this instance, Fausto-Sterling (2000) makes a crucial demonstration of how the sex assignment during birth can be flawed and the fact that the athlete grew up and continued to exist in a female embodiment proves that “labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision” (3). Fausto-Sterling (2000) very urgently claims that scientific truths are curated in a social environment and that the regulation of complex emotions like sexual desires cannot be simplified by a mere calculation of the hormonal composition of the body.

The female athlete in this case who receives an overnight medical revelation that she had been leading her life in a male body only designed superficially like a woman cannot just swiftly change her emotional quotient or idea of pleasure and the sexual desires she had been carrying along due to this sudden information. Thus, if she continued practicing female embodiment the way she was always taught to then what was commonplace in her past becomes a stark statement of resistance in her present. Bodies are therefore volatile agents and much of their functioning is culturally and socially informed despite the empirical medical truths that are associated with them from birth. Showcasing the pertinence of this volatility in the context of the recent global pandemic, Kandida Purnell (2021) writes that bodies are marked with a notion of “(re/dis)embodiment – the continuously contested and intense local, global, social-political process through which bodies continually come to be or not be” (1). Purnell’s idea of bodies being subjected to (re/dis)embodiment concurs with the social, cultural, and political constructionism that corporeality is shaped by. Such a post-essentialist constructionist approach to reading and interpreting bodies inspires the concept of body politics. The most obvious difference between the two terms body politics and body politic is the suffix ‘s’ attached to the former. Despite traditional linguistic indications, this does not mean that it is the pluralized version of the latter. While body politic refers to the state or institutions as a metaphorical body, body politics conceptualizes how the tangible breathing body is scripted by socio-cultural and socio-political norms and how strongly that influences its embodiment. Nadia Brown

and Sarah Allen Gershon (2016) define this difference in their introduction to a special issue on Body Politics in the journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities* as they write, “The politics of the body, different from the body politic, argues that the body itself is politically inscribed and is shaped by practices of containment and control” (1). Thus, while body politic refers to polity, body politics judges how certain bodies are included or excluded from that polity through an overtly reiterated systematic regime. Brown and Gershon (2016) recapitulate that body politics also studies how marginalized bodies can enact their active subjectivity by confounding the dominant discourses and opposing the corporeal ideologies prevalent in dominant cultures that have inscribed the body with meanings. This resistance to dominant bodily ideologies causes a breakdown in meaning and threatens the established power structures. The volatile state of the bodies makes a crucial statement on the power-play prevalent in society while that is never a static arrangement as bodily resistance in the form of new changes and non-conformity to normative ideals incessantly challenge its stability. Therefore, it is urgent to consider the body and interrogate its theorization in local and cultural contexts to understand the power struggles in different social setups.

## **1.2. Why the Female Body? Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

By far I have tried to trace how bodies came to be urgent resources for interpreting social powers and hegemonic systems. It is evident how bodies can be exploited for power and can also react to that exploitation by choosing not to follow normative embodiment owing to their volatility. However, this accessibility to changing bodily norms is not equally distributed among bodies of all kinds. Some bodies are more equipped with such corporeal agency than others and when these marginalized bodies attempt an agential task to alter their embodiment, it threatens an entire system. One of the main parameters based on which this gap in corporeal agency is exercised is gender. Feminist scholars have been debating over the binary of sex and gender, associating sex with the biological aspect of the body and the gender to be socially constructed. However, the second-wave feminists in the 1970s overthrew this binary and rejected the linearity of thought in this division looking for a deeper analysis of sexual subjectivity. Iris Marion Young (2005) asserts that the traditional feminist theorization of the sex/gender binary was challenged with the notion of ‘biology is not destiny’ by the second-wave feminists as they focused on the social condition of androgyny in which a person’s biological sex will not influence their

choice of sexual partner and other embodied practices. The rejection of this binary also opened up a space for a plurality of complex bodily nuances to exist in the forefront that otherwise destabilized the sexual division. Judith Butler (2003) deems gender as socially performative but also observes that the sexing of the bodies at birth itself subjects them to a prescribed material performance. In her *Bodies that Matter* (2011), Butler further elaborates on this idea and focuses on how only the sexed body can be caught in the discourse of gender performance where every performativity is re-iterated. In that sense, some bodies emerge that do fall in the realm of normative performance and can be discarded as abjection. Therefore, Butler argues that the medical assignment of sex to the body is not idealist in nature but has a cultural materialist valuation to it that projects it to the compulsion of a normative performance. Feminist scholars thus shifted their focus on the plights and trials of the lived body to understand in a true sense the challenges that a female body faces in its cultural location.

