

## **Raginis in Haryana: Women Singers, Identities and Transformation<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the faster developing economies as compared to other states of India, Haryana also has been in news for its rigid patriarchal norms and traditions as well as derogatory views and practices relating to women's interests, rights and freedom (Pal, 2018). It is a state with a large number of 'veiled women' (Chowdhry, 1994) and the symbol of seclusion, *ghunghat* or *purdah*, creates a spatial boundary between the private and the public domain. The latter being the exclusive preserve of men (*Ibid*). The status of women in Haryana is very much visible from its poor sex ratio (876/1000)<sup>2</sup> despite claims of improvement in it.<sup>3</sup> Haryanvi society clearly outlines the various gender roles for men and women marked by domestication of women in the private space. Women are usually seen working either in the fields or inside *gher*.<sup>4</sup> Women in Haryana across all the caste groups dominate in agricultural work (Chowdhry, 1993: A-137). Further

women's work in the fields/*gher* is considered an extension of their private space (Chowdhry, 1994). Apart from participation in agricultural work, last few decades have also witnessed women's participation in government jobs, sports and performing arts as well. As mentioned above, the former is seen as an extension of their private space and the latter is considered as an important source of economic support and upliftment for the whole family as well as the kin group given the declining value of agricultural resource and income sustainability in the last few decades. Being a patriarchal community, property transmission from one generation to the other is governed by patrilineal norms. The prevailing norms also include caste endogamy and territorial exogamy as 'land should not be alienated outside the group' and thus daughters and sisters are kept away from the inheritance rights. Another issue is the threat from women's choice in marriage which may become a potential source of introducing new blood into the descent line (Ahlawat

1. This is an excerpt from one of my chapters of my original Ph.D. work in progress at Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It should not be cited or published in any form. This paper was originally presented in Ph. D. Research Scholars' Seminar organized by CSSS/SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University from 26th-27th April 2019 at New Delhi.
2. Second lowest in India and lowest in the age group of 0-6 *i.e.* 830/1000. Hindustan Times 31.03.2011. Sonapat -853/1000, Census of India. National Health and Family Survey 2015-16 report. Pg.2. 836/1000 below 5 years in last 5 years.
3. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sex-ratio-at-birth-in-haryana-rises-to-914-girls-per-1000-boys/printarticle/62488714.cms>, 13th January 2018.
4. A space considered as extension of house meant for keeping cattle like buffaloes/cows and also cow dung cakes are made and dried there.

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2012:16).

The public spaces are dominated by men who are usually seen sitting idle outside their houses or playing cards in *chaupals*. Prem Chowdhry reflects in her article (Chowdhry, 1993) on Haryana that "...men, who can be seen with ample leisure time on their hands, smoking their *hukka*<sup>5</sup>s, playing cards or just hanging about, shows that work ethos applies only to women. This is ironical when it is accepted that men notionally are not idle beings but bread winners" (Ibid: A-142). Thus, a routinized life woven around the household chores is the world view of women folk in the region.<sup>6</sup> It leaves little scope for entertainment, leisure or learning to sing for women, except collective participation in life cycle rites and rituals; or in festivals and wedding processions and that too in spaces seen as ritually feminine. A 'woman has no presence or place in public sphere' of male dominated Haryanvi society' (Kaur, 2010: 15).

### **Women and Professional Singing in the Public domain:**

Singing in public spaces is a taboo for women in Haryana as it has the potential to defame the family of the girl. If women attempt to subvert these norms, their behaviour is vehemently and even violently condemned and dealt with. Public space is predominantly occupied by men and this remains true even for the professional fields of arts, performance and sports. Seen as a masculine genre, sports in Haryana has been dominated by males<sup>7</sup> in the yesteryears but is being transformed into a glamourized profession, even for women, in the wake of Bollywood movies (based on real life stories)

like Dangal and Sultan (Sen Gupta, 2016).<sup>8</sup> In the last few years Haryana has been in headlines for a few women players like Sakshi Malik, and Geeta Phogat due to this. On the other hand, however it is also argued that with increase in number of women claiming public spaces, the possibility of their being subjected to violence and crime has also gone up (Ahlawat, 2012: 15). This applies specifically to women singers and commercial stage performers. As rightly Prem Chowdhry points out in context of Haryana that:

"Exclusive male spaces connote sharpening of certain aspects of masculinities like male bonding, group solidarity, swearing, drinking, fighting and using aggressive and sexually explicit language leading to abundant use of abuses involving the female anatomy. Women are extremely vulnerable in these spaces as their presence there invites attention, ridicule, sexual harassment and even greater violence. Indeed, all such male gatherings act as means of controlling women" (Chowdhry, 2014:41).

