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Somaesthetics in Rajasthan: The Female Body Between Tradition And Modernity

-Case study of Hindu women from Jodhpur and Udaipur

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Abstract

Caught between tradition and modernity, India has increasingly taken women and their status into account since the 1970's. That raises the question of the conditions of Indian women empowerment. How are Indian women in Rajasthan part of a movement going on for a long time but still debated today – feminism and the affirmation of women's political power in the broad sense (affirmation of their identity, their legitimacy within the public space and their will to assert themselves as equal to men in a society which is still strongly influenced by patriarchal norms)?

Following interviews and observations in the region, the somatic style appears to be the favourite medium through which women assert their political and social role and presence in the public space of Rajasthan. The ritual preparation of the body takes place in a singular temporality, as if the woman had to stop in time so as to observe herself and turn her body into a tool aimed at assertiveness and empowerment. So, is the consciousness of the body and of its potentialities the base of the process of empowerment? And does this process contribute to create a contradictory heterotopia – in Foucauldian terms – i.e. the specific spatiality, temporality and rhythm of somaesthetics as it unfolds in order to proclaim the power of women? We show how women, growing aware of the power their bodies contain, can now invest the public space and the political sphere in a country traditionally governed by men.

Keywords: Empowerment, Somaesthetics, Women, Body, Politics, Public space, Observation

Themes: Human rights of women, gender equality, empowerment, women's activism

INTRODUCTION

Female style, seen from a traditional viewpoint appears to be entirely in tension between *bhakti* (devotion, on the side of tradition) and *shringar* (eroticism, which, in its contemporary form, no longer refers to the texts of ancient India, but rather to a whole Westernized modernity). The key point seems to be nudity, not in the strictly physical sense, but rather in a broader sense of deprivation in the social sphere. What is style and what are its real stakes, beyond the simple desire to become prettier, in a society where women's position is marked by ambiguity (modernity / tradition; veiling / unveiling) and patriarchy?

Style is a particularly ambiguous notion and becomes more and more questionable.

Women in India have to belong to two opposite worlds: that of the external public and that of the inner intimacy. They must constantly find a balance between staging their bodies, which they must half reveal, and concealing those same bodies according to the criteria of tradition, modesty and shame, well known in Indian society. Between the desire to impose their own style, obligation to comply with the rules of life in society and the very ambiguous place they occupy, Indian women

have no choice but to duplicate themselves – to create, as it were, a second body, both physical (and that is the whole sense of adornment) and imaginary; this second body allows them to be both wives in the intimate sphere and women in the public sphere, real women and dreamed women, dressed woman and natural women, unique women and traditional women (Fig. 1).

As shown by the French anthropologist M. Mauss, the body techniques that Indian women use are similar to scenic forms as they are orally transmitted, through observation as much as imitation and repetition. Between staging and tradition, between conscious and unconscious techniques, between artifice and sincerity, Indian women enter the world through daily attitudes. Identity, both collective and individual, is thus constructed when they learn gestures and behaviors, that is to say when they learn how to act as women – how to become women, to paraphrase S. de Beauvoir. These two learning processes thus require the assimilation of specific body techniques, rituals, traditions and habitus, each of these connected with the other ones, which can be somehow compared to learning a sacred dance.

According to Mara Viveros Vigoya[1], intersectional feminism is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a woman's social and political identities (race, class, sexuality, religion, physical appearance etc.) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. So as women's experiences vary due to these elements, I chose to study a precise group of women and to use the plural to speak about them as I care to take into consideration all those differences. This paper aims at examining how Hindu women of Vaishya caste in Jodhpur and Udaipur use their bodies in rituals (whether religious rituals or simple daily rituals such as dressing up or making up) as well as within the public space, and how this know-how influences the daily constitution of their identity and their inclusion in society – a changing society where the norms of politics must be redefined. The ritual preparation of the body takes place in a singular temporality, as if women had to stop in time so as to observe themselves and turn their bodies into tools aimed at assertiveness and empowerment. So, is the consciousness of the body and of its potentialities the base of the process of *empowerment*? And does this process contribute to create a contradictory *heterotopia* – in Foucauldian terms – i.e. the specific spatiality, temporality and rhythm of somaesthetics as it unfolds in order to proclaim the power of women?



