



# Self, Body, Language and Digital Identities: Readings from Indian Chat Rooms\*

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## Abstract

There is no denying that the concepts of self, body and language are being radically transformed in digital practices ranging from cell phone text messaging to chatting on the net. In many emerging digital cultures, what is being transformed bear the challenges in relating to the centuries old practices of addressing questions of self, body and language. The practices and expressions associated with digital identities may or may not be expressive of bodily identities in offline settings, but they certainly challenge conventional notions of self, body and language, more so in cultures where there is a supposedly *sacred* association between the language of self and body.

## Introduction: Trajectories of Body Studies

“Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility.

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Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.” *Donna Haraway*

The concepts of body and self have been attracting the attention of Eastern and Western philosophers for centuries. But, feminist, black and queer scholars were the early birds to theorise bodies (Holliday and Hassard, 2001:1). Besides the feminist approach to body studies, there are many other important currents in body studies literature, but many of them seem to fall within either the broad projects of modernists or post-modernists. The obvious difference between the two finds a contrast in the totalising vision of modernists and the local contexts of post-modernists.

In recent times, body theorists have moved beyond their project on the materiality of bodies. The focus on the materiality of bodies, inevitably, centred on the disciplinary (Bordo, 1998) and reconstruction (Balsamo, 1998) regimes through which female bodies enacted their normalisation drives. The focus on the normalisation drive of female bodies did open up an avenue to understand the emergence of new subjectivities, but it quickly became a target of criticism. Critics pointed out that “modern feminist perspectives talking about the materiality of women’s bodies neglect the fact that men must also enact rigorous disciplinary regimes in order to be seen as ‘normal’ “ (Holliday and Hassard, 2001:5). The focus on the disciplinary regimes of female bodies is also seen by Holliday and Hassard (2001:6) as only reinforcing the notion of the historical binary (the normal and self-contained male body Vs the abnormal and uncontrollable female body).

Among the responses which seek to move onto the next stage in body theorising, Ruth Holliday and John Hassard’s, *Contested Bodies* (2001:7) is a significant one. This work is determined to correct not only the above mentioned inadequacy, but also aspires to look at discourses surrounding post-modern subjectivities, which are seen as sharing a commonality with the female bodies.

At another level, body studies are also increasingly focussing on issues thrown up by 'techno bodies' (Holliday and Hassard, 2001:14-16), 'virtual bodies' (Mirzoeff, 1998:181-278) and 'cyborgs' (Haraway, 1991). They have their own competing and complementary visions of bodies and selves. While the 'techno-bodies' approach seeks to understand the "relationship between body, identity and technology" (Holliday and Hassard, 2001:15), the objective of 'virtual bodies' approach is to answer the difficult question, "what is the body in an age of virtuality?" (Mirzoeff, 1998:18). These approaches also identify themselves as projects of humanism and post-modernism, in stark contrast to the project of 'cyborgs.'

What is a 'cyborg'? Believe it or not, 'cyborgs' are visualised as belonging to the post-human and post-gender age! Haraway defines 'cyborg' as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction" (Haraway, 1991:150). Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991), although utopian in conception, holds the promise of liberating 'other' bodies and selves from the multiple dualisms of Western traditions, which she says, "have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. ...High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices. In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice (for example, the homework economy in the integrated circuit), we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras" (Haraway, 1991:177).

Such engagements point to challenges posed by the shifting praxis of body and self due to virtual reality/cyberspace technologies. Among

the notable challenges, the problematic of self and body in cyberspace is seen as contingent upon the problematic of defining cyberspace itself in terms of the conventional notion of *space* and *place*. Not many are comfortable with the idea of ascribing spatiality to contexts of something like chat rooms or blogs. The *space* and *place* in reality, which shelter our bodies and their selves, can not find their equivalents anywhere; and where they can be mimicked, they would only contribute to the disembodiment of selves or the virtual absence of bodies. So goes the logic of those who point to the absence of spatial qualities in cyberspace. Another dimension of cyberspace, one that is normally overlooked, is its literary origin. Cyberspace entered the popular domain as a literary invention. And without the contribution of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), imageries associated with cyberspace would have been very different (Chun, 2000:2).

Moreover, there is another problem that persists in the vision of post-modernists. How to characterise the post-modern character of cyberspace? Is cyberspace an agent of pure post-modernism or a version of 'viral post-modernism'? Batchen (1998:278) says, "if we are properly to characterize cyberspace as a post-modern phenomenon, it must be as part of a post-modernism that does not come after the modern, so much assertively re-enacts modernism's desire to fold back in on itself. Like VR, this viral post-modernism takes nourishment from an inseparable host, replicating itself as an aberrant form of the other and thereby leaving us with a troubling because all too faithful repetition of the same. It is here then, here in the complex interweave of this entanglement - here within the spacing of One with its Other - that the political and historical identity of cyberspace might best be sought" (Batchen,1998:278).

Yet another related plane of contention is the notion of disembodiment, a notion that is very crucial for delineating the difference between real and virtual bodies and their selves. Those who have experienced some kind of disembodiment always vouch for the power of the same, particularly its disorienting effects in VR (Virtual Reality) settings.

