FEMINIST THEORY AND THE AESTHETICS WITHIN

A PERSPECTIVE FROM SOUTH ASIA

Anu Aneja

ROUTLEDGE

"This is an intellectually stimulating and theoretically sophisticated book generating new directions in feminist analysis and in the field of Women and Gender Studies. It is an amalgamation of aesthetic theory with more recent transdisciplinary approaches from Women and Gender Studies to explore and reimagine feminist aesthetics and gender binaries through diverse art forms, including clay sculpture from the Indus valley, rasa theory, and the 'rekhta' ghazal. Theoretically rich and complex, the book promises to be an important document in the way it connects diverse and seemingly disparate fields. Its marshalling of arguments shows a vast range of reading, a sure grasp of diverse disciplines and the ability and articulation to bring it all together to develop a coherent and convincing narrative."

Meenakshi Malhotra, *Associate Professor of English, Hansraj College, University of Delhi; Editorial Board Member, Borderless; Member of the Department Research Committee of the School of Gender and Development Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University; and Member of the Board of Studies for English, SRM University, Sonepat, India*

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This book re-examines feminist theory through the lens of South Asian aesthetic conventions drawn from iconography, philosophy, Indo-Islamic mystic folk traditions and poetics. It discusses alternate fluid representations of gender and intersectional identities and interrelationships in some dominant as well as non-elite Indic aesthetic traditions. The book explores pre-Vedic sculptural and Indus terracotta iconographies, the classical aesthetic philosophy of *rasa*, mystic folk poetry of Bhakti and Sufi movements, and ghazal and Urdu poetics to understand the political dimension of feminist theory in India as well as its implications for trans-continental feminist aesthetics across South Asia and the West. By interlinking prehistoric, classical, medieval, premodern and contemporary aesthetic and literary traditions of South Asia through a gendered perspective, the book bridges a major gap in feminist theory.

An interdisciplinary work, this book will be useful for scholars and researchers of feminist theory, women's studies, gender studies, art and aesthetics, philosophy, literature, cultural studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, political studies, sociology and South Asian studies.

Anu Aneja is currently Director of the Women and Gender Studies program at George Mason University, USA. She has research interests in the areas of transnational feminist theory and aesthetics, particularly their inventive crossings across South Asia and the West. Other areas of interest include contemporary French, francophone and Indian literatures, feminist perspectives on mothering, and feminist pedagogy. She is the co-author (with Shubhangi Vaidya) of *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* (2016). Her edited collections include a comprehensive anthology, *Women's and Gender Studies in India: Crossings* (2019), which maps the contemporary contours of the field, and an edited volume on *Gender & Distance Education: Indian and International Contexts* (2019). She has also published a Hindustani translation of Hélène Cixous's French play *L'Indiade our l'Inde de leurs rêves*. Her research articles have appeared in peer-reviewed journals and edited anthologies. Aneja currently serves as Area Advisor of 'Gender and Education' for the digital edition of Oxford Bibliographies and on the Editorial Board of the *Gender and Education* journal. She has previously taught at the School of Gender and Development Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University, and at the Ohio Wesleyan University, where she was the recipient of the Rebecca Brown Professor of Literature award. She received her doctorate in Comparative Literature from Penn State University and a Bachelor's in French from Jawaharlal Nehru University.

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To my parents,
and to all those others who carted fragments
of memories, images, songs and ghazals
across the space-times of partitioned South Asian sands.

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The interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of this book, in particular its gendered analysis of South Asian iconography and poetry, has been contingent on the kindness of various people and organizations who provided prompt assistance with images, poems and permissions. The discussion of Indus valley clay figurines that touches upon critical issues recurring throughout the book would not have been feasible without the timely support of several individuals from whom I obtained original photographs for reproduction. For the images sourced from Harappa.com that appear in Chapter 2, I am most thankful to Dr. Omar Khan for his generosity (with due credit for copyright permissions to Richard H. Meadow/Harappa.com, courtesy of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan). For the fascinating photographs by Federica Aghadian that first appeared in the book *Lady of the Spiked Throne*, I am very grateful to the author, Dr. Massimo Vidale, who kindly provided the permissions for reproducing the images here (courtesy: Massimo Vidale and EURAL SpA). I would like to acknowledge the ready help provided by the curators at the National Museum, New Delhi, for the use of three Indus valley images that are included in the same chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this book brings together three terms – 'feminist theory', 'aesthetics' and 'South Asia' – each laden with its own histories, contours, epistemologies and interpretations. Let me then begin by expanding on these terms and their interlinkages as these have been envisioned in this study. The first two – 'feminist theory' and 'aesthetics' – have been adequately addressed within the disciplinary and interdisciplinary domains of philosophy, aesthetics, gender studies, and literary and cultural studies, among others. In this book, their juxtaposition underscores the feminist approach that undergirds my readings of past aesthetic traditions in South Asia. The third term, 'South Asia', lays out the geo-political and geographic boundaries that determine the scope of this study, although within this region, my focus has largely been delimited to the northern and northwestern provinces of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, the rationale for which I return to shortly.