The question, therefore, is that of a double body – this created body that is added to the natural matrix body or sometimes supplements it – and the conditions of its formation, its effectiveness in the socio-cultural context of Rajasthan. Indeed, how do the body techniques of Rajasthani women participate in creating multiple avatars of Indian women (who already are seen as a complex group of different social classes) – a little like gods –, how are these avatars constituted around a dialectic between concealment and unveiling (between eroticism and devotion), and how do they allow to renew the political image of the female body in a perspective of rising feminism? We examine the individual and political spheres and the way these two spheres intertwine in the public space to create new frameworks, between tradition and modernity.

Fig. 1, Working Woman, Udaipur, 12 February 2018, © Marie Hoffner

THE END OF TRADITION? ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING MODERNITY

1. Many traditions, many meanings

The notion of tradition has several meanings – some consensual, others a little more opaque. G. Balandier gives a first level of understanding of the term, according to which the somatic tradition of Rajasthan is an eminently patriarchal framework in which female bodies must find their place, their role and their way of being and showing themselves, taking care not to go beyond what is tolerable. This definition stresses the idea of modernity as a break, an element that lies beyond the boundaries of tradition, defined as what is desirable and acceptable in given time and place. Such a break appears to be irreversible, which explains the rise of traditionalist, nationalist movements in India, based on the fear of losing both a cultural identity and, more prosaically, the stranglehold on the somatic behavior of women in the country. However, Balandier recalls that this first definition is very binary and that it seems to admit a fixed principle of tradition that is not really in line with social realities. Indeed, structural change is needed for a modern society to be born, but in any modern society there is a part of what is commonly called "tradition".

According to G. Lenclud [ii], traditional events are of first interest to the ethnologist. In the line of Hobsbawm and Ranger [iii], G. Lenclud explains indeed that tradition as perceived by the ethnologist is part of a cultural representation that is a consensus and does not necessarily go without saying. It is a construct of time and history. Indeed, many testimonies point to a continual reincorporation of tradition in a globalized world that tends to modernize. This is what Neha, 25 years old, said when I showed her a painting by Shilo Shiv Suleman photographed in the streets of Benares, then a photo of the artist herself:

You can see she is a modern girl. Her hair is untidy, she wears overalls like Parisian girls. But her jewels are traditional - they are nomadic jewels typical of our culture! It's a very traditional modernity, that's what makes our style today ... I love her tashan (style).[iv]

However, other testimonies point rather to a modernity that gradually fits into tradition, at a moderate pace: *besharam*, *gandi ladki* – these are the terms inspired by the artist to Sangeeta, 35 years old, for whom the style of the young Bengali woman is akin to a provocation, a desire to arouse the eye (a particular look that a decent woman should not look for). Sangeeta admits though the positive aspect of the young Bengali artist's work as she is fighting through her art for women to live fearless:

The work is good. We need more women like her. But I don't think people will listen to a woman who is wearing this kind of clothes. I think it doesn't serve the cause.[v]

The somatic style then seems to be integral to the claims and messages that feminists want to convey in society.



Fig. 2, Meenakshi, an image of a traditional modernity, Udaipur, 8th February 2019, © Marie Hoffner

The mobile phone, a powerful and undeniable symbol of the modern world, may well be part of the body, and of practices that it often expands.

