

# INTRODUCTION

This thesis proposes a genealogical enquiry of discursive bodies, sexualities, gendered performativity, and subversive gender performances, by engaging with critical theories pertaining to these elements to focus on the theoretical appropriation of the critical idea of subversion to develop a notion of *flaw* with(in) the corporeality of the body, and also within the mechanism of discourse, to analyse the imposition of the flaw on the physicality of the subjected body that allows the body to surpass its materiality to be subsequently appropriated by regulatory regimes of hegemonic discourses.

Flaws are perverse implantations on the body, even within literary texts, and marked with hostility. It is noticeable, exposed, unprotected, and vulnerable to the heteronormative gaze. In general, though, a flaw can be considered as a violation in the continuity of symmetrical forms that conform to the pervasive regulations and conventions imposed by discursive formations in the specific historical conditioning of a particular historical period that repels our eyes in a normalising representational mechanism, and various means are deployed to ascertain its enforced inclusion or exclusion, disappearance, and eventual erasure from the social, cultural, and political domains. Thus, the body can be, and often is, appropriated and marked as flawed, but, at the same time, the flaw is not simply a physical handicap or a signature deformity because it can constitute a way of living the body in its own terms, as well as it can also be a failure to live the body according to a heteronormative matrix, along with a refusal of the body to live with the stipulations of heteronormativity. What happens when a flaw is imposed on a body to politicise its corporeality to appropriate the resulting anomalies? The imposition of a flaw, a defect, an anomaly, a violation of the normalising strictures of dominating hegemonies, over and within and into the corporeality of the body, is a politically motivated act to relegate

the mere physicality of the human body outside the normative arrangement of social and cultural strictures. Clowns, dwarfs, giants, and witches are grouped together with deformed human beings with medical conditions; women with as much sexual desire as men are flawed in specific socio-cultural contexts in specific historical circumstances; women with androgynous attributes are flawed; men with the manifestations of feminine attributes are flawed; women showing greater physical strength are flawed. They are as much flawed as Rembrandt's midgets, Francis Bacon's and Egon Schiele's grotesque human figures. What, then, is the nature of the construction and production of this flaw, and how are these fabrications appropriated to politicise the bodies, to render the bodies into compliant subject positions? How does the imposition of flaws modify the body so that it becomes transformed, reified, and eventually sanctioned as the manifestation of an immutably culturally flawed body? And how, in that process, does the corporeality of the body adapt and reconcile to the normative appropriation of gendered subjectivities that are conducive to exploitation? How does that affect the always already interpreted identities of the corporeal bodies within the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality? Is it at all possible to appropriate one's own identity, to reinterpret one's own body, to counter and resist a dominating imposition? Is it possible to forge newer identities? Does the appropriation of newer identity necessitate the tacit approval of regulatory regimes? Do the regulatory regimes approve of such reinterpretation and reconfiguration of identity to create an 'other' to safeguard its domination? Is it possible, at all, to perform one's gender in an interventionary way in a normative and thoroughly repressive environment?

What then is a flaw? It can be a flaw in corporeality, in physical deformity. It can also be a flaw in a way of doing, performing, acting out one's gender. If gender can be theorised as constituted in action, then acting out one's body, or acting on one's body, creates newer interpretations of gender in social, cultural, and political contexts, in specific historical

conditioning, where such an act of doing one's gender in a parodically disruptive fashion can be construed as subversive and threatening to the established hegemony if the action or set of actions are demarcated as not safe, or non-normative, to the order of the law. The question is not if the action or actions are independent from the instituted or institutional predominance, or are created by the very strictures that allow a consolidation of transgressive forces that challenge the established norms, but if such subversive acts, the pulsations of force contradictory to the dominating force fields, can cause interventions, and if so the how do such interventions and arbitrations work. Are they to be simply regarded as counterforces, possible among many, along the heteronormative axis? Can the flaw be considered as an event that reverses the relationships of concomitant forces that act upon the flaw? The mere action of acting out one's gender that does not conform to the established regulations points towards a proliferation of alternative forces; and the political objective one might read into it is that by enacting one's gender, and burgeoning the possibilities of alternative forces, such subversive gendered bodies render the binary of a juridical power relation untenable. By acting out gender in a different way, by challenging the established model of heteronormativity, it renders the juridical binary model of the oppressor and the oppressed useless.

