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Queering the Norm

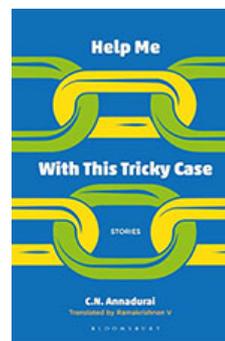
Kalpana Kannabiran

THE PHOBIC AND THE EROTIC: THE POLITICS OF SEXUALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA by Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya *Seagull Books, Kolkata, ,*

2007, pp.,

SEXUALITIES by Nivedita Menon *Women Unlimited (an associate of Kali for Women), New Delhi, , 2007, pp.,*

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Homosexuality, lived out freely and fearlessly, places before the individual and society a real set of imperatives, challenges and

opportunities: to put reason and humanity before fear, habit and prejudice; to test our unexamined assumptions regarding some of the basic elements of human life—the family, marriage, parenthood, independence, loneliness, companionship, fidelity, promiscuity ... Nobody, one has to remind oneself relentlessly, is too old, or too fragile, to be made to shed the habit of discrimination. [Aveek Sen, PE:15]

These two volumes together inaugurate a momentous turn in feminist writing on sexuality in India—majestically holding up for consideration the uncontrollable fluidity of gender, sexuality and desire that change radically with contexts of time and place, marking the shifts in deliberations on sexuality, identity, politics, and intersectionality—for instance, the emergence of desire, the representations of desire, the overt articulation of violence and its subterranean constancy in situations of marginality (e.g. Gayathri Reddy, PE: 301–322). Although the question of sexuality has been a core concern in Indian feminisms for at least three decades, by bringing together these two interdisciplinary, eclectic and reflexive collections, the editors discovered a clearing for an entire corpus on this subject that was to follow and grow in exciting and unimaginable directions. As the first step in this direction, they have an undiminished relevance as foundational texts on gender and sexuality that have provided the reference point for later explorations.

Heteronormativity, despite significant ruptures has ‘produced particular forms of family, gendered identities and desire as natural, eternal, historically progressive, through the mechanisms of law and state and the realm of ideas’ (S: 10). AIDS awareness helped, in Menon’s view, to produce a critical mass of understanding in the public realm in India in 1990s while simultaneously releasing material resources to consolidate organizing on a wider scale. There is of course the underside of the AIDS industrial complex which depends on critical silences and reification of sexual identities.

The understanding of masculinity has been too confined within the dominant codes of heteronormativity, so that the subjugation of male bodies in particular situations remains unarticulated and unexplored. If veiling is expanded beyond a focus on clothing to a system that frames bodily styles, speech forms, gestural codes and spatial locations, veiling by both men and women enables cross sex interaction through a temporary desexualization. Radhika Chopra (S:177–196) explores the practices of Parda among male domestic workers in North India pointing to gestural practices that mute maleness—the lowering of the eyes (nazar ka parda), economy of speech (awaaz ka parda) and the constant collision of disparate, side by side domesticities through which maleness is lost and regained in small transactions of the everyday. What is lacking, however, with respect to male veiling is a complete set of structured practices that are articulated in the literature on female veiling.

Women’s sexuality in India is organized around the politics of caste boundaries that are assiduously maintained through unquestioned



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caste endogamy. Within the parameters of endogamy what is the relative freedom that women of different castes have—the greater freedom of Bhangi women compared for instance to the seclusion of Darbar women. Tied to questions of mobility are possibilities for divorce, widow remarriage, and unions by choice. Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan offer ‘an understanding of culture as an arena in which multiple discourses compete rather than as a coercive, incarcerating code’ (S: 173). Devika argues that despite the reformist appropriation of Lalithambika, what stands out in her work that looks at the predicament of brahmin women in Kerala is that they are essentially ‘meditations on the futility of ascetic efforts to satisfy bodily desire’ (S: 243). A close look at women’s songs in rural Haryana reveals that although procreation is a significant part of the celebration of sexuality, neither procreation nor heterosexuality exhaust the fields of sexual expression—there is a clear homoerotic valence in both all male and all female performance, that celebrates same-sex desire and brings male and female norms relatively closer (Prem Chowdhry, S: 279).

Can the sexual be part of a nation’s heritage? Discourses around the family and nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as also debates around law throw up the multitudinous ways in which values of modernity were tied to certain articulations of sexuality with a range of non-normative sexualities and family arrangements being systematically disciplined into more rigidly redefined normative forms (S:xxiv–xxv).