This photograph (Fig. 2) greatly amuses Sangeeta as she reviews the different pictures that I took between my arrival in Rajasthan and my second interview with her:

I really like the color of the sari. But what is funny is that she holds her baby in one hand and her mobile in the other: it is culture shock – or time shock, I don't really know. [vi]

Without necessarily using the terms we are trying to define here, Sangeeta evokes all the themes contained in this photograph taken by chance: it is the picture of a woman dressed in a traditional way, anchored in her role as a mother – given by patriarchal tradition – and who possesses at the same time the simplest and most significant attribute of modernity. Without realizing it, Sangeeta also raises the question of time – a prerequisite for the notion of tradition as we shall see below – but also that of modernity as it often appears to the eyes of Indian youth, i.e. the result of the openness to the world and the visibility from the West. Without really meaning it, she defines modernity as a form of exoticism, of novelty coming from elsewhere that she tries to appropriate.



Fig. 3, Sunita and her husband, Jodhpur, 3 March 2018, © Marie Hoffner

The notion of tradition thus opens up to the idea of a position and a movement in time. It is a form of permanence of the past in the present; a constant vestige of history still active in a society in motion; the still relevant legacy of a past world that is clearly over. Tradition can also be something old that persists in a modern world in an unchanged or almost unchanged way – in particular terms and conditions that would be transferred into a new context. It would be a "sliding object from the past to the present". However, tradition does not reflect the whole past but results from a cultural selection operated over the ages.

Tradition is thus the place of a certain mode of transmission – often cultural and established in a particular way. It is indeed the privileged place of the transmission of unique body techniques – draping of the sari, use of oils, choice of jewels and make-up, ritual gestures, *solah sringar* – of which Rajasthani women are particularly proud:

I am proud to wear ghunghat, sindoor, bindi, nose jewel... it is a part of my culture and a part of me. I feel happy when I wear all those adornments.[vii]

As G. Lenclud recalled, the very word *tradition* comes from Latin *traditio*, which refers less to the object passed than to the act of transmission itself. Tradition is what is transmitted from generation to generation, primarily through orality. Tradition seems to postulate a predisposition to representation, to imitation. Tradition would thus be an object, in a broad sense (myth, story, clothing, ritual etc.), which remains unchanged in a context conducive to change: actually, it is precisely because modernity exists and settles down so powerfully that tradition takes its whole magnitude. "Tradition is the absence of change in a context of change." [viii] Tradition arises from the relation to time. Time is abstracted from the movement in the space of material entities – it is inseparable from space and movement. Time and space are the same thing, with motion as their common substance – they are generated by comparisons of movements. Tradition is thus defined by modernity, but also by a certain knowledge of the history, more or less ancient, of the practices under study. The other important idea raised by G. Lenclud is continuity. Indeed, tradition, as mentioned above, is what survives in a world in motion: it is the mark of continuity, that is to say the possibility of two simultaneous temporalities – two logics that entangle each other.

Thus, every so-called "traditional" object undergoes changes – the notion of individuation elaborated by G. Simondon makes it possible to understand this by envisaging that each woman slightly modifies the traditional body techniques and appropriates them in a singular way, necessarily marked by the movement of modernity – and by what makes her who she is (social class, family

context, caste etc.). Just as the same ritual never takes place identically in two different temples or two days in a row, women's body techniques vary from person to person, from one day to another, from one occasion to another: they vary on a background of tradition, with the constant addition of a little touch of modernity, more and more significant over the years. Tradition, according to orthodoxy, is a kind of state of conservation; actually, it turns out to be quite malleable, subject to variations – less fixed in reality than in the consensual definitions. Tradition is modeled like clay: it is a kind of starting point from which the style of the object – here the body – is constantly reinvented. However, the boundary between modernity and tradition is blurred by such a definition, since it seems impossible – and meaningless – to define a degree of conservation or transformation of an object in order to distinguish what we would call "traditional" from what we would not. Thus, the forms of tradition vary, but the message, the testimony remains the same.

To help her think about herself, about her body and its stakes, I asked Tulsi (Fig. 4) if she could draw herself in a few minutes – a drawing that did not need to be precise, not even beautiful, but which aimed to see what elements of herself she retained ; what elements of herself she thought of staging and what parts of her body attracted, according to her, the attention of the others.



