ONE

Women (/) Writing (/) (The) Body:
A Few Theoretical Reflections

Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself.

-Beauvoir 1989: 29

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away.

-MacKinnon 1998: 182

Female sexuality has always been conceptualized in the basis of masculine parameters.... About woman and her pleasure, this view of sexual relation has nothing to say.

-Irigaray 1997: 363

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself in to the text- as into the world and into history.

-Cixous 1997: 347

The role of body and sexuality in shaping and defining women, their identities and experiences have been analyzed and theorized to different degrees of sophistication in recent decades. While exploring the various institutions of society like philosophy, religion, law, medicine, arts and aesthetics, feminists have established all these to be male-centered institutions that consistently take 'man' as their yardstick (Beauvoir 1989; Bordo 1998, 2003; Chakravarti 1993; Cixous 1997; Cixous and Clement 1986; Grosz 1994; Irigaray 1997: 363; Ortner...
Within this schema woman is invariably perceived as 'other' and 'inferior.' In this negation and 'othering' of woman, her association with body has played a 'justifying' role. Body is the site where the biological sex and socially constructed gender of woman converge. It is the location where her sexuality is envisaged, and the body's violation and exploitation, as well as its desires and pleasures are played out. The cultural and political significance of women's body and sexuality in both sustaining the patriarchal setup and disrupting it, is by now an accepted dictum in feminist discourses across borders. This chapter, first, briefly highlights the status of body and woman in cultural and philosophical discourses, in the west as well as in India. Then it deals with the foregrounding of the body in feminist discourses – what "writing the body" can mean and in what ways when a woman writes the body it becomes a discourse of resistance. The last section of this chapter deals with the problem of defining and positioning resistance and agency in feminist discourses in general and in the context of "writing the body" in particular. The theories discussed in this chapter form the base of my analysis of contemporary Indian English women's fiction where a frequent foregrounding of the female body and sexuality, its pleasures and desires has been noticed. Just as this chapter would underline that assertion of the body can be both empowering as well as restraining for women, my subsequent analyses of women novelists' "writing the body" at the level of representation, production and reception establish the same. I, here as well as later, argue that despite their theoretical charm, in real life the 'resistant' practices may not be able to meet the intended goals fully. Asserting / "writing the body" fails to prove a fully reliable strategy against patriarchal oppression and may lead to paradoxical results.
Rather than just the female body, it is 'the body' itself which has been marginalized in the philosophical and cultural discourses. In their analyses, contemporary cultural and feminist theorists have established that western philosophical and cultural traditions are based on the system of binary oppositions. This dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchises and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged and the other its suppressed, subordinated, and negative counterpart (Bordo 1998, 2003; Cixous and Clement 1986: 63; Grosz 1994: 3). Western philosophy has frequently characterized even the human subject as constituted of dual elements – the mind and the body. Here, mind is the finer “element,” and body is gross “matter” (Beauvoir 1989; Bordo 1998, 2003; Grosz 1994: 3; Ortner 1972). The role of the “other” cast upon body becomes palpable as one looks at the religious and philosophical texts across history where body is frequently seen as “animal,” “appetite,” “deceiver,” “prison of the soul and confounder of its projects” (Bordo 2003: 3). This dualism of mind and body first espoused by Plato, Aristotle and other Greek philosophers found a new vigour in the seventeenth century in the philosophy of René Descartes and his ideal of pure knowledge that required transcendence from the body (Bordo 1998: 639-42; Grosz 1994: 6; Spelman 1982). As Elizabeth Grosz notes, from the time of Descartes until today, subject or consciousness has been “seen separated from and which can reflect on the world of the body, object, and qualities” (1994: 6, emphasis added). However, this status accorded to body is not an ahistorical phenomenon. There have been traditions of philosophical thought which did not negate body completely. For example, during the medieval period and the renaissance, body and mind were not seen as binary opposites. Rather a unified vision of ‘mind-body-soul’ prevailed. However, Cartesian formulations swapped it completely (Bordo 1998; Grosz 1994; Raju 1947). Besides, there has been an alternative tradition of philosophers like Leibniz, Hume, Spinoza and Nietzsche that has resisted this dualistic mode (Bordo 1998: 652). Nevertheless, it has remained ‘alternative’ only. The dominant tradition has been one that believes that body is not only
different from mind and soul, but also inferior to them (Bordo 1998; Grosz 1994). Through her analyses of various historical stages, Bordo concludes:

What remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the construction of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, sprit, will, creativity, freedom ...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not bodily, is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization (2003: 5).

Thus, body is implicitly defined as something which is not only other, but also unruly, disruptive – in need of direction and judgment. The ordering theory of logocentrism (which has also been phallocentric throughout history) at the foundation of Western philosophy and culture invariably subjects all concepts, codes, and values in binary opposition to one core binary couple man/woman (Cixous and Clement 1986: 64). Henceforth, the mind and body dualism is also gendered, and “man and mind” and “woman and body” become representationally aligned (Beauvoir 1989: 3; Bordo 2003; Grosz 1994; Kirk and Okazawa-Rye 2001: 100; Ortner 1972; Price and Shildrick 1999: 79; Spelman 1982: 110, Wolff 1990: 122-124). Historically, women had to pay a heavy price for this association. If the body is negative, and woman is associated with the body, then she, by default, becomes “negativity” – “distraction from knowledge, seduction away from the God, and capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (Bordo 2003: 5). In any case, woman has been mostly absent from philosophy and her body is used to explain and justify her different (unequal) social position and cognitive capacities. Being “weaker” and more prone to “irregularities, intrusions and unpredictabilities,” women’s bodies are presented to be incapable of men’s achievement (Grosz 1994: 14).
Thus, patriarchal culture associates women more closely with body than men, and this identification closes off women’s roles. The alliance has sustained itself for too long in the Western culture; it has been central to the ways Western philosophy has developed in time, and sees itself even today (Beauvoir 1989: 29; Grosz 1994: 4).

The opposition between mind/man and body/woman is further strengthened by virtue of their coalition with another fundamental cultural dyad - Culture and Nature (Jordanova 1999). In this cementing of relationships again Descartes played a major role. In the service of masculinization of culture, he brilliantly conjoined mind with culture and body with nature and separated them for good (Grosz 1994: 5; Rose 1999: 360-61). Association with yet another inferior category – Nature, furthered woman’s secondary status in relation to culture, which could always control, appropriate and subdue nature. Sherry B. Ortner sees this association of woman and nature as a conspiracy on the part of manly culture (1972: 10, 28), which finds “validation” once again in the body of women and its functions, that are akin to that of nature. She identifies three reasons, all rooted in women’s body, for this subordination:

Woman’s physiology, more involved more of the time with ‘species life;’ woman’s association with the structurally subordinate domestic context, charged with the crucial function of transforming animal-like infants into cultured beings; ‘woman’s psyche,’ appropriately moulded to mothering functions by her own socialization, and tending toward greater personalism and less mediated modes of relating — all these factors make woman appear to be rooted more directly and deeply in nature (24).
An equally crucial dyad associated with mind/body is activity/passivity. Once again body is linked with the inferior term – passivity. Western culture frequently relates body with passivity, something that lacks agency or even consciousness. In sharp contrast to the spirit or mind, which actively guides and controls actions, body “simply receives, and darkly and dumbly responds to the impressions, passions, and emotions” (Bordo 2003: 11). This duality is yet again gendered and like the earlier cases equates woman with the inferior term, i.e., passivity. First articulated by Aristotle, this relationship found further strength in the works of Descartes and Hegel (Beauvoir 1989: 9; Bordo 2003). Various myths and cultural theories repeat this association of woman and passivity and establish her ‘secondary’ nature. One of the most widely circulated one is that of “active (male) sperm” and “passive (female) egg” in the process of conception, which has not just entered popular culture, but even science has “romanced” with it (Bordo 2003; Martin 1999). Philosophy, in general, has projected woman as passive, as Cixous aptly notes, “she is either passive or she does not exist” (Cixous and Clement 1986: 64). Feminists have observed that this has been one of the most powerful dualities that informs western ideologies of gender (Bordo 2003; Grosz 1994).

