

**INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE**


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<b>BLOCK 1</b>	<b>EMBODIMENT</b>	<b>7</b>
UNIT 1	The Body in Biomedicine	9
UNIT 2	The Labouring Body	22
UNIT 3	Racialized Body	39
UNIT 4	Performative Bodies	53
UNIT 5	Commodified Bodies	69
<b>BLOCK 2</b>	<b>ABLED BODIES AND DISABILITY</b>	<b>89</b>
UNIT 1	Discourses of Ableism and Disablism	91
UNIT 2	Disability, Sexuality and Motherhood	105
UNIT 3	Disabled Masculinity	118
<b>BLOCK 3</b>	<b>THE M/OTHER'S BODY</b>	<b>129</b>
UNIT 1	Culture and the Maternal Body	131
UNIT 2	Reproductive Technologies	152
UNIT 3	Surrogacy	173
UNIT 4	The Maternal Body in Urban India	193
<b>BLOCK 4</b>	<b>Sexual Cultures</b>	<b>209</b>
UNIT 1	Myth, Religion and the Body	211
UNIT 2	Body in French Feminist Theory and Psychoanalysis	229
UNIT 3	Sexualities Across Cultures	247
UNIT 4	Androgyny	262

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

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## **MWG-004: “Gendered Bodies and Sexualities”**

“Gendered Bodies and Sexualities” brings together four blocks by feminist thinkers and academicians from different parts of the country, reflecting on the inter-connections between various forms of gendered bodies and sexualities. The course employs political, economic, socio-cultural and psychological frameworks to enhance our understanding of gendered bodies. These frameworks at the same time intersect with the domains of medicine, technology, disability, sexuality and so on, to reveal the complex ways in which the body is culturally constructed. The units of this course draw on the diversity of socio-cultural and inter-regional experiences of women, men, and other genders within the areas of reproduction, motherhood and sexuality. These units will help the learner to understand that gender inequality may be analysed only by situating it within the context of other forms of marginalization. A critical understanding of gendered bodies will enable a deeper thinking about ‘gender equality’ by engaging learners with debates on body politics.

### **Block 1: Embodiment**

In the first block, learners will learn about the subjective and particular experiences of women, men, and other genders in the contexts of the scientific construction of the body, market, race, and performativity. In this block, learners are encouraged to critically examine different perspectives on the body which could be experienced differently by women, men and other genders across historical and cultural situations. The first unit introduces the idea of ‘body as a machine’ and its link to the notion of the ideal/perfect body within the context of the market. The second unit reflects on the embodied position of women as mothers or care-givers vis-à-vis men embodying the features of the productive body. The third unit provides an overview of the historical process of conceptualizing ‘pure race’ which created serious implications for women and men of different races in sustaining their lives. The objectification, appropriation and exchange of female bodies and sexuality is critically analysed in Unit 4. The last unit helps us to understand the socio-political and economic marginalization of different gendered bodies in the domain of dance and performance.

### **Block 2: Abled Bodies and Disability**

In this block, learners will be encouraged to engage with the subject of disability which can not be dealt in isolation from gender, class, social perception and policy-making. The first unit begins with the understanding of the notion of ableism as an analytical category, to express various connotations of disablism. Further, it goes on to explain different models and frameworks which look at ‘disablism’ as a social construct. Learners are encouraged to make interconnections between disability, gender, motherhood and masculinity. The next unit of this block debates that disability not only limits an individual’s political and economic participation, but also denies women’s right to sexuality, motherhood, and family life. The marginalized and specific experiences of women with disability are discussed by critically examining some of the recent empirical cases in the Indian context. The gender-based implications of disability with regard to male identity and masculinity are discussed in the last unit which highlights how masculine

identity and disability create a contested position for the male body in society.

### **Block 3: The M/Other's Body**

The third block focuses specifically on the mother's body, i.e., representations of the maternal body in culture, sphere of reproduction and in contemporary urban India. This block will try to question the constructions of the maternal in the public domain. The first unit examines the work of feminist theorists in understanding motherhood as a biological process vis-à-vis the maternal as an embodied experience. It gives an overview of the feminist theorization of motherhood which can be analysed, critiqued, and understood in various contexts such as surrogacy and reproductive technology. Reproductive technologies as the epitome of new motherhood is critically dealt with in the second unit. This unit focuses on the notion of motherhood within the contexts of right-based frameworks and enforced choice. The unit on Surrogacy makes an inter-connection between commercialization and reproductive services. It argues that surrogacy can be seen as a new form of sexual and reproductive labour in which women's bodies have been reduced to mere resources to deal with multiple socio-cultural complexities. Learners are encouraged to read both Units 2 and 3 together to be able to comprehend the interrelationship between the proliferation of reproductive technologies and marketization of surrogacy services. The last unit of this block examines the situation of urban middle-class women as mothers through a cross-cultural analysis of new urban motherhood and its emergence in India as a consequence of western influences.

### **Block 4: Sexual Cultures**

The final block of this course is thematically related with the course title "Gendered Bodies and Sexualities", in which multiple feminist interpretations emerge through the intersection of gendered bodies and sexualities. The first unit looks at the construction of the female body through religion, myth and culture. It addresses the question of how myth and religious practices institutionalize gender roles specific to women and men differently. The representation of the female body in psychoanalysis is examined thoroughly in the second unit, where the work of certain well known French feminist theorists is taken as the basis for analyzing various constructions of femininity in psychoanalysis. The next unit moves on to explain sexuality as a practice, and attaches multiple meanings to sexuality across cultures. Sexuality cannot be understood as a fixed and universal category; rather, it is primarily linked to contexts such as class, race, culture, religion, wealth, and gender. The final unit of this block discusses the notion of the androgynous body as a specific form that challenges the binary opposition between female/male bodies. The unit examines, in particular, the socio-cultural mapping and oppression of the androgynous body in the context of the *Hijra* community. It also offers learners various other connotations of androgyny through the use of mythological and cultural representations.

There are obvious inter-connections between the various blocks and units of this course and efforts have been made to make these visible to the readers so that each block forms an integral part of the larger effort to examine multiple, intersecting concepts in relation to the gendered body and sexuality. The course material thus intends to strengthen the understanding of each of these related concepts through an examination of diverse meanings in different contexts.



Block

# 1

## **EMBODIMENT**

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### **UNIT 1**

**The Body in Biomedicine** 9

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### **UNIT 2**

**The Labouring Body** 22

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### **UNIT 3**

**Racialized Body** 39

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### **UNIT 4**

**Performative Bodies** 53

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### **UNIT 5**

**Commodified Bodies** 69

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# UNIT 1 THE BODY IN BIOMEDICINE

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Renu Addlakha

## Structure

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Objectives
- 1.3 The Human Body: Multiple Perspectives
  - 1.3.1 Body Celebrated in Art and Sculpture
  - 1.3.2 Body as a Machine
- 1.4 The Body in Biomedicine
  - 1.4.1 Materialism of the Body
  - 1.4.2 Bionic Technology and Reconstructive Surgery
  - 1.4.3 Immunological, Hormonal and Genetic Configurations of the Body
- 1.5 Feminist Critique of the Body in Biomedicine
  - 1.5.1 Body Politics
  - 1.5.2 Reproduction as the Locus of Feminist Critique
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Unit End Questions
- 1.9 References
- 1.10 Suggested Readings

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Our bodies are the first and foremost reality of our lives; we live with and through our bodies. But ideas about the body have varied across cultures and historical periods. This unit examines different perspectives on the body in the context of western culture, which have been foundational in the conceptualisations of the biological sciences, particularly, modern medicine or biomedicine.

Apart from science, religion has historically been a key area of generating philosophies of the body, which are as valid today as they were in the past. For instance, in Hinduism, the physical body also incorporates a *karmic dimension*. Even though in the course of the cycle of births, deaths and rebirths, the soul changes bodies, there is assumed to be continuity between karmic deeds (and misdeeds) and the nature of the physical body that the soul takes on, e.g. disability is considered to be a retribution for misdeeds in a previous lifetime. In Islam, on the other hand, disease and disability are not matters of individual fault or sinfulness; they are accepted with compassion and the object of communal solicitude and assistance. Christianity

too has distinctive notions of the body, which as we shall see in the course of this unit, have played a major role in the conceptualisations of the body in Western culture including biomedicine.

Different cultures have different notions of the human body, and even within the same culture they change over time, as you can see from the following notions prevalent during different times and cultures:

- The body is the tomb of the soul(Plato circa. 428/427 BC - 348/347 BC)
- Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost (Saint Paul circa. 5 BC - c. 67 AD)
- The human body may be considered as a machine(Rene Descartes 1596 -1650)
- The body is what I immediately am(Jean-Paul Sartre 1905 -1980)

**(Cited in Synott, 1992)**

Western culture has had several competing paradigms of the body with the pendulum swinging between philosophies celebrating the body and more spiritual philosophies advocating abstinence and asceticism. For instance, while hedonism in ancient Greece advocated a pursuit of life with pleasure as a dominant theme, Orphism regarded pleasure as anathema and the body as the tomb of the soul. In the Roman Empire, the dominant philosophy, stoicism, continued with the body-soul dualism, with the body being regarded as a corpse imprisoning the soul that is pure and divine in essence.

Like other religions, Christianity has had several different paradigms of the body, viz. physical, mystical, and spiritual. The body was viewed as the image of God: the sharing of body substance mystically through the Mass (church ceremony involving ritual consumption of meat and wine recreating the scene of the Last Supper before Christ was betrayed by one of his followers and taken away for crucifixion). Then, there is the idea of the resurrection (the belief in the Day of Judgement when the dead shall rise from their graves and go to heaven) giving a spiritual dimension to the body. There were both body-positive and body-negative attitudes: while on the one hand Christ engaged in feeding the hungry and healing the sick, there was an equal emphasis on self-denial, fasting, renunciation, poverty, and chastity. In fact, in all major religions of the world, including Christianity, there is ambivalence towards the body, particularly with regard to sexuality. Gratification of bodily needs has been equated with self-indulgence and self-denial has been hailed as proof of mastery of the individual self and a sign of divinity.

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## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Comprehend a historical understanding of different perspectives on the human body in Western culture;
- Critically analyse the conceptualisation of the body in modern medicine or biomedicine; and
- Discuss the feminist critique of the body in biomedicine.

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## 1.3 THE HUMAN BODY: MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

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Greek art, mythology and popular culture, by and large, glorified the body and celebrated the naked (particularly) male form. This honouring of the physical body is illustrated by the Olympics which began in 776 BC on Mount Olympiad in the Elias region. The city state of Sparta (6<sup>th</sup> to first centuries BC) in ancient Greece was known for its emphasis on sports and body culture. However, this celebration of the physical body did not always translate into the philosophical realm. For instance, there is an inherent opposition between body and soul in Plato's dualism. Beauty, purification and the pursuit of philosophy are the means of freeing the soul from the thralldom of the body. Let us now discuss the concept of body in the discourses of art and sculpture, and science.

### 1.3.1 Body Celebrated in Art and Sculpture

Negative attitudes towards the body and an emphasis on asceticism dominated the philosophical and religious thinking in Europe throughout the period of the Roman Empire (circa 1st -7th century AD) and the Middle Ages (circa 5th-15th century AD). However, a radical shift in thinking known as the Renaissance (rebirth in French) occurred between the 14th and 17th centuries beginning in Florence (Italy) and then spreading to other parts of Europe. The Renaissance was a cultural movement involving a resurgence of learning based on classical Greek and Roman sources with Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo (1475-1564) being its foremost representatives. During this period, attitudes towards the body underwent rapid transformation. The body was celebrated in art and sculpture, regarded as beautiful, sacred and good. There was an end to the ascetic ideals of the body giving place to the rise of the egocentric individual and notions of privacy. Even within Christianity, the rise of Calvinism (a reworking of the basic tenets of Christianity by John Calvin (1509-1564) that emphasised this-worldiness and man's engagement in the affairs of this world, predestination, and the grace of God as means of individual salvation) resulted in the development of a more body-respecting religious outlook advocating a path of moderation rather than rigorous self-denial and negation of the physical body.

### 1.3.2 Body as a Machine

Against this ideological backdrop, a new paradigm of the body, viz. the body as machine emerged. Italian Renaissance artists became anatomists by necessity, as they attempted to represent a realistic, more lifelike, portrayal of the human figure in sculpture and painting. The Florentine painter and sculptor **Antonio Pollaiuolo** (1431/32-1498) dissected human bodies in order to investigate the muscles and understand the nude in a more modern way. Both **Leonardo da Vinci** and **Michelangelo** were renowned anatomists of their time.

Experimental investigation through dissection also became a major tool of medicine. **Andreas Vesalius** (1514 -1564) authored one of the most influential books on human anatomy: *'De Humani Corporis Fabrica' (On the Workings of the Human Body)*. He is often referred to as the founder of modern human anatomy. **William Harvey** (1578 -1657) was the first to describe correctly and in exact detail the systemic circulation and properties of blood being pumped around the body by the heart. Bacteria and micro-organisms were first observed with a microscope by **Antoine van Leeuwenhoek** (1623 - 1676), initiating the scientific field of microbiology.

But the most powerful philosophical articulation of the body as machine is **Rene Descartes** (1596-1650) *'cogito ergo sum'* (I think, therefore I am) (cited in Kenny, 1968, p. 62). This Cartesian first principle means that this 'I' by which 'I am' is essentially the mind which is distinct from my body. In fact, Descartes likened the body to a clock which works without a mind. While on the one hand the human body was equated with a machine by philosophers like Descartes and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1669) and operated through laws of mechanics, on the other hand, it was also recognised that human bodies were different from animal bodies, because they had minds and souls. Consequently, a division of labour was instituted with the body becoming the terrain of science; while the soul was the domain of the Church. This dualistic principle laid the foundation of the conceptualisation of the person in science and medicine, which is as valid today as it was five hundred years ago.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Do you agree that the human body is like a machine? Explain this concept while drawing examples from bio-medical technologies.*

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## 1.4 THE BODY IN BIOMEDICINE

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As we have seen in the previous section, the body was conceptualised as a machine in the modern world. This materialistic conceptualisation of the body was reinforced with the growth of science and retained within the field of medicine. In the following section, we will focus on the construction of the body in the context of modern medicine, surgery, and genetic revolution, which looks at body only as an instrument or object of scientific progress and capitalism.

### 1.4.1 Materialism of the Body

As you progress in this unit, you can see the construction and reconstruction of women's body with time and era of development. Beginning with the Renaissance, developments in medicine, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a reconstruction of the body. Edward Jenner's (1749-1823) discovery of the smallpox vaccine in 1796 paved the way for a revolution in modern medicine. The control and eradication of killer diseases like smallpox, typhoid, plague and cholera, the cell theory of **Rudolf Virchow** (1821-1902) and the germ theory of **Louis Pasteur** (1822-1895) transformed medicine. The psychological studies of **John B. Watson** (1878-1958) and **B.F. Skinner** (1904-1990) depicted mental functioning in very physical terms, dismissing the notion of the soul altogether. The final dethronement of the binaries mind/body, human/animal, superior/inferior asserted from Plato to Descartes was witnessed in Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution, whereby human beings were not created by divine design, as asserted by the Church, but were actually descendants of animals.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), the most influential philosopher of that era, elevated the body to a level of total supremacy overturning the ascetic and body denying doctrines of the past. The body was the self. The existentialist philosophy of **Jean Paul Sartre** (1905-1980) furthered the body-affirming perspective. According to Sartre, 'I live my body... the body is what I immediately am... I am my body to the extent I am.' (Sartre, 1984, p. 326). Thus, the materialism of the body reigned supreme in biology, medicine, psychology, and philosophy by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These medical discoveries had massive social and political repercussions; **Edward Jenner's** smallpox vaccination opened a new era in public health with the English Parliament making smallpox vaccination compulsory in 1853. The individual body now became property of the nation state. The Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1866 mandating compulsory examination of prostitutes and the Vaccination Act (1871) making vaccination against diseases like plague, smallpox and cholera mandatory for the population. This was also the period of colonial expansion and many British laws were transplanted to the colonies like India, where they continue to

be part of the legal system even today. For instance, Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code that punishes homosexuality is a product of that period. With the development of vaccines, anaesthesia, antibiotics and sterilisation, the body became something not to be feared and fought against; but it could be enjoyed, more easily mastered, even abused and then cured.

### **1.4.2 Bionic Technology and Reconstructive Surgery**

While a holistic perspective integrating the physical, psychic, environmental, social and cultural dimensions of health and disease may be held up as the ideal, medical practice and research still work with a very strong notion of the body as machine, a predominantly material entity which is hugely manipulable and repairable and whose parts are replaceable. In reconstructive surgery, the body is not given, nor the temple of the soul but so plastic that it can be constituted at one's whim; and bionic technology enables replacement of parts with mechanical aids in the form of cardiac pacemakers, ear and eye implants, collagen fibre (knee replacement) and silicon rubber (breast enhancement). Bodies may also be interchangeable through organ transplants (liver heart, lungs pancreas, kidneys, bone marrow). There are also transplants between species or xenografts. Stem cell technology offers unimaginable therapeutic possibilities in the treatment of life threatening acute and chronic diseases and permanent disabilities such as muscular dystrophies. With the development of more invasive and sophisticated imaging techniques and blood assays and the greater specialisation and super specialisation in medical practice, the dominance of laboratory findings over clinical judgements has almost resulted in the individual as patient disappearing from medicine and being replaced by the socially unmarked body and its constituent parts.

### **1.4.3 Immunological, Hormonal and Genetic Configurations of the Body**

Notwithstanding its greater segmentation and atomisation, the body in biomedicine is not a homogeneous body: multiple complementary and supplementary perspectives are available for envisioning the 'biomedical body'. The most basic biomedical configuration of the body is to view it as a set of interrelated systems, i.e. respiratory, digestive, muscular-skeletal, neurological, excretory, etc. However, with greater understanding of bodily processes at molecular, cellular and genetic levels, there are immunological, hormonal and genetic configurations of the biomedical body.