According to her, her body was all day long exposed in a market (Sardaar Market of Jodhpur) which she seemed to be part of – as if she was part of the environment in which she spent her days. I think that there is an aesthetic experience that is played through the body – an experience that may promote the social interaction between people. Her drawing was striking: most women who had kindly agreed to do this exercise generally drew the main traits of their faces (even their necks, but they rarely drew anything lower than the chest) – eyes, nose, mouth, Bindi etc. But the precision that the young woman showed was surprising:

Should I also draw my phul, my earrings?
Does my tattoo count too?[ix]

Fig. 4, Tulsi in the Sardaar Market of Jodhpur, 1 March 2019, © Marie Hoffner

The tattoo, the jewel, the Bindi, the adornment directly inserted into the skin – are all those elements parts of the body or are they just a kind of growth? I told her to draw according to her inspiration and Tulsi chose to draw everything. Absolutely everything. The young woman is not only seen as a nose, a mouth and a breast; she also sees herself as a fairly salient set of bones with a suntanned skin. When I asked her about her drawing, she simply answered:

I do not know. You asked me to make a drawing that looks like me. But with a nose and a mouth and a Bindi, I'm just an Indian woman you met on the street. There, with these weird cheekbones and those bones that lift my skin under my neck... It's me, you know?[x]

As she said these words, she leaned her head backwards to better show me the details of her neck. And she was right: a whole new dimension of the female body was now revealed to me. Indeed, if my preparatory work largely deals with adornments and gestures, then what about the shape of the body and thousands of small elements – like bones? The skin is elastic and takes the particular shape of what is underneath; what cannot be seen nor felt yet makes our body what it is.

My face is like this... I have too many bones and dark skin... It's a detail, it's nothing, but without it, that's not who I am – we all have the same body apart from that. Well, my drawing is weird... It looks like the bones that are under my

skin are actually above... I look like a rakshasi! After, don't ask me to think about everything in my body: I wouldn't know what to say![xi]

What Tulsi teaches me is that tradition makes her look and feel like an Indian woman, but she wants to be herself, not only a part of a cultural and exotic image of India. Then what about the presentation of oneself in public the space when one is aware of one's peculiarities whether or not they are accurate? Is this awareness of the importance of hidden details the key to a more successful self-presentation, more effective in terms of "taking power" in a society that is still eminently patriarchal?

But what about the way to structure public space? Indeed, the position of women is always complex in the Indian traditional Hindu society: abused but protected, beloved but disparaged etc. However, the separation of male and female bodies in some public spaces enlightens us about this complex construction of a female identity. Indeed, despite of the multiplicity of women, it seems that a female identity arises from a kind of solidarity. For example, when I went to the main temple of Eklingji (Udaipur), I was accompanied by a man. Everything took place according to traditional rituals: arrival at the temple, removal of our shoes, purchase of floral offerings. Then, two lines took shape: a very short one, women and their daughters, and a much longer one, men and their sons. With my garland of flowers, I saw a young woman in a blue sari, the *pallu* on the top of her skull, the *sindoor* finely traced in her hair. She carried a little girl in her arms and held the hand of an older child. The doors opened and women started walking. For the sake of discretion, I observed the slightest facts and gestures of the young woman who preceded me, slightly nervous at the idea of making a false movement when I arrived in the enclosure of the temple. Each temple has a different mode of operation and this was the first time I entered this one, so I was a little distressed at the idea that my friend, accustomed to this place, was not here to guide me. But I was finally surprised at the entrance to the temple. Indeed, the young woman with the blue sari went out of the moving line, with her two daughters and her garland of roses and jasmine. I understood very quickly that she was waiting for her husband to arrive in order to practice the sacred rituals together, so I decided to do the same. Not all women around had this reflex, although all were accompanied by a man: there is therefore a part of personal choice in this social separation of bodies – a part of modernity in a tradition that constantly reinvents itself.

