# Chapter 1

##### Redefining the Parameters of Political Activism: South Asian Women ‘Rocking the Stereotype’

# Introduction

# This chapter focuses on South Asian women’s political agency and challenges their objectification as passive subjects. It examines how they have been able to construct a ‘critical space’ through their involvement in politics at local and national levels. What is of particular relevance is how the parameters of political activism can be redefined to include agency at the micro or community level. The aim is to convey how political agency is operationalized through race, gender and religion *and* how it challenges dominant stereotypes. Feminism as an analytical tool is central to understanding political agency because it draws on the challenges posed to mainstream feminism by black feminists. It also facilitates drawing on experience, difference and the work of postcolonial and third world feminists. The chapter looks at the debates on the conceptualization of power, empowerment, domination and resistance including the power of discourses that can help understand how a collective form of agency can influence social policy and the decision-making process. The final part of this chapter provides an overview of subsequent chapters.

**Chapter 2**

**Conceptualizing South Asian Women’s Political Activism through a Feminist Lens**

**Introduction**

This chapter highlights the main debates within feminism with reference to the processes of racialization, ethnicity and racism. It constitutes the basis for detailed discussions of the role played by feminism in the construction of South Asian women’s political agency. I will be charting how political agency can be claimed through activism and through identification with ethnic identities (a relationship that does not have to be viewed negatively). This chapter develops the ideas raised previously through the concepts ‘experience’ and ‘difference’ to analyze how they have been validated and critiqued in feminist theory with reference to political activism. It also looks at how ethnic identities and the ‘margin’ have been reclaimed as sites of resistance. The final section of the chapter explores how agency has been conceptualized and its relationship to identity and subjectivity to illustrate how axes of power such as race and gender impinge on complex social relations. The use of collective or contingent or multiple identities will be shown to form the basis of political mobilization and in the process it will demonstrate how feminist theory has moved beyond the binaries of active/passive and resistance/oppression towards a discussion of the relationship between the social, symbolic and material worlds.

**Chapter 3**

**Understanding Historical Representations: Political Agency, Resistance and the Role of Discourses**

**Introduction**

The historical representations of Indian women in hegemonic colonial discourses are important in understandings of contemporary racializing discourses and identity construction. This chapter examines how the ‘Othering’ process has been used to produce knowledge that situated women in colonial India as inferior and unable to act in the face of oppression. The controversial issue of *sati* will be used to illustrate how the Indian woman became a site of contestation to justify colonial rule. To challenge the perceived passivity of women, the chapter will chart briefly, their involvement in the Indian nationalist and feminist movements which managed to redefine the public and private spheres. The political involvement of women is further defined with reference to the increasing numbers of women who are politicized based on religious identities. The third part of this chapter therefore explores the ways in which the complexity of analyzing agency is compounded by the link with right wing activity highlighted by the potential collusion with patriarchal structures and discourses. In contemporary India s*ati* remains a central issue to Hindutva and feminists alike and has succeeded in raising important questions around women’s capacity for agency and acts of resistance The idea of collective histories, the commonality of experiences and the multiple locations of struggle on the Indian subcontinent, provide the link between history and contemporary social relations of gendered postcoloniality. It is through the link with the past that a deeper understanding of South Asian women’s identity and agency that resists marginalization, oppression and Othering can be achieved.

**Chapter 4**

**Researching Political Agency**

The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of the research process and the methods employed for the collection of the data. I will situate the research within the debates around methodological issues, including political and ethical implications. In particular I will make reference to feminist methodology and its influence on the research process in this study of South Asian women’s political agency. The research provides challenging questions for the methodological process, specifically related to addressing the question of what propels Asian women into forms of political activism. The chapter addresses the question ‘what counts as feminist research?’ I have chosen to engage with this questions because the study is based on semi-structured interviews and I wanted to examine why interviewing has come to be coded as feminine and subjective, as opposed to masculine and objective. The second part of the chapter looks at how the research for this study was carried out. It provides an overview of how the participants were located and includes issues around access. The final part is dedicated to the process of reflexivity, which allows for reflection on the difficulties associated with access; power and knowledge production; and ‘race’ as an influential factor. The impact of ‘race’ is also explored in connection with quality of data; knowledge production and ‘authenticity’; and emotions and (over)rapport. The chapter therefore charts my journey in collecting the women’s narratives and in the development of a methodological analysis of South Asian women’s experiences. What follows is an attempt to draw together and utilize some of the methodological issues from the key areas above.