It is noteworthy that a lot of the early theories on the body failed to acknowledge the heterogeneity in embodiment across the gender spectrum. A male body does not have to endure some of the social disciplinary corporeal impositions that a female body does. Even the gender identity of 'female' is not enough to account for the exclusivities in lived experiences that might vastly differ depending on the social class, race, setting, and other such parameters of identity. Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) charges Foucault (1979) for this specific negligence of the gendered body while discussing the modes of corporeal disciplining. Bartky (1988) questions the universal treatment of the body and the lack of focus on its intersectional specificities, "as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationships to the characteristic institutions of modern life" (63). Bartky (ibid.) goes on to call the docile bodies of women, "more docile than the bodies of men" and this statement of hers urges body studies scholars to focus on the peculiarities of a female embodiment which even further marginalizes women. As such typically western philosophy has associated men with the mind and the cultural facets of life while women were identified by the natural functions of their bodies. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) in her study reconstitutes women as "more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" (14). While this association of women with their corporeal facets has been critiqued widely by feminists, it is also true that the lived bodily experiences of women often depict the gender hegemony endured by them most prominently. Young (2005) outlines that the ideal of the lived body rejects the distinction

between sex being natural and gender being social. Rather it affirms that “the body as lived is always enculturated” in “what is culturally required of women” (Young, 2005, 28). The female body that lives in a hetero-patriarchal system can then serve as a tool for submission and maintenance of gendered hegemonies. In a patriarchal society, where men enjoy authoritative positions, women’s bodies are subjected to cultural imperatives that ensure their subjugated roles of satisfying male desires. Bartky (2010) problematizes how women are systematically manipulated to internalize men’s social expectations of female bodily appearance, behavior, dietary management, and many more such disciplinary practices to satisfy a masculine perspective of desirable femininity. It is interesting to note that this self-regulation that women practice under the permanent visibility of the panoptical male gaze establishes their subaltern stature in the gender hierarchy.

The aesthetic ideals of female body image in this context are a typical mechanism of corporeal oppression. The popular culture and the fashion industries have propagated a universal slenderness to decide on a desirable femininity. Susan Bordo in her work, *Unbearable Weight* (1993) extensively discusses how the social anxiety created in bodies that do not conventionally fall under the category of ‘desirable,’ consequently results in the form of self-destructing responses like eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia. Such extreme conditioning of the female body is performed at the expense of one’s physical health and reveals a psychological obsession with confirming the ideal picture of femininity. Naomi Woolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990) also explains how the cosmetic industry thrives under the pretext of women’s pursuit of objectified beauty and female bodily insecurities. Such beauty trends and policing of body size have also provoked alternative narratives of fat acceptance and body positivity to emerge, so much so that fat studies is now a serious field of social scientific engagement. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (2009) problematize the normalization of fat-shaming and internet bullying as they read fatness as a mode of social inequality, specifically for women. Similarly, Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor (2021) note how fat activists protest against the exploitative beauty industry, claiming that their embodiment itself disrupts popular corporeal ideals. Women aren’t only corporeally caged through this vicious loop of aesthetic ideals of the female body but also in social institutions like marriage where their embodiment is commodified behind the guise of patriarchal protection and they are treated like the husband’s property. In this context, Rose Weitz (2010) cites the example of the Babylonian law that offered monetary compensation to the husband or the father of the raped woman,



treating rape like a “form of property damage”. Therefore, it is evident that the female-embodied experience vastly differs from that of its male counterpart. This makes it a twice-marginalized element as the corporeal is traditionally treated to be inferior to the rational, the female corporeality is furthermore inferior to the male embodiment, making the female body sub-subaltern. The present research focuses on how the female body is caught in such culturally oppressive norms and how it reacts to such normativity. It presents an opportunity to interrogate how the inscription of gender on the female body reflects itself in the manner its embodiment is disciplined. By focusing on female-embodied subjectivity, this research attempts to decode the meaning-making process of the bodily subjugation of the subaltern gender. How women’s bodies are interpreted as sites of gendered power-play in various political contexts is one of the key queries the present research engages with. However, it is important still to not generalize the politics of the female body through a linear universal lens. As I have mentioned earlier and as the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) dictates, women’s bodies receive different treatments in different socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. Thus, it is important to focus on a particular geographical setting to avoid parochial appropriation and to fathom how cultural exclusivities decide upon the female embodiment. In the following section, therefore, I turn to theorizing the female body in Indian contexts and then situate it at the specific regional location that I am focusing on in the present research.