There are, of course, other images as well which tell a different story of the female body. Whereas woman’s relation with body and nature makes her inferior and subordinate, the same associations prove her threatening as well. Western cultural discourses have abundant images of women like Eve, Medusa, and Delilah, who brought chaos because of their exceptional energy and power. Interestingly, in all these cases it is again woman’s body, specially her sexuality which makes her what she is. Feminists have argued that since the male mind
could hardly reason out or usurp the mysteries of the female fertile body and her “generative” powers, she and her sexuality were constructed as vicarious, unruly, intrusive, mysterious, and insatiable (Bordo 1998: 650-652; Ortner 1972).

These are some of the dominant images, associations and beliefs regarding body, women and the female body which have been reiterated in the various facets of western culture, not only in philosophy and religion, but also in science and ethics (Bordo 1998: 652; Jordanova 1999; Martin 1999; Rose 1999: 360-61). Together these have done both body and woman a great deal of harm in practical life. These have projected a lopsided view of both body and woman. In the mind/body dichotomy discourse, thus, it has been hardly acknowledged that mind exists in body only and plays a formative role in gaining the philosophically valued ideals like truth, knowledge, and experience. Similarly misogynist thought has represented or even constructed women as “frail, unruly and even unreliable,” subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control (Grosz 1994: 13). Contained within bodies women are projected as either too passive or too active, as those who can not and should not be left to themselves, who always need either “protection” from or “control” by men (Kramer 2001: 28). These myths have collectively pushed both body and woman to peripheries as these are not just philosophical propositions, but virtually build a “practical metaphysics” that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relations, popular culture, and so on, even till today (Bordo 2003: 13).

So far as the Indian context is concerned, it must be acknowledged first that it would be very difficult to make a single statement about ‘Indian’ culture, philosophy, or religion and justify that, owing to the vast diversity India and its
tradiotians offer. Still the dominant Hindu tradition and culture might be regarded as a representative one due to its large scale dissemination and influence. Keeping in mind this qualification, it may be said that just as body and women are devalued in the Western discourse, so is the case of Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. Indian philosophy, broadly looks at the universe consisting of two elements or orders, termed variously as – Purusa and Prakriti, Brahma and Maya or Shiva and Sakti in different philosophical schools (Kelkar 2003b). These fundamentals of the universe have been consistently seen in terms of ‘soul/spirit’ and ‘materiality/body.’ Unlike the West the hierarchy here is not between mind and body, but basically between soul and body, pure conscience and material world. Nevertheless, body remains invariably inferior to soul. Very frequently the metaphors of vehicle and container are used for body, whereas soul or consciousness is projected as the driver and the essence. The central concept of salvation or Moksha in Indian religions and philosophy itself is based on the idea of transcending the body and material existence.

Besides, this dualism is gendered as well, where the masculine is consistently related with the superior order and feminine with the inferior (Kelkar 2003b refers to some rare exceptions). For example, In the Purusa-Prakriti model, Purusa is the transcendental self, pure consciousness, and of higher order, on the other hand, all physical events are manifestations of Prakriti. The distinct quality of Prakriti is that although she has neither knowledge nor consciousness, she is active, whereas Purusa is inactive, neutral and fundamentally “liberated” (Kelkar 2003b: 110). However, due to ignorance Purusa identifies itself with the physical body and relates with the material world. Moksha, the goal of human life, ensues only when Purusa is able to free itself from materiality, i. e. Prakriti.
In this model, man is related with *Purusa* and woman with *Prakriti* and accordingly their status is determined. It emphasizes the superior nature of man and the relative and transient character of woman, which often deceives and distracts man from the achievements of life (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987; Kelkar 2003b; Wadley 1988: 26). The pair *Brahma-Maya* represents a similar mould of man-woman relationship in Indian culture and philosophy. In this relationship, *Maya* is denied any separate existence, whereas, *Brahma* is pure existence, pure consciousness and free. *Maya* is the ignorance, the swoon that makes a human being forget his real nature and identify with his body (Kelkar 2003b: 108). The *Shiva-Sakti* model, except in the *Sakta* philosophy, follows the same line of thought where the masculine principle reigns most of the time. Though here the feminine principle is powerful and full of energy, the controlling authority still lies in *Shiva*. Thus, the association of woman with body, nature and passivity in the West has its counterpart in Indian philosophy as well, where she is frequently called *Prakriti*, *Maya* and *Sakti*. A glaring difference that emerges between the two is of woman’s association with activity and passivity. While the West has marginalized woman and body for its passivity, in India, she has been frequently related to exceptional energy and activity (but mostly without any control). But as Simone de Beauvoir has observed, facts do not matter, the significance which society attaches to them matters (1989: 34). Thus, whether associated with activity or passivity, women have been accorded a secondary status only.

Most of the Indian feminists dealing with Indian philosophy and religious texts have focused on this three fold aspect of femininity - *Prakriti*, *Maya* and *Sakti* to explain the discrimination underlying Hindu ideology towards woman (M. Bose 2000; Gombrich Gupta 2000; Kelkar 2003b; Kulkarni 2003; Wadley 2003; 51)
In this interpretation, woman as \textit{prakriti} is nature and the creator. Simultaneously, she is \textit{Sakti} as well, embodying power and energy. But this faculty is \textit{uncultured} because woman has little knowledge or consciousness. As a consequence, such uncultured power becomes dangerous. Further, as \textit{Maya} she can easily deceive and prove treacherous. Susan Wadley skillfully puts it in the equation that "woman = power + nature = danger" (1988: 27). According to her this equation represents the essence of femaleness as it underlies Hindu cultural beliefs and actions about women.

