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**Rethinking Medieval Japan,**  
*Provincializing Europe*

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### **Rethinking Medieval Japan, *Provincializing Europe***

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Drawing on the insights offered in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, this essay seeks to inquire into both the possibilities and limits of using modern categories of thought, which have emerged out of a specifically Western tradition, for an analysis of medieval Japanese texts. It questions the purported universalism of the categories body, gender, sex and agency – all of which are central to feminist analysis – for reading texts that emerged from within the East Asian religious and philosophical traditions. It argues that sex and gender, which are premised in modern thinking upon a division between natural attributes and social roles, have little valence in medieval Japanese writings because 'nature' and 'society' were not constituted as two separate spheres; and suggests that modern liberal conceptions of agency are inadequate for they cannot take into account gods and buddhas, who were seen as central actors in the cosmological/social world of medieval Japan.

Keywords: Body; gender; sex; agency; Buddhism; passivity.

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### **Repensar o Japão Medieval, *Provincializando Europe***

Com base nas ideias avançadas em *Provincializing Europe*, de Dipesh Chakrabarty, este ensaio visa investigar as possibilidades e os limites do uso de categorias modernas de pensamento, surgidas no âmbito de uma tradição especificamente ocidental, para a análise de texto medievais japoneses. Este texto questiona o suposto universalismo das categorias de corpo, gênero, sexo e agência – todas centrais para a análise feminista – para a leitura de textos que surgiram de tradições religiosas e filosóficas do Leste Asiático. Argumento que o sexo e o gênero, os quais assentam na premissa do pensamento moderno que divide atributos naturais e papéis sociais, têm pouco valor nos escritos medievais japoneses uma vez que “natureza” e “sociedade” não foram constituídas como duas esferas separadas; sugiro ainda que as concepções modernas de agência são inadequadas pois não podem tomar em consideração deuses e budas, os quais eram vistos como atores centrais no mundo cosmológico/social do Japão medieval.

Palavras-chave: Corpo; gênero; sexo; agência; Budismo; passividade.

# Rethinking Medieval Japan, *Provincializing Europe*

Rajyashree Pandey\*

The world of medieval Japan, at first glance, seems far removed from the questions and concerns that have animated the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty and others working under the sign of postcolonialism. However, the insights offered by these writings have opened up exciting new possibilities for research fields that have traditionally worked within the framework of ‘Area Studies’ – a self-contained, empirically based scholarly enterprise, with little intrusion from the theoretical currents and intellectual reverberations that have shaken, and on occasion transformed, academic disciplines such as English and French Studies, Religious Studies and History, to name but a few. The far reaching implication of Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* is the call for a critical inquiry into conceptual categories that are central to the social sciences on the grounds that these categories, “which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe,”<sup>1</sup> are necessarily parochial or provincial, and hence not amenable to being seamlessly transposed to the texts and life-worlds of other times and places that do not share in the history that has produced them.

The categories body, sex/gender and agency – all of which are central to my research on medieval Japanese literary and Buddhist texts – emerged within the context of modern Western philosophical, religious and (more recently) feminist debates. The concepts that in-

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1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

form and give meaning and purpose to liberalism, Marxism and feminism – including rights, class and sex/gender – have genealogies that go back (at least) to the revolutions in parts of Europe and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. They come to us laden, inevitably, with certain presuppositions that are shaped by the questions and debates that animated Enlightenment thought. If, as Chakrabarty demonstrates, these categories are not entirely adequate to understanding the political modernity of South Asia, they are even more problematic for illuminating the distant world of medieval Japan, which was as yet largely untouched by ‘European’ thought. However, in so far as these concepts form our grid of intelligibility and are born of our own historical conditions, they are, inescapably, the necessary starting point of our hermeneutic endeavours. For there is little to be gained by aspiring to an unrealizable and indeed unproductive romantic hermeneutic that seeks ‘to step into the shoes’ of those who lived in that long-ago world.

Chakrabarty’s work has brought into view the paradox of using modern conceptual categories which “entail an unavoidable – and in a sense indispensable – universal and secular vision of the human.”<sup>2</sup> The challenge, as Chakrabarty poses it is “How do we conduct these translations in such a manner as to make visible all the problems of translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language of sociology?”<sup>3</sup> Working with the categories body, sex, gender and agency – whose presuppositions are grounded in Enlightenment thought – to study medieval Japan is necessarily an act of translation, one which requires rendering medieval Japanese texts into a language that is intelligible to us moderns; at the same time any attempt at translating works from a very different time and place also brings into view the limits of our analytical framework, which far from being universal, is animated by our own prejudices that are inescapably in and of our times.

