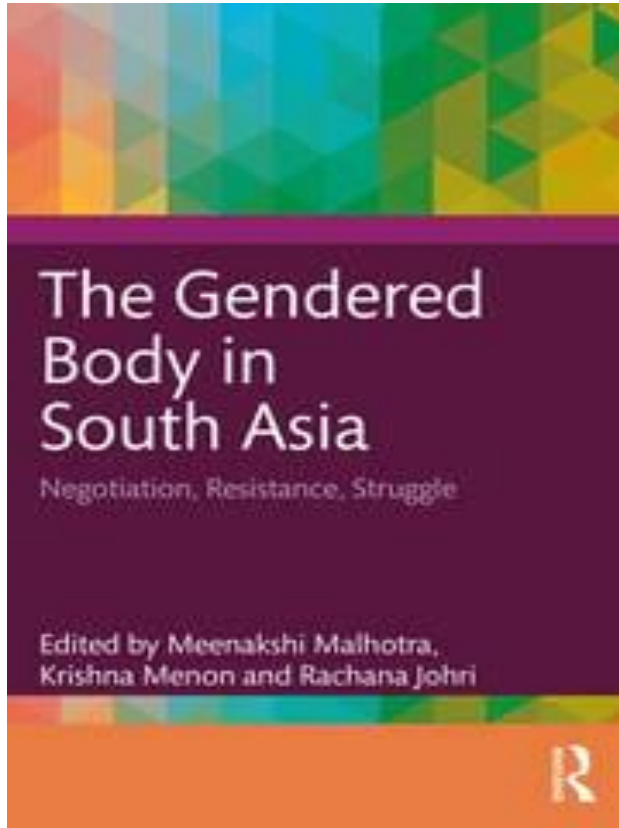


Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, and Rachana Johri (Ed.). 2024. *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle*. Routledge: London, 372 pp. ISBN: 978-1-032-70228



The essays in *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle* are important contributions to the body of work on feminism in South Asia. Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, and Rachana Joshi had come together to form a panel on this crucial topic for a conference held in Toronto in 2017, and this volume is a result of brainstorming that went into its initial conceptualisation. All three women have worked in the field of feminist studies for many years and have entered the question of gendered bodies through their diverse experiences. They have all been part of the women's protests during the crucial years of the 1980s and 1990s. Their engagement with the question of bodies and gender is not just theoretical and academic, but also informed by their feminist activism; along with this, their location as academics who have been teaching college and

university students for many years has meant that they have been reading, teaching, and researching feminist texts theoretically.

Curating an anthology of 22 essays is not an easy task and these three editors were able to do justice to it largely because of their own academic and research credentials and their network built up over the last quarter century. All of them have widely written and published in the areas of feminism and gender studies. This anthology provides a crucial resource for academics across disciplines. As the editors point out in the Introduction, most volumes on South Asian feminism do not engage principally with the question of gendered bodies; if they do discuss them, they focus on very particular questions such as those of religion and embodiment. This anthology offers a large variety of intersecting discourses and is multidisciplinary in its discussion of issues. Malhotra et. al. define their project of locating feminist politics in South Asia as one that attempts to recuperate ideas of pluralism that exist in this area but are homogenised by nation-states that relentlessly name and highlight differences. They point to the constantly changing boundaries and evolving cultures of South Asia that keep people and ideas moving, and to the need to locate the gendered body within this fluid socioeconomic and geopolitical landscape.

The editors next outline the methodology they will employ to effectively explore the multiple contexts in which the gendered body will be studied: since a single lens would be too narrow, they propose to use the “multiple and intersecting lenses of feminism.” The essays in the anthology then come from different theoretical spaces such as psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, etc. Turning their attention to the object of analysis for this anthology, the gendered body, the editors are equally rigorous in the establishment of parameters of the complexity of their use of the term. They write, “Clearly the body we refer to... is not the biological body of biomedicine but the lived, experiencing body located in a specific social context and subject to ongoing contested discourse.” They are careful to acknowledge that “the body is located at the intersection and crossroads of many identities and taxonomies.” By freeing the gendered body from fixed disciplinary grids, they have been able to curate articles that range from questions of individual, social, and national identities to citizenship and cultural location. The body can be located as the site of violence, of violent religious practices, of linguistic violence, and sexual violence. At the same time, they also open up the struggle for rights against the body, for labouring women’s rights, rights to bodily integrity and autonomy, among many other concerns. They trace their feminist genealogy to the legacy of Marxist/socialist materialism concerning the body specifically in India.

The lengthy Introduction traces the history of feminist engagement with the body beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and the writings of the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, moving towards Judith Butler's work on gender fluidity in the 1990s and the third wave intersectional feminist movement. The Introduction is an exhaustive entry into feminist readings for the beginner student as well as the more seasoned researcher and everyone in between. It gives the reader the sociohistorical and pedagogical context in which the project of the gendered body in South Asia is conceived and puts into perspective the chapters that follow.

The 22 essays in this volume are divided into six sections: Negotiation, Struggle, Resistance, Protest, Critique, and Representations and New Directions. The editors write in the Introduction that the enormous ground covered in these chapters demonstrates that "the body is not a settled or a priori and given identity, but discursively constructed, shaped and moulded. Thus, the psychic and social construction of the body, the cultural vocabularies of shame and honour which prevail in South Asian societies, its representation in literary and cultural expression, its museumization form the warp and weft of this book." The chapters in the 'Negotiation' section look at the multiple demands made on women's bodies in their daily lives and the way they respond to these demands. These include the demands of the maternal and of mothering, the violence of the body during the COVID 19 pandemic, and the pressures of contemporary neoliberal economies. The next section, "Struggle" deals with the struggles experienced by women as embodied subjects in their lived reality in South Asia. The chapters include issues from covering and uncovering the body in the name of religion, the reproducing of body that deals with abortion due to sex determination technology, to the "shame" of the dark-skinned body. The segment on "Resistance" explores the defying of the imposition of gendered stereotypes and defining norms on the body through poetry, mythology, and narratives of the subaltern. The essays in this section range from Pakistani feminist poetry to a reading of the iconic Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," to issues of the body and BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism). The "Protest" segment highlights voices of protest against norms, and has essays on recent protests in India, including an insightful conversation among feminist academics about the protest at Shaheen Bagh which visibilised the bodies of Muslim women, and on female leadership in campus protests around CAA and NRC.

Critiques looks at the vulnerability of the disabled woman's body, at the body on which violence is perpetrated, and at bodies that refuse to be disciplined. The final section, "Representations and New Directions" focuses on Literature

and Cultural Studies from different spaces. This section has essays looking at the violence against women that marked Partition, state violence in post-colonial South Asian societies, the phenomenon of child marriage, and the post humanist construction of the body. The segregation of essays into five sections and clustering diverse issues under headings that have overlapping concerns works effectively to order the vast material this anthology presents into a coherent structure. The conversation format also enables dialogue, debate and discussion. It represents a truly collaborative approach. It is a rich resource for researchers in this area, but crucially the material offered here enables entries into areas uncharted before for further research.

Malhotra, Menon, and Johri have used their experiences of long years of being in academia to pull together an impressive array of academics and activists in the field of feminism to gather some of the best minds to write different chapters of this book. From young researchers and academics to those who have been thinking and writing about these issues for several decades, the editors' real labour of love in this anthology is the bringing together of so many insightful feminist voices under one roof.

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