2. Tradition as a powerful indicator of the political dimension of the female body

The question that arises then in the context of contemporary Rajasthan is precisely the variation of the forms conveying tradition: do Indian women in the region get to the point where the metamorphoses of the form – of the somatic style – begin to erase tradition gradually? Can tradition really survive through such a large evolution in the areas that usually carry it? Woman in so-called 'traditional' dresses and adornments convey, through their somatic attitudes both in the public space and in the private space, something like an image of the feminine ideal which obeys the patriarchal precepts. When movies, images of the West and tourists arrived, promoting a change in the body techniques, was it not the starting point for a radical change in society – a gradual vanishing of the patriarchal messages hidden behind such sari or such *jhumka*? An actual cultural message, tradition exists thus thanks to modernity, but the latter could also, in the long term, cause its disappearance. Expressions of tradition – somatic expressions in particular – are shaped by a modernity that tends to erase the message, the still active remnants of patriarchy. However, contemporary Rajasthan does not yet seem to be experiencing



Fig. 5, Bharti. This woman from Udaipur absolutely wanted to be traditional for this picture so she placed her *pallu* on the top of her head saying “*hamara culture*” (“our culture”), 2 February 2020, © Marie Hoffner

the rise of modernity as a possible defeat of the patriarchal regime – but rather as a gradual loss of their cultural identity aura (Fig.5). The ideas and values transposed into rituals, clothing, attitudes and myths thus constitute the reality of tradition.

However, it is essentially the way this tradition manifests itself that we study. We want to show a kind of cultural style, worldview and way of feeling. So, is tradition not simply that other cultural mode? Is contemporary Rajasthani tradition not, ultimately, this blending of tradition and modernity – this growing modernity and the gradual loss of the aura of patriarchy? Then there is a second meaning of the term to be taken into consideration: tradition is no longer only what comes into contact with modernity, this testimony of ancient times, this message of values and ideas linked to a particular philosophy; it is a complex way of life that is foreign to us. The Rajasthani tradition today is simply different from before – different from ours.

Therefore, Indian society – and Rajasthani society in particular – has to organize the transmission of tradition socially, but also psychologically by setting up a process of listening and reproduction of actions.

It is thus a question of memorizing, of training, of imitating until the fact becomes habit. The somatic technique is thus double: it is complex, requiring a certain technical skill, but more importantly it is related to a form of habit. As Richard Sennett shows in his book *The Craftsman*, the creative act – here forming an image and making one's body a kind of living work of art – may find its source in repetition and routine. Against the tradition of Adam Smith who thinks routine is stultifying, Sennett chooses to see it rather as an asset – as a way to encourage the internalization of gestures, the acquisition of skills but also innovation. Although his book deals with craftsmanship, we can see how the same thoughts can be applied to the body techniques of Indian women – for example, draping the sari or the application of *sindoor*. Sennett describes a reasoning of the inductive type which lies at the very foundation of creation. He demystifies the process of creation by stripping it away from the concept of "genius" and linking it to the pragmatic form of reasoning. "Intuition works" he writes, "it's rooted in the routine practice of activity"[xii]. "There is no art without a job. The idea of a painting is not a painting." [xiii] By transposing the idea of craftsmanship to the implementation of style and somatic techniques such as clothing, we perfectly see the idea that a certain routine is necessary for the art of draping or makeup to reach its climax – routine and habit, which the final body work will eventually disrupt. "Originality is also a social etiquette"[xiv] Sennett recalls, allowing us to insist on the eminently social character of the implementation of this routine; of the implementation of a style that wants to be in perpetual change – change that, by the same token, allows us to get out, ultimately, of the routine of gestures.

Tradition can thus be seen, according to Pouillon's terms quoted by Lenclud, as a "point of view" of men in present times on their history; an interpretation of what preceded them operated through the prism of a resolutely contemporary world.

