Transgressive Subversions? Female Religious Leaders in Hinduism

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Abstract

As the eminent (female) anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) pointed out, the "social body" constrains and contrives the way the physical body is perceived and obligated into performance. The physical experience of the body is in turn often modified by a clutch of regulatory and panoptic religio-social categories through which it is known and made to reflect a normative view of society. This paper wrestles with the assertion (DeNapoli 2013) that female *gurus* are transgressive bodies and irruptions into a predominantly malestream tradition of religious teachers. The paper works through the theoretical notion of intertextuality and attempts to deconstruct and read whether such irruptions (and interruptions) into the Hindu tradition are actually transgressive and gendered religious violations, or whether they work instead to discursively and differently perpetuate particular parochial and masculinised social constructions of "woman". The paper thus probes what could be conceived of as "intertextual gaps" in order to examine the assertion that particular gendered enactments of the female *gurus* are subversive. The paper suggests instead that the gendered enactments appear to present ambivalences and ambiguities in renunciate discourses on gender and female agency.

Introduction

Writing back in the 1990s, the Indian scholar Rajeswari Sunder Rajan provocatively titles her essay "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" and states

that when a "community's object of worship and veneration is female, it is logical to expect that women in general benefit by sharing that elevated status" (1998: 35). However, Jacob Pandian (2001: 561) points out what is patently bizarre to the radical feminist: that *woman*, especially in many streams of Hinduism, serves as a sacred conduit to "conceptualise and comprehend" the often masculine "cosmological and social organisations" in which the role and *being* of woman is itself minimised. It would also be immediately apparent to anyone visiting a Hindu temple in India that the inner sacred space of the temple is highly gendered.[1] This is despite the fact that "many of the deities worshiped here have a female form" (David 2009: 342). Fortunately, feminist theory is particularly adroit at unveiling the ways in which religio-cultural systems present and proffer constructions of reality as if they were natural and (God-) given.

As mentioned, one such gendered spatial presentation is the temple. Another such presentation is that of the *guru* or spiritual teacher, also known as *sadhu* (renunciate).[2] Guruhood, in the multiple streams of the polysemic Hindu tradition, in turn presupposes *sannyasa* or renunciation, which has been signified in the tradition as unambiguously masculine. The social anthropologist Meena Khandelwal (2004), who works largely in the area of women and sexuality, points out that Brahmanic orthodoxy reveals its misogynous tendencies by (attempting to) restrict renunciation to upper-caste Brahman men. Thus renunciation and womanhood, semiotically and experientially, are meant to denote mutually exclusive categories.

The relatively few female *gurus* that one encounters in historical records and contemporary empirical studies appear to offer a penetrating glimpse into what may be construed as a level of rupturing of a male divine teacher/leader tradition that is otherwise ritually and theologically sacralised for the male.[3] The concept of *guru* is pan-Indian, and the Sanskrit term *guru* has a cluster of accreted historic and traditionalised meanings that are much more expansive than is the popularly understood notion of a teacher. Joel Mlecko (1982: 33) points out that *gu* means "ignorance" and *ru*, "dispeller". In terms of semiosis and Hindu understanding, then, the *guru* as teacher is a dispeller of the ignorance that potentially inhibits disciples' enlightenment. Women are not overtly prohibited or tabooed from being teachers or spiritual leaders in the Hindu tradition. Yet their relative numerical absence reveals religious mechanisms that operate to pathologise their presence *outside* of such a leadership habitus.

By engaging with the ethnographic narratives and observations presented in the works of Prem Chowdhry (1996) and Antoinette DeNapoli (2009 and 2013),[4] this paper attempts to illustrate that even when we are shown successful examples of female spiritual leaders or *gurus*,[5] we are still left confronting

idioms and articulations of maternal and feminine vocabularies, rather than subversions of Hindu traditions. Each of the aforementioned papers looks at how the female spiritual teacher/leader is positioned within Hinduism. The content of the earlier DeNapoli paper (2009) is spatially and culturally located amongst Rajasthani women, and looks at gendered discourse and female agency in renunciation; her latter paper expounds on what she aptly terms "the rhetoric of renunciation" (2013: 117). This later paper proposes that the female *gurus* distinguish their traditions and leadership from the dominant Brahmanical model of renunciation and traditions of leadership by "foregrounding the feminine values of connection, community, and care" (ibid.). DeNapoli goes on to characterise this as a form of "domestication".