The immune system is the body's defence system against disease; it identifies and exterminates pathogens and tumour cells. In the face of attacks from bacteria, viruses or its own cells, several interrelated biological processes are operationalised to counter the invasion. Over time, immunological memory and adaptation are set in motion to recognise and destroy harmful pathogens. This is the basis of vaccination. In her exploration of scientific

and cultural representations of immunity in different sites such as medical laboratories and AIDS clinics, the anthropologist Emily Martin (1994) delineates characteristics of flexibility and adaptability of the immunologic ally fit body, features that are intrinsic to the contemporary capitalist economic system.

The human genome project, a multi-nation venture, completed the total sequencing of the human DNA (Deoxyribonucleic acid) over a 13 year period in 2000. It *identified* the approximately 20,000-25,000 genes in human DNA and *determined* the sequences of its 3 billion chemical base pairs. This database provides another biomedical perspective on the body, since genes are the inherited building blocks of organic matter like DNA and RNA (Ribonucleic acid). Genes hold the information to build and maintain an organism's cells and pass genetic traits to offspring. Medical technologies such as prenatal testing are an application of genetic engineering which is an expanding field of medical technology that not only offers immense therapeutic possibilities (e.g. removing and replacing disease causing genes) but also raises very difficult ethical and moral issues (e.g. Should the detection of disease-causing genes in the foetus automatically make abortion permissible? And at a broader level how much and to what extent should one tinker with the intrinsic elements of life?).

Hormones are powerful chemic messengers that are produced at one site and then transported via blood to other cells in the body. Growth hormone, thyroxin, estrogen and testosterone are examples of hormones in the human body. Moving beyond the body, emotion and mind divisions, hormones have physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions. For instance, testosterone stokes sexuality, aggression and competitiveness, while dopamine (another powerful neurological hormone or neurotransmitter) evokes desire for pleasure, in general, making us work for a range of diverse pursuits such as love, wealth and power. Oxytocin, also known as the cuddle chemical, is responsible for creating feelings of love and encouraging bonding behaviour in relationships.

The nature-nurture debate is a perennial theme in discussions on the relationship between heredity and the environment and their relative influence on individual health, behaviour and personality. Nature represents innate biological features while nurture represents environmental influences including individual experience. Biomedicine seems to have tilted the scales strongly in favour of biology in this debate. At the most, there is an acknowledgement that biology interacts with culture in individual experience, but by and large biology is considered to be destiny. In such a scenario, bodies are just that: bodies with the sacred element totally sucked out.

The European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the creation of the Cartesian body, a machine symbolising materialism, individualism and

secularism (Synott, 1992). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the body was defined politically as state property and economically as an instrument of production. Nietzsche spoke of the superiority of the body over mind and Darwin and Freud further contributed to the body becoming a central issue. Contemporary biomedicine continues to embrace and enhance the mechanistic and materialistic models of the body with body positive attitudes and technologies. This perspective on the body has been critiqued from several directions like religious and traditional healing systems that harbour more holistic perspectives. One of the most trenchant critiques of this configuration of the body has come from feminism. Let us turn to this in the following section.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Do you agree that your body is subservient to bio-medical technologies? Substantiate your answer with a living example.*

---

## **1.5 FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE BODY IN BIOMEDICINE**

In the discussion on body and biomedicine, it is essential to look at how feminists attack the representation of body in biomedicine. Hence the concept of body politics emerged as a critical discourse within feminism which challenged the understanding of women's body with a dualistic mind/body framework. The centrality of this section will rest on the discussion of body politics and feminists' critique of reproduction as the primary source of women's bodily oppression.

### **1.5.1 Body Politics**

One of the most important contributions of feminism has been highlighting the centrality of the body in different discourses and practices. The pioneering feminist theoretician **Susan Bordo** (1987) traces the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection through the philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel and Descartes, revealing how such distinguishing binaries as spirit/matter and male activity/female passivity have worked to solidify gender characteristics and categorisation. Bordo goes on to point out that while men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated, negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy.



During 1970s, body politics became a key concept in feminist theory and praxis. It arose out of feminist politics particularly the abortion debates in the United States. Body politics originally involved the fight against objectification and commodification of the female body, and violence against women and girls, and the campaign for reproductive rights. “The personal is the political” became a slogan that captured the intertwining of the demand for equal rights in the home and within sexual relationships in the domestic sphere with the struggle for equal rights in the public sphere. This form of body politics emphasised a woman’s power and authority over her own body. Many feminists rejected practices that draw attention to differences between male and female bodies, refusing to shave their legs and underarms and rejecting, cosmetics and skin-revealing clothing. The book *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1979) , published by the **Boston Health Collective**, aimed to widen and deepen women’s knowledge of the workings of the female body, thus allowing women to be more active in pursuit of their sexual pleasure and reproductive health. Second-wave feminist body politics during the 1980s promoted breaking the silence about rape, sexual abuse, and violence against women and girls, which many interpreted as extreme examples of socially sanctioned male power.

The term *body politics* refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body. The powers at play in body politics include institutional power expressed in government and laws, disciplinary power exacted in economic production, discretionary power exercised in consumption, and personal power negotiated in intimate relations. Individuals and movements engage in body politics when they seek to alleviate the oppressive effects of institutional and interpersonal power

Thus, it can be seen that the concept of body politics links female embodiment, patriarchy and biomedicine in multiple ways, with reproduction becoming a central issue. In the West, the right to abortion became a war cry of the women’s movement from the 1960s. During the same period, the female body became a locus of the Indian Family Planning Programme (officially initiated by the Government of India after Independence in 1952) with its emphasis on female-centred and medically controlled methods of contraception such as the oral pill and tubectomy. During that period, women were blamed for poverty and increasing population growth, hence, regulation of women’s reproduction became the lynchpin of the state’s population control programme. Further, victimizing the body of poor and minority women with forced sterilisation had been an obvious practice of the state to achieve demographic target. Therefore, issues like reproductive health, reproductive rights and reproductive justice have been and continued to be prime concerns of the Indian women’s movement. Some of the key

reproductive health issues at stake are availability of legal and safe abortion, availability of contraceptive choices, women's access to basic reproductive services, contesting the use of unsafe contraceptive methods, particularly injectable and hormonal contraceptives (such as Depro Provera and Net-en) and prevention of prenatal sex detection and subsequent female foeticide.

### 1.5.2 Reproduction as the Locus of Feminist Critique

The locus of feminist critique of the biomedical body, and by extension of biomedicine itself, comes from the area of reproduction. Indeed, it is in the area of reproduction that gender politics overwhelmingly influences biomedical discourses and practices. One of the earliest and seminal writings was **Emily Martin's** (1991) work which showed how scientific descriptions and representations of the egg and sperm are deeply influenced by cultural stereotypes of male and female. Analysing descriptions of the male and female reproductive systems in standard medical textbooks used in MBBS courses in American universities, she concluded that scientific rendition rates female reproductive processes as less worthy than their male counterparts. In this rendition, menstruation becomes a failure when described as 'the debris of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis or death of tissue' (cited in Martin, 1991, p.486). On the other hand, male reproductive biology is evaluated differently. Spermatogenesis, unlike menstruation, is evaluated positively by its sheer profusion as the human male manufactures several hundred million sperms per day. By contrast, the female sheds only a single gamete every month. Furthermore, the male continually produces germ cells well into old age, while the female has a stockpile of germ cells at birth which degenerate by the fifth decade of life. Martin highlights that the medical texts celebrate sperm production because it is continuous from puberty to senescence, while egg production is rated as inferior as it is finished by birth. But why is the male's over production not seen as wasteful? Indeed, the language of reproduction is itself imbued with gender coded terms: the egg behaves femininely and the sperm behaves in a masculine way: the egg is large and passive and is transported, swept along and drifts to the fallopian tube. Sperms are mobile which deliver genes to the egg. They have velocity with strong tails; they propel semen into the vagina. They penetrate the egg coat (Martin, 1991, p.489). Even though sperms also live for only a few hours, the language focuses on the fragility and dependency of the egg and the virility and mobility of the sperm.

Logically eggs and sperms are equally active partners in the collaborative business of reproduction. The metaphor of the passive egg and active sperm are gendered cultural representations masquerading as scientific facts. Such gender imagery and stereotypical representations contest the objectivity and value neutrality of science. Indeed, as Martin points out, empirical research shows that far from being the aggressive penetrator, it is made out

to be in standard scientific textbooks that, the sperm has a weak tail. But then some recent research accounts that give a more active role to the egg do not escape the hierarchical gender ordering either. In many cases, the egg ends up as the female aggressor 'who captures and traps the sperm much like a spider', feeding into prevailing notions of women as aggressive and dangerous, another cultural gender trope depicting an engulfing devouring female sexuality.

From the above, we can see that even in an area like reproduction where the focus on gender should be obvious, there is a way in which its impact on the very constitution of knowledge construction remains veiled in a garb of scientific objectivity and gender neutrality. Without the insightful analyses of feminist scholars like **Barbara Ehrenreich**, **Deirdre English** (1979), and **Martin E.** which have deconstructed medical texts and practices, we would not be privy to the layered gender politics of knowledge production and theory construction. These authors highlight how patriarchal perceptions of women infuse the apparently objective understanding of female anatomy, physiology and psychology. Consequently, analysis of the body in biomedicine is incomplete if it does not incorporate a gendered understanding not only of reproduction where the gendering is so obvious, but other medical specialities ranging from neurology to dentistry and orthopaedics to ophthalmology. This exploration is a potentially promising area of future research.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Define body politics and discuss how feminists have used the concept in the analysis of body in bio-medicine.*

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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From self as mind to self as body, from mind as spiritual to mind as material, over time, mind and body have changed places in the hierarchy of concepts and values. As **Anthony Synott** (1992) points out, each new age seems to create and reconstruct the body in its own image and likeness; yet, at any given time there are likely to be many paradigms of the body, competing, complementary or contradictory. 'Philosophical and political constructions of the body co-exist with scientific constructions and recent advances in medical science have reinforced mechanistic and material constructions of the body (Synott, 1992, p. 101).

Mechanistic and materialistic constructions of the body, particularly the female body, have led to its greater commodification, be it in the fashion and glamour industries, organ donation or reproductive technologies (including surrogacy). Medicine envisions the female body as primarily a reproductive body: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause have been totally medicalised. In fact, greater scrutiny of the female reproductive system has placed the burden of birth control almost entirely on women instead of men.

Both patriarchy and biomedicine seek to control the body - fear of death and disease, fear of the strong impulses and desires of the body, fear of nature, fear of the mother's power over the infant, etc. are underlying motives. Idealising the body and wanting to control it go hand in hand.

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## 1.7 GLOSSARY

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- Bionics** : Bionics (also known as biomimicry, biomimetics, bio-inspiration, biognosis, and close to bionical creativity engineering) is the application of biological methods and systems found in nature to the study and design of engineering systems and modern technology. In medicine, bionics means the replacement or enhancement of organs or other body parts by mechanical versions (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bionics>).
- Xenograft** : A surgical graft of tissue from one species to an unlike species (or genus or family. A graft from a baboon to a human is described as xenograft. The prefix "xeno-" means foreign, which came from the Greek word "xenos" meaning strange. <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?>

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## 1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) The body is a socially constructed phenomenon. Discuss with the help of examples.
- 2) "The body is the source of women's subordination". Do you agree or disagree? Discuss in the context of gender identity and gender relations.
- 3) Define the body in bio-medicine and place the feminist critique of the body while drawing examples from the contemporary society.

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## 1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## UNIT 2 THE LABOURING BODY

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Sunita Dhal

### Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Understanding Women's Embodiment and Labour
  - 2.3.1 The Female Body as the Basis of Feminist Debates
  - 2.3.2 The Reproductive Female Body vs. The Labouring Female Body
- 2.4 Positioning Women's Bodies in Non-Work Processes
  - 2.4.1 The Symbolisation of Biological Reproduction
  - 2.4.2 Women and Motherhood: Emancipatory or Constraining
- 2.5 Women and Productive Bodies
  - 2.5.1 The Female Body and the Global Market
  - 2.5.2 Negotiating with the Labour Market
  - 2.5.3 Women in New Challenging Roles
  - 2.5.4 The Maternal Body and The Productive Body: Social Misconceptions
- 2.6 Let us Sum Up
- 2.7 Unit End Questions
- 2.8 References
- 2.9 Suggested Readings

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Defining women by their embodied capacity for 'reproduction' and as 'maternal bodies' is evident even today; therefore, many the young women are deprived of various prestigious roles within prestigious professions like medicine and other such careers (Gatrell,2008). With this background, the unit will focus on explaining the relationship between women's reproductive bodies and women's productive work, which encompass both unpaid and paid labour. The notion of the woman's body is central to sociological and feminist analysis of power relations and remains a negotiated field of power between men and women in the society (Gatrell, 2008). This means that women in the labour room, in the home, within the workplace or anywhere in the society are primarily defined and recognized by their reproductive characteristics. Based on this notion, woman's reproductive labour ends up determining her positioning in the labour market and society at large. Therefore, women's embodied position as 'a mother' often emphasises the social significance of the 'maternal body' and 'reproduction of labour' for women, society and the labour market. Women's labour market choices are tightly tied up with the boundaries of home and unremunerated unpaid reproductive labour. With this backdrop, the present unit aims at analysing

the interface between women's labour of reproduction and the positioning of woman's body in the home and the labour market. We will attempt to do this by looking at the relationships between embodiment and labour, reproduction and production.

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## 2.2 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss and explain the concepts of the labouring body;
- Describe different forms of labouring bodies as gendered beings in relation to public and private domains; and
- Critically analyse dilemmas associated with the female productive body across class, caste, and occupation.

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## 2.3 UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EMBODIMENT AND LABOUR

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### 2.3.1 The Female Body as the Basis of Feminist Debate

Feminists have often questioned the understanding of female body as 'biologically given' in the analysis of different forms of productive, reproductive, sexualised, and violated bodies. This understanding of the female body from a biological-essentialist position makes female bodies vulnerable to oppressive power in society. Therefore, the socio-cultural construction of the woman's body forms the basis of various debates within feminism as it relates power, patriarchy, and the female body within spheres of reproduction and production. Women's embodied labour of reproduction – in other words, the role of mother, nurturer and caregiver experienced and lived through her body is similar to Young's conceptualisation of "lived bodily experience" (Young, 2005, p.5, cited in Gatrell, 2008, p. 9). All women live with their reproductive body and engage in activities such as going out to work, carrying out domestic chores, giving birth to children and playing the role of mother or nurturer. These exemplify the lived experiences of women's embodied labour, and simultaneously shape society's attitude towards them (Gatrell, 2008). Hence, it can be said that all forms of labour are gendered and equally embodied in nature. This idea can be used to understand the concept of the labouring body while critiquing the biological differences between female and male.

Feminists conceptualise women's bodies as socially constructed. Women's labour in the domestic and work domains is devalued. Social norms of being a female or a male get inscribed within the body. This shapes woman's and man's understanding of the experience of the lived body in society. For instance, the social construction of the female body includes the practice of child-bearing, care, and nurture that produce a particular form of

subjective experience for women towards work. This embodied experience of the female body is significant in the discussion of labour. It raises the question: 'Which body matters for what kind of work?'. Therefore, the discussion of the labouring body cannot be dealt with in isolation without looking at its interface with the female biological ability to give birth and to become a mother. Discussion of female labour in the context of reproduction makes us analyse women's subjective embodiment as part of the private domain, which in turn limits women's access to paid labour. Labouring bodies are gendered in nature as also socially constructed. This implies that society expects some specialised tasks or performance from women to prove their bodies are both able and normal. In particular, the 'reproductive female body' is central to our understanding of the normalized female body and women's labour.

### **2.3.2 The Reproductive Female Body vs. The Labouring Female Body**

The sociological enquiry about the body began in the 1960s with the emergence of the women's liberation movement. Feminist theorists of the first and second waves started questioning the binary representations of the body, i.e., the body is aligned with women and the mind is aligned with men in a hierarchical way. They saw this as leading to a conceptualisation of the woman's body as a site of suffering (Jeanes et al, 2011). The female body, due to its features of menstruation, childbirth, and lactation was perceived to have limited access in terms of gaining equality in all spheres of life. Feminists of this tradition started questioning the negative image of the body. They focused on questions such as: the constitution of the labouring body and the way in which the female labouring body is been formed and managed by structures of economy, culture, and social norms which limit the female body to only one role- that of reproduction.

On the other hand, 'the reproductive female body' is considered as an obstruction in the arena of paid work. Women's constant negotiation and struggle to perform forms a significant part of women's embodiment in feminist analysis. All women come across this form of marginalisation as 'women' with their first move into the labour market. Reproduction may lead to various forms of constraints in terms of women exercising their choice to work. In contrast, the notion of the "reproductive female body" is viewed as normative within the family, but not valued as a productive labouring body. Women's continuous conflict with their bodies reflects the inherent dilemma of the labouring body in the family vis-à-vis the work sphere. Further, the aspect of the 'productive female body' demands a compromise of the female reproductive body in the workplace. In the current scenario, motherhood is prioritised through health professionals, media, and government campaigns. You might have seen the recent advertisement in television – which emphasises that every child should be



fed mother's milk till first 6 months of life. It reemphasises the importance of the reproductive body for women through prioritizing the aspect of compulsory breast feeding. However, the requirements of breast feeding are different (compulsory lactation room), and hardly accepted within the notion of the productive body in various work cultures. This contradiction demands redefinition of reproductive and productive work in relation to women's body and bodily processes, and not in relation to gender identification or socially expected behavior. The constraints associated with a woman's body are important and need to be located within the discussion on labouring body and paid work. As quoted by Gatrell, "notions of leakage and seepage are especially relevant to my discussions of women's paid work because women's propensity to 'leak' has been seen to signify women's 'otherness', their 'inherent lack of control of [their] bodies' and consequently of themselves" (Shildrick, 1997, p. 34, cited in Gatrell, 2008). Women's labour is a representation of their bodies in different forms and ways; hence understanding bodily functions and constraints can enhance women's subject position in the workplace. For women, the reproductive body and the labouring body can be interchangeably used as both the aspects refer to the intricate relationship between female body and un-paid labour.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Define female embodiment. Give an example of embodiment.*

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## 2.4 POSITIONING WOMEN'S BODIES IN NON-WORK PROCESSES

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As background to this discussion, we will set out in more detail the aims of this unit relating to the labour of love and reproduction, the positioning of women's bodies within the labour market, and carry out an analysis of the labour market in relation to different forms of the female body such as the maternal body, the productive body, and the reproductive body. Here, **Judith Butler's** work is important as it tries to understand women's work through the material conception of women's embodied experience. As you have seen in Unit 3, Block 4 in Course MWG-001 and Unit 4 , Block 1 of this course, Butler speaks of gender in terms of performativity. In a similar way, women are socialised to perform certain roles in everyday life, in turn symbolise with certain spheres and performances. The female labouring body gets firming through socially constructed practices followed in spheres of domestic work and labour market (see Gatrell, 2008, p.10).