**Chapter 5**

**Race, Agency and Political Activism**

In this chapter I will explore the variety of ways that women’s activism, knowledge production and culture intersect with ‘race’. I will be using the narratives of the women interviewed to locate ideas about the ‘self’ and to show how South Asian women have struggled against forms of racial oppression. It demonstrates how issues such as deportation, institutional racism and domestic violence have propelled women from a variety of backgrounds into action. The women’s involvement in different types of organizations is associated with resistance to racism on a number of levels. My main aims are to challenge the myth of passivity and counteract the objectification of women - an ideology with colonial roots. Despite South Asian women being deeply embedded in patriarchal, racial and class discourses, it becomes possible to present them as self-defining and active subjects. Indeed I would argue that it is precisely the stereotypical image of the South Asian woman as a passive subject without agency that is challenged by the women in this research. Instead, a more active and assertive self is constructed in the process of struggling for equality and rights. Firstly, I examine how social theory and, in particular, Western feminist theory dealt with ‘anomalies’ such as the activity of South Asian women. In subsequent sections, I outline the ways in which issues of experience, agency, identity, subjectivity and ‘difference’ are understood. The possibilities of applying these in practice will be demonstrated through the narratives of the women interviewed. In the final section I will examine the relationship between gender and agency.

**Chapter 6**

**‘In the Name of the Father’: Contours of Gender Relations**

This chapter explores how sexism impacts on the lives of South Asian women and the methods they employ to resist it. The role of agency is examined by looking at the relationship between patriarchy and culture *and* its interpretations. The first section of this chapter investigates the extent of patriarchal oppression within ‘the Asian community’, its link to culture, and how it operates within power relations. The idea of a universal patriarchy is explored and its implications for understanding South Asian women’s experiences. The aim is not to reinforce stereotypes of the Asian family but to examine how sexism operates against South Asian women in their relationship to ‘the community’. Subsequent sections show how the binary of the 'good woman' and the 'bad woman’ is constructed with its implications for subjugated identities within marriage and sexuality. The link between culture and agency is revealed through examining women’s understanding of ‘choice’ in marriage and sexuality. I will be drawing on the narratives of the women I interviewed to show how it provides an insight into some of the strategies employed to challenge oppressive practices and notions of acceptable forms of femininity or behaviour through stereotyping. The narratives provide detail about the ways in which South Asian women are actively involved in the process of self-definition and empowerment, through their claim to rights which reveals the struggle for power.

**Chapter 7**

# Conceptualizing the Uneasy Relationship of Religion to Political Agency

This chapter examines how identity and agency are asserted by South Asian women who have appropriated religious sanctions to achieve rights. In particular, I have focused on the role of Islam[[1]](#footnote-1) as a religious identity in some women’s lives. The rationale for this focus is the involvement of a number of participants in Islamic-based organizations. Although Muslim women are also active in secular organizations in the struggle for equality and freedom, it is predominantly Muslim women who are involved in non-secular organizations. This is evident in the narratives of Muslim women involved in religious organizations. The importance of religion is evident in their narratives, and to compare the significance of religion in women’s lives, the narratives of Hindu and Sikh women working in secular organizations have been included. What I will show in this chapter is the ambivalent and contradictory nature of religious discourse, particularly in the construction of political identity. In this way, I explore the paradoxical relationship between women and religious based activism (agency) for gender equality *and* whether Islamic feminism is an oxymoron. The chapter begins by looking at the reassertion of religious identities and what this means for women. It moves on to examining Islam, Islamism and the association with fundamentalism. Global events and the adoption of dress codes have brought to the fore debates around the veil/*hijab,* therefore the chapter will highlight issues of integration and community cohesion *and* the link to multiculturalism.

**Chapter 8**

**Conclusion**

In my quest to unravel some of the complexities involved in the construction of political identity, agency and subjectivity, I have looked at the role of South Asian women in a range of civic organizations dedicated to bringing about social change. From the experiences in the data collected it is possible to understand what propels women into action. Although here is debate surrounding the methodological use of race and ethnicity – the ‘treacherous bind’ (Radhakrishnan, 1996) – I have hopefully utilized in my use of the category ‘South Asian’, a “doubled” research practice that is capable of working bot within and against racialized categories, and which is able to make the links between lived experience, political relations and the production of knowledge’ (Gunaratnam, 2003:23). It has been my aim to explore South Asian women’s political agency through a historical and contemporary analysis *and* to shift the debate away from the victim status trough an exploration of their political involvement ion organizations. This has helped me to understand how South Asian women’s experiences and the interpretations of identity feed into their political agency. In addition, feminist theory was employed to question how agency has been conceptualized. AN important question is, how and why, despite their history of struggle, have South Asian women been depicted as victims of patriarchal control, unable to exert their influence on, or to engage with power structures? I have engaged with feminist theory and the challenges posed by black feminism to Western feminists’ depiction of South Asian women. The link between types of feminism – Western, lack and third world – has been made by using the idea of continuity in space, time, location and geography which takes into account the historical specificity of Indian feminism (Mohanty, 2003).

1. For a detailed understanding of Islamic history see Ahmed, A. (2002). For a contemporary study of Muslims in Britain see Lewis, P (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)