By contrast, the much earlier Chowdhry paper (1996) looks at the female-headed, neo-Hindu Brahma Kumari organisation. Chowdhry reveals that the ostensibly female spiritual leadership is in fact propped up on the scaffold of a male authority and headship that is made to articulate itself through the female bodies of the Brahma Kumaris.

These ethnographies provide my critical entrée into a discussion on what DeNapoli sees as acts of subversion on the part of the female *gurus,* and their particular leadership *against* and *within* the structural hierarchies embedded in an otherwise overt male tradition of spiritual teachers. This paper thus attempts to interrogate *whether* these female (em)bodied religious and spiritual leaders are to be seen as subverting congealed male normatives. I suggest instead that the female *gurus* remain entangled and imbricated within implications of power and masculinised constructions of spiritual leadership. I point out that their examples present us with acts of *inversion*, rather than of *subversion*. Such a suggestion is buttressed by a perspective of intertextuality.

As Ayo Kehinde (2003: 373) quite rightly points out, the nomenclature *intertextuality* is the coinage of Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality as a theoretical perspective puts forward that every text "is under the jurisdiction of other discourses" (Porter 1986: 35), and that there are thus relational processes and practices at play. Intertextuality is "an instance whereby a text depicts a reading of the anterior literary corpus" (Kehinde 2003: 373). Theories of intertextuality remind us that any meaning in a text (or in this case, in the performances of female *gurus*) can only ever be understood in relation to *other* (con)texts; in other words, the performances of *other* male and female *gurus*. Thus, no work or act stands alone, but is interlinked with the tradition that came before it *and* the social situatedness in which it is produced. Intertextuality, in the context of the female *sadhus*, obligates us to understand that their acts are part of a traditionalised web of texts and contexts, and are to be hermeneutically understood as such. The manner

in which the female *gurus* articulate their religious identities and female bodies likewise, I suggest, reflects intertextual social articulations within Hinduism. An intertextual perspective compels us to consider how meaning emerges from particular constellations of discursive contexts and how we consequently attach our own construed meanings to these.

Marcel Mauss, in his classic work "Techniques of the Body" (1973), maintains that the human body is always treated as an "image" of society, and claims that there can be no inherent way of considering the body that does not simultaneously involve a social dimension. Nowhere is this truer than with reference to the female body within religious traditions, including a tradition such as Hinduism.

Part of the plastic religious/ritual/cultural sculpting of the woman and her body within a religion like Hinduism is through normative "panoptic" (see Foucault 1977) expectations of "woman". The genealogy of tradition creates and normalises the "realities" through textual history, which is in turn sustained by the lineage of ritual orthopraxis (see Naidu 2011). Part of the mechanics of the Hindu tradition is to position asceticism as an overtly male activity *and for male bodies*. The Butlerian (1990) position — that the materiality of the body is produced within particular constellations of regulatory regimes — finds a neat enunciation in traditionalist Hindu thinking about women. The female body becomes the site of sedimentations of regulatory practices. However, this same body is also *the potential site of their rupture*, "the place where conventional ideas about women can be transgressed and transformed" (Mallory 2009: 5). All of this makes the two ethnographies of DeNapoli (2009 and 2013) all the more exciting, in what they appear to promise us: *female embodied subversive acts.*

The connotative distinctions between transgressive *inversion* and *subversion,* which I attempt to make with regard to the examples of the female *gurus,* is more than mere semantic hair-splitting. For to *invert* is to capsize, overturn, reverse, upturn, and turn upside down; while to *subvert* is to undermine, challenge, threaten, weaken, destabilise, and sabotage. In engaging with examples of female spiritual leadership, I am interested in acts of inversion and subversion as modalities of *both* continuity and change. It is, however, more critically the latter act of subversion that holds the potentially powerful possibilities of theoretically queering and experientially destabilising a hegemonic and normative malestream tradition of spiritual teachers and leaders. Claudia Schippert (2005: 94) reminds us that a queer theoretical insistence on resisting and actively threatening and subverting the production of the so-called "normal"[6] provides a starting point to study religious practices and identities. This is especially so for the practices and identities of female religious leaders.