2 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 4.

3 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 89.

### **Sex/Gender**

We have come to assume that what distinguishes men from women is sexual difference, and that this difference is biologically determined. This distinction is founded on the idea that there are two distinct domains – nature and culture – and that the body and sex are aligned with nature, whilst gender, a social construction, belongs to the domain of culture. As a conceptual category, widely deployed in feminist writing, the term gender, from the outset, served a political function. It emerged in feminist writings as a response to the biological determinism that was at the heart of the claim, made since the eighteenth century, that sexual difference was something inscribed on the body, a fact of nature, that could not be changed, and the reason why women were innately inferior to men. The feminist project of the sixties and seventies assumed the naturalness of sex, while challenging the idea that social roles inevitably followed from ‘natural’ biological differences.

In recent decades, scholars such as Judith Butler, often working under the sign of post-structuralism, have sought to challenge the claim that the materiality of the body and sex is self-evident and pre-discursive. The focus has shifted to an inquiry into the ways in which this ‘facticity’ is produced, and how the naturalization of these categories is an effect of the regimes of power/knowledge that produce normative and regulatory frameworks. It is important to note that recent post-structuralist challenges to the view that body, nature, sex and woman are pre-discursive and natural, for all their insights, have emerged within debates that are internal to and produced within a specific framework of knowledge that has dominated Europe’s intellectual tradition. These critiques are reactions to a specific, even provincial, history that is seen as having imprisoned thought within the hard and fast binaries of sex/gender and nature/society. Cultures that have not worked with these binaries, and whose life-worlds were produced within a different epistemic framework do not need the insights offered by post-structuralist arguments in the same way. Neither materialist arguments nor social constructivist claims, I suggest, are entirely adequate to conceptualizing the body in medieval Japanese texts.

Even a cursory glance at pre-modern worlds suggests that male and female were often formal organising principles, which accounted for the very generation of the universe and as a way of structuring both the cosmic and social order. They were used to explain and describe larger generative and creative forces which were hardly reducible to accounts of the human body or sexual difference. Furthermore, these worlds were not organised through the distinctions of nature/culture and sex/gender. Thomas Laqueur has demonstrated how until the seventeenth century in Europe, what prevailed was the ‘one sex model,’ in which men and women were seen as having essentially the same sexual organs – no linguistic distinction was made between ovaries and testicles, which shared the same name, and what distinguished men from women was merely that men’s genitalia lay on the outside while those of women were inverted.<sup>4</sup> To be one’s gender, to occupy a particular place within the social order as a man or woman, was itself seen as part of the natural order. Both what we would call ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ were cut of the same cloth, part of the same divine scheme, and there was no need to turn to the body for affirming this preordained hierarchy. Sex did not function as a biological category any more than gender did as a social one.

In pre-modern China and Japan, likewise, sex and gender, which are premised in modern thinking upon a division between natural attributes and social roles, had little valence given that ‘nature’ and ‘society’ did not constitute two separate spheres. Male and female relations were both ‘natural’ and ‘social,’ “and their “bodily powers were given spiritual significance as fitting microcosmic participants in a universal order.”<sup>5</sup> Male and female principles (*yin* and *yang*) functioned as complementary aspects of the body and were seen to interpenetrate both men and women.<sup>6</sup> Neither the body nor its sexual organs were the privileged sites for the justification of particular social arrangements.

4 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19–20, 25–62, 63–113, 114–142, and 150–154.

5 Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

6 Furth, *A Flourishing Yin*, 34.

Sexual difference in feminist history and activism has been the troubled site for imagining women's struggles and emancipatory possibilities. As Joan Scott has argued, there is a fundamental paradox at the heart of feminist politics: on the one hand feminists claimed that "sexual difference was not an indicator of social, intellectual or political capacity." At the same time, by seeking to act on behalf of women, they "invoked the very difference they sought to deny."<sup>7</sup> Butler's rejection of sex as pre-given and her argument that both sex and gender are products of discourses and power rather than natural effects of the body,<sup>8</sup> or Denise Riley's denial of an ontological foundation for grounding 'women' as a stable category,<sup>9</sup> have to be understood as part of ongoing debates and conversations that are central to the history of Western feminism itself.