In drawing our attention to the disembodied power of technologies, Cliff Bostock (1998) describes cyberspace as a 'soulless shadow of cultural imagination.' Bostock (1998) says that "...through the disembodied technology of electronic media and the collapse of boundaries (through regression), consciousness is overtaken by images generated by the other, a programmer. This is a nearly Faustian experience of consciousness liberated from the body, time and space. But the price, as I will show, is the imagination's integrity, soul itself. It is my thesis here that cyberspace represents the soulless shadow of the cultural imagination and, perhaps as a first cause, the shadow of the cultural body. ...My thesis is in large measure derived from my own experience as an inhabitant of cyberspace for more than 10 years. The denouement of my own life there was the experience of this virtual reality amusement park, which, to my mind, dramatized the subtler, everyday effects of inhabiting cyberspace. In my "mind trip" at *MindWave*, I was — after regression — shown a holographic video of the "ideal future." This ideal was no less than a Frankensteinian vision of the triumph of the Cartesian view. The body was literally represented in its highest evolutionary form as a silvered robotic being — featureless, genderless, gliding, without gestural meaning. The other principal image was of the city of the future, an extension of the imagined body: a gleaming clockworks of glistening geometric shapes around which cars whizzed. The city was literally superimposed over mountains, which receded from the skyline like Sophia banished to the earth's core. As such, it depicted the shadow of the civilized world. The most shocking aspect of the experience, though, is that I could not exercise my own imagination in this environment. When I attempted to visualize something other, because I found the images ugly, I could not. My imagination was, for the time I was at *MindWave*, completely overtaken by the shadow-like but programmed eruption of banal images."

But there are also chinks in the armour of the disembodiment theory. One persistent detractor is the logic of virtual compensation of absent bodies. This logic postulates that the physical body is rendered absent in cyberspace and the virtual body compensates its absence. When

conceptualised in positive terms, disembodiment is seen as an ideal state as it invokes conditions of equality and anonymity, conditions which are utopian in our reality. Embodiment is, alternatively, seen as the natural state of the Cartesian logic, where the mind/self are said to reside within bodies, signifying the identity of our self as singular and self-contained. "I am what I am," because of the sense of embodiment my body and self provide. Such a logic of common sense, of course, would face a challenge in the words of a philosopher or saint, who seeks a rational higher than that of common sense in the quest for enlightenment. The logic of enlightenment would invariably privilege disembodiment over embodiment. Here, what becomes significant is not embodiment, but its reversal, disembodiment. Interestingly, this conventional notion of disembodiment is sought to be repositioned by Chun (2000:6) when he says: "in cyberspace, as in all Orientalist spaces, there are disembodied minds on the one hand, and disembodied representations on the other. There are those who can reason online, and those who are reduced to information. *In cyberspace, there is disembodiment, and then there is disembodiment.*" What this implies is: the conventional disembodied self can only emerge through the process that invokes differences of the 'other.' In these contexts, the following questions assume significance. Does disembodiment really take place in our cybercultural negotiations or is it only a mirage? Can we desert our selves and identities, along with our bodies, in the virtual world? What becomes of us when we lose the sense of being embodied?

Keeping the above in view, this chapter aims to unravel challenges borne of the *sacred* association between body, self and language, based on readings of conversation threads in the *Rediff Chat* ([www.in.rediff.com/chat/chathome.htm](http://www.in.rediff.com/chat/chathome.htm)), one of the popular Indian chat sites. Foucault's notions of 'heterotopia', 'discursive discourse' and 'mirror' are employed in this chapter to aid the stated objective. This chapter also aims to focus on two important topics in the next two sections. My intention is to show a consistency in discussions on i) concepts of self and body in Eastern and Western philosophies and ii) the crisis of bodies.

### Self Vs Body: The Logic of Eastern and Western Philosophies

Bodies (and their selves) have been the subject of contradictory discourses about their materiality and rationality in Eastern and Western philosophies since ancient times. The predominant notion of Western conception of body is the one by Descartes (1968). The centrality of the mind prevails in Descartes' conception of body. Descartes declared that "the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body" (Descartes, 1968:54). Western philosophy puts its faith in the self-contained male body as the site of rationality and individuality. The Cartesian logic is also rooted in the material conception of the body. This logic views body as the site of mind/self, where the mind/self, even though they are positioned as distinct and superior, can not exist outside the materiality of the body. Contrast this to one of the very typical threads in Eastern philosophy, the Indian version: 'one's true nature is bodiless and body is the site of all miseries' (Ramana Maharishi, 1994:2). Here, the stress is on destroying the very essence of Cartesian embodiment, "I am the body." Japanese and Chinese traditions stress, not the distinct division between mind and body, but continuities between body, mind/self and the 'life force' or spirit. In the Japanese tradition, the self comes into existence only in its interactions with social practices of reality (King, 2000).

However, in both Eastern and Western traditions, the body becomes a worthy location in so far as it can nurture a pure mind or self. For instance, one of the well known *Siddhars*, Thirumoolar, says in his treatise on 'Siva Yoga': "a great amount of wealth is innate in the body. It may serve as an abode of God. Hence, one has to take immediate steps to preserve his physical energy" (Annamalai, 2001:1) In fact, by deploying its unique measures of regulating breath, controlling nerve centres and channelling the so-called 'life force' to the vital parts of the body, 'yoga' remains as one of the living examples of the Eastern philosophy's stress on perfecting the body from within.

