Introduction

The Title of the Dissertation:

This dissertation is titled: ‘Precarious Objectifications: Ethics of Representation and the Figure of the Woman’. The expression ‘precarious objectifications’ is borrowed from Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 125). For them, in understanding the relationship between two objects, one cannot start by assuming that these objects are discernable as fully present, or complete wholes, since within a system of relations, “the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself” (125). The “experience” of such incompleteness, or ‘other-orientedness, in their words, “does have a form of precise discursive presence, and that is antagonism” (122). Antagonism is a relation which “arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution” and this ‘antagonism’, they propose, “constitutes the limits of every objectivity, which is revealed as partial and precarious objectification” (emphasis in original, 125). An example of such ‘precarious objectification’ is the ‘metaphorical’ in the case of language. Metaphors represent a partial anchoring of meaning as well as the trail of meaning’s deferral. It fixes a gap as well as keeps it open. But, (and here I differ) Laclau and Mouffe stress more on the first part (the fixing of the gap) whereas in this dissertation I try to figure the labour of the metaphorical as both closing and opening a passage¹.

My sense of using the expression ‘precarious objectification’ (used in plural in the title of this dissertation) is also distinct in the way I try to understand ‘precarious objectification’ as production of a materiality ‘in time’, a point which

¹ The logic being: if objects cannot have full presence, how can the trails of difference have full presence, trails that stay in-between objects, or between their two successive moments.
Laclau and Mouffe overlook (this critique is elaborated mainly in ‘Chapter Four’). From the standpoint of this dissertation, the adjective ‘precarious’ might also be said to aptly refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation of a “precarious foothold [of practice] outside of the subject-position” in “Echo” (Spivak 1993a, 24), a text to which I give a detailed reading in ‘Chapter Five’. The second half of the title links two conceptual blocks, even if commonsensically only the former (‘Ethics of Representation’) is recognizable as a ‘conceptual’ string whereas the latter (‘the Figure of the Woman’) gestures as if toward a more real, embodied figure. One aim of this dissertation is to dispute this binary between ‘concept’ and ‘body’, here exemplified in this coincidence.

If re-presentation (i.e. presenting oneself at a different time and place, or othering of the self) is a fundamental opening of the ‘self’ to the ‘other’, then at the same time it is also about a perpetuation of self, only at a different time and space. I understand ‘ethics’ fundamentally as the setting up of this double-bind which constitutes the ‘step’ of re-presentation. Both as A) opening to the other, and B) perpetuation of self. Feminism, I argue, cannot merely be an affirmation of the first move, since the opening to the other cannot fully negate the desire for self-presence which is also a part of the logic. Here we confront one of the key-problems that this dissertation tries to address, which is the following: how to think of a feminist ethics which does not take recourse to the proper-improper binary, and can work at a remove from any notion of originary essence or ‘properness’?

The second string: ‘figure of the woman’ marks the transaction between generality and particularity. The name ‘woman’ represents bodies, experiences and lives of real ‘women’ through homogenization. If we think of the generality of the ‘name’ as a kind of grammar or law-like structure, then the dissertation asks: how can particular, located events affirm or elude such a grammar? This dissertation works therefore in these two related registers in interrogating the possibility of an ethics of representation which is also feminist by confronting the problem of thinking ‘representation’ and ‘ethicality’ together.

In the brief outline of the argument below, I try to elaborate more on how I build up this criss-crossing texture of problematics.
Outline of the Argument:

This dissertation is situated at the intersection of two fields which are disparate and yet in engagement, deconstruction and feminist critical theory. My approach in this dissertation is one of close reading\(^2\) of key texts mostly philosophical and feminist. Other than texts strictly falling within these two broad short-hands, I have also discussed a Bengali short story and a text concerning history of folk literature in Bengali at crucial junctures of this dissertation. While introducing the ‘short story’ (written by Rabindranath Thakur), I have tried to carefully examine the specificity, if any, of a ‘literary text’ and the typicality of the representation of a woman’s voice in such a textual weave. Chiefly in the last two chapters, I have tried to stage and an encounter between deconstruction and feminism at the site of the ‘postcolonial’; even if the entire dissertation can be seen as a preparation for that staging. The aim, it can be said, has been the articulation of the postcolonial scene all the while, the initial discussions indicate an indispensible detour in reaching that point.