Work both in paid and unpaid form is central to women's existence and embodiment. According to **Meenakshi Thapan**, women's work is central to their definition in the society, governs their relationship with others, and becomes an instrument to enhance their quality of life. If we take an everyday life perspective to analyse women's labour in a day, it will reflect how a woman uses her body to perform wide ranging work starting with domestic labour to paid work, and to maintain social relationships with the community. Within this wide-ranging conception of labour, more often they use their bodies to experience subordination, express resistance to patriarchal norms, and exercise choice within a day (Thapan, 2009, p.132). **Glucksmann** describes pregnancy as a non-work process as it is natural to the notion of good motherhood and the maternal body (cited in Gatrell). Therefore, in this section we will look at women's experience of their own subjective bodies in a variety of activities, which are described as 'non-work processes' by the society.

### 2.4.1 The Symbolisation of Biological Reproduction

The representation of biological reproduction through various symbols and metaphors is central to analysing men's work vis-à-vis women's work. The symbolisation of reproduction which is expressed through terms like 'seed' and 'earth' gives a social definition to the woman's body and associated labour. **Leela Dube** (1986) writes that in parts of northern and central India, the process of biological reproduction is often explained through words such as 'seed'. This emphasises the significance of the father's role, which is essential for the child's identity and survival. The seed gives life to a child through the father's blood. The earth, on the other hand, symbolises the womb and specifies various roles of the mother as a nurturer. The womb receives the seed and provides warmth and nourishment for the growth of the fetus. Within the sphere of reproduction, the woman's role and her body are emphasised as passive agents and the existence of her body is undermined. A similar expression of women's labour can be seen in Sanskrit texts and ancient epics like the *Mahabharata*. In *Narada Smriti*, the quality and responsibility of a man are expressed in the following manner;

Women are created for offspring; a woman is the field and a man is the possessor of the seed; the field should be given to him who possesses the seed; a man without the seed does not deserve a girl (Pandey, 1976, cited in Dube, 1986, p. 24).

The above quote describes the female body as an instrument for procreation in creating the offspring of the man. Therefore, the child bears relation to the father's blood and identifies herself/himself with patrilineal kinfolds or the male line of descent. The main responsibility of a man is to become the head of the household and perpetuate the name of the family through male offspring. Within family and marriage, the role of a woman is subordinated

under patriarchy. A similar expression of female and male labour is found among various groups across tribe, caste, and ethnicity. Dube writes that among the Gond women, the ideology of seed and earth and the belief attached to it are firmly and expressed through the usage of particular phrases or proverbs. Delay in menstruation depicts the inability of the woman's body to perform its reproductive labour in future. Several metaphors have been used in rural India depicting the significance of women's wombs which simultaneously defines the use of women's bodies in relation to reproductive labour. In the study of *Caste and Kinship of Central India*, Mayer remarks on similar illustrations such as, 'The mother only provides the place for the fetus to grow' (Dube, 1986, p. 28). In Andhra Pradesh, the word *Vittanamis* used to describe or refer to man's contribution in procreation (Dube, 1986, p.29). In various parts of India, such metaphors of seed and earth are used to symbolise the differential role of women and men in procreation and specify the significance of female body parts and processes within reproduction as well. Veena Das's work, *Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship* (1976) analyses the role of mother's blood in procreation.

'The seed grows into a child in the mother's womb. The bones of the child are formed by the semen and the blood is formed by the mother's blood. That is why menstruation is said to cease in a pregnant woman' (cited in Dube, 1986, p.30).

The above statement suggests the use of female body (blood) for the growth of the child. It also points to a hierarchical relationship or power inequality existing between the mother and the father while bringing up the child. These references, infused in the common consciousness of people, become tools for socialising women into reproduction of a specific type of labour.

The symbolisation of female body in the process of reproduction depicts a 'relationship of hierarchy' between her body and the reproduction of labour. The implications of this symbolisation impact women's access to paid employment and specify the nature of relationship between the two sexes and their relative positions in the society. These reference points reemphasise the distinction between nature and culture and push the female body further into the domain of nature. Nature is passive; hence the female body is often described as a passive entity in the sphere of reproduction.

These connections between the female body, nature and labour have two major implications for women's unpaid labour. Firstly, symbolisation expresses the essentially unequal relationship, and secondly, metaphors are used by culture or men to undermine women's contribution and significance in biological reproduction (Dube, 1986). Further, the physiological connection between mother and the child places upon the mother a moral obligation

that results in denial of access to other forms of paid employment. For example, a child's dependence on mother's milk constrains her and thus 'going out leaving her baby during lactation' leads to negative reactions. She is perceived as neglecting her moral and natural duties. When a woman's body is linked with the earth, it essentialises women's role in the society and her capability to bear a child with pain. Women's labour in reproduction embodies subjective experiences like pain, emotion, and morality; however these are never valued in the childbirth process. The body of a woman is never situated equally with the body of a man in terms of her contribution toward childbirth, on the contrary, her reproductive labour is invisible and neglected within the private sphere. This form of asymmetrical relationship within the private has its replications in the public domain as well.

According to Dube, the significant aspect of symbolism is how the bodies of two partners are located in the process of reproduction that implicates both the seed and field belonging to the man. She argues that by equating women's body with the earth and man's semen with the seed, we can draw simile metaphor between the process of reproduction and the process of production, in which rights over the crop always remain with the man and not with the women. In general, the man's control over the woman's body allows him to exercise control over women's labour in other forms of productive activities like agriculture, resource management and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising to see women as wage labourers and a flexible workforce in paid occupations. The understanding of social construction of the female body and labour as 'passive and supportive to man's labour' is sustained even though a woman earns her living through paid labour. Now, let us examine the nature of unpaid labour, particularly in the context of motherhood.

#### **2.4.2 Women and Motherhood: Emancipatory or Constraining**

Possessing a female body implies that a woman not only performs work outside the household but also takes on responsibilities associated with childbearing. We can see a dilemma between women's desire for paid work and independence, and submission of their selves and bodies to the culture of unpaid work. In general, it is women's labour that constructs their embodied identities as women. Thapan (2009) discusses issues like the culture of 'son preference' as central to women's labour. For example, women who cannot bear children especially a son feel incomplete and useless. In this connection, women's bodies are not only considered as disabled by the society but also a source of social shame and dishonour for the family. The following example from Thapan's book, 'Living the Body' (2009) aptly illustrates the above points. *Poolwati is mother of three daughters. She seems to be a cheerful woman, but she looks unhappy when the*

*discussion centered on childbearing. She says, no one in the society is allowing me to live as the society expects a boy child from me. It is important to have sons as they continue to carry the family name and gives emotional support to the parents during old age. In her saying, she expresses her bodily incapacity to bear a son, thus this is implicating the notion of 'failing reproductive labour' to maintain the family name and honour in the society (Thapan, p. 134).*

It is perceived that the failure of women's embodied labour in meeting the social obligations (desire for a son) leads towards devaluing her subjective self and the body. Women's labour is based on social conditions, hence easily underplayed by the family and community at large. Let us read the story of another woman who has used her productive body as medium to exercise freedom and agency in the society.

*Sangeeta is in her thirties, expecting her first child after twelve years of marriage. As she narrated, in all these years she has countered her husband and in-laws's actions and words with regard to her childlessness. Apart from her paid labour, she equally contributes intensive and heavy work as part of embodied labour. She says, her husband is "dependent upon me and will remember me proudly after my death". Men are hungry for women's body. In this connection, she made a distinction between sexual desire and female labouring body. Men exercise power and dominate women by using women's bodies in the execution of socially accepted form of labour, which often not considered as a form of domination by the society (Thapan, p. 136).*

The female body is seen as a tool to carry out reproductive labour and becomes instrumental in women's oppression. Sometimes, the same body is used by women themselves for their survival against patriarchy. According to Thapan, women's endless contribution towards domestic work can be simultaneously oppressive and liberating. The expression of Sangeeta's anger and pain is not exclusively about her passivity, but an expression of her strength. She was happy that she could pay for her infertility treatment and capable of managing both household work and domestic paid work simultaneously. Here, Sangeeta carries her 'reproductive body' and uses it for her survival and honour within the family.

The concept of the maternal body exists across classes. In contemporary times, daily 'soaps'(television serials) represent the social construction of the female labouring body to be capable of doing heavy and soft work within the household. Society accepts and appreciates the female body which is capable of doing heavy tasks as it shows physical strength of a woman within the family. The paradox is that the same female body gets disqualified to participate in hard tasks like construction, mining, mechanical engineering and driving, which entails paid labour in the public domain. We

can draw the inference that the division between soft and heavy work is not so much related to the body, but contingent upon the separation between paid labour in the public sphere and unpaid labour in private sphere. Like Sangeeta, many other women use their labouring bodies as sources of survival within the family and in the community.

While we talk about reproductive labour, the relationship between women's bodies, work, and mechanisms of fertility control needs to be discussed. Women's decision-making for reproductive choice is a significant indicator of their access to different forms of work. However, their choice is deeply embedded in social situations. For example, men's opposition to vasectomy is accepted in the society as they bear the burden of paid work. According to Thapan, "women are protective of their husbands who are in need of protection; they require 'healthy' bodies for heavy work" (p.141). There is an inherent understanding that men need healthy bodies to perform heavy work. Hence, men should be free from any pain and discomforts. Further, decisions with regard to controlling female fertility rest with men and are imposed upon the female body. Patriarchy draws an inherent relationship between the female body and its capacity to perform only soft tasks, even though it is capable of bearing health risks which are caused due to extraneous factors like sterilisation. The idea of having a healthy body is never attached to the reproductive female bodies. It is seen that men often impose sterilisation upon women for the following reasons:

- I) The labour of reproduction and the labour of love are always associated with the female body, which is strong enough to bear pain and risk; and
- II) Concepts like the healthy male body, and heavy work are symbiotically related to and reinforce each other.

A series of case analyses mentioned by Thapan(2009) illustrates the above points. In one of the case analysis, *Jeena* wanted to control her fertility and had an abortion and finally an operation. She justified her action by stating that men do not undergo the surgery as their work is heavy. Here, the male reproductive body is perceived to be weak, therefore, women wish to protect their husbands' bodies from any form of damage. Thus, they take decision on their reproductive choices. They project their bodies as strong and capable enough to do hard manual and household work and also bear pain. In all these examples, we can see the differential representation of gendered bodies, i.e., the female labouring body as 'strong' to carry out heavy reproductive labour vis-à-vis the male body as weak in taking hazards related to reproductive matters. This way of managing the reproductive female body is only a reflection of the patriarchal management of female reproductive and productive labour in a hierarchical relation.

**Handy Harcourt** (2009) asks the question: 'Where is the male reproductive body?' Within the population and development discourse, discussions on the

non-maternal body or male reproductive body were completely silent. In the Cairo Programme of Action, 1994, men were encouraged to take responsibilities and participate in reproduction related matters while accepting their social role as fathers. According to Harcourt, the family planning agenda in the post-Cairo period which talks about men's reproductive labour and participation at the level of awareness raising, however, fails to put male reproductive bodies under the scanner. It is paradoxical that male bodies are discussed as 'productive bodies' in relation to their roles as workers and as soldiers, but not as fathers, husbands, and lovers. The gender and development discourse, feminist debates and other international initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have hardly actualised the concept of the 'male reproductive body' into programmes of action. A lack of discussion and debates on male reproductive bodies suggest that embodied reproductive bodies mainly refer to female labour.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Observe some of the women in your family or neighbourhood and try to find out the extent of unpaid labour they perform on an average day. Write a note and compare it with the other students at your Study Centre/through the online discussion forum.*

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## **2.5 WOMEN AND PRODUCTIVE BODIES**

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In this section we will analyse women's labouring body in relation to the labour market. Specifically it will explore the constraints or challenges faced by women when they compete with men in the labour market.

### **2.5.1 The Female Body and the Global Labour Market**

As more and more women joined the labour force, various types of questions surfaced within feminist discourse. In this section; we will attempt to answer the following questions: i) why does the labour market reflect gender segregation? ii) why do women make negotiations between their productive and caring bodies?

The labour market and workplace grew on the structural inequality between the home and the work sphere in both the mind and consciousness. For women, productive labour is perceived to be an extension of their home sphere whereas, for men, reproductive sphere is perceived to be a limiting sphere of action. In 1980s and 1990s, we saw millions of women entering into emerging global labour markets which certainly had set the trend towards viewing the 'female productive body' as a sustainable source of

flexible, docile and cheap labour (Wichterich 2000, cited in Harcourt, 2009). This process of feminisation of labour is growing in tandem with the informalisation of labour market. Both these processes are related and emphasised the fact that female productive bodies are still undermined in the labour market in various ways.

Let us discuss the embodied experiences of women who participate in productive and caring work as well. Most of these women work in the informal economy and are often invisible in the analysis of market and economic growth. As Harcourt (2009) stated, it is important to answer the question of how productive and care work overlap with each other in lives of women and create new forms of relationship. In this context, she argues that the mainstream analysis of the market economy needs to include the stress and strains associated with new roles of women in relation to their productive bodies. For example, toys sewn by women's hand in Chinese factories, African and South-east Asian women's efforts to provide cut flowers and fruits to global super markets and Asian women in sweat shops and other import companies stitching cheap clothes and shoes making fancy jewellery for the world around are thus far invisible in the analysis of the productive labouring body. Therefore, the connections between women's embodied lives in these invisible forms of labour with the changing socio-economic life style of the middle class need to be drawn upon and discussed in the context of gender analysis of the labouring body. Balancing between the productive and family work by the middle class and poor women is of serious concern to feminists, as the female body is caught between the spheres of production and reproduction. As Gita Sen argued, "women are in the crossroad between production and reproduction" (cited in Harcourt, 2009, p.71; quoted by Kabeer, 2007, p.9).

Hence, it is important to unravel the interconnections between women's productive bodies and other aspects like work place harassment, working hours, nature of work, and informalisation of female labour. Paid labour is not necessarily always emancipating for all women across caste, class, and occupation. It is equally important to reflect on the invisible side of women's productive bodies wherein women are engaged in cheap labour and the relationship between women and the nature of work both paid and unpaid.

### 2.5.2 Negotiating with the Labour Market

As we discussed in the preceding section, the labour market has an inbuilt character of gender segregation. Similarly, other social embodiments like marriage, class, and caste which are associated with the female productive body determine/deny her access to a particular job. Young unmarried women have better chances of joining occupations of their own choice than married women. In her work on *globalisation, marriage, and masculinities*, Naila Kabeer has stated that younger women entering the labour market are likely to benefit as economic independence gives them a sense of control



over their lives and reproductive bodies. However, married women joining the labour market are likely to be constantly on guard as they negotiate time, labour, and the nature of work to manage their reproductive roles along with the paid work. In this situation, the female productive body comes under double suppression, i.e., suppression from family and the work sphere as well. Suppression from the family manifests in different ways such as male resistance to accept domestic responsibilities, marriage breakdown, excessive alcoholism, higher rate of suicide, and domestic violence (cited in Harcourt, p.75). Male productive bodies are reluctant to take on family responsibilities with a view to sustain their identity and dominance, and on the other hand, the female body takes the burden of working long hours to manage both paid and unpaid responsibilities as a matter of natural duty.

In the past decades, feminists like **Jane Freedman, Mariarosa, Dalla Costa** and other feminists have demanded wages for housework while referring to the theoretical debate of the Marxist theory of capitalism. They argue that women's housework like care work, childbearing, and nurturing enabled the capitalist system to sustain and expand. Therefore, the household labour is necessary for the production of surplus, reproduction of labour, and continuance of the whole capitalist system (Freedman, 2001, p.53). This analysis signifies the relationship between women's labour and economic production in the society. However, these analyses fail to capture the aspect of women's embodied lives in a particular socio-cultural setup and their everyday struggle to balancing the spheres of production and reproduction. It is not always possible for a woman to have access to work of her choice. Women's access to a particular form of work gives them self-esteem and a sense of social and material empowerment in their everyday lives. Let us take another case study from Meenakshi Thapan's work which brings out the connections between women's paid and unpaid work and factors like caste, class and poverty.

**Premwati who hails from Haryana. She was married in quite young age and had a daughter within two years of her marriage. Initially, her husband didn't allow her to work outside the home in the name of family honour. She wanted to be engaged in a job to organize the dowry amount for her five daughters. Additionally, she didn't want to work as domestic labour because of the association of caste impurity with the occupation. For her, the factory work was more suitable because she felt the factory space is detached from any caste identity. Premawati's lack of freedom to take up paid work consequently increased her burden of physical labour and she gave birth to seven children. After she had her family planning operation, she continued to do family work along side paid work as she considered work is crucial to women's existence (Thapan, p. 143).**

In this case, the emphasis is on the notion of productive body, which every woman recourse to it for survival. Often, women negotiate with a particular work out of compulsion because every social situation is not under the control of every woman. Here, nature of paid work may not be emancipatory for the woman, but her earning capacity as paid worker saves her in economic crisis.