### **1.2.1. Female Body Politics in Indian Contexts**

In the Indian context, one of the earliest theorists who focused on female-embodied experiences and their implications in social criticism is Meenakshi Thapan. Thapan (1997) in her ground-breaking anthology on embodiment in the Indian context, analyses how the female body has always had cultural constraints operating over it. Thapan (1997) proves this claim by citing the example of female sex workers who have been under social and moral scrutiny, especially in orthodox Indian society. Thapan (1997) outlines how these sex works were sanitized to perform safe sex during the colonial period. Thapan (ibid.) criticizes the colonial duality of fantasizing about having sex with exotic Indian women while also having anxieties about the fact their bodies may be risky territories as they might spread diseases. Thapan’s commentary questions why the colonizer was spared from these sanitizing attempts while the Indian woman's body was regulated and controlled to prevent any spreading of disease. Similarly, while discussing Indian women’s body image issues

in local contexts, Thapan (1995) presents a case study where her responder a middle-class housewife complains of getting derogatory criticism from her husband for her body, quoting it to be undesirable. Thapan (1995) analyses how the husband's gaze has become a mode of oppression for the wife's body. The localization of this issue of hatred toward the spouses' body lies in the inaccessibility to divorce in a social sense in this case. The responder, a middle-class Indian housewife would prefer to stay married despite the stressful marriage than get estranged from her husband. It shows how in a typical Indian society the woman who is abandoned (even though it was her choice to leave) by the husband or the father is believed to be of loose character no matter how baseless this belief may sound. This leaves no other option for women who are caught in such regimes but to satisfy in whatever ways possible the desires and fantasies of the patriarchal authority of the household. A white woman from a first-world country may simply choose to get separated but a brown Indian woman, not resourceful enough to lead a secure life, might not have that option.

Thapan (1995) in her study calls such female bodies limited within these oppressive regimes as "bodies for others". Similarly, Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (1998) brought in their study a discursive range of analyses that examine how the female body is limited in the sexual politics of India, criticizing the patriarchal belief that female sexuality threatens to get out of control if not leashed by the governmentality of marital chastity or virginity. The notion of purity and pollution are some of the common ideas the female body is associated with in the Indian context. Maintenance of chastity, marital fidelity, and virginity are looked up to and the female body that achieves it is considered worthy of being dignified and honorable. On the other hand, if a woman fails to conform to these various modes of monogamy and sexual abstinence, they are subjected to public humiliation. This socio-cultural imposition of chastity is also why there existed social evils like the practice of Sati (widow immolation) which was widely challenged during the colonial period. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1988) theorizes the body of the Hindu widow as the body of the subaltern whose desires and pleasure-seeking attributes are silenced through social strictures. Spivak reads the complete corporeal elimination of the widow's body post the husband's death as the silencing of the subaltern subject who struggles to find a voice in such practices. Such idealization of a wife's unwavering dedication is promoted through ancient canonical Hindu texts like *Manusmriti* and it is interesting to note that the undertones of these notions are continuing to this day. Uma

Chakraborty (1995) notes how Brahminical ideologies consider the widow to be confined, restrained, and controlled because her sexuality threatens the dead husband's honor. The widow who no longer has access to sexual satiation for her bodily desires is forced to lead a life of sexual and dietary restrictions in which she is forbidden to eat food that might excite her libido. Chakraborty (1995) decodes how this leashing of female sexuality even beyond the death of the husband tellingly deliberates how the hetero-patriarchal society feels threatened by the possibility of women's self-reliance for self-pleasure and how that would de-stabilize the family structures where the wife's body is only conceived with a utilitarian understanding. This perspective of the female body being driven by its urges and might contaminate caste and class boundaries tends to work reversely in non-Brahminical contexts where subaltern marginalized women are taken sexual advantage of by upper-caste men because their embodiment is accessible to a public gaze. Charu Gupta (2011) writes about the hypocrisy of treating the lower-caste Dalit and tribal female body as a polluting agent while also engaging with it sexually to satisfy masculine bodily desires. Such a duality is also experienced in the fact that the upper-caste Brahminical housewife is never offered ample space to explore her sexuality and while the husband can access sexual pleasure secretly outside the realm of matrimony, the wife is strictly forbidden to cross the boundaries of domesticity.