If ‘deconstruction’ usually tries to stay clear of any predetermined grammar, ‘feminist critical theory’ also is of no uniform shape or aim. ‘Deconstruction’ refers to a broad paradigm of arguments, but within the limits of this dissertation, I chiefly take up the discussions around the problem of ‘representation’ and ‘intentionality’ that one finds in the works of Jacques Derrida, along with cues from other texts\(^3\) dealing with the critique of intentionality, by Louis Althusser for example; and in the context of feminism, especially those by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A further point is made in the dissertation that deconstruction does not necessarily form a critique of intentionality, but through its own performance as a ‘work’ it tries to untangle a supplementary materialization of ‘intentionality’ which is not fully under the authority of the intending subject, or the source of intention. It is this specific deconstructive thought of the ‘supplement’, which both ‘cuts’ the intention from its

\(^2\) I have indicated in the dissertation itself, how this reading is analogous to or differ from a ‘deconstruction’ which is typically called a ‘work’ of deconstruction.  
\(^3\) The point may be made that Jacques Derrida cannot be the only signatory of the ‘Derridian corpus’. For a discussion specifically focusing on the limits and proliferations of the authorial signature, see ‘Chapter One’.
authorizing source and in the same movement makes it ‘sur-vive’ beyond its one-
time unique occurrence, that I discuss in this study.

By ‘feminist critical theory’ on the other hand, I indicate specifically feminism’s engagement and subsequent unease with the poststructuralist critique of the stable subject. It seems that to construe a politics one needs to start with the positioning of an unwavering subject around whom political action and intention can be weaved. Feminism, by its very definition, must work with a ‘generality’ at its very basic: the identity ‘woman’, and a certain material presence given to it, whether in the ontological, historical or performative register. Das reminds that “feminisms” cannot merely raise the “question of the ‘woman’ in the purportedly neutral register of the ‘human’”, and therefore must mark its departure from such a “thoroughly universalist position”, and yet, “they cannot get rid of the generality called ‘woman’” either (Das 2010, 136). In short, Feminism as ethico-political project hinges on this proposition of an identity. Without this minimal essentialization, it

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4 For a discussion of the term: ‘critique’ chiefly in its Kantian usage, see Michel Foucault’s “What is Critique?” (in Foucault 2007). Also see Brown, Butler and Mahmood 2009 for related discussions and for Judith Butler’s gloss on Foucault’s analysis of the term. Foucault opines that in the Kantian formulation, “Critique only exists in relation to something other than itself” and that, “it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate”; and in that sense, Foucault adds, ‘critique’ can also be thought as an opening to a future which is not reducible to any “positive” content, be it “philosophy, politics, law, literature” (Foucault 2007, 42). This reading can be connected to the Foucauldian understanding that the Kantian notion of ‘Enlightenment’ is not merely an historical age to be fixed on the calendrical time-line, but rather a ‘way out’ (Ausgang, in Kant’s words). This sense of the term ‘critique’ has a similarity with Spivak’s following comment (in her Critique of Postcolonial Reason): “My book is therefore a “critique” in that it examines the structures of the production of postcolonial reason” (Spivak 1999, xii). This unpacking of the structure of production of a specific reason is also a search for an Ausgang without guarantee. Our use therefore follows this meaning of ‘critique’ where I try to figure and read feminist interventions not necessarily beyond ‘reason’ but as examining the conditions of production of present reason as ‘reason of man’, and therefore a reason always working behind the horizon of a ‘way out’. 
does not seem feasible even to think of a ‘feminist position’. In this context any questioning or dissolution of the notion of a stable subject seems fundamentally antithetical to the feminist project. But as I argue in this dissertation, if one takes into consideration that in the case of deconstruction not the ‘necessity of subject predication’ but the ‘full presence given to subjectivity’ is critiqued then one sees that the deconstructive fissuring of the notions of stable subjectivity can be enabling for conceiving a feminist politics. Judith Butler opines that to take a finished subjectivity as the point of departure for a feminist politics, would be to “defer the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself” (Butler in Benhabib 1995, 47). She writes,

We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the agency of the subject. But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. (Butler, 46)

A deconstructive feminist critique might question the dynamics of subject formations based on sexual difference itself, and subsequently interrogate the category ‘woman’ in its historical and ontological constructedness. This is an-other kind of politics, a politics which makes all other politics ‘possible’ remaining itself under the shadows of an (im)-possibility. Therefore, one is confronted with two levels or registers of thinking the ‘political’, within a feminist fold. If one of these registers works with the stable subject named ‘woman’, the other questions the very stability of it. In the dissertation that follows, I try to show how these connected yet different registers might work together, but not without the frictional unease produced from using the name ‘woman’ at the service of a politics, and therefore as a generality which albeit refers to real women, tarrying, living, experiencing beings with lives and bodies, dissimilar and disparate. In this dissertation I have tried to

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5 See Spivak 1987, 154. Also see ‘Chapter Five’ for detailed discussion.
6 For a detailed discussion of a distinction between the politics of the “possible” and of the “(im) possible” see Das 2010, especially 163-171. My use is very much in tandem with Das’s use. For my own delineation of this distinction in relation to the notion of an intentionality without position, see ‘Chapter Five’.
meticulously formulate a concept which can be supple enough to give one a critical insight into the double-bind of the possible and im-possible politics as well as other related *aporias*.