Despite the vulnerable situation of women in Haryana, women from various castes (though mostly excluding the *Jats* who are the dominant caste) are now-a-days increasingly seen performing on the public stage. This is an important dimension of change in the highly gendered musical cultures of the region. This is also paradoxically connected with the fact that last few years have witnessed ample cases of exploitation and murder of women performers and singers belonging to the field of *ragini* (folk) singing in Haryana.<sup>9</sup>

One of the popular traditional sources of

5. Traditional smoking pipe.

6. Woman respondent, aged 42, Sonapat (Haryana)

7. Sports is seen as a masculine space and it is more so with respect to the idea of wrestling. Entering an all-male preserve, Sakshi Malik, a wrestler, shared in an interview to a journalist that she had been taunted several times for entering an all-male game. Aruneel Sadadekar, People who taunted me now want to click selfies with me. September 07, 2016, <http://www.rediff.com/sports/report/people-who-taunted-me-now-want-to-click-selfies-with-me/20160906.htm>

8. <http://www.rediff.com/sports/report/dangal-will-add-to-the-momentum-of-womens-wrestling/20161223.htm>, December 23, 2016.

9. Renowned ragini singer Binu Choudhary was murdered in 2012, Neelam Chaudhary was convicted for murder and is serving life term imprisonment since late 2013. Sapna Chaudhary who is the most famous contemporary artist of Haryana attempted suicide in 2016 on being assaulted. Harshita Dahiya was murdered in October 2017 and this year has begun with yet another murder of a local folk singer Mamta Sharma. Ragini singer-dancer, Ms. Aarti Bhorla has filed a case of receiving rape and murder threats. Prior to that she was publicly assaulted during a live performance. Menu (name changed) was allegedly stripped publicly during a live performance and her Khap banned her for performing ragini as it was bringing bad name to the Jat Community.

entertainment in Haryana, ‘ragini’ is a musical narration of a ‘story or incidents’ also known as ‘kissa’<sup>10</sup> It is a prominent source of entertainment specifically for the Haryanvi Jat community. *Ragini* since beginning (twentieth century) has been dominated by men *i.e.* as patrons, performers as well as the audience. Society in Haryana being a conservative one, creates hindrances for its women to come out and perform on musical stages such as that of *ragini*. In the vernacular usage the term ‘*bhand*’<sup>11</sup> has been used for those who sing in public and the same draws a devaluing reference to cultures of music itself.

Thus prevailing normative structures try to confine women to domestic spaces and discourage them from taking up singing as a profession. Within the dominating caste (Jats) ideas of honour and prestige act as severely debilitating factors for women to even harbour such dreams. According to Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (1994), females are expected to be passive recipient of musical practices in ‘public sphere’ but not as active contributor in any form.

However, in the last three decades’ women have started entering the genre though mostly from the Dalit community. Proclaiming her right over the public stage, a woman singer on one hand challenges the ‘*mardana ragini akharas*’ which are seen as primarily masculine spaces of performance while on the other she also negotiates for an identity of a performer. The assigned image of an ‘entertainer’<sup>12</sup> has evolved in contradiction to the ideas of domesticity and ideal womanhood in these cultural contexts.