Though I discuss the relationship between feminist theory and aesthetics in greater detail in the ensuing chapter, let me preface those comments here by dwelling briefly on their interplay, as has been undertaken in a growing body of scholarship in the field of feminist aesthetics.[1] The term 'aesthetics' itself has been the subject of varying disciplinary opinions in recent times. Peg Brand, in her excellent summation of some of the developments in the field in the West, remarks that although 'aesthetics is sometimes considered synonymous with the philosophy of art' it is 'a field within philosophy – generally regarded as a more recent area of study beginning in the eighteenth century – involving theories of perception that focus on the apprehension of beauty and other qualities of intrinsic value' (2007: 254). In its most rudimentary interpretation, 'feminist aesthetics' qualifies 'aesthetics' through the deployment of feminist perspectives brought to bear on the latter. Feminist incursions into the overlapping domains of aesthetics and philosophy, as Brand goes on to show, have introduced and emphasized the relevance of a variety of previously overlooked subjects, including non-aesthetic and contextual aspects such as 'ethics, politics, or history', that were previously 'considered extraneous to the work of art' (2007: 255). Brand's characterisation of the term 'feminist aesthetics' as 'the interplay of feminist theorizing and aesthetics' (2007: 255) suggests an intimate

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connection between the two terms, and it is the weight of this interchange in the context of South Asia that I attempt to address here.

In encapsulating the work of feminist approaches in aesthetics, Brand recapitulates some significant efforts that continue to evolve. Consequently, the 'reclamation of artists from obscurity' (Brand 2007: 256) that laid the foundation to the field of feminist aesthetics has been followed by feminist challenges to the privileging of disinterestedness in classic Western aesthetics and feminist interruptions of such instances through the insertion of contextual factors, including ethical, socio-political, cultural and historical, that were conventionally considered 'non-aesthetic' (Brand 2007: 257–258). The resistance to such incursions by analytic aesthetics in the West is, in fact, viewed by Brand as at least partially responsible for the slower acceptance of feminist approaches within the field of aesthetics (see Brand 2007: 257), an issue with which I engage more fully in the next chapter, in international contexts as well as in the specific context of India, where the relationship between feminist theory and aesthetics has been shaped by the history of the women's movement.

Brand's discussion of the interaction between 'feminism' and 'aesthetics' illuminates a common ground between the two domains, increasingly acknowledged across the fields of feminist theory and philosophy in current times. This common ground, I believe, stems from the shared, critical role played by transformative imagination, an idea and process that is central to both feminist theory and aesthetics; where feminist theorizing relies on the ideation made possible by imagination to envision a transformation in perceptions of identity within a larger network of social relations, fantasy and its transformative emotive effects are defining elements within the domain of aesthetics. Through the revolutionary power of the imagination, both feminism and aesthetics hold the capability to bring about shifts in perceptions of reality, the scattered effects of which continue to shape experience in its empirical as well as emotive configurations, much like the sustained 'delayed release' impact of certain prescription medicines. When these effects impinge upon questions of identity, its social constructedness, and its shifting dynamics within a larger network of social relations in ways that interrupt and re-route their taken-for-granted delineations, such events signal the common 'political' impetus that may be detected in both feminism and aesthetics.

It seems to me that the central role of imagination in the dialectical relation between feminism and aesthetics offers a viable bridge to the context of South Asia and a suitable methodological approach for bringing together this triad of terms in this study. In her discussion of some of the envisioned interdisciplinary and intersectional developments that may emerge in the composite domain of feminist aesthetics, Peg Brand has remarked that 'philosophers crossing disciplines are voraciously interested in the makeup and functions of emotions, psychological studies on perception and resultant value judgments, and the role of imagination in creating fictions' (263).