Thus, tradition is not only a witness of the past, but rather expresses it, often for political ends – here, one may of course think about maintaining some form, even diminished, of patriarchy. Because what this reflection on tradition seems to raise is the question, central in this study, of the political dimension of the body, which tends to be emancipated – the body which is an instrument of liberation, or at least of change of social role. To assert a tradition, a culture that would be authentic, somehow always means to justify the state of the contemporary world – its changes, its drifts. Tradition is a kind of security, but in the case of the somatic question for women in Rajasthan it seems eminently political and overflowing with social issues. This leads to the notion of traditional society. It refers to societies which establish a kind of political project and life – project that consist in following old precepts and living according to ancient customs. Traditionalism presumes a form of awareness of which purported cultural heritage to rely on. But it seems, in the strict case of somatic feminine aesthetics, that the rules – tacitly maintained by the attitude of the male sphere towards the body techniques of women – actually respond to the establishment of a patriarchal ideal designed to maintain a form of order that women could not – or should not – trespass. These choices are thus reflected and current political discourses on the female bodies tend to maintain these choices, this sorting, this selection made over the years in the somatic culture of India.

The actress and active member of the BJP, Kirron Kher, spoke shortly after the rape in Chandigarh in November 2017 of a young woman who took a rickshaw at night, with her baby in her arms. She addressed all young women in the country, telling them not to ride in a taxi in which there are already two men (it is a common practice in India to share taxis or rickshaws). By giving such advice rather than a more consensual political speech on the issue of justice and the arrest of criminals, Kirron Kher in fact unwittingly chooses to fall behind tradition – which assumes that female behaviors, female somatic styles must be forged according to the fixed traditional patriarchal framework. Thus, the choice of what should be considered as traditional is always conscious: tradition is indeed a construct, a cultural one but first and foremost a political construct. Female bodies, precisely because they are perceived in their biological forms (natural – birth, degradation of the body etc.) and aesthetic ones (jewelry, duty to show one's most beautiful sides in the public space in order to spare the *izzat* etc...), actually has a much higher level: a political dimension that raises more and more issues. And because female bodies are political, women tend more and more to demonstrate for their rights – and especially for basic rights related to their bodies. In January 2017, women marched through the streets of some 30 cities in order to obtain the right, or rather the possibility, to "occupy the streets at night": they demanded, among other things, the security of public space and protection of the integrity of their bodies in the streets at any time of day.

CONCLUSION

Tradition and modulations: when the modernity of style becomes an event

Like the work of art, the somatic style (and even the multiplicity of somatic styles, as there is a multiplicity of women) reveals a world and shows off, but with the only goal to tell its secret, its restraint and its modesty. It is *aletheia*, uncovering. But at the same time, what it uncovers as most precious and most authentic is what resists any opening in the world – what, in *the event of being* the world, remains forever concealed. Thus, when we observe Meenakshi in her purple sari on the shores of Lake Pichola Udaipur, her *palu* in transparent veil draped perfectly on the top of her skull, changing folds in the wind, holding a child in one arm and her telephone in her other hand, we understand the whole aesthetic and ambivalent dimension of female bodies caught between two complementary logics which almost annihilate each other. The adornment thus shows this duality of women who must continually put themselves on the scene – women who show themselves while hiding, who show off in the light of the outside day while refusing to say the deepest of themselves, this being linked both to the notion of honor, but also and above all to a desire not to expose



oneself too much to the gaze and interaction with others. In order to make this distance (necessary for the maintain of the social order as mentioned above) possible, they must therefore be able to fit into a standardized system. Assuming that they constitute a fundamental element of the somatic style and therefore of Indian women's identity (as they are seen as a group which shares the same religion, the same culture, the same patriarchal rules and the same somatic tradition), clothes are the object of daily rituals. From the laundry to the folding, clothes are the element *par excellence* that mixes tradition and modernity (Fig. 6). Whether it is the young traditional woman of traditional appearance wearing a sari that she folds more or less suggestively, or the young woman in jeans wearing dupatta, the individual style always bears the mark of both ages – both cultures. Tradition thus appears as the norm – the one you can choose to go beyond, more or less ostensibly.

Fig. 6, Offering to Jagdish Mandir in Udaipur, the modern woman and the traditional one creating one identity, 15 February 2018, © Marie Hoffner

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