In medieval Japan, as I have argued, 'man' and 'woman' were not constituted through the immutability of their sexual organs. There was therefore no need to argue that sexual difference was irrelevant in determining women's moral or intellectual potential. In a world in which hierarchy was taken as a given and seen as part of the natural order of things, there were no grounds for challenging unequal and asymmetrical relationships, and the body and sexual organs did not need to become the sites for justifying social arrangements. Given that both sex and the body were unstable and imbued with transformational potential, there was no way of fixing 'man' or 'woman' and indeed 'human' and 'non-human' as unchanging and essentialist categories. The set of problematizations with which Western feminism has had to grapple are therefore not seamlessly applicable to non-Western pasts, which had a different order of questions to which they sought answers.

## Body

First, it is worth noting that the dualism that the mind/body debates that have preoccupied Western philosophical thought had no valence in

7 Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Harvard Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), x.

8 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

9 Denise Riley, *"Am I that Name?": Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2-5.

the East Asian religious traditions. Both Daoist and Buddhist writings worked with the assumption that the body and mind were integrally connected, and the central question that animated their theorisations was working out how the two could function most effectively together as a mind-body complex. Mental and affective processes were mutually intertwined, and the body, far from being defined as pure materiality, was seen rather as a psychosomatic process, “something done, rather than something one has.”<sup>10</sup>

This is reflected in medieval Japanese texts where ‘thought’ does not function as the other of ‘feeling’ or emotion, and where the term used for love makes no distinction between spiritual or platonic love, on the one hand, and sensual and profane love, on the other. The term carries a wider range of significations incorporating physical desire, longing, passion, and affect. The body through which these feelings are given expression is not associated with sin or shame. The word *mi* in the Japanese medieval lexicon that corresponds to the term ‘body’ does not differentiate between the physical body and what we might call the psychic, social, or cultural body, and hence one of the most common usages of the term *mi* is to signify a person’s status or standing in the world. Both material and mental/emotional processes are integrally linked and central to the constitution of a meaningful body/self.

Second – and this has implications for the purported universality of eroticism and desire – the literary and pictorial traditions of pre-modern China (and this is equally true of medieval Japan) have no “image of a body as a whole object, least of all as a solid and well-shaped entity whose shapeliness is supported by the structure of the skeleton and defined in the exteriority of swelling muscle and enclosing flesh.”<sup>11</sup> This is in striking contrast to European conceptions of the body envisaged in its fullness through muscle, flesh, and bone.

10 Roger Ames, “The Meaning of the Body in Classical Chinese Philosophy,” in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, eds. Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 168.

11 John Hay, “Is the Body Invisible in Chinese Art?” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, eds. Angela Zito and Tani Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.



Although we would readily grant that different cultures and historical moments privilege certain aspects of the body, be it the ankle, the nape of the neck, or the foot, we are accustomed to assuming that the physical attributes of the body are central to the language of eroticism. And yet, we are hard pressed to find in courtly tales or in love poetry any descriptions of a material body, made manifest through the fullness of the breast, the rosiness of the cheeks, or the shapeliness of the leg. In the literary and visual texts of medieval Japan both the physical and psychic attributes that went into the making of the body found expression in the robes within which the body was enveloped. Robes, which were metonymically linked to the body, were not seen as mere embellishments that adorned, covered, and enhanced the beauty of the body: they served as privileged repositories of both the physical and psychic attributes that went towards the constitution of the body/self; they were part and parcel of embodied being and it is the two together as an ensemble that had the power to generate erotic and affective desire.<sup>12</sup>

Third, across a wide range of literary and Buddhist genres, medieval bodies were granted transformative powers that rendered the boundaries between gods, humans, men, women and beasts porous and fluid. The popular tales of medieval Japan conjure up an unfamiliar cosmology in which plants, animals, humans and supernatural beings intermingle and perform the strangest of boundary crossings. A man has sex with a turnip. A young girl eats the turnip, falls pregnant and gives birth to a boy. A snake is aroused and has sex with a woman. A priest makes love to a young boy who falls pregnant and gives birth to a baby, who turns out to be a nugget of gold. A beautiful woman turns out to be a deceitful fox; a young boy reveals himself to be a bodhisattva. All bodies, even those of women, were conceptualized as active agents that could defy common expectations and perform miraculous transformations.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive discussion of the connections between body, robes and erotic desire see Rajyashree Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 34-42.