The danger associated with woman is basically related with her body and sexuality. This aspect of woman’s existence poses a dilemma for the patriarchal society. Whereas her sexuality makes her fit for the only two ‘accepted’ roles in society, that is, of mother and of wife, the same gives her the potential power of independent will and existence as well. As a result, she is both a need and a threat, and her control has been an immensely significant issue in the Indian cultural texts. Drawing on Hindu religious and literary texts, Wadley concludes that according to Hindu cosmology, "if a female controls her own sexuality, she is potentially destructive and malevolent, but if she is controlled by man she is consistently benevolent" (1988: 29). Interestingly, the same is the attitude of Hindu religion towards its goddesses, who too can be equally compassionate or malicious. Thus, it is widely accepted that “Good females as well as goddesses are those which are controlled by males” (Gombrich Gupta 2000; Uberoi 1997: 154). Male control of woman has not only been prescribed but also valorized in Indian philosophy, mythical narrative, codes of conduct, Sanskrit religious texts, indigenous literature and oral tradition (M. Bose 2000: viii; Buhler 1984; Burton 1991; Gombrich Gupta 2000; Kakar 1988; Wadley 1988: 40).
The justification of this control is associated with her ‘naturally’ iniquitous nature. The common ideas associated with woman in Hindu texts like Manusmriti, Mahabharata, the Jataka are of fickleness, ruthlessness, wickedness, evil, disorder and instability (Chakravarti 1993: 581-83; Jamison 1996: 13-14). But the most crucial justification against her comes from her body and sexuality. Mistrust of female sexuality is a recurring theme in ancient Indian philosophical and religious texts (Chakravarti 1993: 582; Gombrich Gupta 2000: 91, 95). Even the most celebrated figure of Sita had to go through the ordeal of proving her purity (basically sexual fidelity). A frequently quoted saying of Manu about the volatile nature of women goes like this: “Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal to their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded” (Buhler 1984: 15). It is because of this anxiety that Manu further said that a young girl must not be left to herself and must be subject to her father in childhood, to her husband in youth, and to her sons when her “lord” is dead (Buhler 1984: 30). Equally frequent were the myths about the dangers she poses to man through her sexuality. The widespread view in this regard was “Women are threatening; their sexuality is destructive to men, whose energy they sap” (Wadley 1988: 40, emphasis added). Along with uncontrollable and destructive libido, another dominant notion associated with the female body, leading to her denial, was a deep seated contempt – gynophobia - for her reproductive organs and processes like menstruation and lactation (Gombrich Gupta 2000: 91; Kulkarni 2003: 55; Sethi 2000: 14). Branded as unclean and impure, consequently, they were often excluded from ritualistic and religious duties, in other words, the dominant
sources of religious power and authority (Chakravarti 1993; Goldman 2000; Wadley 1988: 40).

The control over women was exercised not so much through legal provisions and restricted movements as through the ideology of *stridharma* (Chakravarti 1993: 582). The role models endorsed for women were of Sita and Savitri, which gave little options to women (Gombrich Gupta 2000: 88, 103). Sudhir Kakar pertinently observes the impact of such idealization, “The ideal of womanhood projected by Sita is of purity, chastity, gentle tenderness and singular faithfulness which can not be destructed. The assimilation of this ideal figure serves as a defense against the recognition and acceptance of one’s sexuality” (Kakar 1988: 55). According to the *Shastra’s* dictums of *stridharma*, women were supposed to make themselves subservient to the voice of the (male) family authority to check their “naturally fickle nature” and to control “pollution inherent in the female body” (Gombrich Gupta 2000: 89).

So far as woman’s status and role is concerned, she was traditionally assigned two major roles in Hindu society, of mother and of wife. However, her role as wife has been consistently given more importance (Altekar 1987; Gombrich Gupta 2000). This implies that more than her creative capacities, her (sexual) ‘services’ are significant. In ancient Hindu scriptures and cultural texts, the husband is frequently referred to as “lord” which indicates the status of woman as *his property* that he could easily sell and purchase; use and even discard as per his wishes. Hindu myths and scripts are full of such instances and dictates (Kelkar 2003a: 94). Manu once again comes forth with his model of *beeja kshetra* in this context. In the process of procreation, he declares that woman is the field or earth a man puts seeds into, and he declared that seed is
more important than the field (Kelkar 2003a: 92; Wadley 1988: 26). This decisive metaphor was used not only in a literary sense, but also as a scientific truth and for the justification of supremacy of men over women (Kelkar 2003a: 91). In fact, it is as powerful and pervasive in Indian culture even now as is 'the egg/sperm' myth in the West. The relationship further emphasizes that woman exists only in relation to man, as the body exists in relation to the spirit.

This status of woman, the human body and the female body underlines the similarity of Western and Indian cultures. In fact, almost all the patriarchal cultures and religions are full of such images, metaphors, laws and moral codes. Though ancient philosophy, religious texts and myths are hardly read by the people now, these, nevertheless, represent a corpus of beliefs about women which are still prevalent in India (Kakar: 1990; Wadley 1988: 29). However, it must be kept in mind as most of the scholars have pointed out that Indian cultural traditions and discourses contain counter-hegemonic practices as well. But these have been peripheral only. Besides, the persistent subordination of women as evident in the discussion above is mainly a post-Vedic (about 600 B. C. onwards) phenomena, as since then the girdle of caste became much tighter (Altekar 1987; M. Bose 2000: viii; Chakravarti 1993; Gombrich Gupta 2000; Kelkar 2003a; Kulkarni 2003; Wadley 1988). Whereas in the beginning, the role of women in sustaining caste identities led to enhanced male control and manipulation of female sexuality, the clutch became tighter only, with the nationalist ideology during the colonial period (Tharu and Lalita 1991) and has just changed its face in the present era of capitalist globalization.
The myths and ideologies discussed above make it apparent that woman is always the 'other' of man, mind, reason and thus, culture. And the worst has been her relation with the self. The paradox of the association between woman and body has been that, though woman is said to be one with the body, and in fact, seen as *mere* bodies, the access to the body has remained a male prerogative in most of the patriarchal cultures. As Cixous says, “We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty. We have been made victim of the old fool’s game” (1997: 355). Thus, anxiety regarding woman’s body has resulted not only in contempt towards the female body in ‘higher’ discourses, but also internalization of the misogynist ideas by woman herself. Frequently branded as either the Dark Continent or unresolved mystery, she has been “alienated” from her body; her body has been “colonized.” Thus, she sees herself as men want her to see (Cixous and Clement 1986: 68, 108). This has led women to have an ambivalent relationship with their own bodies. It is the body only that defines their identity, but it is the same body which they have hardly been able to accept positively or openly, being trained to negate it. This leads to discontent and confusion in women. Body is something which occupies women throughout their lives, and the body which concerns them is always a “body for others,” (Thapan 1997: 173) a body to please and satisfy the demands and needs of husband, family, community, nation, religion, or God. It is never a source of direct satisfaction. Not only the pleasures of body are denied, its knowledge has also been tabooed for women so as to seal any possibility of discontent (Kakar 1990: 20). Hence, in “the land of Kamasutra” there is hardly
any awareness about sexuality, especially among women. It still remains an unspeakable area for most of the Indian women (Abraham 2004; Kakar 1990; Srivastava 2004; R. Verma 2004). And if there is awareness, it is related more to anxiety, rather than pleasures of sexuality.

Cultural discourses have traditionally denied women freedom and equality because of the potential disruptive capacities of their bodies and sexuality. This is the reason body has been the target of patriarchal control in various ways. Starting from direct physical violence in family and society at large to the ideological control on movement, diet, dressing codes, fashion, and body language, women have hardly been able to ‘live’ their bodies freely. The female body has been the central site of the exercise of patriarchal control. This is why feminists have given utmost importance to this aspect of women’s existence in their works. They have exhibited a wide range of attitudes and reactions to the female body in their attempt to position it at the center of “political action and theoretical production” (Grosz 1994: 15; Jackson and Scott 1998: 1; Price and Shildrick 1999). Elizabeth Grosz (1994) as well as Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (1999) have identified three major strands of feminist theories based on their approach to the nature and role of body in women’s lives.