Similarly, stresses and strains of factory work, inappropriate working time, and working place do not always address the specific needs of the female body both in the formal and informal economy. The amount of physical strains that women experience in carrying out both household and paid work often leads to ill health. The existing gender hierarchies within the labour market have certain invisible implications for female bodies. Women who work in export firms and other private companies suffer due to low wages, lack of flexi-work hours, sexual harassment, long working hours, and so on. As Harcourt points out, additional problems of the female productive body are associated with lack of security during night, restricted toilet breaks, and mothers not having adequate child care facilities. For single women, devaluation of their social status is an issue of serious concern. For instance, women working in call centres doing night shifts are continuously viewed as women of loose character by the society.

**Reena Patel's** (2011) recent study, *Working the Night Shift*, reflects the construction of the female productive/liberated body in relation to time and space. In Dhaka (Bangladesh) migrant women who go out to work in export-oriented factories often experience hostility, abuse and violence during the night. The street and factory both become sites of women's bodily violence at night. Patel argues that space and time construct the gendered nature of the labouring body; however, women working in night shifts have challenged the traditional understanding that women are safe at home. Working at night can be seen as an evolving strategy for women to assert the notion of productive yet liberated bodies in the discourse of the global economy and existing patriarchy. When women embody a productive body, they come under surveillance and public scrutiny by various stakeholders. For example, when women's productive bodies are depicted in films, they are always shown in supportive roles like private secretaries, receptionists, and as wives. However, several recent films in India depict female productive bodies as 'bold women' and simultaneously their bodies and lives are negatively portrayed. These representations of female bodies can also be seen in other domains of public life.

### 2.5.3 Women in New Challenging Roles

According to Gatrell, within professions and family business, very few women have taken influential and decision-making roles. The author quotes Puwar (2004) who describes women who invade “traditionally male ‘spaces’ such as the House of Commons and the corporate boardrooms, thereby manifesting the ‘troubled dream’ of the future in the nineteenth century” (p, 116). The image given below describes the fear of the unseen, i.e., the dream of a troubled future which challenges the ‘angelic’ role of women within the household while invading male dominated spaces in politics and professions. Gatrell stated that when women encroach upon the male dominated arenas in the labour market, they come under severe scrutiny. Hence, women experience both isolation and pressure from the surroundings and they are compelled to comply with male embodied norms in the workplace. The pictorial representation here, not only communicates that home is the ideal place for women but also gives a sense of threat to male dominance. These interpretations and symbolisations relating work with women’s bodies have had an adverse impact on women’s careers and professional development in contemporary times.



“THE ANGEL IN ‘THE HOUSE;’” OR, THE RESULT OF FEMALE SUFFRAGE  
(A Troubled Dream of the Future)

(Reproduced from the original cartoon featured in Punch magazine - image supplied by Lancaster University Library, adapted from Gatrell,p.102).

Similarly, in areas of family business, small-scale industries and agriculture, the division between women's paid and unpaid work gets blurred and women's contribution to work is further undermined and devalued. Within family businesses, women's contribution is hardly ever acknowledged. In the formal domain of work, women are not only compromised on equal pay, but also sometimes offered the jobs which are not preferred by men. For example, in recent years, marketing jobs have become available for women in the management sector since men opt for financial marketing. Women who work in the male dominated spheres eventually adapt themselves to masculine norms and the organisational culture of management. Women face uncomfortable consequences when they occupy jobs which are predominantly associated with the male body. Similarly, women in senior roles face exclusion and isolation when they cross boundaries of the kinds of work associated with the notion of maternal body (Gatrell, 2008).

#### **2.5.4 The Maternal Body and The Productive Body: Social Misconceptions**

As we have discussed earlier, women's productive and reproductive roles are intrinsically related. Across societies, women suffer from the misconception that maternal bodies are not capable of carrying out productive work. Gatrell has tried to explore some social perceptions about the processes associated with the maternal body. She argues that the Anglo-American society has traditionally associated women with norms of heterosexuality, wifehood, and homemaking. Hence, women's engagement with reproductive labour and men's association with productive labour continue to expand the increasing gender division of labour. Similarly, the labour market follows the model of gender stereotyping and encourages women to continue their reproductive roles against accepting productive roles. Misconceptions such as women being non-committed unreliable workers and unsuitable for senior positions in the labour market still persist. In fear of challenging/disrupting the social norms, women rarely inhabit the sphere which is traditionally associated with the male body.

Another perception is employers' fear of women's absence from work due to pregnancy. Organisations see pregnancy as an embodied awkward condition that puts women in a disadvantageous position to work. There are a very few women in senior and executive positions whose bodies at the beginning make them out for the competition. Many employers associate the female pregnant body with lowered employee commitment, instability, ill health, workplace and absence (EOC 2005a, cited in Gatrell, p. 132). Likewise, the period of menstruation is equated with unstable moods and unpredictable behavior. Therefore, in the productive sphere, women's reproductive functions have not been addressed or been an issue of concern in the labour market. We can see that reproductive bodies have taken an insignificant position to survive productive female body in the labour market.

**Activity:**

*Does the labour market differentiate between the female and male productive body? Use examples from films, books, reports, and your own experience, and collect case note from different individuals. Analyze the case notes using the concepts and ideas you have learnt in this unit.*

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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This unit discusses the association between women's embodied labour and their body and the labour market. It deals with the concept of women's embodiment in relation to different forms of labouring bodies and explains how women experience their transition from the maternal body to the productive body. Further, it describes different socio-economic, and cultural contexts which enable and constrain women to occupy various types of labouring bodies. The unit raises some important concerns with regard to the invisible challenges associated with women's productive bodies and how the reproductive body gets submerged under the productive body. It draws attention to a neglected field within the discourse of gender, development, and the labour market.

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## 2.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) All work is gendered in nature. Discuss this statement from a feminist perspective.
- 2) How does the discussion on the labouring body challenge the principle of biological essentialism? Discuss with suitable examples.
- 3) How does the concept of labour differ in relation to the female body?
- 4) Critically analyse the relationship between the labouring body and the labour market.

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## 2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## UNIT 3 RACIALIZED BODY

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Amit Upadhaya & Shilpa Anand

### Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Defining Race and Racialisation
- 3.4 Race and its Misconceptions
  - 3.4.1 The Scientific Construction of ‘Pure Races’
  - 3.4.2 Social Construction of Race and its Effects
  - 3.4.3 Jewish ‘Race’
- 3.5 Eugenics, Gender and Race
  - 3.5.1 Racialized Birth Control
  - 3.5.2 Poor Access to Birth Control Measures
  - 3.5.3 Racialized Testing of Contraceptives
- 3.6 Race and Sexuality
  - 3.6.1 ‘The Down Low’
  - 3.6.2 Human Trafficking
  - 3.6.3 Factors Sustaining Trafficking in Women
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Unit End Questions
- 3.9 References
- 3.10 Suggested Readings

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In continuation of our focus on forms of “Embodiment” through bio-medicine and the laboring body in this course, Unit 3 will focus on ‘Racialized Body’ as a particular form of embodiment. In this unit, we will understand the ways in which gender and race interact with each other and how certain prejudices lead to the experience of marginalisation. This unit is divided into three sections. In the first section, you will obtain an overview of the different misconceptions that exist in our everyday understanding of ‘race’ while challenging the construction of the idea of ‘pure race’ in the past. In the second section, we will examine the various ways in which eugenic practices across the world impacted women, men and other genders differently. The third section focuses on the interface between race and sexuality in the context of human trafficking.

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## 3.2 OBJECTIVES

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After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Define the concepts of race and racialisation;
- Examine the role of early science in promoting issues of race and discrimination;
- Identify the underlying ideology of racial purity that forms the basis for exploitative social systems; and
- Explain how the exploitation of women of colour forms the basis for unequal implementation of public health measures, eugenic strategies and illegal human trafficking.

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## 3.3 DEFINING RACE AND RACIALIZATION

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Let us first understand what is meant by ‘racialized’. To racialize means to categorize or differentiate people or group on the basis of race. We will study how bodies are racialized in different contexts in the world and the impact it has on people and cultures. We often hear of racism and racial differences in the context of Anglo-European countries and other countries that are dominated by white-skinned people. However, racism and the racialising of people occur in countries dominated by dark-skinned people as well as in countries where there is not much difference on the basis of skin-colour.

‘Race’ refers to genetically transmitted characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, hair texture and body type that are supposedly associated with distinct groups of people (Turner, 2006, p. 490). The concept of race existed only nominally prior to the late 18th Century, at a time when European colonisation of the new world was at its peak (Darity, 2008,p.2). Early science’s attempt in confirming ‘natural differences’ are now discredited for their scientific content and for their role in creating and stabilizing racial stereotyping. The extension of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to social Darwinism helped reproduce the myth that some groups (emphasising race) were at a ‘better’ stage of evolution than others, and it was only ‘natural’ that they were going to dominate certain other ‘less fit’ groups and races (Borgatta and Montgomery, 2000, p. 2330).

Racialisation occurs when differences between human beings are simplified and transformed into discrimination that has social, political, cultural and psychological significance (Dominguez, 1994). For instance, when we treat white-skinned persons as being superior to dark-skinned people we are attaching extra values to different skin colour. Racialisation is sometimes reproduced through colonisation ideologies, institutions, social practices and even in linguistic practices. Hence, it can be understood that race,



racialisation, and racialized body are all interlinked and products of social institutions and practices. Let look at some of the misconceptions which are associated with the notion of race and make some groups privileged over the other in the next section.

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### 3.4 RACE AND ITS MISCONCEPTIONS

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There are many misconceptions about race. This section will examine some of the more prominent misconceptions: the scientific construction of ‘pure races’, the social construction of race and its effects, and Jewishness as ‘race’.

#### 3.4.1 The Scientific Construction of ‘Pure Races’

Race as a matter of biological phenomenon, gets communicated into the public discourse with the growth of modern science. Race as a biological fact was severely challenged in the post-war period. To quote **David Skinner**, “social science became increasingly suspicious not just of the argument that biology determined race inequalities but of any attempt to discuss race and biology together” (2007, p.933). Hence, the construction of scientific racism was challenged within the discipline of sociology. According to Skinner (2007), in the past the certain movement such as Darwinism and eugenics had played a significant role in the construction of modern notion of ‘race’, in which scientific knowledge, perspectives and methodologies have negatively reinforced the divisions among people as natural, fixed and absolute. Science that not only has viewed race difference as an objective biological category but also put barriers towards human capabilities, mobility and behaviour. Intermixing over centuries has meant that ‘pure races’ do not exist anywhere in the world. People of different ‘races’ have in common as much genetic similarity as people of the same ‘race’. This is because genetic differences between individuals do not correspond to different racial characteristics (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, p.252). Each criterion for creating a typology of races would result in a different grouping of races. For example, the epicanthic eye fold is supposedly the distinctive feature among East Asians, but with a consistent application of this criterion the San Bushmen of South Africa would also be classified as East Asian. To illustrate further, skin colour helps distinguish some Norwegians from the Masai’s of East Africa. But it also distinguishes Norwegians from the Turks, both of whom are considered ‘white’. So also, skin colour distinguishes Masais from the San Bushmen (both the Masai and the San Bushmen are native to Africa), whose olive complexion has a closer resemblance to the Turks than the much darker Masai’s (Borgatta and Montgomery, 2000, p.2331). Therefore, facial features, skin colour, hair texture cannot be criteria in making racial categories.

### 3.4.2 Social Construction of Race and its Effects

Though science failed to prove convincingly that there was any basis for racial difference, it did generate a variety of social beliefs that people of one race may be superior to those of another. These socially constructed ideas have had a major impact in the real interactions between people of different regions. While contemporary genetics confirms that phenotypical traits such as skin colour, facial features, curliness of hair, or body type are no guarantee of genetic similarity, racial categories are often a creation of people's beliefs and not products of nature (Turner 2006, p. 490). Separating humans into races continues to have consequences for persons belonging to different groups. Race has significance because people think it exists and act accordingly. Racial distinctions gain meaning when people attach significance to them. Race continues to have uneven consequences on life-chances, health, and probability of being jailed for people of different races (Darity, 2008, p. 2). Let us look at the specific case of misconceptions involving Jewish people and the question of race.

### 3.4.3 Jewish "Race"?

Jews have been historically treated as a race, when in fact they are a religious group, not a racial one. This is another example of the racial prejudice generated by early science where social "others" were separated out using scientifically doubtful principles. Nazi eugenic mentality and its promotion of anti-Semitism in Europe, about which we will read in detail in Section 3.3, led to the racial profiling of Jews. This racial profiling of Jews has been a historical practice from the 16th century. **Johann Blumenbach**, a German physician and physiologist, while writing his *The Natural Varieties of Man* in 1775, talks about how Jews above all appeared to exhibit stable racial types. According to him, Jews "remain the same as far as the fundamental configuration of face goes, remarkable for a racial character almost universal, which can be distinguished at the first glance even by those little skilled in physiognomy" (Solomos and Back, 2000, p.238). Jews have been traditionally represented in literature and popular culture as having big noses. This supposed phenotype has been stereotyped in different ways. For instance it has mingled with the religious profiling of Jews in Europe as being "unchristian, greedy and therefore unfit for public office, blasphemers in the name of Christ" and so on (Solomos and Back, 2000, p.242). According to the authors, interestingly, Jews themselves, on many occasions have claimed to have a racial identity. Racism describes the asymmetrical power relationship between the white and the non-white groups. In this context, **Joe Kincheloe** observed that whiteness is socially constructed and started to reflect the differences between 'white' and 'non-white' people when communities like Irish, Italian and Jews are referred as 'non-white' in a particular historical contexts (Guess, 2006). To quote Kincheloe, "Europeans prior to the late 1600s did not use the label, black,

to refer to any “race” of people, Africans included. Only after the racialisation of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories” (adapted from Guess, 2006, p.668). The process of constructing racism is noting but a product of societal understanding, which has created a stereotypical image about specific social groups. According to Berger (1963), the sociological understanding of the concept of race is “nothing but a fiction to begin with” (quoted in Guess, 2006, p. 657).

***Check Your Progress:***

*Explain the social construction of race the help of examples. What are your own views on this subject?*

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### **3.5 EUGENICS, GENDER AND RACE**

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Eugenics is the idea of maintaining purity of race. In different contexts across the world, women have been burdened with the task of maintaining purity of races. Birth control measures have been often identified as methods by which the purity of a race can be maintained. Kline provides details of the relationship between the female moron (Goddard used the term ‘moron’ to describe people with a mental age of eight to twelve in the context of racial discrimination and equated with feeble-mindedness among women) and the ideal of a better race by referring to the panic of female promiscuity in turn of the century America (see Stubblefield, 2007, p.177). While quarantining of the female ‘high-grade moron’ was initially considered as an effective strategy to keep the race pure, soon sterilisation was seen as the appropriate measure of curtailing female promiscuity as even the middle classes were identified as being susceptible to this infecting presence (Kline, 2001). This form of eugenics is prevalent in the history of the world in many cultural contexts where the threat of some form of human defect has motivated the implementation of female sterilisation - for instance, the case of female leprosy infected patients in leper homes and hospitals in many parts of India in the first half of the twentieth century.

#### **3.5.1 Racialized Birth Control**

In this section we will read about three ways in which birth control programmes were racialized. In the first case birth control is forced with the aim of controlling national populations and often target women of colour in the western countries. The second case discusses women who

have little or no access to birth control methods on basis of their class, caste, ethnic and religious identities. The third case discusses unethical testing of contraceptive methods on people of colour.

### ***Population Control***

Let us begin by examining the difficult relationship that exists between women and birth-control measures. While birth control measures have been considered empowering for women who can prevent unwanted or forced pregnancies, in several situations women have also been forced into compulsory birth-control procedures for different reasons. In different parts of the world women have been affected by forceful family planning strategies. At times they have also suffered exclusion from proper public health awareness campaigns that inform of safe birth-control methods. We will first read about population-control measures that imposed the use of oral contraceptives and adoption of surgical methods on women in poor countries.

As women are the ones to become pregnant and give birth, they are also the targets of population control programmes. Governments and development organisations have controlled and managed women's bodies by managing fertility. As these processes adopt different measures of control for men and different ones for women, they are intrinsically gendered. Population control was adopted especially in the poorer countries of Africa, Asia and South America after the Second World War. By limiting fertility, government authorities were hoping to achieve economic advancement in these countries. United States foreign policy in the 1960s was particularly focused on enhancing birth control measures in the poorer countries through USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development). As part of its 'inundation strategy' USAID promoted contraception and sterilisation across the world. Women in developing countries or the so-called third world were identified as targets of the birth control programmes as they were considered to be irrational, backward and unaware in general. This racialisation of poor women the world over made it convenient for rich and powerful countries to institute forced methods of birth control and family planning that often resulted in disabling conditions. The methods used included sterilisation, injectables (Injectables are strong and high-risk fertility drugs that are injected into the woman's body and often result in serious side effects) and Intra Uterine Devices (IUDs) (*'T' shaped devices coated with either copper or progesterone that are inserted into the uterus*) which are methods that don't require the provision of proper care to the women being treated.

In USA, in 1950s and 60s, women of colour were subjected to forced sterilisation in different parts of the country. Sterilisation was seen as a cure for poverty and overpopulation. It was also an attempt to prevent certain sections of society from reproducing so as to maintain the pure race and class of people. Those who were forcefully sterilized included mentally

disabled people, criminals, those who were thought to be genetically inferior such as people of colour. These eugenic strategies, similar to that of the Nazi regime which we will study below, were prevalent in different parts of the world.