### Men as ‘performing artists’, women as ‘entertainers’:

Public stage is a social space and women’s cultural position as the ‘other’ results in sites of performance further intensifying the stereotypical feminine and masculine roles and images. A woman singer is relegated to an identity of an entertainer or a seductress and not that of an artist. Anguished over mistreatment of women performers in public and the painful realities of a

transformed genre, an eminent folk *ragini* singer said:

“*bahot mehnat ke baad bhi humme artist nahi mantei entertainer kahte hai aur admi to masti karte hai phir bhi artist hai...Entertainer mantei hai matlab woh picture thi na vidya balan wali...aurat ko tho sirf entertainment ki cheej ki tarah dekhte hai...Sur taal pe kisi ka dyhan nahi...jo jaada ganda nacche aur gayei..Khuli ho ...woh utni badi entertainer...*”<sup>13</sup>

(We work so hard, even then we are not considered artists, they call us ‘entertainers’ and while men just enjoy at our cost, even then they are ‘artists’. Entertainer means that Bollywood movie of Vidya Balan. Women are seen as only objects of entertainment, not much bothered about tune and rhythm. The one who dances and sings with greater degree of openness and vulgarity becomes a better entertainer).

Thus women on stage are objectified as commodities to lure the audience for raising money by pleasing men and appealing to their gaze in Haryana. This at times also becomes one of the reasons behind rivalry between women singers as one category of singers wish to retain the mythological *raginis* (devoid of eroticism) while the other choose erotic themes to earn more.

Madhubala<sup>14</sup>, a popular *ragini* singer in Haryana has quit singing *raginis* after the entry and rising popularity of dancers like Sapna Chaudhary. She has now taken to religious singing. Though she still records *raginis* that were written and sung by original *Saangis*. She shared in an interview:

“*jab sei raginiyon mei phudta aai tab maine socha ragini gaana bilkul chod du aur ab mei jargan karti hu, bas asli ragini record karti hu*”

(Since vulgarity entered *raginis*, I thought of quitting *ragini* singing and shifting to devotional song-nights. I now record original *raginis* only).

Thus women see themselves as performers by singing on a public platform and feel empowered by having been able to create a niche for themselves within the masculine public domain on stage. But for the spectators/listeners or co-artists (men) women’s bodies overwhelm their singing voices and skills. On the contrary

10. Mythological Stories

11. Looked down upon as Swangi

12. Seen as a prostitute/ seductress, as freely available.

13. Respondent.

14. Pseudonym has been used to conceal the identity of the singer.

women singers intend to break free from this image of entertainer, often seen as a seductress and freely available one, so as to carve out their space in the public domain with some social respectability (Courchesne, 2013:iii).

Various studies have analyzed the notion of 'woman as an artist' and have reflected upon their unrecognized or missing identity of a performer. Arguing around the same belief, Ellen Koskoff, an ethnomusicologist, cites studies on court traditions in Asia and Europe and argues that women performers and musicians perform 'dual roles of entertainers and courtesans' (Koskoff, 2014:87). Amlan Das Gupta, a literary scholar on women and music, opines that with coming of recording industry in India, women singers have been uncomfortably positioned at the fringes of the musical world. They were called as *tawaiifs and baijis*. However, the profession of music for a male singer entails 'skill in singing various classes of songs and playing instruments' whereas for women there exist 'additional elements of dancing, the arts of courtesy and sexual gratification' (Das Gupta, 2012: 14).

Negotiating caste/identities as women performers:

*"aise samaj mei jahan ladkiya ka jeans pehena bhi bura mana jata hai, accha lagta hai ki mei Kalakar hu aur meri ek pehchaan hai"*<sup>15</sup>

(In a society, where wearing jeans is considered a taboo, she feels good to be an artist and having an identity of her own).

Women singers negotiate with multiple identities *i.e.* of a performer (chaste one), an ideal woman and at times that of a bread earner too. There is no single axis of identity which may absolutely represent their multiple selves. The social location of singers in the community determines their access to resources, identity and respectability as well. A Dalit singer asserted:

*"aap madam kya sochte ho ke jo mei dalit ban kei gaun tho kei yeh manne jin denge"*

(What do you think madam, if I assert/sing with a dalit identity will they let me live peacefully?)

It has been observed that performers of *Ragini* from the Dalit community prefix dominant castes' surnames. Deepak Kumar, a scholar of history also discloses in his unpublished work on *svangs* (Kumar, 2007: 143), that a male performer named Pale Ram<sup>16</sup>, barber by caste, uses

*Dahiya*, a Jat surname which signifies belonging to an important *khap* in Haryana. Similarly, singers also use names of their village which provide them with an affiliation to the identity of a village community or the dominating caste even when the performer belongs to the marginalized community of that village.