One strand of feminists feels that the specificities of the female body, its particular nature and bodily cycles limit women’s access to the rights and privileges in patriarchal culture. They believe in the “natural” split between mind and body and feel that women’s oppression is a result of her biology and they must try to overcome this restraint (Grosz 1994: 15). For them body is “something to be rejected in the pursuit of intellectual equality according to a masculine standard” (Price and Shildrick 1999: 2-3). The second group of “social
constructionists” includes Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow and many other Marxist and psychoanalytic feminists. They all believe in the social construction of subjectivity. For this group also, body remains biologically determined, fixed, and ahistorical, although the mind becomes a social, cultural and historical fact (Grosz 1994: 17). They feel that it is not biology per se, but the way it is perceived in ideology that is oppressive for women. So, the question is not how to supercede biology, but how to give new meaning and values to the body. Many of these feminists see body as something to be “reclaimed as the every essence of the female” (Price and Shildrick 1999: 3). To the third group belong feminists like Hélène Cixous, Jane Gallop and Luce Irigaray with a poststructuralist bent. For them the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given project. They are more concerned with lived body and refuse a mind/ body dualism. The body here is a social and discursive object, a “crucial site of contestation in a series of economic, political, social and intellectual struggles” (Grosz 1994: 19; Price and Shildrick 1999: 3).

Thus, feminists have differed widely on the issue of the “essential” or “cultural” nature of body.iii Equally significant has been their stand on the negation or acceptance of the body. These attitudes towards body have found parallel echoes in their approach to sexuality as well." In fact, in most feminist discourses the female body and sexuality feature simultaneously. Of the three major divisions mentioned above, whereas, the first two groups feel that body is “essential” in nature, the last two vouch for the need of reassertion of the rights of body and sexuality on the part of women. So far as the first group’s rejection of the body is concerned, their response must be contextualized properly. As patriarchy has repeatedly underlined the corporeal nature of women, it is
understandable that feminists would initially resist such an association and attempt to define themselves in “non- or extra-corporeal terms” (Gatens 1999: 227-8; Grosz 1994: 14). This is the reason why “many feminists themselves have been reluctant to engage with the female body, or have found it difficult to provide a positive theorization of it” (Price and Shildrick 1999: 3). For these early feminists (however, even now many believe in this stance) equality lies in going beyond biology. They emphasized the “potential of women for intellectual achievements regardless of their ‘troublesome bodies’” (Price and Shildrick 1999: 3-4). Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone are two among many, belonging to this category, who saw corporeality in a negative light. While for Beauvoir female genital sexuality was like a “carnivorous swamp,” (Price and Shildrick 1999: 4) and something to be transcended; according to Firestone biology dictates women’s destiny. “Unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different and not equally privileged” (1970: 8). Thus, she looked forward to the development of new technological means of regulating reproduction and eliminating the effects of women’s biology (Gatens 1999: 227; Price and Shildrick 1999: 4). In the same line Kate Millet and Catherine MacKinnon found sexuality to be the most critical site of women’s oppression. While focusing mainly on sexual violence they could hardly visualize the possibility of positive female sexuality and its acceptance (Jackson and Scott 1998: 17).

This ‘somatophobia’ and ‘gynophobia’ is very much like the masculine fear and rejection of the female body and sexuality. But in time, as Theory started underlining the constructed and discursive nature of this world and its structures, more and more feminists began to comprehend the arbitrary nature of
the association of body with women and their derogation. They have made body and its related aspects and experiences political issues by conceptualizing these as constructed and changeable phenomena. Now, the dominant sexual practices and desires are seen as no longer fixed by nature, but something erected and often employed to the advantage of men (Jackson and Scott 1998: 6). Realizing this politics working beneath, they have responded more positively to the body and its various aspects like maternal capacities, sexual experiences and desires in gaining subjectivity for women. Rather than just looking at the female body and sexuality as a site of oppression and violence, they have perceived the importance of the acceptance and assertion of body and sexual pleasures. In their efforts at giving body a positive recognition, they have first tried to expose the façade of the standard discourse on body and sexuality and its double and ironical standards. They have uncovered the inherent sexist bias of myths like, women are ‘asexual’ beings having no autonomous desire, but at the same time they are saturated with sexuality to such an extent that they are virtually governed by their sexual organs; and that in the cases of male sexual violence and coercion also “it is women only who are responsible both for their own and their assailant’s behaviour” (Jackson and Scott: 1998: 3). Through their analysis, they have foregrounded the way patriarchal society has adopted double standards in the field of sexuality and “entitled men to sexual freedoms denied to women” (Jackson and Scott 1998: 3). Along with exploding the myths of passive or dangerously active female body and sexuality they have tried to reassert and revalorize the maternal power of the female body. The next project in line has been to retrieve the rights of body, sexuality and its erotic pleasures (Cixous 1997; Cixous and Clement 1986; Hallway 1998; Holland et al 1998; Hollibaugh 1998; Irigaray 1997, 1999;
According to these feminists, for a long time too much of importance has been given to violence at the cost of sexual pleasure (Hollibaugh 1998: 224). As almost a representative voice of these feminists, Amber Hollibaugh notes that for long “our rage” has trapped us “in a singularly victimized perspective,” fury has become our “only response” to the images and acts of sexuality around us, the very idea of explicit sex shocks us, and we think “sex is filthy” (1998: 225). She is here largely referring to the anti-pornography groups that conflate sex with sexism. Such a position denies women the right to represent their own sexuality and sidesteps the whole issue of female sexual pleasure (Meyers 1992: 263). This inclination must change now. “We should also begin to look at sexuality itself, and at what we mean by words like desire, passion, craving and need” (Hollibaugh 1998: 227). For these critics body is not just a critical site of oppression for women, with which they are always associated, but also something representing women’s difference and a possible site of agency with potential for intervention and transformation (Bordo 2003; Gallop 1988; Hollibaugh 1998; Irigaray 1997, 1999; Lorde 2001; Singer 1993). They feel an urgent need for reclaiming the female body and sexuality and celebrating it. Beneath such a proposition lies a general belief that in patriarchal culture, “male privilege is both marked and exercised at least in part by control over the production, circulation, and representation of sexual pleasure” (Singer 1993: 147). Audre Lorde makes a similar point when she calls erotica a source of power and refers to its denial to women:
In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives (2001: 156).

She further notes that patriarchy has constructed its discourses in such a way as to make women feel both contemptible and suspected by virtue of the existence of "sexual desires." In order to enforce subjugation, the system makes women falsely believe that by "suppressing" it only they can gain true strength. Thus, they have been turned away from exploring erotic as a "source of power" (2001: 157). In contrast, they are invested with those forms of desire that facilitate male domination such as "the pleasure of surrender, self-sacrifice, and service to others" (Singer 1993: 148). This matrix of sexist ideology does not let women 'realize' (in both the senses of knowing and executing) their own desires. She is trained in such a fine manner and internalizes the patriarchal ideology so well that:

Not knowing what she wants, [she is] ready for anything, even asking of more, so long as he will 'take' her as his 'object' when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus, she will not say what she wants; moreover, she does not know or no longer knows what she wants (Irigaray 1999: 80).