### The Performativity of Gender

Rather than the sexual attributes of the body, gendering in medieval Japanese texts is a process that is materialised through specific modes of comportment, patterns of speech, and stylized performative modes, which make the categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ intelligible. Here Judith Butler’s work acquires a new kind of relevance that may go beyond her auto-critiques of the West, for her understanding of gender is precisely one that sees it not as “a static cultural marker,” but rather ‘a kind of becoming, an activity...’<sup>13</sup> The romance narrative the *Tale of Genji*, written by a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court at the beginning of the eleventh century – arguably the most important literary work not only of its own period, but of Japanese literature tout court – demonstrates the inextricable links between class, age and the performance of gender. To say that gender and class/status intersect is of course true, but it can have (at least) two different meanings. In one, gender is fixed or static, and variations in it are due to class – a serving woman has fewer privileges but perhaps also greater freedom because of her class. In this reading, her “womanness” is fixed, but how it plays out in social terms is determined by class. The categories are stable, and one could more or less represent the range of possibilities in a graph, where the vertical line is gender and the horizontal line class; where they intersect gives us a reading/representation of what it was like to be a serving woman, an aristocratic woman of the middling ranks, a woman belonging to the uppermost echelons of court nobility, and so on. In the second reading, and one that informs my interpretation of this text, gender is performative, not fixed and given, and thus how it is performed – what constitutes being a woman – is itself shaped by class, which again, far from being stable, functions as a dynamic and fluid category.

Literary texts such as the anonymous twelfth-century fictional tale *Torikaebaya Monogatari* (*The Tale of “If Only I Could Change Them Back”*) explicitly thematize the idea of gender as something that

13 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 112.

is not a given but rather a matter of ‘becoming’ through repeated performance. The daughter of the Minister of the Right Himegimi is raised as a boy and takes her place at the court as a man, while her brother Wakagimi, brought up as a girl, enters court as a lady. It is through forms of rigorous self-fashioning, that is to say, through the cultivation of particular dispositions and forms of comportment appropriate to their respective genders that Himegimi and Wakagimi are able to transform themselves and inhabit their new gendered identities, regardless of their sexual attributes.

A striking feature of medieval Japanese poetry is that gender is disassociated from the body and sex and is seen principally as a matter of certain prescribed stylizations of performative roles. The central figures of love poems, man and woman, appear through terms that are used for both men and women alike. They indicate nothing about the gender, identity, or social status of either the poet or the one who is being addressed. When a poem is described as being a woman’s poem, what is at issue is not the sexual or personal identity of the composer of the poem, but rather the particular stylized role or persona to be adopted by the poet that is consonant with woman, not as a real, living being, but rather as a trope or an idea. Even when a poem is marked as anonymous, or when there is no headnote explaining the circumstances under which it was composed, it is possible to infer which persona a poet has adopted. A poet, regardless of his/her biological sex (a category that has no real meaning in this context), can slip seamlessly into the persona of the waiting female or the male who visits. It is through the performative stances adopted by poets that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ come into being, and only provisionally so, within the discursive space of *waka* poetry.

### **Buddhism and Gender**

Many of the observations I have made above could be challenged by turning to Buddhist texts in which undoubtedly ‘woman’ is the marked category, both implicitly and explicitly defined as different from and inferior to ‘man,’ the normative ideal. Her gendered difference in these

texts takes many forms: her body is marked by the impurities of childbirth and menstruation; she is hindered by the five obstructions - the impossibility for women to attain rebirth as a Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin or Wheel-turning King, and, most significantly, Buddha; she is given to greed, anger, pride, and envy; and her beauty is dangerous for men for it serves as a hindrance to the path of renunciation. The fact that in canonical works such as the *Lotus Sutra*, a woman must attain rebirth as a man before she can embark on her journey to become a Buddha has often been singled out as proof of Buddhism's fundamental misogyny.

While it is true that women's shortcomings and sinful dispositions were often used in Buddhist discourse, *even* here, 'man' and 'woman' are marked by a certain indeterminacy, defying any consolidation of them as unchanging and essentialist categories, always fixed in the same way. In the *Lotus Sutra* for example, in which one of the Buddha's disciples, Sāriputra, expresses doubts about the eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king possessing the necessary requisites for attaining Buddhahood, the dragon girl swiftly transforms herself into a man and proceeds to achieve Buddhahood, thereby demonstrating the shifting and provisional boundaries that separate men, women, dragons, and Buddhas. It is hard to distil from this text any sense of 'woman' as an essentialist and abiding identity. This is in large part because all bodies, even those of women, are conceptualized as active agents that can defy common expectations and perform miraculous transformations, thereby attesting to the power of the Buddhist faith. The fact that the body in medieval Japanese texts is conceived of as a malleable and changeable entity and granted enormous potential for transformation renders the boundaries between 'man' and 'woman' porous and unstable. The transformative potential granted to all bodies serves a larger purpose, namely as a reminder of the temporary and provisional nature of all that seems real in the mundane world of *samsāra*.