Thus in a way *ragini* performance also gives an opportunity for upward mobility in the caste hierarchy. Such a process also highlights the oppressive structure of the performing sites which results in performers using fictitious surnames so that the audience does not tease them with derogatory remarks about their caste status. Sureka Choudhury<sup>17</sup> a prominent *ragini* singer shared that she does not use her real surname so that her performance is not affected by her caste affiliations. A persisting threat of being exploited by the influential persons from higher/dominant caste propels many of the women singers from lower caste to hide their surnames and use neutral surnames or of higher caste but usually not the Jat *gotras* as it may be seen as offending by the dominant caste and would further lead to intervention by the respective *khaps*.

Looking at the intersection of gender and subjectivity with musical performance and transmission, Amelia Maciszewski in her article "Multiple Voices, Multiple Selves: Song Style and North Indian Women's Identity" shares that in post-colonial times artistic subjectivities are formed as a result of intersection of musical cultures with caste, class, religion and gender. Thus, the voices of female individuals could not be heard in the post-colonial times as the intersection of the perceived role of musician and this multifaceted identity construction creates a highly 'polysemic self' (Maciszewski, 2001:1).

Ellen Koskoff opines that in most societies, 'a woman's identity is believed to be embedded in her sexuality *i.e.* she is seen primarily as sexual partner, child bearer, and nurturer. Thus, one of the most common association between women and music links women's primary sexual identity and role with music performance.' According to her, "Sexuality affects music performance in three important ways: (1) performance environments may provide a context for sexually explicit behaviour, such that music performance becomes a metaphor for

15. Shared by a woman *ragini* singer.

16. 'Mahars of Maharashtra produced a rich documentation of his life in cassettes and popular musical sphere used for contestation and claims of identity'.

17. Pseudonym.

sexual relations; (2) the actual or perceived loss of sexuality may change women's musical roles and/or statuses; and (3) cultural beliefs in women's inherent sexuality may motivate the separation of or restriction imposed upon women's musical activities."<sup>18</sup>

### Understanding Sexuality and transformation in a *Ragini* Performance:

Scholars have looked upon the linkage of female singing voice with their sexuality (Koskoff, 1989). Women singers while performing in public arena perform through their bodies. Their sexuality and bodily gestures paralleled with erotic content of *raginis* overwhelms their singing voices. The body thereby becomes an "instrument... In so doing, she enacts a scenario which affirms an enduring understanding of femininity as both in tune with, and subject to, the natural givens of her body... vocal performance is akin to a type of display, and indeed, the singing woman has been associated in many cultures with sexual temptation or sexual availability..." (Green, 2010: 141).

Anthropologists like Mary Douglas see body as a symbol of social relations and opine that control over bodily expressions would vary as per the prevailing societal norms. The body acts as a medium/expression of culture; 'a locus of social control ...regulated by the norms of cultural life' which Foucault called as 'docile body'. Similarly, women's sexuality in Haryana is marked by caste, class, social practices, norms and religious customs since their birth. Thus women's body and sexuality is socially controlled which symbolizes patriarchal assertion in the region.

Embodying honour of the community and family, the virtues of chastity and purity are reinforced in women through folk songs as well. Interpreted by the standards of patriarchal structure, which gives preference to a male-dominated culture, women's lives in Haryana are aligned along the normative rules for female sexuality, activity, and intellect. Social respectability for women remains intact only till the moment women meet the 'views prescribed for their age and class', but performers—virtually by definition—'lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety' (Davis, 2002:3).

Bodily gestures are culturally inherent aspects of *ragini* performance or for that matter for any art form. Keith Thomas says "gesture is inseparable

accompaniment of any spoken language" (ed. Bremmer and Rodenburg, 1993: 6) and thereby defines it as 'a significant movement of limb or body or use of such movements as expression of feeling or rhetorical device' (*Ibid*:1). Every gesture connotes a meaning such as winking, smiling, blushing, nodding or pointing at someone whether it maybe intentional or unintentional.