Inversions and Subversions: Disclaiming/Exclaiming Individual Agency

The latter half of this subheading acts as a visual semiotic, signalling that we are interrogating female agency and its possible absence. It is not meant to deny women carte blanche agentival self-determinacy, but rather to bring up to the gaze, through semantic structure, the rather odd paradox of asserting agency *by denying and disclaiming self-agency*. Such a position is asserted in the ethnographic studies of DeNapoli.

DeNapoli's 2009 work was based on extensive fieldwork in the Mewar district of Rajasthan with 22 female *sadhus* who had been initiated into the lineages of the Dashanami and Nath renunciant orders (*parampara*). DeNapoli reveals "how the oral performance of personal narratives provides a strategy through which Rajasthani female *sadhus* represent themselves not just as exceptions to gender norms, but also as *sadhus* who experience agency and authority in a gendered way" (2009:84). From her sample of participants, she presents to the reader ethnographic windows into two specific case studies, detailed vignettes, and analyses of the female *sadhus* Shiv Puri and Ganga Giri. These two female *sadhus* or renunciates are also presented as women who self-identify as teachers and spiritual leaders, with discernible groups of followers.

DeNapoli (2009: 86) makes the trenchant point that the female *sadhus*' duty to God "not only stems from their being his [*sic*] devotees, but also from their being *chosen* by God to become *sadhus* in this birth" (emphasis added). For DeNapoli this represents the actualisation of a "divine directive". She maintains that this interpretive lens allows the women to negotiate societal expectations of their roles alongside their own religious desires, as "only a fool would question God's authority" (2009: 86). More interestingly, DeNapoli tells us that by *disclaiming* individual agency, the *sadhus* "actually assert agency as female ascetics", and that "this rhetorical strategy allows them to work within normative androcentric frameworks of femininity" (2009: 86).

To me this is a rather clever inversion, whereby the female *gurus* manage to successfully invert and overturn societal criticism of their path of renunciation by shifting the responsibility of intentionality and choice *from themselves to God* — asserting a kind of divine directive from God. This of course is a stroke of genius, as well as what may be a direct or perceived experience of a religious "calling" on the part of the women. However, by in a sense denying *any* self-agentival volition in choosing the (normally male) path of asceticism, the women are inverting rather than aggressively subverting the traditionally established discursive othering of females and gender norms constructed around asceticism and renunciation.

Khandelwal (2004: 6) asserts that women who pursue renunciation as an alternative path are often perceived as anomalies and aberrations. In response to this, DeNapoli (2009: 84-85) maintains that the female *gurus* "neutralise" societal views of their ascetic lives as transgressive, and simultaneously validate their own renunciant identity. She goes on to argue that these *sadhus* assert female agency with "disclaimers of intent". Such female agency, however, by DeNapoli's own telling, is somewhat undermined by the denial built into the fabric of this self-agency. For by emphasising destiny as the original source of their asceticism, the female *sadhus* suggest that they have no control over becoming ascetics. Non-normative behaviours have the power to act collectively as powerful "forms of contrariness" (Pandian 2001: 557). However, one feels that such acts of subversive contrariness lose much of their social power and fecundity when sitting cheek by jowl with a denial of self-agency.

Written back in 1988, Catherine Clementin-Ojha's paper on female Hindu ascetics is entitled "Outside the Norms: Women Ascetics in Hindu Society". Clementin-Ojha aptly names these women "rebels", but points out that they do not use their influence as a platform from which to "criticise any fundamental aspects of Hindu society" (1988: 34). Vijaya Ramaswamy (1992) titled her work in query form: "Rebels-Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India". Similarly Kumkum Sangari, writing on Mira, one of the early medieval female saints of north India, notes that "in the *breaking* and *remaking* of patriarchal relations" and "etched into Mira's enterprise, is not only the difficulty of being 'original', but also the recalcitrance and the precariousness of personal rebellion" (1990: 1464; emphases added).

Clementin-Ojha also points out that to be admitted into a lineage does not grant one automatic permission to transmit its religious tradition — that is, to become a *guru*. Rather, female ascetics in the '80s and '90s were compelled to survive within the framework of systems that were (and are) essentially male-oriented (1988: 34). Over a decade later, DeNapoli's (2009) analysis of female self-agency reveals a similar tension and recalcitrance on the part of the female *sadhus*, which is another reason I see their gendered narratives and enactments as inversions, rather than as subversive acts.

