

# Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible



# Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible

## The Body in Third World Feminisms

Anirban Das



ANTHEM PRESS  
LONDON • NEW YORK • DELHI

Anthem Press  
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company  
[www.anthempress.com](http://www.anthempress.com)

This edition first published in UK and USA 2012  
by ANTHEM PRESS  
75-76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK  
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK  
and  
244 Madison Ave. #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

First published in hardback by Anthem Press in 2010

Copyright © Anirban Das 2012

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

“Call to Prayer” in *Gaganendranath Tagore: The Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*,  
March 1972, ed., Pulinbihari Sen, plate facing p. 78. Published by Shrimati Tagore,  
Honorary Secretary, The Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta.

The verse in the dedication page is a free translation by the author  
from the lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore in *Gitanjali* Volume 1,  
Dey’s Publishing, Kolkata, 2007, pg. 86.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,  
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means  
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise),  
without the prior written permission of both the copyright  
owner and the above publisher of this book.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book has been requested.

ISBN-13: 978 0 85728 569 0 (Pbk)  
ISBN-10: 0 85728 569 6 (Pbk)

This title is also available as an eBook.

For Rumela and Adira

In the dense night of my unsaid words  
Your thought reigns like a star



# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1. Body, Power and Ideology	1
Introduction	1
Question of Power – The Hierarchical	
Constitution of Subjects	4
Ideology and Spectral Embodiment	17
2. Thinking the Body: Metaphoricity of the Corporeal	37
Introduction	37
The Body, Thingness and Ideologies	39
Actuality and (Im)Possibility: Descartes/Foucault/Derrida	46
‘The <i>W</i> oman in the Body’ – Metaphors of Embodiment	54
Beyond Performativity: Universals and Other Generalities	61
3. Thinking the Body: Negotiating the Other/Death	73
Introduction	73
Medicine: Making Up the Normal	78
The Body in Death: Beyond the Post/Modern	85
Dying and the Dasein: Towards an Ontology of Death	90
From Ontology to Ethics: Embodying Death	94
4. Thinking the Body: Beyond the <i>Topos</i> of Man	105
Introduction	105
The <i>Woman</i> in Ontological Difference	109
Property Talks: The (Non)Space of the <i>Name</i>	113
Figuring Sexual Difference: Multiple Singularities	120
Yashobati’s Story – <i>Maya</i> in a Trace-Structure	127

5. Violence and Responsibility: Embodied Feminisms	133
Introduction	133
Third World Feminisms: The Politics of Location and Experience	135
Eating Others: An Inquiry into the Notions of Iterability and Responsibility	151
In Conclusion: Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible	163
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Bibliography</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	207



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Arguably, and for diverse reasons, the most difficult part to compose in a book is the Acknowledgement. For someone who has shifted disciplines, interests, and ethical priorities over about a little more than two eventful decades, it is almost impossible to trace the innumerable and distinctively disparate influences that shaped his work. I suddenly face the sense of insignificance that arises out of the realization on the sheer number of persons who have sustained my thoughts and yet the meager accomplishments I can own up to.

Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been unstinting in her support for my work. The above sentence is shamefully inadequate to express the ways in which her comments, in the form of both written and oral exchanges, have foundationally structured the textures of this book. This, in addition to the overwhelming influence of her written oeuvre, is perhaps overtly recognizable in my scarce attainments. For Professor Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, I can only express a gratitude for the senses of respect, admiration and friendship that his being emanates. It might be somewhat embarrassing for the author to remember all the insights and turns of thinking Sibaji has provided for this book. My thoughts, and a large segment of the processes of my becoming, bear ineradicable traces of his pervading presence. Professors Udaya Kumar and Franson Manjali have read the dissertation from which this book develops in meticulous details and enriched the rewriting with their critical yet encouraging inputs. Both have provided an aura of friendly critique that is rare in its intensity and scope. I thank my thesis supervisors, Professor Shefali Moitra and Professor Pradip Kumar Bose, for bearing with my irregular patterns of work, bouts of enthusiasms for misplaced theories, and long stretches of intellectual hibernation.

I take this opportunity to thank my parents, Laily Das and Dilip Kumar Das, for bringing me up as they thought it right, for bearing with me when I deviated, and for sharing a part of their life with me. To my extended family of relatives including my in-laws who put the word 'laws' under erasure, I remain grateful. A special fond and sad greetings to Nandita Roy, my mother(-in-law), whose mad appreciation for my alleged qualities shall continue to support me

in rougher times, even after her early death. It is gratifying to remember those who made it possible for me to do the work of writing by doing menial jobs for the family, the (helping) hands that had unselfconsciously been friendlier than what the terms of a semi-professional domestic relationship dictated. Durgadi, who left us abruptly, would have been inordinately proud to hold a copy of my book.