But in another thread of Eastern philosophy, body is also seen as a shackle from which self must free itself. It is also not uncommon to come

across stories of *siddhars* who can move to other bodies of humans and animals, treating each body only as a temporary abode and self as its tenant.

Unlike the Western Cartesian philosophical tradition, Eastern philosophers, particularly of the Indian kind, do not point to the superiority of the self-contained male body *vis-a-vis* the leaking female body. Bodies, whether male or female, are depicted as suffering from the lack of self-contained character. However, in India, the female body came to be treated as a site of pollution that must subject itself to processes of purification, periodic exclusion and other kind disciplinary regimes. In such a context, the subjectivity of the polluted female body has contributed to the emergence of its counter site, the non-polluting male body.

In the Eastern philosophical tradition, for several centuries before and after the birth of Buddha, body has been projected as the source of impediment for self knowledge, particularly its attachment to the body. Unless attachment to the body is recognised, knowing the self and achieving self-realisation become impossible, so goes the teachings of Asian philosophers. Negation of the body by the self is the sole arbiter for self-realisation. Ramana Maharishi stresses the need to negate the body in order to take up the journeys of the bodiless self. "Disciple: Master! What is the means to gain the state of eternal bliss, ever devoid of misery? Master: Apart from the statement in the Veda that wherever there is body there is misery, this is also the direct experience of all people; therefore, one should enquire into one's true nature which is ever bodiless, and one should remain as such. This is the means to gaining that state."

Ramana Maharishi says further: "Actions such as 'going' and 'coming' belong only to the body. And so, when one says "I went, I came", it amounts to saying that the body is "I". But, can the body be said to be the consciousness "I", since the body was not before it was born, is made up of the five elements, is non-existent in the state of deep sleep, and becomes a corpse when dead? ...If one remains quiescent without abandoning that (experience), the egoity, the individual sense, of the form

'I am the body' will be totally destroyed, and at the end the final thought, viz. the 'I'- form also will be quenched like the fire that burns camphor" (Ramana Maharishi, 1994:2-3).

To what extent the goal of destroying the commonplace notion "I am the body," affects ordinary individuals is a moot question. More debatable would be the challenge to "I am the body," in the construction of post-modern subjectivities in real/virtual lives. The state of enlightenment, for believers, belongs to higher mortals, an experience beyond most of us. But its post-modern equivalent is within our reach, at least in cyberspace.

### **Bodies in Crisis?**

Exacerbated by the fluid flows of the internet, what gets lost are the singular subjectivities of selves and what gets going are the multiple subjectivities of disembodied selves. How chatters on the net signify their absent bodies in the virtual world is no less deceptive and conceited than the way in which the disembodied selves seek to relate to their physical bodies. It seems bodies, both physical and virtual, are made vulnerable in the 'third space.' But the vulnerability of physical bodies appears to be more real. The vulnerability of physical bodies to a host of invasive and non-invasive scanning technologies that seek to objectivise and fragment bodies in terms of their major, minor and tertiary constituents is a real crisis. This is also ironical because these bodies are sought to be positioned as unitary ones, notwithstanding the crisis, by the 'persons' in bodies. The moot question here is not what happens to the interior (of the body), that is fragmented in all nakedness in order to mend and reconstruct it, but what happens to the mending of identities and selves as a consequence of certain types of medical probing and reconstruction.

Anne Balsamo (1998:223) asks, "when the human body is fractured into organs, fluids, and genetic codes, what happens to gender identity? In a technologically deconstructed body, where is gender located? Gender, like the body, is a boundary concept; it is at once related to the physiological

sexual characteristics of the human body (the natural order of the body) and to the cultural context within which that body 'makes sense'. The widespread technological reconstruction of the 'natural' human body suggests that gender too would be ripe for reconstruction. Advances in reproductive technology already decouple the act of procreation from the act of sexual intercourse. Laparoscopy has played a critical role in the assessment of fetal development, with the attendant consequence that the fetal body has been metaphorically (and sometimes literally) severed from its natural association with the female body and is now proclaimed to be the new, and most important obstetric patient. What effects do these biotechnological advances have on cultural definitions of the female body?"

Does this mean that our notions of 'natural' bodies are as transient as our notions of virtual bodies? Both suffer from and are vulnerable to reconstructions by technologies. Our bodies are in a crisis state because the binary markers of identities, which privileged the exterior over the interior, the visible over the invisible and the true inner body over its outer clothing of skin/ muscle/colour, are under severe strain. The body in our age is only as good as its DNA, which is no less visible to our eyes than virtual bodies. In other words, our bodies are made to lose the traditional notion of identities we have been ascribing for centuries. Our concrete bodily identities are no longer visible marks such as moles, as identified by our passports and similar documents, but genetic and biometric identities to which our real bodies are anchored. This can also be seen as yet another milestone (indeed a positive one, as it amounts to discovering the body in the entirety of its interior), much in tandem with how we have been urged by philosophers to launch an enquiry of the self.