From a South Asian 'positionality', an interdisciplinary methodological framework that encompasses theories of culture, value and sexuality and embraces the role of imagination in revised gendered approaches to art seems particularly germane in bringing to the fore subterranean meanings of bygone aesthetic traditions that represent world views as divergent as myth, folklore, religion, philosophical theorizations on art, affect and sensory pleasure, mystic attitudes towards creative activity, and poetry as shared cultural knowledge and as a form of witness to social protest, among many others. An imagination-based interdisciplinary approach has the additional value of functioning as a conduit between the seemingly distinct disciplinary evolutions of aesthetics in the separate worlds of the West and South Asia because it enables the deployment of common lenses of gender, sexuality, class, religion and other forms of intersectional identity, even though the results of such analyses could lead to entirely distinct, contextualized outcomes.

Of course, contextual interdisciplinary approaches are not confined to Western feminist scholarship. Beyond the West, contextual approaches have been emphasized in recent years by scholars interested in gendered perspectives in the domain of archaeology, an area of scholarship with which I engage in the context of the ancient clay art of the Indus valley. In their work on Southwest Asian prehistory, for instance, Diane Bolger and Rita P. Wright (2013), highlight a recent shift towards contextual gendered approaches that they find especially useful in combating the 'gender ideologies' that have burdened much prior work in prehistoric archaeology. According to Bolger and Wright, gender ideologies transform social realities (386) because 'ideologies convey powerful messages by masking or naturalizing a particular view of the world and by confounding the social and the natural order' (387). Their perceptive commentary prompts us to remain attentive to the critical necessity of teasing out repressed meanings in our readings of artworks of the past, especially those that may have been masked over by masculist ideologies and interpretations.

As we zoom in from this broad transnational context to the more specific one of South Asia, particularly that of Indic art, we find similar emphases on interdisciplinarity and the role of affect and imagination in some recent scholarship. For instance, Shubhangana Atre (2011) places an analogous emphasis on interdisciplinary, eclectic perspectives in her exploration of archaeological approaches to the archetypal feminine in Indic prehistory and mythology. Citing the work of Wendy O'Flaherty, Atre emphasizes the use of an interdisciplinary, eclectic '*bricolage*' that has the ability to unravel the correspondences between 'myth and theory, myth and life' (O'Flaherty cited in Atre 2011: 174). Such an eclectic approach may prove most fruitful in the broad context of South Asian aesthetics where, as already noted, the evolution of artistic traditions has been witness to concurrent emphases on philosophical and religious thought, on epistemological concerns and on the realm of myth, metaphor and fantasy. A heterogeneous, resourceful

feminist lens that attempts to interpret the traces of faded markings that lie concealed underneath dominant ideological readings can gain from this 'toolbox' (Atre 2011: 173) approach, particularly in its encounter with aesthetic traditions homed in realms as diverse as iconography, philosophical inquiry, mysticism and poetry.

Additionally, in the context of prehistoric South Asian art, I find most expedient Atre's cue about Robert Graves's notion of 'analepsis' (see Atre 2011: 164), a perspective I take up again in my discussion of the art of the Indus valley civilization. Suffice it to say, here, that in regard to ancient archetypal forms, stories and meanings sculpted onto clay and stone, 'analepsis' offers a particularly revelatory way of approaching past narratives to make sense of the present and even perhaps to hint at clues to the future. Atre acknowledges that analepsis is 'not a valid historical methodology' for historians, for whom 'myths, which have come down by oral tradition and have all the appearance of imaginary fabrications are the last choice' (2011: 164–165). However, as she points out in the context of prehistoric archaeology, analepsis with its reliance on the role of imagination and fantasy may provide the most fitting entry into the meanings of the past. This is a journey that takes us into a remote 'time-before-time' past where

> the sense of specific chronology transforms into the sense of a broader time stratum: each stratum enlarging and becoming hazier than the later till it is left mostly unavailable to primary cognition. … There are certain undercurrents that emerge in the way of commonalities during the free interplay of ideas. These commonalities are our clues to the prehistoric and historic human mind and its creations.
>
> (2011: 165)

Here, in the absence of written narratives, '[t]he "unavailable-to-primary-cognition" layers of poetic myths and the hidden sources of human creativity reflected in the artifacts can be reached only through analepsis, often at the risk of stepping out of the bounds of historical methodology' (2011: 165). In bringing to bear contemporary feminist theoretical perspectives on the ancient aesthetic traditions of South Asia, this turn to the imaginative powers of memory, flashback and reconstruction may promise a relatively more 'efficient' manner of chiselling out repressed meanings; where these have direct consequences for revised gendered understandings of ancient art, they may also inaugurate contextualized political alliances between feminist theory and aesthetics.