Traversing these related arguments, the dissertation constantly pursues this key question: how can one think of a ‘feminist intervention’ if no thought as such is able to work outside the structural closure of a language shot with the intentionality and representation that is ‘of the man’. One might argue that by positing the phallogocentric closure as the very horizon of meaning-making, ‘deconstruction’ forecloses any possibility of thinking feminism, which would be tantamount to thinking an outside while remaining in the inside of that closure, hence impossible. This dissertation proposes, on the contrary, that such a thought can be pursued through a closer understanding of a deconstructive notion of re-presentation where re-presentation (as delineated above) both facilitates and resists change. It facilitates by dividing the origin or the authorizing principle of intention and representation by re-marking the trajectory of a ‘loss’ of self which can never be recuperated as a productive work propelled by the supplement of the other. The crucial question here would be, if one can think at all of ‘intentionality’ without recourse to any authorizing agency or subject predication. A feminist politics apparently needs, by definition, a subject predication. However, if one works with the excess materiality which *matters* at the margins of the intentional matrix, and which does not fully come under the authority of the ‘intentional’, then one gets a glimpse of a mattering which cannot fully be claimed for any ‘possible politics’. This ‘cut’ cuts the originary and teleological intention from its intended self-presence and retrieves *only its rhythm* which might be called a ‘work without intentionality’. This ‘work of the cut’ however cannot be thought in separation from the intention itself, and its materiality still remains haunted by the ontology of the intention or of the ‘inside’ of the intentional matrix. The ‘cut’ therefore cuts both ways, if intentionality cannot get rid of the work which folds it onto itself making it ever incomplete, then the work itself cannot remain fully de-ontologized, always getting affected by the cut of the inside and therefore by presence and matter. And yet, this ‘materiality’ which is concentrated not like congealed ‘matter’ but laid out, ex-tended in time and therefore like an ongoing work of production, is not to be fully claimed for the
‘political’ either. Especially not for a politics which claims to flow assuredly from a fully present ‘matter’, fixable to an instant of pure location. In the dissertation then, I ask, if this other materiality (which is never precipitated matter, but the work of the production of it) can be mobilized in service of a feminist ethics. ‘Ethics’ here does not merely indicate a stage prior to the political, but it signifies a ‘work’ which never can fully constitute its priority over politics since it works at the very margins of it.

At the same time ethics in this sense would not be reducible to politics for reasons I elaborate more in the text that follows. I hope that through the arguments taken up in this dissertation, both the notions of politics and ethics get reappraised from a deconstructive feminist point of view. A key moment in this argument is fleshed out in the dissertation through a close reading of Spivak’s “Echo” (Spivak 1993a) where it is shown how ‘Echo’ (or the logic of echoing) can be read to prompt the following formula: ‘a position without intention’ (‘Chapter Five’). In the dissertation I generally follow the method of closely reading texts or textual moments to put together my argument. In the first two chapters, I have tried to lay out the background of my arguments to follow. Even if these initial chapters most rigorously read a gamut of texts concentrating specifically on two authorial signatures (Althusser and Derrida) in turn, the method of extensive review of available arguments is in no way limited to the first two chapters only. Detailed readings of texts are presented throughout the dissertation.

The dissertation starts with an intention to re-vi ew and revise some of the existing but generally overlooked ‘arguments’ and ‘concept-metaphors’ (like, for example the Althusserian ‘cut’) by identifying them in the pores of an available set of textual configurations. These threads are then reappraised later in the dissertation in construing the dissertation’s own positions. The first two chapters introduce a host of available critical terms and concepts. These chapters present an initial survey of available tropes and concepts. Consequently, is might be noticed that the first two chapters follow a somewhat different structure of presentation compared to the rest of the dissertation. In doing this, they make the transition from specific author-based or text-based study to a more thematically oriented discussion. It is for this reason, that the titles of these two chapters are overarched by two (formidable) signatures: Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida. In the context of the overall dissertation, the
first two chapters can be considered preparatory (also in introducing and sharpening
the key concept metaphor ‘cut’). I chart below an overview of the chapters which
would make the trajectory of this dissertation more clear.

Chapter Summaries:

The first two chapters can be termed introductory, since they introduce the
central concept term taken up in the dissertation, ‘the cut’, in thinking how ‘change’
is possible in an enclosed system.

‘Chapter One’ takes up the problem at its very basic, asking how a closure
can differ from itself, or how it is possible to think ‘change’ within a given closure.
This interrogation follows what I have called the ‘self-iterating structure’. The
discussion is set in the context of Louis Althusser’s notion of the ‘epistemological
cut’ through which an intervention distinguishes and as if distills the ‘scientific’
(separating it from the ‘ideological’) in a given field, in effect changing the very
make of the field. Althusser weaves his arguments with respect to the
‘philosophical’ field, since for him philosophy has a basic tendency of trying to
differ from itself by making an imperceptible distance from itself; even if it only
repeats what was already articulated within the field before. Althusser thinks that
such an urge for a self-iteration ‘without loss’ can be located at the margins of the
field, where the field simultaneously breaks and makes itself. The self-iteration of
the ‘philosophical’ however, for Althusser, does not produce any positive deviation
from the self, but instead produces the very ‘act’ of incessantly working for such an
outside. Althusser tends to recognize this work as a ‘theory’. It is a theory which is
able to meditate on the very rhythm of the philosophical, which for him is also the
‘Marxist science’. If philosophy is a theory about the production of thought, and
‘thought-concretes’ then ‘Marxist science’ would be the ‘theory of theoretical
production’. ‘Marxist science’ then, gives one a speculative foothold to think about
the ‘act of thinking an outside (of the philosophical)’ which can create a distance