Peru in the late 90s was another target of USAID's aggressive family planning efforts. The number of tubal ligations in Peru increased from 10,000 in 1996 to about 110,000 in 1997. This was USAID's largest 'population assistance' programme in South America. The programme was criticized heavily by a coalition of the Catholic Church, political opponents of the then president Alberto Fujimori, feminists and native rights groups (<http://www.ratical.org/ratville/stolenWombs.html> 22nd July 2012). Large-scale forced sterilisation was also practised under the rule of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany. Hitler's Nazi rule in Germany believed that only the purest race inherited the earth while all others were not entitled to it. This was a form of social engineering that propagated a "healthy stock" by "preserving racial health" which would systematically eliminate what were called "unhealthy elements", if not of this generation then certainly of the next one (Solomos and Back, 2000, p. 216) This view was consistent with the research findings of famous scientists such as Koch, Lister and Pasteur. Racism of this variety sought to purify society in order to make it 'perfect'. In Nazi Germany, Jews were thought of as faulty by blood and heredity and incapable of purification. According to this dangerous racial policy of the Nazis, human life that was considered 'unworthy' was to be distanced or eliminated. Feminist historian, **Gisella Bock** claimed that "women were the main targets of racism" of Nazi eugenics policies. In 1933, the Third Reich passed a law titled 'Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring' which aimed at sterilizing non-Aryan Germans so as to preserve purity of the German race. She found that 12,000 medical officials sterilized 320,000 people between 1933 and 1939. Among those targeted, women were affected more deeply as they were deprived of their motherhood, something that many of the young women complained of (Bock, cited in Guba, 2009).

Towards the end of nineteenth century, birth control measures were seen as a tool to control the population of a particular race in countries like U.S.A. According to **Angela Y. Davis** (2011), ever since, America became urbanised, there was falling of the birth rate among the native-born white women. To cite Roosevelt's argument, this new trend in the birth pattern can be equated with the notion of 'race suicide'; therefore efforts were required to maintain the race purity in the country. This is how in the past, dimensions of gender, race and class became integral to the birth control movement. The birth control movement started to support this new argument with the argument that "race suicide could be prevented by the introduction of birth control among Black people, immigrants and the poor in general. In this way, the prosperous whites of solid Yankee stock could maintain their superior numbers within the population" (Davis, 2011, p. 210).

Forced sterilisations were also underway during the Emergency in India between 1975 and 1977. The number of sterilisations in the country between 1974 and 1975 was 1.354 million, 2.669 million for 1975-76 and 8.261 million for 1976-77. Large scale vasectomies were performed by forcing men into sterilisation camps. Though the sterilisation drives focused more on men, the greater responsibility for family planning was placed on women. Family planning drives in India have often assumed a racial flavour when the targets of the drives appear to be Muslim families, particularly Muslim women. In a study about Bijnor district in Uttar Pradesh, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery find that Muslim women don't feel safe in the hands of the Indian state especially where reproductive health is concerned. Most Muslims in this area feel that the family planning programme is particularly intrusive and coercive to them. Muslim women in this area feel threatened by the attitude of government health workers thus forcing them to avail the services of private doctors. However, Jeffery and Jeffery have found that Muslims in Bijnor generally believe that sterilisation signifies lack of faith in Allah's ability to provide for however many children are born. They believe that a sterilized person cannot be admitted to paradise (Basu and Jeffery, 2001, pp. 135-136). State machineries sometimes enforced certain policies upon the less privileged groups to achieve their hidden agenda of creating the nation with pure race.

### 3.5.2 Poor Access to Birth Control Measures

On the other hand, we cannot forget that birth-control measures have been extremely important for women through history. These methods have helped protect women from unwanted pregnancies and in preventing pregnancy where safe-sex measures have been absent.

The first birth-control clinic was opened in 1916 in Brooklyn, New York, and **Margaret Sanger** established the American Birth Control League (ABCL). Sanger hoped that a wide-ranging grassroots campaign would be directed by African-Americans so as to inform members of the black community about birth control. Once the leadership of the ABCL changed hands, it became an exclusive and elitist operation, leaving out women of colour. Contraceptive programmes were highly valued services that were extended only to white women and not to African-American women in the USA, thus racializing access to information that would empower women. In order to control their reproduction, African-American women became dependent on home remedies and illegal abortion procedures. Lack of access to birth control, poverty and poor health made frequent pregnancies more dangerous to black women. The absence of maternal health and infant health clinics led to the deaths of black mothers as well as a high infant mortality rate. The prevalence of syphilis as well as tuberculosis was several times higher in the African-American community than among the whites in that period.

Nevertheless, African-American women with the assistance of health professionals from their community were able to start and sustain the National Negro Health Movement to address the health needs and clean up the black neighbourhoods as well as educate its inhabitants about health issues. Health clinics were conducted and public health services were made to hire African-American physicians and nurses (Schoen, 2005).

### 3.5.3 Racialized Testing of Contraceptives

The testing of contraceptives emerged as one of the most controversial episodes in the history of race and gender intersections. **Clarence Gamble**, an American eugenicist and population control advocate, assumed the role of a philanthropist in India and Pakistan, in the 1950s and carried out tests of a range of contraceptive methods including diaphragm, jelly, condoms, foam tablets and a salt solution. However, his attempts to test the salt solution in India and Sri Lanka invoked resistance from health care professionals. They charged him with racial discrimination in wanting to test contraceptive methods on Indians and Sri Lankans but not on American women. Soon, issues of race and imperialism assumed importance over the promotion of contraceptives (Schoen, p. 227).

Contraceptive testing in poor populations continued into the latter half of the twentieth century. Evading medical ethics, makers of injectable contraceptives such as Norplant and Depo-Provera conducted trials in countries like India and Brazil. Various hazardous contraceptives have been promoted in developing countries and for women of colour and indigenous women. There was severe backlash from feminist groups in both contexts as women were not informed about the harmful side-effects of these injectable. African-American women's activists groups in the US believe that medical ethics are flouted by medical institutions and pharmaceutical companies as they test contraceptives on women without their knowledge. An American national activist group that calls itself 'INCITE: Women of Colour Against Violence' carries on its website the following warning:

***QUINACRINE: A DANGEROUS FORM OF CHEMICAL STERILIZATION THAT CAN BE ADMINISTERED DURING A PELVIC EXAMINATION . . . WITHOUT YOUR KNOWLEDGE.***

(Source: <http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=124> accessed on 22 July 2012)

#### ***Check Your Progress:***

*What is the eugenics movement? Can you cite any policy from any country which has specifically targeted women of colour?*

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## 3.6 RACE AND SEXUALITY

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You have so far discussed the interrelation between gender and race in the contexts of population policy and contraceptive research. Now, we will be covering another dimension, i.e., sexual practices which are shaped by the racial construction.

### 3.6.1 ‘The Down Low’

The ‘down low’ is a term used to refer primarily to African American men who are secretly having sex with other men while maintaining heterosexual relationships or marriages. Included within this concept is a racialized depiction of men who have sex with men, as well as an understanding of masculinity because these men are assumed to not be effeminate and may perhaps be portraying hyper-masculine depictions such as the ‘homothug’. Another significant aspect of the down low is that these men do not construct themselves as gay or bisexual, but as heterosexual men (O’Brien, 2009). The term ‘down low’ was used within the black community in the US in the 1990s to refer to men who were having sex with anyone other than their wives or girlfriends. In the 2000s, however, it has come to refer to the sexual practices of men who have sex with men.

In this social context, as **Jodi O’Brien** (2009) remarks, the term ‘down low’ is used to morally discredit black men because of the impact their behaviour has on ‘innocent’ black women. In the United States, more white men may identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual than black men. This is a likely indicator of the social privilege that white men experience when compared with black men and men of other racial groups. In terms of health, this also means that white men who identify as homosexual or bisexual are able to access HIV testing more easily than men who identify as homosexual or bisexual but belong to other races. O’Brien contends that men on the down low are also not likely to inform their female partners about the sexual risks the latter might be subjecting themselves to; the likelihood of increased susceptibility of these women to STDs is thus higher.

### 3.6.2 Human Trafficking

Trafficking refers to the forcible displacement of a person within a country, or across borders through compulsion, fraud or illegitimate influence with the intention to exploit. Trafficking affects mainly women and children. According to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, trafficking in persons refers to “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the



purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>).

### ***History and Prevalence***

In order to indicate the longevity of this issue, it is important to note that the first federal immigration law in the United States was the Page Law of 1875. It specifically barred entry of Asian women who were reportedly entering America for ‘lewd and immoral purposes’. Additional legislation extended the ban a few years later to “those likely to become public charges” (Chapkis, 2003, p.923). According to one estimate, the number of women and children trafficked from South East Asia are thrice the number of people who left Africa’s shores as slaves (Demir 2003,p. ii). Around 700,000 to 4,000,000 women and children are trafficked annually around the world, of which around 120,000 enter the European Union annually (Demir, 2003, p. ii). Of those trafficked, around 80% are female, 70% of whom are trafficked for the burgeoning illegal sex industry. This industry is the third most profitable criminal venture in the world behind drugs and arms’ dealing with profits reaching seven toten billion US dollars annually.

### ***Geographical Spread and the Global***

The trafficking of women and children for the sex industry occurs all over the world. Thai and Japanese mafia entice women into prostitution in Japan using the ruse of lucrative jobs, perhaps as waitresses or entertainers. Victims of civil war in former Azerbaijan, Georgia and Yugoslavia are sold to brothels in Western Europe, and women in war zones are forced into sex-slavery by the military such as the US forces in Korea (Cheng, 2008, p. 7), or sold to international networks in human trafficking. In South Asia, local trafficking networks and occasional traffickers seem to dominate. The traffickers and recruiters are sometimes women who are themselves victims of trafficking. Many traffickers have links to the villages of their victims and accompany the children from the recruitment site to their final destination (Regeringskansliet, 2004).

### ***Geographical Spread: South Asia***

Sri Lanka is a popular destination for pedophiles from Europe, since young teenagers called ‘beach boys’ are a commonly available commodity for exploitation (Regeringskansliet, 2004, p. 24). India is not only an important destination for traffickers, but also the point of origin for women trafficked in South Asia. Large urban cities with their brothels keep poor women and children from far-flung poor areas of the country as also Nepal and Bangladesh. This is not surprising since most of the trafficking routes go from rural to urban areas and from poorer to wealthier regions, from Bihar

to wealthier states such as Maharashtra. In fact, the circumstances that forced these women to be trafficked remain un-investigated and unaddressed at the policy level.

### 3.6.3 Factors Sustaining Trafficking in Women

A significant rise in women being trafficked from the developing world can therefore be mapped onto a concomitant expansion of the sex industry (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 141). Refugees from conflict zones and civil wars around the world have also fed this industry, with women from war-torn Yugoslavia, Georgia and Azerbaijan being sold to brothels in Western Europe (Castles, 2003, p. 15). It perhaps explains how illegal economies have a strong interest in the continuation of this forced migration, or indeed in conflicts and civil wars around the world. Vastly improved communication and transport networks around the world resulted in increased volumes of migration and trafficking. In 2000, the Member States of the UN Millennium Summit agreed to heighten their efforts to fight transnational crime including trafficking in human beings, to combat violence against women, and to take measures for protection of human rights of migrants, migrant workers and their families. In November 2000, the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children was adopted.

***Check Your Progress:***

*How do you relate human trafficking with the racialized body? Use examples to illustrate your response.*

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## 3.7 LET US SUM UP

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This unit brings together the two issues of race and the construction of gendered body in varied contexts of including the eugenics movement, state policy, and sexuality. We have looked carefully the question of how bodies get constituted, represented, and marginalised through race and gender. Bodies of colour, in particular, women of colour are less mobile, targeted for vulnerable sexual exploitation, and have less access to public space and policy because they are identified with a particular space and region. The notion of racialized gendered bodies speaks about the discriminatory practices which are emerging from the unequal relation of power between the ‘human of pure race’ and ‘human of impure race’. However, these constructions are fallacious, as yet deeply embedded within society. Examining and analysing their construction helps us to understand and fight against race-based and gender-based discriminations.

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### 3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Define race and analyse it from the gender perspective.
- 2) Does the understanding of “racialized body” differ in relation to female and male bodies? Discuss with suitable examples.
- 3) Critically analyse the intersection between race, gender and sexuality.
- 4) How does racialization of the body impact women? Discuss in the light of contemporary situation in India.

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# UNIT 4 PERFORMATIVE BODIES

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Sanjaya Srivastava

## Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Gender, Biologism and Performance
- 4.4 Producing the Male Body in Performance
- 4.5 Colonialism, Nationalism, and Performance: Reforming the Male Body
- 4.6 Colonialism and Modernity: Performance and the Female Body
- 4.7 Modernity, Performance and Transvestite Bodies
- 4.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Unit End Questions
- 4.11 References
- 4.12 Suggested Readings

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us ask ourselves this question: How do we understand performance? The term ‘performance’ can be understood in at least two different ways. Firstly, it can be used to indicate all those public and everyday acts of individuals and collectivities that contribute to the making of clearly identifiable social contexts. So, in this sense, walking in a group along a delimited space in order to mark that space as ‘ours’ is an act of performance. These kinds of performances include those practices that are not necessarily recognisable as the anthropologist’s ‘ritual’, but which nevertheless mark the contours of social life through simply having been carried out. Such performances contribute to the ‘social construction’ of space, a term that captures ‘the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control’ (Low, 1999, p. 112). As **Ravinder Kaur** (2003) points out in her analysis of the ‘Ganpati utsav [festival]’ of western India, dedicated to the god Ganesh, the “performative uses of public space” (p. 18) both point to and intensify the “volatile tension between order and disorder, [and] celebratory and socio-political aspects” (p. 12). Performance, in this sense, refers to the creation of meanings out of everyday acts of being and doing; it reinforces the fact that human social existence is forever in the process of being made and remade through actions upon and within collective life. Hence, **Edward Bruner** (1986) speaks of the manner in which performances ‘re-fashion’ reality”. It is in the performance”, as he puts it, “that we re-

experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture... the performance itself is constitutive” (p. 11).

The second sense is the more conventional one where we understand performance as ‘staged’ activity, one that is watched by an audience gathered for the purpose. Here, performances might be in the nature of dances, plays, or, religious rituals such as initiation ceremonies, weddings, and birth ceremonies. The history of these kinds of performances, as this unit will explore, is also a history of changing ideas about different kinds of identities - national, gendered, caste, and class for example - as well as an indication of the struggle over cultural meanings across different sections of the population.

Anthropologists, feminist scholars, and scholars of dance have contributed equally to the theorisation of different kinds of performances as socio-political acts. So, for example, a study that explores the relationship between cultural and economic transformations and changes in ideas about the body in China points out that “Changing perceptions of the body were at the centre of the growth of consumer culture” (Brownell, 1995, p. 108). Further, **Susan Brownell** suggests, “the pursuit of beauty was officially acceptable and much discussed in the media. Fitness, beauty and fashions played an increasingly important role in people’s lives and they were also promoted in state discourses” (Brownell, 1995, p. 108). In a similar manner, feminist scholarship, in focussing on the relationship between social norms and women’s body-image, has explored how “the tyranny of slenderness” is a product of the mind/body dichotomy fundamental to western culture in which men hold power and are identified with the exalted mind, and women serve men and are likened to the denigrated body (Counihan, 1999, p. 77). The manner in which the body becomes a site for understanding social, political and economic processes in contexts of dance and performance will be explored in subsequent sections of this discussion in order to more fully explore the key concern of this unit.

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## 4.2 OBJECTIVES

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After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- Comprehend gender as a performance;
- Analyse the construction of gender in relation to both body and performance;
- Compare the construction of gender identities in relation to ‘Male Body’ and ‘Female Body’ in performance; and
- Analyse the socio-cultural processes involved in the production of a performative body.

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## 4.3 GENDER, BIOLOGISM AND PERFORMANCE

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Within western theoretical contexts, the discussion on gender as performance (or enactment) owes much to the work of **Judith Butler** (1999) who has sought to move discussion of gender and sexuality from notions of ‘depth’ to ‘surface’. As you have seen in various previous units where Butler’s work has been discussed (MWG-001, Block 6, Unit 1, MWG- 003, Block 1, Units 1, 2 & 3 and MWG- 004, Block 1, Unit 2), **Butler** also argues against the separation of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’. She suggests that “the regulation of gender has always been part of the work of heterosexist normativity and to insist upon a radical separation of gender and sexuality is to miss the opportunity to analyse that particular operation of homophobic power” (Butler, 1999, p. 186).

However, it is also important to recognise the limits of ‘performativity’ (in the sense utilised in Butler’s work) as a framework of analysis, and that it can not be applied without careful attention to specific contexts. For, as **Blackwood and Wierenga** (1999) point out, “Although performance theory is interested in unraveling the workings of gender, it can not explain how people of different races, classes, and cultures and in different historical periods experience their bodies and their sexuality” (Blackwood and Wierenga, 1999, p. 14). That is to say, while performance theory can offer significant correctives to biologism (that primarily understands the body in terms of ‘inner drives’ and fixed ‘essences’), it may be far too general a framework to offer insights into the specificities of identity and behaviour. So, for example, if gender identities are ‘fluid’ - as performance theory suggests - then how do we explain the fact that ‘butch women’ in Jakarta base themselves on mythical idealised *male* figures? That is, that their sense of being depends upon essentialised representations of manliness (Wieringa, 2007). And, further, why is it that a *biologically female* transgendered person from Sri Lanka - who wishes to be recognised as male - bases his idea of manliness around notions of physical strength and aggression? (Wijewardene, 2007). In other words, gender identities, on the ground, must account for the social and historical contexts within which ‘performing’ subjects are nurtured, and this requires a more nuanced understanding of what makes the ‘everyday’.

Following the caveats noted in the previous paragraph, this discussion on ‘performative bodies’ will not so much focus on any overarching theory of ‘performativity’ as on several culturally and historically specific instances where performing bodies have something to tell us about issues of gender derived from localised conditions of life.