It is just not possible to name all those who haunt memories of learning and growing up. I thank Tapas Bhowmik, my early teacher of schooldays who passed untimely away, and Jayanta Bhattacharya, the friend and teacher of my early youth who continues to interrogate and engage with my thoughts. It is not possible to express my debt to the once comrades-in-thoughts like Bhaskar Bhattacharya, Dipayan Dhar, Nirod Baran Majumdar, Gargi Bannerjee, Ashis and Subhasis Goon, Debdarshan Dutta, Samrajnee Datta, Sudeb Saha, the younger Jayanta, and innumerable others who taught me how to live. Nirod's silent approval and (not to ignore, even material) support have been invaluable in the last few years. Special and loving remembrance for the two Debasish, Das (who promptly provided me with a book I needed for the dissertation) and Ghosh, for growing up together. Appreciations for my work have always been forthcoming from Chirantan, Subrata, Santanuda and Pronita.

My transition into the humanities was made possible with the help of Prof. Subhendu Dasgupta, the staff of the History of Science Program at the Asiatic Society 1995–1996 session, and through long hours of open-minded and affectionate questionings from Prof. Arun Kumar Biswas. A specially tumultuous relationship has since been continuing with Prof. Ajit Chaudhuri, with early affections often turning into bitter contestations. The Research Training Program at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta has been, to use a banal yet appropriate expression, a veritable eye-opener. This was the beginning of a long, uninterrupted and exceptionally rich interaction with the academic environment that distinguishes the Centre. The participants of an intensely vibrant reading group in the years 2005–2006 have enriched my thoughts in ways not always enumerable. I would specially like to thank Prof. Partha Chatterjee for being indulgent and retaining interest in my work, Prof. Gautam Bhadra, Prof. Pradip Datta, Dr. Anjan Ghosh, Prof. Tapati Guhathakurta, Prof. Janaki Nair and Dr. Manas Ray for providing me with comments, books and encouragement. The last couple of years, when I have been a faculty at the Centre, have shaped my ideas and articulations in profound ways. Dr. Rajarshi Dasgupta, Dr. Bodhisattva Kar and Dr. Priya Sangameswaran need to be mentioned specially for the interminable discussions on my work and diction. I thank Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, Dr. Rosinka Choudhury, Dr. Keya Dasgupta, Dr. Rohan Debroy, Dr. Mollica Dastidar and Dr. Manabi Majumdar for their

friendly interest and interventions. Prof. Samita Sen has maintained vibrant and encouraging interest in whatever I was doing through her tenures in the two Universities, Calcutta and Jadavpur.

I fondly remember the interactions with those colleagues in the Margins collective – Asha Achuthan, Ranjita Biswas, Anup Dhar and Nirmal Saha – the subsequent corrosions in relationships with whom have never been enough to erase the sense of enrichment, elation and respect that we then shared. I learnt a lot from my interactions in the extended reading groups and discussions with Anjan Chakrabarti (who also commented upon a paper that subsequently became part of my dissertation), Atanu Thakur, Arup Dhali, Bidwut Bannerjee, Debarshi Talukdar and many others.

I remember the experience of sharing my thoughts with the M.Phil students in the Women's Studies Programs at the University of Calcutta and the Jadavpur University. I also remember the students of the History of Science Program at the Asiatic Society, and the interactions on the few occasions when I communicated with people in Refresher and Orientation courses. The Wednesday seminars for Research Scholars at the Department of Philosophy in the Jadavpur University had always been an enriching experience. Parts of this book were presented on differing occasions at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, in the Departments of Philosophy, Comparative Literature, History, Sociology, and English and in the School of Women's Studies and the Centre for European Studies at the Jadavpur University, in the Department of Political Science and the Women's Studies Resource Centre at the University of Calcutta, in the Department of Philosophy at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, in the department of Philosophy at the Assam University, Silchar, in the School of Languages at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and in the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research in Amsterdam. I thank the respective Departments and Institutions for giving me the opportunity to share my views and all the participants for the enriching experience they provided.

I thank the staff at the Jadavpur University Departmental Libraries in the Departments of Philosophy, Women's Studies and Film Studies, the Central Library at the Jadavpur University and the National Library in Kolkata. For the staff at the library in the CSSSC, my gratitude for the warm, friendly, and the extremely tolerant way in which they have treated my incessant intrusions. Of course, Kalibabu warrants a separate allusion with his unerring memory and keen interest in everything academic. Earlier versions of parts of this book were published in *from the margins* (February 2002), in *Thematology: Literary Studies in India*, ed., Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2004, and in *Rabindra Bharati Journal of Philosophy* (2004). I thank the editors for letting me try out my ideas.