This restriction validates the husband's honor which rests on the wife's chastity. Brinda Bose (2017) engages with this problem as she discusses how the female body is always scripted to enact a moral panic against the corrupting element of sex. Bose (2017) studies how the female body in Indian localized contexts is more often than not discouraged to explore its sexuality even with the realms of "allowable erotics". She problematizes how certain Brahminical ideologies act as oppositional forces to prevent the excess of even "allowable erotics". Not just in the realm of female bodily desires and pleasure, political events like wars or communal riots also use women's bodies as tools to express political dissent. This type of politically motivated bodily oppression has been interrogated by feminist scholars like Veena Das (1995) and Urvashi Butalia (2017) who study the mass abduction of women and widows and their subsequent restoration during the partition of India. Women's bodies are targeted and forced into marriages and communal rapes because, in many of the cultures in India, family honor is always associated with the female body. Therefore, it is an easy site of dominance that symbolically represents the dominance of one community on the other. Both Das (1995) and Butalia (2017) reveal shocking

statistics of how many of these abducted women committed suicide upon being rescued during restoration operations rather than going back to their families. It shows how the female body once defiled of its chastity and virginity is treated like a discardable product. It is interesting how only dignified, honorable, chaste, virgin women find patriarchal ownership. The female body therefore also becomes the tool of cultural markers and community identity as it is always the women whose costumes and attires have to make a stark cultural statement. Commenting on this facet of female embodiment, Nandana Dutta (2012) writes that the female bodies are often used as “repositories of tradition” (149). Recent developments in the scholarship of body studies in the Indian context have seen the publication of two rich and valuable additions such as *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle* (2024), edited by Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, and Rachana Johri and Srirupa Chatterjee and Shweta Rao Garg’s (2024) edited anthology on the politics of body image in India called *Female Body Image and Beauty Politics in Contemporary Indian Literature and Culture*. I specifically refer to Meenakshi Malhotra’s (2024) article on the marginalized tribal body in Mahasweta Devi’s text, Draupadi and Nishat Haider’s (2024) analysis of Dalit body image from the above two anthologies. Both these articles have been especially helpful in my theorization of the subaltern female body. Thus, the female body in the Indian context suffers through corporeal oppression in varying contexts as evident from the above tracing of body theories. While the feminist theorists and social scientists I have discussed here have constructed their arguments from a pan-Indian point of view, my research must have a narrower focus on understanding female body politics through all the exclusivities of its socio-cultural location.

As is evident in this line of inquiry, studying the body politics of a particular body informs heavily on the socio-political location of that body. The geographical setting of the body is therefore crucial to identify the heterogeneity of the female body politics. Thus, I attempt to examine the major themes of cultural and political corporeal oppression discussed above in the local setting of three linguistic cultures of the Eastern-Indian region. In this research, the female body in question is situated in the cultural settings of Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal. I analyze the literary representation of how the female body is caged and exploited through cultural and political norms by undertaking a comparative study of the contemporary translated Odia, Assamese, and Bengali women’s fiction. Adopting an intersectional feminist approach, this research focuses on an understudied body of

women's fiction from the Eastern-Indian regions of Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal to trace how the female body is represented as caged within many regulations of its socio-cultural setting. It must be noted that I have undertaken a comparative study of the English translation of select fiction by women writers from these three linguistic traditions and I am identifying these texts to be contemporary based on the publication date of the English translation and not the original text. All the translations I am dealing with in this research have been published from 1995 onwards. I chose this body of regional women's fiction from these three Eastern-Indian states because of the widespread cultural appropriation of these cultures as they are called sister languages and share many similarities. However, from an insider's perspective, I want to demonstrate how all the regions are suffused with their unique cultural setups and local flavors. This comparative study also aspires to project that while there are many distinctive attributes to each of these cultures, they ultimately reflect each other in modes of restraining the female body. It studies how these modes of exploiting the female body find reflections among all three regions. One may argue that the politics of translation facilitates some aspects of local customs and lingo to get lost in the target language but many of these texts present a rich glossary from the source language aiming to retain the essence of the original expression rather than replacing it with suggestive alternatives in English.

