

# The Female Body as a Contested Terrain: Identity, Trauma, and Resistance in Gitanjali Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold*

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## Abstract

*The Gitanjali Kolanad's Girl Made of Gold through the framework of Contemporary Embodiment Theory. While existing scholarship has approached the novel primarily from feminist and socio-cultural perspectives, limited attention has been given to the embodied dimensions of female subjectivity within the text. Drawing upon Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study argues that the female body in the novel operates as a contested terrain where identity, trauma, and resistance intersect. Trauma is shown to be embedded within bodily memory, while resistance emerges through embodied negotiation of social norms. By foregrounding the body as both regulated and agentive, Kolanad's text contributes significantly to contemporary discussions in feminist embodiment studies. The paper situates the novel within broader theoretical debates, demonstrating how embodied experience shapes female identity and narrative meaning.*

**Keywords:** Subjectivity, Body Politics, Trauma, Gender Performativity.

The body has become central to contemporary literary theory. The longstanding Cartesian separation between mind and body positioned the body as inferior, mechanical, and secondary to rational thought. However, twentieth-century philosophical and feminist interventions challenged this hierarchy, arguing that subjectivity itself is fundamentally embodied. Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously asserts that "the body is the general medium for having a world" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 169). This reconceptualization shifts attention from abstract consciousness to lived corporeality. In literary narratives, especially those centered on women's experiences, the body frequently becomes the site where cultural anxieties, social regulations, and personal struggles converge. Gitanjali Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold* offers a particularly nuanced exploration of this convergence. The novel foregrounds women's bodily existence within structures of gendered expectation and control. Yet it does not reduce the body to victimhood alone. Instead, it presents corporeality as a dynamic field where identity is shaped, challenged, and sometimes

reclaimed. Although feminist criticism has acknowledged the novel's engagement with gender politics, a sustained reading through Contemporary Embodiment Theory reveals deeper layers of meaning. The present study argues that Kolanad constructs the female body as a contested terrain simultaneously subjected to disciplinary forces and capable of generating resistance.

Feminist literary criticism has consistently emphasized the centrality of the female body in understanding gendered oppression and identity formation. Simone de Beauvoir famously states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex* 283). This assertion foregrounds the social construction of femininity and highlights how women's identities are shaped through cultural conditioning rather than biological determinism. Within literary studies, the female body is often interpreted as a site where patriarchal ideologies are inscribed and normalized.

Judith Butler extends this argument by theorizing gender as performative rather than essential. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (45). According to this perspective, identity is produced through repeated bodily acts that conform to societal expectations. Feminist critics applying Butler's theory have examined how literary texts expose the artificiality of gender norms. Although feminist scholarship provides valuable insights into gender construction, many studies remain primarily socio-political in orientation. They focus on oppression and representation but do not sufficiently explore the phenomenological and embodied dimensions of lived experience. This limitation necessitates a more nuanced approach that integrates embodiment theory with feminist critique. Embodiment theory challenges Cartesian dualism by asserting that subjectivity is grounded in corporeal experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that "the body is general medium for having a world" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 169). The phenomenological approach emphasizes that perception, memory, and identity are inseparable from bodily existence.

In literary studies, embodiment theory enables critics to analyze how characters experience the world through their physical presence. The body is not merely represented but becomes the condition through which narrative meaning is constructed. Such an approach shifts focus from abstract identity categories to lived, sensory experience. Moreover, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power demonstrates how modern institutions regulate and produce "docile bodies" (*Discipline and Punish* 136). Power operates through surveillance, normalization, and internalization. When applied to literature, this framework reveals how characters' bodily experiences reflect broader socio-political structures.

However, while embodiment theory has been widely applied to Western texts, its integration into readings of contemporary Indian fiction remains comparatively limited. This gap creates space for applying Contemporary Embodiment Theory to texts such as *Girl Made of Gold*. Contemporary trauma studies further reinforce the importance of embodiment in understanding lived suffering. Trauma is not confined to psychological memory but often manifests somatically. Cathy Caruth observes that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). As a result, it resurfaces through bodily reactions and fragmented memory.

Literary representations of trauma frequently depict the body as an archive of pain. Physical gestures, silence, and sensory memory become narrative expressions of unarticulated suffering. Such representations align with embodiment theory's emphasis on corporeal consciousness. Despite the growing intersection between trauma studies and feminist criticism, few analyses have systematically applied these frameworks to Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold*. A comprehensive embodiment-based reading remains underdeveloped, thereby justifying further scholarly exploration.

The study hypothesizes that in *Girl Made of Gold*, the female body functions as a contested site where identity, trauma, and resistance intersect. It proposes that the narrative portrays

corporeality not merely as biological existence but as socially constructed, politically regulated, and experientially lived. The research further hypothesizes that while patriarchal structures attempt to discipline and objectify the female body, the novel simultaneously presents embodiment as a source of agency and self-definition. Through embodied negotiation, the protagonist reclaims subjectivity within restrictive socio-cultural frameworks.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the representation of the female body in *Girl Made of Gold* through the framework of Contemporary Embodiment Theory. The research seeks to analyze how embodied experience shapes identity, memory, and agency within the narrative. A further objective is to explore how socio-cultural power structures regulate and discipline the female body. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Butler's theory of performativity, the study aims to demonstrate how gender norms are internalized and contested. Additionally, the research intends to investigate the relationship between trauma and corporeality in the novel.