When bodies are in a crisis, what becomes of their co-location with selves? What is the state of our selves in the face of reconstructed bodies and identities? What is the state of our reconstructed bodies in the face of counteractions from selves, which are very likely to be expressive of modified or diametrically opposite versions of previous identities? One clear implication of reconstructions is not the fragmentation of bodies,

but their internalisation. For instance, with regard to effects of cosmetic surgery and associated bodily reconstructions, Balsamo (1998:231) says, “in its encounters with the cosmetic surgeon and the discourse of cosmetic surgery, the female body becomes an object of heightened personal surveillance; this scrutiny results in an internalized image of a fractured, fragmented body. The body becomes the vehicle of confession; it is the site at which women, consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular culture about ideal beauty and, in comparison, devalue the material body.”

Besides the crisis and attendant challenges introduced by medical technologies in the reconstruction of the body, there is also another crisis faced by physical bodies in their relationships with the virtual world as a consequence of VR, animation and internet-based technologies.

Just as physical bodies are faced with the problem of fragmentation of their materiality, they are also caught up in Foucault's ‘heterotopic’ state of being counter-sites. Foucault (1998) argues that sites and their spatial relationships matters. He draws our attention to the difference between the unreal utopian sites, which have no place in reality, and the real sites that exist in relation to other sites in terms of their difference. Foucault calls these sites ‘heterotopias’ (1998:239). He says: “...utopias are sites with no real places. ...There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because the places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias” (Foucault, 1998:239).

### Method

Studies on negotiations of self and body in chat rooms have been conducted in different contexts for nearly a decade. One of the earliest studies on chat room behaviour was done by Hamman (1996) on cybersex and multiple selves in AOL chat rooms. In this study, Hamman related the impact of narrow bandwidth on cybersex and multiple selves. Stanley (2003) investigated the elements of rhetoric and repression in their relationship with the management of loneliness in the Internet. This study used the method of discursive cyberpsychology. The present study, based on readings from the *Rediff Chat*, is the first investigation of self, body and language by Indians in internet chat rooms.

Due to the ubiquitous Internet cafes, Indian chat room users are able to easily access popular chat rooms. Many of them offer a host of services besides chatting and browsing facilities, including broadband. They charge 30-50 US cents per hour, depending on the nature of connections offered.

The present study chose to study users of the *Rediff Chat* because it is the only popular India-based site comparable to chat services of MNCs like *Yahoo* and *MSN*. Even though, *Yahoo's* Indian chat rooms are populated by more users (in comparison with the number of users in *Rediff Chat*), due to the probability of *Yahoo* attracting a wider international user base (which may not have the relevance for the sample this study aims); the present work confines itself to the study of users in *Rediff Chat* rooms. The *Rediff Chat* provides a good scope to study users from all the major geographical regions in India. It has rooms covering all the major cities in India, besides rooms for regions where non-resident Indians live predominantly. Thus, it becomes much easier for users to hop from Bombay to Chennai (Madras) to Cochin to Washington. Besides geographical choices, the site also offers hangouts, lifestyle and private rooms. The *Rediff Chat* also remains the only Indian site that offers three chat clients (*java*, *java lite* and *html*), allowing users to pick the suitable client, depending upon their usage preferences and bandwidth. Those with slow transfer

rates can settle for the *html* chat client, as it uploads very fast, compared to *java*-based clients.

For the present study, the preliminary exploration of the *Rediff Chat*'s rooms and users commenced during the month of May 2005. At regular intervals, the chat rooms were randomly explored to assess the relative popularity of various rooms, the user base and dominant threads of chat conversations. After a month-long exploration, it became clear that users flock not to all rooms, despite the seductive labelling of some rooms, but have clear and consistent choices in choosing their primary chat habitat. It also became clear that the popular rooms are not the lifestyle rooms, but rooms with geographical markers. During the first three weeks of June 2005, the chat rooms were explored every day. And, on most days, users were tracked in their negotiations of bodies, selves and languages from late evening hours (when the momentum starts) until early morning hours when virtual bodies and identities leave the chat rooms.

During this period of intensive exploration, choices and subjects for the study emerged clearly. On most days, users were found in large numbers in the Chennai, Bombay, Calcutta, Cochin, Delhi and Goa rooms. Similarly, the user base of *20s something*, *30s something* and the *small smoke filled café* was also large. The users numbered between 10-50 in these rooms on most days. There were very few users in other rooms, particularly hangout rooms that cover, among others, the campus beats in different cities. There are 30 rooms in the geographical category, 16 in lifestyle and 14 hangout rooms. There are, of course, some errors on the *Rediff Chat* site. For example, the *Rediff Chat*'s geographical category field lists Chennai and the *html* client screen shows 'welcome to the Madras room,' even though they both refer to the same city.

The present study chose to focus on Chennai room users as they were very regular, highly prolific and untypical (their rejection of cybersex is only one of the many examples attesting to their untypicality). The Chennai room users were also chosen for the special focus of this study as their threads provide ample scope for coming to terms with their discursive

constructions of issues ranging from the very serious (such as the rationale for the use of a local slang) to the banal (such as how to make *Onion Bajji*, fried pancake with stuffed onion). The study included one significant thread from the Washington room and two significant threads from the Chennai room of the *Rediff Chat* for examination.