The sexual was however, part of the nation’s heritage in other ways as well. At a time when Indian nationalism was coping with the imperial allegation of effeminacy, ‘Gandhian ahimsa was predicated on a rigorous refusal of heteronormative masculinity, Western or Eastern... [Gandhi’s] own “queering”, as it were, of gender positions is frequently expressed in his aspiration to transcend gender relations or, as he puts it, to “mother” his companions and, in so doing, to become “God’s eunuch” (Leela Gandhi, PE:108). Leela Gandhi further argues that the late nineteenth century socialist Edward Carpenter anticipated Gandhi’s anti-colonialism by bringing his anti western polemic to rest on a radical reconfiguration of association, alliance, relationality and community—the capacity for a radical kinship that ruptures the heterosexual privileging of the sexual over the relational, the social (Leela Gandhi, PE: 95). In the realm of art, Amrita Sher-Gill who famously declared, ‘If Paris belongs to Picasso and Matisse, India belongs to me’ (PE: 454), was ‘the first voice that reclaimed and celebrated the space of desire for and by a woman’ (PE: 455).

Lawrence Cohen argues that male-male sex is good to think with; it evokes a politics rooted in a vision of penetrative homosociality articulated as both violence and play. But such texts must be situated within multiple local worlds irreducible to such a politics, however dominant (S: 212). Does homophobia as a collective attitude, exist in India? Akshay Khanna contends that since the homosexual is not a category that is collectively recognized outside very limited contexts in India, the idioms in which same sex desire and identities are based

are varied and the ontologies that are brought into play are different and dissimilar (PE: 163).

One of the crucial tasks confronting lawyering for queer rights is the campaigns for progressive law reform which has also become a site for the articulation of queer concerns around especially penal legislation. Tracing the continuity between colonial and nationalist standpoints on the one side and Right Wing Anglo-Saxon and Hindutva positions on the other help us get around debilitating arguments around cultural relativism that are used to undermine the emergence of a global discourse on queer rights as human rights. (Arvind Narrain, S: 86) Satya, a trans-sexual activist points out 'gender identity, even in the reality of one person, can shift all the time within a life time. The question should be, how should the law reflect that lived reality?' (S: 96)

From a philosophical perspective instead of giving space to support that medicalizes the problem along the normal-abnormal axis, is it not more fruitful to consider the possibility that the prevalent understanding of gender deviant bodies as a problem needs to be addressed through group political action rather than medical treatment? (Ashwini Sukthankar, S: 97)

Globalization affects sexuality in a number of different ways. The greater mobility associated with globalization brings with it radical changes in patterns of private life (Altman, PE: 149–158) What are the possibilities for transversal queer alliances? (Paola Bacchetta, S: 103) It is important to reconceptualize transnational queerness through the historical-contextual, exploring 'other simultaneous sites of queer apparitions, such as the region, the nation, the city (and therein the neighbourhood, the park, the street, etc.), the village, home, and the body from lenses of internal and external axes of domination/subordination without homogenizing' (S: 122–123).

Counter-heteronormative assertions foreground precisely these ruptures and implicitly or explicitly challenge the edifice of heteronormativity. Take for instance Bhupen Khakhar, whose work is a bold, queer reinterpretation of mythology, the content unambiguously homoerotic (Georgina Maddox, PE: 462). In looking at and through the cracks what one finds is an elision between the West and the rest and colonial homophobia and nationalist denials of homo eroticism.

In this very mixed discursive environment, then, what is the role/place of 'powerless masculinities'? How is heteronormativity constituted through majoritarianism and validations of caste? What is the relationship between procreative sexuality and sexual expression?

What are the possibilities presented by counter heteronormative assertions for broadening of support in contexts of inequality? What are the specific strategies we will use to shift the focus on the fullness of life to notions of sustainability instead of looking at life through the prism of loss and risk? 'It is time', Geeta Patel observes, 'to bring sexuality into the ecology of sustainability and rethink fullness

and care, life and futurity', in terms that are radically different from the hegemonic reproduction of heterosexuality (PE: 223). Could a lesbian standpoint lay the ground for a counter-hegemonic rearticulation of the hegemonic symbolic? What (in)valuable insights do the lives of lesbians—lesbian lives—offer to us, to and about 'our' lives? (Ranjita Biswas, PE: 283) How do we begin to acknowledge, and articulate biphobia, building strategies of bi-inclusivity into discussions on sustainability? How do non-normative masculinities interrogate divisions between heterosexual and homosexual orientations? How do we craft 'a sexual-political agenda that will address "sexuality" without the idea of a permanent divide between "homo-hetero", "passive-active", "feminine-masculine", etc. or going for a peaceful cohabitation of opposites in the name of "bisexuality" that will break circularity, move beyond binaries, stop circulating empty tautologies and check intelligent but ceaseless deconstruction?' (Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, PE: 82)

The volumes speak eloquently to debates on sexualities, address these and other concerns through testimonies of professional-political practice, interviews, campaign documents and theoretical reflections.

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