Srila Roy has been generous in her assessment of my work, in sharing thoughts and incessant questionings. Durba Mitra was extremely encouraging and provided acute observations on Chapter Four at a late stage of writing the book. I am grateful to Moinak Biswas, Kaushik Ghosh, Aniruddha Chowdhury and Abhijit Ray who had been supportive of my endeavors in ways that went further than what I could expect. Sarthak Roy Chowdhury has been appreciative in his intelligent, ironic way and beyond. Amit Ranjan Basu needs a special mention for his consistent support and encouragement. With him I also share a pleasurable experience of reading in a group with Ritwik Bhattacharya and Abhishek Basu as the younger participants. These two, along with Hardik Brata Biswas, Samrat Sengupta and Rajlaxmi Ghosh continue to enrich me with endless discussions on praxis and theory. Barun Sarkar, magnanimously, read and edited the manuscript in painstaking detail. Pradip Bhawal has consistently been pestering with his doubts about seeing the end of my PhD. Without his mental and ‘infrastructural’ support, this manuscript would never be ready for submission.

Interactions with Sourav Kargupta have been intermittent earlier (for cartographic reasons) but always stimulating and appreciative. In the final phase of completing the manuscript, his incisive and informed comments have been invaluable. I owe much of the specific articulations of this monograph to discussions with Sourav. Swati Ghosh had always been more than a caring, intelligent and understanding friend and continues to have confidence in and a critical engagement with my work. Her convictions lent vital support at difficult moments. Special and fond thanks to my two friends in two continents, Stefan Ecks in Edinburgh and Ben Baer in Princeton, who had been unstinting in their appreciations for my thought in the form of engaging in discussions, sharing of printed matters, extensive comments on writings, and hours of friendship. So much of my dissertation has been conceived in the interminable discussions, readings and disputes with Ritu Sen Chaudhuri over the last few years that a simple acknowledgement of her contribution remains perennially inadequate, almost an outrage to decency. Her influence has as well pervaded my diction of writing, that is, thought.

To Adira, my daughter, I owe many hours (of study) stolen from what should rightfully have belonged to her, and lessons in ways of wondrous learning that only a child can impart in her first years of growing up.

One can – with some crudity – remember midnight discussions, heavy with sleep, on still inchoate thoughts, and the first responsive interlocutor. But is it possible to thank someone for sustaining one’s thought, belief and confidence; for the day-to-day work of living, for the unbearable beauty in the experience of sharing the quotidian; in short, for one’s whole being? If it was, I could have named Rumela.

# INTRODUCTION

What shall I do with this absurdity –

...

I pace upon the battlements and stare  
On the foundations...

“The Tower”, William Butler Yeats, 1926

## The Argument

Any form of Knowing has to negotiate the unanticipatable. By definition, the act of knowing has to know what is already not available to knowledge. To make known what already is known does not involve the process of knowing; it is the act of repeating the already-known.

There are two basic ways to approach the unanticipatable. One is to make it derivable from what is already-known. The other is to respect the fact that it is underivable from the *present*. As we will see later, these two ways may not be mutually exclusive.

To derive the unknown from the existing corpus of the known is not a homogeneous process. Some of the attempts that follow this process can also acknowledge that there are elements of indecision and uncertainty in the realm of the not-yet-known. This process tries to formulate a calculus of that uncertainty. Thus the range of indecision may be calculated. This calls for a new gloss on the notion of calculation.

To treat the unknown as underivable from the present is not to deny the necessity of calculating the ways of reaching out towards the unknown. This calculus always has *incalculable* remains. The decision to know the unknown in a specific way is the decision to leap across an ineffable gulf toward a remainder not amenable to the calculations of the commensurable.

Yet, without going through the calculus of the commensurable, the knower does not reach the ineffable remainder. Without the moves to define, elements within the fold of the knowable would easily be marked as ineffable. Variations

of the same look like deviations from the norm if the reach and flexibility of the norm is not understood. Repetition would then be marked as break. As such, one must hold on to the two ends – the calculus and the incalculable.

Trying to think about such a process of knowing, one has to think in terms of the *present* structure of knowing. To envisage this attempt to think I use the term *figuration*. Figuration – giving figures to thoughts, grasping thoughts as figures – is giving a body to knowing, embodying knowledges. Use of the words *figure* and *body* indicates a prior presence and its trans-formation. Here, thinking is not a simple re-presentation – a repetition of the presence of an already existing *thing*. Nor is it an imagining of a completely new *unknown*. ‘Figuration’ tries to give a sense of the tentativeness of the new and the tenacity of the old acting simultaneously in the process.