The study used *html* chat client as it facilitates copying of conversations for in depth 'after readings'. Besides the login, no attempt was made at any stage during the study period to enter into conversations with subjects of this study. The activities in the chat rooms were monitored unobtrusively till the inactivity/server time out wiped the chat client off the screen. Barring those activities missed during such interruptions, the chat threads were followed as long as the active members persisted in their attempts to keep the rooms alive.

The temptation to invoke Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' is very strong in studies of this nature, despite misgivings regarding the wide spread application of the concept in studies on the Internet (Sherman Young, 1998). There are three major points in this chapter. Firstly, by applying Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' to deal with sites in cyberspace that define, contest and represent through the logic of difference other sites in cyberspace, we can better our understanding of contemporary notions of the body. Secondly, the application of his notion of 'mirror' (not the Lacanian one) would certainly get us a different picture of impossible subjectivities in chat room conversations. Foucault's 'mirror' is located between utopia and 'heterotopia'. According to Foucault, the logic of the absence of body in the virtual world, at the back of the 'mirror', is sustained by the presence and active counteraction of the physical body that simultaneously sees its absence and presence through the 'mirror'. And, thirdly, by applying Foucault's notion of 'discursive discourse' (Foucault, 1997), we can examine better the discursive constructions in chat room activities. Besides Foucault's notions of 'heterotopia', 'mirror' and 'discursive discourse', this chapter is also informed by the important notions of body and self, as discussed in earlier sections of this chapter.

This chapter aims to explore challenges borne of the *sacred* association between the language of body and self in the negotiations of the *Rediff Chat's* users. Hence, threads from the Chennai room, which had the potential to reveal the praxis of 'body, self and language, were subjected to 'online readings and in depth 'after readings.' In this chapter, the word *sacred* is not used in any religious sense, but is used to stress the inviolable constants in the conventional relationships linking self, body and language.

### Negotiations of Self, Body and Language in *Rediff Chat*

One of the central questions that have not yet been answered is what becomes of disembodiment when it is defined by the logic of deception. Cyberspace is, not surprisingly, negatively positioned as being incredible, deceitful, and untrustworthy or as a dangerous territory. One is easily duped or tricked by those who are disembodying their selves in cyberspace. Such concern becomes obvious in one of the random picks from conversations in the *Washington* room of the *Rediff Chat*. The whole exchange or the thread subjected to analysis is given here. A thread is defined as the text that exists between two disjunctures, the last substantive topic and the next substantive topic of conversation. Interludes, in the form of messages from the 'trespassers,' (who enter and exit without entering into conversations) have been ignored.

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08 06 2005

Welcome to The Washington Room!

Whitez says, do let me know when ur joke is done ,, i will laf ok !!

Whitez says, tht makes his gf oready married to someone ?? now thts the hidden joke ,,right

linus\_stud says, u got to hv a sense of humor to understand joke and lf is much latter???

Whitez says, yeah yeah i agreee,,

linus\_stud says, now u lett mi a joke???

Whitez says, didnt i oready ,,,

Whitez says, tht makes ur hunk'z gf oready marrried to someone ,, n ur stupid hunk dont even know abt tht ??  
 linus\_stud says, o ya for ur standard tdats the only u can contribute??  
 Whitez says, comeon linus stud ,, chats are defn deceiving ,, specially my chats :)  
 Whitez says, dont b judgemental  
 Whitez says, have a nice day ahead ,, hope to c u again :)  
 Whitez says, bye n TC  
 linus\_stud says, y does pple cheat and decive on net..net gives so much of annonility one can b really bold and frank and loose nothing??  
 Whitez says, proz n conz  
 linus\_stud says, yhx hunny..Tc n though brief nice meeting diffren pple???C Ya

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'Loose nothing'? The deceiving selves on the net are aided by what are not present physically in the chat rooms, their bodies. Without 'loosing' bodies, albeit in cyberspace, the deceiving selves can not be 'bold,' as that would put their disembodied practices in jeopardy. For disembodiment to occur, even in its primitive version, what must be foregrounded is not just the virtual body, but the anonymity of the physical body and its singular self.

Whitez and Linus\_stud's words only capture what is obvious to anyone familiar with the deceiving logic of disembodied selves in the chat rooms. This is, of course, not one of the rare instances of being really 'bold' and 'loosing nothing' as a disembodied self. This is only a random statement that attests to the discursive pattern in which disembodied selves seek to locate themselves in majority of the chat rooms.

The chat identities of the two participants reveal the attempt to enact an act of disembodiment that is deceptive. What could their ethnicity be? Indian? Whitez could not be white, just as Linus could be a Raman or Govindan. One can only surmise that these two could be non-resident Indians, to whom acts of disembodiment may be borne of their hybrid cultural identities and emerge naturally even in their physical settings. Moreover, it is very unlikely for others (non-Indians) to use an Indian chat room. As citizens of the diasporic world, it is natural for non-resident

Indians to enact roles of multiple selves, depending on their private and public social practices/identities.