The emergence of gender studies in the last decades of twentieth century overlaps with feminism but also extends well outside it. In its broadest interpretation, gender studies can be taken as an umbrella term encompassing all manner of studying gender – women's studies, feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, sexuality studies, and also male studies. With the structural and poststructural critical re-evaluation of contemporary critical analyses in the 1960s and 1970s, newer interrogations of gender took place all over the world. In France, especially, feminists like Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray developed systems of analysis which were radically different to that which had been practised in the Anglophone world. Sexuality as a specific field of study within gender studies to be differentiated from the

liberal-humanist first and second wave of feminist movement was first pointed out in the work of anthropologist Gayle Rubin, in a particularly influential essay, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (1984). With a nod towards the best-known work of France's most famous feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), Monique Wittig rejected the biological explanations for inequalities and differences between the sexes. All 'naturalising' explanations for the differences between men and women, according to Wittig, presume that the foundation of sex difference is heterosexuality, which she redefined as a tacit, unquestioned, and enforced social contract. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has explored the phenomenon of 'homosociality', a term she applied to the social bonds formed between persons of the same sex. Michel Foucault, arguably the most influential French thinker in the second half of twentieth century, has provided, through his close analysis of the exclusionary politics deployed in specific historical epochs to investigate the interrelations between power, knowledge, and subject, an indispensable theoretical methodology that informs much of recent discussions about gender and sexuality. Judith Butler has explored how gendered identity is socially produced through repetitions of ordinary daily activities, and her works have opened up newer possibilities for gender studies that circumvent exclusionary gender norms in their portrayal of socially and culturally acceptable gendered identities. In these recent works, the aim now is to construct a critique, not just of the representations of women's experience in social texts, but of the nature of all gendered subjectivities and the language through which they are constructed and symbolised. The newer developments focus primarily on a self-conscious concern with *difference*, engaging with informed philosophical critiques on the interrelations between discursive bodies, subject formations, and the role of agency to politically intervene into the overarching hegemonic predominance of regulatory regimes that thrive on juridical notions of power, and on a concern predicated both on the poststructuralist models of language and subjectivity that inform gender studies as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

If sex is regarded as an anatomical facticity and gender a cultural construction, then the body becomes a site of multiple exchanges and negotiations within a given cultural context. Because a body can never stand outside cultural and linguistic realm to assume a transcendental ontological existence, and because even the sexed body stands always already interpreted, this enquiry will focus on the situated body within the grid of interlocking discourses, on the justifiability of maintaining the binary of sex and gender, and also on the body's refusal to remain only as a passive medium, as a malleable surface of multidiscursive social and political inscriptions. This enquiry, therefore, takes gender as a corporeal locus of cultural meanings, both received and innovated or actively reinterpreted, and examines how gender receives sexuality and organises past, present, and future cultural norms to situate itself with(in) and through those norms as an active style of living one's body. Since an active style of living one's body, appropriating or fashioning an identity that is implicitly or explicitly sexual, requires 'choice' with limited possibilities in culture-specific locations in a given historical period, this study will also focus on the problematics involved in enforcing/enforced gendered performativity to enquire whether such performativity works in complicity with a hegemonic heterosexual matrix.

A theory of discourse postulates that objects and actions are laden with interpretive possibilities, and that their interpretations are the outcome of historically conditioned systems of regulations. By invoking the category of discourse, this study will refer to historically conditioned organisations of regulations that construct the relational identities of objects and subjects. The production of discourses requires the deployment of power and a subsequent organisational arrangement of the relationships between various social and cultural operatives; they are also contingent and historical fabrications that are exposed and unprotected to the forces excluded in their construction, and, therefore, susceptible to the effects of consequences beyond their jurisdiction. From a tactical perspective, discourses are the instruments for various

forces to promote their relevance, advantages, and projects, while also creating the space for resistive counter-strategies to develop.

A genealogical enquiry is sceptical of grand teleological narratives; instead, it proposes enquiry of accounts based on specific ‘little’ causes, operating independently of one another, with no overall outcome in view. Thus, a genealogical description of sexuality will, instead of finding its legal imprint in social structures or moral attitudes, probe a whole set of discursive practices at work to enquire about what Michel Foucault calls ‘a field of possible enunciations’ in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that allows a certain way of speaking about it.<sup>2</sup> Genealogy as an analysis of historical *descent* rejects the uninterrupted continuities and stable forms which have been features of traditional history in order to reveal the complexity, fragility, and contingency surrounding historical events. Such an analysis is associated with the critical engagement of appreciating the inexhaustible nature of interpretation and reinterpretation as the project is not committed to uncover hitherto concealed transcendental meanings beneath the architecture of ideality, but is concerned to unearth only more layers of interpretations which through gradual accumulation of reiterations have achieved the form of idealised, self-justified, and necessary truth, and as such it is the task of genealogy to transgress. A genealogical enquiry, then, far from effecting a transhistorical continuum, locates a multiplicity of ‘origins’, identifies the subtle accidents and imperceptible deviations to problematise the valuative piousness of the desire to couple ‘origin’ with ‘truth’.