These feminists consider that this 'object' position of women must be countered by asserting the body and its pleasures and desires actively, rather than just submitting to the male demands. This would enable the women to retrieve their lost "Continent" and undermine "all the oppressive things that sexuality has meant for women in the past" (McIntosh 1998: 340).
Indian feminists have responded to the issues of body and sexuality along the same lines. There are some women activists, theorists and writers who feel it necessary to move beyond the issues of body and enter the intellectual world of serious matters (Ghosh 2006; Joseph et al 2004; Sarkar and Butalia 1995). However, the majority of feminists now accept the need for reassertion of women’s body and sexuality on the part of women, while acknowledging that the act would not be too easy to accomplish given the patriarchal and class, caste and religion bound setup we live in (B. Bose 2000, 2006a, 2006c: xliii; Chandiramani 2007; Das 2006; Ghosh 2006; Ghosh and Kapur 2006; Joseph 2006; Joseph et al. 2004; Kapur 2006; Menon 2007a, 2007b; Sen 2000, 2006, 2007; Sunder Rajan 2003; Thapan 1997; Vanita 2005). Rather than theorizing on the issue, these critics have mainly examined the representation of the female sexuality in various cultural spheres such as media, advertisement, cinema, folk culture, literature, medicines and law. In their responses they have invariably criticized the derogatory or sexist representation of female sexuality and celebrated the texts and discourses which acknowledge the rights of women over their bodies and sexuality. The underlying insinuation has constantly been to challenge the patriarchal grid on the female body and sexuality and underscore the need to reclaim body for the self. The rationale to do so has been emphatically pronounced by Meenakshi Thapan in her ‘Introduction’ to Embodiments: Essays on Gender and Identity (1997), an anthology devoted to interrogating gendered inequalities revealed in the complex interplay between society, gender and body in everyday life:

Women are allowed little or no space for an independent, self perceived articulation, definition, or expression of their sexuality. Her body
becomes an instrument and symbol for the community's caste, class, and communal honour...a woman's experience of her body is largely that of shame. In a sense, a woman's body is often no longer her body but has been taken over by the community (6).

This alienation from their bodies does not allow women to express themselves as “sexual beings” and hinder not only their pleasures, but also their active role in sexual relations (Sahoo n. d.). The predicament is furthered when their bodies become commodified in the hands of men who brand women as their property (Vijayasree 2007: 413-14). To challenge this denial, objectification and commodification, feminists have frequently insisted on the proliferation of discourses of positive female sexuality (B. Bose 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Ghosh 2006; Ghosh and Kapur 2006; Kapur 2006; Sahoo n. d.; Sen 2000, 2006, 2007; Vijayasree 2007). Despite knowing the pitfalls of raising the issues of sexuality in a patriarchal society, they demand the opening up of spaces, even if fleeting and transitory, as it would “help articulate women’s pleasures, desires and fantasies” (Ghosh 2006: 279). To achieve this end the first myth they, like their Western counterpart, have tried to burst is that “sex is inherently negative and dangerous” (Kapur 2006: 229). In fact, many women’s activist groups have also bought this argument of the conservative sect and frequently conflate sex with sexism. They demand for the censorship of all sexually explicit materials and images. Doing so they, intentionally or unintentionally, foreclose any possibility of a “positive female erotica” (Ghosh 2006; Ghosh and Kapur 2006). To counter this, anti-censorship groups of feminists have sought “sophisticated means of analysis which would be able to distinguish between images that are sexist and images...
that are sexually explicit” (Kapur 2006: 229). Ratna Kapur frames the idea powerfully when she writes:

We need to reconsider our strategies so that they increase the space within which women can express their sexual desires and subvert the notion that sex is something in which ‘good’ women do not indulge. The association of any sexual image with a negative or degrading representation of women has also made it difficult to produce alternative erotica or sexual materials as they risk being collapsed into the obscene (2006: 230).

Somewhat similar are the views of Brinda Bose who calls “the valorization of erotic desire” a political stance (2006a: 97). Equally relevant in this context are the observations of the feminists like Ammu Joseph (2006), Janaki Nair (1998), Mary E. John (1998), Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993, 2000, 2003), Ruth Vanita (2005), Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) who have repeatedly critiqued the position of the female body which often appears no more than as “body for others” (Thapan 1997: 173). In spite of their differences, these feminists feel the urgent need of breaking the silence, giving up “object” position and claiming of rights of body on the part of women, as this alone would result in “decreasing the sexual danger, while increasing the sexual pleasures in women’s lives” (Kapur 2006: 223). One way of doing this has been seen as producing and circulating counter narratives and images of active female sexuality and giving voice to an alternative reality and alternative way of thinking and being. These critics believe that just claming the right of body at individual level does not suffice as feminist goal; flaunting the sexual desires of women ‘publicly’ is equally important, if patriarchy has to be challenged radically.

Discourses on body and sexuality, especially on the part of women, have been denied public space basically for the reason that these areas are regarded as
too private to be discussed publicly. But with the feminist awareness of the political nature of private affairs, it has been widely accepted that the issues related with sexuality and body are no different. As the earlier section of this chapter has made clear, women’s body and sexuality have been persistently controlled and exploited, ‘misrepresented’ and ‘absented’ in and through various discourses like the religious, ethical, philosophical, scientific and literary. A deep seated fear of women with recognition of their powers was so pervasive that the right to produce and disseminate public narratives was not given to women (Wadley 1988: 40; Sen 2000, 2006). Denied access to language and discourse and therefore, effectively power and authority women could hardly challenge their sexist representations in social discourses. Remaining silent or getting silenced had been the destiny of women for a long time. Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (2000) in this context has made a crucial observation regarding the obsession of the male elite in ancient India with the purity of vac and vyakaran – speech and grammar. She associates this with their desire to control women. Both vac and woman, if accessed by others, could pollute the cultural ethos. Not only this, to keep women under control, specially their sexuality, women were denied access to vac, particularly to the Sanskrit mantras and the sacred language – the keys to wisdom, which could provide the power to transform and perfect one’s situation. The condition more or less remained the same till recent times (Sen 2000: 298-99). It has frequently been noticed by the feminists that women are at a disadvantage as sexual beings in the realm of language too. Language is important in shaping sexual behaviour, identities, desires and pleasures, not only by virtue of categorizing and labeling what is ‘erotic’, but also by not framing terms for those experiences and phenomenon that do not ‘matter.’ Thus, we hardly have a language that describes female sexual experience in general (Irigaray 1997: 363; Richardson 1998: 278). Accordingly, Diane Richardson observes:

Sex is defined largely in terms of male experience. The vocabulary of sex is much more concerned with describing what happens at a man’s body during sexual arousal than a woman’s. Similarly there are fewer words for women’s genitals in comparison to penis. In many ways
language is either silent about women’s bodies and sexuality or, where it
does exist, ridicules and insults them (1998: 279).