Moving on to the other significant topic within this course, it is important to ask why over the past few decades there has been such intense focus

within social science and humanities contexts on the **cultures and politics of the body**. To begin with, a focus on the body allows us to “examine those taken-for-granted aspects of the human body and what they reveal about the social organisation of everyday life” (Howson, 2004, p.1). This relates to the growing recognition that “the human body is central to the establishment and maintenance of social life” (Howson, 2004, pp. 1-2). This perspective suggests that the body is a site for the unfolding of a wide variety of social processes. Hence, the way we look, the manner in which we seek to present our bodies, and the regulations to which our bodies are subjected to, are both reflections of social mores and norms as well as sites of production of these norms. **Embodiment** is the term employed to invoke the relationship between the body and society. Embodiment, in turn, is a culturally and socially specific phenomenon; belching loudly after a good meal may be regarded as an expression of appreciation for the skills of the cook in India, but a sign of bad manners in most western countries. Further, men holding hands might be considered a sign of friendship in India, but one that indicates sexual intimacy in other cultures.

In contrast to the perspective outlined above (and which will be followed in this course), the traditional focus on the body - even within the social sciences - has tended to proceed from more or less medicalised interests in it, or in terms of the restraints put upon it by a number of regulatory frameworks. For instance, women or lower caste persons may not be allowed to perform certain tasks such as among some tribes, women are not supposed to hold plough, they are debarred from the task of ploughing. It is, however, the medicalised understanding of the body that has proved to be particularly restrictive in terms of a wider understanding of the relationship between the body and society. So, as **Bryan Turner** (2008) notes, even when we speak of illness, a “disease is... a system of signs which can be read and translated in a variety of ways” (Turner, 2008, p.176), and that the medicalisation of aetiological knowledge - those that deal with causes, effects and implications of diseases-may obscure the complex nature of the human situation and the possibility of a more effective aetiology which might result from taking account of the non-medical context of diseases. So, for example, a commitment towards a socio-cultural analysis of sexual contexts—within which the spread of AIDS is embedded - must lead us towards the study of such *cultural* forms as masculinity and conceptions of the body which underline sexuality and its practice. This has increasingly come to be recognised by medical specialists in the field of AIDS research. Further, as Turner also suggests, we need to abandon conceptions of gender and the body as “regulated” topics, conceptualising these “in a more fluid manner to allow for... important social changes in the wider social context” (Turner, 2008, p. 21).



A significant reason for the lack of focus on the body as a *social* mechanism also relates to a powerful trend within western philosophy which has significantly influenced the development of the social sciences. As you have read in the first unit of the block (MWG- 004, Block 1, Unit 1) about **Rene Descartes**, this relates to the Cartesian (after René Descartes 1596-1650) framework within which “the mind and the body are considered distinct from each other, [and]... the body is subordinate to the mind” (Howson, 2004, p. 3). Further, within this view ‘bodily sensation is not seen to influence or contaminate [mental] perception’ (Howson, 2004). In more recent times, there have been significant departures from this perspective and a questioning of its assumptions. The questioning to summarise a complex set of arguments derives from the idea that “our physicality is the very means by which we define our existence as social beings because the body is a symbolic vehicle that delineates how meaning is shaped, presented and represented in society” (Holmes, Lauzon & Gagnon, 2010, p. 230). The remaining part of this discussion will be devoted to presenting specific case studies, drawn from scholarly analyses, that demonstrate the different ways in which ‘performances’ and ‘bodies’ come together to illustrate the processes of gender in particular, and other kinds of social relationships in general.

***Check Your Progress:***

*What is the meaning of medicalised model of the body and how does it connect to performance? Explain this in the larger context of the relationship between biologism, gender and performance.*

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## **4.4 PRODUCING THE MALE BODY IN PERFORMANCE**

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The ideas of ‘making’ and ‘producing’ are crucial to the study of gender identities, as all individuals are engaged in different forms of performance. They crucially point to the historical and social nature of both gender identities as well as performative activities. In the context of this discussion, then, the gigantic archive of ‘proper’ masculine behaviour - in novels, films, advertisements, and folk-advice - would clearly be unnecessary if it was a naturally endowed characteristic. The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced - ‘if you buy this motor-cycle, you’ll be a real man’ - says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender/masculine identities, which must continually be reinforced. Following from this, we might also say that masculinity is *enacted rather than expressed*.

In this section, we will focus upon a specific context of performance that also serves as a site for learning the ideologies and behaviours of gender.

In his discussion about the Kerala martial arts form known as *kallaripayattu*, **Phillip Zarrilli**, points out that Indian martial arts are “founded on a set of fundamental cultural assumptions about the body-mind relationship and health and well-being that are similar to the assumptions underlying yoga and *Ayurveda*” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 20). Techniques of combat developed during the Sangam Age (roughly 300 BC to 300 AD) in South India are generally regarded as forerunners of *kallaripayattu* which itself emerged as a distinct martial art around the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The context of its emergence, as Zarrilli points out, was a period of extended warfare (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 23). What is important to keep in mind is that, given the historical association of ‘martial’ behaviour and demeanour and men, *kallaripayattu* became a site for the expression and consolidation of masculine identities.

Of course, there is no unbroken link between the practices of *kallaripayattu* as it existed in antiquity and the contexts within which it is practised and exhibited today. As Zarrilli points out, “In an increasingly heteronomous society, in which traditional practitioners must vie for students with karate teachers who often emphasise immediate ‘street wise’ results, the paradigms, beliefs and practices discussed in this essay are in constant process of negotiation with competing paradigms and practices and, therefore, are only more or less observed by teachers today” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 20). Nevertheless, what is shared between its past and its present is the gendered nature of ideologies and practices that contribute to the making of masculine identities. *Kallaripayattu* training is organised around a complex set of ritualised techniques that include elements drawn from yoga, meditation, as well as methods for increasing powers of concentration. Historically, these were intended such that “the practitioner might ideally achieve the superior degree of self-control, mental calm and single-point concentration necessary to face combat and possible death and thus access to certain aspects of power and agency in the use of weapons in combat” (Zarrilli, p. 27). It should be noted that ideas of ‘self-control’, ‘mental calm’ and ‘single- point concentration necessary to face combat and possible death’ have historical association with masculinised identities. Hence, within the very structure of its training regime and process, *Kallaripayattu* borrows its practices from widely held ideas about the attributes of manhood.

What are some of the other ways in which *contemporary kallaripayattu* training might be interpreted as a continuing site for the making and reinforcement of masculine identities? *Kallaripayattu* training consists of a series of exercises that includes the mastering of a number of ‘poses’ (*vadivu*) that are named after different animals. And, while Zarrilli does not

dwell upon this, the animals whose names attach to the poses are stereotypic ‘male’ animals: horse, peacock, snake, and cock. That is to say, their ‘attributes’ are popularly understood as those that attach to men and, we could say, are intended to ‘teach’ masculinity (or, at least; a certain version of masculinity). Let us see how one of the teachers of *kallaripayattu* explains the peacock and cock poses:

#### Box 4.1: Describing Mayuravadivu and Kukkuvadivu

When a peacock is going to attack its enemies, it spreads its feathers, raises its neck, and dances by steadying itself on one leg. Then it shifts to the other leg and attacks by jumping and flying. The capability of doing this attack is known as mayuravadivu.

When a cock attacks, he uses all parts of his body: wings, neck, legs, finger nails. He will lift his one leg and shake his feathers and neck, fix his gaze on the enemy, and attack. This is Kukkuvadivu (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 31).

It is in the various processes of training and performing the techniques of *kallaripayattu* that elements of masculinity are utilised to produce the gender identity of both the trainee and the performer. A significant aspect of training is the belief that ‘inner development’ (self-control, enhanced powers of concentration etc.) will lead to increased ability to exercise control over the external world. Importantly, Zarrilli notes that “In the ethnographic domain, the belief in such powers [of being able to control the external world] is the closest contemporary reflection of the subtle, esoteric powers attained by epic heroes like Arjuna” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 36). That is to say, it is ‘epic heroes’ who, in the current time at least, are imagined as icons of untempered masculinity that continue to provide inspiration figures of “other” to be emulated and followed.

#### ***Check Your Progress:***

*Explain how gender identities get constructed through performance? Draw examples from television soaps, street plays, and performances to show the process of gender construction.*

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## 4.5 COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, AND PERFORMANCE: REFORMING THE MALE BODY

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If performances are sites of the making of gender identities, they are also significant as contexts for *remaking* of such identities. Let us consider the ways in which body-politics and colonial and nationalist politics joined to produce ‘appropriate’ male dancing bodies in the case of Egypt during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Anthony Shay (2008) points out that before the era of colonisation, traditional dance forms in Egypt in Central Asia, the ‘movement vocabularies’ (Shay, 2008, p. 212) employed by men and women (that is, bodily gestures and techniques they exhibited during performance) were quite similar. However, Shay goes on to say, colonial and post-colonial attitudes towards gender and sexuality substantially contributed to the making of a ‘hypermasculinised choreographic’ (Shay, 2008, p. 211) culture within which male dancers were instructed to dance ‘like men’, firmly distinguishing their bodily movements from those of women. Of course, this process also defined how dancing women’s bodies should ‘behave’ in performance.

The ‘reform’ of male dancing bodies in Egypt and certain Central Asian societies (such as Iran and Uzbekistan) came about as a result of specific attitudes towards gender and sexuality held by the colonising powers and, in turn, internalised by native elites. So, “Coming from the homophobic atmosphere that obtained in Europe, where men caught in homosexual encounters were jailed, tortured, and executed, the sight of male dancers performing articulated movements of the torso and pelvic areas offended Westerners who believed such movements to belong solely to the domain of women” (Shay, p. 218). Scholarship on colonialism indicates that in most historical contexts, indigenous elites displayed a love-hate relationship with the culture of their colonial masters. That is say, while they articulated resentment at being treated as social and cultural inferiors, they also sought to emulate the colonisers in order to be accepted as their equals. A variety of attempts both by individual as well as state-sponsored dance companies in Egypt, Iran and Uzbekistan during the twentieth century to ‘create “proper” images for male dancing’ (Shay, p. 211) reflect this attitude. The creation of “new, hypermasculinised choreographic forms” was, according to Shay, “related to pressures from both colonial administrations and the newly emerging, postcolonial, Westernised elites and middle classes to counter negative historical stereotypes of male dancers in these regions” (p. 211).

Colonial powers frequently characterised non-western cultures as ‘backward’ in their acceptance of gender and sexual identities which were not always strictly divided into the binaries of male and female, and hetero and homosexual. Colonised elites accepted this characterisation and sought to

align local cultures along the lines suggested by the colonizing European powers.

As part of the ‘civilising mission’ of colonialism, enthusiastically adopted by native elites, male dancing bodies were sought to be ‘cleansed’ of the ‘taint’ of ‘effeminacy’, as well as placed outside a realm that might possibly have been interpreted to be homoerotic. For, not only did men and women share the same ‘movement vocabulary’ but quite often in local dance forms, male dancers cultivated “an ambiguity in dress and performance mannerisms that were attractive to their male audiences” (Shay, 2008, p. 220). The desire on the part of native elites to approximate to western ideals of gender and sexuality - in turn expressive of a deeper craving to be respected by the colonising powers - led, in turn to specific changes in the ways in which national dance forms were ‘reformed’ in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. This resulted in ‘hypermasculine dance styles’ that sought to present the male body as distinct from (and ‘opposite’ of) the female one, thereby largely reversing a historical situation. The most significant western performative context that was used to change male dancing styles was ballet. Hence, a key difference that occurs in the new style of male dancing in all of these areas is that *‘the torso is held immobile, which is not true in the previous forms of traditional dance; there are no shoulder shimmies or articulated pelvic movements. The hands and head also remain stiff and unyielding, in contrast to the intricate arm and hand movements, and lively facial expressions and head gestures that formerly characterised these traditions’* (Shay, 2008, p. 227).

There is also a class dimension to be considered within the above context. For, once the movement and presentation of male bodies was adequately sanitised - made distinct both from women’s bodies as well those of ambiguous gender - it became easier to attract a more middle-class cohort of dancers: for dance as a career was now seen to be free from its ‘disreputable’ past. In this way, new dancing male bodies in Egypt, Iran and Uzbekistan were produced through cultural collaboration between colonial powers and the colonised elite.

So far we have looked at the male body in the context of performance. Let us now turn our attention to similar issues relating to the female body in order to develop a comparative gendered perspective.

***Check Your Progress:***

*How does performance construct and reconstruct gender identities? Explain with the help of references from a dance form or performance tradition.*

## 4.6 COLONIALISM AND MODERNITY: PERFORMANCE AND THE FEMALE BODY

This unit began with descriptions of the performing male body in order to widen the framework of gender beyond its traditional boundaries. The performing female body is also, of course, a site of social, cultural, and political importance. The case of the *lavani* song and dance form of western India is instructive in this regard.

‘The earliest traceable *lavani*’, Sharmila Rege suggests, ‘dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century’ (Rege, 2002, pp. 1040-1041). Further, the version known as the ‘*shringareek*’ or ‘erotic’ *lavani* - that contains explicit sexual references - has “been traced to the ‘*Gatha Sapatshati*’...[Which] is a collection of *Prakrit* verses composed by the masses about their everyday lived practices, including the sexual and dated between 1 AD and 7 AD” (Rege, 2002, p. 1041). The Peshwa period (from late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) was the high point of the erotic *lavani* in western India. Indeed, a popular Marathi proverb attributes the decline of Peshwa rule to the latter’s ‘excessive fondness’ for *lavani*.

Erotic *lavani* of the Peshwa period can, according to Rege, be interpreted as having played an important role in constructing the sexuality of lower caste women in specific ways. So, “the bodies of lower caste women were constructed in the *lavani* as either arousing or satiating male desire” . Further, ‘This construction was crucial to the pre-colonial Peshwa state in the appropriation of the labour of lower caste women - through the institution of slavery” (Rege, 2002, p. 1041). The manner in which lower caste female sexuality was represented through *lavani* performances was itself through dichotomised representations of lower and upper caste bodies. So, *lavanis* that speak of ‘insatiable desires of women’ were usually attached to the speaking voice of the ‘lower caste whore’, whereas those that expressed loftier sentiments such as ‘*virah*’ (the pain of separation) (Rege, 2002) were attributed to ‘wifely’ characters. If the ‘whore’ sought out men in order to satisfy her ‘insatiable’ needs, the wife expressed ‘purer’ desires of attaining motherhood and admiration of her husband’s ‘virility’. The explicit dichotomy between the ‘whore’ and wife’ was a significant aspect of the *lavanis*’ construction of female sexuality that, in turn, provided justification for the oppression of lower caste women.

The end of Peshwa rule brought about important changes for the *lavani* performers and performances. These related to changing (and usually middle-class, upper caste) notions of what constituted ‘vulgarity’ and ‘decency’ in public life. As *lavani* performers were forced to travel to other regions in order to earn a living, they encountered new social, cultural and economic environments which were also contexts of a different set of attitudes towards

them. A significant aspect of the change in the field of public performance was the emergence of ‘elite theatre’ that sought to distinguish itself “from the folk via a process of de-sexualisation, so that only men perform on the stage” (Rege, p. 1043). In the new environment, *lavani* increasingly came to be portrayed as the ‘popular culture’ of certain sections of the population that was simultaneously ‘immoral’ in its overt preoccupations with sensuality. The growth of ‘bourgeois theatre’ (Rege, 2002), where male bodies performed almost all the female roles was a process through which “The theatre of the male performers came to be marked as cerebral as against the sensuous *lavani*” (Rege, p. 1043). Here, we can observe a particular manner in which ‘performance’ and ‘body’ came together through their location in a variety of social, cultural and political contexts: the male body itself came to be identified as ‘cerebral’ and the female one ‘sensual’. This in turn, was also the consolidation of class, caste, and gender power. This process further intensified later on with the incorporation of the *lavani* within Marathi cinema, “the *lavani* from the Marathi films constructed the *lavani* dancer as a ‘pakhru’ (bird) ‘bijlee’ (lightning), and ‘jawanichi baag’ (garden of youth)..., the focus being on a native, wild and rustic sexuality which was to be tamed and reformed by the hero (invariably either the patil’s son or school master, i e, always upper caste)” (Rege, 2002, p. 1044).

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## 4.7 MODERNITY, PERFORMANCE AND TRANSVESTITE BODIES

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The discussion of ‘bourgeois theatre’ in the previous section brings us to the final section of this unit, with its focus on ‘theatrical transvestism’. Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kathryn Hansen (2004) points out that there developed in Bombay “a metropolitan theatrical culture structured by the overlapping practices of the Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatres” (Hansen, p. 101). Parsi theatre companies, as they were known, not only performed in the Bombay area, but also travelled to other parts of the subcontinent, including cities in Burma, Ceylon and Nepal. As noted in the discussion of *lavani* above, part of the popularity of this (urban) theatre form lay in the fact that it was seen to be offering a ‘respectable’ alternative to the ‘vulgarity’ of traditional theatre forms.

A significant aspect of the performances of Parsi theatre companies lay in the fact that all the female roles were performed by men. Indeed, certain of the female impersonators, such as Jayashankar Sundari and Bal Gandharv, achieved enormous fame in their own lifetime. Female impersonation has, of course, a very long history within Indian performative traditions. However, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rural theatre and dance forms where impersonation was present were slowly falling out of favour with the urban middle classes. These came to be regarded - with European attitudes as cue - as ‘crude’ and ‘debased’ forms of entertainment. Given their origins in

lower caste milieus, the reaction to ‘folk’ performative traditions was also a way in which the upper castes marked their ‘distinction’ from lower caste populations (Hansen, p. 104).