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7 Or ‘concrete by the way of thought’, see “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in
Althusser 1969. Also see ‘Chapter One’ for discussion.
from the ‘self’ and still remains touching the self. This act itself has a materiality and existence which is not fully reducible to the ‘inside’ of the field. This ‘act’, as I try to show through a close reading of some specific texts by Althusser, can be organized around the concept-metaphor ‘cut’ which is a ‘work’ (repetitive persistent act) as much emanating from the logic of the ‘inside’ (of the self-iterating structure) as it is dependent on a supplement of the ‘outside’. Even if Althusser, in some specific moments in his oeuvre seems to propose (after Lenin) that the intervention of the ‘cut’ can be ontologized and claimed for a ‘correct’ intervention through the critical-normative weave of a Marxist class analysis, I try to show instead that if one closely follows the internal logic of his texts, Althusser does not come up as being so transparent about the work of the ‘cut’, and instead can be shown to problematize the figure of the cut as being a work without a clear subject. This strand culminates in his enigmatic question: “But who or what is it that works?” (Althusser 1969, 184). It is this notion of a ‘work of the cut’ placed between intentionality and non-intentionality, inside and outside, between a place for re-presentation and a place for action, that I pick up from the discussions of this chapter.

‘Chapter Two’ examines the work of the cut as it appears in the corpus of Jacques Derrida (in a related but distinct way compared to its position in the Althusserian corpus). In “White Mythology” (in Derrida 1982) Derrida shows, by a detailed discussion of some classical philosophical texts, that the discourse of philosophy revolves around a notion of originary loss. This narrative proposes that there was once a stratum of founding tropes and real meanings which subsequently got lost, inaugurating in effect: philosophy. The mark of that loss is materialized in the form of the ‘metaphorical’ which marks the slide of the meaning away from that lost origin. The philosophical tries to retrieve what is lost, but can only do so by the way of further representational slide, by using more metaphors. To produce itself, or to produce its travail to the ‘original’, the philosophical discourse aims at an ultimate abandonment of the ‘metaphorical’ even if in pursuing this trajectory it must go by the step of the metaphor. Philosophy therefore tries to get back to an original ‘matter’ or ‘physicality’ by the way of banishing the metaphorical which it sees as ‘figurative’. Derrida shows, that the re-presentational act of the metaphorical however, is also a materiality, an inscription of the slide of ever eluding meaning,
never quite precipitating as a matter with fullness of meaning. It is a ‘materiality on
the run’ so to say, meaning being its production in time, but not as fully present, not
concentrated in one instant\(^8\). The philosophical cannot take a step away from the
metaphorical without using the metaphorical (in re-presenting its earlier moment)
and hence there will always be at least one metaphor which would not come under
its sway. This surplus metaphor at the margins which is both used (entailing
responsibility) and missed (denying/cutting authority) is neither fully of the inside,
nor totally of the outside. Derrida likens the operation of this ‘extra metaphor’ with
the failure of the Hegelian ‘true infinity’ to totally circumvent itself, in achieving the
circular figure of full presence. The same critique applies in the case of the
Heideggerian idea of ‘Being’, which, as if, tries to tarry in a space of internal
difference through a conscious acknowledgement of and distance from the
metaphorical, even if such an acknowledgement does not preclude the work of the
metaphorical in self. The ‘retrait’ of the Heideggerian ‘Being’, ever caught in the
‘present’ of its being, Derrida shows, is structured like the inscription of a tarrying
metaphor. Ironically it is this inability (to circumvent the metaphorical fully) which
produces the ‘life’ of the ‘Being’ trapped in ontico-ontological difference. This ‘life’
would not be possible if Being were able to produce itself more than once at the
same space and time. Re-presentation therefore affirms ‘life’ which is constituted of
an inscription which can only be conceived as metaphorical or as a material
writing.

The following chapters further sharpen the notion of the ‘cut’ and of this restance
‘materiality’. This chapter also discusses the ‘cut’ in the context of a key notion of
Derridian deconstruction: iterability. The concept-metaphor ‘cut’ (coupure) and the
nearby term ‘gap’ (ecart) surface at crucial junctures in the book Limited Inc
(Derrida 1988) to signify both the distance which remains between the ‘sender’ and
the ‘receiver’ (of speech act, in this context) and the lingering trace in intentionality
which delivers the message albeit broken, or quasi message, in spite of the ‘cut’ or
the slit. This therefore, gives one a glimpse of the other side of the ‘cut’, not fully
free and eluding, but part-grounded, i.e. in its ontologically tamed figuration.