This is the reason that whenever women have tried to raise their erotic
voices and celebrate their sexual pleasures in language and representation, they
have been either ignored or punished or ostracized. The idea is articulated by the
editors of Just Between Us: Women Speak About Their Writing, who observe that
while no threat to the decorum of the society is felt “when male writes and poets
have explored women’s bodies and lingeringly laid their feelings bare ... when
woman writers write about their bodies or their emotions, they create disturbance
and disease” (2003: 13). The point is strengthened by Nabaneeta Deb Sen who
refers to an incident when a young woman writer, Debarati Mitra, in the 1970s
was “harangued” for writing a beautiful and powerful erotic poem celebrating the
joys of oral sex, whereas another young poet Sunil Gangopadhyay “received
accolades for his courage” for writing on the very same subject (2007: 13). Thus,
the right of self-expression publicly on ‘sensitive’ issues has been denied to
women. This realization that language and discourse play a crucial role in
defining and maintaining man’s world, while delineating and enclosing women’s
place has led many feminists to emphasize the relevance of language in resisting
patriarchy, as well as, its oppressive constructs. Here one could quote Cixous’s
observation that:

If woman has always functioned within the discourse of man, a signifier
that has always referred to the opposite signifier which annihilates its
specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is
time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around and
Writing here emerges as a powerful option because of its reach to a wider audience and its sustaining capacity. Many other critics have also accentuated on the need to write as writing is a “process through which women can become aware of their potentia, thereby contributing to their own empowerment and that of their own community” (Ponzanesi 2000). Besides, equally important is that women write “as women” as it would “render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallocentric discourse” (Minh-ha 1999: 259). They acknowledge its radical impact as writing is a faculty denied to women, once again because of their closeness to body and nature. Nabaneeta Dev Sen rightly points out:

Writing is a social gesture; it is a form of self expression allotted to men.... A writer deals with verbal signs. The act of writing is an act of intellection, and therefore it is regarded as male territory. In ... culture ... the area of mind is allotted to men and the area of senses to women. Hence... the woman who writes... has stepped out of her area of sense and has appropriated a male gesture. ... The power relationship is reversed. The moment she takes up the pen, the woman commits an act of social transgression (2000: 298).

It has been widely felt that the matrices of the ideology of alienation and usurpation of the female body and sexuality are so strong that challenging it requires not only a transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it, but also, creation of new ones to display the existence of alternative experiences and living. Women’s writing and their writing about their desires and pleasures would prove to be one of such transformational discourses. Hélène Cixous was the first to emphatically propound the importance of women’s “writing the body.” In their proposition of ecriture feminine Cixous, Irigaray and other French critics refused to accept the traditional western separation between mind and body, which by extension emphasized that “woman, linked with body rather than
mind was antithetical to writing, an activity said to be restricted to the mental” (Herndl 1997: 343). The authors associated with *écriture feminine* have challenged traditional views in two ways – first by celebrating women’s association with body, and second, by refusing to accept the separation between the two. “Writing the body” is one expression of this resistance. Cixous has repeatedly expressed the need of “women writing about women” (1997: 348). She says that because of male conspiracy women have been denied the right to write for a long time but it must not continue now, because: “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a spring board for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (1997: 350, original emphasis). For her, there is a very close relationship between speech, body and subjectivity. “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (1997: 350) and this is what patriarchy has frequently done. This is the reason why Cixous advocates women’s writing “She must write her self, because a new insurgent writing would allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (1997: 351). Such writing, according to Cixous:

Will give her back her goods, her pleasure, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having them; for being frigid, for being ‘too hot’; for not being both at once; for being too motherly, of being not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ...) (1997: 357).

In fact, many feminist critics have referred to this “calculated” male strategy of making women “guilty” so that they do not recognize their powers
and rights (Irigaray 1999: 86). They see a hope of transformation in women’s writing. According to Cixous, “it is by writing, from and towards women... that women will confirm women in a place other than... silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence” (Cixous 1997: 351). Thus, woman must learn to speak, “To become at will the taker, the initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process” (1997: 351). For Cixous, “writing the body” on the part of women meant both writing “about” the body and writing “through” the body (1997: 355). She and other proponents of *écriture feminine* favoured the creation of a new language, a feminine language. According to Luce Irigaray:

If we do not invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized. Asleep again, unsatisfied, we shall fall back upon the words of men – who for their part, have ‘known’ for a long time. But *not our* body (1999: 88, original emphasis).

For these critics language, in itself, is patriarchal; it has neither the vocabulary nor the structure to give an authentic expression to feminine desire and fantasies from a female perspective. In contrast, *écriture feminine* would be in the mould of the female body, its dispersed pleasures, its fluidity, and would give enough scope for their articulation. Rather than following the rule of the symbolic order it would be closer to the unconscious, and would inscript women’s *difference*. These critics have been criticized vehemently for essentializing the female body and women’s writing and ignoring the social-cultural location of women and their writings (Dallery 1990; Jones 1997; Moi
Nevertheless, the issues they have raised about bringing in the female body and sexual pleasures to cultural and literary discourses and creating alternative narratives, cannot be overestimated. As the discussion above has made clear women’s writing about the body and sexuality, their desires and pleasures would provide a double challenge to the misrepresentation and sometimes even exclusion of female experiences the perpetuation of their subjugation. “Writing the body” can work to *disrupt* and *subvert* the existing order – first, by usurping the so-called male territory and second, by reclaiming it as one’s own territory. It would be able to reshape the ironical aspect of our culture where the female body has been represented too much, but only by male writers and from their perspective. In the name of high art, aesthetics, the female body and sexuality has often been used by the writers for masochistic and voyeuristic pleasures. “Writing the body” would lead to the “reconsideration of male dominated assumptions of sexuality and desire” and this will be empowering for women “both because it legitimates their need by making them public, and because expression allows for a contagious expansion of women’s sphere of entitlement” (Singer 1993: 149).

The impact of the discourse about the female body as a part of self-representation has been espoused by Eve Ensler as well. In her powerful experimental work *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) she notes that for many women vagina is associated with shame, embarrassment, silencing, and even violation. The pleasures related with it are hardly articulated or acknowledged. However, speaking about it would transform the situation drastically. She pertinently says:
And as more women say the word, saying it becomes less of a big deal; it becomes a part of our language, part of our lives. Our vaginas become integrated and respected and sacred. They become part of our bodies, connected to our mind, fueling our spirits. And the shame leaves and violation stops (1998: xxvi).

At this point, it may be well remembered that this emphasis on “writing the body” did not start with the radical feminism of the late 1960s. As far back as Virginia Woolf, we find a concern regarding the taboos surrounding the representation of women’s body, sexuality and its passions in women’s writing. For example, in her essay “Professions for Women” (1996), she refers to the two stumbling blocks when a woman writes and the need to overcome both. First she has to deal with the “angel in the house,” a conscience within, and virtually kill that angel, if she has a mind of her own and wants to express “truth about human relations, morality and sex” (1996: 79). The next problem that Woolf refers to is related with the reception of the text. She imagines a young girl who could not proceed in her writing and faced distress as her artistic mind had

[D]ashed itself against something hard. To speak without figures, she had thought of something, something about the body, about her passions which was unfitting for her to say as women. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked.... she could write no more (1996: 79).