Interestingly, the etymology of 'analepsis' transports us back to the Greek *analēpsis*, to the act of 'taking up', and its subsequent uplifting, restorative connotations in middle English and French. In medical vocabulary, analeptics have restorative, invigorating effects on the central nervous system. In literary terms, analeptic strategies suggest a recovery through retrospection

and anachrony, an interruption of present narratives through flashbacks that recover and imbue new meanings into the present. An analeptic approach thus invites re-visitations of the past not for a mere chronological recording of history but rather for bringing the past into the present in recuperative ways. In all of these healing and invigorating connotations, analepsis thus helps to conjoin the past and the present with a futurity envisioned through an anachronous revivification. In other words, the past becomes accessible through a re-imagination that probes beyond its empirical verité, in an attempt to seek out its abiding experiential links with the present and the future.

Where analepsis enables us to re-interpret the past with the help of imagination, the Sankofa[2] bird from Ghana offers an equally suggestive symbol of learning from the past for navigating the future. With its head rotated backwards and holding an egg in its beak, the Sankofa bird evokes the birthing and nurturing of knowledge as a bridge between past, present and future. This symbolism seems to me especially meaningful in re-traversing the layered cultural heritage of South Asian aesthetic traditions that have evolved on the basis of the gradual accretion of philosophical and aesthetic concepts whetted by epistemological questions that artists and philosophers have grappled with through the ages in the domain of art.

In such a telescopic, uninterrupted view of the past as a zone that lives on in our present and future experiences through its continuities and deferred influences, it may become possible to adopt the analeptic stance, like the rotated head of the Sankofa bird, as a manner of identifying endurances that reject the idea of past, present and future as distinct periodic stages. In reminiscing about a paper he presented at a conference in Aurangabad, Makarand Paranjape reminds us of these deep temporal interconnections in his musings on time: 'Time past suddenly becomes time present; the past persists into the present, showing its hand most unexpectedly. It is not so much that time is cyclical, but all time is present at this very moment' (2016). This almost Borgesian view of time as anachrony, and not merely cyclic, disrupts the notion of knowledge as evolutionary progress with one that suggests a layered unfurling of knowledge across time. In such a world view, the past is no longer cherished as the domain of interred artefacts to be examined from an insurmountable distance; rather, it allows us to recognize the legacies that continue to reside within us and that, in fact, constitute our present subjectivities in the manner of mnemonic genomes.

Here, it would be important to distinguish between those gendered readings of the past that have been burdened under the weight of masculist ideological constructions and avowedly feminist approaches that seek to unearth alternate ways in which gender, sexuality and other axes of identity may have been shaped in the past. Annapurna Garimella's incisive analysis of such gendered ideological approaches in the context of Indian art history may prove equally illuminating in the larger South Asian context. In her survey of the discourse on Indian art history, Garimella suggests that

although colonial perspectives in service of the European imperialist project shaped the readings of Indian art as 'effeminate' or 'enervated', and the 'Indian artistic mind' as 'fantastic and irrational' and even 'degenerate', subsequent nationalist efforts to redeem Indian culture and thought from such a 'feminizing' project, by Anand Coomaraswamy, for instance, resulted in a 'counterdiscourse' that was equally burdened by 'gendered metaphors' (Garimella 1997: 22). Consequently, Garimella argues throughout her essay that 'gender has been manipulated to diminish Indian art' (1997: 22) and that its history can be read 'as a gendered and racialized discourse' (1997: 30) resulting from subjection to processes of orientalism and nationalism.