\(^8\) This notion of a metaphorical as a materiality in time has a connection to a proposition
which comes later in the dissertation: ‘re-presentation is an embodiment’ (‘Chapter Six’).
As is clear, one of the key points that this dissertation drives at, is the necessity to understand the act of the ‘cut’ *in time*. ‘Chapter Three’ introduces the discussion of ‘time’ (and temporality) in more detail. It broaches the problem of a possible critique of propriation in relation to temporality. This chapter has two parts. In the first, I take up a deconstructive reading of the itinerary of the ‘proper’ as it comes up in the Marxian critique of capital’s mode of self-perpetuation. In the second, the double bind of thinking an instant of time (or the axis of event) in relation to temporal drift (or the axis of ‘being’) is taken up through a close reading of Derrida’s “*Ousia and Grammê*” (in Derrida 1982).

Thomas Keenan shows that the ‘use-value’ in Marx comes into being not only as a ‘proper’, a fictional prior state set-up to critique exchange, but also as a ‘production’. ‘Use’ in this sense is not only an unique event when “things differ irreducibly from everything else, including other uses of the “same” thing” (emphasis added, Keenan 1997, 111), but also a body-revealed-in-use. This follows, among other things, from the fact that for Marx, an object has a distinct use-value at each separate moment of its use. Therefore, when Derrida makes the point that the commodity ‘haunts’ ‘the thing’ or the use-value, he also means that the commodity cannot let go of the inscription that is always already presupposed in the very conception of ‘use’. One can add to the Derridian articulation (that the ‘exchange haunts use’) with the equally justifiable claim ‘use haunts exchange’. Exchange cannot rob ‘use’ of all its materiality as full de-ontologization is impossible. The ‘restance materiality’ does not only interrupt fully present matter, it also does linger in any conception of the wholly other or, fully absent outside, guarding such an abyss from the view. In effect, it produces a work which makes exchange and therefore meaning possible, even if this very act of production eludes intelligibility and can only be thought as a work in time. The discussion then takes up a critical comparison between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s and Derrida’s readings of the Marxian text. I propose that these two signatures can be read together as long as both put to question the ‘itinerary of the proper’ (in the self perpetuating circuit of ‘capital’) from within (what I call) a post-deconstructive reason⁹ which is able to formulate a critique of such a circuit without any recourse to a ‘proper’ of its own.

⁹ See ‘Chapter Three’.
But how can ‘exchange’ be critiqued without recourse to an unchanging prior or proper state, i.e. without a reference point? In deconstruction, it is done by getting a handle on things by the inadequate naming of the sensual nonsensual trace as ‘différance’, which is not an unit of existence or matter, but rather the unshakable mark of reason as it meditates on the violence inherent in the act of exchange; the violence which tries to wipe objects off all their materiality or ‘use’. It is this minute yet necessary ‘friction’ (and not merely a necessary fiction), which resists a free exchange of matter and meaning which is named (inadequately) ‘différance’. This resistance of materiality therefore also works as that hinge on which a post-deconstructive reason turns. Spivak however tries to identify such a foothold of a critique of the proper which works instead of the dominant reason of the text as the coming of the ‘literary’ which makes the philosophical text ‘practicable’\textsuperscript{10}. For Derrida, however, this way of staging the fictional would only ontologize ‘différance’, nullifying the very deconstructive move it relies on, and he consequently insists on chipping away at that moment of ‘naming’ (the trace) through language, producing a stalemate of sorts where the only production is the incessant act of trailing the trace itself. In this sense, for Derrida, deconstruction would not be ultimately able to escape the philosophical form, which endlessly tries to master the excess metaphor at the margins. However, deconstruction would still be different in producing this very ‘work’ as a persistent production, never quite claiming to be able to ossify the work as presence, albeit fictional\textsuperscript{11}.

In this chapter, I also discuss how a very deconstructive critique of ‘Capital’s desire for self-presence’ through the negation of the time of production is already implicit in Marx’s Grundrisse, which Spivak apparently misses. A parallel of this Marxian self-deconstruction is to be found in Aristotle’s proposition of the double bind between time as an instant and time as temporal drift, as shown by Derrida. This gives further precision to our discussion of the ‘cut’ which is here set between ‘temporality’ and ‘nowness’. It seems that ‘presence’ in the lived world is possible

\textsuperscript{10} See ‘Chapter Three’.