When the body is conceived in terms of figuration – not as a three-dimensional static space of a given presence – one recognizes that ideology is constitutive of the body. In the previous paragraph, my use of the term body anticipated this particular sense of the word. Yet it also hinted at and retained the sense of immediate presence that has so far accrued to the uses of the word body. As would be evident in the following discussion, my use of the term *ideology* professes *and* anticipates ideology as embodied, and thus is different from a standard version of ideology belonging to the ideational in an idea/body binary. Power differentials act through this space of ideological formation and themselves take part in the making up of the body. Embodiment of knowledge signifies that the process of knowing is a process of figuring this spectral body.

If the body is not defined by the immediacy of an unmediated presence, how is it possible to think the specificity of a given body? The process of figuring implicates a number of generalities that intersect at the given locus of the body. The singularity of the body does not follow from a simple addition of these generalities. The number of generalities involved is never indubitably known, as there always remains the possibility of a new one coming to perception at a later instant. Moreover, singularity is structurally constituted by a certain unknown addendum to the said cumulation. The uniqueness of each *moment* involves a supplement of the unanticipatable.

Naming the body involves the twin task of naming the generalities involved and retaining the (im)possibility of the unknown remainder. The prevailing notions of the body work within a metaphysics of ‘secular’ presence. As such, these notions have a continuity with (as elements which mark a break in) the Judeo-Christian notion of presence (that presupposes a single God and ‘his’ creations). Certain other generalities from a non-monotheist tradition might figure the body differently. Giving a name to the undecidable remainder is also a part of naming the body. The undecidable *is* multiple. So are the names/figures of the body.

*Reality* is perhaps the most all-encompassing of the categories that secular thought has figured in its bid to negotiate with the unanticipatable. Religions, monist or not, have tried to do the same in the form of the God/s, fate or a telos of any other sort. Knowledge, in the prevalent framework – be it secular or religious – is forever a bid to engulf the inscrutable other. The ‘body’, with its sense of impenetrable immediacy, remains to the act of knowing, the epitome of the *unanticipatable as the given*. The unanticipatable is so close here, so much wrapped in intimacy, that it seems not to need any thought, any reflection, any re-presentation. The perception of this presence appears to be beyond thought. The intimacy of the being renders it beyond thinking in the sense of not requiring the work of thinking in its perception. As such, thinking of knowledge as *embodied* – *not* in the spirit of a simple inversion of disembodied Truth, but as respecting the bodily enigma of truth itself – may point at a way of knowing and being that will bear responsibility to the ‘other’ as a singular moment in a politics ‘of the (im)possible’. Here, the ‘other’, so intimate as to defy description, calls for a response and the ability to respond to its unanticipatability.

An ultimate other to the body as given presence, is *death*. Death is the moment of absolute futurity – not the future as a teleological presence – that defines the living body. It is the unanticipatable and incalculable supplement to the body. Knowledge tries to deal with death in the form of ways of dying. Different from the ways of dying, death is also constituted by a historicity that implicates generalities within and outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A respect for the death as an other to the living body involves, but is not exhausted by, a search for such other generalities.

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

This work is an attempt to re(in)state the irreducibility of the unanticipatable to knowledge. The epistemological element of this effort consists in showing that the attempts to contain and calculate unanticipatability always bear their

failures within their own logic. The ethico-political moment is in the reminder of a responsibility to the other. Each of these, the epistemo-ontologic and the ethico-political, flows into the other.

I do not provide – remaining fully aware of the importance and necessity of the act – a substantive non-Judeo-Christian figure of the body. This book, on the one hand, shows how often such efforts of figuring slip inadvertently into a nuanced Judeo-Christian frame. On the other, it tries to recognize instances of such a figuring. The figure of the woman remains operative in these instances as constitutive of such efforts. This is not to pose a conscientious ‘religious’ stance against a thoughtless ‘secular’ one. I try to work, beyond the secular/religious binary, on the continuities of the secular with the Judeo-Christian and point at the need to think of an interruption to this connection. Certain elements of non-monotheist mindsets are treated as possible rudiments of such figurations. Of course, these are not innocent of differentials of power or meaning.

This book is not an attempt to give an answer to the question: “What is to be done?” Nor is it an attempt to chart unmarked (colonized, gendered, race- or caste-inscribed) spaces of discovery where old problems are acted out in new ways. Its humble effort is to trace certain presuppositions that die hard in fresh trials for alternatives and new terrains. The painstaking task of such enumerative clearing is necessary for the more substantive attempts, I submit. That is the only possible way to avoid repetitions looking as ruptures. And that is one of the tasks that describe (as always, insufficiently) the name ‘deconstruction’.