The manner in which the male body came to impersonate the female one in the new theatrical traditions of Bombay has an interesting and complex connection with the older traditions of performance (such as *Bhavai*) which, though containing practices of female impersonation, had become devalued due to perceptions of their ‘lewdness’ and ‘vulgarity’. However, simultaneously as the older forms were eschewed, they were also constituted templates for new theatre stars such as Sundari and Bal Gandharv. As well, the involvement of women in the folk drama traditions was a frequent source of their characterisation as ‘debased’, with women performers regarded as the equivalent of prostitutes. Indeed, a frequent justification for hiring men to play female roles in the modern theatre was the ‘stigma’ attached to women actors. However, as Hansen points out, the fondness among spectators for erotic genres of song and dance such as *thumri* and *ghazal* dictated that these items be retained within the performative structure of the urban drama. In consequence, female impersonators took on the double burden of enacting noble womanly characters even as they inherited the arts of women of the *Kotha* (Hansen, 2004, p. 106).

The final sentence of the previous paragraph, regarding the *kinds* of female representations that were being portrayed by the leading male actors of the day, provides an important clue to another kind of gender politics that was then taking shape within the context of theatrical transvestism. So, the woman of the modern stage (played by the female impersonator) was of a ‘noble type’, and just as importantly, formed the prototype for ‘ideal woman’ of the nationalist period. The following excerpt that concerns Jayashankar Sundari - who had begun his career on the Gujarati stage - nicely captures this aspect: *Returning to Bombay*, he played Rambha, the milkmaid in the Gujarati drama *Vikram Charitra*. The play was performed every Saturday night between 1902 and 1905, for a total of 160 times. Sundari was between thirteen and sixteen years of age. In his most memorable scene, he entered the stage with a pot on his head and offered milk to the hero, singing *Koi dudh lyo dilrangi*. The Vaishnava trope of the youthful lord Krishna with his adoring gopis (cowherd women) associated sexual/mystical enjoyment with the pleasures of oral consumption. As the bestower of ‘milk’ from her ‘pot’, the transvestite heroine maintained a demure, inward-turned posture that legitimised her seductive gesture. Her carefully arranged hair, jewellery, and sari border worked to produce a sublimation of sexuality, an interiorisation of virtue as ‘moral character” (Hansen, 2004, p. 115).



It has frequently been argued that the key reason why men took on women's roles on stage related to 'the social taboo against women appearing on stage' (Hansen, p. 107). However, Hansen points out, this reasoning appears to ignore the fact that female impersonators were popular in their own right, and that given audience preferences, theatre management often employed female impersonators even when female actors might have been available. Further, the author states that "the historical record indicates that rather than filling for absent women, female impersonators competed against them, and actresses competed against female impersonators, for female roles within the theatrical troupe" (Hansen, p. 109). In continuation to this, the author argues that contemporary analyses that view female impersonation as a 'compulsion' arising out of social restrictions upon women might, which reflects an 'anxiety' about both the prevalence of a circuit of homoerotic enjoyment among theatre-going publics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as concerns 'regarding cross-dressing and the implications of effeminacy' (Hansen, 2004). These concerns are similar to those that were expressed by the native elites of Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan discussed above as they sought to establish the 'real' nature of indigenous masculinity in their respective societies.

The homoerotic sphere of the *Parsi* theatre was, in the ways discussed above, simultaneously a context of the erasure of certain older forms of performance as well as the site for gender, class, and caste politics. However, as Hansen suggests, while "the eclipse of theatrical transvestism has been heralded as a triumph for the female performer and therefore for women in general, it also marked the end of an era of gender ambiguity. A binary sex/gender regime allied to differences of class and caste has displaced the transvestite performer and distanced urban spectators from the circulation of homoerotic imagery" (Hansen, 2004, p. 122).

***Check Your Progress:***

*What do you understand by the transvestite body? Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.*

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## **4.8 LET US SUM UP**

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The preceding discussion has sought to outline the various ways in which the notion of 'performative bodies' can be utilised to explore a wide variety of social and cultural processes and norms attached to female and male

bodies. The discussion has suggested that the recent interest in exploring the body as a site of significant symbolic and material processes allows us to move beyond the medicalised models of the body as well the philosophical tradition within which there is a strict mind-body division. The notion of the performative body allows us to go beyond the existing mind/body separation by opening up the possibility of roles in opposition to the sexual body. By conjoining 'body' with 'performance', we are also able to see how each transforms the other and the manner in which the transformations reflect a wide variety of positions of power as well as resistance. Performances - whether in everyday life or the ones that takes place upon a stage - serve as symbolic vocabularies of beliefs regarding categories such as class, caste, and gender. The human body is, in turn, the slate upon which the symbols are inscribed.

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## 4.9 GLOSSARY

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- Lavani** : *Lavani* is a genre of music popular in Maharashtra and southern Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. *Lavani* is a combination of traditional song and dance, which particularly performed to the enchanting beats of Dholak. *Lavani* is noted for its powerful rhythm and erotic sentiment. *Lavani* has contributed substantially to the development of Marathi folk theatre.
- Lewdness** : The trait of behaving in an obscene manner.
- Homoerotic** : Refers to the erotic attraction between members of the same sex, either male-male (male homosexuality) or female-female (lesbianism), and its specific connection to the depiction or manifestation in visual arts and literature.
- Transvestite** : A person who seeks sexual pleasure from wearing clothes that are normally associated with the opposite sex. Receiving sexual gratification from wearing clothing of the opposite sex.

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## 4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Is gender performative in nature? Discuss in the context of Indian society and cultural embodiments.
- 2) Analyse the construction of gender in relation to body and performance and explain how performance might enable us to go beyond the rigid separation of mind/body.

- 3) Explain the notion of the performative body and show how the projection of male body differs from that of the female body in the context of performance.
- 4) “Gender is produced through performance”. Discuss this by drawing examples from folk dance, theatre, and local performance in the Indian context.

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## 4.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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# UNIT 5 COMMODIFIED BODIES

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Regina Papa

## Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Objectives
- 5.3 Sexual Objectification
  - 5.3.1 The Other
  - 5.3.2 Attributes of Sexual Objectification
- 5.4 Commodification of a Female Body
  - 5.4.1 Dismemberment of the Female Body
  - 5.4.2 Woman as Property
- 5.5 Alienation
- 5.6 Pornography
  - 5.6.1 Sexuality in Pornography
  - 5.6.2 Image Construction in Pornography
  - 5.6.3 Pornography-cum-Beauty Industry
  - 5.6.4 Anti-Pornographic Movement
- 5.7 Prostitution
  - 5.7.1 Trafficking
  - 5.7.2 Prostitution by Choice or Force
  - 5.7.3 Decriminalisation
- 5.8 Body Politics
  - 5.8.1 Legal Status of Pornography
  - 5.8.2 Legal Status of Prostitution
- 5.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.10 Glossary
- 5.11 Unit End Questions
- 5.12 References
- 5.13 Suggested Readings

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Thanks to women's ongoing struggle in the private and public world, we have inherited ideas, concepts and language to subject sexuality to a rigorous critical analysis. The sex market is a relation of objectification, appropriation, and exchange. A woman's body is treated as a commodity, a gift, and an object of desire. Her sex, surrogacy services, biological resources and even babies are appropriated. Her genuine autonomy, subjectivity, freedom, and sexuality are denied while men's power as consumers is enhanced.

In a sexist society like ours, women are exchanged as a property in a number of social practices such as pornography, prostitution, escort services, sexual harassment, erotic dancing, strip shows, phone-sex/ cybersex and forced marriages/child marriages. Sexualisation occurs in many forms that range from sexual violence to sexualized evaluation which may even be passing a furtive glance over a woman's body. In this unit, we will build a conceptual framework to understand how and why a female body is commodified in the social practices of pornography and prostitution. We will also examine these within a legal context and identify strategies which help to resist the ongoing commodification of women's bodies.

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## 5.2 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explore how a female body is objectified and commodified in a sexist society;
- Identify the complex processes through which a woman is depersonalized;
- Analyse the attributes of sexual objectification;
- Explain the commodification of a woman's body as a property;
- Discuss 'prostitution' and 'pornography' as the two major social practices that deprive women of human dignity and worth;
- Comprehend the legal status of 'pornography' and 'prostitution' in Indian laws; and
- Identify feasible strategies to help in transforming women from sex objects to human agencies.

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## 5.3 SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION

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Objectification and commodification are two key terms in our analysis. They are parallel to the Marxian terms 'use value' and 'exchange value'. When body parts are objectified, they have use value, and when they are turned into commodities, exchange value is inscribed on them.

The body is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, mediating our experiences. The human body has been perceived in a variety of ways. To **Karl Marx**, it is an economic body while for **Sigmund Freud**, 'Anatomy is destiny' and 'the body is sexual'. The modern reproductive biologists hold that it is a hormonal body. The population experts consider it as a fertile body. All these views are fragmentary and do not treat the body as a whole. As you have already read in the unit on 'Racialized Body' (Unit 3, Block-1, MWG 004), the body is racialized based on skin colour, facial features, body types, and sexual anatomy. For instance, if you browse through the matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers and magazines, you will

invariably find that a high premium is placed on fair, tall, slim girls in the marriage market. In a sexist society, all available ideological and socio-economic factors converge in constructing a sexually alluring female body.

### 5.3.1 The Other

One problem that feminists face is how to theorize about the female sexed body without reducing it to a sexual body. Feminists attempt to inform why and how such reduction happens. The concept of objectification owes much to the famous work of **Simone de Beauvoir**, *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir dwells on the dualistic mode of viewing woman as ‘the Other’. Following **Levi-Strauss** and **Hegel** she observes that dualism is as primordial as consciousness itself. In a gender dichotomy, men and women are viewed as opposites. The body of a man and body of a woman are visualized differentially and discriminated. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir,

“... The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less” (Simone de Beauvoir, 1952, p. 17).

Otherness and equality cannot coexist. Whether a woman is viewed as an inferior being or viewed as mysterious and morally superior, she is the ‘other’ to a man.

Once oppositions are institutionalized, a hierarchy is set up, placing one category above the other. The unequal ranking thus considered is taken for granted, as natural, immutable, and inflexible. In a sexist society, a woman is ranked low. Simone de Beauvoir, citing Bordo emphasises that a woman “is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.” (Beauvoir, 1952, p.17) Being the Other to a man, a woman is subjected to a reduction process. She is reduced from a person to a mere body which is easily objectified, measured and turned into a commodity in the sex market and reproductive technology market. Let us now try to understand, what constitutes objectification of the body with reference to sexual objectification.

### 5.3.2 Attributes of Sexual Objectification

**Martha Nussbaum** in her *Sex and Social Justice* (1999) identifies seven distinct kinds of actions that may or may not be part of objectification in any given instance: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility,

violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 218). These attributes can be applied to the commodified bodies of women.

When a woman's body is depersonalized and viewed as a thing, she is treated as a tool for a man's desire and thus serves the purpose of instrumentality. When she is treated as if lacking in agency or self-determination, her autonomy is denied. When a woman's body is viewed as an inert object, it is used as an exchange item for money in selling and buying anything and everything. Fungibility (a good or asset's interchangeability with other individual goods/assets of the same nature/class that simplifies the trading process) in this sense means that a woman's body is treated as if interchangeable. When her body is considered as a commodity owned by another, she loses the ownership of her body. When she is treated as if there is no need to show concern for her feelings and experiences, it is denial of her subjectivity.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Define sexual objectification with the help of any examples that you may have come across in the news or in your everyday life.*

## **5.4 COMMODIFICATION OF A FEMALE BODY**

In the previous section, you were introduced to the concept of objectification. You must have understood by now that both objectification and commodification are mutually inclusive concepts and they reinforce each other to be sustained in the market. The female body and its parts have long been a target for commodification within myriad cultural settings. Commodification of sex, generally, means that a female body is treated like a commodity, bought and traded, sold and negotiated. The Oxford Dictionary reveals that throughout the 16th century, the term 'commodity' embodied a sense of convenience or utility. But with the rise of capitalism and market economy, it gave way to impersonal and self-interested patterns of exchange and profit. 'Everything can be commodified' is the emerging sentiment. There is a growing 'consumerisation' of parts of the body from cradle to the grave. The amazing scientific and technological growth in the field of Biology finds a female body a rich mine. **Donna Dickenson (2007)** calls it a new Gold Rush, where the territory is the human body. Human eggs are used in huge numbers for the stem cell technologies and women's tissue is worth more than men's. Women are deprived of their rights in terms of control over their bodies.



### 5.4.1 Dismemberment of the Female Body

Sexual objectification disregards the personal and intellectual capabilities of a woman and reduces her to the status of a mere instrument. A woman is spoken of or interpreted only as a body; either the whole body is objectified or body parts fetishised. A depersonalized body is easily and profitably exchanged in the sex market. **Andrea Dworkin** (1979), a radical feminist, writer and an ex-prostitute herself, writing on the abuse of a woman's body in prostitution, states: "In prostitution, no woman stays whole. It is impossible to use a human body in the way women's bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. It's impossible. And no woman gets whole again later, after" (<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourl.html>). Hence the female body, objectified and commodified in social practices such as pornography and prostitution, is fragmented, mauled and broken into parts, and not seen as whole.

### 5.4.2 Woman as a Property

Devaluation of women begins with property ownership, a seizing, objectification and commodification in an exchange market. **Claude Levi-Strauss**, in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), emphasises that men have traded in women throughout most of human history and have regarded them as currency in every country of the world, in societies where monetary system was never arrived at. Thus, in a system controlled by men, women are placed under the control of men and their value determined by men.

As you have already seen in the unit on "Formative Feminism" (Unit1, Block 5, MWG001), **Marxist feminists** argue that the capitalist mode of production is the cause of women's subordination. With the introduction of private property, women became the property of men and the first oppressed class. **Fredric Engels** in his famous work *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) describes the colonisation of women as 'the world historic defeat of the female' (pp.120-121, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02c.htm>). To Radical feminists, the control of women's sexuality in a patriarchal society is at the root of all forms of oppression.

'The personal is political' because women are subordinated not only in the public world but also in the private worlds of family, marriage, sexuality, and biological reproduction. Women's conversion of subjective self into commodities have led to their subjugation to the market, hence they are eventually alienated from their own bodily existence and experiences.

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## 5.5 ALIENATION

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Pornography shapes both female and male sexual desire into victim/abuser roles. It is a sexuality of dominance and submission. This structuring is similar to worker/capitalist dialectic in Marxism.

Marx identifies four types of alienation in labour under capitalism:

- Alienation of the workers from themselves
- Alienation of the workers from other human beings
- Alienation of the workers from their product
- Alienation of the workers from nature (Marx, 1844, cited in Vieta, 2007).

We can see how women suffer alienation in forms similar to the workers' subjugation in capitalism. **Firstly**, women are alienated from themselves by the manner in which males control female sexuality. Not only is a female relentlessly treated as a sex object but also subjected to "dismemberment" which means parts of a woman's anatomy are portrayed in isolation from the whole. The idea is that a woman is nothing but a sum of her bodily parts. As a result, fragmentation occurs within their minds and she becomes a sex object to herself, taking toward herself the attitude of a man. She adorns, beautifies, and decorates herself as a sex object in a sort of fantasy. **Sandra Bartky** calls it 'feminine narcissism' (Bartky, 1982). Given this fragmented consciousness, women cannot discover their own sexual interests and potentials.

**Secondly**, women, like workers in capitalism, do not enjoy common interests or come together as a community. They fail to see the commonly shared interests among themselves. The need for economic security forces them to depend on men and compete with each other in proving their loyalty to the man. In such a sexual competition, women appraise each other's attributes in comparison. They fail in establishing a collective fellowship to ensure their autonomy and self-worth.

**Thirdly**, women are alienated from the product of their procreative capacities, birthing of children, and bringing up children. In the hands of medical technology, childbirth is defined as a 'medical emergency', 'an alienated labour', placing the woman at odds with her body. **Adrienne Rich** in her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution* (1976) describes her own experience of giving birth: "... The experience of lying half awake in a barbed crib, in a labor-room with other women moaning in a drugged condition, where no one comes except to do a pelvic examination or give an injection, is a classic example of alienated childbirth" (Rich, 1976, p.176). Even the mother-child relationship is dictated and codified by ambivalent patriarchal standards. The modern mothers,

pushed to a situation where they have to raise their children single-handed, are subjected to a great physical and mental stress and haunted by a sense of guilt at their inability to manage the children. But when the children grow up and leave the home, mothers suffer the alienation.

Finally, women are also alienated from their biological nature. They are alienated from their women-specific biological phases. Normal phases of their physical growth such as menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, and aging do not relate them to men and are associated with taboos. A woman's body and body parts are deemed to be valuable only as long as they satisfy men or the commercial interests in the consumer society and could be traded-off successfully. Hence women are alienated from their own body, viewing it as tainted and impure during those women-specific biological stages.

***Check Your Progress:***

*How do women suffer from different forms of alienation. Use examples from everyday life to think about these issues and develop a discussion.*

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## **5.6 PORNOGRAPHY**

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Pornography comes from the Greek 'to write about prostitution.' At its root, it has the mercantile notion of the female body as a sexual object to allure male customers. Pornography is an offshoot of the 19th century print information revolution with the advent of print technology in Europe. The period also witnessed the emergence of modern democratic states and capitalist economies with a need to promote the new political and scientific ideas among the people. Pornographic literature and engravings flourished as a distinct cultural genre because they were found to be a convenient strategy to take the new political ideas to the mass.

Today, in India, one has an easy access to different kinds of pornography: softcore, hardcore and online pornographic literature. The movies produced in Indian languages have lengthy scenes exposing semi-nudity of women within similar storylines, especially lengthy and meaningless bathroom scenes. *Debonair*, the adult magazine, displays pictures of many nude models. Various websites and forums are used for such nude exposure of women models. Though hard core pornography is banned in India, some hardcore Indian porn is available illegally in Indian markets.