An intertextual approach and scrutiny is sceptical of any artificial unity, and of the authority of any singular voice, and rejects an uncontested unity among (wo)men. Confronting the complexity of narrative and the multiplicity of meaning that arises out of the gaps in such narrativised tellings allows us to examine and look for possible currents of tension that point away from dominant interpretations. Cast against the work of DeNapoli, intertextuality allows us to see the potential gaps inherent in asserting the carving of self-agency while simultaneously decrying choice/agency. Yet this is what

DeNapoli claims in her study the female *sadhus/gurus* do. Such enactments of ambiguous self-agency in turn create fissures of textual ambiguity.

Chowdhry's work (1996) amongst the females of the Brahma Kumari organisation based in Mount Abu (with regional and transnational branches) is a fascinating study of a sect that is ostensibly female-headed. However, Chowdhry draws our attention to the glaring fact that despite being a female sect, it had — and still has — no central female figure at its helm. He says that in notional terms, "Om Radhe was at the head of organisational affairs, but that the *de facto* head remained a male by the name of Lekhraj", who "spoke the male teachings" (1996: 2313). Even after the male leader's death no female took over, as a "female could not be involved in the production of religious ideologies" (1996: 2313). According to Chowdhry, the organisation kept the ideological thrust and orientation of the founder as male, and spiritually subordinated the women (1996: 2312; see also the much more recent work of Musselwhite 2009: 10).

In the Brahma Kumari tradition, a male god may enter and speak through a female body. However, a male voice in a female body is said to inhabit and prohibit the female leader from claiming the status of divinity. Her identification with the goddess remains incomplete, as she is embodying a male god. Chowdhry maintains that even symbolically, the sect remains identified with male gods, with female divinities mainly portrayed as consort/spousal goddesses.[7] This is ironic, of course, as the Brahma Kumaris are ideationally identifiable with and inscribed by the tenets of celibacy — at least in the case of the women who are formally part of the organisation. Such sustained hierarchies remain entangled and deeply embedded below the veneer of "changed" gendered organisational spaces and enactments. It was Rachel Meyer (2000: 156) who pointed out that an intertextual reading foregrounds a distinction between "deep structure" and "surface manifestation". The surface manifestation in this instance is the notional and ostensibly visible female headship, with the deep structure of male headship remaining unchanged.

Inversions and Subversions: *Bhakti*

Mlecko states that the devotional movement during the medieval period ushered in a new kind of teacher in place of the older, Vedic teacher. The *guru*, as the one who carves a personal salvific path via the path of *bhakti* or devotion, comes to be revered not because of his (*sic*) profound philosophical and metaphysical knowledge — or because of his caste-inscribed birth — but because of individual, inspirational qualities that are rooted in his own personal devotion to the Lord (1982: 46). Mlecko's use of the masculine in

reference to the *guru* reflects more than semantic convenience. It reminds us that, although this period saw certain boundaries collapsing and saints coming from even the non-Brahmanic castes, women were still poorly represented among this category of *gurus*.

One exception was the medieval figure of Mira. Sangari, writing on Mira's devotion, remarks that the resurgence of *bhakti* belongs to a longer historical moment, in which the prescriptions of the literature of the *Smritis* and *Puranas* are selectively internalised, and the customary nexus of religious practice is translated into emotional structures of devotion (1990: 1464). This appears to weaken DeNapoli's assertion that the female *gurus* in her study created an alternative, female tradition of devotional asceticism, and reminds us of James Porter's words, penned over two decades ago:

> The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts. Its system of language, its grammar, its lexicon, drag along numerous bits and pieces — traces — of history. (Porter 1986: 36)

Such a "drag[ging] along" of the vital "bits and pieces [or] traces" of history is not absent within the renunciate traditions of Hinduism. DeNapoli makes the point that the female *sadhus* draw on regional models of female devotionalism, as well as on a more generalised *bhakti* discourse (2009: 84-85). While this point is valid, it is also valid that even within the male model of *gurus*, devotion or *bhakti* has historically carried high religious currency with many male *gurus,* such as Vallabhacharya (1479-1531), Tulasidas (1532-1623) and Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who are known for their ecstatic rapture and devotion to their God. DeNapoli's thesis that such *bhakti* represents a kind of feminisation of devotion also loses some ground when we consider that saints like Ramakrishna often shared with those around him his experience of divine rapture where he saw himself as "woman" and "lover" of God.