Many of the texts present characters from different classes and linguistic cultures. For instance, in her translator's note for Nabaneeta Dev Sen's *Sheet Sahasik Hemantalok: Defying Winter* (2013), Tutun Mukherjee discusses how challenging it was to keep pace and change the tone between the various characters of the old age home, 'Twilight Shelter'. Mukherjee identifies it as the translator's agony to juggle between the sophisticated critical language of the character Aparajita who is a writer and the coarse vulgar lingo of "Nistarini who comes from the 'dubious' neighborhood of Rambagan" (Sen, 2013). This research thus also reads into these linguistic nuances as it undertakes the study through the translations and focuses on how language informs on social identities through such retained rawness of the original. Moreover, the study also aspires to provoke a wider readership of some of these texts that despite being available in English translation are yet to discover fame beyond the periphery of the state they belong to. Another issue that might remain unresolved is the fact that many of these writers have been historically known to take offense in identifying with the phrase "women writers". While it entirely makes sense to not associate gender with the act of writing, for the lack of a better terminology and for

simply identifying the group of writers under a single umbrella term, I have taken the liberty to use the phrase in the thesis and its title. I have chosen literary representations as my primary resources for analysis because it is in fiction where many uncomfortable truths are presented in guise. Therefore, I focus on these socio-literary narratives to read into how the body is depicted in its socio-cultural and socio-political settings.

### **1.3. Scope of the Study**

The female body is caught in various crosscurrents of cultural and political demands in different geographical settings. The female bodily trauma is therefore heterogeneous in its experience and cannot be appropriated. The study through its close analysis of the select literary portraits exposes many underlying regressive cultural and political norms in the three regions of Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal that do not consider female bodily autonomy as their priority and facilitate hetero-patriarchal hegemonies. The critical lens of body politics aids our understanding of how the female body is shaped in a utilitarian environment to contribute to the reproductive gene pool of a society, how it threatens certain forms of nation-building, how it is contained more often than not within the boundaries of domesticity, how it becomes an easy target of violation in communal and political violence, how it is exploited in sexual economies, how it becomes the repository of social culture and most importantly, how it is caged in multitude of ways. Despite often being quoted as sister languages and parallel cultures, this comparative study also reveals many unique cultural and political climates of the three regions while also finding reflections between modes of exploitation of the female body among them. It is evident from the research undertaken that the trials and tribulations of the female body are captured and recaptured in the select body of women's fiction.

The presence of this recurrent corporeal theme in this compendium implies a conscious effort to amplify and archive bodily trauma in the pursuit of gender equality. Thus, in this study, I have tried to look at the three strands of political, social, and cultural modes of caging the female body and have based my argument on the literary representations in the relevant thematic context. Therefore, I have focused on the lesser-known war and partition narratives that have emerged out of the Eastern front of India, in the selected locale and I have tried to situate the female body in that context. To understand the state-sanctioned strategies of banishment of the racially or ethnically undesirable female body, I have focused on the issue of forced migration or labor migrations to interrogate how

displacement treats the female body and reveals new forms of nation-building. I have also attempted to examine how social marginalization based on caste or tribe has certain brutal implications on the female body. It shows a double layer of exploitation when we study how the female body is interlinked with its caste or tribal identity and how it is oppressed at its intersection. One of the pertinent questions this research follows while studying the subaltern body is whether it faces subjugation only outside its community in the form of hierarchical subjugation by men of dominant classes or whether it experiences a form of subalternity within its own community at the hands of other subaltern men. It analyzes how the abuses of subaltern masculinity only manifest themselves in the subaltern female body to experience some form of agency. This study also traces the representations of bodily resistance that comes as a response to such subjugation from the subaltern female body. Finally, to examine the cultural strand of female bodily disciplining I focus on the modes of corporeal trauma that take place within the sphere of domesticity in heteronormative marriage. I interrogate the mechanisms of the marital ownership of the female body even beyond the death of the husband by critiquing the restrictions of Brahminical widowhood. Based on these ideas of interrogating bodily oppression I have formulated the following research question.