Indeed, the instability of man and woman as fixed and enduring entities is the subject of conscious thematization in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. As in the *Lotus Sutra*, Sāriputra challenges a goddess residing in the house of the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti by saying that if she were truly endowed

with wisdom, she would be able to change herself into a male. The goddess promptly responds by changing herself into a man *and* turning Sāriputra into a woman. Drawing on the doctrine of nonduality, she claims that neither maleness nor femaleness are innate or stable characteristics, thereby attesting to the provisional nature of gendered identities.

The stories in collections of popular tales (*setsuwa*) abound with humans, gods, bodhisattvas, buddhas, and beasts who intermingle and change forms. We can only make sense of this mutual imbrication of different realms of existence, if we are attentive to the Buddhist epistemic framework within which this particular way of ordering, knowing, and inhabiting the world, came to imagined.

The idea of the inter-penetration of human and nonhuman worlds was central to medieval Japanese texts, which thematised both the pleasures and dangers of living in a world in which humans and other beings shared a common space and marvelled at the inexorable forces of karma that could work in unexpected ways, bringing human beings in contact with both bodhisattvas and demons.

### **Agency**

What I have argued above has implications for how we use the term agency when we interpret women's actions in medieval Japanese texts. It was in order to get away from narratives of 'victimology' that positioned women as passive objects, subjected to oppression under patriarchal norms and structures, that the term agency gained currency; it came to be used as a way to describe the actions of women, who were perceived as being oppressed, but who nonetheless rebelled against the dominant forms of authority that worked to subjugate them. In their analyses of medieval Japanese texts scholars do not go much beyond the claim either that women had agency and rebelled against the attempts by Buddhism and patriarchy to degrade them, or the assertion that women lacked agency because they were helpless in the face of their oppression. However, ascribing agency to women has been no easy task, for there is little consensus on how one might gauge the significance of women's activities in medieval

texts. There is no way of adjudicating on these different positions on an evidential basis given that the same textual material can yield different readings ranging from women's insubordination and passivity to even complicity in the face of oppression. And yet this framework prevails because, as Marshall Sahlins puts it, the dominance-resistance coupling is "a no-lose strategy since the two characterizations, domination and resistance...in some combination will cover any and every historical eventuality."<sup>14</sup>

A number of unwarranted assumptions undergird the use of agency as a conceptual tool in our readings of medieval Japanese texts. First, agency here is implicitly understood to signify the capacity for action that inheres to humans, defined as autonomous individuals with free will. This understanding of agency is based on a modern humanist conception born of liberal thought, which assumes that each individual is a sovereign subject and is responsible for his/her own choices and actions. However, self-evidently, the world of medieval Japan was not shaped by the anvil of post-Enlightenment thought, or by the self-mythologizing claims of modern liberal and neo-liberal ideologies that declare humans to be autonomous individuals who exercise their freedom and choose that which is in their own self-interest.

Second, this vision of individual responsibility and freedom also presupposes the supremacy of Man as the maker of meaning in the world. Agency in this understanding is something possessed by humans alone. The epistemic shift to a human-centred world, which excised the agency of gods and spirits, was closely associated in the West with the emergence of a new conception of a separate sphere of human life called 'religion,' which from the nineteenth century came to be understood as "a set of propositions to which believers gave assent".<sup>15</sup> 'Belief' in gods and in the cosmos as active agents, in this view, came to be dismissed as flights of fancy or manifestations of irrational superstition, or translated into a secular idiom where they became simply signs or symbols for human fears and anxieties.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Waiting for Foucault, Still* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press 2002), 52.

<sup>15</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 41.

And yet, it is obvious that in medieval Japan, humans were not the sole actors and makers of meaning: gods, beasts, demons, and even dreams and material objects were seen as working together with humans as active agents in a shared cosmological and worldly order. Medieval texts consistently fail to attribute the events that take place in the world solely to human intentions and will; rather they present them as effects unfolding as a consequence of a concatenation of forces, in which a significant role is assigned to the power of the divine and to karma from past lives. Time and time again both men and read the circumstances that unfold in their lives as the workings of inexplicable causes and contingencies reverberating through past existences rather than primarily as consequences of their own actions as autonomous individuals who are in control of their own destinies.