Intertextual theories point us to encounters of "ungrammaticalities": where things appear to not quite cohere and make sense when a word (act) is viewed against the wider landscape of a larger (con)text. For me the female *gurus*, in declaring their unbridled spiritual love for their chosen deity, were following in the well-carved and historically established salvific path of devotion in theistic Hinduism. This is not to be understood as a subversive carving of an alternative path. DeNapoli's assertions regarding female *gurus* and subversive acts thus become somewhat ambiguous and rather woolly. Ambiguity, in turn, serves to alert the reader to the traces of an absent intertext that might resolve the inherent contradictions.

For me, these are spaces or gaps that only become filled when one draws

in absent (con)texts, such as the extremely large body and already established devotional tradition extending from the medieval period all the way into the contemporary articulations and texts of Hinduism. Such a commentary, referred to theoretically as "metatextuality" (Meyer 2000) — or the relational links of one (con)text with another in a lineage — needs necessarily to be drawn into the discussion. As Meyer (2000: 145) states, "the notion of intertextuality maintains links to previous interpretations of dialogically constructed, historically located, and strategic subject positionings".

The female *gurus* are thus operating within established norms of devotion. One needs to remember that the boundaries of (con)text are not solid or fixed barriers that are impermeable to other textual and contextual influences. Ambiguity acts to alert us to the possibility of multiple, often contradictory, readings.

Inversions and Subversions: Femininity and Mothering

DeNapoli (2009: 2013) maintains that the female *sadhus* resist dominant representations of femininity, and adds a qualifier that this resistance is not a denial of their womanhood. She maintains that the *sadhus* identify as women in their personal narratives, but view themselves through implicit constructions of gender androgyny. This, one assumes, is an allusion to what she notes as their preference for referring to themselves as *sadhus*, which is the masculine form of the word. DeNapoli repeats her sustained thesis that "only by disclaiming personal agency do the female *sadhus* actually create and exert their agency, and their status, power, and authority" (2009: 101) and construct themselves as unusual, yet traditional, women who act by divine order. Renunciation of the home and all that it symbolises is understood as leaving home physically, psychologically, and ontologically. This understanding has been critical in helping define the notion of asceticism in South Asian religions (Salgado 2004: 953). All of this, however, is claimed as being done without self-agency by the women.

DeNapoli (2013: 129) maintains that the *sadhus* rhetorically resist, as well as transcend, normative patriarchal representations of womanhood. She goes on to say that the love the *gurus* articulate in their performances of renunciant leadership is illustrated by their domestic practices of caring for others. One wonders why this is referred to as "domestic". DeNapoli asserts that the "most obvious way that the *gurus* show their love to their constituencies is by selflessly preparing and serving meals for them" (2013: 129). She makes the point that these food practices invert the traditional hierarchy between a *guru* and the disciples in the masculine model of Hindu *guru* leadership.

This is a justifiable point. However, the power of such an assertion is destabilised by DeNapoli (2013: 120) also declaring that these practices of preparing and serving food "mirror the feminine values of care and community through which the women readily constitute their leadership and authority". While DeNapoli argues that this is a construction of an alternate *guru*-disciple context that inverts a masculine hierarchy, she goes on to say that the female *gurus* enact multiple "maternal strategies" that "validate the feminine values of hearth, home, and family; domestic ideals of the highest [*sic*] order" (2013: 121). DeNapoli appears to be entangling herself in the sedimented notions of women and gender prevalent within much of parochial Hinduism.

One way of catalysing agency and shifting how bodies are materialised and affected by power is by shifting the fictive bodily signification and reiterative production of "mother" and "motherhood" as carrying the weight of primary domestic nurturer (see Naidu 2011). The women *sadhus* in DeNapoli's work have shifted their bodies outside of that of normative "householder" into the public space of the ascetic — a powerful movement, literally as well as ideologically. However, DeNapoli's ethnographic observations and analyses position them as reverting to the "domestic roles" of "hearth and home" when they are amongst their followers (2013: 120). While the *sadhus* have inverted the male ascetic tradition and entered the public space as renunciates, they have not subverted — in other words, threatened and destabilised — the positions of motherhood and domesticity. For aside from having had children and entered the life of renunciation *after* they bore and raised their families, according to DeNapoli, they were also articulating their gendered ascetic and teacher roles through a domesticated frame, which included preparing and offering food to the followers.