\textsuperscript{11} One might propose that this explains in a way the different kind of prose used by Spivak and Derrida, but this is a matter which takes us beyond the scope of this dissertation. See ‘Chapter Three’ for a limited discussion.
only in re-presentation, since, if presence were full and never differed-deferred through the step of re-presenting itself in a different time and space, then all time and space would have been ‘together’ and there would have been no time, space or any-thing. Therefore ironically, ‘presence’ can come about only as ‘withdrawn’ from itself, and therefore not as fully present. It is also argued in conclusion that the ‘trace’ is not a thing and therefore has no determination other than the mark of naming, there is no trace ‘in-itself’. It is a mark also of that irreversible loss of a certain memory which is produced only through remembering its erasure. This is the crux of the step of re-presentation as trace.

In ‘Chapter Four’ the possibilities and im-possibilities of thinking a deconstructive subject are taken up. It is in this chapter that the key question of intentionality is broached as well, with relation to the ‘subject of decision’. I try to ask how a decision is to be read within the paradigm of re-presentation. Does decision remain a mechanical production which is made according to a prior law or received experience, or is it an agential intervention, staging the coming of the subject-of-choice? In this way the chapter deals with the notion of the ‘machine’ and its intersections with ‘organic choice’ in producing materiality. To begin with, I juxtapose two concepts side by side. One by Michel Foucault, from one of his late and rare forays into the notion of the ‘subject’ (Foucault 2001), and the other by Ernesto Laclau where he is trying to stage a dialogue between Derridian deconstruction and the concept of Hegemony (Laclau in Mouffe 1995). Foucault is shown to propose an idea of a decision prior to all decisions, which he calls “resistance”, and which “bring[s] to light” (Foucault 2001, 329) power relations analysable through the identification of antagonisms in a field which is otherwise dispersed. Foucault seems to propose that the field cannot be recognized as pure dispersion without thinking ‘resistance’ or taking this first step of making an intervention. Laclau, on the other hand, seems only too keen to make a “theory of decision” (Laclau in Mouffe 1995, 62) through which the subject gets, as if a body. For him, such a decision plugs the aporia which stays between the ‘undecidability’ of a given field and the politics of a definite action. Foucault’s argument could stage the ethical along with the irreducible trace of ‘resistance’ without which the field of pure dispersion, or (to be more precise), no ‘field’ as such can be accessed. This
corresponds to his attention to the subindividual marks which shows a family resemblance to the Deconstructive ‘trace’, and makes it possible to retain an opening toward a notion of ethicality which comes ‘before’ (both prior and subjected to) any decision. Laclau, on the contrary, seems to reject that opening to the ‘other’ and therefore the pre-propriative altogether, in favour of a subject who becomes like a bridge in introducing intelligibility into the field. I argue that along with this non-negotiation with the ‘call of the other’, Laclau also ignores the temporal dimension in thinking decision. If one has to persist with a notion of ‘decision’, I argue, then it is to be thought as de-cision, i.e. always already interrupted/ cut within and stretched in time. Subsequently, through a close reading of the Derridian notion of ‘hauntology’ (chiefly in Derrida 1994a) I try to examine: what does it mean to ‘intervene’ and ‘intervene at the present time’. I propose that the returning ‘revenant’ works like a signature which works both through its ‘eventness’ and ‘repetition’. Following this thread, the concept-metaphor ‘cut’ is situated between ‘event’ and ‘machine’ in the next section. This is done through a reading of the Derridian critique of Paul de Man’s notion of the text which is produced, according to him, between the ‘formality’ or machine-like reproductions of the ‘grammar’ and the ‘organic’ nature of the ‘rhetoric’. It is argued that not only the ‘cut’ is placed between the machine and the event, but it cuts the very logic of the machine as well as of the event through its work. The ‘work of the cut’ contaminates the seemingly self-perpetuating smoothness of the machine by inserting the quasi-machinelike logic between the machine and its very act of self-production. It does also cut any organic production which is apparently devoid of the machine or of the inorganic through a similar gesture of injecting the ‘quasi’ or the ‘as if’. But as Spivak opines, subject predication is inevitable, and it also works like a closure only within which thought can turn. In search of an articulation of subject-predication, or predication of intelligibility, I argue for an ‘analytic’ which tries to think not only of the subject in time, but rather of the incessant affirmation of the question, ‘who works?’. It is a deconstructive affirmation of the (Althusserian) question mentioned earlier, reformulated as (what I call) the ‘analytic of the who’. This analytic has a materiality in time (as against congealed matter) as it labours both as the writing surface and as that which gets written on the surface to make a trail, or “subjectile” (Derrida 1994, 270). If the performative of the ‘singular I’ cannot get free of a
mechanical re-production then it also gets its ontology and survival from that very machine-like work. I make a difference here between the Heideggerian analytic of *Dasein* and the deconstructive ‘analytic of the who’ which draws on and adds to my separations of the signatures ‘Heidegger’ and ‘Derrida’ taken up in ‘Chapter Two’.

In conclusion, I propose that the ‘analytic of the who’ materialises both inside and outside of a ‘work’ (which means both an ongoing labour and a body or corpus signed by an author). The materiality pursued, therefore, both suggests an economy and an excess of meaning. But can this materiality which is without an intentionality be claimed for a politics, feminist politics to be more precise? This question is discussed most scrupulously in the last two chapters.