#### **1.4. Aims and Objectives**

This research looks at three major themes found in this body of socio-literary texts and identifies them as three common disturbances, challenges, and aspects of the female body that are mainly depicted in these texts. The three categories of the female body such as the displaced female body, the subaltern female body, and the pleasure-seeking desiring female body are the focus of each of the three core chapters of the thesis. The following objectives of this research constitute what the individual chapters aim to accomplish through their analysis of the select texts.

1. To study the trials and tribulations of the female body in events of forced displacements, its vulnerabilities in spaces of transit, and how it becomes a tool of political dissent during communal violence by studying the war and partition-based narratives emerging from the Eastern front of India.
2. To study how certain forms of subalternity impose tribe-specific and caste-specific trauma on the female body and how the subaltern female body is treated in these texts, what limitations caste and indigeneity have to offer to female embodiment.

3. To read how the desiring female body is considered transgressive of cultural norms and how the pleasure-seeking aspect of the female body is leashed with the boundaries of marital ownership of the female body even beyond the death of the husband.

Following these common themes, the research aims to uncover the problematic portraits and the disturbing depictions that this body of women's fiction bravely features.

### **1.5. Methodological Deliberation**

I have adopted a constructionist approach to interpreting how the female bodies are caged in discourses of cultural and political power. The research is majorly a comparative literary analysis and therefore adopts textual reading and symbolic interpretation. The research analyses corporeal metaphors by reading between the lines and at times even reading against the grain. It has also taken the aid of non-fictional source materials like online news articles and memoirs while dealing with socio-historical events. It focuses on the representational mode of normalizing how female embodiment is controlled and problematizes it through its interrogation of socially and legally institutionalized practices that have resulted in its shaping.

### **1.6. A Brief Outline of the Three Core Chapters**

#### **Chapter 2. The Displaced Female Body: Reading Embodiment and Migration in the Select Women's Fiction**

This chapter looks at the portrait of the women characters who had to bear the brunt of the difficult corporeal ordeals brought forth by the political and communal violence. It primarily studies how the female bodies are treated in events of large-scale migration that came as a consequence of political wars and the partition that took place in the selected geographical regions, especially the 1962 Sino-Indian war and the Bengal partition that targeted the female body as a tool of political dissent. For this purpose, the chapter has taken Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days* (2018) translated from her Assamese novel *Makam* (2010) by the author herself, Jyotirmayi Devi's *The River Churning* (1995) translated from the original Bengali by Enakshi Chatterjee, Sabitri Roy's *Nowhere People* (2019), translated from the original Bengali *Badwip* (1972) by Adrita Mukherjee, and



Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Andhar Bill* (2022) translated from the Bengali by Asit Biswas. It also considers the location of the female body in the ethnic riots during the period of Assam agitation and for studying such a literary portrait, the text selected is Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2013) translated from the original Assamese by Deepika Phukan. Moreover, the chapter also briefly touches upon portraits of displacement where the migration is not the result of a war or other political turmoil but are simple geographical shift to determine what it can culturally mean for the migrant female body. In *Chinatown Days* (2018), the Assamese-Chinese migrants are separated from their Assamese husbands even during their pregnancy post-India's defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. As this incarceration was facilitated by the Defence of India Act (1962), Chowdhury's narrative shows how the state did not care for the special attention and nutritional requirements of the pregnant bodies. Chowdhury depicts the Assamese-Chinese character of Mei Lin who is forced to separate from her Assamese husband Pulok Baruah in the early stages of her pregnancy. Mei Lin's corporeal struggles in the Deoli detainment camp and on the train to Deoli show how the forced migration was a state-sanctioned gendered crime. Similarly, in Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2013), the pregnant protagonist has to hide in a mud pit with rotten banana covers to save her life amidst a riot while she is heavily pregnant. Her pregnancy ultimately results in a stillbirth as the doctors in the camp openly neglect her treatment. This selective negligence reveals a form of constructive nation-building where the nation only desires a certain race and creed of female bodies to reproduce, the ones that contribute to its desirable gene pool.