Thus the stage of *ragini* performances now witnesses women singers 'jostling for, primarily male, attention both in visual and narrative forms' (Srivastava, 2013: 240) blending erotics of tradition in modernity. Here aesthetic of erotics is enjoyed by women, male co-singers as well as the audiences as the sexual desire gets an expression, in public, through the performers. Erotics of tradition in modernity is symbolized by the performers' depiction of women in various roles, in private sphere like wearing a veil, putting vermilion etc. symbolizing a married Hindu woman. But at the same time, enacting and fantasizing the sexual desires openly in public space than 'desexualized versions of public visibility' (*Ibid*) captures the influences of modernity.

For example, in almost all the *raginis*, married women performers apply thick sindoor, wear bangles/*chudda* at times (symbolizing new marriage), wear veil, and in between the performance remove *dupattas* etc. This "plays upon the erotic potential of the sexually voracious traditional woman. The excitement lies at the site of putative transgression: hence, the making of an erotic of tradition" in modernity (Srivastava, 2013: 243).

In *raginis* as well, aged women singers are not preferred as performers due to their incapability to have a sex appeal for audience. An owner of a cassette company shared

"*ib nayi ladki aagi tho badi aurtein chod de sei* (now young girls have come so aged women leave singing)." Further that "*Pehla isshi marein tei aurtoon na aan de thei jo bhi karrei thei mard manas hi karei thei...jib janania stage pe chad ja tei pher un gela aur kei kaam baneei..pehla laaj sharam mei ghar mei kiya kartei ib stage pe kare.. katti gand maccha rakhya*"

(It was because of this fear that women were not allowed and everything was managed by men. Now when women have mounted on stage, what else you can expect to do with them. Earlier such things were restricted to homes but now it has become an open show on stage

18. *Ibid*: 6.

with so much of vulgarity and obscenity).

Thus, women's sexual identity determines their musical roles, particularly with regard to the loss of sexuality through aging. Young women (in the age group of 20-35 years) take the center stage as sexual objects "producing obsessive voyeurs and peeping toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey, 2009:8). Men are seen naturally endowed with masculine tendencies and eroticism being one of them. One of the *thekedars* (contractors) Rajbir Malik<sup>19</sup> attending a *ragini* programmes shared that "*mardo ki asal duniya hi ess mei..kati sab kuch khol ke rakh de, maje lade woh sei asal kalakar*" (this is men's real world, the one who opens up everything, gives us pleasure is the real artist).

Women's erotic singing includes a duet with her male co-performer. Thus men singers who do not sing erotic lyrics or are not teasingly abusive are not seen as masculine or as real performers. On the contrary, women singers are seen to have lost morals due to their choice of singing. It suggests that all *ragini* singers are subjected to the societal pressure to perform as per social practices. However, women's choice to sing on these platforms casts them away from the ideal frame of reference for womanhood in the region.

At the same time, ironically the audience, predominantly comprising of males, is eager for *raginis* with semi-pornographic contents/lyrics but expect that a veil of secrecy should shield them from being morally judged. This provides a space for catharsis and gratification of hidden sexual fantasies. The seductive performances by women lead to their typification even though listeners largely remain unaffected by the stigma. Even the male singers are not much affected

The above categorization is primarily due to the belief that good woman is protected in exchange for loyalty and submission obtained through the institution of marriage, and bad woman refuses protection by claiming right on her own life (Srivastava, 2013: 114). This is also one of the reasons for organizing such *raginis* at night, in an alienated space devoid of women's presence even as audience, which helps in validation of these hierarchies of sexual morality.

This dynamic of the spaces and cultures of performance has transformed the very structure of *ragini* from being a mythological *kissa* to a popular genre often

seen as a seductive one. Women singers are not only not encouraged to enact a fantasy about a sexual situation, position and flirtation on stage but also receive demeaning glances, unwelcome vulgar gestures and abuses in turn. Thus public stage of performance becomes a site of sexual phantasmagoria and spectacle. In the process a hidden masculine desire of seeking voyeuristic pleasure unearths itself and thus gives expression to repressed fantasies/ sexualities. One of the ways adopted by the audience are passing lewd comments on women singers and the content of songs. The whole scenario is that of a complex of fantasy, validation of erotic masculinity, masquerade and cathartic articulation of femininities.