Third, liberal accounts of agency presuppose that it is the natural inclination of all humans to strive to resist the oppressive conditions of their lives. If agency is treated as being conceptually interchangeable with the notion of resistance against relations of power and domination then acts, particularly religious ones, that work in consonance *with* social conventions rather than *against* them cannot be granted real agency. However, what if we were to decouple agency from the liberatory project of progressive politics? Saba Mahmood does precisely this by calling into question the universality of liberal conceptions of freedom, arguing that “the desire for freedom from, or subversion of norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also mediated by cultural and historical conditions...”<sup>16</sup>

Agency, particularly in religious contexts, often lies not in challenging the normative framework of piety, but rather in developing a personal relationship to it through the cultivation of forms of bodily comportment and other acts of self-fashioning to craft the self into a pious and ethical subject. A conception of agency that speaks only the language of compliance or resistance is clearly inadequate to capturing

16 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

these forms of desire and affect, which from a contemporary feminist perspective are reduced to being either signs of passivity or co-option, or at best excused as necessary strategies for coping with patriarchal norms. The act of female tonsure, for example, has been reduced either to an act of resistance to unequal social arrangements where nunhood becomes the space of freedom that a woman actively chooses, or interpreted negatively as ‘a form of death in life.’

Piety in these readings is given little credence for it is often seen as a mask that hides *real* social issues and inequalities. When Murasaki, the heroine of the *Tale of Genji* expresses her repeated wish to take the tonsure, her commitment to the Buddhist path is given far less weight than the fact that her husband Genji refuses to let her do so. Murasaki’s reason for becoming a nun is emptied of religious content or significance and reduced to being little more than a practical way of escaping from a husband who has been unfaithful to her. However, both the taking of the tonsure and the inability to do so carry multiple significations in the *Genji*, and neither is reducible to being seen solely through the prisms of gender and agency, understood in terms of a binary framework of domination and subordination.

Chakrabarty, in his sensitive reading of accounts of widows in Bengali writings, describes how a child widow recounts her suffering and the role played by the Hindu goddess Kali in alleviating it. Her voice, he suggests, conjures up a different subjectivity from that of the modern individual, evoking a self “who acts as though she or he implicitly knew that being human meant one could address gods without having first to prove their reality [?].”<sup>17</sup> These practices of the self, he suggests, are ones “that leave an intellectually unmanageable excess when translated into the politics and language of political philosophies we owe to European intellectual traditions.”<sup>18</sup>

If what Chakrabarty argues is true of Indian modernity, then it is more obviously so in the case of medieval Japan, where relations between men and women were not conceptualized through the language of social justice or human agency, but through an altogether different

17 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 145.

18 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 148



idiom that belonged to a Buddhist view of the world. Amorous attachments, it was acknowledged, inevitably produced pain and misery for all beings, and women often came to exemplify this suffering. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “In religious thought suffering is existential...In social thought, however, suffering is not an existential category. It is specific and hence open to secular interventions.”<sup>19</sup> To turn the protagonists of medieval Japanese texts into subjects of modern ‘social thought’ is in effect to turn the medieval world into a secular one where piety simply becomes a displacement or metaphor that obscures (when read through the lens of ‘gender,’ ‘agency,’ and ‘resistance,’) the ‘truth’ of the inequality and injustice of gender relations.

One of the pleasures of encountering the texts of medieval Japan is their strangeness, which calls for a defamiliarization of categories that have become naturalized and obvious, such that the reading and interpretive practices to which we have grown habituated are unsettled. The ‘otherness’ of these distant worlds requires us to be attentive to the moments when our categories are stretched to the point where they fail to render us service. Without disavowing the intellectual tradition within which our work is perforce located, the medieval texts of Japan might open up new ways of conceptualising the body, gender and agency such that they bring into view both the possibilities and limits of working with these categories for describing not only the distant past of the non-West, but equally the world we inhabit today. For these two worlds while different, are not incommensurably so. What makes possible an intelligible conversation between the now and the then is that moment of the uncanny, when we recognise that “these [past] worlds are never completely lost” ... and that “we inhabit their fragments even when we classify ourselves as modern and secular.”<sup>20</sup> Without flattening or domesticating other life worlds, it may be possible for us to hear, however faintly, reverberations from a distant past that we believe we left behind long ago.

19 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 120.

20 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 112.

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