Such a theoretical questioning of presupposed notions may open up the possibilities of thinking about what one may call *embodied utopia*. Embodied, as it is located in the space of the body. It is utopia, as it is in a no-space, located in non-topos. Yet, the body is always and already utopic in its ideological constitution, and utopia has to have a (body)space to be described. Embodiment as a category has itself to enact the work of embodying knowledges.

## The Book

To make a critique of universal knowledge, one uses the trope of embodiment. To mark the limits of disembodied knowledge perceived as a ‘view from nowhere’, one speaks of knowledge located in space/time/context, a view from somewhere. The ‘body’ is the figure that represents this location of knowledge. When one thus speaks of ‘embodied knowledges’, what notion of the body is one using? If the body is thought of as the simple opposite of mind or spirit then it gets defined by the same structure of binarism that operates in the notion of knowledge as disembodied. For this binary structure



of thinking, knowledge processes occur in the realm of the mind or the spirit, a realm that is neatly distinct from the body. To blur this distinction is to go beyond a body/mind binary, which implies a going beyond of the thinking of the body in simple opposition to the *disembodied* mind/spirit. This would imply that embodiment is not simply opposed to disembodiment – the former bears within it constitutive traces of the latter. This book tries to figure out how embodiment can be thought of in terms of disembodiment and yet carry traces of a beyond. Deconstruction as processes immanent to thinking and being becomes helpful in this endeavor. This is opposed to a structure of reversal in which the embodied is *immediately* the reverse of the universal.

This is an attempt to think of two terms that are analytically opposed – embodiment and disembodiment – as mutually constitutive yet distinctively different from each other. Not content with the analytic separation of the terms, this book tries to look into the processes of their becoming, in which they remain intertwined *and* conflictual. This focus on the entwined ways of becoming of the twin terms embodiment and disembodiment may be called phenomenological as opposed to the neat analytical divide between them, if one chooses to talk in terms of a binary. Again, this choice we are speaking of is at once an impossible and an inevitable choice. This choice is something within which one is already inserted, yet the terms of that insertion pushes one to go beyond. In the book, I try to act this double bind out in the conceptual space of the *body*. That act signals toward a dimension of ethics as an experience of the impossible being constitutive of the ontology of the body.

This book works at the intersection of two related yet different fields. One is the heterogeneous feminist effort to question universal forms of knowing. The expression ‘*embodiment* of knowledge’ – deploying the notions of time (as history), space (as location) and politics (as partiality of perspective or standpoint) to interrogate the purported universality of knowing – is one important way in which feminist philosophies try to perceive the attempt. The second field follows from this: how does one think of the body when s/he speaks of embodiment? In standard versions (of mind/body dichotomy), embodiment involves an act of simple inversion – valorizing the (material) body in place of the mind. On the other hand, if meanings are seen to produce the body as ‘a system of signification’, *embodiment* gets reduced to yet another form of the significatory mechanism. To come out of the impasse, I deal with the dynamics of the production of the generality called the ‘body’ with a focus on the ‘others’ (death, sexual and colonial differences) that fracture *and* define the notion of the body. An ethical responsibility to the ‘others’ consonant with this ontologically differentiated body distinguishes my notion of embodiment from standard versions of ‘third world feminism’. The development of this notion requires an elaboration of the ways in which *power* and scientific rationality

work (epistemically) in a postcolonial setting. Finally, I point at how my notion of *embodied knowledges* is inseparable from a deconstructive *politics of the (im)possible*.

The book starts with a discussion on the interrelationship of power, ideology and the body. Judith Butler (1997b) had tried to think of the relationship between power and the individual in terms of that between the social and the psyche:

[I]f we refuse the ontological dualism that posits the separation of the political and the psychic, it seems crucial to offer a political account of psychic subjection in terms of the regulatory and productive effects of power. If forms of regulatory power are sustained in part through the formation of a subject, and if the formation takes place according to the requirements of power, specifically, as the incorporation of norms, then a theory of subject formation must give an account of this process of incorporation, and the notion of incorporation must be interrogated to ascertain the psychic topography it assumes. (19)

It remains necessary to go into the workings of power in terms of the psychic apparatus provided one does not forget to refer to the fictionality of such a structure. Along with the social/psyche binary, the psyche/body binary must also be put under scrutiny. Otherwise, like that in many a simplistic attempt, the body would be reduced to the 'body-image' in the psyche. This is not to refute the importance of the body-image in the constitution of the body, but to remember the provisionality of a mind/body binary thus presupposed. My idea of the relationship between the body, power and ideology is different from, and in a protracted debate with, such a *psychic* reduction.