Thus, this enquiry will focus on the methodology of a genealogical enquiry, the theoretical complexities involved in a discursive subjectification of the body, the constructed nature of gender through performative enactments, and the strategic location of agency within a subjected body for a possible political intervention to destabilise established hegemonic discourses, along with a discussion of a tentative selection of three texts — Kamal Kumar Majumdar’s short story ‘Mallikabhar’ published in 1951, Ismat Chughtai’s short story ‘Lihaf’

published in 1942, and the frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights* — to locate diverse ‘origins’ of departures (e.g. the enforced invisibility of an opening of the blanket in ‘Lihaf’, the inaudible noise of broken bangles in ‘Mallikabahr’, the three performative betrayals in *The Arabian Nights*) to examine critically the so-called foundational categories of sex, gender, and body, and to explore the political stakes that try to maintain such categories as valuative binaries by designating an ‘origin’ and ‘cause’ for each.<sup>3</sup> Also, one object of this study will be to problematise the validity of a volitional act of choosing, organising, and reinterpreting gendered identity or multiple gendered identities, and to focus on whether such volitional acts are always already interpreted or not within the implicit heterosexual matrix of specific sociocultural and linguistic setting in specific historical conditioning. Adoption of any subversive gendered performativity always foregrounds itself against, or in relation with, other patriarchally sanctioned gendered performativities to create problematic binary formation with its implicit power-generative hierarchic configurations. This enquiry will try to analyse such binary formation to explore whether the method itself of conceptualising a subversive gendered performativity/sexual identity into a binary of oppositional terms, especially in culture-specific locations in specific historical periods, can be shown to work in complicity with a hegemonic heterosexual matrix that supposedly creates a field of subversive gendered performances in order to maintain its dominating ontological status.

The First Chapter of this work focuses on the methodologies adopted by a genealogical enquiry by first discussing an essay written in 1873 by Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-moral Sense’, where, attempting a polemical attack on the foundational nature of truth, he questions the assumption of a pre-existing subject who must precede the production of concepts.<sup>4</sup> The creation of concepts is inevitably aided by language which, Nietzsche claims,

is itself metaphorical by nature; marked with dissimulation, and with the inherent arbitrariness of the reproduction of meaning of words that at best can be called tautological, they cannot be a reliable guide for the formulation of concepts and demarcating boundaries of truth. As manufactured through the suspect linguistic conventions, it is meaningless to compare concepts, privileging one concept over another, because they cannot be measured through the benchmark of fictitious 'true' perceptions. Truth for Nietzsche, in this mode of enquiry, appears to be a human invention that has attained the functionality of authoritatively binding transcendental solidity through repeated reifications over time. This genealogical mode of enquiry that unmasks the fabrications of the actual discreteness of words, and the arbitrary attachment of words and concepts that defines linguistic rules to forge preternatural beliefs and conventions that come to be construed as conceptual truths, also creates the possibility of questioning the politics of creating these concepts and maintaining them for political and hegemonic advantages, as these concepts eventually become powerful instruments in the regulations of hegemonic forces to dominate others.

Briefly surveying the appropriation of this genealogical mode of enquiry in the twentieth century poststructuralist critical thought, the First Chapter also analyses Michel Foucault's amplification of genealogy as a critical tool for a hermeneutical approach by discussing two of his seminal essays, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', and 'Nietzsche, Freud, Marx'.<sup>5</sup> In Foucault's reappraisal, the Nietzschean critique of interpretation has now attained the radical possibility of the inexhaustibility of interpretation, along with a revaluation of the originary essence of the sign, so that the efforts of hermeneutics have now become an infinite task. Moving beyond the rigid structure of binaries, Foucault welcomes this proliferation of interpretive possibilities where the sign appears as always already interpreted, and waiting for a critical intervention to be further dismantled for more interpretation. Also, for Foucault, the genealogical enquiry must be able to diagnose the marks and inscriptions of historical



conditioning on the corporeal body, how it is entirely imprinted by history along with its devastations and resistances, to be able to link these with discursive formations of power. For him, the object of the disparate causes that effect history is the body.

Discourses are formed by different sets of regulatory practices, combinations, and coalitions of institutions and foundations, but they are at the same time designed to maintain and endorse those rules and regulations that produce the discursive subjects. The Second Chapter begins with this notion of discourse found in Foucault's earlier explorations into the concept. Foucault's later works supplement this emergence of discursive formations of various institutions with a greater emphasis on the role of power relations and knowledge formation, and the relationship between the regulatory forces of power in the production of discourse and its subjectification of bodies, where he is more interested in exploring the possibilities of exclusion from hegemonic dominations. The second segment of the Second Chapter focuses primarily on the role of exercising authoritative power in inscribing the body into its controlling mechanism and apparatus to constrain it and to make it a discursive subject through a close reading of Foucault's introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*, that shows how the subject of sexuality is transformed into a proliferative discourse within the hegemonic exercise of power to creatively engage in constructing newer modes of configurations of desire that impinge on the body to modify it corporeally.