### 5.6.1 Sexuality in Pornography

In course of time, pornography lost its political content and purpose and turned into a sexist, racist and misogynist medium. **Germaine Greer** in her work *The Whole Woman*, says, “The sex of the millennium is pornography” (Greer, 1991, P. 181). Pornography manipulates images of women for sexual titillation, entertainment and erotic instruction. Its elements are sadomasochism, misogyny, fascism, phallocentricism, and voyeurism. **Myrna Kostash** (1982) further defines these constituents in her article *Whose Body? Whose Self?*:

“Sadomasochism: the woman’s body is subjected to various bondages, abuses, humiliations, from which she is often seen to extract her own pleasure. Misogyny: contempt for the female and her chastisement. Fascism: the male “lover” is frequently costumed as a militaristic superman, triumphing over the female subhuman, particularly where she is non-Aryan. Phallocentricism: the pornographic scenario is organized, overwhelmingly, around the penis and the ejaculation. Voyeurism: the deployment of the woman’s body so as to excite the viewer” (Kostash, 1982, p. 46).

The pornographic representations generally carry the message that sexual violence is a pleasure to men, and that women desire and at least expect this violence.

### 5.6.2 Image Construction in Pornography

Images representing people are not created in a vacuum. Our perceptions which are different about different categories of people go into image construction. Generally, the image constructors are men in high places or powerful men. How women are viewed by these constructors and how the images are presented about women, depend on their consumption needs. **Sheila Ruth** contends that pornography satisfies the puerile interests and sexual fantasies of male consumers:

“... the official macho attitude requires that women in their dependence, timidity, gullibility, and softness, are to be used and enjoyed like a peach plucked ripe from a tree and discarded just as easily. ... Contempt blossoms into hatred; women are stupid, dangerous, wheedling. The only exceptions are those who cannot be contemplated as sexual partners—mothers and sisters, for example, or nuns” (Ruth, 1980, p. 49).

The eroticized images in pornography do not reflect the actual anatomical characteristics of women. The bodily parts of women are violated, mutilated, exaggerated or diminished or debased to constitute the fantasy of pornography. The *Hunter College Women’s Studies Collective* (1983) explains the manipulation of images of women in pornography thus:

... While the non-erotic witch-woman may consume men (the vagina is sometimes imagined to have teeth), the erotic sex object offers herself to be “eaten.” She is displayed as merchandise and popularly called “sugar,” “honey,” “dish”, “peach,” “tomato.” She may be reduced to a bodily part and called “cunt” or “pussy.” If her bodily parts are perceived as threatening, they may be rendered more harmless by being portrayed as childlike. Juvenile pinups, deprived of threatening adult characteristics, make the sex object appear more accessible, more harmless. She may be referred to by the name of small animals such as “chick,” or “bunny.” If she is perceived as being too pure to be accessible, her breasts and buttocks may be exaggerated. ... Vulnerable women, debased, in chains, and totally available to male penetration, constitute the fantasy of bad pornography (Bates et.al, 1983, p. 33).

Erotic images are key components of the mechanism for producing and maintaining male domination. Further, as Greer observes, indulgence in pornography signifies escapism from true relationships. She says that women are not the focus of pornography. Pornography is men’s denial of sex as the basis for a relationship, their rejection of fatherhood, their perpetual incontinent adolescence. It is men’s flight from woman and Greer concludes that the victims of pornography are men not women.

### 5.6.3 Pornography-cum-Bauty Industry

A woman’s body is subjected to different meanings by different cultural conditionings and these changes are highly accentuated in pornography. A number of feminists conclude that pornography is not simply a reflection of sexism and male domination, but it “nourishes sexism” (Longino, 1982). The impact of pornographic images is drastic on women. They are encouraged to strive hard to adapt themselves to these images. They are impelled to reform their own bodies to conform to male erotic expectations. For the radicals, women are subjected to social pressures to be “beautiful” so that they become qualified chattel or merchandise to be displayed and exploited. They try to imitate the images currently acceptable to male interests which sometimes result in painful and harmful contrivances like skin peeling, reshaping of the noses, fitting breasts with silicone, wearing false eyelashes and false nails, and starving at the risk of damaging their health. For socialist feminists, the promotion and sale of cosmetics and fashionable clothing to women was a divisive class-based capitalist strategy to sell more consumer goods. Liberal feminists like Betty Friedan focused on a critique of images of women in advertising which are used to promote consumerism among “New women”. Since the 1960s, the pornography-cum-beauty industry has flourished into a global industry. Powerful signals are bombarding women to reshape themselves through TV, movies, magazines, phone/cyber links, fashion shows and beauty contests held at venues ranging from small towns

to international cosmopolitan cities. In 1968, in the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, in a bid to draw the attention of the public and the press, members of the protesting feminist group symbolically tossed their bras in a garbage can. News stories erroneously reported that the women had burned their bras and the term “bra-burners” entered the media vocabulary as a pejorative for feminists (Davis, 1991, p. 107).

The sex-alluring products carry subtle and brazen sexual innuendos promoting sexual fantasies of both men and women. Women are tempted to become active collaborators in the reduction process which diminishes their value as autonomous human beings to mere sex objects and commodities. The modern women experience a beauty dilemma regarding the cosmetic consumerism as to whether the beauty products are symbols of oppression or a new pathway to power.

#### 5.6.4 Anti-Pornographic Movement

The ideology of patriarchy governs every aspect of our life. Women work in complicity with men in areas that bring shame and self-degradation to them because they are socialised and internalized by the values, attitudes and beliefs nurtured and cultured by their sexist society and its institutions. They are codified to accept the discriminating images as granted and natural.

But an anti-pornography movement emerged against pornography’s alignment with human trafficking, desensitisation, pedophilia, dehumanisation, exploitation, sexual dysfunction, and inability to maintain healthy sexual relationships. The feminists split into two opposing camps over questions about pornography, consent, sexual freedom, and the relationship of free speech to equality. Liberal feminists argued that when one is paid for sex, a person enters into a contract to give away her freedom and sexuality. Others have claimed that selling sex harms women because pornographic works could precipitate sexual assaults against women as they endorse or recommend the violation and degradation of women.

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### 5.7 PROSTITUTION

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Prostitution is not an unknown phenomenon. It has been of ancient origin and has been thriving in various forms with social sanctions. Prostitution is one of the branches of the sex industry. Estimates place the annual revenue generated from the global prostitution industry to be over \$100 billion. Associated with crimes and torture, it has become a taunting human rights problem today. In 2007, the **Ministry of Women and Child Development** reported the presence of 2.8 million sex workers in India, with 35.47 percent of them entering the trade before the age of 18 years. The number of prostitutes has also doubled in the last decade. Though China has more prostitutes than India, fewer of them are forced into prostitution against

their will. For **Kathleen Barry** (1994), a sociologist and feminist, ‘a prostitute is a woman reduced to her sexual utility’. She attaches three qualities to female sexual slavery; being trapped, having no freedom, and experiencing violence and exploitation. **Barry** also explains how for women who have only sex to sell and with no other means to sell, prostitution is an alternative.

### 5.7.1 Trafficking

You have already read about the trafficking of women in the previous Unit 3, “Racialized Body” of this block. Trafficking has become the third highest income earner after the illegal arms trade and drug trafficking. **Kristof and Wudunn** define trafficking, technically, as taking someone (by force or deception) across an international border. They quote that the U.S. State department has estimated that between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year and 80% of them are women and girls, mostly for sexual exploitation. According to them, trafficking has increased because of three reasons. Firstly, when Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, the power vacuum was filled by criminal gangs. As a result, capitalism not only created markets for rice and potatoes but also for flesh trade. Poverty and international tourist industry make millions of women and girl children cross national boundaries for commercial sex where female bodies and labour are bought and sold. Secondly, globalisation has increased the number of such sex slaves. Thirdly, because of the fear of AIDS, customers prefer young girls so that they will be less likely to be infected and also because of the myth that AIDS can be cured by sex with virgin girls (Kristof and Wudunn, 2009, pp.10-12).

According to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, trafficking is:

“...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (cited in Social Development Notes, 2009, p.1).

Trafficking of women and children is under the control of insidious Mafia groups in collusion with local police. Statistics show that the number of girl children trafficked is on the increase every year. Every day, one million children are affected in Asia alone while two million are trafficked every year across borders. Sex tourism has become a booming industry. Thailand’s

economy thrives on sex tourism. Almost 49% of the tourists come for sex with children and come mostly from East Asia, the United States of America, and Europe.

### 5.7.2 Prostitution by Choice or Force

Feminists like **Kathleen Barry**, **Catharine MacKinnon** and **Laura Lederer** hold that prostitution is not a conscious and calculated choice of women. **Dr.V.Mohini Giri**, who was the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women, India, in her analysis on the Indian situation states that there are four distinct ways why women enter into the flesh trade:

- I) Girls are kidnapped, induced, allured and sold (in many cases by parents themselves). Nearly 80-85 percent comes into prostitution through this pathway.
- II) About 10 percent are off-springs of the prostitutes- unwed or wedded. In such cases, even though the mothers do not like their daughters to follow them in their profession, the powerful nexus of Gharwalis (brothel keepers), pimps, and pahalwans (musclemen) decide otherwise.
- III) Then there is caste/community specific prostitution. Going from generation after generation, this is the type of child-prostitution which is practiced in specific areas in some communities under the gaze of the family itself.
- IV) And finally we have special types - the profession with links in some of the religious customs. Instances are Devadasis in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra, Bhavanis in Goa, Kudikars in West Coast, Johins in Andhra Pradesh, Thevaradiyar in Tamil Nadu, Basavis in Karnataka and Muralis, Jogateens and aradhinis in Maharashtra (refer Giri, 2001).

Liberal feminism which advocates individual's free will conceives prostitution as a contract in a private business transaction. On the other hand, radical feminism views a prostitute as a human being who has been reduced to a piece of merchandise. The liberal contends that a woman is free to enter into contracts. However, the radical feminist does not believe that a prostitute's desire to enter into such a "contract" is done of her own free will. Even if prostitution has been an independent decision, it is generally the result of extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, or of serious underlying problems, such as drug addiction, past trauma (especially child sexual abuse) and other unfortunate circumstances. **Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn** ( 2009, p. 5) quote one 2008 study on Indian brothels and say that out of India and Nepali prostitutes who started as teenagers, about half said they had been coerced into the brothels; women who began working in their twenties were more likely to have made the choice themselves, often



to feed their children. Those who start out enslaved often accept their fate eventually and sell sex willingly, because they know nothing else and are too stigmatized to hold other jobs.

Most suggest that valid consent to prostitution is impossible or at least unlikely. It is found out that impoverished women, women at low level of education, women from the most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in prostitution all over the world. “If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it?” asks **Catherine MacKinnon** (1987). Most prostitutes are in a very difficult period of their lives and most want to leave this occupation. **MacKinnon** (1987) argues that ‘in prostitution, women have sex with men they would never otherwise have sex with. The money thus acts as a form of force, not as a measure of consent. It acts like physical force does in rape’. For radical feminists, this is because prostitution is always a coercive sexual practice.

### 5.7.3 Decriminalisation

If prostitution is an economic exchange in the flesh trade, it calls for decriminalisation, legalisation, and normalisation of prostitution. Since the mid-1970s, sex workers across the world have organized, demanding the decriminalisation of prostitution. Sex worker activists argue that sex workers should have the same basic human rights, labour rights as other working people, equal legal protection, improved working condition and the right to travel and receive social benefits as the pension. But, **Kristof and WuDunn** (2009) do not subscribe to the legalize-and-regulate model as it simply has not worked very well in countries where prostitution is often coerced. They advocate a law enforcement strategy that pushes for fundamental change in police attitudes and regular police inspections to check for underage girls or anyone being held against their will. In 1985, feminists and sex workers developed the “World Charter for Prostitutes states that that prostitutes should be guaranteed “all human rights and civil liberties,” including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage, and motherhood, and the right to unemployment insurance, health insurance and housing” (cited in Ditmore, 2006, p.625).

Behind all these discussions lingers a sad truth, as professed by a prostitute to Kate Millett, “It is not sex the prostitute is really made to sell: it is degradation. And the buyer is not buying sexuality but power over another human being ...” (Millett, 1971, p. 88). In fact, the self-denigration and shame that millions of girls and women suffer in the brothels cannot be restored by any formal law.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Prostitution and human trafficking are existing social practices, which contribute towards the commodification of the female body. Discuss with the help of suitable examples.*

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## 5.8 BODY POLITICS

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You were introduced to the concept of body politics in the first unit of the Block, i.e., Body in Bio-medicine, which analysed the aspect of execution of power through institutions and social practices is equally relevant in the context of commodification. In the 1970s, during the second wave of feminist movement, the term 'Body Politics' was used to fight against objectification of the female body, and violence against women and girls, and the campaign for reproductive rights for women. The powers referred to body politics include institutional power expressed in government and laws, disciplinary power exacted in economic production, discretionary power exercised in consumption, and personal power negotiated in intimate relations.

'Body Politics' is a broad topic. Let us now try to understand what it means, with reference to the legal status of pornography and prostitution in India.

### 5.8.1 Legal Status of Pornography

Prostitution and distribution and publishing pornography are illegal in India and attract several penal provisions. But nothing is mentioned about accessing pornography.

- The Indian Penal Code, 1860, and the Information Technology Act, 2000, are the only laws dealing with the subject of obscenity in India. Neither the IPC nor the IT Act defines what obscenity is.
- Section 293 specifies, in clear terms, the law against Sale etc. of obscene objects to minors. **Section 292** of the **IPC, 1860**, defines obscenity as “ a book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting representation, figure or any other object, shall be deemed to be obscene if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect, or (where it comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items, is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.”

- The *Information Technology Act*, Chapter XI Paragraph 67, the Government of India clearly considers online pornography as a punishable offense.

### 5.8.2 Legal Status of Prostitution

In India, prostitution (exchanging sex for money) is legal, but related activities such as soliciting sex, operating brothels and pimping are illegal. A sex worker can be punished for soliciting or seducing in public, while clients can be punished for sexual activity in proximity to a public place.

The primary law dealing with the status of sex workers is the 1956 law, referred to as ‘The Immoral Traffic (Suppression) Act’ (SITA). According to this law, prostitutes can practice their trade privately but cannot legally solicit customers in public. Organized prostitution (brothels, prostitution rings, pimping, etc) is illegal. Unlike the case of other professions, sex workers are not protected under normal labour laws.

In practice SITA is not commonly used. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) which predates the SITA is often used to charge sex workers with vague crimes such as “public indecency” or being a “public nuisance” without explicitly defining what these consist of.

Recently, the old law has been amended as ‘The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act’ or PITA. Attempts to amend this to criminalize clients have been opposed by the Health Ministry. The main points of the PITA deal with defining and punishing sex workers, clients, pimps and babus, and brothel keepers, procuring and trafficking. Prostitution and its legal status is still a contentious issue in India.

To reduce the destructive impacts of sexual objectification and commodification of women’s bodies, one cannot depend on laws alone. Much can be done by women and men, hand-in-hand in solidarity and by informed and gender-sensitized individuals. Transformation should occur at all levels to build a healthy on man-woman relationship: individual, social, economic, political in collaboration with community, social bodies, governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Think about what we can do in writing, arts, reporting, media production, training, science and technology, school curriculum, socio-cultural practices, legal status, policies and rights, collective movements, and in our personal relationships and ideologies, to bring about positive changes in the representations of women’s bodies.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Think and write a feasible transformative strategy that can be implemented either contextually, ideologically or practically to build a better environment in the context of what you have read so far.*

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## 5.9 LET US SUM UP

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This unit has tried to capture the relative position of women to men in the booming sex market within commodities/consumer paradigm. As you have seen above, the two major and widespread social practices objectifying and dismembering female body are prostitution and pornography. They reduce a woman from a person to the most demanded sex object. The reductionism is worked through various interrelated constructs. The woman is treated as ‘the Other’, her attributes viewed in binary opposition to whatever man is, and placed in the institutionalized hierarchy as a subordinate. Images are constructed and manipulated in such a way as to objectify the whole body or fetishize different parts of the body of a woman. The woman is an outsider in this process but socialised and internalized to collaborate willingly or unwillingly and contrive her body to the dictates of the consumer. In this politics, she is alienated from the product, from the process, from other women and her Self. Though prostitution and pornography cannot be easily eradicated, they can be attenuated through collective efforts.

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## 5.10 GLOSSARY

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- Alienation** : A condition created by the capitalist mode of labour organized in such a way as to alienate the individuals from their own products, from the process of their work, from their coworkers and the non-human world.
- Commodification** : Commercialisation of an object or activity that is not normally and intrinsically regarded as a saleable product.
- Exchange value** : The production of commodities or services for sale, for the market; work as the exchange of goods or services for money or other financial considerations.

- Pornography** : Sexually explicit material consisting in graphic pictorial depictions and verbal descriptions of sexual organs and various modes of coitus.
- Sexism** : The belief that persons are superior or inferior to one another on the basis of their biology.
- The Other** : A gender dichotomy that locates women as the other of men and holds that women are different from men and therefore inferior to men; neglects strong areas in women as inessential while it views male strengths as more basic or essential.
- Trafficking** : Illicit and clandestine movements of persons across national borders, largely in developing countries and some countries with economies in transition, with the end goal of forcing women and girl children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for profit of recruiters, traffickers, and crime syndicates as well as other illegal activities related to trafficking, such as domestic labour, false marriages, clandestine employment and false adoption.
- Violence Against Women** : Any act of gender-based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Article 1 of the 'United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women' and endorsed by the 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action').

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## 5.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Discuss the process of objectification and its key constituents in relation to the commodification of body.
- 2) Examine a fashion magazine. Find the differences in the way a male body and a female body are used. What message is being conveyed to the reader? Discuss with the help of what you have learnt in this unit.

- 3) Apply the Marxian concept of Alienation to the concept of women's relation to their bodies.
- 4) How do you visualize the beauty dilemma that modern women are supposed to experience? Does commodification of body mean oppression or liberation for women? Discuss.
- 5) Imagine that you meet a prostitute who narrates her life story to you. Write a report on it to an English magazine with your own commentary at the end.

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