In the post-Foucauldian era, ideology has become an unfashionable concept. Yet, at least since Althusser and Raymond Williams, ideology as a concept has been nuanced to address the Foucauldian 'dissolution of the subject'. It can address the predicament in which subjects act as if they were securely intended. All subjects are ideological. I employ an ontological notion of power in conjunction with the acting of ideology as a 'necessary fiction'. This move lets one think of an ethico-politics that takes the power-ladenness of one's being into account while trying to mark the traces of a beyond to the dominant ideologemes. One can thus avoid pessimism of eternal subjecthood to an all-embracing Power as well as shun a hasty optimism of reversing the present order too easily by counter-posing a truth to the reigning ideologies.

How does embodiment as a process involve processes of power? The question of power is treated here not in the sense of the macro-politics of states and social groups, not even singly in the sense of micro-dynamic of

social institutions. Taking cue from a specific reading of Foucault's notion of anato-mo-politics, power is seen here to be *ontologically* constitutive of the body. A discussion of power in the theorization of hegemony is combined with the dimension of power as productive of the notion of being. This juxtaposition of power and ontology enables one to think of an ethicality that is co-constitutive with ontology – an ethics that has to take account of power relations, has to concede the inevitability of power in ways of being, yet does not have to leave out a notion of existential responsibility to the other. A juxtaposition of Foucault, Heidegger and Levinas is attempted at through Derridean categories. If idealization and embodiment are thought of as two analytic poles, then neither of these can occur without the other or without the mediation of power and responsibility. Ideologies and the body constitute each other. So, embodiment of knowledge is a condition of knowing, a condition that is often forgotten in the act of knowing, and a remembering of which becomes an ethical gesture. In its turn, this gesture opens the possibilities of thinking a different ethic. This ethic is expressed, at the end of the book, through the metaphor of 'eating well' – the inevitability *and* impossibility of a certain cannibalism in one's being and a need to modify that cannibalism to minimize violence, to learn to 'eat well' – that points at the co-implication of power and being and the ethical imperative to go beyond this toward a responsibility to the other.

There is a need to deal with arguments that, avowedly or not, treat or presuppose the body as unmediated substratum of existence. I begin with two intimately divergent opinions on the mind – that of Foucault and Derrida regarding a specific fragment of Descartes – a thinking of the mind, reason, and, for Derrida and Foucault, the mad. A Derridean thinking of the other in its absolute alien-ness (as of madness to reason) does not necessarily preclude a responsibility to the trace of the other in the self, to the trace as it appears to the self. Attempts to produce a definitional calculus of the other in its distinctness (as of madness through rational discourse) might, on the other hand, tend to naturalize the active traces of the self in the act of defining and be violent to the possibilities of the other. A valorizing of the irrational might valorize the rational 'itself'. I move on to deal with the body in its processes of being. These processes, as I trace, include the signifiatory and power mechanisms acting at multiple axes of identity. My focus is on the sexually differentiated body, as I find a discussion of bodily metaphors to lead inevitably to a discussion of sexual difference. The unthinking immediacy of sexual difference is commensurate with and a grounding instantiation of the given-ness of the body. The invocation of 'cultural' gender differences in contraposition to this 'sexual identity' can hardly point a way out of this predicament. I continue tracing how the ghost of *other* ideologemes animate the corporeal

to subjecthood, speaking inevitably in terms which the mode of thinking I espouse tries to put under scrutiny. In the process I try to deal with certain inadequacies in the highly fruitful theoretical endeavors to conceptualize the body in Judith Butler, Jean-Luc Nancy and Partha Chatterjee.

The body – which is the master-metaphor for location in space – is defined in the context of what the dominant view marks as its ultimate other, death. In this negotiation, for the deconstructive gesture that I propose, the body has to work at the *aporia* of thinking death in its intimate and unknown embrace with life, through a sense of respect and responsibility to the ‘other’. Historicizing the notion of the phenomenal self, one might easily be led on to conceptualize death only in the multiple histories of *ways of dying*. But then, what is ‘death’ as opposed to ‘ways of dying’? I try to emphasize as well as undermine this opposition while reading Derrida on Heidegger. My reading of a Bangla text by Manik Bandyopadhyay opens up the question of the historicity of death beyond the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. It lets one think about the alterity of death in a religiosity that can embody its gods and goddesses. Embodying others might be thought of in different ways in such settings, I presume.