The scope of this study is limited to a theoretical and textual analysis of Gitanjali Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold* using Contemporary Embodiment Theory. The research focuses specifically on the representation of the female body as a site of identity formation, trauma, and resistance. The study does not attempt a comparative analysis with other novels, nor does it engage in extensive biographical interpretation of the author. Instead, it concentrates on close textual reading supported by phenomenological, feminist, and post structural theoretical frameworks. While the theoretical discussion draws upon Western philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Butler, the analysis situates the novel within the context of contemporary Indian socio cultural realities. Thus, the scope remains interdisciplinary but text centered.

Although *Girl Made of Gold* has attracted attention within feminist literary discourse, existing scholarship predominantly emphasizes gender oppression and socio-cultural critique. Limited studies engage deeply with the theoretical framework of Contemporary Embodiment Theory to examine how the female body functions as a site of identity formation, trauma inscription, and resistance. Furthermore, while embodiment theory and trauma studies have been widely discussed in Western contexts, their application to contemporary Indian English fiction remains insufficient. There is a noticeable absence of sustained critical inquiry that integrates phenomenology, disciplinary power, and gender performativity in analysing Kolanad's narrative. The research therefore addresses a significant gap by offering an embodiment centred interpretation of *Girl Made of Gold*, situating the novel within broader theoretical debates in feminist and body studies.

Contemporary Embodiment Theory rejects the notion that the body is merely a biological container for the self. Instead, it views the body as the very condition through which experience, identity, and meaning are constituted. Merleau Ponty's phenomenology establishes that perception is always embodied. Experience does not occur outside the body it is mediated through it. Thus, identity cannot be separated from corporeal existence. This insight becomes crucial when examining narratives in which bodily vulnerability shapes personal consciousness. Michel Foucault expands the discussion by examining how power operates through the regulation of bodies. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that modern societies produce "docile bodies" through surveillance and normalization (136). Power, in this formulation, is not only repressive but productive it shapes how bodies move, behave, and understand themselves. Judith Butler further complicates embodiment by asserting that gender is not an innate essence but a performative process. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (*Gender Trouble* 45). This repetition naturalizes social norms, making constructed identities appear inevitable. When these theoretical insights are applied to *Girl Made of Gold*, the novel reveals how female embodiment becomes the site where social regulation and personal identity intersect. The body is neither entirely determined nor entirely free it is formed

within power structures yet capable of subtle resistance.

In Kolanad's narrative, the female body is persistently subjected to cultural interpretation. Social expectations shape how women are expected to inhabit space, express emotion, and define selfhood. The body becomes readable within patriarchal codes, evaluated and disciplined according to normative standards. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is particularly illuminating here. The novel reflects how control does not always manifest through overt violence instead, it appears in subtle acts of surveillance, moral judgment, and internalized expectation. The protagonist's bodily awareness is shaped by these pressures. Her gestures, silences, and movements reveal an acute consciousness of how she is perceived. The text does not portray this regulation as absolute. By emphasizing interior perception, Kolanad suggests that bodily experience exceeds social categorization. The tension between imposed identity and lived sensation becomes central to the narrative's emotional intensity.

Trauma in *Girl Made of Gold* operates not only at the psychological level but also at the corporeal level. The body registers fear, shame, and vulnerability long after events have passed. This aligns with contemporary understandings of trauma as somatically embedded experience. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied perception helps explain how trauma alters one's orientation toward the world. The traumatized body does not merely remember it anticipates threat, reshaping spatial and relational awareness. In the novel, bodily reactions often precede articulated thought, suggesting that memory resides within muscle, breath, and posture. By depicting trauma as embodied, Kolanad challenges the abstraction of suffering. The reader encounters not a detached narrative of oppression but a visceral representation of lived pain. The body becomes archive, witness, and terrain of vulnerability.

Identity in the novel is not stable or fixed it emerges through embodied negotiation. Butler's concept of performativity clarifies how repeated bodily acts reinforce socially sanctioned femininity. However, Kolanad complicates this framework by illustrating how repetition can also generate awareness. When norms are performed under strain, their constructed nature becomes visible. The protagonist's evolving relationship with her body reflects this complexity. Moments of self recognition occur not through abstract reflection but through embodied experience through discomfort, confrontation, and resilience. Identity thus becomes relational and dynamic. Importantly, the narrative resists the objectification of the female body. Instead of presenting women as passive surfaces of representation, the text foregrounds their internal bodily consciousness. The body speaks, remembers, and interprets.

The power operates through the body, resistance must also emerge through it. Foucault reminds that power relations are never unidirectional "where there is power, there is resistance" (*History of Sexuality* 95). In *Girl Made of Gold*, resistance does not always appear dramatic. It surfaces in subtle refusals, redefinitions, and embodied endurance. Acts of self-assertion reclaim the body from objectification. Silence becomes strategic rather than submissive. Speech becomes transformative rather than reactive. Through these gestures, corporeality shifts from being controlled to becoming agentive. Kolanad thus reframes the female body not only as a site of suffering but also as a site of becoming. Embodiment is shown as a process through which identity can be renegotiated, even within restrictive environments.

The Contemporary Embodiment reading of *Girl Made of Gold* reveals the novel's intricate engagement with the politics of the body. The female body emerges as a contested terrain shaped by cultural regulation, marked by trauma, yet capable of resistance and transformation. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Butler, this study demonstrates that embodiment is central to the novel's representation of identity. Kolanad does not separate mind from body, nor does she treat corporeality as mere metaphor. Instead, she situates the body at the core of lived experience,

where power, memory, and agency converge. By foregrounding embodied subjectivity, the novel contributes meaningfully to feminist and body studies discourse. It reminds readers that identity is not abstract or disembodied it is formed through flesh, perception, vulnerability, and resilience. In doing so, *Girl Made of Gold* becomes a powerful literary articulation of contemporary embodiment.

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