Woolf says that though writing has not remained foreign to women, “telling truths about one’s own experiences as a body” still poses an acute problem for them. The issues of censure both from within and outside that Woolf had raised in her works about women’s writing about body and its desires, still echo in the writings of many contemporary feminist literary critics as discussed above.
All these critics, emphasizing the need to articulate women’s desires and pleasures in and through writing, firmly believe in the impact of cultural representations and discourses in shaping, influencing, and normalizing certain ideas and images through reiteration and wide circulation. Thus, how women’s sexuality is/ or will get articulated in media and other cultural discourses is going to affect how its consumers desire, wish, or understand themselves (Bordo 2003: 24-25). Linda Singer in Erotic Welfare rightly observes, “such emerging narratives would allow for a transformation of each one’s relationship to him or her and to the other body” (1993: 160). And herein lies the transformative politics and liberating power of “writing the body.”

III

I do not see how ... there is any possibility of using the image of a naked woman... other than in an absolutely sexist and politically repressive patriarchal way in this conjecture.

- Peter Gidal quoted by Wolff 1990: 120

To use the body of woman, her image or person is not impossible, but problematic for feminism.

- Mary Kelly quoted by Wolff 1990: 120

Subversion is contextual, historical and above all, social. No matter how exciting the ‘destabilizing’ potential of texts, bodily or otherwise, whether those texts are subversive or recuperative…cannot be determined in abstraction from actual social practice.

- Susan R. Bordo 1992: 172

The critics and the critical positions discussed in the above sections emphasize the transformative politics of the act of “writing the body,” of
foregrounding of the female body and sexuality, its pleasures and desires by women and from their own perspective in cultural and literary discourses. According to them, it would revolutionize women’s entitlement in culture and society. Underlying such assumption is the idea that a transformative agency can enact resistance to the dominant order. However, this celebration of body and sexuality, seemingly quite attractive, has its limitations. These critics have mostly failed to see the problems underpinning such a ‘resistant’ discourse on the part of women. Several contemporary feminist critics, in contrast, have highlighted the complexities and ambivalences underlying the idea of female agency, subversion and resistance, influenced mainly by the post-structuralist delineations on the concepts of power and discourse (Basu 2000; Bordo 2003; Correll 1989; Kalpagam 2000; Sangari 1993; Sunder Rajan 1993, 2000; Thapan 1997, 2009; Vance 1984; Waugh 1989; Wolff 1990). Particularly since Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the debate has been on the extent to which the subject is free to choose for herself and exercise agential powers, and to what extent power can be challenged through resistance if power exercises itself in and through discourses and resistance is also a discursive practice. As such, the ‘transformative politics’ of “writing the body” has been challenged on different fronts.

The first challenge to the celebration of “writing the body” has come from some feminists who contend that re-emphasizing on the relationship between women’s subjectivity and their biology has blunt critical and political edge because of the commonly held association between the two and can only help in perpetuation of women’s status as mere body. For example, Catherine MacKinnon sees sexuality in itself “as a social construct of male power” and equates it with “male dominance” and “female submission” (1989: 316). In a
culture that is saturated with violence against and abuse of women in the field of sexuality, she can imagine no way to women’s “sexual liberation” (1989: 321). Andrea Dworkin (1981) in her anti-pornography stance conflates sex with violence and like MacKinnon, forecloses any possibility of the constructive expression and representation of female sexual pleasures and desires. Thus, “resistance, subversion, and pleasure” are “written out” of the account in their texts (Valverde 1989: 242). In fact, many other feminists, like MacKinnon and Dworkin, believe that what counts as “erotic,” in itself, is a social construct to such an extent that “it is difficult even to think of sex outside of the patriarchal language and culture which shape our thoughts, desires and fantasies” (Jackson and Scott 1998: 17). This pessimism is so overpowering that even woman’s consent in the sexual relations is seen persistently as “conditioned and limited by the social and historical factors” (Valverde 1989: 243). Thus, they see little possibility of successful feminist resistance through the female body and sexuality.

However, majority of the feminists have approached the ideas of female agency and resistance in a more flexible way. According to them, neither power nor resistance to it, is absolute in socio-cultural practices or women’s everyday experiences. Hence, to give credence to one at the cost of the other can not be justified. These critics have invariably insisted on the situatedness of every subversive practice within the system, a system which though not absolute, is neither fully flexible. They have cautioned against seeing every act of resistance in terms of transformative agency (Basu 2000: 188; Sunder Rajan 2000: 154). Frequently emphasized is the idea that “the resistant feminist subject remains firmly enmeshed within and dependent on the economic and cultural systems that
she is responding to” (Basu 2000: 186). There is, in fact, a dialectical relationship between “the individual or collective transformative agency” and “determining material, epistemic, institutional and ideological structures”; both reproduce and shape each other (Basu 2000: 186; Jackson and Scott 1998: 6; Sangari 1993: 867; Sunder Rajan 1993: 130; Thapan 1993: 10, 2009: 165). Thus, within itself, every act of resistance has an inherent contradiction as it “enables possibilities [even] as it forecloses them; allows engagement with the operations of power and simultaneously, prevents the containment of power” (Thapan 2009: 164). To put it differently, “however politically well-intentioned it might be … the possibilities of transformation are always constrained by the restricting nature of the dominant constructions based on gender, class, caste and regional factors” (Thapan 1997: 10). Besides, there are chances that the acts of agency and resistance prove counterproductive as well. Susan Bordo refers to several examples related with the female body like hysteria, anorexia, and certain fashion statements, where it is quite difficult to pin point whether an act is docile or defiant. On these occasions “protest” and “retreat” emerge in the “same gesture” (1990: 20-21). Thus, the very idea of female resistant agency is a problematic one.

In addition to having reservations about female agency in general, feminist critics have raised their concern about any blanket endorsement of bodily transgression as inherently radical. They frequently see the female body as “the conflicting site of both giving in to, as well as resisting dominant structures” (Thapan 1993:11). Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott pertinently point out that when we talk of the use of sexuality and body weapons for challenging patriarchal hegemony, we must keep in mind the social structures and cultural
practices that limit our ways of conceptualizing sexuality. According to them, we need to “retain critical stance on the ways in which our desires have been constructed within a heterosexually ordered patriarchal society, and remain aware of the material constraints which limit the pleasure which we can actually attain in the current situations” (Jackson and Scott 1998: 20, emphasis added). Further, there is also the issue of over-valorization of resistance through the female body and sexuality as it has frequently happened with the French feminists and others endorsing the cause of celebrating women’s body as the most powerful medium of confronting patriarchy (Ahmad 2006: 35-36). Stevi Jackson voices the concern of many when she says:

Sexuality is only one site of women’s oppression and needs to be placed in context as such. To give too much weight to sexual desire, practice and identity is to ignore the many other ways in which male domination is colluded with and resisted and the many other means by which women’s subordination is perpetuated and challenged (1998: 178).