Body-thoughts lead to the question of the sexual difference. The ‘case’ of the woman is not a ‘regional’ question in the ‘general economy’ of embodiment. The ideological work of embodiment involves the act of differentiating men and women. The de-naturalizing of the notion of sexual difference severely interrogates the purported distinction between *sex* and *gender*, a divide that much of feminist theory takes for granted. But what is the import of such an interrogation? This book tries to chart an itinerary of that attempt. The question it centrally raises is, how to mark a space beyond that of the heterosexualism of man if ‘space’ itself is already and always differentiated sexually in a heteronormative way. Does such an attempt only serve the known *topos* of the male desire? I trace the ‘desire of man’ in its fixity to see how the field of metaphoricity operates. I go on to deal with Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference and two names that Derrida uses to mark a space beyond – *Khora* and *Geschlecht* – to address these questions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak tries to mark spaces which are more ontically connected to the ‘woman’. The *clitoris* and the *mother* are two such figures. On certain other occasions, Spivak chooses yet more particular figures in fiction. What is important for my contention here is the multiplicity of the modes of figuring the ‘woman’. Acting through and in the bid to go beyond the phallogocentric *morphe* of the human, I bring in an other figure. I read a Bangla text by Kamal Kumar Majumdar to enact this gesture and its limitations. The non-repeatable ‘event’ness of the ethical encounter with the other is brought out by the figurations I thus proffer.

The immediacy which ostensibly authenticates the body as a material unthought ground makes it possible for the body to be a resource for thinking

an ethicopolitics of the beyond. What seems to be unthought is thus marked to be beyond thought. It can act as a metaphor for that beyond. The metaphoricity of the corporeal allows the corpus to open up the possibility of an other beyond the rules of the same. In the last part of the book I go on to deal with a notion of the politics of the (im)possible based on ideas of such embodiment. This politics is juxtaposed to the politics of the possible, where politics is thought of only in terms of elements that can be derived from the present. In such a present-centered politics, the body is conceptualized as a signifier of spatial location where the notion of space remains inadequately theorized. I point at multiple notions of space that try to speak of the singularities (non-reducible to the universal) of the politics of the (im)possible.

I speak of an (im)possibility with the brackets around the 'im'. The act of putting these brackets combines possibility and impossibility. What is possible is anticipatable from the elements of the present. This possible is knowable from within the bounds of 'real'-ity. A politics of the possible works wholly within the realm of the knowable and the calculable and remains amenable to a calculus of action. What I call impossible is by the same definition unknowable, radically unanticipatable, and exceeds the calculus of action. Along the temporal axis, backwards it is the doubly forgotten – the forgetting of which is itself forgotten, as if, nothing had happened – and forwards it is the un-anticipatable. There are at least two ways of relating to the impossible that gives way to two different kinds of politics. There may be a non-relation to the impossible. That gesture leads on to the circumscribing of the politics to the realm of the possible alone. On the other hand, a relation to the impossible can occur through the experience of the impossible we call the ethical experience. An experience, that concomitantly calls for a responsibility, a responsibility to the 'wholly other' that radically escapes knowledge (epistemology, ontology) yet continue to haunt a pre-ontological undefined space. To remind, the concept of ethics is thus rendered different from that in a standard version.

The subject of the book, though focused on a specific issue, has broad theoretical implications. It thoroughly reworks the notions of body and power and the nature of feminist epistemologies, and sheds new light on the relations of violence and communication implicit in our ways of being. As such, it puts forward a case (with sharpened theoretical tools) for a certain unusual way of setting to use of deconstruction in bringing about a change in the notions of the body and feminist theory in the first and the third worlds, with focus on a comparative perspective. As it tries to modify the notion of knowing itself, my language often strains towards the limits of existing usages of language. The reader will enjoy the challenges of those enunciations, I hope.

To have a condensed review, the book deals with three interconnected themes – a deconstructive thinking of the body, a critical view of identity

categories (woman, third world woman) in feminism, and a rethinking of generalities involved in an ethico-politics based on the singularities of events. As identity categories that work as foundations for a given (feminist) politics often refer to the bodily basis of such an identity, a critique of the naturalization of the body is a prerequisite for a problematization of such a politics. And such a problematization leads to a reappraisal of the notions of politics and ethics in a direction I try to trace. I do not begin with a traditional review of literature not because I am dismissive of traditions but because the literature involved would be too disparate to be dealt with together without a prior idea of the structure of my argument. In this introductory chapter I thus concentrate on laying out the overall plan, with the relevant reviews of literature in the respective chapters. In the book, I had to work across disciplines— trying to complement knowledge through one discipline by that through another — reaching aporia in each. The working through of the discourse on a topic in a given discipline had to be exhausted before going on to another. This is thus different from a hopping across disciplines. The process involves a charting of what happens to the categories when the limits and the possibilities of knowing these categories get blurred — limits become possibilities and vice versa. If the body is seen to set the limit to (purportedly disembodied) knowledge, following the processes of knowing results in the body appearing as that which makes knowledge possible, setting the shifting grounds of the possibility of knowledge itself. Even this general statement regarding the body and the knowledge cannot be articulated without particular enunciations in differing contexts. This monograph thus tries to act out the embodiment of theory in its very structure — its generalities are enunciated in particulars. The body in its turn also act here as an instance of embodiment — its specificity is that the concept of embodiment gives it an epistemological primacy. And this move reorients epistemology itself toward a co-implication with ethics. In Chapter One, I now go on to deal with the relations of ontology and power, and with how a certain notion of their relationship leads one on to a thinking of an ethico-politics of embodied responsibility, an ethic of ‘eating well’.