The emergence of multiple selves may not be dependent on a single source of influence but may be contingent on several sources, which are made invisible even in the supposedly very outspoken context of the above conversation. The problematic of the discursive construction is not in locating its nature or context, but bringing to scrutiny sources of influences that structure the discourse from hidden locales. It is also obvious in the reading of the above conversation that the backbone of any discursive construct ought to be the linguistic dimension. When one says, “chats are definitely deceiving” and the other counters, “Y (why),” both concur with the truth that chats are deceptive enactment of selves. Despite the lurking tone of disagreement one notices in the words of the later, we have no doubt that it is only a masquerade for the agreement it posits. Linus, while not denying the deceptive nature of chats outright, only launches the discursive logic to the next level, when he introduces the praxis of ‘anonymity, getting bold and losing nothing’. Implicit in the source of this level is another level, which is hidden from view. That is: ‘chats can get bold and lose nothing’ only by being deceptive, as chats are inherently anonymous. Hence, in such readings of chats, what must be underscored goes beyond the logic of disembodiment and deceptive selves. Finally, from the hidden source of influence, the discursive journey proceeds towards an open source, revealing two possibilities of discursive agreement/disagreement: i) chats are deceptive and it has pros and cons. ii) chats can not be otherwise and it has pros and cons.

One of the interesting facets of digital identities is the scope they provide for the self to be in its preferred state of being, which is unlikely in *RL* (Real Life) settings. In the case of one of the regular and most articulate participants in the Chennai chat room, *saidapetta machan*, we find a user who revels in patriarchal supremacy and a ‘scornful’ local dialect, the ‘Madras Tamil.’ If one believes that languages and dialects are also class constructions, one would sympathise with the social class that gave birth to ‘Madras Tamil.’ This dialect carries the stigma, not only because

of its corruptive linguistic markers, but also because of its status as the language of the urban poor in the Chennai metropolitan area. This dialect of the urban poor, not only represents the inversions of standard Tamil usage, but eclectically corrupts what it has borrowed from other languages, particularly English, Telugu, and Hindi; even as it succeeds in communicating through the voices of the unlettered urban poor.

*Saidapettai* is a well known geographical location in Chennai where South Chennai's urban poor live. *Machan*, is a slang that refers to a familial relationship (brother-in-law), and a grey area, where it stands as a referent for any casual acquaintance. In the standard usage of Tamil, *Machan* denotes only a marriage-centred relationship (brother-in-law). But in the case of the urban poor's dialect, it exhibits the trait of a discursive construction. It excludes the standard option in favour of accepting everything else. It empowers its users, but derails the conventions of standard Tamil usage. This becomes apparent after following the chat footsteps of saidapetta machan. This digital identity conceals much about the person, his body and socio-cultural background, even as it reveals the urge to reflect on the language and lives of the people he consigned to his virtual world. The use of 'Madras Tamil' appears to empower the disembodied self of this user, who is very unlikely to belong to the ranks of the urban poor, but one who is only living the language of those who have been represented as his 'other.' His expressions in other threads, in flawless English (when he railed against those who argued with him over his persistent use of 'Madras Tamil'), coupled with his hints that he is yet another 'CS' (Computer Science) person in the room; make it clear that he is not a member of the urban poor. This is also testimony to his challenge in taking on the *sacred* association between the language of the normal body and self (which is socially inscribed) and the language of the disembodied self (which is inscribed by the urge to live the language of the 'other' in the virtual worlds). The constraints in emulating the 'other' are far too many to be challenged in our *RL*, more so in the case of breaking the language markers that define our self and provide credibility to our normal bodies in the conduct of social practices. Such constraints

are unthinkable in the relationship between the self and its language persona in chat room settings.

Before examining the thread that constitutes the above context, as before, the significant part of the thread of chat is given below. As the conversations are mostly in the local dialect, ‘Madras Tamil,’ rough translations are given in brackets where necessary.

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10 06 2005

Welcome to The Madras Room!

R.U.L.E says, saidaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa (Hi, saida)

saidapetta machan says, aloooooooooo ba

lilsweetdevil says, machannnnnnnnnnnn

saidapetta machan says, rule machiiiiiiiiiiii

saidapetta machan says, epdi keeraaaaa (how are you?)

R.U.L.E says, enna da fone answer pannalai (why you did not answer the phone?)

saidapetta machan says, danks ba rule (thanks rule)

saidapetta machan says, athu oru phona (that’s a phone?)

saidapetta machan says, attha aniiku katinenla (did your mother shout?)

lilsweetdevil says, machan diet la irukaru ... pazya soru than kannima koduka sollu iruku (machan is on diet. Kannima (female/lover?) asked to give only leftover rice soaked in water)

R.U.L.E says, no comments

saidapetta machan says, aama atthan kudthukichu devilu inniku (yes, that’s what she gave today, devil)

lilsweetdevil says, machan aatha kite adi vaanginiya (machan did you get beating from your mother?)