This also makes the desirable female bodies a soft target to violate a country's identity and honor. In Jyotimayi Devi's *The River Churning* (1995), the character of Sutara is considered to be polluted because she is rescued by a Muslim family during the Noakhali riots. Her sister gets raped and is never to be found but Sutara who survives lives off her days as an outcast. Charal's *Andhar Bill* (2022) also mentions the Dandakaranya project where women were abducted and where the refugees were provided with compromised food. Roy's *Nowhere People* (2019) which is also set during the time of the Bengal partition talks about how daughters were married off to politically powerful families so that their families would be saved from migration. In all instances, the female body is used as a weapon for safety and to express hatred. Anita Agnihotri's *Sickle* (2021), translated from the original Bengali *Kaste* (2019) by Arunava Sinha talks about the Banjara women who migrate to live in shanties in drought season to work in a sugar mill factory. In these

shanties, in the peak of summer women have to be laden with uncomfortable heavy *ghagra choli* because anything light and easy to undo will make them fall prey to the sexual hunger of the contractors. The female body is sexually and physically susceptible to trauma as its embodiment is shaped in the spaces of transit during events of displacement, so much so that many of them choose death over surviving such displacements.

### **Chapter 3. Palpable Subalternity: Reading the Marginalized Female Body**

This chapter looks at how the female body suffers when caught at the intersection of caste and indigeneity. For this purpose, the selected texts include Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story, 'The Girl with the Long Hair' (2020), translated from the Assamese by Ranjita Biswas, Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' (2018), translated from the Bengali by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Pratibha Ray's novel *The Primal Land* (2001) translated from the original Odia by B.K. Das, Gayatri Sharaf's short story, 'A Mother from Kalahandi' (2016), translated from the Odia by Sumanyu Satpathy, 'The Ghat of the Date Palm Tree and Panchi's Sense Organs' (2020) by Saptadwipa Adhikari, translated from Bengali by Barnali Pain and Gargi Talapatra. *The Primal Land* (2001) serves as a brilliant platform to carry out the aforementioned tasks. Ray's novel deals with the life of Bonda highlanders and gives a detailed account of their society that is driven mainly by their localized myths and folk legends.

Through Ray's portrayal of Bonda life, one can see that the Bonda women are used for their skills in doing labor, and also how they are meant to take care of their husbands which is why they are married to boys eight to ten years younger to them. The identity as a wife-mother makes the young Bonda women lead solitary lives. Ray's plot reveals that when the colonized officers came to the development of the Bonda village, their first project was to dress the naked Bonda women, having no regard for the culture of the marginalized. The Bonda women's bodies become the repositories of tradition or modernity. Similarly, in Kalita's (2020) 'The Girl with the Long Hair', Mainao is punished for having participated in the Durga Puja as a Bodo tribal girl. While the leaders chop off Mainao's hair for this innocent deed, her aunt gets humiliated publicly for not wearing a Dokhona as the party members cut her clothes with scissors. While these punishments come from inside the community, Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' (2018) shows how in the community's battle with the outsiders, the female bodies from the community are brutally targeted. The character of Dopdi Mejhen is raped by the policemen and she used her

bruised body as her only weapon of resistance before her captivators. In Sharaf's (2016) short story, one sees the repercussions of poverty in these marginalized cultures on the subaltern female body as the character of Kumari from a village of famine-stricken Kalahandi of Odisha is sold off to a journalist who comes to report their case and highlight government's negligence. Kumari's character culminates into being a sexual slave to this reporter merely to get food. Similarly, in Adhikari's (2020) short story, the character Panchi due to her ugliness and poverty is married off to a person double her age only to be able to eat two square meals a day but faces marital rape. Interestingly, Goswami's short story shows a promiscuous Brahmin woman aborting her unborn children because of the lower caste of the supposed fathers. In all these instances, the caste and indigeneity of the women characters drive the torments their bodies face. These reveal a double marginalization at play.