Another major hurdle that undermines the rationale of “writing the body” is its status as a representational discourse, whose success depends a lot on the response of the readers. Critics have often proposed that the meaning of a text, specially a representational one, is not inherent to the text, but lies in the intentions and desires of the readers (Armstrong 1990; Cranne-Francis 1990; Dralus and Shelton 1995: 20; Mohanty 2003; Plummer 1995; Suleiman 1985; Sunder Rajan 1993: 3, Waugh 1989). This makes the text persistently vulnerable to conflicting readings. As Paul B. Armstrong has said:

Conflicting readings can occur because interpreters with opposing presuppositions about language, literature and life can generate irreconcilable hypothesis about the meaning of a text. The role of belief
in understanding makes disagreement inevitable in interpretation (1990: ix).

This does not mean that the text has no identity of its own. But it implies that just because some texts open up emancipatory space for feminist politics, and have politically correct features, this does not "guarantee" their "effectivity" (Correll 1989: 293; Wolff 1990: 4-5). The emancipatory potential of a resistant discourse may get curtailed if it is misinterpreted consciously or unconsciously at the level of reception (Dralus and Shelton 1995: 24). In fact, the texts representing the female body and sexuality "re-enact the debate on the female body in feminist theory itself" (Correll 1989: 293). The foregrounding of the female body and its desires and pleasures on the part of women may exude contradictory meanings depending on the context (Meyers 1992). Critics like Shohini Ghosh (2006), Ratna Kapur (2005) Ken Plummer (1995), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2000, 2006, 2007), and Janet Wolff (1990) have frequently emphasized the thin line between sexual explicitness and female sexual objectification in the public consciousness which makes the celebration of the female body and sexuality on the part of women fraught with difficulty.

Janet Wolff in *Feminine Sentences* (1990) gives a representative example of the way ambivalence underlies the practice of foregrounding body on the part of women as feminist politics -- the incident that took place on 17th July 1989, when a group of women staged a protest against the sole use of a bathing area at Sandy Cove, Dublin. The men often used to swim naked in this area. To challenge this, women decided to invade the area and remove their own swimsuits. But the way these protestors were 'gazed' at by the people around and the way this event got reported in the media demonstrated that this act of assertion on the part of
women through their body and nudity achieved nothing more than "male lechery." Thus, the political gesture was "neutralized" and "doubly cancelled" (121). According to Wolff, this signals at the problems of using the female body for feminist ends. "Its pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intentions of woman herself" (121). And herein lies the problematic of foregrounding women's body. The practice of "writing the body" by virtue of its reception within the patriarchal culture involves the same predicament. It is not only men who can misappropriate the representation of women; even women may draw contradictory meanings from the same image. What one woman may feel to be beautiful erotica may be regarded by another as vulgar commodification of the female body. Shohini Ghosh remarks in this context of explicit sexual representation of the female body:

> What may be ‘positive’ and empowering for one person may be critiqued or ignored by another... making sense of representations and cultural praxis hinges on a recognizing of identities as multiple, unstable, historically situated and products of ongoing differentiation” (2006: 269).

Another dimension of the difficulty of producing female erotica is highlighted by Nabaneeta Dev Sen who notices either a lack of even recognition of such women authors, or a "great deal of interest – a great deal of unholy, extracurricular curiosity" among the readers while reading women writers (2000: 299). Both are equally destructive to women writers. While in the first instance the voice of the writer is silenced through ignorance, in the second, the writer becomes "a consumer product herself" (302). Frequently, a woman writer’s name becomes "an essential part of the text that she produces" along with “her whole
personal life and her body” (299). She becomes more vulnerable, if she is interested in erotica: “It disturbs her family peace and public image by turning her into an object of pleasure along with the text she produces” (302, emphasis added).

This point leads to another related issue, i.e., of the production. The practice of “writing the body” whether in fiction or any other cultural form does not exist in a vacuum. Its “production” in the male dominated capitalist society further undermines its radical nature (Kappeler 1992). As in the contemporary modern society, writing has no longer remained a solo activity, and has become more and more like a product in the “culture industry,” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1993; A. Desai 2007) even the practice of “writing the body” on the part of women comes under suspicion. One can hardly tell for sure whether there is a genuine concern on the part of the producers to enhance women’s entitlement in the society or the writers are using the female body and sexuality as a saleable product (Suleiman 1985). One feels like buying the version of Catherine MacKinnon who believes that “when capitalism is the favoured social construct, sexuality is shaped and controlled and exploited and repressed by capitalism” (MacKinnon 1989: 319). And if it is so, there is little chance of the success of feminist motto of “writing the body.”

Thus, the practice of “writing the body” as a resistance discourse is paradoxical in nature. Contemporary Indian English women’s fiction enacts this paradox at various levels. Like other resistant practices of writing or foregrounding the body that raise hitherto silenced issues, these have immense transformative potential. But the various limitations that impinge on any feminist discourse that aims at resistance through the body as discussed in the last part of
this chapter limit the subversive power of these novels substantially. However, it must be acknowledged that even though the act of resistance may not be the "guarantee of change;" "it is in the moments of resistance that there is the possibility of openness and change" (Thapan 2009: 171, emphasis added).

Notes:

i. However, some scholars hold a contradictory position as well, and believe that in India women have always enjoyed a place of respect and dignity because of their association with Devi – the Goddess. But, as Jasbir Jain has rightly pointed out, the respect and the privilege which accompanies the position of Devi is not only anti-individualistic but also anti-humanistic and denies women any selfhood or even her flesh and body. Her own and opposing views are given in details in Jasbir Jain and Avadesh Kumar Singh, ed. Indian Feminisms (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2001). A significant work on relationship between goddess and feminism is Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?” (EPW 33.44 (Oct. 31 - Nov. 6, 1998): WS34-WS38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407322>).


iii. For the purpose of my project I have chosen not to deal with the essential or constructed nature of the female body and sexuality. As the focus of this study is to see the inherent ambivalence when women take up the project of writing about female sexuality, its pleasures and desires, this study mainly takes a view of human identity as embodied, where, though, the subjectivity is mainly a


vi. For example, Prem Chaudhry has looked at the women’s folk songs and the expression of sexuality and lust on the part of women (“Lustful Women, Elusive Lovers: Identifying Males as Objects of Female Desire.” Indian Journal of Gender Studies 8.1 (2001):23-50); J. Devika has explored the treatment of sexuality in the writings of Lalitambika Antarjanam (“Lust for Life: Desire in Lalitambika Antarhjanam’s Writings” in Menon 236-254); Ratna Kapur (2005)
has dealt with the complexity of female sexuality in movies and various other genres; Susie Tharu has examined the issue of female sexuality through the prism of caste (“The Impossible Subject: Caste in the Scene of Desire” in Thapan 296-70); Fernando Franco and others have dealt with the issues of marriage and sexuality among Dalit and OBC women (“Marriage, Sexuality and Motherhood” in Menon 141-174); Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick have seen the female body and sexuality in the context of colonialism (“Mapping The Colonial Body: Sexual Economies and the State in Colonial India” in Price and Shildrick 388-398); Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003) has addressed the question of prostitution from this perspective and emphasized the need to adopt an approach other than that of victimization towards sex workers. Meenakshi Thapan ed. Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity and Ruth Vanita’s Gandhi’s Tiger and Sita’s Smile: Essays on Gender Sexuality and Culture are equally significant contributions in this field.


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