Critical Inversions and Subversions: Shifting Gendered Norms in Hinduism

The categories of "gender" and "woman" are to be understood as situational, and cannot be comprehended in any essentialist or universal sense. Scholars working within understandings of South Asian feminisms (see Loomba and Lukose 2012) also quite rightly condemn homogenising and hegemonically ascribing values from Western feminisms to South Asian women (see Daly 1978; Farquhar and Locke 2007). These scholars decry the seemingly wholesale denunciation of reproduction and motherhood, what is valued and found meaningful by South Asian women themselves. Intertextual analysis forces encounters with meanings that grow in permeable spaces, and enables us to confront the possible contradictions involved in gendered identifications and positionings.

One is, however, necessarily wary of theoretical architecture and furnishings that come from outside the context under study, which carry potentially dangerous epistemes of violence. Nevertheless, women working on the Indian subcontinent (see Sunder Rajan 1998; Kishwar and Vanita 1989; and Kishwar 2008) draw attention to the fact that many feminists in India steer clear of interrogating Hinduism, as they see a massive and sustained disconnect between scriptural articulations of women's ontological value and the masculinised hermeneutics that inscribe themselves socially on women and their bodies. These scholars and activists contend that the socially gendered categories that influence the shape and interpretation of women's religious lives are orchestrated around "patriarchy and motherhood", which begins with religiously positioning marriage as axiomatic. Many of these feminists focus, however, on what they consider more pressing bread-and-butter issues, such as legislative and economic equality for Indian and Hindu women across urban and rural contexts.

Neelima Shukla-Bhatt (2008: 62) points out quite rightly that even though there are critical feminist and liberative interpretations of goddess traditions and Hindu women's practices in academic writings — such as works by the Western scholar Katherine Young (1999, in the book *Feminism and World Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young) and the Indian scholar Madhu Kishwar (2008) — "the concept of faith-based feminism is not wide-spread among practicing Hindu women"; and that feminist initiatives and movements in India have been largely secular. The initiatives for women's empowerment are thus not necessarily attended to by a reinterpretation of traditional religious Hindu texts and resources. Usha Menon suggested over a decade ago that feminists working in India find themselves out of touch with ordinary Hindu women because they are not able to offer much in terms of message and meaning that resonates with the lived experience of these women (2000: 79). This is echoed by Sharada Sugirtharajah (2002: 97), who claims that most of the women in India who refer to themselves as feminists have little to do with religion, and rather see it as oppressive and restrictive.

This is my point exactly. It is not an unwarranted epistemological stretch to claim that Hindu texts oppressively assert the enactment of reproduction and motherhood as both a religious and a social imperative. This does not mean that motherhood is not considered profoundly important by some Hindu women themselves, along with what are construed as the related concepts of mothering: care, community, and relationality. However, what I take exception to is the prescriptive and exegetical manner in which motherhood is socially normalised through scriptural injunctions. Conversely, singlehood — and not being a mother — is pathologised as an aberration.

To me, motherhood as defined within the Hindu traditions is very much

a religiously performed and scripturally sanctioned *production* of the female body. DeNapoli's ethnographic analyses of the female *sadhu* appear to be similarly couched within normative frames of domesticity and nurturing motherhood. The female *sadhu*'s courageous interjection into a predominantly male ascetic domain ruptures a tradition, and potentially creates space for counter-narratives, gendered spaces, and gendered religious practices in the realm of renunciation and spiritual leadership. However, perpetuating particular idioms of femininity and domesticity, mothering, and nurturing merely invert (overturn) religious tradition regarding ascetism, rather than actively subverting or threatening entrenched notions of a "woman's place".

Diverse traditions have equated the putative "natural" with the procreative in a variety of attempts to manoeuvre women back into compulsory motherhood and the so-called woman's place. In the context of Hindu society, the female body comes to be appropriated and matrimonised as a sacrament (*samskar*), thus positioning her body as a site for normative and normalising mechanics of marriage (Ussher 1997: 3). A maternal identity[8] is made to mark a "value" (Twine 2001: 32) of procreativity with an incumbent nurturing and domestic script.