#### **Chapter 4. The Pleasure-Seeking Female Body in Marriage and Widowhood**

This chapter follows the female body within the boundaries of domesticity and analyses how its bodily urges are leashed within it. It sees how marriage makes the female body caged to the male script of desires and limits its pleasure-seeking aspects even beyond the death of the husband, in widowhood. For this chapter, the selected texts are Bani Basu's *The Fifth Man* (2014) translated from the original Bengali novel *Pancham Purush* (1990) by Arunava Sinha, Yashodhara Mishra's short stories 'The Picture Within' (2020) and 'Worm in the Bough' (2020); translated from Odia by the writer's assistance, Paramita Satpathy's 'Alone, Together' (2019) translated from Odia by Snehaprava Das, Sarojini Sahoo's novel *The Dark Abode* (2013) translated from the original Odia novel *Gambhiri Ghara* (2005) by Mahendra Kumar Dash, Kuntala Kumari Sabat's 'The Dark Bride' (2014) translated from Odia by Mary Mohanty, Indira Goswami's *In The Shadow of Divine Flute Player* (2019), translated from Assamese by Gayatri Bhattacharyya, and Goswami's (2021) novella 'The Blood of Devipeeth' anthologized in her *Five Novellas about Women*, translated from Assamese by Dibyajoti Sarma. Bani Basu's *The Fifth Man* (2014) paints the character of Neelam who after undergoing a hysterectomy loses her figure and becomes sexually unattractive to her husband. The novel shows how Neelam's constant seeking of sexual pleasure inside her marriage and then the eventual decision to turn to sexual abstinence reveal that there are not enough tools to access circumstances where bodies like hers are allowed to seek pleasure. Neelam's desires are denounced even inside her

marriage because they were emerging from a de-mothered female body within non-maternal contexts. Similarly, Mishra's (2020) characters Amita, Manisha, and Anjali are all punished in various forms for their desires even though they are married to someone they don't desire particularly. While Amita is left estranged, Manisha is considered ugly because of her promiscuity in comparison to Rita Apa who remained chaste after her husband's death and thus beautiful. Anjali on the other hand burns herself thinking that her body deserves nothing more for raging in the fire of desire. Sahoo (2013) writes of a housewife who has an internet love affair with a Pakistani artist and glows in the fantasy that the artist excites in her. However, social norms demand she cut off her virtual ties and rely on the emotionally detached relationship she shares with her husband. The fact that her bodily desires could only manifest in a virtual identity shows their inferior presence in the marriage. While these texts show the sexual dissatisfaction of the female body due to negligence in a marriage, Satapathy's (2019) 'Alone, Together' shows a female protagonist who is a vitiligo patient, and because of this, she is unable to find suitors for marriage. Therefore, she imagines a sexual partner for her desires to take flight from the real and seep into the imaginary. Satapathy attempts to highlight how corporeal desires are present and take shape irrespective of any platform of allowable erotic.

Similarly, in Goswami's 'The Blood of Devipeeth' the character of Padmapriya is abandoned by her husband and the family of her in-laws because she has a white spot on her back. Padma is advised by her friend to make use of the rest of her body to sexually entice her husband. The comparative analysis of the two texts throws light on how the deformed or diseased-skin female is treated in sexual narratives. Similarly, Sabat's (2014) 'The Dark Bride' shows a child bride Lakshmi who is thrust into a life of abstinence from all pleasures and desires while her father marries at an old age and enjoys a life of sexual fulfillment. Sabat shows how society associates any meaning to the female body and perceives it to be of deserving any joy only when it is associated with a husband. If the husband is dead, the female body is forbidden any pleasure. This is further elaborated with the depiction of the restrictive lives of the widows in Vrindavan in Goswami's novel where widows are even forbidden to eat food rich in spice and taste because that is understood to excite their libido. Therefore, these texts follow the body into domestic spaces and show how its desires are considered transgressive no matter whether they are limited to their allocated places.

### **1.7. Limitation of the Study**

One of the major setbacks of this study is that it heavily relies on the English translations of the fictional texts that comprise the primary resources. However, many of the women's fiction from the selected Easter-Indian regions while thematically relevant to the above-mentioned research questions, unfortunately, are yet to be translated. Therefore, many other important texts that are only available to regional readers could not be included in this study. Another problem is the lack of historical and cultural resources for secondary evidence of corporeally oppressive practices which I struggled to collect from a limited number of memoirs and news articles that I have cited as footnotes. Lastly, it was also a herculean task to compare three linguistic traditions and bring forth common strands of corporeal oppression in the specific contexts of historical events the Sino-Indian War of 1962 or the Bangladesh Liberation War (1972). While I have tried to accommodate political meanings through such comparisons, due to the lack of such historical representations of migration provoked by any such wars in translated Odia women's fiction, that perspective remains missing. Due to a lack of narrative on alternate female sexualities, this study limits itself to focus on the heterosexual female body and therefore there is an absence of discussion of queer politics. I have tried to cite the original text wherever possible but due to lack of citation details as many of the texts have now gone out of print in their original version, I have only mentioned the language it is translated from and the translators' names.