# Chapter 1

## BODY, POWER AND IDEOLOGY

### **Introduction**

There is no obvious connection between the body as a category and the categories of power and ideology. The obscurity of this connection is the symptom of a not so hidden assumption regarding the 'body'. A belief – that the body is only a concrete, immediate presence in three dimensional space – prevents the understanding of the links between the body and the ostensibly abstract notions of power and ideology. This book does not rest content with the knowledge that power and ideology are as palpably concrete as any other formation. Nor does it constrain itself to the insight (acquired through decades of painstaking critical scholarship now available in monographs, articles and commentaries) that the body is always and already mediated through categories of meanings and power. If mediations of power and ideology produce the body as something unmediated, then some form of ideological work has to be performed in order to produce this leap from the mediate to the immediate, to make the shift from the abstract to the concrete. This book tries to trace the itineraries of this work. It tries to observe and make visible the processes at work in producing the concreteness of the body from the abstract workings of meanings. One way of doing this is to describe different concrete modes of producing the category of the body through differentiating it from other categories like death and sexual difference. I try to do that in the following chapters. In the present chapter, I indicate certain ways of conceiving power and ideology that make it possible to speak of their role in producing the 'body'. The ideas of power and ideology I thus deploy are counter-intuitive yet, as I hope to show, possible logical extensions of the classical enunciations of these notions.

In philosophical parlance, reification (or hypostasis) is the process in which abstract categories *seem to be* concrete. If one is ready to question the security of the division between seemingness and real existence, reification may very well be used as a category that makes sense of the production of concreteness from abstraction. As would probably be evident from the later sections, I have such a use of reification in mind when I try to describe the production of the 'body' through deployments of power and ideology. There is here a

congealment, a transformation which is akin to the processes of commodity fetishism at work. This association will appear later in the chapter. For now, it is sufficient to point at the possibilities opened up by the use of my approach to the question. One such possibility is that of addressing the problem of embodiment of knowledge. Is embodiment to be thought of as a positioning of knowledge processes in the body, where the body is extraneous to those processes? If not, there has to be some commensurability between the register of the body and the register of knowledge. Reificatory processes let one think of such transformations across registers.

To think about ‘embodied knowledges’ as ways of knowing that might be part of the move to resist dominant modes of thinking, one has to think through the very important category of hegemony. Thinking about ‘knowledge’ and ways of knowing in terms of hegemony indicates a concern with the relations of power that act in the process of knowing. To speak about ‘power’ or fields of force active in the processes of knowledge is to question the notion of a value-free neutral knowledge as a ‘view from nowhere’. As such, to go into an analysis of power relations in a discussion on knowledge would seem to be an act of pre-supposing one’s conclusion – assuming what one has to prove – of the implication of power in knowledge. In this chapter, what I am dealing with is the multiple ways in which processes of power may act between two or more spaces. This conceptual exercise is needed to unravel the workings of power in processes that seem to avoid hierarchy and avowedly work in a neutral setting. To discern the gradients of hierarchy operating in confirmedly disinterested spaces like that of knowledge, one has to forge tools perceptive enough to sense the different and complex ways in which differentials of power can work. One has to remember that this conceptual excursus, of making oneself aware of the complexities of the hegemonic process, is necessary but not sufficient to affirm the workings of these processes *in* the ways of knowing. This encounter with hegemony is but a prequel to a countering of hegemony. Such a countering may not take the form of a charting of counter-hegemonic moves. Instead, it might call for a responsibility in the face of the violence of violations. I will go back to these questions at the end of the book.

Power and ideology are concepts that purportedly belong to two different theoretical narratives. These two narratives, as the received wisdom in humanities disciplines goes, do not meet. Foucault, thinking in terms of power, seems to be suspicious of using ideology as a productive theoretical category. For a Žižek on the other hand, the notion of power only serves to blunt and dissipate the theoretical rigor and effectivity of the tensions in ideology critique. In this chapter, I argue that the two can productively be used to complement each other. But for that, each of the notions has to be thought of in a certain register. Not that these registers are novelties that I invent to articulate the