+HIPPIE\_KILLER+ says, straw

R.U.L.E says, straw

saidapetta machan says, diet lo irnthu orthu machan kullama aaviten devilu (devil because of his diet, machan has become a dwarf)

rsubras says, straw à punnakku? (cattle feed?)

lilsweetdevil says, pullu (grass)

saidapetta machan says, 45ft and 2 inches than machan (I am only 45 ft and 2 inches)

lilsweetdevil says, straw is pullu ... punnaku — oatz (straw is grass cattle feed is oats)

itkarthi says, punnaku is prasad (cattle feed is prasad)  
 rsubras says, athaanda (that's it)  
 saidapetta machan says, alooooo itk (hi itk)  
 lilsweetdevil says, paruthi kottai ?? (cotton seeds?)  
 rsubras says, straw is rgp nu yaaro sonnanga (somebody said rgp is straw)  
 saidapetta machan says, innaba aaliye kanom (why u are missing?)  
 rsubras says, hey itk nee than sonne (hey, itk you only told)  
 saidapetta machan says, engona maatikiniya kadalo varthu (did you get lost while flirting)  
 itkarthi says, enna da sonnen subbu (what did you tell subbu?)  
 lilsweetdevil says, hahaha so fun today  
 saidapetta machan says, aloo sukku kaapi sukchelum epdi keera (how is herbal coffee girl friend?)  
 lilsweetdevil says, a telemarketer called up my home  
 rsubras says, strawberry is rgp nu

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One way of coming to terms with *RL* routines and pangs of parental/ sibling pressures is to give vent to the same when we seek to graduate from the self to multiple selves. But what does not graduate is the normal body. It is not invoked in the guise of virtual bodies, at least in this particular thread. The normal body is seen as 'real' and 'present' in the blunt references to disciplinary regimes allegedly forced on the central character in the virtual drama, saidapetta machan, through the imagined acts of the mother/girlfriend/wife(?). The alleged acts of mother/girl friend/wife(?) are probably meant to discipline the unruly male, who could be controlled only through the disciplinary regime of poor food or no food. This could also be read as a social statement. As such acts are commonly employed, at least as verbal threats, by many parents to discipline unruly children. The mocking remark of saidapetta machan that he has only emerged stronger out of this, by growing as high as 45 ft. and 2 inches, also signifies the location/presence of the normal body. One that remains unobtrusively in front of the mirror even as shadows of impossible subjectivities emerge in the virtual conversations of saidapetta machan. The impossible subjectivities are not the 'real' mother or 'real'

girl friend/wife, but those constructs borne of the discursive use of 'Madras Tamil' in the flow of responses between saidapetta machan and others. The impossible subjectivities are 'atha,' 'kanimma,' and their acts. These subjectivities construct the virtual body and the disembodied self of saidapetta machan in this thread. The disciplinary regimes such as forced dieting, verbal and physical punishments are emblematic of the tools of the struggle between unruly male bodies and assertive female bodies in the social class of the urban poor. The above thread provides ample scope to read a discursive construction of the disciplinary regimes and bodies in the context of Chennai's urban poor. The key statements in the thread could also be read as emanating from the patriarchal order that wishes to dismiss the threats from women even as it fears them.

The *Rediff Chat* rooms are no less 'heterotopian' as they are 'mirrors'. The individual preferences of chat users (depending on their cultural, geographical and linguistic familiarities) show up clearly when the same rooms are frequented by some users again and again. The regulars alone do not constitute the 'heterotopic' nature of the room they choose to call virtual home. But the ability of the rooms themselves to represent their character as relevant (thanks to the geographical and other markers) facilitates them to function as 'counter sites' or sites that serve the function of defining and excluding the rest from the preference list of users. Some chat rooms are popular with users because they have such inherent qualities to exist as 'heterotopias'. Unlike the 'heterotopias' in *RL<sup>2</sup>*, the virtual 'heterotopias' do not seem to dislocate themselves in the geography of cyberspace with the passing of time. For instance, the location of chat rooms as one of the cyberspace 'heterotopias' remains where it was a decade ago, despite the arrival of new 'heterotopias' such as blogs.

In the next thread, we will be discussing the negotiations of users concerning another important facet of disciplinary regimes, the common social practices of body piercing and tattooing. For centuries, body piercing and tattooing have served as important modes of negotiations of the *sacred* association between body and self in India. Over the years, body piercing and tattooing have been incorporated in the association between body

and self through four distinct modes of address. The most widely practised one among the four is the ritualistic one. It is believed that it affords the opportunity for the pierced body and the self to submit themselves as one before God. It also affords the opportunity to inscribe on bodies the resolve to undertake any sacrifice for God. On the other hand, body piercing/tattooing as a socio-cultural practice seeks to inscribe the desired self on the body through chosen imageries. The determinant here could be the logic that the self has no better vehicle of expression than the body. The third mode of address through body piercing/tattooing is also socio-cultural in nature. This mode has been used to express one's love and loyalty to others and oneself. It is not uncommon for people in rural areas to tattoo their names and the names of their dear ones on the visible parts of the body. The fourth mode, like the first one, is employed by almost every Indian woman. This mode seeks to pierce ears and nose for wearing ornaments such as ear and nose studs. Recent times have seen the re-inscription of body piercing and tattooing in the popular domain, thanks to the representations of tattooing and body piercing in visible areas, other than ears and nose. As before, most relevant parts of the thread are given before the reading of the same.