### **Towards a Conclusion: Agency and Crisis:**

The issues of identity and agency become important for women *ragini* singers as they slowly realize the significance of stage and public performance for their otherwise subdued lives. Chandana, a *ragini* singer, says:

'Jo awaaj abi tak ghar mei dabhi Hui thi, useh jaise pankh lag Gaye ho, aisa laga jab pehle baar ghar se bahar Gaya, jaise ek stage mil Gaya ho apne aap ko sabit karne ka, ek nayi pehchaan banae ka'

(A voice that was suppressed at home, now got wings to fly. When one sings outside the home in public one feels as if one has got a stage to prove oneself and establish an identity of one's own).

However, to say that before such an opportunity comes their way these women did not have an agency would be fallacious too. One is propelled to question as to what extent these agencies are actually practiced given the fact that these performers are prominently from the oppressed castes. The term 'agency' can be understood as a medium of expressing one's self/will freely through voice, body, gestures etc. However, agency is a social construct and its expression is contextual. Haryana society systematically expects women to compromise on their right to act, express and choose freely. It is perhaps this expression of selfhood in public which not only threatens the existing order of society but also positions women singers outside the ambit of ideal and respectable women who would otherwise never choose to speak in public sphere.

Diana Tietjens' (2002) work on 'Gender in mirror' is helpful in understanding how patriarchal cultures illegitimately interfere with women's agentic skill.

19. Interviewed in Feb.2016.

Women's singing *i.e.* a form of 'expression through voice' on stage should not be assumed as a free agency devoid of repressed consciousness. Voice authentication becomes necessary for any researcher before asserting it as a claim of identity says Diana. She further argues that it is necessary to identify and differentiate "when women are speaking in their own voices and when they are lip syncing the ominous baritone of patriarchy" (Diana, 2002: 16) as all women internalize oppression to some extent.

Lata Singh (2012) examines the lost identity and agency of women performers, during 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal during the colonial times, in her work 'Play House of Power: Theatre in Colonial India.' She emphasized that in the 'over-determined paradigm of respectability' (Gupta 2012:212), so-called reform movements and nationalist discourses kept theatre women segregated from the defined respectability of chaste middle class women. Stigmatized as prostitutes, women performers' identities and agencies were controlled by patriarchal figures like wealthy men sometimes by even pursuing them to become their mistresses.

Citing from an autobiography of a renowned actress Binodani (*Ibid*: 211), Singh further elaborates upon the agonizing journey of women performers who negotiated for a social status, identity, agency, caste, class and honor. However, only a few of these actresses entered the public sphere of performance with their own will and choice because majority of them were constrained by economic reasons in taking up this profession. So women's own voice, 'agency or non-agency' (*Ibid*: 12) that lay primarily in the hands of men and state as an object, got marginalized. A lot has been already researched on this question but rarely has anyone dealt with the presumed identities or agencies these women artists live with as well as negotiate with an image of so-called ideal woman, especially talking in context of Haryana. Is not competing for an ideal image itself a reflection of the societal conditioning that these singers aspire for?

*Ragini* singers thus reproduce the existing structures of inequalities and discriminatory practices that mirror the cultural practices such as *ragini* based on caste, class and gender stereotypes, sexuality etc. Thus what kind of expression does such a voice give or how voice becomes agency for the performer when an artist and audience

both are artifacts of defined (shared) spaces with expected lenses? For example, the audience may desire to see other women to perform but have different expectations from women of their own kin group whom they consider as pure and sacred while publicly performing women are seen as profane or impure. Thus one is again propelled to question whether these agencies are not repressed? And how can these subjugated voices help women gain an identity and space of their own?

Thus it can be concluded that the agency of singers in a given context is not neutral<sup>20</sup> of the conventional ideologies. Replicating social norms, performers and audience become gendered subjects on sites of performance. Performance (of singing) is not just an act of expression with a 'communicative competence and accountability to an audience' (Sawin, 2002: 31)<sup>21</sup> but also a nexus of coercive tradition, practices and human experiences manifesting through one's voice, body and gestures. This perpetuates a sense of crisis for the performer as a continuous tension needs to be negotiated at site of interplay between one's agency aspirations, contextual constraints and the oppressive structures of the staging of *ragini*.

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20. Sherry Ortner's idea of agency in her work.

21. Sawin cites Bauman.

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