The structural constraints that subject the body and its sexuality should, in this theoretical conception of discourse, also include the possibility of reinterpreting the body in a creative way, to translate a body that is not docile and not in conformity with regulatory regimes, to reinscribe this deviant body in newer structures of regulations to appropriate the subversively flawed body. While denying the exteriority of resistances, Foucault maintains that there can only be possibilities of the plurality of resistances within the relationship of powers that he claims are the necessary conditions of discourse.

The Third Chapter discusses the formation of corporeal subject within what Foucault calls the juridical mode of power through a critical analysis of Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as a performative act of enacting, doing, one's gender. Becoming a gender, by enacting a set of performative acts, is a creative project of interpreting cultural reality with all its deterrents, prohibitions, scripted and sanctioned recommendations. Butler's critical intention is to create trouble for reinforced hegemonic gender hierarchies with the performative aspect of gender to show that the preconceived notions of gender and subjectivity are performatively constructed. She challenges the binary of sex and gender to postulate the concept of gender as a fabrication through a discursive procedure that establishes the naturalness of sex as pre-discursive, so that it can produce the notion that the corporeal body becomes a natural surface on which the cultural imprints of gender can take place. The body itself, therefore, is a construction because it does not have cultural intelligibility prior to the signifying marks of gender. Through a theoretical intervention, then, the body can be reformulated, as the chapter tries to show, not as a passive medium but as a contested site capable of transformations. The body generates its significations and interpretations through the relationships of the signifiatory processes; in other words, gender is not a set of culturally and socially imposed attributes, but it is a relational term that is produced through the relationships between socially and culturally constituted subjects in specific contexts and in specific historical conditions. Following the Nietzschean formulation of there is no doer behind a particular deed in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it can be suggested that the expressions of gender, and the social and cultural assignation of its manifestation, do not require a pre-given culturally approved gendered subject.<sup>6</sup> The gendered subject is performatively produced through the very expressions that are supposed to be its effects.

If the mundane little acts, the stereotyped always already available acts that do not have a subject behind the enactment of those performative acts, create the socially and culturally

acceptable forms of gender, then how does this performatively constituted gender create gendered identity? A transcendental identity cannot pre-exist the gendered identity because the gendered identity is always in a state of flux, in a process of becoming, and its very process of perpetual self-fashioning into an intelligible and corporeal manifestation that conforms to the hegemonic heteronormative grid of intelligibility opposes the idea of a core identity from which any gendered identity can be made intelligible. Chapter Four discusses the problematics involved in conceiving the interdependency of the notions of gender, identity, agency and subjectivity to suggest the theoretical possibility of a political intervention to strategically locate the agency within the relationships of flawed bodies to counter hegemonic heteronormativity for a proliferation of these imposed categories. Certain reformulations of identity cannot coexist within regulatory norms through which the gendered identities acquire acceptability because the juridical strictures deem these flawed identities as logical aberrations. But the consistencies of their existence, their persistence and proliferation necessitate critical opportunities to expose the constructed nature of the foundational categories of sex, gender, identity, subjectivity, and agency proscribed by the hegemonic regulatory regimes, and, therefore, open up the possibilities of discordant, flawed, gender disorder.

If gender is constituted and substantiated by the repeated enactments of a set of discrete acts, then the constitution and substantiation of corporeal embodiment is also a constructed identity which is at best a performative accomplishment. In the same way as gender, identity can never be a finished attribute; it is always open to resignification and reinterpretation. The gendered self is produced in the contingent relations between the performative acts, and when there is a theoretical and political possibility to act differently, creatively restructuring and resignifying a flawed corporeality, the subversive, parodic repetition exposes the fabrication of the essence of a pre-existing transcendental identity and the deviousness of its politically suspect construction. In a strategic move to renegotiate the possibility of an agency, to create

a theoretical space for critical intervention, it can be suggested that the subject is not *entirely* determined by discourse, so that one can locate the agency through the relationships of the variability of performative acts that are parodic and subversive in nature, that opens up possibilities of newer configurations of gender that might enact disagreeable and dissonant performative deeds to creatively assign incoherent subject positions to dissolve rigid binaries and proliferate the possibilities of sanctioned gendered identities to defy heteronormative injunctions.

## NOTES

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2. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972)
  3. Kamal Kumar Majumdar, 'Mallikabhar', in *Galpasamagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1990, 1992); Ismat Chughtai, 'The Quilt', in *Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings*, trans. M Asaduddin (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001, 2009); *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, in 3 Volumes, trans. Malcolm C Lyons and Ursula Lyons (London: Penguin, 2009)
  4. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-moral Sense', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B Leitch, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: W W Norton and Company, 2001), pp. 874-884
  5. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D Faubion (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 369-391; Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Freud, Marx' in *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D Faubion (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 269-278
  6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library Edition, 2000), p. 481