Drawing from and referencing Western feminists runs the risk, of course, of drawing accusations of universally applying a radical Western feminist lens to reading women and their (procreative) bodies. As mentioned, however, the acknowledgement and reticence on the part of Hindu women working on issues of gender and feminism (Usha Menon, Madhu Kishwar, Sunder Rajan, Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, Sujatha Sugirtharajah, *et al.*) lend a measure of weight to the Western critique.

As pointed out earlier, many practising Hindu women feel alienated from discourses around gender equality. They are not able to identify with what may be Western categories of gender interrogation, which they are largely unfamiliar with. My hunch is that these women are also unfamiliar with where those interrogations are coming from. It is not merely a case of women in rural or peri-urban contexts not being literate in gender discourses, whether Western or local. Many urban women (and men)[9] who are practicing Hindus are also very traditional in their approach to their religious practices. Religion is, after all, a lived phenomenon that is also a visceral and palpable bodily experience, especially within theistic streams of Hinduism. This is why so many followers respond to spiritual teachers and leaders, rather than enacting and conducting their religious lives from amongst the textual discourses that occupy feminist scholars working in religious studies. Places where followers gather regularly become powerful potential spaces of rupture and change.

Female Hindu *sadhus* and teachers are therefore in potentially vital po-

sitions to disrupt religiously embedded gender hierarchies and asymmetry through *what they do* and *what they say* to their followers. Their (potentially subversive) religious enactments as spiritual teachers thus hold latent possibilities for the reorganisation and reconstitution of embedded hierarchies and the architecture of gendered norms.

Notes

1 I refer to the inner spaces of the temple as being "gendered" because women are barred from the inner sanctum where the male Brahmin priest carries out the rituals. *Any* devotee, male or female, other than the priest is in fact not allowed into this space. However, women are considered especially polluting by virtue of the fact that they may be menstruating at that particular time.

2 Not all *sadhus* or renunciates in the Hindu tradition are religious or spiritual teachers (*gurus*). Many of these ascetics choose to live as wandering and alms-seeking spiritual mendicants who have renounced all social ties and obligations. While people *may* view some of these nomadic mendicants as teachers, the distinction is that, having renounced all socially constructed ties, they do not self-identify as teachers, and do not have stable followings of adherents. Other *sadhus*, by contrast, see themselves as *gurus* or teachers and offer teachings based on religious and philosophical scripture — and quite often, also on their own life narratives. *Gurus* are perceived as spiritually enlightened individuals, capable of guiding a follower to enlightenment. And although the understanding of "*guru*" evolved and changed from the earlier liturgical Vedic literature through the later, more philosophical, Upanishadic literature and into the theistically conceived *bhakti* or devotional periods, what has remained largely unchanged is the understanding that a *guru* is involved in a relationship with followers. In the absence of this relationship, I agree with Mlecko (1982: 56), who argues that a wandering *sadhu* — a renunciate or reclusive sage — cannot be definitively considered a *guru*.

3 Kishwar and Vanita (1989) point out that in the 11th century several women saints embarked on spiritual journeys, in spite of strong social disapproval. They add, though, that as such examples are relatively sparse, these appear to be exceptions rather than the rule.

4 This essay cannot go into a full summary of these papers; the reader is referred to the full bibliographic details of the articles cited. However, the salient points and the empirical and theoretical positions of the papers are held up for analysis and discussion in this paper.

5 I use the terms *religious* and *spiritual* interchangeably in this paper.

6 The notion of "the so-called normal" is borrowed from queer theory, where it features prominently.

7 Other goddesses like Durga and Kali are absent, because they represent female sexuality within a sect promoting celibacy. Chowdhry goes on to say that the autonomous and more capricious goddesses, "without the restraints of marriage", function as symbols of powerful and liberated women. Hence, their presence "as a self-sufficient and self-directing force was glaring by its absence" (Chowdhry 1996: 2312).

8 DeNapoli (2013: 118) mentions that the women in her study are called *sadhus* or *matas* (mothers) or *mata-rams* (literally, holy mother) as opposed to the common term of *svami*, used to address the male *sadhus* and *gurus*, which translates to mean "lord".

9 Although I have not explicitly mentioned men in this paper, as the focus is on female spiritual leadership, it is imperative of course to remember than gender relations are mutually constructed and enacted between men and women.

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