The problem of the possibility of a ‘feminist ethics’ is taken up in the penultimate chapter. ‘Chapter Five’ starts by staging the ‘figure of the third’ which works as a ‘witness’ and yet is neither of the self nor of the other. The ‘face of the other’ in a Levinasian sense, cannot be accessed without confronting this ‘third’ who is also a recurring figure, I argue following Derrida and Judith Butler. The ‘third’ guards the perils and invitations of opening unconditionally to an ‘other’, being itself like a ‘wound’ never running dry. This ‘wound’ is like a ‘cut’ that bleeds with a persistence (as the other perseveres in self), a cut which is neither of the self nor of the other (this metaphor is already mentioned in the initial chapters). Can this (non) place be claimed or placed in a feminist vein? I read Spivak’s “Echo” (Spivak 1993a) in approaching this problem. The figure of the Echo, Spivak argues, gives one a glimpse of a possibility of thinking a “precarious foothold” (24) of “truth not dependent upon intention” (26). This proposition is crucial for the line of argument I follow in this dissertation. The figure of the ‘cut’ makes it possible for one to think of the supplement which works both for and against any intentional matrix. The ‘intention’ cannot fulfil its objective, or materialise in action unless that action survives in time. Materiality needs this ek-sistance in time to be recognized as matter. The question however remains, if such a figuration of the ‘cut’, or the ‘supplement’ it incessantly produces, is antithetical to a politics based on intentional action. Spivak likens the fold of ‘echo’ to the text of the analysand that the analyst tries to dissect in finding truth in the setting of a psychoanalyst’s chamber. However, following the Derridian critique of a Lacanian (Jacques Lacan) distinction between
truth and fiction, Spivak is able to situate the intervention which cuts intentionality and retrieves the text not in the subjective position of the ‘analyst’ but in the echoing retort which folds back on any such intervention trying to extract ‘truth’. And yet, it is not to get rid of the notion of a truth altogether, but to posit the im-possibility of truth without intentionality. I add that this truth nonetheless can only come to matter by the way of intentionality, just as intention needs this other truth, this supplement to perpetuate itself. This enables one to argue for a notion of decision as de-cision, or decision cut within and stretched in time, having a life. This is done from within what I call the ‘paradigm of work’ which tries to think of decision not as a sudden coming, or instantaneous mattering of the subject, but as an experience of production or calculation.

The chapter ends with a close reading of a Bengali short story by Rabindranath Thakur, first published in 1917, “Paylā Nambar” (“House Number One”). Through this reading I propose at least two things. One, how a deconstructive concept of writing works somewhere between being an active reading and passive affirmation of a given text, clearly being neither, but still being a ‘work’. And two, how in the said short story the ‘writing of the woman’ comes to deconstruct the intentionality of the man and yet retains a certain materiality of this ‘work’. The chapter ends with the proposition that ‘life’ can be thought as a materiality of lived experience, which is produced by guarding the question of full meaning and full presence of ‘life’. In this sense, feminist ethics which tries to pursue the thought of a materiality without intentionality can be proposed as ethicality as such. Especially if one considers the production of life, and hence an opening to ethicality contains in saving the question of meaning and politics from pure nothingness of death.

Consequently, the final chapter takes up the problem of a feminist ethics in the context of life (a production of materiality) and death (the horizon before which any such production matters), strictly within the limits chalked out (especially concerning the metaphor: ‘cut’). ‘Chapter Six’ is divided into three general themes, ‘names’, ‘bodies’ and ‘inscriptions’. Under the theme ‘names’, I first discuss the ethical underpinnings of using the name ‘woman’ in the service of feminist representations. Under the same heading, I next talk about the Spivakian figure of the ‘native informant’ which she extracts through what she calls an ‘ab-usive’
reading of the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. In its textual moments, the “European discursive production” (Spivak 1999, 4) acknowledges the trail of the native informant in ‘naming’, but not in its operational role which it plays in building up the contours of the ‘man of reason’ central to the Enlightenment textuality. Spivak goes on to argue that this specific make-up of the rational text is not exclusive to ‘Europe’ but that this shape can be seen even in the postcolonial textuality which construes its own ‘other’. The postcolonial text has always already foreclosed the ‘subaltern woman’ to such a position as of the native informant. This leads on to the proposition that at its secret perimeter, postcolonialism can be re-thought as a feminism. In the next and last section on ‘naming’, the dynamic of ‘naming the other’ and the irreducible responsibility involved are brought into focus.