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10 06 2005

Welcome to The Madras Room!

Meiraa\* enters our room

itkarthi says, dai devilu when r u starting from there

saidapetta machan says, pasangole kaanji poikinu yahoo la valai virchikinu

keerango (guys are bored and they are fishing in Yahoo)

R.U.L.E says, meiraa

R.U.L.E says, hi hi hi :)

Meiraa\* says, hello rule

R.U.L.E says, h r u doin :)

R.U.L.E says, welcome

Meiraa\* says, am fine

+HIPPIE\_KILLER+ says, ....

Meiraa\* says, thank u

saidapetta machan says, meiraa innathu pakkothula star pottukinu keera

(meiraa why have a star next your id?)  
 Meiraa\* says, hey hk  
 saidapetta machan says, athu inna mookutthiya (is it a nose stud?)  
 itkarthi says, hey meira  
 saidapetta machan says, meera kennu meera kennu mookithi engo pottukinu  
 keera apdinu oru kamnati kaidha message adchikiran (one scoundrel wants to  
 know where you are wearing your stud. He has messaged me)  
 saidapetta machan says, kannulo kutthikirango (she is wearing it in her eyes)  
 saidapetta machan says, naakulo kutthikirango (she is wearing it in her tongue)  
 saidapetta machan says, apaala (then)  
 saidapetta machan says, thoppulo kutthikirango (she is wearing it in her navel)  
 Meiraa\* says, sorry guys  
 Meiraa\* says, rediff screwed up  
 Meiraa\* says, thank rule  
 +HIPPIE\_KILLER+ says, my eyes seek reality  
 itkarthi says, reality a da HK  
 Meiraa\* says, hk....kai zaala....  
 R.U.L.E says, saida  
 rsubras says, itkarthi , oru chat friend da (girl) is trying to come to rediff only  
 for you  
 saidapetta machan says, deviu mookuthi engo kutthipango kennu (devil, where  
 people wear their studs?)  
 +HIPPIE\_KILLER+ says, antha reality illa da goyyala kk (not that reality)  
 itkarthi says, athu yaaru da SUBBU (who is that subbu?)  
 itkarthi says, seri da HK (ok HK)  
 saidapetta machan says, reality aaru ba (who is reality)  
 rsubras says, avalukku page load aagalaiyam (her page is not loading)  
 saidapetta machan says, pudcha vanthukira id ya (she is a new id)

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Like saidapetta machan, Meiraa\* and itkarthi are regular users of the Chennai room. Meera is a common female name in India. But the digital identity Meiraa\* seems to be an inversion of the common name even as it sounds feminine. Meiraa\* could be read as an inversion in so far as it also echoes the Hindi word 'mera,' meaning 'me or my.' Meiraa\*, however, does not confuse the users in the Chennai room, as she (he?) is a regular. But there is also a probability that the identity belongs to a male

user. Male users masquerading under female identities are easily spotted out by fellow users, particularly the regular ones. In this thread, interestingly, what kicks off the conversation is how, all of a sudden, after so many days, some one points to the ‘\*’ in her digital identity and wonders whether it could be her nose stud. Whether Meiraa is a male or female, she (he?) does serve a function for relating to the male subjectivity that can not come to terms with the idea of body piercing and tattooing by female bodies at unconventional body sites. There is an unarticulated demand in the curiosity of the male users for the patriarchal order’s consent before the project of piercing unconventional female body sites takes off. This also echoes in the seeming helplessness of the male users of the chat rooms in stopping such a project. The imaginary probabilities of Meiraa\*’s wearing of studs at unconventional body sites is not only invoked by the male users for the reason of mocking at the seemingly endless attempts by the female subjectivity to express itself through body piercing and tattooing. It also carries a discursive construction in the form of a demand of the male patriarchal order’s ‘right’ to know the possible trajectories of the female body piercing project.

### Conclusion

This chapter outlined the key trends in the field of body studies even as it sought to put in context contradictory and conflicting notions of body and self in Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. The crisis in which bodies find themselves in contemporary times has also been dealt with.

This chapter examined notions of disembodiment, their associated discourses, subjectivities and body piercing/tattooing in the negotiations of users of the *Rediff Chat*. This chapter demonstrates clearly that notions of the *sacred* involving body, self and language leave their imprints strongly among chat room users. The readings of the chosen threads clearly underscore the discursive nature and the ‘heterotopic’ character of chat rooms. The patriarchal inscriptions of body and self show their influence

in the repeated attempts of male users to mock at female subjectivities even as they fear the disciplinary regimes of women.

### Notes

- 1 *Siddhars*, according to Thirumoolar, are “those who live in yoga and see the divine light and power through yoga.” *Siddhars* possessed extraordinary powers and are able to transcend their bodies and locate themselves in any body, human or animal. Their period is in dispute and is said to be between 10-12 century AD. For more details, see <<http://srpambattisiddhar.com/siddhars/>>. June 18,2005.
- 2 Foucault refers to the shifting locations of some heterotopias in history. He cites the example of the dislocation of cemeteries from the heart of urban spaces to the suburbs.

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