In what Garimella describes as the 'dimorphic representational tool' (1997: 23) of gender, polarized binary oppositions of masculine and feminine end up getting synthesized only within a hierarchical structure that firmly establishes the primacy of the former (1997: 24). If, as Teresa de Lauretis claims and Garimella reiterates, gender is a semiotic apparatus (Garimella 1997: 24), that is, if gender produces meaning as well as shapes reality through its 'meaning-effects' (1997: 24), the significance of revising these meaning-effects through feminist theorizations that unravel and undo overdetermined gendered readings must not be underestimated. The gendering of discourse and its dispersed socio-political effects have direct consequences on how meanings are produced and how these impact not only women's gendered and intersectional experiences but equally those of queer and transgendered persons, refugees and those others conceived in perpetual estrangement in social structures that rely on exclusivity for a consolidation of majoritarian power. The discursive elaborations that theory brings to its subjects of analysis can in no way be isolated from their larger political effects since theoretical analysis embodies the capability to bring to the surface curbed meanings that may have very immediate as well as scattered social and cultural implications. Feminist perspectives on art thus can bring to light this particular bond between theorizing, aesthetics and politics. Proceeding from this hypothesis, I attempt two interlinked moves in this study: the first is to push back, as suggested by Garimella and others, against prior ideological readings that have proved burdensome in progressing towards a feminist futurity; the second, and more significant, effort in the context of this project is a move forward that seeks present and future interlinkages between feminist theory and the alternate ways in which gender and sexuality were conceived and represented in select South Asian aesthetic traditions in the past. In the next chapter, I elaborate on these efforts to establish transtemporal and liminal interlinkages with the past as a way of conceiving present challenges and future possibilities.

In her discussion, Garimella poses a provocative question – 'whether gender, as a representative technology, enables an empowering counterdiscourse' (1997: 34) – one which, towards the end of her analysis, leaves her asking 'if feminisation as representational strategy ever signifies anything

but an inadequacy or lack?' (1997: 37). Figuring that an onerous legacy of too much historical 'overdetermination' (Garimella 1997: 37) cancels the possibility of 'a simple reversal', she infers that 'feminization is a dubious strategy for empowerment' in such an intellectual and political sphere (1997: 38). Moving beyond this caveat, Garimella proceeds to stress the critical importance of trenchant critiques that undo the gendered strategies of colonial as well as nationalist perspectives so that such strategies 'no longer have the capacity to signify historical practices in polarized, gendered terms' but serve rather as an articulation of femininity and masculinity as differential categories (1997: 38). Garimella's call for a move beyond 'generalizations rendered in gendered language', the need to 'read against the grain to imagine alternative histories' and her speculative hope that 'perhaps it may become possible to write of other space, texts, times when gender operated in other ways' (1997: 38) inspires us to push beyond mere 'feminization' and intervene with *feminist* re-visionings of past aesthetic and epistemological traditions. It thus brings us back to the critical role of feminist theory in its imaginative 'interplay' with aesthetics.

By reading against the grain, as Garimella invites us to do, I hope not only to generate, even if fortuitously, feminist perceptions and interrogations at the heart of Indic aesthetic theories, within aesthetic traditions conventionally associated with 'authentic' culture, but equally to counter (South Asian) culture's way of habitually locating feminist viewpoints as foreign to itself. In this process, I wish to suggest an alternative to the reactive and adversarial position into which feminism is repeatedly cornered in the context of South Asia and perhaps beyond its borders too. Particularly in contemporary India, the part of South Asia most familiar to me, the 'purist' impulse to relegate feminism to an outsider role in a relentless solidification of East/West and Culture/Feminism divides needs to be called into question since it does so by cannily representing feminism as a polluting influence – one that does not belong to 'culture' or 'tradition' but instead threatens these from a foreign (that is, Western) vantage point. A feminist dialogue with indigenous aesthetic traditions becomes all the more urgent given the centrality and significance of 'culture' and its associated signs and symbols in contemporary social and political discourse. At this crucial juncture, feminist aesthetics, by interacting with 'culture' and aesthetic theory from *within*, may help test and illuminate the porosity of culture and its receptivity towards revision and progressive change. Here, I am mindful of the very diverse ways in which 'culture' has interfaced with feminist histories in the West and in India, as has been persuasively argued by Mary E. John (2019), for instance. But these differences, as John asserts, should not become 'cause for paralysis' (John 2019: 39).

How, then, do we move forward and resist such a paralysis? Makarand Paranjape's counsel may prove helpful in this context. In order to seek out the offerings that the past can hold out for present and future times, Paranjape proposes that it is important, paradoxically, to approach tradition in