Speculations on the theme ‘bodies’ present a reading of a located textual moment. The text under consideration is the account of a fairy tale heroine as penned by the early twentieth century Bengali scholar Dineshchandra Sen. In Sen’s retelling of the story of Mālañcamālā, the woman’s body withstands a series of dismemberment and extreme violence in silence. She is not supposed to speak out, but the performance of the violence on her body is put into language most vividly. ‘Pain’ works here as a recurring site in itself with the body of the woman becoming that location which can never be wholly sanctified. This body as if mounts a resistance to the scholar’s pen by surfacing repeatedly. Most importantly, Sen would make a parallel between the sacrifice of the folk-heroine Mālañcamālā and the figure of the ‘willing sati’, as he quotes an eyewitness account recorded by a British official where a woman wilfully burns herself in the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Sen’s discourse uses the figure of the ‘willing sati’ as a quotation, and refers back to the same figure construed by the ‘pro-sati’ discourse in the debates over the legal abolition of the rite before it was abolished in 1928. How does feminist discourse for which the claims of a woman’s subjectivity and free choice is central, deal with this figure of the ‘willing sati’ becomes the key problem here.

In the second section under the heading ‘bodies’, I take up the recent feminist re-readings of the nineteenth century debates around the legal abolition of the rite of satidāha (widow immolation). I try to tease out the dilemmas involved in the feminist confrontation with the figure of the ‘willing sati’ as I have named it.
The crucial impasse in the feminist engagement has been this: how to retain the agency and subjectivity of the tortured woman without giving-in to the pro-
*sati* motto ‘she (voluntarily) wanted to die’. How to retain both (the critique of ritual burning *and* a right to choose death in specific instances) without sliding into a simple ‘pro-life’ position. How to re-present these moments and how to intervene. In tackling these questions from a feminist point of view, I chiefly discuss relevant works by Lata Mani, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak along the lines of the previous arguments construed thus far in the dissertation, especially the one about mechanicity and organicity of a ‘de-cision’ stretched in time. This prompts the concluding theme ‘feminist inscriptions’.

‘Inscription’ is that concept-metaphor which lets one think of a trail or writing of sur-vival without ignoring singular moments which cannot be ‘fully’ incorporated in any such ‘line’ of existence. This leads on to a fresh consideration of body and ‘embodiment’. I make the point that inscription and embodiment are two related but crucially distinct concepts. ‘Embodiment’ takes body and its sur-vival as its key terms and its trajectory is extended between two bodies in that sense. ‘Inscription’ takes as its main term the ‘gap’ which stays between two bodies, the witness who witnesses the body and its ek-sisting other, and therefore tries to work with that which is neither body nor its re-presentation and yet must be thought in continuity with the two to achieve the ‘body’. Consequently I try to confront the feminist challenges of re-configuring the debates around the woman’s abortion rights in an Indian context. I try to go beyond a simple delineation of the ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ choice positions since both are chiefly articulated within the discourse of ‘rights-talk’. Both ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ choice positions, I argue, take ‘life’ as a master-signifier which retains the power of working as a ‘proper’ reducing each singular bodies to merely its different moments. Instead, through the notion of the ‘inscription’, I propose the concept of a ‘feminist writing’ which is a ‘work’ remaining attentive to the singularity of each moment, and each body. The ‘inscription’ keeps to a vigilant responsibility to other singularities, and other bodies. This also gives us a way to re-stage and confront the figure of the ‘willing sati’. The chapter concludes with a fresh reading of Spivak’s much discussed example of a young woman’s suicide inserted at the end of her canonical feminist
intervention: “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988). It considers the possibility or impossibility of a woman’s choice of death, and asks if such a choice can be disentangled from the patriarchal-legal machinations which try to ‘produce’ that choice in the way of repetition. Can there be a supplementary space for a woman’s intention or materiality gesturing toward a feminist ethicality that may elude the structure of intentionality which is always already male?

The dissertation concludes with a long deliberation on these problems, always staying with the ‘paradigm of work’ for which the act of production and the experience of production is a departure from the trajectory of that desire which aims at a self-presence in the ‘end-product’. I try to weave the feminist ethics of representation also as an aesthetic of affirmation which affirms, and lingers perseveres with the question of the ethical, rather than trying to fix it within a definite ontology. ‘Ethical’ in this sense becomes the very ‘work’ which follows the production of ‘materiality’ at the margins of intentionality, where it brushes with the void of the non-intentional, rather than relying fully on a notion of pure matter or assured ‘inside’. This affirmation also is in tandem with the ‘analytic of the who’ that I pursue and set up as one of the main themes of the dissertation. If politics must work with a certain ‘presence’ then how might one name the self-folding of such a presence at the margins of its own production? I argue in the dissertation that a deconstructive feminist ethicality might indicate an im-possible ‘answer’, albeit a possible ‘work’ and production. The work of a feminist ethics can only remain with the impossible question of the ethical by lingering with it, by being a persistent ‘work’, risking persistent failure at an articulation. But, as I argue in this dissertation, when what is at stake is a ‘life’ as production of a guarding of the ethical question against the complete void of ‘death’, failures at previous moments of articulation can be risked. The text that follows, tries to chalk out an argument toward such a work of the ethical production of life and materiality, in the way of a interrogation of representation from the side of deconstruction and feminism.